

KATHRYN SMITH

**ONE MILLION AND FORTY-FOUR YEARS
(AND SIXTY THREE DAYS)**

A SAMPLER

A COMPANION TO THE EXHIBITION

GIMBERG / NERF / SACKS / YOUNG

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FOR THE MACGUFFIN

KATHRYN SMITH
BY WAY OF AN INTRODUCTION
2007

ARTIST; SENIOR LECTURER IN THE DEPARTMENT OF VISUAL
ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH

Earlier this year, I was approached by artists Douglas Gimberg, Christian Nerf, Ruth Sacks and Ed Young to “not do a catalogue” for an upcoming exhibition they had been invited to mount at the new SMAC gallery in Stellenbosch. Whatever this not-a-catalogue was to be was entirely at my discretion. As an artist who spends far too much time indulging in all aspects of publication and book production, this idea had undeniable appeal, but the several weeks available to conceptualise, research and design the project before the exhibition opened was somewhat disquieting.

The artists’ directive prompted a personal, internal dialogue around convention (of ‘standards’ of form and process) that married with an ongoing preoccupation with the legacies of avant-gardism. In this moment in history, ‘avant-garde’ as an adjective seems at once accusatory and aspirational. Artists pass snide comments about the fashion industry’s perpetual love affair with the term. A certain South African art dealer was bold enough to offer the descriptor in relation to my own work, a possibility that had never before crossed my mind and which seems, to me at least, perfectly misplaced. Recently, I have also noticed a proliferation of the term in press releases for international exhibitions of contemporary art, a place where I would never imagine seeing it. If it’s not so Twenties, or very Forties, then it’s definitely super Sixties. And I suppose there was something of a revivalist attempt at a formalist-mode avant-garde in the Eighties. As much as the historical avant-garde has been put (firmly?) in its place, there is something incredibly, vexingly, enticingly persistent about its legacies. And now, in the first decade of the 21st century, it seems unavoidable that the loop of history is faithfully repeating itself on what seems like a twenty-year cycle.

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I’m sure there are those that set out to be ‘avant-garde’ about things, but there are certainly those who, lacking the critical will to productively engage with certain aspects of contemporary practice, use the term either implicitly or explicitly as a loose signifier of provocation and ambition, damning the indulgence of ‘risky’ cultural acts and poorly-disguised fame-mongering. However, I have come to suspect that those who apply it pejoratively to others, hold onto a not-so-small shred of desire for its rebirth, made in an image of themselves.

In and of itself, an ‘avant-garde’ gesture is haunted by time; ath, specifically. It has an incredibly short shelf-life, becoming something else as soon as it has been enacted, and the final

death-knell sounding on its status as 'ahead of itself' as soon as the knowledge of it has reached the public realm. Its fate is exactly that of the original military vanguard: those who are sent out ahead of the rest, to die. Representing an advancing 'threat', it makes sense that they will be targets. Heroic narratives are self-evident in these situations, and time is a skilful embroiderer of tales. It seems fashionable to think that the 'avant-garde' is defunct, but I imagine this denies a deep desire by artists to access exactly what the historical, anti-formalist avant-garde seemed to achieve towards political, cultural and institutional critique.

The very evident yet wholly uneven persistence of the term 'avant-garde' seems, if anything, to be symptomatic of an ever accelerating and cannibalistic preoccupation with the new. I have never heard the artists who commissioned this book utter the phrase 'avant-garde' in any way other than sardonic. Perhaps this is a South African affliction? Here, it is something of a swearword; a curse that ensures the recipient is never to be taken seriously by the art-set defined by their 'cool-and-ironic' posturing. But the cool-and-ironics are in turn accused of pseudo-avant-gardism by artists who demand integrity, varying degrees of political correctness and for art to 'mean something'.

So I was curious to take the temperature of contemporary attitudes towards avant-gardism, as style, substance and desire, as praxis and historical conceit. Engaging in my preferred (silent) form of communication – written, electronic – I sent out a call to around eighty potential correspondents around the world, the list of which was collectively compiled by the artists and myself, and consisting of both pre-eminent and younger artists, writers, curators and scholars who we believed would offer a useful perspective on the current condition of the avant-garde. Needless to say, this list could have easily been four, five, ten times as long. It included people who we thought might be insulted by being approached for comment with such a short delivery time, yet the quality and quantity of responses received still startles me.

It is important to note that this exercise follows only a few months after the Autumn 2006 issue of *Art South Africa*, for which editor Sean O'Toole sent out a call to regular contributors to the journal, requesting reflections on avant-garde practice in post-Apartheid South Africa. He has kindly granted us permission to republish his overview of the avant-garde from that issue. With all due respect to O'Toole's process, which did elicit some interesting commentary,

I felt a more primary question needed addressing; that is, whether the 'avant-garde' as a notion is still a viable or tenable one at all; intractably determined – is it or isn't it? – by its siamese relationship to Modernism and many of the undesirable values promoted by certain aspects of that discourse.

I was hoping for an engagement at once more fundamental and more complex, asking the question in a more 'global' sense, that is, in a broadly theoretical sense. I will not attempt to sum up or contextualise responses received, or add any further ruminations on the state of the avant-garde, suffice to say it is also interesting, as some writers here point out, that as artistic director for *Documenta XI*, Okwui Enwezor used the historical avant-garde as a counterfoil against which to begin reconceptualising around the project of contemporary art. As part of *Performa07*, a panel discussion scheduled for March 12, 2007 will focus on the notion of the term 'radical', "as it has been used in the past to describe live actions by artists intentionally penetrating broadly held values of the art economy and the institutions that maintain it...even at a time when a buoyant art market quickly absorbs such strategies." (press release received via e-flux, March 10, 2007).

As always, it devolves on language, context and positioning, and the contributors published here reveal a range of attitudes, ideologies and positions assuring me that it is a question still happily packed with discursive tension.

This book consists entirely of email correspondences that took place over a period of only four weeks, with the one exception being a question posed verbally to sound artist and systems-man Brian Eno during a public lecture at the University of Cape Town. A transcript of that exchange is published here. Correspondents were free to send anything they felt best represented their position, hoping that the short deadline would encourage the kind of immediacy that can so quickly become diluted through excessive deliberation. My editorial parameters were straightforward: whatever was received by the print deadline would be published. I was hoping to receive scholarly texts, visual responses, rude ripostes, resource lists, fiction and anecdotes and they're all here, without the authors expecting any financial compensation.

So why *One Million and Forty-Four Years (and Sixty Three Days)*? In probing attitudes towards the avant-garde, I began this process thinking, one also probes attitudes towards convention.

Paradoxically, the historical avant-garde has become a convention, and 'radical' acts are fodder for commercial and branding exercises conceived for audiences imagined to have 45-second concentration spans and 3-second memories.

According to a declaration by Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, January 17, 1963 is Art's Birthday. Before this day, there was no art, but on this day, Art was 1 000 000 years old. It happened, he stated, when someone dropped a dry sponge into a bucket of water, pre-empting The Smith's *The Queen is Dead* (1986) – a post-Sex Pistols *God Save the Queen* (1977) anti-establishment rejoinder – in which Morrissey entones, "I broke into the Palace with a sponge and a rusty spanner". Art's Birthday – and Filliou's too, as it happens – is celebrated by artists and artists' groups around the world with events, networked happenings and much eating of cake and offerings of gifts to Art. As wild as this notion might seem, by declaring Art to have a birthday Filliou questions the very convention of the notion of art: it is not self-evident. The additional forty-four years and sixty three days brings us up to March 21, 2007, when this exhibition and book launch are scheduled to take place.

During the production of this publication, and heated debates concerning its contents, three phrases have made an appearance. At the studio space shared by the artists on this show (and others), 'physical criticism' was offered as an explanation by Ruth Sacks when someone tripped over a rather complex and delicate installation, resulting in a small amount of non-fatal damage. Barely separated from patent vandalism by making a claim for the 'subconscious' presiding over conscious behaviour, I found a reference to a similar strategy – in consequence if not in spirit – encouraged by the artists at the first Dada exhibition in Cologne in 1920: "Visitors were encouraged to vandalize anything in the exhibition that they did not like and some of the results were documented in the periodical [*Die Schammade*]"¹. This has many historical precedents in the form of abuse and destruction of paintings by religious zealots, Nazis and of course, feminists like Emily Pankhurst who famously attacked Velasquez' *Rokeyby Venus* (aka *The Toilet of Venus*, 1647-51) as an emblem of the objectification of the female body.

As anti-social as it might be, this new version of 'physical criticism' retains aspects of the radical or performative acts and gestures that are a residual feature of the historical avant-garde's critical

vitality. Driven by the subconscious – rather than setting out to consciously and discursively critique something – its results are still ultimately censorious. And perhaps this is not such a bad thing in some cases.

The second phrase, proposed by Ed Young, is ‘random contemporary’. This is a very useful and straightforward way of describing so many (usually photographic) works that ‘engage’ or ‘document’ the stuff of daily metropolitan banality: cityscapes, significant stains on sidewalks, transient spaces like airports or stations, and so on; usually large-scale, blurry and framed up for art fairs, where such images are incredibly popular. The ‘random contemporary’ is not confined to urban spaces, although it seems to work best there, but can also take place in living rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms and spaces of nature rather than culture. Proponents of Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics will recognise this style immediately, as a critical means to document these moments of social and interpersonal engagement presented within the context of contemporary art.

For some, Ed in particular, there is the hope that this book is a space-clearing gesture, bringing an end to all this harping on about the avant-garde. For me, I think it’s only the beginning. Which brings me to the third phrase, put forward by theorist Andrew Lamprecht. It seemed appropriate to end this book, which spans some twelve years of critical engagement with the legacies of the avant-garde, with a new discursive possibility. We have this in the form of ‘transactional aesthetics’, highlighting the legacy of Bourriaud’s influential work, presented here as a fledgling proposal disguised as a set of manuscript notes. After all, what would the avant-garde be without a manifesto or two?

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REFERENCE

¹ Steven Heller, *From Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant-Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (London/New York: Phaidon, 2003), p. 66.

ROBERT STORR
EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE
2007

CRITIC, CURATOR, ARTIST

The existence of an 'arrière-garde' or rear guard does not mean that there is an 'avant garde'. Looking around one can see many artists and tendencies that advocate a return to one or another form of traditional aesthetic value and often do so in the name of traditional social values as well. Most of what one can legitimately call retrograde or reactionary art – legitimately in the sense that the people who make it hold frankly backward looking views even if they object to the connotations of the terms previously used – is bad because it cannot measure up either to the unrealized ideals of the past or even to the level of past accomplishments in pursuit of those ideals. (One of the perpetual ironies of such conservatism is the tolerance that defenders of the good old ways have for patently mediocre variants on the masterpieces they profess to revere.) This was the fate of neo-classicism in the 20th century except for pastiches and satires by the likes of Picasso and de Chirico. The troubling thing to remember is that not all such art is dismissable because – like Picasso and de Chirico – it can be very sophisticated in its ambivalent relations to that past and very revealing of the present because of such ambivalences. The return of the repressed may not be a pleasant thing – in the case of the most extreme versions such as the Italian Novecento it may even be both an enervating and a frightening one – but in the hands of powerful artists half-truths may be very compelling not merely because they are expressed with talent, but because they are only half wrong.

However the past, even the misunderstood past exists; the future has to be made. The past may be a moving target seen over the shoulder, the future is a moving target hidden over a hill. There are special circumstances in which cultures shift from making the present and reflecting on the past to hypothesizing the future and imposing that vision on the world. Such visions are almost always half-truths as well, and often they are attached to terrible causes as well. Right now what I see is a strange inversion of the these dynamics wherein dystopian predictions based on the disasters of the 20th century – principally the rise of fascism – mean that those who might under other circumstances have been utopian members of the an avant-garde have become 'progressive-regressives' nostalgic for the worst of times in order to restore or defend the failed dreams of former avant-gardes against the failed (thank god!) dreams of former arrière-gardes – Russian Constructivism and

Dada versus neo-Classicism is the usual pairing – with the result that academically enshrined but anachronistic ideas about the avant-garde have become as much a conservative force in the arts as old style arrièrè-gardes, and maybe more so. Old modernism versus old anti-modernism – two half-truths, two mirages, ‘fascinating fascism’ and ‘fascinating revolutionary fantasies’ – not much of a choice.



DOUGLAS GIMBERG [TITLE WITHDRAWN] 2006
PHOTOGRAPH RUTH SACKS

GUSTAVO ARTIGAS

SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION 1

2002

ARTIST

Opening night at the San Diego Museum of Art: A curator reads a text on the similarities between the 1950's European avant-garde and Mexican contemporary artistry, prompting the spontaneous combustion of another participating speaker.





BAREND DE WET
EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE
2007

ARTIST AND BEE-KEEPER

I don't think the avant-guard was ever a viable or tenable notion
The most important time is now

When doing a thing now, all history and future is, say, taken into account

So nothing can be before its time
And if it is after, it is (now) of something in the past

Anybody doing something now could be followed
Who decides who to follow?

BETTINA MALCOMESS
**THIS IS THE WORK OF IDLE HANDS, OR YOU CAN'T SAY
ANYTHING ORIGINAL ABOUT THE AVANT-GARDE**
2007

FOR ANDREW

WRITER AND COLLECTOR

AN HISTORICAL NOTE ON COLLAGE

Back then, collage was the ultimate gesture of Modernism, at once original and counterfeit.

DIRECTOR'S INSTRUCTIONS TO THE POET IN THE PRELUDE TO GOETHE'S FAUST

And let your piece be all in pieces too! You'll not go wrong if you compose a stew: it's quick to make and easy to present. Why offer them a whole? They'll just fragment it anyway, the public always do.

(Goethe, 1987: 4-5)

To make a Dadaist Poem

*Take a newspaper.
Take some scissors.*

...

Tristan Tzara, 1924 (in Diepeveen 2003: 15)

OF COPIES, ORIGINALS AND LIVING WORKS OF ART

In 1920s New York, one might have been lucky to catch a glimpse of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven in one of her eccentric hats, such as a 'peach basket', a French blue trench helmet, or a hat 'tastefully but inconspicuously trimmed with gilded carrots, beets and other vegetables'. Finally, head clean shaved she would be displayed in Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp's New York Dada in all her bald glory. The same issue announced a boxing match between painters, Frank Stella and Marsden Hartley. Freytag-Loringhoven is identified as the living embodiment of Dada in America: 'she is the only one living anywhere who dresses dada, loves dada, lives dada.'

(Naumann 1994: 168-9)

OF FRAUD

At the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg, the truth hangs naked that Picasso would not have been the renowned creative genius he was if 'he did not steal' and adapt the work of anonymous (African) artists.

(Memela, *Sunday Times*, 19 March, 2006)

ON AUCTIONS

On attending the recent Sotheby's auction in Cape Town it is clear that much of the collection consisted of traditional landscape and portrait painting, often somewhere between a vernacular provincialism and romanticism. Exciting as it was that an Irma Stern painting fetched a price of over R6 million, one felt the absence of work by black South African artists, as well as more abstract, modernist work, especially given that many of the artists auctioned were contemporaries of the European avant-gardists. In South Africa the avant-garde is exotic.

ANDRÉ MALRAUX: MUSEUM WITHOUT WALLS

Difficult though it is to exclude from a work of 'savage' art its savagery...the arts of savage races impressed our artists primarily as systems of forms. ...These exotic arts broke in ... as arts of gestureless- ...expression.

(Malraux 1948: 119-120)

ART AND CURIOSITY- THE BEGINNINGS OF CUBISM

...Now these curious African effigies made a profound impression on André Derain, who gladly studied them, admiring the artful way in which the sculptors of Guinea or of the Congo succeeded in reproducing the human figure without using any of the elements of direct visual perception. ... Maurice de Vlaminck's appreciation of barbaric African sculptures, together with André Derain's musings on these bizarre objects –...– were to exert a great influence on the destiny of French art.

(Appollinaire 1912, cited in Breunig 1960: 260)

OPTICAL UNCONSCIOUSNESS

Rosalind Krauss (1993: 2-5) discusses the particular modernist vocation of the stare. John Ruskin describes his family trips as a child as a "mode of contemplative abstraction from the world", detached from purpose and understanding by the barriers of language. Whether looking at the sea, the holes in a carpet or passing through the streets of a foreign city, what is important is the recognition of a pattern, a structure, a grid. "Ruskin's view-hunting is a means of transforming the whole of nature into a machine for producing images." As such, "ignorance has these advantages. We did not travel for adventures, nor for company, but to see with our eyes..."

It is the voracious and detached hunger of the modernist stare that empties the sculptures, masks and fetishes brought back from Africa of all cultural content.

PICASSO OR AFRICA

Modernism never happened in Africa. The historical conditions of the emergence of the avant-garde were particular to Europe at the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century. *Picasso and Africa* (Standard Bank Gallery and Iziko South African National Gallery, 2006) can be read as an attempt to re-insert African art into the narrative of Western Modernism, by making the story of appropriation into one of influence. Rather than initiating a dialogue, the exhibition returns the 'repressed' to a narrative still told from one perspective – that of the moment of rupture Cubism makes with representation in the tradition of Western painting, a kind of trauma.

On the walls surrounding the collection of African masks and sculptures were a series of paintings, mostly studies for more famous works, all demonstrating some kind of visual link to the masks. In the adjoining space, however, on the wall closest to the exit is a series of drawings of a bull, nine to be exact. They demonstrate a transition from the realism of the first sketch via step by step abstraction to the purely formal, Cubist line of the final drawing. This narrative of the break that Cubism makes with realism makes no reference to the causal link between African masks and Cubism set up in the central positioning of the African masks in the other space. One could argue that it unconsciously re-enacts a repression. At the least, the contradictory curatorial narratives of these two spaces are somewhat schizophrenic.

WHOSE YOUR DADDY?

In one of his more obscure case histories Sigmund Freud deals with the supposed demonological neurosis of a seventeenth-century painter called Christoph Haizmann. Following his father's death, the painter finds himself unable to paint. On several occasions he is visited by the devil. For idle hands, the devil finds work to do. The devil comes in various guises, all of which are recorded by Haizman in the form of paintings. Initially, the devil is portrayed as a fairly respectable gentleman, but ends up resembling the horned figure we have come to know, except for the addition of two sets of breasts. Freud of course reads into the latter a variety of Oedipal possibilities, one of which being Haizman's desire to bear his own father's child. For you see, when Haizman finally gives in to the devil, it is not for knowledge or money or the love of women, all of which are on offer.

The arrangement: for nine years from the signing of agreement the devil is contracted to play father to the painter, and in exchange the painter would relinquish his soul at the end of the contract. The reason the case is recorded at all is that as the time for Haizman to honour his side of the deal grew closer, the terrified artist had approached a priest who had written the case down. Much to the relief of the priest, and Haizman, the painter successfully retrieves the contract from the devil, written as it is in blood. The story gets interesting as a case history for Freud when the supposedly 'cured' painter returns a second time to reveal there was in fact an earlier contract, written in ink. It appears that the devil was back in business. Nonetheless, this contract was also retrieved, and subsequently Haizman gave up painting and the seeming material insecurity that came with his profession to join the Jesuit order. The condition for Haizman's survival is that he paint. Without the devil as father-substitute Haizman could not have survived (literally) the grief at the loss of his father. For Freud, this strange story is an interesting psychoanalytical account of a neurosis following the trauma of loss. For me what is interesting is the contract of art with a darker power. While possibly being a bad painter or at least an unimportant one, a contract with the devil is here the condition for Haizman to paint, and the contract is endlessly renewable, something Freud's analysis entirely overlooks.

STRUGGLE

Here I think lies some clue to an essentially redemptive import of animal figures in [Dumile] Feni's work. On one level the evocation is a nostalgic one, of a pre-colonial African life and consciousness. On the other...[w]hile the piece deals with memory, it is also evocative of an animistic consciousness, especially in the detail of the child being suckled by the cow. In this sense the 'prayer' is to the natural gods of African tradition and, at the same time, a natural world populated with animal familiars.

I confess I am not sure what to make of this level in Feni's work, or exactly how to characterise its significance. On one hand, one doesn't want to overemphasize it and to yoke the artist to a specific sangoma identity...On the other hand, if one looks at the body of Feni's work, the dialogue that is set up between the human and the animal and more specifically, the appeal to the animal world in expressing and defining the artist's own identity has about it a mystical element. It is as though, in the meditative space of making

art – the possession [my emphasis], if you like of the creative process – Feni moved into a space where the two worlds were one in primitive consciousness and brought back that reality through his art, creating his sense of form through that psychically primitive experience.

(Powell in *Art South Africa*, Winter 2005: 37)

SIRENS

Michel Serres makes the point that noise is not only incidental but essential to communication...in speech “stammerings, mispronunciations... or of the technical means of communication, “background noise, jamming, static, cut-offs, hysteresis, various interruptions”. Furthermore, “to hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him”. This third man, says Serres, is the demon, the “*prosopopeia* of noise”. This is compared to “the song of the sirens”, a temptation to which we must close our ears.

(Perloff 1991: 15)

When art is antagonistic, as when we disagree, or misunderstand one another, say things we did not mean, walk off into the night, is that when we address the demon, or open our ears to the song of the sirens?

SALON DE REFUSÉS

Such indecency! ...I cannot take this painter's intentions seriously. Up to now he has made himself the apostle of the ugly and the repulsive. I should hope the derision of serious people would disgust him with his manner so contrary to art.

Felix Jahyer on Manet's *Olympia*, 1865
(in Harrison and Wood 1998: 515)

8. *We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! ... Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible?*

'Manifesto to Futurism', FT Marinetti, 1909
(in Harrison and Wood 1992: 147-8)

CONFESSIONS OF A JH PIERNEEF LOVER

If I confess to liking Pierneef, do I participate in the rear-garde reaction against the extremism of the international avant-garde that Pierneef's provincialism (return to the symbolism of a 'true nature', a kind of deco stylisation) is part of? Pierneef was very influenced

by so-called 'Bushman' rock art. In 1915, he had produced a study of these 'primitive' illustrations. Pierneef along with another researcher had presented their work at a university seminar, only to be told that on no account could this be regarded as art.

Pierneef was a man who belonged to his people – he used to say he travelled with them on the wagon.

(Van Der Waal-Braaksma 1990: 151)

STORY OF AN AFRICAN FARM

'It was one of those old wild bushmen that painted those' said the boy, nodding towards the pictures – 'one who was different to the rest. He did not know why, but he wanted to make something, so he made these... To us they are only strange things that make us laugh; but to him they were very beautiful.'

(Schreiner 1927: 37)

10 YEARS, 100 ARTISTS

South African art is currently poisoned by racism, racialism, the threat of racism, and the history of multifarious racisms. Sometimes from within, it becomes easy to forget this.

(Lamprecht in Perryer 2004: 16)

7. Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece.

'Manifesto to Futurism', FT Marinetti, 1909

(in Harrison and Wood 1992: 147-8)

VANGUARD OR AVANT-GARDE

Is there a space in South Africa for a radical politics of form after political art? Avant-garde practise is all too easily confused with the politics of identity. In contemporary South Africa, the progressive role of the avante-garde at its most simplistic is to give voice to the previously unrepresented, or at its most sophisticated to go beyond 'blackness', to be 'post-race'. For all the deconstruction of 'otherness' in theory, in the practise of reading materials like cowhide, wood or animal figures become simplified cultural signifiers: indexes of the exotic or the primitive. Curators and critics alike legitimate their positions through a global currency of difference. For Olu Oguibe there is something 'pornographic' about difference, where any part stands for the whole. Like porn's erasure and magnification, difference "fills the frame with only that

which satisfies the specifications of desire” (Oguibe 1999: 19-20). In this case a desire for difference, for the exotic, underwritten by the power to possess, to own and speak this difference, to magnify it.

“ETERNALLY CONTEMPORARY”

I am interested in what defines the contemporary.

— Ed Young

The myth of the originality of the avant-garde is best captured in what Raymond Williams calls the “almost neutral” term: the “contemporary condition” (Williams 2001: 293). This is implicit in any view of art as historical. For Arthur Danto, for example, the very definition of the work of art is contingent on the particular theories of interpretation of art at any historical moment. The binaries of original and copy, nature and artifice, practice and theory, avant-garde and kitsch, art and fashion, the exotic and the familiar, traditional and modern were what informed so much of the Modernist avant-garde’s special contract with the future. A contract, which like that of Haizman with the devil, is indefinitely postponed. While we have not gone beyond the binary, it may no longer suit the current taste for living in the present.

NOT HERE NOW

The *homelessness* of the diaspora is what legitimates the place of African art within the international art circuit by its claims to Modernity, the condition of which is a homelessness within the modern subject.

33

MEMORY AND THE LIMITS OF FORGETTING

It is important to underscore what memory in the context of post-apartheid production may connote. Memory in its inimitable way resembles the work of mourning.

(Enwezor 2004: 33)

...[T]he popular tropes of ‘resistance art’ make clear the near impossibility of any detachment from the social context within which South African art has been formed...it can be argued that no significant work of art has been produced in South Africa that has not at the same time confronted the obdurate edifice of the politics of the country’s divided memory.

(*ibid.*: 42)

GOETHE, PRELUDE TO FAUST: DIALOGUE OF THE DIRECTOR, THE POET AND THE CLOWN.

Poet: Do no remind me of that motley throng, Spare me the sight of them!...Give me the quietness where I belong. The poet's place, the stillness never stale...Only there our art thrives on the blessed nature of the heart...What glisters is the moment's, born to be soon lost; true gold lives for posterity.

Clown: Must we bring in posterity?

(Goethe 1987: 5)



2.

Als andere maht ist er in sellicher
 gestalt mir erschienen oder vorkle-
 men, und bewirungen, das ich mich
 mit meinem eignen Blüet hab
 müssen unterseweiben, die an
 dem zelt überkröfftigen, und
 licher ich außs frecht
 hab gethan.

THE SECOND APPEARANCE OF THE DEVIL TO
 CHRISTOPH HAIZMANN

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CHRISTIAN NERF *GOLDEN CALF* 2002 – ONGOING
SKETCH FOR SCULPTURE MADE WITH DIVORCÉ(E)S WEDDING RINGS
IMAGE NICOLE HOUZÉ



COLIN RICHARDS
HISTORIES OF AVANT-GARDISM IN SOUTH AFRICA
2007

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JOHANNESBURG

Under the terms of the sale, the buyer further agreed to wash the drawing off the wall if and when he decided to sell it to another collector or donate it to a museum. The subsequent owner would be entitled to proof of erasure.¹

Avant-gardism sometimes feels like the shit that never happens. Or, if it does, it rarely feels like the right shit.

Historically, the avant-garde left particular droppings on the artistic landscape at the southern tip of Africa; the digestive results of myriad associations, chance encounters, practices, cultural contingencies and the cultural circuitry which structures any artworld. The twin conceits of the avant-garde are that it signals the radically new, and the radically critical. These conceits converge in its self-appointed adversarial 'cutting edge' status within specific contexts, events, histories. And, as far as the last is concerned, very particular views of time and history. The modernism with which it most often associated is over for some, not for others.

Avant-gardism in its dominant, early modern Anglo-American form was largely concerned with medium and mediation, from the physical/symbolic quiddities of brute material to the stuff of whole systems of artistic value and consecration.

What 'art' itself is and means is part of avant-gardism. Its energies tend to be patricidal and internally directed. It often plays with itself more than others. Yet for all this insularity there is little in the world that was beyond its use. It was, is and can be capacious, or, for some, rapacious. Given its place in some or other 'clash of civilisations', which includes colonialism gives the military origins of the term a certain piquancy. What follows is set of historical moments which I think address some of the questions posed by avant-garde practice in this part of the world.

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HISTORY I

Author Samuel Beckett, an avant-garde writer of late modernism, almost taught at the University of Cape Town in 1937. Our scrape with this fate has been documented by our very own J. M. Coetzee.² Apparently Beckett's application for the post was half-hearted. He did not see himself as a teacher, and presumably saw little future in colonial social arrangements mired between

such a mountain and such a sea. Perhaps it promised too few opportunities for the ferocious despair he ultimately made his object. At any rate and more to the point here is an event four decades later, involving Beckett and the avant-garde's ever-unstable entanglements between what is artistically advanced and what politically progressive.

A number of Beckett's texts were included for reading during a 1975 tour of South Africa by Irish actor Patrick Magee. This Beckett could not sanction. According to his London agent "Mr Beckett has never allowed his plays to be performed in South Africa and this programme of excerpts must be subjected to the same embargo."³ Beckett occasionally reassessed his position on this embargo, but mostly stuck to it. He did allow the licensing of staging *Waiting for Godot* at Johannesburg's Market Theatre in 1976, directed by Benjy Francis and with Mannie Manim as artistic director. The director and actors had to live outside Johannesburg and commute to the theatre, as required by the Group Areas Act. Travelling was difficult and often dangerous for the cast, and also affected audience attendance. There was also another production of *Endgame* in Cape Town in the same year. Neither was a great success. A few years passed before the staging of the better-known and more successful Baxter Theatre production of *Waiting for Godot*, directed by Donald Howarth with actors John Kani, Winston Ntshona, Bill Flynn and Peter Picollo. This production was staged at the Old Vic in February 1981.⁴ Here Beckett appears to have been persuaded by the arrest of Kani and Ntshona after performing Athol Fugard's *Sizwi Bansi is Dead* in the Butterworth Town Hall.

The point of all this is that it speaks to the complicated relations between avant-garde art and political systems, between often competing systems of value, and of the powerlessness (or otherwise) of challenging and critical art. It must remain part of the constitutional crisis of avant-gardism that it works within the very set of conditions, contradictions and tensions it seeks to transcend or overturn. Its resistance to pluralist quiescence laced with ironical distance is a precarious affair.

But there is something else about Beckett involving the avant-garde. In the early years of the Second World War, and before, Beckett lost many games of chess to one of the icons of

Euro-American avant-gardism, Marcel Duchamp.⁵ Duchamp's comments on chess put us in mind of what we might understand as a primary impulse within avant-garde practice:

*Chess is a sport. A violent sport... that does imply artistic connotations in the actual geometric patterns and variations of the actual setup of the pieces and in the combinative, tactical, strategical, and positional sense. It's a sad expression though – somewhat like religious art – it is not very gay. If it is anything, it is a struggle.*⁶

Violence, play, struggle, even sadness, all characterize avant-gardism of a certain kind. It is perhaps not for nothing that Duchamp's influence on art in the heyday of Apartheid was at best intermittent, confined to the occasional conceptual outburst from a handful of artists. It is worth speculating on the almost total absence of that dimension of avant-garde practice which focused on institutional critique (broadly speaking) in the dominant South African artworld in earlier years. Absent too were the anti-colonial actions and inclinations of both Dada and Surrealism. Clearly these traditions were of little use locally, where the principle ethos would have been to encourage settler communities to support its institutions, and to force the rest to abide by them. It is not surprising then that the 'art for art's sake', more formalist/ expressionist version of avant-gardism prevailed in early South African avant-gardist modernism. It is not too easy to imagine, for example, a place for a work like Hannah Höch's photomontage *Sadness: From an Ethnographic Museum* (1925) amongst the influential discourses of avant-gardism here, a work which uncannily anticipates some of Candice Breitz's early work.⁷

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HISTORY II

So it was a critically relatively benign avant-garde tradition which was imported to South Africa in early to mid-modernism, and one which aligns best (with many variations) with the efforts of Clement Greenberg. Greenberg's avant-gardism was not particularly radical insofar as it did not actually call the major value systems of the dominant artworld (which would here be essentially colonial) into question. Some may have thought it did – "my child could do it" – but this is an error.

Unlike Beckett, who almost came here, Greenberg did; in fact around the time of the Beckett productions in 1975. His coming was “a very important ‘happening’ in our art world.”⁸ He was considered locally as “the prime spokesman for the Abstract Expressionist School” and, importantly, dismissed “the Pop art school... as a ‘novelty art’”.⁹ During his visit, to his abiding credit, Greenberg tramped on many artworld toes. He seems, unexpectedly, to have inverted the kitsch/avant-garde relation which formed the bedrock of his aesthetic when he selected and adjudicated the National ART – SOUTH AFRICA – TODAY art competition. Was he serious, some wondered, when his practiced eye was caught by a motley assortment of Sunday painters and popular genres, including kitsch wildlife and deranged flower painting?¹⁰ Some saw his call for what they considered national parochialism over internationalism equally distressing. According to him, what mattered “is what South Africans themselves think of their art... South African art will have to make it on its own, in South Africa and with South Africans – just as art in the United States had to, with Americans and in America.” The fact that he was addressing an increasingly anxious and isolated white minority community of artists may have something to do with his perversity, a perversity enhanced by his view that those “South African artists who go after an ‘African identity’ seem to me to be overrated, as gifted as they are.”¹¹

We might imagine those working with pop ‘novelty’ and going after Africa would include the likes of the eccentric ‘accidental situationist’ Walter Battiss and a young Norman Catherine.¹² Battiss was perhaps more conventionally ‘pop’ focused, and involved himself with curio culture, kitsch, media manipulation and performance.¹³ Norman Catherine, according to Ashraf Jamal (rather lacking in critical restraint), is

*...South Africa's foremost Pop artist, that is an artist who, over thirty years, has conveyed a distinctly populist imaginary; he is also, by virtue of his dynamic fusion of European/American and African styles, one of the first South African artist's to locate his art in a strikingly hybrid international arena. The root of this feat lies in the temperament of his art and its urban vernacular, a feat which, today, cannot be underestimated.*¹⁴

There is another, darker Africanesque or primitivist turn to Catherine's work offered by Raymund van Niekerk (then director of the South African National Gallery): "This painter has deliberately taken into his work the acculturated art products of his black fellow countrymen – they temper his own western virtuosity."¹⁵

Primitivism, so closely linked to avant-garde aesthetics, returns again over a decade later in 1987, when a 'third wave' abstract expressionism (NNP, or New New Painting) deposited the likes of critic and museum curator Kenworth Moffett and painter Graham Peacock on our shores.¹⁶ Moffett described Peacock's pedigree as looking "past – or through – the second generation, the 'colour field' painters, to the first generation, the Abstract Expressionists".¹⁷ Moffett, according to Bill Ainslie of the Johannesburg Art Foundation and a prime mover in the development of the Thupelo workshop, saw the latter as "representing the first indication that South African artists can play a role in international developments." The Thupelo (tr. teach by example) International Artist's Workshop program was established in Johannesburg in 1985 by Bill Ainslie and David Koloane and funded by the United States – South Africa Leader Exchange Program (USSALEP) for 1985, 1986 and partially 1987.¹⁸ In terms of aesthetic inclination the debt to Abstract Expressionism was manifest in a number of works produced under the loose auspices of Thupelo, including David Koloane's *Untitled* (1987), *Untitled* (1988) and *Untitled* (1989).¹⁹ Koloane tended to deny the Abstract Expressionist lineage, insisting that the Thupelo "workshop concept was not adopted in South Africa with any specific aesthetic program in mind; its concerns were wholly pragmatic."²⁰

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Pragmatism aside, Peacock proved to be a resolute formalist/materialist avant-gardist, and a militant eschewer of 'context' in the appreciation and meaning of painting. His position links directly to a comment made by Greenberg in his earlier visit, where he asks:

*What do you know about Magdalenian or Aurignacian hunters who did very good paintings in the South of France and the north of Spain or about the so-called Bushman art, some of which is very good. What do we know about their culture? Does that prevent us from experiencing and getting a lot of satisfaction from a lot of the art?*²¹

Inflamations of aesthetic myopia may have more to do with this “experiencing and getting a lot of satisfaction” than anything more deeply cultural, more profoundly avant-garde.

At any rate Greenberg’s advice to South Africa appeared in June 1976, the time of the Soweto uprising.²² This was also the period in which the South African defence force entered sovereign Angola in ‘Operation Savannah’. This act of aggression was supported by the United States as an extension of the Cold War, a conjunction which raised questions about the Thupelo workshop and NNP a decade or so later.²³ We were aware of American support for Apartheid, but more specifically the connection between Abstract Expressionism and the conduct of the Cold War in post-War Europe, and, more generally, the political use of apolitical ‘free’ avant-garde abstract art, all of which raised disquieting questions at the time.²⁴

Such questions were intensified when Peacock showed various forms of abstraction, including a number of images of Ndebele wall painting in an illustrated lecture at the Johannesburg Art Foundation. At the time the KwaNdebele ‘homeland’ was in deep conflict, something discussed by, amongst others, photographer David Goldblatt in two successive forewords to Margaret Courtney-Clarke’s book *Ndebele: the Art of an African Tribe*.²⁵ Goldblatt himself had documented the experience of the forced removal and resettlement of the Ndebele in his *The Transported of KwaNdebele* in 1983.²⁶ None of this was of any moment to Peacock. Nor was the history of the form of abstraction he showed. Nor was he concerned with any referencing in these forms, or the social embeddedness of the practice of wall painting as such. Only the pure, optical ‘visuality’ and form interested him; all then and there. In some ways he appeared to be working with a crude version of the idea of ‘formal affinities’ underlying the rather more sophisticated debates engaged by the controversial *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* held at MOMA, New York in 1985.²⁷ This was the true avant-garde.

What we were dealing with was not simply the presence of a particular aesthetic tradition, but the relationship of that tradition to current politics on the one hand, and the attitude it presented to popular culture (often characterized as kitsch) on the other. The ideology (often couched as pragmatism) of anti-ideology

was sharpened by local artist Bill Ainslie's (Johannesburg Art Foundation) pointed defence of the value of the workshop format:

*Ideology is a dead end. True power comes from a clean discovery of the most unexpected possibilities in the most unexpected places, creating the unexpected... An art workshop is a place where this can happen. For one, there is the direct involvement with the material needing to be shaped, for another there is no pressure on it to be shaped for any purpose other than inner necessities...*²⁸

Ainslie's emphasis on directness, on purity (cleanness) of means, on 'inner' necessity, his ideology of anti-ideology intermingled with Koloane's 'pragmatism', all figure in same modernist avant-gardist aesthetic discourse, the same politics of art.

The responses to criticisms of Thupelo at the time were instructive.²⁹ The criticisms were read as racist; black artists were required to make 'resistance art', and include popular, even kitsch visual cultures such an art draws on. According to Koloane, there is also "a general tendency in South Africa art circles to expect that black artists should not express themselves in a non-representational mode".³⁰ This tendency, for him, suggests "that only artists from other race groups are capable of *transcending* realistic expression." [My italics]. And it is, by extension, in such transcendence that avant-garde potential lies. While Koloane focuses on 'realistic expression', he also points to a conjunction between 'pop' art and politics in resistance art, including cartoons, graffiti, the symbols of apartheid economy, T-shirt imagery, banners, posters. These have all had a profound and arguably not fully recognised effect on what our artistic practices have been critically capable of. The unresolved tension here is between 'advanced' form and a critical art.³¹

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Whatever else it did, Koloane's response entrenched an opposition between 'advanced' abstraction and 'retrograde' figuration, reiterating the founding tenets of one form of modernist avant-garde practice advocated by Bill Ainslie amongst others. Ainslie is surprisingly close to Greenberg in one of his formulations of advanced art. In an interview with Avril Herber, Ainslie suggests that "one of the challenges to artists is to use art to define the limits of art – to establish the area of competence of art", a very

Greenbergian formulation.³² For Ainslie, “painting stands there for what it is”; modern art is no longer “obliged to serve any orthodoxy”, and the artist is free “from any ideological standpoint”. His own modernist orthodoxy (and ideology) is not unexpectedly hostile to mass culture and the products of industry: “mass culture also means people not speaking for themselves, but conforming” and “smothering” their “creativity.”³³ Ainslie’s modernist, avant-gardist orthodoxy suffocates the popular, performance, conceptualism and all the other arguably more fractious and engaged contending histories of critical modernism.

HISTORY III

Notwithstanding the pervasive if not always explicit formalism of avant-garde practice, it is possible to read some of the ‘facts’ of form – the ‘art’ in art – in non-instrumental but still socially and artistically critical ways. In another context, David Koloane argues that Apartheid “was a politics of space more than anything... Claiming art is also reclaiming space.”³⁴ Here Koloane seems to approach an argument for the reappropriation of Abstract Expressionist space in the local situation. This space is literal and embodied in the scale of the works, their often being created outdoors and on the ground rather than vertical. In this last they follow the logic of ‘flatbed’ painting described by Leo Steinberg.³⁵

Locally, space was clearly linked to all those laws regulating association, habitation and movement. This kind of reading of space as semiotic and/or symbolic recalls T. J. Clark’s reading of the brute fact of modernist flatness, a key critical term in the archive of the painting practiced by Graham Peacock and his cohorts. For Clark, the fundamental question about flatness is how “a matter of effect or procedure’ can come to stand for a value. He argues, for the history which is his focus, that flatness could be “imagined to be some kind of analogue of the ‘Popular... plain, workmanlike, honest manual labour’ ”. Or “flatness could signify modernity, with the surface meant to conjure up the mere two dimensions of posters, labels, fashion prints and photographs.”³⁶

This suggests a possible convergence of literal and symbolic space in early Thupelo work, where social space is mapped onto actual pictorial space, this last being something of an arena for action. The works could be seen as offering correlatives of action in space, existentially and symbolically liberated from draconian

(in our case) social control. This view of space as an arena follows more critic's Harold Rosenberg's view of action painting than Greenberg's formalism, or its mannered moment in the work of Graham Peacock.³⁷

These readings raise some queries about the relation between artmaking and intellectual work. The aesthetic tradition within which Ainslie and Peacock were working often carries an air – indeed often the stench – of virulent anti-intellectualism. Indeed, glossing Greenberg's presentations in South Africa, Susan van Schalkwyk reiterates that "kitsch is academic, and... whatever is academic is kitsch." Van Schalkwyk refers approvingly to Greenberg's comments on the impossibility of teaching art, of the crisis of studio teaching, "where discourse, thought and intellectualizing are defeated."³⁸

This is a sensitive matter, as it can, and has, in my view, played out in ways which did not and does not always serve the participants of the Thupelo workshop well. This also relates to wider practices, and goes to the heart of the avant-garde of which intellectual work is often a fundamental part.

Local black artists would have been denied access to formal institutions of learning for many decades, an exclusion which would not have been a matter of choice. The conditions for the development of organic intellectuals were unpromising during the many years leading up to 1994. In a different context, and about a much earlier moment in the history of South African art, artists David Koloane and Durant Sihlali both mention this lack of access and negative assumptions about intellectual work as a source of distress. Referring to the Polly Street era in the late 1950s, Ivor Powell observes that the teachers "encouraged white artists to work in one way and black artists in another." Koloane goes on to suggest that black artists were infantilized in some of these settings, and pressured to work

*...in a primitive, untutored way. If a black artist was referred to as primitive, that meant he was going in the right direction. Blacks weren't encouraged to pursue an academic training... What I find ironic is that artists were not encouraged to develop... were not encouraged to read further, to find out about artistic modes or artistic movements.*³⁹

Elsewhere, Powell recalls a direct statement from Sihlali, also referring to Polly Street: "The thing is the whites around the place all had university educations. But they refused to share their knowledge with us. They wanted us to be different, we wanted to have access to the same resources they did. There was conflict."⁴⁰ Sihlali's view is captured by a review published in 1960 by Cecil Skotnes, writing about John Hlatwayo. Here the relation between primitivism and intellectual work is disfigured by a referencing to practices of Europe, not Africa. For Skotnes, Hlatwayo's

*...work has developed in recent years from a strict (rather derivative) realism to an individuality which is very striking. This individuality is primitive, but entirely in the European sense: I mean that in his simplification of forms, in his subject matter and in his choice of strong, single tones of colour, he more resembles European primitives like Douanier Rousseau than the primitives of central Africa. In composition and drawing he always resolves his problems intellectually: nothing is fortuitous.*⁴¹

From this, as with the Thupelo project, it appears that that dimension of modernism that valued authenticity, which it assigned to directness, spontaneity, instinct, purity, innocence – the special province of the child, the other, the insane, the untutored, and (sometimes) the women, sundry outsiders and noble savages would inhibit the involvement with the pop culture of the city and advanced avant-garde art alike.⁴² The division of labour between the head and the hand, the privilege of the latter, taken with exclusion from and hostility to institutions and intellectual work must count as a profound undermining of avant-gardist potential in this part of the world.

HISTORY IV

Duchamp's mention of violence in chess is perhaps surprising, but apt for avant-garde art. One of the difficulties with the kind of avant-gardism which characterized early South African modernism is the absence of violence, symbolic or otherwise. The best on offer seemed to be the polite, egotonic violence of expressionism. This version of avant-gardism and its variants often came to be seen as a refuge and a panacea; something akin to Matisse's armchair.⁴³

Many of the earlier generations of South African artists experienced their milieu through the expressive languages of European painting, including the kind of painterly avant-gardism we associate with Greenberg. That tradition – like so much of what avant-gardism was or is – was (and remains) predicated on ‘primitivism’ as a form of resistance to prevailing pictorial norms in painting, and (for some) wider social/creative conduct. But resistance here is largely to the forms and fancies of Western Europe and the United States, not the colonies. Or, if in the colonies, in forms which at base, with some variation, supported the artistic and social status quo.

In important ways, avant-gardism in a neo- or postcolonial context was part of the recent Picasso debate.⁴⁴ What is interesting is that at least in some important sense Picasso’s reaction to African sculpture was not formal but visceral:

All alone in that awful museum... Les Demoiselles d’Avignon must have come to me that day, but not at all because of the forms: but because it was my first canvas of exorcism – yes, absolutely!... Braque... wasn’t ever afraid of them. Exorcism never interested him. Because he didn’t feel what I called Everything, life, I don’t know what... everything that isn’t us.”⁴⁵

This viscosity seems more risky and unstable than expressionism tended to allow.

There is a somewhat ironical aspect to avant-garde as institutional critique which reminds me of what Njabulo Ndebele, in quite another context and in quite a different way, called (after Roland Barthes) “the spectacle of excess” of Apartheid. This “brazen openness” not only prefers, as he argues, exteriority to interiority, but in fact actually works to obliterate interiority.⁴⁶ In a sense the formal-expressive form of avant-gardism moves towards interiority as it does insularity, while the institutional critique forms of avant-gardism are necessarily public, exterior, and often spectacular.

Critique remains foundational to any notion of the avant-garde. How much avant-gardist critique articulates with, say, post-colonial critique, remains a key and vexing question. There is very little of that part of avant-garde practice which addressed the institutions and protocols of the artworld imported from Europe. What was

imported were varieties of formalism and expressionism. Of course there is no place in a colony for a critique of its institutions, the very institutions it seeks to entrench and validate in both the settler and the colonized groups.

But there is also another factor. To be sure critique has itself become so profoundly commodified that it is, however critical, always at great risk of simply servicing the accumulation of cultural capital and lubricating 'business as usual'. The balance seems to tip more and more in the direction of fractured complicity; indeed, there is now a rather shameless triumphalism associated with complicity. If you've got it, flaunt it and get the T-shirt. I wonder, for example, what the alleged difference is between the dirty money of, say, a criminal like Brett Kebble who until his murder funded the then-most expensive art competition in South Africa amongst other things, and the dirty money allegedly associated with the Sindika Dikolo African Collection of Contemporary Art currently going on show at the Arsenale at the forthcoming *52nd Venice Biennale*.⁴⁷ Does it matter? Avant-gardist adversariality seems to offer no prophylactic against malignant infections of blood money, nor is its criticality secure and without compromise; perhaps this is both its strength and its weakness. Perhaps Johanna Drucker is right when she says "complicity suggests mutual gain".⁴⁸ But how mutual can a gain be in the oppositional energy which seems to be at the heart of the avant-garde enterprise? How can we imagine such mutuality afresh without being paralysed by compromise or our commitment to critique? Does this matter? Whatever the case, the claims and conceits of the avant-garde here in Africa are faced with the test that they are anything but participants as usual in 'business as usual': nothing special; and, if so, like anything else in the artworld.

Charles Baudelaire, that European who documented the birth of the modernist, avant-gardist enterprise, spoke of both dandyism and criminality as foundational in that birth.⁴⁹ We seem, in our avant-gardist inclinations, to have a surfeit of the first, and a dearth of the last. I would think we need to restore senses of criminality and violence in our notion of avant-garde art, something of the kind we might glimpse in the more transgressive works of Tracey Rose, or Steven Cohen, or Samson Mudzunga.

NOTES

¹ Lewis Lapham, 'Wall Painting' in his *30 Satires* (New York: The New Press, 2003), p. 26.

² J. M. Coetzee, 'Samuel Beckett in Cape Town: An Imaginary History' in James and Elizabeth Knowlson eds., *Beckett Remembering: Remembering Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

³ James Knowlson. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), pp. 637-638.

⁴ See 'Photographic Record of Beckett Productions', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, number 7 (Spring 1982), pp. 119-125.

⁵ Knowlson *ibid.*, p. 289 and pp. 300-302.

⁶ Quoted in Deirdre Bair. *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), p. 465. Beckett regarded Duchamp as a brilliant chess player, and we know that the artist produced a remarkable book on the subject, from which this extract comes.

⁷ See plate 180, Paul Wood ed., *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde* (New Haven; Yale 1999), p. 235.

⁸ See notice, cover, *Arts Calendar/Kunskalender* (July 1975).

⁹ *ibid.* 'Seminar with Clement Greenberg at UNISA, Pretoria, July 1975', transcribed and edited by Susan van Schalkwyk *de Arte* no.26 (September 1976). Greenberg gave presentations in Pretoria and Cape Town; see Susan van Schalkwyk, "Clement Greenberg and Art Education" *de Arte* No.26 (September 1976), p. 25. See also Clement Greenberg, 'Complaints of an Art Critic' in Charles Harrison and Fred Orton eds., *Modernism, Criticism, Realism: Alternative Contexts for Art* (London: Harper & Row, 1984).

¹⁰ This information comes from a variety of sources involved in the exhibition. See also Esmé Berman, 'Greenberg, The Catalyst'. *Arts Calendar/Kunskalender* (September 1975).

¹¹ See *S.A. Kunskalender/S.A. Arts Calendar*, vol. 1, no. 5 (June 1976), p.10.

¹² See Kathryn Smith, 'Accidental Situationist, or, What Happened When Battiss Thought Out Loud' in *Walter Battiss: Gentle Anarchist* (Johannesburg: Standard Bank Gallery, 2005).

¹³ See his silkcreen work *Liza* (1973) in Lesley Spiro, 'From Karoo Landscapes to Human Mutants' in Kendell Geers, *Contemporary South African Art: The Gencor Collection* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1997), p. 30.

¹⁴ Ashraf Jamal, 'Now and Then' in *Norman Catherine: Now and Then* (Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery, 2004), p. 4. For Walter Battiss, see Andries Oliphant, 'Modernity and Aspects of Africa in the Art of Walter Battiss' in *Walter Battiss: Gentle Anarchist* (Johannesburg: Standard Bank Gallery, 2005). For Andrew Verster, see *Mapping Terra Incognita: A Retrospective Exhibition of Work by Andrew Verster from 1957 to 1997* (Durban: Durban Art Gallery, 1997).

¹⁵ Unpaginated, *Norman Catherine 1986/1987: Recent Paintings, Sculptures and Assemblages* (Hyde Park: The Goodman Gallery, 1987).

¹⁶ Graham Peacock, in a relatively recent email correspondence with James Elkins, suggested (not without qualification) that "...there is indeed a strong link [between] the NNP and Greenberg." See James Elkins, *Master Narratives and Their Discontents* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 77. Elkins puts the origins of New New Painting in the early 1990s. He also mentions Kenworth Moffett as being involved in this 'movement', note 38, p. 74.

¹⁷ n.p. Kenworth Moffett, '[Extract] Post-Colour Field Painting' in *Graham Peacock* (Victoria: Hughes Art, 1986).

¹⁸ After they had attended Triangle New York Workshops at Tony Caro's invitation that year and the year before the first workshop took place at the Alpha Training Centre in Broederstroom about 15 km from Johannesburg. For further background see Robert Loder, 'Epilogue' in Jennifer Law ed., *Cross-Currents: Contemporary Art Practice in South Africa. An Exhibition in Two Parts* (Somerset: Atkinson Gallery, 2000). See also <http://www.trianglearts.org/europe/southafrica/jburg/> and Robert Loder, 'An International Workshop Movement' in *Persons and Pictures: The Modernist Eye in Africa* (Johannesburg: Newtown Galleries, 1995). For funding, see n.p. 'Training Programs: Black Artists', USSALEP 1985 Program Report.

¹⁹ See Jennifer Law ed., *Cross-Currents: Contemporary Art Practice in South Africa. An Exhibition in Two Parts* (Somerset: Atkinson Gallery, 2000), p. 24 and p. 81; David Elliott ed., *Art From South Africa* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1990), fig. 2, p. 58; and *Persons and Pictures: The Modernist Eye in Africa* (Johannesburg: Newtown Galleries, 1995), fig. 22, p. 44 and fig. 23, p. 43.

²⁰ The pedagogical value of the workshop format impressed David Koloane after his two-year experience at the University of London. See David Koloane, 'The Thupelo Art Project' in David Elliott ed., *Art from South Africa* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1990), p. 84.

²¹ Elkins, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

²² See Ali Khangela Hlongwane, Sifiso Ndlovu and Mthobi Mutloatse eds., *Soweto '76: Reflections on the Liberation Struggles* (Houghton: Mutloatse

Arts Heritage Trust, 2006) and Elsabé Brink, Gandhi Malungane, Steve Lebelo, Dumisane Ntshangase and Sue Krige, *Soweto 16 June 1976* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001).

²³ See Sophia du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola: Die Verhaal van Suid-Afrika se Soldate in Angola 1975-1976* (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, 1989); Gavin Cawthra, *Brutal Force: The Apartheid War Machine*. (London: IDAF, 1986), pp. 144-155 and Hilton Hamann, *Days of the Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa's Apartheid Era Military Generals* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2001), pp. 1-45.

²⁴ The sources available at the time were: Max Kozloff, 'American Painting During the Cold War' in *Artforum* vol. 11 no. 9 (May 1973); Eva Cockroft, 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War', in *Artforum* vol. 12, no. 10 (June 1974); David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, 'Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting', in *Prospects* No. 3 (1977) and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). See also Francis Francina ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (London: Paul Chapman, 1985).

²⁵ The cover bears the one-word title *Ndebele*, the full title only appearing on the title page, which suggests an entirely appropriate anxiety about the language of 'tribe' and the homogenisation of 'African' cultural practices. Margaret Courtney-Clarke, *Ndebele: The Art of an African Tribe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002).

²⁶ See Omar Badsha ed., *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart* (Cape Town; The Gallery Press, 1986), pp. 34-41. The series was finally published as *A South African Odyssey: The Transported* (New York; Aperture, 1990). Some of these were also included on the recent *Black, Brown, White: Photography from South Africa* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2004), curated by Gerald Matt, Thomas Miessgang and Jyoti Mistry.

²⁷ We had access to parts of this debate at the time, including most of the essays eventually collected in Russell Ferguson, William Olander, Marcia Tucker and Karen Fiss eds., *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture* (New York/Cambridge Mass.: The New Museum of Contemporary Art/MIT, 1990).

²⁸ Bill Ainslie, 'An Artists Workshop – Flash in the Pan or a Brick that the Builders Rejected', in *Proceedings: The State of Art in South Africa Conference July 1979* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1979), pp. 81-82.

²⁹ Colin Richards, 'Alternative, Abstract Art? It's All in His Mind' in *Weekly Mail* (October 23 to October 29, 1987), p. 21.

³⁰ David Koloane, 'The Thupelo Art Project' in David Elliott ed., *Art From South Africa* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1990), p. 84. In his text for this publication Koloane mentions Thupelo, and speaks of his paintings of that period as "largely nonobjective as I experienced various techniques, colours, and formal concerns." (p. 146).

³¹ See Sue Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa* (Cape Town/Johannesburg/London: David Philip/Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1989), pp. 96-97.

³² I am thinking here of Greenberg's characterization of modernist painting: "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." See Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' in John O'Brian ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 4 'Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 60.

³³ Avril Herber, *Conversations: Some People, Some Place, Some Time, South Africa* (Johannesburg: Bateleur Press, 1979), pp. 105, 107.

³⁴ David Koloane and Ivor Powell, 'David Koloane and Ivor Powell, in Conversation', in Clémentine Deliss ed., *Seven Stories: About Modern Art in Africa* (London: Whitechapel, 1995), p. 265.

³⁵ "Something happened in painting around 1950... pictures no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals." Leo Steinberg, 'Other Criteria' in his *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 82-85.

³⁶ "[T]here is no fact without metaphor, no medium without its being made the vehicle of some sense or other." TJ Clarke, 'The Painting of Modern Life' in Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris eds, *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts* (London: Phaidon, 1992), pp. 45-46. Interestingly, this collection also contains Greenberg's 'Modernist Painting' and Eva Cockroft's 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War'.

³⁷ See Harold Rosenberg, 'American Action Painting' in *The Anxious Object* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

³⁸ Susan van Schalkwyk, 'Clement Greenberg and Art Education' in *de Arte* no.26 (September 1976), p. 23.

³⁹ David Koloane and Ivor Powell, 'David Koloane and Ivor Powell, in Conversation' in Clémentine Deliss ed., *Seven Stories: About Modern Art in Africa* (London: Whitechapel, 1995), p. 262.

⁴⁰ Ivor Powell, ' 'Us Blacks' – Self-Construction and the Politics of Modernism' in Ricky Burnett ed., *Persons and Pictures: The Modernist Eye in Africa*. (Johannesburg: Newtown, 1995), p. 16. On Polly Street, see Elza Miles, *Polly Street: The Story of an Art Centre* (Johannesburg: The Ampersand Foundation, 2004).

⁴¹ Quoted in Elza Miles, *Polly Street: The Story of an Art Centre* (Johannesburg: The Ampersand Foundation, 2004), pp. 36-39.

⁴² As photographer Santu Mofokeng has it, 'oumense, vroomense, kaffirs en kinders.' For an account of the African city and modernism, see Gwendolyn Wright, 'The Ambiguous Modernisms of African Cities' in Okwui Enwezor ed., *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* (Munich: Prestel, 2001).

⁴³ "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue". Henri Matisse, 'Notes of a Painter' in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 76.

⁴⁴ 'Picasso in Africa' in *Art South Africa* vol. 4, no. 4 (Winter 2006), pp. 30-40. For a response by Marilyn Martin, see 'A Disappointing Debate' in *Art South Africa* vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 2006). See also Michael North, 'Modernism's African Mask: The Stein-Picasso Collaboration' in Elizabeth Barkan and Ronald Bush eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

⁴⁵ Pablo Picasso, 'Discovery of African Art 1906-1907' in Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 33-34.

⁴⁶ Njabulo Ndebele, *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (Braamfontein: COSAW, 1991), pp. 37ff -38.

⁴⁷ See Lesley Barritt ed., *The Brett Kebble Art Awards: Two Thousand and Four* (Cape Town: Marulelo Communications, 2004) and H-Net Network for African Expressive Culture: <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~artsweb>.

⁴⁸ Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 9.

⁴⁹ See Hal Foster, *Against Pluralism* in his *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), p. 25.



ED YOUNG *BRUCE GORDON* [TORINO] 2005
PHOTOGRAPH TIZIANA ANONNE

RUTH SACKS *DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION* 2005
PHOTOGRAPH MARIO TODESCHINI



RUTH SACKS *HOTEL NAZI* 2005

WAYNE BARKER

DOES THE AVANT-GARDE EXIST????

2007

ARTIST

In South Africa, I think it had a place and a function in the Eighties. During the political turmoil and the State of Emergency. A group of artists were breaking away from the so-called traditional forms of art making that were dominating the South African art world, not only in the work but also the way the work was made, and where the work was exhibited. As we know there was a cultural boycott and access to various and different art practices around the world was difficult. There was a need to deconstruct cultural icons of the Apartheid regime, and to inform and question the system.

In 1984 Robert Weinek and I started a shebeen in downtown Johannesburg called Gallant House. Here we housed artists' studios and jazz bands from the townships as well as contemporary theatre from director Chris Pretorius. We sold alcohol to pay the performers and musicians, and to pay the rent. This was an avant-garde movement as at the time, people of different colours weren't allowed to live together, work together, sleep together.

In retrospect, the vibrancy and cross-pollination of ideas was most productive. It was almost like we believed this freedom to be normal and willed the fact that it was. This was a group of artists that refused to toe the line of the restrictions that were forced on us by the police state at this time. It worked on a social level, where people who were not allowed to exist together were creating a platform to create, play and work together. Ages varied from 65-year old saxophonists to 23-year old visual artists. The aim was to express skills, defy any form of control and to bring like-minded people together at big parties and exhibitions. This was a necessity and not a conscious movement.

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Later in 1987 I started the Fig Gallery: the Famous International Gallery or 'who gives a fuck'. These two ideas were a necessity, as the art fraternity did not accept the work we were making. We were attacking the art of the status quo as well as deconstructing the way people in South Africa were viewing art, and had no platform to do performance. Lots of young and older established artists came to exhibit at the Fig Gallery. We also took shows to nightclubs and places where you would not find art. We were also not happy to exhibit at the established galleries and would go to the Goodman and so on and get drunk and pull down our trousers and scream, "What shit art is this in a time of revolution?!" and the police would come and we would have to flee.

At the first Johannesburg Biennale, we were not part of the official selection, so I created a show using fourteen shipping containers [Laager, 1995] to showcase the work of fourteen artists who were still isolated from the mainstream. In 1996, we created the first art show in the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town, called *Scurvy*. The castle has since become a cultural venue, but at the time it was important to take an icon with such history and turn it into a cultural venue.

So my point is that it was an important time for artists to be avant-garde. Today I think that there are artists who would like to be avant-garde, but I'm afraid they have missed the boat and are without a cigar. If they think they are avant-garde, they are in a sinking paper boat with a cigar wrapped in a European-flavoured condom. If they call themselves avant-garde, they should be told it's the McDonald's version, hermetically sealed; get a life and change their day job.

I do not think there is an avant-garde in the Cape Town art scene at the moment, but it would be interesting if something intelligent would happen and they lose their precious, pretentious ideas of the avant-garde and start making some unwatered-down, un-European-rehashed art.

Love Wayne Barker
Avant Garde ARTIST
a louta continua

PS Is it time for Andrew Moletsie to get on the international art scene? We could start a forum as to how South African art is curated and seen in the rest of the world. Please email me fig2@mweb.co.za

RUTH SACKS *CONSOLATION TROPHIES* (DETAIL) 2004
TROPHIES AWARDED TO ALL NON WINNERS OF THE BRETT KEBBLE ART
AWARDS 2004 WITH CAPTIONS READING "DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY",
"BETTER LUCK NEXT YEAR" AND "I LIKED YOURS BEST"



CANDICE BREITZ

**WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO AVANT-GARDE AFRICAN
ARTISTS?**

1995

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DE ARTE MODERNO

ARTIST

The title of this paper raises immediate terminological problems: the 'Africa' to which it refers, is the construct which has until recently been accepted uncritically by Western purveyors of knowledge. Within this essentialising construct, the possibility of an avant-garde has been unthinkable. This paper will suggest the necessity to challenge the distinction that has been made between a 'European' sensibility and an 'African' sensibility within this construct, rather than accepting this distinction as unproblematic. Although I will concentrate on South African examples in my discussion, the use of the term 'Africa' will bear broader relevance later on when I discuss the manner in which the whole continent of Africa, as a concept, has been constructed in negative opposition to Western 'civilisation' in Western thought.

1. THE TRUE ORIGIN

Art History has been, since its inception, an important site for the manufacture of a particular notion of Western self-hood. This unconscious project has typically positioned Africa at an earlier position than the West on the evolutionary scale. Acknowledging this perpetuation of a progressive linearity (since the eighteenth century), it becomes necessary to cast exclusions in Art History as a function of Western self-definition which has (theoretically) precluded the possibility of an African avant-garde.

The term 'avant-garde' itself has many histories – whilst each manifestation of aesthetic avant-gardism has been particular, avant-gardism can be said to have been understood broadly as a strategy foregrounding innovation. Rather than referring historically to the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde or the Greenbergian avant-garde, the term is used here in the latter broad sense – as it is increasingly used by the South African art community to refer to certain South African artists. In the South African context, the term is generally enlisted to evoke a newness or a challenging of boundaries, a definition which is thus far fairly familiar historically. Rather than recapitulating the similarities and distinctions between well-theorized, historical avant-gardes, however, I would like to explore the binary rift which this term ('avant-garde') actuates within the South African art community, as an example of the different guises which may be assumed by the term, according to the specific cultural and political moment of its iteration. Simplistically speaking, the rift is between those who valorise the avant-garde as a progressive 'cutting-edge' and those who inveigh

against it, viewing the very notion of an avant-garde, instead, as yet another Eurocentric import.

It is important to consider the possible impetus that might provoke the investment of the South African art community into two binarily opposite characterizations of avant-gardism. This will also serve to illuminate the moment at which the whole debate around avant-gardism (which had previously hardly arisen) gained fervour in the South African context. The first camp, the avant-garde and its promulgators, lay claim to a very different past and consequently, to a very different present, than the second camp, which insists that it is necessary to pursue a more 'authentic' contemporary African vision. Andrea Vinassa (1993: 55) describes a common response to those who claim avant-garde status:

Critics [...] have sketched a scenario of callous neo-fascist white artists who are unmindful of African reality, gleaning their 'bogus postmodern style' from overseas art magazines and not their own environment.

To understand what these artists are rejecting in turning to the trends of the international art world, as opposed to seeking an 'authentic' African identity, it is necessary to describe the unspoken conditions of art-making that dominated in South Africa in the late Seventies and Eighties. Art was deployed, during this era (by artists who considered themselves oppositional to the status quo) primarily as a weapon of resistance against the Apartheid regime. Representations of AK47s and clenched fists were ubiquitous, and the making of art which did not express political resistance *recognisably*, was largely dismissed as indulgent and reactionary. It was as a result of a sense of disillusionment with this situation (which demanded an *overt* identification with the political situation, and in which many of those who now label themselves and are labelled 'avant-garde' participated), that a shift towards a more internationalist 'avant-garde' attitude was forged.

Albie Sachs, a leading cultural spokesperson for the ANC, was one of the first to publicly denounce the prevailing notion that the artist was *first* part of the struggle and only *secondarily* a cultural worker. In his article 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom' (1989), Sachs suggested that South African artists had succumbed to a state of

cultural inertia, in which expressing politically correct alignment had come to be thought of as a sufficient artistic goal in itself, thus paralyzing the potential for artists to explore the far richer and more ambiguous nature of representation. Although Sachs' article was concerned, above all, with engendering a greater cultural tolerance for all forms of art-making, it was received by the 'avant-garde-to-be' as a very specific portent of the direction in which South African art needed to develop. Kendell Geers, for example, characterized Sachs' challenge as one which could best be taken up by an 'avant-garde'. In his response to Sachs, entitled 'Art as Propaganda Inevitably Self-Destructs', Geers (1990: 23) writes:

Avant-garde art critically reexamines itself and continually readjusts its strategies, preventing it from degenerating into easy formulae. In that sense it is always dependent on history while at the same time, being a reaction against it. It is diametrically opposed to propaganda, which sets out to present only that which preserves its cause best, and in its particularism is unable to sustain any real criticism. Previously culture that perceived itself to be a weapon of the struggle, often degenerated into a state dangerously close to propaganda in its strict insistence on being politically correct.

For Geers, Sachs' public proclamation compelled a trajectory away from the particular, more specifically, what was henceforth conceived of as an 'avant-garde' trajectory. Somehow, the move away from explicitly anti-Apartheid art had been conflated with a disdain for representational imagery and an attribution of more radical potential to the forms of art heralded as avant-garde in international circles. While this stance in no way condoned an elision of the political responsibility of the artist, it did denounce any sign of particularism in the expression of political issues as inherently problematic:

Increasingly we encounter clichés debasing Eurocentric traditions. Swan Lake is suddenly compared with and seen as inferior to Zulu dancing. It becomes fashionable to pay lip service to Afrocentrism and to denounce European values. This is unnecessarily counter-productive... the range of possible modes of expression in South Africa is unique in its position of having the best of the First and Third Worlds. It is only through the critical examination and mutual acknowledgment of these traditions, that a uniquely African avant-garde may be born (1990: 24).

It is thus in the context of a claustrophobic imperative to create

politically explicit art, that the shift to a call for South African avant-gardism, articulated here by Geers, must be understood. Yet, what Geers fails to acknowledge is that the 'healthy competition', which he posits as the usurper of this claustrophobia, cannot be regarded as an open competition. All competitions have rules, and if one is not familiar with these rules, one simply cannot play the game:

In the search for new forms of expression, avant-garde art sets up a healthy state of competitiveness. Artists find themselves competing with history as well as each other to find a personal, unique solution to the question of representation. This raises the general standard of art.... Avant-gardism is by its nature not as accessible as propaganda. For this reason it has often been dismissed as elitist. The mistake in this country has been to lower the standards of art, in the hope of appealing to a wider audience. This art only resulted in creating culturally lazy people and reducing the span of possible cultural appreciation (1990: 24).

There is a peculiarly South African irony in the fact that the proponents of avant-gardism, in denouncing particularism towards a more inclusive visual culture, unintentionally effected a rift between those who know the 'rules' and those who don't. In this case, as in most South African predicaments, the rift is a racial (and class) one, which falls between formally-educated white artists, and black artists who have seldom been given access to these and other 'rules', as a result of the massive disparity of resources and educational facilities under Apartheid.

The implications of the call for an avant-garde could, of course, not resonate homogeneously in a fragmented South African visual community. Despite the openly-stated leftist affiliation of the avant-garde, there was a second camp which suspected a complicity between the adoption of what were perceived as high cultural traditions (that is, avant-garde strategies), and Eurocentric colonialist manoeuvres. A rhetoric sprinkled with terms like 'improvement' and 'standards', tasted to many, too much like the perverted enlightenment principles which they had been forced to swallow under the Apartheid regime.

Thomas McEvilley (1995: 55) has suggested, in response to similar

cultural rifts, that:

In contrast [to traditional or non-Modern societies], the ideas underlying and surrounding the production of European art for the last several centuries have included the idea that the destiny of art is to embody the force of progress; the positive evaluation of innovation through which that progress is to be attained; an emphasis on individual sensibility as the medium through which that innovation is to be effected and a consequent elevation of the person of the artist to a stature above that of the artisan.

The question that is prompted by the latter observation, is phrased by McEvilley as follows: "If previously colonized people continue this art ideology, are they contributing to the continuation of a myth of progress which was an instrument of their oppression?" (1995: 56). To answer McEvilley's question affirmatively with regards to the South African debate, would be to ignore the specificity of the iterative moment of this debate and the terms in which it is cast: the rift described has characteristically divided the South African art community into those *for* or those *against* the adoption of avant-garde strategies, thus creating an artificially binary predicament. This dualism cannot account for the wide range of hybridized South African identities, the acknowledgment of which must necessarily negate the inclination to view the debate as a simple choice between 'Eurocentric' and 'Afrocentric' traditions. 'South African art' is made in the loci of tension which exist between the many diverse cultural, political and economic pasts and identities which are all authentically South African. Essentially, what is at issue in the debate around avant-gardism, is the *past* that is claimed by the binarily opposite stances described, and the consequent South African *present* which is by implication demarcated as 'authentic'. The affiliation to Western traditions which is expressed by the avant-garde is countered by a claim to a more 'genuine' African past. Bongi Dhlomo (1995: 1) writes:

Rather than acknowledging their indigenous past, South African artists have tended to borrow from the pasts of other countries for guidance in their art-making. The only South African artists who have received recognition are those few artists who managed to become adept in a largely European art vocabulary. This small handful have found themselves in the fortunate position of having control over their own artistic destinies. White artists

have often used their privileged education as the foundation of their ambitions: it has given them access to scholarships, overseas study and the opportunity to pursue and often attain their ambitions... Isolation has meant that rather than African countries acknowledging their commonalities, their art has not only remained extremely parochial, but has also tended to search for role-models in the culture of its colonizers.

Mongane Wally Serote (1990: 31) suggests a similar distaste for the identification of South Africans with Western tradition:

Yes, white South Africans are professionals, they have the money, the resources, the skills, the means of communication and they have over the years, interacted with England and the rest of the world at various levels formally and informally; they have always seen themselves as part of the 'civilized culture' of Europe.

Serote responds to Sachs in terms which suggest that the mere dismissal of overtly political art is callous in its implied disavowal of the conditions and experiences which are thereby represented:

The painted and carved clenched fists, the AK47s, and the portraits of leaders of the Revolution, may not have meaning for other people, but they have been weapons for liberation for the South African people which bought about a difference between life and death (1990: 31).

I am suggesting that the South African past is a fiercely contested battleground on which the appeal to a supposedly homogeneous, Western avant-gardist tradition clashes with the assertion of a putatively more genuine African tradition. And it is through the continual rereading of these pasts, the continual recasting of one as more 'authentic' than another, that the appropriate strategy for the contemporary South African artist is delimited by the various claimants. Crucial to both of the binarily opposed positions described, is the insistence on an authentic origin out of which the cultural subject must forge a contemporary identity. By implication, if we could just determine, for once and for all, which is the *true* origin, the troops could withdraw, agreeing to behave accordingly. I would like to argue, however, that it is both feasible and desirable, to shift this battle away from the binarism which is implicitly endorsed by both camps through their appeals

to an 'authentic' origin. Given the complex and multiplicitous interplay of South African pasts, none of which can be said to be either homogeneous or stable in the formulation of 'South African identity', the attempt to identify the most 'authentic' South African past seems self-defeating. In addition, the very notion of one 'African' or one 'European' tradition is reductive. South Africans have been subjected, for so long, to a regime which delimited their identities according to crippling and fantastic categories. Now that the reign of fascist classification is coming to an end, it seems distressing that South Africans themselves are intent on constituting 'authentic' cultural identities for themselves through recourse to 'true' cultural origins. For Apartheid has taught us, if nothing else, that there is no true origin. Homi Bhabha (1993: 167) has written that:

The peculiarity of culture's partial, even metonymic presence lies in articulating those social divisions and unequal developments that disturb the self-recognition of the national culture, its anointed horizons of territory and tradition. The discourse of minorities, spoken for and against in the multicultural wars, proposes a social subject constituted through cultural hybridization, the overdetermination of communal or group differences, the articulation of baffling likeness and banal divergence.

To view the battle for or against the notion of avant-gardism as entailing a simple choice between European and African cultural histories, is to accept that the subject is coherently constituted through reflection on a coherent and self-contained cultural past, be that past Eurocentric or Afrocentric. The past is, on the contrary, constantly renegotiated, as is 'South Africanness'. Consequently, Bhabha (1993: 212) suggests the need to embrace an interstitial cultural agency 'that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism'. The hybridized subject which emerges out of this refusal occupies an enunciative space which is characterized by strategic and shifting solidarities which are contingent on their historical and social temporality and hence constantly in the process of negotiation. To accept that South Africans emerge out of complex pasts which are assembled of both African and European experiences, is to recast the debate of the true origin, and to suggest, in its stead, a much broader range of potential South African cultural identities. It is in such terms that the interstitiality which constitutes South African pasts and traditions might emerge as empowering rather than divisive.

2. WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO AVANT-GARDE AFRICAN

ARTISTS?

The point at which the binarily opposed camps do seem to intersect, if only momentarily, is in their shared perception that there has not, up until the emergence of the debate discussed thus far, been an *African* avant-garde. In the remainder of this paper, I will attempt to account for the absence of 'avant-garde' African artists within South African perception by examining more closely the history of avant-gardism and consequently pointing to the non-relation between African cultural production and avant-gardism in Western language and knowledge. This absence is interesting in light of the South African debate of cultural origins, inasmuch as it is accepted by the protagonists of both of the aforementioned camps as South Africans start to reformulate their cultural identities for themselves and for the world at large.

Before discussing the manner in which the debate around avant-gardism is deployed at the moment of South Africa's admission into the international art arena, it is necessary to probe the history of the institutionalisation of the concept of avant-gardism in the West. Griselda Pollock notes, in her lecture *Avant-Garde Gambits* (1992), that the institutional conditions for avant-gardism were firmly in place in Paris by the 1880s. Her history of the avant-garde coalesces rather soundly with Foucault's epistemic account¹: Foucault cites the 1860s as the approximate period during which there was a shift from what he calls the 'Classical Episteme' to the 'Modern Episteme'. He points out that notions of originality and the valorisation of the artist as 'individual genius' (which we associate with artists from the fifteenth century onwards) are linked to a wider epistemological position which culminates in the Western subject taking itself as an object of knowledge, and, consequently in the self-conscious exploration by artists of the relationship of their work to earlier images.

This acknowledgment of the relationship of painting to its history is termed '*reference*' by Pollock. She cites '*reference*' as one of the three gambits which characterize avant-garde artists (1992: 12). The second gambit which is deployed by the avant-garde is '*deference*' which in combination with '*reference*' establishes the relation of an artwork to an already valorised context (1992: 15). The third and, arguably, the crucial avant-garde gambit which Pollock identifies is to establish '*difference*':

An avant-garde gambit works only if you can evoke a reference

text, and rework it so that its status is overcome and its place occupied (1992: 28).

The Western, cultural avant-garde has accordingly, in its various manifestations, defined itself through its self-conscious preoccupation with its own procedures, processes and styles. The art market associated with the avant-garde insists on the innovation and individualism which Pollock labels '*difference*' and which becomes valorised with the shift to a Modern Episteme.² Pollock notes that with avant-gardism, there is an increasing emphasis on the manufacture of a public identity for the artist and most importantly, that in order to make cultural profit, avant-garde art works have to be incorporated into a public discourse which can recognize '*deference*', '*reference*' and '*difference*' (1992: 15-16).

Interestingly, the avant-garde strategies delineated by Geers follow Pollock's conception rather closely. If these gambits are, indeed, the conditions for avant-gardism in the Western collective understanding of this strategy, that is, if the artist must have access to and an understanding of the discursive and physical spaces which have been and remain to a large extent (especially in South Africa) the domain of white, Westernized artists, then it is hardly surprising that few African artists have been thought of as '*avant-garde*'. The oft-made assumption that African art merely reflects African social structures, means that African artists are not accorded the self-consciousness usually associated with individualistic Western artists. Consequently, the anonymity of African objects (even those made recently) is not only accepted, but perpetuated in many accounts.³ Furthermore, great effort has been taken to stress the alignment of black art to '*tradition*', thus further distancing the possibility of understanding such works in the terms prescribed by avant-gardist theory.

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Polarized attitudes towards Western and African cultures and the objects which emanate out of them are two sides of the same coin which can be maintained only in relation to each other. It becomes evident in looking at the language employed by the majority of art historians to describe African art, that art history perpetuates a Western notion of self which not only strengthens the sense of cultural unity of Western culture, but also defines this culture as distinct from other cultures. The way white South Africans, in their self-definition as Western subjects, wish to know themselves, has

been reinforced, for example, by inscribing other South African cultures in a less 'civilized' and sophisticated past. Pollock (1992: 11) comments on this tendency in reviewing the relationship between avant-gardism and race. She points to how

...whiteness renders itself invisible by marking its exploited social and cultural others with excessive signs of difference.

Appiah (1992: 143) points out that the chronological distancing of African culture within such discourse is, furthermore, a function of the process of commodification:

To sell oneself and one's products as art in the market-place, one must, above all, clear a space in which one is distinguished from other producers and products – and one does this by the construction and marking of differences.

Thus, whereas work by Westernized artists enters the market in terms of the aesthetic individualism of avant-garde gambits, African cultural objects are labeled 'premodern', 'neotraditional' or 'transitional', in this process – it is in terms of their perceived *lack* of sophistication that the objects acquire their market value. The Western consciousness which calls itself 'modern', in so doing, 'others' not only its own past, but those societies existing in the present that it considers underdeveloped in relation to itself. 'Tourist art' often reflects the Western 'fetishizing' of Africa, as much as the needs of the maker: African makers capitalize on their knowledge that 'exotic' objects sell well and thus exaggerate 'primitive' aspects. It is, in these instances, a Western concept of 'authentic ethnic identity' that is being marketed. This holding of not only people from other cultures, but also their cultural objects, at a distance reinforces a Western sense of modernity.⁴

Popular attitudes towards African cultural production remain imbued with the same perspectival assumptions, assumptions which essentialize Africa as static and 'primitive'. A recent South African television advert for Colgate toothpaste illustrates this point. It is an advert which does for the lineage of the toothbrush what the Darwinian chart of evolution does for the history of humankind. We watch as the history of the toothbrush unravels before our eyes, from its pithy origins in the age of the 'bushman', to its present day state-of-the-art form as engineered

by Colgate. This evolution is visually evoked through a series of representations, which gradually increase in sophistication, so that the ancestor of all toothbrushes is visualized as a crude 'stick-drawing', which develops through a number of stages of increasingly colourful and 'naturalistic' rock paintings, until it bursts beyond representation to emerge at the end-point of its evolution as an actual object – the Colgate toothbrush. The voice-over tells us that Colgate 'leaves other brushes back in the stone age'.

It is apparent here that cultural value is ascribed to *form* as much as to *content* in the history of visual culture. Europeans first collected African objects as exotic curiosities: because their mode of representation did not coincide with the fashion for illusionism in the West, they were considered 'grotesque', 'distorted' and 'primitive'. This is epitomized by the choice of an evolutionary metaphor for the aforementioned advertisement, one which by implication celebrates the constant change and discovery that is attributed to the West.⁵

Whether in television adverts or in Esmé Berman (the archetypal, South African art history handbook), within the construction of cultural identity, Africa is the continent of the past – the continent of King Solomon's Mines, Shaka's Kraal, Indiana Jones' Temple of Doom and most recently Sol Kerzner's 'Lost City'. The relegation of African cultural objects to a cultural past and the creation of a static tradition has undeniably served to reinforce the sense of cultural identity of white South Africans.⁶

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African culture has, of course, changed significantly in response to changing social conditions. Its stasis is fictive. The Western lament for the loss of 'tradition' which is heard when oil-paint is used by African artists, instead of mud, is created by the failure to recognize the new manifestation as valid in terms of a living tradition. It is fuelled, in addition, by a tyrannical structuration (uncomfortably endorsed by Apartheid) according to which there has been no room for ambiguity or eclecticism and little tolerance of people or objects which can not be zoned comfortably into categories like 'European' and 'African'. The failure to address the hybridized identity of South African artists has meant that cultural debates tend to be cast in oversimplified binary terms. Social change may lead to the phasing out of certain African 'traditions',

but new and dynamic forms inevitably arise in their lieu. This is not to say, however, that these traditions have or should develop along the same lines by means of which the West defines its own progress.

While the ideology that has supported the exclusion of African artists from the category of 'avant-gardism' (amongst other categories) is indefensible, it is nevertheless arguable that the space of avant-gardism demands a specific understanding of art. This particular conception of art has usually been held out of the reach of African artists or in some cases, has been rejected by African artists. Consequently, to insert an artist who makes cultural objects with a different (yet not inferior) sensibility into the space of avant-gardism, regardless of how good the intention, might 'evolve' as equally problematic in that it prunes the weed above ground rather than uprooting it...

3. SOUTH AFRICA PRESENTS ITSELF TO THE WORLD

The latter assertion is linked to another task of this paper, that being, to raise questions around the possible problems that arise with the introduction of hitherto excluded 'artists' to existing art institutions and discursive structures, now that diverse attempts are being made to this end in South African art institutions and internationally. The questions raised here are in direct response to the historical moment of the reinsertion of South Africa into the international art world: after years of cultural boycott, South Africa finds itself included not only on a variety of international exhibitions but also hosting its own biennale. The tone of this reinsertion cannot be regarded as arbitrary: one might observe, for example, that the increased use and valorisation of the notion of 'avant-gardism' has coincided with the increasing contact of the South African art community with the international art community. During the Eighties, discursive interventions by South African cultural thinkers challenged exclusions in the field of art. The radical reshaping of South African society, and the consequent welcoming of South Africa back into the international art arena, demands a second phase of critical cultural debate, one which draws on the thought-provoking positions offered by writers like Richards, Nettleton and Dell (see bibliography) so as to raise questions around the state of South African cultural production⁷ as it teeters towards the international fold.

More clearly stated, writers like the latter have made it impossible

for exclusions in the arena of art to be accepted uncritically. They have created a local, theoretical discourse which has not only prompted, but insisted, on the need for a revision of what we can understand by the word 'art' in South Africa. This relatively young discursive space, whilst addressing certain problems, inevitably prompts new questions. The next phase of cultural debate must revisit the same art contexts with their expanded contents so as to examine the consequences that these new inclusions have had for the term 'art' in the South African context.

One consequence, in certain instances, is that artists are admitted to the hallowed space of the art institution on terms which serve those doing the admitting rather than those being admitted. The relativist might argue that this holds true to an extent for any admission into any institution – this position must, however, be dismissed for the moment, due to its tendency to evade critical scrutiny.

A similar frustration with the evasion of critical scrutiny seems to have prompted Linda Nochlin's article, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', which raised many a conscientized eyebrow when it appeared in *Artnews* in 1971. In that essay, Nochlin (1971: 23) writes:

While the recent upsurge of feminist activity in this country has indeed been a liberating one, its force has been chiefly emotional – personal, psychological, and subjective – centered, like the other radical movements to which it is related, on the present and its immediate needs, rather than on historical analysis of the basic intellectual issues which the feminist attack on the status quo automatically raises.

The debate between Nochlin and the feminist position with which she takes issue, bears critical relevance for the South African debate under discussion, for within this debate, numerous efforts are being made to frame African artists in the realm of avant-gardism, yet little attention has been paid to why this framing device has not been available in the past. Nochlin (1971:24) insists that “dig[ging] up examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history” and “rehabilitat[ing] rather modest, if interesting and productive careers” does nothing to question the broad and problematic assumptions that are implicit

in asking why there have been no Great Women Artists. Instead, she responds to the question by closely examining social and institutional structures⁸ and “what they forbid and encourage” (1971: 32), thus redefining the debate within the parameters of a new set of questions.⁹

Nochlin’s strategy remains pertinent. The last decade has seen much redressing of the neglect of African cultural production in South African art institutions. Employing Nochlin’s approach might lead to the conclusion that, while the acknowledgement and redressing of this lack are necessary, they must be understood to be historically strategic rather than rehabilitatory. Following Nochlin (1971: 23), such moves in themselves ‘minister to the needs of the present’ rather than providing an enduring analysis of the status quo.

The gesture of incorporating black artists into a context which has a complex ideology and history is insufficient in itself and should be supplemented by a closer analysis of the conditions underlying the exclusions which have operated in socio-cultural institutions. Avant-gardism is one such institution: rather than searching the art community with a fine-toothed comb for African avant-garde artists, we might try to understand the conditions that have disallowed this category.

This is nowhere more significant than in relation to the way South Africa increasingly defines itself in relation to the international art community. How is South African art being reinserted into the international art world? ‘We’ were represented, in the *Aperto* section of the 1993 *Venice Biennale*, by Bonnie Ntshalintshali. This politically correct choice ministered to the present South African desire to appear inclusive after having been regarded as the opposite for so long. Ntshalintshali was juxtaposed with the likes of Damien Hirst, Matthew Barney, Hany Armaniou and Janine Antoni. The inclusion of artists like Ntshalintshali, Botala Tala (Zaire, now DRC) and Samuel Kane Kwei (Ghana) in an exhibition of works which were on the whole attempting, self-consciously, to challenge the Western sensibility from within (some more successfully than others), suggested two obvious, mutualistic needs: firstly, the need currently felt by those administering art in African countries to be seen as functioning within the aforementioned sensibility and secondly, the need felt by Africa’s

former colonizers to accommodate the first need so as to exorcise their colonial hangovers.

To conjure up a scenario in extreme opposition momentarily, there would, equally, be no value in fostering separatist cultural sensibilities as has been the case in the past. Frank McEwen (1968: 18-19) argued in the 1960s, for example, that African artists should derive their inspiration entirely from Africa – that they should:

...remain uncorrupted by the techniques of Western art schools... With numerous generations of applied thought, Western mentality has developed extensively. A compartmented, conscious mind has replaced a unified religious instinct, leaving far behind, in comparison with modern civilization, a still psychic and visionary Africa.

Far from inferring, like McEwen, that cultural distinctions are essential and that African artists are incapable of being avant-garde, I am merely suggesting that the concept and context of avant-gardism is itself a specific value-laden construct, one which falls under the auspices of contemporaneity, but is not synonymous with it. Cultural producers, regardless of skin colour, gender or ethnic affiliation, should be assessed within the parameters of the paradigm in which they choose to work, rather than being co-opted into other paradigms with which they are unfamiliar or which they have rejected. The insistence on inserting artists into contexts which continue to valorise avant-gardism, when they have not chosen to define themselves as such (verbally or otherwise), is not only patronizing and insensitive to other modes of cultural production, but also has implicit to it the assumption that the paradigm into which artists are being co-opted is superior – that all artists naturally aspire to the state of grace which is avant-gardism.¹⁰

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The co-option of certain African objects/artworks into the realm of the avant-garde, reflects the guilt-invoked needs of a post-apartheid South Africa: while it is important to acknowledge the contemporaneity of these objects (regardless of the sensibility out of which they emerge), this does not mean that it is necessary or important to regard them as 'avant-garde' or, that evaluative frameworks other than those suggested by a Western tradition

of art history might not function more constructively. Different modes of cultural production require different modes of critical intervention, so that we might value cultural pluralism without lapsing into paternalism.

It seemed patronizing, for the same reason, to include Allinah Ndebele's tapestries on the 1994 *Vita Art Now* exhibition, which is essentially a showcase for 'cutting-edge' art. Although this is never openly stated, the installation-orientated *Vita Art Now* exhibitions of the last two years, as well as the urge to modernity expressed in the choice of title for this series of exhibitions, are both telling. The inclusion of Allinah might be regarded as crassly affirmative, not only because Allinah has no consciousness of 'the spaces of representation, publicity, professional competition and critical recognition' (as Pollock puts it – 1992: 12) in which avant-garde gambits are made, but also since, in placing her work in this context, we privilege the terms of a contemporary, Western sensibility which is not Allinah's, and thus undermine the sensibility with which Allinah creates.

Hence Allinah is culturally appropriated, in the sense that we are only willing to confront the work once we have co-opted it into a familiar Western category or context. In discussing the *Standard Bank Young Artist* awards, Richards (1991: 124) invokes Spivak to ask the following question:

Are these awards simply gestures, instances of what Gayatri Spivak cautions against – viz, the putative centre welcoming "selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better exclude the margin".

In the harshest terms, Richards might be understood as suggesting that including objects made with a non-Western sensibility in 'cutting-edge' exhibitions, could be regarded as a refined form of neo-colonialism. While we should applaud any challenge to the usual manner in which various cultures are represented in the realm of categories like 'craft' and 'art', there is a new danger to be heeded. When contemporary African objects do find their way into exhibitions exploring avant-gardism and the like, as do Allinah Ndebele's tapestries or Jackson Hlungwane's wooden spoons¹¹, their placement there is most often a manifestation of how different (and usually superior) 'we' (the white, westernized art community who curates such exhibitions) are from those who made them, even if this is not the conscious intention. The simple relocation of such objects to the

art gallery does not necessarily avoid the 'marking as other' which is more obvious when these objects are viewed in anthropological contexts. Those African art objects, which are made by artists untrained in the Western tradition of contemporary art, are too often used to promote a preconceived idea of sophistication, as embodied in the appropriating, Western culture. These objects are viewed, by implication, as attempts by Africans to aspire to a superior state of evolution, rather than as valid in terms beyond those which are familiar.

We should not feel that we are privileging non-Western makers by conferring upon them the label 'avant-garde' or representing them in contexts which have accrued this provenance. We should be wary that such attempts, despite their good intentions, echo the effacement of difference which characterizes the politics of cultural imperialism. Clifford's (1988: 193) critique of Rubin's MoMA exhibition, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* sounds a warning, which albeit over-stated for this discussion, still warrants consideration: he condemns the exhibition's propensity

...for appropriating or redeeming otherness, for constituting non-Western arts in its own image, for discovering universal, ahistorical 'human' capacities... an ignorance of cultural context seems almost a precondition for artistic appreciation.

As the first Johannesburg Biennale finds its feet, South Africans must take care to distinguish between multiculturalism and neo-colonialism. The question is no longer whether there *is* or *is not* an African avant-garde, but why there has not been and whether it is, indeed, desirable that there should be. Okwui Enwezor's (1994: 6) words offer a pertinent challenge to South Africa as it forges new identities in the face of the international art world:

As the millennium draws to a close, for many non-Western artists, the logic of modernity is no longer configured along the line of the avant-garde as the prevailing zeitgeist or as progress and change. For many (even in the West) modernity has come to mean a peculiar condition. The condition many times bespeaks dislocation and rootlessness; displacement and dispersal, alienation and exile, even in the familiar rooms of home. More than breaking down boundaries, modernity it appears, has constructed them.

NOTES

¹ Pollock writes: "Avant-gardism involves a series of gambits for intervening in the interrelated spaces of representation, publicity, professional competition and critical recognition." (1992: 12) Foucault makes a similar observation – he notes that Manet acknowledges the relation of painting to itself, "...as a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums." (1977:92)

² In establishing an 'African tradition' it has become customary to exclude 'impure' objects. The impulse to strip African art of its visible cultural context emerged out of the desire to make it conform to a Western definition of 'art'. An essential quality of art in modernist terms, is that it exists for its own sake, that it has a higher ambition than to function in a utilitarian sense. That much African art is seen as utilitarian, automatically compromises its status as avant-garde art.

³ Exceptions to this observation can prove equally farcical: Price (1989:100) provides an anecdote which highlights the absurdity of contriving to collapse diametrically opposed understandings of cultural production: While superintending Pueblo pottery revivals, Kenneth Chapman of the Museum of New Mexico insisted that Maria Martinez authenticate and increase the value of her pottery by signing it – something that Pueblo potters had never done. When the other potters in the village realized that pots with Maria's signature commanded higher prices, they asked her to sign their pots as well and she freely did so until the Santa Fe authorities realized what was happening and put an end to this semiotic riot.

⁴ Pollock notes: "The modern (or the historical consciousness called modernity) is formed precisely by being experienced in temporal and cultural difference from what is perceived as the pre-modern or non-modern." (1992: 65)

⁵ The supposedly more enlightened sphere of art history is riddled by the same panoptical assumptions. An example which I've constructed from the advertising and critical response to an exhibition of contemporary Shona sculpture entitled 'Spirits in Stone- The New Face of African Art', is perhaps even more disturbing than the aforementioned advert. The exhibition was held at California's Reece Gallery and advertised in *Artnews* (November 1993: 77) as follows: "From the venerable and masterful Munyaradzi to the exciting young Shaibu Kanyemba, Shona sculptors of Zimbabwe are deeply rooted in the ancient spiritual beliefs and cultural traditions of their people, while confronting the challenges of modern life. Transcending time and place, Shona sculpture speaks eloquently of the human condition, whether it be experienced in urban America or in rural mountain villages of Zimbabwe". (my emphasis). A review of the same exhibition by Bonnie Barrett Stretch in the next edition of *Artnews* (December 1993: 135) reads: "Despite their clear African themes, Shona sculptures... seem surprisingly modern in form... Such works exemplify a beauty and mystery which not only join the African past and present but also speak to our Western

contemporary need for continuity and roots.” (my emphasis) The discourse around this exhibition is remarkable for persisting to identify African art with the past even though it is contemporary (as compared to the ‘Bushman Art’ used for the Colgate advert).

⁶ The language available for the description of Africa and its artefacts is ensnared in the past-tense. Words like ‘primitive’, ‘archaic’ and ‘crude’, are seemingly obvious adjectives when it comes to the description of not only African ‘artefacts’, but contemporary African ‘art works’. The ‘authenticity’ of African ‘artefacts’ is often accrued from their relation to the past. Western expectations have led to the aging of contemporary objects, for example, by burying them in termite hills. Antiquity is one of the most important determinants of the market value of African art; this is entirely related to the Western desire to see African art as a static ‘tradition’. Bassani cites the example of Pigorini, an Italian buyer, who bought a number of West African carvings on the condition that ‘each object bear unequivocal signs of having been used’, in order to ensure ‘authenticity’ (1979: 34).

⁷ I use the term ‘cultural production’ here to refer both to objects made within a Western conception of art and objects made by non-Western cultures which sometimes lack a similar concept of ‘art’ in their language and thought. Simply labelling any cultural product from any culture ‘art’ has implicit to it the unquestioning assumption that ‘art’ is more important/valuable than other kinds of cultural production and fails to examine the constructedness of the labels which are accrued to cultural objects or the ideological implications of these labels. As Nochlin notes, it is not sufficient to merely promote that which is held in low regard to the level of that which is valorised, without attempting to examine the reasons for such distinctions and the hierarchy which organizes them. This is, however, not the appropriate space for the necessarily complex discussion around terms like ‘art’, ‘craft’ and ‘artefact’. It is hoped that the use of these terms in this paper will be contextually read.

⁸ Nochlin notes, for example, that history-painting (which inevitably included many painted figures) was, for a long time, privileged above still-life painting in the hierarchy of genres. Thus painters of still-life were unlikely to earn the accolade of ‘Great Master’. Furthermore, social restrictions forbade womens’ attendance at art-schools which taught the skills necessary to excel at history-painting – when the presence of women was tolerated at art institutions, they were inevitably excluded from life-drawing classes due to social and sexual mores and thus obliged to work in ‘lesser’ genres like still-life which did not require a knowledge of anatomy. Social restrictions thus made it impossible for women to qualify as ‘Great’. This is a necessarily oversimplified example which illustrates Nochlin’s approach.

⁹ This new set of questions makes it possible to see the notion of ‘Greatness’ as one which is itself socially constructed.

¹⁰ Concurrently, the creation of categories like ‘craft-art’ and my current favourite, ‘art-glass’, rather than elevating the status of the objects which

they describe, implies that they are somehow more merit-worthy when associated with 'art' thus failing to challenge the very construction of categories like 'art' and 'craft'.

¹¹ Other artists include Johannes Chauke, Jim Ngumo, Nelson Mukhuba, Noria Mabasa, Johannes Maswanganyi and Johannes Segogela.

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HARM LUX

RAVE

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**COMRADES AT ARMS: THE AFRICAN AVANT-GARDE AT THE
FIRST WORLD FESTIVAL OF NEGRO ARTS (DAKAR 1966)**
2006

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INTRODUCTION

This paper evaluates narratives of the African avant-garde, its involvement in nationalist discourses of cultural practice that emerged from the First World Festival of Negro Arts (Dakar 1966), and how the arts were deployed to further Senghor's ideal of universalism in a postcolonial Africa. The First World Festival of Negro Arts convened by Leopold Sedar Senghor represents the apogee of nationalist politics in 20th Century Africa. It showcased the African avant-garde, whose various visual practices were adopted for a narrative of vibrant African postcoloniality. Senghor used the gathering to promote the accomplishments and vitality of the culture of Negritude, which he posited as a framework for postcolonial African engagement with issues of political and cultural identity. The success of the event was matched by the controversy that followed it, as a younger generation of African avant-garde intellectuals rejected what Wole Soyinka characterized as the debilitating constraints of an African identity dependent on Western models of subjectivity. Senghor's gathering occurred on the cusp of a new African postcolonial politics, in which *coups d'état* and military rule were established as the primary mode of political governance in Africa. This paper argues that this period (1966-1970) also saw the demise of the avant-garde in African art and its slow descent into tightly circumscribed and often ethnic-based aesthetics. What then was the promise of the African avant-garde at Senghor's gathering? Is there a chance to recover their incomplete project of political engagement and cultural affirmation for the visual politics of 21st century contemporary African art?

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REMAKING NEWNESS: THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AVANT-GARDE

At the beginning of the 21st century, a new global African avant-garde is receiving important attention in art and cultural history discourses. This new avant-garde is the subject of critical analysis in leading art and art history organs of dissemination, and of major art exhibitions that present their practice within the context of a post-historical interpretation of the culture of globalization. Curators like Okwui Enwezor are at the forefront of this critical discourse and African artists (most of them based in the West) associated with the movement are becoming increasingly incorporated into global discourses of art practice. Enwezor elevated their concerns to a universal level at the *Documenta XI* exhibition in Kassel in 2002, for which he served as the overall director.

Documenta XI broke new ground in this discourse by introducing a new non-Western avant-garde, among which several contemporary African artists received pride of place. In the catalogue to the *Documenta XI* exhibition, he posed the following question: "What is an *avant-garde* today in the postcolonial aftermath of globalization?" He reviewed the new global avant-garde as a quest for art after the end of art, a search for spiritual and political sustenance in the new world disorder. This search, it has been noted (by Massimilio Gioni, and this author among others¹), evokes an earlier modernist avant-garde's quest for the spiritual in art but it would be a grave mistake to perceive it as such. A century of tumult lies between both endeavors during which the conceptions, media and meanings of art have changed drastically. (More importantly, modernism's discourses were exclusionary, falsely limiting its notions of modernist practice in art to a focus on white, Western Europe).² The quest for spiritual direction has been the Holy Grail of the avant-garde since its inception. It was fitting that at the beginning of a century of existential anxieties, a quest for certainty should lead in the direction of those erstwhile spiritual directors. Thus, although *Documenta XI* proclaimed the demise of the avant-garde's vision of art, its search for meaning in the dystopian reality of contemporary existence after this demise is itself a thoroughly avant-garde project. However, Enwezor reconceptualized the contemporary avant-garde project and attempted to link it to an earlier heritage of radical politics, which in the contemporary era manifest itself in what increasingly looks like a death-struggle between opposing forces of fundamentalist religious ideologies.³

Documenta XI's conception of a new avant-garde is relevant to the new African avant-garde project, which also struggles for a radical aesthetics in its bid to mainstream African identity in global discourses. This struggle first concretized at the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, where an emergent postcolonial African avant-garde asserted its independence from Pan-Africanism and the prevailing Negritude ideology of the time. The resulting intellectual debate is often cast as a radical revisioning of the needs and orientation of postcolonial African culture, by a younger generation of African intellectuals for whom Senghorian Negritude no longer provided an adequate explanation of their contemporary realities. In reality, it marked the end of a Pan-African conception of black cultural unity (which cut across

national lines) and the rise of indigenist and increasingly ethnic conceptions of contemporary African identity, which resulted from the unstable historical conditions of post-colonial African intellectual and national cultures in the era after the Dakar gathering.

THE AFRICAN AVANT-GARDE(S) AT DAKAR 1966

The Nationalist movements that brought about the end of colonial rule in many parts of Africa by the 1960s used the ideology of Pan-Africanism as a tool to organize African colonial subjects. This ideology advocated political and cultural action for the emancipation of African and peoples of African descent worldwide. The ideology of Negritude was arguably the most influential among the various interpretations of Pan-Africanism that were proffered by African intellectuals as viable modes of cultural practice in the postcolonial period. Leopold Sedar Senghor, Negritude's chief theorist, defined it as the "sum of the cultural values of the black world" that engenders an active presence for black people in the cultural and political affairs of the human race. Negritude ideology underpinned the 1966 gathering in Dakar, convened by Leopold Senghor as a forum to reflect on the role and function of African arts and culture in the postcolonial aspirations of African nations and in international discourses of cultural practice. These political aspirations were channelled through the mantle of cultural identity issues, which were reflected in various displays of cultural patrimony at the *Festival Mondial des Arts Negres*.

The narratives of African avant-garde practice that emerged from Dakar 1966 have struggled with the problem of situating the post-Negritude rebellion within a diachronic conception of black identity politics in the 20th century.⁴ The festival brought together two claimants to African avant-garde status: Senghor's group, which included intellectuals emerging into Negritude from an earlier Pan-African worldview, and the postcolonial avant-garde (led by Wole Soyinka and Es'kia Mphahlele) who sought a decisive break with Negritude tenets. Both groups offered contrasting views of African postcolonial political and cultural existence.

Reflecting on this schism, Chinweizu noted that "as Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral pointed out, a people's fight to overthrow foreign domination usually begins in the area of culture, and may then take on political, military and economic forms. In the case

of black Africa's fight to overthrow colonialism, Negritude made that beginning."⁵ Although Senghorian Negritude became the primary locus of discourse at Dakar 1966, the term Negritude can be used as a generic term to describe the various impulses of black consciousness, and the various movements for rehabilitating black African culture, that became manifest in colonial Africa. These include Aimé Césaire's more militant Caribbean variant, and as Chinweizu noted, Nnamdi Azikiwe's African Renaissance movement (1930s and 1940s), Kwame Nkrumah's African Personality campaign in Ghana (1950s-1960s), Amílcar Cabral's Re-Africanization program in Guinea-Bissau (1960s) and Steve Biko's Black Consciousness movement in South Africa (1970s). All these movements in common resisted European cultural domination and sought to rediscover, regenerate and revalidate black African culture. Senghorian Negritude became the archetype of the above movements because of the brilliance of its principal theorist, Leopold Senghor, who inscribed Negritude as a political program of cultural practice when he became president of Senegal.

Senghor's Negritude has been criticized as an uncritical reworking of European ideas of Africans as subservient and primitive populations.⁶ It was also a largely francophone African literary movement. Its value as a site of cultural affirmation cannot be denied but at the same time, its literary prescriptions did not find a useful visual variant until well into the 1970s. While it was easy to formulate a political response to colonial domination and the desire for political freedom through literature, it was more difficult to formulate an artistic transformation of the Eurocentric modes of symbolic communication imposed on colonized African populations. In this context, the question of how to rehabilitate Africa's past and engender pride in African culture became a contentious issue for visual artists and the notion of African culture itself became a battleground of contesting discourses and ideologies. It raised questions about the nature of African culture in the past and in the postcolonial era, the issue of authenticity in African culture, and the need to reject European (and Islamic) cultural domination while appropriating certain forms of cultural practice from both. More importantly, Negritude was criticized for maintaining the use of European languages and conventions of representation, which ultimately doomed it for many postcolonial African intellectuals, who formed the second category of African avant-garde at Dakar 1966.⁷

The struggle for avant-garde status at Dakar 1966 was already evident in the visual narratives of the event. The principal poster for the First World Festival of Negro Arts positioned the event as a decisive grasp for a modern culture, represented by a sea port, against images of traditional African culture, represented by a Fang mask. The Fang mask here references Africa's past but also the appropriation of African aesthetics by European modernists, which in the early 20th century, caused a revaluating of African sculpture as art, most prominently in Carl Einstein's seminal publication, *Negerplastik* (1920). Senghor praised this process of reconfiguration and used it to formulate a concept of an African contribution to a universal ideal of humanity. He also brought an exhibition of Picasso's paintings to Dakar and was documented viewing some of this work in the company of Iba Ndiaye, André Malraux, Pierre Lods and Abdou Diouf. The surrealist cadre of attendees reiterates Senghor's ongoing interaction with Surrealism in his development of Negritude ideology.

The appeal to Picasso's aesthetic underscored the difficulty confronted by the festival's organizers: the lack of an equally highly regarded visual artist whose works adequately interpreted Senghor's Negritude. Ben Enwonwu (1917-1994), who led the Nigerian delegation, was the only artist at the event whose association with Negritude was sufficiently bolstered by an international acclaim. However, Enwonwu's appropriation of Negritude unfolded within a larger concern with Igbo aesthetic values encapsulated in the form of Ala, the earth, whose conception as vibrant female force in Igbo culture coincided with Senghorian Negritude's veneration of 'black womanhood' symbolism.⁸ Enwonwu's take on Negritude was not doctrinaire, and he reiterated his conception of art in various public pronouncements over the course of his career.

A photograph taken at the inauguration of Dakar 1966 shows President Senghor and Alioume Diop addressing the delegates. Diop's earlier work with the First and Second Congresses of Black Artists and Writers (1956, 1959) can be seen as a precursor of Senghor's Conference. The meetings were organized under the rubric of the literary organization, *Présence Africaine*, and their visual documentation showed a struggle between European and African prescriptions for African cultural practice. The poster for the 1956 Congress (held in Paris) was designed by Pablo Picasso

and featured a stylized head of a black subject. In contrast, the cover of the special issue of *Présence Africaine* that chronicled the meetings used a classic Sudanic African symbol (from Dogon art but transcultural) for its cover. The posters for the 1959 Congress (held in Rome) diverged in the same manner: Picasso's poster for the event illustrated Jean-Paul Sartre's ideal of a universal brotherhood of man, with a black, yellow, red, and white man all holding a luminous globe of peace (symbolized by a white dove). In contrast, a second poster superimposed two generic African-type sculptures against a map of Africa.

The push and pull between African cultural particulars and a generalized notion of universal existence illustrates a struggle for control of narratives of postcolonial Africa already evident in the encounter between Enwonwu and the Nigerian postcolonial avant-garde represented by the Zarianists. In many ways, Enwonwu operated on the interface between colonial and postcolonial notions of avant-garde practice. Highly regarded internationally as an African modernist artist between 1939 and 1960, he was displaced by a postcolonial Nigerian avant-garde cadre of artists who criticized his prescriptions for visual practice as hopelessly outdated.⁹ Although Enwonwu resisted their attempt to dismiss him as an artist of the colonial period, he was nevertheless displaced during the Dakar festival because of his close association with Senghor and his public defence of Negritude tenets. Enwonwu's ambiguous imagery did not help matters, as he continued to produce 'Negritude' paintings late into his career. However, Enwonwu's negritude diverged from the doctrinaire version practiced at the *École de Dakar*, where Senghor's patronage created a rigid structure of visual icons that were then deployed in a mannerist style, whose classic manifestation can be seen in the tapestries of Papa Ibra Tall.

The postcolonial avant-garde at Dakar 1966 was led by the radical Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka, who famously criticized Negritude's affirmation of black identity by quipping that "a Tiger does not proclaim its Tigritude; it pounces." For this group, the postcolonial era offered a chance to create a national culture that aspired to a global identity while cognizant of local identity as the products of black Africans. Although Soyinka went on to great international fame (he was the first black African to win a Nobel Prize – in literature), his intervention in the discourse of

postcolonial Africa has not always been received in a positive light. For example, Chinweizu (and his colleagues, the Bolekaja critics) have accused Soyinka of being a “black Conrad who specializes in purveying to Europeans their own comforting myths about a barbarous Africa.”¹⁰ This accusation, which eerily echoes Soyinka’s critique of Negritude ideology, shows that general perception of each avant-garde’s effort to validate African cultural identity was subject to personal allegiances. Chinweizu is a firm Negritude proponent, who like Enwonwu, considered the postcolonial avant-garde (of Soyinka’s cadre) as misguided apologists for a parochial modernity that merely replicated European prescriptions of cultural practice. Despite the similarly acrimonious charges levelled against each other by both groups, both offered useful sites for a critique of European intervention in African political and cultural existence. It may be useful to see their projects as contiguous programs that differed only in their approach to the problem of validating African culture.

The promise of the African avant-garde at Dakar 1966 was thus the pursuit of a cultural definition of African identity that provided a blueprint for political empowerment, within a nationalist discourse that integrated traditional African culture into the demands of the modern world. This issue was debated in journals like *Transition*, and its premises enunciated in popular documents of the time like Ulli Beier’s *Black Orpheus*. Again, literature provided the principal forum for these debates, and although questions of art and aesthetics were constantly tackled by various literary figures, their analysis often failed to consider the viewpoints of artists like Enwonwu, whose practice ultimately fell victim to the postcolonial avant-garde’s inclination to Freudian patricide. Enwonwu had criticized the insurgent nativism that he perceived in the intellectual intervention of European culture brokers in postcolonial African art, and berated their influence on the emergent postcolonial generation of African artists. He had accused these foreigners of leading modern African artists into “the abstract jungle”, and was quite disturbed by the veneration of Picasso at a gathering meant to highlight African accomplishments in the visual arts. Above all, the drums of war were beating in Enwonwu’s country, Nigeria. His delegation returned to a civil conflict (the Biafran War from 1967-1970). By the time the ensuing war ended, the group of young postcolonial artists that he led to Dakar from Nigeria had abandoned his ideal of national and Pan-African cultural

unity for a focus on militant ethnicity. In Senegal where no civil war intervened, Senghor's cultural prescriptions flourished but only because of his massive patronage of the *École de Dakar*. After his rule, with national finances at a premium, the school lost government patronage and dissolved into factions of contending visual practices.

One can therefore conclude from the above analysis that the First World Festival of Negro Arts at Dakar marked a unique instance in the development of modern and contemporary African culture: it was the last time that a truly progressive politics was advanced that tried to change the direction of African cultural discourses. It can be argued that subsequent discourses of African culture in the 20th century failed to actualize the promise of Dakar 1966. As African nations struggled through political instability and economic deprivation, aesthetics and visual culture dispensed with overt theorising and focused instead on documentation of quotidian realities. African artists in Africa replicated Negritude imagery without any significant reconfiguration, while theories of cultural practice preached an ideal of indigenous and national culture even as the collective sphere of national politics fragmented into militant ethnic blocks. The above accounts for the focus on a new category of African artists who live and work in the West, whose artworks are now being used to inscribe a notion of contemporary African avant-garde aesthetics. This focus on African artists (and artists of African descent) who live in the West has been widely criticized for effacing continental African artists from its contemporary analysis of African visual endeavours within global culture.¹¹ The criticism also demarcates the divergent projects of both categories of artists while arguing that imposing the visual prescriptions of Western-based artists on continental Africans amounts to neo-colonial subjugation. Contending factions of critics argue their positions in bitter exchanges but all agree that the time is right for a return to the radical politics of art in the era of Dakar 1966.¹²

REINVENTING THE AESTHETICS OF RADICAL POLITICS

It can be argued that the emergence of a new African avant-garde in the era after the end of art provides a chance to recover Dakar 1966's incomplete project of radical political engagement and cultural affirmation for the visual politics of 21st century contemporary African art. To achieve this goal, we must deconstruct some of the exhibitions that have tried to engage

the role of African art in nationalist politics and contemporary debates. First of all, narratives of the development of modern and contemporary African art need to pay more attention to the achievements of pioneer modern African artists like Aina Onabolu, Ernest Mancoba, Ben Enwonwu, Iba Ndiaye, Christian Lattier, and many others who invented the visual languages that was appropriated by the postcolonial avant-garde in different African countries. In Nigeria, analysis of Enwonwu's career showed an active engagement with theoretical issues raised by the postcolonial Zarianist, who falsely claimed autonomous invention of these positions. Similar analysis in other national contexts will likely yield similar results. In this regard, attempts to explore the role of intellectual and cultural debates in the 20th century African nationalist struggle truncate history by reifying the position of the postcolonial avant-garde. Okwui Enwezor's *The Short Century* exhibition compounded this error when it narrated the significant period of African cultural resurgence as the period from 1945 to 1994. In a context where significant debates about cultural identity in modernity had been ongoing in various parts of Africa since 1870, Enwezor's adoption of a post-WWII demarcation as a marker for the emergence of modernity in African art does epistemological damage to this history. The truncated focus of his exhibition is understandable in light of its focus on "independence and liberation movements", which one can argue dates back to the events of the mid-1800s when emancipated African slaves returned to West Africa seeking to fashion a new modern identity in an urban pre-colonial context. Enwezor's "short century" also negated the long history of Islamic colonization in Africa (and its impact on African cultural practices), which was accompanied by similar struggles for political liberation. With its focus on the impact of European intervention and subsequent African struggle for political emancipation, the exhibition narrates the question of contemporary African culture as an engagement mainly between Africa and the West. The failure of the *Short Century* thus lay in its reification of the transitional moment of independence as an archetype of radical postcoloniality. As our analysis above shows, the period of independence actually brought together contending ideas and categories of African avant-gardes, whose jostling for position in Africa's postcolonial discourse still requires sustained analysis.

The emergence of a new African avant-garde raises the issue of the perennial return of 'avant-garde' and 'neo avant-garde' practices in global culture. According to David Macey, "the idea of an avant-garde implies that progress is always the result of a rebellion against an entrenched establishment, [thus] linked to the concept of innovation and modernity"¹³ (with its desire and search for endless newness). The problem with this formulation is that the notion of an avant-garde is essentially utopian. It originated in the works of the utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) who used it to describe a utopian elite of artists, scientists and industrialists who will be the leaders of a new social order. It was co-opted to describe pioneering trends in the arts, which coupled with an idea of modernity as a deliberate and decisive break with the past, creates an idea of cultural practice ironically hedged in by historical forces. As many authors have noted (in critiques of modernist practices worldwide), newness is endless and the ghost of the tradition it will become with the passage of time already foreshadows each new innovation.

In this regard, the Zarianists' critique of Enwonwu's Negritude inflected art, and Soyinka's refutation of the racial essentialism of Negritude ideology in literature may be better understood today as a gesture of space clearing that engaged the prevailing ideology of the age through perceptive criticism of its inherent contradictions. In the literary and visual spheres, these critics challenged the received wisdom of colonialism and a nascent Africanism. They called an existing order into question and rejected its interpretation of their contemporary search for postcolonial identities. This refutation occurred when the extant understanding of quotidian realities espoused by the prevailing ideology of Negritude no longer spoke to the experiences of the postcolonial avant-garde. The feeling of liberation that emanated from these acts of consecration (Uche Okeke calls it a rebellion, which led to his group's identification as *Zaria Rebels*) contributed to the diversification of creative endeavour/voices in modern African literature (Soyinka went on to win the Nobel Prize), and the configuration of modern Nigerian art as an intellectual project, typified by Uche Okeke's doctrine of Natural Synthesis which had enormous impact on the last four decades of modern Nigerian art in the 20th century. Inevitably, several years later, the claims to newness represented by these acts of consecration have themselves become subject to interrogation. The radical theorists

and rebels are being rebelled against, as a new generation of globalist Nigerian artists challenges the intellectual prescriptions of these older scholars. The wheel comes full circle. One imagines that both Soyinka and Uche Okeke now understand more fully the ways in which intellectual production is circumscribed by one's historical epoch, and that such understanding increases their appreciation for other individuals whose intellectual production grappled with the prevailing contradictions of their age. All such struggles eventually become historically dated even though they may continue to guide individual reactions (artistic or otherwise) to historical and intellectual changes. The challenges posed to their heirs remain constant: what is the nature of modern and contemporary African culture; where is this culture located; what is the relationship between this culture, its indigenous antecedents and its encounter with globalization (either in the form of colonialism, or the neo-colonial strictures of contemporary global economic forces)? It is likely that answers to these questions will, for the near future, be couched in the rhetoric of emergent and newer avant-gardes. Our job as critics is to remind the new champions of these positions that the idea of newness itself has a history, and of the need to be attentive to the struggles of its earlier incarnations.

QUO VADIS?

The new African avant-garde contends with questions of how to define contemporary African cultural identity, as their predecessors did at the *Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Negres* in Dakar in 1966. The persistence of the above questions shows that Dakar's project of political engagement and cultural affirmation remains incomplete, which makes the need for continued engagement with its radical politics very urgent. The idea of avant-garde politics can be restrictive since it has the potential to lock cultural practitioners into a parochial interpretation of political engagement that rehashes the prescriptions of Euro-modernism, with its interpretation of avant-garde practice as a search for 'spiritual direction'. If African art proves anything, it is that art can become a vessel for channeling the spirit, but art by itself cannot thereby become spiritual. The genius of Enwonwu's Negritude-inflected avant-garde position at Dakar 1966 was his realization that cultural development is essentially a historical process, which the postcolonial avant-garde negated by their insistence on ahistorical claims of autonomous invention in art (such as

Uche Okeke's claims that Natural Synthesis represented a new formulation in Nigerian art). By discounting the contributions of their predecessors, they consigned their own production to a synchronic status, which negates the diachronic nature of cultural development. They are however rescued by the fact that time does not still and all forms of cultural inventions ultimately become historical.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, we are afforded a retroactive evaluation that reveals the links between the separate projects of previous African avant-garde positions. We are also privy to the current posturing of the contemporary African avant-garde artists, be it in the use of elephant dung-as-medium in Chris Ofili's mixed media constructs, or the reconfiguration of trade textiles into testaments of Africa's integration into a global context for the last few centuries, attested to in the works of Yinka Shonibare. These new engagements are linked to the post-independence avant-garde of Dakar 1966 by figures like the Nigerian musician/activist, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, whose perennial self-inventions in his *Afrika Shrine* mirrored the capacity of African art and culture for fluid transformations.¹⁴ The reflexive nature of most contemporary African art means that the promise of Dakar 1966 will continue to be sustained, even if the contemporary African artists who sustain it no longer understand their link to this historical heritage. The struggle for African political and cultural emancipation is ongoing, and for that reason alone, we will continue to encounter avant-garde postures in contemporary African art. This struggle is a part of Africa's long history of change, and in the current ongoing encounter with global modernity (obviously the 'post-history' rebellions against modernity have mostly failed), it will continue to engage the attention of the most culturally enlightened artists. As the old African political avant-garde adage goes, "aluta continua".

NOTES

¹ Massimilio Gioni (2002) 'DocumentaXI: Ordering the Universe', www.flashartonline.com/issues/225international/features225int/documenta.asp; Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, 'Ordering the Universe: Documenta 11 and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze', in *Art Journal* 64/1 (Spring 2005), pp. 80-89.

² This tendency survives today: see for instance Hal Foster, *et al.*, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames

and Hudson, 2004), which reiterates an essentialist narrative of modern art as a progressive unfolding of the practice of white Western European males. The authors (Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, all principal members of the October Group) also absorbed the white South African, William Kentridge, into their analysis of 1990s art but disregard all the other non-white artists included in Enwezor's *Documenta*. In essence, this publication represents the nadir of an extremely biased white supremacist narrative of global modernity in art, which the October Group has championed for the last three decades.

³ The Abrahamic faiths are Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which venerate the patriarch Abraham (aka Abram) as a common ancestor. Their internecine conflicts, which has been erroneously interpreted as a clash of civilizations, is actually a struggle between fundamentalist tendencies in these three Abrahamic faiths, whose dogma of divinely sanctioned access to 'truth' renders their future (and the future of the world) quite problematic.

⁴ The word "conception" is used here to define a general understanding of something and "the process of arriving at an abstract idea or belief or the moment at which such an idea starts to take shape or emerge." Its biological idea of culture (the organic birth, development and demise of cultures and identities) were central to Western ideas about culture for most of the 20th century but especially at the moment when global modernity was reconfigured as a specifically European practice.

⁵ Chinweizu, 'The Weapon of Culture: Negritude Literature and the Making of Neocolonial Africa' in Okwui Enwezor, ed., *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945 – 1994* (New York: Prestel, 2001), p. 321.

⁶ See Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) for a chronicle of various aspects of this criticism, as well as its history.

⁷ There is an element of continuing irony here, in the fact that European languages reign unchallenged in African discourses of cultural identity. The attempt to develop an African literature in African languages, mounted by radical theorists like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, remains largely marginal in the discourse.

⁸ See Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, 'Ben Enwonwu: Aesthetics and Artistic Identity in Modern Nigerian Art' in *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 16/17 (Fall/Winter 2002), pp. 24-31.

⁹ See Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, 'Ben Enwonwu, Zarianist Aesthetics and the Post-Colonial Criticism of Modern Nigerian Art', in Krydz Ikwuemesi, ed., *The Triumph of a Vision: An Anthology on Uche Okeke and Modern Art in Nigeria* (Lagos: Pendulum Gallery, 2003), pp. 129-146.

¹⁰ Chinweizu in Enwezor, *The Short Century*, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

¹¹ Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, 'Art History's Inscription of Modern and Contemporary African Art', in Hans Jorg Heusser and Kornelia Imesch, eds., *Visions of a Future: Art and Art History in Changing Contexts* (Zurich: Swiss Institute for Art Research, 2004), p. 129-146.

¹² The critical positions of contending factions can be gleaned from the various journals that they contribute to such as *NKA*, *IJELE*, *Revue Noir*, *Third Text*, and *Critical Interventions*.

¹³ David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 25.

¹⁴ For analysis of Fela's radical politics, see Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music: Fela and his Rebel Art and Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).



SEAN O'TOOLE
CONTINGENT STATES
2006

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AS AN "EXPLANATORY OVERVIEW PREFACING A SERIES OF ARTICLES ON ARTISTIC
MODERNITY", ENDEAVOURING TO EXPLAIN "WHY THIS ISSUE IS LESS ABOUT ART
PRACTICE THAN IT IS ABOUT THE LANGUAGE WE USE TO CONSTRUCT, DEFINE
AND RECORD ITS BEARING ON OUR LIVES".

POSTSCRIPT: IS THIS MUSIC?
2007

SEAN O'TOOLE IS A JOHANNESBURG-BASED JOURNALIST
AND EDITOR OF *ART SOUTH AFRICA*

CONTINGENT STATES

A short story by the writer Ivan Vladislavic offers a useful entrée into a debate around avant-garde artistic practice in South Africa. *Journal of a Wall*, published in 1989, is a story about a wall and takes the form of a haphazard diary. Its focus is a wall being put up across the road from the unnamed narrator's home. At one point during the short story – “just after midnight, in an overcoat, in a balaclava” – he steals across the road and retrieves a brick from the neighbour's yard. The brick, an elemental part of our urban environment, holds a strange fascination for the story's narrator. However, frustrated by its “stony silence”, the narrator returns it to his neighbour's yard the following evening.

“How bored I am with the tired repetition of gesture,” he admits, even though still absorbed by the progress of the wall. It is familiar riposte, especially in contemporary art circles. But Vladislavic's character is not talking about art; he is describing the construction of a suburban wall. “How bored I am with the familiar shape of words,” he adds. “How bored I am with this journal. It's just a wall. That must be clear by now. Even a child could see it. And the words that go into it like bricks are as bland and heavy and worn as the metaphor itself.”

As the last brick gets laid, the troubled narrator (he often smashes things in a rage) makes an unequivocal statement: “THE END.” Except it isn't. The enigmatic arrangement, the completed wall across the road, continues to hold his attention. He cannot ignore it. It compels him to look, to wonder, to write. And so the narrator pushes on, falling back on the familiar shape of words.

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Why this literary detour? And what is the point of this story here? The answer lies in the nuanced language. At once allegorical and literal, funny yet biting serious, Vladislavic's short story equips the reader with the vocabulary necessary to tackle an issue less about art practice than it is about the language we use to construct, define and record its bearing on our lives.

For the most part, words have served us rather well in recent years. The modest critical culture born out of the recent boom in art publishing is a testament to this. At base level, it suggests that that the familiar shape of verbs and nouns and adjectives, when thoughtfully assembled and purposefully grouped, can refresh our thinking and deliver us to new places. For the most part.

The fraught exchanges as Sessions eKapa 2005 proved otherwise. Formal language has its limits. Anthropologist Robert Thornton hinted as much in 1996. In an essay titled 'The Potentials of Boundaries in South Africa: Steps towards a Theory of the Social Edge', he talks about the insufficiencies of language in a post-apartheid South Africa. "There are quite literally no names, no vocabulary, to discuss major aspects and parts of [South Africa's] political being. There is no agreement on what are the boundaries of 'Black', of 'White', of 'Indian' or 'Coloured'." The problem is not uniquely a political one, noted Thornton. "No one knows whether to refer to 'tribes', 'ethnic groups', 'language groups', 'peoples' or 'races'." This problem of specificity is no less pronounced in the visual arts, and is usefully highlighted whenever critical discourse focuses on the subject of the modern, the contemporary, the fashionable, the current, in short, the new.

"A country is judged by its art and how it takes care of that heritage," stated Kendell Geers in a public speech at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) last May [2005]. "When I speak of Art I am specifically referring to radical, cutting edge, elitist, avant-garde works of Art with a capital 'A' and not culture in general." The speech, which foregrounds the role of very specific practices – "radical, cutting edge, elitist, avant-garde" – was reprinted in the *Sunday Times*. It prompted heated public debate. It also set the stage for what was to follow, most notably the desperate grappling with words by a group of impassioned artists (Geers included) in a Cape Town conference facility.

In between the two dates just mentioned – May and December – a request was sent to a number of writers and regular contributors to this publication [*Art South Africa*]. The subject line of the email was unambiguous: "Call for Proposals: Avant-Garde Practice in Post-Apartheid South Africa." The invitation was conceived as a way of thoughtfully responding to Geers assertion, made during a speech at JAG, that local art practice is exhausted (my phrase, not his). Two quotations prefaced the call, statements that suggested opposing views apropos the "ghostly persistence" of an avant-garde agenda. Before repeating them, some contextual detail.

It was Hal Foster who coined the expression "ghostly persistence". Long concerned with the "question of historical returns," Foster's writing makes an eloquent case in favour of a neo-avant-garde,

this in contradistinction to Okwui Enwezor, who expresses a general antipathy to the concept of the avant-garde. “The propagators of the avant-garde have done little to constitute a space of self-reflexivity that can understand new relations of artistic modernity not founded on westernism,” argues Enwezor in his *Documenta XI* catalogue essay.

In a manner of speaking, the two quotes attached to the call for proposals sent out touched on this wider standoff. The first quote was extracted from Geers’ 1995 essay ‘The Perversity of My Birth, The Birth of My Perversity’: “The absence of economic, intellectual and moral support for critical thinking in Africa assists the artist’s task as there are no markets that can be alienated. It has always been an African survival strategy to recycle foreign objects, images and ideologies. In art we must create in this spirit a political Art Povera that hijacks and kidnaps the international (historically defined) languages and codes, tortures and interrogates them until they reveal their true nature and identity. Then according to the strategy that we know best, that of the Freedom Fighter or Terrorist, to plant bombs at strategic points set to explode with maximum linguistic and semantic impact.”

The second quote came from an essay written by artist David Koloane. Titled ‘Walking the Tightrope’, and published in the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale catalogue, Koloane asserts: “... what is often regarded by South Africans as avant-garde may in essence be dated or rearguard in the western capital centres of London, New York, and Paris.”

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An admittedly wistful editorial provocation, the request nonetheless generated forthright and diverse commentary.

What is interesting about the writing that emerged out of this process is the manner in which it dialogues with a point made by Molly Nesbit some three years ago: “The word ‘avant-garde, like the word ‘utopia’, is now too full of associations and diverging experience to be useful all by itself ... It’s not that the old language is bad, but it is preventing us from thinking in fresh directions.”

It is exactly this quest to map fresh directions (as a way of responding to the taunt that local art is *kaput*) that frames the content published [in that issue]. It is a quest that necessarily

reflects a known variable: the contingent nature of language at this historical juncture. Not that one should make too much of this contingency. In the act of recording their experiences the diverse voices published here bear out the possibilities of contestation and dialogue. This in itself bears up a hopeful antonym for the word contingency: possibility.

POSTSCRIPT: IS THIS MUSIC?

I must have been in primary school. It was dark, my mom's car following the familiar route home. We were listening to David Gresham's weekend hit parade countdown, the one he always signed off with the line, "Keep your feet on the ground but reach for the stars". On came a song without precedence, certainly for me at least: *O Superman* by Laurie Anderson. "Is this music?" I remember the perplexed disc jockey asking listeners after the song had played itself out. I wasn't sure.

Now, many years later, I remain unsure. Perhaps not so much about the Laurie Anderson's song – yes, it is a song – but rather, and more fundamentally, uncertain as a way of being. Maybe this isn't at all surprising. Even as I write this declaration of faith my words are overshadowed by their own irrelevance. After all, the art critic is dead. Then again, painting is also dead, so too the avant-garde. I suppose what is really meant or implied in all the deaths plaguing contemporary art practice is obsolescence. New ideas outsmart old ones. In turn, new vocabularies are needed. Okwui Enwezor, for instance, prefers the turn of phrase "artistic modernity" to the overtraded expression "avant-garde".

Succinctly, all of this could be reduced to a single metaphorical aphorism: one age's shiny idealism quickly becomes another's rusted monolith.

As much as the South African historical moment demands, understandably one might add, that we disavow the past, it is not that simple. Rust takes time. This is not a Las Vegas magic show. History, our history, cannot be made to disappear immediately. Sculptor Tienie Pritchard's nine-metre likeness of Australian handyman-cum-pro prospector George Harrison, located in Settlers' Park next to Eastgate, is a constant reminder of this. The sculpture, a visual narration of Johannesburg's founding myth,

is a mess. The plinth is covered in graffiti. The bronze plaques explaining the sculpture's significance have all been stolen. But there it stands, resolute and immovable. I recently noticed that the city's administrators laid out a bed of flowering plants in front of it. Together the blooms read '2010'.

Conceivably, George Harrison will one day be unseated from his perch. Maybe he'll end up like that sculpture of Stanley pictured in one of Guy Tillim's Congo photographs. A curiosity stored in a scrap yard, a pissing post for passers-by. Then again, he might end up like Coert Steynberg's 3.6 metre sculpted head of late Prime Minister JG Strijdom. After its famous collapse on Church Street in Pretoria, the sculpture was reassembled (sans an ear) and moved to Nylstroom, where it is currently on display at Strijdom House Museum. Then again, to obviate the problem of spectrality, maybe old George will simply be melted down. But until then, we're stuck with him.

In a manner of speaking, the idea of the avant-garde is similarly stuck. One reason might be that we – writers, art historians, Wikipedia, Ed Young, that editor of Art South Africa – have placed far too much faith or belief in monotheism. The idea that one god discovered it all. That in stumbling upon a shiny piece of rock in the veldt, George Harrison inadvertently also discovered modern Johannesburg. Or in the context of this debate, that avant-garde artistic practice owes everything to a mass-produced urinal.

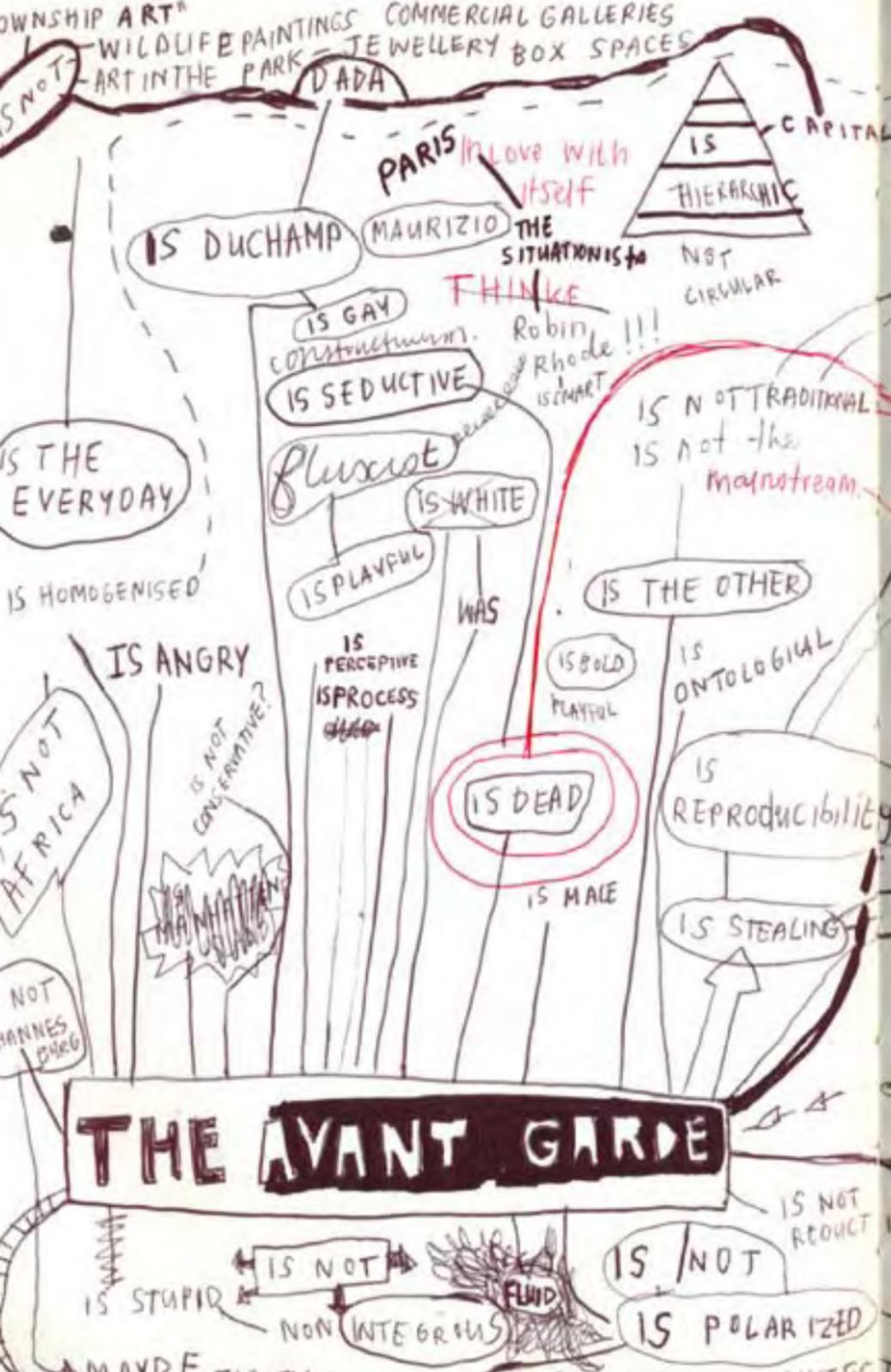
I like to believe that the rupture embodied in our recent history has been, and could still possibly be helpful here. Not only has it upset entrenched orthodoxies, but it has also dethroned the myth of lone gods. In the context of local artistic practice, it has also confronted the legitimacy of rote gestures – of which avant-garde practice, narrowly defined, is a good example. In other words, the transitional fuck-up that is now has created a window of opportunity for fertile new artistic practices, actions and activities that steal a bit from there and improvise with a bit from here, all to no certain outcome. In my view, few have seized the opportunity.

In the 1990s, William Kentridge did just that, so too Kendell Geers, who like Kentridge identified possibility and profit in self-consciously appropriating from Western art history. Their careers are testimony to one splintered thread of the avant-garde locally.

Of course, there is also Moshekwa Langa, who saw something beyond the material paucity of cement bags, the resulting artwork not only compelling but allegorical and ceaselessly frustrating. There is also Jo Ractliffe, whose hesitant practice and romantic self-absorption has resulted in photographs that challenge received conventions of photographic narration. And more recently, James Webb, whose work is subversive for being funny, his art embracing the possibilities of a considered prank. Also Nicholas Hlobo, whose sterner, more laboured moments fall away when he reveals himself as something akin to Leigh Bowery: a fabulous being decked out in costumes suited to such fabulous aspirations.

Examples, of course, complicate things. For many they peg allegiances rather than define the parameters of what is at best a fuzzy if persistent idea, the avant-garde. Which takes me back to my mom's car and that frustratingly solemn question. "Is this music?" As I said, I wasn't sure. But damn straight I knew that what I was listening to didn't sound like Dr Hook or Foreigner. For that alone, I would say thanks are in order.

OVERLEAF
TRASI HENEN *AVANT-GARDE*
FOR BEGINNERS 2006
DRAWING IN NOTEBOOK



CLEMENT GREENBURG

IS NOT A GENIUS
IS NOT WAYNE BARKER
IS PRUNK

PROBLEMATIC

THE CENTER IS THE CENTER

WORD ART

GLOBALISATION

OKUI ENWEZOR

The margin has come to the center
NOT OLD

CONTEMPORARY

NAIVE

In search of new relationships

INTERCHANGEABLE

is perpetuating itself

engaging

MOMENTARY

LAYERED

IS 50 FIVE MINUTES AGO

PARODY

~~NEW~~
NEW
CUTTING EDGE
SHOCKING X

Has a dialogue with the mainstream
TERROR

IS MOVING FORWARD

ELITIST

CRITICAL

IS SHORTLIVED

IS A STUPID TERM

IS ANALOGUE

is technology

EVERY DAY

OLD TERM

IS RIPPED OFF

NEW MEDIA

NEO AVANTE GARDE

FILTERS

is interesting

ATHIEST

IS NOT

CATEGORISATIONS
REDUCTIVIST

is not INDIE

is not kool

Reactionary?

SIEMON ALLEN
RETROSPECTIVES
2007

ARTIST AND CO-FOUNDER OF THE FLAT GALLERY IN DURBAN.
ALLEN HAS EXHIBITED WIDELY AND IS CURRENTLY BUILDING
AN ARCHIVE OF A HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICA 'OUTSIDE OF
ITSELF' THROUGH THE ORGANISATION FLAT INTERNATIONAL.

In these attempts to intellectualize it we finally came to the decision that the irrationality of this movement was its essential factor. We didn't know exactly against whom we should turn. But it was very important for us to find a target for our resentment. Now I believe that all creative people have a great resentment either against the country that they live in or against the civilization [or] the period of history that they live in. And we had this great hostility which we had turned first against the war and [then] against the imperial regime. But finally in Switzerland this kind of extreme hostility died down in a more comfortable atmosphere. We attacked the good Swiss people without any real justification. We attacked everyone in literature but still I was very much dissatisfied with it. So finally we generalized in such a way that we attacked conventionalism. The bourgeois was one of our main targets. But the bourgeois has been attacked so often that this couldn't satisfy me either. So I found out what is the bourgeois... and I made the sad discovery that we were all bourgeois.¹

Richard Huelsenbeck, in a 1959 interview, reflecting on his experiences with the Cabaret Voltaire and Dada. Huelsenbeck co-founded the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 with Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco and Hans Arp.

Ø

In the past ten years so much has been buried as if it never happened. Visual art does not progress by having a good memory. And New York is the locus of some radical forgetting. You can reinvent the past, suitably disguised, if no one remembers it. Thus is originality, that patented fetish of the self, defined. What has been buried? One of the art community's conceivable noble efforts: the concerted move of a generation to question, through a matrix of styles, ideas, and quasi-movements, the context of its activity. Art used to be made for illusion; now it is made from illusions. In the sixties and seventies the attempt to dispense with illusions was dangerous and could not be tolerated for long. So the art industry has since devalued the effort. Illusions are back, contradictions tolerated, the art world's in its place and all's well with that world.²

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Brian O'Doherty, New York City, 1986. From the 'Afterword' for the Expanded Edition of *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. In this final and brief afterword, included only

in later editions of the book, O'Doherty reflects on the shifts in the visual arts during the period since the publication of his seminal essays on context and the exhibition space originally published in *Art Forum* in 1976.

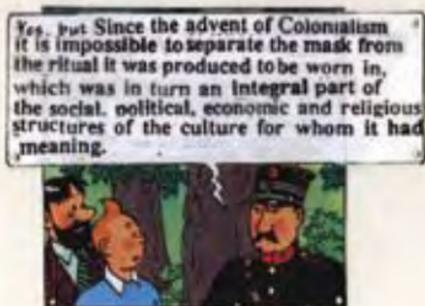
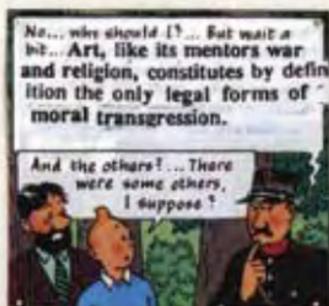
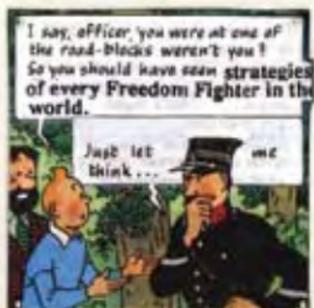
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Siemon Allen, *Pictures and Words* (pen, paper, cut-up comics & text, correction fluid, cloth), 1998.

This image is an excerpted detail from the installation *Pictures and Words* which was exhibited as part of *Vita Art '98* at the Sandton Civic Gallery in Johannesburg. This body of work consisted of a series of détourned comics, newspapers and theory books presented in a self-contained room-like environment.

¹ Richard Huelsenbeck, 'Inventing Dada', interview, 1959. From the audio CD: *Futurism and Dada Reviewed*. Produced by James Neiss (Brussels: SUB ROSA, 1988).

² Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space - Expanded Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 109.



JAMES SEY
WHEN DOES A MOMENT END?
2007

WRITER, THEORIST, MULTIMEDIA ARTIST AND DJ

What is contingency? It is defined as a chance occurrence, an unforeseen event. Seen as a condition of culture it is contingency which defines modernity, since, without contingency, both trauma and regulation would be unnecessary.

Formally, avant-gardism, as Duchamp's urinal perhaps most famously demonstrates, uses contingency to disturb formal relations between aesthetic judgement and the nature of art objects. It was possible, a century ago, in the 'original' avant-garde moment, to use the philosophical category of the contingent event to interrogate and defamiliarise perception, representation and the social provenance of art. Nowadays, the conceptual move which deploys artworks as a means to question the relationship between social institutions and the conditions they place on representation and meaning has become everywhere commonplace. Has the concept of an aesthetic avant-garde thus become superseded by the forms of absolute mediation to which contemporary culture is subjected? When does such a moment end?

We know that the historical, or 'original' avant-gardes placed psychoanalysis at the centre of their project. And that hand in hand with the centrality of the unconscious to their working methods was a fascination with technology – a technofetishism, almost. It is an aspect pointed out by the novelist J.G. Ballard (1984: 102), himself an authority on the Surrealists:

The preoccupation with the analytic functioning of the sciences as a means of codifying...the inner experience of the senses is seen in the use surrealism made of discoveries in optics and photography – for example, in ...Marey's Chronograms, multiple-exposure photographs in which the dimension of time is perceptible. [Surrealism's] interest in the peculiar time values of Oceanic art, in the concealed dimensions hinted at by Rorschach tests, culminated in psychoanalysis.

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Friedrich Kittler makes the crucial point that psychoanalysis provides the epistemological and scientific underpinning for the centrality of both trauma and 'nonsense' at the forefront of our experience of modern culture, aspects of it which centrally concerned the avant-gardes. The sensory overload which characterises modernity – traffic, advertising, electricity, mass entertainment – is indeed traumatic and cacophonous, and is

allied from the first with technologies of war. The great counter-science of psychoanalysis, developing contemporaneously with such material technologies of labour and leisure, was the first to establish an account of the mode of psychological being appropriate to dealing with modernity. How would the mind react to the huge flood of traumatic psychic impressions it was subject to – assailed by technologies of duration and extension; technologies of war, labour and leisure, by the mode of ‘speed and dynamism’?

According to Kittler, the psychoanalytic account of trauma which is most relevant to understanding media technology was predicated on the “principle that consciousness and memory are mutually exclusive”. Kittler points to the absolute inclusiveness of experience which new media technologies allow in our era, and how the function of memory as such becomes censorious or selective – thus, he argues, for the first time, case studies can become media technologies:

Producing psychoanalytic case studies, that is, putting into writing what patients have said, requires that one record whatever the two censors on and behind the couch want to render unsaid: parapraxes, puns, slips, signifier jokes. Only technological media can record the nonsense that (with the one exception of Freud) technological media were alone able to draw out into the open.... . [H]is principle that consciousness and memory are mutually exclusive formulates this very media logic. For this reason it is consistent to define psychoanalytic case studies, in spite of their written format, as media technologies. Freud introduces his ‘Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria’ with the audacious avowal that his written record of hysterical speeches has a ‘high degree of trustworthiness’, though it is not ‘absolutely – that is, phonographically – exact’. Psychoanalytic texts are thus haunted by the absolute faithfulness of phonography.

For Kittler it is crucial that sound technology trumps the receiving capacity of the highly trained analyst, precisely because nothing escapes the recording angel’s sound reception. The ‘absolute faithfulness of phonography’ includes everything in its ambit – the sonority of the analyst’s treatment rooms, the white noise of the street outside, the parapraxes of analysands as well as analysts which might otherwise be misheard or misremembered, for any

number of reasons, conscious or unconscious. It is phonography, the inscription of sound, which presents the fullest media representation of the unconscious in action. Benjamin proposes a similar argument for lens-based media technologies. In his well-known formulation from 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction',

...a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored... Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person's posture during the fractional second of a stride. ...The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.

The technological ability to reveal such hidden processes encapsulates the chief ambivalence of modernity itself – not only an ambivalence about the prosthetic logic of technology, but an ambivalence about modernity's own conflict between regulation and mechanization on one hand, and novelty and contingency on the other. This is an ambivalence which is true for all media technologies.

But in order for the mechanical-industrial labour complex to operate as a social regulatory mechanism, and obey its own logic of mass capitalist production, such ambivalence had to be minimised. Time and space had themselves to be regulated. Stephen Kern, in his book *The Culture of Time and Space* (1983), recounts how world standard time was only instituted fully on the morning of July 1, 1913, when the Eiffel Tower sent the first time signal transmitted around the world. Thus, a global electronic network – in effect, one based upon a phonographic representation of an abstract temporality, a sound or radio signal – enabled the implementation of a system of standardization that had been agreed upon by the most powerful twenty-five industrial countries decades previously, at the Prime Meridian Conference in 1884. Ironically the pressure to institute a global time standard came initially from military logistics planners. Hand in hand with the standardisation of time came the regulation of space, in the division between the labouring space of the factory, and the leisure spaces of the city, the amusement arcades of the emergent techno-utopias or urban arcadias.

The technological armature developed during the industrial era was therefore in the service of understanding and regulating growing urban populations in order to control them. The rise of statistics as a science of populations in the 20th century is the chief outcome of this technological drive. But the other side of this systemic regulation was the thrilling shock of the new – the increasing familiarity of modernity with the conditions of trauma and contingency.

Mary Ann Doane discusses the nature of the relation between regulation, contingency and trauma:

Rationalisation must entail a reduction or denial of contingency. In Taylorism...the body's movements are purposeful and efficient, and time becomes the measure of that efficiency. But modernity is also strongly associated with epistemologies that valorise the contingent, the ephemeral, chance...in modernity meaning is predetermined not in ideal forms but in a process of emergence and surprise. And new technologies of representation...are consistently allied with contingency and the ability to seize the ephemeral...and focus upon the particular, the singular, the unique, the contingent.

Doane argues that the valorisation of contingency or shock by aesthetic forms is an attempt to reinstate a sense of aesthetic freedom outside of the structuration and regulation of labour and leisure space and time. It is a valorisation that is definitive of the original avant-gardes. Surrealism's attempts to productively release the contents of the unconscious, for example, were already prefigured by the ability of 'media technologies' to mimic and replicate memory. Doane also points out that the relay between the rationalisation of space and time and the valorisation of contingency, whether this was aesthetically driven or not, is a constitutive or productive ambivalence for modernity, rather than an exclusionary choice.

So where are we now? Does this avant-garde moment mean anything for us today? Is it useful? Is it nonsense? Has the moment ended?

If the breakthrough that the 'original' avant-gardes have left us with is the institution of contingency in the heart of aesthetic representation, thereby instituting the possibility of conceptualism,

this is no longer acknowledged. We live in the era of the 'post' – the post-modern, post-colonial, post-conceptual, even, in our blind haste to obey the regulatory dictates of modernism's organisation of time and space, to go faster, further, more. Extension and duration still tend towards presence and instantaneity. We consume without regenerating, and pretend to be surprised when nothing threatens to be left. If art can recapture the notion of a meaning in the relation between elements, a relation between a media technology and an unconscious, like the sewing machine and the umbrella on the operating table, then the avant-garde will be shown to be quite vital yet. If all we think we do when we make art is to represent a moment – especially if it is a moment already 'post' - then all we have is apocalypse culture and the end of things. If concepts, on the other hand, can introduce themselves still between objects (physical or not) and their meanings, then the avant-garde moment has not yet run out.

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KATHRYN SMITH AND ED YOUNG
TWO CHINESE GUYS
2007

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THE DORMITORY BOYS

LIFE IS SHORT, MAKE FOOLS OF YOURSELVES WHILE YOU CAN!

FRIDAY, 19 AUG 2006

Dadada



The Dormitory Boys
We're two boys, and... er... Chinese.
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KENDELL GEERS
I, TERROREALIST
2004

ARTIST

PART I

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

John 1:1-3

We must find out what words are and how they function. They become images when written down, but images of words repeated in the mind and not of the image of the thing itself.

W.S. Burroughs

“Did you pack your bags yourself? Were your bags with you at all times since you packed them? Could anybody have tampered with your bags? Are you carrying any electronic or battery-operated devices? May I see them please? What is your occupation? Where do you live? How long have you lived there? Who paid for your ticket? How did you receive it? Are you carrying anything that could be used as a weapon? Please remove your laptop computer!! Please remove your shoes and belt!! Thank you and enjoy your flight.....”

Every time I fly to the USA I am amazed and shocked by the naive stupidity of the security procedures at the airport. As if you would say that you did not pack the explosive bags yourself or that you intend to set your shoes on fire mid-flight. Then once you arrive in the USA the visa forms ask if you are a Nazi, terrorist, drug addict, alcoholic or have a history of insanity in your family. The assumption is of course that if your intentions are to engage in any form of terrorist or subversive activity, when asked you will readily reveal your intentions. Why would you go through all the trouble of acquiring sophisticated and undetectable explosive devices, spend months if not years planning your attack, engage in a secretive life hidden inside a sleeper cell and then in the eleventh hour admit that you are a terrorist and that you are packing a bomb? Why do we so readily assume that such a person would not lie and would not be carrying false passports hidden beneath the veneer of a fake lifestyle and gray suit?

God gave me language and my profit of it is that I can lie and lie and I shall for I am an artist. George W Bush gives us two options, that we are either with HIM or we are on the side of terrorism.

Following his logic, you would immediately become a terrorist should you lie about that vibrator in your bag that you would simply prefer not to show to the macho monkey in the uniform. Indeed the truth is even stranger than fiction for on September 11, 2001 the hijackers did not have the need for luggage, packed by themselves or not, nor were they carrying dangerous weapons when they brought the capitalist world to its knees using credit cards, masking tape, box cutters and a great deal of faith, vision and courage. Perhaps our greatest shock was to discover that faith, vision and courage are still all you need to change the world.

In reality if you really want to disrupt an international flight with an act of terror it's so much easier to simply open the doors mid-flight, for the pressure alone will suck out at least two dozen people, a dozen more will die in the panic, ten will die from exposure to the extreme temperatures up there and you can be certain of at least two more heart attacks. If your accomplice forgot his nail file or toenail clippers, or if they were confiscated at the airport, he can break the neck off the bottle of in-flight champagne or red wine and use it to cut the throats of a dozen more passengers. Alternatively he can simply strangle his neighbour or drop sleeping tablets into the captain's coffee. Let's face it, it's about as easy to hijack or cause terror in an airplane as it is to lie about your intentions.

Terrorists are not born any more than their actions can be considered illegitimate. Irrespective of their political position, their actions and strategies are always forced upon them through a lack of alternatives. Denied a country they have no voice or seat at the United Nations. Their plight is made illegitimate only by virtue of their being born disenfranchised and alienated from the seats of global power and capital. Outnumbered, outgunned, undernourished and impoverished they are supposed to disappear into the folds of history and silently assimilate into the culture of their oppressors and masters.

The concept of a 'Terrorist', as opposed to that of a 'Freedom Fighter', is built upon the premise of a homogenous society in which we all have the very same value system and subscribe to the same socio-political and ethical codes. The terrorist is the outsider, the other to whom our codes do not apply and who is as a result now our enemy. We classify them as terrorist only because they do

not play by our rules, respect our currency, worship our gods and they certainly do not respect our crusades and declarations of war. We expect them not to lie because we have been taught that only the truth shall set us free and why should they be any different, especially if they aspire to our measure of civilisation with its so-called universal laws of democracy and justice?

Arriving in the USA today everybody who requires a visa is then also digitally photographed and their fingerprints scanned. Of course visas are not required for anybody from the EU, Japan, Australia or any other wealthy partner of global capital. The visa is in effect the very same method of controlling the movements and access of people deemed undesirable as was used by both the Apartheid regime and the Nazis in Germany. With the Patriot Act and the fingerprinting of visitors, the USA has however gone one step further than even Hitler could have imagined. Standing there as my body is scanned I am reminded that I am alien to that culture, that I am unwelcome and shall be tolerated only for as long as I behave appropriately. My differences, my otherness is in the process coded as criminal, captured and archived. My crime was to be born into a country classified as suspicious.

PART II

Indeed, terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime.

Edmund Burke

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Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue.

Robespierre

I gave birth to myself in May 1968 in an moment of terror, a riot of global proportions as Paris, Prague, Mexico City and San Francisco were burning and Carl Andre's bricks were being hurled into the faces of capitalist authority. The Molotov cocktail and dustbin lid transformed forever our understanding of the quotidian object and in the explosion the innocent milk bottle lost its virginity. It would take another three decades and another generation before the importance of that shift would be fully understood as Seattle, Genoa and of course the World Trade Centre finally caught on fire and this time it was on a scale hitherto unimaginable.

I did not grow up in Soho nor was I ever invited to dine with the Queen or hide my emotions in a suburban haze whilst resting in a Matisse armchair. I do not speak the Queen's English because I grew up on the streets of Africa, a place where you can die for what you believe in or for the small change in your pocket. My accent is my resistance for it reflects my lived experience, the realities of my being born twice. My accent separates me from the centre, by choice.

Language is oppressive for it only acknowledges that which can be named. It is not the result of any particular individual's design as much as the external manifestation of a culture. The structures and codes that enable or disavow what may be articulated and expressed in any particular language is predetermined by the dominant class and culture that it gives voice to. In English it is the Queen's accent and Oxford University that set the standard and norm, the structure of authenticity. It is thus hardly surprising that English should be predisposed towards the prejudices, value and experiences of that social class. For example the Royal habit of understatement, especially when it comes to the world of emotions, means that we have only one word, LOVE, to express what you feel for your Corgi, your mother, your lover, your wife, your favourite ice cream flavour, a book, colour or chair.

A vastly different lifestyle and experience than the Queen's translates into an entirely different language and whilst that is certainly true for example with French that allows a far greater emotional vocabulary, the prejudices of its own ruling classes are embedded in the very same manner. Your only resistance is in terms of your accent, which is by no means neutral nor impotent. The accent is an authentic voice that, whilst limited in terms of vocabulary, is empowered in terms of points of reference, allusion and intonation. It prioritizes the spoken word over the written, transforming the tongue into a very sharp weapon. The accent is built upon the foundation of a lived experience that places the street, the parochial and colloquial at its semantic core, defining itself in terms of the shared experiences that bind that specific community and no other. Whether it's the Irish accent or the argot of prisoners, the accent embodies the conflict between the centre and periphery, a dialogue and negotiation between points of contact and points of resistance.

In creating their colonies the *modus operandi* of the European Superpowers was to duplicate the centre in every imaginable aspect, from the language to the names of the streets, the urban design, architecture and even the history lessons. I was for instance taught more at school about European history than the continent where my family had been living for 400 years. Teaching the natives how to read and write was a quick and efficient method for inserting the 'master's voice' and hence his values and beliefs into the soul of the good students. With the Bible as textbook the transformation quickly meant that there were more churches being built in the colonies than in Europe. According to the logic of the church and colonial master plan, the natives were divided between that of the 'good' native who read his Bible diligently and who spoke, dressed, walked and thought like his master and in every way aspired to become that master, and on the other hand the 'bad' native, who functioned according to an entirely different concept of good and evil and was thus cast in the role of cannibal.

In 1928 Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropophagic Manifesto* recalled this same cannibal as the most appropriate voice for the native who sought a way out of the binary duplicity of the Christian European model. He explained that

...the struggle between what one would call the Uncreated and the Creature [is] illustrated by the permanent contradiction between man and his Taboo. The quotidian love and the capitalist modus vivendi. Anthropophagy. Absorption of the sacred enemy. To transform him into totem. The human adventure. The mundane finality. However, only the pure elites managed to realize carnal anthropophagy, which brings the highest sense of life, and avoids all the evils identified by Freud, catechist evils. What happens is not a sublimation of the sexual instinct. It is the thermometric scale of the anthropophagic instinct. From carnal, it becomes elective and creates friendship. Affectionate, love. Speculative, science. It deviates and transfers itself. We reach vilification. Low anthropophagy agglomerated in the sins of catechism-envy, usury, calumny, assassination. Plague of the so-called cultured and christianized peoples, it is against it that we are acting. Anthropophagi.

I grew up watching *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *The Smurfs* and *Rocky 1, 2, 3, 4* and *5*. I never saw *The Muppets* or *Coronation Street* because they had the good sense to boycott Apartheid South Africa. I did however read *Face* magazine, ate Kentucky Fried Chicken and drank Coca Cola, even though the latter pretended to boycott by changing the name in the very small print on the side of the can, but looked and tasted exactly the same as any can of Coke anywhere else in the world. To all intents and purposes I was weaned on the same cultural crap as a kid of my age in London, New York, Melbourne, Nairobi or São Paulo.

On the other hand the violence of my childhood colours my memory of the Smurfs and nails one foot very firmly down in African soil, giving my Smurfs a slightly different shade of blue. I think I shall carry a coffin of Germiston earth around with me like a vampire for the rest of my life. That's not necessarily a bad thing for at least I will never forget where I come from and always be reminded that I am in fact the Frankenstein of a failed experiment in social engineering.

It's been two years since the opening of what was meant to be 'our' *Documenta* and I would argue that little has changed as a direct result. Those of us born into the Third World, the margins, the disenfranchised, the colonized, the disempowered naively trusted that the tables would turn, that we would finally be granted a seat at the table rather than waiting on it. I believed in the hope of a global expression that would adjust the colonial structure whereby I have always been judged by a model that prejudices quality in terms of proximity to the centre, how well I spoke the Queen's English. I listened aghast during the 'Empires, Ruins + Networks' conference in Melbourne earlier this year [2004] as the former Pope of art, Okwui Enwezor, explained to a naive, isolated audience that no single person had the power to change the system. His words stood in stark contrast with my memory of the same man literally having to run through art fairs as the most powerful galleries, dealers, vendors and artists in the world chased after him with complete devotion and would jump to any height or sink to any depth to win his favour.

No sooner had Enwezor's appointment been made public than the punters began placing their bets. Everybody who had previously supported him or even been seen in his company was scooped

up into the net lest they become part of a new turn in the art market. We all benefited from that and it certainly made a world of difference that otherwise would have taken a decade longer. It's very ironic to say the least that the punters took more risks and were infinitely more courageous than the show they were trying to pre-empt, and in the end it was they who changed the way we now understand art from the margins.

Documenta XI ushered into the mainstream the Politically-Correct-Multi-Cultural (PCMC) artist from both the margins and the racially unequal centre. However, this ushering played into the hands of the neo-conservatives and left us with an art that is desexed, desensitized, devoid of content, apolitical (except for the predictable partisan accusations and propaganda), innocuous, calculated, decorative, bland, sentimental, saccharine and inoffensive. The PCMC artist is unlikely to change or even challenge anybody except their own political nemesis. The direct expression and literal articulation of one political position is really as valid as any other and with time the pendulum of fashion will swing in the opposite direction and disavow its predecessor. The Holier Than Thou PCMC artist starts off on the wrong foot with the assumption that they have the moral high ground and that the rest of us mere mortals should follow. The problem with such a position, irrespective of the artist's political bias, is that such work leaves us with a very predictable binary choice where we are able to only agree or disagree with and little else, a small stone's throw away from George W Bush's special version of reduced political logic. The partisan nature of such work neither challenges nor subverts any value system and probably reinforces difference with its reductionism. Ultimately it embodies precisely the same logic of power as that which it seeks to disavow and is thus as guilty as the mirror through which it sees everything in reverse.

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Since the work of art is always an invested social relation and always the physical embodiment of a culture located at a specific point in time, the work of art will always be politically inscribed. It's not necessary to announce who the artist voted for since that should already be clear in terms of their choice of scale, medium, symbolism, imagery, strategy and so forth. To be truly subversive or revolutionary the artist creates a context or situation through which the composition of power is disavowed and the viewer cast into a complex semantic labyrinth through which they must

find their way back to safety alone. In reversing the polarity from passive consumer to active participant the work of art functions more as a catalyst that starts a chain reaction, whereby the socio-political and moral prejudices of the viewer become the checker board on which the delicate game of ideological chess is played out.

This dislocation process is really possible only when the field lies beyond the safety of the known. The work of art needs to move outside the logic of language into the dangerous world of terror. The codes of language and history are threatened only by terror and that which is unimaginable, unpredictable, inexpressible, untranslatable, unmentionable, unsayable, inappropriate and articulated through humour, contradiction, danger and extremism. Of course having been articulated once, the code resets itself and assimilates and denies the threat by transforming it into fashion. It is here where the colloquial becomes so powerful, for the lived experience of life in the margins, be it geographical, emotional or moral, lies so far outside the conception of the centre, that complete assimilation is very problematic. In order to function it is necessary that the expression be articulated through the common ground of a mutually understood code. The point of contact here is language and history that, since we assume it to be set in stone, plays straight into the hands of the cannibal with a different eye on what's permissible. The point of resistance is the emphasis on the accent and the cannibalization of language and history by inverting the logic of power through an entirely different lived experience and relocating the centre to the outside.

When the slave finally gets to dine with his master he can either decide to imitate the master and even fuck the other slaves, entirely forgetting where he comes from; or he can quietly poison the master's food and seize control of the entire farm and liberate all the other slaves.

PART III

The white cube gallery is the high temple of capitalism and its dealers are the priests who make daily sacrifices of integrity in order to keep the gods of profit happy. The entire institution of art, from the critics to the collectors, the trustees to the punters, make the timely visits to these temples to renew their faith and maintain their shrines at home. Art has always been there and will always be. It differs from what we understand as culture in that it is culture at its most rarefied and pure.

Culture is an open-ended expression of heterogeneous individuals who have created particular forms that give material form to their social needs. These groups are united and divided by their individual relationships with these expressions. On the other hand Art, with a capital A, is the purest expression a homogenous culture can give to its most holy beliefs, investing objects and images with symbolic power and ideological charge. At its service are the artists who are commissioned either formally or via the pressures of market demand to make manifest this value system. Only that which is able to perfectly express the unspoken will of the elite will survive, for only it will be taken care of and preserved for posterity by the commanding powers, for only they can afford and only they have the vested interest in protecting that legacy. The white cube gallery system is the manifest form of high capitalism and the physical form of its purest ideological expression.

Capitalism responds to every potential threat by assimilating the threat in the form of fashion. Since the '60s every sub-cultural challenge from the underground threat to the mainstream, from the Punk movement to the commune, from the drunken wail of Bukowski to the cut-up technique of Burroughs, from the bullet of Valerie Solanas to the body fluids of COUM Transmissions or the call to arms by Malcolm X, has been assimilated and translated into the safe, cathartic rituals of fashion. No longer dangerous, the implicit violence and transgression has been recorded as mere history and the fabric cut into Prada's anti-fashion, no less fashionable, fashion. Che Guevara is now only a slogan on a T-shirt and his diaries a Hollywood script. The last *Documenta* shifted the MultiCultural and Politically Correct into the mainstream only because it was already dead.

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PART IV

Hoaxes are warnings that contain incorrect information about malware or system events. These warnings often describe fantastical or impossible malware program characteristics that often fool the user into performing unwanted actions on their system or suggests that users should forward the warning to other users. A hoax can be considered a nuisance by the mere fact that by forwarding it causes a waste of time and bandwidth.

<http://www.trendmicro.com/en/security/general/glossary/overview.htm>

I would like to return to my starting point, to the question of language, of truth and the ability to lie. Given that the semantic composition of the artworld's structure embodies and represents the values and needs of the ruling class and that their brokerage predetermines the outcome, the artists themselves are impotent. What I make, say and do has no value beyond how it can be used, traded and exchanged.

Enter the Terrorealist. I have previously attempted a somewhat crude analysis of a certain kind of marginal artist, an artist who speaks both within a language of vested power and simultaneously articulating the realities of an entirely different experience. I observed that artists who had grown up in countries that had been torn apart by war, revolution, conflict, crime and genocide created work according to an entirely different set of aesthetic principles. In place of the cool, detached, passive showroom aesthetics of the white cube shrine, their work was invested with a Reality Principle that sought to disrupt the viewer's pleasure more than satisfy it. Whilst most of these artists may be known to the institutional powers, their practice seems to preclude full assimilation.

On the one hand these artists typically grew up or lived significant parts of their lives in countries that had experienced extreme ideological switches, like the former USSR, Yugoslavia, Serbia, Croatia, South Africa, East Germany and so forth. Having witnessed such extreme ideological reversals and dramatic shifts in their social realities and moral codes, these artists would naturally be more critical of any social codes and ideological promises. I was thinking here of artists like Milica Tomic, Ilya Kabakov, Aleksandra Mir, Christian Jankowski, Sisley Xhafa, Oleg Kulig, Alexander Brenner, Marina Abramovic, Irwin, Fernando Alvim and so forth. There exists too an entirely similar group of artists who grew up or lived in countries in which capitalism has failed to take root, countries that embody the empty promise of profit and the criminal inequality of a system designed around the needs of G8. The favelas, streets and ghettos of São Paulo, Mexico City, Rio, Havana and Bogotá have witnessed a very similar strategy coming from artists based once again on a loss of faith in a political system that disqualifies and disenfranchises them even before they begin and this experience has created artists like Cildo Meireles, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Hélio Oiticica, Victor Grippo, Lygia Clark and Carlos Capelán to mention a few.

The USA was naturally shocked and deeply traumatised to see the Twin Towers burning but in countries like Iraq, Angola, Russia and in cities like Johannesburg or Bogota such terror attacks are daily events. Everyday families and friends are traumatised by rape, kidnapping, murder, bombs, assassinations and incarceration for no other reason than being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Almost immediately as I had articulated the theory of the Terrorealist, that albeit somewhat forced still made sense, I was uncomfortable with it for a great many artists from the centre demonstrated the very same characteristics like David Hammons, Jimmie Durham, Maurizio Cattelan, Carl-Michael von Hausswolff, Jens Hanning, Giani Motti, Gino de Dominicis and so forth. In the case of Spanish artist Santiago Sierra I would say that his is a simple case of the colonial structure of raping and enslaving the natives for profit, but for the rest I needed to expand the logic somewhat.

Terrorists must infiltrate in order to survive, slowly integrating themselves into the culture they seek to destroy. The more successful they are in being able to lie about their intentions and disappear into the social fabric, the greater their chances will be to later rip it all apart. Whilst the ensuing attack will certainly be articulated in terms of terror, it can be as effective with a well-placed rumour as with a benign, but suspicious-looking package or a spectacular car bomb explosion made from fertilizer. Their weapons are all recycled from everyday life so as to avoid suspicion, but also because they have no access to any other means. Their greatest weapon is their precise analysis of the social fabric, its strengths and weaknesses; and where a well placed object or telephone call would be the most disruptive. Since it can sometimes take years for a plan to be set in motion, it is very important that they keep their eyes on their goal with a very strong sense of faith and courage, hiding behind subterfuge and equivocation. As a role model there can be no better for the contemporary artist, for the terrorist needs to, by definition, study and perfectly understand the structure of power and the logic of the social, political and economic classes of the society of its enemy.

The artists I have attempted to define as Terrorealist would refute such a definition for they would be suspicious of the power and

control that follows the process of naming. Their work is difficult to define because it concerns itself more with the social fabric than the objects or images that are the external expression of that fabric. Their work is performative and disruptive, anti-social and yet at the same time they can sometimes use fashion as a vehicle. Most importantly the Terrorealist distrusts power, whether it is in the form of language or history, the logic of the institution or an individual. Power is defused with humour, contradiction, disavowal, and history is thrown back into the dustbin from whence it came.

Perhaps the most important aspect of such an artist is that they begin every project from the perspective of the self. Unlike the PCMC artist, the Terrorealist does not speak on behalf of others or create victims by imprisoning either the viewer or their subject. Instead, the self is located at the centre, as the subject from which the world may be analysed and decoded. The self is fixed in another time, language, history, place and culture and as such it is the most subversive place to begin, for it all holds all the keys to the dislocation of the centre. The lived experiences, the colloquial subjectivity of this space provides all the clues necessary to create the bumps and potholes on the gallery floor of a homogenous culture.

PART V

According to the Hindu tradition of cosmology we are now entering into the age of Kali Yuga, a dark spiritual age of chaos, rampant sexuality, greed, violence, debauchery and lies. The gods that were once feared have since been reduced to one-dimensional clichés like Bush's Episcopalian America, Muslim fanaticism or even entirely forgotten as profit replaced the prophets. Most contemporary art practice reflects this condition in its vapid banality and decorative emptiness. The gestures become more slight and the expressions more flat. The Veneer Disease of 'Empty V' television is spiralling out of control and artists have absolutely nothing to say about nothing and are happy to simply go on photo-shopping. There is no spiritual dimension to contemporary art beyond celebrating the sale and exchange value of the objects. I would argue that this absence of faith is directly related to the emptiness and boredom of living. The excess of profit has created lifestyles in which death, disease, pain, trauma and the fragility of the body is removed from experience. According to ancient Shamanistic ways, it is necessary that you confront and deal

with the realisation and experience of your own death before you can express life. Throughout the history of art, the proximity and experience of death and disease, revolution and war translated into entirely different strategies and expressions than during periods of luxury. In our own life time the Aids epidemic in New York brought death, suffering and empathy into the lives of a generation of artists who as a result, produced work that was far more engaged with life and its fragilities than the decade either before and after. The same may be argued for the work created in the time of the Vietnam War, although we have yet to see what the attack on the Twin Towers and unjustifiable war in Iraq will translate into.

Memory is a scar that holds onto the body in pain, ecstasy, anger, orgasm, hysteria and excess, constantly reminding itself about that moment when every word, every vowel or syllable it had been programmed with was unable to save or protect it. This loss of control threw the body into a space beyond language that was closer to God than any other experience before or since. The memory of it remains a scar because time has no way to cover the wounds with words or cultural expressions and only the experience itself can describe the experience. God is the ultimate terrorist, constantly creating and destroying our world with violence and beauty, simultaneously expressing infinite terror and infinite joy.

I have ripped out the tongue of my master and with it firmly in my cheek I would now like to speak about the spirit and the soul. This is not the sentimental quoting of yet another faith I have read in a book, but a baptism of fire into the secret life of objects as ideological receptors. It's about returning the body to a space for desire, sex, blood, sweat, pain, love, death, the awakening of the Beast within, the cannibal in Dionysus devouring Apollo in order to assimilate him.



CHRISTIAN NERF *UNITED STATES, SOUTH AFRICA* 2007
PHOTOGRAPH DAN HALTER







CHRISTIAN NERF *WORKING WITH TOM* 1999
REMOTE CONTROL PORTRAIT SERIES



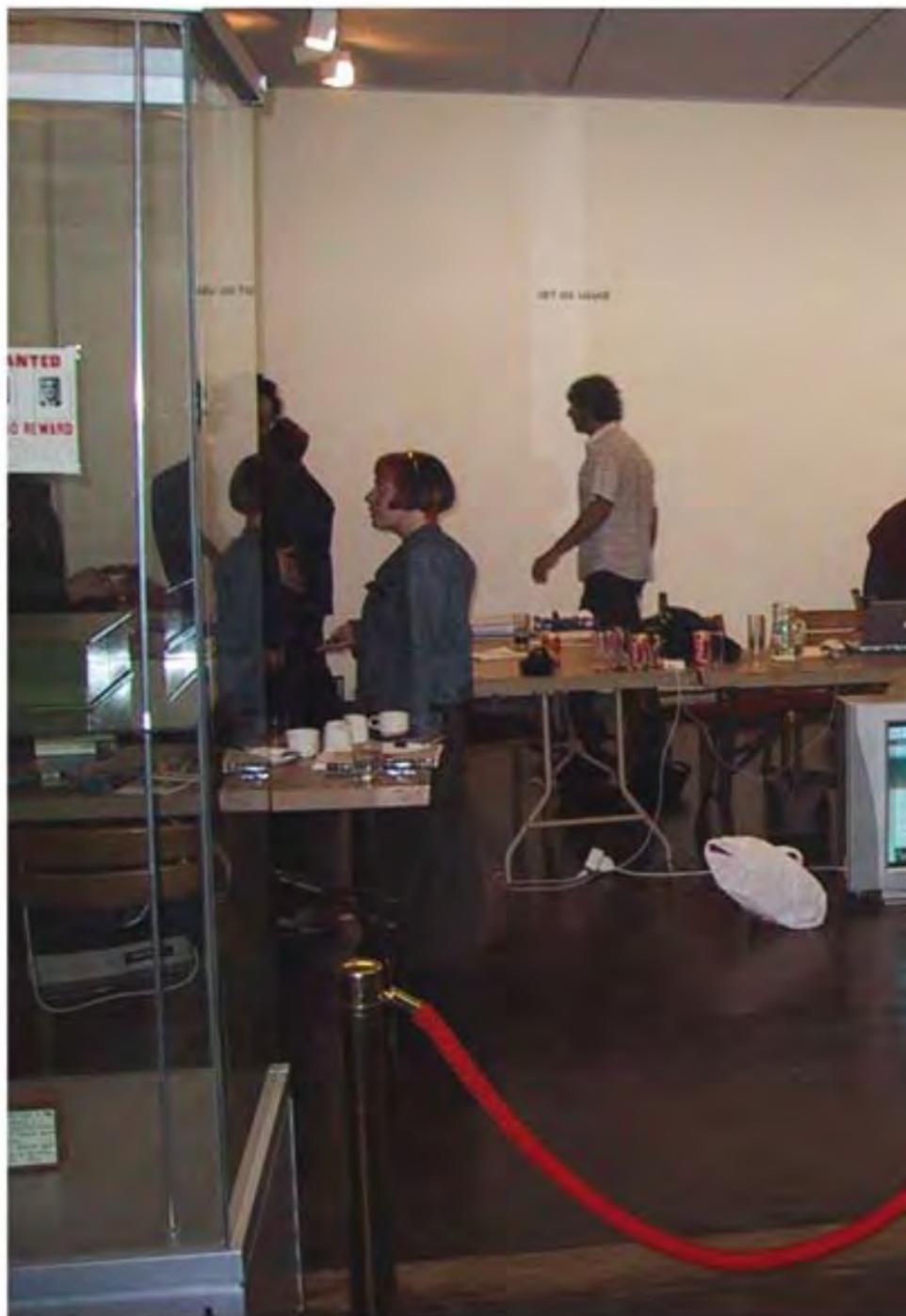
CHRISTIAN NERF CONTRACT 8887 WITH BAREND DE WET 2005
PHOTOGRAPH RONAN COYLE





CHRISTIAN NERF POLITE FORCE 2001- ONGOING





CHRISTIAN NERF 24.7 JOHANNESBURG ART GALLERY 2003
PHOTOGRAPH SEBASTIAN CHARILAOU



CHRISTIAN NERF
RULE NO. ONE
2007

ARTIST

Angasi Nkosi
Angasi Nkosi

MICHAEL SMITH

**THE POWER OF THE CLONE: PRODUCT PIRACY AS AVANT-
GARDE PRACTICE**

2007

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This essay takes its cue from a text by James Sey, published in Art South Africa.¹ Sey's piece speculated about the possibility that terror, as a strategy for reconfiguring power relationships through symbolic acts, had eclipsed any contemporary avant-garde. In this essay, I attempt to deal with the form and strategies of product piracy as an avant-garde practice.

The expansion of certain art brands both locally and globally has ushered in a sense that art is increasingly simply the stock-in-trade of large corporations. A far cry from the genuine ruptures in the fabric of Western culture variously initiated by Romanticism, Realism, Dada, Conceptualism *et al*, contemporary art as commodified object and experience seems to hold sway. The Guggenheim brand's move into Bilbao in Spain, the proliferation of Tates in various locales across Britain, and especially the cynical, commodity-trader-like manipulation of artistic trends à la Britain's Charles Saatchi have meant more and more that art remains object-based, consumable and contained. Locally, corporations like MTN, Telkom, BHP Billiton and Standard Bank have become the new patrons as the country's state-funded institutions flounder under confusion and miniscule budgets. These corporations, along with competition sponsors like Absa and Sasol, effectively brand the art experience, and seek to promote and populate their collections with art objects that might scratch a few surfaces but certainly don't rupture anything. A veneer of edginess seems to have replaced any sense of art's vitality and importance for galvanizing progressive, challenging thought.

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In the 1980s in South Africa there was a definite feeling of Orwellian dread about the fragility of our rights to expression, as if the Draconian strictures of a police state *would* ultimately succeed in silencing dissent. As it turns out, the contemporary reality seems far closer to Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), where stability is achieved through a combination of social streaming and pandering to the desires of the populace. Dissent inevitably becomes less the attractive option when weighed against the possibility of selling works to a corporate curator with a big cheque book.

In fact, art arguably forms a very important part of maintaining this social status quo. Its function is to suggest to the higher social strata that debate *does* exist, that pressing issues *are* being

opened up and something *is* being said and done. In reality, the works that investigate issues or propose certain social or political changes frequently become assimilated, literally and figuratively, into the fabrics of commodity culture and monopoly capitalism by being purchased for private or corporate collections. In this situation, criticality becomes akin to taste, an *accoutrement* of the refined consumer, like the ability to choose a good Pinot Noir: it certainly doesn't translate into social change.

All of this points to the effective paralysis of the art object, as it assumes its place amid the smorgasbord of other commodified 'experiences' in a global economy.

But social change demands quicker action than that afforded by high culture. Social change, as with Realism and Dada, demands to happen when and where it sees fit, outside of the social hierarchy's timetable. And therein lies the proposal of this essay. If we accept that avant-garde practice is that through which the practitioner/producer upsets the terms of production and asserts the (often unwelcome) conceptual importance of her/his product, then the mercurial yet booming international industry in production and sale of pirate goods contains all the hallmarks and value of good avant-garde practice. This amorphous industry, when viewed correctly, could potentially eclipse art as the social phenomenon that challenges the status quo and destabilizes it.

As Duchamp used 'readymades' to attack originality as a construct, exposing its terms and conditions as inextricably linked to flawed notions of genius and therefore problematical, so too does piracy undermine the concept of the brand as a beacon of quality and authenticity. A pair of pirate sneakers produced in an Asian country looks like the real deal, feels like it, even seems to work like it, but somehow (we are told) is not *it*. The strategies that underpin the pirate pair's production, strategies of appropriation and mimicry, seem in line with twentieth century avant-garde thinking, the especially evident tropes being both Dada and Pop Art (also called 'Neo-Dada'). Piracy, in this case, seems to have built into it an awareness that the terms of production, such as ownership of its means and access to its markets, are neither fair nor equal in a global economy. But, like Dada did, it chooses to participate on its own terms, forcing its point and position onto the agenda.

Furthermore, the pirate pair of sneakers speaks eloquently, more so than an artwork could, about the division of labour in the global commodity market. Naomi Klein's book *No Logo* (2000) functions as a powerful indictment of the labour practices of multi-nationals, highlighting the prevalence of outsourcing as an issue of dangerous ambiguity in global politics. Corporations based in the West, she says, may do much of their research, development and marketing on home soil, but go on to outsource much of the actual production and assembly of their products to factories in poorer countries. My suggestion is that pirate products, because they so often come from the same countries (and same factories?) that accept contracts from Western multi-nationals for production of 'genuine' articles, highlight important issues around labour practice, human rights and intellectual property in a global economy, on a scale that art could not hope to do.

Pirate products make good on the promise of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) and other 'readymades' to destabilize the economy of the art world, and by extension the structure of Western economies. *Fountain's* implications rippled through more than just the art world: the notion of replacing aesthetics and craftsmanship, the values upon which many European urban economies rested, with intentionality, potentially threatened the very way that Europe had come to understand its economy. If value could be arbitrarily conferred onto an object rather than be accrued through beauty or skill required in making the object, where did that leave the craftsman?

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Yet the threat was hollow: although the original *Fountain* was lost soon after its original showing, and survives only in a photograph taken by Alfred Stieglitz, artist-authorized replicas are on show at the Indiana University Art Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Tate Modern in London. Essentially, *Fountain* has become another work of art which, to paraphrase Claes Oldenburg, sits on its ass in a museum. Seen against this context, the physical nature of the pirated object, its aping of the forms of the original, arguably causes far more offence than the art object ever did, even one as radical as Duchamp's.

The pirate product, in contrast to the art object, really does challenge the global economy and its sacred cows, posing danger to the structures of trade so palpable that the authorities

get involved. While the consecrated enclaves of art exhibitions (now increasingly large-scale biennales and art fairs along with the aforementioned branded galleries/museums) do all they can to ensure that the balance of supply and demand is maintained, the pirate product deliberately devalues itself *and* the original from which it is cloned. It floods any market it enters, asserting its brutish position and speaking to the populace *en masse*, eschewing the limiting sophistry of limited edition fine art objects. Its promiscuity makes it infinitely more democratic than an artwork could be, despite the perennial resuscitation of Realism's original impulse to make the 'common' man the focus of high art. In retrospect, and with the benefit of postcolonial theory's understanding of centers and peripheries, it is possible to view Realism as an essentially ghettoizing practice, highlighting the peculiarity of the Other without actually effecting any shift in power. By contrast, the pirate product actually gets involved in the lives of the 'common' man, the street trader and the hawker, the factory worker and the smuggler, becoming the means by which each subsists. It does not speak over him about him, but becomes part of the fabric of his existence. Its ability to parasitically derive value from the sanctioned, official commerce of the powerful is strikingly similar in spirit to Jean Franoise Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857). Yet the pirate product is powerful precisely because it does not wait for a polite artwork to inspire the benevolence of the rich: there is nothing pathetic about it, as there is in Millet's work. It steps out of poverty's ghetto and into the business of trade, once again on its own terms.

The viewpoint illustrated in this essay is surely a contentious one, and one that could easily sustain much more debate. Yet to at least begin to see product piracy as a form of avant-garde practice may go a long way towards reconfiguring stagnant received notions of economics and power.

REFERENCES

¹ See James Sey 'The Art of Terror and a South African Avant-Garde', in *Art South Africa*, vol. 4, issue 3 (Autumn, 2006), pp. 42 – 43.





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BRENDEN GRAY

**CONSIDERING THE ACT OF TERROR: THE DILEMMA OF THE
AVANT-GARDE**

2007

BRENDEN GRAY IS A LECTURER IN DESIGN AND VISUAL ARTS,
PRACTICING ARTIST AND CRITIC BASED IN JOHANNESBURG

Despite the delirium of some of its celebrants and apologists a truly new culture could only emerge through the collective struggle to create a new social system.

Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991

Clowns and soldiers are dangerous characters. Clowns are those who expose the absurdity of the game of art on its own terms. Serious clowns. They attempt to renew the field in their provocations. Their work is at once critical and playful. Then there are those who are not interested in the game of art, but a project where 'art' is a vehicle to achieve certain social goals outside of the game. They mean business. Soldiers. Their seriousness is in itself a provocation to the field. Western art history is full of such dangerous characters. The deeply macho participation in that project we call the avant-garde. The rest of the bunch just tow the mediocre line. Both types aim through their artistic struggles to redefine the field through an eternal cycle of destruction and renewal. But what happens in a cultural context where struggle is merely absorbed by the game?

In Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2001) is instructive here. A traditional, poor Kashmiri village, Pachigam, is caught up in a border war between India and Pakistan. They are reduced to a wasteland by an absurd ideological struggle between three central characters, the main protagonist of which is an artist bent on revenge. The political allegory plays out in a contest between these three macho men – the sensitive, Muslim village clown Shalimar, the fumbling Indian army general and the heroic Jewish-American ambassador Max Ophuls. The object of their struggle is, yes, you've got it, the prize – a beautiful young Hindu Kashmiri village girl, Boonyi, who embodies the aspirations of modernised youth. She falls in love with the clown Shalimar, the general declares his love to her with no return, and the ambassador seduces her with his money. She ultimately acquiesces to the ambassador, destroying her body and reputation through a mixture of sex, fame, drugs and food. All the ingredients of a postmodern cultural situation are here: the insatiable, devouring feminised market, the terrorist/subversive artist (clown), the corrupt, militaristic state and the administrator of culture. It becomes a story of revenge – the terrorist assassinates the administrator as an act of revenge

against the West's hijacking of culture, and turns against his first love, his betrayer, the market. And yes, as usual, the losers are the lower classes, the villagers, whose world of intimacy and joy is reduced to nothing. What the novel suggests, in the figure of Shalimar, is that creative acts of radicalism are the only options left to a true postmodern avant-garde and the consequences are dire. It is disturbing to see how Shalimar the artist, in radicalising and politicising his practice, becomes a professional assassin, terrorist and murderer and yet throughout we have a tainted respect and sympathy for his project.

The postmodern cultural situation as it stands now is far from radical. Postmodernism is yet to accommodate a radical practice, nevermind define one. The art of provocation is all very good and well, but when the culture industry within the context of late capitalism has grown to the point that it can neutralise all provocations, the avant-garde becomes yet another brand in a litany of lifestyle choices. Art today just doesn't want to go there. Criticality is just too dangerous. Or it is pointless. Better to remain in the realm of pointless, in the world of the clown. Shalimar begins as a mere clown. It is when he realises that he is alienated from his creative labour that he becomes dangerous. He must act. Artists resist this dangerous journey because there is a tacit acceptance on the part of cultural producers that no art that has and can escape the long shadow of the commodity. Avant-gardism as a cultural response/reaction to formative capitalism seldom succeeded in escaping that shadow, so why should we bother now that capitalism has entrenched itself universally? To effect an escape is easy enough, but to act would be tantamount to committing gratuitous acts of symbolic violence within the game of art. What are the stakes involved when an artist takes on the challenge of subverting the neutralisation of culture?

There is today only the illusion of an avant-garde. What we, as the art community, take for an avant-garde may be mistaken for the upward displacement of taste in an economy where symbolic goods have become capital or the signs of capital. More and more art is being absorbed into a wider lifestyle economy used as a means by which dominant social groups can forever maintain their position in what has shifted from a struggle over the means of production to a struggle over symbolic goods. Consumer culture. As late capitalism, or the 'cultural logic of post-modernism',

entrenches itself as the dominant mode of production, art begins to look more and more like fashion and less and less like a form of critical inquiry or critical action. Clowns pretending to be soldiers. On the fashion ramp criticality looks absurd, as an infantile form of attention-seeking. Critical inquiry has become absorbed into workings of fashion, with the former merely becoming the stuff that gives commodities the lustre of art. The signs of criticality, embedded in the art object, imbue it with the status of a fetish, making culture a category easily consumable by a privileged class. Think Benetton. The middle and upper classes consume 'art', the working class consumes mass culture, but at the end of the day it all amounts to the same thing. For me, there cannot be an avant-garde if there is no hope of participation. Postmodernism is a failure because it cannot construct cultural praxis in relation to the administrations and managements of monopoly capitalism. Here 'art' is merely an index for managed and tamed expression. Think art competition, corporate sponsorship. However, things were not always so.

The 'critical modernist', or what I designate as an authentic avant-garde (as opposed to formal modernism), may have made some fairly destructive assumptions but at least it generated some powerful questions. Big questions. Grand questions. We all know that the avant-garde is a historical construct, a narrative in the grand project called modernism. Their game is finished. Periodicity is a sham, progress is a lie, agency is an illusion. So we are told by our beloved contemporary art books. Modernism is now a dirty word. Modernists may have asked big questions but their achievements have been overshadowed by mistakes. Big mistakes. If you want to shame someone in the art world today – or shame yourself – invoke the spirit of modernism. Modernism has been reduced to a one-liner with the name 'Greenberg' thrown in somewhere, associating the term to the decrepit ramblings of educated, middle-aged white men. As such it has become almost invisible and the big questions that critical modernists asked have been nullified. It is more fashionable now to align yourself – as a 'producer' – with hip, young POMO, rather than crusty, old MO. I want visual culture. I chose Duchamp, I chose life. Drink Pepsi. Maybe cultural producers should wear badges. No, that's too passé, too political. Better to wear the T-shirt, or get a tattoo. Studio artist or Apple Mac intellectual? Painter or conceptualist? The choice is yours. You decide. This choice to give up the

project of critical modernism allows you to circumvent an entire body of Marxist thought and make believe that problems such as poverty, destruction of the ecosystem, injustice, inequality are just lifestyle issues. POMO – come and play! As an artist you can toy disinterestedly with the idea of criticality and pretend that you are a member of the artistic avant-garde for a while, until it gets boring or too difficult.

I am told that the avant-garde only makes sense within the context of the narrative of progress, industrialisation, modernisation and so forth. Imagine living in a world that is radically transforming within your lifetime. You could not help but be concerned about futurity, value and originality in art as well as its instrumental potential. I am told that I now live in a strange, new emergent world – the world of multiculturalism, post-industrialism, the knowledge economy, the information age, the electronic era, the global village – a world in which I am a post-historical subject and so forth. I am also told that the remnants of modernity are still with us. Millions of people remain slaves to monopoly capitalism. It's all so confusing that I struggle to fashion a position from which to act. Rather, I am encouraged to 'adopt' a position as if acting in the world were choosing a brand in the supermarket of ideas. How can an artist formulate an avant-garde position if they are told that all the positions have been taken? I imagine artists waiting in a queue with their shopping trolleys.

There is a committed utopianism inherent in old-fashioned modernism that I always find refreshing, and which is so pointedly lacking in contemporary art discourse and practice. The central premise in what I term critical modernism, as distinct from formalist modernism, was how to make cultural production a valuable contributor in the construction of a better society. Think Russian Constructivism. Think Bauhaus. Think Dada. Deconstruction has pointed out the inherent naivety of this position. Who decides what 'better' is? But critical modernism was not naive in respect to limitations of art as commodity. Avant-garde movements predicted the reification, fetishisation and commodification of art that is now the defining feature of contemporary art. They struggled pre-emptively against the sort of art we have today – art as a subdivision of the fashion industry. To me, the critical modernists attempted to construct a position from which art could be made that would affect social transformation, hence the

preoccupation with the development of new visual languages. Universalism was their stumbling block. The struggle for critical modernists was how to resolve the tension between art as a commodity form and cultural form in an historical moment when something could be done to improve the lot of the human race. Only if that aporia could be resolved, could art be wrenched from the hands of the bourgeoisie. If art is private property, confined to the superstructure, owned and consumed by privileged social groups, then it cannot affect social change. It is here that art gets serious. The rest is just eye-candy or brain-candy. Junk. Yuppie art. Vending machine art. Postmodern art.

Contemporary art, despite claims to the opposite, remains an institutionalised form of cultural production that cannot escape the shadow of the commodity. Rather it celebrates it without even the effort of affect. Only art with a socialist agenda can renew itself authentically because its project is real. The problem is that art informed by socialism just doesn't look like art – it begins to look more like design, activism or social work. It just wouldn't be 'read' by the marketplace, because it could not be bought and owned, inserted as an object or commodity sign into the art economy, travelling the international circuit and finding its final resting place in a museum or corporate collection. To me, postmodernism's art is a failure to imagine a practice outside this economy. It is a cultural response to monopoly capitalism. Postmodernism can only recycle, disaffect and ironise because it lacks the courage to tackle the big question – "what is to be done?" I chose to be critical, I chose life.

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Artists who challenge art within the confines of the art industry and its related institutions can only offer simulacra of avant-gardism. Kendell Geers and Ed Young do this. Their work can only show the outward signs of avant-gardism. Geers offers us the simulacrum of criticality and risk-taking within the sanctified space of the art gallery. Easy avant-gardism. These are clowns not terrorists. Then we have the pseudo-critical variety: 'issue-based' art. This work is paralysed communicatively – it can only read within the symbolic game that is the art industry. Pre-digested art. This work can only pretend to engage with real social issues – representation, identity politics, memory, the gaze etc. (yawn). I struggle to name this art. The discourse of art offers no brand to situate it. It is an art that appears to engage critically with social issues, where its content

appears engaged but the form in which it manifests subverts its intentions; the commodity form. Pieter Hugo's work exemplifies this type of art. Like a Benetton advert, his photographs want 'us' to be more aware of the plight of the marginalized and the invisible and then proceeds to exploit their otherness, in its macabre exoticizations, in order to make profit and establish the artist's own reputation within the field. This is an art that is 'about' things in the world, yet cannot reflect self-criticality on how it acts as an agent within the world of social relations. An art that does not want to get caught up in the messy world of the object. Reproductive, reified art. Dead, theological art. Perhaps we could call this the 'art of the spectacle'; an art where meaning is contained and encoded in its material form of the object as if it were a transcendental religious icon. The meaning is not present in the encounter, in the relation between its material and the viewer. Essentialist art. Non-dialogical art. Art that requires certain privileged competences to decode. Art, that when you stand before it, makes you feel somehow inadequate, as if it were alive and you were not. High art. Art. Institutionalised art of whatever kind, whether it be 'critical' or not, is all commodity fetishism.

The institution can so easily liquidate into capital efforts to practice avant-gardism. In this kind of art production socialism is merely a badge of distinction that marks it out as a quality in a marketplace of competing brands. Serious artists interfere or resist the liquidation of their work into capital or property by engaging with the mechanisms that perform the liquidation – the administrative mechanisms that reify objects as art. Hans Haacke is a good example of this, or Thomas Hirschhorn. Then there are artists who eschew the entire game itself by operating outside of its borders.

I know of none. Or they seem not to exist because they have been edited out of the discourse. Artists don't want to operate outside the bourgeois confines of the art institution because it is cognitively and experientially taxing work, offering little rewards in terms of exposure and recognition – the two poles around which institutionalised contemporary art revolves. I have been an educator for nine years now and have always asked why my art practice cannot look more like what happens in the classroom. In this space of improvised production, concepts take on an immediate and powerful relevance. Meaning is constructed dialogically in the situation of participation. As an artist I design

dense learning situations, that activate students' 'relation-making'. The mark of a powerful learning situation is constructive and purposeful chaos, where learners participate spontaneously in the construction of knowledge. I consider what I do in the classroom as artistic and cultural practice. Institutionalised art pales in comparison. It is a specular art devoid of the spark of relationality. The 'viewer' cannot learn or grow in their interactions with a fetish. The greatest obstacle to an art of progress is the category of art itself.

RAFAEL MOUZINHO

BARRIGA DE DRAGÃO (DRAGON ABDOMINAL CAVITY)

2007

ARTIST AND THEORIST

At the beginning of the 1990s, Mozambique was experiencing a new political reality. The end of the civil war between Frelimo and Renamo, the end of apartheid in South Africa and the changes in the international arena constituted a challenge for Mozambique.

During that period our art revolved around our local context and had a passive relationship towards what was happening globally. At this time, nationalist, socio-culturally focused art was celebrated, with painting, drawing, printmaking and photography the acceptable form.

In 2003, Muvart appeared with the objective of stimulating and promoting the practice of contemporary art in Mozambique. In 2004, Muvart organised an exhibition, *Expo arte contemporanea 2004*, which promoted an inclusive production incorporating new languages like installation and video alongside more traditional media.

At this time, we had to confront a structure that promoted very specific kinds of production within the local context. We wanted to eliminate prejudice against, and create access to, the kind of art being shown on the international circuit, particularly art from Africa, Latin America and Asia.

The task of communicating the wide variety of the phenomena called art required, at first, the revision of some conventionally held beliefs and concepts.

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Creativity today is a place of experimentation. Intention becomes part of a process where discourse moves between concept and complex language, to avoid homogeneity and the exploiting of new forms. Reinventing for continued existence always opens channels for multiple desires. Painting required centuries to become understood and affirmed as autonomous, then came the independence of photography from painting; so do new media need to establish their languages and characteristics. Modern forms need to develop to liberate art from our secular dependency on established Renaissance traditions, which were limited to the representation of external reality.

Barriga de dragão (Dragon abdominal cavity) was produced when 'public art' practice was rare in Mozambique. The central idea was

the question of exhibitions getting out of the isolation of the 'box' (gallery, museum, art centre), immediately announcing my intention to rethink the relationship between aesthetic and politics, and to increase the political engagement of artistic practice.

The avant-garde of the "ism" came up with new ways to represent reality and new ways of accessing and manipulating information. Its techniques are still necessary now in our contemporary era.

This work is a metaphorical interpretation of phenomena that occur in public spaces in specific contexts of an African city like Maputo, where the political, economic and social situations are constantly in flux, and where people are submitted to certain conditions without the possibility of questioning them.

The title *Dragon Abdominal Cavity* comes from a type of public transport which circulated for a period here in Maputo. This type of transport exists almost exclusively in Africa with very specific names; *candongueiro* in Luanda, *mathatu* in Nairobi and so on. *Dragon Abdominal Cavity* marks a period of chaos in Maputo city. The name of a dangerous animal is appropriated and associated with a form of public transport that causes many accidental deaths on the roads, drawing attention to an inefficient municipal structure and a passive population. This work explores questions of existing realities of behaviour in public space.





KENDELL GEERS *BROKEN ENGLISH* 2006
PHOTOGRAPH RUTH SACKS



SEBASTIAN CHARILAOU *RANDOM CONTEMPORARY* DSC07003 2007

LIZE VAN ROBBROECK

THE AVANT-GARDE IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE AVANT-GARDE!

2007

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A pink and scrubbed student, with the carefully cultivated juvenile appearance in vogue among middle-class kids (Hello Kitty t-shirt, baby-blue mini skirt, slip-ons and pony-tail), earnestly tells me that she produces avant-garde art. I suppress a sarcastic snort, and ask her what she means by this. “Oh, like”, she says, ruminatively chewing her gum, “you know... provocative stuff, not commercial art...”.

I am a theory lecturer, so I suppose I should take some responsibility for our average student’s near-total ignorance of this loaded term’s complex semantic connotations and historical resonances. But where to start deconstructing its current cynical/amnesiac postmodern usage, when even in its original context it was rife with ambivalences and aporias?

With its Romantic roots, the avant-garde was saturated with Modernist expressive fallacies: it rested on the unique and visionary genius of the individual artist; it celebrated constant innovation; it promoted the creation of brave new languages to celebrate brave new worlds; it was resolutely anti-tradition; it promoted a radical break with the past; it despised hypocrisy and lauded honesty; it shunned security for dizzying change. It endorsed revolutions and often put its idealistic young neck on the block in real wars.

But oh, how rife with contradictions! It loathed the bourgeoisie but was without exception a product of and for the middle classes. It loved women but was flagrantly sexist. It adored ‘The Primitive’ but was rampantly racist. It hated tradition but loved origins. It was nihilistic and utopian. It espoused art as universal language, but revelled in its elitist incomprehensibility. It was young and dirty and white and muscular and macho. What it couldn’t eat or drink or smoke or snort or fuck, it transmuted into *priceless, inimitable, original* artworks. It was a libidinous rebel with more causes than it could count. It drew up sizzling manifestoes in an absinthe and opium-induced haze. It leered at innumerable innocent Hello Kittys and ate them for breakfast.

On its last Modernist, American legs, it was in the throes of midlife crisis. It was still grungy, white, middle-class and macho (and even muscular, in a somewhat flabby and alcoholic way) – a brave battalion of ageing soldiers forming a thin, wavering front-line against a massive army of popular media-generated Kitsch.

Think of a rather sad Pollock drunkenly pissing on gallery carpets to the delighted applause of the cognoscenti and the secret satisfaction of cynical CIA ideologues, who needed proof of virile American individualism for their dirty Cold War propaganda: America, land of the Brave and the Free and the (weird and suspect, but basically harmless) Avant-Garde. We love 'em and hate 'em, but unlike the Reds we put up with 'em, and we'll nuke any commie gay bastard who suggests we are not a nation of free individuals!

The gallery carpet was barely dry, a whiff of expressive/expensive Pollock-piss still hanging in the air, when in minced Andy Warhol sporting mascara and an aura of total ennui, a bevy of boneless and sexually indeterminate groupies in tow. It was immediately clear that something seminal had finally spent itself and dried up. Could this spunkless, blatantly Kitsch and populist (but, oh, so indisputably cool and fresh) trend actually be Abstract Expressionism's replacement in the avant-garde battle of succession? After Duchamp's paradigm-shifting urinal, there could be no question that multiple Marilyn Monroes in a gallery was of an entirely different order to multiple Marilyn Monroes in the media. Greenberg's jealous protestations aside, this was indisputably cutting-edge stuff. Also, it was collectible, expensive, and (let's just admit it), easier to look at than Pollock's endless reams of apocalyptic wallpaper. In short – a good investment in a market saturated with Pollock wannabes. But was it avant-garde? What was the avant-garde without a cause? What was it *avant* of? What was it guarding, now that it had joined the ranks of the Kitsch and Commercial? Could a silkscreen actually be said to *express* anything? Could one be a Genius without a Gesture to prove it? But, what the hell! The term had its uses. It signified, in a rather satisfyingly foreign-posh way, the Best and Latest, the Cutting-Edge. In an art world increasingly patronized by rich multinational corporations with no time for nit-picking or reading about art, Avant-Garde would do just fine.

The advent of Pop made it clear that a major semantic shift had taken place. The term avant-garde still carried faint traces of youthful rebellion, cultish individualism and energetic renewal – connotations that could usefully be mined by the art market and rich collectors – but it had been irrevocably severed from its original political context. Ever since Pop, Avant-Garde has been

a shameless slut, licentiously allowing itself to be used by a wide array of conservative, liberal, white, black, progressive, militant, ignorant, cynical, young, old, male, female, queer, feminist artists from a wide array of contexts; used by curators who should know better; used by eager *nouveau riche* collectors and businessmen; used even by art theorists, for want of a better term. For a while attempts were made to acknowledge the slippages it underwent by renaming it (for instance, Neo-Avant-Garde) but such attempts were predictably and depressingly stripped of energy or impact.

So here we are now, 60-odd years later on the southernmost tip of Africa, debating whether the term still has relevance. Clearly it has *some* kind of relevance just by virtue of the fact that it is still around, as Hello Kitty will testify. But with all its slippings and slidings, all its floatings and temporary landings, all its duplications and reduplications, it has collected so much unforeseen debris that it is one of the most unstable signifiers around. It floats free in a veritable constellation of free-floating signs. The cruelly ironic transmutation of Che Guevara's face is the key to understanding the semantic slippage of the term avant-garde. Once a sign of militant revolutionary idealism, now a fleeting signifier of Young Consumer Cool, like poor Che, Avant-Garde is now an enervated and spoilt, rich, cool-conscious rebel without a clue. It is just one more instance of a vastly accelerating process of postmodern de- and re-signification – just one more ironically misplaced sign in a world of misplaced signs. The Shock of the New??? The new is now so cushioned by padded gallery walls, so reified and praised and written about (and blissfully ignored by the overwhelming majority) that it is the *old* that shocks and provokes – think Goya's *Disasters of War* (1810 – 1815) or those deadpan graphic medieval torture scenes – images that manage to elicit gasps of horror from students who yawn at Kendell Geers' oh-so-transgressive bricks and impotent semen-stains.

Despite its stated political agendas, the intent of the original avant-garde was essentially to shock and unsettle the art establishment, to challenge the dominance of the smug, overfed and complacent bourgeois panel of judges that rejected them. Now the art mafia can absorb any amount of shock tactics and will remain hungry for more. Hello Kitty's attempts at transgression will play right into their sweaty, pudgy capitalist hands. It might even, protestations of anti-commercialism aside, earn her a few fat prizes or sponsorships.

Little Kitty does not (yet) realize that 'shocking the general public' is like canned lion hunting. She will probably get her trophy (one outraged letter in *Die Burger*) but so what? For the overwhelming majority of the 'general public' she won't even be a passing reference in a blog on the blog-ridden World Wide Web. Beside Britney Spears' pantyless cavorting, she will remain less than nothing in the general public's consciousness.

So where does my cynical diatribe leave Hello Kitty and other aspirant young artists? I want to tell Kitty that the best we can hope for is to use the term with a great deal of wry self-reflexivity – to use it parodically, tongue in cheek (but please, not Kendell Geers'), with full cognizance of the ironies and conundrums inhering in the notion of 'an avant-garde tradition'. We need to acknowledge it as endless reduplication, as a camp mime of the fervent and sincere gestures of its, in retrospect, quite touchingly innocent and idealistic Founding Fathers. We should scratch at its flattened surface like archaeologists. We should marvel at its layers and learn what we can from it – not only about art – but about language and the world of mirrors we inhabit.

For those that are not so much concerned about the relevance of the term, but are really prepared to risk their necks to provoke reaction (no matter how limited or transitory), Steven Cohen may serve as example. While I've never heard him use the term avant-garde, he has risked life and limb by sashaying or limping (depending on the height of his stilettos) into right-wing gatherings, squatter camps or rugby matches, flaunting his gloriously invented/inverted transgender personas in the red and stupid faces of very real and very dangerous heterosexual brutes. But for Cohen's practice, Art Terror is perhaps a more apt designation than avant-garde. In a world held ransom by terror (state sanctioned and other), Cohen is one of a mere handful of effective art terrorists who manage to blast away our mirrors and lies, leaving us naked in a bloody pool of exploded prejudices. To achieve this, you must first be prepared to eat your own shit, like Cohen has done.

So, Hello Kitty, I want to say to you that you should perhaps forget about the term avant-garde for now. Forget about provoking others and rather provoke yourself by reading and thinking where you've never dared to read and think before. Acquire the hard-won skills of contemplation and self-reflexivity by spending a lot of time in

your studio actually working. Try the library instead of the cafeteria. Try dialogue instead of monologue. Look at and to the people who surround you here in your immediate locality, because, as Sylvester Ogbechie recently reminded me, no artist actually inhabits a global art-world. Make the best effort you can to understand what is right around you. Speak to other people – ordinary people – and actually listen to what they say about art and about life. Speak to other artists but remember to always be sceptical about what they say. Maybe, if you do all this, you will find yourself a few years from now, probably *sans* Hello Kitty t-shirt, and mercifully *sans* the desire to call yourself Avant-Garde.





THANDO MAMA

**“IS THE AVANT-GARDE STILL A VIABLE AND OR TENABLE
NOTION IN THE CURRENT CONTEMPORARY MOMENT...?”**

2007

ARTIST

THE AVANT-GARDE, THE ANGRY ARTIST!

I cannot remember seeing anything remotely avant-garde recently in South Africa. Well, if you take angry artists as being avant-garde I haven't seen that either. Perhaps to give them something to pioneer, to innovate? No, I am not talking about net.art, just about real issues; the crime in the country, the socio-political climate in Zimbabwe, the conflict in Darfur...notice anything, no London, Paris, New York! At this point we could talk about the innovative ways to instigate critical discourses through art, just by not being conventional, not being commercial-gallery-standard-issued.

So where is the avant-garde in our current contemporary moment? Lost in historical modern art of the far away art institutions? I am not saying there are no artists around who are pushing the boundaries of the art institution, but asking my fellow artists to think a little more, to think because they have to think, to feel, to work smarter and harder!

MISPLACING THE AVANT-GARDE!

Avant-garde, bizarre, offbeat, unconventional, contemporary, outdated, ultramodern, activist, forward-thinking, advanced, ahead of its time, modern, advocate, innovative, highly developed, radical, pioneering, inventive...

The following is from Leon Golub's *Do paintings bite? Selected texts 1948-1996*¹:

Since everyone is in the Avant Garde, the ranks of the academy are empty.

Today, instant avant garde! Everyone to the front! Everyone has learned the lesson of history. A series of avant gardes proclaim heroic destinies! There is the avant garde and nothing else today! And unlike the past, today's avant gardes are everywhere and triumphant – in the ateliers, in the art galleries, the art journals! In the homes of the avant garde collecting class.

We are looking at art in historical terms, and most recently, ours has not been innovative, but conventional. The rebirth of paint I feel is being standardized by art galleries, and so are other conceptual art works. Everything goes, that is, only if it's fashionable.

Okay, since “everyone is in the avant garde”, and “the ranks of the academy are empty”, can we honestly trust anyone in the academy to be even half avant-garde? I should think that if this is the case, where everyone is avant-garde, and the avant-garde is everywhere, I will encounter the most exciting works today, be stimulated out of my brains from what I see in all the WONDERFUL AND BEAUTIFUL ART GALLERIES! But I have yet to experience that here in South Africa.

I think ‘avant-garde’ is seriously misplaced. Not that I care too much about it. What it really boils down to is that it grants a few individuals instant fame; those who only yesterday were dead, could be *instantly reborn*.

“...but if the mass media culture interdicts the underground, the avant garde disappears...”²

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¹ Edited by Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag), p. 157.

² See ‘Sense of the Sixties’, *Art in America*, January – February, 1967



ED YOUNG *DO NOTHING* 3/5 2005/6
CENTERFOLD PHOTOGRAPH TIZIANA ANONNE

NATHANIEL STERN
NATHANIEL STERN... SINGS!
2007
ARTIST

ARTIST

nathaniel stern... SINGS!

a new album out now, and available from iTunes as soon as they recognize stern's genius
(in our newly developed mp3-on-vinyl format!)



This album features classic hits like:

"That's not avant-garde (and neither are you)"

"Hal Foster built my hot rod"

and of course

"WOOP! There's nothing worse than nostalgic postmodern artists pining for stuff they never experienced"

But as a bonus, don't forget the infamous b-sides, all in mp3-on-vinyl format:

"Boundary transgressions are for pussies (a drinking song)"

"South Africa is better than this (even tho you keep trying to disprove it with stupid 'provocations' like this)"

and the underground hit

"You're so vain, you probably think this song is about Ed Young"

Act now, and get explicated by an explosive literacy in social relation!

ELAN GAMAKER

**TO BELIEVE IN THE AVANT-GARDE IS TO DENY THE
PERMANENCE OF THE WIDTH OF A HORSE'S ARSE**

2007

ELAN GAMAKER IS A WRITER/FILMMAKER LIVING IN CAPE
TOWN. HE MOSTLY DOES WORK THAT IS EXTREMELY OLD-
FASHIONED

There is no such thing as the avant-garde. The concept sprang up at a time when there was no better word for it. Similarly, there is no such thing as a bicycle. Or a car. These only sprang up because of the previous invention upon which they are based. Isaac Newton's overused "standing on the shoulders of giants" bollocks. Even the design of the world's fastest train is based on the width of a horse's arse, because the dimensions of its undercarriage are based on that of wagons, used to build railroads. The wagons in turn are only as wide as two horses walking together, banging their butts into each other. So we've been accommodating ourselves and squeezing along train carriages – ah, but what amazing spy stories we got out of it! – because of a couple of fillies and their hay-fuelled *derrières*. So why define the avant-garde? Why question if it exists? It's a bit like trying to prove you had plaque on your teeth after brushing them. And then calling the toothpaste passé because you just spat it out. History is fluid. It doesn't rest for a second. Never has. That's why the distinction of language and race and nation-states is ludicrous. Just because the avant-garde suggests something significant doesn't make it any less redundant. I find comfort in the term's etymology. It comes from the French for the 'advance' or 'front' guard of a battalion. This was not the part of a country's warhorse there to push boundaries or discover new worlds or set new standards or experiment. It was there to die. The cannon fodder, most likely the most illiterate and inbred of the bunch. The avant-garde is pre-ordained to perish. It is an expression akin to conservatives describing neurotic or eccentric characters or stories as 'quirky'. Or food or people as 'exotic'. There is nothing more self-defeating or cannibalising than terminology that relies on the term itself to exist. Few terms or expressions, save for the variants of 'God' and income tax, exist in and of themselves. Every definition is in fact a connotation that has the gumption to open itself up to misinterpretation. Avant-garde is woefully pedantic, almost fascist in its selfish demand to 'be', and to appropriate any work considered new or unusual, even though every work is new, unusual and shop-worn, pastiche. I would go so far as to suggest we ban the term altogether, but I'm not sure if the world is quite ready for that.





CHRISTIAN NERF *CAPE TOWN TRIENNIAL 2007*
REWORKED CANCELLED PAINTINGS FROM THE ESTATE OF LARRY SCULLY

STACY HARDY

EVERYONE HATES ME BECAUSE I'M NERDY AND WHITE

2007

WRITER, JOURNALIST, MULTIMEDIA ARTIST AND THEATRE
PRACTITIONER

Ed: Everyone hates me because I'm white and nerdy.

Stacy: That's okay I'm white and nerdy too!

Ed: Yes, yes, you are.

Stacy: I'm *really* white and nerdy!

Ed: Yes you are. You're *really* white and *really* nerdy.

"Everyone hates me because I'm white and nerdy," says Ed Young. We're hanging outside Bell-Roberts Contemporary in Cape Town at the ass-end of an exhibition opening, smoking cigarettes, blowing lines of white into the closing dark. I barely know Ed, except that he's some hot-shot controversial artist type. In interviews and profiles he comes across as louche: lazy, provocative and egotistical. His work is similarly provocative: on the surface it seems to consist of nothing more than him getting drunk and fucking up. But he seems so sweet today, so shy, so halting, so awkward in his surly slouch. I smile, say, "That's okay, I'm white and nerdy too." "Yeah," says Ed, "Yeah, you are. You're *really* white and *really* nerdy."

I'm left not knowing what to think. Is Ed the asshole his words makes him out to be, a drunken lout or bourgeois racist, as critics have alleged, or the sharp cultural critic, as his works suggest? Is he all of the above? Everyone has an opinion. Critic and curator Andrew Lamprecht calls Ed's art "playful" and "fun". Andrew Lamprecht is fucked in the head. Ed's art is not playful. There is nothing fun about it. Rather it is emphatically, unremittingly depressing in its succinct critique of defining characteristics of late-capitalist liberalism: free will, self-determination, property rights, the separation of the public and private spheres, tolerance, and *laissez-faire* morality.

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More to the point, his art in all its surly egoism stands as a massive 'fuck you' to the lazy liberalism and bourgeois hedonism that define the predominantly white, yes, mostly nerdy, post-1994 South African art world. The artist Coco Fusco argues that, if we as postmodern artists are doomed to explore personal, minute utopias only, we are also doomed to accept global capitalism and its faithful travelling companion liberal democracy, as the status quo.¹ Ed takes this further. Our obsession with postmodernism, he seems to suggest, with its evacuation of subjective intentions, its infinitely layered irony, its composite intertextuality, and its theoretically sophisticated conceptualism, is not the embrace of

the multicultural, the undecidable or indeterminate or hybrid, but rather the search for a safe philosophy to navigate a dangerous world.

Postmodern godfather Michel Foucault has noted that art, in our society, is related to objects and not individuals. He has thus argued for “[...] making everyone’s life a work of art”.² However, what Ed’s art does is to map the effects of this project of aesthetisation of the self and everyday life in a system where art already is completely commodified and reified. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his 2002 work, *Bruce Gordon*, which saw him auction off bar owner Bruce Gordon as an artwork. The work caused an instant furore. Critics were quick to note that in the context of South Africa’s history, the human-as-artwork coupled with the large amounts of money exchanged presented a strong indictment of the failure of elements within the white art elite to effectively bridge the gap between “life” and “art.”³ Um, precisely. Or as Ed puts it: “Unlike ‘privileged’ artists who deal with personal and introspective issues in their work, I deliberately set myself up to be typecast as the ‘nasty white guy’. By this action I aim to spark debate, as opposed to social tiptoeing and artificial political correctness.”

Similarly, Ed’s artworks test the implications of Foucauldian search for transcendence through the celebration of bodies and pleasures. “Reflexive transcendence” has gone, Baudrillard declared long ago, “...today the scene and the mirror no longer exist; instead, there is a screen and network... a non-reflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold... [The] psychological dimension has in a sense vanished.”⁴ Ed’s art mimics this failure. Quasi-pornographic representations invade his work. Titles containing words like ‘Asshole’, ‘Blow Job’, ‘Bitches’ promise sex titillations and excitement – only to disappoint horribly.

“The atmosphere of decay, of tragic failure attached to today’s art ultimately gets stuck in your throat,” says French author Michel Houellebecq. In our high capitalist era the transgressive experience has become nothing more than the frenzied drug-like high that one looks for in popular culture and entertainment. At the same time, to ‘want’ this transgressive experience destroys the ideal of the *jouissance* that leads to transcendence. In a way, Ed is acting out the embarrassment of desiring and constructing the thrills of super-authentic experiences. He is showing the utter helplessness and absurdity of the pursuit of something beyond.

“Contemporary art for me seems under constant threat of exhaustion,” says Ed. “Because of this exhaustion, I sometimes feel that I have nothing to bring to the table. My work therefore relies on aspects of conceptual minimalism, banality and sometimes absurdity, often using myself (the idea of artist) as subject.”

All our pretensions: our playfulness, our provocations, our personal-as-political really amount to nothing more than a grandiose form of passivity. Meanwhile we maintain our delusions with hypocritical tact and lip service to notions of authenticity and equality we have no intention of enacting. Like that line in that Lesego Rampolokeng poem, “brain locked behind contact-lenses & electric fences scared to make contact with yr senses.” We attend trendy ‘cutting edge’ art exhibitions, desperately needing non-conformist art in perfect inverse proportion to our increasingly banal lives. We do nothing but admire the work and get drunk. We endlessly re-enact Ed Young’s 2004 performance piece *Do Nothing*, in which he does nothing except enact what the public is doing: admiring the work and drinking wine. Lesego Rampolokeng again: “We don’t have a culture of criticism, just a tradition of bitching.” Even our art has become nothing more than a w(h)ine. Do nothing, nothing to do, do nothing. All very fucking nerdy, very fucking white.

“Everyone hates me,” says Ed. He’s not kidding either. He’s been accused of racism and sexism and sloth and apathy, regressive habits, “fuelling an inward turned and one dimensional cult of the personality”.⁵ He’s been called “hairy”.⁶ The amazing thing is that he remains resolute, preferring to drop out and get drunk rather than opt into the pre-tensions and post-uring that define the scene. “I almost made my brain explode to come up with a project, I came up with some really mediocre ones. Nothing really kicks ass. But, after some discussion I decided to just do what I do. My boring and perfectly mundane life. The good thing about this is that I can basically spend my production budget on beer and new jeans,” says Ed.

The more he opts out the more he is hated. Ironically, the more he is hated the more the internally-focused art scene, hungry for the next South African *enfant terrible* sign him up. The more he is signed up, the more he is hated. “Even the most arcane fads can

be marketed for success, but nothing stays hip for very long. The regulative principle of postmodern irony is that we can survive only by squandering ourselves, which is to say by becoming yet more cynical than our controllers.”⁷

So yeah, everyone hates Ed Young. Fuck it, I hate him too. We’re still standing outside at Bell-Roberts. In his mirror shades I look hopelessly distorted: a half-starved stick figure with a too-big Barbie doll head, blond hair fluff snaking out from my peachy cream skull, lips stained with complimentary red wine. The street lights flick on and people flood out. Exhibition opening over: free wine gone. I hang back. I want to corner Ed. I want to say something that will cut through his cool, his distance; his utter indifference. I want to somehow get passed his mirror shades, wipe the scowl off his face. I want to get under his skin. To get inside. Make him feel – what? Something – *that* something. What Bataille calls the something “that goes from one person to another when we laugh or make love.” Something lost in the instant, over as soon as it happens. Something untamed, beautiful, terrifying...

Instead I smile, showing teeth. I say, “Yeah, I know what you mean.” I am drunk. My skinny jeans feel too tight. It’s too late – or too early. I stick to the safety of my first person binocular, shedding light here and there, illuminating no one but myself. Ed says, “Do you want a ride?” And I follow him into the street. His friend’s car is one of those new Merc SUVs. No one has change for the security guard. Fuck it. The doors unlock with a beep and we pile in: Ed in the back with two trendy art school graduates; me stuck up front, next to the driver, some wanna-be artist-illustrator type.

Salt River looks like something straight outta Compton: barred up store fronts and Tupac memorial graffiti, coloured crack whores flashing their cunts at our blacked-out windows. Someone lights a joint and the street signs dance. Ed is going on about alcohol poisoning. He is still wearing his mirror shades. They catch in the glow of the oncoming head lights, a lustre and then dark, a lustre then dark. He has his arm around the girl on his right and he’s whispering something in her ear. I turn away and pretend I don’t give a shit. I take a drag of the joint and let my head drop down. The illustrator guy says, “So what do you do?” I tell him I write. I say I’m working on a paper for a book on the South African avant-garde and he seems suitably impressed. He asks if I know

Cameron Platter's work. He says, "For me the really exciting stuff is what's currently happening in the in-between between art and design", but I barely see his lips move. The smell of wine on his breath is so much louder than what he is saying. Still, I don't pull away when he reaches across and runs his fingers through my hair. I don't resist his hand on the back of my neck. His erection, jutting against his fly and the cool silver of his belt buckle grind against my skin, Ed laughing in the back seat. I think to myself shut your eyes tight and this could be somewhere else. I don't move when he reaches down, zipper spreading. His dick looks pink and small in the half dark. It tastes sour. It feels too big in my mouth. The car rushes forward. 80. 90. I can tell from the pressing of his foot on the peddle, his hand on my head, my head going back down again, and up, and down, the impact against my teeth. The car lurches as he comes. The hot liquid floods my mouth. It tastes sour and vaguely chemical, boozy. It tastes like the bad free wine at the exhibition. I gag, fighting the impulse to spit. Instead I swallow. I take it as it comes. I swallow down hard. Feel it in my throat. A small tight ball. A knot, a gag. Can't come out, won't go back down.

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² Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress' in Rabinow, Paul (ed.) *The Foucault Reader* (Pantheon: New York, 1984), p. 351.

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⁴ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Communication', in Hal Foster (ed.) *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto, 1985), p. 126.

⁵ <http://www.veryrealtime.co.za>

⁶ <http://artheat.blogspot.com>

⁷ Steven Shaviro, *Doom Patrols: A Theoretical Fiction about Postmodernism* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1996), p. 22.

I  **NEW**

N WORK

A photograph of a man in a blue Diesel sweatshirt standing next to a stone building. The building has a large white sign with a stylized '13' logo and text in French and English. The man is looking towards the building. The building has a stone facade and a set of stairs with a metal handrail.

13

PALAIS DE TOKYO
SITE DE CRÉATION CONTEMPORAINE

DE MIDI À MINUIT
SAUF LE LUNDI /
FROM NOON TO MIDNIGHT
CLOSED ON MONDAY

ED YOUNG *ST. MOTHERFUCKING MAXIM'S DAY* 2005
THEFT FROM THE PALAIS DE TOKYO
PERFORMANCE IN COLLABORATION WITH MAX RAFFARD
PHOTOGRAPH MELODIE ABAD



IT WA

AS ONLY A BLOWJOB





ED YOUNG DAMN THOSE BITCHES REPRESENT 2003





ED YOUNG *BRUCE GORDON* [TORINO] 2005
PHOTOGRAPH TIZIANA ANONNE

JOHAN THOM
DIGGING UP OLD HORSES
2007

JOHAN THOM IS A FULL TIME ARTIST BASED AT THE
FORDSBURG ARTIST STUDIOS (POPULARLY KNOWN AS THE
BAG FACTORY), JOHANNESBURG

At present I am producing a low budget sock-puppet show in which I will remake some of the Viennese Actionist performances, amongst other things. I have a soft spot for the work of Muehl, Brus, Schwarzkogler and Nitsch but can no longer spare their work the ravages of post-modern subversion. If nothing else this is due to the simple fact that I am a performance artist living in a changed, contemporary society. The virtual ubiquity in all spheres of life of mass media, of corporate structures and their interests, of (right wing!) democracy and capitalism, of the cult of Nike-individualism and the soft revolution of Al Gore, have all changed the way art is produced and functions within contemporary society. To give but one example, whilst the Actionists shocked relatively small audiences with their antics approximately thirty years ago, today some family from Ohio or Brits, or anywhere for that matter, fuck horses, each other, stuff plants up their stinkies and end the spectacle by pissing all over one another in front of a million people. Just videotape it and put it out on the internet. They have day jobs and simply do it for the kicks. I do not have a day job and have to rely on my work as a contemporary artist to make a living.

I guess I could try to defend my territory by saying that I don't just 'do it for the kicks', that I have issues or principles and that, through my unique artistic gifts, I can make a 'real' difference. Well, let me tell you, that family from Ohio, they are making a real difference too. Fair enough, but I will make a difference for the better by 'critiquing' this or that aspect of contemporary society through my odd behaviour. In fact, I will not (exactly because the narrow morality of society does not interest me in the least - except where it comes to screwing it up). Again, I have 'principles': Nietzsche, Bataille, Proudhon, Kropotkin, Marx and god knows who else have helped me see the light. So I will fight the good fight because general humanity does not know their purpose and without the guiding light of revolutionaries such as myself, they are lost? The allure of inhabiting an elevated position above or beyond the reaches of ordinary society is not lost on me, but maybe I am just too much of an anarchist to buy into it. Moreover, this attitude smacks of elitism and arrogance, values I feel are thoroughly out of place in our post-modern, post-colonial environment.

Today the borders the avant-garde used to patrol do not exist anymore and quite frankly, I am not sure they ever did. For example, the avante-garde functioned well in modernist society

exactly because a clear separation between art and life existed (with a number of notable conditions, a thought to which I will shortly return). In their own ways Cubism, Constructivism, Abstraction and the early Body artists all shared the dream of overcoming the oppressive separation between art and (modern) life. For example, where the Cubists espoused the notion of introducing memory as a fourth dimension in aesthetic representation (an innovation based on new scientific discoveries that refuted the conventions of Renaissance painting), the early Constructivists envisioned a new role for the artist as a social engineer working with the proletariat by using the raw materials and technical innovations produced in modern industry (including mass-produced steel, glass, concrete etc.). Of course the Actionists were a bit more rowdy and, amongst other things, thoroughly investigated the workings of our primal human nature with often shockingly humorous results. Ergo, Günther Brus' fascination with our bodily functions in works such as *20 September* (1967) where he literally shat in a bucket whilst Kurt Kren captured the event on 16mm film for posterity's sake. However, these matters seem to have been of great import only to a small group of people who clearly occupied a hostile and highly visible position in relation to everyday society, namely 'High' artists. Put differently, the physical properties of shit are known to every human being on the planet. But when you call the investigation thereof *art*, suddenly it becomes a 'ground-breaking' aesthetic discovery.

Earlier I alluded to having reservations regarding the specific conditions upon which the avante-garde premised its working methodology. It seems to me that these conditions, or limits, not only set the stage but also wrote the play and attempted to publish the authoritative review thereof. Perhaps we could begin to clarify the matter by questioning to what extent the avant-garde was instrumental in establishing and maintaining those societal boundaries it seemed so intent on destroying? It is important to remember that avant-garde artists were, for the most part, a bunch of reactionaries, and that reactionaries always need clear enemies. This is one of the reasons why they are referred to as the avant-garde, a military term meaning 'advance guard'. Thus, much like the soldier, who without an enemy, soon finds themselves unemployed, an avant-garde artist without a social boundary is just a lost fart. But, if you can contain this fart in a bottle, isolate

it and display it as art, then it retains something of its power and (foul) potential. Ergo all the so-called 'outrageous artworks' housed in otherwise perfectly respectable museums and galleries all over the world.

Another thought that begs entertaining is whether or not, despite themselves, the avant-garde played a pivotal role in breaking new cultural boundaries? I am not so sure. I think that the role they played in creating social change has often been subject to art historical hyperbole (post-industrial capitalism, changes in politics and technology are much more likely the *agent provocateurs* of grand social change). Furthermore, I have to say that I find the (post-modern) assumption that the avant-garde was the last group of artists who had a fair crack at creating something new in the arts more than just a little annoying and disingenuous. What bullshit. Whilst I do not approve of the avant-garde's elitist position and their working methodology, I do not so easily discount their utopic dreams of the future and concomitant desire for change. Contemporary artists have just as much a right as scientists, engineers, politicians and the traditional avant-garde to work towards socio-economic and politic change. Trying to occupy the centre stage in this venture may be a tad optimistic, but contemporary artists may still, on the occasion when they are sharp and imaginative enough, create ripples in the pond. Perhaps this is a similar sentiment to what Kendell Geers might call the 'trickle down effect' (from showing ideologically difficult work in the super-shows to super-powerful patrons). I call it post-modern common sense (what chaos theorists in turn may refer to as the Butterfly Effect).

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Lastly, I realise that whilst pissing on the avant-garde, I am shitting in my own shoes too. This seems to me a necessity. We must be willing to laugh at, criticise and implicate ourselves in the problem, if we are to change the marginal position that artists occupy in contemporary society. In this polemic, I believe the narrow definition of the avant-garde espoused by academia and the art world has outlived its usefulness. Individual avant-garde artists, their ideas and/or their works may still have relevance to the very real difficulties facing artists today. I suggest that we leave all the formal(ist) horseshit behind and start thinking strategically about art production in contemporary society. Here the Actionists and early Body artists remain a firm favourite of mine. Most of their

works were created in public or semi-public spaces and they were fearless risk-takers in pursuing their goals (regularly spending time in jail after a performance, for example). In this way they quickly created a large number of ripples in the pond, the effects of which we are still experiencing today. What I mean to say is, if your working process does not lend itself to the super-shows, then find or create a space that does (and stop worrying about being hot). Take a risk and do the unexpected, because as Bataille would say, without taking individual risks we quickly pass from the tragic to the ridiculous. But, I hasten to add, we are no longer living in modernist times, and we cannot justify progress, innovation and change at all costs. Thus we have to start thinking strategically about ways of creating anew whilst minimising inevitable damage. If contemporary artists cannot start thinking strategically about art, art history and its practices, we will continue spending our time digging up old horses for no justifiable reason at all (with a bemused public and professionals from other industries simply shaking their heads and thinking, "What a fucking waste of time").



ED YOUNG PAPA DON'T LOVE YOU HENRY 2006
[PROGRESS PHOTOGRAPH]
PHOTOGRAPH MARIO TODESCHINI

ARYAN KAGANOF
EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE
2007

ARYAN KAGANOF WAS BORN AGAIN IN RANDBURG, HE DRIVES
A 1966 VALIANT 200 AUTOMATIC AND SHOOTS GLOCK

“Is the avant-garde still a viable and/or tenable notion in the current contemporary moment?”

In the question posed above I see three tensions lurking:

1. The tension between “viable and/or tenable”
2. The tension of the “current contemporary moment”
3. The tension of “the notion of the avant-garde”

For myself I would like to address these tensions in the following order:

2. I believe the current contemporary moment is always a very poor place to be making art from. One should always be working in eternity, or at least aspiring to do so to do, otherwise I fear not doing so allows for the creation of fashion, not art (although I admit that most ‘art’ being made today is entirely synonymous with fashion).

1. “viable and/or tenable” could be interpreted in so many ways. For me, only that art which is clearly, boldly, ruthlessly and self-consciously UNTENABLE and UNVIABLE is of any interest. Art that is tenable and viable is only of interest to academics.

3. The notion of the avant-garde is one that I thought had long ago been conscripted to the garbage bin of history where all notions belong.

PEET PIENAAR
EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE
2007

PERFORMANCE ARTIST AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF DADDY
BUY ME A PONY

For me the avant-garde is as over as 'contemporary', which I think is more about the past than the now, especially if it was focusing on the now for the past 20 years. Maybe the rehash of the avant-garde is because of our need for something more contemporary than contemporary but can't get away from the meaning of the word, rather than what it represents. I must say it almost feels more appropriate to call these artists [Gimberg, Nerf, Sacks and Young] 'Modern Artists of South Africa, 2007'.



CHRISTIAN NERF ED YOUNG WITH MENTOR SEBASTIAN CHARILAOU, NYC 2006



ED YOUNG

**SHOW ME THE AVANT-GARDE AND I'LL SHOW YOU A GOOD
TIME**

2007

What difference does it make if your tray table is stowed and your seat is in the upright position?

The term avant-garde is a silly one. When used within art circles it tends to be a bit elitist and a cover-up for a misunderstanding of contemporary practice today. It has also been making a recent comeback when referring to contemporary 'African' art. This being sad, I have only ever heard the term in question used loudly by young visiting American scholars and *Art South Africa* editor Sean O'Toole. And it often goes hand in hand with the phrase, 'it is so post-modern'. I have often warned such scholars that it is possible to get shot with high-powered rifles for using such terms in public within the borders of South Africa. They don't seem to listen.

Although there might be something terribly wrong with the American art education system, the AG simply cannot exist. This becomes clear from the opening sequence of the film *Saving Private Ryan*,¹ in which all the soldiers in the front line are shot down and die an agonising, violent and bloody death at the exact moment of hitting the battle-field. Although it is a fairly entertaining scene to watch, claiming the title of the avant-garde is either foolish and/or extremely unfortunate. It is often better to sit back and let your friends take the fall, and possibly more convenient for your immediate family.

I do realise that the AG commonly refers to flaky industries such as the majority of fashion and contemporary audio work, but at the same time it remains synonymous with the term *merda*.² I am neither a fashionista nor a cheap GarageBand expert. So how do you define your style, baby?

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I like terms. They are funny. When recently encountering AG soundman Brian Eno, I was introduced as a young South African conceptualist. Eno happens to be the first to urinate into Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (to be followed by Kendell Geers and others). He calmly explained his new ideas around Empty Formalism and pointed out that failed empty formalists will all eventually and inevitably become conceptualists. I still have no idea what he was on about but feel proud and confident that it will make sense to some.

But not today.

RANDOM CONTEMPORARY

The AG cannot exist today. Since the early Nineties, artists and prominent practitioners of the art world have tried to define contemporary production on their own terms, which in turn resulted in the explosion of art fairs and biennales. Galleries have become important again. Administrators curate curators. There is no good work really. There are nice uncomfortable dinner parties.

I have been thinking about the random contemporary (a term I have been trying to develop). I sure could use a hand.

DON'T BE AFRAID. IT'S ONLY BUSINESS.³

Random Contemporary is a term that does not really exist either. It is bigger than art fairs and biennales; meaning it is also quite big within European gallery systems. Although I do not yet fully understand the term, it probably has its origin with photography (and photographers are the worst breed).

There exists a current trend of making images of the arbitrary, selling them at hugely inflated prices and dressing well. And a nice dinner with the gallerist after. I really like it. We definitely need more biennales and art fairs.

In my puerile attempt to describe this concept, I realise that I did fail miserably. But I do know that this concept possibly has to replace the notion of the AG. We do not have to push and we never have. Boring work is safe and nice and everyone is happy with his or her cut of the cheese. Boring work is also easy and does not really demand a lot of brainpower. And it also does not really demand a lot of brainpower from an audience, something that is definitely lacking here at home. A colleague recently reminded me that once you define what is random, it cannot be labelled as random anymore. The only definition for this mode is that it is the thing that always looks the same at shows or fairs. It is found in countless stalls one after the other. It is like how everything at Macdonald's tastes the same. And it all looks a bit Swedish.

I was driving down Vanguard Drive the other day. It is a big road that takes you to the industrial area in Cape Town. I always feel very avant-garde when taking that road.

It is a warm feeling and it is on the way to the airport.

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² Italian for shit.

³ 'What God Wants, Part III', Roger Waters. From the album *Amused to Death* (1992).

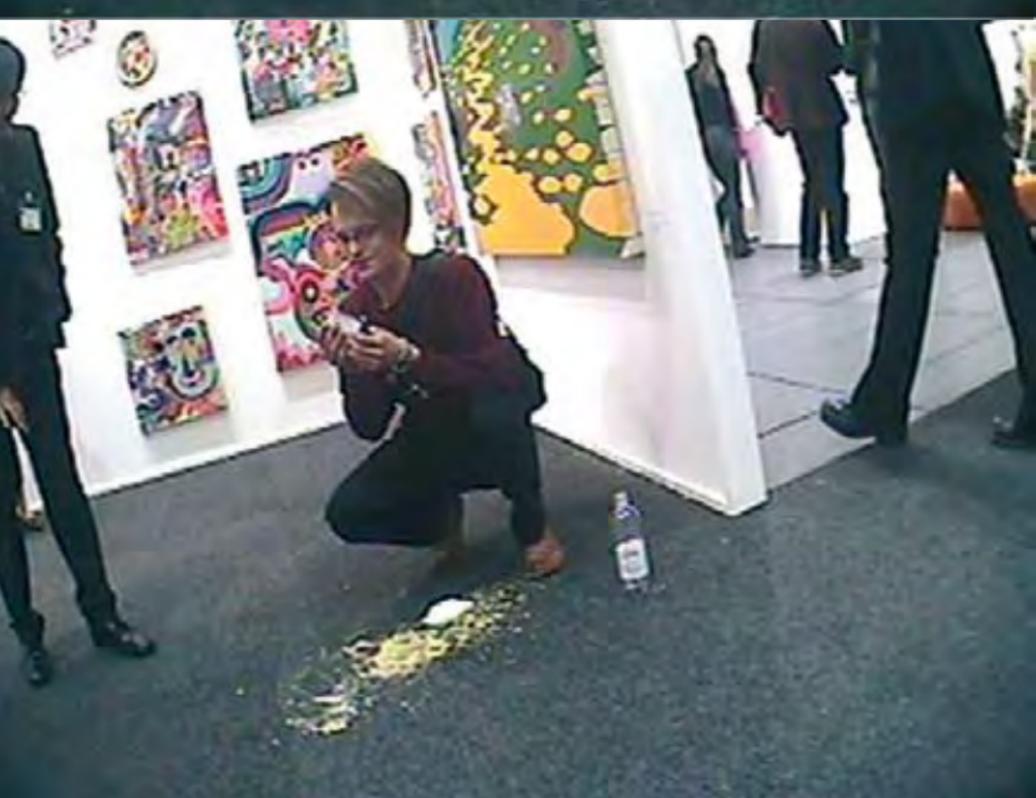
KRISTOFER PAETAU
ART FORUM ACCIDENT
2005

ARTIST

I started to feel really bad at the opening of the Art Forum 2005 Art Fair in Berlin. And suddenly I couldn't help myself, I had to vomit.

Complete documentation:

<http://www.paetau.com/downloads/ArtForumAccident/ArtForumAccident.html>





RUTH SACKS

**A CONVERSATION WITH TAKASHI MURAKAMI AT
*T1 – TRIENNALE TORINO TREIMUSEI: THE PANTAGRUEL
SYNDROME***

2005

ARTIST

RS

For *T1*, your own superstar status in the art world, as well as the mass appeal of your work, was used as a kind of bait to attract members of the public to the gallery. Do you feel that this formula is a successful one in the case of this exhibition as well as your own curatorial projects?

TM

I'm not sure it is right to always call it "bait" – hopefully a curator will find something meaningful in the work besides prestige to offer the viewer. However, I admit that to have a famous name to sell will often work as branding for the show; it will bring out people who would normally not go to see art. In my curatorial projects the concept of mass appeal has been intrinsically related to the content of the shows – not as bait but as an investigation into the artistic merits of Japanese popular culture. I don't see it as a formula, but rather as my own, unique approach to art.

RS

Patricia Sandretto and other members of the curatorial team have been very positive about the contrast between your work and that of Doris Salcedo. Do you agree that the two solo exhibitions featured on *T1* complement each other?

TM

I do. Our work is very different, and I think that seeing the shows in contrast facilitates the viewing of each. Both shows approach the triennale's themes of hunger and consumption in different ways.

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RS

Apparently one of your sculptures from the *Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo* had to be sent back to Japan to repair an imperfection that even the curator Francesco Bonami could not detect. Has this kind of incident occurred before?

TM

Artwork, especially sculpture, is sometimes damaged in transit. Depending on the extent of damage, I either attempt on-site repair or, as in this case, re-ship the work. As far as my level of perfectionism goes, I think it is very high. When I cannot go to check the installation of a show myself, I almost always have someone go to check and make a report to me. Especially in

this case, since I was the artist, I was particularly sensitive to the quality of the work. A curator's job is to oversee and create an entire show, not necessarily inspect each piece of work for technical perfection.

RS

There was some tension with regards to the art fair *Artissima 12* running in such close proximity to the *T1*. This echoes a general feeling in Europe at the moment that markets are a necessary evil that must be tolerated in order for the art machine to run successfully. Where do you stand on this issue?

TM

Well, if there were no market, you could not even be speaking of an "art machine". There are artists who disengage themselves as much as humanly possible from the economic and commodity aspects of their art. I am not one of these artists. I feel that knowledge and understanding of the business aspect of art gives me good perspective on what I am doing in this world; without it I would feel like a hypocrite actively operating in a system that I was always shunning or trying to ignore. I understand the intellectual and cultural appreciation of art for art's sake, but I also understand that there are people who make a livelihood from art, and I am not about to deny them that.

RS

Do you think the art world needs more biennales?

TM

I am happy to support large-scale art events. As long as there is interest and a market to sustain the number of artists in society, I see nothing wrong. The only problem with biennales is their claim of representation of a certain group of people or type of art, which can sometimes be misleading or pretentious.

RS

Has your recent involvement in *T1* altered your views about contemporary art in any way?

TM

It was a pleasure to see the work of the young artists involved in the show. Every exhibition that I participate in helps me understand what I am doing. This show was no exception.

RS

Your success as an international artist has been phenomenal. Are there other Japanese artists who you feel have the potential to reach supernova status?

TM

I think that potential and drive are two different things. While there are plenty of Japanese artists with to potential to become international hits, they are not necessarily approaching success itself as their task. In the end, it is all about choosing your battleground.

RS

What makes your work 'high art', according to your definition of that term?

TM

But I don't like that term very much. I have worked to break down the borders between what people conceive of as 'high' and 'low' pastimes. However, I do maintain that 'art' exists, and what distinguishes it from pure commercialism is probably the facility for cultural commentary. If an object can, for some reason, feed intellectual discourse, it will be talked about in a different way from an object that is purely commercial. It has to do with the thought and consideration that flows through the object from creation to consumption.

RS

Many fakes have been made of your merchandise, especially the handbags designed in conjunction with Louis Vuitton. Do you find this flattering or infuriating?

TM

The act of disseminating art into popular culture necessitates a certain loss of control on the part of the artist. This kind of dissemination, however, is something that I take great interest in, and am happy to have contributed to with this bag. The phenomenal success of the design continues to amaze me even to this day. The extent to which this particular bag has been plagiarized is a little overwhelming, but I am also flattered. This project was an interesting risk to take, and I have learned a lot from it.

RS

You are said to be branching out into feature films next. Can you give us some information regarding what to expect in the future?

TM

I am interested in how my work up to this point can be related and applied to film creation. I am interested in the mass-scale of movie production.

RS

Do you feel it is essential for viewers to be aware of your nationality in order to fully appreciate your work?

TM

I think that as an artist I have been sensitive to my nationality when creating art. I have drawn from, and refer to, imagery that has its roots in Japanese culture and history. While the perception and analysis of art does not always directly reflect the artist's intent, the specificity of my work will probably invite at least some cultural interpretation. I am happy for people to have a completely neutral, purely subjective reaction to my work, but I think the interpretation is more interesting when you consider nationality.

RS

In the current climate of contemporary art, what, for you, gives an artwork true value?

TM

I would have to say uniqueness. Ingenuity. A quality that allows the work to survive over long periods of time. Historicity.



BRIAN ENO
TRANSCRIPT
2007

THIS IS AN EXTRACT FROM A TRANSCRIPT OF A PUBLIC LECTURE BY BRIAN ENO AT THE LITTLE THEATRE, HIDDINGH CAMPUS, UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN, FEBRUARY 21, 2007. ENO RESPONDS TO A QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE MEMBER KATHRYN SMITH

ARTIST, MUSICIAN, IDEOLOGUE AND SYSTEMS-MAKER

KS

I'd like to know whether you think that the notion of the avant-garde is still a viable concept?

BE

Well, that's a very interesting question, because it's something that I've been thinking about a lot. It hinges on another question, which is, is the notion of the fine arts, as a separate and sort of 'honoured', privileged activity a viable concept? And I more and more think that it isn't. I think there is such a continuum nowadays, in many different directions, between things that are called fine arts and then other things that are called craft or design, or popular art, or ornament. One of my feelings ever since I started asking this question about 'what is art?', or 'what does it do for us?', is that we can't even start to approach that question unless the umbrella called 'art' is so wide that it can include everything that is stylistic activity. So I have this phrase that I use sometimes: art is everything that you don't have to do. So, for instance, you have to eat, but you don't have to involve these beautiful, complicated cuisines or wedding cakes or other strange things that people do with food. You have to wear clothes, but it could just be fabric, couldn't it? It doesn't have to be Coco Chanel or Yves Saint Laurent or Levi's. In every part of our lives, once we've solved the simplest survival issues, we then spend a lot of our time in the stylistic arena surrounding it. And we care a lot about that. Now for me, those are all art acts. That's all art activity. And I think it is something that everyone is doing all the time. Ok, sure enough there are some people, like all of you and me, who decide to specialise in doing that, who decide to make that the area of the world where we spend our time.

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What I think about conversations relating to the arts is that it is pre-Darwinian. Now, by that I mean that when Darwin came along and published *The Origin of the Species* in 1864 or whenever it was, he'd suddenly created a frame through which people could look at all of life as one type of thing, and they could see how they were related to each other. So prior to Darwin, there was no understanding at all of how a horse related to a fruit fly, or how a giraffe related to a bacterium or something like that. People didn't even know whether they should be classified as the same type of thing. Of course, as soon as Darwin came along, he said all life has this one characteristic called evolution. You know, the fittest

survive and so on, and everything that Darwin implied. As soon as he came along with that, suddenly it was possible to make a sort of map of the whole of organic life. And it was also – the most important thing about that – was that you could immediately see that nothing was really more important than anything else. There was no basis upon which to say humans are the superior ones, which of course is what had been believed; and horses come next, and then women, and then French people...these *are* the English... So it just completely destroyed that hierarchical view of how life was organised and it replaced it with an ecological view, which is saying, it's all a web and every point in the web has so many connections, it's very difficult to pick it apart. And it's very difficult to say that any one part is more important than any other.

We haven't had that revolution yet in thinking about art. It's probably because artists make such a point of being inarticulate, and are so proud of themselves for being bumbling idiots. If you want to see the worst writing... The worst writing being done nowadays is about the arts. I mean, I think astrologers probably do worse. But you look at any exhibition catalogue and you have an example of writing and thinking at its poorest. I have lots of friends who are scientists and it's partly because they are used to the idea of speaking in a public language. Science has to be in a public language. That's the definition of it. If I say something is true, you have to be able to test it, so I have to be able to explain it to you properly. I'm not suggesting that art should be that sort of activity, but I just wish there was a little bit more of that rigour in the conversation about art. And I think that there can't be until there is a better theory of art to start from; until there are better answers to these questions: what's art for; why do we all like it; and why do we all do it?

Anyway, to get back to your question. Part of the answer to that question is, I think, that we have to stop thinking of some parts of art as more privileged than others, and we have to start looking at the whole continuum of human cultural stylistic behaviour – whatever we call it – from cake decoration to Cézanne, as being somehow related. And we have to dignify it all as being part of the same enterprise. So yes...back to the avant-garde. Part of the issue about the avant-garde is, I wouldn't mind if people accepted that there were avant-gardes all over the place. You know, if there were avant-garde motorcycle designers, there were avant-garde

cake decorators, avant-garde crochet ladies. But they only think of the avant-garde in relation to the fine arts, as if that's the only place where you can be brave and courageous and innovative. So I don't like the word for that reason, because it again overdignifies this one area of human work.

CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV
EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE
2007

CCB IS INTERESTED IN REPETITION AND DIFFERENCE IN
HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ART. CHIEF CURATOR AT
THE CASTELLO DI RIVOLI, SHE LIVES BETWEEN NEW YORK,
TURIN, ROME AND IS THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE 2008
SYDNEY BIENNALE

Is the avant-garde still a viable and/or tenable notion in the current contemporary moment? If not, why not; and if so, how does the contemporary avant-garde define itself? What forms does it take, and how does it differ – if it does, from the ‘historical’ avant-garde? Can it – or should it – be ‘rescued’ from its relationship to modernism, or is it intractably bounded/determined by that? If it does not exist in some or other form, what caused its ultimate death? Can we even speak about certain contemporary practices in terms of avant-garde discourse? In other words, if it looks like the avant-garde, and sounds like the avant-garde, is it the avant-garde?

– Kathryn Smith, email to contributors

As always, it is a question of language, and translation. I think you use the word ‘avant-garde’ in a way that suggests rescuing it from ‘modernism’, which would be ‘over’. I think what you mean is ‘advanced art’, and yes, I think it is healthy and fine as always, but sometimes you do not see it as clearly because a lot of people start to like art, and then most art becomes less innovative and interesting.

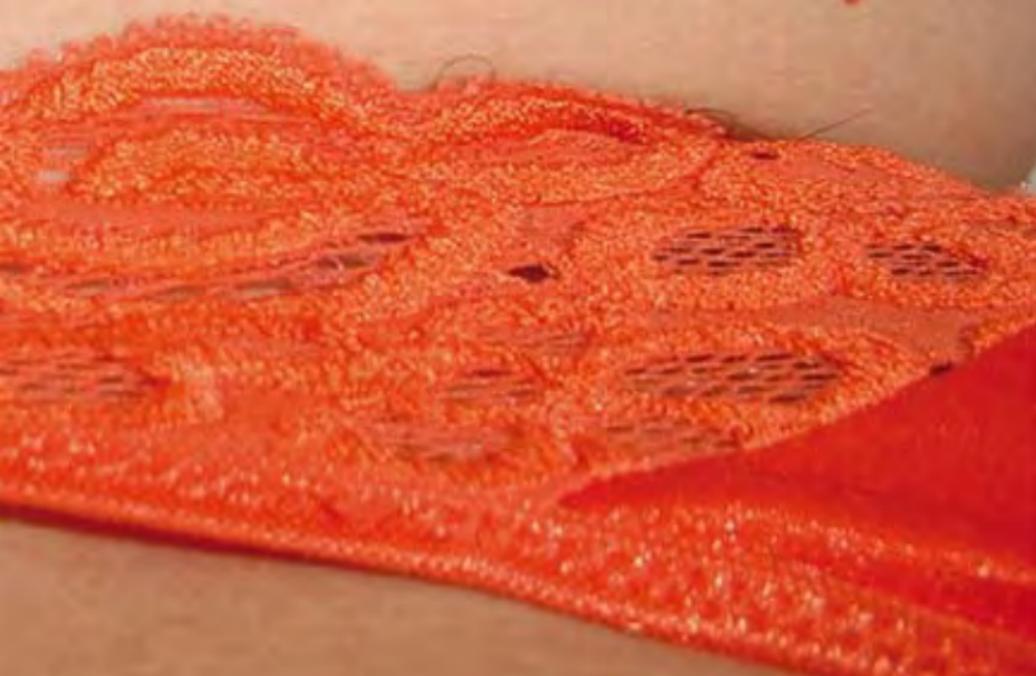
Today we are in a ‘salon’ period, where art is considered a good investment, and thus it is a bit like in 1850 with the Salons. But soon, as soon as there is a little bubble, people will be less interested in it as an investment, and the ‘advanced art’ will be more visible again.

The word ‘avant-garde’ per se is a military compound word indicating the soldiers in front of the main body of soldiers. Thus it is embedded with oblique references to World War I, and I do not think anyone wants to go to the trenches. So I prefer to use the word ‘modernism’ and would like to rescue it from ‘postmodernism’, which sounds like ‘postpartum depression’ and which allows little space for agency, opinions, impulses, anarchy and energy. I would like to rescue the word ‘revolution’ from the word ‘evolution’ as well. I like the prefix ‘re’ – to go backwards in order to go forwards, to repeat, to reverse, to react.

IT'S BORING



Living without
you



RUTH SACKS HIGH TEA AT THE PLAZA 2006



RUTH SACKS ONESIZEFITSALL 2005

PLEASE DON'T PL
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RUTH SACKS *DON'T PANIC* SKY-WRITE ON MARCH 21, 2005 (HUMAN RIGHTS DAY)
PHOTOGRAPH MARIO TODESCHINI







RUTH SACKS *COUCH THROWN* 2006
PHOTOGRAPH DOUGLAS GIMBERG



RUTH SACKS *FRAGILE* 2006
PHOTOGRAPH SEBASTIAN CHARILAOU



JAMES BECKETT
EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE
2007

ARTIST

Artists/creative people are too wary of how their production will be perceived.

In the old sense of the avant-garde, it is more difficult than ever to lose oneself in the fever of one's own processing!

This would point towards a death – a hollow, overly socially conscious mode:

* Constant attempt to contextualise before something is given a chance to breathe

* Weight of history can also cause such inertia

ROBIN RHODE
LETTER
2007

ARTIST

1st March 2007
Kathryn Smith
Department of Visual Arts
University of Stellenbosch
South Africa

Dear Kathryn Smith:

Thank you for your invitation. My response to your publication framework is the following:

In relation to your keywords 'avant-garde', 'forms', 'historical', 'reused', 'discourse', and 'death', I make two contributions, firstly the following keyword 'time', secondly a dialogue published in 1988 between Alighiero Boetti and Sandro Lombardi:

I would like to talk to you about the wind; a force that moves and transports, that makes light of everything, even heavy things. The wind is a moment of grace. Forms created by the wind are always forms of energy. In addition, the wind makes everything temporary, it provides a measure of time, as it creates in the forms a succession of instants, one after the other, instant after instant...A gust of wind also blows away the past / traces of the past. The wind constantly transforms shapes, you can see it in snow, dust or sand. It is a living force, like the sun's rays , but not as strong. And yet it can be very violent. On the whole , wind is the image of lightness. It is even a mental metaphor / you say for instance, 'words on the wind'.

(from pg. 197, Alighiero Boetti Shaman/Showman, Annemarie Sautzeu Boetti)

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rhi Khule". The signature is written in a fluid, cursive style with some loops and flourishes.

CESARE PIETROIUSTI

THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE IDENTITY-DILETTANTE

2007

ARTIST

No question of demonstrating anything here, i would rather express the feeling that the concept of 'avant-garde' is still related to such attitudes or, better to say, psychological and political mechanisms as differentiation, separation, splitting, directionality. I think instead that, in most of the cases, the work of the contemporary artist has to do with reticularity, co-presence of opposites, side effects and shifting.

'Avant-garde' sounds like a beautiful term. Specifically, it triggers a certain sense of beauty that has to do with struggling for a just cause; feeling to be a minority but to be right; feeling to be those who are sacrificing themselves because they will be recognised in the future. Something that seems to have more to do with the romantic rather than with the rational side of modernism. To my memory, the last time that such an attitude/ideology seemed powerful and credible in the art field was the triumphant *retour à l'ordre* and to the specificity of the art object in the early '80s. At that time the explosion of neo-expressionism came out of a mixture where the refusal of political 'duties' and a need to re-consider subjective issues, went together on one hand with a revamping of consumerism and of wild market economy, on the other with the celebration of the artist as an heroic prophet of a subjectivity that wanted to be free from the moral constraints of the *engagement*, as well as from the rational constraints of any 'theory'.

Probably because of that (or maybe because the new non-theories about the end of linear and evolutionist progression in cultural production were actually successful even for those who, like myself, thought to be against them), the term 'avant-garde' slowly lost appeal and seemed less and less useful to identify one's own position in the art field.

The above mentioned *retour à l'ordre*, having to do with the celebration of an heroic figure, obviously brought with itself an implicit assertion that the hero was a male (any neo-expressionist female figures in the '80s?) and one of the most important change that i remember, in the second half of that decade, was the relevant and meaningful presence of female artists who were able to put at the foreground critical issues at the intersection between subjectivity, politics and art history that were able to make many previous assumptions naïf or stereotypical. I have

the feeling that this is another reason for a certain obsolescence of the term 'avant-garde'. Due to its evident relations to military male/male terminology it probably fell into deconstruction and loss of credibility. Other terms such as 'comrade' or 'militant' or 'battle' might have probably had (in the political arena) a similar destiny.

Another important element has been, *ça va sans dire*, the web. The magic new word is 'connection'. Do you remember *il dolce suono di internet* (how my daughters used to call it), that long and modulated beep, that sounded always the same from any telephone line, that you could hear just a moment before the connection-to-Internet? Do you remember that sense of thrill, of precarity, the waiting and the fear that something could go wrong and that the connection would fail? Do you remember the multiple attempts, the impatience, the delusions and the sudden release when the web page finally appeared on the screen? Didn't all that create a Pavlovian (still active and strong) desire and longing to be not so much ahead or before the others, but *with* them, connected with them? I think that this desire of togetherness was at one with the sense that everyone, every computer on line, could contribute something to a common available knowledge.

Then there was the rise of the search engines for the web. From the end of the '90s onwards, a new and quickly pervasive model of knowledge has accompanied and partly substituted any other previous one. This new model is based on connection (again!) rather than accumulation; it is based on shifting rather than on definition; it is based on crossing boundaries and amateurism rather than specialization and professionalism.

To be 'avant-garde' mostly means to be in a specific position, to know something that others still don't, to indicate a possible path to the others who still have to come. To be 'connected' mostly means the possibility of exploring multiple sites, to know something *because* of sharing it, to have paths to walk on *because* of the others that, basically, are all there, each one, like a brain cell, offering the possibility of creating one and many.

Finally, let's go to the problem of right-and-wrong and maybe to the i / non-i. It might depend on the fall of ideologies and the disappearing of the up-coming rising sun of revolution that was faithfully expected by almost every Western who was born

before 1960. It might depend on the enormous influence of cultural exchanges and the presence of different cultures in the contemporary metropolis. It might depend on the 'alloverness' of the deadly jam that the contemporary society of spectacle prepares for us daily. It might depend on this and much more, but now it is really difficult to think to be 'right', and see the other as definitely 'wrong'. Better, every time i see someone who pretends to be right, he/she sounds either naïf or fake if not, when he happens to have political and military power, frankly scary. Since i generally don't like to be naïf, or fake, or scary, i try my best to avoid appearing too 'righteous' (i might not succeed, of course, but this is relevant only for family and friends...) and to consider diverse or opposite points of view. This kind of 'shifting' – in fact it's not so much an 'accepting' or an 'including' of someone else's vision, but more an actual moving-towards a different place from where one stands – is probably more important as well as more difficult than moving through different disciplines, techniques and media. The artist, for me, is the one who can make, of all these shiftings, a job. S/he is not only the perfect dilettante who doesn't know how to do anything, but can go everywhere, and do whatever. The artist is also the 'identity-dilettante', one who tries to establish a relation with the other, in order to have the possibility of moving towards such other, and see things with the other's eyes. Plus, i believe that this is possible especially when the field of the exchange between me and the other has more to do with mine and other's 'wrong' parts (things that create embarrassment, difficulties, discomfort) rather than with the 'right' ones (such as, for instance, politically correct issues).

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Now, how do i formally see these movements, so to say? In the case of a relation with an other it's like that of a ping-pong ball: if at a certain point i see with your eyes, then you see me seeing with your eyes, and i see you seeing me seeing with your eyes and so on. In the case of a relation with many others, the movements are mostly circular and multi-layered (the group dynamics of a relational group are essentially different from the spectacle dynamics because of such multiple shifting-exchanging of points of view). Are these movements compatible or coherent with the concept of the avant-garde? I am not sure. How can i identify myself with an avant-garde if my possibilities, and even my identity as an artist, all rely on be(ing)coming the other?

LIAM GILLICK
FROM CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UNO
2007

EXCERPT FROM OUTLINE FOR A FORTHCOMING BOOK

ARTIST

Over time they completely reconfigure the working space of their new work. They write on the walls and create diagrams on the floor that reveals the passage of their thoughts, false starts and developments. More windows are opened up in the space to create new vistas and bring them closer to the exterior spaces that now make them anxious and should be kept as a view not an experience. Some people work all night and if you are driving past the factory you might see them through the windows, involved in long discussions and lengthy expositions of their ideas. They attempt to find a way to create a total transfer of all objects and ideas in such a way as to ensure that nothing is depleted or diminished but everything is different. They are exhausted but happy. Their work is personally destructive but provides a new matrix of exchange. The focus upon one to one exchange ensures that they are the primary element of depletion. Through their desire to create an 'economy of equivalence' they ensure their own rapid demise. They have created numerous models, equations and diagrams that will ensure that everything can be exchanged and remain the same simultaneously.

Their work appears to improve over time. Their economy of equivalence is increasingly perfect. Yet the 'authors' are the ones who are diminishing. They have not factored themselves into the process of equivalence. There is a constant expansion and contraction of relative 'freedom' within the workplace – use of non-monetary incentives and techniques to alleviate the boredom of work. Yet with the rise of 'share-holder value' we see an increasing fluctuation in the treatment of workers. Plundering the pension funds of companies and constantly shifting the responsibilities of the worker. Of course, the book starts from the point when all these issues are over for the workers concerned. It is possible that a sub-text was the thought that their initial enthusiasm for flexible working techniques maybe contributed to the loss of their jobs in the first place, but it is not clear whether they are the architects of their own unemployment.

They are locked within an attempt to view things from a politico-ecological perspective. They think about breakfast cereal, for example, as it takes ten units of energy to produce one energy unit of breakfast cereal. This is not an effective situation for them and is symbolic of their excessive reliance on fossil fuels (despite the fact that they are producing cars). The characters

in the book feel strongly that they are functioning in a complex form of liquid modernity where individual relations to the social realm are complex and fluctuating. Old questions of class struggle are initially difficult for them to focus upon and keep blurring, clarifying then shimmering away. As a result they shift the terms of engagement and use their applied theoretical work to try and restart and re-antagonise the relations of production. Their goal is to improve things and change the way we relate to the world. But of course their project leads to a diminution of their own capacity for clear thought. It is not obvious how successful or unsuccessful their thinking actually is, as their slow collapse makes it hard to tell where moments of judgement can take place. They have a strong desire to reject or transcend notions of flexibility without becoming repressive or fixed about social relations, so they try and focus much more carefully on the relation between things rather than people, which leads to a new urgency to reconstitute an understanding of class relations.



CHRISTIAN NERF *GOD SAVE THE QUEEN* 2007
PROPOSED INSTALLATION, PARLIAMENT SOUTH AFRICA



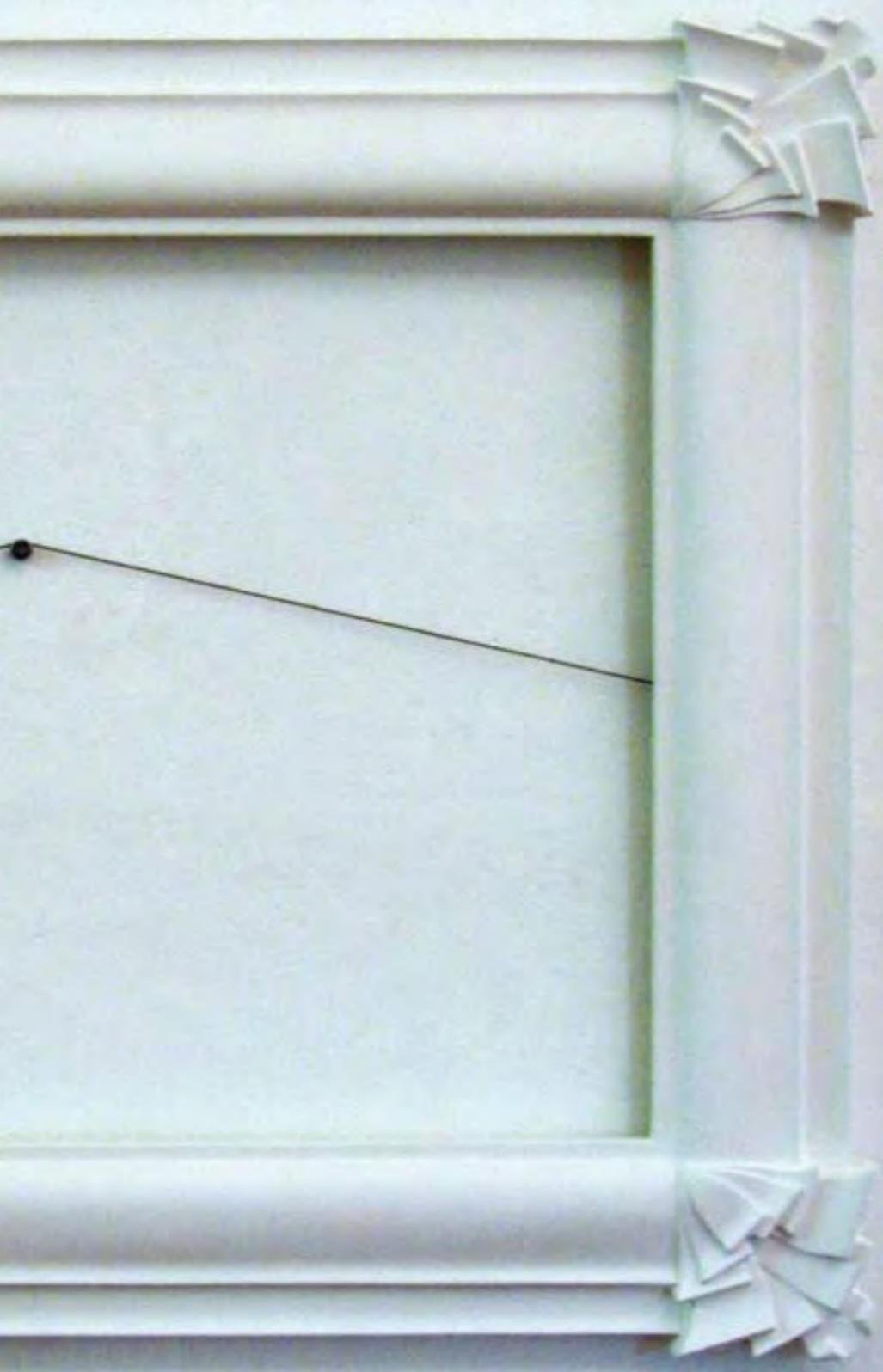
DOUGLAS GIMBERG *BAD POLITICIAN* 2006

UG IMBERG

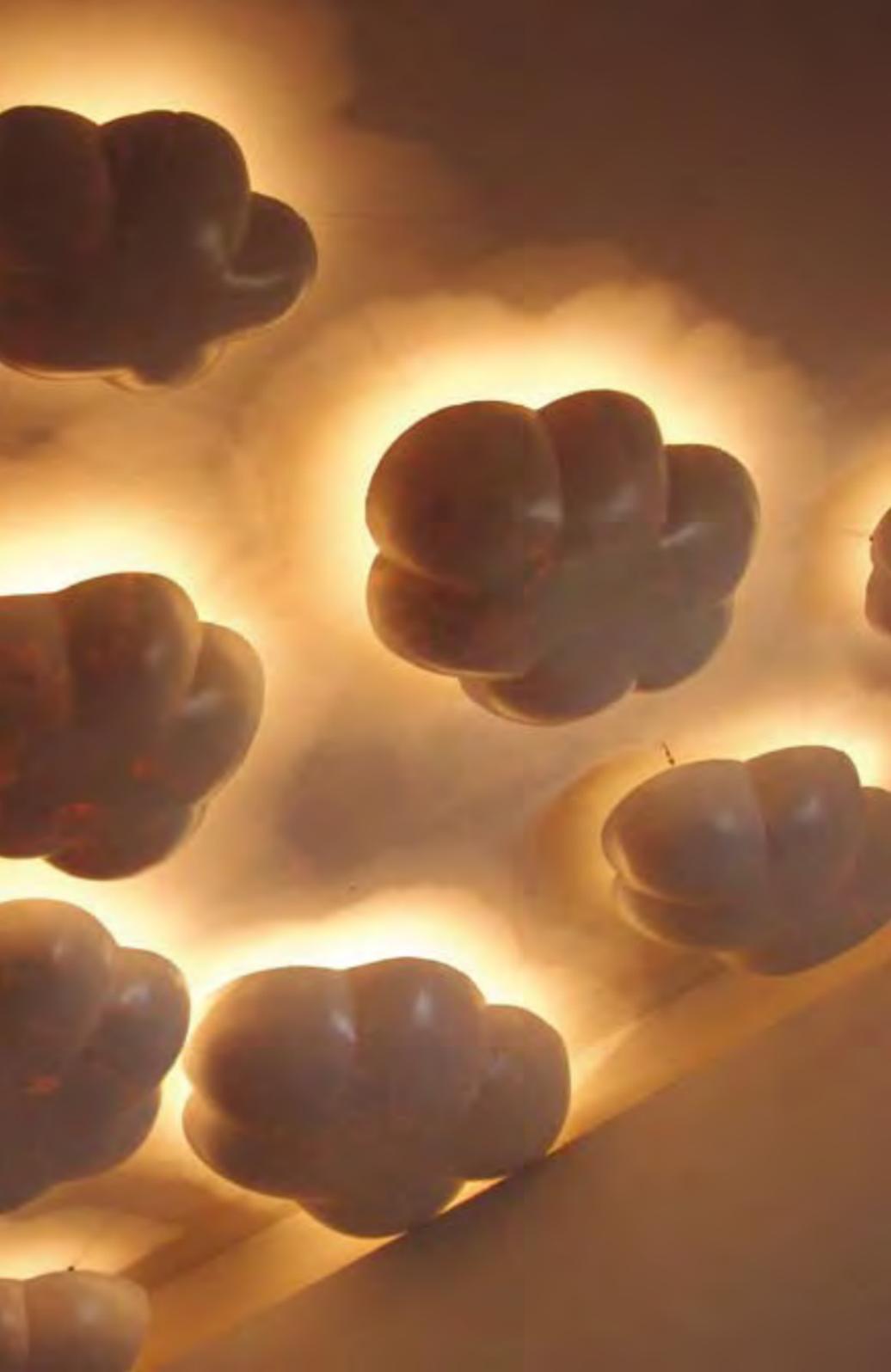
BAD

MAN









DOUGLAS GIMBERG *REVOLT!* 2006
GIVEN TO ED YOUNG FOR HIS FIRST FORTIETH BIRTHDAY ON OCTOBER 15, 2006.
I SUGGESTED HE PUT IT IN THE BATHROOM IN CASE HE FELT AN URGE TO SHIT IN THE SINK

I AM REVE



ED YOUNG
TAKING THE PISS
2005

I think art is the most useful of the useless things in the world.

(Bonami in Lamprecht and Young 2003)

The influence of the readymade as a means of contemporary artistic production seems to have engaged indifferent minds throughout the past century. It has situated itself primarily within the thinking space of an ignorant¹ sector of the art world, easily generalised as uninformed students, self-made artists and older traditionalists within the arts sector.

Due to little interest and a small art community, the public's reception of such work seems troublesome within a South African context,² and proves to be fairly unstable in situations such as Britain's Turner Prize. In the aforementioned case, it has caused a certain amount of unease in terms of a public perspective and has drawn crowds protesting outside the Tate Gallery on opening nights of these events.

The Stuckists,³ of which artist Tracey Emin's ex-punk-rocker boyfriend Billy Childish was a founding member, exists as an 'anti-anti' contemporary art group, one that has grown to roughly 100 groups and 6 Stuckism International Centres globally.⁴ In 2000, they released the Turner prize song *Art or Arse (You Be The Judge)*, and have denounced the prize as an "ongoing national joke" and "a state-funded advertising agency for Charles Saatchi." They also claim that "the only artist who wouldn't be in danger of winning the Turner Prize is Turner" and that the prize "should be re-named The Duchamp Award for the destruction of artistic integrity".⁵

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This is a prejudice in the acceptance of a form of art which has a history dating back to Marcel Duchamp. It questions an artistic sensibility concerning the past century: a shocking and frustrating truth. However, a conclusion still remains to be drawn as to what the readymade actually is and what it meant in its original context.



BILLY CHILDISH AND TRACEY EMIN



ART OR ARSE. CD FACE. BILLY CHILDISH
AND THE STUCKISTS

HISTORY

Dada was initiated in Zurich in 1916 at the Cabaret Voltaire. Although short-lived, the movement had immense impact on the structures of contemporary practice today. At its birth, Dada was primarily a protest against World War I and the prevailing ideas of art and conceptions of artistic beauty.

But by 1921 it was over: its participants had ceased their raucous demands for freedom and dispersed, to become career artists (Hans Arp), religious converts (Hugo Ball) and psychoanalysts (Richard Huelsenbeck). How influential was Dada? Can we agree with the philosopher Henri Lefebvre, writing in 1975, that “to the degree that modernity has meaning, it is this: it carries within itself from the beginning, a radical negation – Dada, this event that took place in a Zurich café?” If Dada can be seen as a first wave of Conceptual art, Surrealism, which followed it, had different interests and its investigation into the nature of art (begun by Dada) was less radical.

(Godfrey 1998: 37)

Marcel Duchamp, a key artist of the 20th century, moved from Paris to New York in 1915 after he was ‘forced to withdraw his painting Nude Descending a Staircase (No.2) from the Salon des Indépendents⁶ in Paris’ in 1912 (Godfrey 1998: 25). ‘A nude never descends the staircase,’ the hanging committee had pronounced, ‘a nude reclines.’ This was an outrageous piece of academic codswallop: perhaps in the unreal, pallid world of the academy, a nude did just recline, but in the real world people when nude do more than that.

(Godfrey 1998: 25)



NUDE DESCENDING A STAIRCASE (NO.2). MARCEL DUCHAMP. 1912

In 1916 in New York, Duchamp joined the Society of Independent Artists, an organisation of which both he and Man Ray were directors. One of its aims was to create an exhibition that was not prejudiced and conservative in the way that large parts of the art world were in New York at the time.⁷ In 1917, the 'Independents' set out to produce an annual exhibition of submitted works without any curatorial judgements. Any artist who paid the six-dollar submission fee was allowed to exhibit two works. Duchamp submitted *Fountain* (Godfrey 1998: 28).



FOUNTAIN. MARCEL DUCHAMP. 1917

The well-known controversial urinal has troubled historians and scholars for decades. We have relatively little factual information on which to base the history of this object (Betancourt 2000). It is recorded that Duchamp himself had purchased the urinal from the J.L. Mott Ironworks and had signed it R. Mutt (R for Richard which is French slang for 'moneybags' (Godfrey 1998: 28) and Mutt possibly referring to J.L. Mott company and the Mutt and Jeff comic strip (Varnedoe 1990: 274). Unaware of Duchamp's authorship of the Richard Mutt pseudonym, the board rejected the work on the basis that it was immoral and was seen as an act of plagiarism.

Instantly the arguments started: Glackens, who of course did not know that R Mutt was a pseudonym for Duchamp, was horrified: he believed that it was indecent and could not possibly be shown. Arensberg, a supporter of Duchamp who had encouraged him in this venture, retorted that R. Mutt had paid his six dollars and therefore the piece must be shown; anyway, he claimed, "a lovely form has been revealed, freed from its functional purpose, therefore a man clearly has made an aesthetic contribution. Mr Mutt has taken an ordinary object, placed it so that its useful significance disappears, and thus has created a new approach to the subject."

(Godfrey 1998: 28)

A vote was cast by the committee with regard to the acceptance of this work as an object of art. It was refused. The directors had flawed their original agenda. They had failed in their principles and declared the object as 'by no definition a work of art' (Godfrey 1998: 28). Duchamp wrote to his sister Suzanne:

Tell the family this snippet: the Independents opened here with enormous success. A female friend of mine, using a male pseudonym, Richard Mutt, submitted a porcelain urinal as a sculpture. It wasn't at all indecent. No reason to refuse it. The committee decided to refuse to exhibit this thing. I handed in my resignation and it'll be a juicy piece of gossip in New York. I felt like organizing a special exhibition for things refused at the Independents, but that would only be a pleonasm! And the urinal would have been lonely. Bye for now. Affectionately, Marcel.⁸

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(Naumann and Obalk 2000: 47)

The 'female friend' is possibly a reference to Louise Norton, author of the piece 'Buddha of the Bathroom', which appeared alongside the article by friend and fellow artist Beatrice Wood in the second issue of the journal anonymously published by Duchamp, Norton and Wood, *The Blind Man*.

Godfrey (1998: 29) suggests: “Although this reference to the ‘female friend’ was probably a Duchampian joke, the faint possibility still remains that the true ‘author’ of *Fountain* was not in fact Duchamp, but his friend Louise Norton.”

Other scholars attempt similar arguments, but with less specified assumptions. Dieter Daniels writes:

*Whilst at the only contemporary public exhibition of Duchamp’s Readymades, in 1916, the term Readymade appeared in the exhibition catalogue of the Bourgeois [sic] Gallery, New York, the objects themselves remained unnoticed by both the public and the press, such that to this day Duchamp researchers are still wondering which ‘Two Ready-mades’ they might have been. The only Readymade ever to attract public attention was the urinal signed ‘R. Mutt’ which was submitted to the first exhibition of the New York Society of Independent Artists as *Fountain* and was refused. But that Duchamp was actually the spirit behind the ‘Richard Mutt Case’ remained a mystery to almost all contemporaries, and even today there is still some slight doubt among Duchamp experts as to its sole authorship.*

(Daniels 2002: 27-28)

Historians William Camfield and Kirk Varnedoe also doubt the origin of *Fountain*. Varnedoe writes:

*One of the nicer twists of history’s perversity is that, while the Duchamp *Fountain* exists in numerous replica versions, a surviving example of the original type of urinal has proven impossible to locate. If it exists at all, it is now an item of exquisite rarity.*

(Varnedoe 1990: 274)

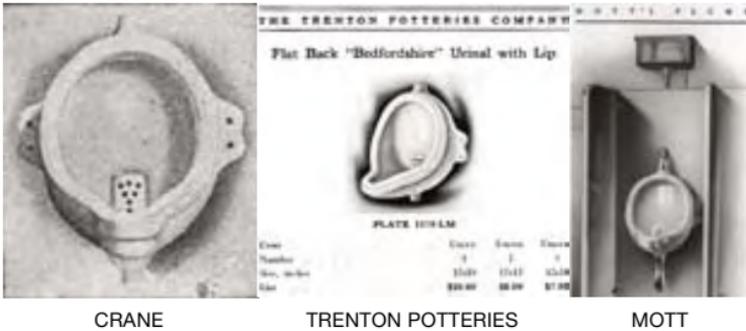
Varnedoe suggests that a closer example of *Fountain*, the porcelain flat-back ‘Bedfordshire’ urinal with lip, is found not in the catalogues of the Mott Company but rather the ‘Bedfordshire’ in the A.Y. MacDonald Company catalogue.

In the early 20th century, companies like Mott, Crane and various others bought their urinals from Trenton Potteries, Trenton NJ (aka “the sanitary pottery capital of the U.S.” – Shearer 2000: 7). The Mott ‘Bedfordshire’ fails to provide us with the exact number

of drain holes of Duchamp's *Fountain*, whilst the MacDonald 'Bedfordshire' bears a stronger resemblance to the Duchamp original and also maintains the exact number of drain holes.

Varnedoe extends his argument to justify Duchamp's claim for the object not having any aesthetic appeal whatsoever. He realises that Duchamp might have in fact bought his urinal from the MacDonald company purely because the Mott company stocked more appealing sets of plumbing for the beautiful American bathroom. The fact that the 'Bedfordshire' appeared in the catalogue at all and that it was restricted to its back pages, together with the fact that the 'Bedfordshire' would not have been found in the Mott showroom, might have added to a game that Duchamp intended to play in the first place.

Although Duchamp made claims for not wanting aesthetic accessibility, Camfield notes the work's popularity amongst Duchamp's circle, and the aesthetic links to the Buddha form in the writings of Louise Norton (Varnedoe 1990: 276-277).



In 2000 Rhonda Roland Shearer, together with Gregory Alvarez, Robert Slawinsky, Vittorio Marchiand and Stephen Jay Gould published an argument supporting Varnedoe's 'Richard Mutt Case' titled, 'Why Hatrack is and/or is not Readymade' (Shearer 2000). Shearer's interest in Varnedoe's inability to locate Duchamp's original urinal is situated in the possibility that *Fountain* might only have existed in the Alfred Steiglitz photograph, produced for the *Blind Man* journal and also in the edition commissioned by Duchamp, reconstructed by Arturo Schwarz in 1964.⁹



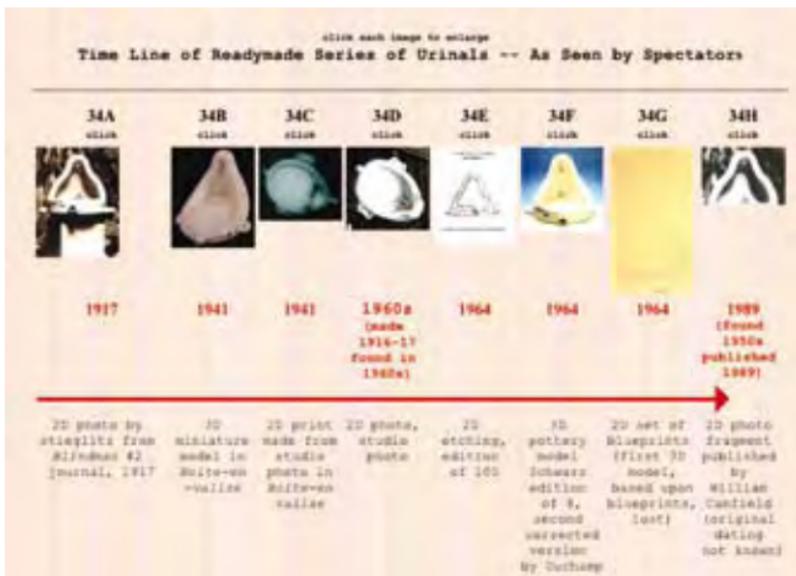
*Duchamp's original 1917 urinal does not exist today. Historians such as William Camfield and Michael Betancourt have documented the contradictions and conflicting stories that leave us with effectively no definite evidence about the urinal's existence – including any potential witnesses of the object (the few testimonies that exist conflict); who photographed it (Stieglitz himself, who supposedly photographed the urinal for the 1917 *Blindman* publication, only briefly mentions the urinal in writing, and no negative or print was ever found in his archive); or how quickly the urinal vanished into thin air in 1917.*

(Shearer 2000: 6)

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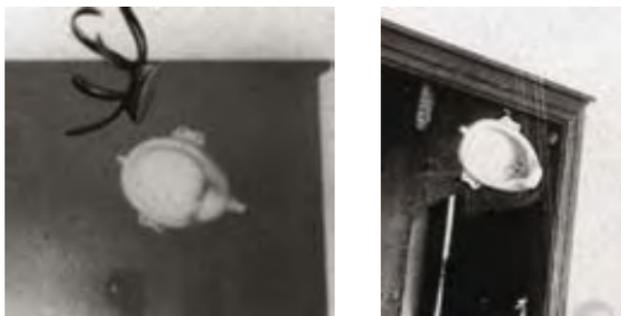
Camfield, however, managed to track down a second version of the Stieglitz photograph, which was shown for the first time in 1989 after it 'quietly appeared within the archive of Duchamp's main patrons, the Arensbergs, in the 1950s' (Shearer 2000: 6).

The fact that the urinal was "lost",¹⁰ together with the fact that the only physical Stieglitz photograph appeared with a missing bottom section, pointed to obvious difficulties surrounding Duchamp's urinal. Shearer produced a timeline of the readymade series of urinals, in the order in which the only images known to spectators were produced. Shearer attempts to show snapshots in time as many possible versions as Duchamp would have wanted us to perceive his work: "information" in addition to the "serial characteristic of the readymade" (Duchamp in Shearer 2000: 1).



SHEARER'S CONSTRUCTED TIMELINE OF *FOUNTAIN*

She believes that 34A and 34C (created from a 1916-17 photograph) are in fact two different versions of urinals produced at the time. She argues that her 34C and 34D studio photographs present us with “close, but not exact” versions of the Bedfordshire from the Art Science Research Laboratory collection,¹¹ as well as the 1917 Stieglitz photograph (Shearer 2000: 7).



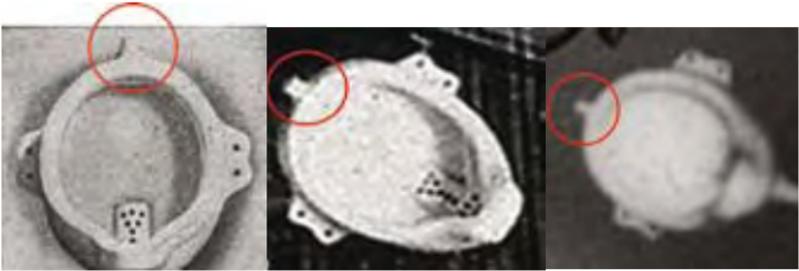
STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHS

When her 3D model of the Stieglitz image is placed in a similar position to that of the studio photographs, the R. Mutt signature is visible (see opposite), but absent in her analyses of the images taken in Duchamp’s studio (Shearer 2000: 7).



She also observes that when the images (below) of the ASRL 'Bedfordshire' are placed in similar positions to that of the studio photographs, a vague resemblance can be noted. It fails, however, to provide us with exact details such as the size of the ear-like brackets, which appear both larger and different to the Mott model. She also notes the difference between the pipe connections both at the top and bottom of the urinal (Shearer 2000: 7).





Shearer fails to acknowledge the strong resemblance between the studio photographs and the Crane catalogue entry (as outlined above). However, this does not resolve the problem with linking the studio photograph's pipefittings and brackets to those of the Stieglitz photograph in the 3D model (as outlined below).



She argues that Duchamp's (or should that be Norton's, or Stieglitz's, or Man Ray's?) manipulation of the urinal would have been achieved photographically rather than manually (which also remains a possibility). She notes the fact that the urinal seems to be in two different perspectives in the top and bottom half of the picture and demonstrates her point by trying to reconstruct the basic shape of the Stieglitz photograph by re-photographing the ASRL urinal in different positions:

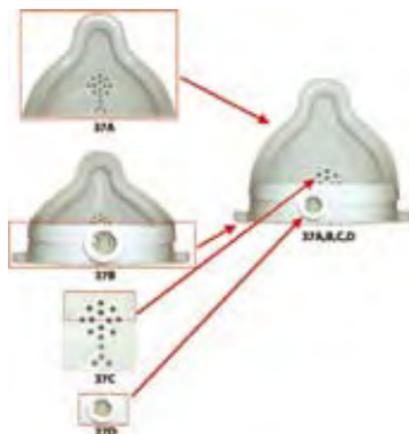




This remains a possibility. Shearer's own attempts to reproduce *Fountain's* angle with the Mott model fails to provide us with an even remotely similar shape to that of the Stieglitz image, but as outlined in the previous illustrations provide us with a similar perspective. She produces two different photographic angles that resemble *Fountain* only when combined.

She also provides us with an argument that the drain holes in the Stieglitz model appear much closer to us than those of the Mott model (again suggesting photo-fakery) and the pipefitting appears closer. The possibility is convincing, but she neglects from the start the fact that we are not dealing with the Mott model in the first place, as mentioned before, but possibly the Crane model. As Varnedoe suggests, "a surviving example of the original type of urinal has proven impossible to locate" (Varnedoe 1990: 274), and we simply cannot assume that the Crane model was in fact the model used by Duchamp in the first place.

This leaves her with a stronger argument.



SHEARER'S ATTEMPT TO RECONSTRUCT *FOUNTAIN* USING THE MOTT SEGMENTS DUCHAMP MIGHT HAVE INCLUDED IN *BLINDMAN* IMAGE

She asks the question and suggests reasoning for Duchamp's manipulation¹² in that he deliberately altered perspectives in other important works such as *The Large Glass*.¹³

Shearer goes as far as to illustrate the possibility that the drain holes might also have been added to the Stieglitz photograph existing today as the top half of the *Blindman* photograph, using a different method to 'cut and paste'.

The drain holes could have been added in by using 'dodge' and 'burning in' methods used in the printing process of early photo manipulation. This is demonstrated when amplifying the brightness and contrast levels of the Stieglitz picture, wherein a brighter border appears around the edges of the drain holes.



The "indefinite shadows" and "discontinuous lines and edges" outlined in the last image may also suggest the area where the photographs were fused.

Shearer's article goes on to provide us with further evidence concerning the manipulated Stieglitz image and hints at further research concerning the matter. A pool of urine seems to be defying gravity at the top of the urinal, suggesting the partial image might have been taken from an existing fitted urinal.

My own observations lead me to the comparison in this particular area between the Stieglitz photograph and the reconstructed Schwarz model, the latter of which was presumably reconstructed according to Duchamp's own instructions in order to replicate this item which is now 'lost'. Note the drain holes in the Schwarz reconstruction which appear to be absent in the Stieglitz model:



Shearer's claims seem strong in some areas and slightly obsessive in others. In an article that appeared in *The New York Times* titled, 'Taking Jokes By Duchamp to Another Level of Art', Sarah Boxer wrote: "This has caused a small stir among Duchamp scholars. First is the factual question: Could she be right? Second, and perhaps more to the point: Would it matter?" (Boxer 1999). It would matter. But to what extent? It might not change the way that we perceive the readymade (to a larger degree), but the way that we perceive Duchamp. Boxer cites Arthur Danto:

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"I guess it's possible that he made a commercial porcelain urinal and a grooming comb. But what would I think of him if his great contribution was as a ceramicist or a woodworker? I think it would make him far less important." Of course, "that wouldn't change the readymade; that's part of the discourse now"...

"But if she's right," he adds, "I have no interest in Duchamp."

(Danto in Boxer 1999)

Leslie Camhi¹⁴ also supports Shearer's arguments in an article titled, 'Did Duchamp Deceive Us?' She argues extensively in favour of Shearer, and provides us with cohesive arguments by other scholars:

"If Rhonda Shearer's theories [are] confirmed," says William Camfield, a scholar of Dada and Surrealism and the author of a groundbreaking study of the readymade Fountain, "that would not rest easily with all kinds of interpreters of Duchamp's readymades."

(Camfield in Camhi: 1999)

It should be possible for us to look further than the basic premise that justifies the readymade as a work of art. If the art world is incensed and cannot grasp Duchamp's intervention with these works, are we not accepting these works of art with a similar conservatism with which his nude was excluded by the *Salon des Independents*? To feel that Duchamp played a joke on us and being disgruntled by it is a mere repetition of the controversy of *Fountain*, which occurred almost a century ago, but of course in a different context. These works may once again only fall into Duchamp's categories of 'assisted readymades' or even his notions of 'rectified readymades'. Therefore it would be more difficult to accuse him of deceiving his audience, and maybe the audience needs to take responsibility for its lack of understanding the clues that he left behind in the first place. Once again the artist has managed to elevate himself above the audience's basic understanding of production. Only when all the facts are uncovered and all the factual inaccuracies, created by the artist himself and those associated with him at the time, have been eliminated, will we have closure on the Duchamp case.

To The Editor.

If our friend and supporter Marcel Duchamp were alive today, he would thank Rhonda Roland Shearer for her work on his behalf, applaud her audacity, marvel at her perspicacity - what an eye! at last a super-sleuth! - and wink at her for not having him pull the wool over her eyes. In a courageous critical act, an important contemporary artist, but one who has faced down a master.

Shearer has given Duchamp more nuisance time on this planet. If Duchamp did indeed blend his own face (and in another instance, that of his friend Picabia) into the moustachioed Mona Lisa [L.H.O.O.Q.] and therefore today stares out at us through her soft gaze, Shearer has no choice but to expose the dual nature of those eyes; for she is a heroic practitioner of a crisis ethics with no tolerance for needless lapses or inaccuracies.

Duchamp once said to us as we strolled together through Washington Square Park: No use being an artist unless you are willing at every moment to risk doing something that most people in the world will completely despise. Without such acts, nothing ever happens.

*Madeline Gins and Arakawa*¹⁵

(Gins and Arakawa 1999)

NOTES

¹ Meaning that the acceptance and understanding of the readymade relies to an extent on some form of education. It is not yet a widespread phenomenon that could easily be accepted by the general public (mainly because of its brief history dating back only as far as the 1910s).

² Based on my own assumptions relating to various conversations with friends, colleagues and the media.

³ The Stuckists appropriated their name through Tracey Emin's drunken response to Childish's work and referring to it as being "stuck, stuck, stuck". See 'Stuck on the Turner Prize', <http://www.hatii.arts.gla.ac.uk/MultimediaStudentProjects/00-01/9704524I/MM Project/Html/stuck1.htm>

⁴ See Stuckism International, <http://www.stuckism.com>

⁵ See 'The Turner Prize' in Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turner_Prize

⁶ Which might have been accepted if Duchamp had changed the title and removed it from the painted surface. It was also seen to resemble too many influences of Futurism.

⁷ "...an attempt to circumvent the conservatism of such institutions as the National Academy of Design." (Godfrey 1998: 28)

⁸ Address on admission label attached to the urinal suggests the 'female friend' is probably Louise Norton, née McCutcheon (1890-1988), married to Allen Norton and later to marry composer Edgar Varese (Naumann and Obalk 2000: 47).

⁹ I present a detailed summary of Shearer's observations in this document because of the centrality of them to my own operations and the views of dissenting historians.

¹⁰ According to Charles Prendergast, *Fountain* was broken by Glackens as a solution to the problem of exhibiting it. However, the piece would have been listed as 'destroyed' and Stieglitz supposedly only photographed it after it was rejected (Betancourt 2000).

¹¹ Digitally reconstructed Mott urinal.

¹² In the same article, she also provides strong evidence of the similar photo-manipulation in the case of both Duchamp's 'Hatrack' and 'Coatrack', which have similar histories in that they were also 'lost' and exist only in photographs and replica versions.

¹³ Because of length restrictions, I am unable to go into the details of Duchamp's reconstructed perspectives in other works, such as *The Large Glass*, for example.

¹⁴ Leslie Camhi is a cultural critic whose work appears in *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, and other publications.

¹⁵ Letter in response to Sarah Boxer's article in *The New York Times*, March 23, 1999. Madeline Gins and Arakawa are well-known architectural theorists and philosophers, and close friends of Duchamp.

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DOUGLAS GIMBERG *LOVE LASTS FOREVER* 2006
DUE TO TIME CONSTRAINTS WE COULD NOT OBTAIN A HORSE'S HEAD.
BIANCA BALDI AND I SETTLED ON DELIVERING A DEAD CANARY
TO ANDREW LAMPRECHT'S HOME.

ANDREW LAMPRECHT

END NOTES

2007

THEORIST, CRITIC, CURATOR

Transactional Aesthetics

Trans = latin preposition
across
to/on the further side of
before
over

transaction (fr. late latin *transactio*, ultimately deriving from *transigere* = to drive through/accomplish. [trans + *agere* (=drive/do)].)

Meanings of transaction: (from Shorter OED)
* ≠ but see transact for major meanings *

1. Roman + Civil Law: essentially a dispute being resolved through compromise (i.e. "an arrangement"/"an agreement"/"a covenant").

2. The act of transacting

3. That which is transacted; a piece of business
b. Theological: in ref. to the Atonement, chiefly ^{in terms of} ~~depress~~ deprecation.)

* 4. "The action of passing or making over a thing from one person, thing, or state to another" - described as obsolete

5. Record of proceedings of learned society.

Transactional = adjective.

From: Peng. Dict. of Lit. Terms + Lit. Th.
p. 405.

hypallage (Gr. 'exchange') Also known as transferred epithet. A figure of speech in which the epithet is transferred from the appropriate noun to modify another to which it does not really belong. Common examples are "a sleepless night"; "The condemned cell"; "a happy day". [...]

d. prolepsis (p. 702) "A figurative device by which a future event is presumed to have happened [...][e.g.]

So the two brothers and their murdered man. [...]"

Transactional vs Relational



implies more active, changable and non-definable system of interaction



assumes a system of relations
L = fixed, defined "pin-pointable"

Think genetic, family, etc.

Indeed, relations do not imply actions necessarily!

Trans. v. diff. to relations.

disproduction... ABSOLUTELY NOT DIS = "in two ways" does not work!

Postproduction



Deproduction

"De" as prep. = "down from"

contemporary

contemporary

contemporary

contemporary

contemporary

"com" and "con" both Latin ~~for~~ preps. for "together" BUT com is archaic + also means "altogether/completely" and is an intensive form of "con." (Shuster 000!)

Despiciant = looking downwards

com
contemporary } = together in time.

In the sense in which we say "Contemporary Art" with whom is the art "together in time"?

↳ usual is a ref. to other artists.

BUT I should argue that it is with

a) the viewer

b) the "times" themselves. (i.e. things as they are [unfolding])

~ i.e. Art of its time / referencing its time; not out of time. (Neither anachronistic [looking backwards]), nor "avant-garde"; not self-referential; neither "outsider"; but actually of its present.

GOOD STUFF!!

From Brewer's Dict.

p. 905 To have had one's time.

A British soldier's expression in WWII = ripe for death, to expect imminent disaster.

- To know the time of day = to be smart / awake.

=

p. 892 Tempora mutantur

(Lat., the times are changed).

The tag is based on Omnia mutantur, nos et mutantur in illis (all things are changed, and we with them), a saying of

Nicholas Bourbonius, Lat. poet of 16th.

Cofhair, Emp. of Holy Rom. Emp had already said: Tempora mutantur, nos et mutantur in illis.

From Peng, Dict. Philos.

559 temporal

pertaining to the present life in this world, in contrast to eternal life (after death).

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Q. How did "art" become applied to what we now understand "art" to be in the context of "contemporary art"?

see R. Williams Keywords
cf. S.A. Ind. languages.

Must check full OED. Shorter OED notes "skill" as earliest use but also "perfection of workmanship" later (!!).

A. Middle English meaning was a verb for cramp, limit or constrain (!)

CIVILISATION AND BARBARISM

Looking at Short. OED. it would seem that to be civilized as opposed to barbaric is to be refined + kind. (More or less....)

From Peng. Dict. Phil.

p. 8

aesthetics.

[...] also, the theory of taste and criticism is in the creative [...] arts.

The word was 1st used in this sense by Alexander Baumgarten (1714-62) [...]

2. ^{proper sense:} Kant, Kritik Pure Reason = Transcendental Aesthetic = way our internal + external senses convey knowledge of objects

p. 8 affective fallacy

'evaluating a literary work through its impact on the reader's subjective, emotional response rather than considering the qualities of the work itself...'

p. 9⁺ NB diff between performatives + constatives of Austin.

Constatives state facts; performatives do not.

p. 157 Dyadic relation

a two-place relation, e.g. being [both] to the left of and being the father of
(see also monadic predicate)

p. 508 Scholasticism

- are we in a new age of scholasticism?

8

To quill ^{"he is"} (cavilling) is to excessively find fault, argument + engage in disputation.

Idelect

Consider Schopenhauer, opponent of Hegel + pessimist.
Wrote on vision + colours 1815.

Brewers p. 572

Lucus a non lucendo

An etymological contradiction; [...] words derive [...] from their opposites.

~ would "deproduction" be such??

Re: Aesthetics

Follow trajectory of:

Wolff - thoroughness + accuracy*

↓

Baumgarten - 1st real "modern" theory of aesthetics

↓

Kant

↓

Continental Phil.

* Consider this formulation in context of transactional aesthetics; on one hand yes this applies (cf. Nerf's "measure twice, cut once") but the aim and results are different.

DOUGLAS GIMBERG
LOVE DOUGLAS
2007

ARTIST

Kathryn Smith wishes to thank the artists who, bravely or foolishly, trusted her to 'frame' their exhibition with a publication they had only limited control over; and to Baylon Sandri and Grizelda Hall of the SMAC gallery for extending facilities and infrastructure to support these ideas. Finally, she would like to thank her colleagues at the University of Stellenbosch's Department of Visual Arts, particularly Lize van Robbroeck who is published here, and Katherine Bull, who tolerates her distracting book fetishes with stoicism. It is a privilege to be a part of a supportive research environment.

