



The Second Johannesburg Biennale
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Organized by Christopher Till and Lorna Ferguson, the First Johannesburg Biennale, "Africus," opened in 1995. Commemorating South Africa's political and cultural reentry into the world, it marked the nation's first year of democracy, its fair and open election of Nelson Mandela as president, and the potential inauguration of a new era—"The Rainbow Nation at peace with itself," as Ferguson put it.

Unfortunately, this biennale was accompanied by a good deal of controversy. While some observers feared that South Africa

was not ready for such an event, others argued that the nation's modest economic resources could be used more wisely for other purposes.

Till and Ferguson invited curators from many countries to participate in the biennale on the condition that they include South African artists in

their national exhibitions. The result was a frenzy of activity in which international curators were whisked from the airport to the studios of various South African artists with the hope of finding local work that might fit within the context of their nation's pavilions. The biennale ultimately featured an astonishing variety of contemporary art from

throughout Africa that intrigued South Africans and foreigners alike. But, for the most part, the installations seemed to lack internal integrity, and grasping the biennale as a totality, both visually and conceptually, was difficult. Nonetheless, many who had never before ventured to the tip of Africa came to Johannesburg to see art on a grand scale. In doing so, they inevitably observed what was magnificent and what was disastrous within the new South Africa.

The Second Johannesburg Biennale, "Trade Routes: History and Geography," which took place in Johannesburg and Cape Town from October 1997 to January 1998, had an entirely different feel. Under the artistic direction of the Nigerian-born, New York-based curator and art historian Okwui Enwezor, it featured more than 160 artists from sixty-three countries, including thirty-five South Africans. Enwezor invited six other curators to organize exhibitions that took place in sites spread across Johannesburg and Cape Town. Artists also created special projects, ranging from billboards to performances, websites, "collective wear projects," and bus-shelter installations. Although lacking in economic resources, which created logistical challenges for both the participating artists and the curators, the exhibition was rich with intellectual sophistication.

As Enwezor stated in the accompanying catalogue, the biennale was designed to examine the "history of globalisation, by exploring how economic imperatives of the last five hundred years have produced resilient cultural fusions and disjunctions" (9). Its purpose was "to give critical

Carol Becker The Second Johannesburg Biennale

Hans Haacke. *The Vindication of Dulcie* September, 1997. Flags (cloth, steel, text, photograph). Dimensions variable. Second Johannesburg Biennale/ "Alternating Currents."



significance to those modes of contestation, analysis, exploration, and interpretation with which contemporary artists contend and to contemplate shifts that have led to the redefinition of our senses of society" (9). Consequently, the exhibitions would "explore how culture and space have been historically displaced through colonisation, migration, and technology . . . and engage, by emphasising how innovative practices have led to redefinitions and inventions of our notions of expression, with shifts in the language and discourses of art" (9).

To achieve these goals, the biennale also included a conference organized by the Nigerian-born, Florida-based art historian Olu Oguibe; a film series featuring independent films from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe organized by the New York-based Mahen Bonetti; and a catalogue with essays by Francesco Bonami, Julia Kristeva, Saskia Sassen, and ten other authors, as well as statements by the seven curators—Enwezor, Hou Hanru, Yu Yeon Kim, Kellie Jones, Gerardo Mosquera, Colin Richards, and Octavio Zaya. Because of the weight of the discourse; the critical reputation of Enwezor; the seriousness of the artists, curators, and conference participants; and the "exoticism" of the locale, many denizens of the international art world attended both the opening and the conference. While the performance artist Robyn Orlin—a falling balletic Icarus wearing a motorcycle helmet, pink tutu, and ten pairs of toe shoes—suspended herself by metal harnesses and flew across the space of the Electric Workshop (the main biennale site), smashing lightbulbs against the cement, an international assemblage of artists, curators, art historians, and writers mingled with their South African counterparts to create a truly international gathering for this opening event.

Invited to participate in the conference, I had hoped that President Nelson Mandela would open the proceedings, but he did not. Nor did Thabo Mbeki or anyone else of high governmental stature. For those guests who had never been to South Africa, Mandela's presence would have signified the importance of art and culture to the African National Congress's social agenda and to the country's internationalization after years of isolation. I was hoping for a direct link between the biennale and contemporary South Africa because aspects of the exhibition and the conference concerned me, yet I had trouble articulating my ambivalences. Perhaps I believed that Mandela's sanction might erase them.

At the core of my ambivalence was my concern that this biennale—dramatic, brilliant, at times gorgeous, at times moving—was in truth isolated from, perhaps even ultimately irrelevant to, what was happening in South Africa. The biennale and the conference were focused largely on the diasporic citizens of the world and on issues of cultural displacement, but the intellectual framework of this focus drew on discourses originating in the international urban centers of the West. And, in fact, many of the artists, although impressively diverse in their points of origin, were now

living in New York, London, or Paris. In many ways this emphasis appeared removed from the realities of the South African situation; it did not seem to facilitate the conversation that South Africans were having with themselves. As the journalist Ivor Powell wrote in *The Mail and Guardian*, the biennale seemed “stuck within the problematics of the colonial” instead of exploring the multifarious economic, political, and social issues being debated in postapartheid South Africa.

South Africans, who are desperately trying to construct mechanisms by which they can begin to think about themselves in relationship to a totality, are not in the same place as artists and intellectuals who travel around the world relatively freely and respond to their new locales with the ever-evolving languages of postcolonialism and diasporic cultural studies. Those who move through space and time in these ways are, in some sense, post-national because they link local concerns with global issues. But most South Africans do not. How could they, when they are in the process of working through their own desperate emotional and physical problems—when they are attempting to create equality at all levels, perhaps for the first time, as a nation? From striving to solve such basic problems as bringing housing and running water to the majority of citizens, to profoundly interrogating their nation’s past through the nightmarish process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South Africa is grappling with the legacy of apartheid. Those who were once in prison as “insurrectionists” are now running the country, trying to build confidence in the government’s ability to bring stability to all races. In this context, the biennale’s debate on postnationality seemed abstract.

The tensions in South Africa were everywhere apparent. During the biennale’s opening days, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was meeting only blocks from the Electric Workshop. In a medium-size room in the Sanlam Center, filled predominantly with journalists but open to the public, South Africa’s apartheid past was on trial. The former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rieff “Pik” Botha, and the former Minister of Law and Order, Adriaan Vlok, were making their amnesty testimonies. Here, those who had grotesquely divided the populace, who ordered the “elimination” of individuals thought to be a threat to the apartheid government, were explaining to an incredulous audience that they never intended these orders to mean “murder.” In a tone of pure sarcasm, Bishop Desmond Tutu insisted that someone must have thought these words meant “to kill,” because in fact many had been. As Mandela stated on April 28, 1997, “They claim they don’t know, and expect South Africa and the world to believe them.” But no one in the audience did, not on that day. Photographers snapped pictures as Botha apologized to Bishop Tutu and to God, while many snickered when Vlok did not apologize but instead pronounced, “We are all victims of the conflicts of the past.”

Into this complex process and into Johannesburg—a culturally rich city



Bili Bidjocka. *16,000 Holes*, 1997. Garden. Dimensions variable. Second Johannesburg Biennale/"Alternating Currents."

tragically fraught with uncertainty, poverty, crime, and drugs—comes the Second Johannesburg Biennale, positioned against the nationalistic tone of its predecessor in its effort to present South Africa as an international player in the arts. These difficult and jarring juxtapositions became conspicuously visible when the international art world arrived. Hundreds of visitors, dressed in art-world black and funky chic, wandered around the biennale site, some wondering aloud if it was possible to realize a transnational biennale in a country not yet a nation. This group was joined in the second week of October by curators from the United States sponsored by the Norton Family Foundation, who were encouraged to step outside their own Eurocentric worldviews to discuss how their experience in Africa might transform their curatorial work. In many ways this biennale, heavy with the presence of the curatorial hand, marked the emergence of the curator as the framer and articulator of art's meaning in global history. In addition to this group of international and South African artists and curators was an impressive lineup of conference participants—many of whom, like Gayatri Spivak and Andreas Huyssen—originally came from extreme points of origin but are now based in New York.

The most dramatic of the biennale's sites was the Electric Workshop, where the exhibition "Alternating Currents" was presented. Built in 1929 to house a generating station, the space was reconfigured for the First Johannesburg Biennale. Organized by Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, "Alternating Currents" dealt with the themes of movement, migration, and the lost and damaged home. Outside the Electric Workshop were two installations that related directly to South Africa's contemporary historical situation. Up against the building, Hans Haacke presented the closure of his trilogy, *The Vindication of Dulcie September*, about an ANC representative to



Cildo Meireles. *Marhulo*, 1992–97. Mixed-media installation: books printed with different images of water, soundtrack of voices, and wooden pier constructions. Dimensions variable. Second Johannesburg Biennale/“Important and Exportant.” Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

France murdered in Paris in 1988. Haacke saw this work as the culmination of two previous installations. The first presented the old apartheid flag; the second, this and the ANC flag tied together. In this third work the large postapartheid flag flies with the smaller flags of the previous installations, the ripped flag of apartheid separated from that of the ANC. It is sadly ironic that on the biennale’s opening day Pik Botha was queried about September’s assassination only blocks away from Haacke’s work.

Across from Haacke’s piece and also in front of the Electric Workshop, but facing into the building, was *Home*, by the South African artist Andries Botha. This small, prefabricated wooden house (a type often used in South Africa, for security guards) was surrounded by Astroturf, a low white picket fence, and windows covered with white lace curtains. The open door invited

visitors inside, where the temperature was kept coldly air-conditioned. There was no furniture, no place to rest. Only hand-engraved metal texts covered the walls—excerpts from victims’ testimonies to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996. One of the texts was a quotation from Mrs. Caroline Sono, mother of Lono, last seen in the company of Mrs. Winnie Mandela: “Sometimes I hear a knock on the door and I think Lono has come home. At night I see him flying and think he is coming home and I open my eyes and say, Welcome my son, Welcome Home.” The effect is chilling on several levels, the juxtaposition of inside and outside both powerful and devastating. There is no home here, only horror. This work touches on an important issue central to South Africa—what Andries Botha refers to as “emotional geography,” or the violation of space that once was home.

Within this theme of the lost, disenfranchised, disturbed home was the installation *Saturn’s Table* by the Cuban-American artist Ernesto Pujol. The walls of the darkened room were covered with cow excrement, and a heavy nineteenth-century Afrikaaner table and chairs sat stolidly on the dank, earthen floor. A place was set for the worst of all monstrous patriarchs who grotesquely abused his power—the mythological Saturn, who ate his own children.

Also in “Alternating Currents” was Penny Siopis’s small “art theater” installation designed to show her magical film *My Lovely Day*, created from old, faded footage of her Greek family’s early life in Cape Town. Showing them arriving from Smyrna, unable to return home because of Greece’s civil war, the archival footage, to which Siopis added her own text, grapples with the memories of childhood and displacement. It juxtaposed these memories with the reality of assimilation into the land of the Other.

Across from the Electric Workshop is the famous Market Theater, where the late Barney Simon staged some of the first racially mixed productions defying apartheid. Hundreds of township youth attended his laboratories and were trained as actors. Some of Barney's close friends, including such well-known white activists as Joe Slovo, Ruth First, and Nadine Gordimer, came here to see the original productions of South Africa's most famous playwright, Athol Fugard. Also in this space was the Rembrandt van Rijn Gallery, where Hou Hanru's exhibition "Hong Kong etc." was mounted.

The Museum Africa, topped by Stephen Balkenhol's two sculptural figures from the last biennale (which he donated to the city), silhouetted against the Johannesburg sky, was the site of Yu Yeon Kim's exhibition "Transversions." The building is a former produce market renovated to house collections on the history of Johannesburg and the region, as well as exhibitions on subjects such as the mining industry and the Treason Trials. It is certain that nothing as high-tech as Kim's exhibition has ever appeared in this space before. In it were video installations by Dennis Oppenheim and a fabulous piece by Diller and Scofidio, *Pageant*, of morphing corporate logos projected onto a large circle in a dark room—a clever and terrifying statement about globalization. Here, too, was Alfredo Jaar's *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, a dramatic work about the ten weeks of genocide that ensued after Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down above the capital of Kigali—a catastrophe Jaar feels the world turned its back on. There were also drawings by William Kentridge from *The Trials of Ubu* and *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, a play by Kentridge, Jane Taylor, and the Hand-Spring Puppets. This animated, humorous, damning production was based on *Ubu Roi* and featured eccentric, engaging movement choreographed by Robyn Orlin.

What did South Africans make of this high-tech wonderland, which consumed so many financial resources? Steven Pusey, who set up the technological installations for "Transversions," told me that the young people from Soweto who were facilitators for the exhibition and who had no prior training in this area, learned quickly and easily how to install and maintain the technological equipment. He speculated that perhaps they were used to an oral and visual culture that allowed them to hold such information in their heads.

Gerardo Mosquera's exhibition "Important and Exportant" was presented in the Johannesburg Art Gallery, a large museum with a collection of European and contemporary African art. In the heart of downtown, where many small vans moving people from the townships converge, the museum is protected like a fortress. Heavy metal gates are juxtaposed with the many sleeping people stretched across the lawns surrounding the building; some are coming from work, while others are homeless. (The area has become so unsafe that there is talk of actually moving the museum.) For this exhi-

bition, the South African artist William Boshoff presented *The Writing That Fell off the Wall*. Boshoff's statement about this work alludes to "fourteen stations of an imperious cross" that "testify to the failed bid for the soul of South Africa," with small pillars from which promises like truth, order, destiny, identity, progress, and principle have fallen to the ground, reified in the languages of the colonizers—French, Dutch, English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian. Within their chaotic assortment, resembling words fallen out of a Scrabble box, lies the history of Africa and its colonized past. But such moral platitudes can no longer be reassembled. Here, too, were photographs of German reconstruction, by the French artist Sophie Calle, of places that once housed monuments, now removed, that have since become spaces of memory. Calle has recorded their history, as interpreted by people who have experienced these places directly.

The Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles's installation consisted of a wooden pier jutting over books covered with blue paper meant to resemble the sea. The illusion of water was amplified by sound—the word *water* spoken in myriad languages. In my attempt to understand if the volume of this sound was related to how close one approached the end of the pier, I nearly fell into the imaginary sea of books, the sea of imaginary books.

In Johannesburg the challenge was to take in the entire breadth of the work while also attending the conference, which competed for the visitor's time. Here Olu Oguibe, the conference's organizer, sought to put artists in dialogue with critics to create what James Clifford refers to as a "contact zone" and to reflect the degree to which artists, curators, and theorists are often focusing on the same questions. Panels were structured around topics such as Home and Exile, Funding and Culture in the 21st Century, Speaking of Others, Cultures in Diaspora, The Politics of Mega-Exhibitions, Cinema and Globalization, and Culture and Rupture in the Digital Age. Among the discussions were debates on issues unresolved in the United States. Howardina Pindell continued her attack against African American artists like Michael Ray Charles and Kara Walker for what she perceives as their antiblack, racially stereotyped images that appeal to the United States' intrinsic racism and then succeed in the art world as a result. Not all African Americans present agreed; many who spoke after her, including the art historian Richard Powell, used this forum to clarify their disagreements with her position. But the debate was not resolved. There also were serious tensions arising from the meanings of racism and sexism in both Africa and the United States that were evident throughout the conference; yet these points of contention, which would have proven truly interesting if debated, were not addressed directly.

Salem Mekuria, for example, offered a critique of *The Sexual Binding of Women*, Alice Walker's film about female genital mutilation in Africa. However, clips of the film, shown in this African context, revealed a lack of understanding of the specificity of this controversial practice. Walker's



Ernesto Pujol. *Saturn's Table*, 1996/97.
Installation: Afrikaaner
table and chair, silver-
ware, clay sculptures,
soil, and cow dung.
Dimensions variable.
Second Johannesburg
Biennale/"Alternating
Currents." Courtesy the
artist and Linda Kirkland
Gallery, New York.

all-too-eager willingness to draw a parallel between having been blinded in one eye when she was a child and this type of mutilation made the film seem outrageously odd, patronizing, and naive. In this context, in which both African and European Americans are often humbled by how little they, as Westerners, can truly understand Africa's complexity, it becomes especially painful for African American artists and thinkers to realize that they, too, are in fact dislocated when visiting this continent, with its multifarious cultures to which they are historically connected but from which they are diasporically removed. It would have been wonderful to hear Africans comment on these clips, but they did not.

The intensity of looking and talking then moved to Cape Town, where the biennale continued at the Castle of Good Hope, a structure built in 1666 as a fortress to protect the first colonial settlement in the Cape by the Dutch East India Company (in Afrikaans VOC—letters hauntingly illuminated in Wayne Barker's *The World Is Flat*, a massive map installed in the Electric Workshop and composed

of one hundred green bottles and three thousand army fatigues). In Cape Town Kellie Jones's exhibition "Life's Little Necessities" featured women artists, from the American Pat Ward Williams to the Nigerian Fatimah Tuggar. Various technological problems and rumors of inadequate support hampered Jones's attempts to create an exhibition as successful as she might have desired.

At the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, Colin Richards presented "Graft"—an exhibition of South African artists. In South African slang *graft* means "hard work"; it also means "bribery" and, moreover, describes the process that brings disparate elements together to create

hybridity. An amalgam of such entities, the exhibition featured a compelling work by Moshekwa Langa entitled *Temporal Distance (with a criminal intent)*: You will find us in the best places, in which toy cars and large spools of thread placed on the floor created a cartography of distance and a sense of movement. Using empty whisky bottles to indicate points of national origin, Langa created a clever and strange miniature map looped across the gallery floor; between the locations he placed little plastic rats. The work was a reflection on the passage of all postnationalists who migrate from city to city.

But almost nothing in “Graft” had the power of the first work one encountered upon entering the space—Jane Alexander’s *Butcher Boys* (1988). Although not part of the biennale, it is in the National Gallery’s collection and was not moved for the exhibition. *Butcher Boys* is a representational sculpture that reifies the sickness of apartheid. Three life-size male figures—half-human, half-animal—sit on a bench as if waiting for something to happen. Their bodies are muscular and lean, their ramlike heads deformed, their eyes dark and glassy. They are nightmarish figures that remind one of the fierceness of so much of the antiapartheid art that exploded out of the dark ages of National Party rule. The sculpture was made even more dramatic when set in relief by Siemon Allen’s installation *La Jetée*, whose walls of recycled videotape inadvertently lent a dramatic backdrop to the *Butcher Boys*’ twisted, gnarled souls.

The conference also continued in Cape Town, where the sun and sea competed with these darkened galleries and lecture halls. I spoke on the last panel of the last day. By then many tensions had developed, and too much had not been said. South Africa itself seemed to have been largely ignored. Knowing the intensity of South African artists and intellectuals, I should have expected what happened next, but anxious to give my paper and hopeful for the discussion that might follow, I did not. I, too, was frustrated by this point. Everyone had been far too polite. The conversation had been too abstract. Nothing had been said that brought us back to South Africa directly, and no attempt had been made to summarize the ideas presented, to formulate any type of theoretical model around which to think about transnationalism and its many complexities. Ideally the first day of the conference should have been focused entirely on our host country; perhaps the last day should have been structured to allow some theoretical postulations to be made. In any case, there was a palpable restlessness that needed to be addressed, as well as internal South African cultural debates begging for disclosure.

Andreas Huyssen began the morning of the last day with a fascinating analysis of the dehistoricization of the city of Berlin—the way in which it has lost its relationship to its local inhabitants. Corporate architecture colonizing the city into an international center, he demonstrated, has caused an erasure of history. Visually, Huyssen juxtaposed the new and unfortunately

unsuccessful Berlin building ventures with the architect Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum Project. His talk, although specific to place, nonetheless powerfully presented the notion of the global city as "progress" run amok, deflating for a time any romance associated with globalization. It would have been pertinent to follow his analysis with a similar one focusing on the city of Johannesburg.

By the afternoon the many complex undercurrents of the day began to surface. My panel was called *Speaking of Others*, in reference to the problematization of Otherness; it was moderated by Sallah Hassan, originally from Sudan but now teaching at Cornell University. The panelists were asked to discuss what constitutes Otherness at the end of the century; I had written a piece in which I proposed that the United States had become "other to itself." But right before our panel was to begin, I could hear conversations building around me. Anger was expressed that there had not been enough discussion about South Africa; this, the very last panel, should therefore devote itself to the subject. Unbeknownst to me and the other panelists, the moderator agreed and then announced that we would speak briefly (although I refused to budge on our agreed-on allotment of twenty minutes), that we would focus on South Africa, and that we would specifically engage an already heated discussion on the representation of Otherness activated by an essay Enwezor had written for an exhibition of South African art in Oslo. In this essay he attacked certain white South African women artists for appropriating the images of black African women's bodies in their work. This essay has caused tremendous controversy in South Africa.

When called on, I stated that I had already written an essay about this debate, which was soon to appear in a book published in South Africa and edited by Brenda Atkinson called *Grey Matters*. I had not intended to discuss these issues today, especially because there was an international audience unfamiliar with the work around which the debate was focused. I then read my paper. Francesco Bonami, the editor of *Flash Art*, spoke next, followed by Richards. None of us came prepared to address South Africa or the Enwezor debate specifically. When we were done, the attacks began.

I was criticized for not presenting my *Grey Matters* essay, for not focusing on South Africa, and then for an allusion I had made to the transformation that had occurred in South Africa. I had contrasted South Africa's collective admission of its previous racism to the absence of such admission in the United States, where those with social consciousness are still isolated, hoping to see change in their lifetime. By then I felt myself an honorary South African because I was the only foreigner attacked in an otherwise too-polite conference that had failed to address South Africa's ongoing debates—an omission for which we were suddenly paying.

Then a young South African man addressed his attack to Richards. He requested that all artists who had benefited under apartheid please stand up.

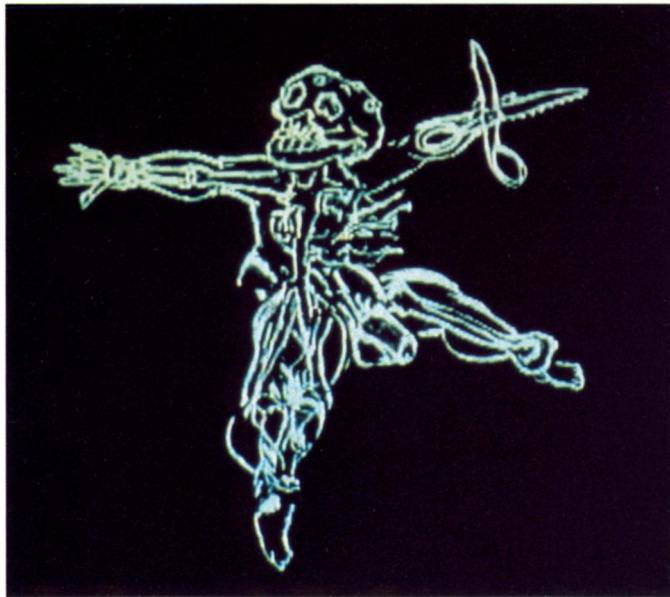
Richards asked if he meant all white artists; he said yes. Many white artists in the room did stand, including Richards, who then asked something like, “Now what do we do?” Of course, there was nothing to be done. The point was made. When describing this series of events to Andries Botha, who was not present at the conference, he remarked, “At the point at which Colin was asked to stand, Colin should have said, ‘Will all those South Africans not damaged by apartheid please stand up?’” But in reality only a South African could have pursued that line of inquiry with another South African.

Then a heated debate between Enwezor, Oguibe, and several women artists, particularly Siopis, ensued. I was somewhat shocked to hear these sophisticated, diasporic Nigerian men insisting that if white women were to use images of their sisters’ naked bodies in their work without the consent of these black women, Enwezor and Oguibe would want “to strangle” the white women artists, even if the intent of their work was to expose sexism, pornography, or colonial violence. The paternalism in such statements was astounding, and the scorn for white feminists painfully obvious.

Accusations were flying, and everyone was waiting for the black South African women present to take the lead; but when they did not, African American and diasporic women from other parts of Africa, now living in New York, spoke up in support of the positions taken by Enwezor and Oguibe. But no black South African women ever spoke. The tensions in the South African art world, politely contained all week, had finally exploded. The argument ended in true South African fashion, which is to say that after it was over we moved outside to the lobby for tea. This was something I had also witnessed with amazement at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: certain rituals, colonial ones at that, were used to reestablish civility when there was nowhere else to turn.

Afterward, what was so clear from discussions with Americans who had been present was that it was too easy for them to extrapolate from the U.S. identity-politics debates of the 1980s and assume that the South Africans were referring to the same issues. But when race is discussed in South Africa much is still measured by where people stood in the struggle against apartheid. Some of the white women artists questioned by Enwezor had used their work to build support from foreign countries for the anti-apartheid movement and cultural boycott. To attack these artists now for work made then is a complicated matter, especially for non-South Africans. But there was neither the time nor the inclination to engage the complexities of these debates—so much by then had been personalized and in the process depoliticized.

When we were in Johannesburg, we had heard that a soldier guarding the new Guggenheim in Bilbao had been killed. The Guggenheim’s U.S. curators at the biennale were clearly shaken. The questions raised by the actions of the Basque separatists (given that the Basques had originally



William Kentridge. *Ubu Tells the Truth*, 1997. 16mm film transferred to laser disk. Second Johannesburg Biennale/ "Transversions."

supported the museum project), as well as those concerning the significance of recontextualizing art at this moment of globalization at the end of the century, went largely unanswered. What does it mean in practice to decontextualize ourselves and our creative work, and what would it mean to recontextualize all our efforts, on a global scale, beyond nationhood and personal national identity? We had only just begun to imagine, and the pitfalls seemed enormous.

Postscript

Almost upon my return to the United States I began receiving frantic e-mail messages that the biennale was in danger. By mid-December it had closed, but it was soon reopened after Enwezor, Bongi Dhlomo, and other key players intervened.

The ambivalence on the part of the Johannesburg City Council was apparent: they desired to close the biennale because of its daily operating expenses and used the low attendance numbers as further justification. Such a shaky outcome to the tremendous efforts of all those who brought this biennale into being was terrifically upsetting, foreboding badly for the future of international art events in South Africa and for the support necessary to sustain South African artists in the future. One is left with some serious and fundamental questions about how to measure the success of such an event, on both a global and a local level. How well can anyone, however clever, position a transnational cultural event in a society in turmoil, still attempting to become a nation?

It is impossible not to speculate what the reception of the biennale might have been had it been centered on a topic like reconciliation and had it featured South African artists and artists from around the globe addressing this issue in terms of this historical moment. Had the conference participants discussed this issue and positioned South Africa as a leader in this century in the construction of such a transparent process to accomplish reconciliation, perhaps the exhibition might have generated more local interest. Perhaps its presence might have been more easily justified, its themes more organically contextualized. But these are speculations. It is true that at present South Africa is a society in transition, as thousands of immigrants from the rest of Africa fill its cities. Perhaps if these migratory patterns had been featured, the conceptual framework for the biennale would also have been more fully contextualized.

International visitors came to South Africa hoping for an entirely new experience. For that to have occurred would have required an exhibition whose roots went deep into the local dialogue and spread out to touch



Pascale Martine Tayou.
***The Colorful Maze*, 1997.**
Mixed mediums. Dimensions variable. Second Johannesburg Biennale/ "Alternating Currents."

international concerns and South Africa's position in the international debate. The biennale would have had to project the sense that it could have happened nowhere but in South Africa. It might also have required a large parallel exhibition, perhaps at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, offering international viewers a chance to see the diverse, fabulous spectrum of South African art. But this focus on South Africa was never Enwezor's goal. Still, without such a stated purpose we are forced to ask, Who was this biennale for? If it was for the international art world, then it was a success—smart, sophisticated, conceptually ahead of its time. But even so, it was somewhat disappointing because of the sense that it could have happened anywhere

in the West. If the biennale was also for South Africa, then perhaps it needed to consider its local audience much more closely—not with the sense of where South Africa *should* be but realistic about where it is and where it *wants* to be. Without a general local audience who will come to see the biennale, any biennale, after the hoopla of the opening is over, how can one justify the enormous expense of such an event, especially when the pedagogical purpose for the local community is not clear? Perhaps Enwezor would have had to admit that the fabulous biennale he created really did need more mediation, filled as it was with work from artists whose points of origin were far-flung, whose concerns were complex and often conceptual in execution. Perhaps he would have had to concede that South Africa does not as yet have a critical mass of viewers able, interested in, and prepared to engage with the work of the sophisticated, conceptual nature of this biennale, whose postcolonial discourse originated primarily in the United States and Europe, where so many of the artists and thinkers involved now reside. And perhaps in attempting to bring the world to South Africa, South Africans were inadvertently left out. Finally, what seemed most left out was what South Africa itself has to offer the international debate about postcolonialism and the relationship between art and politics.

I have been traveling to South Africa since 1992 to debate the place of art in a democratic society. With each visit I have been struck by the sophistication of the debate among artists and arts activists (as arts administrators often call themselves in South Africa). The complexity of thinking that South Africa itself has to bring to the world at this time around race, reconciliation, and art making in societal contexts felt overlooked in this biennale. This to me was a great loss.

The conversation around the Second Johannesburg Biennale will continue for some time because it crystallizes the issues of what biennales are and could be for the future. It forces us to reevaluate such events, especially in nations whose own immediate problems demand that such exhibitions justify themselves in relationship to the pressing needs of the country from which they take their locality, sustenance, and ultimate meaning as art events positioned within a social and historical context.

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Becker: How did you envision the biennale conceptually?

Enwezor: It was very clear to me, from the outset, that the Second Johannesburg Biennale had to take a critically different approach (conceptually and ideologically) from the first. I say this not to devalue the immense contribution of that exhibition. However, I was quite uncomfortable with the way it was put together, especially in the overly nationalistic tone that was part of its organizational structure. My refusal of this apparatus, which is part of the national pavilion tradition of Venice and São Paulo, gave me the opportunity to attempt to develop a critical paradigm for the reorientation of

biennales as global cultural enterprises. I wanted to look at this biennale as being antinational, to bring about a conversation in which we can ask if it is possible to make a transnational biennale that is not naively boundariless but that places the privileges that the nation unquestionably enjoys under a more critical gaze.

Carol Becker

Interview with Okwui Enwezor

The following interview took place in Johannesburg on October 13, 1997, shortly after the opening of the biennale.

Becker: What is your hope?

Enwezor: To be able to provide a broader set of references to help create a better understanding of what contemporary art is. To help inaugurate new discussions, contacts, experiences, and relationships between the local audience and the biennale as an institution capable of making a meaningful contribution to the many changes occurring today in South Africa.

Becker: How do you measure your success in this regard?

Enwezor: First, just the fact that the exhibition went up. Second, that the artists have responded so enthusiastically to our call. The question of audience, however, is more difficult. Even though I'm working here, I'm not really able to put my hands on what it means to frame the subject of globalization in South Africa. I am seeking durable transformations in the attitude of the media and of art institutions, and I want a very diverse public to come to see this exhibition. But that really hasn't happened yet.

Becker: Could this show have happened somewhere else? Is it contextualized in such an international way that it could be fluid, that it needn't take place in Africa at all?

Enwezor: It was made to be fluid, yet it does not refuse its locality, because it takes that locality as a structuring device and as a strategy to get inside the local/global question which is often preached at the level of liberal rhetoric but is never really incarnated as a dialectical practice. I intended for the biennale not to become ossified in one particular context where it could become an illustration of certain points that we see in a particular terrain. I'm glad I have organized this biennale and [he laughs], I'm really hoping I won't have



Tracy Rose. *Span I*, 1997.
Performance. Second
Johannesburg Biennale/
"Graft."

to do another. But it would be interesting to organize such an exhibition in New York, for example. A truly international exhibition never occurs in the United States.

Becker: In a sense the biennale is almost a twenty-first century exhibition because it refuses locality. The conference is also positioned around the global village idea, both in its positive and in its negative connotations. But I guess the real question for me is whether South Africa itself is ready for the show, or is the show many steps ahead of where the country is?

Enwezor: I still find this difficult to answer. One of my main criticisms of biennales, especially in the West, is the way that they insist on the vigorous nature of site as a way to posit cultural authority. This is what places like South Africa may find attractive, a readymade context that could be easily imported, but poorly translated. This is what biennales outside the West sometimes seem to me: an image of the margins as quasi-international contexts that are not so much in competition with

the West as much as they enjoy proximity to it. So, on one level South Africa wants to be global while not taking responsibility for what an international practice could mean in terms of diluting its sense of particularity. It is this sense, an alterity which is still very lucrative in the way South Africa communicates with the world, that has been shaken somewhat by the biennale. It says that "you are no longer as special as you may wish to think," and local people are completely dumbfounded by what they've seen. The institutions here have not prepared people for what we've brought, and they are surprised. Certain groups in the art community are all acting very pleasant, even though secretly they want this exhibition to fail. But at the same time, even though this exhibition is one that the country is not really ready for, it is only possible to make such an exhibition in a place like South Africa.

Becker: It's a serious and interesting paradox.

Enwezor: If you notice the criticisms we've gotten so far, part of it is that we've not tried to make an exhibition that diminishes the challenges and the critical language of contemporary art and the artist's own relationship to that rich but complex language. It's as if the critical establishment, with few exceptions, has refused to really see how artists are working and what new developments there are. But at the same time the international context has been a liberating factor for many South African artists, who have stepped



Fatimah Tuggar. *Village Spells*, 1996. Digital image. 19½ x 47¼ (50 x 120). Second Johannesburg Biennale/"Life's Little Necessities."

outside their normal practice to enjoy this possibility. I will use one clear example: Andries Botha. The work Botha has made for the biennale, stylistically, is very different than the work he has made before. The issues he is dealing with touch on the heart of the question: What is South Africa, and what does one make of this strange subject?

Becker: I think he's the only person who is directly addressing the Truth and Reconciliation issues.

Enwezor: Yes. South Africa is a very anxious country, where there is denial every day, and few artists are engaging with the real political questions of their country in their work. Many use the false notion of not wanting to adhere to political correctness as a form of evading political responsibility.

Becker: Could you explain that?

Enwezor: When people use the term political correctness, it's almost as if they are saying that their point of transgression is about their refusal to acknowledge the historical questions that will plague this country for the next few years. Toni Morrison put it even more succinctly when she said that labeling something "p.c." is often a way to discredit ideas and to foreclose debate on urgent questions. Andries Botha is tackling the paralysis that often is a result of that tendency towards denial head-on without apologizing for anything. Through his installation, he has dealt with this compassionately, intelligently, and without fetishizing the kind of suffering that people have undergone. And then there is Santu Mofokeng's work, which confronts in both a concrete and elliptical manner the formidable and inscrutable terror of the archive in a country such as this. His work is not at all a morality tale, but a meditative probing. There is a wide awokenness to his method of deal-

ing with history. His slide installation for me is utterly melancholic. It points out quite clearly that in the South African context soliciting answers from the archive is akin to talking to ghosts in a space haunted by specters of violence and human violation. Botha's and Mofokeng's work pose one simple question: What memories does the archive possess, and what knowledge does it yield when prodded? And when memory and knowledge are unyielding to this prodding, it becomes necessary to invent new stories and intentions, which is what is happening at the Truth and Reconciliation hearings. In a sense it is quite perverse, because that ability to reinvent a different past seems to be what South Africa is using to shape its future. And again, although it might sound patronizing, this makes it fertile ground for experimentation, for the critical ground that one needs for making an exhibition. The desires are big. They are global, cosmopolitan. South Africa wants to grow up overnight, with video and computer art, and so on, which is exciting. But I've never seen so many technological disasters. Yet, in the end they are all working flawlessly.

Becker: I know. People couldn't even find a hammer to build their work, and then at the same time there are so many high-tech installations—and they are all working. There are lots of contradictions.

Enwezor: Exactly. No drills, but lots of projectors and computers. This is the paradox. On the facade South Africa is a first-world nation, but then one penetrates into its core, and you begin to see the cracks, the frailties, the dysfunctions, and all those things in between.

Becker: I don't think people on the outside understand how long South Africa and South African artists in particular were isolated. Decades passed when no art came to South Africa because of the cultural boycott, and very few people were able to travel out of the country. Most South African artists only saw images in glossy magazines. I get the feeling that they now are in a bit of shock—those who are in the show, and those who are not—because of the international audience that came to the opening.

Enwezor: I think there is an opportunity missed here. The first biennale was put on in the spirit that we are now part of the world. Various governments came, and it was, "Go ahead. Here's your space. Put up what you want." Now it's a little different. Various relationships have been established between the work and the artists. Just on the mezzanine of the Electric Workshop you see the work of Eugenio Dittborn from Chile, Peter Spaans from the Netherlands, George Adeagbo from Benin, Sophie Ristelhueber from France. You go downstairs, and there is Wenda Gu from China, Jeanette Christensen from Norway. There's movement.

Becker: And outside you see a Hans Haacke.

Enwezor: Yes, you have a Hans Haacke confronting an Andries Botha, and

they are addressing the same type of subject from completely different positions. It was very important to have this kind of confrontation not just to dissolve the boundaries, but to make those boundaries quiver a little bit.

Becker: That's a wonderful way to put it. But no one seems able to give up the West.

Enwezor: Exactly. Istanbul wants to be the bridge between the East and the West. São Paulo wants to confirm its own sense of cosmopolitanism via this conduit. Johannesburg wants to connect to the world through the West. Sydney talks about its own proximity to its ancestral home in Europe. It is still a good thing that international biennales are happening because you can never get the kind of feeling you've had in Johannesburg at the Whitney Biennial. There is the one-night opening and several secretive parties and then everyone goes their separate ways. Biennales are a whole different animal. When properly reinvented they could present a whole new paradigm for making exhibitions. So this new "tribe of interpreters," as Homi Bhabha would call them, will add significantly to a broader understanding of the contemporary imagination.

Becker: This tribe of itinerant intellectual workers with Coco Fusco giving everyone their passports. Did you name your nationality "postnational"?

Enwezor: Yes, postnational [he shows his fake passport]. That's my identity. This tribe of interpreters that we call artists continually try to defy any kind of conscription into any national body. They are really not dealing with global issues; they are dealing with local issues which, when amplified, become global in many ways. Almost a micropolitics of the global itinerary.

Becker: That's right. It is very difficult—in fact, it's impossible—when living in America not to talk about America, because it is such a mythologized place and because its image of itself bears so little relationship to what it actually is. I get nervous at the thought of not being rooted somewhere because I'm not sure what I'm measuring anything I say or do against. We have to be grounded somewhere. We are still in the physical body, and even though there is cyberspace and virtual reality, we still have bodies which have to be standing on earth somewhere.

Enwezor: Absolutely. Rooted somewhere with their history and point of departure. What you said is interesting because Edward Said has written, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience." That leaving behind the Western body is something you have to come to terms with.

Becker: There almost needs to be a different kind of being, maybe not as yet invented, that can exist in a more abstract or a Buddhist way, who could be present wherever he or she was without needing to have an identity located in some physical place. That is a somewhat different problem than



Truth and Reconciliation Commission, October 1997. Bishop Desmond Tutu fourth from left. Photo Carol Becker.

trying to step out of one's completely Western paradigm, to be nationless and without anxiety. Since we are talking about this tribe of interpreters, could you say something about the conference? After days of looking I think most people now are very glad to sit down and actually talk.

Enwezor: I think it is very important. Often one comes to these exhibitions, and we are engaged in responding to art through visuality alone, and our readings are only limited to what we see, not the ideas that carry the world forward. But artists have always been close to critics and philosophers. It is therefore important to have another "contact zone" as James

Clifford would call it, where the production of a different kind of discourse can evolve. So we know now that artists are also thinkers, writers, critics, intellectuals.

Becker: Do you think this itinerant tribe of artists and intellectuals can roam the world, each person doing what he or she does?

Enwezor: I do not wish to invoke this as a kind of sheer bliss of global oneness. A lot of artists are responding critically to the mobility within the world of biennales, not just in the sense of "have passport will travel." There have to be different points of intersection and some dissonance for this kind of mobility to be meaningful. Pepón Osorio's work takes on a new meaning when transported from its Nuyorican locality. Its Latino existential dilemma translates differently in Johannesburg than it would in Holland.

Becker: His piece was first in a New Jersey storefront. Here it is also perfectly relevant on so many levels. The issue of imprisonment which his piece is about is so immediate here. How many people in South Africa did not raise their own children because they were in prison? Of course the cultural context is very different, and yet what is poignant between the father and the son crosses over.

Enwezor: His piece is about love and loss, family, and community. It is about missed opportunity and human failures. It is a new kind of social realism, but without the utopianism and moralizing polemics. It directs the imagination. It



Andries Botha. *Home*, 1997. Mixed-mediums construction. Second Johannesburg Biennale/ "Alternating Currents."

directs compassion. It directs what I would call exhilaration. You see points of conflict that have been exacerbated by the metropolitan tensions that we all live. We are dealing with issues of displacement and migrancy because Osorio's subjects are really caught in that web, what I would call the world of endless mobility and deferred homecomings. I am very grateful for being able to make this event happen in Africa, because people think that if you try to do such a thing here, it will never go right. I think this is a lesson for everyone. If you persist, it is possible to have, in this continent, a moment of reflection—and not just of the disasters that occur. We've broken through the ice and have said that the terrain of contemporary art is one in which Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and North Americans can coexist. For this I am especially grateful to Bongi Dhlomo-Mautloa, Clive Kellner, and Christopher Till.

Okwui Enwezor is a curator and writer who has organized numerous exhibitions on contemporary international art.