Fresh from South Africa: Supporting Young Artists
Paper presented at 'Art, Minorities, Majorities', congress of AICA
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"Here's another paradox. In a recent issue of the art magazine, *Art in America*, [one] American critic implied in hardly uncertain terms that there is no such thing as an African avant-garde. A few months hence, a rival American art magazine, *Artnews*, had a startling and contradicting cover: 'Contemporary African Artists, The Newest Avant-garde!' What a perfect note on which to rest the case."

Olu Oguibe[i]

It is fitting that this congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) should be held on the African continent at this time, the dawn of the African century. It seems appropriate therefore to examine art practices by selected young South African artists who deserve international attention and whose works should be seen alongside those of their contemporaries from around the world.

Fresh was a project devised to focus attention on young South African artists. The project consisted of a series of artist's residencies at the South African National Gallery, [ii] in which artists were given stipends to make new work. In addition, the artists selected authors to write about their work for small monographs, which are being boxed and distributed as a set of publications on some of South Africa's most exciting young artists.

The brief given to the artists was both broad and focused, allowing artists to engage with the particularities of their own experience in relation to the country, the city and the institution. While apartheid ended with the first democratic elections in 1994, its legacy has continued in subtle and complex forms which impact on all aspects of personal and communal life. On the other hand, dynamic changes and an innovative constitution have promised and guaranteed many new freedoms and opportunities. Artists were free to consider this broader context of the country and/or to examine the history of Cape Town as a port city, the first colonial settlement on the southern tip of Africa and outpost on the lucrative trade route between Europe and Asia. The South African National Gallery is in fact set in the Company Gardens, laid out by the first colonial settler to provide fresh produce for the Dutch East India Company's ships rounding the Cape.

The entire project was made possible by Marlene Dumas. Arguably one of South Africa's greatest cultural exports, she has lived in Amsterdam since 1976. Her recent exhibition, *Suspect*, at the 50th Venice Biennale will have attracted a wide range of critical interest. Dumas' passion for South Africa and generous support of the South African National Gallery, in particular, are well known. In 1995 she donated to the Gallery an impressive collection of watercolour portraits, entitled *The Next Generation*, which she had shown on the Johannesburg Biennale in that year. So it was in keeping with that spirit of generosity that, on winning the David Roell prize

presented by the Prince Bernhard Cultural Fund, Dumas chose to spend her prize money on a new generation of young artists emerging from the country of her birth.

The project was launched with **Senzeni Marasela**'s residency in June 2000, the month in which South Africa commemorates its youth for their contribution to liberation and development. Marasela seized the opportunity to continue her investigations into the gaps in South African history by exploring the stories emerging from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It is perhaps surprising to find that so many young artists are preoccupied with the past, but the nature of political developments in South Africa has necessitated the exploration of history as a means of understanding a painful past in order to lay the foundations for a better future.

The TRC hearings were open to the public, unlike any preceding truth commissions, and coverage was broadcast nightly on public television. The nation was saturated with images of violence and violation. But importantly the TRC created a public forum in which survivors, the family of the deceased and eye witnesses could disclose their suffering and expose the horrors of the past. It was 'an important mechanism that, in allowing individuals and communities a space in which to articulate experiences of oppression, attempted to ensure that the history of apartheid remain part of the consciousness (at least the archival consciousness) of the South African nation' (Bester 2002a: 164).

In Neville Alexander's opinion the TRC represents 'a unique and courageous attempt by a people to confront a violent past – one which is very much still alive – in short, its own contemporary history' (Alexander 2002: 133). In an ongoing effort to understand and come to terms with the past Marasela has been involved in an almost compulsive examination of the 'gaps' in South African history - events or truths that were suppressed and have been emerging through the TRC. *In Memory of Stompie Seipei* includes a sketchy image of the fourteen-year old activist in whose murder Winnie Mandela's associates were implicated, alongside a text acknowledging him and 'all other young heroes and heroines of our struggle Who Laid down their Lives'. Works such as these encompass research processes, memory archives and sites for the commemoration of sacrifice and loss. By sandblasting images and texts onto mirrors in which the viewer is reflected, Marasela forces her diverse audiences to consider the degree to which they are implicated in these histories.

'The ways we remember define us in the present. As readers of Freud and Nietszche, however, we know how slippery and unreliable personal memory can be, always affected by forgetting and denial, repression and trauma, and more often than not, serving the need to rationalize and maintain power. But a society's collective memory is no less contingent, no less unstable, its shape by no means permanent and always subject to subtle and not so subtle reconstruction' (Huyssen 1995: 9).

Marasela has a finely honed sense of irony. Her *Colonial Tray Cloths*, printed with the most traumatic images of suffering, are presented in conjunction with 'silver' trays. Representing colonial conventions of tea drinking inherited from the days of the British occupation of South Africa, they accentuate the civilizing pretensions of authoritarian rule. Marasela alludes to what William Kentridge has called the 'disease of urbanity' in South Africa society, that is the 'ability to absorb everything, to make contradiction and compromise the basis of daily living'. In Kentridge's opinion, this

desensitization, particularly in relation to violence, amounts to a form of disremembering (Godby 1998: 111).

'In the South African context, it is the physically and emotionally marked body that narrates the history of apartheid-era violence' (Bester 2002a: 168). A consequence of the TRC and the willingness of South Africans to come to terms with the past is that images of extreme violence abound in the public realm in South Africa. As Kenneth Foote writes, "Few events produce such strong ambivalent feelings as acts of violence, and as societies grapple with these feelings in public debate, the struggle comes to imprint itself on the landscape." [iii]

Dorothee Kreutzfeldt is an artist with a longstanding interest in the historical, social and political dynamics that characterise urban environments. In 1997 she produced *Contamination*, an extended series of paintings, investigating sites of inner city criminal violence. Of particular concern is the violence perpetrated against women and children in a country where an enlightened constitution offers protection to the most vulnerable while at the same time pervasive patriarchal attitudes and practices culturally entrenched. Kreutzfeldt is committed to shifting such attitudes and practices by engaging with social issues. To this end she has worked extensively on collaborative and public art projects such as *Sluice* and the Joubert Park Public Projects.

For her project for *Fresh* she began investigating the effects of the bombings in Cape Town between 1998 and 2000. In that period official statistics listed 22 bomb attacks which caused 3 deaths and injured over 100 people. As Rory Bester points out in his *Fresh* essay, the 'nature of urban terror – and of bomb blasts in particular – is that they are public events and media spectacles. But they are also private traumas that profoundly affect the lives of individuals and their families' (Bester 2002b: 23).

Kreutzfeldt's *Fresh* project and exhibition, entitled *in view of you*, raised awareness about surviving trauma and encouraged empathy and self-reflection amongst audiences. To achieve this she developed a collaborative and interdisciplinary methodology for examining the effects of violence by interviewing survivors and allowing them to share their traumatic stories. These were recorded and played at low volume in the gallery space, so that audiences had to lean into the speakers and listen intently. The premise underpinning the interviews and the visitor experience was that listening is a vital step in the process towards healing. To 'listen' another person into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be the greatest service that any human being can perform for another.

What the exhibition highlighted was the way in which the art gallery can provide the ideal space to begin the processes of facing traumatic pasts, of dealing constructively with communal issues, of re-imagining the city, of questioning the role of art – as a transformational, critical and constructive enterprise.

In her earlier works **Berni Searle** used a variety of approaches including colouring her body with spices, as in *Cap-ture*, or discolouring her skin with henna, as in *A Darker Shade of Light*. These strategies are harnessed to explore her heritage and to challenge the arbitrary racial categories imposed by apartheid laws whereby Searle was classified 'Coloured'.

Of course the works are multivalent and also refer to present realities. Darkening her skin with henna can be read as a subversive strategy for questioning the moral values that many attach to light (good) and dark (bad). But the dark stains inevitably conjure up forensic evidence of bruising and 'suggest that marks of trauma … hint at deeper damage, whether these be the gross human rights violations exposed through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or injuries sustained by women in a particularly violent society' (Bedford 1999: 15 – 16).

In *Profile* Searle examines the ways in which history and heritage have impacted on her by, literally, impressing into her cheek a range of objects loaded with cultural connotations. These are not processes by which to fix identity but to assert the complexity of influences and the fluidity of identity. Two images from the series show her skin marked with the indentations of a crucifix and an Arabic prayer, alluding to her ancestry: her maternal great-grandfathers came from Mauritius and Saudi Arabia and her paternal great-grandfathers from Germany and England.

Slavery at the Cape differs from the history of the trans-Atlantic African diaspora in that Cape slaves were imported to Africa from the rest of the Indian Ocean. As Ward and Worden point out, unlike in the United States and the Caribbean, there were no written slave testimonies by ex-slaves at the Cape and representations of slavery had been firmly submerged in the Cape (Ward and Worden: 204). Not only did colonial and apartheid authorities suppress histories of slavery in the interests of either highlighting their emancipatory or civilizing role but it was also 'forgotten' by many of the slave descendents themselves. Ward and Worden explain how in the 1940s and 1950s, the distancing of the urban 'Coloured' elite from popular commemorations of a slave past was furthered by the construction of a 'Malay' identity. 'Malayism' provided a convenient identity for Cape Town's Muslims with Islamic and East-Asian origins but neglected the slave roots of such a culture (W&W: 207 - 208). This was exacerbated by certain Afrikaner academics eager to promote the notion of Malay culture in order to obscure the history of slavery and the heritage of racism and discrimination that the apartheid state perpetuated.

For her *Fresh* project Searle set about researching the archives for evidence of her ancestry, particularly the Muslim maternal side of her family from which she had become estranged when her mother married a Catholic man. In her attempts to reconstruct her past Searle was confronted by the lacunae in the archives, which are mute on the histories of the disempowered: the stories of slaves and women who forego their names, are mostly absent.

While much of Searle's work 'explicitly invokes the absences of conventional histories and the limitations of the archives which traditionally supply its sources' (Coombes 2003: 14), the artist nevertheless succeeded, during her *Fresh* residency, in tracing and documenting the home built by her great grandfather, Imam Ely, from which he and his family were subsequently evicted.

Relative constructs Searle's family tree 'as a gallery of portraits with many empty frames, traces of her identity that are left unanswered, waiting perhaps to be filled in at a later stage' (Van der Watt 2003: 28). The empty frames suggest that just as writing history is a continuous process of rewriting, so identities are constantly

evolving. But they also allude to what Van der Watt calls 'the radical insufficiency of all identity', a recurring theme in Searle's oeuvre.

Usha Seejarim draws attention to 'the spiritual and transformative potential of phenomena that are so easy to ignore, simply because they have become such an assumed aspect of our material visual culture' (Smith 2003: 23). Her work explores notions of migration and transition, evoking experiences of displacement and dislocation experienced by her family when they relocated from India to South Africa. Images of transport and motion map the spaces divided by racial and class boundaries or function metaphorically for spiritual journeys.

Motherland is an installation in which bags, used to transport goods from India are suspended above fragile wax bowls. While the bags look bulky, they are empty, alluding to the vulnerability of cultures in transition and the loss of nurturing relationships when families are fragmented and dispersed. The ritual bowls, as much as they are elements in sculptural environments articulating space in certain ways, are also metaphors of the self.

In a perceptive essay for her *Fresh* monograph, author Kathryn Smith explains that a work such as this 'points to the parallels between the ritualised character of Seejarim's chosen spiritual lifestyle and the rituals of everyday existence. Rituals are about transferring physical form onto abstract religious or spiritual convictions, but they are also about habit and routine providing structure to time and space, both physical and metaphysical. Where Seejarim is concerned, she seems to identify more in the essence of ritual than the detail in the activity. And while artefacts associated with Hindu ritual have featured in some of her installation work, brushing one's teeth and driving to work are other ritualised activities that have fallen under Seejarim's penetrating and sobering, critical and creative gaze'(Smith 2003: 14). So *Cash Ticket Ash Ticket*, from the exhibition *Long Distance*, is constructed from a myriad of bus tickets pinned to a support and resembles in its exquisitely crafted patterning, the fabric of a sari.

Robin Rhode's *Fresh* residency was astonishingly productive, building a body of performance-based work that he has shown in many subsequent exhibitions such as *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age*, which opened recently at the Walker Art Center. Combining his innovative performance practice with drawings 'graffitied' onto the walls of various sites coded with historical and cultural meanings, he reclaimed forbidden spaces and re-scripted them with new meanings. For *Park Bench* Rhode drew a bench on the walls of the Houses of Parliament. Its precarious angle and his failed attempts to sit on it, allude to the apartheid practice of reserving certain facilities for whites only and to his disenfranchisement, as a person designated 'Coloured'.

Getaway took place outside The Slave Lodge. Built originally by the Dutch East India Company to house its slaves, it became a museum in 1966 when it housed the South African Cultural History collection. In 1998 its origins were acknowledged when it was renamed The Slave Lodge and is now one of the museums of Iziko Museums of Cape Town, an umbrella organisation that includes the South African National Gallery. Rhode's performance not only draws on the site's colonial past but alludes to

the history of a museum whose focus on the culture of Western Europe and Europeans in South Africa has occluded the stories of local inhabitants.

A number of his performances, such as *He Got Game*, took place, literally, on the streets. In addition to reclaiming urban streets as safe and creative places, Rhode also makes oblique reference to the pervasive influence of American hip-hop youth culture especially amongst young black South Africans.

Having just been invited to participate in Harald Szeemann's exhibition, *Plateau of Humankind* for the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001, **Tracey Rose** seized the opportunity offered by the *Fresh* residency to explore the imaginative possibilities of her project for Venice by experimenting with a range of identities and personae. From found materials, costumes, props and various media she fashioned a range of characters that were photographed in various sites around Cape Town. These were then scripted into a three-channel projection, one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken by this artist.

Entitled *Ciao Bella*, like the famous Italian song, it presents a table akin to that of *The Last Supper* surrounded by characters all played by Rose herself. Astonishing transformations were effected: a mermaid's tail from bubble wrap or a Marie Antoinette in fabulous décolletage fashioned from bin liners. From the demure schoolgirl to the leather-clad La Cicciolina exposing and flagellating herself to Sarah Baartman, made whole again from her dismembered parts in the Musée de l'Homme and here seen ascending to heaven, Rose explores a multitude of identities and revels in these many guises. But the boxer catatonically beating herself up with alternate black and white gloves gives the lie to any of these women who might have imagined that they are free from the bonds of sexism, racism and a broader global oppression whose ranking order is as ruthless as it ever was. And all this is interspersed with the delicate strains of Cesar Franck's *Panis Angelicus* making the work as exquisite and ironic as it is hard-hitting. In the opinion of Dan Cameron, senior curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, it is one of 'the most exciting installations by young artists' at the Venice Biennale that year. [iv]

'In Tracey Rose's post-apartheid playground,' as Kellie Jones points out in her *Fresh* essay, 'the sense of personal freedom and authority that is now owned by the social and political body allows the artistic one to explore all possibilities, to reinvent, reconsider, review everything before us' (Jones 2003: forthcoming). Rejecting any apartheid-era classifications of herself as 'Coloured', she turns the ethnographic camera onto the stereotypes constructed in colonial anthropologies and uses her own performative body to invert them, 'overturning centuries of visual iconography and cultural authority' (Jones 2003: forthcoming).

Ciao Bella and other works by Tracey Rose address what Firstenberg has aptly called "the psychocultural politics of postcolonial representation" (Firstenberg 2001: 175).[v] Rose uses her freedom to explore cultural practices previously closed to scrutiny. Her practice raises questions about whether multiculturalism, pluralism or hybridity are sufficient. In concluding her *Fresh* essay, Jones poses a number of questions: 'Do these categories still keep us locked inside of certain expected formations? Are they addressed only to "the butterfly collectors of alterity"? Do we instead need

practices that, in the words of Paul Gilroy, are "cosmo-political" and "outer-national"; new words for new times to speak of cultures that are relational and ever in motion?'[vi]

During her *Fresh* residency Tracey Rose also produced a photograph, entitled *The Kiss*, parodying Rodin's famous sculpture. But the canons of conventional art history are imploded by substituting the marble-white bodies, those epitomes of aesthetic perfection, with bodies that assert their difference through a range of skin tones. As critically self-reflective as she always is, Rose also satirizes the role of the artist as muse and siren, by presenting herself as both subject and object of desire.

Moshekwa Langa shot to international prominence after being invited, at a very young age, to study at the Rijksakademie voor Beeldende Kunst in Amsterdam. His selection marked a deviation from the norm for the Rijksakademie as it is virtually impossible for an artist who has not gone through the formal art academy channels to be selected for this prestigious programme. Langa is a brilliant young artist whose work reflects the extremes between which he moves, whether from rural Lebowa to urban Johannesburg or from South Africa to Europe where he divides his time between Amsterdam and Berlin, when not on tour.

Works such as this sequence of 4 giclee prints, entitled *Far away from any scenery that he knew or understood,* reflect a nomadic life, lived between spaces and cultures. Photographs of the artist shot almost mechanically and without any acknowledgement of the photographer take on the appearance of a surveillance camera. The subject is awkwardly fixed in confined spaces, his dark body stark against naked white walls, 'constantly wedged into the slippery terrains of an uncertain belonging' (Oguibe 2001: 59). Caught between Europe and Africa, survival and sustenance, market and home, the sequence perfectly captures the harsh realities facing young artists from Africa trying to make it in the international arena.

Langa was featured, along with two other *Fresh* artists, Robin Rhode and Usha Seejarim, in a major exhibition at the Walker Art Center entitled *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age*. In the accompanying publication Olukemi Ilesanmi explains that 'he has referred to himself as "an inside-outsider", never truly fitting in anywhere and caught between his self-imposed exile and nostalgia for where he's been' (Ilesanmi in Vergne 2003: 206). Yet it is this very in-between condition that allows him to escape the confines of any obvious categorisations, eluding expectations of what a young black South African might produce and instead delighting audiences with his penchant for the unexpected.

Where do we begin is the title of a three-monitor video with which Langa won the FNB Vita Art Now prize in 2001. Incorporated into a larger work, it is currently being exhibited on *Faultlines*, the show curated by Gilane Tawardros for the 50th Venice Biennale. Evocative details of impoverished lives are counterpoised against volumes of ocean that separate the so-called first and third worlds. Shirley Bassey's haunting voice repeats the line 'Where do I begin?' on a looped soundtrack, making poignant the loss, confusion and costs of complex, diasporic identities.

Langa's global practice raises questions about the realities of a globalising world economy. "Globalisation has both advantages and disadvantages. Its advantages allow

us to develop the world's wealth and commerce," claimed Jacques Chirac in a news broadcast about the recent G8 summit. He was silent on its disadvantages.

The challenges facing artists on the African continent today are not in the realm of imagination but of distance, isolation and limited funding. Supporting and promoting South African and African artists not only enables them to create new, varied and positive impressions of the African continent but to counteract, if not stem the tide of, negative images of Africa and preconceptions about cultural inferiority. It also empowers them to engage productively in new forms of art making and critical discourse that inform and enrich art theory and practice globally.

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[i] Olu Oguibe, "Strangers and Citizens", in S. M. Hassan and O. Oguibe, eds. *Authentic / Ex-Centric, Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, Ithaca, NY: The Forum for African Art, 2001, p. 68.
[ii] Since amalgamating with fifteen other national museum sites in Cape Town the institution has become known as Iziko: South African National Gallery.
[iii] Foote, K. E. 1990. 'To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture', American Archivist 53, summer, p. 385, quoted in Bester, R. 2002. 'Trauma and Truth' in Enwezor, O. et al. *Documenta 11: Platform 2: Experiments with Truth: Traditional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, p. 164.
[iv] See Curator's Diary on Artforum website at www.artforum.com.
[v] Firstenberg 2001: 175 quoted in Jones. K. 2003.
[vi] Gilroy 1997: 23-26.