

Beyond the Racial Lens

By SAHO and the conference organisers

If South Africa's tradition of social documentary photography remains among its best known and most celebrated cultural achievements, it has also been at the centre of the often tumultuous debates regarding art, historical memory, and political engagement during the post-apartheid period. The apartheid state endeavored to control what could be viewed and how, organizing urban space in an ultimately quixotic effort to eclipse the very existence of an urban black population and bluntly racializing vision. Photographers sought to challenge this visual regime at a number of different levels: recording and exposing the system's brutalities, celebrating myriad forms of survival and resistance, producing alternative narratives that contested the images propagated by the government and apartheid cultural establishment. In some respects, the end of formal white supremacy radically shifted the social and political terrain of image production. A younger generation of photographers has increasingly turned toward experimentation with both aesthetics and the medium itself to forefront questions of identity, sexuality, subjectivity, and persona. But the afterlife of apartheid's social divisions and the persistence of a highly divided society continue to pose the question of photographic representation with intensified force. Who controls the creation and distribution of images? Who represents whom? And for what audiences? How can people - divided by race, class, and history - come to see differently?

We have invited a diverse group of photographers, curators, art critics, and historians to discuss and debate these questions over a four day period. By bringing veterans of the apartheid period into conversation with a younger generation, we aim to begin an ambitious reevaluation of the documentary photography tradition and its significance for South Africa (and southern Africa) today. The conference discussions will center on three major themes:

First, it is necessary to revisit the construct of "struggle art." Since the early 1990s, a critique of documentary photography has been at the centre of debates over art and political engagement under apartheid: critics have focused on its didacticism, instrumentalism, and "photographic literalism." However, recent interventions have challenged this one-dimensional account, which minimizes the complexity of the debates over art and politics during the 1980s, overlooks the range and sophistication of earlier photographic practice, and simplifies the relationship between "art" and "struggle" photography. Moreover, this critique—which often seems to resurrect liberal notions of artistic autonomy and "photographic humanism"—has little to say about the questions of cultural production and engagement today. How can we move beyond the bifurcation between "the aesthetic" and "the political" that seems to organize the current debates over photography?

Second, there is a pressing need for a renewed discussion of audience: debates over photography have been artificially divorced from the institutional politics of exhibition. The visual vocabularies that photographers have created and worked within have always been intimately related to publics, whether the nearly insatiable foreign market for (certain)

images of South Africa that first emerged in the 1940s or the revolutionary impact of mass black audiences on photography in both the 1950s and the 1980s. In post-apartheid South Africa, documentary photography has largely entered into the art world and few spaces to exhibit exist outside the commercial galleries and museums: the market increasingly dictates the terms and very discourse of “relevance.” At the same time, a small number of photographers, most of whom are white, have achieved enormous visibility through international exhibitions such as Documenta 12 and the Venice Biennale. The result of these developments has been a pervasive—if rarely voiced—disquiet over (largely) white photographers representing (overwhelming black) subjects to (a still generally white) public. This racial economy of the post-apartheid image poses an obvious question: what possibilities exist for alternative spaces and exhibition practices that can move towards expanding and desegregating the audience?

Third, the post-apartheid period has seen a reinvigorated engagement with photography from the rest of the continent as critics and historians have turned their eyes northwards and started to reexamine the South African tradition within broader contexts. Events like the Bamako Photography Biennial and Maputo’s PhotoFesta have become salient points of reference. We have also seen the first steps at sustained engagement with the photographic histories of the surrounding southern African countries, especially Namibia, Angola, and Mozambique. Concurrently, the engagement of South African photographers with other African contexts has produced concerns over exoticism and the perpetuation of long-entrenched stereotypes: the Afro-pessimistic vision of a continent of war and sublime ruin. What are the promises and imminent perils of this “rediscovery of Africa”?

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