

# In Defence of Social Documentary Photography

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It's an art world cliché. During the final decade of the anti-apartheid struggle, photographers allegedly embraced a social documentary mode that subordinated the image to the propagandistic needs of the moment, embraced naïve literalism over aesthetic experimentation, and reduced the complexities of interior experience to the mute fact of African suffering. Content merely to record spectacular instances of repression or deprivation, documentary photography, the paradigmatic form of 'struggle art', ironically codified a one-dimensional and thus dehumanising image of black life: it peddled in legibility, easy hits for an overseas market, the fungible stereotype. Political reportage straight-jacketed the artist. Realism trumped self-reflection. High politics eclipsed the importance of everyday life. Engagement suffocated the pleasures of form and play. The medium itself, one renowned curator informs us, became 'myopic'.<sup>1</sup>

So the story goes. Perhaps it should be added that historical research into the photography of the apartheid period, and especially the 1980s, has just recently gained significant momentum.<sup>2</sup> We are only beginning to have a fuller picture of the archive of widely-recognised figures like Ernest Cole, Jürgen Schadeberg, Alf Khumalo and Santu Mofokeng; dozens of other significant photographers, many of them from black communities, await sustained critical attention. Perhaps we should also note that this critique largely focuses on news or agency photographers whose images circulated in the liberal and international press. It conflates the Bang Bang Club and their ilk with a collective like Afrapix, which promoted a much broader range of photographic idioms and staged dozens of exhibitions (many in black areas) during the 1980s. And perhaps one might add that there is a long tradition of photographers, including Ernest Cole (1967), Peter Magubane (1978), and Omar Badsha (1979 and 1985), who have challenged reductive images of black life by exploring the everyday realities of their communities without abstracting these sorrows and joys from the overarching political context of apartheid.<sup>3</sup> Critical reflection on the 'politics of representation' did not, as some writers rather brashly assume, begin in the mid-1980s.

Documentary photography is not primarily concerned with capturing the real 'as it actually is' or establishing the veracity of events. That is the provenance of the photojournalist. As American photographer Walker Evans famously maintained, documentary is a style, a way of depicting the present as if it were already past: a self-conscious reflection on the historical meaning of people, events, and objects.<sup>4</sup> Its mode is narrative rather than index. It abstracts from the raw flux of the

<sup>1</sup> Okwui Enwezor, 'Photography after the End of Documentary Realism: Zwelethu Mthethwa's Color Photographs' in Zwelethu Mthethwa (New York: Aperture, 2010), p. 101

<sup>2</sup> A new body of work significantly qualifying the current picture of photography during the 1980s is beginning to appear. See the invaluable essays on South African documentary by Patricia Hayes, including 'Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography', *Kronos* 33 (2007) and Santu Mofokeng's, 'Photographs: "The Violence is in the Knowing"', *History and Theory* 48 (December 2009); and two recent books, Darren Newbury, *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa* (UNISA, 2009) and John Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Cole, *House of Bondage* (New York: Random House, 1967); Peter Magubane, *Soweto* (Cape Town: Dawn Lindberg, 1978); Omar Badsha, *Letter to Farzanah* (Durban: Institute of Black Research, 1979) and Imijondolo: *A Photographic Essay on Forced Removals in Inanda, KwaZulu-Natal* (Johannesburg: Afrapix, 1985)

quotidian. It explores significances beyond what is strictly visible. Sometimes, the narrative is conveyed through the choreography of elements within a single image. More often, a photographic essay develops a set of ideas from frame to frame, building an argument at the levels of content and form, exploiting the possibilities of visual echoes, resonances, repetitions, juxtapositions, absences and discontinuities. In other cases, the photographer assembles an essay by returning to his or her archive, editing images from different contexts together in order to reflect on broader events and questions. Within the context of an essay, an individual photograph can assume multiple significations: literal and allegorical, didactic and conceptual. And underlying every photographic essay is the parallel, if sometimes obscure, story of the photographer's relationship to the subject matter; a practice, a distinctive manner of building connections and negotiating social spaces, an itinerary, an ethos.

The struggle against white minority rule involved a battle of images as well as arms. In its efforts to control what could be seen and how, apartheid created a visual regime predicated on the invisibility of black South Africa, the state adamantly denied the very existence of such an entity, within areas reserved for whites. This system sought to render the larger structures of oppression and control invisible; it also fragmented the social conditions of vision along racial lines and atomised the collective imaginary by regulating movement and access not only to 'white South Africa', but also within black areas. The apartheid propaganda apparatus, Afrikaner cultural establishment and sections of the academy worked to normalise so-called Separate Development and refute the historic claims of the liberation movements. An entire media landscape depicted blacks as the beneficiaries and willing collaborators of white trusteeship. Race infected every aspect of vision. A generation of photographers, many sympathetic to or active within the mass democratic movement, sought to challenge this visual regime by creating alternative photographic narratives. Responding to the political exigencies of a country on the verge of civil war, many of these counter-images were unapologetically Manichaean, spectacular, brutal: testimony to the state's murderous acts and celebrations of mass revolt and defiance. Other narratives, however, avoided the exclamatory and explored the everyday effects of oppression. And some of these same photographers turned to subaltern histories, Omar Badsha's studies of the Grey Street ghetto, Chris Ledochowski's Cape Flats project, Paul Weinberg's work on the San, Santu Mofokeng's explorations of African township life, in order to record aspects of society and the past erased by the official narratives of both the regime and the liberation struggle. They began to reflect on the role of photography in creating a new South African culture and transformed ways of seeing.

In some respects, the end of formal white supremacy radically shifted the social and political terrain of image production. A post-apartheid generation of photographers has greatly enriched the visual idiom by experimenting with aesthetics and the medium itself in order to forefront questions of identity, sexuality, subjectivity, and persona. But the afterlife of apartheid's hierarchies

and the persistence of a sharply-divided society continue to pose the basic question of social documentary with intensified force. How does one narrate stories of shared concern in ways that challenge the viewer to see differently?

## two

The photographic essays in this catalogue are evidence to the undimmed force of this question. The organisers of Bonani Africa 2010 Festival invited photographers working in South Africa to submit images produced during the last three years which address issues of broad social or political relevance. Fifty six participants entered over sixty essays. Their range of subject matter, plurality of aesthetic strategies, and raw visual urgency surprised even the organisers. They include Santu Mofokeng's widely-celebrated series *Let's Talk*, which deciphers the vast consequences of global climate change in the dramaturgy of landscapes and ordinary objects; Sabelo Mlangeni's flirtatious yet unnervingly poignant studies of gay black men in rural Mpumalanga; Alexia Webster's grim look at the state of dysfunctional schools racked by violence on the Cape Flats; and Tracey Derrick's courageously tender record of her changing relationship with family, body, and personal objects during her battle with breast cancer. Collectively, these projects express a drive towards an expanded visual language, a hunger for representations of a South African reality which refuses easy partition by inherited social categories, a set of perspectives reaching beyond the racial lens. These stories are often incomplete. Their power is alchemical.

This collection of photographic essays captures another important, and in many ways unique, aspect of contemporary South African photography: the power of a highly contested, yet fundamentally cumulative, tradition of photographic practice from the 1950s to the present. At the current moment, four distinct generations of photographers continue to produce work, exhibit, publish, and significantly influence one another. Although not included in the Bonani exhibition, pioneer figures of the fifties like Schadeberg, Magubane, and (beginning a decade later) David Goldblatt developed aesthetics sharply inflected by a self-conscious modernism drawing on a number of European and American predecessors. In quite different ways, Schadeberg and Goldblatt both promoted a strong emphasis on the composition of images and general questions of design. Through their own work and energetic mentorship of others, they established exacting standards that challenged and inspired subsequent generations even when, as was almost always the case with black artists, younger practitioners lacked the considerable resources necessary to produce prints or books of equivalent material quality. The following two generations (the struggle photographers of the 1980s and the fine arts photographers of the next decade) not only shared a critical engagement with this earlier body of work, they both understood the responsibilities of the photographer in profoundly ethical and political terms. Even as artists like Zwelethu Mthetwa, Zanele Muholi, Nontsikelelo Veleko and Jo Ractliffe moved away from the

documentary mode of the 1980s, they largely assumed its broader imperative of grounding photographic practice in the representation of the social.<sup>5</sup>

As the Bonani festival establishes, a fourth generation of photographers has started to emerge. Immediately striking is its diversity. The opportunities for photographic education have substantially expanded in the last twenty years. In addition to university art departments and technical colleges, the Market Photo Workshop and a burgeoning number of township-based collectives like Iliso Labantu, whose bold and discerning series on women appears in the show, have nurtured an unprecedented number of younger black photographers. The digital revolution has expedited this shift. Photographic technology is cheaper, easier to master, and far more accessible than any time in the past. Some of the most impressive submissions came from largely self-taught photographers working on their own and outside the world of the galleries. Another notable presence is a small but important group of foreign photographers living and working in South Africa who have eschewed the characteristic genres of the outsider: the sensationalist, the journalistic, the picturesque, the exotic, the sentimental. The work of several younger photographers evinces a similar quality: almost sociological exactitude combined with an unabashed, and even fierce, sense of empathy.

### three

The most significant essay reproduced in this catalogue is almost certainly Chris Ledochowski's Petros Mulaudzi of Nthabalala Village. Beginning in the late 1970s, Ledochowski began to photograph Mulaudzi, a migrant worker employed in his parent's household who became a family member, an intimate, an adopted father. After Mulaudzi retired in 1980 and returned to his home in rural Venda, Ledochowski made the first of four trips to visit and photograph Mulaudzi and his family in the village of Nthabalala, a project which would slowly develop over the next three decades until his most recent visit in February 2010. Nothing quite like this undertaking exists in the history of South African photography. Genuinely epic in both scope and narrative structure, Ledochowski has produced a meticulous and unsentimental account of ordinary experiences that continue to shape the lives, either directly or indirectly, of most South Africans: the longings and heartbreaks of migrant labour, the changing countryside and its daily rituals, the struggle to build and preserve a home. South African photographers have often depicted change in essentially nostalgic terms. George Hallet's pictures of District Six exemplify this tendency: they capture a world on the threshold of disappearance. In contrast, Ledochowski's photographs concern the endurance of loss, its impact on a group of people, and their ability to persevere. They explore the relationship between generations, the evolving nature of skills and knowledge, economic dependency, and the threatened obsolescence of village life. If the narrative proceeds through an almost obsessive accumulation of detail, the resulting portrait is anything but fragmentary. It is a catalogue of one

<sup>5</sup> For a similar argument, see Patricia Hayes, 'Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography', *Kronos* 33 (2007), 159

community's meanings, the things that an individual, a family, and a village have managed to preserve and endow with value.

Although no other project approaches the same enormity of scale, a number of other participating photographers share Ledochowski's commitment to building long-term relationships with the individuals and communities whom they photograph. Reciprocity and engagement, rather than journalistic or aesthetic compulsion, animates some of the most compelling photographic storytelling in the Bonani exhibition. One example is Angelo Kalmeyer's unusually vivid essay on the Delft pavement dwellers. Expelled from local backyards by the city council, the pavement dwellers rebuilt their shacks on the side of the immediately adjacent Symphony Way. Photos of residents battling the police splashed across front pages for weeks. In response, Kalmeyer decided to spend a month living with this community in order to document the process of reconstruction. While unquestionably a record of displacement and extreme poverty, the resulting photographs also portray the pavement dwellers' diversity and cosmopolitanism, their public moments of shared celebration and play, the central role of spirituality in their lives, and the private spaces that they manage to claim for themselves. The photo of the name 'Louise', painted on a recently built wall, powerfully asserts place and ownership in the midst of true powerlessness. Given the formulaic manner in which black communities are often photographed, the sheer range of perspectives, distances, and compositional strategies is itself significant. Kalmeyer's achievement is that he conveys the ways in which the pavement dwellers assert dignity in their own terms without reducing their experiences to predictable, and therefore depersonalising, images of suffering or resilience.

In terms of unexpected iconoclasm, perhaps no other contribution matches Oupa Nkosi's sympathetic portrayal of the new African middle classes in *Black Diamonds*. This story is central to the country's future; few developments have transformed South African society as radically. Nevertheless, the discourse regarding the emerging black elites remains divided between a utilitarian and moralistic extreme: the Diamonds either represent the unique vehicle of black empowerment or creatures of corruption and gross opulence. And rarely does it seem that the material successes of white elites, particularly English-speaking liberals, provoke equivalent censure. Subverting both frameworks, Nkosi's stylish and concurring portraits exalt the experience of achievement itself: its performance, its embodiment, its personae and its pleasures. His self-conscious and closely shot photos echo the intense self-awareness of his subjects. Nkosi shares Veleko or Muholi's fascination with identity and subjectivity, but he examines these issues in the context of a reconstituted cultural vernacular. This is African refinement, swank, easy and unapologetic. The framing of his shots also reveals some of the ironies of this world: it is inhabited as much by objects, crystal glasses, designer watches, oversized handbags, jewellery, as people. In many respects, it is a world built through and around the power of images.

## four

The enthusiastic response by photographers to the Bonani Africa 2010 Festival of Photography more than demonstrates the need for an ongoing platform for the exhibition and critical discussion of photographic work that explores the intersecting questions of narrative and social engagement. Of course, none of these categories, narrative, engagement, or the social, are simply fixed: their changing meaning insures that they remain sites of theoretical reflection and political intervention. New forms of telling stories, of challenging how we see, must accompany transformed circumstances. In the name of rejecting a narrow realism, South African critics of documentary photography and struggle art in general have installed a mind-numbing opposition between aesthetics and politics in its stead. In content, this critique resurrects the bourgeois-liberal and (within the South African context) historically white conception of artistic autonomy: the belief in a space of cultural or intellectual production that somehow lies outside existent power relations. But in practice, it has mainly provided ideological cover for an uncritical entry into the cultural industry of the art world: an acceptance of its exclusionary modes of valuation, distribution, and determining relevance.

In going forward, Bonani, which plans to adopt an enlarged biennial format, faces two decisive challenges. First, it must develop alternative spaces and exhibition practices that move towards expanding and desegregating the audience for contemporary visual arts. The vocabularies that photographers create and employ have often 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 the 1950s and 1980s. Today, documentary has largely entered into the art world and few venues exist for exhibition outside commercial galleries and museums. This near monopoly should be challenged. But it will necessitate a sustained rethinking of the politics of audience and, particularly, the ways in which new publics are created and sustained. Second, the South African debates need to be de-centred and re-contextualised through an expanded dialogue with African and, especially, southern African photography. The next Bonani festival will be continental in scope and travel outside of South Africa. In this respect, it will seek to build on the groundbreaking work of projects like the Bamako Photography Biennial and Maputo's PhotoFesta. But this expansion must be mindful of the historic and present-day asymmetries between South Africa and the surrounding countries. Future initiatives should not only provide opportunities for photographers from north of the boarder to show work and participate in discussions. They must also build new infrastructures of collaboration and critique. Otherwise, the movement into Africa, so visible in current South African photography, risks enacting the oldest of colonial scripts.

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