Engaging with South Africa, Part Two: David Goldblatt

Last week, Arthub launched a series of in-depth interviews with South Africa based artists as a post Cape Town Art Fair analysis. The exchanges were instigated by Arthub's Director and Founder, Davide Quadrio, following his moderation of the panel discussion *Cross Cultural Encounters, Post Colonialism and Appropriation in the Age of Artistic Mobility,* at the fair this past February.

Arthub's Head of Production and Assistant Curator Ryan Nuckolls had a chance to speak with South African photographer David Goldblatt about the many ways in which apartheid has impacted his work. David (b. 1930) has been taking photographs since the 1950s. At that time, he was shooting the unfolding political campaigns mounted by the Congress Alliance, but it wasn't until 1964 that David received his first career break, when Sally Angwin, the editor of the avant-garde magazine *South African Tatler*, started passing assignments his way.

As a self-appointed forensic witness, apartheid was often the central subject in David's work, but his true fixation was with photographing and understanding the values of South Africa and the individuals within it. Read on to learn more about photographer David Goldblatt's artistic motivations for past projects (dating back to the beginning of his career), as well as his plans for future series.

Ryan Nuckolls (RN): It seems that labels are very powerful in South Africa. For example, you are a White English-speaking Jewish South African. These are labels by which many would define you. You have referred to yourself as un-appointed unlicensed critical observer. I would like to ask you about one more label—how do you feel about the term artist?

David Goldblatt (DG): I must say, I find the word artist to be a rather presumptuous kind of title. To me, art is a grey area. I understand we need shorthand ways of comprehending certain subjects, so sometimes it's a good idea to use a term like the *arts* or *artists*—regardless of whether I'm comfortable with it. Here, I will follow the Oxford dictionary, which defines art as either a craft or an attempt at a transcendental statement. I wouldn't presume to make such a statement, but I do believe that I am a good craftsman, or at least I hope so anyway.

Whether or not my work can be regarded as art is not terribly important to me. If people choose to regard me as an artist, then it's up to them. Admittedly, I make my living nowadays by the sale of prints. This is to me, a very interesting, but strange place to be in, because I think the international art market is a bit of a bubble. The world has taken to photography in quite a

big way and regards it as art (whatever that may be). I am a part of that – I don't feel altogether comfortable with it – but I am very happy that I'm being paid ridiculous amounts of money for prints. I would never buy my prints for those prices.

At the moment, we are in throes of a situation in South Africa—recently, students have being trashing art, they've burnt paintings and photographs. This is a disturbing matter; I believe these students are just one step away from matches. First, they burn art and then they burn people. In 1986, at a large outdoor rally in Soweto, Winnie Mandela is recorded declaring, "We have our matchboxes. We have our bottles… with necklaces, we will liberate the country". Here she was referring to the nation's ability to violently protest and attack their opposition (necklacing is the execution and torture of individuals by forcing motor car tires, filled with petrol, around their chest and arms, and setting it alight).

The actions of these artists – if I can use that term now – is a very serious matter (not just idle talk). I think the artists of this country have been remiss in not standing up and talking or rather shouting about what has happened to them and to their fellow countrymen. I understand the need for direct action in order to bring about change, but South Africa has a democracy—as was proven yesterday by a very significant judgment in our constitutional court. [i]

I believe the essence of democracy is discussion. When we have differences within a democratic society, we are able to settle our differences by talking. Parliaments, media platforms, freedom of expression, these are all important aspects of a democratic state. When I'm threatened, which is how I feel after the burning of somebody else's work, I take that as an infringement on my right to express myself. When you're attempting to achieve your ends by throwing human shit or using matches – acts that inevitably lead to fists and guns – these are methods of direct action that seriously infringe upon democracy.

RN: Following the 1948 National Party election you considered leaving South Africa, fearful of raising your kids in a highly racist society. I understand that in the following years you realized that leaving would have meant becoming an alien forever; whether you decided to immigrate to Israel or Europe you would never have been as familiar with the people and the land in the same way you are connected with South Africa. In past moments of self-censorship and fear, have you ever regretted your decision not to leave?

DG: I'm delighted that I stayed in South Africa and I would hate to be forced to leave now. I think the only circumstance in which I would contemplate leaving, even at this ripe age, is if we

were seriously overcome by intolerable violence. And we certainly haven't reached that stage yet.

The violence being exercised now is a threat to our freedom of expression, but hasn't yet become a threat to our existence. However, it has to be said again, we are currently in a situation in which people who are regarded as foreign, particularly in the townships, are being targeted. Their businesses have been raided, looted and destroyed. This is the antithesis of freedom, free market values and democracy. South Africa is governed by the rule of law, which simply means that there are guidelines by which the society has agreed to govern itself. And when you seriously impede on those laws and threaten the validity of the state's infrastructure, then you're in a very vulnerable place.

RN: I know you do not consider yourself a political activist, but throughout your career you have been involved in politics, either as a critic of exploitative labor practices or by capturing the structural inequalities that exist in both literal and metaphorical manifestations. In 2006, you received the Hasselblad Foundation Award for photography, the Henri Cartier-Bresson Award in 2009; you've exhibited at institutions and galleries around the world. Do you think your work has helped shape the way non-South Africans understand and relate to what happened during Apartheid?

DG: I find it very difficult to make any kind of assessment about the impact of my work on the world. Who knows whether it has had any influence on the actions of others—what they may or may not have done otherwise. It's a topic that I've never really explored. Every now and again, I'm warmed by people saying how much they respect the work I've done. I'm very glad for these sentiments, honored really, but honestly, I don't think that my work is the kind that influences people.

I'm a bit like coffee in a percolator; just as the continuously dripping coffee causes small ripples, I will continue to make photographs, which may or may not affect somebody's mental horizons. The way they think about the world or about South Africa may be impacted, but it's hard for me to see that my work has any direct influence. That doesn't mean that I don't pursue these loftier goals and that I don't believe that the work I started fifty years ago isn't necessary. I have to do what I do. It's my way of standing up and being counted, and I hope I go on doing it until the day I die.

RN: At the beginning of your career, you said that part of your motivation for becoming a magazine photographer was driven by an ambition to tell the world what was happening in South Africa, by using this miraculous instrument that allowed you to touch the real

world, while simultaneously abstracting it. Publications like *Life* and *Picture Post* allowed you to step through a window into a different world and you wanted to help others do the same. Eventually, you realized, maybe the rest of the world wasn't very interested in what was happening in South Africa—do you still feel this way? Do you have a desire to share the country that you know so well with the rest of the world or do you think in some ways it's a culture that as a non-native is almost incomprehensible from the outside?

DG: It sounds really selfish, well it is really selfish, but ultimately I'm engaged in a conversation with myself – it's nothing more than that. When I say myself, I like to think that this includes my South African compatriots. A long time ago, in 1968, I stopped trying to talk with people outside of South Africa about my work, because I realized that it was very difficult to convey the essence of the photographs that I'm interested in making. I had to explain to them what the work was about; it was like explaining a joke. When you explain a joke its no longer funny. Whereas, when I'm talking (or think that I'm talking to South Africans) I'm often aware that somebody, even someone whom I've never met, in some other part of the country, could be saying, "that photograph really spoke to me, I like what he's saying". Even if they are responding: "I don't like what he's saying", at least I know the work will resonate with them on a cultural level.

At the end of the day, the fact that I participate in international exhibitions and continue to publish books means that I do want my work to be seen. I hope that it does reach people, but I don't assume that it does. And I certainly don't assume that it has any more importance to people, than the rest of the general mess of information out there does.

RN: Throughout your career you've made it clear that you're not interested in photographing the events themselves, but that the "underbelly" leading up to political and social tensions captivates you. Is it safe to assume that you have an equal appreciation for the repercussions and resulting impacts of such events, as well as the phases leading up to them?

DG: The events themselves and how they unfold are of great importance to me. That's partly because I'm a photographer, but also because I'm a South African citizen. The people who take tough photographs—the ones working in the trenches, deserve to be honored. Yesterday for example, a photographer who had taken a remarkable photograph in Alexandra Township about a year ago came to visit me. He captured an image of a man stabbing another man; it was a tremendously powerful photograph, taken under very difficult circumstances.

I was glad that he came to see me. I had never met him before, but after seeing his photograph in the Sunday Times and reading the accompanying article, I knew I had to write to him and tell him what a terrible photograph this was. I was impressed and glad that he had taken it. He appreciated my efforts to reach out, so he came to see me. I'm sad to say that he's retiring to become a freelance photographer. He's no longer going to do that kind of work. Photos of this nature are difficult to take.

RN: You've made a sharp distinction between your professional and personal photographs, describing the distinctive process of each as being somewhat schizophrenic. If you've been hired for a commission then you attempt to detach your motivations and intentions from the process. Which of your series are completely personal—not commissioned or funded by a third party?

DG: That's a pretty simple question to answer in broad; virtually, all of the photographs that I've published and exhibited publicly have come from my personal work. In other words, I have funded the series myself and regard them, for what its worth, as personal statements. Here and there you have crossovers; there aren't many, but there have been a few. In these cases, I may have been on a commission or assignment for a client (a magazine or corporation) and in the process I regarded some of the photographs shot as being of the right kind to put in my personal portfolio.

So broadly speaking, it was a watertight division between the personal and professional. I say was, because I don't really do any professional work now. I think young art directors want to speak to their peers. Ungrudgingly, I understand that they regard me as an old fogie, which is likely why I no longer receive any professional commissions.

RN: You've described Afrikaners as being a highly contradictive people. During the course of your series *Some Afrikaners Photographed* (shot in the 1960s), do you think you grew to empathize with them?

DG: That's a complicated question. Yes, I did empathize with them in many instances. But I would say, rather than use the word empathize, that I became aware of complexities and nuances in ways that I hadn't been before. I hope that the photographic essay *Some Afrikaners Photographed* reflects my exposure to these previously unexplored cultural differences.

In all of the photographs that I've ever taken, I very rarely try to do one-dimensional shots. To me, they're too easy and they don't really attempt to deal with the complexities of the real world. For example, in the series you mentioned, there is a photograph that could be viewed as

purely one-dimensional. But by understanding the image's layers it's likely your perspective would change—making you view *Policeman in a squad car on Church Street, Pretoria (Tshwane), Transvaal (Gauteng)* (1967) as a far more complex work. I snatched it while standing at a traffic circle in Pretoria. As I was looking through my Leica telescopic lens a squad car jumped into focus in front of me and in the car was a policeman, looking straight at me. His face seemed completely bare. He had what I regarded as a Gestapo face; there was a brutality about him that I couldn't confront, frankly speaking, he frightened me.

In the background, in the same frame as this police officer, there was a sidewalk full of white people, who were probably waiting for a bus; they appeared as nothing more than grey shapes. I realized afterwards – I can't claim that I realized this in the instance of taking that photograph – that those grey shapes were us. Those blurred images were the whites of South Africa, sheltering behind the gun of the policeman. And this was the truth of our situation in many ways. We were the privileged group, protected by the guns that belonged to the ruling class, which of course was the national party government.

So it was a complex picture in its own way, but it originated in my instantaneous response to that head in the squad car. Other people may have a different interpretation of that photograph and I would be very glad if they did, because to me, photographs are to be read and peeled away like skins on an onion, so that you have various possible interpretations.

RN: Unlike *Some Afrikaners Photographed,* in your series *In Boksburg* (shot in the subsequent two decades) you were capturing the everyday social rituals of the townspeople, in familial and social settings. The town was very similar to Randfontein where you grew up. But despite your determination to present the unordinary, the series has somewhat of a staged feeling. Did you intend for the settings to feel theatrical at all?

DG: That's really interesting, because none of those photographs were staged, not a single one of them. Let me explain the background to that work. As you described me at the beginning of this interview, I am a middle class White English-speaking Jew and I come from that class. I find it very difficult to photograph my own family. I have photographed my children and grandchildren occasionally, but I've never been able to make a pursuit of it. And similarly, for a long time, I avoided photographing the background from which I come, i.e. middle class White South Africa.

I happened to be doing some commercial work in Boksburg, a town near Johannesburg – for a big finance house – when I realized that the city was very similar to Randfontein. It wasn't

exactly the same; it was different in that it seemed far more raw. I won't go into the complexities of how I chose Boksburg. But I will tell you, it was one of three towns in that area I was considering: Boksburg, Benoni and Brakpan. I was interested in all three locations and though they were categorically similar, Boksburg was the one I eventually focused on. The city possessed a nakedness, which I regarded as being essentially middle class White South African, or at least what was then middle class White South African.

I became absorbed taking photographs in Boksburg. I had in the course of other work, particularly in the black townships of Johannesburg (such as Soweto) and the city's white suburbs, shot quite a lot of people in their homes. So with this project I wasn't really looking for intimate portraits of people in private spaces. Gradually, as the project progressed, I realized more and more that I was interested in ordinary daily life in these communities. I wanted to explore the ways in which their normality exhibited in public—the places that even visitors, such as you and I, would be able to see: streets, supermarkets, dance classes, soccer and rugby matches.

That's what I set out to photograph, but more than that, there was a particular quality that I wanted to capture. With the home portraits I did quite extensively in the 1970s, there was always an encounter between the subject and me. I would travel the streets of Soweto with my young black male accomplice and mentor (Joshua), until we met someone I was interested in shooting. I would see their home. And I would say to Josh, "please ask that lady if we can come in and talk to her, perhaps even take her photograph." If she agreed, then perhaps I would take her picture in one of the rooms of the house. That was an entirely different thing than what I set out to do in Boksburg.

In Boksburg, I wanted to convey a sense of what ordinary life was like; I didn't want to dress it up, dramatize or theatricalize it (if such a word exists). I'm very interested to hear your reading of the pictures, because that is precisely what I wanted to avoid. I don't remember a single picture in which I asked anybody to do anything. I would come to a situation, some of which were suggested to me by a young local female newspaper journalist, whom I had become friendly with. We traded information about what happening in town—I would tell her if I heard about an upcoming boxing match and she might tell me about a ballroom dance or something of that nature. Whatever the situation, upon arrival, I would make myself known to the people in charge and after getting their permission – always with permission – I would set myself up with a camera on a tripod. Very few of the pictures were taken without a tripod, that way everybody could see me.

They knew that I was there; they knew why I was there. I declared it: I was photographing daily life in Boksburg. I would normally just wait, until they were no longer acting for me, which is something people often tend to do. But after awhile, they forget about me and they get on with their lives. Acting for someone else quickly becomes boring, because it isn't your natural state of being.

That is why those pictures were taken. Technically, for almost every single photograph I employed a normal 80-mml lens on a 6 x 6 cm format camera, such as a Rolleiflex or Hasselblad, and possibly a few shots with a 35-mml lens. The tonal range was kept quite narrow. Again, I didn't want to dramatize anything. I didn't want people to say "what a clever photographer". I didn't want them to think that this was photographicness; I wanted them to feel as though they were present at whatever was happening in the exact moment the photograph was taken. So thank you, for giving me a completely different interpretation.

RN: Can this desire to capture the normalcy of an ordinary moment also be seen in your series *The Transported of Kwandebele* (1983)?

DG: That's a completely different thing; well it's not completely different. Yes, I suppose that was life as it was being lived by people in those buses. The individuals photographed certainly weren't performing or doing anything theatrical for me.

RN: And on the buses, like in Boksbrug, were you also asking peoples permission to take their photographs?

DG: Asking permission is my normal way of working, but on the buses things went a little differently. We, that is Joe Lelyveld of the *New York Times* and I, got into the buses at the beginning of their routes, so that would be at the KwaNdebele terminus at about half past one or two in the morning. Initially, as a few people began to come onto the bus, I would explain what I was doing and ask them if I could take their picture. But as the bus rapidly filled up it was clear that this was impossible – I couldn't approach everyone. And I didn't want to make a loud announcement to the whole bus, because as they got on, everyone immediately tried to fall asleep. Even if my intentions were good, it would have been very disturbing if I had shouted out, "is there anybody here who doesn't want me to photograph them?" I tried that initially, but it was evident that this was impossible—quite soon, it became clear that people really just wanted to go to sleep and they didn't give a bugger about me.

RN: You've said in the past that the series on the bus was your only work that was in direct confrontation with apartheid, but could we say that *Fietas* (shot in the 1970s and 1980s) instigates a social commentary that is also in conflict with apartheid supporters?

DG: I made no secret of it—I think virtually all of my work has been political. During apartheid, you had to pick apart a situation in order to discover the values underlying what was happening. My primary concern has always been with values. I want to know two very simple things: what values do people have and how do they express them. But obviously, the process of exploring value systems is complex.

The bus series was much more of a direct confrontation, because it was at the coalface of apartheid. Most of those people would never have been living where they were if it weren't for insanely discriminatory governmental policies. They would have found ways to live inside the city, but they couldn't, because there were severe restrictions on the number of black people who were allowed to live there. So they were forced to move to this place miles and miles away from any possibility of work. And in order to support themselves – to put food on the table for their families – they had to travel hours to work. And this was exactly what the government had planned; they didn't want black people putting down roots in our cities.

They wanted them to live in these distant homelands, where they would be given 'rights' that mimicked the kind you would expect to find in any civilized society, but these so-called privileges would be restricted to those peculiar places. Just to digress for a moment, I want to make clear that the people on those buses will continue to travel the same routes for the next fifty or even one hundred years, because when two to three hundred thousand people make their homes in one of these remote places, they invest in houses and in furniture, and in schools and a way of life. This infrastructure will not be easily changed when freedom finally comes around. So those buses continue on their same daily journey and they will go on doing so until somebody discovers oil or gold—something of value that will offer large numbers of people employment.

RN: You've described the expressions of South Africans as being naked, especially in regards to apartheid. In your series *Structures*, government buildings and places of worship, can be viewed as expressions of the country's values or at least the people who built them. Is this ethos manifested mainly in structural elements or do you see it in other aspects of South African culture?

DG: I've been working on *Structures* for about forty years. Let me deal with the last part of your statement first, I think you'll find in a lot of ways, if you really strip it down to its essentials, my

work is concerned with values—at least I hope that's what you will find. The work I did and am still doing on *Structures* is an attempt to analyze the things that we build. The structures I am referring to in this case are built by humans. There are also structures built by animals and birds, and though it is possible to look at those structures and analyze them, when you're dealing with human structures you're dealing in almost every case with an expression of values.

Let me try to explain, let's say you form a relationship with a man and you get married. Initially, you each lived with your parents growing up and now you are making a second home together. How do you go about that? What do you do? What is the process that begins to unfold as you gradually reach a conclusion about what will become your home. Let's say from the beginning he declares a desire for a double storied house, a big garden, and a swimming pool. You have much more modest aims in mind; you realize that as the putative housewife you're going to be responsible for quite a lot of this structure and you would much rather have a smaller, more compact house, one that is designed to save labor. Plus, you don't particularly want a swimming pool, because you regard swimming pools as a declaration of values that you don't sympathize with. Swimming pools suggest consumption. You want a modest garden, you would like to cultivate roses and dahlias, and for that all you need is rich soil and a small space.

So before you start considering divorce, all of these things have to be sorted out.
This is what happens in real life—people have to arrive at structures and space themselves. Quite often these partialities differ, unless you've come to an understanding of which values are important to him and which values are important to you early on. Your house is an extraordinarily rich book; the structure is a physical declaration of the values that you and your husband share. This same principal can be applied to every structure that we've built; included in that, are societies ideological and political structures, which don't necessarily have to be physical. But because I'm a photographer and my camera can't easily photograph things that aren't physical, I photograph structures that I can see. These structures have ranged from the interior of a beehive hut in Zululand in the KwaZulu Natal province to grand statements of power and dominance in the form of religious and governmental constructions.

I find our structures in South Africa to be particularly rich. They are naked in their declaration of values. This is perhaps because we are a young society. We don't have many structures that are so old that it becomes impossible to know what values initially motivated their construction. And because we are still in a sense, a kind of frontier society, one in which the social contract has not been fully explored and worked out – smoothed out in a hunky dory way if you will – there's still a great deal of terribly vital differences amongst us. These differences mean that our structures inevitably become major declarations of values. And so, I look at our structures not as architecture, which I am interested in as a field of study, but in this

case as a photographer. I wanted to look at structures as a declaration of values. And it became, and still is, a very interesting pursuit.

I spent 15 years on *Structures*, but suddenly the bottom dropped out—when then President F.W. de Klerk made his famous speech, essentially ending apartheid. And I thought, well, this is the end of it. What am I going to do with all of this? I was going to call the book, The Structure of Things Now, because "now" was a reference to apartheid. Thankfully, I was in America with my friend Ezra Stoller, a great architectural photographer, who told me to simply change it. He suggested I call it The Structure of Things Then. And so I did.

I then discovered, some years later that the project was continuing. South Africa was in a new place, one in which new structures were emerging. So now, I've come to call the book, The Structures of Domination or The Structures of Dominance and Democracy. That's not entirely chronological, because I discovered that within democracy, we have structures of domination. But anyway, it's a very interesting field, with very rich pickings for a photographer like myself.

If you would allow me another digression, we have a system of toll roads that the government has been trying to impose, because of our increasing automobile population. This means we have good roads, but they are very expensive to maintain and even more expensive to build. Therefore, it was proposed that we have tolls—that is, we have to pay for using these roads. So the government bought a highly sophisticated system from an Austrian developer. It requires that along major roads you build gantries, which register the passing of every vehicle. So if you are driving a Ford Mustang, and you are driving like hell, very fast, it records you as you go through every time.

I'm driving a very slow old Chevrolet. You can hardly read my number plate, but still it will record me. The government told us that we could pay in advance or that they could send us a bill at a later time. This nearly resulted in a civil war, because South Africa generally speaking has a very low degree of compliance. And this system requires a very high degree of compliance. You are leaving it up to the honor of the people you are sending these bills to, to actually pay them.

I am one of the people who objected to the whole system, because I felt that it was extremely expensive. A large part of the money that they raised will be paid out to the Austrian inventors. I have objected to the system at every step. I think it is a very badly thought out operation; we weren't even consulted about it as citizens. We could easily have had tollgates, like you have as you enter New York or San Francisco. They are clumsy, but they work. And if you want to get

through quickly you pay in advance, so that as you pass it clicks and the system records you, knocking a dollar off your allotted amount.

So I will not pay to pass through these arches, these gantries, until they actually threaten to take me to court. And then I will pay, because I am a compliant citizen. But I object to the whole system, a lot of people have objected to it. Now this is a case in which – it is very difficult to prove – there was most likely corruption involved in the buying of the system itself. Though this hasn't been proven true, there is certainly a lack of wisdom in the whole setup.

And so, I have spent the day before yesterday photographing these toll roads. I had seen one gantry that I thought would be easy to photograph, well not easy, but possible to photograph, in a sort of way that would expose its essential elements. I saw that particular structure about 3 years ago and finally decided to do something about it last week. I've been out there twice early in the morning to photograph it.

It's certainly not an artistic structure, and it's not an artistic photograph, but it will be informative and I will explain in the caption – captions are very important to me – the pertinent information related to the building. I will explain what it is and why I think it is an important declaration of values.

Interestingly, as I was working, a car pulled up and two men got out and asked me what I was doing. I thought, here we go again. Because that's what used to happen, when I was working in strange places under apartheid. The security police would show up. It turned out that these two men were from the bureau of state security, and they wanted to know what I was doing there and why. There happened to be a military airport behind the road I was photographing and I wasn't even aware of it. They thought I was photographing the base. They wanted to make it clear that I couldn't do that. There are a lot of values wrapped up in that photograph, that place and communication.

Following David's interview with Arthub, the artist took the time to write to us, so that he could more aptly elaborate on his understanding of values and how they relate to his work. The following text is from David's explanation of values—which goes to the core of his photography.

DG: In first year economics we learn that people have preferences and the way that they order these penchants indicates the value that they place on commodities, ideas and/or passions. All human action arises from, and is an expression of, these preferences (or values). This applies to the most trivial, to the most momentous, and from the purely private to the public and societal. Broadly, we can exclude our bodily reactions to stimuli, which are 'innately' programmed to act

responsively; even though some of these are controllable by exceptional individuals and in exercising that control they further demonstrate their preferences.

Let's apply this understanding to South African immediacies: in 2010, we 'won' the opportunity to stage the World Soccer Championships. Our soccer powers and government press-ganged Nelson Mandela into using his international popularity. On top of that, we appeared to have paid a ten million dollar bribe to acquire this honor. To comply with the requirements of the Federation International de Football Association we had to erect huge stadia in a number of cities and spend vast sums on publicity, provision of media facilities and control of trade – including the clearing of street traders from areas anywhere near the stadia.

The tournaments took a month. Leading up to the games and during the actual events the whole country went into a state of soccer madness. Township protests demanding water, electricity, housing, sewerage, and clean government nearly disappeared. Everyone (though not I) flew flags. The stadia were wonders to behold. Suddenly we were united as the Rainbow Nation.

At the end of the month it all stopped. Flags disappeared. Service protests broke out. We had to pay the bills. The problems that had beset us before the soccer tournaments were no less present than before.

How does all of this relate to values? Let me explain:

Karl Marx said that religion is the opiate of the masses. Today, in many countries, including South Africa, soccer has taken on that role. We opted to put our money into building soccer, rather than into education for example. There are at least two generations of Black children who have been denied a decent education since the end of apartheid because of corruption, mismanagement and the lack of well-trained teachers in the school system. With the money spent on soccer we could have – amongst other needed facilities – put a library and functional lavatories into every school in the country. Instead, there are schools without any books whatsoever. During this time period, two small boys drowned in the shit of the cesspools that passed as lavatories at their schools.

We now have stadia that require upkeep and are indebted large sums of borrowed money, but South Africa does not have enough incoming funds to meet these charges. The Johannesburg municipality met the overcharge costs of the city's stadium by taking a billion rand out of our public resources. Now, we don't have enough money to pay for the filling of potholes in our

roads. We have breakdowns in reticulation of electricity, because we cannot afford adequate maintenance of equipment.

These events all relate to choices made at every level of governance and public affairs, and ultimately to the choices that we, the people, have made in our votes and, yes, even in the expression of our 'art'. I cannot claim to have exposed all of this in photographs. At best, much of my work has been concentrated on exploring and probing our values and how we have expressed them during and since apartheid. I do this in photographs and in the text that goes with them.

My work, in essence, is a probing of our ethos.

RN: It seems that in many of your series you have a natural instinct (or a gut reaction) in dialoguing with the images or the people being photographed, in order to evoke a reaction from your viewers. I've read that while shooting *Structures* a lot of time you would photograph a building and then do the research about the space after the fact. When a viewer is experiencing your work first hand, do you hope ideally, that they would not know the historical or societal context of the space, allowing them to respond in a more unfiltered, natural way? Or do you think it is important for them to understand the context before viewing your work?

DG: In the book that I did on *Structures*, I took care to provide detailed notes on the context of each construction. My preference as you've said, is to go in un-researched and simply to be excited, provoked or irritated by what I'm seeing. After which, I then proceed to photograph. I generally work in this way, and only do detailed research afterwards. But let me say, I think I can do this only because I'm working in my own country, in South Africa.

I couldn't do that in Germany, Sweden or the United States. Or I could only do it to a minimal extent, because so many structures there would have an immense amount of information and historical context that I wouldn't be privy to. Because I wasn't born there, naturally I wouldn't be familiar with the landscape. I would often be mislead into photographing something that had a different meaning entirely to the one that I ascribed to it, whereas that doesn't often happen in South Africa. In my opinion, being born here is a very important part of the process, or rather having lived here all my life is what impacts the photographs I'm taking.

When I'm in a foreign place, I'm very cautious about taking photographs, because I realize that I just don't have the knowledge, the experience or the inborn sense of the place itself. This has happened to me: I was once commissioned to photograph the square mile in London known as

The City, the area in which the financial world revolves. For 3 weeks, I wandered around without taking a single photograph, because I couldn't come to grips with the place. I just couldn't understand it. I would walk into a courtyard and find that there was a pub that had been there for three hundred years. And it looked as though the people who were in it had been there for three hundred years too.

Basically, what I'm trying to say is that I attach a great deal of importance to the fact that I'm a local. Even if you put me into a place that I have never been in South Africa I would usually have a fair sense of what it is about.

RN: Your series *Particulars*, which you shot predominantly in 1975 (over a period of 6 months), is especially interesting. It's very aesthetically different than the rest of your work. You were quoted as saying that you wanted to be more lyrical in the photos from that series. I was wondering if this was a moment for you to break free from the restraints of what you felt like you should be shooting and simply photograph something that you found beautiful?

DG: You are quite correct. Yes, this was something that excited me greatly and for 6 months I was obsessed. It was for me a moment at an attempted lyricism. I was, and am still now, very envious of people like Edward Weston, who never seemed to have a thought about who owned the piece of land he's photographing and how they acquired it.

This series grew out of the portraits that I was taking during that period. While shooting in Soweto and the white suburbs of Johannesburg I became very conscious of the fact that if a person moved a hand or a leg, or slightly altered their posture, it would have a profound affect on the photograph that I was taking. So I became particularly conscious of their limbs and bodies, breasts, hips, faces – not so much the face that you take a portrait of, but the face as a part of the body.

Exploring that and giving free reign to it was a great pleasure. Initially, I thought it would be a purely sensual / sexual / lyrical exploration, but I soon discovered that politics crept into this series as well.

RN: In what way did politics creep in?

DG: Well, I photographed two men sleeping on the grass in a Johannesburg park, and both of them were really extraordinary declaratives of values. One image is of a young man, whose was sleeping with his hands clasped above his head, as if he were taking shelter. It's a fetal

photograph; he is sort of curled up, with his hands on the back of his skull, fingers interlaced as if for protection.

Let me say, this first photograph was taken without his permission, because he was sleeping. But with the second man, I decided I couldn't do that again. So I woke him up to ask his permission, after which he fell back to sleep. His fists clasped beneath his head and his broad powerful back were to me declaratives of Africa, of Africa emergent, of the power of African men. So here you had two photographs, but both were quite different in what they conveyed.

RN: My last question is also an inquiry about the way you work aesthetically. I know that only recently, and I say recently meaning the last decade or longer, you started using color for the first time in your series *Joburg* (mid-1960s to 2006) and *Intersections* (1999-2009). You once said that viewers need to work to look at a black and white photograph, that it doesn't immediately come to you, whereas with color it's more sensuous, sweet, and welcoming. Do you still feel that way? Or has your view of color changed through your use of it?

DG: I'm not sure about that. I can't be dogmatic about the answer. But to me, color does remain a rather sweet medium; it was too sweet during the years of apartheid to use for my personal work. After apartheid, I spent about a decade photographing the country in color and I stand by those pictures. I think they were a personal exploration, like everything else I've done. Moreover I enjoyed them and I still enjoy looking at some of them.

But there is no question that for me the black and white photograph is a more complex object. It's not just that the viewer has to work to understand it, and I'm not sure that I would say that again. Now I would say, that there is certainly a tension in black and white photographs. There is almost no tension when you look at a photograph in color, because it duplicates the world in a way that we all know. Unless there's been a deliberate falsification of the color, which is a different thing entirely—that's a more conceptual sort of approach. But generally speaking, in a color photograph you know immediately what the work is about and the color speaks to you directly. In the case of the black and white photographs, you know the content, but at the same time, you don't know it, because it's not quite the same as reality, so there is a tension in you, the subject, the viewer, to me that is endemic in the black and white medium. That doesn't exist in color photographs.

I would like to clarify that I believe that there is a *potential* tension in black and white photographs, it doesn't always come, but unlike color photos the possibility for tension is there.

RN: Thank you for taking the time to speak with Arthub about your work. You must do a lot of these interviews and we appreciate the time and consideration you've given our questions.

DG: It's been good to talk to you. I attach importance to these interviews and I don't regard them as casual endeavors.

Arthub would like to thank David Goldblatt for not only taking the time to speak with us, but for the photographs he has taken over the last fifty years. Whether or not he believes his work has or will have an impact on the narrative of South Africa, his efforts to identify and express the values of a complex nation deserve admiration. We – the world outside of South Africa – may not always get the joke, but we appreciate his efforts to tell us the story of his nation nonetheless.

For information about David Goldblatt and his work please go to Goodman Gallery or write to: David Goldblatt, Box 46086, Orange Grove, Johannesburg 2119, South Africa.

Arthub's interview with David was conducted April 1st, 2016 via Skype.

Make sure to check out Arthub's interview with Roger Ballen launched last week here.

---

[i] *David Goldblatt is here referring to a decision made by the South African Constitutional Court on March 31st, which found incumbent President Jacob Zuma guilty of violating the constitution, when he refused to obey the public protector's request to repay part of the state money used to upgrade his private home in Nkandla. The home improvements, estimated at a cost of ¥108,389,680 RMB, included a chicken coop, cattle enclosure, amphitheater, swimming pool, visitor center and helipad. The unanimous ruling of the Constitutional Court's 11 justices, declaring that the president has "failed to uphold, defend and respect the Constitution as the supreme law of the land," has the dual effect of checking the conduct of a governmental executive and affirming the constitutional author of the Office of the Public Protector, which has been berated by Mr. Zuma's party since issuing the reimbursement orders in 2014.*