

Conversation with Paul Konings at his Cape Town house in October, 1985

I went to school in New Zealand, and grew up there. I had been to South Africa once before in 1970 for a couple of weeks, and then in 1974 I was going to come over here for two years to see what it was like. After that I went to Michaelis art school here, and then I had to make my own way, and that has just been the case. I have been involved in graphic advertising, design, promotions, that sort of thing. So I am a graphic designer, and photographer here in Cape Town. I did the book, the Brotherhoods: State Control and Street Gangs in Cape Town, which was published by David Phillips. It's about crime in Cape Town. It is a historical study of the socio-political and economic causes of the "informal sector" in Cape Town. You know, everything from pickpockets, shabeens, petty crime, to the big gangsters who go after big business.

It was originally going to be just a photographic book, but then the publisher wanted to expand it. My pictures were also in Nothing will Separate us.

Then I've been working for advertising agencies, and film companies, and then I went to freelancing completely on my own. And now I approach individual companies, design packaging, point of purchase displays, product promotion.

And the Boera (sp?), what culture do they have? None! Otherwise they wouldn't be running around killing guys. It's obvious. All you have to do is think, that there is a much better way, whether you are a heavy capitalist pig or a whatever you are, even a socialist would do the same thing. It is against western culture what they are doing here. The ethic, the basis of western culture is changing of what they are doing here, that is what they fought the in the 2nd world war, so called, for, you know. They don't call it by the same name you know. We could say Ronald Reagan was a fascist, you know, but nobody would say that. Margaret Thatcher you could say the same thing. But they've got some brains you know, culture, background.

They had Reagan on TV and he was just coming off his helicopter after Camp David or something and someone asked him a question about South Africa and he said this whole thing about they have just taken away this and that.....you could tell that nobody had told him what to say. And he was just caught off guard. It was terrible.

This project....we are not in art school. Maybe the sort of teaching is formal and so on, and sort of more leaning towards art for arts sake, so, I wanted to sort of like try and connect to what I relate to as a social documentary photographer.

Some of this work is quite recent because I go to Langa, you know, we go for a cruise around, you know, are passing through, you know, and this camp, I just got up one morning. And this camp, I just got up one morning and thought, wow, I am going out to take some photographs now, because I had to do it. And I just got up at 5 O' Clock in the morning and went to Gordon's Bay where that labor camp is you know. I just walked in there. Just parked my car at the thing and took my tripod and the camera, I just walked in. And I happened to

meet a couple of guys I knew who were working as laborers in the town somewhere. And so we went for a cruise down to the INAUDIBLE.... No, I cruised around all that morning, and when I was coming out, then the bags arrived you know, this was now a couple of hours later on after cruising all in the back of this camp I went to see, I sort of ended up in some guys room he had spent.....I mean these hockeys, if you have seen inside them, there is a picture somewhere, it is really kind of an outdoor toilet, in terms of what it is. I suppose it is like, I don't know, it's like Mexico, it like the other end of the world.

This guy had posters you know: Shirly Bassey sings how beautiful black is you know, or how powerful black is, you know. And then he had Bob Marley there, he had all sorts of pictures of all sorts of black cultural sort of things, black power numbers and something. He had this huge radio connected up to two car batteries, you know, and he just had jazz cruising, beautiful Jazz, you know. That was all he owned, this cassette player and the two car batteries and the Jazz he listened to. He was a migrant worker. We talked to him for a long time. I even have a picture of him somewhere doing a number. And somebody sings how beautiful black is.

So I cruised around and when I came out, I saw these guy from a long way. I mean I was in there and they weren't expecting to see me. They had seen my car and they were just wondering where this guy was you know. So when I came out, I just, there were lots of kids around, and I was coming up, so I just skipped into the lane, into the middle of the street, and I just cruised up this street, stopping, taking photographs, you now right in his eyes, sort of thing, just sort of saying, you know, "This is nothing." You know, if you are now trying to hide yourself.....There is no way you can get out of there without passing..... So you've just got to breeze in there and make like you've gone out there to take photos of the kids. And you just cruise around and as I just moved up the road, I just took pictures and I was cruising and I even cruised right up to them, and then they stopped me and said, "What are you doing."

And I said, "Just come to take a couple of Photographs." It was slightly illegal for me to be there. But it depends on how you handle it. And in the end I got up to take....I asked them....you know because now you've got to just bullshit your way out of this, because you are not allowed to be there, but you've got to make out that you are harmless sort of asshole sort of going out to take photographs you know of little kids sort of. Like you were just passing by and dropped off the gardener or something, that's what you say, "Oh, I dropped off the gardener, this morning, and the kids were there and he asked me to take a couple of pictures of them you know. Ba ba, ba, ba, ba..And well, you know....And he said, "Well, don't you realize that you've got to have a permit to be here you know?"

"Oh, a permit, you know, really? Well I've been dropping off the gardener, for a long time. Well, how can I get a permit you see? I said, No how can I get a permit. I mean shit, I'd like to come back, I mean he wants me to bring the photos back now. I mean you've got to have a permit and I'm quite a moral sort of law abiding citizen. Shit, I'll get a permit, no sweat. Where can I come? You know?" And after

that he never saw me again. I just buggered off, you know.

I think, I don't know, white culture didn't really appeal to me. It is sort of like a very status sort of orientated society I think. And I mean, oh, I suppose all my connections and things. All my friends. They were all on the other side of the front line. You know. So that was it you know. Too bad. I mean I came here and that was quite interesting normally relating to people you know, and so obviously if you connect somebody and you talk to them, and they are not used to that they would say, "Hey shit, come down to my flat. Come and have a cup of tea and meet my wife and my kids and so on. And it's OK, you know. You are supporting your habit. You're there by the place.

And so I was interested, you know, I checked this because I was going to these different things, you know, and seeing all these things and so and I mean and then I was coming back to the house and I was from out of town, you know, sort of, you know, I didn't know anybody here. So I am getting to talk to these guys and I am checking the difference now which is a thing I am not accustomed to, right. I mean where I come from people don't even walk in the streets taking things out of bins. You know, you don't see that. That's how almost idyllic that little place is. So isolated (New Zealand). And they can worry about the All Blacks playing the Sprinbocks (soccer), you know they had a big riot about it. But I mean meanwhile, this started other things happening, and much more violent sort of things.

I got on well with blacks when I arrived here, far better than I could get on with my so called white compatriots. Because their sort of scene was going to discos and that's all they did with their lives, senseless sort of shit, nothing. And I wanted to get something out.... I suppose it is the way I sort of.... I didn't want to photograph rubbish tins and light poles and trees and the sky, the things people take pictures of, totally sort of abstract as such. I felt, I am a human being and I must relate to the human beings around me. And so I photographed human beings. I was photographing things like staircases and windows and I used to go out to these places out into the old country or something like this you know, and then you would come across like ten prisoners or twenty-two prisoners. You know, on some farm plot. With the Boera, and these guys digging huchie (sp?) you see and so they all,

I didn't know what the scene was like, you know. I just arrived at the airport, and the first thing I saw is a huge rubbish dump, and I cruised along the N2 and I saw all these squatter shacks. And that was sort of like shocking, that was the first experience for me, to see, you know. Here we arrived in this big jet, woooooosh, I suppose it is like Beirut in a way, something like that, you know, you sort of land over everybody's houses, blow all the washing off the line. You know, "fuck them, it's too bad for them." So I mean it was kind of strange. So I saw all these things and then I was in this one.... I mean I arrived in this place and I had always been able to speak and relate to somebody, right? And when we arrived in this place there were about twenty, thirty guys, each day coming to the house for work! One for a gardener, one for a this and one for that. Where I came from

you didn't have that sort of thing. And these guys could hardly talk. They knew, "Yes Boss, No Boss, I want a job Boss." They had learned three or four words from somebody who had been here before. The relationship everybody had to have and how to deal with this guy you know? Because I didn't know how to deal with this guy. It was something else, you know. I was about sixteen when I came here. I've been here eleven years. It shocked me. I am used to being able to talk to somebody. And now you see this guy and he has got a totally other experience. He is a different sort of person. It is not that he doesn't know anything, it is just that you've got to communicate with the guy.

It was very interesting. I mean to come here and see the landscape. The landscape was harsh. It is not like soft rolling countryside, green grass and boundless valleys of trees. It was like granite rock right down to the sea and the sea is wild, you know. I come from this place where you just cruise down to the sandy sea shore. And that was the first thing. I mean I was travelling in this car. I was travelling to this town that I thought I'd live in. And before this town, there were just miles and miles of squatters in the sand.

And then the whole relationship of being stopped and being told, you know, "Hey, you are in the wrong toilet. Go into that one." And everybody's sort of attitude. And then their attitude is still the same today. So we've got nowhere. These guys haven't changed one single little iota. You know. They have still got the same attitude. Exactly the same attitude.

In my pictures I was trying to communicate with human beings. Not with a black guy, a colored guy, or a squatter or a metz (sp?) drinker or a gangster. You know I saw these people and I thought, "Hey these people have actually got something." And they have got some warmth and some cohesion. There is more to them in terms of relating to a human being. You know, you can actually relate to these people openly. Whereas with the white people you have got about twenty walls to hang up because if you don't know so and so or if you turn up in the wrong shoes or are half shaven or whatever. That is what the situation is like. It is only through working commercially to survive that I..... Obviously you have to sit there and I mean OK, you get older and you change. So this was reality and I've been trying to relate the reality and the aesthetic together.

Well I suppose you can see what is around. I was trying to say, look any average white person, I mean even my mother was saying, you know, British, you know what their attitude is like. When they see a person who is lying in the gutter.... to me, a guy lying in the gutter with a bottle and pissing himself in the street is no different than a guy living in say the wealthiest suburbs and getting drunk out of his brain and wetting himself in his \$5000 bed with the flip up this and the spring-on radio. It makes no difference. It is the same thing. You see he's no more cultured. He's only got a status because he's got the \$5000 bed and he can afford to have somebody come and wipe up his piss and change his clothes and wash him. That is the only difference.

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And I found many people who were sort of much older than myself. I'm not talking about I was just going there with people my own age. I was cruising with people my own age and their fathers and their.....It was very interesting. Because I sort of had relationships with their children. But I also sat having pow wows with them where they couldn't go, where they wouldn't let their children go. Because obviously everybody is now having a big long three blader pull you know. And this doesn't go down with the religion and the culture taking things like this.

So we'd talk and not only discuss the horses and daily life and all the problems of daily life, but they used to have really daily discussions, ideological, political, you know, talking about economic things. These guys wouldn't talk about a political ideology. It wasn't Marx or Lenin or Trotsky or Kensian economics. IT was, "This much buys a loaf of bread," and you know. They would talk about it in terms of real things which were actually highly political. But they weren't our western cultural language as such. But the way the guys explained themselves was far clearer because it related to real things because that is how the guys related. They didn't relate to abstract entities. They knew this and this and this and this happened and that is how you explain a situation of oppression. You don't say, "Ideologically speaking, if I don't have the vote and all this and this and this...." It comes down to bread and butter. He is not worried about all this bull. He is not worried about the theory of ethical sort of labor and what not. He goes for what he sees. He knows he goes to work all day and such and such happens and he comes back and this is what he gets for a day's labor. It's in much more real terms.

It's sort of quite interesting because the average guy, I don't think he is inclined to total violence and shit like that, but he needs bread on his table and a roof over his head. He wants something for his future as well. He is a much more humble person, very humble.

[I don't think there is a market within South Africa for this kind of Social Documentary Photography. And as yet,Obviously to set up a system, I don't think the photographers, individual photographers, there's a couple that are organized, and the rest are just totally disorganized, and incapable of remembering of where they put their negs they shot last week, and printing a decent print, having the technical ability of actually producing something of quality. I think being organized and cohesive without also being egotistical. You know, I think it is a very elitist thing, taking photographs. And I think many people, they might live low and they might be starving too, but because they aren't prepared to compromise to a certain degree to commercialize this in some way. This is in actual fact the bottom line. The bottom line is this must pay for your bread if you are going to do it. It doesn't matter, you don't have to live like a king or anything. You must just be able to pay for the film and paper and eat.

I can see using the mechanical means of reproduction, including the graphic arts, to actually create awareness and education, using it much more creatively. And trying to put it.....It would be nice to do

that. But all the different organizations must now....somebody has got to identify what approach they are going to take. You've got people starting up something new every day. And everything else... maybe organizations that are cohesive are destroyed all the time. So it is a total process of building up and degeneration, building up and degeneration. So I suppose under those circumstances.....

You think of all the Unions, all the political organizations, the community organizations, and there are lots of artists out there. They just need to have the proper professional organization. I think teaching people how to do something properly, rather than doing something half-pie, no liberal bullshit approach - discipline

It is a problem. You have got to earn.....You take a... You have to compromise somewhere. You can spend the rest of your life grovelling OK, trying to take a couple of photographs. I got to the situation where nobody would employ me because they thought I was a communist. Ok? And when the word goes around in a small little shit house like this what happens? This place is like a little Timbuktu out of nowhere. Everybody knows who you are. You know? And obviously I don't socialize. I am not at their parties. I am in Guguletu. So, they know. Because where was I. And they know the whole situation, how I talk to them. When they tell me, "Oh these little monkeys are doing this and this and that," I say, "No!" And I got myself into shit because I was prepared to stand there and say, "You guys are ignorant, absolute ignorant, naive, fools." These guys are just a paranoid bunch of whities who think that every darkie, every black guy is a "Kaffir" you know, they want them to live in trees. They don't think they are good for anything. But they don't realize that is denying that guy any opportunity.

And there is so much culture. Those people have got so much culture. You can go in there and see grand musicians, grand photographers, brilliant people, people with insight, experience, guys who are philosophers and educated people. But they don't have pieces of paper that say, "I am professor so and so." But those guys have used their own minds.

Whereas the average white guy doesn't use his own mind. He just uses it in brie (barbecue) places and chevrolet. Going for barbecue down by the beach, and going there in the chev, the window open, the hand out and going for a drive on Sunday afternoon. And that's it....Party. Whenever you get the chance, all you do is spend, buy trinkets, or you go to some city, it is a highly westernized society. If everybody lived like that it would be fine.

But you can go, you find a lot of activities happening in the lower class areas, because obviously the guys are all living one on top of one another, but there is community. And your kid can walk out in the street because there is somebody else that is going to look after him. Yea, when you are very close to those places, you are totally safe.

But then you get like what was happening in district six, for instance. My interest is political, economic and social as well you

Difficulty of Doc in S.A. - Remings

How white stand out who see Remings

see. What happened to those people is they just destroyed all those families. You came into a place which was a huge house, and sure there might be twenty people living there, and you might have four or five kids living in a room. But the mothers and dads have got their own rooms, and everybody lives together and supports one another. You know. It is not as if the whole family...when the census man comes along and he takes down, "Well this girl has got a child, and this girl has got a child, and this one's husband is there" and there is this whole interlinking of people that they now separate. "Oh, now, grandma and grandpa must go there, and mom and pa with their immediate family must go over there. And then the ones with husbands and children must also go away. And they can't survive like that. Because the standard of living is so low that you need twenty people to keep those people just eating. Because you have to send out people to work. And that has changed. I supposed it is like olden European days. They had extended families and the families all go into business together and you know.

People go for those things. They are just as consumerist and materialist as we are. It is not as if they are all a bunch of commies. That is what is so ridiculous. They are just as materially interested as we are, as anybody is, any human being. They want better for themselves and they want to be able to obtain it in their own right you know. And everybody looks at them. It is quite interesting to think that you know, there are thirty million black people, and four million white people, and they enforce those thirty million black people to speak Afrikans. But none of those white people, or very few, can speak Xhosa, or Zulu or whatever.

↳ And the whole thing is divideable, divideable and destroy and destroy, you know. I mean it is all totally crazy.↳

There is big bucks to be made now for news photographers. But I'm not interested in that. Anyway, I think what will happen, it depends what will happen politically, but I think you'll find the photographers are going to loose their lives as well. Because what is happening is people are very politicized now. It is not just like "You are a photographer and you are aiding us." Certain photographers will get in and they will be recognized and they will be able to send the stuff out. But they must now be recognized by the people. It is just like community councilors. If you aren't recognized well, you might end up in the street with a tire around your stomach.↳ And that is what is going to happen, because that is just what these guys are. They are just making big bucks pulling in from Germany and this big agency this and that. He's not hasseling. He can just climb a jet. Or he goes to the U.S. Embassy if things get really bad and wait on the roof for a helicopter. That is all it is in the final analysis. He gets lots of bucks. He's getting lots of money. Especially these news cameramen. And I know these guys that have made big big moneyh out of it. And they have so much money now that they can wait until virtually the tidal wave is about to drop on everybodys head and they will catch the last plane out. And they will survive because they have got bucks. They could have bought themselves a Ferrari or Mercedes and sent it overseas and sell it for cash. Because the Rand is not going to be worth anything. The rand will be worth nothing. Things will be

totally.....

↳ For so many years, being a white person, you are isolated. You are isolated completely unless you completely devote yourself to the other side. You must now go and move there and live there all the time, which is what I used to do. But I mean to earn a living, I had to do something with myself, and to earn a living you know, so I could tear around doing photographs, even a basic living. You have to go and work somewhere. So now, the only way you get a job is if you can get the guy to relate to you. If he identifies with you. So if you are a white man acting like a black man, or you have the same perspective as a black man, then he is vary wary of employing you, because you are against the basics of what he is. He is only where he is because he's got plenty of black men to throw around. It is not as if..... you don't see machines that dig holes here. You see thirty black guys digging away furiously.↳

It is a different situation. It has come to a point where everybody has been denied a lot of things. And people have learned different things in different ways. But it is just now getting all those people to identify with a certain political system. I suppose it is like the welfare state. It's like most of western Europe identifies with the welfare state. Or the majority of American people identify with the American constitution. But here you don't have that, you don't have any of that, so its a bit macabre, because guys disappear and guys run away to fight another day. It is very.... nobody knows what is going to hit the fan. It is hard to say. It is just you know.

This sort of photography I am doing is too personal. I get to know people so personally. These are my friends and a lot of things have changed because I can't go and see my friends anymore. Because when I get five miles outside of Mitchells Plain, I'll just get ripped out of my car, and they will just pump my name in every little computer, and old Mark so and so who visited me one day on such and such a date will have filed his report. And said.....well it depends.

Well Chris and I have been into Guguletu heavy shit by KTC. So we are cruising along on this dirt road. We are cruising through Gugs now, everybody is checking us out. There we are cruising and they can check that we are not involved with this thing. And we are cruising down on these bumpy roads and moving into the squatter camp. It is no sweat, just taking our cruise. The people aren't the people don'tI think there is actually a horrible paranoia created by the media and by everybody of "These people are totally anarchistic." They will become that, sure, because everybody is getting into violence now because that is what has always been used. It is not as if.....

The terrorists are the police. Terrorism is government orchestrated right from the very beginning. Since I've been here, guys have been going on a regular patrol with their baseball bats and beating up women and children and loading them into vans taking them to Polsmore and prosecuting them for not having a pass, or for living with your husband, things that don't have any sort of ethical....if you want to talk like that. If I was really extremely.

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That is why this new alliance, "Let South Africa Speak," those are the assholes. Those guys are just total wankers. And they think they are going to come in now, in 1984, the whole of South Africa's business, They are just going to come out in 1985, 1986 and say to the government, "Oh, Oh, all this Apartheid, this is nasty stuff lads, we've got to stop it." This is just bullshit. They could have done that forty years ago. And as capitalists they would be much richer men today because they would have had a much bigger market and they wouldn't be suffering this economic downturn and this international isolation. They would have manufacturing and everything organized.

So I believe that whoever takes over, it doesn't matter, they are going to have to have economic changes, build industries to support all these millions of people who have just been left totally idle, never been taught how to do anything that is associated with industrialized economy. And their usual things like farming and bricklaying....if you go in there are guys who are stonemasons, now that is a traditional African thing. And there is beautiful work, craftsmanship, you see, but that as been destroyed. Because the guys must have their big holes for LTA construction or Anglo-American. And all they do is carry a shovel. And so the grandfather can no longer teach his son how to be a mason. So that society is destroyed. So what else now. All the sons are migrant laborers. And they know nothing but carrying a shovel. And so they are becoming politicized and they are learning those sort of things and guys have tried to become educated. But you go to town and what do you do, you ride a fucking scooter for a chemist.