

Conversation with Chris Ledechowski at his home in Cape Town in October, 1985

I grew up in Joberg, but I went to boarding school in Swaziland, it was called Waterford (Kanhlababa) It was the first multi-racial, co-ed, what have you boarding school in the region. Most of the students were south Africans, 2/3rds, and the other third was made up of Swazis, Venda people, kings, and all Mandelas people. The school was on top of this mountain, just parked there on its own.

My folks were living in Joberg at the time, and so I did just the English curriculum, I didn't do Afrikans. I was at that school until I was 18, until I finished my A level, in 1974. That was one of the main advantages of the school, was that you could transfer directly into schools in the United Kingdom, Oxford and all of that, so Ford and all the foundations were supplying the bucks.

Everybody fucked-off from South Africa, and then when you got back to South Africa you were totally alienated from what was going on, you weren't part of that life. You would come home for holiday, and you know we all smoked Zol at the time, we weren't supposed to but we were all totally corrupt and so we just lived in an artificial life in Swaziland with not that great of a political understanding of what was happening in South Africa.

In those days, it was all sort of aimed for the cream. You had a couple of Swazi's from the bottom of the hill, but most were Swazi's from the king's family.

After school I went overseas, to Poland. My parents are both Polish. I've got lots of family, quite famous types really. I was supposed to be an academy man. Well then the time came to decide was I going to come back and do the army. You were told, either you come back and do this thing or else it is cherry-bye. And since both my parents at that stage, still lived here, I thought, this will never do, my whole situation was totally....If I came back I would be snatched up within the next few weeks. I was eighteen. I must have been nineteen. So I had to do the army for a year.

The army was pretty serious. What you try and do.....well that was the first time in my life when I confronted my fellow, so-called South African comrades, white South Africans. I had never really know them. And they all spoke this Afrikans, which I didn't understand. From the beginning I just thought, I have got to get the fucking hell out of this thing. So I started my Vortrekking, and got my way down to G-4 light duty work. So I got sent up to Pretoria, and there I was put into administrative tasks. Well it was basically translation, I didn't do any Russian, Polish or French, translation, like I was supposed to,

but I ended up doing Afrikans-English translation. That is when I started learning Afrikans, in the Army. Those guys start shouting at you to do this and do that, and you learned. But I tried to get out of it. That was 1976, and things were getting hot. I was in the office and got to know how these guys really think. There was another Yugoslav guy who was faking it.

For me this was heavy. I mean if you sit next to Mandela's lighty in school and feel fuck-all about it, I mean by the time I left school it didn't seem that strange, so coming back to South Africa was a whole reorientation. You had to realize that you couldn't just go and visit your friends from school, during the holidays.

So then after the Army I came back, and decided not to move back to Poland and came to Cape Town. I was on my own. And then I started this Michaelis school of art. I was a student there for four years. It is part of the University of Cape Town. I majored in photography. So the only other D who was vaguely doing the same thing as me was Paul Konings. He was at Michaelis too. And independently, we started photographing outside of school. And I was operating (photographing) in this little village which is called ( ) for the final year at school. And so I started taking these pictures.

We were living in this (Harfield (sp?) village, which is now white. I mean the last few families were kicked out a few months ago, but basically it is different from 76 in that it was more gradual then. But the structure of the village is very much the same, very small alley-ways, and stuff in between, and strategically all designed for hiding. So once you got into that little alleyway, that behive of back yards, there was no way any cop could ever find you. And so what was happening there, everybody was being slowly pushed out, and young guy my age who had just come out of the University with a building or science degree or whatever, were getting their daddies to buy them a street, buy the fucking street! Most of the guys who had lived there were in the semi-skilled occupations, building trades mainly, so now all these guys who had been living in those houses for all their lives, were now used by these guys to renovate the houses, very cheaply, obviously you paid them very little, and they weren't paying these guys much, they just basically gave them stuff to drink.

I was photographing this one guy and his group of characters. He was living in these places, all the time. So I would just take pictures of all the different characters who were around. And at the time, the whole artistic thing was quite important. I was trying to make series. There wasn't a single photograph that stood on its own it was all part of a series. It was both documentary and artistic work in the sense that these D's at art school were expecting you to take pictures of I don't know what, arty type pictures. So how are you going to put the thing together, your interests and whatever they think you should be doing with photographs. So I had to have some artistic thing to hold it all together.

Well my whole theory was #1, Evidence. Each photograph you take you give back to that person, or those people. That is why you are taking the picture. You give them a big one, because the whole process

CHRIS  
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is an educational process. You are not just giving them a picture, you are breaking down a whole idea of special picture. After a week and after a month, and after six months, and after a year of handing over these hundreds and hundreds of pictures, and being there every day taking pictures, you break down that whole "specialness" of pictures and you start to actually see the everyday life, and the relationship with the photographer, whatever it might be.

The whole thing was at that time, no one was really being serious with me except for Dubos, and he's the head of the department, a Bauhaus type character, Dada and all that. So obviously the social scene was, well the teachers didn't know how to handle this, they didn't agree with the series pictures, because for them, the series had to be really great. What I was saying was "Fuck it." If I take a picture, ten minutes later it's different. Things have moved on, time has moved on. Maybe someone's left and another person's arrived. Now you just destroy the whole thing, this photography as art with the single picture that you can just dissect.

Then I finished Michaelis, I wasn't very keen on that. Then I went up to Joberg again, to try and get into film because that was a logical step, in my whole theory, to get beyond the individual image altogether. And if you had voices and words, then things would get clearer. Because the kind of photography these guys at school were after was one that mystifies more and more, rather than clarifies more and more. Take a picture of a cat on a wall and try to read terribly deep thoughts into that, which is mysticism, just getting as far away from reality as possible.

So I was just saying, let's get down to more basic things. But very straight stuff. I wasn't taking gangsters in fights in all that sort of sensational thing which the sort of stuff that Paul (Konings) does. Everything had to be absolutely, in Afrikans you would say "spoonsteen (sp?)" so that there was no evidence and the whole understanding of the people involved, because obviously all these guys cannot be on the right side of the law, as ninety percent of the working class must be outside of the law to survive, the pass laws and all that. So most guys on the average spend ten, fifteen years of their lives in jail, the average. And on top of that all this building, all this renovating is not really giving them enough money, so they have got to also hawk and meat (sp?) to actually keep their families going and to pay the exorbitant rents.

The whole thing was obviously in slightly artificial set-up, because it was an art school theoretical set-up. I could, I mean it wasn't realistic work, now when I look at the stuff, it is not realistic. But it was a process.

Well then I started going off the Vendale and stuff. I had been taking a lot of pictures before I even went to Art School, but just color pictures, I had never done black and white. But I had been all over the place. So now I went back up to Vendale, to visit this guy (Petrus), and then I came back to Cape Town. I spent a few weeks in Vendale. This is in 1982. I had been up there many times, many times I'd been there.

This guy worked for my parents, he brought me up, a second father. Petrus Maluwazi. They are a serious lot in Venda, traditional culture, very conservative, rich in a way, but they didn't fuck around. I mean since I can remember he has been moved, long before Vendale existed, he's been moved countless times. And he would have a couple of months and go and move his house from one place to another, because some farmer decided to move him. I mean they started off on the top ground near that mission station there, it was beautiful, fertile, and it just rained. I was the most amazing ground I'd seen. That is where they lived traditionally. Since then they were moved further and further down, down, down, down. And now they just are all clapped in together in a little village on top of this ridge in a valley. And there is a tiny river there that has totally dried out. But their conditions are just absolutely beyond belief.

With Carnegie, I was mainly involved in the video business. But Crossroads, as soon as I came back from Vendale, I went into Crossroads. Because I used to go to Crossroads before I started taking pictures in Art School of that village, I was taking pictures out in Crossroads and all over the area. I was involved in Crossroads for a long time. It was a little place. You could walk around it in a half-hour.

It was vibrant, absolutely positive. I never ever had any bad vibes or anything like that in Crossroads. It was not like in the townships, where you can have bad times all day long. I mean you don't get the best vibes from those places, all the gangsters and all that. And you have got to be on the defensive in the townships. While in Crossroads, I never had to feel that. Maybe now, if I walked in now, I think it would be different. But in those days, you really you just didn't worry about anything, and it was really relaxed there.

I went there originally for Zol, yea it was probably that. I just felt at home there. It wasn't such a formal structure as the townships you know. I mean the townships it is all pretty formal. While there, you could move easier, and the people were easier also.

So the Carnegie work was from 1983, since I've come back to Cape Town. And when I came back, I checked, you know. I mean the first thing I did when I came back to Cape Town was go check what happened and I checked all black people I knew. So decided, since I was staying in Phillipi in the time, I decided I'll just come here to Crossroads every day and see what is going on. Phillipi is a farming area.

But things had changed when I got back to Crossroads. Because there were now plastic shelters. Before they were shacks which were knocked down, but now there was a whole other movement, with more and more influx of people who didn't have rights to stay. And they were now being harrassed, they were being told that they couldn't stay. I always told, you have to tell people exactly what the fuck is going on before you can even take a picture. So they know these pictures are going to go to Afrapix, you know, or to Carnegie, or whatever, and they have still got option to refuse, when I bring them the picture and they check it. If they don't like the picture, I'll scrap it, I can't sell it. And so far I haven't had anybody say no, except for the

Chris

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flowers, up and down, up and down, until the fucking flowers are coming out of their ears.

As my work has been going, it has been going more and more towards portraits, but I suppose one just has stages. I've gotten more and more involved in portraits because I sort of realized, what is that extra quality, printability, so I went to 2 and 1/4. But I mean I spend hours, six seconds, f stop sixteen, all indoors, 100 ASA.

With Afrascope, there was nothing arty about it at all. The job was to document what was going on. So we just documented right from the beginning of the formation of the UDF. We documented everything, it was absolutely invaluable. In theory it was a good idea. Because you had all the networks filming at all or some of the meetings, but some of them they couldn't get into but we could because we were actually officially UDF documentary team. So that was very very important. So the thing would have been to edit very fast and produce something solid that actually made a statement and then to distribute it all over. Noone really got the proper story. But the Police raided us and got all the tapes and are now using this as the main evidence in the treason trials.

I was fascinated by this project because of my concern for documenting, and knowing that all that really mattered was who was in control. Because you can influence things by your angle your moment, etc, etc. But the other choice, the real choices are sometimes in your control. Meaning who uses the work, in what context, and with what captions, in whose interests, etc. etc. etc. It gets very complicated and that is really what it is all about when one gets down to the hard facts. With video, when the camera is on all the time, you are documenting reality, which documentary has always been trying to get close to. That is about as close as you can get. But this is very dangerous, because it can be edited to say any number of things and used in a way it was never intended. The film is more useful for the Police than it was for us.

Omar: If you are going to hide from the police, you hide from the people. If you are going to be worried constantly about the state and what it has to say, then you will never get to the people. If all your political actions are determined by what the state has to say, then there is no political action. The main concern is to document things or to work things or to say things from your point of view. The state will always use material like this for its own purposes.

Chris: In video, they have the master tape, not the negative. We should have made copies and given the boera not the original things, and all that other stuff, and the film that will follow for the people will be in all sort of edited form. We should have edited it fast for history.

Conversation with Chris Lechowski at Mike Davies apartment in Capetown in November, 1985

It was all very very stimulating .....except that to me there was always, I mean especially once I started going to school in Swaziland, then I know, I identified the problem. It was the environment, and the style of life and the relation to the servants or whatever. That no matter how good the conversation and the actual vibrancy of discussion and everything, activity, intellectual activity in the house, it was overshadowed by the reality of the situation. I really felt that I, as the one who was feeling it, was not right, you know, and no one else could check it, no one noticed it. We still had servants serving. I felt out of it, right from that age, from the 11 to 12 years old onwards. From then, I went to school, away from home. At school, OK, you are away from home and all that and here you were in a strange country up on this hill, you know, but you couldn't speak the people's language to start with. And there were all these different races, and quite a heavy attitude towards South Africa, which made you, at that age.....which was a problem at that age, because when you come back to South Africa, then you don't know where you actually belong, withing South Africa. Because you are checking it out, "That's a whole lot of shit over there," But in the end you still haven't developed to such an extent mentally or maturity-wise that you realize the full social, political significance of it. You are recognizing it more on subjective level and just on a racial level. When you start picking up that this is a bit wierd, because of the guy down at the bottom of the hills, from the favelas, from the squatter camps. I was brought up at squatter camps, now when I think of it because of, after school, you would be down the fucking mountain which was a good two K's you know, and I mean in those days you were active because of this mountain, and you had to get down over this river, and into the mixture of huts and modern of urban Favela whatever, squatter camp situation, corregated iron Crossroads situation. ....at the bottom of the Hill. That was where the life was.....the bottle store, the shabean, that would be the life, the opening to that outside world, the druggies, and the prostitutes and you would be checking it all out. But that was the main thing, you see, checking it out every day for the best one in the village, and you build up your connections and I mean from that age, and I mean before that age, I had already stayed in Vendaland, you know, stayed in Vendaland, with that guy in the picture, the guy from Vendaland, I had stayed with him when I was a little boy, out in Vendaland, you see. So now, I was used to the whole set up, and I was always close to the servants, so this Swaziland situation and because of my mother being connected to all these liberal things, you know, I mean, I was really used to black kids, so when I went to Waterford, it wasn't such a big change, it was just that this now became reality...you would go to school up the road, run by these masochistic Brothers, you know, but as I was saying.....what I was saying about that bottom of the hill business was that some of the guys at school were actually from the bottom of the hill, and from places much more remote than the bottom of the hill, because the bottom of the hill was already an aspiring area, an aspiring suburb compared to out in the fucking sticks somewhere, and there were O's from out in the sticks who were there on government grants and that's when you started to realize that this is something wrong, you know, because although it is all nice and sweet, and I mean apart when you go home for holidays because you suddenly realize that in Soweto you can't visit so easily.

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The main realization came with these guys, when you start realizing, shit, this is actually their country, but these guys aren't part of us. They haven't been brought up the same, they aren't from the same class level. That is where the conflict was. It wasn't a racial thing, it was more of class thing. That is when I started to realize it was fucked here. And then I fucked off to Europe and thought, no man, I must just go to Poland and forget this whole thing because it's just getting too complicated. But I really thought, I must come back and learn what the hell is going on in this country, because I didn't know what was going on, because I was like all these other misfits from Zambia and Tanzania, and Kenya, not so many of us were of that class in South Africa almost the top strata of all races.

I think of lot of my classmates just closed up on the whole racial question and just moved into academia into whatever their thing was and just moved overseas. Their whole thing was to use school to get through to an overseas university, which was what the school was actually designed for, it was for non-whites who didn't have the opportunity in South Africa to be able to go to a school where they have a British curriculum and a Cambridge education whereby they could be automatically channelled into British Universities and American Universities, and then there were the ones who didn't go. And the ones who went weren't happy either, some of them are and some of them aren't, some of them are disillusioned. Some of them are still talking about South Africa in a very intellectual way but then they lost touch.

It just wasn't such a conscious thing in my youth, but racial things, weren't ever discussed, ever ever discussed. I mean it wasn't ever an issue at the school. But the class issue, the more delicate class issue wasn't discussed, I mean Maybe, but it was usually like these guys would keep to themselves from Swaziland, you know, and I mean you would find a bit of a Soweto there also, and a bit of an Indian clique also, and a big Indian and a Joberg clique and a Joberg clique, separate Jols, you know, but then there are the religious issues too, the Hindus and the Muslims, Fuck man,.....

When I took these pictures of this man, when I was young, sometimes we would go together. My mom would always go with us, we would be driving up there the whole fucking lot of us. My old lady would take the whole house. The way we picked him up, after moving from Pretoria my parents moved to Joberg and we were living out of Joberg in a place called Morningside. And in those days that was genuine country, there was farmland and our neighbors farmed and that is where Petrus was from. I mean for them, that's the way, it's through the farms, and then you get to move and he got his opportunity and got out of that whole farm thing and into the safe custody of a domestic. For him was safe compared to the farm. He did not bring his family. He was always contract labor. And the other guy who came when we then moved from Morningside to where my parents have just left which was ?????(name) when we moved into that house, we inherited, CAN YOU BELIEVE, a Malawi guy, who was just really, I mean a really nice guy. But you know not to good in the intellectual thing, and he didn't get along with Petrus at all, you know with the Malawi and Vendaland just don't work. They are both into this witchdoctor business and that

whole development, that whole thing developed with time. Petrus was into that too. There was a feud between Petrus and that guy, both being domestic serants now, for my parents. Very interesting. So I checked that all out, in my youth, and finally, OK, the other guy had to go, Flywa had to go. He was from Malawi. I mean and he would make the most amazing picture, he was shiny, SHINY, and had the most incredible well groomed mustache and I mean he was an east African, He would be there in his white articles for supper, white kakkies but actually immaculate, smelling very strongly of Sunlight Soap, and I always remembered this epitomy of clean serving us every night. But he was only allowed to serve because Petrus was the cook, and I mean Petrus was a fucking brilliant cook. He can cook any fucking thing anyone can, and that means Polish, French, Italian and English, only the top stuff, not the peasant stuff, and he ran that house, he ran that whole fucking mansion, he directed that whole thing.

I spent much more time with the servant than my parents when I was young. When I spent time with adults, I would spend it with him. I wouldn't eat much with my parents, you can ask that of my parents if you want. I just wasn't up to the whole routine of sitting down that way, because it was formal and the accent was on the intellectual and now my brother would take care of that so I knew I was excused of the task of having to open my mouth. So I realized there was no fucking point in me being there, so I realized I might as well go and rap with Petrus in the back there and eat the genuine food, not all these little tidbits coming in courses with their little plates. We would go and eat pap in the back there, you know, mealie pap, the staple diet, mealie pap and meat. He would never eat the main dishes of my parents. I mean if there was leftovers they would eat this always, but they didn't like, they liked their own food, that is one thing for sure, if you asked Petrus personally, what kind of meat he would want, he would want the meat that you have to cook for an entire three hours on full, three hours on full, not on simmer, so by the end, that meat is just genuine servant meat, but you now how that meat tastes..., but you know how much electricity of the Lannies he used cooking it?..... lots of Electricity. Now in the early days, they had a fire, they had a big kind of wood fire, on which they were supposed to cook, in their quarters, and that wood heated the water for them. So, if you hadn't made your own fire and you thought you could make a slow move in the lannies kitchen, you didn't come out with your hot shower. If you wanted your hot shower, you had to fucking make you fucking shower and clean that hearth every day.

Everything was part of life you know. He would be telling me all the stories, giving me all the knowledge from the bush, the animals and everything, to make you know what, from making everything that you need to.....MIKE DAVIES ENTERS HERE AND WE QUIT THE INTERVIEW!!!

Childhood +  
RACE  
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Face +  
Childhood  
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Conversation between Chris and Mike Davies in Cape Town 11/ 85

Mike Davies: .I can't understand why there has been so many masters degree students in photography, I mean in painting, in sculpture and ceramics and silkscreen. And yet nobody in photography.

Alex: What do you mean by them being scared of photography, Chris

Chris: Because if you are given a painting which has four corners, it is fairly safe. That keeps the reality within those four corners. And you can sort of play around intellectually and artistically and use all sorts of values to describe those four corners. But if you start to actually accept that those four corners are only a part of actually an exposure of reality, which is a photograph, then you are talking of something different. Because all these people at artschool spend their lives trying to run away from that bloody reality. They haven't driven eleven thousand kilometers like this guy did to do his masters to go and see South Africa. They sit in their rooms with a couple of books and whole lot of theory. To keep it all watertight. Because anything that actually threatens them outside of their watertight system is obviously a threat. And they don't know how they deal with it. They can't put a mark on it. They can't say okay, you've got a first class, second class or third class. Now they don't know. You are actually talking about the situation out there. What the hell do they know about the situation out there. Fuck all.. All they know about is what Modigliani said about Picasso about, what have you, what have you. All that really rigid stuff. All really rigid stuff.

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When you are confronted with this photograph of whatever, what did we describe, a photograph like the cover of this book. What does Michaelis say about that. They will start talking about this corner in relation to the frame in relation to the other. They wouldn't know what to say. They have never been to a bloody funeral like that.

That's the problem. They have only stayed within the upper echelons of society. They haven't seen the white or black side, of the lower side. So they just don't know. And now the Buffalo Rally that Mike Photographed, that smacks to them of the Sunday Times...is all it means to them. That lowly, sort of stuff, but it is the reality of South Africa. But they can't find a niche for it within this very constricted artistic framework. If it doesn't fit in there than there is no place for it.

Mike: First of all you have to define a heading for what you are doing. So lets start the heading like "Some South African cultures or sub-cultures," looking at specific leisure time activities, relating to cultures. So we have a couple of words already which they can hit you on. What is a culture, what is leisure time? What do those things mean? What is the umbrella concept of leisure time? What is this whole subculture? Is there a subculture. You have try to define what a culture is. Then you have got to talk about leisure time. What is leisure time goes back to the ancient Greek philosophers. The sorting of the homeland. end of conversation.