
Unlocking identities in globalising South African art¹

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As part of the centenary celebrations of the University of Pretoria, an exhibition entitled *Visuality/Commentary*² was held in May 2008 to commemorate a history of more than fifty years of teaching and learning in the discipline of the visual arts. For the artists who participated in the centenary exhibition, the initial custom-made stage on which they learned to play was the Department of Visual Arts at this institution. Here they learned the skills and pleasures of looking, examining, conceptualising and representing, since this is what artists do: they survey the world, scrutinise and evaluate it, and they comment on it through visual depictions. In this article, the impact of world construction on the conceptual orientation of alumni of the Department of Visual Arts is traced. In particular, the relationship of artist to world is explored in the notion of a tertiary institution as an initial 'world' of learning; thereafter, the place of artists in a globalising world and the idea of the world as the metaphoric stage and playground of the artist are explored. All the artworks referred to here were part of the *Visuality/Commentary* exhibition.

Institutional and global ideologies

It is fair to maintain that every world construction, also a "world" of learning such as a tertiary institution, is blue-printed in some form of ideology. The lecture halls at a large university such as the University of Pretoria also speak about this expanding cultural horizon and it is not uncommon to have a class where there are students from Korea, Zimbabwe and Namibia mingling with a range of South African ethnicities. The picture now is very different from the picture of years ago when South African universities were predominantly "white" as a result of the ideological patterns of the time.

Artists are players in these ideology games of the world and, as citizens of the world, participate in and reflect the *Zeitgeist* of their time. In South Africa, art production has consistently displayed utopianism of varying kinds, evident in both Modernist art that corroborated loyalty to colonialist European influences and traditions and in work entrenched in soft protest to white supremacy in the 1980s.³

After the initial playground of the University, the graduandi moved into the public arena of display, an arena which is becoming increasingly *global*;⁴ nowhere is this more evident than in cities where a new sociology of space that focuses on the experiential rather than the social-discursive aspects of the city is playing out (Wolff 1994:129). Such multiculturalism was depicted, for instance, in Talita Swarts' work, *Kwere-kwere* (no date, Figure 1), an installation of radios that through sound literally broadcasts a conundrum of communication in the eleven South African official languages. The uniform frames and models of radio represent commonalities in global ideological frames of mind that are entrenched in the spread of



Figure 1: Talita Swarts, *Kwere-kwere* (no date).
Radio installation, 2 x 2m. Courtesy of the artist.

knowledge and information through communication technologies. Yet every radio is tuned to a different station, confirming human individuality and differences.

The works of artists such as Anton Karstel, Keith Dietrich and Johan van der Schijff are stylistically and conceptually aligned with global issues of nomadism and mobility, yet their references to South African culture and life are detectable in fragments of colonial histories and local storytelling. Karstel's installation at the *Visuality/Commentary* exhibition entitled *108166N* (2004, Figure 2) consisted of block-mounted photographs and depicts a flat Nyala (a kind of antelope) police truck. A photographic record of the surface of the armoured truck was made by the artist and presented laid out on the floor like a vast piece of skin, reminiscent at the same time of flattened



Figure 2: Anton Karstel, *108166N*, 2004.
Installation, 7 x 6m. Courtesy of the artist.

out land. The work speaks about sense of place, ownership and state control, aspects that evoke utopian notions of design of state. The artist states: 'I am interested in the symbolic power of the thin layer of paint that covers the armour plating. The truck had a dove grey colour. A neutral white replaced the old distinctive yellow and dove grey, marking the change from the South African Police Force to the South African Police Service' (Karstel in *Visuality/Commentary* 2008:78). Subtle hints at institutional control, discipline and "colouring" in terms of shaping the thinking, orientation and world views of students are detected in the metaphors of the military vehicles and the grey colouring.

The structuring of the work, almost as building blocks or a puzzle of sections, could be seen as representing the building blocks of a design of state or a utopian idea of a perfectly ordered world, evoking the Platonic idea of the life of the citizen interwoven with that of the polis as an ideal state.⁵ As argued by Michel Foucault⁶ and Kevin Hetherington (1997:12), although utopia was mainly articulated as a fictional construct in literature, an important contribution thereof has been the awareness it brought to the notions of spatial and social ordering in contemporary life, especially with regard to cities and the globalising world. Postmodernity today is conceived as entrenched in heterotopic spatiality where difference and Otherness are articulated as post-utopian space. Hetherington (1997: 43) states that:

Heterotopia signify not through resemblance, as in the way a metaphor works – one thing being used to resemble another – but through similitude, more an example of metonymy as in the manner that Magritte explores in his paintings, where meaning is dislocated through a series of deferrals that are established between a signifier and a signified rather than directly to a referent.

Dystopia is a depiction and a critique of utopia-gone-wrong. The reference to the indoctrination of state policies in Karstel's *108166N* contains an innate dystopian tone when considered against the dehumanising impact of apartheid and poses an innate question about the nature of the boundaries and regulations created by institutions and ideological policies.

Global identity

Most of the artworks on exhibition at the *Visuality/Commentary* exhibition reflected an ambivalent mixture of utopian and dystopian visions of the globalising world. The expanding scale and heterotopic nature of globalisation and social relations have manifested in a range of conditions, activities and occupations (Cohen & Kennedy 2000:147), such as the physically disabled, the insane, pickpockets, apprentices, thieves and prostitutes that mix with elegantly dressed, fast-moving aloof business people – all part and parcel of the rich global landscape of the cities of developing countries. This landscape has become a spectacle of a different kind, depicting contemporary human condition on a global canvas. On this canvas, artists are *flâneurs*,⁷ described by Stefan Morawski (1994:181) as 'notoriously harboured in familiarity with our past and actual surroundings, accustomed to our unshaken at-homeness in the world. ... If it is agreed that this situation is characteristic of the human condition and calls for philosophic reflection, then there is no doubt that *flânerie* is due not primarily to onto-existential reasons but is due first of all to more or less definite sociological processes.'

Metaphorically speaking, artists as *flâneurs* stroll through the world, entailing acts (often detached) of observation and leisurely play, as well as Guy Debord's (1958) concept of *dérive*, which is the practice of an itinerant stroll that is neither determined, nor teleological. Aptly rendered in Adele Oldfield's mixed-media work, *Wo-man* (2008, Figure 3), the habitat of the global *flâneurs* is a fragile, volatile place where dreams and hopes of utopia, even if flawed, have been traded for commodities in the survival game. The continuous voyage of discovery of the *flâneur*-artist in the South African context is a 'sociability of Ones' where individuality and agency are jealously guarded (Shield 1994:76-77) and manifest in *Wo-man* in individual styles of dressing, a kind of sentiment for what is one's own.

Global citizens, as Saskia Sassen (1997:61) argues, reconstitute strategic spaces in the city in their own cultural and personal images that reflect the patterns of the changing morphology of late modernism.

Post-utopian questioning of boundaries, applied to identity issues in the global context, sees difference and Otherness glibly becoming Sameness in a society where the strong force of the modernising impulse erases traditional and conceptual boundaries and differences. The reproduction capability in mechanisation and the computer industry has turned duplication and mass production into signal words of the global world. In Theresa-Ann Mackintosh's work, *Tina* (2006, Figure 4), the centrality of the concept of duplication induced by mass culture is depicted through the presentation of identical dolls with two bar codes for eyes and another two as dress decoration. The stylistic simplicity of the objects, reminiscent of Popular Art, refers to a culture of global communication, engineering and production systems premised in computer principles of cost-effectiveness and streamlining. As such, the work comments on the global human condition.

Similarly, Gwenneth Miller's work, *Holy relics* (no date, Figure 5), presents a collection of selected glass objects neatly ordered in compartments. In the work, the calculated arrangement engages a scientific paradigm, yet the objects have a personal history, being specially manufactured for the artist's father-in-law, a scientific researcher from Germany, and handed down to the artist as gifts. The meaning of the universal technological and scientific character of the objects is thus transmuted as personalised treasure.

Within the planetary hive of transcultural activity, individuality and particularity present as a domain where personal experiences, idiosyncrasies and human tragedies can be staged. Most of the alumni works at the *Visuality/Commentary* exhibition, though, such as the work of Mackintosh and Miller, engaged a universalist and international framework that does not necessarily reproduce South African distinctiveness. Although the nature of contemporary artmaking in South Africa is increasingly becoming more international and less indigenous, local South African identity-rendering was strongly evident in many of the artworks on exhibition, such as those by Daniel Mosako and Sakie Seoka. Seoka's work *Hope of World Cup Final in South Africa* (no date, Figure 6) depicts two figures in a rural village environment and is entrenched in the hope projected onto a global event, the 2010 Fifa World Cup, which many South Africans

believe will bring about prosperity and wealth. The work engages with patriarchal values because the woman serves the man and is depicted half-naked and "primitive"; the man is dressed in trendy sports clothes and therefore the dress codes marry African third-world culture with international culture.

Global grouping

A leading globalisation theorist, Roland Robertson (1992: 8, 27), observes that the process of globalisation at work in spaces where cultures and groups are squeezed together seems to be 'driven towards increased mutual interaction' (Cohen & Kennedy 2000:24), which affects the construction of identity as well as the understanding of space and time when the world becomes one place (planet) and one (global) nation.

The collaborative work by Franci Cronjé and Adam Levin *Voorstedelike nagmerries van onvergenoeagdheid*⁸ (Suburban nightmares of discontent, 2006, Figure 7), challenges ideas about social belonging and the meanings traditionally attached to goods such as artefacts and houses 'circulated within families through inheritance and shared ownership' (Cohen & Kennedy 2000:232). The installation addressed life in contemporary South Africa and how South Africans position themselves and take ownership of their "own" within the context of the global world. A view expressed by the work was that in terms of the expression of a human condition, experience and awareness, South Africa as a peripheral country within the domain of powerful first-world giants should not be derailed and dominated into an inferior global position on the basis of wealth and the disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots".

Cronjé and Levin's work furthermore addresses the notion of the "victim", a concept that is central to globalisation discourses. In this regard, Cohen and Kennedy (2000:29) note that 'globalization impacts very differently on different regions of the world', which raises questions about why some lose and some win and whether losers can alter their place in the hierarchy and become potent. These questions are symbolised by the portrayal of Adam Levin as a victim of HIV/AIDS.



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Figure 3: Adele Oldfield, Detail of *Wo-man*, 2008.
Mixed media, 100 panels, each panel 15 x 21cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



04

Figure 4. Theresa-Ann Mackintosh's, *Tina*, 2006.
Fibreglass, 152 x 55cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



05

Figure 5: Gwenneth Miller, *Holy relics* (no date).
Ultra chrome inks on Hahnemühle paper, A1. Courtesy of the artist.



06

Figure 6: Saki Seoka, *Hope of World Cup Final in South Africa*, no date. Polychrome concrete, 70cm high. Courtesy of the artist.



07

Figure 7: Franci Cronjé and Adam Levin, *Voorstedelike nagmerries van onvergenoegdheid*, 2006. Video installation. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8: Colleen Maswanganyi, *Doctor*, 2007. Cocker wood, 90cm high. Courtesy of the artist.

Within the global perspective of haves and have-nots, there has been a newly emerging Other, described by Nigerian art critic Olu Oguibe (1996) as follows:

Electronic mail and the web browser, with all their unarguably positive potentials, nevertheless become veritable tools for the construction and fortification of an other world, outside the borders of which everything else is inevitably consigned to erasure and absence. In connective South Africa the majority of the population fit most perfectly into that category of the inconsequential revealingly known in cyberspeak as "PONA". They are, indeed, a people of no account.

This situation has been drastically altered, however, since the above-mentioned article was written in 1996, and today there is more abundant use of digital technology and electronic components in South Africa, which is apparent in contemporary artmaking. Colonialist and apartheid constructs of race as Other have mostly become obsolete in the rush for material and economic gain and survival. The Other as the "have-not" or the victim is actually the economically poor person who has neither work nor technology, or someone who has become impoverished through an illness such as HIV/AIDS. In Saskia Sasen's (1997:56) article, 'Globalisation and the formation of new claims', she confirms this view and argues that the global world that is fast turning into an artifice of networks, technologies and manufacture, and that the city as an organisational commodity could provide the infrastructure to disenfranchised and disadvantaged communities to grow and "catch-up"; by sharing resources that are the very consequence of a racist regime, she argues, a new transnational economic geography can be created and the past overcome.

A question to be asked is whether globalisation itself is a force that contributes to social marginality. The key deprived groups, according to Cohen and Kennedy (2000: 135), are workers in de-industrialising areas, peasants, refugees and the urban poor. Colleen Maswanganyi's *Doctor* (2007, Figure 8) portrays a plea for help and "healing", a view reflected by Lyman Tower Sargent (2003: 229) who in 'The problem of the "Flawed Utopia": a note on the costs of Eutopia' argues that utopian thought life is seen as having the potential to be fulfilling if only enough people would insist that poverty, disease, and degradation are *not* the portion allotted to human beings.

In other works of Maswanganyi, as well as in Seoka's *Hope of World Cup Final in South Africa*, the desire for a foothold in the global economy and absorption into the global elite of the "haves" was rendered through the depiction of *flâneurs* that conform to dress etiquette in the business sector and are equipped with cell phones and laptops. Maswanganyi's work represents the Oguibeian view that technology in Africa is empowering, uplifting and utopian.

Global technologies

A critical problem in globalisation entrenched in modernisation theory is, as Andrew Feenberg (1995:27) argues in *Alternative technology: the technical turn in philosophy and social theory*, that 'In the postcolonial era, modernization theory ... cheerfully predict[ed] the passage to *Western style* modernity on a world scale' [my emphasis]. In South Africa these modernistic utopian ideals resulted in an amalgam of residues of traditional belief and moral systems of the third world with first-world visions of technologies, markets, commodities and money.

Many South African artists have succumbed to the seduction of the digital machine, only to be lured back to traditional materials such as paint and turpentine. Just like the early prophets of postindustrialisation such as Daniel Bell, Lyotard's analysis of the importance of the role of the computer in *The postmodern condition* (1991) seems less prescient than anticipated. His speculation that in future the expression of knowledge and insights will be limited to 'machine language' only (Lyotard 1991:4), is proved fallible when considering powerful works that show that artists have found alternative ways and means of expressing themselves. This does not mean that the old has passed for ever. Within the global paradigms of digital networking and new kinds of communicating, in the *Visuality/Commentary* exhibition the new was folded in the old and vice versa: bronze works speaking of medieval blazing neighboured luminescent multimedia works and works utilising found materials such as velvet sat comfortably next to fluid oil paintings. The impact of modernisation in these works seems not to have been a flattening of cultural differences but a new range of choices in materials and topics opening up for artists.

Several artworks in the *Visuality/Commentary* exhibition spoke about the ontologies and power structures underpinning global phenomena such as mobility, transnational cultures and digital technologies. In Johan Thom's two-channel video projection *Birth of a tyrant* (2007, Figure 9), globalism as a human condition is evident in the placement of the viewer in the middle of an interaction between two groups of characters: the contestants of the first season of the reality show *America's Next Top Model* and the artist performing Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Heterotopic constructs intermingle in the merging of recorded and televised reals, both part of global media constructs. By placing the viewer in the mid-position, the artist articulates the idea of recipience in the face of massive media overload where different ideologies mingle, such as the political ideologies embedded in the Iraqi debate and the ideologies of body and appearance inherent in the Top Model context.

In the ideologies of the visual media, a multitude of "truths" is presented and truth becomes something that is demonstrated rather than theorised. Feenberg (1995: 130) argues a kind of truth 'consumerism' where 'the pursuit of truth becomes just another business, a new concept of truth as "performativity" replaces traditional realism'. In Minnette Vári's *Fulcrum* (2007, Figure 10), the self is presented as a free agent and the boundaries of the self are constantly transgressed and violated. Naomi Jacobs (2003:93) defines free agency as complete in him/herself, impenetrable and his/her boundaries inviolable, while not relinquishing the postmodern self as decentred, fluid, and multiple and its desires the product of social forces: 'A person may believe herself to be bounded, complete, and independent; but this sense of unity or self-identity is itself a mark of the extent to which the subject exists in a state of subjection and is penetrated through and through by Otherness'. The 'truth' of self articulated here is a nomadic self that transforms continually within the contextual spiral of global change.

In Vári's *Fulcrum*, the apocalyptic imagery evoked notions of a dystopian world propelled onto a self-destructive path, almost as an entire city on an exploratory rampage. The work can be interpreted as a demonstration of mortality and the inevitability of "end" and death, an existential *fait accompli* that everyone shares and flattens the differences between people. It further recalls Sargent's



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Figure 9: Johan Thom, *Birth of a tyrant*, 2007.
 Looped two channel video projection, 3 min 27 sec. Installation, 7 x 6m. Courtesy of the artist.



10

Figure 10: Minnette Vári, *Fulcrum*, 2007.
 Digital video. Duration: Video 2'30" Stereo Audio 5'00" Looped
 Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

(2003:225) view of utopia as ‘the ultimate tragedy of human existence, constantly holding out the hope of a good life and repeatedly failing to achieve it.’ *Fulcrum* speculates on utopia that can become a dystopian web of control that can be so densely woven that it becomes a *mise en scène* for a configuration where the self cannot be expressed freely any longer and individuality is generally destroyed.

When an art medium such as video is considered, the notion of the boundaries of the self is under siege since in cyberspace loss of identity and agency is facilitated through the disembodiment and the engagement with the artificial, which in the end becomes dystopian. Such nomadism and *flânerie* in cyberspace encapsulated in the posthuman body imply endless potential for interfacing differences: ‘For Braidotti’s nomad, identity is serial; many different styles of being or thinking may be used as needed and then set aside. The parallels with Butler’s universe-roaming, hybridizing, shape-shifting aliens are not difficult to trace’ (Jacobs 2003:95).

Vári’s (mostly) degendered *flâneuse* is thrust into uncharted territories of being that border on horror and the abject. Her solitary *flâneuse* propels aimlessly through the land and the city, the latter often in transit, morphing and unfolding. As in previous works, her figures are restlessness incarnate, living an ‘obscure existence with a yet-undiscovered-essence, looking around in hope to find the predication that has-not-yet-arrived; the hope on a hunting expedition in the aim is the game’ (Bauman 1994:139).

Closing

The rich and diverse body of work that was exhibited at the *Visuality/Commentary* exhibition reflected emerging global geographies that have become ambivalent spaces where there is an almost alchemical mixing and intermingling of different cultures and languages that nevertheless generate global commonalities and international styles. The artworks produced within these contexts reveal that identities have become hybrid and pluralist, cities have become cosmopolitan and art production has become complex and multifaceted.

Notes

- 1 This article is a revised and amended version of the article in the catalogue for the exhibition, *Visuality/Commentary*, held at the University of Pretoria by the Department of Visual Arts, 12-21 May 2008.
- 2 The exhibition took place on the campus of the University of Pretoria and was curated by Margaret Slabbert, Elfriede Dreyer and Guy du Toit.
- 3 At the turn of the second millennium, white South African artists produced work – considered at the time as mainstream – that was entrenched in colonialism, predominantly displaying European supremacy and a marked schism between art and so-called craft. Under the Nationalist regime, from 1948 onwards, whiteness as culture and identity was the guiding norm when it came to determining a South African identity. It was only during the mid-1980s that, as a strategy of resistance in art practice and exhibition, that curators such as Ricky Burnett (with the *BMW Tributaries* exhibition) made a deliberate attempt at inclusivity and to showcase the work of as many cultural groups as possible.
- 4 Globalisation is a complex process that is rooted in economic, social, moral and intellectual advancement: According to the communication giants, nations needed to be wired up and connected, especially the so-called ignorant such as Africans. The idea of a global culture is not new, and was already thematised during the second century by Polybius in his *Universal history*, where he refers to things happening in the world as united in a common bundle (with reference to the Roman Empire) (Robertson in Featherstone 1990:21).
- 5 Many ironies are embedded in the term ‘utopia’ understood as a fictional place as initially articulated by Sir Thomas More in *Utopia* (1516) in the sense of ‘no place’ or ‘land of nowhere’.
- 6 Argued especially in ‘Space, knowledge and power’ in *The Foucault reader* (1986:239-256), edited by P Rabinow. Harmondsworth: Penguin, and ‘A question of geography’ in *Power/Knowledge* (1980:63-77), edited by C Gordon. London: Harvester Press.
- 7 The term *flâneur* is derived from the French verb *flâner*, which means to stroll and wander. In the nineteenth-century Baudelairian sense, the *flâneur*

was essentially a refined male city stroller, a concept that laid the foundations for many theoretical and philosophical deliberations on the new artificial habitat of the urbanite. From this time onwards, the urbanite has essentially been viewed as a *flâneur* who plays a key role in understanding, participating in and portraying the city.

- 8 Translated as *Suburban nightmares of discontent* (*Visuality/Commentary* 2008:39).

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