

A Study in Black and White

Almost 30 years after the beginning of apartheid in South Africa, white artists began to understand they were in the midst of a profound moral dilemma. Some chose a straightforward approach, others a more conceptual one, some emphasized collaborations with black artists, others chose educational tools, some marched the streets, others felt completely useless. Their story is the story of art in the time of cholera

— MICHAL SAPIR



Image

Sam Nzima / Soweto Riots, South Africa

June 16, 1976

Sam Nzima's iconic photograph of three students rushing away from police bullets during the Soweto riots has become one of the most famous depictions of the evils of apartheid.

Thirteen-year-old Hector Pieterse is bleeding to death in the arms of fellow student Mbuyisa Makhubo. Hector's sister Antoinette runs alongside. Pieterse died shortly after this picture was taken.



On June 16, 1976, thousands of schoolchildren marched in the black township of Soweto near Johannesburg to protest the South African government's policy of enforcing education in Afrikaans. The police opened fire on the peaceful marchers, and soon mass protests erupted around the country, with demonstrators demanding an immediate end to apartheid and the release of all political prisoners. In response, Soweto and other townships became the stage for increasingly violent state repression. Apartheid in South Africa began in 1948, with the coming to power of the Afrikaner-dominated National Party and its promotion of an ideology of racial and ethnic separatism. The system, a development of earlier tendencies of the state, took 30 years to put in place, by which time it had already begun to disintegrate.

What happened in Soweto was in many ways a profoundly visual affair: The shooting of children had caused a spectacular media scandal, both in South Africa and abroad. Following the event, it became clear to many white South African artists that it was time they contributed more actively to the condemnation of and the opposition to the apartheid system and government. But how to translate this realization into actual art-making was less clear.

Waking Up

Before 1976, South African art rarely dealt with the socio-political problems of the country. "The white artist," one commentator wrote, "cannot dare look into himself. He doesn't wish to be bothered with his responsibilities as a member of the 'chosen' and dominating group." And another said: "In

South Africa the impotency of the individual seems to relegate most (white) people's roles to those of voyeurs who transfer the burden of their inaction to the work of the Liberation-conscious artists, and then go home to a troubled-free sleep." The events in Soweto shook many artists from their sleep. "It was time for counting the cost," wrote the artist Sue Williamson in her book *Resistance Art in South Africa*, "for accepting responsibility, for asking the question, 'What could I have done, what can I do now, to work for freedom?' New organizations mushroomed in opposition to the state, new possibilities for action came into focus."

In the course of my research for this piece and in an e-mail interview with Williamson, who was 35 at the time of the Soweto uprising, I discovered a complex and moving story of radicalization and change, which involved a wide range of personal emotions, from anger and guilt to frustration and hope, and all in about equal measures.

I asked Williamson if there was a specific moment in which she decided her art had to address the realities of apartheid. "In September 1976," she replied, "a few months after the schoolchildren of Soweto stood up against the state, I was part of a mass meeting of women in the Cape Town City Hall, a meeting which led to the formation of an organization of women of all races with an agenda of working for change on many different levels: personal, social and political. The organization was called the Women's Movement for Peace.

"This organization gave me a way to meet and get involved in the lives of black women and in social issues, a way which I had not had before. Apartheid was very successful in literally keeping people apart. Schools, places of entertainment like restaurants, cinemas and

theaters, public transport, even beaches were strictly segregated. Through the WMP, we organized social events and defied apartheid laws in as many ways as we could, but also we became involved in political action, raising consciousness on many issues, witnessing police raids and trying to intervene, etc.

"It was the feeling that I was taking whatever action I could that empowered me to translate this into art. Before this, I felt I did not have the 'right,' or an authentic voice, to make political art. But it still took several years for me to find a way to combine my new activism with my art-making.

"I sketched constantly, a habit of years, and in September 1977, I was part of an attempt to prevent the authorities bulldozing the 2,000 houses of Modderdam, a settled squatter community just outside Cape Town. I went out each day for seven days as the camp was demolished and, in between other activities, made sketches.

"But it took another year before I found a way to turn those sketches into a series of etchings in a way I found conceptually satisfying. This was the 'Modderdam Postcard' series. Five postcard-size etchings of the events of those days, with below each, what seemed to be the reverse side of the postcard on which I wrote, by hand, comments as if from a government observer, the reason why the demolitions had been necessary.

"So the moment I came to the idea of turning the sketches into the postcard etchings was the moment. But there was a long lead up to that moment," Williamson concluded.

In her book, Williamson describes how this change of thinking from passive to active, symbolized by her turn to the mobile, communicative and subversive postcard, was manifested and formulated more generally in two conferences. The first was hosted by the

Image

Paul Stopforth / Torture and Deaths in Detention

Hooded Figure

1978, Market Theatre Gallery

What happened in Soweto was in many ways a profoundly visual affair. The shooting of children had caused a spectacular media scandal, both in South Africa and abroad. Following the event, it became clear to many white South African artists that it was time they contributed more actively to the condemnation of and the opposition to the apartheid system and government

University of Cape Town in July 1979, and was titled “The State of Art in South Africa.” Although they were invited, no black visual artists were present at the conference, feeling that nothing important would change as a result of it. The artists present pledged to no longer allow their work to be sent overseas to represent South Africa until all state-funded art institutions were open to black as well as white students. In effect, they refused to continue giving the apartheid regime a cultural cloak of respectability. Three years later, in July 1982, black artists were far more present at a conference that formed part of the Culture and Resistance art festival in Gaborone, Botswana (it was held outside the South African republic so that exiles could attend as well). Perhaps this was because by that time, they could see white artists really getting involved in the struggle, taking some decisive and positive actions. The year 1976, for instance, saw the founding of the Market Theatre in Newtown, on the western edge of downtown Johannesburg – a space for experimentation and activist theater. It soon became one of the few places where artists, actors, directors and audiences from all communities could mix and debate freely and openly. This was one example of how progressive artists attempted, before the fact, to define what “post-apartheid” life might mean. A year later, the artists Paul Stopforth, Michael Goldberg and Wolf Weinek opened an art gallery at the market. The Market Gallery, operating on non-racial principles, exhibited art that was in touch with progressive politics and art trends abroad, and it featured work that contained acute social commentary on events in South Africa.

That year the gallery exhibited Paul Stopforth’s installation *Torture and Deaths in Detention*. A year after Black Consciousness

leader Steve Biko died of injuries inflicted in detention, Stopforth was one of the first visual artists to confront the injustices of the apartheid system through his work. Six male figures, cast in white plaster, were arranged around the market building, each in a different position of distress, each naked. Their positions were based on reports of the treatment of detainees that Stopforth had found in the South African press.

“It is part of the contradiction of this country that at a time when the treatment of detainees is arousing acute anxiety, it should be possible for an artist to hold an exhibition depicting torture during interrogation,” wrote art critic Anne Pogruind following Stopforth’s show. “It is astonishing that such a public protest should pass without much response, positive or negative, from anyone.”

“I want to bring the facts home to those willing to look,” Stopforth said. “We can’t refuse to accept that these things happen.” After 1976, art became one crucial way to spread information about the punitive side of apartheid and depict the horror behind the system and the “sweet life” of the whites who supported it.

Art as a Weapon of Struggle

In 1981, a satirical poster campaign for what might be considered South Africa’s best-known product, apartheid, hit the streets of Johannesburg. The posters were the work of art student Benz Kotzen, and they advertised different items from the apartheid range: cigarettes, lager, matches, coffee. Kotzen pasted up his posters in the streets on early Sunday mornings. Sometimes the police would tear them down minutes after they had been put up, or passersby would deface them. Kotzen knew his posters would not effect change in South Africa, but he saw them as a means of

heightening awareness among white middle-class South Africans.

That same year, Stopforth was one of six artists chosen to represent South Africa at the Valparaiso Biennial International Art Exhibition. The work chosen to go by a panel of experts appointed by the South African Association of Arts was two small graphite drawings of damaged hands and feet entitled *Steve Biko* and *We Do It*. Government intervention caused the drawings to be withdrawn. Three other artists had refused the invitation to send work in the first place, not wanting to let the South African government appear as if supported by the art community, particularly in a repressive country like Chile. Stopforth had taken the confrontational route, and failed.

Other artists chose a more conceptual approach. In 1980, William Boshoff, who in 1976 was 25, showed *Kyk Afrikaans* (loosely translated as “Afrikaans to be looked at”), a series of “concrete poems” written between 1977 and 1980. In the same year, Boshoff’s *Bangboek* (“book of being frightened”) was shown in Belgium as part of an exhibition of war memories of African artists. Boshoff was jailed for his refusal to carry arms in the South African Defense Force, and devised a minute code writing in which to keep diaries. It is these pages that make up *Bangboek*. In these works, Boshoff started developing a practice of questioning systems of knowledge and classification, while creating linguistic puzzles that recover and unravel forgotten, neglected or dissenting alternatives.

By 1982, too, art became a means for enhancing the presence and visibility of South Africa’s black population in the country’s cultural consciousness, as for example in Sue Williamson’s celebrated series of portraits “A Few South Africans”. “I always tried to



make work that could be understood by a popular audience,” said Williamson. “Spending time in houses in the squatter camps, I noted that mainly what people hung on their walls were family photographs, usually in colorful hand-made frames. In 1982, I started a new series called ‘A Few South Africans’ – portraits honoring women who were heroines of the struggle. The series was specifically intended to provide portraits of women [whose images were largely unknown as they never appeared in the press at the time] as an inspiration to all women, white and black. In order to get these portraits into general distribution, I printed postcards of the images, which were widely disseminated through alternative sources.” The white artists’ everyday lives were, for the most part, removed from the worst violence of the struggle, but their new outspokenness was not without risks. The title of “art,” however, offered some protection. Bill Ainslie, for instance, a white artist who dedicated himself to improving access to art training for black South Africans, founded the Johannesburg Art Foundation, a non-racial, non-credit art school in 1972. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the police were itching for an excuse to arrest Ainslie and close his school, which was open to all races, but the informality of the school made it difficult to incriminate anyone. Glossy art magazines, meanwhile, which were primarily white-oriented elite venues, could more easily publish controversial materials censored from mainstream newspapers without being banned. “It was a matter of policy for the security police to harass activists,” Williamson told me, “and I did receive my share of death threats, being greeted by name on the street by strange policemen, midnight phone calls, strange thefts from the house, etc., but that was par for the course for anyone seen as engaging

in political activity. “Artists were not locked up specifically because of the work they made – although the security police twice showed up at galleries where I was exhibiting to look at the work. Nor was the work banned if it was inside an art institution.

“When the work was turned into street art, however, printed for wide distribution, like a poster or a postcard, it often got banned. One of the Modderdam postcards was turned into a real postcard as a consciousness-raising exercise in the struggle to save Crossroads, the next squatter camp under threat. That postcard was almost immediately banned for distribution by the state. So sending one or even giving one to a friend became illegal.” In 1982, with the support of activists aligned with the African National Congress, which had been banned since 1960 and operated in exile, the Culture and Resistance conference issued a call for all “cultural workers” to use their art as a “weapon of struggle.” The argument was that South African art needed to be relevant to the anti-apartheid struggle if it was to be relevant at all. The idea of fighting apartheid using the tools of culture was inspired by the Black Consciousness movement, which in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the most popular form of resistance to apartheid. The movement, whose leading spokesman was Steve Biko, put a great emphasis on poetry, music and visual culture as means of re-educating the masses about their history and instilling a sense of black self-assurance. Inspired by this approach, the Culture and Resistance conference argued for a “people’s culture” – not exclusive to the elite world of art galleries, but playing a part in the life of the community and its struggle for freedom. There was a growing realization among anti-apartheid forces that cultural resistance was a tool of immense power.

Image

Paul Stopforth / *Torture and Deaths in Detention*

(Installation View)

Standing Figure (background)

Hooded Figure (middleground)

Hanged Figure (foreground)

1978, Market Theatre Gallery

They felt that if the media could be used to brainwash the white electorate and dominate the mass of oppressed people, then it could, in a different form, be used to fight that domination.

And so, in contrast to the glitzy, greedy and even cynical New York art world of the 1980s, in South Africa that decade was characterized by an ethos that saw the artist as a cultural worker, whose role was to use his or her skills in the service of the broad-based democratic movement. Protest marches, silk-screened banners and T-shirts, posters, murals and graffiti, alternative art presses and literary magazines and pointed political critique in theater, song and gallery art became the status quo in progressive circles.

The Committed and the Resisting

Some artists even thought that at that point in their lives it was necessary to work in the community and help others get culturally involved before allowing themselves the privilege of making art. The Bantu Education Act in 1953 meant that art, literature and rigorous intellectual training were denied to an entire generation. Artists' organizations like the Visual Arts Group in Cape Town organized art exhibitions in the black townships, tried to help black artists become more visible, tried to make museum practice more democratic, worked with trade unions to provide posters, T-shirts and puppets for rallies and so on. In 1988, some of these efforts resulted in the exhibition "The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930-1988)" at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. The show presented work by almost 100 black artists, only a few of whom were generally known. It was the first time ever a large-scale retrospective show of work by black artists had been held in one of the country's leading

art galleries. According to Sue Williamson, however, galleries did not play a key role in the development of resistance art, although the important galleries like the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg and the Market Theatre Gallery had no hesitation in showing work with strong social content. It was more an artist-driven initiative.

Yet artists were not always convinced that a propagandistic, social realist, fist-and-flag approach was the best, or only, way to change minds or to change the system. Some felt that such an approach might not actually relate to "the people's" more fundamental need to create zones of freedom and openness within. So efforts were also made during the 1980s to make art less easily categorizable as "black" or "white." In August 1985, an annual two-week workshop was started at a holiday resort at Hunter's Rest, near Rustenberg, initiated by Bill Ainslie and David Koloane, a black artist. The intention of the project was to create a temporary respite for black artists who lived in isolation from other artists, had limited access to the kinds of art facilities available to white artists and worked in a representational mode on a limited scale. They were encouraged to explore the freedom of color and non-objective painting after the manner of abstract expressionism or color field art. Pouring, splattering and scraping paint over yards and yards of canvas was for them an eye-opening adventure that altered the direction of their work in subsequent years.

These experiments with non-figurative abstract art took place at the same time that pressure was mounting, in the wake of the historic Culture and Resistance festival, for all cultural workers to conform to a critical, realist, committed art. The workshop faced accusations of elitism and exclusivity, of a lack of political commitment, of succumbing to

American cultural imperialism and of not being South African enough. Nonetheless, the ANC cultural desk in London did not apply the anti-apartheid cultural boycott to the project. In the context of South Africa, to which it had been transposed, the American formalist art exercise could be read as another way to make political community art. In fact, there were many ways to practice what became known as resistance art, directed at South Africa's ruling white elite and its increasingly oppressive exercise of power. It could be practiced by doing direct protest work accountable to the community, but also by producing a personal response to the fears, anxieties and sadness of the society. Many artists, like David Goldblatt, for example, did both.

Born in 1930 to parents who came to South Africa to escape the persecution of Lithuanian Jews in 1890, Goldblatt was simultaneously part of privileged white society and a victim of religious persecution and alienation. Motivated by his contradictory position in South African society, he began photographing this society from an explorative, critical perspective.^[1]

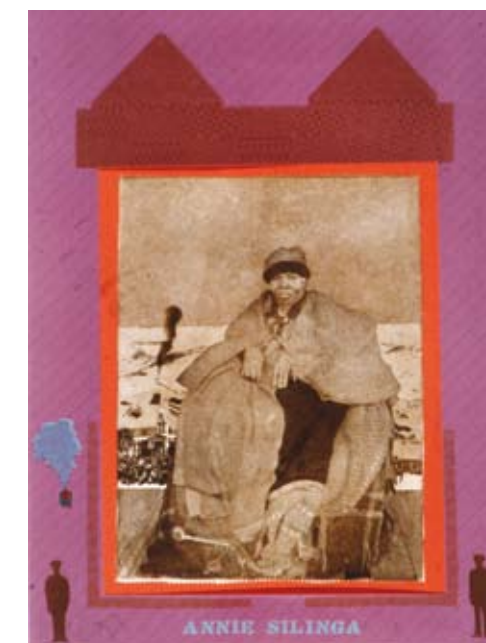
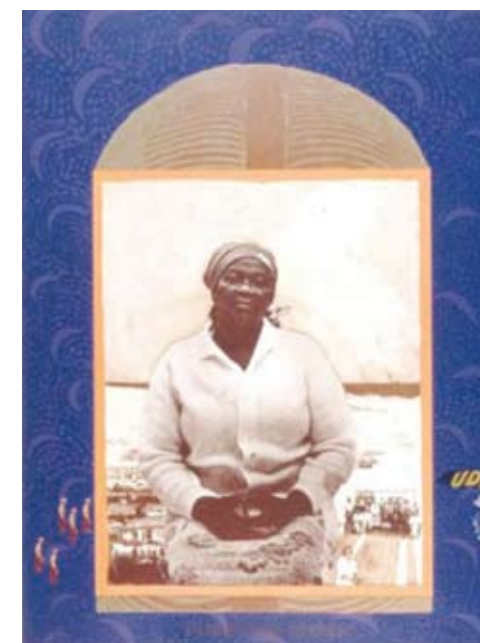
In the 1960s, Goldblatt initiated a series of investigations into the mines surrounding Johannesburg. But it was only after 1976, by his own admission, that his work really became political: "I was probing and prodding my interest in the structures of the mines. I was concerned very largely with the graphic nature of what I was looking at. I think this was a bit of red herring for me. 'On The Mines' is most unsatisfactory in this sense." In 1979-1980, Goldblatt made "In Boksburg," a series of photographs of a stolid white suburb. "I was asking myself how it was possible to be so apparently normal, moral, upright – which almost all those citizens were

– in such an appallingly abnormal, immoral, bizarre situation."^[2]

His series "The Transported of KwaNdebele" (1989) records the invisible assault of apartheid by taking an early morning bus ride with black workers. "'The Transported of KwaNdebele' was certainly the most explicitly political (...) in all of the work I have done, though I have been engaged with the consequences of our actions and of our values."

At the time, other photographers took a more stridently realist and more pointedly political approach, denouncing the violence of the state by showing bodies brutalized in an heroic protest against heavily militarized state forces. Goldblatt, however, was one of a number of photographers who during the 1980s produced images that contested the spatial and social vision of apartheid in more oblique ways. His strictly black-and-white photographs were neither lectures nor aggressive provocations nor telegraphed pieces of propaganda, but rather meditative documents of a complex and intricate situation.

In 1989, Goldblatt founded the Market Photography Workshop in an old post office in Johannesburg, with the object of teaching visual literacy and photographic skills to young people, with particular emphasis on those disadvantaged by apartheid. The workshop was successful in creating an environment in which people of all races could collaborate constructively. "If the primary thrust of such a facility was to be towards young black Africans," Goldblatt explained, "it had, at the same time, to be open to everyone, irrespective of race. In this there was a principle but also the hope that in throwing people together who would otherwise have no experience of each other,



[1] "David Goldblatt," by Sean O'Toole (December 2002), an art bio posted on ArtThrob, <http://www.artthrob.co.za/02dec/artbio.html>

[2] Ibid.

Images
Clockwise from top left
Sue Williamson / Nokukanya Lutuli, Winnie Mandela,
Annie Silinga, Albertina Sisulu
1983, photo etching/screenprint collages
70 x 64 cm, Editions of 20

the workshop might be a small counter to the ethnic surgery that had so successfully separated South Africans under apartheid.”

It Starts With Images: The Case of William Kentridge

Goldblatt’s move from the more oblique engagement with politics of “In Boksburg” to the more explicit stance of “The Transported of KwaNdebele” could be connected to another fault-line in the struggle against apartheid, the declaration of the first state of emergency in 1985, following months of unrest in the townships. After that, the tensions coming out at street level were very strong and the sense of things coming apart was quite exposed. The police were again given wide-ranging powers for the forceful suppression of popular protest, including the detention and interrogation of suspects without trial. Thousands were immediately detained and press reporting was strictly censored. Perhaps no work expressed this atmosphere of violent disintegration more than Jane Alexander’s *The Butcher Boys*, exhibited at the Market Gallery in 1986. It consists of three life-size humanoid sculptures sitting on a bench, in postures ranging from boredom to expectancy to anxiety. They are made of plaster, with pieces of bone, leather and horns fused into their flesh. They are devoid of their outside senses – their ears are nothing more than deep gorges in their heads and their mouths are missing, appearing to be covered with thick roughened skin. In their woundedness and their bestiality, these figures have been read as personifications of the appallingly spiralling violence, the anarchy, the necklace killings, the civil war, the police brutality, the child detentions, the burning and the lootings of South Africa in the 1980s. But Alexander’s work is also concerned with broader issues of

identity, desire, victimization and power. She herself – one of the most worthy artists of the resistance – has never called herself a political artist, saying: “What is the point of doing burning tires? Isn’t that just the artist saying ‘I am aware of this’? Why are we not rather looking at the whole environment?” Another artist who was not content burning tires, and therefore took a long time in formulating his artistic response to apartheid, was William Kentridge. As someone who had become very suspicious of certainty, he was one of those who questioned the social-realist approach to resistance art. In the end, the solution for his impasse came about almost by accident.

Like Goldblatt, Kentridge, too, grew up with the ambiguities of being white and Jewish in South Africa. Both sides of his family had immigrated to South Africa before the turn of the 20th century, to escape the wave of pogroms in Russia. In South Africa, as assimilated Jews (the family name had been Kantorowitz), they became part of a tiny liberal elite in a land where highly conservative whites ruled over an overwhelmingly black majority. Sydney Kentridge, William’s father, was a leading trial lawyer in the anti-apartheid movement, and his wife, Felicia, co-founded the most important public-interest law firm in South Africa. The family lived in a large, comfortable house, on a hillside about two miles from the city’s center, with three acres of rambling English-style gardens. Their black servants lived in separate quarters on the property. Most of William’s classmates in the all-white boys’ school he attended came from families that supported the conservative United Party.

At university, which he entered in 1973, after a year of compulsory military service, Kentridge majored in politics and African studies. Student

opposition to the apartheid government was rife, and Kentridge did some marching and protesting. He also studied drawing at Bill Ainslie’s Johannesburg Art Foundation, and directed and acted in theatrical productions, many of which were politically based. One of the plays, “The Fantastical History of a Useless Man,” was about “what it felt like to be white and useless in South Africa. We finished it in 1976, just as the Soweto riots exploded, and we had this big discussion: Do we keep on going or do we stop?”^[3] The group eventually joined forces with a black theater company and continued performing. Kentridge acted, directed, designed sets and made posters. He also designed posters for the black trade unions, which had gained the right to strike in 1979. But by the end of the 1980s he felt completely stuck. During the decade the situation in South Africa became increasingly grim. In 1981, Kentridge’s parents left and moved to London. “My father couldn’t bear to appear before the terrible South African judges anymore, and it seemed impossible that things would change.” The state of emergency first declared in 1985 was renewed yearly until 1990. During successive states of emergency, South Africa experienced an escalation in mass resistance, state-sponsored violence and internecine warfare. International sanctions and boycotts isolated the country from Europe and most of the world. By 1989, hundreds of political activists had been murdered, thousands had died in inhumane conditions in the mines, the last scraps of arable land were being appropriated from the native black population and tens of thousands were banned or detained, many of them children, many of them without trial. By the late 1980s, too, the resistance movement had made the black townships ungovernable and was bombing “soft targets” in the cities. Mass protests in the form of funerals

[3] Calvin Tomkins. Profiles. “Lines of Resistance,” *The New Yorker*, January 18, 2010, p. 53.

They are devoid of their outside senses – their ears are nothing more than deep gorges in their heads and their mouths are missing, appearing to be covered with thick roughened skin. In their woundedness and their bestiality, these figures have been read as personifications of the appallingly spiralling violence, the anarchy, the necklace killings, the civil war, the police brutality, the child detentions, the burning and the lootings of South Africa in the 1980s



Image

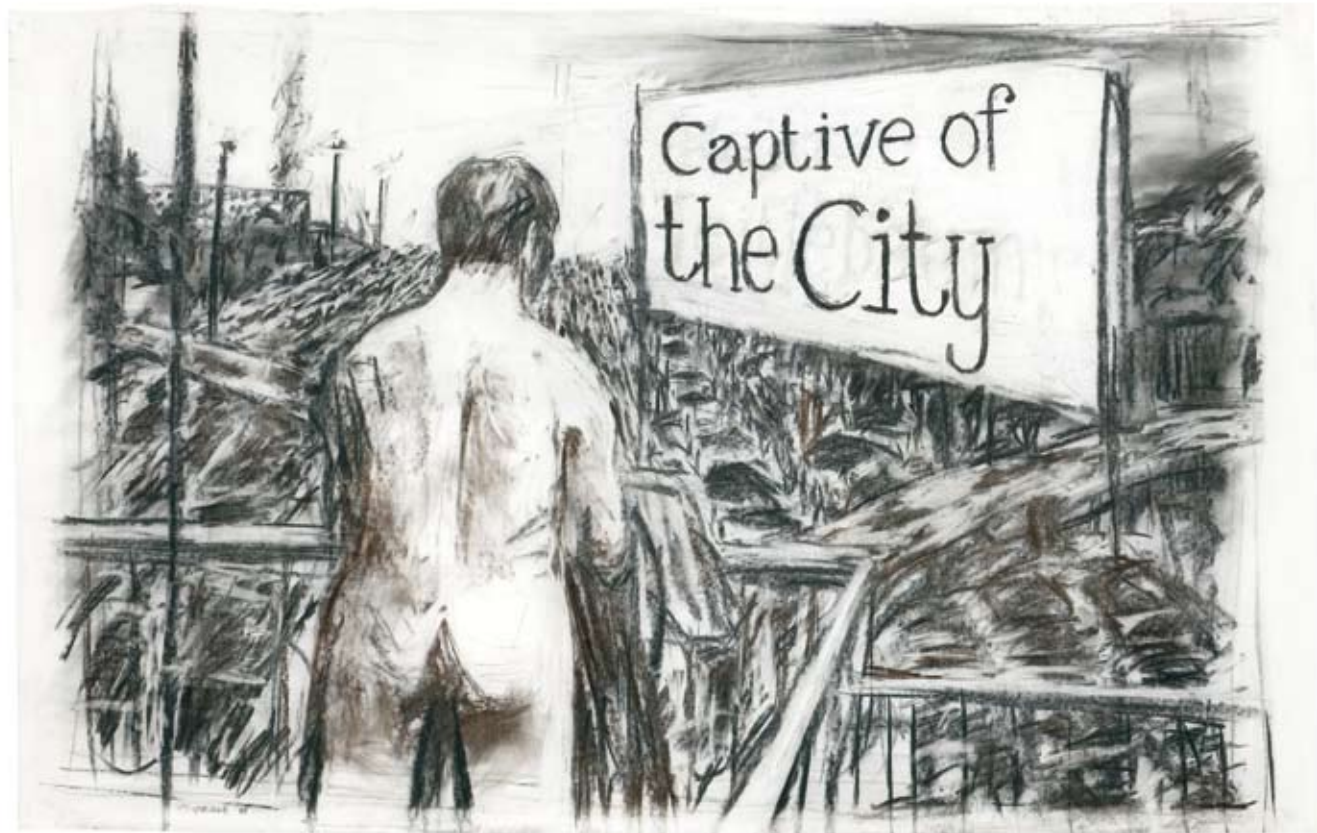
Jane Alexander / *The Butcher Boys*

1985-86, reinforced plaster, oil paint, bones, horns, wood

128.5 x 213.5 x 88.5 cm

Collection of the South African National Gallery

Photograph by Mark Lewis



had become a regular feature of South African life. In 1989, disillusioned by yet another state of emergency, the artist Paul Stopforth immigrated to the United States. Kentridge was then 34 years old, married to a doctor, with two young children, and he considered himself a failure at everything he had tried to do – painting, acting, commercial filmmaking. In his studio, staring at the large-scale charcoal

drawings and engravings he had been making, many of them quick studies of people he had seen on the street, Kentridge had no idea how to proceed. “I was aware of Joseph Beuys – Beuys and his honey pump, which was supposed to be political art. But politics is not spreading honey around the main building at the Documenta art exhibition. It’s putting electrodes on people’s testicles, locking

them up, putting them in fear of their lives. There was some anger separating me from the naiveté of Jasper Johns, who could celebrate his national flag so un-ironically. In South Africa, you could not begin to paint the flag.” Using a borrowed 16mm Bolex movie camera, Kentridge began making a film in his studio, with the Warholian idea that anyone or anything that came in would be included.

One of his charcoal drawings was on the wall; he filmed its successive changes and erasures. The animated drawing ended up being the only interesting thing in the film. Finally, here was a way out of the sleepy, slow-moving, desperate inaction, a way to project a different future. Kentridge set about making his first animated film, *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City After Paris*. It was the first of “9 Drawings for Projection,” short animated films that, showing a cast of fictional characters as they struggle to navigate the political and social climate of Johannesburg during the final decade of apartheid, exposed the hypocrisies and ironies of white South African life. Kentridge has called his improvisational working method “stone-age animation”: a single charcoal drawing, altered and re-photographed again and again, creates the illusion of movement when the series of

frames is played as a continuous sequence. The movement of successive charcoal-drawn images evoked the local mining industry, suggesting eroding landscapes with a continual process of wiping away and reworking. The shadowy leftover traces of smudged or erased lines in the final state of each drawing makes each film a palimpsest, a history of its own making, a record of the painstaking process of erasure and addition and the emotional tension between forgetting and remembering. “It doesn’t start with a social message. It starts with images that interest me, or provoke me. I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain ending – an art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check, and nihilism at bay. I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings and

the films are certainly spawned by, and feed off, the brutalized society left in its wake.”^[4] Apartheid ended in 1994, when the African National Congress Party won the first democratic election, and Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa. For Kentridge, though, the key event had occurred four years earlier: “I was driving on a highway, listening to the boring opening of parliament in 1990, when the announcement came that all the political parties banned since the 1960s would be un-banned. I pulled off to the side of the road, because I understood that everything was going to be different. We didn’t know what would happen, whether it would turn into civil war, but we realized that the unchangeable blocked situation had just been rolled over. That was the night we opened the champagne.” ⇐

“It doesn’t start with a social message. It starts with images that interest me, or provoke me. I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain ending – an art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check, and nihilism at bay” ⇐ WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

Images
William Kentridge / Drawings for Johannesburg,
2nd Greatest City After Paris
1989
Courtesy of Goodman Gallery

[4] William Kentridge by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (1998),
Société des Expositions du Palais de Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles.

Find the Compassion and Be Generous

Thirty years after his poster campaign satirising South Africa's apartheid "product," Benz (Benzion) Kotzen, now a senior lecturer at the School of Architecture and Landscape at the University of Greenwich, London, is still interested in the influence of the visual on physical, social and moral environments - in Israel, too ▸ MICHAL SAPIR

As a landscape architect, Benz (Benzion) Kotzen specializes in sustainable landscape planning and design and in visual impact assessment. In recent years, in another seemingly quixotic attempt to affect change through colors and forms, Kotzen has been trying to set up a botanical garden in the Negev, in the hope that such a conservation, research and education center on the desert's indigenous plants could aid sustainable development and promote peace and tranquility in the region. I contacted him to see if he felt there was a connection between one arid, oppressive and unsustainable terrain of militarized windmills and the other.

Michal Sapir: Can you tell me a bit more about your 'apartheid range' project?

Benz Kotzen: I completed a B.A. in fine arts and my work was rather intellectual, far too clever for its own good, playing with words and images and puns. Prior to undertaking an M.A. in fine arts, I spent almost a year in Europe, most of it in the U.K., and I became very interested in 'Marxist Aesthetics' advertising and the social relevance of images. I realized at this time in South Africa that it was really impossible for artists to be doing anything other than socially relevant art. I felt that people who were involved with

creating work that was not socially relevant in a situation like South Africa were not only being ignorant and blind and complicit, but they in fact were missing an opportunity. At the time I was in the U.K., in 1979, Guinness had a wonderful ad campaign where they used the product in the landscape. Their ads were a little like Christo images, but instead of placing fences or material in and on the landscape they were placing images of Guinness. Another thing I noticed was that on packaging and bottles and cans, etc., one always had a label that told of the products origin - 'Product of ...' and I realized that apartheid was a 'Product of South Africa.' Thus, the creation of these products - a series of 22 - began.

The posters I produced were deliberately made as a reflection of myself in the society - as a white, middle-class, educated boy who was 'pissed off' with the apartheid situation. I could not make work like a black person. (If I had been black I would have been really pissed off and probably would have left South Africa and joined a rebel group.) But I was a white, middle-class intellectual creating 'art' and I am pretty non-violent.

I used other commonly identifiable products, such as Lager beer, which I changed to 'Laager' - the word is used as meaning enclosed, insular, 'laager mentality' and

originates in the drawing of wagons together to form a barricade against the warring black people in the early settler days. In the end all the posters/apartheid products were poking fun at the system and drawing attention to the stupidity of the system.

MS: What was the impact of the campaign?

BK: I produced over 20 posters over a shortish period of time - probably one every three weeks, and I placed these in groups on campus, in shopping areas, etc. I used to get up at about three in the morning and go and do this in the dark - it was a bit scary. The reaction was immediate - they were the talk of the campus, the police followed me and tore them down, people threw acid on them, wrote on them, my phone was tapped. So why was I not arrested? Mostly because my impact was small. I was making fun of the system and not provoking rebellion.

MS: Were you involved in the struggle against apartheid in other ways, especially as an artist or an architect?

BK: I attended every anti-apartheid rally I could - got chased by dogs and policemen... Prior to becoming a landscape architect, I worked in advertising in South Africa as an assistant art director. This was a conscious



Images
Clockwise from top left
Benz Kotzen / Apartheid Washing Powder, the Whiter Than White Washing Powder - Product of South Africa
Apartheid Lemon - Product of South Africa
Apartheid Filters - Product of South Africa
Apartheid Witblitz, posters on a building site in Johannesburg

decision to change peoples' perception of society. It is hard to believe now, but then a white person and a black person would not be filmed or shown in the same ad. I hoped to change society from the inside; I was 10 to 15 years too early.

MS: How did you come to work on the Negev botanical garden?

BK: I lived on Kibbutz Revivim for two periods totaling around one and a half years – I fell in love with the desert and I was amazed that people did not see the potential for the native plants to be used for landscape and environmental purposes. I did my PhD on the question of whether these native plants could be used and how they could be used. The concept for a Negev Desert Botanical Garden stems out of my research. The local Ramat Negev council mayor and staff were quite keen, even offering land and water – but it all comes down to money and it is really difficult to get people interested in this with the current standoff with the Palestinians. Today it is more or less in limbo – I did see it having potential as a peace bringer and that the 'garden' could be one of a 'string of pearls' of botanical gardens across the region, drawing people together.

MS: What do you think of the comparisons constantly made between Israel and South Africa? What are the similarities and the differences, in your view? What lessons can we, as Israelis, learn from the case of South Africa?

BK: I knew South Africa very well. I was born there and lived through the early and middle stages of apartheid. It was ugly, diabolical, unjust and a horrible place to live if one had any conscience at all. As a teenager, I used to say to my parents that we

should leave South Africa and go to Israel as there was sure to be peace in Israel sooner rather than later, and in South Africa the situation did not look like [it was] moving. How wrong could I have been?

The situations in Israel and South Africa were and are totally different. Different demographics, histories, etc., but in some ways similar. Apartheid can only have ever existed in South Africa, as there is only one Holocaust. People will try and use the words in different situations to make points or propaganda but the shoe doesn't fit properly. However, that is not to say that there are no aspects that the Afrikaner and the Israeli have in common. I mentioned the laager mentality above. The Holocaust still weighs heavily on Israel and, in some ways, the Afrikaner was very wary of the outside world and particularly British colonialism, which lead to the Boer Wars and where the first concentration camps were set up. I am not sure you would know this but the British invented the concentration camp, and women and children starved and died of disease in them. So there are great similarities in mentality. Both peoples have generous spirit amongst themselves and to others that they have synergy with, but there is perhaps this problem with those who don't belong.

As a teenager, I used to say to my parents that we should leave South Africa and go to Israel as there was sure to be peace in Israel sooner rather than later, and in South Africa the situation did not look like [it was] moving. How wrong could I have been?

The 'goyim.'... Of course everyone knew of Israel's military links to South Africa in the past and the supposed offering to sell nuclear weapons to South Africa.

It took one person to sort out the South African situation – Willem de Klerk had the 'nouse' to understand that the writing was on the wall for apartheid and that it was morally corrupt. Of course, there was Nelson Mandela to talk to and a political organization that could step in with help. Both sides needed each other to survive and prosper. In Israel the mentality is perhaps that if we 'give' too much we may not survive.

I suppose one could have seen Rabin as this one person and that was why he was assassinated. So where is the next person? I also believe that the society as a whole needs to be ready as well. This leads on to the state of the society.

I mentioned generosity above. I think this generosity to others is largely missing in Israeli society – the laager mentality stands fast and the world and everyone is against Israel and therefore 'we will do what we want in our own interest because no one else cares or has our interest at heart.' Would it not be better to flood Gaza with whatever they want? Food, medicine, water, energy, building materials, sanitation (of course not weapons) and act with compassion. This is the smart thing to do. The attitude of making people suffer is poor politics, poor in spirit, poor in compassion and the essence of what we hope is our 'human beingness.' In the same way in South Africa there was a loss of compassion and social 'righteousness' and thus a kind of poverty within the society. So the short answer to the question is: Find the (wo)man, find the compassion and be generous as a society and deal with others as far as possible with compassion and do good. ▯