

Case study: The nature of art consumption in Pretoria from March 2005 to July 2006 with reference to selected exhibitions

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ABSTRACT

This paper entails an investigation into the nature and conceptual content of selected exhibitions that took place in Pretoria from March 2005 to July 2006 and, more specifically, the consumption and reception thereof by the Pretoria art audience. Audience in this context is understood in a broad sense, inclusive of the public, the media, students, academics and artists.

The case study is based on first-hand experience gained in my capacity firstly as curator of an art exhibition, *Reconciliations*, for the University of Pretoria in 2005 and secondly as art consultant for Fried Contemporary Art Gallery in Pretoria since July 2005. The main objective of the study is to find concluding evidence regarding the character of the spectatorship more than a decade after the initial processes of political transformation started in 1994.

The argumentation will revolve around notions of the artwork as commodity and as aesthetic object; authenticity; taste; and the 'new' African elite. Aspects such as the nature and character of the presentation and installation of the artworks in the gallery; the concept and theme of the exhibition; exhibition attendance; recorded comments; public taste; and sales will be critically analysed in an attempt to make decisive assumptions about the nature of art consumption in Pretoria during the specified time frame.

In this paper selected art exhibitions that took place in Pretoria from March 2005 to July 2006 are investigated as material for a case study on the nature of art consumption and spectatorship in Pretoria more than a decade after the initial processes of political and cultural transformation started in 1994. The particular exhibitions comprise various that were curated for Fried Contemporary Art Gallery in Pretoria since July 2005 when the gallery opened, as well as the exhibition, *Reconciliations*, that I curated for the University of Pretoria in March 2005.

The main argument in the presentation is that, in terms of the reception of and taste in art in Pretoria as cultural domain, there seems to be a radical divide between taste for the so-called avant-garde and the clichéd. The meta-narrative in this paper is that exhibition practice in Pretoria is not about political and cultural reconciliation and concept but about myth and semantics. In *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning and Aesthetic Theory* (1995), New York academic Garry Hagberg (1995:155) argues that language games are important in justifying choices in terms of exhibition and that artists can be artificially empowered by institutions, a situation that in turn affects the reception and understanding of the arts. Hagberg (1995:155) quotes Wittgenstein as maintaining that: “Giving grounds ... [and] justifying the evidence, ... is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language game”. Joseph Margolis (1995:162) argues that: “Works of art ... are emergent entities, tokens-of-a-type that exist embodied in physical objects”. Statements such as these confirm that the meaning and value of artworks are negotiated and relative.

According to Andreas Beyer (2002:xv), a German academic, exhibition is a compelling medium of scholarly argument and visual demonstration, since it is a medium that engages with discourses by *showing* rather than by writing. Similarly, my departure point in this investigation is that the meaning of an artwork can be presumed to exist and be articulated through its mode and manner of presentation as well as through its locale of presentation. Curating an exhibition would therefore entail the selection of artworks for exhibition in the public domain at a specific venue and location, so that the language of the artworks can become intentional. The role of the curator is certainly to raise awareness for a specific cause; to elicit and contribute to discourse on a contentious topic; and perhaps to tell stories about it in a spatially deployed exhibition of objects, images and texts. The notion of the artwork as commodity should not enter this configuration since it could defeat the ideological purpose of an exhibition; yet exhibiting artists are seldom ignorant of the financial implications and consequences of exhibiting their work. This aspect is however not the focus of this paper which investigates instead the nature and conceptual content of selected exhibitions and, more specifically, the consumption and reception thereof by the Pretoria art audience. Audience in this context is understood in a broad sense, inclusive of the public, the media, students, academics and artists.

The *Reconciliations* exhibitions formed part of the Arts and Reconciliation Festival took place at the University of Pretoria in 2005 and was under the patronage of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Mr F.W. de Klerk. As understood by the academic organisers of the Festival, , , the strategic objective of the project was to redefine and celebrate the role that music, drama, films and the visual arts play in the process of healing and reconciliation in present-day South Africa. The word “strategic” was used, since it followed on events such as the celebrations concerning the first decade

of democracy in South Africa (1994-2004), as well as the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was initiated in 1995.

As curator my interpretation of this objective was that the notion of reconciliation could only be seen as a kind of hypothesis or position statement; that is, that it could be assumed that within the domain of the visual arts the processes of reconciliation and healing have already manifested over the past ten years. In addition to being given such a specific brief in terms of the curating of the exhibition, my personal opinion was that the selection of artists should reflect something of the significant role the Tuks Department of Fine Arts had played over the last few decades in the domain of art education in South Africa.

The initial reasons, then, for the selection of the artists were partly determined by their connection with the department as graduates, post-graduate students, lecturers or as participants in community projects. However, such selection immediately presented a number of challenges and raised the question of institutional theory, of institutions being instruments of government policy. It seemed ironical to follow a theme of reconciliation for the exhibitions when the department has produced primarily white professional artists and art historians. Since the notion of reconciliation could be approached from various perspectives, it seemed important that the selection of artists had to be as inclusive as possible in terms of geopolitical, racial and gender differences.

Given all these complicating factors, the decision was to follow an alternative non-political route and raise awareness for the material realities of artworks that, ironically again, have always been the embodiment of the times in which they were produced. The artworks selected for exhibition therefore dealt far more with metaphoric significance and about a kind of aestheticisation of politics and histories - even maybe about an exploitation of forms of representation for its own discourses of power - than about offering solutions regarding political issues. What the exhibitions clearly demonstrated, I hope, was the co-existence of the collectivity and the dissimilarity of experience within a particular context, further corroborated by the curatorial intention to demonstrate that the cultural and political transformations in the country were not all pain, introspection and trauma. Hand in hand with the deconstruction of the old came the new and its consideration; thus to have suggested that only radical forms of resistance art, like the kind we've seen especially during the 1980s, are valid forms of social critique, were to be misguided. Many milder and softer ways and forms emanated, similarly questioning perceptions, practices and histories, and not necessarily in a political sense.

Despite the publication of more than twenty articles and reviews in the media, all of these except one dealt with the political content and prestige of the event elicited through its patrons. Although the exhibition encompassed the work of eleven artists (including amongst others Kudzanai Chiurai, Keith Dietrich, Frikkie Eksteen, Minnette Vári, Carine Zaayman, the embroiderers of the Mapula Project - including Rossina Maepa and Emily Maluleka - and the photographers of the Fatherhood Project) and was exhibited in five different venues, only one short article on the exhibitions appeared in the *Pretoria News* and it was generally badly attended. Yet, about a month after the exhibition, a well-known Pretoria artist said to me that he was so inspired by the exhibition that he immediately went home to make art afterwards.

In his address at the opening of *Reconciliations*, Constitutional Court Justice Albie Sachs slammed the very rationale of the Festival with the contention that an exhibition on reconciliation was a virtual impossibility and had failed before it had even opened. In his view the revolution had already taken place and Pretoria had not exactly been part of this process. In her article on the exhibition in *de arte* 72, Stella Viljoen (2006) of the University of Pretoria nevertheless interpreted the Festival as “a laudable endeavour because it attempted to bring together theorists and thinkers from diverse fields to wrestle with the difficult stuff of reconciliation”. According to Viljoen, while the rest of the world was presumably striving towards reconciliation between different genders, races and classes, on the campus of the University of Pretoria dominees and artists were struggling to understand each other. She commented that *Reconciliations* formed the one consistent and fixed element in the organic mix and flux of the conference programme and that it alone was the same at the end of the conference as it had been at the beginning. Still, to her, the notion of ‘reconciliation’ appeared transient and intangible.

It is difficult to assess why there was so little interest in an exhibition of this scope. It can only be assumed that it either had to do with the post-political and post-facto agenda of the event presented in an already politically satiated environment, or with a disregard for art that is not decorative and/or comfortable. In contrast, the opening of the Fried Contemporary Gallery in July 2005 saw some four hundred odd people attending, probably out of curiosity, but also, I believe as the expression of an urgent need and desire for contemporary art viewing. The opening exhibition, Art from two metropolises was a curated event and included the work of artists such as Bonita Alice, Stephen Hobbs, Willem Boshoff, Sidwell Rihlamvu, Diane Victor, Stephan Erasmus, Leora Farber, Antoinette Murdoch, Titus Matiyane and Wilma Cruise. *Pretoria News* art critic, Miranthe Staden-Garbett (2005) described the venue and “hip and happening” as well as oozing with potential, atmospheric and welcoming, and predicted that it boded well for Pretoria’s “somewhat dismal art scene”.

A subsequent solo exhibition of Guy du Toit at the same venue was equally well attended with around two hundred people on opening night, but the next exhibition, The Maswanganyi Family was only attended by a handful of people. This exhibition that included the work of Johannes, Collen, Esther and Pastor Maswanganyi was a double first: it marked the occasion of their first solo exhibition in a gallery and their first-ever exhibition together as a family. Since Johannes and Collen have exhibited and sold work internationally and have work in national and international public collections, it seemed long overdue to introduce the artists to the Pretoria public in a more organised and prominent manner. Government officials, embassies and collectors were personally invited to the exhibition and *artsouthafrica* nominated Kathy Coates to write on the exhibition.

Whilst Johannes’s work is entrenched in the socio-political histories of Southern Africa, Collen corroborates global impulses and the impact of new technologies on disenfranchised communities. Gen Doy (2000:85) reminds us that the so-called ‘new internationalism’ viewed by some theorists as a progression from ethnic arts to multiculturalism to an engagement with the international is far more about a conceptual avant-garde than a political one. This view is commensurate with an encouragement of the visual arts practice and scholarship of a diaspora of artists who are moving across the globe and whose views and artworks have been adequately

represented and disseminated. It is not a case of the celebration of the ethnic ‘Other’ who has become empowered, but about the non-static migratory state of being as a human being whose history is continuously unfolding.

Frank Ledimo, who opened the Maswanganyi exhibition, noted that Esther’s nceka cloths and art objects defied the notion of namelessness that similarly has nothing to do with politics but with human dignity. It is a position that rejects the modernist notion of a unified, coherent self, echoed in the writing of Amina Mama (Doy 2000:141) who argues that through the analysis of subjectivity as “positions in discourse”, allowance is made for the person to be conceptualised historically as changing over time and in different contexts.

A situation of non-attendance prevailed throughout the duration of the Maswanganyi exhibition and as curator I approached individuals in an attempt to understand the phenomenon. Verbal comments such as “I meant to come”, “I’m not really interested in their work”, “Who wants to see craft”, as well as “Why is the work so expensive – I can go and buy it at the zoo or at Hartebeespoort Dam for next to nothing” proved that a general preconception regarding the work of black artists was prevailing. Within the context of the political and cultural histories of Pretoria, the Maswanganyi exhibition reiterated old stereotypes of hierarchical difference the lingering of divisionist perceptions that often still result in exclusive power-play practices.

Surprisingly enough, Celia de Villiers’s highly conceptual exhibition, *LiveWire*, that dealt with the manner in which artists challenge conformity and emancipate themselves in their attempts at maintaining a cohesive self by employing cross media interactions, received comments from the Pretoria public (recorded in Fried Contemporary’s visitors’ book) such as “Best exhibition I’ve ever seen”; “Opwindend”; “Fantastic & stunning”; “Ongelooflik”; “Exceptional”; and “Deliciously wicked”. In the strongly academic exhibition, De Villiers aimed to demonstrate her hypothesis that, at present, distinct Gothic and Baroque sensibilities are manifesting as during previous periods of cultural stress that were characterised by anxieties about social transformations and crises. Yet, a *Pretoria News* review described the work as “[p]oetic, more than academic, from the fireballs to the faux fur, it’s all about having a sensuous experience” (Staden-Garbett 2006a).

Similarly, in a Masters exhibition of Nathani Lüneburg consisting entirely of video installations, the Pretoria public, artists and scholars were apparently swept off their feet in an unadulterated frenzy of non-critical acceptance and enjoyment of the ‘new’ and exciting digital medium. Gallery visitors raved in the visitors’ book with comments such as “like a European gallery”; “You go girl!”; “Magnificent Wow!”; “Captivating! Brilliant work – congrats”, and so forth. In Charles Haxthausen’s *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, Barbara Stafford (2002:xvii) talks about the “visual-communication monoculture [in digital art] in which the future seems not to have a past”. It would seem as if the manipulation of images of dematerialised worlds of schizophrenia in Lüneburg’s exhibition created the opportunity for visitors to escape from their cultural-historical realities in the darkened gallery that became a place of isolation where the past and the future are dissolved into imaginary timeless space.

It would seem that the ‘other side’ of the Pretoria face entails a reigning conservatism that reveals a taste for an aesthetic grounded in the legacies and vernacular of domesticity and safe conformist imagery. This taste has often manifested in visitors who do not spend more than two seconds in the first room of Fried Contemporary, since according to such visitors, it does not exhibit *skilderye* and its artworks seem incomprehensible. This type of visitor does nothing but sigh nostalgically for the good old days when art was traditional, academic and classical, and does not make the slightest attempt to penetrate and grasp the motivations and ideas behind the work.

An interesting point in case is the *Roles/Robes* exhibition that took place from 15 July to 5 August 2006 and was curated in celebration of the gallery’s first birthday. One of the selected artists were South African born, Belgian resident Wendy Morris who presented a satirical short film dealing with Eurostocrats’ fetishising of Africa as a consumable package and their imperialistic ‘taming’ of stereotypical African wildness. It is a powerful work that has been exhibited at five other international film festivals and followed on her previous research on the nineteenth-century Belgian Leopold the II who exploited and violated the people of the Belgian Congo in similar way. The work was virtually ignored by most visitors and its content was perceived as unpalatable and uncomfortable.

Diane Victor showed three powerful smoke drawings entitled *The Emperor’s new clothes*, but whereas the Johannesburgers stood in awe in front of these works at Goodman Gallery in July, the Pretorians managed to show some interest but dubiously questioned the merits and durability of smoke as artmaking medium. It was the delightfully decorative and sensuous video installation of Frikkie Eksteen that stole the show, once again demonstrating the Pretoria public’s intolerance of and resistance to political art and criticism.

Approached from the perspective of her own understanding of postmodernism, the exhibition was criticised by Ms Staden-Garbett (2006b) as including artists who have not surrendered to “the post-modern abyss of meaninglessness” (Staden-Garbett 2006b) and she expressed the hope that “we may find ways of getting over that hurdle toward a semblance of integration”. These statements mystify, since it dismisses postpositivist sensibilities and the cultivation of diversity. In *Towards a Semiotics of Ideology*, Carlos Reis (1993:7) refers to one of the most documented and systematic studies on the subject of ideology by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi that does not attempt to *define* ideology as much as to describe the various frameworks in which it operates. Ideology, according to Rossi-Landi (Reis 1993:7) is mythology, popular belief, cliché and bias, as illusion, self-deception, and so on. Reis (1993:9) argues that collective representation contains a dialectical tension that articulates ideological content connected to a historical situation. Diverse forms of representation presented together (Reis 1993:9) would then create discursive poles that cannot be separated from the tradition/innovation dialectic in the flow of evolutionary dynamics. Reis (1993:69) moreover describes the relationship between art and society as one that reveals a diversity of artistic languages and genres in relationship with society.

It would seem that the progressive narrative of ideological evolution and transformation has left an indelible mark on cultural life and aesthetic taste in Pretoria. Both the articulation and the deconstruction of old racist ideologies have left a residue of artists who practice criticism as much as curators and art writers. It also

cultivated amongst a large group of intellectuals a radical taste for novelty, challenge and renewal, manifesting in applause for the work of progressively thinking artists who, for instance, challenge patriarchy, sexuality and dominant ideologies of power. Such proponents of a kind of counter culture have succeeded in subverting the hegemony of the conventions of Modernist Pretoria and have cultivated a relish in products of non-conventional and non-orthodox thinking.

To return to the notion of the artwork as communication, text and language, Bakhtin (Young 1996:57) reminds us that "... language in society [as in an artwork] ... is heteroglot and fully represents 'the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions'", does not allow for what an artwork does *not* say and, following the Foucaultian assumption, that there are groups in society that are voiceless or silent. As we know, women and, ethnic and religious minorities and others who 'don't belong' have found themselves in positions of displaced abjection in the country. Language or the articulation of the artwork through language could therefore provide a fulcrum for conflict in power, which in its diversity is nonetheless subjugated to the most dominating ideological discourse. Such conflicting perceptions and ideologies seem to be at play in Pretoria, both in terms of art production and art reception. The long and the short of such conflicting perceptions in art discourses are that very few curators and art collectors will look further than Johannesburg and Cape Town and will not take the trouble to seek out merit in the Pretoria art scene; they prefer instead to display and express blanket bias with regard to art from Pretoria.

As a fundamental imperative, art seems always to express the particular, the localised and the peculiar and operates as an historical dialectic. The new is created on the foundations of the past and the ruins of time. As gathered from the highly subjective comments and responses of visitors to the exhibitions under scrutiny, socio-cultural and political transformation did take place in Pretoria, but not in any predictable way. It was Clement Greenberg who as a leftist critic maintained that both the avant-garde and kitsch are the cultural fruits of social, economic and political situations and that they occur at the same phases of decadence in bourgeois and capitalist societies (Poggioli 1968:80). Even if the avant-garde in Pretoria operates as an art of exception, it does so by paying involuntary homage to its originating context.

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