

# KRONOS

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southern african histories NOVEMBER 2012



**Documentary Photography in South Africa**

Editors: Diana Wylie & Andrew Bank

*Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography* was published to coincide with an exhibition in the Porter Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The book is divided into four sections: an essay by Tamar Garb, over 150 pages of colour plates, a compilation of interviews and artists' statements, and a round-table discussion with Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall, Riason Naidoo and Colin Richards titled 'Thinking from the South: Reflections on Image and Place'.

As an exhibition catalogue, *Figures & Fictions* presents a beautiful collection of photographs by seventeen contemporary artists based in South Africa who produced photographic works between the years 2000 and 2010. The artists chosen to participate in the exhibition are largely predictable: Jodi Bieber, Kudzanai Chiurai, Husain and Hasan Essop, David Goldblatt, Pieter Hugo, Terry Kurgan, Sabelo Mlangeni, Santu Mofekeng, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Zanele Muholi, Jo Ratcliffe, Berni Searle, Mikhael Subotzky, Guy Tillim, Roelof Petrus van Wyk, Nontsikeleko Veleko and Graeme Williams.

Perhaps the least predictable, but a very fruitful inclusion, is the *Park Pictures* series by Terry Kurgan, in which the artist produces portraits of Joubert Park photographers, juxtaposing an image-making process in a cosmopolitan yet contested outdoor space with the often insular image-viewing process in the adjacent Johannesburg Art Gallery. An interesting addition would have been Michael MacGarry, a recent Standard Bank Young Artist winner who uses photography to explore, amongst other things, China-Africa relations. Although his photographs taken in South Africa, Nigeria, Angola and China are not entirely problem-free, they touch on one of the most critical socio-economic issues in Africa and the world today.

In her essay, 'Figures and Fictions: South African Photography in the Perfect Tense', Tamar Garb analyses three 'filters of figuration' (12): ethnography, documentary and portraiture, arguing that these pictorial traditions 'continuously jostle and rub against one another' (13). While the stories of these photographic conventions are very familiar, the most significant contribution of this essay is Garb's analysis of the ways in which images can be more complex than their instrumental function (22) when these seemingly discrete filters have to be negotiated within the same image (21).

As an example, she compares Zanele Muholi's *Beulah* series, which references historical pseudo-scientific conventions, to Gustav Fritsch's photographs of ethnographic 'types' that isolate sitters like 'biological specimens' (18). As Muholi makes clear in her interview, all of her subjects are people that she knows: 'My principal over the past few years has been to capture those who I know; people who I know by names and surnames' (289). These photographs, she adds, 'are about me ... Zanele celebrating my community...' (288). While this personal relationship between the photographer and the sitter in Muholi's photographs differs starkly to conventions of ethnographic photography, Garb argues that one can read an 'exquisite particularity' in some of Fritsch's nineteenth century photographs, for the language of portraiture,

which emphasizes the individual is, in certain photographs, more powerful than the flattening function of typology. Although rare, it is possible for images of ethnographic 'types' to 'exceed the imperatives of classification' by taking on 'the language of portraiture' (18). On these rare occasions, interpretation can be opened up beyond the 'conventional post-colonial critique to which they have more routinely been subjected' (22).

What Garb points to here, is the tension between the 'typical and the unique' (21), which, she says, has always been a part of photography. While Garb's essay considers this tension in terms of ethnographic 'types' versus known individuals, more could have been done with this tension in relation to place, a tension that would bring to her essay contemporary issues of globalisation and the 'Global South'. While this is discussed in the roundtable, 'Thinking from the South', it is unfortunate that this conversation, arguably the most theoretically exciting part of the book, is reproduced in small print and placed right at the end. Similarly, the interviews, also printed in small type, are at times very rich expressions of the artists' own voices.

Just as there is comfort, knowledge and specificity to a photographer photographing his or her own community, there is a certain specificity to 'thinking from the South', although this specificity needs to rigorously maintain the tensions, interfaces and contradictions of these spatial explorations. While Mbembe stresses the 'interface of the multiple worlds we inhabit' and Nuttall suggests turning the north-south axis sideways (301), there is general consensus in this conversation that the slippages between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the specific and the general, the homeliness and the homelessness, or the proximity and the distance ought to be treasured.

Garb could have gone further in relating this productive tension with regard to place to the slippage between the 'typical' and the 'unique' in photography and the related ongoing debate about the 'insider' and the 'outsider' in the process of image-making. As she points out, an 'insider's' view is not necessarily exempt from 'allegations of voyeurism, prurience or exploitation' (27), just as it is not impossible for a photograph taken by an 'outsider' to reveal real empathy 'despite the display of difference and the play of power that exposure to the camera entailed' (21).

Nonetheless, in the interviews, Garb continues to press artists to discuss their assumed 'outsider' or 'insider' status. For example, she asks David Goldblatt whether there is something about his Jewishness that is relevant to the representation of human catastrophe in his photograph, 'Refugees from Zimbabwe Sheltering in the Central Methodist Church on Pritchard Street, in the city, 22 March 2009' (273). She asks Pieter Hugo if we are 'in the realm of anthropological or ethnographic photography' when his photographs tell stories from the 'outside' (275). She asks Jo Ratcliffe if she was 'uncomfortable as an observer' in Angola (291) and regarding his photographs taken in Mozambique she asks Zwelethu Mthethwa: 'Do you feel that you are working from within communities, or are you an outsider who visits the communities you portray?' (284).

While such questions are not irrelevant, it seems incongruent for an author to press artists to talk about their supposed insider or outsider status when a key theoretical point in her essay is the potentially redemptive slippage between photographic conventions that may result in unexpected empathy or even intersubjectivity. Surely this slippage indicates that images potentially have the power to exceed the imperatives of our photographic legacies, especially the weighty legacy of colonialism and ethnographic photography. While power imbalances are still very real, and while

many of these imbalances continue to be framed in racialised terms, it is imperative in contemporary South Africa to read the potential power of the photograph as well as the potential power of the photographic subject in nuanced ways. As Pieter Hugo suggests, we should not assume a lack of agency in the person being photographed: '... I question whether there's no reciprocity between subject and portraitist. In a way it's a recording of a collaborative event. So you can't assume that the subject of a photograph is passive and has no agency' (275).

In a number of interviews Garb asks the photographer to what degree he or she allows the photographic subjects to create their own poses, and often the answer is that the subjects are free to project themselves as they wish, suggesting that they are active players who participate in the process of image-making. Terry Kurgen says, for example, that she did not dictate her sitters' poses, but rather 'tried to get the photographers to collaborate with ... [her] in the representation of themselves' (277).

Pertinently, the interviews reveal that contemporary South African artists are acutely aware of issues of power in the process of taking photographs and they carefully navigate this minefield in different ways. Jo Ratcliffe, for example, stresses that she avoids making human subjects central to her work because 'the relationship is just too complex' (291). Zwelethu Mthethwa says, 'I think if you look at yourself as an outsider it becomes just too difficult because you are very conscious of the fact that you are coming from the outside' (284). Complicating the notion of a photographer being an 'insider' or 'outsider', Roelof Petrus van Wyk argues that by using such language we would have to call Goldblatt an outsider when he produced *Some Afrikaners* (206), even though his photographs reveal some empathy. He describes his own experience of looking, as a white Afrikaner, at media photographs of khaki-wearing AWB members and thinking, 'I am also an outsider when I look at these images. I wonder, "Who are these people?"' (296). Pushing the legacy of ethnographic photography up against the conventions of portraiture, Van Wyk merges both his identity and the sitter's identity with the notion of a 'type' (young Afrikaners) through his labeling of photographs, such as 'Young Afrikaner – A Self Portrait, Koos Groenewald' or 'Young Afrikaner – A Self Portrait, Natasja Fourie'. This strategy, along with Muholi's statement that her photographs of other people are 'Zanele celebrating my community...' (288), allude to the notion of *Ubuntu* – the idea that I am who I am because of who you are. Both van Wyk and Muholi reveal themselves as photographers directly in relation to who their respective sitters and respective communities are.

As is demonstrated in a number of interviews, the time that can be afforded the post-apartheid photographer to build trust with a photographic subject is critical to contemporary South African photography, and does not have to be dictated to by colonialist or apartheid classifications. The best example of this in *Figures & Fictions* is Sabelo Mlangeni's discussion of the making of his stunning 2006 photographic series 'Invisible Women'. While these sensitive, intimate photographs reveal what Garb calls a 'corporeal connectedness' (27), Mlangeni was not automatically an 'insider', but describes how these works were only achieved after eight months of building a relationship with the women who swept the streets of Johannesburg at night. At first the women did not want to talk to him, and he engaged with these women for two or three months before he even started to take photographs. Obviously this is a starkly different context from the urgency that was required of social documentary photography during apartheid, but it is important for writers to recognise this way of

image-making that has the potential to move beyond our legacy of past photographic conventions, regardless of classifications of 'race', gender, sexual orientation or class. Although, as Nuttall and Garb suggest, we are not yet entirely over the 'weighty legacy of objectification and ethnographic essentialism that permeates the long history of colonialism' (305), Mlangeni's approach to his subjects reveals enormous potential for the creation of a new legacy of respectfully figuring photographic subjects.

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