

“THE SECRET RAPPORT BETWEEN PHOTOGRAPHY AND
PHILOSOPHY”:

CONSIDERING THE SOUTH AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHIC
APPARATUS THROUGH VELEKO, ROSE, GOLDBLATT,
RACTLIFFE AND MOFOKENG

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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt at understanding South African photography through the lens of Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko, Tracy Rose, David Goldblatt, Jo Ractliffe and Santu Mofokeng. Through the works discussed this thesis intends to unpack photography as a complex medium similar to that of language and text, as well as attempt to understand how exploring South African experiences and spaces through the lens of photography shapes and mediates them. Furthermore it also attempts to understand how these experiences and spaces conversely affect the discourse of photography or at the very least our perception of it. Through these photographers and their works it is hoped that ultimately the interconnected relationship of exchanging codes that takes place between photography and society will be highlighted. The example of connectivity or dialogue I believe exists between the medium of photography and the physical/social and psychological spaces it photographs will be mediated through Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of “the wasp and the orchid” where “the wasp becomes the orchid, just as the orchid becomes the wasp...an exchanging or capturing of each other’s codes”. Other theorists I will be looking at include Vilém Flusser, focusing in particular on his book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, as well as Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and others. The main aims and objectives of this thesis are to understand the veracity of the documentary image and whether or not the image harbours any objective truth, as well as whether truth, if it can truly be said to exist in the world, resides *between* the camera and the seen world. This dichotomy is further complicated by the matter of subject-hood and technical and philosophical understandings of the camera as an apparatus. At no point do I aim to be conclusive, rather it is hoped that by developing the dynamic tension between the theory and the image world that I will be able to bring fresh insight into the reading of a changing

South African condition and the subject position of the photographer in relation to this condition.

Declaration

“I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by means of complete reference”.

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Introduction

In 1987, J.M. Coetzee accepted the Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society, however, in his acceptance speech he noted the inherent paradox of receiving a prize for freedom when he himself came from and lived in a country that was so inescapably unfree. In this speech, Coetzee eloquently captures the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in South African society and the role of the arts therein. This speech, therefore, becomes an important framework for this thesis which attempts to unpack the imaginative task of photographing in South Africa today. Coetzee (1987: 96) describes South Africa as a place where one can never truly have an occupation in the act of writing and self-writing because ultimately it is a space in which the imagination fails: “You can imagine resigning, you can perform a symbolic resignation, but, short of shaking the dust of the country off your feet, there is no way of actually *doing* it”. It is specifically because of our obsessions with history and truth, these “pathological attachments” preventing a healthy inner life, that imagination fails and because of this there is a failure of love and fraternity, we are left with “feelings of homelessness and yearnings for a nameless liberation” (Coetzee 1987: 97-99). History overwhelms us and truth “swamps every act of the imagination”, and, in this life of violence and brutality, South Africa becomes “as *irresistible* as it is *unlovable*” (Coetzee 1987: 99) (italics added). What does it then mean to photograph in this unlovable space that is impossible to resist, using a medium that as an apparatus is a structuring form of society itself?

Coetzee (1987: 98) notes that in the variety and vastness of South African literature, one still experiences the “entrapment of infinitudes”. The vastness of South African photography reveals similar problematics in its attempts at the imaginative in a medium of supposed truth, exemplifying fascinations with the irresistible but unlovable country. Photography is a medium of historical significance in post-apartheid South Africa because during apartheid photographs became “glow-in-the-dark instruments of white-hot truth, cutting through and cauterizing the lies ...on which apartheid society was built” (Powell 2008: 117) and therefore one should consider their continuing significance today in terms of efforts of self-imaging and the

imaging of South Africa. Brenda Atkinson (2000: 40) writes of photographer Jo Ractliffe:

...it seems not entirely accidental that she has chosen photography as the medium most suited to her thematics, occupying as it does that maddeningly, resistant space between otherness and the real, between unconscious and ego-based consciousness, between 'truth' and lie.

This raises the questions: why does photography occupy this maddeningly resistant and awkward space? And what is it about South African photography and particularly South African space that finds itself so comfortable in this maddeningly resistant and awkward space? This thesis will therefore be considering some photographic moments of resistance in South African photography, namely through the works of Nontsikelelo "Lolo" Veleko, Tracy Rose, David Goldblatt, Jo Ractliffe and Santu Mofokeng in an attempt to consider these questions and their relation to the dynamic between photography and society. These photographic moments will be interpreted through the works of Vilém Flusser, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in addition to Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and others. The essential thing to note here is that "photography evades us", it is

...unclassifiable because there is no reason to *mark* this or that of its occurrences...deprived of a principle of marking, photographs are signs which don't *take*, which *turn*, as milk does (Barthes 1984: 4).

This thesis will, therefore, be specifically considering photography as a type of language or discourse in terms of concepts like image and text, while attempting to highlight photography as a medium that always suggests significance while acting as an equaliser, continuously resistant, always tending towards and away from meaning. Walter Benjamin sums up the orientation of this thesis in speaking of "the secret rapport between photography and philosophy" (Cadava 1997: 5).

Photography exists precariously between the notion of image and text, magic and concept, tangible meaning and the uncertainty of that which is beyond reach, it paradoxically announces 'look, here is something to see... but it is only as important as all other reproductions'. Photography suggests one moment that it is rooted in concept, perception and structure and the next disappears into "the world of magic, a

world in which everything is repeated and in which everything participates in a significant context” (Flusser 2000: 9). The photograph, therefore, situates itself squarely between the dilemma of imagination and truth, history and the magic that allows it significance.

Most importantly, however, one must debate photography in terms of its relationship with society, which is more than simply something to be captured in front of the lens and is in fact an innate necessity to photography as an *apparatus*. In other words, it is not enough to just consider photography as a discourse that mediates the experiences and (social/psychological/physical) spaces that it captures, but that it is as important to consider how these experiences and spaces mediate the discourse of photography. As Flusser (2000: 46) states “...society is in a feedback relationship to the camera which makes it possible for the camera to improve progressively”, therefore photography and society exist in a dialogue or state of connectivity with one another. This interaction is further complicated when considering Coetzee: how does a society desperately attempting to imagine itself towards freedom do this through a medium that pulls between the conflict of the imagination and truth?

Consequently the aims and objectives of this thesis are: firstly, to understand the veracity of the documentary image, secondly, to contemplate whether or not the image harbours any objective truth, and lastly, to consider whether ‘truth’, if it can truly be said to exist in the world, resides *between* the camera and the world seen. This dichotomy is further complicated by the matter of subject-hood and technical and philosophical understandings of the camera as an apparatus. At no point do I aim to be conclusive, rather it is hoped that by developing the dynamic tension between the theory and the image world that I will be able to bring fresh insight into the reading of, firstly, the changing South African condition, and secondly, the subject position of the photographer in relation to this condition. Overall, it is the intention of this thesis to establish some understanding of the interconnected relationship between the photographic apparatus and the society that engages with it, comparing this relationship to Deleuze and Guattari’s example of connectivity, the wasp and the orchid which involves *an exchanging or capturing of each other’s codes* (O Sullivan 2008: 19).

Because this thesis is wary of any fixity or determination, all proposed categories must therefore be understood as existing *under erasure*. This term, proposed by Jacques Derrida, is I feel a useful one through which to interpret the

slippages built into the making of a photograph, and the making of a personal identity or the narrative of a nation. J.M. Coetzee's Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech is important for understanding the context of what I'm trying to do. The key paradox of Coetzee's text is that because we are mired in truth it is all the more difficult to imagine other worlds. It is because of our rootedness in history that we cannot dream and because of the horrors of the world around us that we cannot have a healthy inner life. The vitalism of Veleko is a possible alternative to the dark narrative that Coetzee suggests but is it enough? Equally so, Coetzee's narrative is considered in terms of the hybridism of Tracy Rose, the pathological attachments of David Goldblatt, the desire to dream out the nightmare in Jo Ractliffe and the ever inaccessible desire for the mythical and transfigurative in Santu Mofokeng, which is perhaps our greatest yearning and the most unattainable.

South African Self-styling: a preamble

Art books, particularly the ones that are given the task of being literary representations of an exhibition, are curiously strange entities. They inhabit an odd liminal space between being aftermath and belonging to that eccentric world of ‘coffee table’ books that are more often than not, awkwardly jammed into library shelves. Part of their awkwardness lies in the fact that they are forever trying to represent an already past moment that the readers themselves will most likely never experience; a dialogue existing between absence and presence much like the photographs that exist on their pages. Another part of their awkwardness very simply lies in their often quite formidable size: they are not the kind of books you can easily pull off the shelf and flip through in your hands; rather they demand the support of your whole forearm or upper leg, pulling muscles with their weight, the bearer fighting gravity and the sacrilegious act of letting it fall to the ground. All of this came to mind when considering the book created out of the exhibition *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, as it was not simply a big book but, on first appearance, somewhat of a tome in its own right. Unopened, the sheer size of this book seemed slightly excessive, like oversized lettering, demanding importance. When considering the mass of photographs inside and how they attempt to “examine...contemporary life in Africa in all its richness and complexity...” (Hartshorn 2006: 7), however, it becomes clear that this book can never really ever be big enough.

Snap Judgments was an exhibition formulated out of a need “to illuminate the enormous social and cultural shifts now taking place across the African continent” (Hartshorn 2006: 7). As a continent that has previously been over simplified this is a seemingly mammoth task, because not only must the complexities of the present be acknowledged but also the neglected complexities of the past, complexities in the making, complexities transmutating, complexities of diversity, complexities in detail and individuality. It is a continent of complexities expanding at a rate faster than our population; evolving, dying away and renewing, moving and ebbing continuously like a gradually flooding river. To even begin to capture all these cultural shifts and dialogues of a continent in an exhibition or a book would, therefore, be an impossible task but Enwezor goes a long way towards offering shifting frameworks within which to understand contemporary Africa through the photographic works he has chosen.

The need to illuminate cultural shifts in the African continent comes out of the need to rewrite Africa away from the simplifications of colonialism. ‘Afro-pessimism’ is one of the many challenges an exhibition like this faces and, therefore, one of the aims of *Snap Judgments* “...is to provide an alternative” (Hartshorn 2006: 7) to this, because stereotypes stemming all the way from slavery and colonialism still impact on the African consciousness today. The works selected by Enwezor are works by African photographers from all over the continent, chosen to portray a different Africa from that reflected in world media and “to ask pertinent questions about the role of images in the public narrative of the African self and spaces within a changing global image economy”¹ (Enwezor 2006: 19).

The stereotypes that these artists are breaking away from associate Africa with darkness, disease, madness and chaos. Africa, the metaphorical Caliban² whose perversity is only intensified by western notions of civilisation, is everything the West is not and less, while simultaneously being everything the Western imagination wishes it to be. It is a place that “is always perched on a precipice, on the threshold between something and nothingness, between survival and the negativity of life cycles” (Enwezor 2006: 11). It is constantly caught between the contradiction of being both knowable to the superior Western mind and completely inexplicable. It is supposedly knowable precisely because it is beyond understanding, “reduc[ing] a landmass ten times the size of Europe to a veritable unknowable” (Enwezor 2006: 12). As Enwezor and Octavio Zaya (1996: 40) state:

Such are the actively lived contradictions of the African experience.
They raise difficult questions about the notion of origin and authenticity, revealing the bald fictions of essentialism.

It is this essentialism that reduces the “distinctiveness and diversity” of the African continent into a singular “blurry, indistinguishable thing” (Enwezor 2006: 11) and it is this essentialism that *Snap Judgments* stands in opposition to, by instead focusing on the multiple experiences, spaces and ways these photographers picture Africa. Therefore, each photographer contributes their own individual interaction with the place and psychological space called Africa, as well as their own interaction with the

¹ This is also an aim of this thesis.

² A deformed creature from Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*.

process of photographing or representation itself. This culminates in a unique and stimulating yet inescapably incomplete alternative to traditional reductive imaging of this complex space.

In his essay ‘African Modes of Self-Writing’, Achille Mbembe tackles many of the same problems Enwezor highlights in *Snap Judgments* but while *Snap Judgments* might stand as an alternative to notions of afro-pessimism, “Mbembe explores how Africa has internalised and domesticated this pathological reading” (Jamal 2005: 142). Mbembe (2002: 241) unpacks how slavery, colonization and apartheid have acted to alienate the African self from itself by reducing identity to that of objecthood. “The violence of falsification and material expropriation” (Mbembe 2002: 241) have robbed the African self of any sense of familiarity making it so that “not only is the self no longer recognised by the Other; the self no longer recognizes itself”. Herein lies the importance of self-writing for the postcolonial subject and simultaneously the difficulty of it, as the African subject is not only faced with the debasement of the past³, but also a state of “nonbeing” (Mbembe 2002: 241) the undoing of which is complicated by the “long rise toward nothingness that Africa has experienced all through its history” (Mbembe 2002: 242). Self-writing is, therefore, an act of “*self-styling*” (Mbembe 2002: 242), an act of self-representation, that attempts to move away from this nothingness towards an existence defined by more than just ‘nonbeing’.

There is, however, a significant difference between simply attempting to construct a sense of self and Mbembe’s chosen term of self-writing which by implication is inseparable from the concept of language. What Mbembe is alluding to here is the power of language as a primary organising mode of representation and therefore language as a primary organising mode of society in itself. As beings who have the ability of communication through language, we believe that we possess language but it is language that in fact possesses us. It is a medium we must enter into and, once inside, whose conventions we can never free ourselves, from which we can never escape. Language is simultaneously an organising medium of individual thought and society and therefore there are much greater implications in the act of self-writing as opposed to simply constructing a sense of self.

³ African selfhood is often “understood in terms of both victimhood and mutilation” (Mbembe 2002: 272)

Language is not, however, the only organising form of representation within the mind, the image is another form of representation that has the power to shape and be shaped, to possess us while letting us believe we possess it⁴. The term ‘image’ here relates to both physical images and images that exist in the human mind. Much like language is a mediation between human beings and the world, a removed cognitive interaction as opposed to, for example, a direct physical one, so too is the image a mediation between human beings and the world. Images in our consciousness can be explained as our perception of the world (the complex understanding we form of it) but the difference between an image and perception is how our “consciousness is *related*” (Sartre 2004: 7) to the world. With perception the world “is ‘encountered’ by the consciousness” (Sartre 2004: 7) whereas with an image it is not and the encounter has already taken place. In other words, an image is what is left behind by the act of perceiving the world, but it is also more complex than simple aftermath. When perceiving an object one can observe and learn from the object as long as the object is in front of them, but one can observe an image at any point, however, it is impossible to learn anything more from the image than what has already been placed there and what is already known (Sartre 2004: 9). An Image is

... exactly determined by [one’s] consciousness: it includes in itself nothing but what I am conscious of; but inversely, everything that constitutes my consciousness finds its correlate in the object (Sartre 2004: 11).

Interestingly then, while language acts as an organising medium of the mind, so too are images, as they not only exemplify the “certain way in which [an] object appears to consciousness” but also the “certain way in which consciousness presents to itself an object” (Sartre 2004: 7). The point of this is that the importance of visuals in the act of self-writing, or perhaps a type of self-imaging, is as important as the linguistic. The significance then of exhibitions like *Snap Judgements* is that they examine the visual, which (as mentioned before) has already had an overwhelming impact on global understandings of an Africa that is “...reduced to a spasmodic, unchanging

⁴ The interesting difference between language and images is based in the act of communication. Language has relatively stable semiotics because of the need to communicate but images are ambiguous and unstable in their meaning, potentially making them even more powerful (this is a discussion that will be continued further on).

cycle...[where]...Existence itself is expressed, almost always, as a stuttering” (Mbembe 2002: 251-2). Therefore, the artists Enwezor selected for this exhibition investigate not only “how to look at Africa” (Enwezor 2006: 19) but how to picture Africa and how “Africans picture themselves” (Rocco 2006: 350)⁵.

How “Africans picture themselves” (Rocco 2006: 350) is an interesting approach when considering what Mbembe (2002: 242) says about:

... how current African imaginations of self are born out of disparate but often intersecting practices, the goal of which is not only to settle factual and moral disputes about the world but also to open the way for *self-styling*

This concept of *self-styling* is taken up in *Snap Judgments* by Andrew Dosunmu and South Africa’s Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko. Both Dosunmu and Veleko turn to capturing fashion when exploring notions of the African self and body; investigating the space between the individual and society in which they exist, the liminal space where the inner person projects outwards modes of self and *self-styling*. Dosunmu (Image 1 and 2) blurs the boundary between studio fashion photography and street photography, becoming more concerned with “his models not as characters but as subjects” (Enwezor 2006: 32). There is often a seemingly brutal or perhaps brutally honest moment to Dosunmu’s black and white images as his subjects on most occasions exude a suspicious antagonism toward the camera. There is an emphasised tension between the consent to be photographed and yet a resistant unwillingness to do so, which highlights a brutality of the camera but which the sitter is strangely complicit in. Many of his subjects’ expressions are hard and defensive but also at times un-place-able and even chilling as, for instance (Image 2), a fully clothed woman unconcernedly flashes a breast creating a moment that could either lie in the realm of intimately revealed vulnerability or exploitation.

While Dosunmu’s untitled fashion photographs have a harsh element, “Lolo” Veleko’s brightly coloured images overlap into the area of play as many of her images

⁵ In essence, examining how Africans picture themselves is an attempt to imagine Africa outside the colonial imaginings that have previously confined it, however, returning to Coetzee and the South African situation, how does one achieve this imagining when mired in ‘truth’?



Image 1: Andrew Dosunmu, Untitled Fashion Photographs, 2005, gelatine silver print



Image 2: Andrew Dosunmu, Untitled Fashion Photographs, 2005, gelatine silver print

deal with young urban people living in South Africa, particularly Johannesburg, having fun with fashion and the selves they present to others. The difficulty faced by these optimistic portrayals of South African self-imaging, however, is how does one successfully imagine or image in a country where imagination is swamped by truth? Certainly the vitality of Veleko's works stand in contrast to the dark prophesising of Coetzee that tells of the pathologies of the South African space, however, whether simply the will towards optimism is enough to overcome this irresistible darkness is uncertain.

Veleko's images do not portray the same antagonistic tension between the camera and the subject as Dosunmu's, but rather emphasise a more playful tension between the subject and the society that tries to contain and categorise them. Enwezor (2006: 32) describes Veleko as "a scavenger of individuality, a hunter of cool street fashion" who "is partial to subjects who express themselves through their social camouflage". The use of the word camouflage is interesting because there is an inherent duplicity in clothing to both reveal and hide the person behind them, therefore, although clothing is supposedly a visual expression of a person, it also allows for the choice of how one would like to portray oneself. Clothing becomes the border where the individual and society meet, the point at which the individual adopts the camouflage of a social being, making concessions to society by the very fact that clothing is a cultural object. The garments Veleko's subjects wear might, therefore, be described as social camouflage; however, they certainly do anything but let these people blend into the crowd. The clothing Veleko's subjects wear is undeniably complicit in society but they also stand in reaction to society, to "social camouflage", further intensifying the tension between hiding and revealing, society and individual. The overall problematic of this in a society mired in truth is where does the truth lie in this camouflage and can these acts of self-reimagining move past the preoccupations of truth and authenticity to a new platform for the imagination. Is the vitalism of Veleko enough to overcome the dark narrative suggested by Coetzee?

Many of the people Veleko has photographed receive persecution everyday, even harassment, because of their refusal to simply blend in, but Veleko feels this is a point of common ground that she shares with her subjects as she states: "I can say I have been in the shoes of the misunderstood in my quest of discovering my many selves and this is what you actually find in all the photographs" (cited in Shaman 2008: 70). This persecution of difference can be seen in any type or form of society

because society, by nature, is programmed to desperately prevent dissent in its ranks, to maintain group security through unity. The proverbial *we* that stands in united opposition to all others, *we are one because we are not them; we are similar because we are not different*. This has obviously become more complicated by the cultural heterogeneity of a global society and it is interesting to note that Africa is inseparable from the global considering that the “historicity of African societies...are rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualised outside a world that is...globalised” (Mbembe 2001: 9). However, there are still persisting values of unity and nationalism, especially; it would seem in South Africa. Leon de Kock (2004: 264) argues that “cultural heterogeneity is nothing new or surprising in a context of globalisation, but the South African case is peculiar because it remains to this day a scene of largely *unresolved* difference”. This unresolved difference stems ultimately from the irony of attempting to embrace a diverse but unified society. In other words, South African society is anxiously trying to assert a type of unity through difference, the failure of which is only intensified by the reactions and persecutions Veleko’s subjects face everyday.

Jamal (2005: 148-9) considers this unresolved heterogeneous condition in terms of Stephen Gray’s metaphor of an archipelago in his study *South African Literature: An introduction*. Archipelagos are islands whose peaks exist separately but which are ultimately joined under the surface of the water, a type of metaphoric diversity and obscured unity, “the hidden life that blurs or eliminates difference ‘beneath the surface’” (Jamal 2005: 148). Jamal (2005: 148) goes on to note that the “unresolvedly heterogeneous condition which continues to define South African culture” is “a condition which Gray sought to cross by alerting us, paradoxically, to the realisation that ‘beneath the surface’ this condition *had already been crossed*.” What Jamal (2005: 149) is pointing out here is that quite simply South Africa does not know itself, “that we already possess, even though we may not declare that we do”, and perhaps this is the importance of Veleko’s attempt to explore the concept of many selves, to know oneself. There is an interesting connection here between ‘beneath the surface’ or what de Kock terms a ‘secret life’, in terms of clothing which in itself is camouflage and inherently obscuring, creating the tension between hiding and revealing. It is precisely the ambiguity of what lies beneath the external, the appearance, the clothing, which blurs and reduces the diversity of the internal,

therefore, it is always dubious to turn one's focus to a subject matter that is inherently external, the surface beneath which the 'secret life' or hidden truth exists⁶. Furthermore, when Veleko talks of the act of capturing other's self-imaging in her own quest for discovering her many selves she strangely becomes the obscuring, unifying force that reduces diversity of the people she photographs. Therefore one should always be aware of the unifying but reductive nature of society and the self, the inherent desire to not only reduce the complexity of individuals but the desire to reduce the complexity of the many selves of individuals. Veleko's investigation of her many selves has led to an investigation of others' many selves which in turn has become not only a kind of self-portrait of her own exploration of selves but by in large a self-portrait of the overlapping intricacies of self in us as 'South African'.⁷ To further clarify this argument in greater depth it is helpful to examine individual works of Veleko's which have greater ramifications for the series as a whole.

The idea of many selves is an intriguing one that can be seen obviously in the comparisons between images like "Cindy and Nonkululeko" 2004 (Image 3) and "Nonkululeko" 2004 (Image 4), and more subtly in the series, *Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder*, as a whole. In "Cindy and Nonkululeko", two young women are photographed in front of a relatively grey street and building, in brightly coloured dresses and stockings. Both are dressed in the same type of formula from head to toe which follows: clip in hair, brightly coloured dress, unusual stockings⁸ and high heels; but each adds an individual flair. Although Cindy (on the left) stands with one leg forward, leaning on the opposite hip which exudes a certain amount of attitude; Nonkululeko seems to conform to the overall girly-ness of the image by standing with her feet together and one arm behind her back, holding the other arm. The girly atmosphere of this image is almost reminiscent of the "Lolita" fashions that first influenced Veleko⁹. "Lolita" refers to a Japanese girl who dresses in adapted Victorian dress to look like a more modern version of Victorian porcelain doll (Shaman 2008: 74). The cutesy feel of this style of dress is reflected in Veleko's

⁶ Again one should be wary of these preoccupations of truth but perhaps it is best to simply embrace the tension of what might or might not exist beneath.

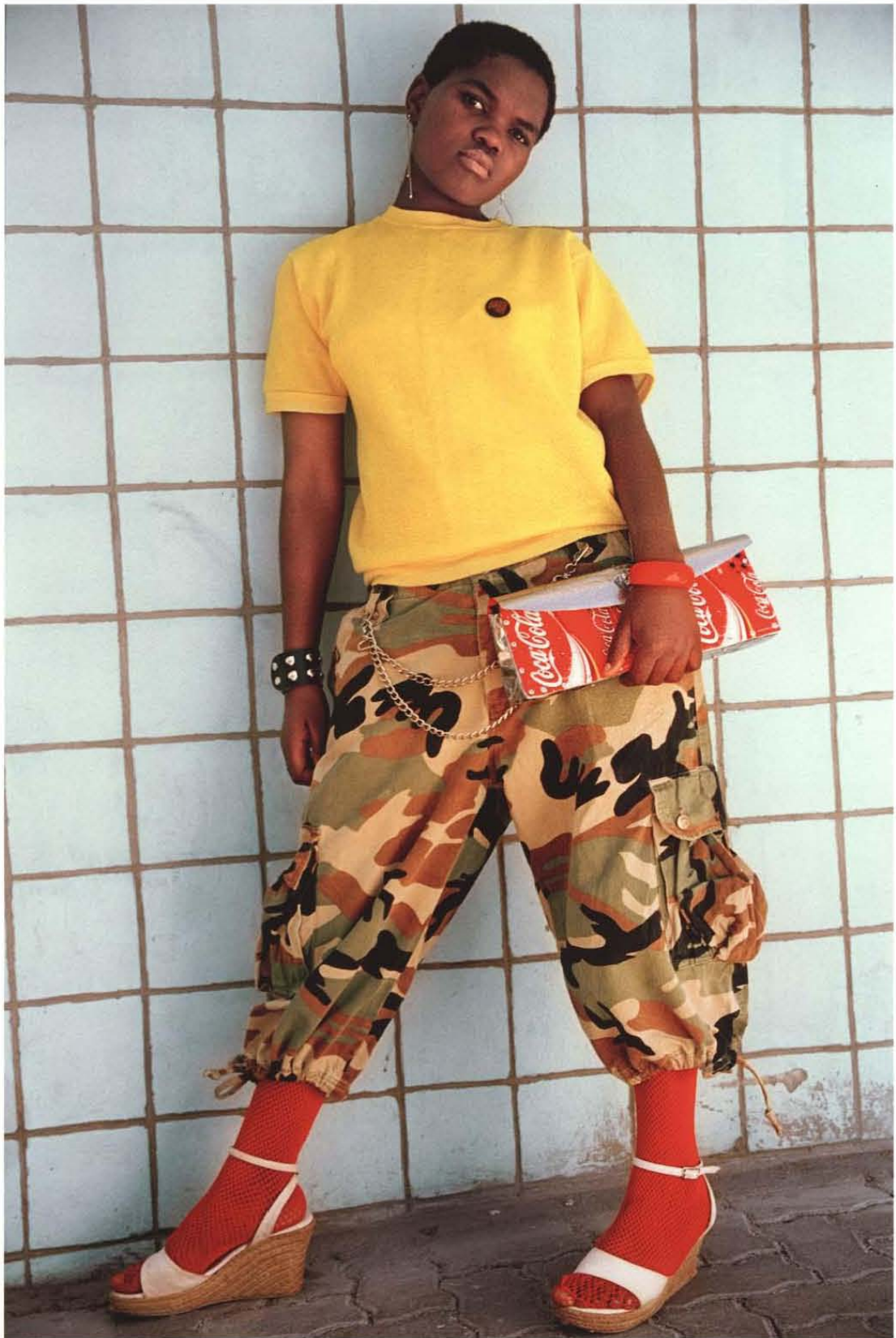
⁷ According to Jamal (2005: 16) this is a permanent condition of preparation for South Africans who, hindered by the gulag of the past and the "global gulag that preys upon fear and hopelessness", must continually attempt to re-imagine the South African space out of the predicaments of its culture.

⁸ Which only came into fashion quite a while after 2004, making these girls a couple of years ahead of the times and trends.

⁹ In 1995, Veleko saw an image from Japanese photographer, Shoichi Aoki's *Fruits*, of a "Lolita" that stayed with her and has influenced her work ever since. (Shaman 2008: 74)



Image 3: Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko, *Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder: “Cindy and Nonkululeko”*, 2004, Pigment on paper, 20.3 x 30.5 cm



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NONTSIKELELO VELEKO

Image 4: Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko, *Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder: “Nonkululeko”*, 2004, Pigment on paper, 20.3 x 30.5 cm

image as both young women (but particularly Nonkululeko) seem to be alluding to some youthful girlishness. Disturbingly, this cutesy style is also concerned with the infantilisation of women which is particularly prominent in Japanese culture and the image of the Lolita. This photograph of “Cindy and Nonkululeko” does not appear to be highly sexualised, therefore playing less to the lecherous gaze that accompanies such images, however, this raises questions of sexual geography in South Africa, particularly, because South Africa is still in essence a very patriarchal society where women have even faced assault due to issues with things like the length of their skirt.¹⁰

What is noteworthy about this type of Lolita fashion in which Japanese girls attempt to mimic Victorian dolls, are the implications of this for Japanese society. After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the defeat of World War II, the Japanese youth has entertained cultural elements like manga cartoons, which allow for a fantasy symptomatic of Japanese culture while subverting their own inherited reality. Japanese artist Takashi Murakami (cited in Thornton 2008: 198), who uses these cultural elements in his work, explains that “We define *subculture* as a cool culture from abroad, but *otaku* is an uncool indigenous culture...I idled my time, imagining that Japan was a Philip K. Dick¹¹ world”. Therefore, these Japanese Lolita’s adopt and adapt a genre of ‘cool’ western culture to replace their own while embracing a state of objecthood and consumerism in the appearance of dolls and evoking a moment of innocence that no longer exists. It is this strange atmosphere of performed innocence, a contradictingly knowing naïveté, that links the image of “Cindy and Nonkululeko” to the concepts of Lolita, which in turn raises questions about scarred South African culture forever robbed of its innocence by colonialism, apartheid and slavery. Are Cindy and Nonkululeko, therefore, alluding to a moment not entirely embedded in wound of the past? Or inducing some sort of contemporary innocence that will never exist? Perhaps they are exploring a type of new transnationalism where one is reborn into an impossible moment of innocence renewed?

The notion of performed innocence is by the very nature of innocence a dubious one. It is as impossible to knowingly perform genuine innocence as it is to be

¹⁰ This is a topic that Veleko tackles in the series *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder* through images of woman in short skirts and even a self-portrait of herself.

¹¹ Philip K. Dick was an American science fiction writer from the late 50’s to early 80’s.

both deliberate and unwitting; however, this highlights to a large extent the dilemma of the third world attempting to start anew after colonisation or the contradiction of a 'new South Africa' after apartheid. In Veleko's photograph, "Cindy and Nonkululeko", Cindy captures this tension of performed innocence slightly more powerfully by appearing vaguely older and more refined than Nonkululeko. The expression on her face, which lingers between passive and what could be a slight frown, somehow captures more of a sense of knowing and duplicity inherent in her innocent attire. Nonkululeko, however, appears younger and sweeter with a slight smile hanging around the corners of her mouth, giving her a more genuine air of gentle innocence. Her yellow dress is almost pinafore like, a type of clothing often adopted as a school uniform for girls and therefore having obvious connotations with more formative years; while her black stockings are covered in white cut outs of witches and she wears big costume jewellery earrings and bracelet. What is interesting about Nonkululeko in this image is that she appears again a few pages later in *Snap Judgments* in a completely different manner.

In "Nonkululeko 2004", Nonkululeko exudes a hardcore attitude that is vastly different from the slightly shy innocence of "Cindy and Nonkululeko". Like the famous feminist artist Cindy Sherman, who comments on society through her altered chameleon-like appearance in portraits, Nonkululeko has transformed herself through clothing, stance and camera angle¹². Again, Nonkululeko wears bright colours but this time more of a primary colour yellow t-shirt with bright red stockings and a Coca-Cola hand bag. This is paired with a pair of calf-length camo pants draped in chains, complimented with red and studded black leather bracelets. There are obvious elements in her outfit that add to her sense of attitude but ultimately these are all secondary to the attitude she exudes and which the camera magnifies. Nonkululeko fills the whole frame, her legs far apart; she leans into her hips and against the wall behind her. The camera looks up at her and with the opposite tilt of her head; she looks down at it with a sense of determined 'coolness'. In both images of Nonkululeko she creates an atmosphere of authenticity that, although helped by them, is about more than simply the clothes being worn, she exudes a manner that creates a seemingly legitimate tone to the work. Nonkululeko shows an insight into how to move her body and subtly change her facial expression to make her physical being her

¹² (although this would have been Veleko's doing)

weapon of self-styling. There is, therefore, something very interesting happening here in the collaboration between Veleko and Nonkululeko, and between the works “Cindy and Nonkululeko” and “Nonkululeko” that goes beyond merely the clothes individual’s wear; there is a sense of self-styling that seems to be more about a psychological space and a sense of ‘self-writing’, than just fashion.

Albie Sachs (1988) acknowledges the importance of the imagination in ‘Preparing Ourselves for Freedom’ but this is an almost impossible task for many interrelated reasons. For Coetzee it is our pathological rootedness in history and truth, for Mbembe it is the impossibility of self-writing when the self is other to even itself and for de Kock it is the erasure of difference through the attempt to create unity-through-difference and all of these concerns ultimately highlight a failure of the imagination. Veleko’s works therefore hint towards some moment of the imagination, a creative act of self-fashioning, yet one cannot be entirely convinced because this is something that can only occur ‘beneath the surface’ of the image and ‘beneath the surface’ of clothing. Veleko’s images can only hint at the act of the imagination because in the light of the “Predicaments of Culture in South Africa”, they disappear and fade and the external act of fashion itself can only be the “permanent condition” of “preparation” (Jamal 2005: 16) for the imagination.

What this points out, perhaps, is that although clothing might be a fascinating border where the individual and society converge, the external expression of the internal is unavoidably mediated by the conviction or presentation of the exterior. The authenticity of this external expression is still deeply rooted in the psychological; any attempt at self-styling is still very visually embedded in the structures in the mind, in the process of self-imagining. As previously stated, the image is another form of representation (like language) that exists externally and internally, which has the power to shape and be shaped, to possess us while letting us believe we possess it. Therefore, in these photographs of Veleko’s, one can see the disparity but interconnectivity of the visual world that surrounds us and the images we project in our mind. Nonkululeko’s transformation of self is therefore inescapably an act of self-imagining which raises questions of either the ability to fake a psychological space or the notion of schizophrenic “many selves”. The concept of many selves, however, is one that Veleko herself admits makes up a large area of exploration in her works. Not only does Nonkululeko dive into the psychological space of self-imagining many selves, but Veleko also interacts on a level of self-imagining through the fact that she

too must attempt to inhabit her subject's psychology to create a visual atmosphere of authenticity in the photograph. This opens up a fluid notion of the experience of self-styling through self-imaging that is even more flowing than the initial concept of multiple selves; rather notions of personal, shared and societal schizophrenia blur and overlap becoming more and more interconnected.

This entire argument has a very subtle manifestation in the images themselves and undeniably the most obvious element of Veleko's photographs is in fact the clothing in them, but Veleko's work has come under criticism for its strong focus on fashion as having a supposed lack of substance and meaning. The reason for this pull between depthlessness and that which lies beneath the surface is the duplicit nature of syncretism within the works, which involves the subtle mixing of ideas while at the same time entertaining the "*inconsistent* refusal to unify differing schools of thought" (Jamal 2005: 61). The "inherent corruptibility...[of]...syncretism can reinforce cultural stasis or promote change" (Jamal 2005: 62), meaning that it can simply emphasize the constructs of the exterior or promote the subtlies of the imagination underneath. Veleko's focus on fashion is, therefore, at times interpreted as merely a focus on the superficial and exterior and her emphasis on keeping her works 'simple'¹³ only exacerbates this.

Theorists prefer likening her works to Seydou Keïta and Samuel Fosso because they supposedly make her works "academically" (Veleko, cited in Shaman 2008: 74) stronger but Veleko herself prefers not to let her photographs become too "complicated" and by her own admittance does not write much about her work (Veleko, cited in Shaman 2008: 69). Veleko describes her work as "not specific" and although her "work centers around issues of identity through clothing", she also describes it as "flirt[ing] with fashion, politics, tradition, music, graffiti etc" (Veleko, cited in Shaman 2008: 69). This might be interpreted as an overly exterior approach but I am not entirely sure Veleko's works desperately need some greater, more meaningful explanation from her specifically. Perhaps this is a championing of what Roland Barthes declared the "death of the Author", an advocating of the interpretive powers of the reader, but there is a definite strength to Veleko's works in allowing the viewer to interact with these images without some overarching prescriptive rationale from the artist. One of the reasons for this might be due to the fact that while the

¹³ Although Veleko does state that "to the best of my knowledge I have tried to simplify things but I think the more I consciously did that, the more it became complicated". (Cited in Shaman 2008: 69)

interaction between the photographer and subject might be a schizophrenic overlapping of multiple selves, so too might the interaction between image and viewer open up a dialogue of various selves that cannot be dictated.

A personal favourite of Veleko's work and one of her better known images is a photograph taken after *Snap Judgments*, entitled *Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder*: "Sibu 2007" (Image 5). It is an image that is easy to place, a young man in a floral orange and pink woman's suit challenges concepts of sexuality while the graffiti of Steve Biko on the wall behind him makes obvious references in the background. What is striking about this image is not, however, the conventions which it speaks to, rather in spite of them, there is something wonderfully awkward and simultaneously comfortable about Sibu. His stance is both commanding and yet uncertain as his hands and feet uncomfortably give him away. His glasses hide his face, making him slightly inaccessible and obscure while his clothing makes him somewhat vulnerable to the viewer and to ridicule. Not to attribute an excessive amount of meaning to Veleko's image, but rather in an attempt to open a certain atmosphere or sentiment up to debate I would suggest there is something in Sibu that is symptomatic of the South African dilemma, a tentative uncertainty that is bound up in contradictions that characterise "a critical and cultural discourse that reflexively points to the construction of difference and its erasure" (Jamal 2005: 150). Sibu slightly falters with the conviction of attitude that Nonkululeko achieves but this only acts to make him more fascinating, creating something in the image that is subtly un-place-able and even disruptive. There is a distinct uncertainty created by the disjuncture of conflicting elements in Sibu, he has both an awkward confidence and vulnerable inaccessibility. The reason I find this particularly compelling is because the psychological space of self-imaging that Sibu creates, reflects to an extent the psychological space I feel South Africa inhabits. Plagued by the past, attempting to move forward, South Africa emanates an awkward uncertainty that is indicative of inevitable contradictions. Somewhere between unity and diversity, memory and forgetfulness, forgiveness and resentment, transformation and destruction; South Africa inhabits an ambiguous no man's land that it ironically continuously attempts to situate as the post-apartheid 'New South Africa'¹⁴. However, "'South Africa' itself

¹⁴ "What struck him forcefully...was the phrase: 'New South Africa'. How dated it seemed. When had it been coined? Five years ago? Already it was worn out and passing quietly from use" (Vladislavić 2004: 81)



Image 5: Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko, *Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder*: Sibu 2007, Pigment on paper, 20.3 x 30.5 cm

remains a sign under erasure” (de Kock 2004: 273), the term has become worn out as we continually struggle towards imagination in the wake of what Coetzee points out as a failure of the imagination and as Jamal (2005: 16) notes: “we may continue to live with the terrible unease of never having begun”.

The biggest dilemma that faces African identity as a whole is the conflict between: “Does African identity partake in the generic human identity? Or should one insist in the name of difference and uniqueness...” (Mbembe 2002: 253). Should African identity assert that Africans are people like all people and should therefore be treated equally; because justifications for slavery, colonisation and apartheid were all based on difference? Or should African identity assert a unity, “the idea of a unique identity founded on membership of the black race” (Mbembe 2002: 241) or geography. It could be said that Veleko focuses on difference and uniqueness in her work as she specifically chooses individuals who stand out from the norm but she creates an interesting dialogue as she does not seem to be attempting to assert a sort of African or South African unity through her work. Of course this is something that could be read into the work, a certain type of stereotypical ‘African-ness’ associated with bright colours and patterns, but Veleko is exploring difference within South African post-apartheid society itself rather than simply a difference in South African identity from the rest of the world. Interestingly, South Africa attempts to assert a unified notion of nationality through diversity but Veleko does not seem to be overly concerned with asserting either unified humanity or specific unified nationality. In fact, there is a certain global appeal to her works which Veleko (cited in Shaman 2008: 70) comments on as being a result of the fact that “both modernity and globality are still currencies of contemporary identity”. Therefore, Veleko acutely points out that both discourses around generic notions of humanity, the global, and unique nationality are still persistently inevitable in contemporary notions of identity.

Surely then the logical assertion to make about the dilemma of generic human identity versus unified unique African identity would be:

... the possibility of diverse cultural forms within a single humanity –
but cultural forms whose purpose is not to be self-sufficient, whose
ultimate signification is universal (Mbembe 2002: 253)

For South Africa it is exactly this type of logic, directed towards nationality, that has in fact created the proverbial corner into which South African identity has been written, an idealistic attempt to create unity through diversity, a “paradoxical faith in unity-through-heterogeneity” (de Kock 2004: 274). *We are South African because we embrace difference, because we are multicultural and cosmopolitan, because we are diversity*. To a large extent this is a farce, however, and has resulted in what Leon de Kock has described as “*unresolved* difference” (de Kock 2004: 264), “the homogenisation of heterogeneity” which creates an “erasure” (de Kock 2004: 274) of the difference that emphasis is placed on. Diversity can in fact become a reductive term, minimising everything to difference, much like Clare Bell (1996: 9) states that “...art history often encounters differences only to sum them up with the most convenient terms at its disposal”, consequently terms like “multiplicity poses a difficult hurdle”. It is interesting then that Veleko is focusing on difference within South African post-apartheid identity because it acts within this dialogue of “*unresolved* difference” (de Kock 2004: 264), however, whether it is challenging this dialogue or simply conforming to it, is unclear. In other words, Veleko exemplifies diversity through her photographs in a country that is infatuated with the notion of difference but while South Africa attempts to assert a fallible unity through this difference, there seems to be no evidence of such an attempt on Veleko’s part. She allows her photographs to stand separately from one another rather than attempting to assert any unity amongst them other than the logistics of place (for example Johannesburg) and the creative act of self-styling. Returning to the fact that Veleko (cited in Shaman 2008: 69) does not write much about her own work, this is perhaps another reason why her desire to not let her works become too complicated is in fact a strength in her work. If Veleko were to go to extensive measures to create significance within her work, she would simply be falling into the trap of placing her work squarely within this dilemma, the dilemma of writing South Africa which as Jamal (2005: 141) shows in his book, *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa*, is “An Extremely Vexed Occupation”. Instead, Veleko lets her work stand by itself and the people she photographs speak for themselves. While some might interpret this as a superficial approach, I believe that in the very least it allows her images the ability to potentially exist outside the dichotomist quandary of unified South African diversity.

Other than the paradoxes of unity through diversity or unity through similar humanity, there are two other major obstacles for notions of self-writing in South

Africa, both arising out of pathological attachments of the past. The first, as mentioned from the beginning of this thesis, is an overwhelming of the transformative power of the imagination. Coetzee (1987: 98) asserts about South African novelists:

How we long to quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence, and take up residence in a world where living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation.

Over twenty years later, this dilemma still exists for acts of writing and self-writing, whether literary or photographic¹⁵. The second, being that “...contemporary African modes of writing the self are inseparably connected with the problematics of self-constitution and the modern philosophy of the subject” (Mbembe 2002: 240) which is of course still centred on the West. This meant that Africans “had to be *converted*” to notions of self, that if they were to be recognised individually, difference was to be done away with and Africans “were henceforth to be considered as alter ego” (Mbembe 2002: 248). Even assertions centred on Africans belonging to universal humanity, however, are “almost always accompanied by the claim that their race, traditions, and customs have a specific character” (Mbembe 2002: 254). This raises problems because not only does it reassert “loudly and forcefully [African] alterity” (Mbembe 2002: 255) but it does not interrogate “the fiction of race” (Mbembe 2002: 254) nor the fiction of geography. “Africa becomes the land of black people” which overlooks the fact “that Africans might have multiple ancestries” (Mbembe 2002: 256) and multiple diasporas. Africa, instead, needs to be conceived of “...as a living, dynamic, changing substance” (Enwezor 2006: 29), it is a “society in flux” (Enwezor & Zaya 1996: 32), a ‘multiple existence’ (Appiah, cited in Bell 1996: 11).

This is by no means a straight forward task because this conception of Africa can equally be fed into “clichéd rhetoric of nonsubstantiality, instability, and indetermination [as] just one more way to come to grips with African imaginations of self and the world” (Mbembe 2002: 272). One image in particular, however, that stands out in regard to concepts of identity and notions of Africa as a ‘multiple existence’ (Appiah, cited in Bell 1996: 11), and perhaps embraces whole-heartedly

¹⁵ The question now, is how are photographers today faring in attempts to negotiate this dilemma?

the power of the imagination, is a work by Tracey Rose entitled “The Messenger” from the series “Lucie’s Fur”.

Rose approaches themes like identity in a unique dreamlike way. Her images exist in the realm of the surreal, drawing on different cultural tropes and subverting them to explore post-apartheid existence. The series of Rose’s presented in *Snap Judgments* is entitled “Lucie’s Fur” which simultaneously plays off concepts of the divine, the title lending itself to the name Lucifer the fallen angel, and concepts of human origin, Lucie’s Fur literally referring to female genitalia from which we are all born (Rose cited in *Art South Africa* June 2004)¹⁶. It uses fantasy and allegory to “twist biblical and literary narratives and archaeological and scientific research” (Enwezor 2006: 31) to challenge ideas surrounding humanity, homophobia and sexuality, gender and race. Rose’s series not only breaks away from stereotypical picturing of themes like Adam and Eve, who are rather substituted with Adam and Yves (Enwezor 2006: 31), a black homosexual couple, but Rose also breaks away from traditional understandings of photography through experimentation and manipulation.

The photographic work that gently sets itself apart from the series is a work called “The Messenger” 2003 (Image 6), an image of an angelic being whose ambiguity and complexity expresses a dynamic, changing understanding of post apartheid South African identity. The whole picture frame is taken up by this being who stands on its haunches, looking intimately into the viewer’s eyes. An angelic light floods in from behind the figure but this is balanced by a central darkness that hides the torso and the eyes which is both allusively concealing and revealing. The full title of the work “Lucie’s Fur Version 1:1:1 – The Messenger” seems to conflict as one is unsure whether this being is Lucifer or Gabriel, good or evil, and yet there is an overriding sense of humanity in this being that seems to embrace the ambiguity of both. The humanity of this being is exuded through the curiosity of its gaze and stance, clasping its hands under its legs it takes on a childlike innocence and inquisitiveness which perhaps alludes to a more innocent time for human beings, a time of origin before the labels and categories that separate us from one another, perhaps a time of prior heterogeneity. Although, Rose (cited in *Art South Africa* June

¹⁶ _____ . (June 2004) “The Gospel of Tracy Rose”, *Art South Africa* 2(4)

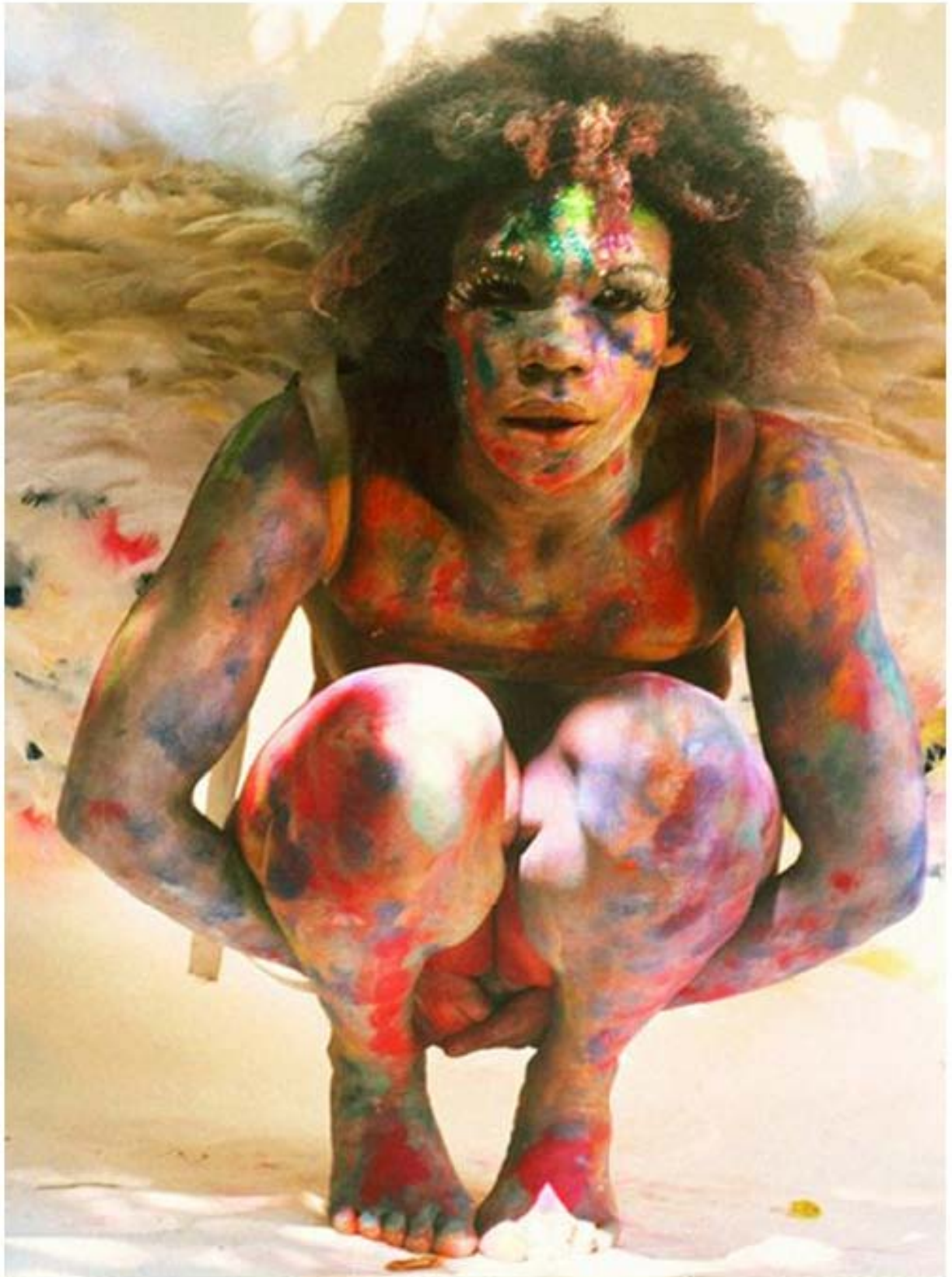


Image 6: Tracy Rose, *Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1*, "The Messenger", 2003, Lambda photograph, 80 x 60 cm

2004) would seem to imply that there was never a time of such innocence when retelling the myth of Lucifer being thrown out of heaven and falling to earth: "...the whole thing is basically about evolution – he [Lucifer] started off this Big Bang.... So this could mean that this is hell, on the one hand, which is great, because this is one hell of a party". This seems to be the point, however; a constant pulling between a fluid concept of good and evil and humanity, questioning them in their entirety, and in doing so alluding to a moment of prior heterogeneity, a time of essences and diversity that existed in fullness, a moment of limitlessness without the reductive nature of categories to bind them.

Returning to the concept of the humanity of this other worldly being: its humanity is an impossible characteristic to escape simply because of the fact that any angelic or godly being is always represented in a human form, a narcissism that we find impossible to escape. The reality of the image is that the person modelling in this photograph has both a distinct race and gender, but Rose erases both of these through various visual techniques that transform the image into something beyond these concerns. The model is in fact male and is obviously feminised in the costume of angel (for example he wears extended eyelashes that reach up to his eyebrows in a knowingly delicate manner, like the soft kiss of exaggerated beauty) but to say that the image portrayed is somehow androgynous, somehow between femininity and masculinity seems incorrect as there is rather something simply indefinable about the whole look.¹⁷ There is something both gender-less and gendered about this creature.

Likewise, this celestial being created by Rose becomes almost raceless through the kaleidoscope of colour splashed over every bit of skin. Ethnicity is only alluded to through certain physical characteristics but skin colour becomes completely obscured. This is interesting when considering what Mbembe (2002: 256) says about the perception of "Africa become[ing] the land of black people" or even the perception of South Africa being the land of black-people-versus-white-people and how this overlooks the concept of multiple ancestries. Mbembe (2002: 258) states that in order to move away from obstacles inherent in notions of self-writing, "we must clear an intellectual space for rethinking those temporalities that are always simultaneously branching out toward several different futures and, in so doing, open the way for the possibility of multiple ancestries". The inability to rethink African

¹⁷ This is interesting as the image of angels is something very much rooted in tradition and perhaps the snow white feathered wings are the one predictable moment in this photograph

ancestries is a “problem of *seeing* Africa” (Jamal 2009: 56), however, rethinking or reimagining the way one sees Africa is possible. For example, the category of whiteness no longer has “the same meanings as it did under colonialism or apartheid”, although one must also note that it is not yet entirely fluid either (Mbembe 2002: 264). Perhaps then it is possible that we are slowly moving away from the overwhelming hold of truth that Coetzee highlighted in 1987 to new types of reimagining and rethinking, which, although still mired by notions of truth, being to step away from it. It is this type of rethinking that Rose has possibly achieved with “The Messenger” as there is something intrinsically other about this being without being ‘the other’, it is other while exuding a type of kinship or intimacy. The triumph of this image also lies in the fact that it is so unavoidably tied to a specific tradition and yet is so multifaceted, opening it up to the ambiguous, the multiple, the complex, to a new re-imaging of African identity.

It is important to note here again, however, that both Mbembe and Bell (1996: 9) warn against the danger of notions of multiplicity which in themselves can be reductive by renewing concepts of African “ambivalence and instability”. Also, that as a South African work; we are reminded of what both de Kock and Jamal term ‘unresolved difference’. However, this is complicated by the fact that Rose alludes to a moment of prior heterogeneity, a moment before the dilemma of notions of multiplicity and difference which in themselves have become categories. Therefore, although Rose’s work might not be completely fool proof in its re-imagining of identity there is something quite striking in its attempt, an attempt at imagination. This attempt might have the power to open up a space where certain ingrained perceptions can be rethought or re-interpreted and where, like Veleko’s works, there is at very least the possibility that the photograph might step outside the frameworks that restrict self-imaging in Africa. The imaging and imagining of self become tools used by Veleko and Rose in attempting to re-imagine the South African identity out of the gulag of its past. For Veleko this translates into the vivacity and complexity of many selves, while for Rose it is translated into hybridity and notions of prior heterogeneity. However, is the power of the desire to re-imagine identity enough to counter the dilemma Coetzee proposes? These photographs open up the possibility of moving away from this dilemma; however, it is a very tentative possibility as they can equally reinforce it. These works partake of a syncretic moment that can simultaneously reinforce or undermine.

Veleko and Rose's works make up only a handful of the complex photographs pictured in *Snap Judgments*. In total *Snap Judgments* contains two hundred and eighty photographs by forty different photographers and artists from all over Africa and these works are not simply applied to concepts of self-writing through portraiture but range from portraiture, to documentary images, to what might be called 'postdocumentary' images, and all the way round to experimental works which challenge their very status as photographs at all. Bell (1996: 11) aptly states in the introduction of *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the present* that, "just as it is wholly impossible to sum up the experiences of a single individual, it is absurd to try and formulate the ideological constitution of a continent". In a similar sense, *Snap Judgments* is successful in standing against afro-pessimistic notions of Africa as the knowable unknowable by showing that just as it is wholly impossible to sum up the experiences, complexities and ambiguities of a single artists work, let alone forty, and that therefore it is impossible to sum up the experiences and complexities of a country.

The photographs of *Snap Judgments* are a rich and varied collection of works that all to some extent challenge the boundaries of photography and the African continent. Each artist accesses the quandary of Africa through their own themes and interaction with the photographic medium itself. Allan deSouza, for example, mutilates old family photographs to confront concepts of memory and loss. The images become almost unrecognizable, each erased and disfigured in its own way, which leaves the viewer with only traces and vague clues of what existed before. Mikhael Subotzky on the other hand, uses the technique of panoramas when photographing Pollsmoor Prison, a maximum security facility in Cape Town, to allude to concepts like the panopticon, surveillance and visibility. Therefore, while not all works deal with African identity directly, many works deal with the complexity of the African space, physical and psychological, which feed into the internalised pathologies that Mbembe confronts.

Another artist who explores the realm of spaces as opposed to identity is Jo Ractliffe. Using a toy camera, Ractliffe photographs one image on top of another creating a long strip of images that feed and melt into each other. Ractliffe uses this technique when exploring the city of Johannesburg, showing the varied yet almost banal everyday images of this city. Guy Tillim takes up a similar task in his series

“Jo’burg” (2004) which looks “at the epicentre of the city’s unique modernist downtown” (Enwezor 2006), but his series partakes of a much more straight forward documentary tradition than Ractliffe. One of Tillim’s most striking images (Image 7) is of three men in the foreground of room with a child just behind them, entitled “Ntokozo and his brother Vusi Tsabalala at Ntokozo’s place, Milton Court, Pritchard Street”. The remarkable thing about the image is the wall behind the figures, upon which sensationalised and obscure newspaper headlines from *The Star* become reduced to the equivalent of wall paper. This raises questions not only about the desensitisation of people exposed to regular crime but also newspapers bizarre portrayal of these events.¹⁸

As Enwezor (2006: 12) explains, although the works chosen were selected as an alternative to Afro-pessimism this is not to say that they “...offer palatable impressions and accounts of Africa; rather, what is important is that they bring to bear on the subject in question a different set of lenses” (Enwezor 2006: 12). Although only a few artists have been touched on here, the point is to show that one can quickly see to what extent the lenses discussed differ from one another in *Snap Judgments*. To mention every photographer would indeed be an immense task but as Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya (1996: 22) (when discussing the exhibition *In/sight*) state: “...what is truly enriching, thrilling and even vexing is the diversity of approaches, disciplines, and strategies that the artists have brought to photographic practice”. This is also true for the *Snap Judgments* exhibition which undoubtedly shows that “Africa is a ‘multiple existence’” (Appiah, cited in Bell 1996: 11).

In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the present, is also an exhibition based around African photographers and is in fact the predecessor to *Snap Judgments*. This exhibition was also curated by Enwezor, in conjunction with Octavio Zaya, and has many of the same ideological basis as *Snap Judgments* but to different affect. Heralded by Thomas Krens (1996: 6) as “...the first time, Africa and not European constructs inform[ed] the ideas surrounding the works on view”, this exhibition introduced a forgotten and neglected history back into the medium of photography (Enwezor 2006: 24) by showing photographs of self-representation that had been overlooked by Western representations of Africa. After *In/sight*, many

¹⁸ It is interesting to consider Tillim’s photography in terms of the photographic document and its discontent (which is discussed in chapter 3) because certain elements of his work mirror David Golblatt’s practices (the photographer which chapter 3 focuses on). In particular there is a textological obsession with lengthy image titles.



Image 7: Guy Tillim, *Joburg*, “Ntokozo and his brother Vusi Tsabalala at Ntokozo’s place, Milton Court, Pritchard Street”, 2004, Pigment on Paper, 43.6 x 65.5 cm

exhibitions turned their attention to similar focuses on African photography, therefore, when Enwezor (2006: 24) returned to African photography in *Snap Judgments* it was not just to challenge continuing negative portrayals of Africa in the global media but “in recognition of the fact that it has become a vital tool and source of imagery for many artists”. And furthermore, in recognising this, acknowledging how “photography now serves as a vehicle for considering the fate of the African landscape” (Hartshorn 2006: 7). Photography has, therefore, not only become a popular medium amongst African artists because of the complex interaction between imaging and the act of self definition or self-imaging but because of this has also taken on a potentially important role in the outcome of African identity. The camera in Africa has consequently become a transformative medium which is adopted by artists with a sense of hope that its ability to capture might garner a new understanding or sense of Africa.

It is interesting that photography would present itself as such a useful tool for Africa to explore and analyse “the dizzying processes of spatial transformation, massive transition, and social adaption” (Enwezor 2006: 19) seeing as “no other cultural landscape has had a more problematic association with the photographic medium” (Enwezor 2006: 13). On the other hand, it seems quite important that Africa does adapt the use of the camera. Photography takes on an important role that moves between revealing histories forgotten by the rest of the world and even Africa itself, the role of witness, to roles of self representation and an investigative role that questions itself and the world around it. As Bell (1996: 11) states in the introduction of *In/sight* “...it is the camera, not the continent, that links the endeavours of the photographers”. Each photographer presents a unique worldview stemming from personal interaction with the continent because just as the self-imaging of an individual is so multifaceted and complex, so is the interaction between an individual, society, the camera and a “landmass ten times the size of Europe” (Enwezor 2006: 12), infinitely more complex. Quite simply there are too many variables in the process of photographing the continent for curators to honestly create generic exhibitions of it, which stands in quite stark opposition to notions of colonisation, afro-pessimism and even travel photography. In exhibitions like *Snap Judgments* and *In/sight* which intend to examine Africa from the interior, the only uniting factor should be the medium itself, which raises the question, why photography? Why, in *Snap Judgments*, when desiring to “highlight what, in [his] view, constitutes a new position in the

expanding lexicon of contemporary African art” (Enwezor 2006: 41) does Enwezor turn his attention to photography? Obviously on some level it stands as an alternative to photographic representations of Africa in the world media, but even Enwezor (2006: 11) asks: “Can the photographic event of Afro-pessimism be overcome?” Certainly photography has been adapted by the continent to investigate and challenge previous imaging of Africa and as Enwezor (2006: 24) explains “photography has been a remarkably dynamic, creatively sophisticated, and artistically important component of African visual culture for over a century” but it still remains: what is the importance of photography that makes it such an effective or popular tool for African modes of self-imaging?

None of these questions seem to have clear answers but perhaps a more philosophical engagement with the medium of photography will shed some light on the situation. Returning to the discussion of self-writing versus self-imaging that was mentioned earlier in the chapter; self-writing is a term used by Mbembe because of the power of language as an organising form of representation that permeates thought and society, however, the image is also an organising form of representation and we must therefore consider the visual as we do the linguistic. Exhibitions like *Snap Judgments* and *In/sight* consequently explore the same notions of multiplicity through what could be considered self-imaging. However, not only do these exhibitions examine how Africans picture themselves or how to picture Africa but also “...how artists work with the tool of photography to trace the arc of different social reality” (Enwezor 2006: 19). In other words, if language is an organising medium of thought and by extension society and the image is also an organising medium of thought, then it follows that images can be an organising medium of society as well. For this reason, just as it is important to understand language as a discourse, so too must the discourse of photography be understood and by further implication, the interaction between photography and society.

The Photographic Program and the Rhizome: Theoretical Excursions

Vilém Flusser (2000: 7) in the opening pages of his book, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, boldly states that there are two major turning points in the history of contemporary culture: the first being “the invention of linear writing” and the second, “the invention of technical images” which began with the invention of photography. Photography is important not simply because it has been used as a tool for and against Africa but because it has a unique relationship with society, equivalent to that of texts. Photography has a power to impact on the world around it unlike other forms of art or visual culture because, similar to texts, it can actually alter and manipulate world views through representation. Salah Hassan (cited in Rocco 2006: 350), when introducing the 1998 African Photography Festival in Bamako, stated “...Why show African photography? The response is simple: *if you don't show, you don't exist!*” Photography not only has the power to manipulate world views but it can actually write them, dictating what will exist and what will not. This influence is clear when considering the impact photography has had on Africa. The question is: what is it about photography that has given it so much power? And the answer is relatively straightforward though not uncomplicated; it is photography's unique relationship with society that transforms the symbolic into the real through circular interaction. Society shapes photography, while photography in return shapes society, each feeding into the other through an incessant exchange of information.

Obviously photography is an invention that has come out of society and therefore is undeniably implicated in it. Society, particularly bourgeoisie society, shapes photography as it chooses what should be photographed and what should not, it dictates how photographs are to be read and understood. As John Fleetwood explains: “...a certain culture has made rules for photography and one is denied the possibility to explore unframed and not recognised photography” (Nunn 2001: 85). This certain culture is distinctly Western, highlighting the importance of the periphery – which stands “at odds with that of colonial modernity” (Enwezor 2006: 29) – to etch out a type of space where their sense of imaging can become recognisable. Enwezor (2006: 29), therefore, highlights the importance of photography that extends along new dialectics, stating that:

This photography focuses not just on individuals through social representation, but also on social environments, on networks of shared relations and coevalness, on the events of the self, on spatial practices.

Social representation of individuals has become the norm in international photography picturing Africa. Firstly though colonial constructs like ethnography which pictured people as examples of their traditional ‘tribal’ situation, and now the currents of which have been translated into people as examples of the social failings that lead to poverty or the aids epidemic. By placing emphasis on social environments and networks of shared relations, Enwezor attracts attention to the fact that society is not only the force in front of photography (a subject to be captured) but generally to a larger extent the force behind it. In any case, what becomes clear is that ultimately it is almost impossible to ever take a photograph that is not deeply or wholly imbedded in the structures of society. However, this is not the complete interaction between society and photography but one part of a much more intricate exchange.

Society panders to acts of photography as the photograph itself has become “a doorway on to a world waiting to be recorded” (Clarke 1997: 11). By reproducing the world’s image, it has become one of the few things that reassure the world of its own reality. Wright Morris (2003: 73) states: “what else so *instantly* confirms that the world exists?” (italics added) And in a postmodern existence, where everything is questioned and uncertain, where concepts like knowable truth, stability and permanence are eroded and dismantled; the camera presents itself as the perfect tool for *desperately*¹⁹ holding onto what is recognisable, even if this in itself is only for a fleeting moment. The interesting thing about this desperate need to hold onto the recognisable is that African notions of self-writing are attempting urgently to break away from the recognisable model of “colonial modernity” (Enwezor 2006: 29). There is a complex attempt to diffuse African identity along new lines of existence away from the recognisable, while at the same time trying to carve out a recognisable existence along these new lines. This is probably a result of what Mbembe describes to be “...the burden of arbitrariness involved in seizing from the world and putting to death what has previously been decreed to be nothing, an empty figure...” (cited in

¹⁹ While in many instances we embrace the uncertain or unknowable in an attempt to break free of the confines of modernist structures, an crippling fear of the unknown propels us quickly back towards preserving the recognisable.

Enwezor 2006: 18). The burden of moving away from the familiar nothingness of the stereotypical African figure, because in truth, how exactly does one avoid the familiar and the unfamiliar? Or challenge the notion of the empty without creating something?²⁰ At some point there still seems to be an inherent need for comprehension and acknowledgement in acts of self-imaging, for Africa *to etch out a type of space where their sense of imaging can become recognisable*. This is perhaps the dilemma of all post-modernism though, in which society attempts to move away from the knowable only to cling to it more fiercely.²¹

Susan Sontag (1997: 160), in her book *On Photography*, states that the “notion of what is real has been progressively complicated and weakened” and in an attempt to cope with this we have turned to photography, making “the notion of image and reality...complementary”. Flusser (2000: 14) states that this makes technical images difficult to decode because “to all appearances, they do not have to be decoded since their significance is automatically reflected on their surface – just like fingerprints, where the significance (the finger) is the cause and the image (the copy) is the consequence”. Barthes (1984: 6) makes a similar comment about “the photograph belong[ing] to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape”. The problem with seeing photography as a window instead of an image is to see them “as ways of looking at the world”, rather than to consider “an analysis of their production” (Flusser 2000: 15).

As reality becomes more and more questionable, so increases the need to desperately hold onto some sense of it through things like photographs and as a result “photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it” (Sontag 1997: 4). They are no longer simply a way of looking at the world or the authority that reasserts its existence but photographs in fact become substitutes to reality. The irony of this substitution, however, is that it creates even more distance from an already broken sense of reality by the fact that “to process the world in the form of images is, precisely, to reexperience the unreality and remoteness of the real” (Sontag 1997: 164). And so it becomes a never ending cycle of trying to

²⁰ These concerns will be discussed at a later point in terms of what Jamal (2010: 5) describes as “the ability to withstand hunger”

²¹ This is not in any way an attempt to liken the transition from modernism to postmodernism to the shift from apartheid to post-apartheid as this would be a gross oversimplification. (Godby 2007: 9) I am simply noting a similarity in dilemmas of moving away from the ‘knowable’ to the ‘undefined’.

reach at the real and forever failing to grasp at it, only to move further away from it.²² “The urge to have new experiences [or any experience at all] is translated into the urge to take photographs” as we become more and more addicted to the camera. Morris (2003: 75) declares, when discussing today’s excessive photographing, “am I wrong in being reminded of the printing of money in a period of wild inflation?” And the result of this is that “...people taking snaps feel they have gone blind: Drug dependency takes over. People taking snaps can now only see the world through the camera and in photographic categories” (Flusser 2000: 58).

An example of this addiction discussed by Sontag is that of travel, because indeed no tourist experience is complete without a camera hanging around the neck or shoved in front of the face, obsessively clicking. Even places where it is a courtesy to be quiet (important or spiritual monuments or hides in game reserves) are filled with the incessant clicking of shutters as though it is not disturbing the peace but simply a given background noise to life. The problem is much bigger than tourism, however, because today everything in our lives requires documenting: achievements, relationships, the banal day to day, even a night out with friends is not complete without a camera as a trusty sidekick. The camera has gained so much power that an entire occupation or group of people are defined by the constant flashing of cameras. Today’s celebrities are almost wholly characterised by the paparazzi attention they receive and the paparazzi themselves only seem to be extensions of their camera, their identity stolen by the machine covering their face. Photography is so visible in everything that we do that it has become the norm, it has become invisible; and “in the twilight zone between seeing and not seeing, we fail to get the picture” (Cadava 1997: 7). It is this that makes photography such a powerful medium of representation, that while society might influence and shape photography, photography itself has a considerable amount of control over society in turn.

Previously the camera was considered as simply a tool for human use, a tool that was fought over by science and art, both asserting that the camera to some extent could reveal truth, either as an objective reproduction or as a creative endeavour of inner genuineness. Flusser’s (2000: 23) definition of the function of tools is to “... tear objects from the natural world in order to bring them to the place (produce them)

²² This is perhaps what makes the camera such a useful tool for African self-imaging because it moves further and further away from the recognisable, yet at the same time this in itself poses a problem to the act of self-imaging itself.

where the human being is”. In doing so the object undergoes a change, the tool “imprint[s] a new, intentional form onto” (Flusser 2000: 23) the object, such as hammers and nails can join wood into furniture or a knife can prepare food. Tools “inform” objects causing the object to acquire “an unnatural, improbable form, [that] becomes cultural” (2000: 23). It would seem then that the camera is a tool; it tears objects or moments from the natural world reproducing them, bringing them to where the human being is and in doing so imprinting them in the culture. However, there seems more to the functioning of a camera than a simple tool like a hammer or a knife.

“Tools in the usual sense are extensions of human organs...” (Flusser 2000: 23) and the camera, since based on theories of optics, would very simply seem to be an extension of the eye, a type of “seeing machine” (Flusser 2000: 23). Roland Barthes on the other hand, however, thinks of the camera as a different organ. For him, “the Photographer’s organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens” (1984: 15). This understanding makes sense when considering that the camera is more than simply an extension of the eye and seeing like binoculars, but that in fact it chooses out of a continuum of time a single moment, pointing like the fisherman’s finger in the famous painting of Walter Raleigh as a child²³, saying ‘look!’, ‘here is something to see’. Ossip Brik (2003: 90) makes another interesting point when he states that “the task of the cinema and of the camera is not to imitate the human eye, but to see and record what the human eye normally does not see.” From a technical point of view the camera does indeed manage to capture moments that are invisible to the human eye, split seconds that are too quick, scenes that are too dangerous, heights that are unreachable, but the camera also has the ability to extract the unfamiliar from even the banal. “This is one of the central fascinations of photography: its power to “document” an unfamiliar world that is at the same time our world, transformed” (Sayedoff 2000: 128). Therefore, the camera has a bigger role than simply being a tool as it not only pulls from the world into culture but has the ability to further transform that goes beyond simple imprinting.

Perhaps the camera could rather be described as a “seeing *machine*” (Flusser 2000: 23) (*italics added*) as it uses scientific theory to replicate the optics of the human eye, but the camera is much more than a tool or a machine. It functions on a

²³ John Everett Millais, *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, Oil on Canvas, 120.6 x 142.2 cm, Tate Gallery, London

much greater level than simply what the photographer intends for it because even though the photographer, in the moment of clicking the shutter, says ‘look, this is important’, the image itself becomes part of a much bigger system of reproduction. This system of reproduction reduces everything to simulacrum, obliterating organising notions of authenticity or worth by making everything a copy. Flusser (2000: 67) describes this system as “the photographic universe” which is “made up of such little pieces, made up of a quanta, and is calculable (calculus = little pieces or ‘particle’) – an atomized, democratic universe, a jigsaw puzzle”. This description lies very close to Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of what they call the rhizome, which “is a system, or anti-system, without centre or indeed any central organising motif. It is a flat system in which the individual nodal points can be, and are, connected to one another in a non-hierarchical manner.” This system will be returned to at a later stage but what is important to note here is how photographs enter into a type of network where each one is “calculable” and therefore exists as a piece of information.

Photography is in fact part of the information age and therefore post-industrial, which means that rather than functioning as a tool or machine, the camera is an apparatus (Flusser 2000: 24). The actual photographic paper itself is of little to no value; instead what is important is the information that it carries (Flusser 2000: 51), and this is even more pronounced by the invention of digital photography where the image no longer needs to exist as a physical object at all but instead exists purely as information. The intention of the camera is no longer “to change the world” to bring it to where the human being is like other tools, but instead it wishes “to change the meaning of the world” through information, the camera’s intention has become “symbolic” (Flusser 2000: 25) like most endeavours in postproduction. Overall information is the driving force behind image taking; photographers are always in search of something new to show, something unseen, as well as “attempt[ing] to find the possibilities not yet discovered with [the camera]” itself (Flusser 2000: 26). The camera, in truth, acts as a game²⁴ rather than a tool as the photographer is constantly challenging the rules of the camera to find “new possibilities of producing information”. In doing so, however, the world becomes “purely a pretext for the realisation of camera possibilities” (Flusser 2000: 26-27) and the photographer

²⁴ The definition of an apparatus in actuality being: “a plaything or game that simulates thought....An overarching term for a non-human agency” (Flusser 2000: 83)

becomes a simple functionary of the camera. The best example of this is again the example of the paparazzi, who give off the strange surreal sense that they are merely a body with a camera for a head, a new morphing of machine and man.

The concept of the world as merely the pretext for the game the camera sets out is interesting in terms of its relationship with Africa. Has Africa in the past then simply become a playground for the camera to use and abuse? Certainly Africa has become a playground for the Western imagination and perhaps by implication a pretext to camera's role as a favourite Western plaything. And if Africa is the court on which this particular camera game is held, what of the players of this metaphorical game? If the African figure is an empty and faceless pawn, then surely the Western figure's facial features are only as distinct as what can be seen behind the camera through which they always look but never see, and their body only as weighty as the camera that sits atop their shoulders. The importance of this, however, goes only as far as it is the predecessor to a new game that has come into play. A new game in which Africa might be the court but Africans are the players; and while this might stand in opposition to the previous game, it is in fact slightly separate. This new game is not a pitting of Africa against the West, or Africa against the camera, but a complex interaction that goes both with and against the camera in what can only be described as a never-ending chess game in which any player can play from any side at anytime and new or fallen pieces can return at any moment. This example of the challenge that the camera sets out might capture the understanding of both strategy and chance involved but the interaction between photographer and camera is probably even more complex than this. Returning to more fathomable notions of this interaction, Flusser effectively lays out an understanding of this interface through the functionings of programs and apparatuses.

Flusser (2000: 35) states that "in the act of photography the camera does the will of the photographer but the photographer has to will what the camera can do" (Flusser 2000: 35) because "the state of photographic technology obliges photographers to carry out specific operations which pre-exist their intentions" (Chamboredon 1996: 139). In other words, although "the apparatus functions as a function of the photographer's intention, this intention itself functions as a function of the camera's program" (Flusser 2000: 35). Therefore, when Jean-Claude Chamboredon (1996: 139) acknowledges that: "it seems, then, that photographic aesthetes who seek to assert the creative intention are only repeating the cultural

experience in its original form”, what he means is that when photographers assert their power over the camera, when they play against it they are, ironically, simply doing what the photographic program requires. According to Flusser (2000: 46) the camera program functions as follows: “first, to place its inherent capabilities into the image [and] second, to make use of a photographer for this purpose...” In using a camera the photographer is forced to operate within the camera’s program. Photographers in fact cannot photograph whatever they wish, instead they can “only photograph what can be photographed”, which is the “states of things” (Flusser 2000: 36). This is again reiterated in John Fleetwood’s comment about how “...a certain culture has made rules for photography and one is denied the possibility to explore unframed and not recognised photography” (Nunn 2001: 85). Ironically, Bourdieu (1996: 92) states that “refusing the meaningless (*insignificant*) picture...or the picture which is ambiguous and anonymous, actually means refusing photography as an endless finality”. This means that either one way or another, through considered photographs or ambiguous shots, the photographer cannot escape the photographic program of the camera and the photographer is always limited by the rules of the camera, which must be overcome or circumvented.

Ossip Brik (2003: 90), on the other hand, believes that society

... actually limits and impoverishes the possibilities of the camera. The camera can function independently, can see in ways that man is not accustomed to – can suggest new points of view and demonstrate how to look at things differently.

Brik therefore states that “we must break out beyond the customary radius of the normal human eye” (2003: 91) and that we must put “the camera outside the bounds of that radius”. Clearly, the camera is limited by the person using it and the society that surrounds it because if it was automated it literally could photograph the surrounding world in any way, from any angle, to infinity. Interestingly though, this is simply another challenge set out by the camera program, not only to overcome the camera but to overcome society and the self. It is not surprising then that photography presents itself as the perfect tool for the act of African self-imaging when considering that overcoming western notions of self is a challenge that the camera sets out in the first place. This is both in terms of the fact that the camera not only created and

perpetuated many of the notions of Afro-pessimism but then also adapted itself to the reverse by setting out the challenge of contradicting these notions in an attempt to keep the game going. Therefore the camera acts as both instigator and possible solution, playing both sides of the chess game but also only adapting out of reaction to changes in society (i.e. the conception of the supposed end of slavery and colonisation). So to summarise, the photographer is limited by the camera and the camera is limited by the photographer; they act on each other, pulling at one another as they exchange codes, moving inside and outside the radius of the ‘normal’²⁵ human eye but also expanding and evolving it.

This expanding and evolving is the task of the photographic program which is dictated by both an interaction with society and in reaction to society, constantly improving and adapting to culture through feedback with society. This is the third function of the camera program which seeks “to distribute the images produced in this way” so as to improve through feedback from society [and] lastly, the camera program functions “to produce better and better images” (Flusser 2000: 46). According to Flusser this is in fact the essence of post-industrial progress. Again, when a photographer takes up the challenge of playing against the camera by attempting “to bring to light the tricks concealed within” (Flusser 2000: 27) or overcome the photographic program, they are essentially acting within the intention of that program. Added to this, not only does “the camera’s program [provide] for the realization of its capabilities” through “the use of society as a feedback mechanism for its progressive improvement” (Flusser 2000: 46), but society is also programmed by the photographic apparatus to “act in a ritual fashion [toward photography] in the service of a feedback mechanism for the benefit of cameras” (Flusser 2000: 64)²⁶. The way photography has become a substitution for reality and an almost obsessive compulsion of everyday experience is all part of the ritual way we interact with the camera. In short, photography has a unique relationship with society in which each equally and interactively informs the other.

²⁵ Perhaps it would be better here to say the *norm* of the human gaze because the normal human gaze does not exist.

²⁶ “To summarize: The photographic universe is a means of programming society – with absolute necessity but in each individual case by chance (ie automatically) – to act as a magic feedback mechanism for the benefit of a combination game, and of the automatic reprogramming of society into dice, into pieces in the game, into functionaries” (Flusser 2000: 70)

The relationship between tools and human beings was reversed with the transformation of the industrial revolution (turning tools into machines): “Previously the tool was the variable and the human being the constant, subsequently the human being became the variable and the machine the constant” (Flusser 2000: 24). In the information age, everything is variable as both the information and the human being are constantly changing, which opens up “a new kind of function in which human beings are neither the constant nor the variable but in which human beings and apparatus merge into unity” (Flusser 2000: 27). This is a much more interconnected interaction between society and photography than what many theorists have thought to acknowledge. In many cases, when theorists have considered photography ontologically, it has been studied as a contained instrument that exists somewhat independently from its greater interactions, and society is often only accredited with being a use of photography. Sarah Kember (2003: 206) in her essay “The Shadow of the Object: Photography and Realism” acknowledges that photography is a social and cultural practice but goes on to state that “like any other form of technology it has neither determined nor been wholly determined by wider cultural forces, but it has had its part to play in the history of how societies and individuals represent and understand themselves and others”. This thesis hopes to contest this view of photography and will hopefully prove that in fact, photography, unlike any other form of technology does determine and is determined by greater cultural forces; that photography in essence as we understand it today is inseparable from society and, although it might be bold to assert, that today’s society is in part inseparable from the concept of photography, which is one of the reasons that it has played as great a part as it has “in the history of how societies and individuals represent and understand themselves and others” (Kember 2003: 206).

Certainly, “apparatuses are part of a culture, [and] consequently this culture is recognizable in them” (Flusser 2000: 22) and of course the social uses of photography are important, but too often, these are concessions in which the bigger picture is overlooked: that “...the structure of the cultural condition is captured in the act of photography rather than in the object being photographed” (Flusser 2000: 34). Pierre Bourdieu (1996: 73), in the opening statement of his essay: “The Social Definition of Photography”, states that

... if it is legitimate to wonder... how and why photography is essentially predisposed to serve the social functions which have been generally conferred upon it, it remains the case that the social uses of photography...define the social meaning of photography at the same time as they are defined by it.

Bourdieu is quite correct in recognising that the social uses of photography are both defined by and define social meaning but what is neglected here is that both the social meaning and the social uses of photography define and are defined by the photographic apparatuses interaction with society. Both Chamboredon and Victor Burgin (1977: 65) accuse art history in particular of presenting only “a partial account” of photography “which leaves the social fact of photography largely untouched”. Chamboredon (1996: 131) goes as far as accusing “photographic virtuosos” of attempting “to deny the social definition of the uses and possibilities of photography” and that altogether in fact “the questions which aesthetes ask themselves are not determined by the possibilities which photography actually presents, but...by the social definition of this technology and by the social conditions regulating its use” (Chamboredon 1996: 138) In any case, both of these criticisms only seem to view the social fact of photography as an inescapable characteristic or unavoidable side note in its definition, rather than an inherent ontological base.

Perhaps a better way to understand the interaction between photography and society would be to consider an example of interconnectivity offered by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In their book, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the concept of an anti-system (mentioned before) which they call a rhizome. A rhizome by dictionary definition is “a continuously growing horizontal underground stem with lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals”²⁷ but Deleuze and Guattari use this root system as a metaphor for a flat, non-hierarchical system where individual points or nodules are equally and unbiasedly connected to one another at times by chance. Also, Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 11) state that “the wisdom of plants [is]: even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else – with the wind, an animal,

²⁷ South African Concise Oxford Dictionary

human beings...etc". Ultimately, the rhizome is an alternative system that Deleuze and Guattari use to understand a poststructuralist world in which everything can be connected or linked to everything else in a state of immanence. To explain the connection that exists between the individual points of the rhizome in a state of simultaneous deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, Deleuze and Guattari use the example of the wasp and the orchid.

In nature, certain orchids replicate the smell and visual appearance of female wasps or bees to attract the male insects of these species through the allure of a potential mate. When a male wasp unsuccessfully tries again and again to reproduce with the various flowers of these orchids, he transfers pollen from one flower to another, unknowingly performing pollination. In so doing, Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 10) explain that these "heterogeneous elements" of wasp and orchid "form a rhizome" because by imitating the image of the wasp, the orchid becomes deterritorialised but the wasp becomes reterritorialised in the image. Simultaneously, however, the wasp becomes deterritorialised by "becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus" (1987: 10) while reterritorialising the orchid through pollination. This interaction in itself then becomes more than simply a "game of mimesis" or imitation as the wasp and the orchid form a map between each other, partaking in "an exchanging and capturing of each other's codes" (O Sullivan 2008: 18). This is described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 10) as a "surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp".

This deeply interconnected relationship of becoming is what I wish to apply to the relationship between society and photography. For the purposes of this thesis, which focuses on South African society in particular, perhaps a more local example of the wasp and the orchid is the Cape beetle daisy which uses bright colours and dark dots on its petals that resemble beetles to attract monkey beetles also for the purposes of pollination. As Flusser (2000: 70) states "the photographic universe challenges one to look in two directions: towards a society surrounded by the photographic universe and towards the cameras programming the photographic universe". This is because it is not simply just the camera that produces the photographic universe; the photographic universe is specifically born out of *both* society and photography. Both society and photography deterritorialise and reterritorialise each other when exchanging codes in a state of becoming, because while photography in making an

image of the world deterritorialises itself, it reterritorialises society by confirming that the world exists. At the same time, however, photography makes the familiar seem strange therefore deterritorialising the world and society, while expressing a control over perceptions of reality and therefore reterritorialising itself. The photographic universe, in fact, is the map or rhizome that exists from this interaction of becoming between photography and society. In his book *Cinema I*, Deleuze quotes Henry Bergson (cited in Deleuze 1986: 58) when explaining that “*every image acts on others and reacts to others, on ‘all their facets at once’ and ‘by all their elements’*”. The use of the term ‘image’ here does not necessarily refer to technical images like photographs in particular but can be applied to them all the same as images in the photographic universe do indeed act with all their elements on all each others facets and this is exactly the nature of the rhizome. Put another way, Barthes (2003: 122) explains that “the language of the image is not merely the totality of utterance emitted...it is also the totality of utterances received” and the totality of utterances received emanate concurrently from society and the photographic apparatus.

Photography and society exist as a “circular system of ramification” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 5) where each feeds into the other as society shapes photography while photography shapes society, and within this circular movement a complexly interconnected photographic rhizome forms. While this interaction between society and photography might be said to be circular this does not mean that there are not breaks or ruptures that occur. “The program of the world and the camera are only preconditions for the image, possibilities to be realized” (Flusser 2000: 37) and while photographers might inescapably be playing within the program and even if it is the intention of the program, there are indeed slight ruptures that are created and lie with discontent within this cycle. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 9) acknowledge ruptures as an inherent part of the rhizome, explaining that “a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines”. The rhizome is described as constantly fleeing down “lines of deterritorialization” but it always reforms much like “you can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 9). This is a good way to understand how the photographic program works, by always challenging the photographer to overcome it, breaks and ruptures are formed in the photographic rhizome between society and

photography, but this rhizome simply mends itself or springs up along different lines, therefore adapting and improving itself, much like Flusser attests to.

The interaction between society and photography is existentially more complex than can ever be articulated through simple concepts. Equally, when talking about 'society' in itself, it is also very difficult to exactly pin down something that is so varied and complex, much like it is difficult to pin down a continent, but this thesis hopes at the very least to provide useful guidelines with which to better understand it. Most importantly, when considering the significance of self-imaging in Africa or South Africa, it is important to understand the complex relationship between photography and society that replicates that dynamic relationship between the wasp and the orchid or the Cape Beetle Daisy and the monkey beetle. In *Snap Judgments*, Enwezor (2006: 14) states that:

Consequently, there is never a settled point at which Africa is not photographically coextensive with the carefully organised jumble of images...this photographic archive and its apparatus have remained largely intact and their capacity for mischief undiminished

Therefore, the importance of understanding the photographic apparatus and its interaction with society is clear. To exist in a society that is so determined by photography, it is essential to comprehend and interact with the photographic apparatus or its capacity for mischief will remain undiminished, although this will probably always be true. Like language is inescapable, so too has the discourse of photography become inescapable, only intensifying our need to unpack and understand it.

In light of this, the question remains: how exactly does this interaction between society and photography impact on African and, with closer focus, on South African society? How does the interconnected dance between wasp and orchid transform and manifest itself in the interaction between Cape beetle daisy and monkey beetle? What type of game does the camera now play with the African figure who is no longer a pawn but an active player in the African arena? These questions are all important because with photography taking on an integral role in the constitution of African modes of self-imaging, one has to consider how this photography shapes and is

shaped by the periphery such as Africa and South Africa. And in fact, it is essential to consider self-imaging within these frameworks as one of the intricate games played between the photograph and society. Therefore, I hope to apply the philosophy and theory discussed in the earlier part of this chapter to the specific contexts of the periphery, Africa and South Africa in an attempt to unpack and understand the modes of imaging that I experience within South Africa and to an extent within myself daily.

Returning to the notion of a never-ending chess game, in which any player can play from any side at anytime and new or fallen pieces can return at any moment, as an example of the interaction between Africa and photography one can see how this interaction is symptomatic of the photographic rhizome. Let us suppose that Africa is the chess board and each chess piece is a nodal point or particle in the photographic rhizome, a photograph, and the camera and the photographer are the players that influence and push these pieces around the board. The camera and photographer's interaction with these pieces is also the connection between these pieces in the model of the rhizome and therefore if any player can interact with any piece at anytime, the points or particles can be, and over time will be, connected to each other equally and non-hierarchically²⁸ creating the flat structure of the rhizome. Furthermore, there is a break in the rhizome every time a piece is removed from the game but the rhizome springs up along new lines every time a new piece is put down or an old piece is returned. More specifically it would be the challenge of the photographer to remove pieces and force the rhizome to spring up along new lines and it would be the intention of the camera to consistently improve the program or game by adapting itself and therefore would ensure that for every piece taken a new one would be put down, ensuring that the game continued endlessly. However, despite the photographer's challenge and the camera's intention, any player can at anytime remove or add a piece and ultimately despite both players having motives, because of the repetitive nature of the game, the game becomes mostly about chance²⁹. Additionally, because of this repetitive moment of chance and the desire of the photographer to create new lines of connection in the rhizome, as well as the desire of the camera to adapt, the ultimate movement of the game will be a circular movement of removing and adding pieces. This then shows the "circular system of ramification"

²⁸ This is the importance of the game being never ending.

²⁹ Chance being one of the defining factors of the rhizome.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 5) that exists between the camera and the African³⁰ or peripheral photographer.

This metaphorical circular interaction of the never ending chess game can be translated into a literal circular interaction of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation between the peripheral photographer and the camera. In the chess game, acts of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation (removing and adding chess pieces) come about as a result of the camera and photographers' motives within the game. To reiterate, the photographer's motive is to overcome the challenge of the camera or a challenge set out by the camera, while the camera's motive is to consequently adapt so as to improve and to keep the game going. Looking again at the idea of modes of self-imaging in Africa, the camera deterritorialised Africa through colonialism, othering and afro-pessimism in global media only to adapt and therefore offer itself as an affective tool for the act of reterritorialisation through self-imaging. As is expected within the structure of a rhizomatic interaction, a similar process of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation occurs with the photographer's attempts at modes of self-imaging. Earlier, when mentioning our addiction to the camera as a result of our need to hold onto a sense of reality, I stated that there is an interesting attempt to diffuse African identity along new lines of existence away from the recognisable, while at the same time trying to carve out a recognisable existence along these new lines. This creates an intriguing tension where African modes of self-imaging are both trying to subvert and create the recognisable. Much like in the metaphor of the endless chess game, the photographer attempting modes of self-imaging desires to force the photographic rhizome to spring up along new lines through rupture or deterritorialisation of western representations of the African other, yet there is still a desire to create reterritorialisation through this act of self-imaging. One example of this desire of reterritorialisation is South Africa's emphasis on unity, even after the acknowledgement of South Africa's complex diversity there is still a contradictory attempt to create unity through diversity.

The crucial point about this attempt at self-imaging through deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation is, however, that it is never really successfully achieved either

³⁰ To be clear, it just seems ridiculous to refer to 'the African photographer' as some sort of unifying blanket term, so although I am talking about photography in Africa at this point I am more concerned with a connection in psychology and action than the notion of a unifying place so I will therefore rather refer to the periphery or peripheral photographer, meaning photographers that are not mainstream media but challenge these notions from outside the constructs that alienate and 'other' them.

way. In terms of deterritorialising afro-pessimism and Eurocentric notions of Africa; Enwezor states that “even if decolonisation proposed a liberation from colonial subjectivity toward ‘African modes of self writing’ it was never, in any case, a complete rupture” (Enwezor 2006: 32). Within the rhizomatic point of deterritorialisation there has only been a partial break, a partial moment of rupture and what remains is a fractured but still existent connection that pulls African self-imaging back towards it. In terms of reterritorialising the African self; as mentioned before, Mbembe (cited in Enwezor 2006: 18) points out that “...the burden of arbitrariness involved in seizing from the world and putting to death what has previously been decreed to be nothing, an empty figure...”. Therefore, if the moment of rupture is only partial and remains ambiguous, the new lines of reterritorialisation upon which the rhizome resumes are equally incomplete and ambiguous. Added to this, Sontag comments on photography, that “to process the world in the form of images is, precisely, to reexperience the unreality and remoteness of the real” (Sontag 1997: 164). This might be beneficial in terms of deterritorialisation but detrimental to the act reterritorialisation. This in-between moment where neither end point is achieved is in fact the rhizome at the very heart of African modes of self-imaging. It is the point at which peripheral existence moves backwards and forwards between the recognisable and the unrecognisable, the ingrained and the new, the other and the self; creating a complex dialogue entrenched in a predicament that mimics the interaction between the Cape beetle daisy and the monkey beetle. This liminal moment in African self-imaging is like a scabbing wound, still sticky in the process of healing, half mending, half reopening, still moving between the moment of rupturing and the moment of closing.

Returning then to the photographs of self-imaging discussed in chapter one, it is interesting to consider the in-between moments of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation within these images. Thinking again of the tentative uncertainty of “Sibu 2007” which I reflected on as being somewhat symptomatic of the South African space, in itself exhibits an uncertainty as a result of its own moments of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. (For South Africa is a place also constantly moving between a continuum of the present and the past, healing and rupturing, survival and hesitation.) It could be said that Sibu’s confident awkwardness, also comes from the moments of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation inherent in African modes of self-imaging. He has not yet reached the point of confident certainty

and yet he still has the confidence to step out from the norm, creating an awkward confidence that is shifting but not resolved. Rose also allows her figure of “The Messenger” to step out from the usual stereotypes and categories whilst still drawing on them, creating a moment of partial deterritorialisation and at the same time keeping this figure in the moment of ambiguity, never fully allowing it to fully re-materialise.

“Nonkululeko 2004” on the other hand, exudes quite a definite sense of determined confidence. In both of Veleko’s photographs of her, Nonkululeko seems to commit quite intently to the roles she is performing and this lack of uncertainty or ambiguity might therefore seem to stand in contradiction to the notion of self-imaging being an in-between liminal space. The important thing to note here is the element of performance, the fact that she seems to transform herself through the act of taking on roles, the first role being a performance of unachievable or unrecoverable innocence and the second a self-assured attitude of coolness. This brings us again to the dilemma of accomplishing a full, unfractured state of African or South African self because performance is only a mimicry of these types of space. There is an implicit difficulty in reconstituting the African self, as Mbembe (2002: 241) states that “not only is the self no longer recognised by the Other; the self no longer recognizes itself”. It is almost impossible to reach a completely reterritorialised or recognisable form of the African self. Mbembe hopes that Africans might one day achieve this type of utopian space and acquire a voice of their own but as Jamal (2009: 56) points out: “...here lies the rub. What if such a voice no longer exists? What if as Zina Saro-Wiva notes, there is “no going back?” This is a very real crisis, that the African self might never truly become reterritorialised, specifically because of the postmodern weakening of notions of reality, nationality, authenticity and the self. In a sense we are stranded in the middle of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, in the no man’s land of the rhizome that is like a thawing platform of ice, and as it slowly cracks and melts away we frantically try to keep the pieces together to stop the floor being pulled out from under us.

Jamal (2009: 56) then concludes “Does this not mean that Africans are compelled to play-act; are compelled to work within what Mbembe terms the ‘zone of indistinction’.³¹ If this position of ambiguity (of constant deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation) which we are stranded in is inescapable, then very simply as Jamal

³¹ Jamal makes this statement in an essay about photographer Pieter Hugo’s series *Nollywood*

states what is left to do but inhabit it. What is left for Nonkululeko to do but act out moments of self-writing if the ultimate pinnacle of self-writing is unachievable? Therefore, Nonkululeko's act of self-imaging is just as symptomatic of the game between society and photography (which constantly moves the act of self-imaging backwards and forwards in an ambiguous space) as Sibule's act of self-imaging. Play-acting and uncertain awkwardness become just two of the possible outcomes or strategies of survival within this ambiguously liminal space and within the parameters of South African culture's photography-society game and it is important to take note of these because it is important to know how to continue to exist in this space.

In his essay on 'African Modes of Self-Writing', Mbembe (2002: 258) comments that:

Finally, on a sociological level, attention must be given to the contemporary everyday practices through which Africans manage to recognize and maintain with the world an unprecedented familiarity – practices through which they invent something that is their own and that beckons to the world in its generality

In the following two chapters I hope to unpack some of these strategies of survival within South Africa's modes of imaging through the individual works of Goldblatt, Ractliffe and Mofokeng. Each photographer offers an interestingly unique view of their, and other's, interaction with the physical and psychological spaces in which South Africa exists. These will all be considered within the frameworks offered by the photographic program and apparatus, as well as the rhizome and interconnectivity of the wasp and the orchid, in an attempt to situate some concept of the interaction between photography and society. Perhaps the one thing that has not been touched on as of yet is the relevance of this in terms of the framework of Coetzee's Jerusalem Acceptance Speech. The importance of understanding the photographic apparatus lies in the importance of understanding the relationship South African society has with one of its most prominent mediums of imagining. In a country so wholly embedded in history and truth, the imagination becomes the path to freedom and the tension of our attempts to re-imagine through the camera is that it too has become embedded in history and truth. However, there is a moment within photography that lies between truth and magic and it is this moment that will be explored in the next two chapters.

This brings us to the importance of the rhizome and interconnectivity, because if truth and history are inherently hierarchical and structured, magic and the power of the imagination are specifically unstructured and interconnected. As Flusser (2000: 9) states: “this space and time peculiar to the image is none other than the world of magic, a world in which *everything is repeated* and in which *everything participates in a significant context*”.

To conclude, let us return to the notion of the “contemporary everyday practices through which Africans manage to recognize and maintain with the world an unprecedented familiarity” (Mbembe 2002: 258), focused specifically through the lens of the camera. Jamal (2010: 5) describes these strategies of survival within the images of South African photographer David Lurie’s work as an inherent hunger coupled with the capacity to survive hunger. This will be expanded on in the next chapter but what I wish to bring to mind here is the astonishingly stirring sensation Jamal (2010: 8) leaves us with when he ends off with a quote by Sharman Apt Russell: “You are built to be hungry and you are built to withstand hunger. You know exactly what to do”. What is striking about this statement is the reminder of the inherent resilience within us, that although the photographic program has the complex ability to adapt, so in fact do *we*. Consequently, we seem to forget this as theorists bemoan the fate of African self-writing and economists bemoan the fate of our nations; we seem to forget that we are in fact built to withstand these complexly ambiguous spaces and that, often without noticing, we automatically have the ability to adapt.

The Photographic Document and its Discontents

The *story* of photojournalism and documentary photography in South Africa during apartheid is as well known and as easily understood as any tale of the “emblematic struggle between good and evil” (Powell 118).³² Apartheid, which wished to maintain values of white supremacy, committed various human rights violations, cruelties and atrocities against people of colour as well as people of different religious and cultural background. And the camera became the perfect tool to reveal the true nature of this degrading system the reality of which was to an extent hidden and censored from many white South Africans and the rest of the world. The camera became an objective tool of truth that plainly documented the terror of an oppressive system and it became the sanctified job of the camera to fight for what was right and just. With the glorification of the camera also came the glorification of the photographer who became heroic, masculine and brave. The problem with this, however, is that “we stop seeing the image” in its actuality and significance, and rather “the heroism of the photographer becomes paramount” (Enwezor 2006 18). Photographers became one distinct part of the “‘taking sides’ generation” where, as anti-apartheid photographer Paul Weinberg (2007: 6) commented, “we were unabashedly partisan, [and] saw the camera as a ‘weapon against the system’”. In short, as Weinberg explains, “the apartheid period gave us a simple construct that was easy to respond to: humanity and inhumanity, for and against, black and white, right and wrong”. He goes on to note however that “of course, while these juxtapositions remain meaningful, our country and society are also considerably more nuanced and complex than this” (Weinberg 2007: 6). Therefore it is essential not to “stop seeing the image” over the heroism of its user or uses and rather to consider the interaction photography had with society at that time and how it has since changed.

Apartheid might seem straight forward in understanding the interaction between society and photography but as Weinberg stated society is much more “nuanced and complex” than the distinct lines we draw in the sand to understand it. However, these lines themselves, these categories of right and wrong, black and white are essentially functionings of society and the photographic program in their own

³² The emphasis here is on the story rather than the reality, on the perceptions of anti-apartheid photojournalism and documentary photography that were, and at times still are, rather singular in their approach of a much more nuanced photography.

right. In other words, it was to the benefit of the functioning of the photographic program to perpetuate these distinctions and understandings of anti-apartheid photography. During apartheid, the photographic program, existing in feedback with society, transformed the camera into an objective tool for recording so as to serve the purposes of society³³, but also its own needs. It is no secret that photography enjoyed “an unprecedented prominence in the arts in South Africa” (The Star 16 Aug 1989: 9) at that time. Therefore, society might have needed a tool of supposed truth but this need equally helped the photographic program become pre-eminent in South African society. Furthermore, this desire for the objective and ‘truthful’, although not unquestioned, shows to some extent the South Africa mirrored by “truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination” (Coetzee 1987: 99).

Since its invention, the camera had always been thought of as a scientific instrument, for example, William Henry Fox Talbot’s initial concern with silver nitrate and salt paper was “to create a scientific instrument for the investigation of properties of light” (Daston and Galison 2007: 126), but it has also long been a tool of art since the time of the camera obscura. There has always been conflict between ideas such as objectivity, record or document and concepts of mass production or more aesthetically orientated ideas of individual vision and creativity, but ultimately both express a belief that the camera has the ability to reveal a certain kind of truth. During apartheid there was an extensive emphasis on these ‘pathological attachments’ to truth, on revealing the realities of situations and conditions under apartheid, which translated to an emphasis on the photography as a factual document that illustrated evidentiary powers. Looking at more general sources of media like newspapers, as opposed to academic sources which challenged and interrogated assumptions of documentary use, one can notice certain propaganda and even ‘buzz’ words circulated at the time. Photography was described in multiple newspapers at the time in terms of its “stark documentary” (Business Day 20 May 1986: 4), “stark detail” (The Star 16 Aug 1989: 9), or “stark” imagery (The Star 2 Apr 1986: 17), and one has to question: *what on earth is ‘stark documentary’ or stark detail in the first place?* Of course the term stark implies harsh but only because of its connotations with concepts like barren, and what exactly is barren detail? The term stark can also have connotations of obviousness in terms of the fact that anti-apartheid photography was often presented

³³ A society that, according to Coetzee (1987: 99), had pathological attachments to ‘truth’, “truth by the bucketful”.

as ‘stark’ oppositions to apartheid. However, this again shows a mind-set of extremities and these binary oppositions themselves were propagandistic for the political purposes of the struggle. Flusser (64) explains that “...we are manipulated by photographs and programmed to act in a ritual fashion in the service of a feedback mechanism for the benefit of cameras” and this ritualisation of reaction becomes quite clear in the thoughtless repetitive uses of quite obscurely paired terms. This obsessively reoccurring buzzword of ‘stark’ creates the strange impression that South African’s were so trained by the interaction between photography and society on how to ritually respond to photography, to the extent that everyone was simply repeating the same rehearsed phrasing to make the accounts of photography correlate. Again, this is not to suggest that there weren’t those who questioned and interacted with photography in a more nuanced way but simply to emphasise the perceptions and propaganda that were expressed to South Africans through media such as newspapers and to suggest again that this was a functioning of the photographic program.³⁴

These types rehearsed reaction became part of the photographic program, overshadowing artistic or academic photography produced at the same time³⁵ by creating a greater emphasis on supposedly “objective truth of documentary photography” (Dubow 1987: 98) and the social responsibility of photographers and photojournalists to reveal these truths. Society had a purpose for photography and photography adapted itself into being “glow-in-the-dark instruments of white-hot truth, cutting through and cauterizing the lies and contradictions on which apartheid society was built” (Powell 2008: 117). The photographic program, which is the rhizomatic interaction between the photographic apparatus and society, shaped the understanding of the camera within society so as to best function within that situation and this all came about through rhizomatic interaction. Let us then reconsider the interaction of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation that exists between the wasp and the orchid, the Cape Beetle Daisy and the Monkey Beetle, in terms of the interaction between photography and apartheid society. The camera, through capturing censored moments in images during apartheid, deterritorialised apartheid society by revealing it and simultaneously reterritorialised non-white reality in the

³⁴ A program that comes out of the interaction of society and photography to benefit the apparatus of photography through adapting to and benefitting society.

³⁵ At the time there was also a sense that it was irresponsible to be making ‘art’ at the time of Apartheid and that, to make a contribution to the struggle, photographers were obliged to take photographs that were perceived to be socially responsible.

process. However, it also reterritorialised apartheid society in essence because “what was good evidence for one side of the struggle may also be good evidence for the other” (Nixon 2 May 1987: 579)³⁶. In short, the camera deterritorialised and reterritorialised society during apartheid. The camera, however, was also deterritorialised and reterritorialised by apartheid society, completing the interaction of the rhizome. The photograph was deterritorialised by becoming simply a service to something else (society) and by denying certain characteristics, qualities or uses in favour of others, for example documentary uses over experimental uses. The photographic program, however, which both adapts photography to best function within society and which conditions society’s response to the photograph, reterritorialises photography within this framework.

To summarize: The photographic universe is a means of programming society with absolute necessity but in each individual case by chance (ie automatically) – to act as a magic feedback mechanism for the benefit of a combination game, and of the automatic reprogramming of society into dice, into pieces in the game, into functionaries” (Flusser 2000: 70)

Considered another way, if the camera is usually the challenge that the photographer has to overcome, during apartheid, society was that challenge, making not only society a functionary but the photographer a functionary to an even greater extent. Society became pieces or dice in the game of the photographic program and the photographer became a pawn rather than a player.

The photographic program tailored the challenge of fighting against apartheid, the challenge of making “a commitment to change through photographic communication” (McKenzie 1982: 17) into its own. It discarded the challenge of overcoming the camera for the challenge of overcoming a societal system and in so doing, preventing to a large extent questioning of the failings of the camera. And if the failings of the camera are not questioned, the camera achieves a certain victory over human beings as functionaries. Flusser (2000: 59) states that

³⁶ By revealing the realities of apartheid society, these photographs were also simultaneously reaffirming the existence of apartheid society in itself.

...both those taking snaps and documentary photographers...have not understood 'information'. What they produce are camera memories, not information, and the better they do it, the more they prove the victory of the camera over the human being

What is meant here by the victory of the camera over the human being is that when the camera and photographic program are not challenged, human beings act as merely functionaries for camera possibilities to be realised, quite plainly a finger to click the shutter. Supposedly, documentary photography situates the camera as an objective tool of truth and quite thoughtlessly in the past we have been taught: why question truth? While it is therefore important to challenge the camera, one should, however, be somewhat sceptical of Flusser's own generalisations and assumptions about what constitutes information versus camera memories and documentary photography's role in this. What is at times striking about the propaganda and perceptions surrounding anti-apartheid documentary photography, was not simply the supposed belief in photographic truth during that time but the sense of trust people had in the photograph's abilities. The photograph had the supposed ability to stand against apartheid and instigate change while even simultaneously redressing "the grossly inadequate distribution of skills and information" (Nixon 2 May 1987: 579), however, what is interesting here is that these perceptions became generalised in terms of the photographic program and not these generalised perceptions themselves.

Returning to Flusser, he suggests that taking snaps or documentary photographs, is simply the act of reproducing 'camera memories' which are redundant because they do not challenge the camera and therefore are not information. Flusser (2000: 67) feels that "the photographic universe" is "an atomized, democratic universe" which consists of particles or photographs containing new information and that these particles challenge but function and exist within the photographic universe. By not challenging the imbedded social constructs and limitations of a representative form like the photograph, it could be said that photographers let themselves become unknowing functionaries of the camera program³⁷ and therefore perpetuate the control of the camera over society, but, perhaps the wrong question is being asked here. Instead of asking whether documentary photographers perpetuate the control of the

³⁷ Although it seems that photographers can never fully escape that role as it is a prerequisite of even just clicking the shutter.

camera, perhaps one should question the assumption that they are wholly unquestioning of the photographic apparatus in the first place and whether they do or do not create what Flusser terms 'information'.

Certainly there are instances during apartheid where very little questioning of the photographic apparatus occurred. For example, Andrea Vinassa (10 Nov 1988: 11) writing for *The Star*, discusses a debate between photographers at *The Weekly Mail* Book Week in 1998, stating that "the discussion proved to be infuriatingly superficial. The photographers refused to answer questions about aesthetics and the search for more metaphors to express their ideas". While the photographers involved in this discussion might have proven themselves somewhat uncritical, however, Vinassa proves that she is undoubtedly not. This implies that there certainly was an element of society that was critical of documentary photography. On the other hand, however, it cannot be ignored that at times documentary photography that has perpetuated cultural stereotypes and societal constructs, for example, the "photographic event of Afro-pessimism" (Enwezor 2006: 11) which *Snap Judgments* tries to overcome. Documentary photography of Africa has long perpetuated stereotypes by "shap[ing] images of Africa and us[ing] them to telegraph reports which the global public absorbs as the events of life "over there" (Enwezor 2006: 11). And it should not be suggested that documentary photography in Africa or South Africa does not at times buy into these same constructs. However, it is essential to acknowledge that this photography is not as straight forward as one might think. Anti-apartheid photography in itself is not nearly as straight forward as it has been portrayed. Michael Godby (2007: 10) equally comments that:

...it would be a mistake to believe that the entire Struggle project was not involved at some level with these critical issues. To state this is, of course, to suggest that Struggle photography was rather more complex than generally supposed

Anti-apartheid photography was indeed more complex and critical than previously supposed, as one might see in any attempt to clearly define this photography that it inevitably encounters many difficulties. The exhibition *Now and Then* attempted to evaluate how the work of anti-apartheid photographers had changed after the end of apartheid but in an introductory essay, "Family Matters", Weinberg (2007: 6)

commented that “...in the course of the project it emerged that notions of ‘then’ and ‘now’ were not as clear as I had imagined at the outset...”. There are many things that lie in the way of photography before and after apartheid being clearly defined. Firstly, despite what many think, there is not as clear a distinction between social systems during apartheid and social systems after. Perhaps this is the overzealous hope of transformation, but many have looked around at the structures of social oppression and asked ‘what has changed’? In truth society itself is not as wholly distinct before and after apartheid as one might think as most configurations of white economic power and non-white poverty remain. Secondly, as Godby (2007: 14) explains “As far as style is concerned, it is not possible simply to categorise the changes in the work of documentary photographers either side of 1990: the field is too complex and varied”. Not only is the style of each individual photographer too varied but the category of documentary too simplified.

Photography in South Africa has been categorised, and perceived to have been dominated, by its documentary role...yet the range of photography purporting to be documentary, or perceived as such, is wide and variable both in theme and in quality of insight (Dubow 1998: 24).

In the most basic of arguments people distinguish between social documentary photography and photojournalism. Rob Nixon (2 May 1987: 579) writes for *The Nation* that photojournalists “have been prone to operate like heat-seeking missiles, moving rapidly from” event to event and “are therefore often unable to record and account for the logic of the confrontation”. Social documentary photographers, on the other hand, are committed to “alternative values [that] frees him or her to continue working in a community even when it is not the focus of violence” (Nixon 2 May 1987: 579) These are indeed differences to take into account, although somewhat generalised here, however, rather than trying to classify works as one type of documentary as opposed to another, it is more useful to consider individual photographers, embracing difference rather than further reducing it by category.

More pointedly, David Goldblatt, a photographer that worked both during and after apartheid, is considered to be a documentary photographer but his intentions were very different from other anti-apartheid photographers. Charlene Smith writes

(*Sunday Independent* 28 Jan 2001: 20): “while many photographers and journalists fought apartheid using their cameras and pens as swords, Goldblatt adopted a different stance. He used his camera lens as a microscope”. Goldblatt’s camera can be described as a microscope due to the fact that, instead of focusing on the violence of apartheid which many other photographers concerned themselves with, Goldblatt turned his attention to the small everyday structures and violences that came about as a result of an oppressive society. On the same note, the Goodman Gallery (*Sunday Independent* 31 Oct 2004: 12) states that in Goldblatt’s photographs “you never look for the obvious; you look for what catches David’s eye, something quite minimal but relevant, whereas other photographers focus on the obvious”. This approach of Goldblatt’s seems to be evident from even his initial moments of practising photography. Goldblatt (2007: 7) describes his first attempt at photographing the structures of apartheid in the early fifties: beginning enthusiastically, he is soon overcome by an inability to follow in the footsteps of other anti-apartheid photographers:

The outside world seemed neither to know nor care what was happening and I took it upon myself to inform and to stir consciousness. I failed. Not only did I lack experience and skill and the nerve ... but I seemed deficient in an essential ingredient: I felt no driving need to record those situations and moments of extremity that were the stuff of the media. It was the quiet and commonplace where nothing ‘happened’ and yet all was contained and immanent that I was most drawn

There is something quite unusual in what Goldblatt says here, not only does he display a desire to move away from the ‘moments of extremity’ that fuelled ‘struggle photography’ but in doing so he shows a lack of desire for the definite and the categorised while embracing the commonplace and analysing the spaces where supposedly nothing happens. Goldblatt moves away from the obvious struggles of apartheid such as riots and protests to moments of silent or hushed suffering and in this way his work is very different from traditional social documentary at the time, but what does this all mean in terms of Flusser’s protest against ‘camera memories’ and the victory of the camera over the humanbeing? Is Goldblatt more questioning of the

camera than other photographers and does he produce something more than ‘camera memories’?

While Goldblatt’s approach to anti-apartheid photography might be different from other anti-apartheid photographers it is interesting to note that his intentions behind the work are not much different. A 1986 article in *The Star* (2 Apr 1986: 17) commented that Goldblatt’s photographs “are not overtly political”, yet the inherent irony of the article is that every time the article quotes Goldblatt what is said is blatantly political. Goldblatt (cited in *The Star* 2 Apr 1986: 17) personally makes it clear that he “felt a great need to protest” and that it is his “private mission” to record South Africa for the future, “so that when the time comes, people will know what happened here”. There is nothing inherently wrong with this intention or the fact that his works are by nature political, in all honesty the politics of space and the everyday permeate almost everything, but it is important to take note of. Goldblatt’s techniques might have stood apart in a time obsessed with photojournalistic images but their purpose was relatively similar, to stand against apartheid discourse, the challenge adapted to the camera at that time. This will be returned to in time but to begin with one must consider Goldblatt’s approach and the *affect* of his images, their ability to make one question and engage rather than simply accept the world around them.

In 1998 an exhibition of Goldblatt’s opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the curator, Susan Kismaric, is quoted (*Mail & Guardian* 3-9 June 1998: 3) as saying “...my first reaction is to respond to the photographs with a kind of chilled revulsion. As I continue to look, I find them to be increasingly complex”, in them there is an “aspiration toward ‘higher goals’ – spirituality, striving, courage, refuge...” There is something quite interesting about this notion of aspiring towards ‘higher goals’ but even more intriguing is her initial reaction of chilled revulsion. What is it about the commonplace and the everyday which Goldblatt captures that is so disturbing and unsettling, what is it about these spaces that seem to make one react? Here I would like to return to Goldblatt’s (2007: 7) comment about being drawn to “the quiet and common place where nothing ‘happened’ and yet all was contained and immanent”. The word that stands out in his description of the commonplace is the idea of it being immanent, immanent of course meaning both a part of something and “present everywhere”³⁸, which is unusually juxtaposed with the

³⁸ Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 2005

word contained. Immanence, in terms of Deleuze (2001: 25), is an affinity for the interconnectivity of the rhizome: “a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness...a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self”. It is a transcendental moment that is unique because of the fact that it is immanent, being both in everything and everywhere. Therefore, while transcendence is inherently hierarchical³⁹ and centred around the self, immanence is precisely embedded in the flat anti-structure of the rhizome. It is a moment that is neither dependent on a “Being or submitted to an Act” and is “ceaselessly posed in a life” (Deleuze 2001: 27). Immanence comes out of an experience of being intricately connected to everything else while manifesting out of an ‘excess’ or ‘rupture’ within the rhizome (O Sullivan 2008: 40), a moment of ekstasis. It is an experience that is inescapably beyond representation in that it can only be described as “passages of intensity, a reaction in or on the body at the [immanent] level of matter” (O Sullivan 2008: 41) meaning that it evades the classifying reaches of the mind and signification, only to be conceived through a type of molecular physicality. This specific encounter of “a given object or practice...on its beholder, and on its beholder’s ‘becomings’” is named by Deleuze and Guattari to be an ‘affect’ and can only be directly experienced therefore making it specifically an ‘event’. Whether Deleuze and Guattari’s immanence is the same as Goldblatt’s sense of immanence is uncertain, particularly in light of the fact that Goldblatt contrasts the immanent with the contained and Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of the rhizome is specifically not contained⁴⁰. However, what does seem to be similar between these two understandings of immanence is a propensity towards a distinct reaction.

In his writings on *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (cited in O Sullivan, Simon 2008: 1) states: “Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of fundamental *encounter*”. Forcing us to think through a fundamental encounter or reaction to immanent experience seems to be exactly what Goldblatt hopes to achieve through his images. Neville Dubow in fact entitles his essay on Goldblatt, “Constructs: Reflections on a Thinking Eye”, in the hopes that the metaphor of the thinking eye will invoke how “the notion of photographic enquiry as a means towards understanding is fundamental to Goldblatt’s approach to his work” (Dubow 1998 28). And a fellow photographer even described

³⁹ One must transcend or move above earthly or ‘normal’ experience to achieve transcendence, making that experience less valued than others.

⁴⁰ Although Goldblatt acknowledges several times his desire to create tension in his work and this could account for the juxtaposition of terms.

Goldblatt as making the rest of “us photographers look intellectually fluffy” (Greg Marinovich quoted in the *Sunday Times* 6 Aug 1998: 24). There certainly seems to be something questioning and probing about Goldblatt’s photographs that exists apart from other documentary photography at the time but what are these images actually challenging? Certainly he challenges traditional imaging of apartheid South Africa but is that enough to challenge the interaction between photography and society, to question the amendment of the challenge of the camera to the challenge of society?⁴¹ I’m not entirely convinced. For one, he at times depicts a very ‘empty’ and unpopulated country which in itself seems to hark back to the picturesque, colonial landscape discussed by Coetzee in his book *White Writing*, in which the black presence does not exist.

Goldblatt’s focus, in particular in *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*, is on the physical structures of South African society which in turn express a sense of social structuring. In his desire to avoid obvious violence and explore the quieter commonplace, Goldblatt turns to physical structures such as the buildings that inhabited the world around him. Goldblatt (cited in *Mail & Guardian* 3-9 July 1998: 3) states:

I don’t see any difference between these structures and humanity – they are really an extension of each other. I’ve always felt that if you wanted to do a portrait of a person, why the face? What’s particular about the face? Why not the foot, the backside, the back, the arm? And by extension, why not the things people value and build?

In this sense, Goldblatt believes that the structures of society are implicitly imprinted on the buildings and physical structures one interacts with everyday. For South Africa, this is an inescapable reality as we not only inherit buildings of past colonialism, such as colonial government offices or town halls, but through elements like continuing unequal distributions of wealth which impact on community’s buildings or lack thereof therefore creating segregated areas between rich and poor. Goldblatt’s focus moved to specific buildings during apartheid, particularly turning to

⁴¹ As discussed before, the photographic program that results from the interaction of photography and society, adapted the photographer’s challenge of overcoming the camera to the challenge of overcoming society so as to better function within apartheid society and further the prominence of the camera.

churches of Afrikaner Protestantism (for example, Image 8) which were not only an important part of Afrikaner everyday life, but also because “they arose in the form that they did almost exclusively out of the ethos and dynamics of Afrikaner life” (Goldblatt 2007: 16). “Tall” and “unmistakable” (Goldblatt 2007: 16) these churches became the embodiment and “material expression of the Afrikaner’s belief in his God-given mandate to rule” (Dubow 1998: 27). Goldblatt (2007: 11) explains his faith in the ability of buildings to portray something quiet and immanent about society as such:

Even when we attempt symbolism it has the quality of clumsy transparency rather than dissimulation. Our structures often declare quite nakedly, yet eloquently, what manner of people built them, and what they stood for. There was – and is – a rawness to the forces at work here that is evidenced in much of what we have built.

There is something quite interesting about what Goldblatt suggests here because ironically there is not only a sense of symbolism in the structures Goldblatt photographs but a sense of symbolism in his approach itself. Lesley Lawson writes for the *Weekly Mail* (4-10 Oct /1991: 26), “Goldblatt would not seek out a photograph of a riot policemen in action but would instead go to his house and try to see him as a more complex phenomenon”, but somehow the idea that Goldblatt approaches the riot policemen or Afrikaner as a more complex phenomenon is not that convincing. Anthea Bristowe (*Sunday Times* 6 Sep 1998: 24) rather notes that Goldblatt “stays aloof from the Afrikaners he is depicting – they become, in politically correct and art-historian jargon, the Other”. Michael Godby equally argues, in his essay *The Personal and the Political in Fifty One Years*, that Goldblatt has “othered” the Afrikaner in his photographs. The irony of Goldblatt’s statement then, is that although one can see the symbols of apartheid society in his photographs, one can also see the symbolism of the ‘other’ and ‘othering’ which anti-apartheid sentiments should stand against.

Finding a certain rub with Goldblatt’s exterior spaces as well as the rehearsed reactions to him; “David Goldblatt is that rare animal” (Aska Wierzycka, *Business*

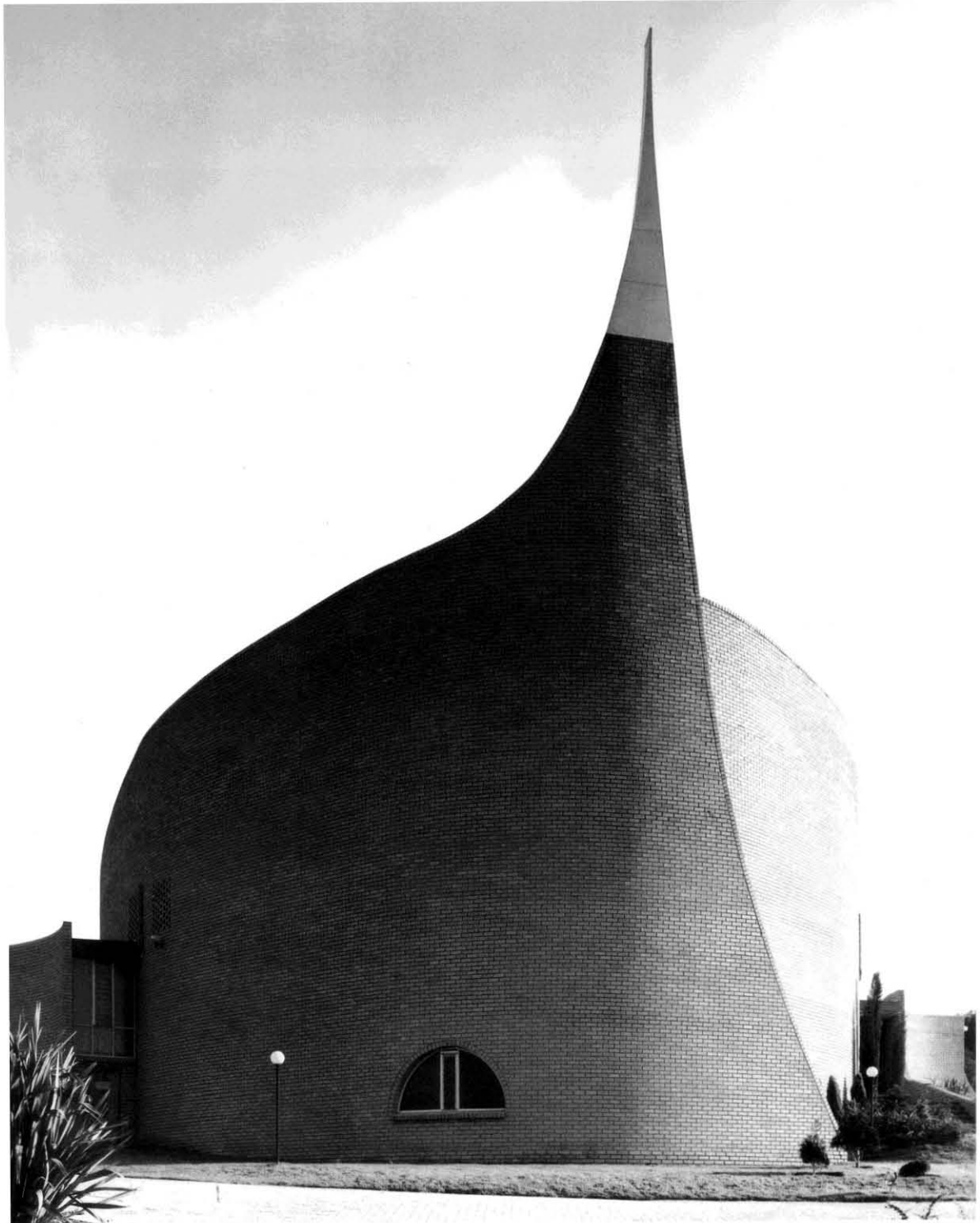


Image 8: David Goldblatt, "Dutch Reform Church", completed in 1986, Quelerina, Johannesburg, Transvaal, 2 November 1986, Silver Print

Day 11 Aug 1998: 9), “He is that rare bird” (*The Cape Times* 11 Aug 1998:16) “David is the rarest of men” (Hugh Murray, *Leadership* 31 Oct 1998: 75)⁴²; I turned to considering Goldblatt’s lesser discussed interior’s. There is a quality to his older interior spaces that speaks even more subtly of quiet violences, yet it is a violence that is even weightier in its personal existence. As Dubow (1998: 25) states: “the quality of immanence is central to Goldblatt’s vision of things; his work has a contained quality, a kind of ‘indwelling’”. Perhaps this is a too literal interpretation of the idea of ‘indwelling’ but there is something quite compelling about photographs such as “Interior of the foreman’s house” (Image 9) and “The Docrat’s bedroom before its destruction under the Group Areas Act” (Image 10). On first appearance these images are intriguing because of an aesthetically pleasing element of design that is strangely cropped by Goldblatt becoming a voyeuristic window into the peculiar world of another’s home. In the “Interior of the foreman’s house” a cracked floor is covered by patterned lino that fades and disappears with age in some places while lying clearly defined in others. This muted but ornamental floor then leads up to a unique set of shelving that stretches from ceiling to floor, each layer of scalloped shelving containing what appears to be every piece of cutlery this foreman owns, up on display. This creates a playfully decorative space where each plate and tea cup takes on an individual importance and rather than being unvaryingly piled one on top of the other, each plate stands up full circle taking its own place along the shelving. Humorously, what comes to mind is Disney’s movie of Beauty and the Beast, where the enchanted kitchenware hosts dinner and the entertainment for the night by dancing in single file along the table and around the kitchen.

There seems to be something quite charmed and quaint in both photographs of the “Interior of the foreman’s house” and “The Docrat’s bedroom before its destruction under the Group Areas Act” which is almost reminiscent of the illustrations in old children’s books depicting the fantastic little homes of characters, some sort of Alice in Wonderland moment. This stands in severe contradiction with the harsh realities of these places, like the Docrat’s bedroom that is about to be

⁴² This is again an example of social conditioning by the photographic program as one can see the ritual reaction adopt towards Goldblatt and as Enwezor (2006: 18) comments: “we stop seeing the image; the heroism of the photographer becomes paramount”. Interestingly, two of the articles quoted were released in different newspapers but on the same day.



Image 9: David Goldblatt, "Interior of the foreman's house", Sonop, Winburg, Orange Free State, 24 August 1986, Silver Print



Image 10: David Goldblatt, “The Docrat’s bedroom before its destruction under the Group Areas Act, Pageview, Johannesburg, Transvaal, 1976, Silver Print

destroyed. On my part, I find this interpretation of the images appearing quaint and picturesque really quite disturbing because it speaks to a kind of romanticising of how the 'other' lives, a kind of fantasizing of a space that is difficult to access, and, to be honest, I am not entirely sure whether it expresses my own psychoses and perversities, Goldblatt's photograph's, society's, or all three but I find this sense of the space quite difficult to shake. It is these sorts of elements that draw the viewer to Goldblatt's works, making his photographs examples of the 'thinking eye' because not only does one question society but often times oneself. However, should Goldblatt not also be questioned in these types of images? One can see that despite the tentatively quaint or fantastical atmosphere of the room, there is a much greater dynamic happening in the two interior works discussed. Again the symbolic image of the other steps into the frame even though there are no people present or perhaps because of it. Bristowe (Sunday Times 6 Sep 1998: 24) comments about the emptiness and lack of human presence in Goldblatt's photographs:

There are no gods or men in Goldblatt's pictures, just earth and sky. What we get here are exquisitely framed and brilliantly lit shots of depopulated buildings. The final results are decorative and descriptive...

There are inherent problems with the "an art form responsive to 'empty' country" because as Coetzee (1988: 50-51) points out, this alludes to the colonial influence of the picturesque which modelled South African landscape on the European imaging while excluding the black presence. What is interesting here, however, is that it is not only the coloured presence that is excluded from the frame but also the Afrikaans presence. There are other bodies of work such as *On the Mines* (1973) and *In Boksburg* (1982) that do focus largely on portraiture and therefore Goldblatt deals extensively with images in which the human being exists, however, in terms of the series *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then* (1998) it is interesting to consider this focus on the empty landscape. Coetzee (1988: 51) recognizes that the empty wilderness is either space where god does not exist or where one can find oneself, however, as Bristowe points out there are neither god nor men in Goldblatt's photographs and it makes one wonder what then is to be found? Alternatively, it could be suggested that in fact there are inescapably gods and men in Goldblatt's

photographs as he himself states “I don’t see any difference between these structures and humanity – they are really an extension of each other” (cited in *Mail & Guardian* 3-9 July 1998: 3). Here again lies a discontent with the symbolism⁴³ that Goldblatt tries to exemplify through his photographs and the symbolism that Goldblatt uses himself; because if Bristowe was correct and there is neither god nor men to be found in them then surely we are only left with the decorative and the descriptive. The impact of the photographs themselves, however, is quite unsettling in the sinister quaintness of these images and one has to wonder at it. What exactly is the ‘thinking eye’ or as Lawson (*Weekly Mail* 1991: 26) names it the “critical eye”? And what is the thinking eye in relation to the critical eye? Dubow (1998: 22) justifies the thinking eye by quoting Barthes: “ultimately photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatises, but when it is pensive”. Again there is a tension as it seems harder and harder to make these things lie coherently.

There is a certain danger in the decorative but it also says something about these spaces. Reconsidering “The Docrat’s bedroom before its destruction under the Group Areas Act”, the room itself becomes a landscape of design as everything from the wall to the beds to the headboards to the lone picture that hangs on a sea of plaster semi-circles, displays its own unique ornamental pattern. Nothing in the room lacks a textured decorative twist that makes one want to run their fingers along the image and which radiates the surreal sense that one would be devoured by the vastness of twirling lines and repetitive shapes if they ever entered this space. Despite entertaining an element of the surreal, what each decorative piece portrays is an importance or significance placed on each item in the room, a desire to create beauty through vibrancy and perhaps ultimately a sense of pride in one’s belongings and space. This sense of pride is exhibited in both the photograph of the foreman’s house and the Docrat’s bedroom as a cleanly orderliness and a desire to beautify which goes beyond just simple resilience to a determination in the creation of one’s own space in a country that would deny even that. These people not only faced discrimination and hardship but they exhibit a valiant attempt to self-image and create their own place in a society that oppressively hopes to take that from them. This only makes the title of “The Docrat’s bedroom before its destruction under the Group Areas Act” even more

⁴³ which “has the quality of clumsy transparency” (Goldblatt 2007: 11)

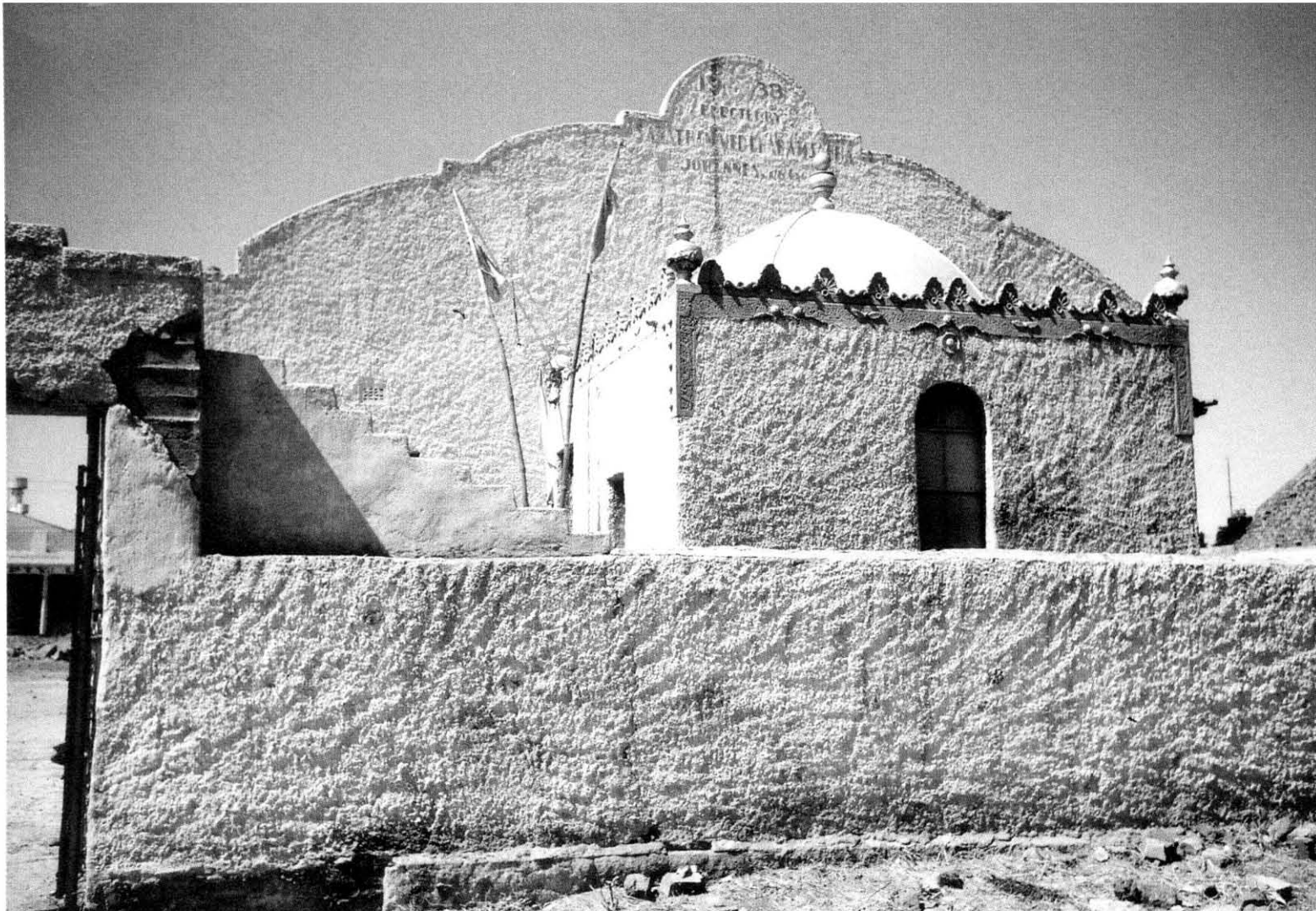


Image 11: David Goldblatt, "Hindu Temple", Martindale, Johannesburg, August 1961, Silver Print

obscene as the space becomes a dialogue between a silenced, often overlooked, violence and a space of survival.

These attempts at survival and even more self-imaging (an attempt to self-define and create one's own space in the world) through structures is a recurring moment in Goldblatt's work. When discussing a photograph of a temple (Image 11) in Martindale, Goldblatt (2007: 9) states:

Held in bricks and mortar was an intricate web of ideas and values which constituted the beliefs of this community regarding their relationship not only to the ineffable, but also to themselves within the world they inhabited. It was, indeed, their self-image made manifest.

Although the structures and spaces that Goldblatt photographs are of course acts of self-imaging of their 'makers' or 'owners', there is a very interesting thing that happens when viewing these works as (almost out of reaction to seeing self-imaging) one attempts to situate themselves and their own understandings in terms of these structures as an ultimate act of self-imaging by the viewer. Therefore, perhaps the strength of the 'thinking eye' in Goldblatt's images could be seen as a result of the response of questioning self-imaging in reaction to structures of self-imaging, which often forces interrogation on behalf of the viewer. However, it could be suggested that Goldblatt has not undergone this interrogation himself as there are inherent complications in that within these moments of 'self-imaging' the self does not appear except to be mediated by Goldblatt, in both the photographs and the captions that accompany them.

What the reader ascertains from Goldblatt's captions about "The Docrat's bedroom before its destruction under the Group Areas Act" is that Ozzie Docrat grew up in his parent's house in Pageview Johannesburg before it became his own home and the room photographed in particular was the bedroom he especially prepared for his new bride (Goldblatt 2007: 201). In 1977, he was "'disqualified' under the Group Areas Act from living in his house" which was shortly demolished thereafter, leaving "unaccountably a ruined fragment ... the Docrats' upstairs lavatory agape on concrete columns" (Goldblatt 2007: 201). Docrat is quoted twice by Goldblatt, once in the caption and once on the back of Goldblatt's book *South Africa: The Structures of Things Then*. Firstly he is quoted in the caption to explain: "I haven't been back to

Pageview, but I passed in a bus. More or less I kept my eyes closed and I cursed. I saw my lavatory and I thought, “Shit. That’s all they’ve left us is shit.” (Goldblatt 2007: 201). The sad irony of this abandoned outlandish monument only emphasises the cruelty of the violence in this act of space appropriation. Not only is this space a physical place but a psychological one of self determining; the Docrats’ very attempt at resilience and a sense of belonging and identity is viciously undermined creating a severe psychological and emotional violence complicit in the physical brutality of destroying a house. What is equally concerning here, however, is that there is a moment of overlap in the literal act of space appropriation and the act of photography which is metaphorically an act of commandeering. The aggression present in photography’s ability to ignore or possess any moment it wishes and in its ability to violate people “seeing them as they cannot see themselves” (Sontag 1997: 32) is inescapable, but the fact that the Docrats do not appear in the photograph somehow intensifies this moment, the Docrat’s room has been appropriated twofold.

The second time Docrat is quoted he explains the brutality of having his home destroyed: “I feel as though my teeth are being pulled out one by one. I run my tongue over the spaces and I try to remember the shape of what was there”. This is an evocative metaphor that Goldblatt appropriates as an overarching statement for the back of his book, *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*. In many ways it is a metaphor that remains relevant today as South Africa still seems to be searchingly tonguing the spaces of our past and present, trying to remember what used to be there, what was there to start with, what we have lost and what we have gained, and in many ways the shape of things to come. However, considering it in terms of Goldblatt’s approach this is something to be considered. Goldblatt (2007: 7) states about his approach:

I was neither an activist nor a missionary...I wanted to explore the specifics of our lives, not in theories but in the grit and taste and touch of things, and to bring those specifics into that particular and peculiar coherence that the camera both enables and demands

Nina Johnson (The Sunday Independent 17 Oct 1999: 11) writes:

I'm not really sure I fully accept Goldblatt's statement that he is "neither activist nor missionary". His work is never sensational or "in your face": [but] it is powerful because it is already known to all of us – we've just never taken a closer look.

The problem is exactly that many of us never really take a closer look precisely because his works have become so well known. In many ways we have been programmed how to react to them, how to interpret them, and while Goldblatt's photographs encourage us to question society, they do not encourage us to question Goldblatt or the camera. This is not to suggest that this is Goldblatt's intention or that he is even accountably for it, but to note it and suggest that is the functioning of the photographic program which programs us to ritually respond to photography. However, in order to break away from this programming it is important to consider the inconsistencies in Goldblatt's work itself.

Goldblatt talks of "the grit and taste and touch of things", a moment that seems to appeal to the sensory, which is brought a particular coherence by the camera but one might be somewhat sceptical of this coherence attributed to the camera. Particularly, in that it seems contradictory to talk about the coherence of representation while trying to allude to the immanence of things. If he is attempting to appeal to senses such as touch and taste it seems illogical to appeal to an apparatus that is so definitely embedded in the visual and which would only act to minimise "the grit and taste and touch of things". The coherence Goldblatt attributes to the camera would most likely stem from the general assertions of photographic documentary truth during that period of South African photography⁴⁴, which is highly dubious because if the camera is unchallenged it often simply repeats the social constructs of the society around it, the opposite of what anti-apartheid documentary intends. Therefore, ironically, Goldblatt captures the physical structures of society in an attempt to highlight the constructs of society but through an apparatus that simply repeats these constructs and is a structuring mechanism of society itself. Perhaps this was his intention but rather than something that is confronted it seems to be something ignored. Either way, what is interesting is a seemingly inherent tension between

⁴⁴ Again, this is not to assert that documentary truth and photographic truth were not questioned, simply that there was a drive towards social documentary in anti-apartheid photography for the purpose of revealing realities and truth which has resulted in a country mirrored by "pathological attachments" to truth. (Coetzee 1987: 98)

coherence and the incoherent, structures and speaking beyond them, extremities versus the contemplative, theory versus ‘the grit of things’, and what comes out of most of these endeavours is a false dichotomising that one can see so evidently between apartheid and post-apartheid.

According to Godby (2007: 9) there are some theorists who have even attempted to liken the transition from modernism to postmodernism to the shift from apartheid to post-apartheid. In short, while modernism is conceived of as a period of structure, truth and the knowable and postmodernism a period of questioning and fluidity, so too has apartheid been thought of as a time of oppressive structure and distinct sides, while post-apartheid is thought of as more grey, more shifting, more uncertain. This apparent symmetry, however, is very problematic because as Godby (2007: 9) points out, it is a very blatant “oversimplification”. Firstly, rather than comparing a shift in specific photographer’s work, this theory looks at different artists; “the change is one of personnel rather than one that necessarily affected individual photographers” (Godby 2007: 9). Also what is largely overlooked is “that academic photography was practiced even in the darkest days of apartheid”, it was just simply not as recognised. Secondly, modernism has inescapable links to colonialism (Godby 2007: 9) and although photography at the time might have been involved in dichotomy and the categories of modernism, it did stand firmly against colonialism. Lastly, anti-apartheid photography might have aimed in opposition to apartheid but “it was also concerned with issues of representation and of power relations between photographer and subject that place it within the orbit of Post-Modern interests” (Godby 2007: 9). This is clear when an anonymous writer for the *Weekly Mail* (22 July 1990: 2) stated

I am wary of categorising photographer David Goldblatt. Or his work.
In a society where people and, all too often, their creative endeavours,
are ‘suitably’ labelled, categories may be tempting, but they remain
curiously entwining devices

One can plainly see the postmodern sentiment of avoiding categories and labels in this comment but what of the photographers themselves. Anthea Bristowe (*Sunday Times* 6 Sep 1998: 24) explains that when approaching Goldblatt’s works, “to assess them

one first needs to acknowledge that Goldblatt is a modernist” and attributes Goldblatt’s decorative style to it, noting that:

...taken to extremes, modernism got pretty dreary and decorative – all surface and no substance. In his attempts to remain dispassionate, Goldblatt has not always succeeded in avoiding the decorative trap

There is perhaps a modernist element to Goldblatt’s work when taking into account what is written about his “rigorous, almost religious attention to detail” (Alex Dodd 3) or the fact that his colleagues talk of “his obsessiveness that the text in the book [*The Structure of Things Then*] took five years to do – “to write fucking captions”, as one photographer put it” (Pippa Green, *The Sunday Independent* 23 Aug 1998: 14). However, Goldblatt himself has not identified his work as modernist and following postmodern sentiment, one should be wary of such categorisations. What is more useful to note, however, is the inherent contradiction in actions such as this and statements such as “I want to make my photos open-ended so that you come to your own conclusions” (Goldblatt: *The Sunday Independent* 31 Oct 2004: 12). This obsessive attention to detail seems to stand in contradiction with the ideal of the images being open ended, but it is not even the fact that these statements so blatantly contradict, rather that they sit so incongruously side by side. Goldblatt explains that he likes to create tension in his images but there is an incongruity that is more misplaced than just ‘tension’. In terms of *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*, “Goldblatt is quick to find fault with this volume which has taken him years to complete...” acknowledging that “I wanted to take liberties with this book, make sweeping generalisations, that no sane historian would allow. Having said that, I’m aware of deficiencies, the lack of nuance and qualification...” (The Cape Times 11 Sep 1998: 16). Although his acknowledgment of this must be taken into account and certainly no project ever embarked on faultlessly, these incongruities are very interesting not so much in terms of specific problematics within the images discussed but rather because of the deeper nuances underlining them.

Katherine Butt (The Cape Times 11 Sep 1998: 16) stated: “I comment on the musicality of his photographs over the years, the power of space and silence within them, the sense of contained, interrupted, often frenetic activity”. However, what type of musicality is there to be found in a photograph characterised by dispassion, taken

by a photographer heralded for his dispassion because his “dispassionate view sets [him] apart” (*Weekly Mail* 4-10 Oct 1991: 26)? Bristowe (*Sunday Times* 6 Sep 1998: 24) describes his “refusal to face his own pain” as a “river [that runs] through all Goldblatt’s work” but also notes that “as a viewer, I feel that distance, and resent it because I find the photographer’s dispassion patronising”. I would have to agree with this but in truth the viewer is often patronised and there is nothing astonishing or new in this. On the other hand, Alex Dodd (*Mail&Guardian* 1998: 3) states: “I am drawn in by this austere love with which Goldblatt seems to approach the world – again this notion of intimacy and dispassion”. Personally, I’m not entirely certain of the idea of intimacy and dispassion or the tension created by it, for intimacy is specifically emotional in its connotation and the idea of indifferent familiarity seems somewhat hurtful. Nor am I entirely certain of the notion of “austere love”, which seems to suggest a somewhat loveless love and perhaps in a world where “love has been replaced by lovelessness... [because] ...all connection, exists in passing as a kind of blip” (Jamal 2010 4). It seems to hold onto the South Africa that “is as irresistible as it is unlovable” (Coetzee 1987: 99) and does not attempt to imagine a way out of this space. Goldblatt seems unable to avoid the “pathological attachments” to history and truth which make South Africa according to Coetzee irresistible in its perversity.

Goldblatt (*Mail&Guardian* 1998: 3) himself, does not so much talk of love, however, as he does of sex, stating: “I think the photographic act is very close to a sexual act. When the photographic act reaches its climax and it’s a good one, it’s like a sexual climax”. Not committing either way, what then is it exactly that Goldblatt wants from the viewer? Dispassionate sex..? This makes his photographs seem as dissatisfying as soggy toast. Perhaps this is the only way one can approach the irresistible unlovable or the irresistibly repulsive but it only acts to preserve this relationship rather than picturing a South Africa that is resistible and lovable (Jamal 2005: 15). Furthermore, it is not simply that these notions of dispassionate sex sit unhappily next to one another in an artificially forced, incongruous partnership but that together they are positioned at the absolute point of impossibility. Perhaps one could value this as the genius of Goldblatt’s images but to some extent it is also the unhappy sting of them. The discussion of Goldblatt will be left at this for now: his photographs seem to be unavoidably dissatisfying but it is uncertain whether this is a moment of brilliance or something that simply reinforces South Africa’s pathological attachments and perhaps ultimately it is the marriage of both. This will be returned to

in the next chapter where a further discussion of photography will hopefully shed some more light on the matter. For now, however, what must be acknowledged is the persisting role of the photographic program shaped by the interaction between photography and apartheid society.

The question was raised by Godby's assertion that anti-apartheid photography was infinitely more complex and critical than perceptions of it: what is the reason for this oversimplification? Godby (2007: 9) explains the changes in photography after apartheid as "a change in the spotlight of critical reading where one practice that had formerly been eclipsed by documentary photography is now shown in the limelight." So, why this shift in limelight and focus and why did society overlook other types of photography? There are probably a number of possible explanations, however, the one proposed in this thesis is that of the interaction between society and the photographic program. Photography or society's view of photography was adapted to best suit a social need, South African culture needed a documentary apparatus to capture moments of truth and reality in a controlled society that propagated fallacies and as an apparatus the photographic program adapted as such. This allowed the camera to be perceived the way it was needed, as a credible documentary mechanism, which in doing so served the photographic program's purposes simultaneously. With the camera being perceived as an objective tool for the recording of events, photography as a practice became prominent and the photographic program was able to instigating interactions between society and photographs without greatly having to adapt to avoid photography becoming redundant. Although the camera was questioned and there was photography like Goldblatt's that was more than just reactionary, to a large extent the photographic program created ritual responses towards photography that focused on the social responsibility of these images rather than focusing on the questioning of them.

It is interesting to note, however, that although Goldblatt challenges traditional imaging of South Africa, he does not necessarily question the camera and the photographic program as he attributes certain coherence to the camera. Furthermore, his intention is the same as most anti-apartheid photographers, to stand in opposition to apartheid, which means that there is still not a questioning of the challenge of social change adopted by the camera. Photographers and writers during apartheid did challenge the camera and used it reflectively; therefore the photographic program could only shape *perceptions* of itself, it could only program society to "act in a ritual

fashion [toward photography] in the service of a feedback mechanism for the benefit of cameras” (Flusser 2000: 64). However, there is a tension in Goldblatt’s work where he is trying to stand against the structures of society but is equally implicated by them; therefore, one can see how the photographic program has assimilated Goldblatt to its cause making him a functionary of its program. One can also see how South Africa has been programmed to react to Goldblatt’s work by the repetitive phrasing used about him and it is because of this programming that society is hesitant to question his works. Goldblatt becomes assimilated to the photographic program and simultaneously assimilates his work to the pathological attachments of South African by conforming to the very pathologies of truth that smother the imagination and prevent real freedom. Lastly, although notions of *Then and Now* and the distinctions between apartheid and post-apartheid are not as clearly defined as once thought, the photographic program has been forced to adapt. No longer can it effortlessly sit in the referee chair compelling the game between society and anti-apartheid photography but now it was forced to join the game, to adapt the challenges the photographer must overcome once again to the camera as well.

The Black Box: between representation and the unrepresentable

Most creative endeavours in life come about from starting point/s that inspires one to action; or as Deleuze and Guattari would explain it, a “fundamental *encounter*” which forces us to think. While this ‘happening’ or moment might grow infinitely beyond itself, there is always at some point a need to return to it, forcing oneself to move simultaneously backwards and forwards within a body of work rather than along a straight line of progression. The starting point of this thesis began with a quote by Brenda Atkinson about the work of South African artist Jo Ractliffe. Atkinson (2000: 40) states:

it seems not entirely accidental that she has chosen photography as the medium most suited to her thematics, occupying as it does that maddeningly, resistant space between otherness and real, between unconscious and ego-based consciousness, between ‘truth’ and lie.

If this quote was the inspiration for this thesis then two questions that immediately sprung to mind straight after were: Why does photography occupy this maddeningly resistant and awkward space? And what is it about South African photography and particularly South African space that finds itself so comfortable in this maddeningly resistant and awkward space? It is through these questions that an investigation of the photographic apparatus began and why the focus of this thesis is on South African photography in particular. This is not to suggest that there is something inherently ‘different’ or ‘special’ about South African space but that it is interesting to consider the specifics of South African space in terms of the specifics of photography.

The first work I was introduced to by Ractliffe was a work from 1999 entitled “Vlakplaas: 2 July 1999 (drive-by shooting)” (Images 12-16). This eerie and mesmerising long strip of overlapping images is of a farm near Pretoria with which the images share the name Vlakplaas. This farm is an undeniably political space because of its inherited history during apartheid when it became used as a type of torture and death camp for anyone the government decided to silence. It was only during Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings that the atrocities of what happened were revealed by Vlakplaas commander Eugene de Kock and as Atkinson



Image 12: Jo Ractliffe, detail of *Vlakplaas: 2 July 1999 (drive-by shooting)*, 1999, Black and White Photographs, size variable



Image 13: Jo Ractliffe, detail of *Vlakplaas: 2 July 1999 (drive-by shooting)*, 1999, Black and White Photographs, size variable



Image 14: Jo Ractliffe, detail of *Vlakplaas: 2 July 1999 (drive-by shooting)*, 1999, Black and White Photographs, size variable



Image 15: Jo Ractliffe, detail of *Vlakplaas: 2 July 1999 (drive-by shooting)*, 1999, Black and White Photographs, size variable



Image 16: Jo Ractliffe, detail of *Vlakplaas: 2 July 1999* (drive-by shooting), 1999, Black and White Photographs, size variable

(2000: 12) describes, Vlakplaas became “the country’s own heart of darkness”. The subtitle of drive-by shooting, therefore, applies to the acts of violence on this farm as well as Ractliffe’s own act of drive-by shooting with the camera. This concept of the photographer as a drive-by shooter is a compelling one, as not only does it implicate the photographer in the violence but it gives a strange sense of the interaction between the photographer and the space, as though Ractliffe was in a transient moment, never lingering too long in this uneasy place. In one fragment of the image one can even see a dashboard and windscreen wiper as though Ractliffe literally photographed from a moving car. The way Ractliffe photographs is significant not only in the manner in which she approaches Vlakplaas spatially but also through the camera she approaches this space with. In this work Ractliffe uses a Holga camera, a plastic toy camera that exists in the same realm as lomography, having the constraint of a fixed focus which creates grainy images that at times blur and haze. Lomography has become a subculture of snapshot photography that “constitutes the freeze-frame version of reality TV –an ostensibly surreptitious medium which captures unrehearsed life in its gritty, fragmented and unfettered form” (Friedman 2002: 46). Ractliffe, however, warns against the danger of being “seduced by surface at the expense of substance” (Friedman 2002: 46), her own work dealing with more than the surface but rather the slippages and cracks that lie beneath it. Although Ractliffe is more serious in her subject matter than the general lomographer, she still manages to create a playful satire with the Holga camera. Through her own use of the Holga and Diana⁴⁵ cameras, Ractliffe challenges South African documentary photography, which in the past has taken itself so seriously and the photograph as evidence, for her interest in photography lies in that moment where photography and reality sit uncomfortably and incongruently staring at one another. Of photography as a medium, Ractliffe (cited in Atkinson 2000: 16) states:

Photography is a very resistant – and resisting – medium to work with, a medium of non-disclosure, if you will. Despite this, we retain a certain belief in the truth of appearances; we conflate the real with its representation. I’m interested particularly in that space of slippage between photography and the real, and the notion of trace.

⁴⁵ A toy camera that was predecessor to the Holga.

Jamal (1996: 74) notes of Ractliffe's images that because of this impression of the resistant trace, "often the interpretations of what is seen diverge: we are forced to invoke meaning" and it is this resistance that creates a type of third meaning, a meaning despite itself. It is this moment that is so fascinating specifically because of our obsession with the truth of appearance, because as Coetzee (1987) points out, we have pathological attachments to history and truth which act to suffocate the imagination. However, the resistant nature of the camera which creates a slippage between photography and the real, perhaps also creates a slippage where the imagination can sneak in. What then does this resistant nature leave us with, though, when looking at the work "Vlakplaas"? Quite starkly, nothing; there is nothing in the images that signal the violence of Vlakplaas, there is nothing to signify its importance, nothing to signify its history, all one sees is another Highveld farm generically flanked by a road and at times a fence or gate. In the landscape of grass and trees there is nothing remarkable and the only thing that might stand out is the image of the odd dogs that bark from across the fence. Daniel Jewesbury (2005: 21) comments on the lack of evidence that exist in Ractliffe's images of Vlakplaas, which show "a failure to register the past, a footnote alerting us to history's tendency to disappear in between the official (and thus preserved) and the unsanctioned (unpreserved)". This is not a failure on Ractliffe's side but rather a failure in the appearance of things, a resistance in the photograph and the physical world around us to show us what we think it should. Ractliffe (cited in Atkinson 2000: 13) quite rightly questions: "look...there is nothing wrong here...Just what did you think you would see? The 'truth' of atrocity (the camera never lies)? The 'real' thing? ...". In doing so Ractliffe undermines the evidentiary power of the camera and the evidentiary power of the appearance of things, the surface of things, while emphasising the startling everyday of what Hannah Arendt terms the "banality of evil".

"Vlakplaas" expresses all these things but there is also something more to these images than just their historical and political undertones, there is also a confronting, undermining and examining of photographic space because these images are not just straight forward or individual shots but rather have a decided instance of intervention. Ractliffe uses the Holga camera to capture strange blurring images that she photographs one on top of the other, creating ghostly spectres where the images fade and overlap, giving the entire work an uncertain and uncanny tone. Her use of

black and white photography acts to intensify this tone, recalling old photographs and fading memories, but also acting to suit her intentions “as black-and-white states of things are theoretical, they can never actually exist in the world” (Flusser 2000: 42). Overall, there is something almost cinematic about her strip of connected images, almost like an old strip of film, jumping and scratching in a projector, but one might consider “the concept of the *tableau* (both painting and fragment) as an intermediary form of representation between film and photo” (Ungar 2000: 246). It is a *tableau*, however, that sets out to tell a story, only to repeat and double back on itself, essentially saying nothing or very little at all. There is still something more; nevertheless, to this technique Ractliffe uses in the “Vlakplaas” images, there is something that is quite un-place-able. The images are not simply burned as a long strip of photographic instances patch-worked and sutured together but also as a continuous negative whose white numbers and Agfa labels stand out starkly against the black background of the burned in print. The significance of this is that “the photographic negative...can only be developed later, it traces the imprint of what is to come. At the same time, it is written only in order to be left behind” (Cadava 1997: xvii). There is therefore an interesting tension between the images being a negative that has been developed yet which still holds the traces of the negative, the only function of which is to be left behind. The moment in all photographs between presence and absence becomes intensified in Ractliffe’s moment of captured loss, aftermath and process become confused, moving between the moment of the shutter opening and the moment the print finally leaves the darkroom into the light. There is an atmosphere formed by the black darkness around the images and the traces of the negative that recreates the space within the camera, the moment when the image has been captured but not fully caught in a final print.

The process an analogue photograph goes through is quite interesting as it goes from the black box of the camera, to a dark room, till finally being able to emerge into the light of the everyday. This dark moment of the photograph has always seemed like a slightly magically shadowed space, the realm of the unknown, as “no photographer, not even the totality of all photographers, can entirely get to the bottom of what a correctly programmed camera is up to. It is a black box” (Flusser 2000: 27). This realm of the darkly charged unknown is reminiscent of Maurice Blanchot’s essay “The Gaze of Orpheus” in which he compares artistic endeavour to the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In summary the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice is as follows:

Orpheus and Eurydice are lovers and when Eurydice dies, Orpheus follows her into the netherworld in an attempt to bring her back to life. The lord of the underworld agrees to release Eurydice from death but only on the condition that she walks silently behind Orpheus and he does not look on her before they reach the light of day and the world of the living. Orpheus leaves the netherworld and walks back towards the light, his anticipation of Eurydice growing with every step, but as he walks into the light he turns around before Eurydice is out of the dark, only to look on nothing as she has disappeared back into the netherworld. Blanchot adapts this tale as a metaphor for creative endeavour by making Orpheus the artist who wishes to represent, and Eurydice the obscure object of desire that drives the artist to represent the *unrepresentable*.

Eurydice is the limit of what art can attain; concealed behind a name and covered by a veil, she is the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death, and the night all seem to lead. She is the instant in which the essence of night approaches as the *other* night (Blanchot 1982: 99)

Eurydice is darkness and death; she is that which is beyond consciousness, representation and the knowable. She is the face for which we search, which instigates inspiration, but she is the face we can never see for every time an artist pulls her into the light, pulls her into representations like images or text, she quickly disappears back into darkness. The work that remains is “everything except that desired gaze in which the work is lost” (Blanchot 1982: 102), everything but the gaze of that unrepresentable moment in which one is inspired and desiring, because the unrepresentable moment must stay in the dark to retain its magic. And so the work must be “betrayed for the sake of Eurydice, the shade” (Blanchot 1982: 103).

This metaphor could be seen as an analogy also relating to the process a film photograph goes through, for example, “the significance appears to flow into the complex on one side (input) in order to flow out on the other side (output)...[but]...what is going on within the complex – remains concealed: a ‘black box’ in fact (Flusser 2000: 16). From the moment the photographer clicks the shutter, the image captured only exists in the darkness of the ‘black box’ of the camera and in the imagination of the photographer. It is exactly this shaded unseen image, pulled

from an experienced moment or sensation, which exists in an unrepresentable state and it is that unrepresentable state that drives the photographer, that instigates the desire to photograph. Flusser (2000: 27) aptly states: “it is precisely the obscurity of the box which motivates photographers to take photographs. They lose themselves...inside the camera in search of possibilities...” Therefore, Eurydice is to Orpheus what the camera’s black box is to the photographer, an unattainable desire that must forever linger in the shade. Indeed the shaded image follows the photographer from the black box to the dark room like Eurydice follows Orpheus, never standing in full sight, only giving hints of her existence like the sound of her footstep or the glimmer of an image in a shaded developing tray. When the photographer finally brings the print out of the dark room and into the light, there is always something missing from the moment the photograph was taken, there is always something hidden that is not showing itself, Eurydice has fled and returned to the darkness of the black box. By creating an image that seems to mimic and reflect the inside of the black box, Ractliffe (cited in Atkinson 2000: 16), therefore, hints at something else, at a lost and unattainable moment, “the things that happen outside the frame – the not so obvious, the furtive things that are not as easily imaged” and it is this that Ractliffe is interested in. Talking about another work entitled “Shooting Diana”, a body of work done using a Diana toy camera, Ractliffe (cited in Atkinson 2000: 34) states:

I think that photographing has been largely about guarding against loss. It’s never about arresting the thing because that is not what you want to keep. Rather, you want that transitional moment...*just this moment*...not about photographing a thing, but trying to have that moment just before it’s passed.

Photography is inherently about a certain loss as there is always an absence in every photograph, a loss of reality, a loss of a moment, a loss of the fleeting that is emphasised by the fixity of the photograph, and a loss of ‘the shade’, the unrepresentable Eurydice. There might be an absence in photography but there is also a presence as a photographer’s “sense of reality (where [their] picture starts) and much of [a] sense of craft and structure (where [their] picture is completed) are anonymous and untraceable gifts from photography itself” (Szarkowski p103). These

anonymous, untraceable gifts are that which is added and embedded into an image by the photographic program, by the interaction between photography and society. The unspoken conventions, understandings, and views that make up one's interaction with individual photographs are all imposed the moment the print comes into the light, the moment representation overtakes the unrepresentable. More than that, however, the interaction between photography and society, the photographic program, manufactures both loss and an unattainable desire, an absence and a presence; making the black box not just the point beyond representation but the threshold/the liminal space where representation is embedded and the unrepresentable begins to flee. Flusser (2000: 28) states:

This is precisely what is characteristic of the functioning of apparatuses: The functionary controls the apparatus thanks to the control of its exterior (the input and output) and is [in turn] controlled by it thanks to the impenetrability of its interior

In other words, the photographer might control the input and output of the camera but it is in the moment of being in the impenetrable black box that the photographic apparatus controls the photographer, not only does it manufacture a desire to photograph, but simultaneously makes this desire unattainable, creating a sense of loss, a presence and an absence. By doing so, the photographic program ensures there is always a desire to photograph and the photographic game will continue forever. It is perhaps for this reason that Ractliffe (cited in Atkinson 2000: 16) feels that “photography is a very resistant – and resisting – medium to work with, a medium of non-disclosure”, and perhaps why she “is interested particularly in that space of slippage between photography and the real”.

Returning to the initial question posed in this thesis: why does photography occupy this maddeningly resistant and awkward space? It might seem as though the nature of the black box goes a long way towards explaining why the photographic apparatus and the interaction between photography and society create such a resistant medium. However, there is more that can be unpacked when further considering the ‘nature’ of photography. As mentioned before, Vilém Flusser (2000: 7), in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, proposes that there have been two major turning points in the history

of contemporary culture: the first being “the invention of linear writing” and the second, “the invention of technical images”. What was not discussed, however, is how these two events have engaged and evolved through each other, creating contemporary dialogue and discourse. Much of the nature of technical images or photographs is owed to the development of images and texts.

To begin, Sartre (2004: 7) states that “images are “certain way[s] in which [an] object appears to consciousness, or, if one prefers a certain way in which consciousness presents to itself an object”. As human beings, the world around us is not directly in our reach so we convert the direct experience of the world into images that exist in our consciousness. Images are the aftermath of our perceptions, fixed moments in our consciousness that are acted upon by all the other facets of our conscious and unconscious mind. Flusser (2000: 8) describes the idea of the images as surfaces that “signify – mainly – something ‘out there’ in space and time...[made]...comprehensible to us as abstractions”, because “the world is not immediately accessible to [us]” (Flusser 2000: 9). In other words images are a basic level of reality taken out of the world and seen through human interpretation and perception, they are perhaps the first step towards reaching at that which is beyond representation. Flusser (2000: 8) also explains that “this specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time is what is known as ‘imagination’”. Described another way, images are the “reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions” (Flusser 2000: 8) that act as mediations between humans and the world but in the same instance come between humans and the world by becoming screens that we project rather than decode (Flusser 2000: 9/10). Because images become screens between human beings and the world, a means was needed to decipher images and so text was invented in an attempt to decode these screens, leading to the development of “conceptual thinking” (Flusser 2000: 10/11). Therefore, texts are the mediation between human beings and images but conversely “images also illustrate texts in order to make them comprehensible” (Flusser 2000: 11), meaning that each feeds into the other making text more magical or imaginative and images more conceptual (Flusser 2000: 12). However, just as images, acting as mediations between humans and the world, can simultaneously come between humans and the world, so too can texts come between humans and images through mis-representation and obscuration (Flusser 2000: 12). When this happens texts are projected onto the world and experience is mediated by

them meaning that texts themselves need to be decoded. According to Flusser (2000: 13), “textolatry [idolisation of texts] reached a critical level in the nineteenth century”, preceding the invention of the technical image which was invented “in order to make texts comprehensible again, to put them under a magic spell – to overcome the crisis of history”⁴⁶

Texts can be described as a function of linear history and conceptual thinking, an undeniable form of representation, while images function rather as part of the circular magical world, “a form of existence corresponding to the eternal recurrence of the same” (Flusser 2000: 84), a moment that reaches towards representation but is not wholly unpossessing of that which is beyond representation. Flusser (2000: 9) describes the magical power of images being that which “...lies in their superficial nature, and the dialectic inherent in them – the contradiction peculiar to them – must be seen in the light of this magic”. In other words, this movement on the continuum between representation and the unrepresentational and the contradiction of their supposed superficial nature in which one can observe nothing new but on which all facets of the consciousness act, are all part of the circular movement of their magical nature. Flusser (2007: 9) then explains that the “space and time peculiar to the image is none other than the world of magic, a world in which everything is repeated and in which everything participates in a significant context”. This explanation of the world of magic is very similar that of the rhizome which “...is a system, or anti-system, without centre or indeed any central organising motif. It is a flat system in which the individual nodal points can be, and are, connected to one another in a non-hierarchical manner” (O Sullivan 2008: 12). There certainly is a shift in society away from the hierarchy of modernism, towards the immanence of post-modernism and Flusser (2007: 11-12) describes this as coming out of the need to bring magic back into texts because “conceptual thinking admittedly analyzes magical thought in order to clear it out of the way. But magical thought creeps into conceptual thought so as to bestow significance on it”. Therefore, according to Flusser, photography came out of the need to bring magic back to texts and conceptual thinking but it is also undeniably pulled between the two. Texts are inherent in images today “at the level of mass

⁴⁶ It is interesting to note that today experience is measure by photography because it has made reality an anti-climax (Sontag 1997: 3). Perhaps we are currently experiencing a type ‘photolatry’ which raises the question: in what direction is society heading next? Consequently there is also an irony in writing about photography if photography’s role was to bring magic back into texts, however, photography itself also acts as a barrier between human beings and the world and we must therefore attempt to unpack it.

communications”. Barthes (2003: 117) comments that “the linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon.” However, there is a greater link between photographs as texts than just simple captions. Cadava (1997: 5) contextualises Walter Benjamin’s views on photography which place photography within the realm of history and conceptual thinking:

What comes to light...in the history that is photography, is therefore the secret rapport between photography and philosophy. Both take their life from light...For [Benjamin] there can be no philosophy without photography...“knowledge comes only in flashes...in moments of simultaneous illumination and blindness”

Technical images are inescapably embedded in conceptual thinking by their very nature, indeed their very invention came out of scientific thought and experimentation but even further to the point they “are essentially involved in the historical acts of the production of meaning” (Cadava 1997: 85). The very act of making continuous time atomised, fragmented, motionless and unable to move into the past, that very intervention, makes photography an act that alludes to the ‘meaningful’. One can talk of the rhizomatic photographic universe as conferring equal significance on each photograph but there is still a moment of discrimination in the act of clicking the shutter. The passing of moments in time in the ever changing world around us are inherently immanent and it is human beings who have selected this or that as significant. In the same way, the potential of the camera is its ability to reduce “every single experience, every single bit of knowledge, every single value...to individually known and evaluated photographs” (Flusser 2000 70). The camera can capture any moment it chooses, it can transform any passing second into a photograph and everything in the photo is potentially significant. The lens of the camera forms a photographic rhizome with the world in which each nodal point is a moment and the lens of the camera becomes the rhizomatic connection between them but in the moment of photographic capture, even for the most thoughtless of snapshots, something happens that pulls that moment out of the world, through the lens, and into the realm of photographic reproduction. In that moment of clicking the shutter the photographer chooses one moment out of time and it is privileged above others, it

assumes meaning as the photographer says ‘look, here is something to see’. As Barthes (1984: 15) states: “the Photographer’s organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens”, his finger which like a colophon points to one moment out of infinity. In that moment things are centred but at the same time the photograph becomes part of an acentred universe. It is in this act of choosing, of pointing to significance, that the photograph becomes historical and assumes meaning while simultaneously entering the rhizome of the photographic universe which erodes that very meaning. As Barthes (2003: 114) explains, there is a “vague conception of the image as an area of resistance to meaning – this in the name of a certain mythical idea of Life: the image is re-presentation, which is to say ultimately resurrection...” In other words, the “technical images absorb the whole of history and form a collective memory going endlessly round in circles... there is a general desire to be endlessly remembered and endlessly repeatable” (Flusser 2000: 19-20) creating the magic the photograph wishes to return to texts. “In this way, however, every action simultaneously loses its historical character and turns into a magical ritual and an endlessly repeatable movement” (Flusser 2000: 20). “The photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially” (Barthes 1984: 4) and therefore it always seems to be positioned somewhere between text and image, magic and concept, tangible meaning and the uncertainty of that which is beyond reach.

Barthes (2003: 19) admits when contemplating the nature of photography in *Camera Lucida* that “I wasn’t sure that Photography existed, that it had a genius of its own”. Barthes (1984: 4) states that “Photography evades us”, it is “unclassifiable because there is no reason to *mark* this or that of its occurrences...deprived of a principle of marking, photographs are signs which don’t *take*, which *turn*, as milk does” (Barthes 1984: 6). In other words, photography might be a discourse like language or a medium like text but language specifically functions as a form of communication because of the use of universal signs⁴⁷, while photography’s signs are uncertain and never constant because there is no definite consensus about what the visual world means, if it ‘means’ anything at all. This characteristic of photography is closer to the image than to text as “images are not ‘denotive’ (unambiguous) complexes of symbols... but ‘connotive’ (ambiguous) complexes of symbols” (Flusser

⁴⁷ This is not to suggest that language is completely unambiguous but at some point there is a level of agreement over meaning for communication to occur.

2000: 8). Perhaps then, the magical power of photographs also “lies in their superficial nature” and “the contradiction peculiar to them” (Flusser 2000: 9), the tension between being equalising and constructing significance which pulls both simultaneously towards and away from meaning. There are many similarities and connections between images and photographs, this is indeed why photographs have come to represent an organising discourse in our society and minds, but one should be cautioned between conflating the two. It is precisely because people see photographs as images and therefore as a more direct reflection or window onto the world, partaking of the state of ‘laminated’ objects that photographs have gained so much power in the world. Photographs and technical images are in fact “abstractions of the third order: They abstract from texts which abstract from traditional images which themselves abstract from the concrete world” (Flusser 2000: 14) and just like images or texts, photographs also become screens between human beings and the world by being seen as a way of looking at the world rather than a means of production. A refusal to acknowledge photographs as abstractions of the third order simply furthers human beings to re-experience unreality and emphasises the “remoteness of the real” (Sontag 1997: 164) and photographs become “both participation and alienation in our own lives and those of others – allowing us to participate while confirming alienation” (Sontag 1997: 167).

A difference in levels of abstraction from the world is not the only difference between images and photographs. There is also a difference between the type of magic that presents itself in images and photographs. According to Flusser (2000: 17):

Traditional images partake in a prehistoric magic while technical images are involved in new post-historic magic. The new enchantment is not designed to alter the world out there but our concepts in relation to the world. It is magic of the second order: conjuring tricks with abstractions.

The magic of photographs lies in its symbolic ability, the ability to simultaneously manipulate and adapt to society through abstraction. To reiterate again, the photograph’s specific ability to mimic reality while betraying it, to appear to be reality while simultaneously emphasising the “remoteness of the real” (Sontag 1997: 164), making human beings only cling more fiercely to it in an attempt to hold onto a sense

of reality. Flusser (2000: 17) also notes that “prehistoric magic is a ritualization of models known as ‘myths’; current magic is a ritualization of models known as ‘programs’”.

This leads us once again to the photographic program and the notion of the photographic apparatus, as even the unrepresentational moment of magic and immanence within photography is inherently symbolic. Photography truly is the apparatus of the information age and in every aspect of it functioning, even its seemingly resistant and maddeningly awkward nature, it remains part of that. So when answering the question why does photography occupy this maddeningly resistant and awkward space? The answer relies completely on photography as an *apparatus*: Photography is resistant because it exists between text and image, history and magic and it is this magic which resists meaning and creates an unattainable desire to capture this magic: the unrepresentational. This unattainable desire helps to ensure that the photographic program has functionaries in the form of photographers and elicits a certain amount of control in the apparatus because photographs screen human beings from reality through abstraction that simultaneously mimics reality while emphasising “remoteness of the real” (Sontag 1997: 164). The resistant but ultimately pliable nature of photography allows it to adapt to society while equally adapting society for the benefit of the photographic program. Therefore in the end, the maddeningly resistant and awkward nature of photography relates back to photography as an apparatus that forms out of the interconnected relationship between photography and society.

So then what does this mean for the relationship between photography and South African society? And, in particular, how can we understand the technical image as both text and image in terms of this society. To begin with, it is interesting to consider apartheid society itself as a crisis of history and text not only in terms of literal text such as the constitution but also in terms of the way human beings were reduced to labels. Apartheid was different to other forms of colonialism because of the fact that it actually adopted discrimination based on race into the constitution and into the very text of the country but even more than that apartheid was a crisis of texts because *it adopted these texts as reality*. Rather than seeing the reality of humanity within people, apartheid society transformed perceptions and images of the world, which were in fact screens to the world, into texts, therefore reducing people to labels and

words. The only way one can truly reduce a person's humanity is by reducing them to a word, to a representation that reduces the complexity of reality. Apartheid was a crisis of labels, black, white, *non-white*, coloured, and indeed the camera was used in an attempt "to make texts comprehensible again, to put them under a magic spell – to overcome the crisis of history" (Flusser 2000: 7) through revealing the raw humanity that existed underneath these labels.

One photographer that really does seem to capture this element of magic is Santu Mofokeng, a South African photographer who worked both during and after apartheid. The astonishing thing about this photographer is not only the strange dream like images he manages to capture but also the beautiful texts that accompany his works and the striking texts they inspire. As photographer Pieter Hugo states of his own work: "I think the way I view photography is closer to poetry than documentary" (cited in Federica 2008: 78) and this is also certainly true with Mofokeng's works which not only show moments of magic but also show an extraordinary interweaving between image and texts. Mofokeng's own text accompanies his images in *Taxi's Santu Mofokeng*, giving the viewer moments and snapshots of his life. This text can only be described as poetic because poetry is one of the few acts of writing to truly capture the image and magic in its own right. Beginning with the memory of "Lampposts" in the townships he grew up in, which becomes the title of this piece, Mofokeng (2001: 25) writes:

They suffer abuse mostly quietly, except maybe give a dull wooden thud or a metallic twang when struck. They provide illumination. They are viewed with suspicion by some, they are ignored by most. They are taken for granted. They are there to lean on or to piss on.

The soft violence of Mofokeng's words mirrors the objectified violence done to people of colour and more than simply telling a history, these words tell a story, they capture something deeper than these words. This is the beauty of most of Mofokeng's photographs which manage to capture almost unobtainable moments such as eyes that are neither open or closed, where time is both present and absent and where reality both exists and is not real without entertaining the sentimental. Sean O'Toole (2007) writes skilfully about the artist in his essay "Anyway":

The photographer is leading a walkabout of his Johannesburg show, and is surrounded by a group of young hipsters who nervously titter when the photographer cracks a joke, which is often. Mofokeng tells us that what we are seeing is “magic”. Standing just askance his earliest body of work, a series on religious worshippers catching the Soweto train in the late 1980s, he directs us to look at a large picture of two goats. On the flat picture plane the one goat appears to be standing on the other...He suddenly swivels around and points to the horse, the first in a trilogy of oversized magic pictures.

“Have you ever seen a horse with three legs and no head?”

The particular image (Image 17) is of a white horse with a dark mane and tail grazing in a misty clearing in the woods. The angle of the camera looks up at the horse who has its head down, making its dark neck blend into the background causing it to appear headless. At the same time the horse’s dark tail hides one of its legs causing its white body to stand out as the central focus of the image but also creating a strange headless animal with only three legs. The overall mistiness of the shot adds a dreamlike quality emphasising the inherent magic of this photograph. Part of the reading of this moment of magic, however, also comes from one’s reading of the text and concurrently the text gains a certain magic from the image. Overall there is an interesting alliance between the image and the text that intensify each other and make each other comprehensible.

Goldblatt is another photographer whose work has become accompanied by the notion of text but it is interesting to compare the differences in dialogue between the two. While Mofokeng’s images are accompanied by pieces of creative writing, Goldblatt’s take the form of captions, which consist of “interviews, court transcripts, research material, personal anecdotes and historical quotations” (*Weekly Mail* 1991: 26). These captions which are described as being almost obsessively written over five years in *The Structure of Things Then*, become dictatorial and slightly autocratic, leaving very little room for interpretation much like his highly specific titles, for example “The Docrat’s bedroom before its destruction under the Group Areas Act”.



Image 17: Santu Mofokeng, The Buddhist Retreat Kwa-Zulu Natal, 2003, Black and White on photograph baryth paper, 100 x 150cm

Wierzycka (*Business Day* 11 Aug 1998: 9) describes “Goldblatt [as] that rare animal, a photographer who believes in the importance of the written word in a world where authority of photographs is pre-eminent”. However, if according to Flusser the invention of the technical image was to bring magic back into texts, the idea of a photographer who believes overall in the importance of the written word seems quite contradictory. Indeed photographs have become pre-eminent in today’s society, becoming screens and, therefore, needing to be decoded (which is what this thesis hopes to do) but surely there is something slightly redundant in using a tool of uncertainty and connotations only to rigidly define it? Goldblatt (*Business Day* 11 Aug 1998: 9) himself states:

Photographs in general, and particularly these kinds of photographs, are closer to written statements than they are to painting. And, like sentences, they must be coherent and very, very carefully put together.

Perhaps this is the dissatisfaction which lies within photographs such as Goldblatt’s, the perplexing moment of wanting passion and dispassion, rigid definition and the open ended. Goldblatt does hail from a social documentary tradition which greatly employed the use of text and long titles, while shorter more obscure titles are influenced by gallery and fine art settings. The use of long titles does then reflect perhaps more on the photographic traditions than on the actual photographers that employed them but it is important to note how their approaches differ. Interestingly, with Goldblatt, it seems as though he is fighting against the tradition he employs creating an unresolvable tension between dispassion, text and “in the grit and taste and touch of things” (Goldblatt 2007:7), however, there seems to be something clouded in the fact that he is attempting to fight a crisis of text *with* text through photography. The fact that he is attempting to overcome symbolism and othering with symbolism and the written language they are all inherently embedded in. Overall, Goldblatt seems only to be re-iterating rather than re-imagining the obsessions with “truth that overwhelm and swamp every act of the imagination” (Coetzee 1987: 99). It is not my intention to minimise Goldblatt’s efforts, simply to note that there is something strange and unfinished about them, something that sits unhappily within these photographs which are “like sentences”, and, like sentences, purportedly transitive: subject – verb – object.

This is not to suggest that Mofokeng's photographs are not faultless either. At times they might be said to also create a moment of dissatisfaction because, although they inspire texts, there can seem to be very little text in them and, perhaps, they engage too much in the moments of magic (which by their very nature escape us). One image of dissatisfaction that is particularly poignant, however, is an image taken in the Drakensberg of Kwa Zulu Natal (Image 18). In the photograph the camera's focus only touches on an open passenger door that leans into the front of the frame and behind it one can vaguely make out in the blur a mountainous landscape and sky. The viewer is powerfully aware that the door is of little importance, despite it being the central focus of the lens, and therefore one attempts to make out the landscape, trying to place any piece of illuminating information, but which ultimately does not exist. The overall image exudes a moment of frustration in its inaccessibility but this is exactly the condition of the South African landscape. O'Toole (2010) writes about the photograph: "how to find this present but missing place, this landscape?" What this question really alludes to is the inaccessibility of the South African landscape as a space that is *both present and missing*. It is a landscape stuck in the past, attempting to move forward, written by colonialism and apartheid as unstable and unhinged, but unable to re-write its identity in postmodernism and post-colonialism that is by its very nature equally unstable and unhinged. It is a place that is consistently forgetting and always remembering, making it both nowhere and everywhere. And the overall significance of this landscape is that it permeates every aspect of the psychological South African space which finds itself both present but missing. And is this not simultaneously the resistant nature of photography and the resistant nature of the South African space which both partake of, both fighting meaning and coherence?

Finally, to conclude this discussion of Mofokeng and the concept of magic for now, let us return to O'Toole's (2007) text describing Mofokeng walking around one of his Johannesburg exhibitions:

...“Have you ever seen a horse with three legs and no head?”

Before anyone can answer, he turns again, this time to face a giant-sized portrait of a middle-aged man. It is not just any man: he is a holy



Image 18: Santu Mofokeng, "U-drive Car, Little Switzerland, Kwa-Zulu Natal", Black and White Photograph

man, a *sangoma*, Ishmael Mofokeng, the photographer's brother. He died of Aids-related complications in 2004.

"I don't know if his eyes are open and shut," he says, pointing to a pair of ghostly eyes that seem to be both open and shut at the same time. Magic.

The picture becomes the source of a story. In matter of fact terms Mofokeng tells how, on his brother's insistence, he drove him to Salpeterkraans, a sandstone overhang near Fouriesburg in the hills of the southeastern Free State. The area is a place of ancestral worship. Mofokeng explains how Ishmael, severely disabled by his sickness, had to be pushed in a wheelbarrow to the cave.

"They gave him water and holy ash. He felt better and said thank you."

It was during this moment of respite that Mofokeng took his picture. Afterwards, they both walked back to the car.

"It didn't take him long and he was dead." He pauses. "Anyway."

O'Toole (2007) comments that the truest moment of this text is the moment captured in Mofokeng's word *anyway*. The magic of this text exists in the "the fragment, a moment sectioned off from the whole and magnified, a moment exaggerated". In this way O'Toole is as much a man of the snapshot, the small consequential instances of life, as Mofokeng.

The absolutely intriguing moment of Mofokeng's photograph (Image 19) of his brother is that he somehow manages to capture the last breaths of his dying sybling: *eyes not open but not shut*. Fascinatingly he captures the unearthly second where life and death overlap, mingling for and instant and eternally in the eyes of a beloved. The significance of this is not simply in the astonishing feat of capturing this moment but that in the moment there is something of true immanence and connection. Mofokeng has lightly brushed the fleeting impossible and in doing so hinted at the unrepresentable, which Blanchot describes as death or the other night, and



Image 19: Santu Mofokeng, "Ishmael: Eyes Wide Shut", 2004. Black and white photograph on baryta paper

simultaneously grasped at everything, at pure immanence, which Deleuze (2001: 27) describes as *A Life*:

We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that in nothing is itself a life. A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss

This is a moment of the actual and metaphorical, life and death, a moment between representation and the unrepresentational. Ractliffe captures a similar moment in her photograph of a dead donkey from her work “End of Time” (Image 20). Ractliffe found the donkey and two others abandoned on the side of the road and left to decay, having been shot presumably by the very people who would have needed the donkey as part of their livelihood. Ractliffe (47) describes the experience as such:

...driving through the landscape with its small town and familiar markings, and having the desire for them to maintain as they were, as you knew them before...and then in the *End of Time*, there was the shock of the dead donkeys and the shock of thinking, *this was something I have relied on*...and I don't know quite what stability means for me but it all disappeared looking on those three dead donkeys on the side of the road.

The remarkable thing about this image, however, is that while the donkey lies dead, mouth open, on the gravel surrounded by the sheddings of its own hair caused by decay, on first appearance the donkey almost looks as though it is alive. With its eyes open and head slightly turned away, there is a moment where it appears as though the donkey is simply standing in front of a strange background. This is once again the moment of magic within the photograph, the entangling of life and death, absence and presence and it creates a desire within the viewer to understand, to partake of this moment. And concerning it Ractliffe explains: “It is in this gap that desire resides, anxiously holding loss at bay: if the moment could just be captured, perhaps it will not have been lost”. Again it seems as though moments of magic inherently reside in the



Image 20: Jo Ractliffe, "End of Time", 1999, Black and White Photograph, 1 x 1 m

gap of the photograph which also becomes the gap of desire, the unreachable, *the unplace-able Eurydice*. This is the moment of the imagination or at least the closest moment to the imagination, the closest moment to freedom away from the constraints of history and truth. This is also, however, the perfect functioning of the photographic program which intends to make us functionaries of the camera and is done through the creation and continuation of an unattainable desire for magic. This finally brings us again to the second question proposed: what is it about South African photography and particularly South African space that finds itself so comfortable in this maddeningly resistant and awkward space? Enwezor (1996: 181) comments about South Africa that:

...to enter South Africa today is to step into the harsh glare of two opposing conditions: one that is assertive, welcoming, tolerant, forgiving, optimistic, hopeful, reconciliatory, and determined to move forward; the other tentative, distrustful, intolerant, intransigent, xenophobic, pessimistic, self-righteous, and regressive.

Enwezor (1996: 181) goes on to state that “this contradiction does not in itself fully suggest the country’s rich complexity, fascinating character, and beauty” and there are many associations with South Africa as a place of oppositions and contradictions that have limited more complex understandings of it. Rather than approaching South Africa as a clutter of opposing contradictions, it is more helpful to think of South Africa in terms of continuums along which it consistently moves. However, one must also consider the dissolving and inconsistent nature of these continuums as “‘South Africa’ itself remains a sign under erasure” (de Kock 2004: 273). In terms of this the only real conclusion that can be drawn about South African society is that it is uncertain and that it is persistently resistant much like the medium of photography which is also inherently resistant. However, I am also aware that in this thesis I argue for the pliable nature of the photographic program which, being an interaction between society and photography, can spring up along new lines after ruptures have occurred. I would like to state here that of course I am very aware that I might also simply be adapting photography to benefit my own discussions which in turn would be to the benefit of the photographic program and the camera. While in the past documentary photography might have demanded objectivity and definiteness, I argue

for fluidity and mutability which I can not only adapt the photographic program to but which in its ultimate act makes the photographic program an inevitable condition of contemporary everyday life. I cannot remove myself from present postmodern post-apartheid social ideas and quite simply I do not intend to try, realising in very act of writing this thesis that I am unavoidably a functionary of the photographic program myself, but, perhaps if the photographers discussed can teach anything, it is that 'stark' opposition is not always the best route to the subversive and transformative. On the other hand, Enwezor (1996: 11) also states that "we choose which Africa suits our intentions, or, as it were interventions". In this way photography and South African society can both be thought of as pliable in nature which would seem contradictory in terms of their shared resistance but perhaps it is specifically because of this resistance to fixity that photography and South African society are so pliable and that both have the ability to adapt.

Conclusion

Returning to J.M. Coetzee's Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech which points out the key paradox of South African society that is so innately embedded in history and notions of truth that we are unable to imagine ourselves out of this dilemma, I would like to conclude by considering again the photographers discussed in this thesis in term of this speech. Considering for the last time the *vitality* of Veleko as a possible alternative to the dark narrative that Coetzee suggests, the *hybridism* of Tracy Rose, the *pathological attachments* of Goldblatt, the *desire to dream out of nightmare* in Ractliffe, and the ever inaccessible desire for *the mythical and transfigurative*, which is perhaps our greatest yearning and the most unattainable, in Santu Mofokeng. All these photographers attempt to re-navigate or re-imagine the paradox of a country that "is as irresistible as it is unlovable" (1987: 99) and while some are more successful than others and all are symptomatic of this dilemma, none of these photographers truly manage to escape the failure of the imagination. However, the rich complexities of the works by photographers such as Ractliffe and Mofokeng, though they are not defining, possibly suggest a direction we as a society might have to take.

The vitality of Veleko lies in her unique approach to self-imaging through the locally and globally attractive medium of fashion. Through her works she challenges notions of post-apartheid self-imaging, the reductive attempt to create unity through diversity and the convolutions of modernity and globality. However, is the vivacity of her work enough to challenge Coetzee's dark prophesising of South Africa? Ultimately, "can the photographic event of Afropessimism be overcome? (Enwezor 2006: 11) Rose also suggests an alternative to the dilemma of history and truth through the mystic hybridity of an otherworldly being that calls out towards a prehistorical time before labels and categories. However, while both Veleko and Rose suggest compelling formulations towards imaging identity it seems as though they are never actually *doing* it but rather simply "perform[ing] a symbolic resignation" (Coetzee 1987: 96) of the history that plagues South Africa.

When considering South Africa's preoccupation with truth it is imperative that one return to conceptions of anti-apartheid photography, in which the camera supposedly had a documentary coherence that exposed the lies of apartheid society, specifically because of South Africa's obsession with that inescapable history. Within this dialogue of the notion of truth between apartheid society and the photograph,

which only acts to further the remoteness of the real, one can see the functioning of the photographic apparatus. Considering South African society and the photograph, both are inherently resistant and equally pliable, meaning that each adapts to and adapts the other in an interconnected functioning of exchanging codes: Deleuze and Guattari's the wasp and the orchid. Regarding this adaptability I only wish to quote Sharman Apt Russell in terms of his use in Jamal (2010: 8) "You are built to be hungry and you are built to withstand hunger. You know exactly what to do". Jamal (2010: 8) applies this to the marginal no man's lands of South Africa where tentative moments of survival occur, but this simple logic can be thought of as the mantras of society and photography within the photographic game. As an alternative to anti-apartheid 'struggle' photography, Goldblatt attempts a new imaging of South Africa through his dispassionate and detached view which focuses on the commonplace. This approach is interesting, however, it maintains ingrained values of documentary accuracy which, without challenging the coherence of the camera, preserves notions of truth which "overwhelm and swamp every act of the imagination" (Coetzee 1987: 99). This causes Goldblatt's efforts to fall within the very acts of objectification and othering he attempts to oppose, by engaging with the pathological attachments of South Africa that are unlovable but irresistible in their perversity.

Perhaps the most remarkable works are those of Ractliffe and Mofokeng which attempt to go beyond representation through life and death and at times both, to perhaps the most convincing endeavour of the imagination, magic. The sensation of dreams and the mystic hang heavily in their images, through which perhaps we might experience an imagining of a new space. Once again, their works are not definitive but perhaps they suggest a new direction for society to take. This thesis, however, in itself cannot be definitive and therefore can only hope to suggest insights into photography and in particular South African photography. Therefore the two founding questions of this thesis, firstly, why does photography occupy this maddeningly resistant and awkward space, and secondly, what is it about South African photography and particularly South African space that finds itself so comfortable in this maddeningly resistant and awkward space, must remain open ended.

There are also many other South African photographers who approach the impossible act of the South African imaginary through alternative means. David Lurie, as Jamal (2010) argues in "South of No North: A Raw and Shredded Edge", leaves behind the moralism and aesthetic voyeurism of previous South African

documentary photography when approaching the very edge of marginal existence and the survival of people within these no man's lands. Mikhael Subotzky on the other hand adopts entirely new styles of intervention to documentary to create a type of post-documentary documentary work. Both Dale Yudleman and Roger Ballen assume a style of play because one is compelled by the very nature of the photographic apparatus to play with it. The photographic program is essentially in its symbolic nature a *game* as photographers are constantly fighting the challenge set out by the camera through information. However, while Yudelma's digitally constructed photographs exude a type of wit and at times vibrant playfulness; Ballen's are dark and psychologically rooted in the mind and the subconscious.

As Coetzee (1987: 98) states:

how we long to quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence, and take up residence in a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation.

There certainly is an attempt by contemporary South African photographers to engage with play and the imagination, however, the camera is still a discourse rooted in the rhetoric of truth. Photographers might be moving further away from notions of truth contained within documentary photography towards the imaginary and experimental, as for Mofokeng (cited in Corrigan 2007: 2) writes: "I see my role becoming one of questioning rather than documenting". However, there are still persisting notions of this truth that have become disguised in new terms. Mary Corrigan (2007: 2), perhaps ironically, writes of curator's like Heidi Erdmann that they "have shifted the goal posts, demanding transcendental photography that rises above purely documentary visual traditions". Yet straight after she quotes Erdmann stating: "When I look at a photograph I immediately and impulsively search for a degree of honesty, both in terms of subject matter and medium". What honesty is there to be found in South African photography and the medium of photography itself if both are so resistant and uncertain? Surely honesty is just another conception of truth that obliterates the imaginary and if so it would seem as though we truly are plagued by the inescapable weight of history and truth. What then are we left with but the unavoidable instance of

“the storyteller telling his listeners he doesn’t trust his stories anymore” (Powell 2008: 121)

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