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BEYOND THE FRAME

A liminal space in contemporary South African photography

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

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A liminal space in contemporary South African photography

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Anthropologists and ethnographers documenting the African subject – as soldiers of the colonial enterprise, dominated early practices of photography in Africa. These endeavors manufactured a visual narrative that was uniform in its approach to Africa’s landscape, which largely persists in the popular imagination.

In the early 1990s with the fall of apartheid and transition towards democracy, South Africa’s landscape witnessed a new current in the medium of photography; photographers who had been documenting the ‘struggle’ were suddenly deprived of the central focus of their work. Creative artistic expression, which had been largely restricted, blossomed.

This paper examines four of South Africa’s ‘new generation’ of photographers who have seen unprecedented success both in South Africa and in the West. This paper examines whether these photographers and their images are confronting and challenging the stereotypical stock photographs that have misrepresented South Africa’s landscape.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Image of Africa: A Visual Construction	7
Chapter 2: Photography and the South African Landscape	14
Apartheid	15
The Problem with Documentary Photography	19
Documentary and Art Photography	23
Chapter 3: Post-Apartheid: New Approaches	27
Chapter 4: A 'New Generation' of Photographers	33
Pieter Hugo	34
Nontsikelelo 'Lolo' Veleko	42
Mikhael Subotzky	50
Guy Tillim	58
Conclusion	66
Works Cited	69

Introduction

To begin, writes Okwui Enwezor, “it is necessary that the reader confront the ‘idea’ of Africa as a substance. But to do so requires us to struggle with a central paradox of this substance, by virtue of the fact that Africa is always perched on a precipice, on the threshold between something and nothingness, between survival and the negativity of life cycles. At the core of our consideration is the unrelentingly grim view of the world Africans occupy.”¹ “This,” he contends, “is the terrain of Afro-pessimism.”² Afro-pessimism, the belief that Africa is devoid of anything that is good and that her people “possess nothing of value for the advancement of humanity,” also serves as the foundation and backdrop when discussing the highly constructed image of Africa.³ While it is difficult to imagine that an entire continent can evoke a set of standardized images as though it were a single country, the image of Africa is indeed very real.

It is no revelation that Africa fares poorly in the eyes of the global media.⁴ These images have filled our minds with inimical objectifications, which have played a key role in our construction of an image of Africa. While it is not the only means by which we are acquainted with Africa’s landscape, it is unquestionably the “most saturating.”⁵ The image of Africa has revolved around the same self-contradictory fields of representation for decades,

“either showing us the precarious conditions of life and existence, in which case the African subject always appears at risk, on the margins of life itself, at that intersection where one is forced to negotiate the relationship between man and animal. Or we are confronted with the heartbreaking beauty of its natural world, where man is virtually absent except on the occasion when the landscape is left to the whims of tourists and researchers with dollars and fat grants.”⁶

It is these images that have been fixed and indelibly inscribed in the Western mind. This fixity has denied us the opportunity to imagine an alternate understanding of what Africa represents in the larger imagination.⁷ This, of

course, becomes highly problematic. If we use sight to establish ourselves in our surrounding world, must we not be skeptical of the image and of the narrative it recounts? *What* images are we using to narrate Africa's landscape? Furthermore, *whose* images are we using to tell Africa's story? In contemporary society we find ourselves surrounded by millions of visual images that form an integral part of our daily lives. Rarely, however, do we question the production or reproduction of these images and what they claim to represent. Instead, our tendencies are to "accept photographic (visual) images as slides of reality, denying the photograph the distinction between it as object, and it as a representation"⁸ therefore allowing the photograph to carry "its referent with itself."⁹ This negligence allows the photograph to be elevated, thus occupying the status of 'neutral provider of truth.' In his magnum opus, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger explains: "Seeing comes before words...it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."¹⁰

In thinking about Afro-pessimism and the nebulous lens that has distorted the West's vision of Africa, we look towards the medium of photography. Photography is unique in its immediacy of impact and the way in which its look at the world is given compelling aesthetic visual form.¹¹ It is ironic to contrast the complexity of a charged image to the simplicity in the way a camera functions: light passes through the aperture from the object photographed onto film and through chemical processes, preserves the trace of light. What remains complex, however, is how we grasp the "nature of the appearances which the camera transports."¹² John Berger asks, "[a]re the appearances which a camera transports a construction, a man-made cultural artifact, or are they, like a footprint in the sand, a trace *naturally* left by something that has passed?"¹³ He argues that it is both: First, a photographer chooses what he photographs and this choice can be thought of as a cultural

construction; Second, the “material relation between the image and what it represents...is an immediate and unconstructed one...indeed like a trace.”¹⁴ Despite the grip that Afro-pessimism retains as the primary way the West has come to understand Africa, intellectuals and artists alike are using it as fertile ground to stage their dispute.¹⁵ The quest to find a more informed representation of Africa to help establish her place in history “excites a lot of passion and sometimes regret.”¹⁶ Because we have always chosen which representation of Africa “suits our intentions, or, as it were, inventions”, each choice “corresponds to a ‘correct’ representation...Africa ceases to exist as a concrete reality.”¹⁷

Discussing South Africa within the context of Afro-pessimism can at times be delicate as it occupies a unique space in its relationship with the rest of the continent. While the continent as a whole combats stereotypical negative imagery, South Africa often battles the criticism that it is not part of the continent at all. But South Africa does suffer from, as well as contribute to, the misrepresented archive, most notably through its history of apartheid, serving as dominant subject matter in visual imagery. A critique by Mark Stevens of a recent exhibition of African photographers entitled *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* curated by Okwui Enwezor at the International Center of Photography reflects this view:

In America, we rarely see Africa through African eyes. Writers and photographers from the West have created an impression of the continent that instead suits Western tastes and interests. Africa is villagers in mud huts, apartheid, Soweto, famine, exotic animals, tribal violence, National Geographic, the ravages of AIDS, African-Americans looking for roots... To give just one example: South Africa looks very different to me after this exhibit. I’ve never been there, but the vast flow of articles, essays, and photographs about the country has certainly created in me a powerful image of place. A stark black-and-white image. A false and clichéd image.”¹⁸

The fact that the observer has an image of what Africa looks like, without ever having been there, is testament to not only the power of the image, but the role the image has played in shaping the Western conscience regarding Africa. How do we combat this powerful and clichéd image? In order to concretize a more informed representation concerning Africa it is not enough to proffer counter-representational or positive images. Instead, a more balanced approach is required, one that begs questioning through the work of contemporary South African photographers. Does their approach to photography call into question the clichéd and complex archive that Africa's landscape has been burdened with for so long?

The local and international art scene has heralded a 'new generation' of South African photographers who are said to be challenging South Africa's 'false and clichéd image.' A recent exhibition at the Kuckei + Kuckei gallery in Berlin, for example, hosted a handful of South African photographers in an exhibition curated by Christian Ganzenberg entitled *A Look Away*. The gallery chose as their emerging South African photographers Pieter Hugo, Sabelo Mlangeni, Mikhael Subotzky, Nontsikelelo Veleko and Guy Tillim. The exhibition claims that the title, *A Look Away*, is what "photography in Southern Africa has always avoided."¹⁹ Drawing comparisons between pre-1994 photographers who "relentlessly visualized the political and social grievances in the fight for democracy," the exhibit has chosen to highlight the younger generation of South African photographers who they claim, "strongly draw attention to the unknown and unnoticed in a complex society."²⁰ The exhibit claims that it is in their "awareness of photographic traditions in a personal search for new forms in contemporary photography that they are able to offer individual portraits of African realities."²¹

While it is not my aim to make this exhibit the primary focus of my paper, research indicated that four of the five photographers from *A Look Away* were consistently mentioned as the most in-demand photographers in South

Africa, Europe and the United States. I therefore use this exhibit as a point of departure to interrogate the transformation that is taking place in South Africa's photographic landscape. This thesis seeks to interrogate if and how the work of these photographers forms part of the transformative images that are redefining public narratives of South Africa's landscape and with it, the image of Africa.

Chapter 1 explains the image of Africa as a visual construction. Why is there a stereotypical 'image' of an entire continent? I begin this chapter by illustrating how visual representations have been pivotal and detrimental in the construction of an image of Africa. I use the arrival of European powers and the period of colonialism as a benchmark for explaining the beginning of documentary photography on the continent. This chapter lays the foundation for localizing the genre of documentary in South Africa's landscape in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 unpacks the loaded nature of the word 'documentary' and the complexities associated with the genre. I examine a few of South Africa's controversial encounters with documentary photography in order to frame the way South Africa's new generation of photographers are looking at the medium. I also explain how documentary photographers worked during apartheid in order to contextualize the shift that happened in South Africa's post-apartheid landscape.

Chapter 3 examines new approaches to the medium of documentary that evolved in the post-apartheid landscape.

Chapter 4 examines the work of four South African photographers who are receiving unprecedented attention in South Africa and in the West; Pieter Hugo, Nontsikelelo Veleko, Mikhael Subotzky and Guy Tillim. Through an examination of their work I show how their images are providing a space to look at South Africa through a different set of lenses.

Chapter 1

THE IMAGE OF AFRICA: A VISUAL CONSTRUCTION

In order to contextualize South Africa's shifting photographic landscape and new generation of photographers, it is important to understand the historical events that contributed to the shaping of Africa's image. Chinua Achebe tells the story of his encounter with an older man one "fine autumn morning" when walking from the English Department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, to a parking lot.²² Remarking how young the freshmen were as they briskly hurried about the campus in all directions, the older man asked Achebe if he too was a student. "I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who also taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African history, in a certain community college not far from here. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had thought of Africa as having *that kind of stuff*, you know."²³

"Image," Paul S. Landau asserts, "is a very forgiving word, even a promiscuous one. In a very basic sense, an image means a picture, whether the referent is present as an object, or in the mind."²⁴ Therefore when discussing the image of Africa we must not disregard the fact that what we are really acknowledging is that this image is rather a set of visual representations and ideas associated with Africa. In trying to understand the elderly man's ignorant comment, Achebe contends that "something more willful than a mere lack of information was at work...one might indeed say the need – in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe..."²⁵ We must always consider that the history of a European view of the other has always "reflected Europeans' history of imagining themselves...people use images to draw together previously inchoate social meanings from their *own* societies, then use them to 'recognize' people from *other* societies."²⁶ Frantz Fanon

referred to this recognition of people from *other* societies as a “racialized form of looking” whereby “profound differences of history, culture and experience” are “reduced to a handful of stereotypical features, which are ‘read’ as if they represent a truth of nature, somehow indelibly inscribed on the body.”²⁷ Because we see these differences, because they are visible to the naked eye, they are assumed to be real.²⁸ Fanon used the term ‘epidermalization’ to describe this process of racial inscription on the body, whereby racialized difference is “profoundly implicated in dominant practices of visual representation.”²⁹

Visual representations have been pivotal in the cultural constructions of racial and ethnic dissimilarities from the earliest European encounters with others. These encounters with difference were used to “construct a source, origin, or alterego, confirming some new ‘discovery’ within the territory of the Western self.”³⁰ In *Hopes and Impediments*, Achebe explains the deep anxiety suffered by the West regarding the precariousness of its civilization and finding a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. Achebe’s quote resonates with the course of events during a time when European identity was determined by its encounters with something different from itself, evolving into the construction of the ‘Other’.³¹ This ‘Other’ fell under the category of primitive in the eyes of Europeans. Like those of the exoticised Orient, they were seen as devoid of a history, seemingly suspended in time. Africa was ‘it’ for Europe; there existed a lure, as Achebe reaffirms: “Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray - a carrier on to whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate”³²

Africans have long been subjects of photography by the West and the “appropriation of Africa’s visual world through the invention of the camera went hand in hand with the appropriation of Africa’s wealth” during the colonial period and subsequently.³³ The rapid expansion of colonialism on

the continent of Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, peaking in what is known as the 'Scramble for Africa,' was also concurrent with the birth and development of photography.³⁴ With the introduction of the camera to Africa, the photograph was a powerful means to reinforce the notion that a darker people of the world were inferior, creating a false sense of authenticity and reality. In their book, *The Black Female Body*, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams contend that a number of significant developments in Western culture coincided with the invention of photography and further contributed to the way in which black people were regarded and ultimately visualized.

“The births of ‘popular culture’ and modern visual pornography; the development of the natural sciences and the related disciplines of ethnology and anthropology; and the abolition of slavery both in the colonies and at home were practically simultaneous, and each served to compartmentalize, objectify, and categorize any manifestations of difference from the European ideal.”³⁵

In addition to colonial expansion in Africa, the late nineteenth century also saw the birth of the realist movement in France; concepts such as “materialism and the scientific method created an intellectual need for ‘objective’ or realistically correct imagery.”³⁶ The ability of the medium to reproduce reality in a way that had never been done before led to exploitation by daguerreotypists, who soon set off to foreign lands that few Europeans had the means to visit.³⁷ French daguerreotypists started traveling to North Africa in the early 1800s to photograph the landscape and indigenous peoples. The British and Americans soon followed suit in their travels to India and Australia.³⁸ Soon after, South Africa was introduced to the daguerreotype process as ships passed through the Cape of Good Hope on their way to India and Australia. Despite the complicated and cumbersome procedure that characterized early forms of photography, the incomparable and mirror-like image that the camera reproduced was seen as a victory in the fields of science and art. The daguerreotype “revolutionized image making both practically and conceptually.”³⁹ With the European and American public’s

desire to “see the ‘exotic’ and ‘mysterious’ people...who had been the subjects of military campaigns and innumerable romantic paintings and novels”, the emergence of photography in the nineteenth century was quite opportune.⁴⁰

Enwezor and Zaya explain:

“...it is impossible to examine African art and history of any period without taking into account Western anthropology’s complicity in constructing and framing a natural history of critical intransigencies and visual codes, as well as the specific means through which the West has apprehended, consumed, and interpreted the African continent as a site of both scientific inquiry and popular entertainment. In building the framework through which this encounter has been accessed and codified as unimpeachable knowledge, photography has often been allied with anthropology.”⁴¹

The birth of institutions including the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and the National Geographic Society in the nineteenth century meant that colonized people were righteously compared to the West in the name of science. With the study of facial structures, skin colour, and genitalia, a classification of human types presented Africans as “less developed...associated with moral deficiency, sexual deviance, and intellectual inferiority.”⁴² In the late nineteenth century, ‘colonized people’ were introduced at European world fairs as spectacles, serving as proof of the successes and industrial advances being made in their respective colonies abroad. Africans had for centuries been known to Europeans, mostly as slaves. These exhibitions, which “examined the notion of human difference through the displacement of the ‘Other,’” gave Europeans their first experience with black Africans reinforcing the image of a primitive being.⁴³ These recently developed disciplines of ethnography “justified the domination and classification of peoples...soon no moral concern restricted

the displacement of the naked coloured¹ body.”⁴⁴

Photography was used by ethnographers² to catalogue these new-found subjects and as a “means of surveillance to identify and control the subject nations: this revealed the function of photography as a means of appropriation and control.”⁴⁵ The manner in which the subject was portrayed in E. Thiesson’s *Native Woman of Sofala* exemplifies this control. Sitting on a wooden chair bare breasted in profile, the method employed is the ethnographic technique of “frontal, rear, and side view,” developed centuries earlier and adapted from artists’ anatomical studies and from the “mug shot” used in classifying criminals.⁴⁶ Such classification methods were techniques used to document these new categories of race.”⁴⁷ The subject photographed in profile was standard in ethnographic photography because it negates the subject of an identity. Instead of a frontal view that would resemble portraiture, in profile, the skull becomes the subject and focus of the image – it transcends age, carrying no expression or emotion. These views became standard, reducing the individuality of the subject and the “specificity of identity” making it easier to compare to other human beings.⁴⁸

While initially photography proved an expensive medium due to the time-consuming and laborious nature of the art, the size and affordability of an image soon made it accessible, offering an “ideal medium for looking at nude and provocatively dressed bodies.”⁴⁹ As photographers and artists continued to explore Africa, an interest in figure studies emerged and images of a forbidden world were brought back. In *Surviving the Lens*, author Michael Stevenson notes that nearly every photograph in their collection was acquired

¹ The term ‘coloured’ in this context refers to the North American euphemism that was once widely used to describe black people. In this context, it should not be confused with the South African definition denoting people of mixed race, as defined by the South African government.

² Eileen Krige and Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin are examples of ‘ethnographic’ photographers practicing in Southern Africa..

in the United Kingdom, a “confirmation that they were mostly bought to be taken away from Africa...Because such photographs needed to meet the preconceptions of the early tourists who took them away as illustrative souvenirs, they invariably stereotyped the subjects.”⁵⁰ The image by Ernest Benecke entitled *Esclave Abyssinien* is exemplary of the typical “highly constructed nature” of these images, as the subject stands awkwardly against a brick wall, half naked, her gaze non-confrontational. Standing defenseless before the gaze of the camera, Benecke clearly dictated the subject’s pose.⁵¹ While the photographer lacks familiarity with the space, it is clear that he knows who the intended audience is: “It was only with the greatest hardship did I complete the task to be able to depict representatives of some of the least-known peoples.”⁵² The clear isolation from her environment, however, only serves as a decontextualization of the subject, as one historian noted, “one of the few certainties about these photographs is that the women were seldom in real life what they appeared to be in the photograph.”⁵³ While the photographer assumes she is complacent in her nudity, her specimen-like body reveals she is uncomfortable in this space. Images such as Pierre Tremaux’s *Fille de Dar-Four* were not considered pornographic, rather, picturesque, which made them even more available for possession.⁵⁴ The subject, just a young girl, is positioned against a wall wearing a loosely hung straw skirt and framed between two rugs. The nature of her pose - direct, frontal, and stiff - is highly constructed as she awkwardly rests one arm on the rim of her skirt provocatively. There is, however, nothing provocative about this pre-pubescent girl.

Not only did images such as these, taken by ethnographers and anthropologists, claim to document the African condition, they also produced a large archive of “visual tropes about Africa that have persisted in the popular imagination.”⁵⁵ Christopher Pinney warns that “we must not lose sight of the extraordinary circumstances of inequality (encompassing the range from cultural, political, and economic hierarchy to systemic genocide)

that gave rise to the vast majority of images inhabiting the colonial archive.²⁵⁶ These images have contributed to the way in which Africa has been visually constructed, thus perpetuating a landscape fixed in time. What is important to draw from these early practices in ethnographic and anthropological photography are the foundations they laid for the way the West has come to imagine Africa – a discriminatory form of representation, far from the objective reality.

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Chapter 2

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN LANDSCAPE

In the wake of nineteenth century merchant and colonial empires, photography arrived to South Africa with Jules Léger at Algoa Bay on the schooner, *Hannah Codner*, in 1846.⁵⁷ This would be the beginning of a long photographic history. From Léger's arrival in the 1840s to the establishment of S.B. Barnard and F.A.Y. York studios in the 1850s, to Bleek and Lloyd's photographs of /Xam bushmen in 1871 and Duggin-Cronin's photograph on the Kimberley diamond mines, to Constance Larrabee and Leon Levson's commissions and Santu Mofokeng's project on the 'Black Photo Album', photography is widely embedded in South Africa's history.⁵⁸ Yet despite South Africa's long, rich, and diverse photographic history, most would agree that social documentary photography as practiced during apartheid stands out as one of the most influential in South Africa's history.⁵⁹

Just as the medium of photography facilitated the political imperatives during Africa's colonization process, photographic practices during the late 1960s into the early 1990s in South Africa were largely predicated on the political state of affairs. A policy that discriminated on the grounds of race, apartheid was adopted as a slogan by the successful Afrikaner National Party in the 1948 elections, extending and institutionalising existing racial segregation in South Africa. Due to the political nature of the landscape, a kind of oppositional photography emerged, which was used to document the ills of apartheid in hopes of bringing about political change. While more artistic forms of photography were being practiced, albeit by a small number of people³, "[b]ecause of the depredations of apartheid, the documentary style became the dominant photographic genre in South Africa. Photography was

³ Neville Dubow and Paul Alberts are examples of South African photographers considered to be more 'artistic'.

consistently used in the service of news reportage and in the ideological struggle between the apartheid state and its opponents.”⁶⁰

While photographic practices in South Africa are by no means limited to this small period of time, the fact that debates in contemporary South African photography are often preoccupied with periodising changes in the medium to pre and post-apartheid is significant. Just as Enwezor and Zaya comment on the impossibility of examining African art without taking into account photography’s alliance with anthropology, it is impossible to examine South Africa’s ‘new generation’ of photographers without briefly reviewing the impact apartheid had on documentary photography in South Africa.

Apartheid

Typically known as the Drum decade in South Africa, the 1950s saw to fruition *Drum Magazine*,⁴ which provided a platform for a dynamic group of talented writers and photographers, the latter including Alf Khumalo, Bob Gosani, Ernest Cole, Peter Magubane and Jurgen Schadeburg.⁶¹ Initially portraying popular urban life, setting the tone for “glamour, desire and consumerism”, the mission of the magazine and the work of these photographers evolved into more serious projects as South Africa’s political and economic situation began to deteriorate.⁶² A courageous group, their efforts collectively worked at ripping open “the belly of apartheid” through documentary and photojournalism, including Cole’s *House of Bondage* and Sam Nzima’s infamous photograph of Hector Peterson in the Soweto uprising, to name a few.⁶³ While many of these photographers were forced into exile due to the political nature of their work, they paved the way for a subsequent generation who would be more commonly known as the ‘struggle photographers’. Among this group was Omar Badsha, a key figure to emerge in the 1980s, who later founded the Afrapix collective with photographers

⁴ It was started as *The African Drum* but failed, it was later taken over by Jim Bailey and renamed *Drum*.

Paul Weinberg, Cedric Nunn and Peter Mackenzie. Their shared interests were to expose the malefactions of apartheid.

South African photographer Paul Weinberg recalls this time period when working photographers often referred to themselves as the 'taking sides' generation:

“We were unabashedly partisan, saw the camera as a ‘weapon against the system’...We had a strong tradition of working collectively – whether it was running workshops or exhibiting jointly. The ethos of the time was that the common cause against apartheid was more important than our individual needs or interests.”⁶⁴

Weinberg's sentiments reflect the binaries that are characteristic of a colonialist discourse with relation to documentary photography: “...the political imperative necessitated a clear and oversimplified distinction between oppressor and oppressed: between good and evil, black and white, etc.”⁶⁵ Apartheid gave photographers a simple construct that was easy to respond to: “[H]umanity and inhumanity, for and against, black and white, right and wrong.”⁶⁶ While South African society was undoubtedly more complex and nuanced than this, these juxtapositions nevertheless remained meaningful in the way that photographers' work was restricted. As South Africa's political turmoil started receiving international attention occupying center stage, 'the land of violence' allowed members of Afrapix to become full-time professional photographers. ⁶⁷ Nunn comments: “We started out as activists...ironically, what happened is that the more successful we [Afrapix] became, the more people we attracted...And it was quite a sexy way to make a career for yourself...”⁶⁸

While journalistic and documentary-style photography were the dominant disciplines during apartheid years, denouncing and exposing the wrongdoings of the apartheid government, they are nonetheless “limned by a paradox.”⁶⁹ In *Democracy's Images*, Jan-Erik Lundstrom and Katarina Pierre explain that the

history of this particular documentary practice, “as a form of cultural expression...was foremost aimed at an international non-South African media audience; being, so to speak, export goods of apartheid.”⁷⁰ When South Africa started becoming popular in the media, market forces and the international arena began dictating the kinds of photographs that would sell. Afrapix members soon realized that they were competing against multinational news agencies and the images they were taking were in fact valuable commodities. This resulted in the proliferation of a particular kind of desensitized image. Reflecting on his photographic trajectory during the 1980s, South African photographer Gideon Mendel explains:

“...whenever there was a protest or a march I felt I had to go and photograph, just in case something dramatic happened. It was a real waste of film...I just got too many funerals and protests...when I really should have been trying to look beneath the surface of what was happening...I was repeating myself over and over and over again.”⁷¹

As members of Afrapix began making careers out of their experiences, obtaining employment with news agencies including Reuters and the Associated Press, the nature of the organization began to change.⁷² Afrapix began sending images to networks overseas to be disseminated among a variety of organizations, which in turn had an impact not only on the kinds of images that were put into circulation, but also the kinds of images people wanted to see.⁷³ By allowing international market forces to dictate the *choices* they made in their photography, rather than basing choices on what was really happening on the ground, anti-apartheid photographers unconsciously allied themselves with former ethnographic and anthropological photographic practices thus replicating the problems of the ‘colonising camera’. Just as colonial photographers were capitalizing on the ‘Otherness’ they encountered in Africa by displaying Africans as spectacles at their disposal, struggle photographers were using the medium of documentary to capitalize on South Africa’s political situation.

The propensity of market forces in the West was clearly one in favor of a linear narrative, a single story - “the state as total aggressors and people as victims”.⁷⁴ “You’d have people coming in looking for blood”, explains Patty Donnelly who assembled photographs for the public at the International Defense and Aid Fund (IDAF) in London.

“They were looking for hard, hard-assed pictures...And there was a lot of appalling state violence that was happening and those basically were pictures that people were fixed on. And they certainly were the pictures that people could organize a picket around or get a meeting around. You needed that sort of imagery.”⁷⁵

Chris Ledochowski shares his frustrations with this kind of imagery:

“We were propagandists for the struggle. I spent four years in those COSATU meetings since its launch...What photos have I got to show for it? Reels of boring footage. You wait two hours for one amandla! And maybe by then you might have nodded to sleep and you miss the shot. The main shot, the Badsha or Weinberg type photo. Because we all were influenced by those archetypal shots.”⁷⁶

Hungry for these ‘archetypal shots’, which were causing a “hardening and proliferation” in the medium, it seemed anti-apartheid photographers had forgotten the reasons they began photographing in the first place. Having begun as activists whose collective cause was to expose the practices of a racist government, struggle photographers started ignoring the fundamental social motivations that had initially fueled their work.

In an interview with Patricia Hayes, photographer Chris Ledochowski addressed the forfeiture of photographers’ personal relationships with communities they were photographing, commenting that even captions became stereotyped: “What is that picture of Crossroads all about? What is Crossroads? I mean if you are going to write a proper caption for this situation it’s going to take you two weeks!”⁷⁷ One can deduce two corresponding problems from Ledochowski’s statement: First, the social distance that is created between the photographer and photographed; Second,

the huge rift between the viewers of the world audience and the photographed.⁷⁸ Guy Tillim comments that when he thinks about the work he produced in the 1980's, he feels some regrets, "we were circumscribed by quite unified ways of thinking."⁷⁹

The Problem with Documentary Photography

Before discussing the changes that occurred in the medium of post-apartheid photography, as well as South Africa's 'new generation' of photographers, it is important to briefly touch upon the idiosyncrasies, or rather, complexities, surrounding documentary photography. We have seen throughout history the use of documentary photography as a means of recording and serving as evidence under an aegis of objectivity. The truth-telling nature of the camera under the assumption that it never lies allows realism to be inexorably attached to the medium; Allan Sekula explains: "...photography, according to this belief, reproduces the visible world: the camera is an engine of fact...independent of human practice."⁸⁰ We have seen through ethnographic and scientific documentary photography, as well as struggle photography, the 'supposed' realistic and indexical qualities that are attached; if it is pictured, surely it existed. This, however, negates the role of photographer, assuming that the camera alone takes the picture. Both images taken by colonial and struggle photographers (transmitted through documentary photography) demonstrate how dominant ideology is manifested in the intent and desire of the photographer. Because the photographer is shaped by social circumstances and society at large, his or her personal ideologies and concerns are incorporated in the intent, inevitably reflecting what is depicted. Abigail Solomon-Godeau comments: "Dominant social relations are inevitably both reproduced and reinforced in the act of imaging those who do not have access to the means of representation themselves."⁸¹

The very nature of the word 'documentary' is complex in that people tend to associate it with having the ability to provide not only an absolute truth, but also a neutral one. Documentary carries with it an especially loaded connotation when we refer to the continent of Africa because photographers, in 'documenting' the 'Other', were also seen as exploitative. The same is true for struggle photographers. Hayes explains that there were moments when Afrapix photographers found openings in particular stories they had access to and abused their privileges as photographers. She explains that 'exposure' was one of the photographers' main priorities.⁸² Eric Miller's photograph of Cosatu House, concerning the police's occupation of the largest labour organization's headquarters in the country, exemplifies this. Miller explained he was "fueled by anger" and his photograph was a "**** you people!" response. "How dare you do this shit and try and keep it a secret sort of thing."⁸³ While struggle photographers were oftentimes regarded as fighting on the same side of the people, they were also seen as intrusive and capitalizing on individuals as victims. What Miller perhaps didn't realize is that he had overstepped his boundaries as a photographer, or, he had overstepped his boundaries and simply didn't care.

Perhaps South Africa's most infamous example of documentary photography's contentious nature can be taken from Steve Hilton-Barber and his photographs 'documenting' the Northern Sotho initiation ceremony in South Africa. To say the incident was a public outcry in the field of photography would be an understatement. While Hilton-Barber claimed that his images were simply documenting the process of Northern Sotho male initiates, he was publicly harangued by the art community and accused of using his role as a photographer from a position of privilege. Among the many issues that arose were the ethics surrounding representation in documentary photography, an issue that extends from debates surrounding ethnographic and scientific documentary. In response to Hilton-Barber's

images in *The Documentary Photographer and Social Responsibility*, Rhonda Rosen comments:

“Contemporary documentary photographers in South Africa, like colonial ethnographic photographers before them, often perpetuate two beliefs about the nature of photographs without question, or at least without resolving the questions. They hold, firstly, that a photograph can represent the subject with accuracy and with dignity and, secondly, that a photograph provides us with real knowledge about the people in the photograph.”⁸⁴

Rosen explains that even progressive documentary photographers, in assuming that a photograph can speak on a subject’s behalf and provide real knowledge about them, “align themselves with a power structure that has developed alongside colonialism and which powerfully carries out an important function of colonialism: to control knowledge about the people who have been appropriated.”⁸⁵ Hilton-Barber responded by explaining that as a documentary photographer, he has attempted to portray subject matter in their specific social circumstances in an *honest* and *accurate* manner: “Like many others in my field, I have attempted to act with integrity and with a sense of responsibility and sincerity. One of the most enduring problems faced by documentary photographers is that of the distance between themselves and their subject. This is an issue which I continue to grapple with in my work.”⁸⁶ But this is the very issue Rosen has with Hilton-Barber’s images. Somehow Hilton-Barber believes that in being *honest* and *accurate* his intention and images become acceptable, therefore his right in representing the ‘Other’ through the lens of the camera is somehow validated. Even though the worst of apartheid was over by the time Hilton-Barber’s images opened at the Market Theatre Gallery on November 25th of 1990, it was clear that photographers would not be able to carry on in the way they had as struggle photographers, without being publicly scorned. South Africa’s changing landscape⁵ meant that if they were going to continue photographing social

⁵ By ‘changing landscape’ I refer specifically to the fall of apartheid and disappearance of photographers’ subject matter.

documentary while investigating new subject matter, they could no longer disregard the academic discourse and ethics surrounding documentary photography, or, at least, without widespread criticism, even if it was “In Good Photographic Faith.”⁶ As Hilton-Barber commented: “It seems as if nothing short of a major anthropological thesis would satisfy my academic accusers.”⁸⁷

The nature of this debate is one that contemporary South African photographers are, in a sense, plagued by. A very well known South African photographer was lecturing at my university one morning recounting his days photographing Nelson Mandela. Stopping at one particular photograph of Mandela standing in the doorway of his home, the photographer proceeded to tell us how he captured the image. “Just as I was about to photograph him standing there, he moved.” Having missed the opportunity, the photographer proceeded to ask Mandela if he wouldn’t mind ‘posing’ the way he was standing only moments before. After the lecture I approached the photographer and asked how he felt about the photograph’s ability to narrate history. If someone saw his photograph ‘documenting’ Mandela standing in his doorway not knowing it was a ‘constructed’ image, did he feel in any way irresponsible in narrating the event as though it had happened just as the image (and the caption) appeared? He became very offended and immediately stated that he was “not a documentary photographer.” The conversation came to an abrupt halt. In the case of the aforementioned photographer, even though his style is within the documentary realm, he was hesitant to be labeled as such. A photographer may assume that in calling him/herself a documentary photographer he/she is ascribing to traditional forms in the medium that are allied with ethnographic and anthropological practices, in other words, ‘the colonizing camera’. The photographer was very aware of the implications of being labeled a ‘documentary’ photographer.

⁶ “In Good Photographic Faith” is the title of Steve Hilton-Barber’s response to the criticism of his photographs of the Northern Sotho initiation ceremony in South Africa.

He more than likely assumed that in being labeled as such, he would be more restricted in terms of creativity with the medium and more open to scrutiny. If the image is in any way manipulated, for example, the legitimacy of the photograph is at stake, especially when it claims the accuracy of a particular time, place, or event, as was the case with Mandela's photograph, which, was staged. This photographer's answer, however, was shortsighted. He serves as a good example of the changes that started happening in the medium and the ensuing convoluted argument in trying to answer the question: What is documentary?

Documentary and Art Photography

Discussing Henri Cartier-Bresson's *The Decisive Moment* in an interview with Sean O'Toole, photographer Adam Broomberg poignantly remarked: "Documentary photography is also a style."⁸⁸ It is easy to understand why the aforementioned photographer claimed he was not of the 'documentary' type. The negative association with documentary photography and the highly politicized environment in which it has evolved has in a sense framed the medium as malicious and ill intentioned. What is interesting about the word documentary however, is its definition: "consisting of official *pieces* of written, printed, or other matter."⁸⁹ I highlight the word 'pieces' because rather than thinking of the word 'documentary' as finite and conclusive, we must consider it as fluid and porous, much like South Africa's evolving landscape. While Hilton-Barber's exhibit received much criticism, one could argue that it did attempt to look at documentary in a different way, working outside the frame of photojournalism that struggle photographers had previously ascribed to. His exhibit is part of one of the biggest debates to transpire in the post-apartheid landscape, what many call a blurring of boundaries between documentary and art photography.

One has to remember that the reason documentary photography was so popular in South Africa, overshadowing those photographers whose work was more artistic, was because of the political nature of the landscape. Therefore, artistic changes in the medium not only made the transition for struggle photographers more prone to criticism, but people weren't accepting of a fluid concept for 'documentary'. Alan Sekula comments:

“All photographic communications seems to take place within the conditions of a kind of binary folklore. That is there is a 'symbolist folk-myth and a 'reality' folk-myth. The misleading but popular form of this opposition is 'art photography' vs. 'documentary photography'. Every photograph tends, at any given moment of reading in any given context toward one of these two poles of meaning.”⁹⁰

Just as Sekula explains, to separate art photography from documentary photography is misleading. And this is part of the problem people encounter when discussing and attempting to define documentary; they are not mutually exclusive. To reiterate Broomberg's comment, documentary is also a style. Rather than trying to draw boundaries between the two, or suggesting that documentary morphed into another style, one should try and think of documentary as growing and maturing, adopting in new features. In South Africa, any form of photography that was not clearly documentary was considered art photography; people were accustomed to associating documentary with the struggle and photojournalism. As Hilton-Barber's images proved, anyone working outside or on the margins of the frame, injecting creativity into the medium of documentary, would be susceptible to criticism. O'Toole recalls the “vexed deliberations” of the jury members at the DaimlerChrysler Art Award exhibition while standing in front of the photographs of South African photographer, Jo Ractliffe. “While contemplating the atmospheric grey pallor of Ractliffe's image, taken inside a hotel in Johannesburg's inner city, Jurgen Schadeberg asserted: “This is not photography, this is just boring.”⁹¹

“I found Schadebergs outburst revealing”, says O’Toole. “In a wave of the hand, and the breath of an utterance, this accomplished documentary photographer hoped to condemn the drift of an emerging style of South African photography. For want of a better word, this avant-garde practice is committed to portraying reality as contingent and fragmentary, not defined by the hegemony of single, iconic or conclusive images. This new practice might not always please or satisfy for its contrariness (and occasional lapses into insouciance)...Having returned to Schadeberg’s outburst again and again in private conversations, I have come to regard his view as emblematic of a widespread prejudice, a bias that consciously seeks to tether all image production in South Africa to social and political history, worse yet, to this history of how South Africa has traditionally been imaged.”⁹²

Schadeberg’s bias calls to mind a comment South African photographer George Hallet once made, claiming that in this shift from struggle to post-struggle photography, South Africans are a people no longer “as obsessed with documentary photography as they used to be.” He continues, “there’s no market for it.” Whether Hallet was referring to the aesthetics of the image itself or the politics surrounding the documentary image, taking Hilton-Barber’s case as one example, I’m afraid Hallet is sorely mistaken. While I do agree with him that post-struggle photographers are a lot more playful and adventurous with the medium, his comment suggests that documentary and art photography are mutually exclusive. Even though documentary photography is “limned by a paradox”, we cannot justly say that there is a complete rupture and we certainly cannot disassociate ourselves from the ‘style’ of documentary. Just as ethnographic photography in the name of science was documentary, and anti-apartheid photography in the name of the struggle was documentary, so too is the photography that is being practiced by South Africa’s new generation of photographers.

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Chapter 3

POST-APARTHEID: NEW APPROACHES

When Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, South Africa's landscape and photographers were no longer unencumbered by their political subject matter. David Goldblatt explains that the distinctions between 'the bad guys and the good guys' that in many ways defined the work of struggle photographers came to a halt:

“When apartheid stopped as the official policy of the state and the machinery was thrown creakingly into reverse, photographers – and others – were suddenly deprived of the central focus of their work. Whereas before there was an enemy and no one was in any doubt about the nature and identity of the enemy, there was now a confusion of forces. Previously the protagonists were clearly divisible into the bad guys and the good guys. Now they were no longer unequivocally so.”⁹³

At the official opening of the exhibition *Through a Lens Darkly* at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town in 1993, Goldblatt announced the “end of an era of militant photography engaged in a struggle against apartheid.”⁹⁴ When apartheid ended, the imperative to document the ills of the struggle disappeared with it. Documentary photography was faced with a crisis, “the function of expose seemed redundant in the context of transparency and reconciliation.”⁹⁵ In *Democracy's Images*, Lundstrom poses the question: “What happens when the subject-matter of this tradition, apartheid, turns into history?”⁹⁶ South Africa's constitution, granting equal rights to all its citizens regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation and age, was praised for being one of the most “progressive in the world.”⁹⁷ Josephy explains that now that “the voice of the ‘other’ could be heard,” there was no longer a need to speak for the silent majority; people could represent themselves.⁹⁸

Documentary photography in South Africa was put to the test. While on the one hand it was “visually well formulated and rhetorically skilful,” on the other hand it was “exclusively dependent on its context.”⁹⁹ Lundstom’s question therefore becomes quite pertinent: “What might happen...with such a refined and specific tradition such as South African documentary...?” Similarly, “[d]oes South African photography depend on apartheid for its lifeblood?” Paul Weinberg explains that Mandela’s release from prison was one of the best and worse days of his life; [t]he best because he saw to fruition the very aims to which he had dedicated his photographic career; [t]he worst because it soon became obvious that the international media had little interest in South African affairs.¹⁰⁰ With the demise of apartheid South African photographers were each left with his or her own creative crisis. Freed from their collective political purpose, photographers were challenged to redefine their individual photographic identities and aims.¹⁰¹

The difficulties affecting documentary photographers in the post-apartheid landscape resulted in a number of them leaving the country or giving up the practice altogether.⁷ Suddenly, the subject matter that had encompassed the bulk of their portfolio vanished. Reflecting on the “crisis” that photographers were up against, having “lost” their subject matter, Jo Ractliffe suggests that something more intricate was at work, that not only photographers faced; people began to think differently about themselves, their past and how it had been narrated: “There was a new complexity to image making; an investigation into other themes, modes and languages, as well as more self-reflexivity in the work of that time, all of which previously had not seemed possible...”¹⁰² Godby describes the opening of a new door: “...if the tradition of documentary photography in South Africa was suddenly paralysed

⁷⁷ In *After Apartheid: 10 South African Documentary Photographers* Michael Godby explains that Lesley Lawson was one such photographer who abandoned the medium, turning to other forms of creative expression; Gideon Mendel, Ingrid Hudson, and Wendy Schwegman, also left the country, some still practicing outside and Guy Tillim, while still living in South Africa, found much of his work abroad or in other parts of African.

by a loss of significant subject matter on the one hand, and the closing of familiar media outlets on the other, the political changes in the country introduced a whole new world of photographic opportunities.”¹⁰³

Godby explains that artistic and academic photography, which had been overshadowed by the dominance of political work during apartheid in the eighties,

“...came to flourish in the political freedom of the nineties. And if the outside world had lost interest in South Africa as a political story, the lifting of the cultural boycott in the new dispensation allowed international curators and gallerists to discover and promote the extraordinary range of creativity in the South African art world, not least in photography.”¹⁰⁴

South Africa was able to reconnect with the international art scene, hosting the Johannesburg Biennials in both 1995 and 1997. The binaries that had given struggle photographers a simple construct to respond to slowly started to blur, thus expanding the field of photography and pushing it into the territory of art.

Since the 1990s South African photography has changed, taken a radical turn from the “ethos, style and conventions of traditional documentary photography.”¹⁰⁵ The advent of democracy in South Africa gave rise to an artistic freedom that photographers had been previously deprived of. With South Africa’s new Constitution taking effect in 1997, photographers were secured rights that guaranteed freedom from persecution thus opening up a “wealth of concerns and bodily imagery for exploration.”¹⁰⁶ In the post apartheid landscape photography evolved into a probing tool, “as much a medium of witnessing as...an analytical one.”¹⁰⁷ Commenting on the shifting landscape, Santu Mofokeng writes that during apartheid,

“I had a rationale for documenting the lives of black people in the South Africa of yore, but, now, that things have changed, it has become more difficult to legitimize my role as a documentary photographer in the traditional sense. As I

get more intimate with my subjects, I find I cannot represent them in any meaningful way. I see my role becoming one of questioning rather than documenting. The projects I have undertaken recently are about the politics of representation.”¹⁰⁸

Mofokeng’s attitude is one that started becoming more common in the post-apartheid landscape, leading photographers to take an analytical approach in their work, orientated around their “heightened sense of observation.”¹⁰⁹ Photographers began questioning the paradigm of documentary practice and now openly explored works that had previously been “covert, constrained, or entirely avoided”, investigating issues surrounding the body, sexuality, identity and self-representation. Photographers’ collective concerns focused on the need to question issues of representation, an interrogation of multiplicity thus rejecting the concept of a “unitary truth”, and favouring the subjective and personal instead of objectification of subject.¹¹⁰ Photographers also began investing in personal stories rather than images serving as representative of a political agenda.

Other changes reflected in the medium included a liberated gender situation and the end of racist discrimination in education. While documentary photography was almost exclusively practiced by men during the struggle, the end of apartheid saw an entrance of more women into the photography scene; they were now considered as equal.¹¹¹ The official liberated education system also meant that black students now had access to universities that offered fine arts programs. Thus a younger generation of black photographers emerged including Berni Searle, Tracey Rose and Zwelethu Mthethwa, to name a few.¹¹²

Breaking from conventional forms of documentary, colour was also injected into the medium. Whereas the documentary image was black and white, suggesting a well-defined and rigid image, the use of colour brought a sense of

reality to the image.⁸ Black and white images had been appropriate for the less-distracting “legible narrative.”¹¹³ These also served as a “distancing mechanism”, not only objectifying the subject but also suggesting a detachment from it.¹¹⁴

A testament of the 90s as having “heralded the rebirth of a South African photography” is reflected in the diversity and number of exhibitions that have taken place in the post-apartheid landscape: *Photosynthesis: Contemporary South African Photography*, *Democracy’s Images: Photography and Visual Art After Apartheid*, *After Apartheid: 10 South African Documentary Photographers*, *The Cape Town Month of Photography*, and *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*. In these exhibitions artists explore the medium of photography as a vehicle for self-expression. The diversity of concepts explored, such as the scrutiny of the ordinary family snapshot, the revisiting of the traditional landscape and the interrogation of philosophical discourses gives new life to the medium. Revisiting techniques of photomontage and photo-construction and the return to hand-colouring prints also adds complexity to a constrained two-dimensional and framed medium, overshadowed by struggle photography. Kathleen Grundlingh explains that the developments in post-apartheid photography have allowed the medium to occupy the status of “forerunner amongst creative mediums” rather than “poor relative of the arts.”¹¹⁵ With the constant evolving of the medium, contemporary South African photography has become somewhat interdisciplinary, transforming with the changing landscape with an unrelenting zeal to redefine itself. “Contemporary documentary photography in its widest sense and use, is simultaneously linking and breaking the past and present in South Africa,”

⁸ In a photographic visual literacy project I ran in 2008 in the township of Nyanga, just outside of Cape Town, I was shocked at the response my grade 10 students had to black and white photographic slides. The image could have been meticulously composed, aesthetically beautiful and of engaging subject matter, but it didn’t matter. If it was in black and white, it was not beautiful. While looking at a black and white photograph of a bride and groom on their wedding day one of the learners commented: “Why is this photograph in black and white? It is a happy day, but there is no colour. The grass should be green, her dress should be white.”

explains Rory Bester. “In terms of approach and focus, it is overturning the particular visibilities of apartheid by archival recoveries of what had been (and in some instances continues to be) made invisible, as well as recording and inventing new visibilities for our time.” Documentary photography is therefore playing a critical role in the evolution of new post-apartheid sensibilities.¹¹⁶ It is important to emphasize that with the advent of democracy, documentary photography in South Africa’s landscape witnessed shifts paving the way for new and different forms of representation.

Photographers have been allowed to rethink and reformulate the way histories have been narrated; there are new and different voices that are telling new and different stories. In Paul Weinberg’s *Then and Now*, photographer Graeme Williams, who worked on the front lines during the height of apartheid, described his transition: “Now I’m interested in exploring a looser way of photographing; letting go of frame and form and preconceptions, and letting things flow more. I also want to apply this to documentary photography. I do not want to shoot conventional social documentary stories; I’m far more interested in how I photograph subjects, and how people react to the images.”¹¹⁷

Chapter 4

A 'NEW GENERATION' OF SOUTH AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHERS

“In facing down apartheid, the culture of resistance has often been able to glance at a more imaginative future out of the corner of its eye...Its struggle has mostly been to create conditions for creativity.”¹¹⁸

Over the past several years contemporary South African photography has witnessed an increase in popularity and demand in Europe and the United States. In various interviews conducted in Cape Town, New York and Europe, I asked gallerists which South African photographers were most 'sought-after' in South African, European and American markets. I was repeatedly told Guy Tillim, Pieter Hugo, Nontsikelelo 'Lolo' Veleko and Mikhael Subotzky. This chapter interrogates how the work of these photographers collectively forms part of the transformative images that are redefining public narratives of South Africa's landscape. I have selected their most recognized works, which have been exhibited in South Africa as well as in Europe and the United States. The analytical and stylistic way that these photographers have approached their subject matter engage new positions in representing South Africa's landscape. I begin by looking at two artists whose work is primarily concerned with representations of the African body through portraiture: Pieter Hugo and Nontsikelelo Veleko.

“Historically, portraiture in the West has largely been an elite white male endeavor,”¹¹⁹ and as such, there is an obvious absence of black subjects within the canon. Those that do exist are commonly associated with negative and false stereotypes, which have become ingrained largely due to the mass media.¹²⁰ Portraiture becomes of utmost importance in reversing overcoded representations of Africans in contemporary photography. Unlike colonial photography, which depicted the African subject as a specimen for scientific

purposes, and struggle photography, which depicted the subject as victim, the manner in which these two photographers engage their subjects provides an alternate understanding of identity and representation.

Pieter Hugo

Interviewing Hugo, Sean O' Hagan from *The Observer* explains that having an “understanding of the limitations of their vocation” is what makes Hugo part of this ‘new generation’ of photographers.¹²¹ The fact that Hugo considers himself a “political-with-a-small-p photographer” is testament to the difficulties South African photographers face as soon as they pick up a camera.¹²² “It sounds extreme,” explains Hugo, “but for me to work at all as a photographer, I have to be conscious always of the problems inherent in what I do. I have to be conscious, if you like, of the impossibility of photography.”¹²³ And conscious he is. Perhaps it is this consciousness, the rigor with which he interrogates his vocation, which makes Hugo’s images so compelling. In 2006 he was awarded first prize for his portraits at the World Press Photo and later the prestigious Discovery award at the Arles Photography Festival for his series *The Hyena and Other Men*. This consciousness is very characteristic of this ‘new generation’ of photographers. Hugo was also featured in *reGeneration: 50 Photographers of Tomorrow 2005-2025*, a publication whose aim was to “identify a good number of emerging photographers who, by 2025, could become well-known names.”¹²⁴ But the project was more complex than this, as the title implies, the very definition of *reGeneration* is defined as an “[a]ct of bringing new and vigorous life to something.”¹²⁵ Ewing notes one of the most interesting features characterizing submissions were the artists’ “tendency to theorize about photography, and to situate one’s own work accordingly.” Rather than citing other photographers as central influences in their work (e.g.: an Arbus, a Bravo, a Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, etc), Ewing, referring to Roland Barthes, notes that “no photographer’s name, past or present, was cited as

often as this influential theorist's."¹²⁶ Ewing explains that this shift from photographer to theorist suggests a profound transformation in how young photographers are "thinking about the medium."¹²⁷ This "academization of photography", is largely due to the fact that more photographers are seeking university degrees whereby they are required to grasp the fundamentals in photographic theory. Access to university degrees also exposes students to related disciplines including visual anthropology, communications and cultural studies, allowing students to theorize about media within the field. While previous generations of photographers, such as the Afrapix collective, had little formal technical training and instead relied on their instincts regarding subject matter, a newer generation of South African photographers have typically gone through a university system. Formal education has given them a "better grounding in the history of photography itself, and therefore a broader view of past accomplishments."¹²⁸ Ewing notes that, "like an aspiring novelist who is enthralled by visits to a big bookstore, where he feels a sense of community...photographers of *reGeneration* are therefore both more *self-conscious* about where they themselves fit into the historical framework."¹²⁹

'Less self-confident' in the sense that Hugo is skeptical about the medium's ability to replicate truth as the documentary image historically set out to do. Having joked about the imminent death of photography while at the Arles Photography Festival, on a more serious note Hugo expressed his reservations about the accuracy of the medium questioning "his art's ability to represent the "truth" of experience":¹³⁰ "I have a deep suspicion of photography, to the point where I do sometimes think it cannot accurately portray anything, really. And I particularly distrust portrait photography. I mean, do you honestly think a portrait can tell you anything about the subject? And, even if it did, would you trust what it had to say?"¹³¹ But Hugo's interest is invariably in faces, entering the arena of portraiture equipped with the inherent tendencies of an "intrepid documentarian."¹³² While he does retain some of the qualities of a portraitist in the traditional

sense, retaining an “incurable, even romantic, interest in faces – in what they hide and reveal” – his work seems to draw from people living on the margins of society. Six-feet-tall, blond hair and blue eyes, “I stick out like a sore thumb”, he says in an interview with Sean O’Toole. The oddity his presence evokes while on location in a way complements his desire to document people living on the fringes of society. One such series, which most appositely reflects this, is *Looking Aside*. Hugo presents a candid and resolute portrait of people who are often cast aside by society. The title alludes to the nature of the project; Hugo photographs people whose appearance might cause us discomfort hence, making us ‘look aside.’ By photographing their portraits, front and center, he invariably forces us to confront not only the subject in the portrait, but ourselves and the prejudices we might have towards them. All of his subjects, unusual by societal standards, have visible abnormalities, be it albinism, blindness or a skin disorder.

The systematic approach that Hugo uses almost mimics that of an ethnographer’s “obsessive examination of a genetic condition.”¹³³ Except for their size, the images seem more like passport photos in the way Hugo meticulously strips away their context, leaving just the face of his subject under the harsh studio lighting.¹³⁴ Calling to mind South Africa’s history, Bronwyn Law-Viljoen likens them to the passbooks during apartheid: “The series seems an almost perverse riff on the I.D. photograph...which served to curtail movement, distinguish nationality, and thus outline the rights and privileges (or lack thereof) of individuals in society.”¹³⁵ But through repetition and a “sustained minimalism” he challenges assumptions about “physical beauty, propriety, and the moral implications of *just* looking.”¹³⁶ What is interesting about the series is that the repetition does not culminate in a crowd of indistinguishable faces, rather, “individuals – whether plain, sad, aging, or startling beautiful – emerge from the crowd of people who are, to most viewers, albinos before they are anything else.”¹³⁷ But therein lies the power of Hugo’s images. His refusal either to “come closer or to move

farther away” and by “maintaining a constant angle of observation and an established distance from the subject in each shot,” Hugo interrogates the essence of the “critical space” that the photographer crosses.¹³⁸ In forcing us to look into these faces, we are compelled to ask ourselves why we are not at ease when encountering people with abnormalities in our daily lives. And that is largely what makes these images controversial; they do not go away. “Even today, particularly in Africa, albinos are often considered to bring bad luck; alternatively, they may be idolized, their physical distinctiveness being seen as a sign of the present of magical powers.”¹³⁹ Perhaps Hugo believes that only after incessantly presenting us face after face will we forget that his subjects have abnormalities; we can only then stop looking and instead start seeing.

Equally as controversial are Hugo’s arresting images of the *Hyena Men* of Nigeria, which perhaps, not coincidentally, were his most successful series. In an interview with Yossi-Milo gallery in New York, I asked why they felt the series was so successful: “His images are different...”¹⁴⁰ Hugo explains how he first came to know of this troupe: “...a friend emailed me an image taken on a cell phone through a car window in Lagos, Nigeria, which depicted a group of men walking down the street with a hyena in chains. A few days later I saw the image reproduced in a South African newspaper with the caption ‘The Streets of Lagos’. Nigerian newspapers reported that these men were bank robbers, bodyguards, drug dealers, debt collectors. Myths surrounded them. The image captivated me.”¹⁴¹ While critics liken Hugo’s ‘happening upon’ the troupe to an “ethnographer’s inveterate curiosity about society and subcultures”, Hugo’s personal engagement with the group of men dispels such accusations.¹⁴² While Hugo could have just as easily yielded to traditional documentary’s devices by capturing the Hyena Men in a fleeting moment, instead, by choosing to make portraits of the Hausa men and their animals, he forms a relationship that is at odds with traditional forms of documentary photography. “I just got sick of documentary’s devices, I found them very limiting,” Hugo explains. In his *Hyena Men* the frontal view, the placement of

the subject in the center and the straightforward angle of the camera give the images a uniformity in style allowing the subject to directly engage with the camera. With the oversized nature of the prints filling our field of vision and magnifying every detail, we the viewer, are confronted. Photographing the men was not particularly easy, however, as Hugo explains, he was not happy about how the images turned out during his first encounter.

“The spectacle caused by this group walking down busy market streets was overwhelming. I tried photographing this but failed, perhaps because I was not interested in their performances. I realised that what I found fascinating was the hybridisation of the urban and the wild, and the paradoxical relationship that the handlers have with their animals - sometimes doting and affectionate, sometimes brutal and cruel.”¹⁴³

He found that portraiture allows for a more personal engagement with the subjects, allowing him to further investigate the social complexities they faced as outsiders. What is particularly interesting about the subject matter of these images is that they do not engage what we might assume them to. For example, they are street performers, this is their livelihood, but Hugo’s images do not entertain the mysticism and elusiveness that they portray in Nigerian society. Hugo does not photograph them walking down the street while they are gawked at or performing amongst a stunned crowd of people as they move from town to town. In these circumstances one could argue that he was capitalizing on the mysticism that surrounds them. By recording the “quiet dignity before and after the spectacles, rather than the narrative rush and flash of the performance itself,”¹⁴⁴ and by directly engaging with the Hausa men, Hugo averts the gaze of the ‘colonising camera’ that he is often arraigned for.

Frequently portraying ‘outsiders’ as his subject matter, it is easy to understand why Hugo has been heavily scrutinized in his career as a photographer. Using Diane Arbus’ figure of speech, one might even call him naughty: “I always thought of photography as a naughty thing to do – that was one of my

favorite things about it...and when I first did it I felt very perverse.”¹⁴⁵ Sontag explains that in seeking out subjects that are considered to be “disreputable, taboo, marginal”, one can think of a photographer as naughty (to use Arbus’s pop word).¹⁴⁶ And this is usually the case for South African photographers whenever they mix marginal subject matter with Africa - people tend to revert to the power structures that developed alongside colonialism that served the purpose of objectifying and exploiting the subject.

Hugo, however, rejects the view that he chooses his subjects for their exotic otherness.

“There’s always an element of condescension in it, the notion that people I photograph are somehow not capable of making their minds up about being photographed. And, you know, it always comes from white, liberal, European people, which suggests to me that there is something essentially colonial about the question itself.”¹⁴⁷

One of the ways that Hugo combats this negative association is with the use of a large format camera. A large and cumbersome apparatus, Hugo is required to negotiate “consent and dialogue with the person being photographed – a more sedate and contemplative approach” because he is unable to quickly photograph them.¹⁴⁸ And it is this process of mutual acknowledgement between photographer and subject that he believes gives the image such a “commanding presence”.¹⁴⁹ One of the key characteristics distinguishing post-apartheid photographers from their predecessors is the process of obtaining permission before photographing. We know that the photographer has some sort of relationship with the subject, instead of the candid shot captured by the bystander. Hugo considers this straightforward engagement to be one of the most important aspects of his work.¹⁵⁰ Just as he, a blond, blue-eyed, six-foot tall, Caucasian male, stands out in Nigeria, this ‘outsiderness’ is infused in his work. Instead of trying to blend into his surroundings (it would prove a futile attempt) Hugo “constructs the photographic encounter outside of otherness.”¹⁵¹ His work is almost self-

referential; “Hugo makes his presence overt by turning these photographic interactions into a series of highly deliberate meditations.”¹⁵²

The “highly deliberate” form in which some of his subjects pose for the camera is another characteristic inherent in this new generation of photographers. The fact that they are posing, mirrors Hugo’s skepticism of the medium’s ability to reproduce truth. This calls to mind an interview with South African photographer Jean Brundrit. The interviewer commented that her images seemed to exist in an “ambivalent space, somewhere between ‘truth and fiction’.”¹⁵³ Brundrit responded by saying that she wanted to reassure the viewer that her images are constructed, as are *all* photographs: “The repetition of the mundane subject matter, the subjects’ awareness of being photographed, the fact that the same people reappear in different images, all work to reinforce the fact that these photographs are staged. I want the viewer to realize that there is an irony to what I’m doing...I wanted to mess with our notion of ‘reality’. I want to confront the visual codes that we think make up ‘reality’...”¹⁵⁴

Hugo’s questioning of the truthfulness of the image is also reflected in the way he uses colour. What some might consider a daring tactic that would stupefy traditionalists, Hugo mutes the colours of his photographs in Photoshop to achieve what has become his characteristic “pale palette.”¹⁵⁵ To him, he’s just depicting the world as he sees it, and he makes no apologies for his choice: “Whatever medium you shoot on, it’s always an interpretation...I find that colour negative emulsion is designed for ads and snapshots, so the colours are a bit saccharine. It doesn’t reflect the way I see the world, so I try to desentimentalise my images.”¹⁵⁶

The *Hyena Men* was also part of an exhibition on portraiture at the Tate Modern titled, *Street and Studio*. An article about the exhibition explained that the intrigue of the images raised more questions than they dealt with.¹⁵⁷ But

this, too, is part of the forging of new forms in contemporary South African photography, to force people to ask questions about the images, rather than have it carry a single linear narrative that is easily discernible by an audience, a characteristic of traditional documentary photography. Hugo uses documentary to explore and interrogate what lies beneath the surface of the image in an attempt to engage new positions in documentary. Rather than looking at his images from, as he says, the *white, liberal, European* point of view, where one might be compelled to ask why he chooses to photograph exotic animals thus perpetuating images from the colonial archive, Hugo suggests that instead, “we could ask why these performers need to catch wild animals to make a living. Or why they are economically marginalised. Or why Nigeria, the world’s sixth largest exporter of oil, is in such a state of disarray?”¹⁵⁸ Hugo implies that the people asking the questions seem to be perpetuating more stereotypes than those they accuse him of. Speaking of the *Hyena Men*, he explains that even though the keepers have permits from the Nigerian government, many animal-rights groups contact him wanting to intervene. “When I asked Nigerians, ‘How do you feel about the way they treat animals?’ the question confused people. Their responses always involved issues of economic survival. Seldom did anyone express strong concern for the well-being of the creatures. Europeans invariably only ask about the welfare of the animals but this question misses the point.”

Hugo’s role as a photographer has been to rehabilitate that point, to engage with his camera and subjects in order to offer more meaningful and responsible representations of African realities.

Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko

“If independence has a style, this is it—vivid, highly individualized, and a touch defiant. These images are antidotes to the prevailing view of the ‘dark continent’ as a place of entropy and despair; these are people in charge of at least their own sartorial destiny.”¹⁵⁹

Commenting on Okwui Enwezor's exhibit, *Snap Judgments*, New York Magazine's Mark Stevens remarked: "It was a shock – an awakening shock – to come upon the bursting contemporary colours worn by the fashion-struck people portrayed by Nontsikelelo "Lolo" Veleko on the streets of Johannesburg."¹⁶⁰ Enter Nontsikelelo 'Lolo' Veleko. Despite her recent arrival onto the photography scene, this young South African was awarded the Standard Bank Young Artist

Award in 2008 with her street shot portraits of Johannesburg youth dressed in their highly stylized "eclectic, Kool-Aid colours."¹⁶¹ Veleko's photography has been compared to some of photography's greats, including Seydou Keita; the two were recently grouped together in an exhibition at Danzinger Projects gallery in New York, linked by the "control evident in their work and the pleasure they take in observing their subject's personal style."¹⁶² Considering South Africa's history of apartheid where representation and individuality were bound by the confines of a racist government, Veleko's interest in individuality lends *that much more* credibility to her subject matter. A "scavenger of individuality", her interest is not just in any individuals; she has a particular affinity for those who are conscious of how they chose to represent themselves through their clothing - their "social camouflage" – whether for themselves or for others,¹⁶³ often "young, fashion conscious, urban black South Africans."¹⁶⁴ In contrast to the negation of an identity in a fleeting image taken in a photojournalistic capacity, in her street portraits, her subjects confront the camera in a direct and frontal manner, celebrating and exploring their identities in the post-apartheid landscape.

Veleko made her presence on the art scene with her ongoing project *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, a series of constructed portraits in which she looks at urban street fashion culture in Johannesburg and the surrounding townships. Her portraits examine the way people present themselves to society in the way they construct their identities. The questions she asks, which ground and give strength to her projects, are ones that beg answering in a post-apartheid

context. How is identity perceived or assumed? What do we consider beautiful? Do we judge people based on the way they project their external identities? In *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder* she answers these questions by photographing subjects who use their clothes to “construct their guises of identity.”¹⁶⁵ Veleko explains:

“I named my project *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder* because other people, when they saw those people dressed up like that, would ask: ‘How can you dress up in yellow pants and a lime green jersey with stripes?’ And I thought the way I see beauty and the way I perceive beauty might be different to someone else next to me... So the project is called *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, because for me they are beautiful. I was excited [by them]; I didn't care what anyone else was saying... It was all about drawing attention around issues of beauty...”¹⁶⁶

It is this series that launched her local and international career, not surprisingly, explains Bester:

“This is in part because the work fits globalization's expectations of the variegated local, but also (and more importantly, I think) because it is the strength of Veleko's oeuvre to date, a strength that lies in her keen social observation and interpretation of cultural environments.”¹⁶⁷

Her ‘keen social observation’ as well as personal experience seems to be the impetus driving most of her projects. In her series, *www.notblackenough.com*, Veleko photographs people of mixed black parentage responding to people’s assumptions about identity. “It turned out to be an extremely personal series with which I hoped to discover how black people perceived me to be”, she explains. Despite her age, race and gender, writes O’Toole, “despite all expectations that she step beyond history,” Veleko is “profoundly concerned with issues of race.”¹⁶⁸ Veleko’s concern mirrors the influences apartheid had in South Africa’s landscape, even in a generation of young photographers who were not directly exposed to the policies of a racist government. Although photographers’ engagement with race in a photographic and artistic

capacity is nothing new in the post-apartheid landscape, Veleko stresses that still “not enough is written on race and South Africans today.”¹⁶⁹

“I’ve been called too thin to be a black girl; not black enough; I roll my words; asked where did I go to school and that sort of thing; told that I do not walk like a black person. I do not know where those things come from, but it was all black people saying this to me - the black people that I grew up with, my teachers at school too...”¹⁷⁰

By using herself to explore South Africa’s mixed cultural heritage, her images challenge historical assumptions surrounding identity that are based on appearance.

This calls to mind the exhibit *Unsettled: 8 South African Photographers*, which Veleko was a part of. Mads Damsbo, in his essay *Unsettled: Notes on a Mirror Nation* explains that the word ‘unsettled’ frequently used in existentialism, where it designates the ethical encounter between the subject and its other...refers to the effect of the unknown on the subject.¹⁷¹ Veleko’s photographs fit perfectly with the theme as she explores and interrogates the ‘unsettled’ nature of identity in a post-apartheid landscape. As *Lindive Ntlebi* hunches her shoulders while posing for the camera, not only is she in direct confrontation with the viewer’s gaze, but the informality and amicability of her stance indicates to the observer that she perhaps carries a relationship with the photographer. She oozes confidence and individuality wearing a bright pink halter top and lime green jersey with yellow piping down the sides, paired with knee-length jean shorts topped with a hat and multi-colour knee high tube socks. Her expressive nature towards the camera is done so with confidence and ease. “This is the nature of the dialectical and analytical image”, explains Enwezor. “The subject is never an object already predetermined, a priori, by a discourse.”¹⁷² There is nothing random in the dress and posing of the subject in the execution of Veleko’s photographs; there is an implicit collaboration between artist and sitter.¹⁷³

Along with praise, however, comes fierce critique of Veleko's work. In *Mute!Scream!Mute!* Veleko also questions notions of identity, although here she turns the camera on herself. Cognizant of the difficulties of traversing the contentious thematic territory of racial and sexual identity, whereby Veleko attempts to "explore the role of clothing and self-presentation as a means by which identity is constructed," Anthea Buys comments that it "would indeed be a worthy thematic endeavor if it were in fact realized in the work... but every so often an artist emerges whose work manages to bypass the disablating filter of the critic's eye and to find its way, inscrutably, into prolific collections and unprecedented commercial success."¹⁷⁴ Buys explains that the notion of identity, in this case, seems to be the convenient explain-all that has been pinned onto this vaguely correlative assembly of photographs in the earnest hope that they might somehow hold together.¹⁷⁵ Examining her self-portraits, Buys suggests that her lack in artistic direction and disjointedness from her overall thematic structure make her images problematic. In her Oriental-style self-portrait, *Love for Self*, for example, Lolo lies in a patch of green grass bearing a black kimono and thick red waistband, her face painted like a china doll. This particular image has potential to invite criticism, carrying the underlying tone of an obvious 'East and West' discourse that has been addressed in Africa's landscape time and again. Buys notes that it is a rather "facile reference to the 'whitewashing', or extreme Westernisation of contemporary Black South African identity."¹⁷⁶ She explains that as a black woman, "posing as a Japanese courtesan identifies her with the ultimate Other to the white, male, 'West.'¹⁷⁷ Although, one might argue that the invitation of criticism is Veleko's continued engagement with the issue of race in a post-apartheid landscape and her perception that it has not been addressed enough.

In her most recent exhibit, *Wonderland*, Veleko continues her bold and individualistic style street portraits from *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, thus keeping open the window to discuss the shifting cultural landscape in South

Africa. Using her camera “like a novelist,” using words to “lure us into a ‘through-the-looking-glass’ world where young urbanites use fashion savvy to create fictions of their own identity,” Veleko engages with the viewer by inviting us to be transported, so to speak, to a world of intrigue and fantasy.¹⁷⁸ Using a Horizon camera, Veleko’s images produce panoramic views that stretch perspectives of various architectural sites and public spaces. This aesthetic choice adds to her *Wonderland* theme, whereby she asks the viewer to stretch their limits in the “possibilities of this Wonderland’s makeup and reality.”¹⁷⁹ Taking her subject matter a step further as an extension of the questions she posed in *www.notblackenough.lolo*, Veleko plays with notions of truth through her subjects, directly responding to the overarching ‘uniquely South African’; her subjects cannot be defined as *strictly* anything. They do not conform to a formal definition of South Africa nationality; instead, it is plausible that “what was once perceived to be South African, understood in the context of a fixed, rigid definition and concept of what that comprises, has become something else.”¹⁸⁰ Murinik asks; “Where do the numerous immigrants, refugees and first generation South Africans exist in relation to that label as finite category? Or have they, actively and by default, unofficially broadened the concept, stretched that perspective further, having brought with them interfaces that mark a change in the cultural landscape of the country, changing that definition?”¹⁸¹ Just as Veleko’s subjects show diversity and individuality in their style, it appears that South Africa’s boundaries too, are becoming increasingly permeable.

In Veleko’s *Wonderland*, a porous and contentious environment where imagination and reality somehow intersect, Tumelo Mosaka questions the way we look at her images. “Often, when we look at images, we want to know their “true” or intended meaning and what they ultimately might represent. Frequently, we gravitate towards the author’s biography, or that of the viewer, to make sense of the image. How these pictures communicate as signs and symbols and have an effect on us is usually understood as an expression of

artistic desire or seen as a mechanism to elicit public response. In both cases, meaning is located outside the image.”¹⁸² Mosaka challenges us, asking whether our interpretation would be the same if we were to shift it away from the artist and back to the image. In doing so, our focus is redirected to the image as an object, “as opposed to a representation of a cultural, ethnic or racial narrative.” Therefore, what can we understand by looking at “images as pictures?”¹⁸³

While I do agree with Mosaka that a photograph needs to be appreciated on its own, especially considering that Veleko’s work is consistently examined through the “limited lens of identity politics in South Africa”,¹⁸⁴ to remove the artist from their image is in a sense removing a politician from their policies or a writer from their novel. We cannot negate the intent of the photographer or his/her background. Veleko trained at The Market Photo Workshop, a photography school in Johannesburg that was created for those that had been excluded from studying photography during apartheid. In the mid nineties, the school predominantly trained in social documentary and its strength was rooted in its response to apartheid.¹⁸⁵ Photography was used as a tool to reflect the then current realities in a mode that can only be called ‘documentary’, explains John Fleetwood, head of Market Photo Workshop. “In the late nineties South Africa found itself struggling with a very similar tension around constructing identity in a newly acknowledged reality...Lolo’s strength was to deconstruct this dynamic.”¹⁸⁶ It is unfortunate that South Africa’s history is burdened by racist policies that still largely lingers, but we cannot rupture this part of our history, and in Veleko’s case, she challenges it. This is what gives strength to her work. When we look at her images, while we are unquestionably seeing and interpreting them through our own eyes, ultimately, it is through the photographer’s eyes that the images were taken. Take her graffiti images, for example; Ann-Marie Tully criticizes them almost mockingly: “Her photographs of graffiti, which she poetically muses, ‘paints a more secretive portrait of society’ are unoriginal to say the least. How many

more contemporary artists are going to jump on the graffiti wagon (or should I say skate board) of American artist Barry Mcgee (who can at least claim having been a bonifide anarchist and vandal).”¹⁸⁷

For Veleko, however, these images were a way to investigate the subculture associated with the people she was photographing, realizing that they were perhaps a declaration of individualism. Fleetwood explains: “These layers of paint by graffiti artists, covered with layers of paint by more recent graffiti artists...were ways of creating an understanding and dialogue between what was constructed and what the reality was, of finding traces of an imagined world between layers.”¹⁸⁸ Therefore, in reducing the photograph to a mere ‘end result’ of having ‘jumped on the graffiti wagon’, Tully in a sense neglects the whole picture, most of all, the background that informs Veleko’s images. This particular issue, however, is also thorny. While one would hope that Veleko’s success is attributed to the content of her work, rather than the combination of the work and the background that informs it, one cannot neglect that her graffiti images, alone, are nothing ingenious. Going back to Lundstrom’s question about whether documentary was dependent on apartheid for its lifeblood, we can, in a similar fashion, extend this question to Veleko’s images. Does the success of her ‘weaker’ images, such as her graffiti photographs, depend on the audience knowing the background that informs her work? Must an audience, local or international, be aware of South Africa’s history in order to appreciate her images? On the flipside, one could argue that the ‘commonality’ of her graffiti images normalizes her work. Just as her street portraits address identity politics confronting a ‘uniquely South African’ identity, her graffiti images too confront the notion of something discernibly ‘African’.

A subtle yet interesting parallel one could draw between Hugo and Veleko is that Veleko, too, chooses to represent people on the fringes. Her subjects are not what one would call ‘mainstream’. By taking risks in the way they choose

to represent themselves they become vulnerable. But this is what makes her work important. By insisting that her subjects' identities are fluid in the way they refuse a pre-determined and set identity, Veleko positions herself in direct confrontation with historical modes of representation unconsidered under colonialism and apartheid. While she is still growing in her artistic capacity, like Keita, her work resists the "rules of *mission civilisatrice*" thus transforming, challenging and rehabilitating African subjectivity.¹⁸⁹ And just as Keita's subjects were unaware of their "grounding as subjects in a social milieu", Veleko's subjects represent their own singularity and individuality as well as "enunciating aesthetic values of African beauty" previously denied to them by the "primitivising apparatus of colonial ethnography" as well as the apartheid government.¹⁹⁰ Veleko presents a vibrant counterpoint to the way South Africans have been traditionally represented through the Western lens, bringing to the photographic medium a freshness that is uncharacteristic with the way South Africans were represented both in ethnographic and anti-apartheid documentary photography.

Mikhael Subotzky

"...Subotzky's photographs give you the sense that you are looking at something you have always known and yet have never seen."¹⁹¹

The youngest of the group, Subotzky embodies a generation of socially concerned photographers with an acute awareness of their surroundings, taking social documentary to a whole different level, and standing in direct opposition to Hallet's comment regarding people's disinterest in documentary photography. His work forces one to take a concerned perspective towards environments that are typically kept at bay; his *Die Vier Hoëke* series is one such place. Inspired by the "tradition of photographic portraits of small towns in South Africa", Subotzky was encouraged by the different angle David Goldblatt's book, *In Boksburg (1982)*, took in telling a "powerful social

story by exploring one particular place largely ignored by the outside world.”¹⁹² Like his predecessor, Subotzky finds a necessity to expose those places which society typecasts. “You know, we like to see prisons as separate from society; but with constant movement in and out, they are really a central part of our society.”¹⁹³

Although too young to have experienced apartheid firsthand, his predecessors nonetheless influence his work. Michael Godby explains that South African documentary photographers can be considered “heirs to the legacy of “struggle photography.”¹⁹⁴ They have grown up aware of the political commitment photographers made in documenting the struggle against apartheid and they have absorbed the example of resistance photographers who routinely circumvented restrictions on local media to bring conditions in South Africa to the attention of the world’s press.¹⁹⁵ This was the impetus driving his *Die Vier Hoeke* series. Having just graduated from University of Cape Town’s Michaelis School of Art in 2004, *Die Vier Hoeke* launched him into unprecedented success both locally and internationally. “A sober and aesthetically paradoxical documentary project,” in *Die Vier Hoeke*, Subotzky examines the intricacies of a prison located in the small desert town of Beaufort West.¹⁹⁶ What Subotzky found particularly interesting about this prison was its location: it sits in a traffic circle at the center of the town at the intersection of the main highway between Cape Town and Johannesburg. But even more than that, Subotzky found a personal draw to the subject matter:

“I started making work about South Africa’s prisons in 2004 with a series called *Die Vier Hoeke* (The Four Corners)...This looked at the historical role of South Africa’s prisons and the role they were playing in society ten years after the country’s first democratic elections...The work I did was in response to thinking about my life and the fear of crime was affecting all of us in South Africa, across the social and economic spectrum.”¹⁹⁷

Subotzky spent months carrying out a detailed photographic examination of the prison calling to our attention various scenarios that challenge and confound us. In an interview Subotzky explains that what inspires him most about the medium is the possibility of exploring and engaging with the world around him. In the case of *Die Vier Hoeke*, Subotzky mentions being blown away by what he saw in the prisons:

“...they were grossly overcrowded, full of social problems, and most importantly, purposefully hidden from view. I felt a strong pull to make images of a part of society, which, because it was hidden, had become subject to stereotyping and fantasy. It was hidden from most of society, and yet an integral part of the life experience of so many people who pass in and out.”¹⁹⁸

While our assumed realities of an overcrowded prison come to life in images such as Subotzky’s panorama inside one of the cells, he also brings out other more personal sides of the prison, weaving together a more comprehensive narrative not available to ‘outsiders’. “Subotzky shies away from the kinds of scenes that feed our predictable obsessions with prison inmates: violence, rape, escape attempts”, explains Michael Smith. “Instead, he trains his lens on moments of community, of human tenderness, and of course on the ubiquity of human presence in an unnatural, overcrowded system.”¹⁹⁹ Take for example his image of Johnny Fortune. Having spent most of his life in prison, he dislikes communal showers and therefore bathes in the washing machine during his shift at the laundry. When we first look at this image of the elderly scraggy naked man, covered in tattoos climbing out of an unidentifiable contraption, we are dumbfounded. We then realize, however, that it is not only the subject matter that confounds us; Subotzky’s images also demonstrate a remarkable level of trust between himself and the prisoners. Not just anyone would be able to capture such images; Subotzky develops relationships with his subjects “- a two-way dialogue – that extends beyond the idea of simple consent for the photograph to be taken.”²⁰⁰ Subotzky explains:

“...consent is not really a simple matter and it goes far beyond waving your camera and getting a nod. So I have really worked hard at figuring out ways to describe what I do and where the work is going and where it will be seen and what it will look like – and this has become a very important part of my methodology. It is not only about consent – but also about the beginnings of trying to form an open and honest relationship that will eventually lead to photographs being taken and beyond.”²⁰¹

While an academic background undoubtedly educated Subotzky regarding the balance of power that exists between photographer and subject, his awareness of his past and the fragility of South Africa’s history fosters a social responsibility in representing others in a post-apartheid landscape.

The relationships and understanding that Subotzky gained from spending time in the prison system led him to his second project, *Umjiegwana* (The outside), which I believe represents another pivotal shift in the post-apartheid landscape and in challenging traditional forms of documentary. Subotzky explains:

“Very early on when I was working on *Die Vier Hoeke*, I realized that I needed to find a way of tracing the narratives beyond the prisons themselves. It just didn’t feel right to show prisons in isolation. I was worried this would contribute to a type of exoticisation of the prison world. So I came up with the idea of photographing the lives of ex-prisoners as a way of putting what I saw in prison into a broader social context – to make reference to the direct relationship between problems inside and outside of our prisons that I believe are causally significant in both directions.”²⁰²

Subotzky’s approach works in direct opposition to documentary’s historical association with a non-interventionist approach. Susan Sontag, in another context, explains:

“Part of the horror of such memorable coups of contemporary photojournalism as the pictures of a Vietnamese bonze reaching for the gasoline can, of a Bengali guerrilla in the act of bayoneting a trussed-up collaborator,

comes from the awareness of how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to chose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene.”²⁰³

Such is the case with what has been nicknamed South Africa’s *Pieta*,⁹ the photograph of Hector Peterson, the first victim of the Soweto shootings of 1976 and probably the most recognizable image to date of apartheid’s manifestations. These are the problematic associations that have burdened the field of documentary photography in South Africa’s landscape. This is a classic case of documentary’s devices in a photojournalistic capacity. The image of Hector Peterson was clear, legible, and linear – this was a victim of an oppressive government - there was no doubt when looking at the image what it was intended to convey. Sontag argues that by documenting with a camera one is not only participating, but interested in keeping things as they are - “in the status quo remaining unchanged (at least for as long as it takes to get a “good” picture) to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing – including, when that is the interest, another person’s pain or misfortune.”²⁰⁴ She uses Dziga Vertov’s film, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) as an example. It “gives the ideal image of the photographer as someone in perpetual movement, someone moving through a panorama of disparate events with such agility and speed that any intervention is out of the question... Even if incompatible with intervention in a physical sense...”²⁰⁵ She likens it to sexual voyeurism, explaining that “the act of photographing is more than passive observing, rather, it encourages “whatever is going on to keep happening.”²⁰⁶

⁹ The reason Sam Nzima’s photograph is nicknamed *Pieta* is due to Cape Town artist Kevin Brand, who attempted to provide a new approach of the image in an installation entitled *Pieta* at the Castle of Good Hope in 1996. By titling his installation *Pieta*, he alludes to the way in which the dead body of Christ hangs in the arms of his mother, as did Pieterman in Makhubu’s arms.

This criticism, however, relates more precisely to Hilton-Barber's images, for example. Disputing the accusations that he violated the ethics of ethnographic photography he stated:

"I complied with the basic ethics of documentary photography, I had permission to photograph the ceremony and publish the photographs...Both the initiates and the organizers knew exactly what I was doing. I attempted to document a situation in a way that would allow the situation to speak for itself."²¹⁷

While the photographer claims that he followed rules, this instead reflects a noncommittal attitude on his part, suggesting that by adhering to a check-list one could get in and out and the job would be done. Subotzky's level of involvement is different, however, his commitment is shown in the personal spaces he is allowed to enter once his subjects leave prison. This is the difference between the type of documentary photography that is unfolding in South Africa's landscape, and Subotzky is at the helm. Non-intervention is out of the question. Describing one of the most difficult issues he copes with as a photographer as being the "gulf between the context in which the picture is *made* and that in which it is *shown*", Subotzky redressed this by making his *Die Vier Hoeke* series accessible to the prisoners at the culmination of the project by hosting an exhibition.²¹⁸ Subotzky also hosted a series of photography workshops for the prisoners at Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison; their work was later shown alongside his at the Old Women's Prison at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg.²¹⁹ While the project was important in its capacity to expose prisoners to the power dynamics in the photographer-subject relationship as well as providing skills that some of the prisoners were able to use to later find jobs, one of the most important outcomes of the project was bringing the public into the prison space. By doing this Subotzky challenges the debate surrounding the gallery space – a space traditionally seen as stark, exclusive and uninviting to the non-gallery-goer. This undermines

the stereotypical view of a place deliberately hidden from the public eye, and shows that prison systems are an intrinsic part of society.

In 2008 Subotzky was featured at the *New Photography* exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York for his *Beaufort West* series. This series was an extension of *Die Vier Hoeke* and *Umjiegwana*. Here, however, here Subotzky pushed the envelope even further, becoming more than an observer and instead a part of these peoples lives. He mentions that what initially drew him to the project was “the image of the town radiating out of the prison”²¹⁰ – his projects are thus interconnected. This makes for a much more powerful interrogation of the intricacies that encumber this small town. From gangsterism and drugs, crime, sex work and the municipal dump, Subotzky manages to give us startling insight in to his inquiry of incarceration and social marginalisation having gained the trust of the lives he depicts.

One could argue that Subotzky balances a fine line, at times seemingly perpetuating the very non-interventionist approach Sontag critiques. In one particular incident, Subotzky photographs a man climbing into a window to rob someone’s house, he captures the robbery on film, but does nothing to stop it. Subotzky explains:

“Major and I were hanging out with a group of gangsters, and they were talking about going off to rob someone’s house. They thought they were going to find something there that they wanted. To my complete surprise they asked if I wanted to come along. I asked myself a lot of questions in deciding whether to go with them. They told me that somebody had been watching the place and nobody was home, so I was assured that the situation wouldn’t end in violent confrontation.”²¹¹

However, a counterpoint to this argument is part of the strength in this ‘new generation’ of photographers in their awareness of the mediation of the image. O’Toole explains: “All we’re doing is giving people a warning, letting them represent themselves instead of pretending to catch the defining

moment that speaks the unwitting truth. Point is, we're being self-conscious about our intervention, about the fact that it is a mediated truth."²¹² Subotzky is aware of the criticism his situation and image might invoke, and his response is to push us further. The same way that Hugo likes to test our perceptions of truth while his images teeter between fiction and reality, thus begging us to look deeper and interrogate the image, Subotzky rattles our comfort zone. "An image needs to draw you in, to agitate the eye, to ask to be looked at repeatedly," he says. "This aesthetic function can be performed in either complex or extremely simple ways. When this is combined with a seriousness of purpose, the potential is here for something very powerful to be conveyed."²¹³ Subotzky's injection of creativity into the medium is a powerful aspect of his work.

Having been able to study the formal properties of documentary photography in academia, another signature approach of Subotzky's are his 360-degree panoramic works. In order to achieve this result, a technique he learned while working with his uncle, acclaimed South African photographer Gideon Mendel on his *Harsh Divide* series in 2002 and 2003, Subotzky stitches together several individual photographs. While the conventional documentary photograph discloses a single point of view, the results of his stitch work are sweeping multi-dimensional panoramas allowing the viewer a glimpse into the entire surroundings. By using such creative devices, Subotzky is able to reflect an innovative divergence from former conventions of documentary photography at the same time drawing attention to subjects who have little control over how their images are portrayed to society.

Guy Tillim

Tillim is unique by comparison with the other three photographers in that he is the only one who first had a career as a photojournalist. Guy Tillim began photographing professionally as a photojournalist in 1986 and later formed part of the Afrapix collective. His personal transition in his *Departure* series, I believe, mirrors the transition that is happening in the medium of photography in South Africa's landscape. In an excerpt from *Departure* the artist comments:

“My brand of idealism that had its roots in the time I started photographing in South Africa during the apartheid years of the 1980s has dimmed. There was right and wrong, it seemed clear to me which side I stood. One would forego, what I might now call subtlety, for the sake of making a statement about injustice. The world's press set the tone and timbre of the reportage it would receive, and I for one was bought by it. Perhaps that is why I now look for ways to glimpse other worlds, which I attempt to enter for a while. But one cannot live them all, and usually I am left with a keen sense of my own dislocation.”²¹⁴

While Tillim's previous experience as a photojournalist might provoke one to establish a bias due to the negative associations with anti-apartheid documentary photography, Tillim's work has transcended that of the 'archetypal' image that previously defined his work. Hayes suggests that Tillim's background in photojournalism is what makes his photographs work, and implies that it is dubious whether Tillim would be taking the images he takes today had he not come from the Afrapix generation.²¹⁵ “It is doubtful he could have taken the South African urban photographs he did recently about inner city tenements in Johannesburg, without having first photographed the postcolonial ruins of Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. He, more than most, has bridged the temporalities between then and now, between Africa and South Africa, by keeping close to the human beings who cross those lines. As he himself puts it, he has gone from being a documentary photographer (in a photojournalistic capacity) to being a 'photographer of interesting spaces'.²¹⁶ For example, in his *Departure* series, while Tillim did situate himself in “stock locations,” one's often degraded by

war, what makes his work different now is his avoidance of “the abjectness” of fellow documentarians working in a photojournalistic capacity.²¹⁷ Like Hugo, Tillim explains that one way he avoids this ‘abjectness’ is by photographing with a larger-format camera, thereby being able to respectably portray the “fabric of war,” instead of the clichéd portrayals of conflict, which are rife in Africa’s landscape.²¹⁸ One such image that illustrates this, and that particularly intrigued photographer David Goldblatt, is one of two young men wrestling on a beach in Luanda, Angola: “With South African photography slowly realizing its place in the African canon, it was exciting to see an image that immediately reminded me of the great Malian photographer Malick Sidibe’s beach portraits. In the context of the book the image might have a latent sense of unease, but it is also an optimistic portrait, of youth, of time and place, of Angola after the apocalypse.”²¹⁹

Examining his breadth of work, Tillim’s *Kunhinga portraits* were pivotal for his career in that they signified a shift from his previous black-and-white reportage photographs to colour. The series portrays displaced Angolans who fled from the town of Monge in Angola to Kunhinga trying to escape civil war.²²⁰ Having been a member of the Afrapix collective, Tillim is very well acquainted with the overcoded documentary image, which reinforced a didactic public message - the prevalent mode for photographing during the apartheid era.²²¹ Tillim’s work today, however, reflects “less obvious modes of telling” and the pedagogic modes characteristic of documentary photography are instead overshadowed by images that place more emphasis on the personal statement instead of political document.²²² If we look at the image of *Justino Ngene, Laurino Bongue and Faucino Hando*, for example, without a caption or background information, it is difficult to discern that these are refugees that have just spent five days walking to escape civil war. The narrative of the photograph is to be discovered by the viewer instead of the image being readily legible. While Tillim’s photography used to draw from a didactic method with a clear and linear narrative, characteristic of

documentary and journalistic photography, the messages in his recent work are more fragmented and blurred, distancing himself from the didactic narrative.²²³ His *Kunbinga portraits* are highly stylized and artistic as he plays close attention to composition. Ten of the seventeen portraits in the series present a main subject in the foreground and receding into the background we find at least another subject. The way he frames his photographs is not the traditional way of documentary photography, trying to reveal as much as possible. Rather, sharp and deeply focused, his images are close-up shots, leaving the viewer guessing as to what is happening in the background. The desaturated colours of his portraits almost seem like a natural transition from his black-and-white photographs, with “colours so subdued that they recall the quality of hand-coloured black and white photographs.”²²⁴

Colour patterns are still very much subdued in Tillim’s *Leopold and Mobutu* series, although several of his photographs are interspersed with black and white.²²⁵ A notable departure in this series from traditional documentary photography, and evidence of Tillim’s ability to engage the photographic canon, is his choice to present the photographs in diptychs and triptychs. The title alone is a prelude to the change in presentation: a link is formed between Belgium’s King Leopold II (who ruled during the colonial era) and Mobutu Sese Seko both brutal leaders in Congo’s history. When glancing at Tillim’s *Leopold and Mobutu* series, the first thing one is tempted to do is connect the grouped images with some sort of story. This proves to be quite fruitless, as Tillim is not enlisting the viewer for some kind of ethical *right or wrong* evaluation. Rather, he is presenting images for the self-analysis of the viewer.²²⁶

This is an important contrast with traditional documentary photography, where the picture is “self-sufficient and autonomous” and intends to relate to the viewer the whole story. In contemporary South African photography the didactic nature of the one-story image is substituted by the notion that a

picture can recount more than one story. Rather than the image informing the viewer, now, Josephy explains: "...there is usually a discourse, an equal conversation, which is discursive, playful and sometimes contradictory."²²⁷ This leads to the "destruction of a 'story'...and the abandonment of a linear plot."²²⁸ What we see in contemporary South African photography is that the image can still have a beginning, middle, and an end, although it might not necessarily be in that particular order. The traditional documentary image was presented as "being rooted in a particular time, and yet as timeless in an attempt to appeal to the universal conscience of viewers."²²⁹ This can become problematic; instead of reading the image as representative of a "very specific slice of time and place" in history, the documentary image instead stands as a much more universal testament to history. While ethnographic and struggle photography were revealing of a specific time and place in the way an event was framed, post-apartheid and contemporary South African photography are aware of the restrictions of the frame and instead allow for a multilinear narrative, implying a continuation of time and space "on either side of the photograph."²³⁰

Tillim's change in presentation directly alters the narrative structure of the images, challenging what was once a "stark divide between 'truth' (documentary) and 'fiction' (art)."²³¹ The diptych and triptych instead "forces juxtaposition of subject and meaning", which could otherwise be different or perhaps "less complex."²³² By pairing images in such a manner, not only does Tillim take a chance in restricting his viewer's interpretation of the image, but at the same time he risks evoking effortless and simplistic comparisons between them."²³³ According to Tillim, an individual image is less risky in that it is "linked by obvious, rather than mystical connections."²³⁴ When photographing in chaotic environments, as Tillim usually does, it is difficult to avoid the criticism of perpetuating negative stereotypes, which are allied with traditional forms documentary. By pairing images together, Tillim's risk

actually works in his favor in the way the images leave room for interpretation.

If we take the diptych *series 12* from *Leopold and Mobutu*, for example, in the left image (colour) we see a faded green cloth star that seems to be superimposed on a faded white piece of cloth or papier mâché. Next to it is a faded red, white and blue commendatory ribbon. On the right side there is a crowd of people gathered around a moving white truck with a man standing on top saluting. Drawing parallels between these images would seem a futile attempt, almost fictive, but as we read the text we become aware of the continuation of the historical narrative between the two of them. The left image reads: “The Congo Star which adorned the Congolese flag during the Leopold era, photographed at the Military Museum in Brussels, January 2004. When Laurent Kabila displaced Mobutu Sese Seko during the first Congo War of 1996, he replaced the Zairean flag with a banner featuring the old Congo Star.”²³⁵ The image on the right side of the diptych is described as: “Goma residents salute Laurent Kabila after his army takes the city, 1997.”²³⁶ After reading the caption one realizes that there is indeed a link between these two images – the star in the left image pertains to Kabila’s reign - in the image on the right, Kabila is standing on top of the car. This is an example of one of the conceptual links that Tillim makes between the two photographs.

Tillim also creates visual links in his series. In his triptych *series 26* from *Leopold and Mobutu*, the obvious similarity between the three photographs is that they are all taken in stormy conditions. The first photograph is a black and white image of four people in clear plastic raincoats walking down a muddy road in a storm. The photograph is quite blurry, probably taken from inside a foggy car window, which gives it an aesthetic edge. The second image, in colour, is of a small (what appears to be mud) house framed by two palm trees in a rural area. With rain clouds hovering in the sky, the muddy ground is flooded around the house. In the third image (black and white) it

appears to be raining; we see a women standing in the foreground walking towards us on a beach. There are houses and palm trees in the distant background. When we read the images' descriptions, the visual is reiterated in the caption and we learn that stormy conditions were indeed the link that Tillim used to connect the images.

Kim Gurney explains: "[T]he conscious framing of the images also reminds us that they were selected as a slice of life from a particular viewpoint. This is reiterated in photographs that play with reflections, including the photographer's own."²³⁷ Or perhaps some of the groupings are to remain elusive to the viewer as we are left to draw our own conclusions. What remains important, however, is the use of the diptych and triptych structure in contesting the previously practiced didactic structure of documentary. The diptych and triptych also allows the photographer to avoid perpetuating stereotypes in South Africa's landscape in the way the grouped images "extend and modify the message of its partner."²³⁸ This is also reflected in a comment he once made:

"My journeys have been idiosyncratic, often purposeless, not so much to commit journalism as to travel for its own sake. Perhaps the more successful images reflect this; perhaps a pattern can be discerned from their parts. I can describe moments, or trace a journey, by the images I am left with. They themselves form a thread."²³⁹

In a sense one can think of this thread as weaving through Tillim's career as a photojournalist and the process by which documentary has become entwined with art. He mentions the limiting consequences of being labeled and gives the example of his *Johannesburg* series, which was published in books and shown as galleries as well as published in magazines and newspapers.²⁴⁰ Therefore, he claims documentary and art are not mutually exclusive. Tillim's approach to his *Johannesburg* series was much like Subotzky's *Beaufort West*; he injected himself in the environment spending five months working on the project. Intrigued by the formerly white Johannesburg that saw a reentry of

blacks into the city with the end of apartheid, by living in one of the infamous, overcrowded and crime-ridden high rises at the center of Johannesburg, Tillim was able to move about somewhat inconspicuously. Tillim was also intrigued by the immigrants that Johannesburg attracts from many other cities in Africa who come seeking opportunities, which makes for interesting and dynamic social situations. “It was emblematic of a city becoming an African city, its colour, its darkness,” Tillim mentions. “It’s a very vibrant place.”²⁴¹ But like every photographer in Africa’s landscape, Tillim invited criticism from his series that “seems to depict the very stock ‘pathologies’ of Africa as spectacle which the exhibition aims at combating.”²⁴²

Shocked that Tillim would be selected as one of Enwezor’s “icons of the new vie for visual precedence,” Clare Butcher argues that his work is instead “contrary to Enwezor’s claims that he wishes to amplify ‘Afro-Positivism.’”²⁴³ However, like Hugo, Veleko and Subotzky, whose work is informed by South Africa’s deep- rooted history of apartheid, Tillim (a part of the Afrapix collective) is aware of the nature of generation; he is aware of the nature of visual representation and the dangers in possibly reinforcing stereotypical preconceptions. Tillim’s cityscapes, therefore, while showing the consequences of decades of racism and poverty, are also imbued with enigmatic and hopeful messages that are far from the clichéd images that burden South Africa’s landscape.

Conclusion

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this thesis, how do we combat the powerful and clichéd image that has burdened South Africa's landscape for so long? And are South Africa's contemporary 'popular' photographers doing so?

In the introduction I cited a commentary made by a reviewer's¹⁰ impression of the exhibit *Snap Judgments*. What struck me most was that the reviewer admitted that he himself had never been to Africa, yet had a "powerful image" of what it was like. This serves as a testament to the power of the image and the challenges that contemporary South African photographers face. We must bear in mind that the medium of photography is generally alluring and seductive; it "conscripts our gaze, turns us into voyeurs, and utterly redefines our status as observers."²⁴ We have seen throughout South Africa's history the shared power ethnographic and anti-apartheid documentary practices had in manufacturing a visual narrative that was uniform in representing the landscape. The same way that ethnographic documentary photographers found their purpose as soldiers furthering the initiatives of the colonial enterprise, struggle photographers were collectively engaged as fighters against a repressive system of government. Their motivations were carried out and achieved because of the power of the image and the ability of the medium to reproduce subject matter with an incomparable accuracy.

Though despite its falsehoods, fragmentary nature and "mise en scène," photography still remains one of the most "enduring and focused instruments of documentation,"²⁴⁵ and as such, the ideal medium to challenge clichéd modes of representation that have burdened South Africa's landscape. The

¹⁰ Mark Stevens

title 'Beyond the Frame: A Liminal Space in Contemporary South African Photography' is most appropriate when describing the work of this 'new generation' of South African photographers; the word 'liminal', relates to a *transitional* or *initial* stage of a process, which I believe is relevant when discussing contemporary South African photography. While contemporary South African photographers continue to make great strides in the post-apartheid landscape, the phase is transitional, much like the term 'documentary.'

It is important to remember that one of the characteristics all four photographers discussed in Chapter 4 share is their recognition of South Africa's photographic landscape as complex. In recognizing the complexity that documentary photography has played in South Africa's trajectory for example, South Africa's new generation of photographers are able to apply the concept of documentary more fluidly in their photography. Their approaches reflect the recognition of the term documentary as constantly evolving with the landscape, instead of confined by well-defined and rigid margins. By recognizing the contentious nature of the medium they use, and the history that informs it, their work is able to serve as an oppositional force in contesting historical modes of misrepresentation.

We cannot avoid or neglect the archive of images that have 'documented' the African landscape, nor can we ignore the images that currently inundate the media. What we can do is be more demanding in what we require from these images, perhaps seeking more complexity from the simplicity we have allowed them to narrate for so long. This is what contemporary South African photography is offering. It is creating the space for multiple ways of representation, "visual practices that recognize coevalness, that reach beyond the stock images that have endured until now as the iconography of the "abandoned" continent."²⁴⁶ Just as struggle photography in the 1980s in South Africa became a way for photographers to expose the ills of apartheid,

contemporary South African photography has become a vital tool for photographers to represent Africa as the multi-dimensional place that it is.

“Whatever its identity, contemporary African art has occurred against the backdrop of historical change. And the quest to define it has been marked both by that change and by resistance to imposing a monolithic interpretation upon it.”²⁴⁷¹¹

What Pieter Hugo, Nontsikelelo Veleko, Mikhael Subotzky and Guy Tillim actively represent are a generation of post-apartheid photographers “whose creativity and works innovation and output is not root-bound to the archive of apartheid - a remarkable feat considering the tenacious legacy of apartheid” and a group which collectively embodies what might be called “a new photographic consciousness as regards the representation of Africa to the West.”²⁴⁸

Just as the four documentary photographers that I have examined wouldn't reduce changes that have taken place in the post-apartheid landscape to a list of fixed attributes, I can do neither; the field of documentary photography is too complex and diverse. However, each one of them brings new elements to the medium that challenges traditional forms of documentary. Whether it is through explorations and manipulation in colour, multilinear narratives, viewer participation or new representations in identity, the changes that I have outlined in their work are offering valuable and more complete narratives of a South African landscape. The four photographers in this essay are representative of a group who do not allow themselves to be bound by the confines of a frame. They are experimental and investigative, presenting new initiatives in their exploration of a post-apartheid landscape, introducing us to new dimensions of the South African experience. They hold conscious and meticulous analytical perspectives in their approach to a South African space in this new century. To borrow a statement from Clare Bell, what these

photographers do is “broaden the parameters of the notion of place...”,²⁴⁹ a place that for many for too long has been clichéd and misrepresented.

Returning to the remark made by the reviewer who had never been to Africa, yet had a powerful image of what it was like, it is interesting to note that he later commented that after seeing the exhibition *Snap Judgments*, South Africa looked different to him. This is the aim. This is what these four photographers are extending. Also commenting on *Snap Judgments*, Ractliffe explained that what struck her most was the difficulty in finding ‘Africa’ in the show, if one was “looking for something that would reflect anything of the myth or stereotype.” For her, what emerged instead was “the impossibility of defining ‘Africa’ in either photographic or other terms.”²⁵⁰ Hugo, Veleko, Subotzky and Tillim thus embody the other meaning of the word ‘liminal’, which refers to occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold, representing a new generation of photographers whose work challenges our preconceptions about South Africa and represents a new photographic consciousness regarding the way the West envisions Africa.

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