

TRADE ROUTES AT CROSSROADS

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Whether visitors approach the city by plane, foot or automobile, they must first confront the landscape encircling the city, an anti-garden as desolate as the moon's surface: Johannesburg sits in the high veldt, a vast, yellow-like-a-stain prairie of burnt grass and no trees, thousands of meters above sea level, littered with mounds of dirt and rock dug up from mining exploits. It's a landscape whose only landmarks are man-made, and even these are swallowed back into the earth in time. William Kentridge's animated film "Felix in Exile" shows this veldt as it erupts in industrial hotspots, is pockmarked, then subsides, eating its own history, all physical traces or memories of its past, along the way. Dirt hills are flattened by the wind, holes fill in, weeds grow over the scarred ground, wells dry up, fallen bodies are covered with paper, then yellow grass, and disappear.

With this inauspicious start, it makes sense that the city should be as bleak and as formidable. After waiting hours in the airport for our apparently lost driver, I was finally ushered into a luxury sedan along with three other visitors to the second Johannesburg Biennale. We hurtled into the city along a mad series of freeways and overpasses, craning our necks out the windows to watch this landscape change. Could it be

photographed? Even Andreas Gursky's lens isn't wide enough. Warehouses with broken windows, asphalt lots full trucks, tractors and bulldozers, billboards selling cars and health insurance gradually make way for imported greenery and red brick walls. Here, sometimes next to dingy corner-stores and piles of uncollected garbage, begins the South Africa we'd heard about — houses that would be called villas in any other country have encased themselves in gleaming coils of razor-wire.

We played a game to help us settle in: which American city is this like? Minneapolis for its flatness, LA for its freeways. But after dropping our bags off at our suburban hotels, we clambered back into the taxi and went downtown to the Biennale site. Nearly there, someone exclaimed: Detroit! We peered out at an eerie mix of abandoned concrete factories overflowing with squatters, diamond-shaped, mirror-windowed towers, grey skyscrapers under a stubbornly grey sky, peddlers

selling meticulously arranged bowls of oranges on the sidewalk, and thousands of pedestrians who seemed to move from one corner to another only to hustle or hang out. Bits of newspaper floated in the wind, greasy vetrines advertised chicken meals at incredibly low prices.

Of course, we would eventually discover that Johannesburg is exactly like Johannesburg, and our driver told us so. "The problem," he explained, "is that while Apartheid is officially over, it still exists as an economic structure: the country's wealth is in the hands of a very small minority. The 'Bantu' education system has left its legacy in a huge majority of uneducated, untrained, and as a result, unemployed black citizens. People are angry and frustrated. Guns are easy and cheap to buy, and violent crime is rampant. They'll steal your car, your wallet, anything you have. What's more, South Africa is so rich compared to other African nations that thousands of



Carrie Mae Weems (USA). *Africa Series*, 1991-93. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. Photo: Werner Maschmann

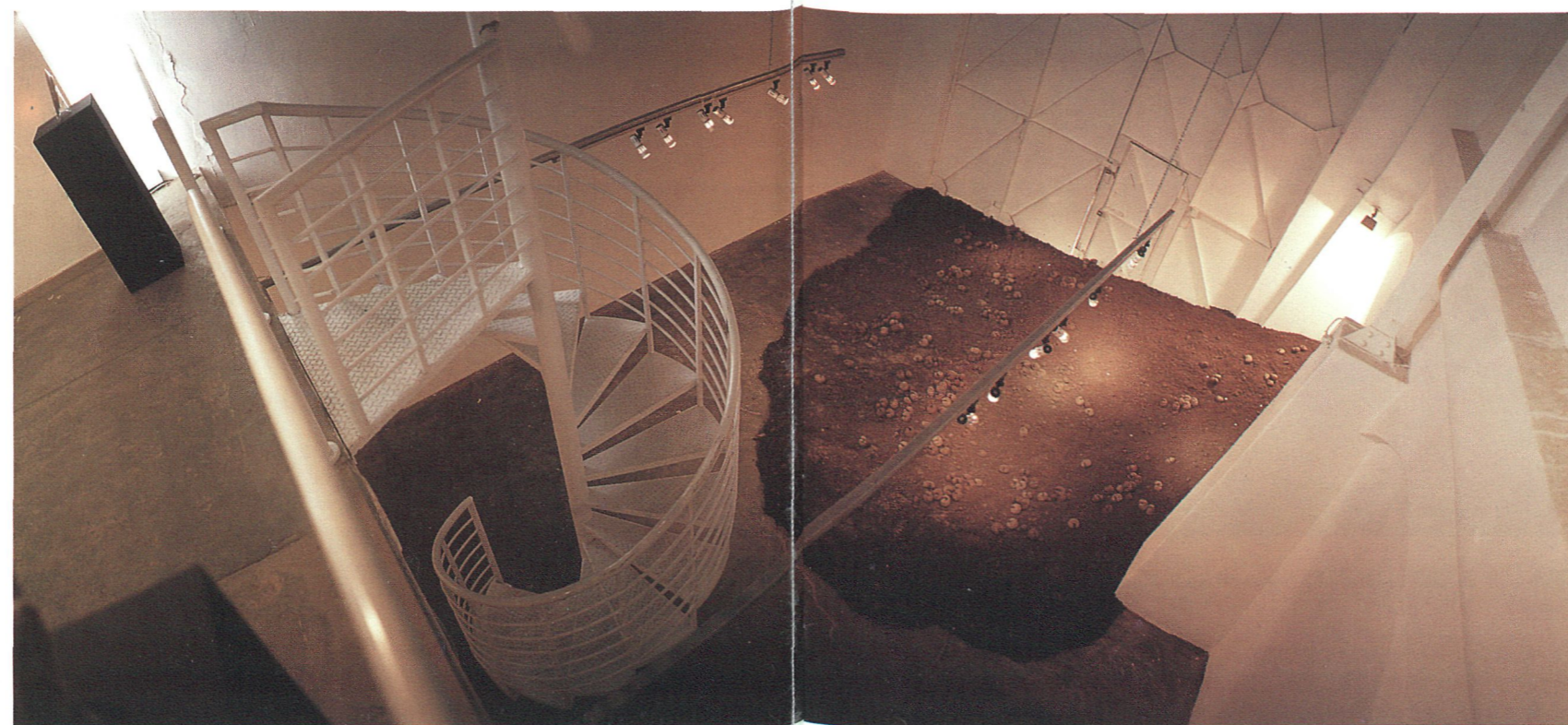


Rona Pondick (USA). *Dirt Heads*, 1997. Mixed media. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. Photo: Werner Maschmann

foreigners have made their way to Johannesburg to make money. See that little park? That's the front of the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Don't walk there alone, people get mugged there all the time. I advise you not to walk anywhere, including during the day. Why, it's not even safe in this car! If they see a purse or someone wearing jewellery, they might smash the windows to get it — right here, at noon, while we're stopped at a red light."

We checked to make sure that the doors were locked and shifted bags under our feet. Our driver was black, in his late twenties, and spoke the queen's English. He was obviously very well educated. "I was born in exile," he explained, "My father was with the ANC. I grew up in Zambia, Geneva and Spain, and have two university degrees. I came here — home — for the first time only four years ago." We asked him why he returned to work in a hotel and drive a taxi when he could certainly find a good career elsewhere. "I have a responsibility here," he said, "And besides, South Africa is much better now."

Outside the main entrance to the Electric Workshop, the gigantic ex-factory in which the central Biennale show, co-curated by Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, took place, two tall flagpoles stood. On one, the ANC flag billowed above the old



South African flag tied in a knot, part of Hans Haacke's contribution to the "Magicien de la Terre" exhibition in Paris, 1989, when Apartheid was on its last legs but Mandela still in prison. His work was an homage to Dulcie September, ANC's Paris representative, who had been assassinated the year earlier. On the next flagpole, here in Johannesburg, South Africa's new flag flew proudly on its own, an international symbol of democracy. Haacke called this sequel "The Vindication of Dulcie September." Yes, it confirmed, South Africa is better now.

II

Chaos reigned inside the Electric Workshop, twenty-four hours before the opening. The unskilled labourers who'd been employed to clean had swept away Pascal Marthine Tayou's scatter art. Marko Peljhan had just been informed that the Biennale would have no funds to complete his installation which involved the tracking of air traffic over Africa. None of Renee Green's video monitors worked. Ken Lum would not be able to paste up his billboards for another two weeks. The man employed to construct Oladélé Bangboyé's light-boxes hadn't even started, though he'd been working so hard on other

check-in counter only to find that no-one had paid for their tickets. (Some of us who had frantically pooled credit cards in an effort to stick to the schedule still haven't been paid back).

"This is Africa," Bangboyé insisted. "Just have a beer and relax."

One of the organisers stormed by, barking, "If anyone ever asks me to work on another big international show again, I'll shoot him!"

I went to the cafeteria and ordered a beer.

"Has anybody been to the Jo'burg Gallery yet?" David Medalla asked each person who walked in. "Did you see if any of my video monitors were working?"

"I don't think we're going to have the computer installations up and running for another few weeks," apologised Hou Hanru, curator of the "Hong Kong, etc." satellite exhibition, to an American critic who was leaving in three days.

A young man was making rounds trying to sell "I Survived the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale" T-shirts. "It's too early to say," exhausted-looking people explained as they waved the guy away.

III

A visitor might have almost missed Pat Mautloa's installation in the rear of the Electric Workshop. He built a kind of cave or mud hut into the walls of the factory, lined in places with patterned paper and posters, edges torn. It functioned as a subtle, curious analogy to the landscape and political situation around Johannesburg, either emerging or submerging, tradition welded to the very industrial architecture that has made this city the unofficial capital of Africa.

The Workshop might be 100 meters long. A series of ramps and winding staircases connect three floors and various lofts. One had to make an effort to find works, but this hide-and-seek relieved us from the boredom that would have settled in during other shows this size. Small oases, often film and video installations, allowed us to sit and collect ourselves. Kay Hassan's room was particularly popular with the guards, who may have felt at home in the amplified re-creation of a Soweto

aspects of the installation he hadn't seen his family in ten days. Steve McQueen couldn't get his video to run, and was packing up to leave, in a huff.

"Hey, take it easy, man," Bangboyé tried to reason with him, laughing. "You're in Africa now, things don't happen like in London!"

In fact, a number of invited artists, critics and curators were still stranded in airports back home, having arrived at the

livingroom. Two video screens projected images from popular black TV and films, hip-hop music blared, beer cans were stacked on the coffee table, photos and knickknacks abounded (it could have been a house in the southern USA as well). Penny Siopis made a miniature copy of her grandfather's theatre, which he built decades ago in Durban. Old home movies from the artist's childhood played as a narrator recounted her grandmother's story of immigration to South Africa. Teresa Serrano's double video projection matched the seasonal migration of butterflies with the migration of displaced people world-wide. It's a melancholic vision, but one that's as necessary to confront in Africa as in Cuba (where it was shown

colonial" present. Stories emerging from the nation's Truth and Reconciliation Commission add to this flurry of information. "South Africa's just like any other post-colonial country," some of them insisted. Many outsiders have agreed — South Africa's situation seems to "uncannily reflect the situation that we're still dealing with here (in the USA): the shared legacies of an apartheid that is technically illegal." Thomas McEvelley wrote after his visit to the first Biennale. Later, the same people would take pains to show that due to the duration and intensity of Apartheid, South Africa was qualitatively different — violence, guilt, labelling, political-correctness and reactionary flight take place and move each individual on a day-to-day level. The



2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Alternating Currents*. Photo: Werner Maschmann

earlier in 1997 at the Bienal de la Habana): directly across the street from the Workshop is another former factory in which live up to 3000 squatters. While the art crowd, whom I would call the impoverished jet-set, were bumping into old friends and acquaintances from other biennials and exhibitions, it's likely that only shouting distance away, a different class of migrants had no idea that anything special was taking place, and if they did know, they had no pressing reason to care.

South Africans tend to barrage visitors with history, statistics and arguments over its colonial past and "post-

country is going through a period of self-questioning to rival only that of Germany after World War II.

Suchan Kinoshita created a space in which visitors could watch a video 20 meters away through binoculars. Two people whispered into the artist's ears while she repeated random excerpts of both monologues. This jumble of half-told stories, confessions and exclamations was broadcast loudly to the viewer over speakers, who then left strained from concentration and partial or mis- understandings, much like strangers inevitably leave Johannesburg.

IV

The question couldn't help posing itself to every non-South African: how could the Apartheid system have possibly existed so late into the twentieth century? If we live in Paris, Vancouver, Perth or New York, we tend to forget our own weighty and recent colonial histories, lost as we are in a maze of shopping malls, fast-food outlets, fashion magazines or TV. It's less hard to forget brutality if you're from Kiev, New Delhi, Hong Kong, Lima or Seoul. And impossible if you're from any place in Africa. But the structures of Apartheid recall certain North American ones. Visitors from Canada and the USA like to

Indians to raise money for fighting land claims — both stories suffice.

Stan Douglas explored the psychological drive to conquer others in his video and sound installation “Nu•tka•,” named after the area of Vancouver Island, Nootka Sound, where west coast natives first met Juan Pérez and James Cook in the eighteenth century. Douglas describes this work as a “Canadian Gothic.” There is no surprise, he tells us, that the Gothic romance flourished in Europe during the era of high imperialism, since this genre is based upon the return of the repressed: “some past transgression haunts, then destroys the culpable person, family or social order.” Europeans worried



2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Alternating Currents*. In center: Ouattara (Ivory Coast/USA). On floor: Néstor Torrens (Canary Islands). Photo: Werner Maschmann

sympathise: Coco Fusco wrote in the catalogue to the first Biennale that “Canada’s Indian reservation system was the model upon which apartheid was based”; McEvelley said that he’d heard that “when Hendrik Verwoerd and the other founders of apartheid conceived the system in the 1940s they specifically consulted the Jim Crow system in the American South.” Although I suspect that Fusco’s claim is more correct — First Nations people were not allowed to vote in federal elections in Canada until 1960, the government had earlier instituted a pass system and made it a criminal offence for

about “infection” from contact with the radically foreign cultures they were invading. The solution in practical terms was segregation or annihilation.

But then there’s money, too. Marc Latamie demonstrated another European artwork that was based upon colonial economic structures: a Degas painting of a cotton mill. Mounds of soft raw cotton lay on the floor next to the reproduction, and we could only imagine the softness or roughness of fingers that picked it. How might we re-write art history textbooks to incorporate the voices of those not even represented, but



Teresa Serrano. *The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence*, 1997. Stills from 3-screen video projection. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale.

signified through absence? Sergio Vega, instead, found the origins of the exploratory urge in a cyclical, Christian compulsion to seek new gardens of Eden, which can't be separated from the more persistent sexual compulsion for renewal in another's body. In Vega's story, Adam and Eve are reduced to making love in the blue glow of a television screen, long after South America's been conquered and its indigenous population devastated, while a penis-train obsessively circles a track, finding its glory within the same tunnel time and time again.

We were told by curators that many of the Biennale's staff — custodians, guards, etc. — took pleasure in Esko Männikkö's photo portraits of rural and working-class Finnish people. An elderly man in rubber boots feeds his baby goat from a bottle next to his small fireplace. Another man lies sleeping in a bare-boned room that's carpeted in dirty rag rugs. These images found a parallel in Zwelethu Mthetwa's photographs of black South Africans in their similarly shabby houses, walls lined with ANC posters, holes patched with sheets of newsprint. Women from a local shelter who were working with the artist Lucy Orta stood for hours in front of Pepón Osorio's video installation. In one room, starkly "decorated" as a prison cell, an incarcerated Puerto Rican man explains his absence to his adolescent son. In the next room, which is decked out in enough teenage-boy paraphernalia for ten boys (basketball shoes, posters, TVs, sports medals, pictures of sex symbols and brand name clothing), the man's real-life son talks about his feelings about growing up without his dad. The absence of fathers, who may be in prison, migrant labourers, in exile, dead or simply renouncing familial responsibilities, is a sadly universal topic.

On the other hand, many people felt put out by Fusco's performance during the press opening: visitors were asked to pay five Rand (about a dollar) to have their photograph taken for a "pass card" that would allow them access to the main exhibition. This miniature, ironic re-staging of the pass system that was in place in South Africa until very recently seemed too flippant to provoke the controversy it begged. Why should we all suffer a small humiliation for the sake of a false

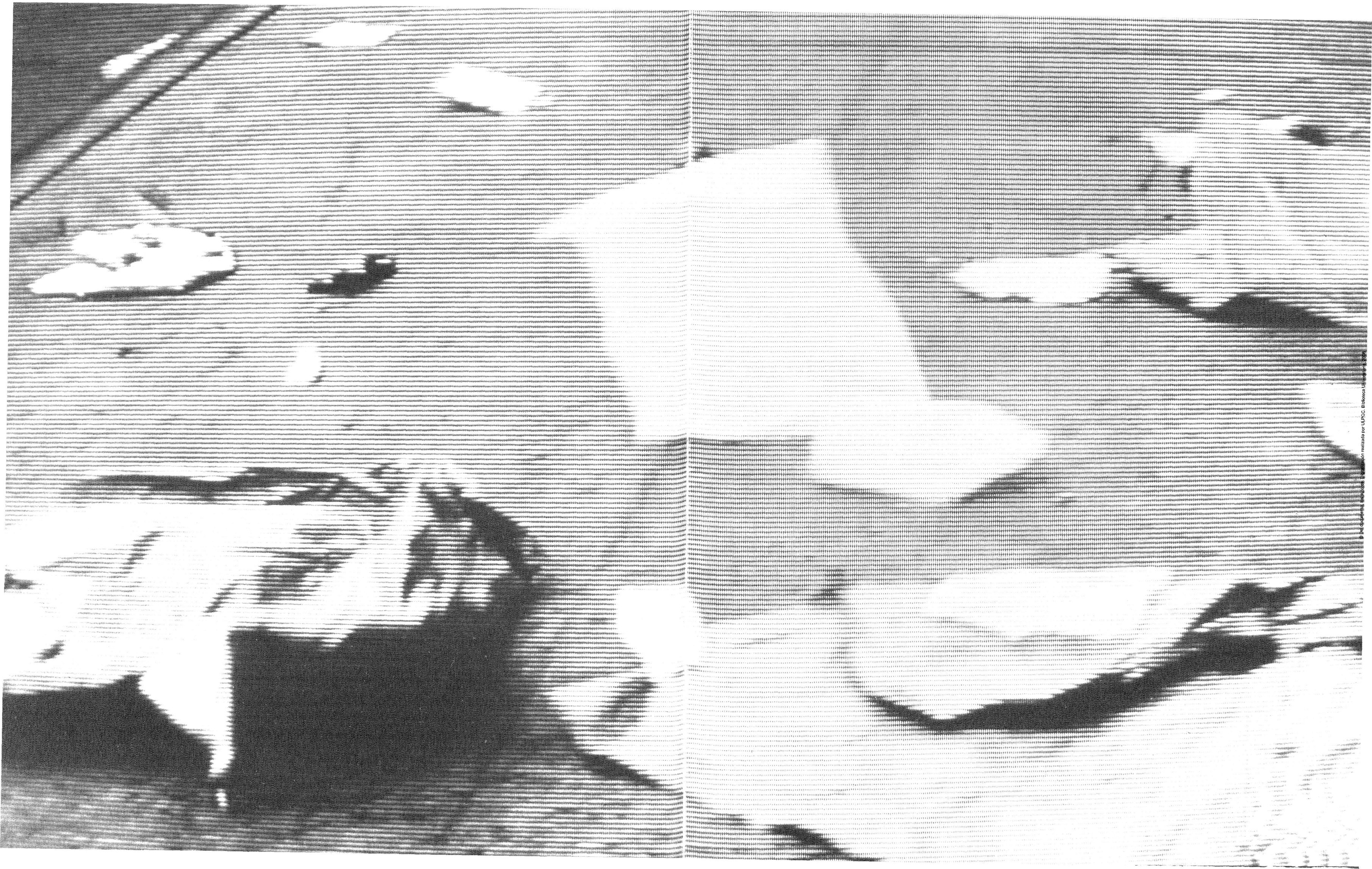
understanding? But Fusco claims that it was mostly white South Africans, not used to queuing, who were offended. Many black members of the audience saw the performance as pertinent questioning of South Africa's current social system -no longer segregated by law, it is still often segregated in practice.

V

After two days, we'd heard of numerous muggings and one stabbing outside the Johannesburg Art Gallery, a mere five blocks away. Only the bravest and maddest of the Biennale crowd ventured out on foot: the American critic Christian Hayes said he felt no more threatened than in any major city as he wandered alone at dusk; Medalla donned a strange bi-sexual mask and paraded about downtown for a whole afternoon. The rest of us nervously confined ourselves to the main exhibition site, roughly the size of a football field. We huddled from the wind in the cafeteria, consuming countless coffees and even more beers between viewings. Thus, everyone got to know each other, a rather unique experience for a show this size. Hundreds of interviews were conducted, thousands of cards were exchanged, and scores of future visits and meetings promised.

We were in the mood to celebrate, despite our half-captive state. A question had been raised in anticipation to the Johannesburg Biennale: will it disrupt the hegemony of the north, or else play into the hands of a voracious "Western" system that wants the "new" from afar to supplement its own flagging culture industry? It became apparent that regardless of financial and technical difficulties, "Trade Routes" had achieved something unique.

As we all know, Africa and Europe (which were the same land mass before the Suez Canal) had established trade routes long before Picasso discovered the art of "primitive" cultures and changed the course of Western art history. European art and culture have been formed from their contact with other cultures, and this exchange has worked two ways, if not often through mutual agreement. But art history has always denied an equality of vision and voices, and contemporary theoretical discourses around "Otherness" often reinforce segregation as



much as they attempt to break it. In the second Johannesburg Biennale, it was not only the sheer number of artists from African, Asian and South American countries that convinced us something different was happening, but also the space and respect given to the artists, as well as the curators' selections — no mere roll call of the “Third World” as, say, Havana tends towards. As Kendell Geers wrote, “the primary difference between ‘Trade Routes’ and its predecessor, ... ‘Magiciens de la Terre,’ is that the latter implied that African artists were naive shamen living outside and untouched by any developments in the rest of the world.” After our first few days in Johannesburg, visitors were stunned to realise that “Trade Routes” turned this supposition on its head.

“‘Trade Routes,’” Geers continued, “suggests that Africa has not been isolated at all, but rather has over the centuries responded to and been influenced by the exchange of ideas and commodities with the rest of the world. It proposes a continent that is able to speak for itself in the very same languages that the rest of the world does, as equals.” Just a few days after the opening of “Trade Routes,” Nelson Mandela would tell the USA to go mind its own business and stop patronising black Africa, as he made a friendly visit to Libya. The Johannesburg Biennale’s birth can’t be separated from the fact of Mandela’s election, and likewise, it seems that something new, a real shift, took place with its second edition, even if it did not resolve problems of representation as fully as Geers may have hoped.

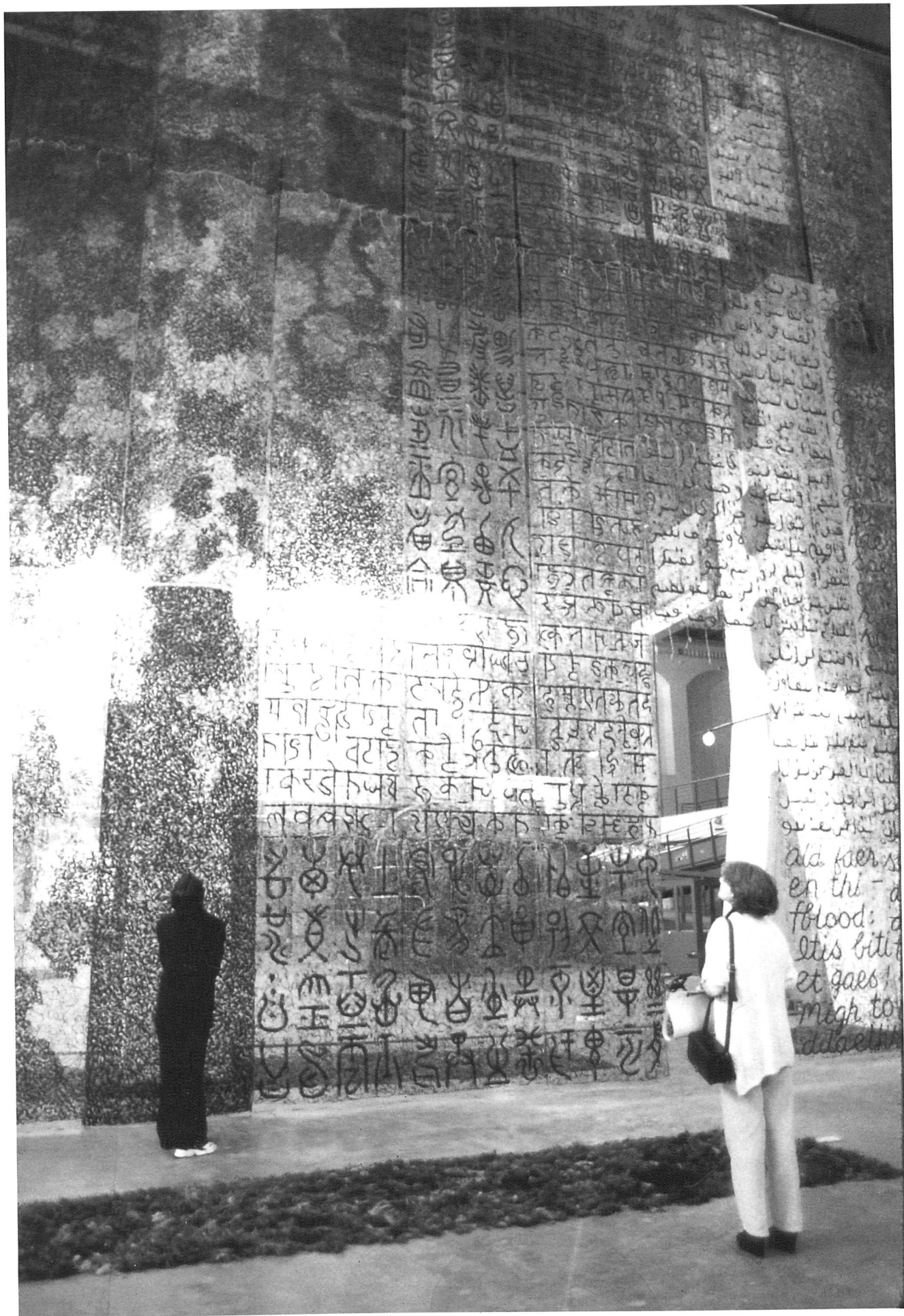
VI

We ate in Indian restaurants, Portuguese restaurants, Chinese restaurants and plain old South African restaurants (everywhere the food came in American-style “whopper” portions), and I was surprised to find that I was often the only woman at the table. “Life’s Little Necessities” was a somewhat disappointing all-woman satellite show curated by Kellie Jones in Capetown. But with this exception, the majority of the work in the Biennale was by men, and Johannesburg swarmed with them. In part, this reflects the daily political situations of many southern

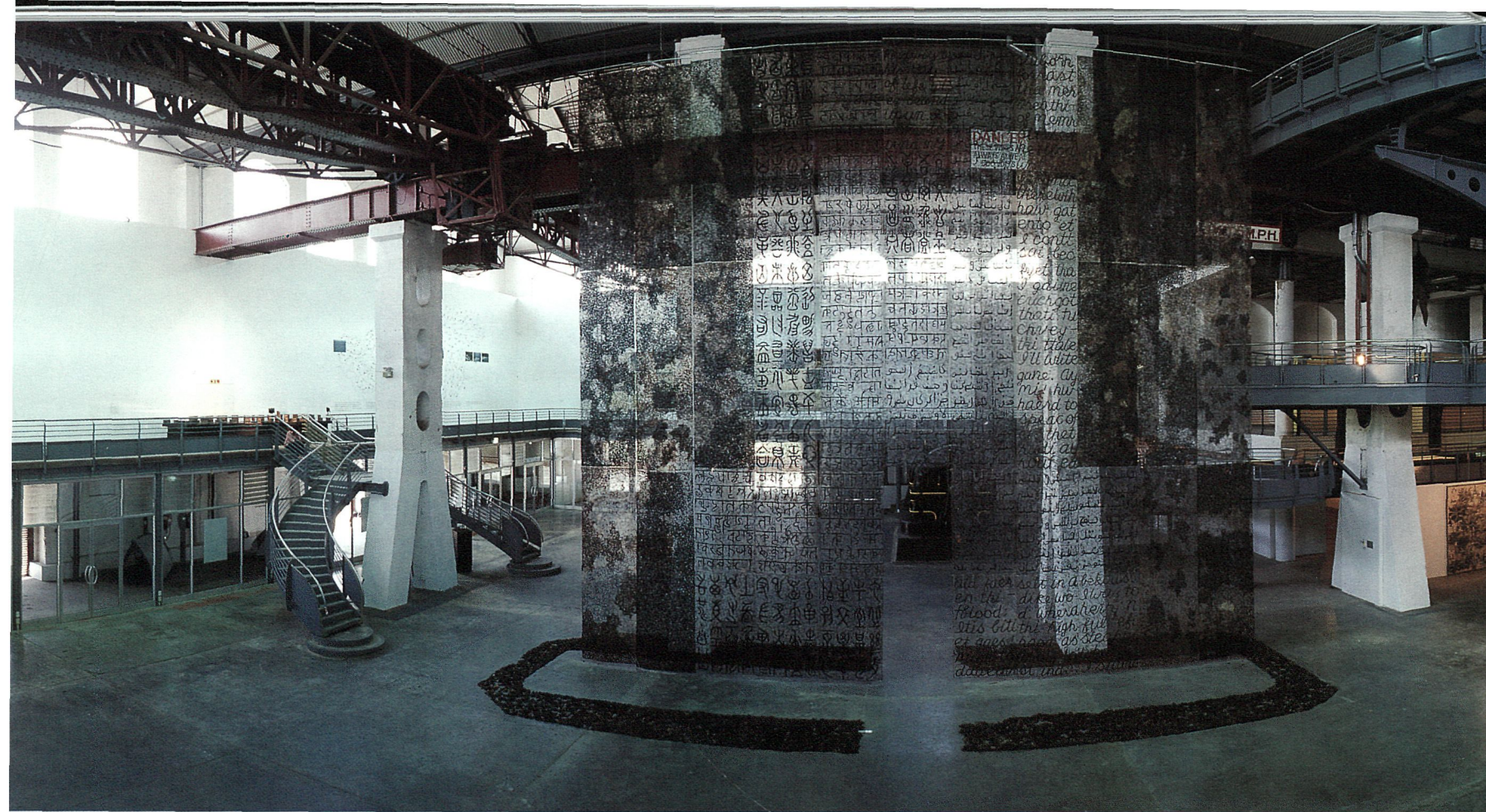
countries, where patriarchy still looms large (all the same, in northern cultures it’s no small problem). So this made feminine works by artists such as Ghada Amer, who stitched ethereal, layered designs of women masturbating onto canvas, or Rivane Neuenschwander, who presented the most immaterial fabric made of pollinating tree seeds, even more powerful. There were also poetic ties between the fragile, egg-shell based work of Tania Bruguera (which dealt metaphorically with Cuban involvement in the Angolan-South African war) and the egg-shell and sand installation by Abdoulaye Konaté, who is male but makes a distinctly meditative, delicate art. Nestor Torrens’ red and green chilli pepper installations, which shrivelled and rotted even during opening week, enveloped viewers in a pungent odour and hinted at an organic approach to life and death.

A tense, long-running debate unfolded during the conference series over the work of a white female South African artist, Candice Breitz. Her work was accused of being exploitative of the black female subject, i.e. racist, insofar as it incorporates more or less demeaning images of black women (she has made Hannah Hoch-styled collages that combine the tourism industry’s postcard images of bare-breasted tribal women with hard-core pornographic images of white women). What was most disturbing about the debate we heard was the utter lack of black female South African voices — the war was waged between white women and black men.

Vast inequalities in education and economics means that there are very few black women making “contemporary” art in South Africa today, and even fewer working on an international level. The theoretical language used by critics at this conference was also inaccessible for some members of the audience, people who might more articulate than the rest when it comes to talking politics and history but can be initially bewildered by statements such as Catherine David’s: “I don’t believe in subjects, but in the processes of subjectification.” I don’t bring this up as an anti-intellectual reaction, but to point to problems of translation and infrastructure — material and educational — that have to be faced if we really want to talk about “globalization” and allow those without traditional Western art



Wenda Gu. *African Monument*. Oasis. 1997. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale.



Center left: Wenda Gu (China/USA). *United Nations - African Monuments: Oasis*, 1997. Mixed media.
On right: Beat Streuli (Germany). *People I Met*, 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Alternating Currents*. Photo: Werner Maschmann

academy backgrounds to participate. For example, certain presentations of South African contemporary art practice have been criticised by black artists for projecting visions of a holistic or thriving scene. The fact is, most black South Africans, male or female, wouldn't even know what a "biennale" is, let alone possess the materials and resources necessary to make art. "Many young white South Africans pose as 'avant-garde.' This is impossible in a country with such vast inequalities, where there is no majority middle-class with values to transgress." South African artist and writer David Koloane told me, "We need to build studios and provide facilities, as well as consult artists about their needs. It's the only way to bridge the gulf between black and white artists in this country."

VII

After five days, most of us had gained five pounds from all the beer and from a lack of walking. Many people curbed their claustrophobia by hiring cars to take them on field trips to nearby Soweto and Alexandra — others went to game parks to watch animals. Since I lived for years in Canada near lots of big animals and Indian reservations, I declined both. In a short

visit, nature viewing was not a priority, and tourists' trips to watch poor, supposedly traditional communities make me uncomfortable — there are too many rich Germans and Japanese on Canada's river systems capsizing canoes to take pictures of First Nations people, and First Nations people don't like it one bit (having to get all wet during rescue attempts). Nevertheless, some "feeling" was certainly lacking between the exhibition site and our distant hotels, between the cafeteria and the restaurants in what are basically strip malls, that made visitors yearn to see the "real" South Africa.

"Who is the Biennale for, anyway?" some Johannesburg people began to ask. The Biennale was doing a shoddy job of advertising its immense and fascinating film festival, along with its more boring conference series, and other things as well: money was not available to construct an adequate education program. Local artists and teachers complained that the Biennale had geared itself towards an international audience, and this wasn't enough — it ought to engage with the city too. In the end, the most important outreach program was conducted by Orta with the women from the shelter. Rural women who had come to Johannesburg seeking work, only to find none, were paid by Orta during a ten-day session to make

"collective wear," clothing for solidarity. When the women decided to march through the biennale grounds in the linked clothing they'd made there, they sang one of the two national anthems, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica* (God Bless Africa), which had been banned from secular performance under Apartheid. The women still believed in the new South Africa, they explained, though it hasn't given all it's promised. A foundation is being planned to give them a studio to make clothing to sell at markets, while a few weeks ago, their entire installation made with Orta was stolen from the grounds of the Workers' Library, next to the Workshop.

Issues snowballed during the Gate Foundation's Artists' Forum into a sillier question of legitimacy. Some African artists accused other African artists of not being African enough, contests were held (in English) to see who could speak more African languages, and more fluently. Finally, somebody asked: why is it all you artists from places like Nigeria and Argentina live in New York City after all?

The catalogue tells a different story. The second Johannesburg Biennale's curating team is originally from Nigeria, Spain, Cuba, China, South Africa, Korea and the USA. They invited artists who live and work in Port-au-Prince,

Havana, Cotonou, Dakar, Goree, Santiago, Bogotá, Seoul, Bamako, Kumasi, Oulu, Lusaka, Lima, Luanda, Ljubljana, Rio de Janeiro, Christ Church, New Delhi, Yaounde, Tenerife, not to mention Alexandra, Johannesburg and Capetown, just to name a few places that are not New York. A few who were born far from Western centres do live there now. Medalla, who's from the Philippines but lives in London, insisted that's because he can make money there — "Show me a way to sell my work in Johannesburg, and I'll move here tomorrow!" — but since he is one of those artists who make practically no money, I think he was being coy. Rather, some artists are exiles, and some find that cosmopolitan cities provide more resources and opportunities for dialogues on the subjects that interest them: post-colonialism, diasporas and contemporary art, etc.

We wonder with good reason why a country in dire need of infrastructural work, such as South Africa, would spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to fly foreign artists, critics and curators in to visit, instead of investing this money into programs and foundations for the artists it's claiming to promote. Aside from obvious reasons of national self-promotion and tourism (for which the Olympic Games serve much more efficiently), my guess is that a theory of "globalization" can't be postulated without a knowledge of and connection with off-beat cities such as Johannesburg, and in this it's both a self-serving and generous act. It's hard to imagine the first strong chorus of African voices in contemporary art happening outside of Africa, yet these artists also need the international contacts — both south-north and south-south — that the Biennale provides. Deliberately or not, a South African biennial also brings us more immediately face-to-face with the bourgeois nature of contemporary art, and forces us to question practises of art-making and curating that are exclusionary. On another level, it renders curatorial practises that patronise African, South American, Asian or Caribbean art or use it as a token gesture to political correctness more difficult, providing that information from the Biennale circulates abroad. All in all, there are no easy answers, only many questions that wouldn't otherwise be asked.