

# LIFE'S LITTLE NECESSITIES

## INSTALLATIONS BY WOMEN IN THE NINETIES



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Fatimah Tuggar, *Untitled*, 1997. Digital image, 90 x 240 cm, 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, *Life's Little Necessities*. Photo: Michael Hall.

“Necessity is the mother of invention” was the originary phrase that gave birth to the show’s title, a well known aphorism in English that joined the idea of women with that of creative production. I asked myself, how could the imagination and resourcefulness of women be brought to bear on the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale’s theme of Trade Routes? Where were the places that women’s voices erupted in the critique of globalization’s “present enunciation as a reconstituted form of universalism” put forth by artistic director Okwui Enwezor:

where was women’s presence felt in his problematizing of diaspora as “the virtualisation and inscription of mass movement...where immense aggregates of human communities circulate in the complex vectors of class, race, gender, religious beliefs, ideology, commodity and labor”?

As a curator it was important for me to highlight women’s contributions to such world realities and dialogues. On the one hand women are often overlooked on the global stage as producers, whether of culture or any other kinds of assets



Jocelyn Taylor (USA). *Alien at Rest*, 1996. Video projection. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Life's Little Necessities*. Photo: Michael Hall.

(besides children that is). On the other hand, women rarely stand as signs of those larger discursive universes from which grand international exhibitions launch their cultural crafts: the global, the transnational, the postcolonial, etc. While half of the people on the planet are women, they perform most of the work. Yet, rarely is this acknowledged, let alone celebrated.

"Life's Little Necessities" was installed in Cape Town's Castle of Good Hope, a former fort built by the Dutch in 1666, known as the oldest surviving (and I would add western style) building in South Africa. This huge pentagonal structure is also home to the William Feher Collection of paintings and decorative arts relating to the history of the Cape, a museum of military history, and a functioning military garrison. A newly renovated space for changing contemporary exhibitions was once the domicile of colonial governors.

Like the confluence of the Indian and Atlantic oceans over which the Castle itself presides, each artist in the exhibition

skillfully employs installation's ability to display and imply a variety of truths as an active component in her work. We enter the exhibition through a space that alludes to the original life of the place as one that encompassed the domestic and labor. One cannot get to the other parts of the show without passing through MARIA MAGDALENA CAMPOS PONS's *Folding Desires* (1997), seven weathered wooden ironing boards topped with crisply ironed and folded white sheets. Here Campos Pons' nod to a tradition of feminist art coincides with colonial history. You can believe that a lot of ironing did in fact go on in this residence of countless colonial governors, and that it was done by black women very much like the artist herself (and who had their own creative desires).

In a significant twist of fate, the army actually lent us bed linen for the project. Campos Pons provided the topmost sheet for each board, all of them embroidered with a phrase in Spanish or English: *para mi padre* (for my father), *para un*

*amigo* (for a friend), *para un extraño* (for a foreigner). The maze-like space created by the ironing boards replicated, in a sense, the web of nationalist affiliation: from the fatherland and its allies to the foreigner, who at times might be either friend or stranger.

FATIMAH TUGGAR, as well, brings us a meditation on women and labor. Her photo murals and sculptural pieces work in tandem, exploring confluence as hybrid. In *Ceiling Fan* (1996), a mechanical ceiling fan has blades of raffia fronds, in *Whisk* (1996), an electric mixer is fitted with twig beaters; both comment on how the exigencies of life create opportunities for invention. Tuggar's photographic world is populated by African women who pound yams with traditional wooden mortars with one hand, and create steel skyscrapers with the other. They manage the opposing poles of developed and developing, high and low cultures, and devise a place in between where things work, move, and happen.

In the work of VELISWA GWINTSA, the concepts of domestic and labor refer to national production. With *1913 the Inception* (1997), the artist (who is also an assistant curator at the Johannesburg Art Gallery) creates a room modeled after a diorama, highlighting the life of a working miner under apartheid. Using burlap and dramatic lighting, she has created four distinct chambers within which this archetypal laborer's existence unfolds. There is the barrack-like homeplace emanating with joyous music, holding a bed and a small dresser. This is juxtaposed with an area in which a single plastic shopping bag hangs from the ceiling, underneath a poem speaks of the perennial traveling man. In another section, an actual museum case displays both weathered articles on black freedom marches and chunky white wax crosses. Finally we come to the man himself, his dark clothing setting off the gold nuggets that spill from his hands.

An American artist known for her photo-based installations, PAT WARD WILLIAMS has been living in Johannesburg for over a year. Like Gwintsa, her installation *Vista View* (1997) is divided into discrete areas of influence, in this case along race/class lines. Against one long wall are large black & white photos of black people on the streets of urban

Africa. Directly opposite is a simple tableau of domestic leisure: an armchair and a side table rest on a rug. These furnishings do not face the peopled cityscapes across from them but instead a wall on which are hung colonial prints.

The separation between the two spheres of existence is heightened by obstructions hanging between them, a barrier of tools and bits of metal suspended by string from the ceiling. These strategically circle the tableau forming a virtual fence which traces the rug's oval. Larger objects — a dust rag, a valise — litter the intervening landscape, a panorama of denial where one side refuses to acknowledge or compensate the toil oppressively imposed on the other.

The specter of colonial heritage again surfaces in the work of GLENDA HEYLIGER. *Your Highness* (1997) is a ten foot high sculpture made on site using found wood and local clay, "crowned" by an Aloe plant. The circular mud-like "body" of the piece is made in the manner of traditional house building in the artist's home of Aruba: clay is mixed with a grass binder, then slapped/thrown onto an armature. Wooden arms and hands shoot out from the center of a spiral shape incised in Heyliger's work. Her royal reference opens onto reflections on the fragmentation of the colonial subject, one who may reside in, but never feels entirely of, the fatherland, in this case the Dutch imperial legacy shared by both Aruba and Cape Town.

If labor and domesticity have points of confluence, these two exigencies or necessities of life can also be overshadowed by another insidious player: the apparition of dominance or control, which many times in the case of women, is coupled with prurient overtones. "[Violence] has its sexual side" one could say, in the spirit of Jenny Holzer's *Truisms*.

MELANIE SMITH, like a number of artists in "Life's Little Necessities", examines the places where sensuality brushes against brutality. *Orange Lush VI* is the largest piece in a series begun in 1994. Covering a 12 x 17 foot wall, it is a resplendent array of (largely plastic) gewgaws: toys and tools, foodstuffs and housewares, posters and directive signs, all in a riveting DayGlo orange. Viewers of all ages are drawn to the abundant relief surface, seduced by its powerful texture, and the passionate consumerism that it represents. Its hue is instructive,

commanding, pervasive, demanding our concentration and insisting that we heed its authority.

*ComFort* (1997) is one of five interconnected works that BERNADETTE SEARLE has installed over two rooms, incorporating found objects, razor wire, resin and plexiglass in various combinations. Here, our orientation shifts to the floor, as we encounter the pentagonal shape of the Castle of Good Hope formed of Masala, a spice distinctive in Indian cuisine. In *ComFort*, the condiment not only recalls Cape Town's strategic importance in trade routes between Europe and Asia, but denotes South Africa's Indian heritage. The Castle (as it is called), the ultimate symbol of national culture, is literally filled with Indian custom. The aroma and powdery mounds of Masala in the work invite our delectation, but a piece of razor wire spiraling out of its center reminds us of the militarized and violent history of which the building is a part.

On the five points of her Masala Castle, Searle has placed a small plexiglass box containing respectively: a nest, a tree stump with roots, an ostrich egg, a buoy, and a vase. In each case these objects are partially embedded in resin before being further constricted by their plexiglass enclosures. These items — emblematic of the history of the Cape's indigenous peoples (either as signs of their livelihood or of their oppression) — become restrained, blocked, stifled, within the confines of South African national history and power. Though born and raised in Cape Town (or more correctly, because of this fact), Searle had never stepped foot in the Castle until a couple of years ago, as one of numerous and quotidian protests against the apartheid regime. She entered it finally as an artist, on a mission to conquer this highly charged symbolic space.

In WANGECHI MUTU's *Four Square Pillahs* (1997), violence is again embedded in a structure of lush tactility. Each of the sixteen, amorphous pillow-like objects is a strange hybrid. They are earth-toned and appear organic but are soft and manmade at the same time. Implanted in almost every one is a gourd that has been painted or otherwise altered. These do not fit standard western notions of African sculpture: they are not vertical or made of wood; if they accompany a specific ceremony, it is one expressive of outlandish contemporary

tragedies where massacres and turmoil have made way for a bizarre combinations in a culture of survival.

Across from the "pillahs" are a parallel row of orange light bulbs which hang from the ceiling suspended over pools of orange sand. This is the face of technology, which can also be as rudimentary as "primitive" sculpture. At the same time science and industry may be equally as brutal in their methods and goals as any militarily enforced carnage. People approached me over and over again at the exhibition claiming that I had mislabeled the lightbox called *Pure Moment of Love* (1997) by ZARINA BHIMJI. The image, photographed with what looks to be a wide-angle lens, reveals the archival storage of a library. Shelves seem to be veritably dripping with papers and books. Her photographic manipulation allows us to feel enveloped by the image as the space opens out to us. The pleasure alluded to here is the pleasure of reading, the exhilaration of learning and the gratification in discovery. In a situation of oppression, this delight is traded for danger, where too much knowledge in the hands of the opposition threatens the power of the status quo. Taken in the renown British Library, this image acknowledges Britain's role in the development of the South African nation and implicates it in comparable repressive colonial structures. Indeed, as *Pure Moment of Love* demonstrates (and as Audre Lorde has described so eloquently), the sensual does not always connote the sexually erotic but may point us towards a profound sense of satisfaction and self-realization beyond the libidinal.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the pursuit of personal ecstasy and desire for fulfillment, is often symbolized by the carnal self, the sensual body, alive to its own needs and yearnings.

The work of VALESKA SOARES, though visually subtle, magnifies and intensifies our understanding of the sensorial, and through it our comprehension of space. In an earlier work like *Cheap Emotions (Passion)* (1995), the aroma of perfume fills the gallery, defining it not only in an olfactory sense but by releasing associated memories of different places and times. In *Playground* (1997) the room is demarcated by a layer of thick black foam topped with velvety flocking; it beckons us to tread and sink down, leaving the marks and soil from our shoes as reminders of our lives, as clues of our existence and passing.<sup>2</sup>



Pat Ward Williams (USA). *View*, 1997. Photo mural and mixed media. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Life's Little Necessities*. Photo: Michael Hall.

The quest for individual attainment/completion plays a role in LORNA SIMPSON's *Call Waiting* (1997). Here the sophisticated imagery we have become familiar with over the last decade in her photography and photo-driven installations, is applied to film projection. In this new work for a single projector—filmed in black and white with an edge of film noir—we witness the return of the figure and the emphasis on the narrative vignette. Using an array of telephone equipment and a spectrum of languages, communication between Simpson's characters is transformed into a chase. The electrical charge that drives each human connection is the pursuit of an intimate relationship. In each case this association would seem to signal achievement for the pursuer, while the one pursued appears nonplused or impedes access altogether. The phenomenon of phone-sex has been flattened out, made quotidian and non-erotic due to technology's invasive reach.<sup>3</sup>

*Alien at Rest* (1996) is JOCELYN TAYLOR's epic ode to black women's subjectivity. Epic because of its archetypal, mythic, and allegorical qualities, but also owing to its large scale (at the Castle it reached 9 x 20 feet). In this three-projection piece, black female sexuality is sheroic, freed from the diseased and/or lascivious frames of eras passed. Taylor strides through New York City nude, self-possessed, confident, and unafraid. In other scenes she stares out at the viewer from underwater. The seamless editing makes us feel as if she's been under too long, we feel panic, helplessness and finally controlled by Taylor's larger-than-life size presence.

*Alien at Rest* also enters into a dialogue with a short video made in South Africa during the previous year. *Uku Hamba 'Ze - To Walk Naked* (1995) documents a 1990 incident in which black women, contesting the removal of their dwellings, faced down bulldozers by stripping naked in protest. The video



Zarian Blimji (Udanda/UK). *Hundred Petals*, 1997. Cibachrome transparency, light box, 89 x 107 x 18 cm. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Life's Little Necessities*. Photo: Michael Hall.

caused much controversy there, raising questions about appropriation (since it was made by a collective of white women) and its historical sensitivity (or lack thereof — for years it was fine for black women's breasts to be bared publicly but illegal to show those of white women).<sup>4</sup> Taylor's access to resources and her ability and desire to effectively tell stories through her own unclothed body, problematize these issues and received structures that remain in the new South Africa.

Like *Alien at Rest*, SILVIA GRUNER's *Billboard Necklace* (1997) blurs the line between public and private. The billboard format is a model of mass communication, large, eye-catching, persuasive. But Gruner's image, of a necklace, represents something that is intimate, and personal, made to adorn and celebrate the human scale of the body. *Billboard Necklace* is affixed directly to a wall that has been painted to match the rest of the room, creating a seamlessness that allows it to become

part of the architecture. The necklace is immense yet partial, only a small section of the jeweled image snakes across the paper panels from which it is formed. Is it still emblematic of the private realm, or has the nature of its splintered form and public exposure displaced the intimacy held there?

The genre of installation highlighted in "Life's Little Necessities", covers a lot of territory, so to speak, from lightboxes and mixed media sculpture, to Masala and cheese puffs. Each individual's gallery space is transformed into her "work" using the calculated processes of spatial arrangement from which sites of interpretation are created. Installation lays bare the dazzle of art's deliberateness, shifting signification from purely perceptual to referential and connotative. At the center of this practice is a reliance on both the mundane and metaphorical sense invested in the objects from which these environments are constructed. In these pieces the significance

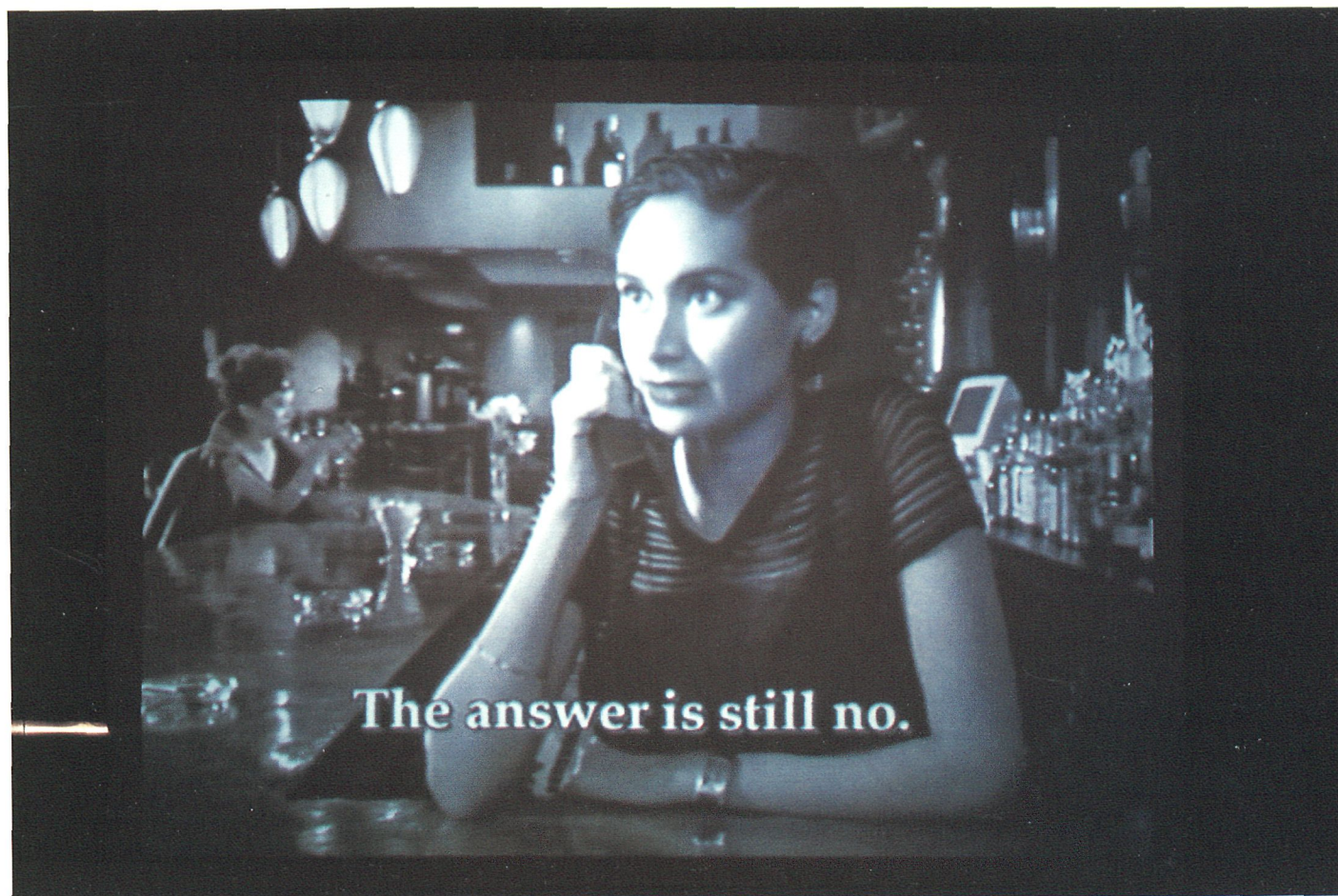
or message is fluid and everchanging; a slippage or migration of meaning occurs.

With installation the mystical realm of the artist's studio is in effect transformed into a public space, since as a genre it seems to disclose a working method as well as the necessary tools. This effectively decenters the authorial role of the artist while centralizing the position of the spectator, who is invited to "complete" each work, both by moving through it and by bringing her own knowledge and history to bear on its explication.

In this way, the artists in "Life's Little Necessities" and others working with installation, encourage viewers to join in the originary moment of constructing meaning and to share in the elation of (self)realization. This move from private intention to public purpose, is propelled along an axis that Cornel West has identified as the movement from pleasure to joy.<sup>5</sup> Here individual delight, experience, and the artist's one-to-one connection with the work of art, is enlarged; signification circulates as part of a wider arena, one that is open to

theoretical reasonings and interventions of the collective. In this small and quotidian gesture, in the slippage of our understanding of objects from the mundane to the metaphorical, in the slide from pleasure to joy, we arrive at the little things that trace the necessities of our communal existence.

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- [1] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," reprinted in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury, eds. *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
  - [2] Owing to administrative and technical problems with the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, the artist was prevented from completing the planned work.
  - [3] See Coco Fusco's interview with Lorna Simpson in *BOMB* no.61 (Fall 1997): 50-55.
  - [4] The collective —Jacqueline Maingard, Heather Thompson, and Sheila Meintjes— seemed aware of the concerns the piece would raise. See Jacqueline Maingard's statement in *Panoramas of Passage. Changing Landscapes of South Africa* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand and Meridian International Center, Washington D.C., 1995): 58.
  - [5] Cornel West as cited in and brilliantly analyzed by Gina Dent, "Black Pleasure, Black Joy: An Introduction," in Michelle Wallace, *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992).



Lorna Simpson (USA). *Call Waiting*, 1997. Video projection.  
2nd Johannesburg Biennale, *Life's Little Necessities*. Photo: Michael Hall.