

CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES: two examples in South African Art

BY BENJAMIN WEIL

The following discussions of two works by South African artists is an attempt to reflect upon the kind of cultural production that has been generated in an environment where the co-existence of various racial communities was defined by a very tight segregation; that has substantially affected the chances to create any interface of exchange. This may explain why one would approach the situation with the “black and white” predicament, although the situation might be substantially more complicated (no mention is made here of the colored communities, which might either relate to themselves as “white” or “black” in terms of their position within the social structure, and the type of relationship they maintain with the other communities).

On another level, the country has suffered a quasi-complete state of isolation, as the international community declared a total embargo which obviously affected culture as well as any other aspect of the social structure. The Western settlers suddenly found

themselves cut off from their cultural roots and confronting an environment that was completely alien to them, as they never established any real form of exchange with the “native” community. Apartheid not only established geographical borders, but it also managed to consolidate the level of non-communication that existed ever since the colonials settled in the country. Consequently, the work of artists of Western origin has also suffered a lack of confrontation with the current thoughts that animate art in Europe or America and other sources were quite difficult to appropriate. Similarly, the black community has had to deal with a constant suppression of their own cultural roots. This was enacted by a systematic redefinition of their territory, and a very strong control. Generally speaking, one has a feeling of confronting to two communities who have been uprooted. These two artists quintessentially express the results of that history, addressing issues that relate to the construction of identity in that context.

The two bodies of work discussed thereafter do reveal a similarity of preoccupations, as well as somehow a similarity of process -the importance of the found object in each body of work, although they are treated differently. These were also chosen because they both stand at the edge of each communities’ practices, in that sense prefiguring the possibility of exchange between the cultures they represent.

WILLIE BESTER

Willie Bester was born in a township, where he experienced the reality of institutional segregation from a black viewpoint. Because they were not given to participate in the establishment of the structure in which they had to live, the black South Africans had to bear the results of decisions made on their behalf. These were assumed by a large majority as an indisputable situation: racism and discrimination of all kinds were to be accepted as a given, for the consequences of disobedience were represented and enacted as far worse



Willie Bester. *Homage to B.* 48 x 48 cm. Photos Courtesy The Goodman Gallery, Sandton (South Africa).

than submission. In a conversation, the artist explained that the generation of his parents and grand parents actually discouraged him and his generation to engage in any form of subversive activity, and rather advocate an attitude of constructive submission, which by their standards meant the construction of a family, the development of a solid professional situation, and the respect of religion. The degree of terror maintained in the townships by the white rulers was another efficient manner to dissuade the most willing activists. The enactment of that control included the constant redefinition of assigned territories, implemented by forced removals and

paramilitary attacks conducted in black armored vehicles that would blindly shoot on the population.

In his two-dimensional depiction of life in the townships, Bester describes this terror literally; expressing the disequilibrium in force that existed between the oppressor and the oppressed. These pictures also expose the state of extreme poverty in which the inhabitants of the townships still live today. That poverty also explains how many black people preferred submission and its sort of security; working as a prosthetician for a white dentist, Bester assumed that passive behavior. The awakening of his conscience only

occurred when he later took a job as a policeman and subsequently became the representative of white order in the township. Having to fight his peers made him realize to what extent the law he was to enforce was unjust, and he then started getting acquainted with those he was supposed to repress. More than a mere context for the elaboration of his work, this situation has conditioned not only the form, but the essence of his art. Indeed, the artist started that practice in getting actively involved with a local community Arts Center, where he was able to develop his own body of works as well as teaching and being exposed to the work of other artists including a few white ones who were involved with the development of those structures alongside their black peers. His vision of art is that of an agency of socio-political evolution. In that light, representing the life of the township became his tool for expressing his resistance, a means to develop his thought process and define a strategy of opposition, as well as a means to generate a rebellious consciousness among his peers. Wille Bester's work blends a Western-like conceptual grounding with an African iconography. That characteristic is what makes his work so particular. Indeed, very few other South African artists happen to have access to both cultures and establish a dialogue between the two of them, eventually revealing the similarities that may exist in their processes. The traditional

African sculptors carve found pieces of wood to reveal what they relate to as the form and spirit these contain, not unlike the classical Western sculptor who often refers to the raw material as being in itself a source of inspiration.

His working process resembles the one of a detective and of an archaeologist. From the latter, he borrows the meticulousness of collecting what constitutes the daily life of his people; from the former, the attitude and manner in which he will represent that daily life with those “clues” that he gathered. All the pieces he produces are based on events that have occurred in the neighborhoods where he was given to live or in other townships. He collects information and evidence from the scene of an event and then assembles it in two or three-dimensional form. Sculpting out of junk, the artist also refers to the traditional art-making of his people, who used to carve out found pieces of wood. The paint that serves as a link between the constituent parts of these assemblages echoes the transformation in meaning and form that carving brings to the found pieces of wood. What this reference brings out is the fact that people usually lived nomadically in a more or less defined territory. The partition of the land as per the various laws passed by the colonial ruler has modified the relationship to territory, and living in a somewhat urban environment determines the kind of raw material one can “carve” out of. The two-dimensional work depicts more

literally the landscapes in which he was given to live. They somehow echo in a strange manner the paintings produced by white artists in the early part of the century; one can see in those the manner in which the traditional relationship that is maintained with nature differs from Western culture to African. While the Westerners tend to romanticize the African landscape as being closest to the original state of nature, local culture assumes the environment as a given in which they are to operate in harmony with the elements, not much differently from the Asians. The sculptural pieces express a physical confrontation with the violence he was exposed to: careful assemblages of found objects take the shape of soldiers in armor which represent the para-military organization which used to come into townships in black armored cars to “pacify” the environment, translated in the daily maintenance of terror in the townships. With his series of benches, the artist addresses similar preoccupation in a slightly different manner. These indeed are made of wood which bears traditionally carved decorative patterns. They serve as supports for clues that evoke the condition of “colored” people, more specifically the definition of their identity within the system of laws that has been imposed on them: titles and constituent elements evoke such events as the passing of laws relating to Apartheid or major rebellions against the established order. They also become a gallery of portraits of resistance heroes

which have contributed to the evolution of the socio-political context.

Willie Bester’s work functions as an ongoing documentary of the social conditions in which he has been given to live which happen to be based on the color of his skin. The artist is a privileged witness of his environment. He perceives art as an important instrument of change inasmuch as the blatant representation of oppression can serve the purpose of awakening a consciousness of political responsibility.

KENDELL GEERS

Kendell Geers was raised in Johannesburg. As a white male, his education was tinted with the contradictions that such a condition would generate: on the one hand, being exposed to the reality of living in Africa with the privileged status of a settler, attending the classes of a university where the colonial frame of mind was being perpetuated, where no reference was made to the geopolitical context; on the other hand, being confronted to the very fact of not “belonging” to the soil, and being constantly reminded of this state of things, particularly in the light of the political changes that have occurred recently. The education the artist has received was more focused on formal issues deriving from Western culture than on the particularity of the geopolitical context in which his work would be grounded in. That results in a lack of resources to question issues of

representation that would enable him to address the specificity of the situation.

It is therefore not surprising to find in the artist's work a very strong tension that exposes the discrepancy between the will to insert his practice in a Western art historical tradition, and the impossibility to do so given the predicament he finds himself in, that radically differs from the one of colleagues raised and educated in a –somewhat– homogeneous Western culture.

Each piece formally echoes -or blatantly quotes- the developments of Twentieth Century Western art. They however attempt to reflect upon the inadequacy of the references when applied to the place they are produced and the public that is to experience them. For instance, Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* is represented covered with plastered fabric and stained with red paint; in a similar manner, Robert Morris's felt sculptures become body bags that hang wide open on the wall as an anticipation of the next load of dead bodies that the ongoing guerrilla will generate.

Until the recent political developments which might have put an end to the everlasting civil war, South Africa was indeed a place where violence was so entrenched in daily life that seeing dead bodies on the street became part of the regular experience in the urban environment. A very strong feeling of



Kendall Geers.

insecurity was also felt among the white community, living with the probability of an imminent attack. In affluent white neighborhoods, each house is isolated from the street with high walls topped with razor blade wire. In fact, each community lives with the fear of being exposed to the anger of another, and these lines of demarcation can be found almost everywhere. Rolls of blade wire enact the artist's reference to minimal art in a sculpture that obviously refers to the territorial marking and the consequent tensions they produce. Geers turns every signifier of violence into a ready made. Any object can be turned into a weapon, including what can be traditionally understood as material for construction: urban violence literally translates in its deconstruction.

Brick, garbage bags, or an attaché case are exhibited in perimeters of security that can be found around a crime scene; they also bear a textual rendering of the manner in which they were used as weapons. Similarly, his old paintings are wrapped in police line, "do not trespass" plastic tape. Painting quaint landscapes or beautiful abstraction in the realm of South Africa has become virtually impossible; covering those images up also reveals how a white supremacist representation of the country is no longer feasible; the situation is one of urgency where the white community can only witness the end of the colonial era and question its future as citizens of a country where power is shared with the once oppressed black majority. Using a similar strategy, Geers presents bags of

shredded bank notes which symbolize the end of the white-only ruling of the country; it seems obvious that the currency will have to reflect the political change.

Going back to his vision of Duchamp, one could also point out that what Kendell Geers seems also to express is the limit of that all-white all-Western cultural reference. Like most of the South African artists of his generation, Geers introduces the issue of anger vis-à-vis the lack of realism and obsessive denial that characterizes the attitude of his ancestors. It took almost fifty years of bloodshed and total isolation from the international community for South African rulers to realize that their political system was *no longer* sustainable. The younger generations have to bear not only the result of such blindness, but also the guilt expressed by the more liberal background which most of the artists probably originate from.

Appropriation has been at the core of the Western artistic practice for the past ten or fifteen years. Based on theoretical writings by such prominent figures as Baudrillard or Foucault among others, many artists engaged in the discussion of issues such as presentation and contextualization of the art work within the continuum of history, thereby exposing how, for instance, the institutional frame in which they were operating based its criteria of appreciation on such concepts as

authorship. The codification of representation and the deconstruction of the structure that prevailed in the art produced by European and American artists seemed to address the reification of the art object as a result of a lack of rituals and the need for a system of icons that would fill in the gap. The denunciation of a patriarchal order was also one of the main preoccupations of many female artists; similar attitudes were adopted by artists belonging to communities that are discriminated on the basis of race, religion, or sexual choice.

Kendell Geers reflects upon this approach. He however furthers his practice to meta-appropriation. His relationship to that production is more *one of denunciation*. In his work, quotations somehow serve as a manner to expose the disempowerment the artist experiences in a context that is increasingly hostile to Western cultural imperialism.

Similarly, he refuses to refer to formal elements that belong to local culture, as it seems that he does not believe that those can be manipulated so easily from his position as a member of the once dominating racial community. That in itself reasserts the degree to which the segregation instigated by his ancestors has affected communication and cultural exchange between the various co-existing communities in South Africa.

Geers likes to think of himself as a cultural terrorist. This romanticization of terrorism is a characteristic commonly found among white South African male artists. Somehow, and beyond the labelling which might sound a little self indulgent lies the reality of a generation whose parents have finally decided to modify the structures of blatant privilege in which they have brought up their children thereby leaving them with the bearing of the changes without any preparation.



Kendell Geers.