

Emerging Art Center

JOHANNESBURG

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Johannesburg, born spontaneously of a Euro-American-led gold rush in 1886 (van Onselen 2001), is South Africa's industrial heart and Africa's wealthiest city, a young, sprawling, polycentric people magnet motivated by opportunity and riddled with challenges (van Onselen 2001). It is also known as Jozi, Joburg, or eGoli, depending on which of its almost four and a half million inhabitants you ask. Today this thriving metropolis continues to fuel the subsistence and lifestyle needs of the southern African subcontinent and its various social classes. Few of these have any direct contact with institutional "fine" art, but with a vibrant visual culture making visible its mixed histories, cosmopolitan spaces, and constant intermingling and improvisation, Johannesburg today inspires the reexamination of urban theory itself. Residents of Johannesburg have the capacity to generate "their own cultural forms, institutions, and lifeways, but also with the ability to foreground, translate, fragment, and disrupt realities and imaginaries originating elsewhere" (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, ix). For those in the fine art industry, this is the place to be. It is where the major section of the market as well as access to funding is concentrated (Hagg 2010).

White minority rule and legally enforced racial segregation (apartheid) have been removed institutionally since the first democratic elections in 1994, and economic divisions seemed to be very slowly shifting at time of writing. South Africa's black middle class, though only 2 percent of the population, has more than doubled since 2004 (ten years after democracy),

accounting for 4.3 million people in 2012, and is gaining increasing economic power—also as art lovers and buyers. In annual household spending, it now outranks its white counterpart group (Unilever Institute of Strategic Marketing 2012). A black super-wealthy elite (“black diamonds”) forms part of this, with rising visibility. The Black Collectors’ Forum, founded 2014, aims to promote the buying, investing, and appreciation of visual art in the emerging black-middle-class market (Mabandu 2015).

Johannesburg is continually being torn down, renovated, and rebuilt—evidence of rapid economic expansion for some. Socioeconomically, however, after over twenty years of democratically elected African National Congress (ANC) rule, 47 percent of South Africans live in poverty, in fact, a sad 2 percent increase since 1994. South African unemployment formally stands at 25 percent, and 50 percent among young black men. Despite affirmative action and black economic empowerment (BEE) laws, black citizens continue to earn on average six times less than their white counterparts (Statistics South Africa 2011). All this is not good news for the art world, which often exists not because but in spite of these conditions, through a machinery that still largely operates through white gatekeepers, affecting the power relations reproduced by all art institutions. The 2010 HSRC Report on the Visual Arts Industries found 58 percent of respondent practicing artists to be white, with black women (12 percent) being particularly poorly represented.

Speaking ten years after democracy, in 2004, the curator Khwezi Gule summed up the art world’s challenges:

It is obvious that some people would gauge the significance of the past 10 years in terms of South African artists’ ability to become part of the global (read European/American) art elite. Others would gauge it in terms of the degree to which art institutions within the country have been able to achieve transformation in terms of demographics, aesthetic biases, discourses, rules and processes. Others still would like to understand how the various groups of elites have contested the terrain left open by the demise of apartheid and how the politics of aesthetics have mediated these contexts. (Gule 2004, 6)

Twenty-five years of my life have been spent in Johannesburg, and more are to come. My paradoxical city continues to surprise me, fascinate me, and elude my understanding. I will attempt to tell this history as inclusively as possible, knowing that I do not speak for all. Moreover, as an artist, it is considered taboo for me to comment on the market forces that determine our survival. I can only do so minimally.

During my first decade, the 1980s, my parents sold art in the park at Zoo Lake. Unusually for the times, this artist-run initiative also hosted black artists, and eavesdropping on adult conversations when families shared a shade cloth, I first got acquainted with black people who were not domestic servants. I remember the social awkwardness of attending an all-black birthday party in Soweto, or secretly visiting the painter Mokgaba Helen Sebidi in a commune in then whites-only suburban Troyeville. It had to be explained to me that it was illegal for her to be there. Although I attended progressive, mixed-race schools, I only began to understand the national implications of our isolated white privileges when in 1994, at the age of fourteen, I experienced the euphoric fall of apartheid. Only a year later, at the 1995 Johannesburg Biennale, curated by Lorna Ferguson, I was able to have my first experience of international contemporary art; 250 artists from eighty countries were represented, on a platform aspiring to equality, alongside white and black South African artists. The Biennale encouraged suburban whites to explore abandoned inner-city venues they had last visited in their youth and to puzzle over artworks that none of their cultural-boycott-era high school art education or limited art institutions had prepared them for. After approximately four decades of isolation, the world had come to us, and adults educated or well-travelled enough to understand showed themselves deeply moved. I encountered the work of artists like Marlene Dumas, who had left South Africa in 1976, and Berni Searle, whose career as a local woman of color was just beginning to attract visibility in South Africa. In a review on the event written in 1995, the artist Candice Breitz sums up the challenges of that decade: "The Biennale could not and did not redress the imbalances entrenched . . . over decades of discrimination. . . . It provided a forum in which a vocabulary more pertinent to the South African context began to emerge" (Breitz 1995, 94).

The second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997, curated by Okwui Enwezor, far more polished than its predecessor, was officially closed a month ahead of schedule, citing financial challenges of the city of Johannesburg. There were to be no further Johannesburg Biennales. These must have been enormously expensive but very important exercises. It must also have become clear that the audience was very small, elitist, and white. I remember being almost entirely alone in big industrial halls aside from the security guard.

Public funding for the arts in modern democracies depends on tax money from a large middle class. In 1995 and 1997, the white middle class in South Africa was a dwindling fraction of the population, and the black middle class

lacked the muscle to contribute economically, and therefore ideologically, to state visual arts funding. (Minimal public funding remains one of the arts sector's biggest setbacks.) The power of the large exhibition format known as the biennial is of course that its intention is not to profit; it is conceived as a gift to society—but someone must bear the cost. Striking a compromise between profit and cultural value, the *Spier Contemporary* exhibition, brought to Johannesburg from Cape Town in 2007 and 2009, styled itself as a biennial produced with private corporate funding. It did not survive economic hard times.

Having personally grappled with the discontinuation of such formative events in South African art history, I have come to accept that perhaps this elaborate biennial format does not cater to the most pressing needs of a young postcolonial democracy, which should prioritize employment, running water, and basic sanitation. Supporting an international art event would have seemed impractical and hopelessly pretentious to some municipal decision-makers in 1997. This disconnection from local contexts and audiences is noted by the Nigerian curator Bisi Silva in her review, which concludes: "For future Biennales, Johannesburg needs to find a format that will connect to its African neighbors without the forfeit of its global aspirations" (Silva 1998, n.p.).

In contrast, eleven years later, post-apartheid South Africa has created the Joburg Art Fair, a glamorous contemporary art fair staged annually since 2008 by Artlogic, a privately held company, with funding from First National Bank (FNB). Drawing all South Africa's large galleries, as well as influential individual market players from Europe, it boasts a full program of talks, an art prize, and guest artists of global standing. More recently, the annual Turbine Art Fair, supported by AngloGold Ashanti, has sought to create a market for emerging art. These events financially support themselves, and as private initiatives independent of political goodwill, they seem to have evolved as the only form currently practicable in South Africa. Artlogic won the government tender for the curation and exhibition of the South African pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015 and 2017, a move that would seem to reflect the muscle of private capital in such matters.

Privatization and gentrification are general themes that will remain part of the consequences of economic upward mobility in South Africa. In the 1990s, as apartheid fell in a South Africa celebrating democracy, neoliberalism and globalization triumphed internationally, posing drastic threats to democracy as we know it (Bond 2014). Beyond the scope of this article, such corruption scandals defined the Jacob Zuma presidency starting in 2009, a

legacy that will take the country decades to recover from. Johannesburg's inner city in the 1980s and 1990s was deserted by big business due to fears of crime and the influx of rapid immigration from the African continent. I watched the city change on daily bus commutes to the National School of the Arts in Braamfontein, on the edges of the inner city, also home to the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Middle-class people started to trickle back into "Braam" in the late 1990s. During this time, property developers started buying up lofts, and Johannesburg acquired the reputation among artists of being Africa's Berlin. An independent German curator who had lived there in his early twenties once told me Jozi was his favorite city in the world. I am regularly amazed at how international newcomers move into the city to take full advantage of the broad spectrum of nightlife and entertainment, given the reluctance of many suburban South Africans of all ethnicities to venture into town due to the distance, lack of night-time public transport, and the ever-present fear of crime. Statistically, perhaps in part to its conscientious data collection, South Africa dubiously tops the list when it comes to violent crimes on the African continent (Harrendorf, Heiskanen and Malby 2010). Today Braamfontein is the home of WAM (Wits Art Museum), and a growing number of small independent galleries, as well as the Johannesburg branch of Stevenson, one of South Africa's most prominent galleries for contemporary art, with a wide international distribution program.

Within thirty minutes' drive through the crowded inner city lies the private property development Maboneng, part of the formerly run-down light industrial neighborhood of Troyeville. Black and white upper-middle-class people can afford to live and work in this now trendy neighborhood in the city, something almost unheard of during apartheid. Developers invited adventurous creative individuals to occupy studio space in their buildings there, starting with the mixed-lifestyle space "Arts on Main," using urban renewal models tried and tested in London, New York, and Berlin. William Kentridge is the anchoring tenant here, with warehouse-size studio space. David Krut has a branch of his printmaking studio and bookshop. A number of galleries have come and gone. The one that has showcased the most independent work has arguably been the German-funded Goethe on Main, hosting a number of young black artists' first solo shows.

Ahead of migrating to a nine-month residency in Paris in October 2015, I house-sat a loft in downtown Johannesburg, not far from the fashionable gentrified Maboneng precinct, with stunning views from the roof of the

building. It was the base of Ayana V Jackson, an American artist who calls Joburg home. Like a growing number of international artists, having lived in New York, L.A., and Berlin, she enjoys a lifestyle she told me is no longer possible anywhere else in the world. Working in Johannesburg with Gallery MOMO, South Africa's only black-owned gallery, which put Mary Sibande on the map, and somewhat notoriously paved the return of South Africa to the Venice Biennale, Jackson is perfectly positioned as a woman of African American descent to participate in the global market for African contemporary art.

Mary Sibande's character Sophie first attracted public attention featured on billboards across Johannesburg. Making historical reference to the oppression of black women in South Africa, but restaging it as heroic celebration, Sophie is inspired by Sibande's great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother, all domestic workers, whose labor contributed to sending her to university. In South Africa, and in the global diaspora, as intellectual currency, the work of these artists grappling with blackness as "body" has the power to anneal the fissures of colonial history. It may even fulfill the function of nation-building, which is one of the criteria for funding prioritized by the government Department of Arts and Culture. Further, it currently seems evident that a private self-funded black-owned entity like Gallery Momo can politically and economically participate in foreign markets through *both* commercial and public exhibition formats. In 1995, the world had to come to us, but twenty years later, we are actively exporting our newfound South African cultures.

The question remains of how African art with activist intentions is read in the oversaturated white, ironic mainstream art world of Europe and America, centers African art and artists must utilize in their quest to participate in global flows of power, as Nicholas Bourriaud outlines in *The Radicant* (2009). Bourriaud makes the point that the desire for a peaceful multicultural society, in order to fulfill the dream first popularized by the United Nations, requires the participation of artists who obviously represent those nations in the limited understanding one has of them. In the hard, fast, and expensive international art world, South African art is often reduced to the keywords "indigenous tradition, apartheid and Mandela" (as an observant Swiss curator once remarked to me), and exhibition selections are made to reflect this. The desire to be "inclusive," in true liberal form, is still a superficial "us" and "them" approach in which white people take it upon themselves to include "the others," never considering their own alterity. Bourriaud argues that to include people on the basis of their ethnicity is in fact

patronizing, since the intention is to demonstrate how they can all be brought together in these central places of power. He further suggests that it can be cruel encouragement to foreign artists who do not understand on what basis they are being selected, and that their work is in fact not necessarily regarded as “equal” in the discourse of international contemporary art debates according to the centers of power. The *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition organized by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1989 is often cited as an early example, in which the desire to be inclusive results instead in unspoken alienation.

Today, this is a factor consciously motivating the critical work of a number of young black artists in South Africa, often to great irony. Athi Patra-Ruga’s tapestries, often referencing ethnic souvenir kitsch in deliberately “bad” taste, are an example, sold with great success to foreign collections.

These overdeveloped centers are, as the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek among others argues, postpolitical. In such neoliberal societies emerging post–Cold War, political choice is reduced to giving consent to being managed and policed, and “politics proper is progressively replaced by expert social administration” (Bryant 2015). Civic participation is at an all-time low. Young people stop voting because their consent is not needed, and any illusion of choice, even right-wing, begins to seem desirable to voters. Affected by global neoliberalism, ANC-led South Africa also shows aspects of this consensual politics. However, as the nationwide student protests of 2015 and 2016 again showed, young black South African intellectuals are passionate about forging their own independent African and decolonial identity. Democracy remains a relatively recent and hard-earned right. The very struggle for a modern individual identity is one that must be defended, and can get you killed by older social structures. Zanele Muholi has highlighted an example in her “Faces and Phases” portrait series making visible the independence of lesbian and transgender lives in townships, where lesbians are often subject to “corrective” rape or even murder by male relatives who wish to silence them. In 2016, Muholi made number 95 in Art Review’s Top 100 List, ranking her as the most influential woman in the African Art world that year (van Niekerk 2016). What meaning a photograph of one of these women, possibly nude, selling at a high price at Basel Art Fair, is able to have when bought and transferred into a private collection on another continent in a postpolitical society remains hotly debated among South African intellectuals, but publicly discussing such topics is taboo, since it is bad for business. Does it empower the artist or does it devalue the context of the work?

While there have been efforts in all economic sectors to transform corporate ownership through black economic empowerment (BEE), it remains a logistical challenge that the South African art market is based on export of black artists (representing 80 percent of the population) by white gallerists (representing 8.9 percent) (Statistics South Africa 2011), mainly selling works to non-South African collections through the fairs in Basel and Miami. It is the work of the Black Collectors' Forum to redress this within South Africa. The open secret is also often remarked upon in private conversations, such as a discussion I had over breakfast in October 2015 with Molemo Moilola, national director of the developmental nonprofit Visual Arts Network of South Africa (VANSA), which conducts industry research, lobbies the state, provides educational talks, and has and builds information resources for and about artists in South Africa and on the continent.

As a proposal and grant writer for VANSA Western Cape from 2008 to 2011, much of my time was spent advocating for art as a viable economic activity, and therefore worthy of funding support. Government knowledge when it comes to visual art has been limited. The Arts and Culture Ministry, once considered a safe "training ground" for higher government positions, has only recently begun to attract employees with working experience in other institutions. State-commissioned reports going back to 1998 identify music, publishing, and particularly the craft and film sectors as suitable for the task of rural and urban job creation, and current policy remains informed by this (CAJ 2007). Visual art has not been a priority for the ANC-led government beyond the craft sector. In 2002, Brand South Africa reported the craft sector as being estimated to employ 1.2 million people, contributing R3.4 billion to the South African economy every year (Russouw 2002). More recent figures focusing on the visual arts after the rapid growth initiated by the Joburg Art Fair and Turbine Art Fair are not currently available.

Given the facts of economic hardship, it is easy to come up against the accusation that visual art is elitist and expensive, but this opinion has been shifting in recent years. The Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) was built in 1915 with a British colonial patron's funding to house the nation's treasures (read the history of white people) in a once trendy area that is currently still considered an inner-city slum. JAG and cultural institutions like it have sought to ensure social transformation through a representative exhibition program, affirmative action staff appointment policies, and educational initiatives. It was already collecting art by black artists in the 1930s and holds major contemporary works of local and international importance (R. Sassen

2015). Research by VANSAs positions JAG as the most visited art museum in Africa, with 90 percent of visitors being black and young. It can barely operate under the comparatively small amount of state funding it receives, which was highlighted in 2012 when a burst sewage pipe flooded the basement and threatened to engulf two storerooms containing artworks with an estimated worth of R500 million, and the gallery could not even afford to call a plumber (Kuper 2012).

There have been further efforts citywide to break the stereotypes that visual art is elitist through the adoption and implementation of a public art policy by the city of Johannesburg. Between 2005 and 2010, the year of the FIFA World Cup, R15 million was spent in the city by local and provincial government funding, as well as corporate funding (Hagg 2010).

If the interest in investment art is growing among the general population, this may have something to do with its private utilitarian value. South African art from the 1980s now commands a high price on local and international auctions. Acting on well-considered political concerns, the private art dealer Andile Magengele, one of the initiators of the Black Collectors' Forum, concentrates on selling West and Central African painters to his black South African clients.

A quick glance through a trade publication like the *South African Art Times*, or the accessibly priced Turbine Art Fair, will show that the majority of South African galleries live off the interior decor market. Certainly the distinctions blur, but while some like to include more ambitious works and artists in their shows, these do not have access to buyers that will support this market. There are still relatively few South African galleries presenting at international art fairs, or that have branches in both Johannesburg and Cape Town. The gallery triumvirate, as they are often called by art critics, are Stevenson, Goodman, and increasingly Everard Read, which has built a market for modern contemporary art through the prominently placed and architecturally noteworthy Circa Gallery in Johannesburg, soon to open a duplicate in Cape Town. By sheer financial ability, these exist in contrast to the reach and scope of institutional spaces such as the national galleries, university-run galleries, and project spaces operated by French and German cultural organizations. Openings at artist-run galleries such as Room, Kalashnikov, Sosesame, and No End Contemporary are filled with hopeful 20-something intellectuals and aesthetes, providing opportunities for a generation rising in independence. Sadly, such artist-run spaces are often short-lived, most often the experimental ones aligned with exploring critical discourse. The curator Gabi Ncobo's

collaborative platform "Centre for Historical Reenactments" (founded in 2010) provides a vital experimental research platform for the development of relevant debates on the challenges faced by black artists in South Africa today. It staged its own suicide in 2012, and currently finds a home within the Wits University School of Arts. More recently, her work in Johannesburg has taken place through "NGO—Nothing Gets Organised," a project space co-operated with the artists Dineo Bopape and Sinethemba Thwalo.

The fact that they continue to exist in Johannesburg must be celebrated. Even the former township Soweto, from whence many black artists, like the painter George Pemba (1912–2001), once departed into exile, boasts the beginnings of its own locally supported art scene, in the form of pop-up exhibitions run by the young curator Zanele Mashumi (Memela 2013).

The 2010 HSRC report on the Visual Art industries acknowledges certain entry barriers. "Occupations in the sector are generally knowledge-intensive and the majority require comparatively high levels of both formal education and on-the-job experience before significant professional validation and concomitant economic reward is achieved, whether as an artist, administrator, curator, gallerist or dealer. . . . While [it is] easy to enter the industry . . . it is difficult to sustain entrepreneurial activity in the absence of patiently nurtured networks of artists, suppliers of services and—most importantly—buyers" (Hagg 2010).

For early-career artists, considering the sheer size and resources of the international art world, what may be considered avant-garde and worth historical notice is a matter of institutional perception, and visibility is far too often only possible through good marketing budgets that are beyond personal means. I shared a studio at the artist-run organization Assemblage in Newtown with Minenkulu Ngoyi and Isaac Zavale, who together are Alphabet Zoo. They were trained at the legendary Artist Proof Studios nearby, where students travel in daily from homes often many kilometers outside the city to learn their trade. The tourist clichés of shacks in dusty streets, crowded minibus taxis, and exclusive cocktail parties at exhibition openings form part of the contrasting urban playground of these young printmakers. Mini, as he is known, likes to keep some zines in his pocket, something Alphabet Zoo is known for. Inspired collaboratively, using any found ideas or materials, from the Lion matchbox cover to the city's ubiquitous leaflets promising penis enlargement or the return of lost lovers, their playful approach and biting sense of humor has attracted attention internationally, but at time of writing, in 2016, none of the artists based at Assemblage

had regular gallery representation. The case is similar at other inner city artist hubs like August House and Nugget Street Studios.

I see artists like Mini and Zak as foot soldiers in a young democracy. Like many of the successful young black men who are their peers, their prints are economically and aesthetically affordable to the growing black middle-class art buyer. This is where the value of the European import of "fine art" needs to be interrogated and cultivated if a truly inclusive and representative support base for more challenging South African art practices is to be established—a task currently taken on by the Black Collectors' Forum.

Eventually, since my income was not based on art sales, I could not longer afford the rent and moved out of this studio space, relying on a number of international residencies in the following years. Zak and Mini, who never attended university, really struggle to make it happen. Today their partnership with Assemblage, the artist-run Prints on Paper printing studio, which they manage and own shares in, allows them to stay put. In their milieu, they are currently unlikely to be introduced to players in the upper echelons of the art world, such as the museum, biennial, or art fair circuit, who go shopping at university graduate shows and would expect them to justify their work in art historical theory. The irony is that they are perfectly placed to grow with the rapidly emerging private South African market for their work, whereas most local university fine arts graduates are unable even to cover their production costs from art sales and the minimal public funding available. In our young democracy, the grand ambition of the publicly funded biennial exhibition for society has proved untenable, while the privately funded art fair model has sustained itself. Similarly, self-funded practice and the challenges of engaging with commerce and corporate funders seem like the most realistic way forward for the majority of individual artists working and living in Johannesburg today.