



Figures & Fictions: The Ethics and Poetics of  
Photographic Depictions of People

Friday 24 & Saturday 25 June

Victoria & Albert Museum

Hochhauser Auditorium

**Abstracts**

Anna Douglas

Alfred Duggan-Cronin

Today, as well as provoking an aesthetic response, the work of Alfred Duggan-Cronin may be understood as hybrid and syncretic representations of 'actual moments' - the preservation of cultural conditions and situations - and as semi-staged tableaux that convey something of the photographer's own 'native fantasies'. It is perhaps ironic that these photographs, produced at the time of colonialism, have the potential to make visible (and therefore empower) personal as well as collective histories. Whilst at the same time, for others they are representations and objects of colonial appropriation and fetishised difference.

Over 90 years, response to Alfred Duggan-Cronin's work - in all its various forms - has continuously changed and continues to do so. As artistic and ethnographic objects they write and perform ideas of race and racial difference for new audiences. The paradox, perhaps, is that while Duggan-Cronin photographed customs and rituals that distinguished indigenous peoples from white society (e.g, initiation ceremonies), and that language used to describe his works consistently emphasised their 'authentic nativeness' (read *different* from white), his photographs are characterised by humanist values, expressed through western archetypes, that advance the idea of commonality and universality across black and white society: motherhood, love, courtship, the idea of community, and most interestingly, the idea of an ordered society, governed by royals. Alfred Duggan-Cronin is caught up, indeed is produced by and yet simultaneously tries to side-step the philosophies of racial difference. By the 1950s, a white man of his class and position in South Africa could not afford to ignore the anxieties around race.

The photographs of Alfred Duggan-Cronin were exhibited recently in the touring exhibition *Life Less Ordinary*, curated by Anna Douglas. They had not been seen in Britain since the 1950s.

Darren Newbury

Cape Town People: Bryan Heseltine's South African Portraits 1950-  
52

This paper is based on a largely un-researched collection of photographs made by Bryan Heseltine in the early 1950s in South Africa. The work was originally shown in Cape Town in 1952 under the auspices of the South African Institute for Race Relations (ostensibly as a survey of housing conditions), and subsequently travelled to London where in 1955 it was exhibited in the crypt of St Martin in the Fields, connecting the work to the emerging anti-apartheid movement as an early attempt to find a visual language with which to represent apartheid South Africa to a British public. The collection includes some remarkable portraits of black African subjects providing an intimate portrayal of township life. These provide the main focus of the paper. The images are situated historically in the context of representations of black African subjects, specifically the emergence of photographic studies of urban Africans. It is only in the post-war period that African subjects begin to be represented in urban settings, providing a stark contrast to the more conventional performance of African identity as ethnic and rural, as for example featured in the Van Riebeeck Festival held in Cape Town in 1952, images of which are also included in the collection. Finally, the paper reflects on the 're-discovery' of these photographs and the issues involved in their re-exhibition.

#### **Ashraf Jamal**

#### **"No flab, no space, no pretension": Billy Monk in South Africa today**

In her blisteringly compelling essay, "Now you've gone 'n killed me," Lin Sampson says of Billy Monk's photographs: "They were the first photographs I'd seen by a South African photographer that were right there. He had a way of moving with his camera right along the cutting edge. There was no flab, no space, no pretension." In the tradition of gonzo journalism Sampson relays the riveting story of Billy Monk's life and death, the discovery of his negatives by Jac de Villiers, and his posthumous triumph. Exhibited at the Brighton Photography Biennial in 2010, and now the subject of a major retrospective in South Africa's premier art arena, the Michael Stevenson Gallery, Monk's photographs have proved irresistible. Images of nightclub life in the 1960's, they have a canny currency in this "post-post apartheid" or "post-transitional" moment. Records of the "jol," rave, or debauched party, they vividly echo today's inner-city culture which, with its deluded sense of non-accountability and cool acceptance of being caught "between shit and derivative," invokes a certain casual nihilism. That Monk's photos more obviously evoke the rock 'n roll revolution is not the focus of this paper; rather, what will be addressed is their potency as visual correlatives or symptoms for a contemporary national-and-transnational society which, having lost its hold on morality, thrives within the extra-moral. It is important to note that I am not advocating what J.M. Coetzee calls a prurient and sentimental longing for lost moral values; rather, after Lin Sampson, I am celebrating the long overdue release of an optic and state of being unconstrained by the ideological strictures which, for too long, have over determined South African photography.

Michael Godby

In Black and White: Some Thoughts on recent Documentary  
Photography in South Africa

The paper examines two representations of the Shembe Church festival, one by the noted documentary photographer, Paul Weinberg, and the other by Zwelethu Mthethwa, who has strongly distanced himself from the documentary tradition in South Africa. The paper explores the medium, style and vantage point of the two projects and uses this comparison as a starting point to question the function and nature of documentary photography in South Africa today.

**Amy Halliday**

Considering the Human/Animal in Contemporary South African  
Photography

From safari to sacrifice, conservation to consumption, discourses of the animal are writ large on the (South) African landscape. But these discourses also form a prevailing narrative web around the historical depiction of people, for example in ethnographic photography's notions of capturing and conserving a visual record of groups of people 'endangered' by the physical and cultural encroachment of colonialism, or in the framing of white masculinity encoded in hunting portraits. In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe asserts that the 'discourse on Africa is almost always deployed in the framework (or on the fringes) of a meta-text about the *animal*... its experience, its world, and its spectacle'. If we are to address the pervasive fictions of figuration in South Africa in a 'posthuman(ist)' moment in critical theory, it is necessary to look towards the representational violence levied on Africa and Africans through discourses of the animal, interrogating that most enduring of binaries: human/animal.

In my paper I consider two contemporary photographers - Pieter Hugo and Daniel Naudé - whose works illuminate ongoing anxieties and localised histories around identity, difference, and the ethics of picturing others, through relation to the animal. Pieter Hugo's 'The Hyena and Other Men' (2005-7), a series in which portraiture sits uncomfortably alongside informing traditions of both ethnography and documentary, has become the controversial subject of representational unease around claims of 'exoticism'. Meanwhile, young photographer Daniel Naudé - known for his lavish photographic portraits of Nguni cows and Africanis dogs - has, in his recent series 'Animal Farm' (2010), extended his reach to include portraiture of farmers, herders and hunters, such that issues of human identity are considered through questions of nature and culture, indigeneity and heritage, breeding and 'race'.

**Liese Van Der Watt**

Reframing the Afrikaner subject: the visual "grammar" of David Goldbatt and Roelof van Wyk

The almost 40 years that separate David Goldblatt's *Some Afrikaners Photographed* from Roelof van Wyk's *Young Afrikaner: a selfportrait* offer an easy explanation for the differences in these two bodies of work. Not only do the immense political changes in these 40 years invariably make one puzzle over the reasons for Goldblatt's 2007 decision to re-issue a book that was controversial 35 years ago, but it also goes some way to explain the recuperative process that is apparently Van Wyk's project. The differences in approach are obvious and legion: the one is outside, the other inside; the one positions Afrikaners as object, the other as subject; the one relies on context and frame, the other deliberately erases context; one builds distance, the other attempts intimacy; one is history, the other contemporary; one unsettles, the other aestheticizes .

While this paper will probe these obvious differences and the effects thereof, it is however more interested in another issue. I will argue that at the core of these seemingly different projects lies a disconcerting similarity that complicates the curative project of Van Wyk's work: I will ask what is at stake in positioning identity - specifically Afrikaans identity - as a noun (Afrikaner) rather than an adjective (Afrikaans-speaking) as both Goldblatt and Van Wyk seem to do in these works. Accordingly, what happens when identity labels become descriptive rather than defining, porous rather than unyielding? With reference to work by other South African artists I will propose, finally, how, and more importantly why, the grammatical journey from Afrikaner to Afrikaans-speaking need to be performed in visual terms.

Carli Coetzee

Translating the gaze, reversing the gaze

In this paper I engage with debates around agency, performance and audience in visual art criticism, but come at these from another point of view. The paper develops a reading of Njabulo Ndebele's essays, in which, I argue, there is sensitivity to context and audience that makes his work potentially useful for artists and art historians. He often seems to be /performing /the position he is developing in his work, for example in his 1986 address to the English Academy of South Africa ("The English Language and Social Change"), in which he argues - /and performs/ - that English is not the private property of a small elite who dictate how it should be used. Ndebele also reflects on the problems of addressing a split audience: that is how to address a particular audience while being watched by others with different aims and viewpoints. This too seems pertinent to much of the debate in visual art studies in South Africa, and I show the connections by engaging with critics and practitioners such as Enwezor, Oguibe, Goniwe and Koloane.

My argument thus engages with questions of representation and portraiture from an inter-disciplinary point of view. As a particular example, I discuss Thembinkosi Goniwe's iconic work "Returning the Gaze" of 2000 in terms of audience and address, showing how the work not only interrogates its audience's

position, but also /performs/an awareness of its split address. Like the writings of Ndebele, I show, Goniwe's art work reflects on questions of containment, power and self-determination; themes central to the conference and exhibition.

Sean O'Toole

My brother is dying: Santu Mofokeng's personal social portrait

In 2004, while preparing for a commercial exhibition in Johannesburg, Santu Mofokeng, a former street photographer, newspaper darkroom technician and photojournalist who now pursues a self-directed career as an exhibiting photographer, received news that his older brother, Ishmael, a practitioner of traditional indigenous medicine, had been diagnosed with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and had further also contracted a virulent strain of tuberculosis. At his brother's request the photographer took Ishmael to Salpeterkraans, near Fouriesburg in the Free State Province; the site of the largest sandstone overhang in the southern hemisphere, the caves here continue to serve as a place of ancestral worship. Mofokeng took a number of photographs of his brother: being wheeled to the caves in barrow, seated in the cave amongst worshippers, and, energised by the visit, walking back to the vehicle. My paper will offer a close reading of one of these photographs, *Ishmael: Eyes Wide Shut* (2004), a work that has enjoyed considerable circulation since it first went on display at his 2004 selling exhibition. I will consider the photographer's statements around the production, titling and import of the photograph in relation to his practice, drawing particularly on statements made shortly after it was taken "I don't usually subscribe to taking pictures of misery," stated Mofokeng. "For me though, this image is about me trying to deal with the fact that my brother is dying, is already dead."; discuss the photograph's subsequent critical reception; elaborate briefly on the political context in which it was made, in particular former president Thabo Mbeki's vigorous debating of the causality of HIV; as well as situate this photograph within a broader continuum of, especially, portraiture focussing HIV-positive persons, in particular by looking at selects works by Gideon Mendell and Pieter Hugo. It is my contention that this intimate portrait offers a compelling social portrait of post-apartheid South Africa, partly because it eschews the strained documentary conventions typically used to portray the country's large HIV positive population. Mofokeng is a singular practitioner, his work marked by his obstinate, wilful, angry, lyrical and engaged vision, a vision that has resulted in a body of work invested with doubt and marked by its subtle refusal to declare itself.

**Andrew van der Vlies**

***Here I Am: Contemporary South African portraiture and the politics of queer knowledge.***

This paper takes as its starting point the work of Zanele Muholi, well known in particular for her intimate photographic portraits of black lesbians. Muholi is interested in the politics of visibility and of the gaze, and regards herself primarily as an

activist seeking to present positive images of queer black life. Her work has been seen in a number of international exhibitions (including *Figures and Fictions*), has garnered praise globally, and attracted appreciation and notoriety in South Africa (a cabinet minister famously branding it "immoral, offensive and going against nation-building"). Making selective comparisons with the work of photographers including Lunga Kama (whose work references Rotimi Fani-Kayode's) and Sabelo Mlangeni (particularly the *Country Girls* series, also represented in the V&A exhibition), I will consider how these photographers subvert the tradition of ethnographic representations of the black body, negotiate the pitfalls of objectification, intervene in the fields of local gender politics, and 'perform' in local and international art spaces. How do these photographers engage visual vocabularies that test the very limits of representation (and of the 'representable') and interrogate modes of seeing that subvert expectations in particularly queer ways? What are the theoretical pay-offs of invoking questions about whether such bodies of work might be regarded as 'archives of affect', and what 'queer' potential does this reveal?

Kerryn Greenberg

Revisiting History: The Influence of Colonial Portraiture in the work of Andrew Putter and Zanele Muholi

In the late 19th century thousands of photographs were taken in studios across Africa by colonial photographers, using beadwork and other accessories on coerced models to create staged portraits of Africans for a European audience and according to European perceptions of the other. Michael Graham-Stewart and Michael Stevenson note that "such contrived stereotyping upheld the pretence that the lives of the subjects were untouched by colonialism, and photographers often went to great lengths to ensure that their images did not allude to cross-cultural influences or the effects of colonialism on their subjects' traditional way of life." While relatively little is known about who produced and consumed many of these images, such photographs are significant for the detailed, albeit distorted, view of the past they offer. They have also become increasingly important as a reference point for photographers working in South Africa today who seek to portray another side of this history, problematise picturing the other and question the relationship between photographer, subject and viewer.

This paper focuses on Andrew Putter's *African Hospitality* series from 2009 and Zanele Muholi's *Beulahs* from 2010. In different ways, these two South African photographers construct images, which engage with this history of representation. Their sitters are not the unidentified and coerced subjects familiar from 19th century photographs taken by Europeans in Africa, but rather active collaborators, conspirators even, in the semi-fictional narratives the photographers create. With the full participation of their subjects, and careful attention to staging the image through their choice of backgrounds, garments and props, Putter and Muholi create images that mimic the styling of 18<sup>th</sup> century British painting and 19<sup>th</sup> century portrait photography in Africa respectively. Putter's painstakingly researched and meticulously

produced photographs of European castaways shipwrecked on South Africa's Wild Coast and adopted by local communities in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are both 'real' in the sense that they are based on true stories and every artefact is genuine and entirely imaginary in the way the subjects and objects are combined and staged. Muholi's *Beulahs* also hover between fact and fiction, past and present. They draw on 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial photographs of Zulu maidens, while simultaneously subverting these by replacing the nubile women with effeminate young men. She also makes use of contemporary versions of traditional dress replete with plastic combs and bangles that clearly signal a different set of concerns to the colonial photographers she mimics.

In this paper a close reading is made of *African Hospitality* and *Beulahs*, situating these two series in relation to the visual colonial tropes they appropriate and confound, something I argue is necessary to understand and fully appreciate the work of Putter and Muholi.