

# みんなのポジトリ

国立民族学博物館学術情報リポジトリ National Museum of Ethnology

## Secular Sacrilege : Space and Representation in Graft, 2nd Johannesburg Biennale

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Richards, Colin メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.15021/00001674">https://doi.org/10.15021/00001674</a>

## Errata

Page	Line	Error	Correct
contents	16	... <u>The Space of</u> ...	... <u>Space and</u> ...
33	2	... <u>The Spectre of</u> ...	... <u>Space and</u> ...

## **Session 2 On Biennales: Through Art, Who Represents What for What?**

### **Secular Sacrilege: The Spectre of Representation in *Graft*, 2nd Johannesburg Biennale**

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Before starting, I want to say two things arising from today's discussion. One is that ideas of 'Africa' and 'authenticity' are a strategic necessity when we speak about art and cultures, although these phrases continue to disturb us. As long as it's reasonably clear what we mean when we use these words, I think the conversation can be productive. The second thing I want emphasize is that I would not agree with any suggestion that these terms need to or even could be expunged from the discourses of art.

My role in the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial was as one of seven curators of the core exhibitions (Okwui Enwezor/ Octavio Zaya, Gerardo Mosquera, Kellie Jones, Hou Hanru, Yu Yeon Kim). I was in fact the only South African of this group, and was invited to curate the only 'South African' show. That is, the only show implicitly located within a national (nationalist) framework — being South Africa. The conflicts and questions that arose from this positioning within the whole event were complicated and fraught, and remain with us.

At the beginning of my presentation here I am going to make some pleas about 'representation,' the difficult subject of this talk. I ask that, for better or worse, we accept representation and violence as inextricable. It is better, it seems to me, to acknowledge as fully as possible the entanglement between representation and violence — and the implications of this — than to wash away or write off that entanglement. Further, I would argue that representation and the idea of 'translation' be strongly linked in our minds. Introducing 'translation' in representation offers us a way we can talk effectively about what moves, challenges, and distresses us about representation, or, more distinctively, artistic representation. 'Translation' also holds within it the questions of violence. I seek to keep it visible.

To elaborate a little; the other term we tend to associate with reading or looking is 'interpretation'. This common association is not in itself problematic; but when we think of 'translation' rather than 'interpretation,' we think more immediately of foreignness or strangeness, and add a certain stress and instability to how we see things. And this stimulates a powerful sense in us that in order to access and appreciate the impossible fullness of artistic expression and communication, we need to commit ourselves to the communicative act in a special way.

'Translation' seems fundamentally more active than the often passive work we call 'interpretation,' especially when 'interpretation' is reduced to a matter of merely

individual subjectivity, or personal 'taste,' as it often is in art. Foreignness and strangeness bring necessary, productive and quintessentially communal (that is social and relational) tensions into our artistic communications with each other. And violence — the violation of clear misreadings, patent misunderstandings, cross-purposes — seems part and parcel of estrangement, foreignness and otherness. At the same time, 'translation' acknowledges the fundamental meaningfulness of the 'other,' the strange, and the foreign.

For the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial I curated an exhibition called *Graft* held at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town. Cape Town is actually about 1,000 miles from Johannesburg, and is regarded by many as the least 'African' (least liberated) city in post-Apartheid South Africa. This location of the 'South African' exhibition in itself raised questions about the marginalization of the local contribution to the Biennial, with the main centre of activity being Johannesburg. At any rate *Graft* was informed and shaped by a number of interlocking ideas about 'graft.' I presented these ideas in a text associated with the exhibition.

Briefly, *Graft* explored the idea of the imperfect fit. It meditated on ways some South African artists were dealing with cultural contact and exchange — themselves so many 'acts of translation' — at the 'post-Apartheid' end of the 20th Century.

The exhibition was organized loosely around three meanings of 'graft.'. The first meaning is botanical and anatomical; 'graft' as in hybrid 'plant' cultivars and as in skin grafts. Here 'graft' involves the cutting and joining of the raw surfaces of 'different' but compatible elements. Metaphorically, 'different' could here be understood in cultural, sexual, racial, spatial — as in rural/urban — as temporal — as in traditional/ contemporary — terms, and so on... The results of 'grafting' in this sense are seldom seamless or invisible. As well as being benign and beneficial, 'graftings' can also lead to disfiguring, scarring, sterility, monsters, rejection and death. The ambiguity between positive and negative was an important part of the work selected for exhibition.

The second meaning is 'graft' as work. Work involves expending bodily energy, often in some sort of exchange — such as in paid labour. I was especially interested in how labour and the body were being reconfigured in contemporary cultural contacts and exchanges; contemporary being the so-called post-modern, post-colonial, post-national 'information' age. How, for example, does the body and labour contribute to a sense of individual and communal 'self,' to identity, in contemporary art?

The third meaning of 'graft' references illicit work; that is, work involving corruption, contraband, bribery, black marketeering and other forms of clandestine economic activity. I intended no necessary moral judgment here, but sought to explore the dynamic effects of those ubiquitous economic activities which fall

outside officially sanctioned, lawful forms of exchange.

As part of other Biennial events I also participated in a panel discussion held in Cape Town, titled *Speaking of Others*. As it happened, this discussion became extremely heated. This heat showed — and reminded — us all, locals and foreigners, quite how difficult it remains to speak about ‘representation’ in South African — or perhaps African — art. Because of our particular history there seems to be an intense energy to and tension in shaping how ‘representation’ plays out in art and in the general media.

The effects of globalization (however understood) were also implicated in this heat. This may partly be because globalization as we experience it in South Africa has coincided both with dramatic historical change and the rampant effects of first-world cultural and economic imperialism. The end of the cold war as played out on our continent and the belated onset of democracy in our country come to mind here. The liberation of the country progressed dramatically at about the same time — the early 1990s — as the more direct pressures of globalization were making themselves felt across much of the globe.

Olu Oguibe, a Nigerian-born curator, writer and artist then resident in the United States, framed the panel discussion in terms I paraphrase selectively here. Oguibe constructed two constituencies in two locations in his framing presentation. One was what he called the ‘expatriation in the metropolis,’ by which he seemed to mean exiled, diasporic cosmopolitan Africans. Included here are people who don’t live on the continent but who have some deep link with ‘Africa.’ Many of these people — especially English-speakers — live in the United States and the United Kingdom. Oguibe’s second constituency was South African, bound by a new ‘nationalism.’ Included here would be those living in the country and who identified themselves with a new, post-Apartheid society.

Amongst artists, writers, curators, viewers these constituencies actually emerged in stark opposition to one another in the Biennial itself. This opposition played on other oppositions, like the perceived antagonisms between those exiled from South Africa (voluntarily or otherwise), and those who remained in the country during Apartheid and after. But perhaps the main way this antagonism was expressed in the Biennial itself, specifically by creative director Okwui Enwezor, was as ‘national’ versus ‘post-national’ identities. The former was implicitly negative, the latter positive. Now many resident South African artists, intellectuals and so on would see ‘post-national’ discourse as continuous with rampant and rapacious globalization, especially as associated with the hegemony of the United States and its English consorts. Those thinking this way would probably recognize ‘nationalism’ as problematic. But they would consider nationalism as a positive force, as an inclusive form of social cement necessary for binding a violently divided post-Apartheid South Africa. They would resist any simplistic rejection of nationalism in some

sweeping, global 'post-nationalism.'

This brings us to the really unmanageable question of representation which animates our discussion today. The backdrop to the panel discussion in Cape Town involved intense debates about pictures that had directly to do with the rights and responsibilities of our acts of representation in art. In this instance, the focus was on sanction and authority; who was entitled to represent 'others', in this case specifically the bodies of black women in the arts? These pictures came from both the 'high' and popular spheres of culture. They referenced, specifically, the imagery and rhetoric of those ubiquitous 'tribal' and wild-life tourist postcards found throughout the region.

The panel discussion was, I think, based on a conflation of 'of' and 'for' in representation (signaled by the title *Speaking of Others*). But, when we speak 'of' another, do we speak 'for' that other? If so, in what way? In the discussion we tried to grapple with the question of whether, in fact, one could speak of oneself without speaking of 'others'. And was this 'of' always also 'for'?

My own feeling was and is that this conflation between 'of' and 'for' is at worst a serious error, or at best profoundly unproductive. Perhaps more to the point is my strong sense that any notion of 'self' is inevitably and unavoidably relational. It seems inconceivable to me, as it must to many, that one could develop a sense of 'self' without a sense of 'otherness', and, indeed, the actual, historical presence and experience of others. Power and hence violence are deep parts of this experience, even if at different removes and felt in different ways. This being so, it amounts to mystification to avoid or attempt to erase this relationality, whether through some kind of neo-liberal cultural tolerance or some reactionary ethnocentric essentialism. If we decided that we could and should only speak 'for' ourselves in some narrow, unrelational, sense, would we not finally find ourselves estranged, enslaved, locked in separate enclaves of cultural solipsism, not speaking to each other at all? Was this not the very underpinning of separate development that grounded and animated 'grand' apartheid?

At the panel discussion I and others presented the common enough view that one could not, and indeed should not extricate 'self' from 'other' in representation. This is especially so in the nuanced exploration of expression, representation and translation that is at the heart of artistic creativity. And this is where I would want to remind myself and spur you to be reminded that we best acknowledge the violence in this activity than to try to construct things in a way that erases that violence. Violence — symbolic, material — cannot be denied at this historical conjuncture in South Africa. We best be brave and be prepared to strive for cultural interactions which are actively and passionately social in a way which acknowledges the historical trauma which is at the root of violence in representation.

Although he argued against this idea, the consequence of Enwezor's arguments about representation in the Biennial and other writings was that only people who have a particular identity experience in a particular body, time and place have the right or authority to speak of that experience. Only they can responsibly do this. But I ask again (as, if you will, an indigenous African settler of many generations); how can experience be framed so narrowly as to separate selves from others in this way? Our violent history and complex lived experience suggest this is wrong-headed. We have lived in South Africa with each other for many years, even if under oppressive conditions. We continue to live there to liberate ourselves from the limiting conditions placed on the ongoing, intimate interaction between our 'different' cultures.

This brings us to the idea of 'translation' I made an argument for earlier. If we can at least open ourselves to the possibility that what we always see in others is something strange, unfamiliar, untranslatable and that this is part of who and what we are, we will move forward. If we resist the easy liberal option of reducing meaning to simple subjectivist 'interpretation', and encourage active translation involving real work, the body, cognition, loss and gain, then we remain in productive relation to the world of other things and other selves. People and things like language, thus entail 'translation.' This both invokes and puts at risk our assumptions about both people and things, and through this instability we can achieve — and have achieved — a great deal. Something different, imaginative, creative.

How might we do this? Where to start? How do we build on the struggles of the past without remaining slave to that past?

Something comes to mind here about my own experience. During my travels in Europe, Africa, or North America I have found that whenever 'African' art is exhibited, there is often a lengthy accompanying text. Visually indifferent, this explanatory text is usually placed close alongside the work, and interferes with our looking at that work. Such texts seek to establish a context for more-or-less correct 'translation' and appreciation. This is an advantage and a problem.

Some of the difficulties in this practice and the attitudes it suggests were dramatized in an exhibition of contemporary Chinese art I saw in New York two years ago. It struck me when seeing this show that 'other' cultures inevitably attract such lengthy texts (context-representations) which the dominant, ostensibly internally transparent and homogeneous culture can, by implication, do without. Whatever the text 'explains', this asymmetry is in practice deeply prejudicial.

The problem is that this asymmetry and what informs it are simply not acknowledged. Perhaps one way to do this would be actively and openly to force a confrontation with strangeness, rather than assimilate strangeness to the familiar by invoking context in a proximate visual text. In my view assimilation simultaneously eroticizes (tames) the strange and pacifies the challenges it might pose to the invisible dominant. If a textual elaboration of context, especially as a visually

indifferent wall text, applies to art from 'other' cultures, then this elaboration should include some visible accounting for the presumptions of the 'home' culture in its representing of those 'other' cultures. Part of doing this is to deal with contextual wall texts as a device for both marking difference and seeking translation of that difference. Quite how this might actually be done in practice cannot be discussed here, but I do want to acknowledge something of the challenge facing us in our display of cultures.

One of the virtues of seeing artworks as involving 'translation' is that imperfection is at the heart to the enterprise. We lose as well as gain in translation, and, crucially, we know we do. We lose and gain value and pleasure in translation, and, crucially, we know we do. Violence—trauma—seems part of imperfection. Translation is as intimate as it is imperfect, it requires basic contact and the relative familiarity that contact achieves. In translation matters are neither stable nor closed. 'Difference,' changeable difference, is somehow more visible in 'translation,' and with it the promise (if never fully realized) of freedom.

Those of us who can speak at least two languages have some idea of what we can and cannot say in one and not the other. And it is right in this experience, in this idea, that we find and refind the idea that the picture is never going to be fully understood — that is fully translated. We can imagine that the picture can be productively misunderstood. Imperfect translation is both a reality and a virtue. Because translation is never pure or true, the authoritarian voice that might insinuate itself into our artistic communications can never entrench itself sufficiently to become invisible. We are always prised open in our encounters with otherness, and this drives us to sometimes drastic acts of self-definition. And such ritual crises of self lies an opportunity, one we can really exploit in that imaginative part of life we call art.

Returning to the Biennial itself, I must confess I find the issue of nationalism and post-nationalism compelling in that it provokes the kind of questions I have touched on above at another, very historical, very social register. As I have suggested, the post-nationalist position was taken up by those curators, artists and viewers who could, did and do globetrot, with all this implies economically, politically and personally. These individuals were and are mobile largely by choice and material capacity. The rest of us are mostly caught in place, and have to deal with the realities of our relative immobility. This difference in mobility was a major source of tension in all our discussions on the panel. Those who were mobile spoke passionately out of the discourse enabled by their mobility. Those who were not, spoke equally passionately about the local, locality and the more ambivalent, even malign effect of globalism.

By way of conclusion, these broad issues were expressed in a major shift between the first and second Johannesburg Biennials. In the 1st Biennale there was a good deal of typically, even stereotypically 'African' art, mostly wood-carving from the



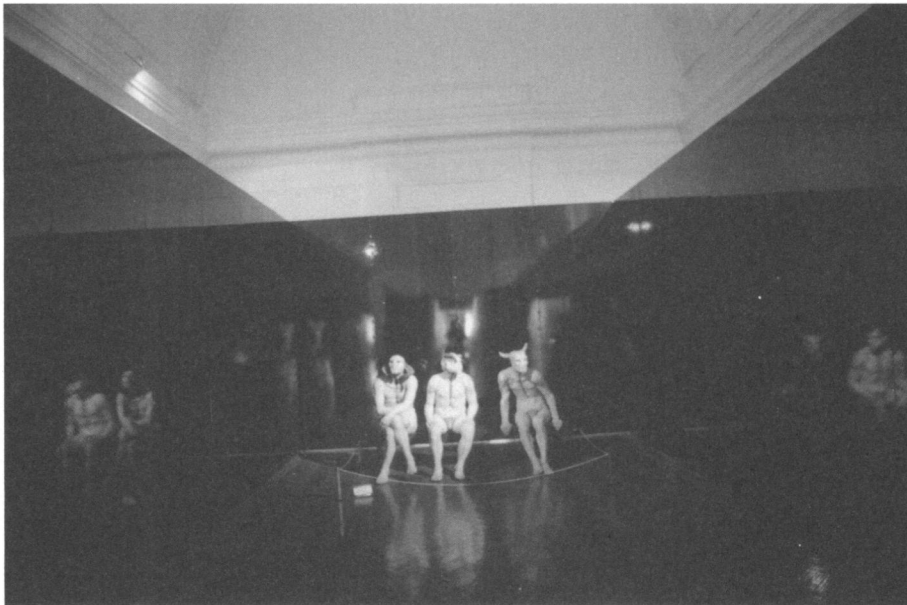
Venda area. This mostly hand-crafted work in wood and other 'natural' materials effectively disappeared in the 2nd Biennale, replaced mostly by the differently technologized, commodified, easily transportable work of the electronic information age; video, still photography and so on.

The type of artwork absent from the second biennial arose from a culturally transitional "moment" in South African art. This was the moment when rural and urban traditions and technologies confronted one another in a unique historical conjunction signaled by a rapidly globalizing post-apartheid South Africa. In this confrontation, ideas of 'African' art, of authenticity and cultural dislocation, of cultural trauma, violence, and cultural restitution within what we call 'modernity' became newly manifest, key issues. In some ways the second Biennial missed an opportunity by playing too uncritically into the cultural fractures which characterize the globalization of different art worlds.

My own jumbled feelings, still developing, about all this are that there's something about the presence and absence of secularity and spirituality, symbol and site, the body, craft and appropriation implicated in this shift between the first and the second Biennials. A critical problem for contemporary art in Africa is also, I imagine, exemplified by this shift.

In some ways all these questions became concrete for me in an image I used to emblemize the *Graft* exhibition. (Figure 1–7) This is the image of a crudely but effectively fashioned metal cross most of us would associate with Christianity. This cross, while quite large, was actually worn around someone's neck. It was a weapon; a functioning gun. I was told about this object by artist Anton Karstel, and we re-discovered it in the police museum in Pretoria, unindexed and with little background information. It seems it was confiscated from a black youth in Mamelodi Township outside Pretoria in the late eighties. These were the years of successive States of Emergency heralding the death-throes of statutory apartheid.

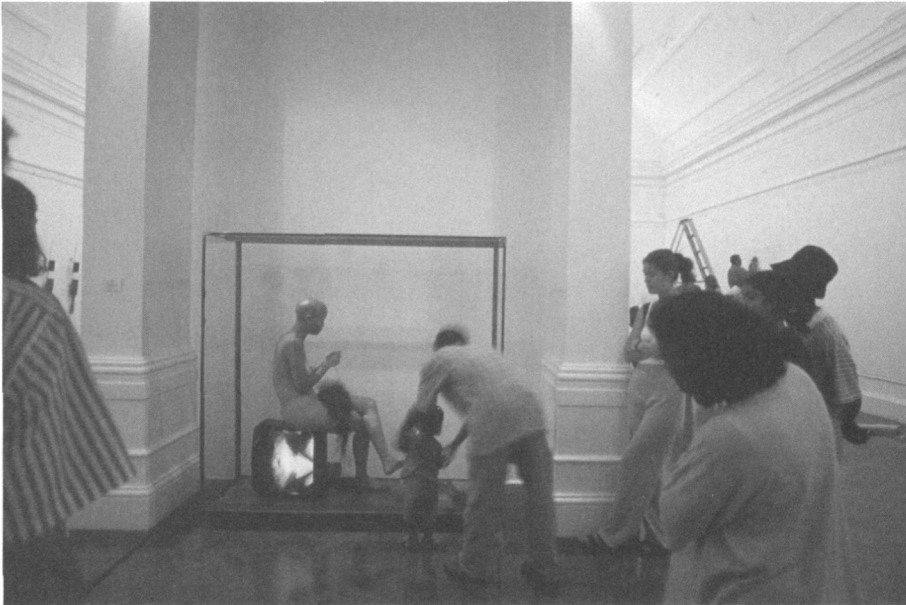
What might this work represent? How might we translate it? I must unhappily leave you to tease out this very concrete material conjunction of different spiritual and secular worlds, of mimicry and violence, of enslavement and liberation, of sheer strangeness... in short of our history-in-translation. But I leave you with the thought that, however translated, this cross holds captive that complicated reality of contemporary South African art, a reality arguably rendered invisible by the dominant 'globalism' — 'internationalism' in darker times — of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial. It may provide a lesson to us, one we should heed the next time round. Thank you very much.



**Figure 1** Siemon Allen (South Africa/United States)  
La Jetée (The Jetty, interior view) (1997)  
Installation; VHS videotape, steel



**Figure 2** Sandile Zulu (South Africa)  
Frontline One: Grassroots Rising, Frontline Three: With Centurion Models, Abduction, Endangered Roots  
Installation; fire, water, wind on grass, reeds, metal, newsprint, barbed wire, metal trunk, grass, string, sweet potatoes, bamboo roots



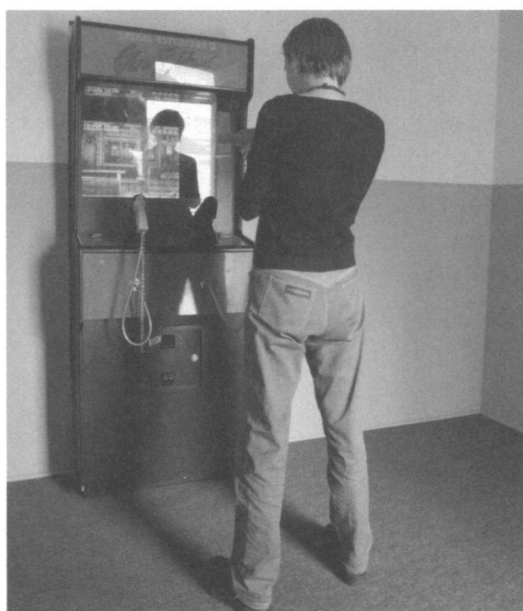
**Figure 3** Tracy Rose (South Africa)  
Spain I (1997)  
Performative installation; vitrine, television monitor, human hair, body



**Figure 4** Moshekwa Langa (South Africa, Netherlands)  
Temporal Distance (With Criminal Intent) You will Find Us in the Best Places (1997)  
Installation; empty bottles, coloured wool, cars, stones, spindles and other found objects



**Figure 5** Bridget Baker (South Africa)  
 Water Baptism (Christian Centre, East London, 1985) (1997)  
 Part of installation on external surface of 'white cube'; photographs, needlework (cotton), mixed media



**Figure 6** Sleuth (Participants) Julia Clarke, Tom Cullberg, Dorotheé Kreutzfeldt,  
 Mandy Jandrell, Adam Lieber (South Africa)  
 Rixdollar (1997)  
 Installation; video games, monitors, mixed media



**Figure 7** Pitso Chinzima (South Africa)  
Attacking Family Pleasure (1997)  
Installation; Volkswagen car body, welding ,box with bullet damage