

**“What Remains Is Tomorrow”**  
**Christopher Till**

The opportunity to speak here today as part of the ICEE conference being held in South Africa for the first time presents me with the opportunity to take you through the process of putting together the South African contribution to the 2015 Venice Biennale which comes to an end in the next two weeks. I thought this might be of some interest given the inevitable criticism with which this event is always likely to be associated with and also to give an insight into our own country and the issues currently occupying newspaper headlines and the psyche of its citizens.

The exhibition was not my first adventure into the world of the Biennale exhibition, having been part of the South African participation in the Venice, Sao Paulo, Valparaiso and Abijan events previously along the way. This experience led me to decide that South Africa needed its own Biennale the result of which was the Johannesburg Biennale's of 1995 and 1997 which have proved to be seminal events in the establishment of South African Art as a force to be reckoned with.

Coming as it did on the heels of our watershed 1994 election and a return to the spotlight for the right rather than the wrong reasons, the art world arrived on our doorstep to see for themselves what the laboratory of racial discrimination looked like and found artists who's particular vision moulded by the events in this country was fresh fired up and furious. The socio political commentary underlying much of this was critical and considered and the execution in many instances novel and unfamiliar.

The influx of curators critics museum directors artists journalists and camera crews moved the cursor of the art worlds attention to Johannesburg bursting the wall of isolation and ushering in a period of great energy and wider horizons for South African art and artists. Halceon days indeed!

The template for the first edition in 1995 was based on that set by the Venice Biennale of inviting countries to participate showing their selected artists. However the planning of this event in 1993 prior to our first democratic election, and recognised the need to develop opportunities for local artists and provide a basis for learning and participation.

An extensive program of events exhibitions and performance was held in venues in the city and townships. The most ambitious was the trainee curator program where 13 young candidates were selected from applications received and paired with 13 international curators selected from the countries invited to participate in the first Johannesburg Biennale.

We identified who we felt would work within this frame work and invited the curators to come to South Africa and spend three weeks touring the country. We publicised the dates that the curators would be in individual cities and invited artists to bring their work to the venues selected to be seen and discussed.

The next phase was for the invited curators to head home with their allocated trainee in tow to spend several months together curating their individual exhibitions in which they could include South African artist for their submission to the Johannesburg Biennale . In retrospect this was an ambitious project and more than a little mad. However it worked!

The most satisfying result was the experience gained by all concerned particularly the trainee curators a number of whom have gone on to do bigger things including two who became directors and curators of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the Brooklyn Art Museum respectively. The other result was the participation of 64 countries with an international network being established resulting in South African artists being invited to exhibitions all over the world.

It was the second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997 that has a contemporary resonance with the current Venice Biennale. For this I decided to change the format and appoint an artistic director calling for proposals for an artistic vision for the event. From those submitted I selected Okwui Enwezor, a Nigerian art historian and curator. He curated the exhibition working with four assistant curators he selected. Okwui went on to direct other major art exhibitions and Biennale's around the world including Documenta and is the current Artistic Director of the Venice Biennale.

The exhibition curated for the South African Pavillion at the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice International Art Exhibition Biennale currently being held in that city, takes its cue from our historical past seen through the lens of contemporary artists looking at current event. The Biennale is the oldest international art event in the world having been held every second year over the past 112 years!

A call to curate the South African Pavillion was put out by the Department of Arts and Culture in October last year for the 2015 Venice Biennale Exhibition opening at the beginning of April, giving six months to put the exhibition together. Without going into the reasons, we received notification to resubmit our proposal again, five weeks before the opening giving four weeks to develop the exhibition and transport and install it in the Venice venue. The resulting focusing of ones mind and taking immediate decisions without procrastination is a lesson translating fear into art!

The title of the exhibition , *What Remains is Tomorrow* is neither a resigned acceptance of the mixed blessings of that history, nor a utopian gesture. Instead it conveys a desire to weigh the present against what preceded it, and cast ahead to the possibility of alternative ways of being in and making of the world. If we are to understand our contemporary moment , and to plot our future so that it is more equitable, just and more humane than the present , we must grapple once more with our history.

What we know best- what touches our lives most directly- is what is unfolding in our country through a series of violent and explosive events. Marikana, a

tragic recent event where the police gunned down 46 striking miners reminiscent of the Sharpsville massacre in the 60's , xenophobic attacks on fellow Africans from neighbouring countries now living and working in our country , service delivery protests against the ineptitude and corruption of our government , and a new generation "the born frees" those born after the 1994 elections in our country, who are questioning decisions taken and historical events in weighing up their reality and social condition, and reacting with dissatisfaction, activism and protest. The recent 'Rhodes Must Go' campaign a reaction against the monuments to colonial figures, is an example of this as is the "Fees Must Go" protests by students demanding free education currently sweeping across our universities and cities.

The artists whose work are presented on the exhibition venture into this terrain. They take issue with who is in and who is out. They have a sense that there is a narrative of belonging that must be interrogated. Without exception ,while they are no doubt as susceptible as the rest of us to spectacles of violence , they are also cognizant that beneath the spectacle are insidious "slower" forms of violence that are eating us from the inside which seems to be in danger of rejecting the message of reconciliation brought by Nelson Mandela on his release from prison after 27 years and nearly 27 years since then.

The exhibition is presented and used to illustrate how the language of art has the ability to interrogate, comment on and effect the understanding and evaluation of the social, political and economic heartbeat of a nation and its identity. Thereby creatively adding to an analytical and critical faculty within education.

At the time of curating the exhibition , a photograph detonated in our collective consciousness. On the front page of the South African *Sunday Times*, a Mozambican man called Emmanuel Sithole was shown being stabbed to death while people looked on. Those of us—not only in South Africa, but all over the world—fortunate enough to be in the comfort of our homes as we flicked open the newspaper, set aside our coffee cups, and looked again at this horrific image.<sup>i</sup>

This photograph, and the events of which it was only one part, was a deadly and unwished-for representation of the central and underpinning idea of this exhibition, that the past has come back to haunt us, that in fact the past is by no means gone, and that if we are to understand our contemporary moment, and plot our future so that it is more equitable, just and humane than the present, we must grapple once more with our history and weigh the present against what has preceded it and to cast ahead to the possibility of alternative ways of being in the world, and of making the world.

The title of our exhibition, *What remains is tomorrow*, is therefore neither a resigned acceptance of the mixed blessings of that history, nor a utopian gesture. Instead it conveys a desire to weigh the present respect we have taken our cue from Okwui Enwezor's title for the 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia, *All the World's Futures*, and sought to give it a particular interpretation—in light of what we know.

And what we know best—what touches our lives most directly—is what is unfolding in our country through a series of violent and explosive events. But these localised upheavals are embedded in an immense global matrix of power and capital, apart from which we cannot begin to understand ourselves and our social, political and cultural situation. Indeed, if we read our own predicaments and achievements as the products and expressions of a narrow, idiosyncratic nationalism for which we alone are responsible, we will sink.

Power and capital are multivalent, and present in an array of guises. They connect us to a global conglomeration of relations that not only emerge from the past (from imperialism and colonialism) but also stand apart from history's grand narratives, with the latter's link to the modern nation state. Power and capital make use of the nation state, but they do not believe in it. They believe only in ownership and profit and they employ the trappings of the state to extend these privileges to the few.

The state, on the other hand, believes in itself, and perpetuates its own mythology of the nation as a coherent entity, logically explained by history, to which the citizens must declare their allegiance and from which others are excluded. This a little-examined aspect not of the xenophobia that is erupting in South Africa at present, but of the analytical discourse surrounding that phenomenon. So although there has been a vociferous and outraged reaction—a resounding condemnation of acts of violence against foreigners who have made their way into our towns and cities in order to make for themselves a meaningful and dignified life—a blind spot remains in the assessments. Xenophobia is attributed to unemployment and poverty, and the lack of delivery of basic services to communities is decried, but surfacing repeatedly in the discourse is the criticism of the government's failure to police our ever more porous borders.

This imperative to police is fed by the deeply held belief that some are 'naturally' inside and some are outside. Certainly, decent, law-abiding people condemn the persecution of those who are outside, but don't imagine that they can undo—or question—what is assumed to be their fundamental lack of belonging.

In curating *What remains is tomorrow*, however, my co-curator Jeremy Rose of Mashabane Rose Architects and I did not want to simply present works that hold up a mirror to our society, or offer a litany of wrongs and injustices in order to give an international audience a sense of the local zeitgeist. The work that the two of us have engaged in over the past several decades, individually and together, has made us deeply suspicious of lists of wrongdoing or lists of achievements. Such things give us only the illusion of having *done* something. We have both worked in fields—the public sector, museum design and curatorship, architectural practice—that have obliged us on occasion to inhabit the past.

Having done so has made us wary of nostalgia, and of the perils of a mythologising, museological approach to history. We have had to engage the latter in many aspects of our work, but having done so, we have not abandoned the idea that the past is an important reference, the key to knowing *what to do*, even if, as humans, we seem unable to learn from our mistakes. We are not,

however, historians. Rather, we think about the world in visual and bodily terms. Visual in the sense that we spend a great deal of time contemplating how things *look*, and bodily in the sense that much of our work involves considering how human beings move through, and engage with, space, built environments and landscape.

So in order to create something out of the potential cacophony of a group of individual works of art placed together in a single, enclosed space, we organised the exhibition not so much around a theme as around a *moment*, signalled by a small, darkened cube of a room at one end of the exhibition around which the other works are, more or less, gathered. This room references the Rivonia Trial, in which Nelson Mandela was found guilty of sabotage and sentenced to life in prison -and a video work in close proximity to it, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission a process where perpetrators of atrocities during apartheid were given the chance to request amnesty and face their victims.

The material of these two installations is sourced from and commissioned by, respectively, the Apartheid Museum, the one museum in South Africa whose relationship to the past—the bad past—is undisputed and necessary.

In the context of the exhibition, however, these museum artefacts are now, inevitably, aesthetised. This is a deliberate manoeuvre since what we want to do, precisely, is look at the past through an aesthetic lens. Not because we wish, crassly, to beautify it, but because we want to give ourselves the liberty to apply *different rules* to that past than those that might apply in the context of a museum. And so what we have done is to *uncouple* from their history, from their original context, and from their museum home, two fragments of the past: a trial and a truth commission. We have done this in order to revisit that past via a different set of pathways than the ones usually open to us. And we have engaged the services of a group of artists for this purpose (and in doing so have enacted the inevitable violence on their work that a group exhibition cannot escape).

The hope is that in the company of these artists, we might arrive at a new version of our own history. In particular, we have imagined—perhaps foolishly—that the looped recording of the disembodied voice of a man speaking in quiet but impassioned defence of the struggle to overturn a system of colonialism and white domination, will *sound* new. That the very textures not only of the voice, but of the defunct technology that captured its cadences, will make us hear something that we have not heard before, or have not heard in a very long time. We have imagined that the sheer repetition of the voice in a darkened space will not only move those who hear it, but will unsettle the mythologies of democracy, ubuntu and nationalism.

This may all sound like a politicalization of Art however it rather rather gives an insight into the extent to which Art has the power to be a mirror of our time and us, as socio - political beings existing within a landscape which moves beyond mere physical beauty and into a contested space.

The *deja voux* of being once more at a moment of tectonic shift in the landscape of our country is palpable, reflecting on the Johannesburg Biennale

being at the cusp of a brave new world with great optimism and leadership, and today two decades later when the artistic gaze is once more filled with chanting crowds whose message is not one of jubilation but that of the howl for change that echoes that of the 80s and 90s.

The Artist is a chronicler a critic and a muse in reflecting and interpreting the human condition . The interperation of the manner and the understanding of the rationale for doing so, forms part of the recognition and response of an audience in gathering greater understanding of the artistic process.

This is perhaps as much as we can wish for!

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<sup>i</sup> The photographs of Sithole were taken by the South African photojournalist James Oatway.