

But What's All Dis Here Talkin' 'Bout?

"If my cup won't hold a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?"

Sojourner Truth (1851)

It has been five years since my article 'Doing it for Daddy' was published in *Art South Africa*. The article presented what I perceived to be stagnation in transformation in the visual arts sector, which saw White women replacing White men in many key positions in institutions and projects (a quick glance through the recently produced VANS/HSRC report on the visual arts sector proves that this has not shifted much since that publication in 2006). I did not believe this was simply coincidental and felt that this change of guard continued systems of White privilege inherited from apartheid and perpetuated some misguided sense that White women were able to relate to all forms of oppression, a situation which often resulted in White women speaking 'about' and 'for' Others.

The reaction to the article was beyond anything I could have imagined. Overnight I went from being an upcoming visual artist to a pariah. I experienced first-hand the power relations that I had written about when the White vanguard closed ranks, and projects, jobs, scholarships, reviews and even listings of my exhibitions became impossible. Too many incidents occurred to mention here, but the question to be asked is why did this article merit this kind of strong reaction? I certainly wasn't the first to critique this issue (the likes of Thembinkosi Goniwe, Rhoda Elgar, Gabi Ngcobo and Pro Sobopha have also presented criticisms of the White-dominated system).


It seems my cardinal sin was to present a quick census of institutions/projects headed by White women. I had, unforgivably, named names. This meant that 'Whiteness', which when abstracted and spoken about generically can be deferred, was instead pinned down, and fingers were pointed to say, "Look! They are all White females and they dictate the agenda!" (Raman, 2006: 11). Prof Pattabi Raman (in a letter to *Art South Africa*) found this process undignified, vulgar, shameful, unethical, the beginnings of a xenophobic attitude; the dominance of White women was even cause for celebration under the sentiment 'better women than men!' The fact of my point escaped Raman completely, that for people of colour in South Africa, coming out of a history of disadvantage based on race, this supplanting of White women for White men was no better, as it still advanced a White Eurocentricism at the expense of a much-needed deconstruction of White hegemony and a reconstruction of a contemporary African art history and visual culture practices. It implicitly 'implicated' persons in positions of power that I assumed had some ability and charge to set agendas of transformation (reasons for this not happening are varied and a discussion of how to transform the sector at various level still needs to happen). As long as no singular person or place was mentioned, it was easy for White persons in charge to say, 'not me, someone else'. Nobody likes to think they are perpetuating racist agendas, or, worse, that they are racist themselves, and yet HR equity policies continue to be flouted in the visual arts sector; written projects continue the dominance of White artists and curators (some examples of this include *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* by Sue Williamson and Ashraf Jamal; *Voice-Overs* by Anitra Nettleton, Julia Charlton and Fiona Rankin-Smith; *10 Years, 100 Artists* edited by Sophie Perryer, *The Visual Century* by Gavin Jantjes and Mario Pissaro); and artworks by artists and curators of colour are too often only seen through the gaze and lens of White writers who shape the visual arts and art history discourses in this country, for better or worse.

Allow me in this short article to use one of the 'worst' examples. In a May 2010 article in *The South African Art Times* by Lloyd Pollak which reviews the '1910-2010: From Pieterman to Gugulethu' exhibition curated by Iziko SANG director Riason Naidoo, the headline screams SANG's reputation trashed for 2010 show. Pollak made it clear from the first sentence that the show lacked anything that resembled a curatorial strategy. It seems that while he was allowed to direct the Timbuktu project – which has historic importance for African and world history – Naidoo, who succeeded Marilyn Martin as Director of Iziko Art Collections: South African National Gallery and Old Town House, managed to ruin SANG's 80 year old reputation with just one show (having the audacity to remove a Gainsborough and Reynolds in the process!). Editor of *The SA Art Times*, Gabriel Clarke-Brown, is quoted in a *Guardian* article (UK) as saying, 'As soon as you introduce quotas, it's going to be a political tool and Stalinise the industry... I believe Riason Naidoo was a political appointment rather than on merit. That inevitably leads to certain things...'

These arguments around merit keep cropping up without any mention of what criteria govern 'merit'. Clearly neither Naidoo's first class Masters degree in Fine Arts from Wits University nor his experience as an artist and curator were, for Clarke-Brown or Pollak, indicative of this elusive 'merit'. In January this year, I had the opportunity of hearing Naidoo present a lecture at the Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar on his curatorial intentions and methodology for the '1910-2010' exhibition, even addressing some of the criticisms leveled at the show. The almost 70 staff members, students and interested parties seemed to have little trouble understanding or appreciating Naidoo's curatorship.

In the five years since my article, it has become apparent that young White artists have become more vocal about their disdain for politics in this country, especially any that situate them at the top of the social ladder. This can best be visualized in a work by the Avant Car Guard collective, *Phasing Out European Art* (2009) which shows a group of White students dressed in black facing a blackboard filled with chalk writing and the statement: 'I will not use the following - gender, race, politics'. While the title seems to suggest that the collective may be directing this statement to the contemporary international art world, which looks to the Third World for socially conscious work, when read within the local context it seems flippant. The White students appear to be proclaiming they are above defining themselves according to issues of 'gender, race and politics', the cornerstones of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa.

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Colour-blindness and apolitical stances serve to draw attention away from the fact that the default colour and gender of power is still the White man (and the White woman). 'They' are beyond critiques of identity politics because they are what 'others' are defined against. These young White individuals are the (conveniently) amnesiac inheritors of the privileges of the apartheid system and subsequent lack of economic transformation – a system of inequality predicated in South Africa on intersections of race, gender and class. But how does one quantify such 'by-privileges' in succeeding generations, especially when they underline everyday taken-for-granted activities such as basic education, tertiary studies, owning your own car and house? A recent SABC 1 advert brilliantly reverses the roles of Whites and Blacks in South Africa, following a young, pantsula-dressed White man from his White township into the city - using stereotypical scenes from Black township life, the advert visualises the realities of race and class disparities which are still glaring.

Of course, since 1994 (and 2005), there have been more people of colour who have managed to establish themselves in the visual arts sector. In bell hook's 1996 article 'Doing it for Daddy', she addresses what she sees as the complicity of certain Black men with White women in upholding the White patriarchal system. Although not touched on in my initial article, this is an important point to consider for people of colour who, upon entering this White centre, may be charged with effecting change and find themselves unable or even unwilling to do so, hinting at the fact that a change of race and gender will simply not suffice if individuals do not engage critically with transformation in the spaces they occupy (Reasons for this range from not being able to because of unwillingness on the part of their colleagues/institution, being tired of fighting 'the system', to being a willing participant in the system who doesn't want to 'make trouble' or the kind of intellectual Edward Said talks about who believes he is working against the system so covertly that the system just doesn't know it yet. There is also the black male intellectual who will 'cry race' to advance his career).

And so the White-dominated visual arts centre remains largely untouched in the years since I wrote that, with slander being passed as debate and a mechanism of silence – and silencing – following the issue. One thinks that such a system of dominance cannot possibly sustain itself but, of course, it can because this is one facet of cultural hegemony which outlasts colonial rule. Since violence and oppression cannot be as easily quantified as armed aggression and law-sanctioned segregation, the centre can continue its racialised economic and cultural hold. On the margins of this centre are other White individuals who don't 'fit' within the centre's paradigm of 'relevance', while Black opposition working on the margins form concentric circles of activity beyond the dominant centre (e.g. Third Eye Collective, Gugulective, Dead Revolutionaries Club, Centre for Historical Reenactment). Beyond them are other artists who have little hope of understanding how the visual arts sector is dominated by personal and socio-historic politics. Margins will form margins will form margins, while the quiet eye of the centre is held together by White power and money.

When writing this article, I was reminded of the process of 'natural attrition' by which numbers of people are reduced in a system. Thus, out of the many people who study visual arts or art history, many will find employment in other marginally-related or non-related fields (what are often presumed to be more 'lucrative' fields). But if one examines further definitions of 'attrition', one finds the following: 'a wearing down or weakening of resistance, especially as a result of continuous pressure or harassment'; 'a gradual reduction in work force without firing of personnel, as when workers resign or retire and are not replaced'; 'a wearing down or away by friction'. While I will allow for the fact that, like most art centres around the world, the South African contemporary arts field is subject to the whittling down of numbers of art graduates and self-taught artists due to the difficulties in initially establishing and maintaining oneself as an artist/curator/writer, I do not believe it is simply a 'naturalized' process. What I continue to argue, as I did in my article, is that there are mechanisms in place – whether they are at academic institutions, art programmes, public or private galleries, art reviewing processes, etc., – whereby persons of colour are purposefully limited or excluded or where apartheid systems have not been overhauled to be inclusive. I have witnessed, as have many persons of colour participating in the contemporary visual arts sector, efforts by White individuals to actively exclude persons of colour (especially those deemed 'troublesome') in 'their' spaces. When such incidents are brought to light, they are usually hushed up almost immediately. Where then 'are the effective mechanisms such as industrial tribunals to take up matters of this kind' (Raman, 2005: 11)?

The South African government is reluctant to intervene even in the spaces it controls (with money or support). This was demonstrated by a statement issued by the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) after the public accusations of racism by Lebo M at the 2008 Naledi Theatre Awards; with the DAC saying it is not the agency through which transformation can be implemented. Not surprising then that in the report on the visual arts sector commissioned by them, equity transformation only makes it at 'Recommendation no. 20' (out of 23). This leaves us with private institutions and individuals who have no mandate to change how they function; a few players of colour who struggle to effect change; and those rare individuals of any colour who try to make a difference to the course of arts in this country.

But how do we begin to transform? HR equity policies cannot be flouted and we cannot turn a blind eye when they are so that we can work with friends or people we like, but to realize that by bringing in diverse persons with different perspectives and histories, we can begin to challenge the monolith of White Eurocentricism that dominates the visual arts and art history. Racial and gender quotas are written into policies to induce some level of equity and instead of seeing this as an imposition, we should strive to encompass diversity (and not to continue believing that there really aren't that many qualified black persons 'out there'). That we have to make a concerted effort to find people and give them opportunities, not to feel good about ourselves for a day or week, but rather to begin sustained training, development and inclusion. We have to continuously educate ourselves on 'Other' histories which we may never have been taught and may have to be instrumental in excavating. We need to remember that even visual aesthetics have a cultural bias which we need to debate and discuss. And above all, not to reduce dissent and debate of Other voices into opposition and defence (or some Oprah 'ah-ha' moment quickly forgotten), but rather to continue to struggle with one another so that we can reach some understanding through listening and engagement that results in more complicated discourses. Let us not forget that being able to debate, contest and change are some of the tenements of the democracy that was so hard fought for.

Many of us seem oblivious of the gaze of a largely Black population who is starting to get tired of 'waiting' for things to change and this is already beginning to show in the increasing anger, hostility and anti-White sentiment – from that of young Black intellectuals to more covert organizations deciding on Blacks-only clubs. Maybe we need to understand that to live in our small, safe,

comfortable circles is to continue apartheid's mentality of 'separate but equal' segregation and leave out a lot of people, who deserve like you and I do, to participate. Perhaps a lot more Gainsboroughs and Reynolds need to be relegated to the basements of our institutions in order to make way for our very interesting present.

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In response to Sharlene Khan's sequel to her earlier 'Doing it for daddy' piece, I would like to briefly make a few observations. Firstly, there is much I agree with. I concur that there is "stagnation in transformation", although I have my doubts whether it was ever really underway. I also concur that race, gender and class and their relationship to power is still critical to consider, not least in the visual arts. I also despair at the lack of engagement of the DAC with transformation, particularly in the visual arts, although I do think we should be wary about their ability to lead on this issue, given their dismal record. Like Khan, I welcome Riason Naidoo's appointment at Iziko SANG. More importantly, for the purposes of this response, I agree with Khan that personal slander and silencing tends to take the place of insightful criticism and robust debate, and that naming is sometimes necessary when dissecting power in the sector. I also agree with her that many whites look for 'good' blacks to deracialize their white emporia, although I'm not convinced that 'troublesome' black voices get a worse deal than troublesome whites, but let me not digress. The point that I really want to respond to is Khan's perception that her "cardinal sin" was that she had "unforgivably, named names". It is instructive to go back to her original piece, and to recognise that comparatively few individuals were named at all. Her infamous list was rather, as she puts it: "a quick census of institutions/projects headed by white women". It is thus instructive that Khan did not, in most cases name individuals, but that the simple identification of institutions headed by (unnamed) white women was enough to cast her as a "pariah". This is an indictment of the dangers involved in even coming close to naming real people, but that is not my main point. My main point is that Khan let her own argument down by not going far enough. If her hypothesis was, as stated in her latest piece, that "white women [were] replacing white men in many key positions in institutions and projects" then one would surely need to begin by naming both individuals and institutions. Then one would need to address a series of questions to test this hypothesis. Obvious questions to ask include: How many of the white women in leadership replaced white men? How many of these women were appointed into their current posts, or ones of equivalent authority, in the post-apartheid period, or were they already in such positions? Who are the white men who were deposed in the post-apartheid era? Who took their places? What patterns can be observed, and do they play out consistently across the country, or do regional dynamics come into play? One also has to make provision for personal agency: race, class, gender et al are important but people cannot simply be reduced to these categories. One should also ask of persons in leadership or positions of influence: have they done anything that warrants them being in these positions? Like Khan, I suspect that affirmative action has sometimes been cynically used. I suspect that, in some cases, it has contributed to the furtherance of some careers of [white women] of questionable quality. But the way to make this point would be to make a convincing argument backed up by details, including names. (There would also be some interesting exceptions to her hypothesis to get one's head around - Where do Maishe Maponya, Bongiwe Dhlomo-Mautloa and Okwui Enwezor come into the 'deposition' of Christopher Till, for example?) Had Khan worked through such questions she may well have come up with some important observations that anyone interested in transformation would have to take seriously. Instead, by adopting the one label suits all approach she probably alienated many potential allies, and it is this lack of differentiation, I suspect, that was her "cardinal sin". I will avoid saying much about Khan's dismissal of the Visual Century, a four-volume series of books featuring over 30 writers, even before it is published. Suffice to note that this confirms her tendency to judge on the basis of a superficial "census" the quality and integrity of a project. But what does it matter what I think, say or do - my real name is, after all, Mlungu Kuphela...

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