OTHER REFLECTIONS – THUPELO 2003

In February this year, I was given the opportunity, along with 20 other artists from around the globe, to participate in the yearly South African Thupelo International workshop in Cape Town. The workshop was my first international workshop, and proved to be quite a challenging, eye-opening experience. The Thupelo workshop is based on the New York Triangle workshop format initiated by British philanthropist Robert Loder and artist Anthony Caro. Twenty-odd artists are isolated in a remote place for two weeks, to live, work and interact with each other in a confined environment, with limited art materials. The focus is on experimentation and not on an exhibition of the work. The attraction of these international workshops is their 'non-academic, fluid, interactive and hands-on character' (Ricky Burnett quoted in Richards, 1997: 79). David Koloane (1990) co-founder of the Thupelo workshop, in an article on the Thupelo workshop (in which he discusses his participation in both workshops and his university studies in London), reiterates this idea, '…in assimilating this integrated experience I realized that teaching in a workshop was often more rewarding than an academic approach…The former has to do with the experience of making things and the latter with the principles of how to do things'.

The Thupelo workshop has been criticized however, over the years, as lacking criticality and formal critical discussions (Richards, 1997: 78 - 79). While art historian Colin Richards (ibid.: 79) recognizes that there is merit to the interactive nature of the workshop, he also argues that the elements of 'benign anti-intellectualism' and 'anti-academicism' do not auger well for the development of criticality and critical writing in South Africa. This year's Thupelo workshop marked a significant change in this debate though. Daily slide presentations by artists became a forum where many artistic, cultural and sociological issues were heatedly debated (these sessions lasted between 2 - 3 hours at times) during the two weeks spent at Goedgedacht farm in Cape Town.

Slide presentations at workshops fundamentally occur to introduce artists to each other's works, to begin and further stimulate discussion between artists about their respective works. These discussions at Thupelo `03 became increasingly interrogative during the two weeks, with a few artists distinctly unhappy with the aggressive nature of the questioning (Anonymous, 2003; Elgar, 2003: no pg. nr.). Rhoda Elgar (2003: no pg. nr.), a British Phd student and observer at the dynamic to the workshop', and also felt that the complaints and feelings of vulnerability expressed workshop, noted that 'many questions were unexpectedly challenging, which added an important by certain participants were important in shaking people out of a 'degree of complacency'.

The issue of representation and the Other (both as artist and subject) proved to be a central debate during the discussions. The issue of the Other proved to be a rather complex one. With 21 artists from diverse cultural, religious, economic and educational backgrounds, everybody was an Other in some sense, and questions often arose on what one perceived as the depiction of an Other by an artist, i.e. the right of a White artist to photograph a black subject/Other; the appropriateness of a foreigner/outsider to portray an Other's social condition. One also saw the perpetuation of Western attitudes to African (Other) art by certain participants who still used Western standards as a benchmark in visual arts. First World and Middle-Eastern artists criticized Third World artists as being too locally specific and not globally/universally relevant. This essay seeks to show how issues of

postcoloniality's ideas of the Other, as well as prevailing ideas of Western/global standards have been perpetuated in this last Thupelo workshop.

Firstly though, I have to make clear the style in which I have chosen to write this paper. I do not aim to present this essay as one written by a detached, silent, 'objective' observer and researcher. This paper is due to my practical participation in this workshop, as well as my alarm at the perpetuation of Western ideals as a 'natural' way of thinking in this workshop. Thus I have chosen an Afrocentric feminist mode of writing that allows me to write in a first person sense, so as to communicate my own experience and observations of the workshop. In an Afrocentric feminist espistemology (Collins, 2000) concrete experience is seen as an important criterion for validating knowledge, as well as for stimulating dialogue (another fundamental criterion in Afrocentric feminist epistemology for validating knowledge).

Initially, there is a most pressing issue regarding the critical discussion at this year's workshop. While issues of the Other were being debated by the predominantly tertiary educated participants, there was an Other at this workshop that remained silent on most of these critical issues, an Other whose absence of voice had gone largely unnoticed in these discussions. The workshop saw a distinct division between self-taught artists and tertiary educated artists in these critical discussions. Self-taught artists remained, for the most part, silent during these discussions, which employed the language and terminology of Western art critical discourse. Koloane (1990) has said that the 'notion of introducing the workshop concept in South Africa can only be viewed against the social and political background which exists in the community'. This social and political background in South African society and in this case the visual arts field, comprises of both formally trained and self-taught artists.

While this year's workshop indicated that critical discussions were an important feature in a practical workshop, this need has to be contextualised in the South African context, where self-taught artists (and what can be referred to as previously disadvantaged persons), participate in these workshops on a practical level, but are then excluded from critical discussions due to their not understanding Western fine art discourse. With a group majority of tertiary educated artists, the self-taught artist became a silent Other. It concerns me that this aspect has been overlooked by my own, as well as other reports of Thupelo `03 (except for Zambian participant Victor Mutale, who observed this as well), but this is a problem that needs to be seriously and urgently addressed at both regional and international Thupelo workshops, especially if the workshop character changes to include much more critical discussion. For all the discussion regarding the Other, the critical discussions at Thupelo resulted in an othering of self-taught artists, who despite the relevance of the issues discussed, where forced into a voicelessness regarding these issues. One possible solution to the character of the discussions, is to have some sort of mediation during these sessions, to facilitate the discussions i.e. to encourage all artists to express their opinions, as well as prevent certain artists from being attacked. Of course this brings all sorts of questions into play - who will facilitate this role of mediator, how will this mediation be done practically?

The Question of the Other

The issue of the Other in terms of representation was constantly raised and with 12 of the participants from South Africa, representation and the Other were often discussed in terms of race.Victor Mutale (2003: no pg. nr.), a Zambian artist currently residing in Amsterdam, expressed how uncomfortable he initially felt with the talks about race (as did many of the

foreigners), but came to realize the importance of people discussing and dialoguing these issues, for people to really get to know each other. As mentioned earlier, when people from diverse backgrounds get together, the issue of the Other gets rather complicated. A case in point is Jennifer Lovemore-Reed, a White female, South African photographer, who was questioned by Mgcineni Sobopha, an African, Xhosa, male South African artist, about her photographs depicting scenes from a township in Port Elizabeth (predominantly African and Coloured people). Lovemore-Reed was criticized as contributing to the exploitation of these people because she was said to be the omnipotent creator behind the camera (this, regardless of Lovemore-Reed's claims of how on an economic level she identified with them).

For Sobopha, Lovemore-Reed could never fully identify with her subjects - she was in control, they were the Other. Lovemore-Reed's (2003) claims that she sometimes 'dressed down' purposely to fit into their context, was seen more as a tactic by Sobopha, who felt that this confirmed her deception and exploitation of the Other. Many participants felt Sobopha's questioning was too harsh and at times racist. Sobopha however did have a valid line of questioning, with regard to Lovemore-Reed's representation and motives for depicting the Other. There are however, many more questions that this issue raises. Can a person from what seems to be a privileged position, identify with traits or characteristics of people who would fit into an Other category? Without attempting some sort of essentialism, surely there are traits that most human beings can identify with? Is all control exploitative, and therefore is all photography exploitative? Does the Other feel exploited? While Sobopha is an Other as a black person, so is Lovemore-Reed as a female - does this give Sobopha as a black person, more of a right over certain Others than it does Lovemore-Reed because she is a White person?

Western colonial attitudes created the unitary, image of the Other (in this case 'Africa'), which it essentialised as everything the West was not (Mitchell, 1989: 455). Despite all of the complexities, differentiations and contradictions that characterized the Other, Western notions of the Other tended to homogenize the image of the Other. Postcolonial studies have sought to debase these mindsets, to expose the political, linguistic and cultural policies of former European colonies (Ashcroft, et al.,1998: 186). Different theorists have varying ways of addressing these issues. One of these issues of contention is the dualistic Western center-periphery model. Kapur (1996) argues that instead of eradicating the center-periphery model, peripheral occupants seek to enter the center, and when they achieve this position, they need to then define themselves by another periphery. Thus, the Western model and dichotomous mode of thinking is upheld. Likewise Collins (2000) too negates using Western modes of binary thinking. The sort of relationship proposed by Sobopha, with regard to Lovemore-Reed and the representation of black people (i.e. the controller/the controlled, the exploiter and the exploited) is far too stark and simplistic, and representative of Western dichotomous thinking that reduces complex relationships to an either/or state, where the White person represents evil, selfish exploitation, and the black person is the vulnerable exploited. What Sobopha has done is inverted the West/Other binary, homogenizing the West and White people along certain negative stereotypes, not accommodating individuals with different, 'non-exploitative' intentions while still succumbing to the Western dichotomous reasoning and mentality.

Human relations are never as simple as Sobopha makes them out to be. Jim Supangkat (1996: 71) quotes artist Paul Kagawa's view that artists who support the values of the ruling class are (regardless of their race), ruling class artists. By the same token, Third World artists are sympathetic with the conditions of Third World people in all sectors of society, and are a 'voice of the oppressed' (ibid.). Thus according to this view, Lovemore-Reed qualifies as a Third World artist, who was not only identifying with the economic circumstances of her subjects, but was also sympathetic to their plight, and her work can be viewed as a voice of the oppressed. Although Lovemore-Reed can never completely identify with her subjects (based on racial and educational differences), for Sobopha to essentialise differences and understanding to just race, is equally problematic in its generalizing, dualistic stance.

Another problem with this sort of argument is that it doesn't accord any power to those being photographed, as well as according too much power to the photographer. There seems to be no middle-ground in this relationship. This thinking thus seems to convey a weakness, a naiveness upon the Other, thus further disempowering the disempowered. The fact that many of the people Lovemore-Reed photographed, were willing subjects and wanted to have their photographs taken out of choice (hence the middle-ground in the relationship), is overlooked by these binaries that sees the privileged photographer as active and the photographed, exploited Other as merely passive. Western dualistic thinking reduces complex human relations into simple either/or stances. Choice is an important characteristic of any democratic relationship, but too often the aspect of choice by the exploited is overlooked, in favour of an apparent associated passivity.

Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins (2000: 11) has claimed that passivity, which has often been associated as an inherent characteristic of women, is a falsity as women have always spoken out. For Gayatri Spivak (in Probyn, 1990: 182 - 183), the question of whether the subaltern can speak is a problematic one. Spivak argues that the Western subject/investigator has created the idea of a silent subaltern, and brings into question more the person asking this question, than the 'object' of study (ibid.). Collins (2000) takes this further arguing that it is not a matter of whether the subaltern can speak, but rather of whether we are looking for their voices in the forms or forums where they do speak. Thus, the Other, which is often spoken for, may not be as passive and as exploited as the privileged researcher/speaker may like to believe.

Figure 1: Jennifer Lovemore-Reed, *Milk in the Shebeen*, 1992 (Black and white photograph)

Figure 2: Jennifer Lovemore-Reed, *I'll Keep On Trying*, 1992 (Black and white photograph)

Figure 3: Jennifer Lovemore-Reed, *Once in a Lifetime*, 1992 (Black and white photograph)

Hence, having been given the choice to be photographed or not doesn't necessarily exploit the other anymore, and one has to be careful of such blanket generalizations, which still serve to uphold the power structures of colonial models, associating all power with the center and passivity with the Other. With regard to the complexity of being both an Other and a privileged person at the same time, there is another example that is worth mentioning with regard to this issue i.e., the work of participant, Effie Vourie.

The Outsider vs The Other

The work of Australian female artist Effie Vourie, presented an interesting discussion of what it meant to be an outsider and what it meant to be an Other. While in Australia (prior to the commencement of the workshop), Vourie was constantly warned by friends and people she knew, about South Africa and its rape situation and that she had to be extremely careful as a woman. Vourie decided to use World War II bandages (still in their wrapping) that she had brought with her, to create a mosquito netlike covering over a dining table, and to do her performance naked on the dining table with a piece of meat covering her genital area. Her comment seemed pretty evident - to show how women are treated by men as a piece of meat to be devoured, with the mosquito net forming a 'feel-safe' place, a place of protection for her (but at the same time, like skin it is also 'vulnerable', and can be torn by anything sharp (Vourie, 2003, no pg. nr.). Vourie was trying to show how people's comments about rape in South Africa had led to her perceptions and feelings of vulnerability as a female, and was not meant to as a judgment or commentary on the rape situation in South Africa.

However, during the walkabout session this is what many of the artists read the work as. Vourie was severely criticized for allegedly trying to comment on a situation she knew nothing about. She was reminded that she was a foreigner in the country, that she knew nothing about South African women's situations, and that she was an outsider. Surprisingly, it was not just male participants who registered these complaints, but non-South African female participants as well. Vourie's status as a woman, an Other herself was overlooked in light of her being privileged in other contexts (as White, First World, tertiary educated). While once again one has to constantly be careful of essentialising women's experiences, it can be agreed on that rape is regarded as a universally violent crime against women, and other women (despite race and nationality) may be sensitive and sympathetic to, as well as paranoid about this issue. Vourie as a female may be able to relate more to this issue than some of her objectors.

For Vourie, as a female, an Other herself, to comment on the paranoia created in her by the dismal warnings of rape even before she came to South Africa, was well within her right. Her not being non-white and South African were not automatic disclaimers to her being an Other as well. Once again, Western dualistic thinking reduces rather complex relationships and identities to generalized binaries of white/black, First World/Third World, privileged/exploited. South African society is an excellent example which shows how people are privileged in one situation and disempowered in another, how exploiters in one circumstance becomes the exploited in the other. This example of Vourie raises important questions in terms of postmodern fragmentation of identities - which identity is foregrounded in which particular situation? Which Other (gender, race, class, sexuality, education, religion) in an identity gets privileged over another in which circumstance? Unfortunately, this line of thinking is structured in Western dichotomous thinking, and the answers to these questions are all too relative to the situation one finds oneself in.

It can be argued that in discourse, generalizations and essentialisms are inevitable parts of theorizing. In fact, with regard to feminism, Gayatri Spivak (Butler, 1990: 325) has argued for an operational/strategic essentialism, so as to be able to speak of women as a universal (she does admit this is a false ontology), and to be able to advance a political program for women. Similarly, Susan Bordo (1990) also sees a need for some sort of generalizing, that allows bodies of dominance and theory (for example 'gender') to be interrogated. Nonetheless, Spivak's point has to be reiterated, that this is a 'false ontology', and one has to be wary of such generalizations and simplifications of complex human relations which serve to entrench Western either/or thinking. Collins (2000) rather advocates that an either/or mindset should be replaced by a 'both/and' concept that is more inclusive of complexity and allows for contradictions, fragmentations and differentiations evident in everyday life. This brings me to my last section where I will discuss the idea of Africa as the Other, and one of the criticisms leveled against African art at this workshop by Western participants.

First World, Global Art vs. Third World, Local Arts

The issue of internationalism and art, as well as the global/local nexus is currently a widely contested issue in the visual art world. These issues also surfaced in discussions at Thupelo `03. These discussions also made evident that the Western art/Other art dichotomy (the Other here referring to art from Africa), still dominates thinking on visual arts from these contexts. There seemed to be a division between participants educated or practicing in the

West and Middle East, and those from Africa. During discussions between artists, one of the constant criticisms made against South African/African art, was that it was too locally specific and not universally relevant. The work of Western/Middle Eastern artists was though to be much more universal, appealing to a wider range of people (and 'humanity' as such).

Kizzy Sokombe, a female French artist, was probably the most vocal person on this issue, saying that people from outside of these contexts probably find it hard to understand and/or relate to these works. This point was hotly debated during the slide presentation of South African artist Nkoali Nawa. Nawa, an ex-miner, produces work that depicts the social life and circumstances of miners in South Africa. By depicting the various aspects of the lives of these African miners, Nawa inevitably comments on South African political, economical and historical circumstances that have shaped the mining industry. Despite much disagreement with her, Sokombe continued to feel that this subject matter was too locally specific, not catering for a global/international audience outside the South African context.

This issue of the global versus the local is currently a rather contentious one, in terms of globalization, internationalism and the visual arts. Nestor Canclini (1994: 500) in his 'Remaking Passports', discusses reactions to Latin American art in international exhibitions, as an art that is conceived of in terms of tribalism or national dreaming, and not as relevant enough to the global and the complex.' Canclini however goes on to say that those artists who have achieved international acclaim have had the particularities of their work and country subsumed 'under conceptual transnational networks'. He argues that leading monopolies in the art world, 'subordinate the local connotations of the work, converting them into secondary folklorie references of an international homogenized discourse' (ibid.: 501), that is adaptable to global politics.

Many academics have warned against this tendency - where the need to participate in international art exhibitions have given rise to a 'delocalised art ' (ibid.: 504), one that is representative of a globalised identity (ibid.: 505). Geeta Kapur (1994: 48) in 'A New Inter Nationalism' warns against both primitivist trends and non-historical avant-gardism in exhibitions that contribute to 'reterritorialising arenas for cultural practice, across the globe on cue from the balance of power in the new world order'. In her discussion on the avant-garde and internationalism, Kapur calls for a sufficiently political avant-gardism, that acknowledges a 'particular history' (ibid: 46) that will point the way to a new internationalism.

Figure 4: Effie Vourie *Derma*, 2003 (Installation)

Figure 5: Nkoali Eausibius Nawa, *Thinker*, 2002 (Charcoal on paper)

Figure 6: Nkoali Eausibius Nawa, *Two*, 2002 (Charcoal on paper)

This is very much the case in South Africa, where many artists are still choosing to struggle and confront the political history of the country. Kapur (1994: 46) feels that the tension and ambiguity this brings to the visual arts, is what's needed to undermine an international 'trans-avant-garde aesthetic'. Nawa's work of the miners doesn't seek to contribute to a national idealism, but instead interrogate a historical, political and economic activity that has shaped his life personally and South African society as well. The range of activities he depicts though from his experiences are not only relevant to the South African mining industry, but with similar industries in other parts of the world.

Hence, in Nawa depicting his particularities, he has unintentionally ended up appealing to a universal condition. As Evenlyn Nicodemus (1997: 28) has argued that although everyone is affected by the global process, problems and solutions tend to be local, which brings diversity to the global process. Nicodemus also sees this as a reciprocal relationship, where Third World countries have the opportunity to participate in the global, while allowing individual and local African aspects to be penetrated by a common global process. To say that Nawa's work is too locally specific and not globally relevant is much too dismissive and perhaps says more about Sokombe's inability to relate to the work, than about the work itself. This debate between the artists usually ended in a defensiveness by African artists, and

misunderstanding by the ones doing the questioning (add to this the issue to language, translation and educational levels, and one ends up with much misinterpretation and frustration at times).

This idea of being universally irrelevant and locally-based was not the only Western standard advocated by First World and Middle Eastern artists. Furthermore, these selfsame artists, during the debriefing session after the opening of the exhibition went on to say that artists were 'too nice' and 'polite' during these critical discussions (Darsi, 2003; Sokombe, 2003). Their attitudes mirror those described by Kapur (1994: 46) of a group of international curators at the Johannesburg Biennale - 'The team of international curators [were] divided in my mind along stereotypical lines. The white curators in this situation were, as always, ambitious and tough, with a built-in work ethic upholding, though somewhat discreetly, the sign of excellence, western style.' Although the above mentioned artists at Thupelo were not white, their attitudes seemed to conform with Western attitudes as described by Kapur, and one has to be aware and guard against these attitudes being displayed as if they were 'natural' standards to be followed.

The Thupelo International 2003 Workshop showed that issues of postcoloniality - of the Other, of Western standards being used as a benchmark of art in Africa, despite its localized forms - are still quite relevant to art discussions at present in the both Western and African contexts. It also showed that while critical discussions were imperative to the workshop, critical debate could become highly biased towards those who know the language of art critical inquiry. Despite my criticism though of certain Western attitudes and standards perpetuated at Thupelo `03, this paper is due to the vociferous debate and dialogue that was generated from the slide presentations. As Mutale (2003: no pg. nr.), who has participated in a number of workshops both in Europe and Africa, succinctly states, that 'what happened at Thupelo during presentations should be encouraged in the future.' The observations made in this essay seek to continue this dialogue long after the initial practical workshop has ended. For while a practical workshop certainly has its merits, the importance of the critical discussions at Thupelo `03 is best summed up in Elgar's (2003: no pg. nr.) words, '… without the forceful criticism that was seen at the slide shows at this latest workshop I wonder how many artists would have really had to think about their work, to defend it, and give reasons why they make the work they do.'

Khan participated in the Thupelo International Workshop in Cape Town in February 2003.

Sharlene Khan, 2003

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