

Alien

How can one not be tempted to divine one's own destiny from the televisual tarot of global media? There were times when, told in the language of international news, the histories of my country would unfold in unrecognisable ways, and my place within these stories would become disjointed and unbearable. I wanted to speak of the discomfort of a thousand ill-fitting interpretations. Using television images relating to the transformative events between 1994 and 1998, I attempted to locate my own implicit presence in the narrative of these critical times. My project was about reclaiming these moments, re-inscribing them with the movements of my own body, the sound of my own heartbeat - a memory recounted in flesh and bones. Although my body is not a-political nor neutral and my access to it is not uncomplicated, I wanted to bring the extremes of fear, euphoria, desire, rage and loss into a language beyond democratic rhetoric.

When used as an instrument against the forgetfulness of history, the strategies of art become volatile and impatient. Through my work I tear at the fabric of different realities, severing images from their origin and cleaving apart the logic of their familiarity. The links I make in this process can be chilling and brutal, but often the things we can't bear to face are the most telling witnesses of our times. Considering the socio-political imprint that this place and time has left on me, I choose in my work to bring the peculiarities of a mutating subjectivity to bear on the specificities of its historical context. We need all the individual fragments we can find in order to anticipate the places our histories could take us.



Interview

Rory Bester: How have you tried to use different kinds of archival footage in the video?

Minnette Vári: I preferred sources such as television news footage from the distant and recent past. I also used free publications by various South African organisations, travel brochures and commemorative pamphlets of the South African Armed Forces. I chose the kind of information that is endlessly recycled on global media networks. I was once snowed in at a motel room in Detroit, watching CNN for news on South Africa. It was 1994, a very important year for South Africa. Inevitably the requisite news items came up and I photographed them straight off the television screen with my small automatic camera. Ironically these re-claimed images became part of my souvenirs of America. Eventually I decided to re-animate these low-tech stills. I wanted to restore a new kind of authenticity to these over-familiar images by applying the aesthetics of cyber-animation, broadcast news and virtual reality games. I've tried not only to reconstruct the way the images were used, but to also rewrite them.

RB: It isn't really clear what images you're using as sources for the animated video...is this important?

MV: The original content is all but lost through this process of

visual encryption, but I think the sequences contain clues that say a lot about where the images originated and even their context. Some details do remain, things like microphones, emblems, aircraft. These trivia may be arbitrary, but when read as part of a sequence they reveal the trappings of a kind of reportage - a version of South Africa that the world sees in 'eye-witness account'-type reporting. We start seeing ourselves in this revolving mirror of up-to-date-ness, but also uncover the world's desires with regards to this country and its situation, the tell-tale patterns of othering. TV frames events and crops meaning, animating world events in a very particular way. I'm interested in how images get convoluted and translated in the narrative of news and sent all around the world, becoming quite detached from their origin, almost alien. That is why the figures in the video seem so bizarre and distorted. They speak of the discomfort of an ill-fitting interpretation. In my failure to fit into their forms I become misshapen, yet remain recognisable. Because one is instinctively drawn to one's own image, there is a tension in being repelled from it at the same time. My project is about reclaiming these images, re-inscribing them, personalising them. It's about embodiment, quite literally giving a new body.

RB: How important is it to you that you end up re-creating a narrative?

MV: We live in a time where everything has to be redrawn. A simple analogy is the new constitution. 'Draw' implies a going back, a tapping into, but when you make a drawing you also advance along a line. Drawing is a process of appropriation, always covering new ground. 'Draw' also implies pulling, tugging, an act of struggle. To draw is to give shape to something. Applied as an implement of narration, it can be a way to plough up pieces of fragmented history, a means to re-member certain things. Art can be a powerful instrument against the forgetfulness of history. In the animated video, I render the silhouettes live, drawing myself into that space. With this appropriative gesture I am re-inscribing the photographed figure with the vernacular of self-portraiture, as part of a need to create a new subjectivity in post-apartheid art. It's about our paranoid fantasies of ownership and loss. One cannot take one's identity as a South African for granted. This kind of identity-configuration always remains negotiable.

RB: Why have you inserted yourself into the images?

MV: It's a way to figure out what the implications are for me. In an image of a policeman escorting a photographer away, I wanted to register the moment of forced erasure and alienation. Both the policeman and the photographer were acting in the interests of particular bodies of people and are caught up in that moment of discord: a desire to remember and a counter-desire to erase, to forcibly divert the gaze. It is a moment where distinctly different agendas draw these figures into an explosive unit. I attempt to write my own implicit presence into the narrative of these crises. But by doing this I myself perform an act of erasure. My body is not a-political nor neutral, my access to it is not uncomplicated. It is a site of continuous arbitration and transformation. I find the same sense of tentative uneasiness in images relating to transfor-

mative events. The figures in the original footage, members of the armed forces, press and political delegates, are all in some way emissaries, representatives of a South Africa. As representatives they have a mandate to speak or act on my behalf. This way I'm not actually absent in the images I've used. Yet my implied presence in the original images is fraught with uncertainty. Like news events, it needs to be explained and recounted again and again.

RB: Are these images about your own guilt about the past?

MV: No.

RB: In using documentary processes, how important is the visual discourse itself?

MV: To me it's important to show how the same visual iconographies can be applied in propagating vastly different agendas. The context of representation is easily tainted by the way images are presented.

RB: By adopting this approach you run the risk of becoming too preoccupied with form...

MV: Actually it's more like a morbid fascination. Surface has become such an important visual commodity. Presentation means as much, sometimes more than content. Visual discourses are used as a means of creating wealth and power. My work is about re-appropriating the aesthetic of these discourses, to see if an aesthetic can maintain its power in a different context. To slit open the surface, to get at its innards and see how it's constructed. By re-tracing the steps that make an industry have a certain 'look', I can attempt to reflect the histories, the political strategies and social implications behind that appearance.

Excerpt from an interview conducted by Rory Bester, from the catalogue of Democracy's Images: Photography and visual art after apartheid, Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden, September 1998. Rory Bester is a Johannesburg-based art historian and critic.



Road. (Artist's Statement)

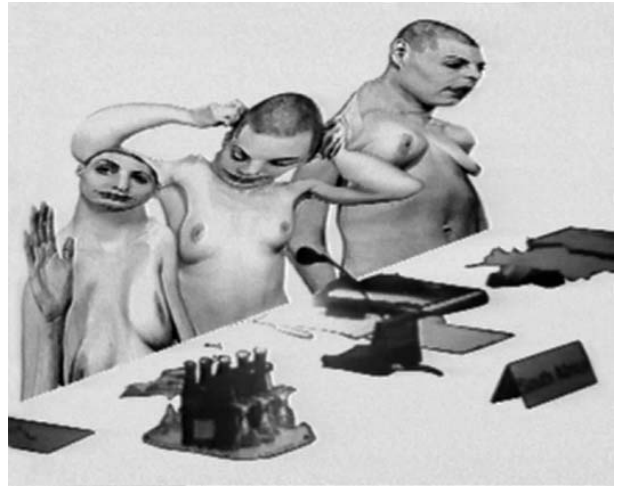
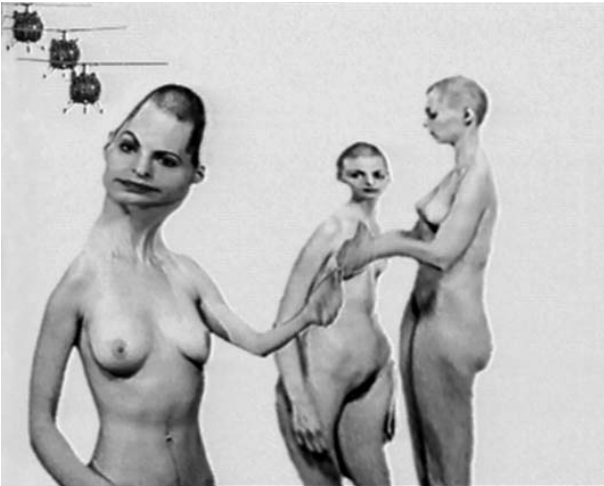
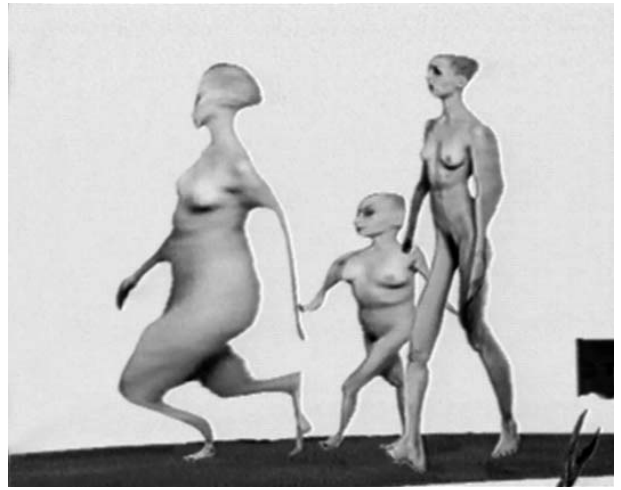
En route, there is a lot one can pick out from the passing landscape to serve as example and evidence of a history still being lived out, being lamented and celebrated. A thin black scribble, the road is witness to so much history. My best conversations with the occasional visitor from Europe or elsewhere happen in my car when we are on our way to or from the airport, from Johannesburg to Durban, or Cape Town, or Pretoria. On the road there are people and situations: minibus taxis weaving through the traffic, large groups of tourists who crane their necks to take in the scenery, men in overalls perilously crossing the highway on foot, big old buses with school children who sometimes wave at us. We see billboards that advertise international brands for an African market, factories, ungainly monuments, the sunsets, the expensive German cars, the high fences, beggars of all descriptions with their trade mark handwritten cardboard signs. Traffic cops pass by us on their motorcycles, we see street vendors with

their dismal wares from Taiwan, armoured vehicles carrying cash to and from banks, lamp-posts festooned with various posters, many printed boldly with the newest headlines, dead animals by the roadside: dogs, big ones and small. Cats. Hares. Pigeons. Other animals too - we call them roadkill, one category. Often, what you see doesn't resemble anything much, no specific breed or type of animal. But it's clearly roadkill - shredded flesh, smeared into the tarmac, pieces of fur or feathers loyally sticking to unrecognisable remains of animals torn from their skins, opened up, broken and twisted, exposed, naked, dead. At times I speed past such scenes of destruction as fast as I can, to try and blur away some of the impact of this sadly unwelcome and unwelcoming sight. Strange that I would feel so uncomfortable driving by animals crushed under speeding tires? Still, the road is a living document, and our memory must be uncompromising.

Here, these roads connect the scenes of a more famous destruction, not as clear or as final as the fate of a ruined dog. Every day brings new witness of a history of blight, and new reasons to wrench hope from a past and a present violently bound together in the anticipation of a very different future. To understand something is in a way to close in on it, to dissolve distance, to embrace that maimed thing, if only with your mind. But up close, some memories seem improbable and perverse, so unrecognisable that their owner, torn and uncomprehending, fails to dodge their crushing momentum. A known and lived past has shown itself to be monstrous - like an animal that, in trying to cross a dark road, has instead crossed over another less visible divide. Mutilation introduces a distance: that animal is now part of a very different reality. I cannot, as such, feel 'one' with it anymore: it is a crowded encounter that affords no space for empathy, an impatient decay with no time for nostalgia. There can be no healing in the simple sense, no whole parts to piece together again. No remembering. Only brokenness, separation - and because of this, horror.

On the dark mirror of the road there is a moment of hesitation. Why is it so painful to write myself into this history? Doubt freezes me in its headlights and, on impact, shatters my body into a horde of strange reasons, each rising from the oily surface of forgetfulness. They rise with an awkward gait and begin an inexorable march on a road that will retrace a history I was not ready to recall. The road is hot, hazardous in its elasticity, the boundaries not yet solid. I recognise with dread the discomfort they feel in an ill-fitting skin, too tight and too thin for this critical journey. Naked in an alien landscape, their story retold by a thousand tongues, they wake with the scent of blood on their breath, and with the smell of burnt hair. Into a grey and heartbreaking dawn they march two, three abreast. There is no honour in their silence. Against an ever-brightening sky they must perform their tragedies, negotiate their triumphs and their losses and weigh their currency over and over again while their mute interrogation rings in my ears.

All texts © Minnette Vári



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1998

video animation · dimensions: variable · duration: video 52 seconds; audio 134 seconds · looped indefinitely