

Daimler Art Collection

Ampersand

A Dialogue of Contemporary Art from South Africa & the Daimler Art Collection

Daimler Contemporary, Berlin

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Introduction

South African art's journey to the international stage – a personal perspective

So when did my observation of South African art as part of the spectrum of 1990s international art discourse begin? After the end of apartheid, marked politically by the first free elections in 1994, the new, transformed and celebrating South Africa was in the global spotlight – and, for the first time, artists from all over the world visited South Africa and engaged in dialogue with the young art scene that was beginning to form there. I read the reports on the 1st Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 in rapt amazement. Due to financial problems, the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, curated by Okwui Enwezor 1997, marked the end of this ambitious endeavour to join the global art world right after the end of apartheid. How hard it would be to make South Africa an automatic presence on the international stage was demonstrated by Documenta X in 1997, where only one South African artist – William Kentridge – was invited to exhibit.

The 'Colours' exhibition of 1996 (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin) and the 1998 show 'Liberated Voices' in the New York Museum of African Art provided a glimpse of the great variety of voices in South African art post-1994. Thirteen artists provided representative work

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groups showing how deeply 45 years of apartheid had impacted on the national consciousness – but also how powerful the hope for a real new beginning was. The founding of the first online magazine, edited by artist and author Sue Williamson (www.artthrob.co.za), was equally important for the visibility and self-confidence of South African art and for its gradually materialising links with the international scene. In 2001, Okwui Enwezor's show 'The Short Century. Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994' bore impressive witness to the genrespanning subculture of the apartheid era and how it had targeted opposition and oppression in the wider African context. The exhibition opened – quite unexpectedly – in the Villa Stuck in Munich (it went on to tour Berlin, Chicago and New York). It collected a high concentration of the everyday life, poetry and politics of a whole continent and gave me at least some idea of what contemporary African art had to offer.

In the same year – 2001 – I began to travel to South Africa regularly. As director of the Daimler Art Collection, I was responsible for curating the 'Mercedes-Benz Award for South African Art and Culture'. Previously I had seen the artworks in the exhibitions – now I had a chance to see the people behind them and the stresses of everyday life that the artists are exposed to, now as in the past. But perhaps more importantly, I also now had a chance to share in the energy and willpower of the artists, and the earnestness and sensitive intelligence with which representatives of various cultural strands paved the way for a future that had yet to be defined and claimed.

Since then, the country's new galleries, a quick succession of important exhibitions on South African culture – 'New Identities' 2004 (Museum Bochum), 'Afrika Remix' 2004 (Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf) and 'A Decade of Democracy' (Boston 2004) to name but a few – and the opening of the first South African art market –pre the 'Jo'burg Art Fair' – in Johannesburg in 2008 have significantly accelerated developments – higher profile and visibility, building up of links and infrastructure and dissemination of South African art. The artist Sue Williamson has recently produced a significant overview of the South African art from the 1960s to today (South African Art Now, New York 2009) and Chris Spring has also produced a review of African contemporary art (Angazi Afrika. African Art Now, London 2008).

The Mercedes Benz Award for South African Art and Culture The Mercedes Benz Award for South African Art and Culture was presented for the 10th time in 2009. Over 80 South

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African artists, musicians, architects, authors and fashion designers were introduced to the country in cultural centers and – for the first time – to an international public. Since then, the ten winners in the different cultural fields have been presented worldwide in galleries and projects, at Biennales or involved in documenta in Kassel, and are seen as representing advanced approaches to contemporary art and culture. From its beginnings in 1999, the award process has taken place under the curatorial patronage of the Daimler Art Collection. The first Mercedes-Benz South Africa Award went to Johannesburg artist Kay Hassan for Contemporary Art in 2000, followed in 2001 by jazz musician Themba Mkhize. Sculptor Jane Alexander received the award in 2002, and in 2003 it went to choreographer Sbo Ndaba. Photographer Guy Tillim won in 2004, followed in 2005 by poet Gabeba Baderoon. Heinrich Wolff was recognized in the field of Contemporary South African Architecture in 2007. In 2008, the award went to Kevin Brand for Art Projects in Public Spaces. In 2009, the award for South African Fashion Design announced the Johannesburg label Black Coffee (Jacques van der Watt and Daniça Lepen) as the winning label. As part of their prize, all award winners were invited to exhibit at the Daimler Contemporary, Berlin, thereby presenting their work to a larger international audience. Exhibitions also took place in various South African cities.

We have also acquired work groups from the following artists for the Daimler Art Collection – Hassan, Alexander, Tillim, Brand. Additionally, representative works by David Goldblatt, Zwelethu Mtshwa, David Koloane and others have been bought in connection with cultural engagement in South Africa. Over the past years, the works in our collection have been exhibited in various different ways. For our present exhibition - *Ampersand* – we decided to show artworks primarily by young South African artists loaned from galleries and private collections.

Ampersand

In the year of the Soccer World Cup in South Africa, the Daimler Art Collection aims to continue its long years of addressing and intensively promoting South Africa's cultural development with an international contemporary art exhibition in Berlin. The presentation is arranged in dialogue form, juxtaposing current performative, conceptual and abstract tendencies in contemporary South African art with selected works from the Daimler Art Collection. At this event in Berlin, the Daimler Art Collection (which concentrates on abstract avant-garde movements and reduced conceptual tendencies from Bauhaus to current contemporary art) presents mainly new acquisitions in the field of international contemporary

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art for the first time. The presentation of our *Ampersand* exhibition includes site-specific installations and video art as well as paintings, drawings and photography. About 60 works are shown. While the exhibition does feature selected predecessors, its main thrust is directed at current works from recent years by younger artists (most of whom are between 30 and 40 years old).

In the context of the Daimler Art Collection, Jan Henderikse (*1937, the Netherlands) and Robert Filliou (1926-1987, France) and the South African artists Willem Boshoff (*1951, South Africa), Kay Hassan (*1956, South Africa) and Sue Williamson (*1941, United Kingdom) were selected as the forerunners and initiators of the most recent developments in art.

As early as 1961/62, Jan Henderikse's work summed up, or rather anticipated, the most important driving forces behind the art of the time, rooted in the 'readymade' tradition and the use of everyday materials. Beyond their subtle political implications, a key characteristic of Henderikse's work is his 'compromising' rejection of any aesthetically endowed forms imposed upon the found material. Coincidence, play, humour and other anti-aesthetic strategies also characterize the work of Robert Filliou – whose work, like that of Henderikse, involves using trash and readymades to infiltrate subversive political and socially critical messages. In the screen prints series *7 childlike uses of warlike material*, 1970, which has been acquired by the Daimler Art Collection, the artist juxtaposes the concept of innocence and peacefulness we associate with children and play with the dangerousness of potential war-making equipment.

Thanks to the generosity of the Gordon Schachat and Jack Ginsberg collections and the Goodman Gallery Johannesburg, we have been able to present three unique pieces of South African art from the 1980s and the 1990s in the *Ampersand* exhibition. Willem Boshoff's sculpture *370 Day Project* represents an initial example of authentic developed South African concept art. In 1981 and 1982, the artist collected 370 types of indigenous South African wood (or wood that grew in the country) over 370 days, carved each of them into a 24 x 5 x 1 block and labelled them with precise information on their type and species. For every 74 blocks, he built a wooden box with the same dimensions as a coffin for a normal-sized man, and he also built a wooden display unit for all 370 blocks, from which one can pull out the original pieces. In the conceptual photographic work *For Thirty Years Next to His Heart*, 1990, Sue Williamson analyzes the mechanisms of repression during the apartheid period. The

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passes [dompas] that 'Black South Africans' were legally obliged to carry with them at all times were a repressive instrument of racial segregation. They listed their place of residence, their tax details and their current employment. The euphemistic title *For Thirty Years Next to His Heart* refers to the literally physical conditioning imposed on human beings by the obligation to carry a pass. It might have been carried in the breast pocket, literally next to the heart, but what the title is really referring to is how the pass laws deform human psyche and feeling.

The works by young international artists from the Daimler Art Collection presented in Ampersand were chosen according to two different sets of criteria. On the one hand, the works – predominantly new acquisitions from the past three years – were chosen to represent the Daimler Art Collection's minimalist section. These were the three young Polish artists Natalia Stachon, Monika Sosnowska and Alicja Kwade, the wall objects by New York artist Jim Lee and the Italian Luca Trevisani in the 'Trash Minimal' tradition, and, finally, the packing of 'disposed-of' pictures and the mobile phone videos by Patrick Fabian Panetta. On the other hand, the conceptual strategies and political implications of the selected works were also important, creating a connection with the artworks by the pioneers already mentioned. This can be seen in the videos by the Brazilian Marcellvs L., the *VOID* word sculpture by Pietro Sanguineti, the poster edition by Jérôme Saint-Loubert Bié and the works of the Danish artist Lasse Schmidt Hansen. Simone Westerwinter picked up on our curatorial idea of a 'friendly match' and 'married' a youth set of goalposts with a bridal veil, creating a cryptically ironic homage to masculinity and soccer fever.

Taken together, the works by younger South African artists reflect a full and representative spectrum of current themes and production forms. Concepts of gender, identity, HIV/AIDS, sexuality and the ongoing subcutaneous effects of discrimination under apartheid are central, for instance, to the sewn pictures by Nicolas Hlobo, the photographic projects and animal hide sculptures of Nandipha Mntambo, the sound installation by Kay Hassan, the video *Bird's Milk* by Dineo Seshee Bopape about a failed romantic relationship and the fashion performances and photographic series by Athi-Patra Ruga. Ruga's photograph series *The Naivety of Beirut* refers to the so-called 'bugchasers', who intentionally infect themselves with HIV in order to 'share' the experience of HIV/AIDS sufferers (in a kind of Ruth-like altruism). Other works by South African artists included in *Ampersand* are characterized by explicit political analysis and critical statements. Lawrence Lemaoana attacks the manipulation of the media and the survival of corrupt patriarchal structures under the current

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president Jacob Zuma, Rowan Smith reconstructs bygone utopias and progress models as a sign of positive energy in the heart of disintegrating social structures, and in *Welcome to Paradise!* Lolo Veleko creates camera portraits of African refugees, who, in a kind of mimicry, are hoping to find a place for themselves in the false postcard idyll of the holiday island of Gran Canaria.

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