



SIX ASIDES ON ART & LIES

An essay first given as a public lecture at the University College of London's Institute of Advanced Studies as part of a series of talks on Lies.

By Ashraf Jamal

1: BLUE ALOE

It was a brisk afternoon in a valley in Yorkshire in the north of England when my art teacher, Mr Waddington, standing beside me seated at my easel, first introduced me to Charles Darwin's phrase, 'cryptic colouration' - an organism's ability to blend into its surroundings. The phrase has stuck with me, spurring a long-standing interest

in mimicry - the relationship between survival and calculated obscurity. The National Geographic channel provides countless examples of this ability to blend in and dissimulate a given context. Human beings are no different. We devote the bulk of our lives to disappearing acts. However, 'cryptic' is a curious word to attach to this disposition, for it suggests something mysterious and elusive, and

not an act of survival, or one of damnation, which, after all, is what it also means to dis-appear.

Against the endless disappearing acts we consciously or unconsciously perform, it is surely startling to encounter a creature who refuses to do so. Joseph Conrad's bling harlequin-figure in *Heart of Darkness* springs to mind, but so does a rather strange looking African Aloe, created by Rowan Smith, which I encountered in an art gallery in Cape Town with the alluring moniker, WhatIfTheWorld. While a compelling facsimile, Smith's aloe was painted a jarring and unearthly swimming pool blue. Fixed to a stainless steel stem and bolted to an achingly white, fluorescent-lit, wall, this pale blue plant stood anomalous. Part of an austere installation which centred on mimicry-dissimulation-camouflage - and the impertinence of this orientation - this chlorinated blue aloe suggested an Africa sterile and antiseptic. For there was doubtless something unhealthily pallid in the artist's colour scheme.

In 2015, Wired Magazine introduced me to another term - 'plastiglomerate' - the aggregation of starkly dissimilar yet integrally related synthetic and organic matter, which more compellingly reminded me of the unnatural conditions in which we live. Smith's blue aloe epitomised this unnatural state. For ours, today, is no longer Darwin's cryptically coloured world. Ours is a world which has shifted from acts of imposture to acts that are aberrant. And it is in this particular regard that Rowan Smith's blue aloe proves an apt prelude to our conversation - Art and Lies.

2: WITCHES' ORACLE

As a verb the word - lie - intrigues me most. In its past tense we know it as lay, or lain, as some condition, something, which, according to the OED, assumes 'a horizontal position on a supporting surface ... undisturbed or undiscussed'. It is this sense which prompted Virginia Woolf, in *The Waves*, to ask: 'what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?' The supposition, here, the query, is often asked, for we commonly suppose that meaning, or truth, is something concealed, hidden from view, difficult to ascertain. Truth is supposed to exist beneath the lie, and it is truth - said to exist 'beneath the semblance of the thing' - which we hanker for and enshrine. It is truth's remoteness that compels us, its rarity, its

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preciousness, which we believe best informs and defines us - all the more so in this post-religious and morally bankrupted moment in which we find ourselves.

For no one can fail to recognise - in this era dubbed 'post-truth' - that which keenly concerns us most is truth's absence. Ours is a realm of veils in which truth possesses no traction and no worth. In our world - a world of copies - we no longer possess the capacity to issue forth truth. A lie has become our staple. It defines our culture. It is the 'new normal'. The very condition for life itself. It is therefore not the scarcity of truth that matters, but the ubiquity of lies. We live because we lie, we exist the way we do because we cannot imagine a world which is not infused and shaped by deception. Lies, therefore, are constitutive. They are the ground - now groundless - which makes it possible to wake up and complete the tasks - riddled with 'little lies' - which, we pretend, enable us to continue.

Lies are the acts and conditions which we must learn to accept, for not to do so would make living unbearable. And yet we gnash and groan in the face of lies. When someone blithely demurs that there are all kinds of truth - 'alternative facts' - we protest in the name of some inviolable essence which we insist in believing exists beneath the surface of this post-essential and post-religious moment. However, if there remains a justice in demanding the existence of a condition pure and inviolable, this is not because it is the purity of truth that we seek, but the purity of a better, if contaminated, lie. Dissimulation is inescapable. The inauthentic defines who and what we are, especially those who traffic in the arts, in fiction, which Plato sought to rout out and condemn as liars.

Lies - the staple of fiction, of art - are integral to the creation of imagined worlds. Lies are wagers,

ventures, leaps of faith, willed conditions. They are not intrinsically or essentially bad for us. However, because they are deceptive, they can also be treacherous. We know this well. Act 1, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* sets the stage for this treachery. That it stems from the mouths of three witches – and women we are reminded, again and again, are the ciphers of treachery, as is the black man – should alert us to the fact that the 'lies' they supposedly tell are not lies at all, but veiled truths.

Shot through 'fog and filthy air', through a veil contaminated, unclear, in which 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair', the witches present to us their oracular insight which Macbeth chooses to read to his own advantage. The moral of the drama is that we cannot presume to know, in absolute truth, the meaning of a statement, we can only infer, at our own peril, its true import. For what the witches' oracle reminds of is that we can never fully disinter truth from falsity. This difficulty stems not merely from the failure of morality, or the collapse of our cognitive faculties, it stems from a fair deeper problem which Friedrich Nietzsche in particular has scrupulously tackled.

In his essay 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', Nietzsche reminds us that 'the art of dissimulation reaches its peak in man. Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front, living in borrowed splendour, wearing a mask, hiding behind convention, playing a role for others and for oneself – in short, a continuous fluttering around the solitary flame of vanity – is so much the rule and the law among men that there is almost nothing which is less comprehensible than how an honest and pure drive for truth could have arisen among them'. The barb is lethal. We cannot ignore Nietzsche's assertion that it is truth that is rare, dissimulation – the culture and rule of lies – which is normative.

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The witches in *Macbeth* understood this founding condition, for it is not only Macbeth's craven ambition which they ensnare, but his vanity. Nietzsche returns, repeatedly, to this 'pitiless, greedy, insatiable, and murderous' indifferent and ignorant desire for the realm of lies. 'The liar', he says, 'is a person who uses the valid designations, the words, in order to make something which is unreal appear to be real'. For Nietzsche, this dissimulation is not intrinsically wrong, it is inevitable. What concerns him far more is the consequence of this sleight of hand – 'being harmed by means of fraud'. What troubles us, he says, is 'not deception itself, but rather the unpleasant, hated consequences of certain sorts of deception'. It is this incarnation of lies – as something profoundly harmful and destructive in its fraudulence – which troubles us most.

Tautology – fair foul, foul fair – is not a falsity but a complexity wired into a linguistically driven cognitive faculty. Words are forked, meaning volatile. This is because 'we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities'. And concepts – which are the ideational means through which we make sense of things – arise, always, from the equating of the unequal, through acts of transference. Macbeth imputes his triumphal fate. It is not that the witches deliberately seek to lead him astray. Rather, the act of straying, intrinsic to the confection of meaning, is tragically amplified and guided by Macbeth's overweening vanity and hunger for power. He will find the meaning which he chooses to find in the witches' oracle. For it is not that they are lying – they speak the truth – but not necessarily the truth Macbeth seeks. By placing himself centre-stage, as the rightful ruler, which he is not, Macbeth, after Nietzsche, mistakenly misreads the witches' oracle as the particular sum of a 'regulative an imperative world'.

However, this imperative is one of many, for words designate multiple outcomes. What something appears to be is not necessarily what it is. The very essence of a thing can only be understood as a complex of possibilities. What words provide is the appearance of meaning, not meaning in-and-for itself. For as Nietzsche reminds us, 'it is not true that the essence of things "appears" in the empirical world'. Truth is mediated at every turn, holographic at best. In the secular realm – a realm relative,

speculative – it cannot be satisfactorily regulative. Which is why Nietzsche reminds us that it is not the fraudulence of meaning-making which is the problem, but its damaging consequence when it is abused. Echoing Macbeth, the philosopher reminds us that ‘man has an invincible inclination to allow himself to be deceived and is, as it were, enchanted with happiness when the rhapsodist tells him epic fables as if they were true, or when the actor in the theatre acts more royally than any real king. So long as it is able to deceive without injuring, the master of deception, the intellect, is free’.

Deception, therefore, is inescapable, even bountiful. But it is also potentially lethal. And one would do well to keep this in mind as we venture into the realm of lies, our natural but also our debased habitat. As for truth? For Nietzsche the desire for it remains a mystery. At best, ‘Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions’. However, it is not this paradox which exercises me most, but the far more pervasive, necessary, and dangerous realm of lies with which we cloak our lives. More particularly, it is this realm of lies and its operation within a specific world – the world of contemporary South African art – which compels me the more. How do lies work effectively in art? When does the lie become dangerous and damaging?

3: PATHOLOGICAL ATTACHMENTS

In ‘The Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech’ – an essay to which I’ve returned more persistently than any other – J.M. Coetzee considers the difficulty of telling the truth. Penned in 1987, in the very heart of a cruelly divisive time in South Africa’s history, Coetzee notes that therein ‘there is ... too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination’. By ‘truth’, here, the Nobel Laureate is speaking of ‘The crudity of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies’, which, in hindsight, have never been resolved. And if this crudity persists – a crudity which makes it impossible to imagine my beleaguered country differently – it is because we have been unable to, or have refused ‘to quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract

forces, of anger and violence’, and, subsequently, remain unable to ‘take up residence in a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation’.

Our very idea of the world and what it must become is defined by a pathological morality – a need both just and obsessive which has made it impossible to shirk a constitutive abomination – racial inequality, poverty, the psychic horror of centuries of abuse. As a consequence, our art cannot be sustained through enabling appearances – a ‘living play of feelings and ideas’ – and, therefore, finds itself mired in nakedly cruel and violent forces.

And yet, if we hold fast to Nietzsche’s conclusion that truth is chimerical, then what are we to make of Coetzee’s yearning to be rid of ‘pathological attachments’? Surely, if art is to ‘truly have an occupation’ it cannot ignore the inescapability of an abusive and cruel world? Surely what matters is not art’s capacity to overcome this horror, but its capacity to think and feel through it which remains sustainable? This I think has been Coetzee’s project all along – he does not seek some vainglorious and beneficent world, he seeks, rather, to engage with the very gravity of the world in which we exist, a world ground down by naked appeals, hunger, rage, greed and lies – a world intestate and unresolved.

This world – shaped and honed through pain – is not one which we must refuse to imagine, but which we must learn to imagine differently. In so doing, we must not only recognise the difficulty of expressing it truthfully – whether this is possible is disputable – we must also reconsider the unscrupulousness of the fictions we live by – the fiction of liberty, self-possession, and self-determination. The lie of greatest concern is one in which we accept that we have been defrauded, a lie that champions salvation when there is none, that imagines a world in which, finally, we are one. In South Africa no such parity exists. Ours remains a society mutilated and ugly, founded on the illusion of supremacy and the shackles of bondage. Ubuntu, the Southern African credo in which we are whom we are because of others, has withered. It is a sentiment, a ‘truth’, which has been replaced by a pathological culture shaped by hate, fear, confusion, greed, desperation, violence, which, if Nietzsche is correct, must be endured.

Reflecting on the 'rawness' of life in South Africa, 'the evils that were practiced here', the novelist and essayist, Mike Nicol, in *The Waiting Country*, goes on to examine the inevitability of dissimulation - 'how we lie to one another'. 'We lie to accommodate', he says. 'We lie because we believe it does not matter. We lie because we think that in the face of so many years of misery, a lie that is for the good is not a lie at all. And we lie because we have no self-respect. We lie because we are victims. We lie because we cannot imagine ourselves in any other way'. But it is not only the instrumentality of lying which is the problem here, but the extent of the fraud perpetrated because it - the psychic cost of lies.

For Coetzee the root of the problem stems from the falsity of 'fraternity', 'The vain and essentially sentimental yearning that expresses itself in the reform movement' which he sees as disingenuous and corrupt in its 'yearning to have fraternity without paying for it'. The destructive consequence of this illusion - the illusion of fraternity - remains with us today. But the problem goes deeper, for what concerns me is not the confection of equality, but the root problem which founds its impossibility. What we are dealing with, when seeking to right a wrong, is not so much truth's impossibility, but its metaphoricity - for truths, says Nietzsche, are illusions both necessary and duplicitous. They come in the way of the greater problem presented to us in-and-through the culture of lies.

To better understand just how the South African art world operates, therefore, requires not merely the quest for a truth, but the greater quest to understand just how lies have operated, how they sustain us, and how, at their best, they can begin to help us reconfigure our condition and position in this world. This is because we need lies that operate as enabling metaphors.

4: AGE OF ANGER

An artist who compellingly engages with the duplicitousness of the South African experience is Ed Young. In his word-works, in particular, one confronts the delusory nature of fraternity and the psychic discordance which wracks the country's body politic. *BLACK IN FIVE MINUTES* is but one of many ironic barbs directed at the canned notion of transformation and the ruse of some instantaneous shift. Young understands the desire for change,

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but far more critically he asks us to reflect upon the conditions which makes this change seemingly possible - South Africa's phantom democracy. His aim is not merely to spoof hope, but to understand the yearning which triggers it - a yearning for a different world in a fundamentally indifferent time. Because of course at the very moment - historic and global - in which we hunger for connectedness, we also find ourselves confronted with what Pankaj Mishra terms the 'widening abyss of race, class and education'.

This abyss is by no means peculiar to South Africa. What Mishra addresses is a global 'Age of Anger', an age crude, barbarous, divisive, which no moral logic can countenance, and in which 'Well-worn pairs of opposites, often corresponding to the bitter divisions in our societies, have once again been put to work: progressive vs. reactionary, open vs. closed, liberalism vs. fascism, rational vs. irrational'. However, while this antithetical realm assumes dominance, it also refuses any reconciliation. Indeed, says Mishra, 'our search for rational political explanations for the current disorder is doomed'. This stark conclusion, made in 2017, is chastening. For today one cannot, rationally, resolve an escalating conflict. Indeed, the parsing of categories - open/closed, true/false - has become all the more difficult. This is because we can no longer suppose it possible to make distinctions. Instead we find ourselves caught in what Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe have termed a 'zone of indistinction' - foggy, filthy - in which it is difficult to disinter being from non-being.

Fanon's and Mbembe's insight deserve greater attention on our part, for what concerns the Martiniquan psychoanalyst and Cameroonian philosopher is the notion that blackness - the black body and psyche - has been so thoroughly obliterated, so wholly denied its self-presence, that it cannot return itself to itself. Objectified,

humiliated, rendered in-existent, it is a body, an agency, which, even today, remains at the margin of being. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is the clamour for being, for breath, for life, which has driven a humancentric will for selfhood. This drive, this yearning, is agonistically evident in a protest placard which reads - I AM SOMEBODY. For it is the very denial of the human that lies at the heart on an on-going struggle for dignity.

My point, however, is not to champion this justifiable right. What interests me, rather, is the voided being, the in-existent limit, the abyssal horror which we choose to flee from, or like Macbeth, tragically misconstrue. For as we are inescapably caught up in lies, if deception is the very ground upon which we live, then, surely, the recovery of some solvent agency, some beneficent model for a better life, comes at quite another cost. For one cannot only replace absence with presence, nothingness with something substantive, one must also reflect upon that which is worthwhile which lies within the void - the ability to exploit the veils that cloud us, the mystery that subsists in an afflicted and recessive condition. For to merely rename the black oppressed body positively, to bequeath it with a reason which, for centuries, it was denied, is to merely invert a pathology, replace a lack with a seeming clarity. In so doing, we come to foster a vision of black experience and black art as merely a reactive decree, and, thereby, deny it its richer complexity. For surely the black body and experience, and its artistic expression, should also be allowed its incommensurability, its perversity?

If, for Mishra, reason is doomed and no longer a useful tool, if reason is on the verge of bankruptcy as a mechanism for mediation, then why should it now assume a dominant role in black expression? As Edmund Burke, the eighteenth century English theorist of the sublime and compatriot of Schiller reminded us, 'The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and therefore no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man's nature, or to the quality of his affairs'. Reason, as a mechanism in-and-through which to attain a human right, is broken. Which is precisely why we find ourselves caught up in an era of hyperbolic excess, hysteria, and, along with it, a mounting violence. It is because 'Reason has been reduced to a bloodlessly instrumental mode of rationality,

which does no more than calculate its own advantage', that we must now reconsider not only its uses but its abuses. For as the Marxist cultural analyst, Terry Eagleton, resumes, 'Nature has been drained of its inner vitality and reduced to so much dead matter for human manipulation. What holds sway over human lives is utility, for which nothing can be precious in itself'.

The art world - indeed, the world at large - has fallen victim to this cynically energised and limited application. Reactive rather than active, declamatory rather than invocatory, this disposition, while necessary, is also enfeebled, for it blunts and contains a given struggle in scare quotes. Divisive, oppositional, monomaniacal, and hysterical, it is a mechanism which cannot save us. Hovering as we do in fog and filthy air, it is understandable that we might seek some clarity, but that clarity, as Eagleton rightly notes, comes at the expense of complexity. If reason is doomed, if we find ourselves today in a realm in which distinctions are collapsing all about us, in a state increasingly liquid - 'fluid' - this state, the state of our time, need not be lamentable. Truth after all was never the other of falsity. As Nietzsche argues, ours has always been a culture informed in-and-through dissimulation. It is the ideal of truth, an imposition upon an inherently unscrupulous world, which is the strange attractor - a quality and a category which remains inherently remote. Which is why I've chosen to emphasise the importance of lying as a generative rather than a degenerative agency.

What makes Ed Young's word-works compelling is not that they seek to speak truth to power, but that they implicate us in a founding hypocrisy. ALL SO FUCKING AFRICAN - displayed at Frieze-New York in 2016 - is precisely that, a word-work which challenges the fetishization of Africa as a continent, an idea, a principle. The tone of Young's work is exasperated, exhausted, numbed not only by the hype but the banalisation of a continent which for the past 500 years has operated as Europe's inverted and perverted Other. That there has been a concerted attempt to rewire this prevailing prejudicial perception has in no way stifled its prevalence. Instead, what we get is a disjunctive state in which a constitutive pathology is transmogrified. And yet, if we concur with Coetzee's view, then it is those very pathological attachments which, despite all attempts to the

contrary, will prevail.

For Coetzee it is this very pathological attachment to a dark truth which cannot be vaulted which makes South Africa 'as irresistible as it is unlovable'. While I share Coetzee's conviction, indeed his morbid neurosis, I nevertheless have also asked that we flip the prognosis and, thereby, resist this reading and learn to love the aggrieved and brutalised body of a country and a continent, and its people. For it is only through resistance and love - a resistance and a love which is not prescriptive - that we will begin to understand the complexity of the problem.

Art's job, if it can be said to possess one, is not to solve a problem but to inhabit it in an engaging way. And I think that Young does just this - he occupies a dilemma and makes it his vocation. In this regard, however, he also goes against the grain - the grain of resistance art which, dominant in the 70s and 80s, muted in the 90s, has resurfaced. For today, we find ourselves thoroughly caught up in Mishra's polarised and doomed logic, precisely because we mistakenly believe that we can think and paint ourselves out of a corner. Paradox, however, cannot be so easily overcome, which is precisely why Young has chosen to operate inside a contradiction, and, in so doing, foreground the lies which willingly, or unwillingly, we choose to spin.

I SEE BLACK PEOPLE - a word-work exhibited at the Johannesburg Art Fair in 2015 - expresses an observation. One might assume the first person pronoun - I - to be the subjective perspective of a white male artist. This could be true, but it is also not. The statement does not read, I, Ed Young, a white South African born in Welkom in the Free State, see black people. But because we know the artist to be white, male, and notorious, we tend to fix upon what could be a supremacist and racist abstraction of others. The generic conflation - 'black people' - is now not read as an objective sighting of a cluster, but a derogatory diminishing of a corpus of singularities into a blurred group. And yet, given the context for the exhibition of this statement, a forum whose very culture is exclusionary and predominantly frequented by a white middle class elite, surely this sighting is inaccurate? Surely what Young is telling us is that he does not see black people? That black people are markedly absent from a forum - the Johannesburg Art Fair, one of Africa's leading trading centres - and, therefore,

that it is their absence which is all the more palpable?

5: THE SLEEP OF REASON

The black body in pain is not the oracle of truth, and yet it is precisely the fixation on abjection which, with a morbid excrescence, has assumed dominance. It is against this impassioned but also pragmatic deployment of the black body - of blackness - which Achille Mbembe has chosen to think. His *Critique of Black Reason*, typically dismissed by those who use blackness as a categorical imperative, is an inspiring attempt to think inside the difficulty of a contentious category. 'Though some names can flatter, the name "Black" was from the beginning a mechanism for objectification and degradation', Mbembe notes. 'It drew its strength from its capacity to suffocate and strangle, to amputate and emasculate. The name was like death'. To be black, he more starkly adds, is 'the prototype of a poisoned, burnt subject ... a being whose life is made of ashes'.

Departing from this most defiled of categories, Mbembe seeks to explore just how a category like blackness - typically perceived as debased or threatening and violent - could operate both as 'the clinical manifestation of a "sickness" of a political nature as it was a practice of the transformation of symbols'. It is only in this doubled sense - as a category pathological and transfiguring - that we can begin to grasp the complexity of the being it frames. The relevance of this approach is that it defies easy polarisation and allows one to inhabit a realm that is indistinct, in which one is no longer captive to the rights of an oppressed body or glibly insouciant in relation to its messianic destiny.

It is in this regard that Lungiswa Gqunta emerges as a particularly canny young artist, for she not only recognises a history of pain and injustice but seeks, through a series of visceral and conceptual installations, to foreground the complexity of the oppressed being. Clinical, exacting, daring in its execution, Gqunta's works point to the zone of indistinction, the constitutive void, which defines black experience in contemporary South Africa.

One work in particular stands out as an instance of this complexity. We see a bedframe, shaped in a precise square, the bed coils starkly a-glimmer, the bed's frame tracked all about by a cold white light. Above the coiled square the artist has fixed a clear

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sheet of Perspex. This is the structure's surface – transparent, vertiginous, devoid of any consoling support, for there is no mattress. There is only the frame that we see, the idea of a bed, shorn of any comfort, any fabric which one would reasonably suppose necessary for rest, for sleep. For in this lean sculptural work, spot-lit, stark, it is precisely rest, sleep, which is denied. In the place of a mattress, we find a thin bilious film of petrol. Greenly iridescent, it is beautiful and it is chilling, for what Lungiswa Gqunta is telling us is that this is not a time of sleep but one of violent discord. Francisco Goya's etching, as ruthlessly precise as Lungiswa Gqunta's skeletal stage, is called 'The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters', and it returns us to the implacability of this unrest. For ours is a time in which reason has failed us, in which we have become traumatised, besieged, and panic-stricken. And if we cannot escape the monstrousness of our blasted lives, it is because we are ruinously inconsolable.

The brilliance of Gqunta's installation – the bed is accompanied by a video work in which we see the artist's calves and feet swaying backwards and forwards, clasped in makeshift sandals made of scrubbing brushes, the bristles replaced with matchsticks – lies in its latent force. For the installation is incendiary. It speaks to a burning world – 'a being whose life is made of ashes' – in which there is no privacy, no peace, in which the home is a battleground. As the matchstick points of the brushes sweep across a bed of coals, we imagine that all, in an instant, could be engulfed in flames – a sensation which all the more forcefully ignites itself within us as we see the shimmer of petrol and the delicate impress it has made on the Perspex sheet.

Here we return to my initial reflection on the lie as something shallow, undisturbed and undiscussed, assuming a horizontal position on a supporting surface. But I am also reminded of K

Sello Duiker's superb novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, published in 2001, in which the wracked state of the black imagination assumes its stark presence. For Duiker, like Gqunta, well knew that reason, dispensed as an antidote to horror, is not only generic but a venomous fake. 'We're not all God's children', Duiker writes. 'In here God doesn't exist. I am the forgotten who lies rotting in a barrel of fermenting apples. God never heard my cries. I never saw the light or touched on something sacred in myself. We're not all mystics who can extract beauty from our pain. Some of us are just born with too much corruption to ever survive it'. That Duiker's novel proved the inspiration for a group show jointly curated by Blank Projects and the Stevenson gallery in 2016, should further impress upon us the crippling extent of South Africa's damaged psyche. Today we are very far removed indeed from Ed Young's only optimistic work, a sculpture of Desmond Tutu in flight, holding fast to a lurching candelabra. Made in 2010, it is a sculpture to which I repeatedly returned with my daughters'. The words which accompanied the grinning airborne Desmond Tutu, now, in hindsight, are an arid mockery – BE PATIENT – the declaration reads – WE ONLY HAVE A FEW THINGS TO FIX.

At the exhausted limit of reason, in the midst of an agonistic and inconsolable fact of abuse, disregard, debasement, Duiker, like Gqunta and Young, seek to create art that infects us with its ruinous difficulty. Duiker would kill himself in 2004, but not before he bequeathed us a bare-boned body of work which defied the hypocrisy that still seeks to contain and nullify black experience. 'I don't care for people who want to prescribe what it means and doesn't mean to be African', he writes. 'People say things just for the hell of it, to hear their own voices blowing out vacuous breath. I know who I am'. It is this vacuity which we find spoken all about, a vacuity which shapes and informs so much talk of African art today. It is a vacuity that subsists in a dangerous and fraudulent lie.

At the root of the problem is perception: what we choose to see and why? Given that lies are built into perception, the problem is not that we lie – this is unavoidable – rather, what should be concerning are the lies which come in the way of a deeper understanding. If Ed Young's provocation or Luniswa Gqunta's insinuation are compelling, it is



Sleeping Pools – Lungiswa Gqunta

because they appeal to this greater understanding – they understand and manipulate the illusory power of art, and, in so doing, tap into the structures of feeling – a structure of anger and dissent – in which it subsists. Neither artist is reactive – though Young’s art appears to be so – rather, both actively engage with the difficulty of perception, the one by challenging the complacent exploitation of entitlement, the other, more demandingly, by foregrounding a besieged psyche and body.

I have written on these matters at great length, and in variant and conflicting iterations, in my book *In the World*. For the purposes of this conversation, however, I seek only to address the ubiquitous nature of the misperception of African art. There is, for example, the gauche view that the spiking interest in African art signals a ‘second scramble’, yet another occupation and deterritorialization of Africa’s agency and value. To bluntly state, as does Matthew Partridge, that ‘in South Africa the art world is a white world, trading in blacks’, is a view that is as convincing as it is offensive and disturbing. But my point, here, is not to bemoan this state of affairs, let alone right it. Rather, what interests me far more is the value of a calculated dissonance and an enabling lie. For just as I cannot stomach the exploitation of the black body and its expressions, neither can I wholly endorse the jingoistic assumption that it is an invariable force for good.

Piety in the understanding of black experience must be routed out. As Steve Bantu Biko noted

in *I write what I like*, ‘The first step ... is to make the black man come to himself, to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an inward-looking process. This is the definition of “Black Consciousness”. The ‘Black man’, therefore, is complicit in the engineering of his own dissolution and co-optation in an enterprise which, fundamentally, refuses him a greater probity. And if the

art world has allowed this to happen it is precisely because it has favoured the iconic and spectacular at the expense of what Edmund Burke termed ‘the greatest possible complexity’.

Tragically still perceived as a curiosity, the black being and its works have rarely been permitted to move beyond an assigned representational economy. There is, of course, an urgent move to override this tendency, the decision by an institution – which will not be named – to exchange its white male blue chip art with works by women and blacks being a typical and rather sinister instance of this new-fangled political correctness. Ironically, it is the overweening desire to ‘do good’ and right an imbalance which further compromises an already compromised art world. After Nietzsche, it is this political correctness which has emerged as a symptom which has forgotten it is a dangerous illusion. We see this misstep in operation in curatorial projects and tertiary curricula everywhere. The widely touted

“Tragically still perceived as a curiosity, the black being and its works have rarely been permitted to move beyond an assigned representational economy. There is, of course, an urgent move to override this tendency.”



Candice – Daniel Stompie Selibe

decolonising project is a glaring instance of this misstep. As a rational project – a project driven by a good reason – it fails to address the more complex matter of human complexity, a matter, a factor, refused at its outset by colonialism, which, as Terry Eagleton has rightly pointed out, is ‘at root a political and economic reality, not (as some postcolonial theory imagines) a cultural one’.

The greater appeal – expressed by Achille Mbembe, and which has been troublingly disregarded and disabused today – is to engage in ‘the project of a world that is coming, a world before us, one whose destination is universal, a world freed from the burden of race, from resentment, and from the desire for vengeance that all racism calls into being’. Consigned to the dumpster for being utopian, it is a view which nevertheless connects rather than divides us. It is, in other words, a better and more engendering lie, precisely because it holds fast to a beneficent will in a time which is fast becoming irredeemably balkanised. For as James Baldwin has reminded us – a reminder which the ideologues amongst us

wilfully suppress – ‘The rage of the disesteemed’, while ‘absolutely inevitable’ is also ‘personally fruitless’.

Art cannot construct solutions to our ills, it can only implicate us in the difficulty of addressing them. As Jeannette Winterson notes in *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, ‘The true artist is interested in the art object as an art process, the thing in being, the being of the thing, the struggle, the excitement, the energy, that have found expression in a particular way. The true artist is after the problem. The false artist wants it solved (by somebody else)’. While I do not support Winterson’s distinction between the ‘true artist’ and the ‘false artist’, claiming rather that we lie for better or for worse, I nevertheless cannot shirk her conclusion that prescriptive art is also unduly conscriptive – it asks us to complete its meaning, to be its foil. That this incorporating and inclusive view has become increasingly commonplace – the viewer democratically championed as art’s extension and arbiter – reveals the degree to which populism has infected the art world, indeed, the world at large. In this troubling regard, however, we should remember Biko’s caution and be wary of being complicit in the ‘crime’ of allowing ourselves to be so ‘misused’.

This caution – qualified variously by Mbembe, Biko, and Winterson – is brilliantly heeded and overridden by Daniel Stompie Selibe, who, to my mind, best exemplifies an art in which blackness – as a trope for subjection or victimhood – is exhausted and reconceptualised. In his works – part collage, part febrile mark-making – it is ‘the being of the thing, the struggle, the excitement, the energy’ which compels us.

Simon Schama’s description of the paintings by Soutine as ‘observed phenomena’ that ‘dissolve completely in a pottage of paint – the paint flung on with abandon, wet into wet, forming ropes, snakes, flat ribbons of sharp colour, while the whole surging surface is sometimes slashed over with welt-raising strokes of black’, cannily mirrors the abyssal vortex which distinguishes Selibe’s world. His is an art refined by oblivion, which stands as a remarkable testimony to the enraging hopelessness which consumes us. For as James Baldwin reminded us, ‘People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them’.

The prevailing lie – mired in political correctness,

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and thus, after Winterson, a lie that generates a ‘false’ art – is that this oblivion must, perforce, be overcome. Daniel Stompie Selibe, I’d wager, has refused this stifling and crippling imperative. Rather, his is an art – closest in spirit to K Sello Duiker’s *Quiet Violence of Dreams* – which has chosen to inhabit an enraging hopelessness. It is an art poised at the tipping point in the experience of being human at this moment in the twenty-first century. For it is not only the art of a black South African consciousness but a consciousness that is engulfing the entirety of the world; a consciousness distressed, panic-stricken, fearful, which, nevertheless, must forge a path, no matter how inarticulate and graspingly futile.

6: A DIFFERENT POLITICAL POTENTIAL

If ‘[T]ruths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions’, if they are but ‘metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins’, it is because they have lost or mistaken their currency. This, however, has not stopped a failed currency from being minted anew.

In South Africa, I have witnessed this counterfeit played out in the quest for free education in which neither freedom nor education has been fundamentally addressed. But it is not this acutely complex matter with which I wish to conclude this conversation, but its antidote, for above and beneath this rhetoric for change there exists an art which can overcome it – an art which refuses to sustain the fictions which we inevitably embrace, but which, despite this refusal, can nevertheless help us to live better, if difficult, lives.

One such fiction, one such lie, for JM Coetzee, is that ‘After we die we wake up in another, better world’. Another is Achille Mbembe’s, ‘of a world that is coming ... a world freed from ... resentment.’

If damned for being fraudulent, they nevertheless hold fast to their currency. And what connects these beliefs, these fantasies, is their fortitude and their fundamental inconclusiveness. For while we cannot shirk the indisputable fact of ‘a widening abyss of race, class, and education’, while our ‘intellectual industry’ has become increasingly polarised, what persists and cannot be overridden, despite innumerable efforts to do so, is our capacity for some starkly austere critical wonder. In the midst of our flawed and aggrieved state, we have the ability to access our better selves. And it is in this particular regard, finally, that I want to share with you the work of a remarkable young artist – Alana Blignaut.

A Master’s graduate from the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg – I was her external examiner in 2018 – Blignaut introduced me to a room blackened, but for one light projection which revealed a series of looped portraits. My first impression was that I was looking at fine pencil drawings, or drawings scored with acute delicacy in some grey ink. Photographs were not what I thought I was seeing. This incorrect, yet reasonable impression, made sense when I realised that what Blignaut was in fact doing was not taking photographs but digitally morphing a grouping of photographs of men and women respectively, and reconstructing them according to received ideas of caste-phenotype-race. The images were taken from an apartheid prison archive, the subjects deemed a threat to the state.

Through a digital process – too complex for me to grasp and explain here – the artist had reconfigured the idea of objecthood and personhood. She was asking us to rethink how we see people – the ideological-political-cultural-faux scientific methods we use to appropriate others and consign them to a preordained and imposed set of categories. The reasoning behind it all was especially compelling, for what I thought primarily interested Blignaut was not only the system of closed meanings which confined the subject-as-object according to gender and race, but the slippage that occurred in the attempt to do so. The categories were intrinsically aberrant, it seemed, for they also inadvertently announced the a-categorical.

This insight I thought then, as I do now, is critical, particularly today, in a culture both local and



Female average Male average
 – Alana Blignaut

global which seeks to imprison and herd human beings. That Blignaut chose the faces of purported 'criminals' or perceived 'threats' to the apartheid system as her focus and terrain, in no way belied the fact that she was also addressing the darkly current reinvestment in the objectification of human beings according to race and gender. However, her critique was even more far reaching, for what interested the artist was the impertinence and obscenity which undergirds the naming and framing of people. What spurred her on was the vexed impossibility of any strategy of containment. In short, the artist had deftly drawn my attention to the visceral and cognitive fact that no human being can, finally, be reduced to a type.

Blignaut's endeavour was not only a brilliant deconstruction of types, but also a deconstruction of the imagined essence mistakenly believed to subsist in types. For through an exploration of 'Facial Averaging', in which a cluster of men and women were morphed to create a single image, we learnt not only of the universality of faces – that we belong to one species – but, far more importantly, that no face can truly contain its singularity, and that faces – the aggregation thereof – resulted in two impossibilities – the impossibility of the singular and the impossibility of the universal.

What, one wonders, is achieved in renouncing or suspending these absolutes? For Blignaut, I think it opened up a far more fluid comprehension of the viscosity, rather than the density, of being. That the artist is currently undergoing an alteration in gender – thereby challenging the

imperative of polarity and the ruse of essences – has surely informed this astoundingly potent work. For as Blignaut's co-supervisor and long-standing collaborator, Kathryn Smith, more pointedly noted, the artist's innovation displayed 'an active perversion of a historically discriminatory and repressive technology and method', and, in so doing, invoked 'something both beautiful and unsettling, that asserts a different political potential'.

I have chosen to conclude this conversation with Blignaut because she has reminded us that the lie that is art, the lie that is perception, is

one that harbours great riches – a different political potential. In foregoing certainty, in embracing the infinity that is difference, we arrive at the enabling lie which makes life and art conditions in which we can survive. After all, a 'regulative and imperative world' is one that kills, no matter how necessary that regulation and imperative may seem to be. ■

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