Moshekwa Langa

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FRONT COVER : ***My Life as a Disco Queen, As Told To John Ruskin,***
computer-scanned polaroids, mounted on aluminum,
124 x 150cm each, 1999

BACK COVER : **Untitled banner study, paint on vellum, 30 x 21cm, 1999**

Moshekwa Langa: The Global Village Revisited

Hamza Walker

> New Babylon ends nowhere (since the earth is round); it knows no frontiers (since there are no more national economies) or collectivities (since humanity is fluctuating). Every place is accessible to one and all. The whole earth becomes home to its owners. Life is an endless journey across a world which is changing so rapidly that it seems forever other.
>
> Constant
> *New Babylon*, 1974[1]

From 1958 to 1966, Dr. Hendrik F. Verwoerd served as Prime Minister of South Africa. His vision of apartheid was distinguished by its scope. Whereas apartheid proper involved the segregation of races, Verwoerd wished to separate them into newly created, self-governing states. "Grand apartheid," as it was known, was unprecedented in the country's history. It called for establishing a small white republic to coexist alongside a series of black tribal states or homelands. Its implementation sparked major protests. In March of 1960, after riots in Johannesburg, a state of emergency was declared. Opponents to Verwoerd's plans were jailed and the principal black political organizations, notably the African National Congress (ANC), were outlawed. Verwoerd resumed his plan, creating the illusion of tribal authority by appointing a group of chieftains to govern the yet to be determined territories. Maps were eventually drawn-up and communities were bulldozed and resettled according to new boundaries. At the same time, the migration of blacks into the industrialized cities had to be halted and reversed. Factories were encouraged to relocate. Already existing pass laws were stiffened. All blacks, including those born and raised in the city, were assigned a homeland.

Although Verwoerd died in 1966, grand apartheid had enough momentum to see it through successive administrations before its dismantlement in 1989. By 1977, four out of ten homelands were granted independence. Although homeland chiefs could liken their independence to liberation struggles elsewhere on the continent, the homelands exemplified neo-colonial rule. Massive land reapportioning complicated by tribal bickering resulted in the relocation of upwards of 3.5 million blacks. The shanty towns and resettlement camps which began cropping up in arid wastelands as early as 1963 were now a permanent fixture. The homelands were characterized by corruption, exploitation, widespread poverty and a substantial number of internally displaced persons.

In an untitled assemblage made in 1996, Moshekwa Langa taped a map of Bophuthatswana to a trash bag, but not before scribbling on what was already a masterpiece of gerrymandering. The drawing

features a roughly sketched circle accompanied by a few stray grids, arrows and fragments of hand-rendered text. One reads "They Lived Happily Ever After" and another "State Copyright." In the context of Bophuthatswana, the circle is not so much a symbol of unity as it is of containment. In light of apartheid, the text is purely and painfully ironic. Obviously this is not a fairy tale. The state can not only copyright what it has created, it literally and systematically copied, i.e. repeatedly exercised, its right to move and remove people as it drew and redrew boundaries. In general, however, Langa's language is consciously cryptic. Making sense of this work is no doubt like trying to follow the logic of apartheid which, in the case of this map, is the illogic of dispersal. Langa's rough, desperate line and emphatic use of tape reek of force—an effort to fix and rationalize displacement in a homeland whose creation involved the redistricting and reapportioning of several far flung regions in the Northern Province. Having learned from the mistakes of previous homelands, Bophuthatswana was to be a model independent state. Instead it only illustrated the advanced stages of grand apartheid's moral and political bankruptcy.

Langa hails from KwaNdbele, a homeland adjacent to Bophuthatswana. He was born in 1975, two years before Bophuthatswana became an independent state. Considering when and where he was born, Langa witnessed revolutionary change from a regime in the last and perhaps cruelest stages of its maintenance to the coming of a democratic and unified South Africa. He is a radical scavenger. While living in South Africa, he worked almost exclusively with found materials, particularly those imparting a sense of impermanence. The untitled Bophuthatswana assemblage is one in a series of thirteen works formally linked through the use of trash bags and maps. These materials, along with scraps of corrugated metal, fishing line and tarp-sized pieces of paper that were crumpled and smeared with household goods (tea, coffee, soap, sugar, syrup), seem to have been his favorites. The works were often installed in a transient manner—leaned, hung, clipped or draped—coming across as disparate fragments of happenstance. Whatever holistic, personal sensibility Langa brought to bear on this work found itself disassembled and reapportioned much like KwaNdebele's makeshift environs. Indeed, Langa's formative years were marked by conditions in which the dichotomy between the personal and the political was an imploded binary whose remnants were indistinguishable. Biographical and political content had become one and the same. This is confirmed throughout his notebooks in which maps of South Africa's provinces are squarely juxtaposed against family photos. In another related work from the previous year, Langa draped several homeland phone books over white wire coat-hangers and permanently sealed them in black plastic to prevent their being opened again. It is tempting to read this work as an acknowledgment that the historical chapter of the homelands had drawn to a close since those independent states were absorbed into Nelson Mandela's government. But by then, dislocation had become an inextricable part of South Africa's foundational narrative—from its colonial origins, with its celebratory tales of treks, voyages, frontiers and settlers, to the rampant displacement of blacks under grand apartheid, and finally in the biographies of numerous dissidents and exiles. For a vast amount of northern South Africa's black residents, the journey to Johannesburg from the immediately surrounding townships and underdeveloped homelands still remains all but mandatory. If anything, Langa, through his own travails (moving from KwaNdbele to Johannesburg), cultivated a sense of internal displacement already endemic to South Africa's polyglot national identity.

Langa has produced videos, banners, photographs, drawings, paintings and installations. No medium is privileged, yet all are distinct, as the eclectic hanging of his exhibition makes clear. Langa's heterogeneous mix of artistic media ultimately recapitulates two contradictory artistic paradigms: namely, modernist art's aspirations for universal legibility, i.e. "the prospects of an emancipatory transcendence of regional and national artistic conventions,"[2] notably through abstraction, and post-modernism's investigation into the basis of subjectivity and identity formation as they reside in autobiography, performance and figuration. Although each of Langa's works, ranging from the sizable monochromatic paintings to the photographs prominently featuring the artist engaged in role-playing, may be considered individually, the paradigms they represent when taken together pose a set of interesting questions regarding the development of an aesthetic articulating the conditions of displacement and exile. Given that mass migration is an inextricable aspect of modernity, one could, as art historian Benjamin Buchloh suggests, begin documenting such an aesthetic so as to yield a "typology" of formal characteristics corresponding to displacement as a global condition. But what, if any, would be the relationship between an aesthetic articulating global conditions of displacement and modernism's utopian aspirations for an art of universal legibility? Tellingly, Langa engages modernism's universalist paradigm as someone whose experience is that of displacement. According to his work, the key characteristic of an aesthetic articulating displacement as a global condition is one of universal illegibility. This is born out in Langa's most consistent practice, drawing. Langa's drawings are a mixture of styles resembling the Twentieth Century's best scribblers (Cy Twombly, Jean Michel Basquiat, Bill Traylor, Louise Bourgeois). Many are executed with unorthodox materials, including nail polish, ball point pen and White-Out used to delete fragments of appropriated text. They are strange, idiosyncratic acts of communication belonging to someone in search of a private Esperanto. This is hardly surprising since his native South Africa has eleven official languages.

Whereas it would appear that Langa's earliest work reflected circumstances unique to South Africa, the conditions of displacement specific to that country no doubt greatly inform larger, global conditions of displacement. Although places such as Bophutatswana, KwaNdbele and Kwazulu Natal, all of which have been featured in Langa's map-based collages, are neo-colonial tribal constructs, under a rubric of global displacement they become as cosmopolitan as any place else whose population is essentially a transient ward of the nation-state at the mercy of global capital. In this respect, Langa's work is hardly region-specific. Without ever leaving the confines of his native South Africa, Langa could have assumed the status of "world citizen" and his work could rightfully lay claim to being "cosmopolitan" insofar as that word is commensurate with the term "global village." Paradoxically, Langa's emigration from Johannesburg (the new world) to Amsterdam (the old world) would threaten to reduce his status from "world citizen" to that of "native" since his work—based on the artist's identity, as manifest in his name, race, and country of origin—was in all likelihood expected to reflect regional specificity. Its ability to participate in a global or universalist discourse would then be denied unless the modernist paradigm for universal legibility was disrupted.

Langa moved to Amsterdam in 1996 to pursue two years of study at the prestigious Rijksakademie. During that time he produced a sizable body of work in all media, much of which constitutes his dual exhibitions at the Center for Contemporary Art, Geneva, and The Renaissance Society. Langa notes

although he had no intentions of producing paintings, he was not immune to pressure to study the craft upon which the Rijksakademie most prides itself. His response was a series of several large canvases, some monochromatic, and others drawing-based. Together, this body of work represents opposite poles of painting's universalist discourse as it was developed early in the twentieth century. On one end of the spectrum, abstraction's claim to universality was bolstered by the monochrome that transcended (or obliterated) reality through its reductivist, formal rigor. On the other end was the rhetoric of primitivism advanced by several strands of the avant-garde (Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, and later L'Art Brut), all of which found inspiration in a category of cultural production (ethnographic objects, cave drawings, children's art) taken to represent nascent states of human development common to all individuals and societies. Langa's large-scale canvases indulge both extremes. The densely layered scribbles and sheer painterliness reveal an integrity to each approach, suggesting that both languages—primitive and transcendental—are not simply tropes but fully operative. A universalist discourse as expressed in the medium of paint, however, was also an absolutist discourse that had achieved historical closure. On both primitivist and transcendentalist terms, figures such as Paul Klee and Ad Reinhardt could be said to have already spoken on Langa's behalf. Both painterly languages, even when employed by the likes of Langa, only serve to reiterate the exclusion of non-Western individuals from a universalist discourse already predicated on their absence. If the universalist discourse were to be re-opened so as to register inclusion of the "other," painting would have to be joined by another medium. This required that Langa expand his assemblage sensibility to encompass the installation of his exhibition so that his paintings could inform and be informed by other bodies of work.

Although Langa pursued painting with the utmost integrity, it was never his intention to exhibit these works separately. For Langa, the absence of the universalist subject in painting would equal its very presence in photography. In this instance, the universalist subject being conjured is none other Langa himself. Parallel to his painting practice, Langa executed several series of photo-based self-portraits. Sans shirt and shoes, Langa captures himself in a variety of action poses. Shameless, silly, sexy, sentimental or just plain non-sensical, Langa's computer-enlarged Polaroids have no production values to speak of. In the series *How I Left the Couch*, Langa sports only crisp white briefs and socks. Two of these photos feature Langa suspended in the air, a large portion of his upper body cropped out of the frame making it impossible to tell how he is suspended. While airborne he fully contracts his lower legs in one photo. In the other, they are thrust out. Between the contraction and release, it is a striking and extremely expressive gesture, but even before Langa's body can assume the form of an expressive grapheme, it speaks through the inescapable matrix of race. In short, his body speaks while at the same time it is already spoken for. His attempts to defy gravity can be read as a rather humorous but futile effort to transcend narratives of self and other played out through the cultural fetishizing of a skin tone set in stark contrast to his white undergarments.

Langa's self-portraits can be linked to an older tradition of African studio portraiture through the figure of Samuel Fosso whose self-portraits, dating from 1977-78, are likewise filled with a playful sensuality. One in particular features Fosso churlishly posed, hands on hips, in white briefs and tank-top. As Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy note of Fosso's role-playing, "These images are consciously constructed around or across the traditional/modern dichotomy: they are 'playing' on both a certain desire for the modern, and on

certain dissonances in the idea of 'modern' Africa."[3] Unlike Fosso, Langa has largely dispensed with props in what is a non-descript, makeshift studio so barren as to be labeled primitive and so primitive as to be considered modern, or post-modern for that matter. With the exception of a black leather couch which he occasionally straddles, the only other prop is a microphone that appears in the triptych *My Life as a Disco Queen, as told to John Ruskin*. In one image, Langa offers the microphone to his make-believe audience in a gesture that is unabashedly erotic and at the same time an endearing invitation to sing along. The honesty and aggressive charm behind this performance is a surreal view into the sparsely populated karaoke bar of the artist's mind. No costumes and no make-up, these photographs are a critical camp redux, the "passionate failure to strive for a compulsory identity."[4] Stripped of any options as to how his corporeal self is to be perceived, this is "Moshekwa! Unplugged" and literally "playing" at the presentation of an essential self unable and unwilling to hide behind name, gender and race.

Graced with a billowy pair of parted curtains at the entry, Langa's Renaissance Society exhibition announced itself as theater. Needless to say, the metaphor of life as theater is central to any definition of camp. Langa's image is omnipresent throughout the exhibition as he is engaged in all manner of role-playing, borrowing poses from a variety of discreet sources (pornography, Weegee homicide photos, crucifixion scenes). In this respect, the relationship to an ongoing tradition of African studio portraiture, in which the sitter borrows available clothing and accessories to better express how they would like to be perceived, is quite clear. Role-playing becomes synonymous with self-determination. So the question is not "Why role-playing or theatricality?" The question relevant to Langa's work as it was phrased by Susan Sontag in her now classic essay *Notes on "Camp,"* is "When does travesty, impersonation, theatricality acquire the special flavor of camp?"[5] The answer to this question becomes apparent when comparing Langa's self-portraits to the dignity found in the work of Seydou Keïta, the excessive romanticism of Rotimi Fani-Kayode's photographic tableaux, the irony of Iké Udé's parodies of fashion photography, or the stern, masculinist identity-politics of Oladélé Ajiboyé Bamgboyé. Playing against this context, Langa's self-portraits harbor camp's essential element, namely a seriousness but "a seriousness that fails."[6] To use Sontag's words, Langa's self-portraits contain "the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive" to be considered prime examples of camp.[7]

This becomes even more obvious when Langa's work is considered within a trajectory of staged photography that developed in the 1980s as a critique of earlier documentary and photo-journalistic practices. The photograph no longer simply registered an available reality. Instead, the photograph was viewed as complicit in the construction of subjective codes involving race, gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity. Photographic truth was interrogated, often beginning with the self and the body, particularly as it posited notions of difference and beauty. However, by the time Langa reached the decision to interrogate identity it was something of an exhausted topic. When Langa began his series of photo-based self-portraits, staged photography, at the hands of Lyle Ashton Harris, Catherine Opie, Iké Udé, and Yasumasa Mori Mura, to name but a few, had run much of its course. As early as 1990, cultural critic Kobena Mercer noted the neutralization of leftist political movements was "paralleled by the cultural appropriation and commodification" of identity politics, "many of whose radical slogans (such as 'the personal is political') have been hijacked,

objectified and sold back to us as an ever-widening range of 'lifestyle' options for those who can afford to pay."[8] Langa's photos could hardly be said to appear at a moment of crisis, one lacking in representations of blacks. If anything it is just the opposite. The photos appear at a moment dubbed "hyperblack," allowing Kobena Mercer, in a later essay, to restate his earlier position more emphatically.

> Surveying the contemporary mediascape in which the drag, kitsch and camp iconography of a Ru Paul is about as transgressive as the Muppets; in which supermodels like Naomi Campbell and Tyson Beckford seek to subvert nothing more than their previous salaries; and in which hyperstylized blackness resold by Karl Kani, Tommy Hilfiger, Nike and other logos and labels demonstrates the frenzied commodification of diversity, we are faced with the paradox whereby the apparent proliferation of freedom of choice is undergirded by the gothic social horror of resegregated demographics.[9]

Despite the accuracy of Mercer's assessment, his expectation that camp iconography transgress the very conditions that bring it into being—namely, the recycling of an exhausted commodity fetishism—is misgrounded. Camp can mock, not transgress, the subject it lovingly imitates. It is problematic precisely because it is a solvent of the morality being raised by Mercer. In Susan Sontag's words, camp "neutralizes moral indignation," sponsoring a playfulness that is a defining characteristic of Langa's work in general.[10] Needless to say, market demographics pale in comparison to the state-sponsored "gothic social horror" Langa has witnessed. As much as it is the byproduct of an assemblage aesthetic, Langa's crypticism, his decontextualized iconography, his deployment of any and all media, is a willful obscurity meant to disrupt readings overdetermined by a political context. All this for the sake of play, which is not to say that there are no stakes. Camp is not only a solvent of morality. It is also a solvent of an authenticity that artists in Langa's position are no doubt expected to bear. The bona fide African subject who would speak for an entire village cum continent cum world is re-instating a universalist discourse as an exclusionary master narrative to which ultimately no one belongs. The failed seriousness at work in Langa's photographs is also at work (or play) in his monochromes, for it is not an essential Africaness that is being subject to camp but the universalist discourse itself. Langa is merely exploiting its inherent hyperbole. Now that the world is a global village who else but Moshekwa Langa should speak on its behalf? Although this question is rhetorical, the point being that which camp cannot transgress, it may be able to redeem. What is at work in Langa's use of camp is nothing short of the reprisal of humanism. Fully applicable to Langa's exhibition is Sontag's extraordinarily insightful observation regarding camp's ability to re-animate whatever universalist discourse remains latent in humanism through fragmentary practices.

> This [camp] sensibility also insists on the principle that an oeuvre in the old sense (again, in art, but also in life) is not possible. Only "fragments" are possible... Something is good not because it is achieved, but because another kind of truth about the human situation, another experience of what it is to be human—in short, another valid sensibility—is being revealed.[11]

Under those circumstances, who would want to transgress the Muppets? Certainly not Langa. Theirs is a sensibility that is vital to the imagination, which is why he has appropriated it, as in his use of toys for variations on his signature string installation, *Fieldwork* (1997).

A temporary installation exhibited during the end of his studies at the Rijksakademie, *Fieldwork* has been reconfigured for numerous venues including the Offenes Kulturhaus in Linz, Austria, the Johannesburg Biennial, and The Renaissance Society. Spilling hundreds of yards of string across the floor in a gesture reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's manner of painting, Langa converted the ground plane into an elaborate map. The metaphor was completed with the occasional toy car and through the use of spools and bottles as stand-ins for buildings, monuments or significant topographical features. Despite the simplicity of means, the results varied greatly, occasionally warranting a new name. The poetic nature of the piece was reinforced by Langa's literary flair, which he often reserves for his titles. In Linz, the work was entitled *The Mountains of My Youth—A Novel*, a ridiculously sentimental title in which nostalgia is bred by chronological as well as geographical distance. By contrast, The Society's version was more compact and baroque, filled with toys, including a plastic tank, rubber mice and spiders, and replete with a mirror ball at its center. Yet, Langa offset its playfulness with a gothic, if not downright sinister, title, *Temporal Distance (with a criminal intent); You will find us in the best places,* a version of which was shown at the Johannesburg and Havana Biennials. In any and all cases, these installations gave new meaning to the term World Wide Web.

Part of this installation's critical success lay in the playful manner it reinscribes Marcel Duchamp's famous installation *mile of string* within the rubric of globalization. Not surprisingly, Duchamp, as part of the 1942 *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition, in which *mile of string* was included, encouraged Sidney Janis's children to play loudly and excitedly during the opening reception—a gesture Langa has subsumed through his use of toys. Given *Temporal Distance*'s delightfully haphazard resemblances to a metropole, the installation has an even deeper affinity with the Situationist's ideas regarding city planning about which they wrote numerous tracts. Inspired by the writings of Johan Huizinga, in particular his concept of Homo Ludens, man as player of games, the Situationists rooted the motives for their architectural theories in "a passion for play."[12] Their grandest scheme was Unitary Urbanism and its most vocal proponent was Constant, whose installation, *Yellow Sector* (1958,) which utilized toy cars, is also a seminal precedent for *Temporal Distance*. Unitary Urbanism was a combination of all the Situationist's thought and strategies, the dérive and détournment, brought to bear upon ideas of urban planning. In no way whatsoever was Unitary Urbanism pragmatic. It was a critique of a functionalist, post World War II urban environment stripped of joy. Guy Debord and Constant were keen to stress Unitary Urbanism as a game that emphasized continual movement. "Unitary Urbanism is opposed to the fixation of people at certain points of a city. It is the foundation for a civilization of leisure and play."[13] Constant, however, persisted with Unitary Urbanism well beyond the Situationists, incorporating it into his concept for a utopian civilization called New Babylon, which was his preoccupation from 1956 to 1974, becoming the basis for hundreds of models, paintings, and collages.

The Culture of New Babylon does not result from isolated activities, from exceptional situations, but from the global activity of the whole world population, every human being being engaged in a dynamic relation with his surroundings. There are no a priori links between anyone.[14]

Reveling in the ecstasy of communication as described by Constant, Langa is perhaps New Babylon's first citizen. Having abandoned a sense of mastery and master narratives, his robust laughter serves as his passport. For him, the world is a ball of string with neither its beginning nor its end anywhere in sight. It is a monotonous series of windings creating elaborate connections between people and places accompanied by an equally elaborate set of thoughts and longings. If Langa's disparate and desperate practices constitute an atlas of the difficult world, then his is an invitation to join him "in the streets of the universe, now!" [15]

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[1] Constant, "New Babylon," in *Theory of the Dérive and other Situationist writings on the city*, eds. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996), p. 150-151.

[2] Benjamin Buchloh, "Structure, Sign, and Reference in the Work of David Lamelas," in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000), p. 307.

[3] Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy, *Different, a historical context: Contemporary photographers and black identity* (London: Phaidon, 2001), p. 53.

[4] Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like A Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 15.

[5] Susan Sontag, "Notes on "Camp"," in *Against Interpretation*, (Anchor Books: New York, 1986), p. 280.

[6] ibid, p. 280.

[7] ibid, p. 283.

[8] Kobena Mercer, "Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 66-67.

[9] Kobena Mercer, "Iké Udé: A Dandy in the Naked City," in *Subject to Representation: Essays on the Politics of Representation*, ed. François Dion (Ottowa: Gallery 101, 2000), pp. 34-35. The term "hyperblack," cited in Mercer's essay, comes from Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for the Sign of Blackness*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[10] Susan Sontag, "Notes on "Camp"," in *Against Interpretation*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1986), p. 290.

[11] ibid, p. 287

[12] Michèle Bernstein, in *Theory of the Dérive and other Situationist writings on the city*, eds. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996), p. 53.

[13] Unsigned tract, Unitary Urbanism at the End of the 1950's, Potlatch #20, in *Theory of the Dérive and other Situationist writings on the city*, eds. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996), p. 84.

[14] Constant, "New Babylon," in *Theory of the Dérive and other Situationist writings on the city*, eds. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996), p. 157.

[15] Adrienne Rich, *Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988 - 1991*, (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 22.