

The Archaeology of Repression:

FOUR SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS

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BY EUGENIO VALDÉS

On the morning of the 2nd of October 1990 Nicholas Cruise received a package containing a computer that he had to repair. The job didn't at all surprise him because that was precisely what he had been doing during the past two months with a Durban based computer company. He therefore confidently opened the package. When he did so the bomb that would kill him exploded. The incident caused quite a scandal, not so much due to the assassination, but to the strange way in which the supposed murderers made everybody forget their victim, presenting themselves as protagonists of a political action, and demanding, with a hunger strike included, that the political amnesty then declared should also favour them. The dead man retired to the background, went into an absent territory, from where even the most hard

working historian probably could never rescue him. An archaeological initiative was necessary, an excavation in History's back yard, in order to recover his lost identity. This archaeological task was projected as artistic action.

According to Linda Givon, Wilma Cruise's works on the Nicholas case, "are related to Nicholas, yet they also go much further. They are neither portraits or illustrations. They are a shot in the dark". Evidently, in a type of artistic investigation that from a thematic point of view rests on documents, Wilma Cruise resorts to figuration. With his sculptures life size the artist creates a kind of scenographic montage, with a symbolic criterion, a narrative of crime. Contorted bodies, bound with wire, dismembered, faceless, are some of the effects that Wilma Cruise incorporates

as resources to create impact, and simultaneously to steer away from anecdote. Her characters adopt an impersonal appearance, and the circumstances that surround each work contextualizes the messages. Enquiry is the starting point for the artist, yet she tries to avoid the results being a straightforward transcription of the incident. Wilma sets out to rewrite the acknowledged story. What's more, the artist attempts to conceptualize the effects of violence, using extremely direct codes, that make the rubbed out faces refer to the annulment of identity and the alienation of the individual under the power of state repression and mutilation, becomes a symbol of violence. Thus, this excavatory task occurs at two levels: at a level of physical aggression (of which Nicholas's death is only an individual example, and as such only a pretext), and, at another, of the violation of individual values in an alienating medium.

From its postmodern attitude, this proposition takes for granted the implicit capacity of contemporary art for reconciling the present to a past that has previously undergone crisis; to restore diluted, fragmented and marginalised identities beforehand.

The denial of history as a system is followed by the implementation of archaeology as method. This is what has given post-modernism that "anti-historical historicist" allure, given the contradictory emphasis on a past that is



Wilma Cruise. Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana.

negated as valid discourse. Yet postmodernism not only delves into the infinite discursiveness of ideological history, it not only toys with the possibility of stating the already stated, but also, and in no less systematic a manner, with the possibility of saying the unsaid, discovering textual and ideological areas that haven't been institutionalized by history.

I could appropriate the idea of Foucault in the sense that "archaeological description is applicable when it comes to making a history that differs from what has been said" and also adding that we can also write a history of the unstated. Both intentions can be attributed to postmodern art. These intentions confer a different sense to the documental, that stops being mere fact, and becomes simulacrum, an unedited reality that prescribes its own rules of reading and interpretation.

The boundary between the unreal and the real becomes blurred. Such is the case with the work of Jane Alexander, who interested in creating a truthful and convincing image, nevertheless resorts to the metaphorical animalisation of her creatures. The impoverishment of consciousness coincides with the physical degradation of the bodies, or better with their visual degradation, their incongruencies with an historical logic of the human body.

Jane Alexander is a naturalist to the extent that her intention is to offer us

even more solid proof-value of the document. It is what she does for example, with *The Butcher Boys*, (1985-86), one of her best known works, initially conceived as an installation, and afterwards photographed to serve for a new work. (*By the end of the day you're going to need us*, Photo-collage). It is a document of the first work, that is somehow not viewed as an art work, but as ideal construction of a socialized space, to amplify the individuals' conflicts of the South African. The document involves the spectator as it urges him to narrate his own personal conflictive world. For this reason the images are both provocative and aggressive. In the photo-collage that I have mentioned a text appears giving the work a title: *At the end of the day you'll need us*. It is a menacing text that brings terror to the viewer's heart, as well as violence and blame, all accentuated by a chain of associations where the victim and the victimizer are confused. If in Cruise's work roles and codes were clear, in these images that merge the butcher's shop and the torture chamber, man and the beast, danger and calmness, it is never very clear where we stand when the ambiguous subjects address us in every possible way.

Man with wrapped feet, (1993), one of the works that Jane Alexander presented at the Fifth Habana Biennial, is much more graphic and relates more to death as a physical happening. However, works as *Domestic Angel*, (1984),

formulate an interpretation that is halfway between *The Butcher Boys* and *Man with wrapped feet*. The latter boasts an almost journalistic kind of objectivity, although the halo above the negro's head is ironically charged, resembling those surrounding the wings of the "domestic angel", also hanging with bound feet. Both works are terrestrially oriented, contradicting the Christian notion of the moral identity that governs the dichotomy of good and evil, (above and below). As the rest of his oeuvre, these works are a reflecting of the value crisis contained in social violence.

Works such as these play with power: they conceal, present and deny their artists. They filter the identities that power tries to annul. As archaeology of repression these pieces are the search for lost identities, ("of that memory" Nelly Richard would say) destroyed by repressive power. Furthermore, repression is self-repressive, self-negating, self-deceiving. Repression is the schizophrenia of power.

The documentary character of a great deal of contemporary South African art functions as a kind of shock therapy against such social alienation. South African artists pretend not so much to "testify" against the social order as to act from within the system, furnishing it with an identity, making it face its own terrifying image. Searching for an identity that serves the marginal person,

the repressed and the repressor, the South African artist is also unearthing the hidden self of a self-negating system. The localist effect of these works is extremely interesting. The spectator must observe himself in them. The work doesn't introduce any distancing process: the first reaction is specular, identificatory, self-analytical, not only in the sense that postmodern art traditionally subjectifies the artistic object turning it into a tautological reaffirmation of its essence, but also in terms of the spectator transcending the artificiality of the object and thus experiencing a painful self-confirmation.

That is why Jane Alexander's work in effect is a document of what theoretically is non-documentable: the psychological trauma of South African man. This psychological depth is not exclusive to the artists mentioned. It pervades the work of Willie Bester despite manifest differences. His first works are paintings and collages, chaotic compositions that combine portraits of black leaders, that are centrally placed, with symbols, numbers and graphic elements. The two-dimensional collage in these works announces the three-dimensional collage of his most recent "objects". The flat works are more spontaneous and innocent, as part of the highly politicised discourse which they constitute. Bester transfers to his art the personal experience of marginality, and in this sense we have to consider the fact

that he is self-taught and has had limited access to academic education.

This may account for the somewhat imprecise use he makes of symbols, hard to categorize conceptually, despite their recognizability, for instance, his reference to the passbook, or to the automobile colours and the police uniforms. Moreover, the autobiographical content of these references lends them an emotional edge, and creates a psychological tie that is reinforced by the use of collage.

Collage emerges not as mere technique, but as counterpart to the simultaneity of events, as if it is established a mental process, a fragmented memory. In the three dimensional works this process of addition and juxtaposition is clearly transmitted by the object, that indicates through its visual simultaneity, time-warps and coincidences. The end product is an historical parable based on the connotations of the elements that make up the works. Here we find a substantial difference with Alexander and Cruise, who tend to employ facts as keystones for historical reconstitution. Bester looks out for physical remains, (we'll see how artist Sue Williamson adopts the same procedure in some of her works), and rejects the chance of creating new documents for past events; he prefers to rescue remnants, true marks that indicate much more than the anecdotal passing of time.

The critic Mark Coetzse has defined the art of Willie Bester as a "desperate intent to write the contemporary history of his people", inscribing him in the protest art register, that transmits a far more obvious level of confrontation between power and the language of aesthetics and art. The modelling of "soldiers" or "policemen" with found objects is a paradigm of this, together with industrial waste and distinctive elements, determined by colour, function, or a violent and aggressive appearance. These constructed objects, put together with almost formalist care, summarize the exact physiognomy of repression, they give corporeality to the face of unjustifiable violence, they reveal terror, and transcend, local territory, although they mirror apartheid society.

The first work by Sue Williamson reveals a tendency to recover identities suppressed by repression. Similarly to Cruise, Alexander and Bester, her art is an objectual reconstruction of reality. However, from the start, we notice in her art stronger emphasis on the traits and singularities that shape character. It is no surprise to find in her initial work a series of portraits, *A Few South Africans*; prints that incorporate symbolic elements that reconstruct the identity of the portrayed person. The subjects are women who were once involved in the fight against sexual or racial discrimination. With these portraits, the artist generates an archive of personal histories, egged on by that

proclivity to narrate that characterizes her art and which defends the discourse of those marginalised by History.

This combination of the interest in the individual and a narrative based reconstructive process is emphasized in the work *For thirty years next to his heart* (1990), where Sue Williamson conceptualizes the problem of identity, questioning her own representative methods (such as photocopy in colour) and laying bare their own ideological essence. This work contains a copy of each page of the passbook that an individual carried with him for thirty years. The passbook is an instrument of repression, its manipulation by the artist transforms it into a document of repression, a document of a document, a tautological tool resource that cancels the object and rescues the subject's identity. Through art Williamson has tried to subvert the alienating and repressive nature of the "identity card". The document enables her to mark the crisis of the conventional notions of the art object.

Her art activity is fundamentally reproductive. Jane Alexander resorts to autoreproduction of her own art, in a process that implies a transference of the means, with the purpose of arriving at a self-referential metatext. On the other hand, Sue Williamson has preferred to make different documents of the same event, which is very unlike the variations on one work theme. The process implies

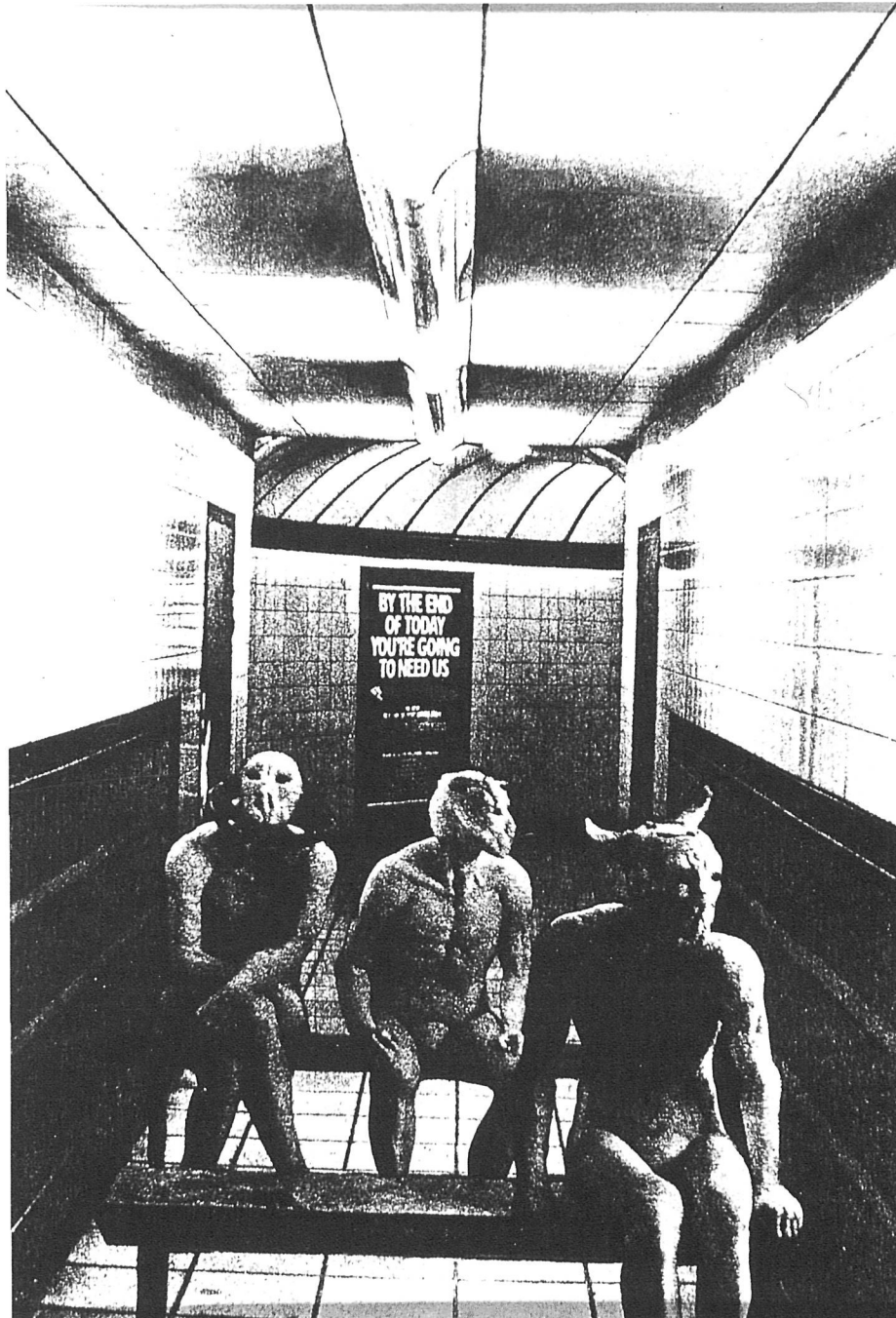
the willingness to experience anew the traumatic happening, to relive it and so to exorcise it: the final result should be stimulating and therapeutical, a type of mnemonic purification, similar to the kind that psychoanalysis motivates.

That is the essence that works like *The Last Supper* (1981), *The Last Supper*

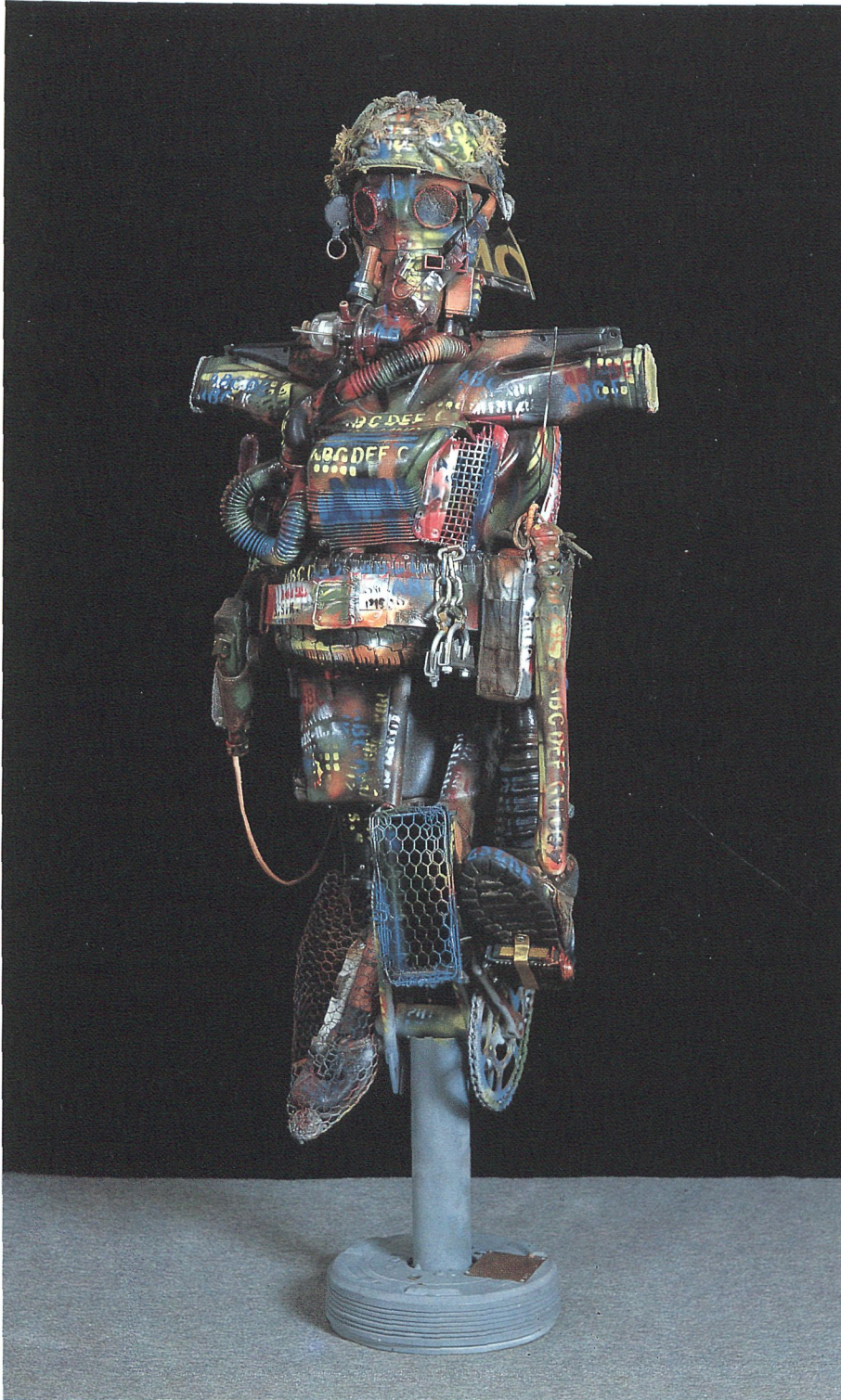
Revisited (1992), *Mementos of District Six* (1993) and *Out of the Ashes* (1994) communicate. All of these works correspond to different moments of a remembered event (the demolition of District Six in Cape Town, 1977), and are, as a consequence, an image of how our memory of the event is pieced together again. The fact that each work

recycles elements of the previous one also indicates temporal concatenation, a material link and an intertextual connection. *The Last Supper* has a theatrical allure. Its basic information is a family dinner which it reproduces artistically using debris collected at the demolition site. The installation is surrounded by chairs with white sheets, underlining absence as a dramatic element. *The Last Supper Revisited* keeps the places covered with white sheets. On top of them the artist has written texts that attempt to compensate emptiness. The chairs circle a table on which are placed personal objects and waste preserved in resin. These same fragments appear in *Mementos*, yet organized in a steel structure elevated on a small mound. The structure has the shape of the kind of house that existed in Villa Manley, District Six. Two ash paths and burning coals open the installation *Out of Ashes*. On the coals burns the memory of the tragic event, symbolized by the resin-preserved objects already used in past works. The heavy steel structure is replaced by a group of light cloth tents, suspended in the air, where they sway softly.

The initial work conserves a virtually reproductive character while the second describes the fossilization of the circumstances that prompted the event; the third, much more aesthetic, appears defiant in its monumental dimension and it expresses a much stronger will of resistance; the fourth, one of the most



Jane Alexander. *At the end of the day you're going to need us*. Photomontage. Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana.



Willie Bester, *Soldier n° 2*. Semblage sculpture. Courtesy Goodman Gallery, South Africa.

beautiful and emotive works created by Williamson, combines the rescue of the remnants of the event with the crystallization of memory, and mixes tribute with accusation, forcing one,

with its reference to its predecessors, to make an interpretation that is coherent with the context of production. It is worth recalling that this work was made on the eve of the first multiracial

elections of South Africa, in very different social conditions, therefore justifying the change of attitude to the past (symbolized by the ashes and the resin), and to the future (symbolized by the cloth tents). The allusion to the Phoenix is confused with the simulacrum of the unearthing, and finally the spectator can wonder whether Sue Williamson with this installation hasn't in fact done quite the opposite of archaeological research, if she hasn't effectively executed a symbolic "burial", suggesting that oblivion is perhaps the best homage to the past.

The present situation of South African artists will now be determined by this double perspective. The changes in social structure will necessarily imply a change of historical perspective and different intentions in the approach to History. Although it is evident that the end of apartheid won't in many ways suppose the disappearance of many unstable socio-economic conditions for the black majority, nor the end to the frequent situations of violence and marginality that they have to face up to, we could question the degree of "actuality" present in works referring to a moment that at least officially already belongs to the past. The choice of the artists will lie between two alternatives: to forget or to discover. Oblivion, beyond the ethical implications of such a state, would imply the abandonment of a complete strategy of artistic production that "uses" historical matter

as a basis, yet that does not pretend to find in it its justification. South African archaeological art has not sought aesthetic legitimation in its object (repression), but in its methodology (disinterment). If the insistence on such an object in the long term could prove dangerous, the insistence on methodology isn't so at all. To the contrary, such a creative method would guarantee the continuity of the development of this type of art and the chance of participating in the dialectics of contemporary South African society. For it is evident that archaeological art relates to social problems.

This is not an abstract process, because it relies on the participation of a subject determined by his environment.



Jane Alexander, *Black Madonna*.
Mixed media, 82 x 122 cm.
Courtesy The Everard Read Gallery,
Johannesburg (South Africa).