

## Grey Areas

Representation, Identity  
and Politics in Contemporary  
South African Art

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Who has the right to represent whom? Is the act of representing cultural others the same as "speaking for" those others?

Contemporary art in post-apartheid South Africa is informed by the same debates around cultural production that mark this country's broader political landscape. *Grey Areas* is the first book of its kind to document these debates as they unfold in the cultural field: over 30 contributions from locally and internationally based practitioners engage the controversial issue of imaging identity in South African artistic production.

The diverse perspectives constituting *Grey Areas* will inevitably fire further dialogue on issues that will remain vital to an ongoing and productive critical debate in this, and future, historical moments.



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Contact details: Tel: 27-11-807-3435 Fax: 27-11-807-2698. Postal address: P. O. Box 4497, Rivonia, Johannesburg, South Africa 2128. E-mail: chalkham@iafrica.com. Physical address: Metropolitan Office Park, 82 Wessel Road, Rivonia, Johannesburg, South Africa.

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## GREY AREAS

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*Editors*

Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz

## A BLACK VOICE

Siemon Allen

It has been with great interest that I have followed the recent debates around issues of representation within the South African context. I believe that cultural production within the particular historical conditions of post-apartheid South Africa throws issues that have broader relevance in a post-colonial world into sharp relief. More directly, as a South African artist, I have found myself confronting these issues in my own work. This was most apparent when I created a sound work that involved the appropriation (both metaphorically and literally) of the "voice" of a black, African man. I was forced to address the complexities and contradictions that arise when one begins to speak across what was once an impenetrable wall. And then, in an effort to build on that "conversation", one finds oneself engaged in what can easily become a form of suspect representation of the "other".

The roots of this particular work began in 1993, at the FLAT Gallery in Durban, South Africa. A group of artists, myself included, were obsessively recording all social interaction that took place at the FLAT. These recordings were made without censure or specific intention, following the urge to record (as neutrally as possible) the "found sounds" of this environment, so as to produce a "purposefully" uncritical social document. Often, the resultant tapes would be used as raw material for further sound pieces. While many of these works were built with ordinary sounds or words, reduced through manipulation to pure sound, the most interesting were those created when the recorded words were not (at least initially) unhinged from their signifying function. This brought both meaning — and a definite speaker's voice — to the constructed piece. Though the subjects were aware of being recorded (this was never a surreptitious enterprise), the very act of using and re-using voices other than my own was problematic, in terms of (mis)representation, permission, ownership or even coercion.

At that time, the FLAT had evolved into a space where artists gathered to work and exhibit. It had a free-flowing atmosphere, with people coming and going as they pleased. In apartheid South Africa, it was not insignificant that this included a diverse group of participants. One conversation, recorded amongst many, took place during a typical late-night session. The conversation took place between four men (all South African), engaged in a rather "ordinary" late-night activity for young men — drinking too much and talking about politics and women. What was not ordinary (by apartheid-era South African standards), was the fact that one of these men, Moonlight, was black.

A grounds-keeper at the Natal Technikon, Moonlight had befriended one of the FLAT occupants, Thomas Barry. In a recorded conversation, Moonlight expressed this opinion on the subject of prostitution:

Black ladies, just stopping to sell your body!  
White ladies, just stopping to sell your body!  
Indian ladies, just stopping to sell your body!  
...er... Coloured ladies, just stopping to sell your body!'

I was struck by these phrases. I would not presume to know what Moonlight "meant", and our meeting was the result of such a rare contingency, that we have not met again. Rather, I seek to elaborate on the thoughts that his words provoked for me.

That the speaker, a black man, in speaking to women — all women — would address them as Black, White, Indian, or Coloured, seemed to me to reveal how thoroughly apartheid's notorious classification programme was entrenched in consciousness. Given a system in which any single individual was identified first by racial group, it was not surprising at the time, that Moonlight would address each group separately. However, it also seemed significant that this "roll call" put special emphasis on the fact that all women were included, and that *no* woman, whatever her race, was exempt from his warning. Such an admonishment to women, delivered by a man, might imply respect, yet such a statement also begins to speak *for* women. The implication is: "Women should not... (sell their bodies)," and thus reveals the complexity of a man speaking for women (his "other").

That Moonlight, in speaking to women, addressed each group separately, reveals a complex dynamic of relationships across gender and racial lines; however, the repetitive pattern of these phrases also asserted themselves on a purely formal level. Some months later, when I began to use the collected raw audio material to generate sound works, I revisited this conversation with Moonlight and "looped" the sample quoted above. The original audio information was subsequently superimposed upon itself numerous times, so as to produce a work that began with recognisable words, and then progressed into a cacophony of sounds.

My initial influence for this process lay in the technical experiments of American composer Steve Reich, in which he constructed a "new music" entirely from recorded words. More significant was the fact that he too appropriated voices in his work, and, in two very important pieces, the voices of black men. They were a Pentecostal street preacher named Brother Walter, and Daniel Hamm, a youth accused of murder in the Harlem Riots of 1964. In the recording of Brother Walter, Reich used words from a sermon on the Biblical story of the Great Flood ("It's Gonna Rain") and, by superimposing repeated sounds, created a cyclical "wash". He described the work as "controlled chaos... appropriate to the subject matter — the end of the world".<sup>2</sup> In this way, he participated in the original message of the sermon. Brother Walter was given credit in the liner notes.

The second example operated very differently: it too appropriated the "voice" of another, but it was originally produced, in part, for a benefit on behalf of the individual whose voice is heard. Reich describes the sources for this work — "Come Out" — in the liner notes of the CD:

Composed in 1966, it was originally part of a benefit presented at Town Hall in New York City for the retrial, with lawyers of their own choosing, of the six boys arrested for murder during the Harlem riots of 1964. The voice is that of Daniel Hamm, now acquitted and then 19, describing a beating he took in Harlem's 28th precinct station. The police were about to take the boys out to be 'cleaned up' and were only taking those that were visibly bleeding. Since Hamm had no actual open bleeding, he proceeded to squeeze open a bruise on his leg so that he would be taken to the hospital. He said, "I had to like open the bruise up to let some of the bruise blood come out to show them."<sup>1</sup>

Both the appropriation of the "voice" of another, and the formal manipulation of that voice, are problematic. When words are reduced to pure sound, there is a risk of losing the potency of their original content. Yet, it is significant that Reich's work has overtly "political" content and function, and was created in the spirit of a "protest"; it was done for the benefit of another, another whose voice had been "taken". While work of this kind protests the suffering of another, it unintentionally reveals the divide between the experience of the one who "speaks" (the artist) and the experience of the one "spoken of" (the subject). Is there merit in a work which allows the voice of another to be heard, but does so through manipulation? Is that merit somehow negated when formal manipulations "aestheticise" these words into abstract sounds? Do such efforts speak accurately for the appropriated voice, and if so, do they do so with respect? Are these concepts — "speaking for" and "respect" — mutually exclusive? Reich's abstracted sounds, appropriated from the voices of others, may be problematic, yet what would have been accomplished by leaving these voices silent?

These questions resonate with the contradictions that were later inherent to the so-called "resistance art" of South Africa (during the '70s and '80s). The fact that the work of many white artists of this period was produced at a time when, to remain silent, or *not* to speak of the "other" in the face of outrageous injustice, would have been immoral. The alternative — retreating into academic formalist abstraction or sanitised imagery — would have been unconscionable. Though justifiable at the time, some of these strategies may have been outgrown at this point. Perhaps a greater sensitivity to the complexities of "speaking for" and "speaking of" is now required. Kellner addresses these issues when he points out that "speaking from one's own position, not through that of the Other, will contribute to a heterogeneous, yet cohesive social politik."<sup>4</sup>

And yet, I wonder if it is possible (particularly in race-obsessed South Africa), to speak solely "of oneself" *without* implicating the "other"? How can any self-critical process not make reference to that which is intrinsically present in its critique? Indeed, to deny individuals who occupy any particular "side" (across gender, race or economic lines), access to representation of the "other side", is to obliterate their mutual interaction (even if that interaction is problematic).

The issue is perhaps not a question of "who has the authority to represent whom", but rather, an urgent need for more voices in the debate.

In exposing the contradictions that lie in any construction of "self" and "other", we may begin to understand the dynamics of "otherness" as they operate in a changing society. For, this "otherness" may reveal itself as a relative thing, not always rigidly or easily located in one's race, gender or economic status alone. Rather, the complex composite of factors that make up each "individual" shift with each social interaction, and with each formation and re-formation of affinities within a group.

The original recording of *Moonlight* was a document of an authentic social interaction between a black man and three white men. As with many FLAT tapes, the conversation revealed how awkward our efforts can be when we seek to communicate. I look back on that work without any clear resolution as to the "correctness" of such an act, but I am certain that the encounter was significant in its implications. Both the original recorded materials, and the resulting sound work, are resonant with larger "conversations" that are now taking place. Did I appropriate *Moonlight's* voice ill-advisedly? To have excluded him from the number of voices that I used (and still use) to create sound works, would have been to remove a valid "voice" from the FLAT documents.

#### Endnotes

1. *Moonlight*, FLAT Recordings, December 1993.
2. Steve Reich, liner notes from the CD *Early Work* (Elektra Nonesuch: 1987).
3. *ibid.*
4. Clive Kellner, "Cultural Production in Post-Apartheid South Africa", in: *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, catalogue of the second Johannesburg Biennale, 1997, p.30.