



Rise and fall of apartheid: photography and the bureaucracy of everyday life

Ruth Simbao

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Note

1. The photographs in the new edition are prominently time-stamped to provide a helpful narrative arc to the series. However, these time-stamps differ from details given in captions accompanying the same pictures in previous publications. Though Goldblatt is most likely just providing updated information, it would be troubling if the time-stamps were fabricated to fit the story. See also Badsha (1986, 34–42).

References

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Daniel Leers

Independent Curator, New York, USA

danielmleers@gmail.com

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Rise and fall of apartheid: photography and the bureaucracy of everyday life, edited by Okwui Enwezor and Rory Bester, New York, NY, Prestel, 2013, 543 pp., US\$50.53 (hardback), ISBN: 9783791352800

The exhibition catalogue *Rise and Fall of Apartheid* is a valuable collection of photographic images that create, according to Enwezor, "a critical visualization and interrogation of [...] [apartheid's] normative symbols, signs and representation" (18). The catalogue focuses on African subjects as "agents of their own emancipation" (18), and contextualises South Africa's anticipation of the end of apartheid within broader global changes in the late 1980s. Essays by Okwui Enwezor, Michael Godby, Achille Mbembe, Darren Newbury, Colin Richards, Patricia Hayes, Andries Walter Olifant, Rory Bester and Khwezi Gule are included in the catalogue, and are interspersed between photographic images that are grouped in chronological clusters: 1948–1959; 1960–1969; 1970–1979; 1980–1989; and 1990–1995.

Eighty-three practitioners are listed as "photographers," including the artists William Kentridge and Adrian Piper, who would not ordinarily be considered photographers. Through the contrast of white and grey pages, the catalogue visually separates the majority of photographs from series of photographs published as books, such as Ernest Cole's *House of Bondage*, and artists' reactions to apartheid in the form of photo-based works. It is not clear, though, why drawings by Kentridge are included

in this section, raising questions about the medium of photography; the ways we tend to interpret photographs; and the ways we expect photographs to interpret the world.

Stepping back from the rich details of this body of images, two authors, Newbury and Bester, ask especially poignant questions about how we look at photographs, and particularly, how we view this body of images 20 years after the official end of apartheid. Newbury asks, "What remains then to be written about the history of photography in apartheid South Africa?" (226).

The catalogue as a whole begins to address this, if a bit unevenly, and Newbury suggests that the attempt to "move beyond the grand photographic narratives of struggle and liberation" (231) is an ongoing project. It is now possible, Newbury writes, to develop "a more complex and finely graded interpretation of apartheid-era photography" (231). In his essay, he focuses on portrayals of dynamism that "affirm life and the living body" (230) as part of "a more complete interpretation of the medium's significance" (232).

In "The Politics and Aesthetics of the Fall of Apartheid, or, the Translatability of Witnessing," Bester opens up ways of interpreting the anti-apartheid photographic tradition, which, he suggests, "[witnessed rather than translated an experience of apartheid]" (513). Bester analyses four series of photographs, Mendel's *Beloofde Land*; Hilton-Barber's images of a North Sotho initiation ceremony; Oosterbroek's *The Muse on Location*; and Ballen's *Platteland*, in order to challenge our understanding of the medium of photography, the documentary tradition and "the changing currencies of photographic 'truth'" (509). He argues that South African audiences struggled to view these works in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as they generally still expected documentary photographs to be raw records of facts, rather than particular interpretations of life. "The apparent indexicality of the photograph and its attendant relationship to notions of 'truth'," he writes, "is in part what established photographic practice to the end of the 1980s as a form of witnessing" (517). In a sophisticated manner, Bester utilises Walter Benjamin's notion of the echo of translation, and discusses what he calls the "photographic echo," which, like all echoes, requires a certain amount of distance (517).

Similarly, Patricia Hayes considers the tensions between an apparent lack of distance and the act of stepping back in order to interpret or translate. In her nuanced analysis of Afrapix, she compares the demands of being on the frontline, where there is little space or time for interpretive distance, to the reflections by photographers, such as Magubane, Mofokeng and Tillim, who in different ways contemplate what Njabulo Ndebele calls the spectacular in the 1980s in South Africa in relation to the system of signs that became packaged as saleable photographs. Analysing the local and international "drive for a certain coding of images" (345) in the 1980s, Hayes argues for a more complex narrative of the simplistic term "struggle photography," in which invisibility plays a role too. "There are older deposits," she writes,

of unseen violence that keep demanding some form of compensation. This cannot be explained in a single unitary narrative about what happened in the 1980s. Such complexity would be better served by something like Adorno's notion of the "exchange structures of history". This suggests temporalities carried over with unresolved issues that find some form of appeasement in displaced compensatory acts in the present that are in fact about something else. (346)

Both Hayes and Richards reference Ndebele's *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*, as a way of pointing to the smaller gestures, the "normal" moments and the intimacies that were also part of South Africa's photographic documentation of apartheid. Taking his cue from Ndebele's appeal for interiority, intimacy and attention to detail, Richards poetically analyses very ordinary images, such as a photograph of a man on a reserve gazing at a small photograph of his wife; a young man in a worker's compound absorbed in the act of helping another man with his tie; and two migrant workers dancing arm in arm in a hostel. "Our pursuit," he writes, "of a certain kind of everydayness that genuinely 'normalizes' the social life-forms not continually captive to some spectacular exposition counts as a move toward becoming human" (236).

As this catalogue simultaneously records, translates and interprets the rise and fall of apartheid, it reveals the tension between the insanity of violence and the mundaneness of everyday actions that register our humanity. In response to Albie Sachs's well-known call in 1990 to ban culture as a weapon of struggle, Malange et al. (1990, 99) wrote,

Albie Sachs must not worry: we do make love sometimes and we have said on occasion that culture is a weapon of our struggle. But, what we understand by "struggle" and what political activists understand by "struggle" is often not the same ... it is about surviving, being resilient, living, singing and fighting.

As "struggle photography" is reinterpreted by intellectuals, who attempt to breathe nuance into what often seemed madly unambiguous, it is important not to lose sight of the insanity, nor the ordinariness; neither the fighting nor the love-making. *Rise and Fall of Apartheid* opens up this important body of photographs without over-intellectualising it to the point of losing its edge. As Richards points out, these images still shock: "Part of the shock of fresh encounters with historical atrocity is that it becomes less, not more comprehensible [...] Hindsight seems oddly impoverished; insight oddly disfigured" (234).

Reference

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Ruth Simbao

Associate Professor in Art History and Visual Culture and leader of the Visual and Performing Arts of Africa focus area, Rhodes University
rsimbao@gmail.com, r.simbao@ru.ac.za

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