

michael godby Professor of History of Art, University of Cape Town

## THEN AND NOW

In an interview in the video *Images in Struggle* (1990), Paul Weinberg described 11 February 1990, the day on which Nelson Mandela was released from prison, as simultaneously the best and the worst day of his life. It was the best day, of course, because the release of Mandela and other political prisoners, and the unbanning of the ANC and other political organisations, were the very aims to which he had dedicated his professional life as a photographer for many years. And it was the worst day because, having fought as a Struggle photographer with a relatively small band of like-minded colleagues, he was stampeded by a contingent of international photographers and effectively prevented from taking any pictures until the next day in Cape Town. Moreover, as Weinberg has explained in subsequent articles, once the media circus surrounding Mandela's release had left town, it soon became apparent that the international press retained little interest in South African stories. But the real crisis at this moment of joy lay in the realisation that the passing of the political conflict had effectively robbed him of his regular subject matter, and that there seemed to be nothing of importance left to photograph. As David Goldblatt – whose own documentation of apartheid South

Africa was generally more analytical than confrontational – said a few years later, the old distinctions between 'the bad guys and the good guys' had been replaced by a 'confusion of forces'; photographers – and others – were suddenly 'deprived of the central focus of their work'.

A measure of the crisis affecting documentary photographers at that time is that several practitioners who had identified completely with the Struggle simply left the country: notable examples are Gideon Mendel and Wendy Schwegmann. Others, like Lesley Lawson, gave up photography in favour of less confrontational work. Each case, of course, is individual, and doubtless financial and other factors applied, but the phenomenon invites comparison to the experience of certain MK cadres who, having fought in the Struggle, left the country, or abandoned political activity, at the moment of liberation. However, if the tradition of documentary photography in South Africa was suddenly paralysed by a loss of significant subject matter on the one hand, and the closing of familiar media outlets on the other, the political changes in the country introduced a whole new world of photographic opportunities. The world of artistic or

academic photography, which in a sense had been eclipsed by the predominance of political work in the eighties, came to flourish in the political freedom of the nineties. And if the outside world had lost interest in South Africa as a political story, the lifting of the cultural boycott in the new dispensation allowed international curators and gallerists to discover and promote the extraordinary range of creativity in the South African art world, not least in photography.

Numerous exhibitions and publications have celebrated the new world of post-apartheid South African photography, including *Photosynthesis: Contemporary South African Photography* (1997), with an essay by Kathleen Grundlingh; *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art After Apartheid* (1998), with essays by Jan-Erik Lundstrom, Rory Bester, Katarina Pierre and others; *After Apartheid: 10 South African Documentary Photographers*, by Michael Godby (exhibition in 2002, essay in *African Arts* in 2004); and Svea Josephy's essay 'Post-Apartheid South African Photography' in *The Cape Town Month of Photography* catalogue of 2002. To these should be added Okwui Enwezor's *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (2006), which devotes considerable space to South African photographers. Most of these writers discuss the issues that appear to concern contemporary photographers working in the aesthetic space of the art gallery. Thus they identify a tendency to question the nature of photographic representation; a disavowal of the idea of a unitary truth in favour of multiplicity; a rejection of the sense of objectivity in favour of the subjective; and a corresponding interest in personal subjects at the expense of public and political statements. In these terms, much of contemporary South African photography is now concerned with issues of identity – notably in terms of race, gender and sexual orientation; issues of memory – especially in relation to the apartheid past; and the conventions and genres of representation. So different do these concerns appear from the urgent political expressions of the apartheid era that some have been tempted to characterise the change as

the transition from the Modern to the Post-Modern era. But while this argument might be sustained in relation to selected examples from both periods, it is demonstrably an oversimplification when one considers the history of South African photography as a whole.

In the first place, the argument is an oversimplification because those cited as representing South Africa's entry into the Post-Modern world – Penny Siopis, Jo Ractliffe, Jean Brundrit and others – represent a distinct group from those who made their names as Struggle photographers: the change is one of personnel rather than one that necessarily affected individual photographers. Put another way, the change is a change in the spotlight of critical reading where the one practice that had formerly been eclipsed by documentary photography is now shown in the limelight. But, in the same way that academic photography was practiced even in the darkest days of apartheid, so now, in spite of the huge change in both political and cultural conditions, and in spite also of their initial confusion at the end of the Struggle project, many former documentary photographers continue their commitment to social and ideological concerns: we shall see the form that some of these new projects takes in the latter part of this essay. Secondly, relating documentary Struggle photography too readily with the Modernist project leads to the unfortunate identification of this practice with the conditions of colonialism to which, of course, it was fundamentally opposed. Documentary photography of the Struggle era was certainly united in its opposition to apartheid. But it was also concerned with issues of representation and of power relations between photographer and subject that place it within the orbit of Post-Modern interests. What else is meant by Weinberg's observation that 'Recent work has indicated a shift into more in-depth community photography and more personal searches in the community of the photographer', if not the ideas of multiplicity and reflexivity in the photographic project? He made these remarks in 1989, shortly before

the end of political restrictions, but it would be a mistake to believe that the entire Struggle project was not involved at some level with these critical issues. To state this is, of course, to suggest that Struggle photography was rather more complex than is generally supposed.

Insight into the particular nature of Struggle photography, notably its adherence to progressive aesthetic concerns, can be gained by comparing *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart*, the major collection of anti-apartheid photographs published in 1986 by the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, with the use of photographs by the original Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa of 1928-1932. In the report of the first inquiry, photographs are unattributed and stereotyped: 'types' of 'poor whites' and their dwellings are presented face on and centrally, in the manner of police mug-shots. These strategies suggest that the photographers, who were probably commissioners anyway, identified completely with the investigation as an instrument of the state with the power to decide which of its indigent subjects were worthy of charity.

The first commission and its photographers, therefore, exercised absolute power over its subjects: from the visual record it is possible to reconstruct the photographic encounter and imagine the subjects being instructed how to present themselves to the camera, and how their appearance – and even their very facial type – would be used as evidence in determining their fate. The power relationship between the second commission and its subjects – particularly photographer and subject – was almost entirely reversed. The twenty photographers whose work was published by the inquiry were clearly chosen both for the strength of their individual styles and their interest in having their subjects speak for themselves. In a way, the transfer of authority in the second inquiry from the commissioners to their subjects is represented in the decision to publish the

collection of photographs as the very first volume of the report: the photographs, of course, represent the subjects of the inquiry more directly than could any writer, and many images clearly articulate the urgent political demands of their subjects.

The clear photographic personality of the twenty photographers included in *The Cordoned Heart*, in both choice of subject and their manner of treating it, suggests a certain subjectivity in the project, a provisional quality that contrasts strongly with the assumed objectivity of the photographs produced by the first inquiry. Moreover, while the style of the earlier images tends to confirm the sense of power of the commissioners over their subjects, *The Cordoned Heart* collection seems to have purposely used different aspects of style to communicate a sense of both humanity and agency in its subjects. A comparison of portrait-like images in the two collections suggests that individuals in the first were presented virtually as specimens for the inspection of the viewer, while those in the second were given a full humanity by calling on the conventions, of pose and lighting, for example, of the Western portrait tradition.

However, it is the communication of the sense of agency in the subject that really distinguishes *The Cordoned Heart* and Struggle photography generally from the photographs produced by the earlier inquiry. And it is this recognition of power in the subject which makes nonsense of the idea that Struggle photography is a version of the Modernist project that inevitably objectifies its subject. Whereas many of the new portrait images work in part by representing the engagement of the subject with the photographer on the basis of equality, many of the documentary images gain power to the extent that the photographers refuse reference to their presence at the scene. Participants in political gatherings, protest meetings, funeral processions, and other Struggle events continued their activities regardless of the presence of

the photographer. Paradoxically, this very absence of contact provided a sense of continuity between spectator space and pictorial space, an impression that was often reinforced by the apparent extension of activity in the photograph beyond the picture format. The quality of actuality that is achieved in these ways communicates a sense of autonomous vitality in the subject that has unmistakable political significance.

During the final State of Emergency in the 1980s, in an effort to cut off international support for the Struggle, the South African government effectively outlawed photography of 'any unrest or security action'. In 1989 Afrapix, the collective of Struggle photographers, with other organisations, sought to circumvent this restriction on members' work by organising the major travelling exhibition and book entitled *Beyond the Barricades: Popular Resistance in South Africa in the 1980s, Photographs by Twenty South African Photographers*. In the absence of coverage of current events, the project reprinted major photographs of the decade to remind the international community that the Struggle was indeed continuing. Significantly, the strategy of this project was to downplay the identity of the photographers – they are not listed until the very end of the book – seemingly in order to give greater prominence to the events depicted. But the apparent anonymity of the photographers serves not so much to identify them with the authority of the project, as in the first Carnegie inquiry, but rather to emphasise the agency of their subjects. There are photographs of police repression, of pain and of grief, but the collection as a whole was surely designed to give expression to the extraordinary vitality of the South African Struggle.

Struggle photographers often have an uneasy relationship with the aesthetic quality of their work. Thus Omar Badsha, one of the most pictorial photographers of his generation, routinely gives contradictory accounts of the importance he attached to pictorial issues such as composition in his work: for a time it seemed that any expression of concern

for photographic style would detract from a sense of commitment to the subject. But Badsha and others clearly worked hard to develop a formal language to communicate the precise sense of humanity they recognised in their subjects; and they clearly searched for stylistic forms to create powerful, meaningful images. In this search, the experience of producing both *The Cordoned Heart* and *Beyond the Barricades* not only as exhibitions but also as well-printed, durable publications no doubt encouraged even greater concern for the language of visual communication. Most of these photographers would have been used to having their work reproduced in newsprint within 24 hours of the story they were documenting by editors who would not hesitate to crop the image to make it fit in the page layout: the experience of seeing the same work published on high-quality paper, independent of the political narrative, a year or more after the event must have been eye-opening. To contemplate photographs at such a remove is to demand a definite visual authority in the image.

In recent years, all the photographers in this collection have had their work shown in art galleries, whether as major retrospectives in South Africa or overseas, or in themed exhibitions or group shows. Similarly, they have all had their work published in book form, whether monographs or collections, and several of them have been published many times over. These outlets are obviously the same as those for academic photographers, and they certainly encourage critical engagement with aesthetic issues. Thus Santu Mofokeng intervened recently in the hanging of his retrospective exhibition *Invoice* to introduce a distinctly pessimistic reading of political developments in South Africa; and Mendel, having developed a style of arresting beauty in his documentary work, chose to both violate the aesthetic space of the National Gallery for his *Broken Landscape* exhibition and aestheticize the political space of street protests, to promote the cause of HIV/AIDS activism. But the overriding point of this immersion of socially motivated

documentary photographers in the aesthetic discourse of the art world is that they are using the contemplative space of the gallery to develop a more subtle and intricate visual language.

The photographers in this collection have been selected for this project because, having been active in the Struggle period, they all still work with a commitment to political – or, rather, social – developments in South Africa or elsewhere on the continent. Thus Eric Miller and Guy Tillim have moved from the South African Struggle to cover the mind-boggling phenomenon of child soldiers elsewhere in Africa adopting bizarre items of dress in efforts to make some sense of their lives. Gisèle Wulfsohn documents the HIV/AIDS pandemic, not as the catastrophe that it self-evidently is in statistical terms, but as the experience of individuals and families choosing to live positively. Significantly, Goldblatt also takes a tangential view of the pandemic in a series of photographs of AIDS signage that both suggests the inadequacy of official response to the catastrophe, and literally inscribes it into the landscape. Weinberg maintains his commitment to social issues in ongoing essays on the present complex condition of the Bushmen and in his explorations of the story of land redistribution, surely one of the most potentially explosive of political issues. Other photographers in this collection and, of course, elsewhere address the theme of the urban landscape. In this issue, as in the others, there is no readily identifiable good guy or bad guy, in Goldblatt's terms, but the transformation of South Africa's cities is an obvious cause for concern. Goldblatt himself documents different aspects of today's cities – notably the degradation of the inner city, the startling juxtapositions of extreme wealth and extreme poverty, and the ostentatious vulgarity of the suburbs. And other photographers concentrate on particular aspects of the urban experience; Graeme Williams picks up on the bizarre and the incipient violence of inner-city life; and Tillim graphically documents the implosion of vast areas of Johannesburg's flatland as the landlord-tenant relationship

breaks down. George Hallett, on the other hand, continues to celebrate the sense of community in Cape Town's poorer suburbs; in District Six, before its demolition in the apartheid era; and, most lyrically, in the Bo-Kaap, which appears to maintain traditional spiritual values in the midst of Cape Town's materialism.

HIV/AIDS, land redistribution, and the transformation of the urban landscape – with the attendant erosion of social structures, crime, and environmental degradation – are obviously the major social issues facing South Africa today. But they do not mobilise the country – indeed, the country is deeply divided over them – and they do not maintain a high visual profile in the media. There is no established iconography, because the issues are too complex, and responsibility too diffuse. Photographers can neither propose solutions nor identify culprits: they can simply document the experience of those affected. Thus photographers who earlier might have combined their statements of human interest with some kind of declamatory intent – drawing on generally accepted notions of right and wrong, and pointing to self-evident political solutions – must now abandon rhetoric and simply address the specifics of each occasion. Current work by these photographers, therefore, is likely to be both more intimate than their earlier work and visually more exciting. It is intimate because it enters the lived experience of specific individuals; and it is exciting because, in avoiding the well-worn formulae of public rhetoric, it can explore the syntax of visual expression with sensitivity and new creativity.

The ambition to document the lived experience of one's subjects is to engage with an empathy that obviously involves the personality and memory of the photographers themselves. Already in the Struggle period some of the photographers selected for this project – and, of course, others – felt the need to withdraw from the frontline, as it were, and explore something of their own identity and

history. There is a marked autobiographical quality in much of Goldblatt's earlier work. But photographers such as Weinberg and Williams used the perspective they had gained in the Struggle to explore their familiar world with new eyes. Similarly, as soon as the racial categories of apartheid had been scrapped and the reality of a universal citizenship finally established, some photographers turned to the taboo subjects of racial identity and origins. Thus Cedric Nunn explored the experience of so-called coloured people, cut off from both their black and white parentage, and seemingly still searching for a cultural identity: his essay *Blood Relatives* seeks paradoxically both to cement his identity within his extended family and to lament the survival of racial categories in post-apartheid South Africa. And Badsha, who has long been committed to the idea of non-racialism, took the opportunity provided by the return of the passport that had been confiscated by the previous dispensation to travel widely in India in search of his ancestral roots.

At different times either side of 1990, certain black photographers, including Santu Mofokeng and Zwelethu Mthethwa, protested against what they perceived as the reductive quality of politically motivated photography and expressed the need to represent a fuller sense of the humanity of their subjects. These remarks should be seen in context, because it is clear that many Struggle photographers were deeply concerned with precisely this sense in their work. But, in the same way that politics tended to overshadow aesthetic concerns in the Struggle period, they also tended to preclude any sense of the spiritual dimension in their subjects. Thus it is not surprising that it is black photographers like Mofokeng and Mthethwa, together with Andrew Tshabangu, who have expressed the strongest interest in this aspect of South African life since liberation. In this collection it is Weinberg who represents this important trend with selections from his major essay on the several religious traditions in South Africa, entitled *Moving*

*Spirit*. On one level, this work is concerned to document certain rituals and ceremonies. But photographers are also concerned to develop formal means to convey a sense of the spiritual. Thus, like Mthethwa, who rejects black and white entirely in favour of what he considers to be the more resonant medium of colour, Miller uses colour to evoke both the poetic and the bizarre in human experience; and Mofokeng, Weinberg, and others explore the expressive potential of tone – from radiant brightness to shadowy gloom – to suggest the proximity of the spiritual world. Hallett certainly relates to this trend, but with the important proviso that he has consistently rejected the genre of documentary because of what he sees as its negative characterisation of its subjects in favour of the more positive assertions of the human spirit, such as music and dance. Thus, in different ways, most of the photographers in this collection draw on a sophisticated formal vocabulary in their recent work to evoke a sense of resonance, if not actual spiritual depth, in their subjects.

In terms of subject matter, therefore, one may discern both change and continuity in the work of South African documentary photographers either side of 1990 or, as this collection has it, *Then and Now*. The achievement of political liberation, to which all of these photographers directed their energies for so long, has introduced an equivalent freedom into their work – with the lack of structure that all freedoms entail. Liberated from the standard events of political photography, such as protest meetings and funerals, they have been forced to find new subject matter that by definition has no established iconography. But the same drive for a better society that fuelled the earlier political work is apparent in many of the essays – on HIV/AIDS, land redistribution, and other subjects – today. And the same need in Struggle times to present their subjects as rounded human beings rather than victims or ciphers still inspires these photographers to engage with the humanity of their subjects. During the Struggle, photographers would

literally place themselves amongst their subjects, even against the onslaught of the forces of the state. With the advent of democracy, photographers clearly seek more empathetic ways to identify with their subjects, and frequently recognise their own issues in the process.

As far as style is concerned, it is not possible simply to categorise the changes in the work of documentary photographers either side of 1990: the field is too complex and varied. But there are some tendencies that are worth considering. For example, certain photographers, like Tillim and Miller, are experimenting with colour, not to make their work appear more realistic but rather as a vehicle for some form of poetic content. Moreover, in the earlier period, photographers would frequently both avoid the centre of the format, seemingly to allow for a multiple focus in the picture, and work with the margins, as if to acknowledge both the provisional nature of the image and the fact that life obviously continued beyond the frame. These strategies effectively undermined the sense of authority in the photograph – and, of course, in the photographer – in favour of a greater complexity in the subject and a more active role for the viewer. Today Goldblatt is extending this tendency by working with triptychs, either to offer three different views of the same subject or to compose three different images on the same theme. Moreover, photographers like Mendel and Tillim appear to be seeking a greater democracy in the triangular relationship between the photographer, the subject and the viewer. Thus Mendel and Tillim, in some recent works, seem even to question the legitimacy of the documentary project and have tended to construct the photographic encounter as opportunities for self-representation, with the subjects effectively dictating how they want to be recorded. Moreover, in their reluctance to frame their subjects in any way, both photographers have refused to describe their subjects as their commission seems to have required, as AIDS victims on the one hand, for example, and famine survivors on the other. These strategies are extreme, and they can only be effective

because of the patently aesthetic dimension of their work. But all the photographers chosen for this project have, to a greater or lesser extent, rejected the declamatory mode in favour of complexity of subject and openness of interpretation. Thus, if the moment of *Then* can be characterised as a period of disciplined struggle that focused on clearly defined objectives, the moment of *Now*, with political freedom achieved, would seem to rejoice in the fuller humanity that can thrive with that victory, not least the creative expression of the photographers themselves.

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