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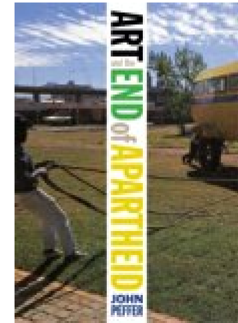
John Peffer. *Art and the End of Apartheid.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. xxii + 339 pp. Illustrations. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-5001-9; $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-5002-6.



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Published on H-AfrArts (July, 2009)
Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti

Art under Apartheid Reconsidered

This book is a most welcome addition to the existing literature on the history of art in South Africa. It purports to cover the years of censorship and struggle during the latter stages of apartheid: 1976-1994, a period of artistic production that has been designated as "resistance art." Peffer broadens out this category, and, substituting the terms "oppositional" or "activist," traces the complicated relationships between politics and aesthetics with thoroughness and a solid historical grounding. The South African art world, then as now, was fraught with internecine battles, and Peffer works his way through the contested issues with admirable evenhandedness. Although some of the text is based on his doctoral dissertation for Columbia University (2002), the writing style is free of academic jargon; indeed, it is lucid and articulate, resulting in a scholarly book that is a pleasure to read. Peffer is an expert in the field of modern and contemporary South African art and visual culture, and with this book he has provided a valuable contribution to its revisionist history.

My major problem with this book is in its organization. *Art and the End of Apartheid* attempts to contribute to an inclusive South African art history by bringing into focus the careers of black South African artists whose adoption of modernism has, in some cases, kept them marginalized in the misleading and often derogatory category of "township art." Peffer's well-researched examination of the careers of artists such as Gerard Sekoto, Madi Phala, and in a separate chapter that is the centerpiece of the book, Durant Sihlali, are illuminating and argue forcefully for their importance. However, the average reader may initially feel a bit misled. Given its broad general title, one might assume that this is a survey text that will provide a balanced coverage of the visual arts in South Africa during this crucial period. As interesting and important as this text is, however, it is episodic, and because of its implied goal of redress, includes some topics of lesser interest. The result is that optimally this book should be read in tandem with other recent publications, such as those on the Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre and the Polly Street studios, as well as classics such as Sue Williamson's *Resistance Art in South Africa.*[1] In sum, if one abandons the hope of finding the ideal required text for a survey course, *Art and the End of Apartheid* provides detailed discussions of complex topics that a broader treatment might of necessity gloss over. (I must confess here that this criticism may be a generational thing. As a student in the 1960s, I was taught that "unity" and "coherence" were of paramount importance in a text, whereas the current generation is all about sampling.)

From the outset the author is clear that his aim is " to examine the development of an oppositional, non-racial aesthetic practice ... [by tracing] the historic predicament of urban-based black artists, their relations with white artists, and their struggle for cultural and political representation through art" (p. xv). One of the central arguments of this book, also set forward clearly in its intro-

duction, is that black and white artists operated in "grey areas," multiracial and intellectually sophisticated urban zones that produced a hybrid aesthetic. This concept, so redolent of the ideal of non-racialism on which the Constitution would be based after 1990, is an inspiring one: the arts were not only not a "frill," but provided a model for the future, democratic South Africa. Indeed, in chapter 1, "Grey Areas and the Space of Modern Black Art," Peffer states bluntly that "as the state's segregationist program became more onerous after the 1950s, it was the 'black art scene' that preserved the promise of a future nonracial South Africa" (p. 5). If this claim seems a bit exaggerated, nonetheless Peffer does successfully argue for the aesthetic and political significance of the art created from the Soweto uprisings to the first democratic elections.

Gerard Sekoto serves as the representative of the emergence of this hybrid aesthetic, and Peffer is at pains to separate Sekoto's depictions of everyday life from the "repetitive, sentimental, self-regarding and limited set of styles collectively, and pejoratively, termed 'township art' " (p. 5). Before returning to this topic, and Sekoto's considerable influence on black artists under apartheid, he tackles the prickly issue of modernist primitivism and the black artist. To illustrate the complexities of founding an African modernism that would reference indigenous cultures, he uses the example of Ndebele mural painting, which was just being "discovered" by the white art world in the 1950s. Its most prominent exponent was the Amadlozi (spirit of our ancestors) group founded by dealer Egon Guenther in 1963, with its "settler primitivism" exemplified by the work of Cecil Skotnes and Sydney Khumalo, the influential teachers at the Adult Non-European Recreation Center on Polly Street. This cubist-expressionist style is contrasted with that of more naturalistic painters such as Sekoto. Having established the two poles of modern art in the early apartheid years, Peffer then of necessity plunges into the thicket of the critical assessment of township art. He concedes that much of the art is repetitious, and because it contains little or no reference to politics of the era may stand accused of the "aestheticization of poverty" for its white patrons. But he gives space to David Koloane's counter-argument that township art was a sort of collective memory of the difficult living conditions blacks endured under apartheid, a concept to which Peffer returns in his chapter on Sihlali. In his intriguing conclusion to the summarized debate, Peffer argues that "black artists used modernism (and perhaps even self-primitivizing imagery) as a way to *share* in the culture of the colonizer, at a time when apartheid ideology explicitly *denied* and violently suppressed any signs of an in-commonness of cultures" (p. 34). He ends the chapter with the statement that the history of the struggle for representation in South African art should begin "here," although it is unclear what "here" means exactly.

During the 1960s, with the rise of Black Consciousness and the increasingly violent repression of the black majority, the cubist-expressive wing represented by Polly Street artists such as Sydney Kumalo and Ezrom Legae along with the most prominent artist to emerge during the 1960s, Dumile Feni, took precedence over the naturalistic wing of township art, and, according to Peffer, was "a crucial precursor to the Black Consciousness Movement." In addition, these artists were part of the global youth culture that broke down barriers between the arts, moving "toward a more inclusive nexus of politics, performance, music, visual art, and poetry" (pp. 50-51). In chapter 2, "Becoming Animal: The Tortured Body During Apartheid," Peffer argues that the depiction of bodies reduced to the state of sacrificial animals was a metaphor for the actual torture of detainees by the apartheid regime, as well as its monstrosity in general. Unfortunately, Peffer's discussion of the key examples of this trend, Feni's *Guernica* (1967) and Legae's "Chicken Series," the latter a reaction to the death of Steve Biko in 1977, are not illustrated. Thus when he places Paul Stopforth's Biko series (1981) and Jane Alexander's *Butcher Boys* (1985-1986) within the expressionist art of political critique, the recontextualization of these iconic works of resistance art seems a bit forced. However, Peffer does carefully ground Stopforth's work in the nonracial cultural arena of the Market Theatre and Gallery, located in the grey area of Newtown, and Stopforth was certainly a key player in the vibrant nonracial social scene described in the previous chapter. So, despite the fact that the gallery Stopforth co-founded was strongly influenced by sixties art internationally, and Stopforth himself by American "pop" artists such as George Segal, it is not unreasonable to place him within this broad trend. A reminder of the strong influence of German Expressionism from the 1930s on, which the Amadlozi group reinforced, would have helped to provide greater historical context for this cross-racial discussion. It is also significant that the work of Mmagkabo Mmapula Helen Sebidi is placed in this context. Her collage, *Where is My Home? The Mischief of the Township(*1988), is a cubist-expressionist riposte to "township art" and all it repressed, including rape, violence, and robbery. It is an indelible image of the body in pain.

Chapter 3, "Culture and Resistance; Activist Art and the Rhetoric of Commitment," is devoted to the art and ideology of Thamsanqa "Thami" Mnyele, who as a leader of the Medu Art Ensemble while in exile in Botswana, developed the concept of an art of struggle created by cultural workers. This crucial movement in South African art has yet to be adequately charted, and Peffer is correct when he argues that the Culture and Resistance Festival in Gabarone in 1982 was "an apogee moment for the 'grey areas' that had been preserved in the South African art world up to that time" (p. 97). Curiously, he barely mentions parallel developments within South Africa itself, which collectively came to be known as the resistance art movement. For example, Sue Williamson's work as an artist-activist is not discussed, and Gavin Younge and CAP receive only a passing mention. I simply cannot understand such omissions, even if–and this remains unstated–a major goal of the book is to plug holes in the current historical accounts of South African art under apartheid.

Instead of a larger discussion of resistance art, Peffer moves quickly in the next chapter to the phenomenon of young township boys who, unable to go to school after the 1976 Soweto riots, made wire toys in the shape of the various Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) that were causing so much horrific damage in their lives. Peffer recently co-founded *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture,* and the effort here to locate modernist art, which is given the default definition of painting and sculpture, within the broader elements of South African cultural production, is a welcome one. Even though the leap from the ideological arguments about activist/resistance art to the lived experience of township children is a bit jarring, he does physically bring these semantically loaded "toys" back into the art world, by discussing the life-sized steel and canvas Casspir left by artists from the Katlehong community art center in a gallery during the first Johannesburg Biennale, in 1995. That sculpture is a wonderful example of resistance art that cuts both ways.

Chapter 5, "Abstraction and Community: Liberating Art during States of Emergency," examines "how one group's 'formalist art exercise' became another's 'community art movement' " (p. 129). At over forty pages the chapter narrates at length the story of the controversial intervention of English and American formalist modernist artists into the South African cultural matrix through the two-week "Thupelo" workshops held between 1985 and 1991. The acrimonious debates over neocolonialism and elitism that this episode generated permits Peffer to elaborate on the problems of defining modernism in South African art. Despite positive outcomes, such as Koloane's founding of the Speedy Bag Factory artists' studio and residency program, the workshops themselves seem to have generated more heat than light. I would have preferred to see the emphasis here placed on the Johannesburg Art Foundation, and Bill Ainslie's crucial role in supporting black artists in this era. Peffer sets out a general chronology of the foundation and hints at some of the difficulties pertaining to its administration. Since, according to Peffer, Ainslie is "one of a small group of white South African artists who, like Cecil Skotnes at Polly Street, made art across the color bar," sharing his studio with Dumile Feni, Louis Maqhubela, Ezrom Legae, Ben Arnold, David Koloane and others, (p. 134), a more complete account of how that studio operated is warranted. The time is past due to give proper credit to this key artist and mentor in South African modern art, and to fully account for the fertile "grey area" the Johannesburg Art Foundation cultivated. Admittedly, it will not be an easy task.

The following chapter, "These Guys are Heavy: Alternative forms of Commitment," is in effect an addendum to the previous one, and examines the influence of the Thupelo workshops in fostering a post-struggle art in the late 1980s, using the examples of David Koloane, Sam Nhlengethwa, Kay Hassan, and Pat Mautloa. Although Peffer is explicit that all of these artists, with the exception of Koloane, studied at Rorke's Drift and/or Polly Street, the suggestion here is that the new aesthetic of everydayness they developed resulted primarily from the Thupelo workshops and the experimental freedom they permitted. With an unjustified jab at former SANG director Marilyn Martin, who–he claims–"despised" resistance art, he uses her brief description of one of Madi Phala's paintings to launch into an extended discussion of this lesser known figure. He argues here that resistance art and abstract art were not opposite poles in this period, and that the more "abstract" wing could and did carry radical political content. This is certainly the case for these artists as it was for the earlier "expressionists" reviewed in chapter 2. However, in restricting himself to "graduates" of Thupelo, he ignores such other important examples as CAP participant Willie Bester, who moved well beyond a sloganeering art during the 1980s, but inexplicably is not even mentioned in this text. Moreover, is it too much to expect that he would provide an example of the woman participant in the Thupelo workshops, Bongi Dlomo? Can only guys be heavy? However, apart from these quibbles–why isn't this or that artist

included–I suspect that these artists' styles were a hybrid of their multileveled artistic experiences, and not simply a result of the spotty Thupelo interventions.

Perhaps these lacunae were necessary to clear a space for the fine monographic study of "The Art of Durant Sihlali" in chapter 7. Peffer does not flinch from the more thorny interpretative issues his art raises, from "township art" to "settler primitivism," and he tactfully negotiates the artist's radical stylistic shifts, as well as what could be considered his self-mythologizing. This solid art historical analysis is worth the price of the book, whether or not you agree with his assessment of Sihlali's art. All of the threads he has been tracing come together here, and if they remain somewhat tangled, that is as it should be, as Sihlali's body of work merits additional and more extended study.

Because the careers of Gerard Sekoto and Durant Sihlali frame this text, and give it its shape, the two final chapters, one on several examples of iconoclastic gestures found in South African art and visual culture at the end of apartheid, and the other a brief survey of art photography highlighting the work of Santu Mofokeng and Zwelethu Mthethwa, seem tacked on, even though the photographic work pertains directly to the dominant topic of township art.

Moreover, despite the rich cultural and political history Peffer provides throughout the text, the "grey areas" where the strict government-imposed racial segregation was subverted needed even greater definition for this central argument to be fully convincing. How do the histories of the various art centers–CAP, FUBA, Funda, Rorke's Drift, and JAF–intersect to form an interlocking entry point for black South African artists? A more expansive treatment of the "grey areas" in the last few chapters would have left the reader with a clearer understanding of the development of modernism under apartheid, and how precisely it provided a model for a non-racial South Africa.

As it is, *Art and the End of Apartheid* might better be titled "Episodes in Art and Visual Culture in South Africa, 1976-1994," or perhaps "The Politics of Cultural Production under Apartheid." But it is precisely because readers must think through the controversies he so adeptly summarizes in order to reach their own conclusions that this book is so very rewarding.

Note

[1]. Elza Miles, *Polly Street: The Story of An Art Centre* (Johannesburg: Ampersand Foundation, 2000); Philippa Hobbs and Elizabeth Rankin, *Rorke's Drift: Empowering Prints* (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2003); and Sue Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa* (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 1989/2004).

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Citation: Pamela Allara. Review of Peffer, John, *Art and the End of Apartheid.* H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. July, 2009.

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