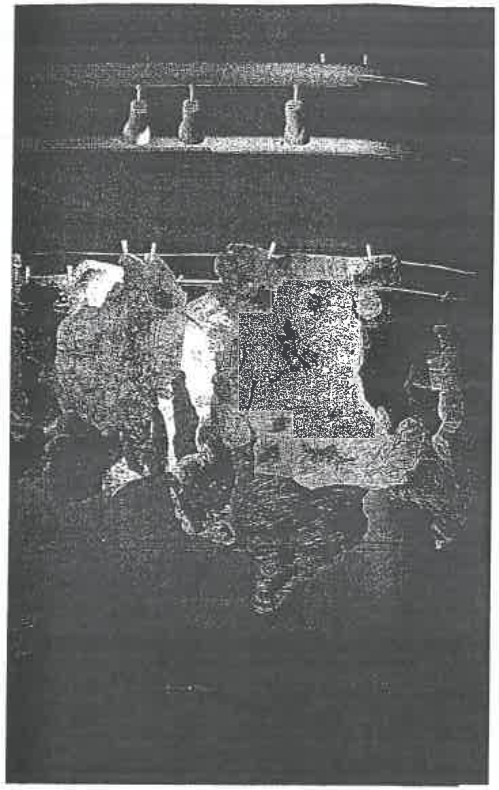
These are peculiar obstacles, of course, which work outside the perimeters of limitation/transgression. The challenges they pose require of artists resistive rather than transgressive strategies. More important, they pose an even greater challenge for contemporary cultural theory and for postmodernism as a critical culture. To bring its object into crisis is the duty of criticism, and postmodernism must extend this responsibility to contemporary African art, and even more so to the logic that regulates its contemplation of non-Occidental contemporaneity. To engage meaningfully with the contemporary, a credible postmodernist criticism must place its own ambivalence under crisis, and extend the borders of criticality beyond the demand for identity and the subnormative.

1995

conceptual art: — At became part of a happening & performative. in 60's ∴ just like in Africa Art for the ritual.



the thought is the thing

- conceptualism in South African printmaking

Colin Richards examines conceptualism in contemporary South African art – and finds it both distinctive in its materiality and more deeply rooted than is currently acknowledged

Whatever else conceptual art is, it is not new. Seen one way, it is an aesthetic orthodox permeating almost all contemporary art practices.1 In this article I take a generous line on conceptualism. Austerity might be better angled: more precise, but surely limiting. The challenge is to grasp conceptualism beyond perceptions of prim, calculated, anaesthetic practices aimed at cauterising material messiness, sentiment, sensuousness. Practices often so savagely self-serious that humour almost only lies in the anaemic amusements of irony and self-reflexivity. And, it must be said, practices which are often aesthetically anodyne; the "thin gruel of visual interest", as Marcia Vetrocq writes about a recent exhibition on global conceptualism.2

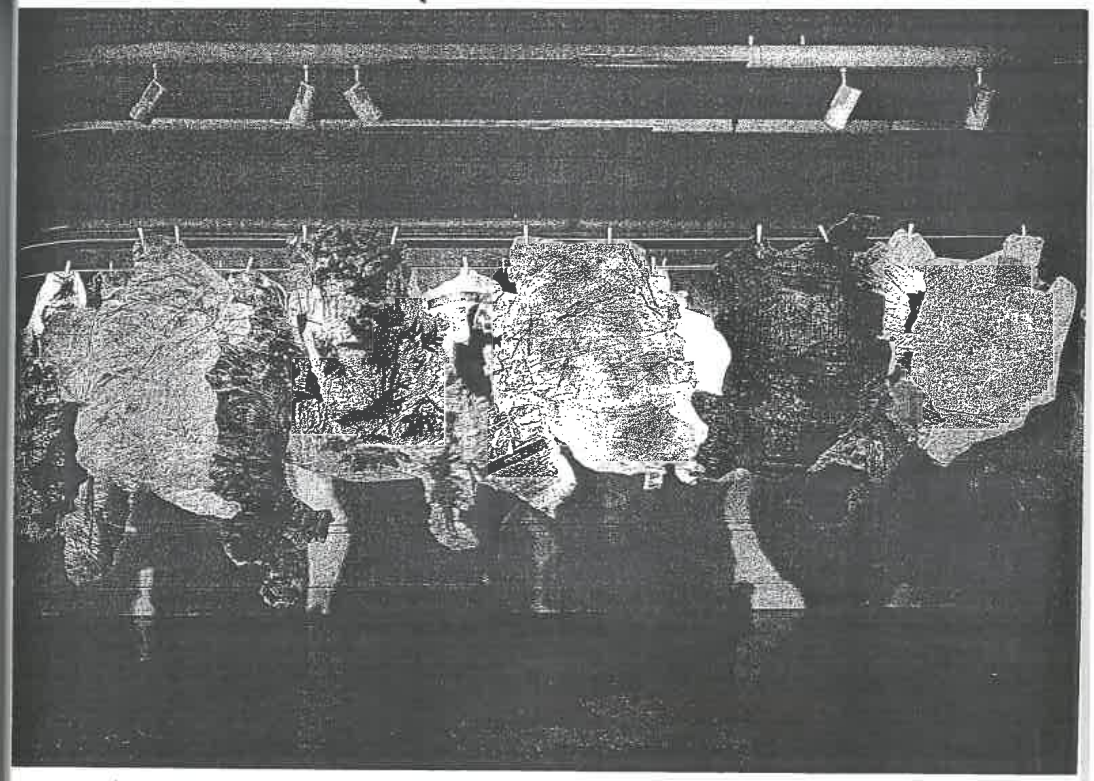
I imagine that the generosity I have in mind also animates the global exhibition to which Vetrocq refers, as well as two others. All these exhibitions attempt a critical articulation with European and North American conceptual art, along with the difficult task of identifying something other to and within Western canons of conceptualism. *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* was held at Queens Museum of Art in New York in 1999. The other two exhibitions are *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, held at the 2001 Venice Biennale, and our own *Beyond the Material: Conceptual Art from the Permanent Collection*, held at the South African National Gallery this year. All these, importantly, grapple with the "African" dimension of conceptualism. In *Global Conceptualism*, "Africa" was curated by Okwui Enwezor. *Authentic/Ex-centric* was curated by Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, and *Beyond the Material* – a remarkable initiative to locate conceptualism on the map of recent South African art history – was curated by Emma Bedford. Clearly there is continuity of purpose here, both in the connections between those involved and the general orientation of these curatorial ventures. 4 years, one objective.

I: What's the Big Idea?

Conceptual art and conceptualism are obviously categories of art. Categories are forms of discursive captivity. Many artists resist this prison-house of discursive categorisation. Crypto-conceptual artist Malcolm Payne, for example, suggests this when he insists – too insistently – on the virtues of muteness and silence in art. The desire underpinning the *Fault Lines* exhibition held at the Cape Town Castle (1996) in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was, for Payne, "a desire for meaning. What I am trying to do is take it all away again. Why do people think an explanation will suffice? Discourse needs its throat to be cut, it needs to bleed. I think artists are Dr Death."3

Not a modest ambition. Whatever else these words describe, they subscribe to the very conventional romantic idea that the anarchies, liberties, silences and sheer slippery contingency of art are domesticated by such naming, explanation,

Colin is slashing.



discourse. Silence = Life. Of course it needs words, narrative, discourses to say all this, lending a certain irony, even pathos to the rather anti-intellectual romance of that species of conceptualism with which Payne is associated.[4]

But naming is important in another sense: as branding, territorialisation, cultural positioning. Tendencies, movements, the privileging of particular practices – painting, installation, performance, technomanic art, slack art – have become brands positioned in an increasingly commodified global art world. Such branding secures a constituency, a market, critical and cultural capital, legitimacy, and gives discourse – writing on art – a point and a shape. That discursive point and shape secures for the art it captures a place in the public present and, if persistent enough, in public history.

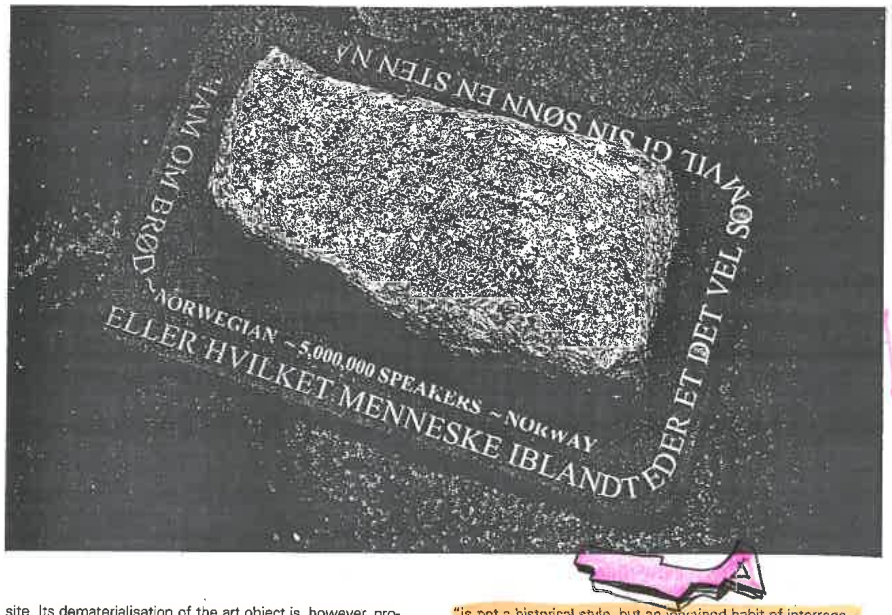
The cultural cachet of conceptual art is obvious. Many "progressive" artists "brand" conceptual originality itself as avant-gardist, hence progressive, in a sort of neo-modernist version of individual "style" in art.[5] This branding is produced by artists, art critics, adventurous art historians, philosophers; in art magazines, catalogues, monographs, institutions – in short, the whole panoply of texts, sites and institutions in which art practices are entangled. What is really distinctive about conceptual art is that this textuality, siting, dissemination and institutional address are its means and materials. It is in this expanded field that the "idea" – the central tenet of fundamentalist conceptualism – gets to breathe.

What might other tenets of a conceptual attitude be? Firstly, we might agree that the history, forms and content of conceptualism remain hotly disputed. There is no generic "conceptual art". As we traverse time and space the phenomenon transmutes, not as constant essence and variable appearance, but as mutable series with no authoritative form or set of practices. Secondly, conceptualism is a sort of mindful idolatry of the "idea"; or, conversely, an iconoclasm of the purely optical, whether abstract or mimetic. Obviously ideas inflect any material production to a greater or lesser degree, and it is hard to imagine a cultural object without imagining ideas. But conceptual art is really a claim for not merely the presence but the primacy of "the idea". The thought is the thing.

We get greater purchase on the term "conceptual" if we follow Tony Godfrey's outline of the four conditions of conceptualism[6], namely: 1) the prevalence of the readymade; 2) a critical strategy of contextual insurgence and intervention; 3) extensive and intensive "documentation" of processes, performances and events; and 4) a strong link to language, words and various cripto-visual forms. Conceptualism occasionally aspires to philosophy and is antagonistic to the defining modality of art, visuality.[7] Cynical about "originality" of the romantic kind, it considers originality as an intellectually driven gesture, not something hand-wrought.

Because of its critical relation to context and institution, conceptualism is deeply historical. It has a time and a place: a

Moshekwa Langa, *Untitled*, 1995, mixed media. Installation view, *Beyond the Material*, South African National Gallery, 2002



Willem Boshoff, *unifica*, 2001, engraved anite bread, granite sadboard, 25 x 43 x cm. Installation detail, nice Biennale, 2001

site. Its dematerialisation of the art object is, however, profoundly paradoxical, unless we consider this as simply (and narrowly) continuous with its anti-aesthetic, anti-optical tendency. Of course there is no communication, critique or pleasure without materiality, but here the materiality is that formalist truth to materials we know in the recent history of Western art. By and large, Enwezor, Hassan and Oguibe measure their discussion in similar terms. Hassan and Oguibe, for example, cite "self-reflexivity", "disdain for objectness", the "pre-eminence of framing" as significant in conceptualism. For these writers "the roots of conceptual art lie [in] efforts to make art that questions its own nature and stature, rejects the cult of the artist's hand and uniqueness of the art object as fetishised in the West, as well as problematizing the desire for coherence and narrative consistency".[8]

Their account of the influence of the non-Western world is outlined in some detail in *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*. What is especially compelling is a crucial connection with history – decolonisation, the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the war in Vietnam in the United States. It is here – in specific histories – that I would argue for something distinctive or intensely felt in conceptualism on the tip of Africa. Another important connection involves what these authors call "[n]on-western body norms :.. ritualism, masquerade".[9] These also allow for distinctive creative tensions within local forms of conceptualism.

II: African Conceptualism?

The desire to name continental or global forms of practice as conceptual art is a critical, strategic necessity. I will come to why I think this, but for the moment want to mark a problem with such geo-political elaboration. This extension of "conceptual art" beyond its specific if contested origins tends to dilute the historical specificity of the phenomenon; where, when and why it happened, what its legacy might be. And with it, the pointedness and pleasures of its creative and critical focus. But perhaps Godfrey's comment that the legacy of conceptual art "is not a historical style, but an ingrained habit of interrogation" and that "[i]t is in the act of questioning that the subject, reader or viewer becomes himself or herself"[10] is the best we can achieve in understanding this protean impulse.

Certainly to speak of a conceptual *impulse* (attitude or disposition) rather than invoking the historical category "conceptual art" is helpful. In doing this it becomes easier – without special pleading – to speak of historical conceptual impulses within cosmopolitan cultures across the globe, and allows us to recognise and argue for forms of conceptualism where the influence of Western-type internationalist modernism is complex, indirect or relatively absent.

I say cosmopolitan because I assume cosmopolitan cultures uniquely cultivate an enabling symbolic and material ecology for conceptualism; the friction generated by rapid spatial and technological change, social mobility and instability, sites where "tradition" (however construed) assumes forbiddingly complex pathways in the present. There are obviously risks in leveraging greater space for conceptualism: everything and everybody gets in the door, nullifying the critical point. But the limit condition would be that such an impulse seeks specifically to engage deep questions of language, site, cultural and institutional politics, the very things which initiated and energised historical conceptual art in the so-called Western tradition.

In their writings Hassan, Oguibe and Enwezor are generally sensitive to such matters, but not always convincingly so. For all the caveats the argument for "African" conceptualism does get strained to breaking when Enwezor, for example, does engage in special pleading. He claims, for instance, that "[i]n African art, two things are constantly in operation: the work and the idea of the work. These are not autonomous systems."[11] But does this not apply to all cultural signification, indeed all art? Autonomy is always "relative", and such matters are surely matters of degree, not absolute distinction. The argument requires greater subtlety if it is to be persuasive.

Somewhat more convincing are Hassan and Oguibe. They tend to look at the interface between different localities and

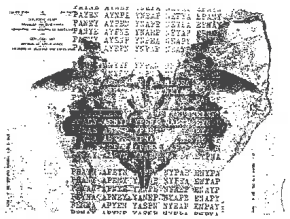
traditions, to identify not so much (or not always) determinate difference and spurious claims to priority, but the mutual entanglements that characterise "conceptualism". But they also make strong, debatable claims about African art: "If any creative strategy establishes a firm link between contemporary and classical African art, that strategy is conceptualism, with both emphasising the pre-eminence of idea over form. Although many contemporary African artists are aware of this link and have drawn considerably from classical African art independent of whatever precedents were set by modernism, it must be emphasised ... that conceptual art by contemporary African artists is inseparable from the global conceptual art movement."[12] This is rather to have your cake and eat it. But such is the terrain.

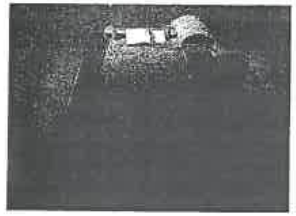
Such considerations notwithstanding, what are the implica-

III: Conceptualism in South African art

Writing of the Gencor (now BHP Billiton) collection, Kendell Geers includes works of the late Neil Goedhals, lionised by Geers' generation as a conceptual artist par excellence.[17] In the same publication, Olu Oguibe mentions Michael Goldberg as "a forerunner of conceptualism in South African art".[18] Within what has become the conceptual orthodoxy, Geers is prominent, as are Payne, Willem Boshoff and Berni Searle.

What is striking here is that for all its institutional interrogation there remains the conventional desire to (re)describe genealogies to serve particular, quite limited interests. But even so, the picture here is too limited, and too prone to make quite orthodox claims for originality, newness and suchlike. Any account, for example, of Boshoff's laboured, textually driv-





Left: Kay Hassan, *Flight*, 1995, mixed media. Installation detail, first Johannesburg Biennale, 1995
Middle: Malcolm Payne, *Rorschach Test*, 1975 (reconstructed 1999), screenprint on government geological maps. On *Beyond the Material*, South African National Gallery, 2002
Right: Lucas Seage, *Found Object*, 1981, mixed media. Installation detail, *Beyond the Material*, South African National Gallery, 2002

This entire conceptualist project seems, rightly, to attack 'exoticist' and persistent neo-primitivist perceptions of 'African' art head on

tions of simply transferring the rhetoric of nationalism to post-nationalist "continentalism" ("cross-cultural and trans-national" in Hassan and Oguibe's phrasing), and so articulating an "African" conceptualism? There is something deeply difficult about this transfer; postmodernist "globalism" (however construed) conditions this transfer in much the same way as modernist neo-colonial internationalism conditioned the production of the "nation" as a discrete cultural site. The problem remains the problem.[13] Framing "African" conceptualism begs important critical questions, as most of the writers cited acknowledge. But the point here is that this kind of continental framing does not sit comfortably with the discourses of post-nationalism and nomadism that characterise the activities of the curators of at least the first two exhibitions.[14] Of course, a case can be made for a strategic "continentalism". Even so, the usual battles around the conditions of identity would still press; what would "African" be, for example? ***

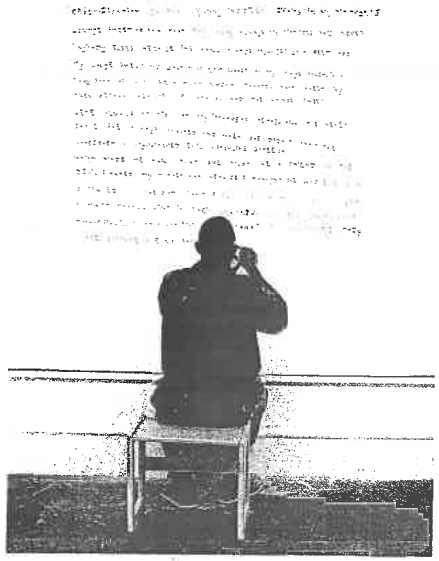
On a more positive note this entire conceptualist project seems, rightly, to attack "exoticist" and persistent neo-primitivist perceptions of "African" art head on.[15] South Africa's showing at the 1993 Venice Biennale extracted shades of this discourse (leavened by much slurred paternalism and ideological equivocation) from, among others, Achille Bonito Oliva: "For some years now a well-kept secret has slowly been finding its way into the open – from busy urban jungles and quiet rural villages, from the grasslands and asphalt highways a vivacious, energetic and questioning art without much ado sought and found attention in Europe ... It seems significant that, seven years before the end of the 20th century, the work of some of Africa's most dynamic artists should similarly draw attention as did the art of the so-called 'primitives', immortalised by Picasso in *Demoiselles d'Avignon* roughly seven years of the turn of this century."[16] Conceptualism, with the availability and proliferation of new media, offers a bracing antidote to such exoticisation and "primitivism".

en "conceptualism" would need to recognise a debt to avant-gardist literary practices in the second half of the 1960s: the Sestigers, André Brink, the periodical *Wurm*. Duchamp was a light in this local firmament then.[19] Speaking of Payne as among the first artists to "explore systems of representation of the self, and the state's overwhelming control over defining that self"[20], Enwezor betrays scant knowledge of South African art history, but also a worrying affection for rhetorical declamations of priority, origins and the like.

A history of South African art has still to be written, let alone a local history of conceptual art. If, however, classical and contemporary African art are indeed bound creatively and critically by conceptualism – as Hassan and Oguibe argue – then that history will be wide indeed. Certainly, over the past four decades, artists like Lucas Seage, Durant Sihlali, Jackson Hlungwane, Ernest Mancoba, Noria Mabasa and Samson Mudzunga might all be up for consideration. Of the older generation white artists, the likes of Alexis Preller, Walter Battis and Nils Burwitz might bear some scrutiny. The presence of allegorical procedures in our art would also further elaborate the picture, as allegory – especially post-colonial allegorical forms – is a quintessentially conceptual mode of articulation.[21]

But I want here to make another argument, one difficult to make. It seems to me that certain cultural conditions over the past four decades provide fertile ground for the fruit of conceptualism in this part of the world. If this holds water at all, it is likely that the conceptual impulse lies deeper and is more widespread in our art history than we currently acknowledge.

The conditions I refer to can be grouped in three broad terms. The first would be directly *political* in the sense of cultural resistance to those oppressive cultural forms and practices which have dominated our cultural history. In our case this dimension would involve the unending, self-renewing and diffuse processes of colonisation on the one hand, and the more discrete (at least legally) moment of Grand Apartheid



Left: Tracey Rose, *Span II*, 1997, mixed media. Installation view, *Graft*, second Johannesburg Biennale, 1997
Right: Moshekwa Langa, *Temporal Distance (with criminal intent). You will find us in the best places ...*, 1997, bottles, wool, toy cars, stones, spindles and other found objects. Installation detail, *Graft*, second Johannesburg Biennale, 1997

which fed on and elaborated the colonising process to absurdity on the other. There may be a way of understanding the criticality of conceptualism in synchrony with how art encounters, responds to and resists these political conditions.[22]

Where the law and official institutions were so palpably unjust, dissent thrives. We still live in a world in which agency is possible, where we are neither numbed nor dumbed by the information deluge and the presumed hegemony of American culture. In a sense, and rather perversely, this line of thought continues a long romantic tradition of the idea of art as liberation. Whether hardcore pseudo-sociology, inflamed aesthetic anarchism or soft-core ecophilia, the motivating impulse is the same. Goldberg's *Monument to the Nationalists* (1978) and *Delta Bravo* (1981), Seage's *Found Object* (1981), Kay Hassan's *The Flight* (1995) and Sihlali's *The Messenger* (1986) and *Fragments of an Ancient Wall* (1991) all suggest conceptually rich aspects of this tendency.

The second term would be what we might loosely call *textuality*, ranging from language to literatures to narrativity, orality; that is the spoken, written, printed and otherwise manufactured word. We live in a polylinguistic world in which translation is a key but fraught process in daily life and in culture. "Translation" has rightly become a veritable post-colonial trope and is part of institutional critique and self-reflexivity across a wide front of cultural practices.[23] Important here would be selected works of *inter alia* Boshoff, Geers, Tracey Rose and Roger Palmer. I might remark that looking at some works of older generation black artists, there is often a textual element in the visual field, something that bears investigation. The linguistic enclave that is the title of a work also offers options for unconventional textual elaboration which points (if unevenly) to conceptual potentialities.

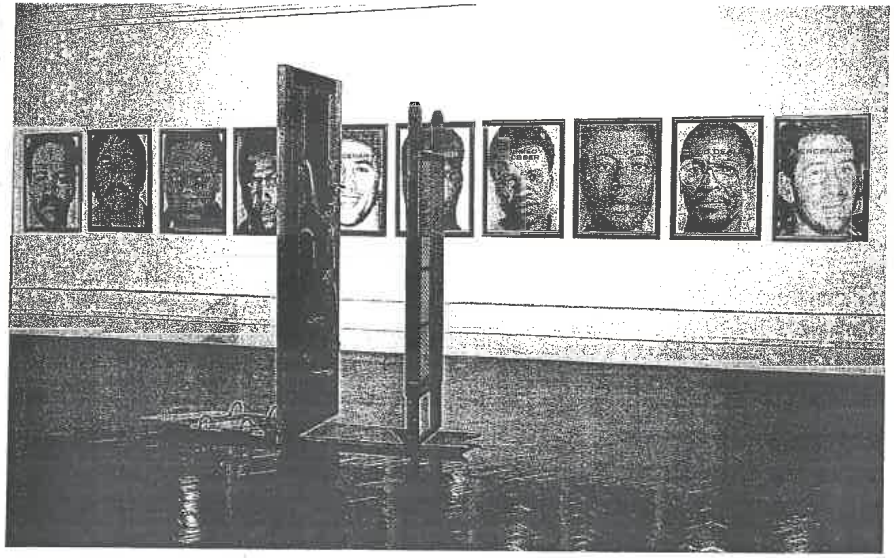
The third term is much more difficult to articulate, but has to do with the persistence of *materiality*, whether as body, or the stuff of the world, and the work between. Here there seems to be a definite dialectic shaping a major tendency in local conceptualism:[24] the relation between the handmade and the readymade, between found manufactured/natural materials and technologically complex media.

Whether in performance or installation, the more object-like, existential, materialist dimensions of contemporary South African art frequently remain vitally attached to their reproductive "representations". Perhaps this is part of a response to what Hassan and Oguibe call "(n)on-western body norms".[25] Violence, poverty, dispossession and prejudice all dramatise the condition of the body and its ways in a material world. I feel convinced that we remain deeply involved in a dialectic of concept and craft (labour), of "readymade" and "handmade", of a world in which the labile triad of hand, heart and head remain integrated, vital and viable.

We may not be unique in any of this. But history is history, and I do sense that there may be a strong claim for the distinctiveness of conceptualism – and its connectedness with other non-Western traditions – in "African" art on all these grounds. Certainly on the surface "African" conceptualism appears less mesmerised by the visual fundamentalism treated with such hostility by the early European and American conceptualists. Hence, it seems more materialist, and with that, dare one say it, more critically "aesthetic".

My sense is that a primary dynamo for what is vital in art and a producer of value within avant-gardism in Africa is the dialectic between craft and conceptualism. The starkest moment of this narrative in Western art history would be Duchamp's ironical rejection of craft as part of his larger act of aggression against the myth of "pure visuality" and what Hassan and Oguibe refer to as "the cult of the artist's hand". This is made explicit by Octavio Paz, who makes the relationship between selection (an act) and craft (bodily work) explicit in the rhetoric of the Readymade. For Paz, Duchamp's Readymade "is a criticism of 'retinal' and manual art; after he had proved to himself that he had 'mastered his craft', Duchamp denounced the superstition of craft. The artist is not the maker of things, his works are not pieces of workmanship – they are acts."[25]

My contention would be that in South Africa the political and material circumstances which conditioned art production have produced a kind of dialectic between craft and conceptualism, the manual and the mental, where the hand (and by



Foreground: Michael Goldberg, *From Here to There*, 1981, mixed media
Background: Kendell Geers, *TW*, 1997, series of 11 photolithographs. Installation view, *Beyond the Material*, South African National Gallery, 2002

We remain deeply involved in a dialectic of concept and craft, 'readymade' and 'handmade'

implication the body and materiality) was not simply rejected; where passion for conventional art media and the value of the hand and work interface with a strong relationship to materiality, embodiment, language, consciousness of insurrection and dissent, an open attitude to found objects, and a preoccupation with documentation as a species of historical witnessing of ephemeral and traumatic events. If we consider some of the conceptual work of Seage, Goldberg, Hassan, Boshoff, Rose, Payne, Alan Alborough, Johannes Phokela, Moshekwa Langa, Jane Alexander, Candice Breitz, Siemon Allen, Anton Karstel, Stephanus Rademeyer and many others, there is a marked sense of work or labour, materiality and embodiment.[27]

Consider Alan Alborough's anagrammatic and exquisitely material *Heathen Wet Lip*. Craft, embodiment and materiality are intensely configured in this work. "Craft" (work/labour) here takes the form of dedicated precision of construction, an exacting selection of materials and intricately conceived and intensely felt techno-aesthetic concerns. The embodiment relates to the site; Alborough's insistence on using a certain place within a certain room, within an institution. In some ways his sensitivity to the viewer and the conditions of viewing – the viewer's position, the lighting, the space – reminds one of the affections of late 1960s American minimalism turned critical.

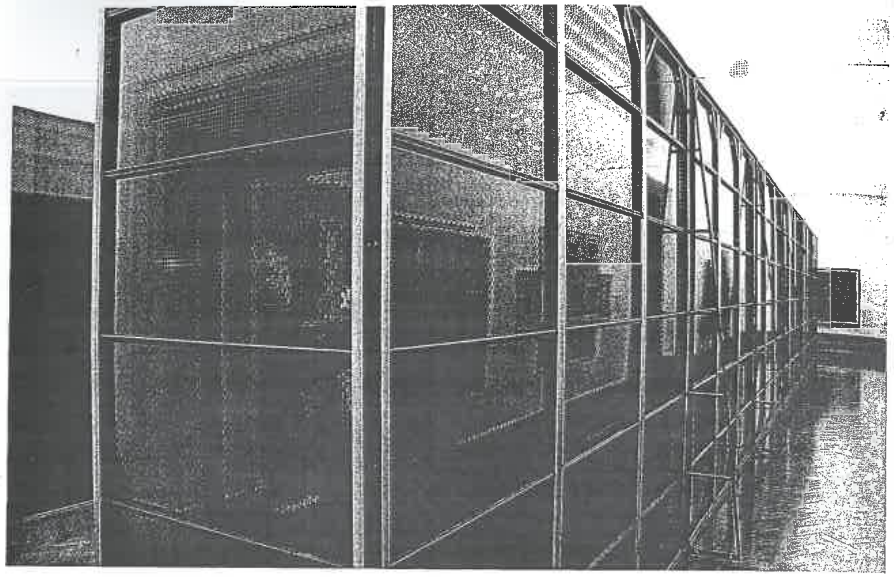
What could be more emphatically material than the sheared, salted ears of elephants, strung up like flags rigged on a structure of chains, pulleys, clamps? One glimpses some kind of outlandish ship, or an elaborate animistic gallows constructed on the very material pseudo-classicism of the National Gallery interior. How absolutely material are the chafed, cracked feet displayed on bluntly utilitarian "canteen tables". In a sense Alborough's work reinstates with a passionate, precisely calibrated intensity what conceptualism sometimes seeks to liquidate – materiality. But it also valorises readymade acts, and the act of selection, while also manipulating textuality through the convention of the title. His title – which sounds like some sort of racial-religious slur – is an anagram for "white elephant", a sign of monumental uselessness.

One could look at any number of Boshoff's works or indeed Payne's in the same essentially materialistic way. More so because of the grueling work ethic and invocation of the senses of the body that characterise much of this work. It is this materialism which perversely conditions the "aesthetic" dimension of a usually anti-aesthetic or simply anaesthetic conceptualism.

Another artist in whom this impulse is patently at work is Siemon Allen. Allen's *La Jetée (The Jetty)* (1997) involved the laborious hand-weaving of VHS videotape in sheer, quasi-reflective panels. Exhibited on *Graft* at the second Johannesburg Biennale, these panels formed a screened enclosure, obscuring certain works already displayed in the room while enhancing others. The work interrupted the front room of the National Gallery, then occupied by works of contemporary South African art including Jackson Hlungwane's *God* and Jane Alexander's paradigmatic *Butcher Boys*.

Allen manipulated the lighting to increase the ambient darkness of the space and enhance the reflectivity of the screens. This favoured certain of the works in the space, while leaving others in the dark. The viewing distance on the periphery of the enclosure was severely constricted and a source of frustration to viewers. Curatorial arrogance, conceit and bias is usually discretely hidden in exhibitions; here it was not.

The ever-dimming reflections of particularly the white sculptures in the middle of the space functioned as "echoes" of South African art of the recent past. The screens reflected these works in a sort of infinite reproduction. The obscuring of some works in the peripheral passages staged for viewers the exclusion of certain cultural traditions and histories from "official" national culture. All that tape was also textual in that it contained information we have no way of accessing. Information became sheer physical material.



Siemon Allen, *La Jetée (The Jetty)*, 1997, VHS videotape, steel. Installation view, *Graft*, second Johannesburg Biennale, South African National Gallery, 1997

Also on *Graft*, Tracey Rose's *Span II* (1997) was a performative installation that engaged textual, material and institutional critique. Rose entered into a paying contract with an ex-prisoner on probation from Pollsmoor Prison. The probationer painstakingly cut phrases on the false wall of the gallery with a penknife throughout the duration of the exhibition. Some of these phrases were private, his own and scripted by Rose, while others are more public – clichés from overheard conversations by visitors which included comments about "coloured" and other racial identities. The presence of the prisoner in blue work clothes as artist's proxy was uncomfortable, stimulating a host of ethical and institutional questions.

Criminality of sorts links this work to Moshekwa Langa's *Temporal Distance (with criminal intent). You will find us in the best places* (1997), installed in the rear of the room abutting Rose's work. Langa is resolutely resistant to fixed categories of experience and identity. Contingency and chance in a sometimes serious, sometimes playful, often poetic way characterise his use of found materials. In this work the floor became a stage for his extended action, and the resulting artwork is the often lyrical and poetic trace of that action. The materials used were specific in their connotations – toy cars from Europe, empty "dop" bottles from around Cape Town, cotton and wool – all posed and threaded through the visual field. The scale of his activity was important as this gave him room to perform his rituals, and also allowed the viewer to enter in the spirit of the performance. His title suggests mobility, mutability and criminality. Perhaps something illicit and profane was being done in that sacred public cultural space that the South African National Gallery embodies.

Johannes Phokela's *X-Communion* (1997) asserts a critical interest in painting within "classical Western art". His work is often labour-intensive, and arguably best described (by James Gaywood) as "syncretist". Using the archive of Dutch and Flemish baroque imagery, and specifically the tradition of Rubens, in this work he reproduces an act of iconoclasm, something at the critical heart of the conceptual endeavour against conventional opticality. Phokela's use of a readymade target – a mechanically reproduced image of a reproduction of Rubens' *Fall of the Damned* (ca 1619) – restages the original act of iconoclasm, albeit for different reasons. The depredations of reproduction itself become part of that iconoclasm.[28]

IV The Affair of an End

The paradox of conceptualism is that it often becomes more material under scrutiny. Experienced intensely enough, almost all art of ambition becomes "conceptual" in unavoidable ways. So the "conceptual" is mutable, almost all that we do when we make art. Roger Seamon makes a deflationary but promising claim about conceptual art which runs like this:
"Conceptual art strongly emphasises what was already present in some art, and the conceptual dimension should, therefore, be understood as a permanent possibility and an addition, rather than a challenge, to a rough consensus about the forms of artistic value that have emerged over the last 250 years."[29]

A permanent possibility; because perception is conception, seeing is knowing. The purely optical seduces minds, and the parade of ideas enchants through sensuous concreteness. Thoughts are coloured, shaped, formed; a text is an image, ideas are things. Perhaps it is the anarchic virtue of conceptualism that it restates this, makes us edgy and reminds us of what it is to be human, and humanely incoherent, in this over-administered post-human world. There are things we should not understand – an endangered idea in our information saturated, pseudo-transparent times.

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Endnotes

1 A well-documented, mostly Western-oriented form of cultural activism labelled "conceptualism" exists. Since the later Marcel Duchamp conceptual art has become consecrated as a "movement"; see Wood, Paul (2002), *Movements in Modern Art: Conceptual Art* (London, Tate). To consecrate something in this way can be a death knell for what is vital in the practice. Thinking of chronology as progressive – central to the avant-gardism that permeates conceptual art – key moments of its history have clearly passed. Yet intense conflicts continue on the global stage concerning the provenance of conceptual art. See Godfrey, Tony (1998), *Conceptual Art* (London, Phaidon); Harrison, Charles (2001), *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art and Language* (Cambridge Mass, MIT); Newman, Michael and Bird, John eds (1999), *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London, Reaktion).

2 Vetrocq, Marcia E (1999), 'Conceptualism: An Expanded View', *Art in America* Vol 87 No 7 (July); 72.

3 Williamson, Sue and Jamal, Ashraf (1996), *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* (Cape Town, David Philip); 127.

4 See Enwezor, Okwui (2001), 'Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on 'African' Conceptualism' in Hassan and Oguibe, *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (New York; Forum for African Arts/Prince Claus Fund); 72-82.

5 On post-apartheid avant-gardism cf Geers, Kendell (1999), 'Competition with History: Resistance and the Avant-Garde' in *Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about Cultural Freedom by Albie Sachs and Respondents*, edited by Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (Cape Town, Buchu); 43-46; and Breitz, Candice (1995), 'Why Have There Been No Avant-Garde African Artists' in *Atlantica* No 11; 145-157.

6 Godfrey (1998).

7 See Osborne, Peter (1999), 'Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy', in Newman and Bird; 47-65.

8 Hassan, Salah and Oguibe, Olu eds (2001), 'Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art' in their *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (New York; Forum for African Arts/Prince Claus Fund); 10-11.

9 Hassan and Oguibe (2001); 15.

10 Godfrey (1999); 424.

11 Enwezor, (2001); 73. Enwezor rightly writes: "Given the complex issues that are its fundamental organizing principles, conceptual art, as elaborated in the US and Western Europe, would seem to exclude Africa. Such an exclusion would ... be in line with the already prevailing disqualification of African aesthetic thought from the broader argument of modernism. Despite the different experiences of modernity globally, this art historical conceit remains firmly entrenched in different institutional and epistemological operations. This, the notion of pleading a particular area's case for inclusion, remains a fraught one. There has still not been a way to remedy that neglect, and here is not the venue to do so" (72). For Vertocq (1999), "Africa presents the most direct challenge to the elasticity of the 'Conceptualism' rubric" (75), but she also credits *Global Conceptualism* for at least "prompting critical discussion", citing Enwezor's own curatorial reservations: "what would it mean, this late in the day, to nominate as 'conceptualist' something that acts like, looks like, and resembles those practices, but whose chief concerns may lie elsewhere? ... Indeed, how does Africa participate in this exercise in constructive revisionism at the core of which resides the idea of the avant-garde, with so clear a history located in the metropolitan identity of the Western city?" (Enwezor, quoted p77).

12 Hassan and Oguibe (2001); 14-15.

13 Vertocq (1999), for example, asks important questions about "regional divisions" in the *Global Conceptualism* exhibition.

14 Post-nationalist discourse was clear in the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial in 1997, for which Enwezor was creative director. See Enwezor, Okwui (1997), 'Introduction, Travel Notes: Living, Working, and Travelling in a Restless World' in *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, catalogue, second Johannesburg Biennale, edited by Matthew Debord (Johannesburg and the Netherlands, Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council and the Prince Claus Fund); 7-12. For an interesting discussion on nomadism, see Becker, Carol (1999), 'The Romance of Nomadism: A Series of Reflections' in *Art Journal* Vol 58 No 2 (Summer); 22-29. For an example of "other" conceptualisms, cf Alberro, Alex (1999), 'A Media Art: Conceptualism in Latin America in the 1960s' in Newman and Bird (1999); 140-151.

15 This is complex terrain. Nevertheless, what distinguished the first and second Johannesburg biennials was the presence and absence of a widely accepted regional "tradition" in local "African" art. Then curator at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, California, Charles Merewether was not alone in querying the relative absence of, for example, specifically the "Venda" sculptors on the second biennale. Their presence had been marked in South African visual culture of the decade of the 1990s, and was reflected in the first Johannesburg Biennale. The reasons for this have partly to do with the notion of "African art" with which the different curators were working. The almost exclusively cosmopolitan focus of the second biennale evidenced in, for example, the many technologically based works suggests part of the answer. What was being played out here were a number of complicated relationships and counternarratives; between, for example, the rural, urban and cosmopolitan spheres of culture, between the global moment and perceptions of "African art".

16 Oliva, Achille Bonito (1993); 8.

17 Geers, Kendell ed (1997), *Contemporary South African Art: The Gencor Collection* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball); 13-14. For more on Goedhals see Jersky, Michelle and Rosen, Rhoda (1993), *Neil Goedhals* (Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand).

18 Oguibe, Olu (1997), 'A Place in the Centre: South African Art at the End of the Century', in Geers (1997); 125.

19 See Paton, David M (2000), *South African Artists' Books and Book-Objects since 1960* (Johannesburg, unpublished MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand).

20 Enwezor (2001); 81.

21 See Richards, Colin (1997), 'Cross Purposes: Durant Sihlali's Art of Allegory' in Geers (1997); 81-97

22 Resistance here should be very broadly understood, and certainly as extending beyond the reduced notions of resistance art that informed the Albie Sachs debate of the early 1990s and which persist to this day. See De Kok, Ingrid and Press, Karen (1990), *Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about Cultural Freedom by Albie Sachs and Respondents* (Cape Town, Buchu Books); and Williamson, Sue (1989), *Resistance Art in South Africa* (Cape Town, David Philip).

23 See *inter alia* Maharaj, Sarat (1994), '"Perfidious Fidelity": The Untranslatablity of the Other' in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts* (London, Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts); 28-35; and Bhabha, Homi K (1996), 'Postmodernism/Postcolonialism' in *Critical Terms for Art History*, edited by Robert S Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago, University of Chicago Press); 307-322.

24 The currency of reproductive technologies (photography, video, digital multimedia) in contemporary global practices is very marked. My sense is that these provide the networked conduit for a disseminated conceptualism in the contemporary moment, and are obviously continuous with the "documentary" aspect of conceptualism in its formative years. See Roberts, John ed (1997), *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain* (London, Camerwork).

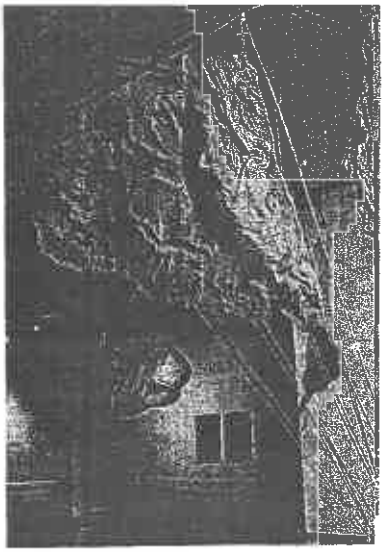
25 Hassan and Oguibe (2001); 15.

26 Paz, Octavio (1981), *Marcel Duchamp* (New York, Seaver); 23-24.

27 I am referring here to work less characterised by "gesture" or "act" than by an embodied materiality. Much of Geers' work is gestural in this sense (see Geers (1995), *Argot: The Way Art is Going* (Rivonia, Chalkham Hill Press)). Performance artists – playing out extended gestures – would also involve another tendency. But my point is that there is an important "materialist" tendency in South African conceptualism.

28 An acid attack took place on February 26 1959 at the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, by one "Walmen". Walmen sent letters to the press before the act of "sacrificing" the work in this way, and surrendered himself to the police the next day. His reason was that "he needed to startle the world, which was only interested in television, and that it was an action ... performed with the miminum of means and would never be forgotten". See Gamboni, Dario (1997), *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (London, Reaktion); 193-194, 198-200.

29 Seamon, Roger (2001), 'Conceptual Dimension in Art and the Modern Theory of Artistic Value' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol 59 No 2 (Spring); 140.



Left: Johannes Phokela, *X-Communion*, 1997, mixed media, Xerox copy, acrylic on board. On *Graft*, second Johannesburg Biennale, 1997
Right: Alan Alborough, *Heathen Wet Lip*, 1997, dried and salted elephants' ears and feet, rope, chain, pulleys, clamps, canteen tables. Detail, on *Beyond the Material*, South African National Gallery, 2002