

d.o.a.

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I

South African art history (visual culture) cannot be reborn (only) after the dramatic revolution of current political events. Rebirth emphasizes an event, an originary natal moment, that which Nathaniel Mackey insists does not exist because “an insistent *previousness* evad[es] each and every natal occasion.”¹ Does a reborn art history come back to us as a new formation—a *post-embryonic* entity to be stained yet—or does it come alive again, reborn, after an (*un*)/eventful death—does it return as a ghost that aims to seamlessly haunt us? The rebirth assumes to originate subjectivity and simultaneously, perhaps unintentionally, originates subjection. What it will become is always already entangled with the “violence” and “trauma” of its past, its present, and its future.

Much like many political revolutions, a rebirth is pregnant with expectations of a glorious future—much like political revolutions, the outcomes of the expectations are fraught with dissatisfactions. As Henri Bergson states, the current moment of hope is always more gratifying than the projected moment when what was hoped for is meant to occur.² Hope is of many things, but in reality, only a segment of those things is realized, and often in a compromised version.

Art history is reborn, it is unborn; it *existed* in the future and came back to be rewritten; it exists in the past, incessantly consumed by hope.

Art history cannot be reborn—placing emphasis on the primal moment places history in a chronological posture that requires tangling. It propagates the messianic awaiting of the heroine who liberates. The moment before the rebirth, the moment of the rebirth, the moment after the rebirth exist simultaneously in time and space, thus eradicating hegemonic temporalities.

With a depressingly imaginative history of South Africa, art history has been documenting racial and gender discrimination since the advent of colonialism. Art history has also in most instances been instrumentalized to inflict the very trauma and violence it will have us believe it subverts.

For whom is the rebirth occurring, and who or what is doing the rebirthing? This inadvertently becomes a perpetuation of problematic past events, a return of *disabling* ideologies that categorize and alienate—that include and exclude.

II

Now, indulge me in this simplification.

South African history is a history of institutional and systematic racial oppression. The year 1994 was marked as the end of the apartheid era—this was preceded by the historical release of Nelson Mandela from prison. These moments are easily classified as revolutionary—they are accompanied by expectations and projections of a brighter future.

Because of the length constraints of this paper, the forced brevity of recounting the history of South Africa—narrated chronologically in this instance—points to the ability of framing a country’s history through a few, specific, emblematic events.

In *Swarm of Events: What is New in History and the Politics of Enunciation*, Stefan Nowotny states that “[e]vents only exist in the plural.”³ Reading a single event as the sole moment of a revolution does not acknowledge other events that would collectively become the revolution. The single event is a spectacular moment that encourages everyday nonspectacular ruptures to be ignored. As Saidiya Hartman will have us believe, only the discernible, overtly violent is acknowledged and made visible.⁴ The nonspectacular violent moments of everyday life do not feature in the narration of history. This results in a particular aestheticization of violence, where what is perceived as the moment of rupture, the dramatic moment of the revolution, becomes the sole representation of that revolution.

Since the moments that led to the “end” of apartheid, there have been other “moments” that have claimed their place in the country’s event-narratable history. In 2015, a student from the University of Cape Town threw excrement on a statue of Cecil Rhodes, one of the most reviled archetypes of apartheid. The moment “actioned” countrywide university protests where students demanded the decolonization of academic curricula that advance untranslatable West-Euro-North-American histories and methodologies only, at the expense of more local, relatable narratives. South African history of art falls snugly within those parameters that erase the multiplicity of histories that stem from and are being produced on the African continent.

Some time later, at the unwavering demand of the students, the statue of Rhodes was moved in the presence of an elated audience of satisfied students. As can be expected, the removal of an emblematic object (accompanied by the spectacle of the event) does little to solve broader, entrenched oppressive structures. And so, more protests ensued.

III



1 Sethembile Msezane, *Chapungu—The Day Rhodes Fell*, 2015 (photograph provided by the artist)

On the day of Rhodes’s removal, Sethembile Msezane, artist and student at the University of Cape Town, did a performance that coincided with (but should not be confused as responding to) the achievement of the revolutionary act. Standing on a plinth with her back against the statue, Msezane awaited the “moment” when the large crane uprooted Rhodes from the place

he had occupied for over a century. As the crane lifted the statue, Msezane lifted her winged hands, perhaps enacting a concurrent event, which attests to the multiplicities of the “main event.”

The removal of Rhodes (emblematic of the *death* of colonialism) and Msezane’s performance (the revolutionary moment of hope that projects a better future, that signifies a rebirth), signifies an appositional occurrence of the death and the rebirth—that which we have incessantly argued does not exist. It is useful to acknowledge the concurrent existences of the events at the same time, in the same place. Together, they exist as events in plural.

Most political events are marked by a single image or a series of images that “capture” the event. These, usually in the form of documentative photographs, monumentalize the event in a manner that supersedes deteriorating memories of those that witness and experience it.

The 1976 Soweto uprisings are recalled through Sam Nzima’s iconic photograph of one of the first students who was gunned down by the police. The dead (or the dying) body of a young boy being carried by an older boy while his sister runs alongside them, the intensity of her trauma worn theatrically on her wailing face, attests to the aesthetics used to convey violence in a spectacular, dramatic way. The dramatic performance of Chapungu’s raised hands, juxtaposed against the concrete sculpture of Rhodes, echoes, in some way, Nzima’s photograph. Similarly, *The Day Rhodes Fell* has become emblematic of the event. It exists in history as an indicator of the dual events that occurred on that revolutionary day.

IV

Now, indulge me this bluntness.

A response to current political traumas will not transform South African art history. To borrow from Jacques Derrida, a specter is not haunting SA art history.⁵ The bleached face of SA art history is the specter that haunts. It takes the form of a racism that superiorizes whiteness. It takes the form of financial capital that allows for a limited circulation of positions of power. A response to political traumatic events does little to transform history of art, but SA history of art has been in a state of transformation for a while now. There is no option for art history but to continue, as it has, its continual transformation.

Notes

¹ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

² Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: S. Sonnenschein; New York: Macmillan, 2012).

³ Stefan Nowotny, *Swarm of Events: What is New in History and the Politics of Enunciation*, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0811/nowotny/en>.

⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006, first published 1910).