Informing Contexts

**Critical Review**

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Introduction

Before examining your own work as a portrait photographer one will always have to firstly examine the works of other photographers who also chose the portrait as their genre of choice. Classic photographers who have been doing that are legion but some like Avedon, and Bailey still come more to mind when it comes to a specific genre and choice of style. My problem with portrait photography recently has been the lack of agency that we the photographer give the subject.   We work with subjects but the power of making choices still lies with the photographer, therefore it is stuck in a one sided relationship. Richard Avedon once said in an interview "I used to think that it was a collaboration, that it was something that happened as a result of what the subject wanted to project and what the photographer wanted to photograph. I no longer think it is that at all. The photographer has complete control, the issue is a moral one and it is complicated." (WesternCameraClub, 2013). Clearly Avedon has reached the conclusion where the challenge in portraits is then the in the process of giving the subject agency in the photo. How do we make them feel empowered in the image? How do we create an imager where the subject has more chance to make the decisions? The solution is clearly through collaboration. David Bailey once remarked "you can't create a portrait by yourself. I always tell people it's them taking the photograph, not me." (Telegraph.co.uk, 2015). This is as close to the truth that we can get in portrait photography and a tenet that I try to stick too closely when I take portraits. Even though this is a well established and discussed problem in the taking of portraits there are seemingly a large amount of photographers, local and international not cognisant of this issue. This lack of understanding and the lack of agency is something that I will discuss in the following document.

Portrait Photography in Southern Africa

When it comes to portraiture in Africa and particularly Southern Africa the list of photographers that could act as inspiration is long but in the end the one that will always stand out is that of the work of David Goldblatt. Goldblatt had an especially slow take on his subjects, taking the image only once the subject was at ease with him and he had a clear understanding with the subject of what is expected and how the image will be portrayed. Even though his work can be seen as a mix between portrait and Farmers Son with Nursemaid. David Goldblatt (Businesslive.co.za, 2018).
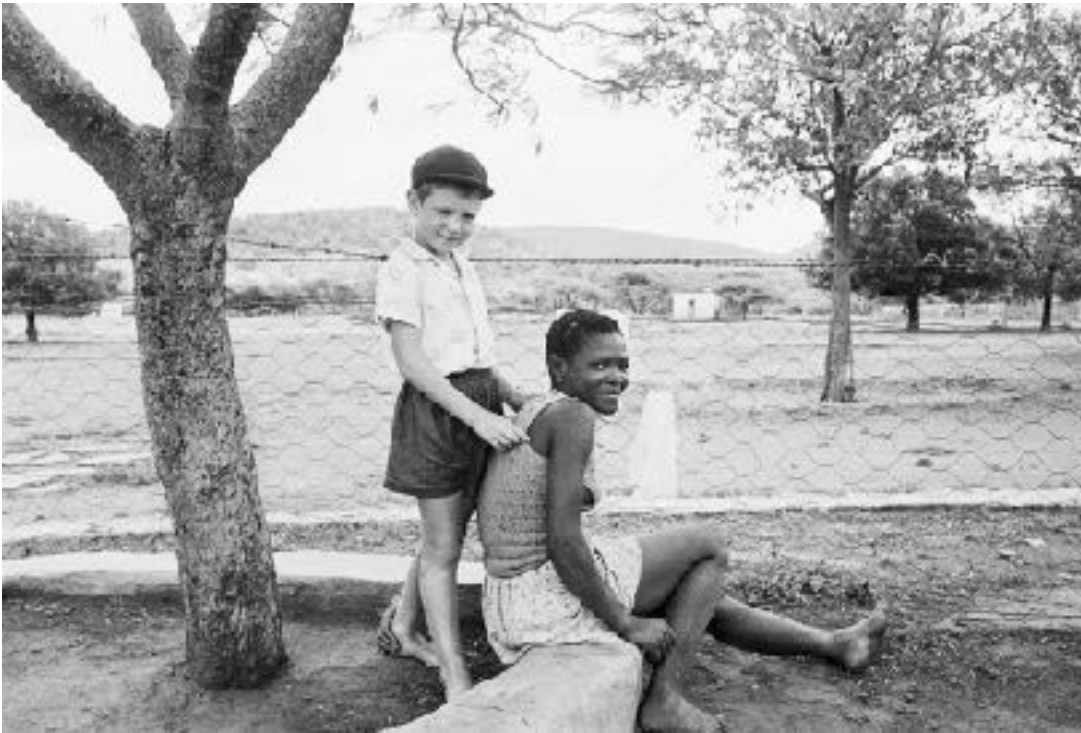
Farmers Son with Nursemaid. David Goldblatt (Businesslive.co.za, 2018).

documentary work it is especially his environmental portraits, where the subject is pictured in their own choice of locale, that speaks to me.   This therefore not only includes the subject, but also switches attention to the surroundings, the tale not restricted to the subject only. Goldblatt was very purpose-full in these images and said: " I wasn't interested then… in photographing the moment that something happens. I'm interested in the conditions that give rise to events." (Businesslive.co.za, 2018) His type of slow photography stands out compared to other local photographers of the time and their love and pre-occupation with the decisive moment. Godlblatt was also not interested in telling forced stories, instead letting the story tell itself. "Photographers, like journalists, should not become propagandists. They should simply reveal the truth" (MCA.co.au, 2018) was a mantra that he lived by. Other historical South African photographers like Santu Mofokeng also reiterated Goldblatt's view by stating "A successful portrait is a negotiation between the person depicted and the photographer. It is worth making a note that this negotiation is not one that occurs between equals." (Artthrob, 2002)

One year after the death of Goldblatt and the current trends in South African photography has become worrying. With a massive influx of young photographers suddenly practicing their art you have to ask if the approach to portrait photography practiced by these photographers are correct and more importantly are they correctly educated? Alice Mann, recent winner of the Taylor Wessing award for photography is a shining example of

a photographer that seemingly does not give any agency to her subjects. From her Domestic Bliss work from 2014 it was clear that she does not understand or seem to want to understand what it means to give space and equal weight to her subjects. Her images of domestic workers in the homes of the employers is uncomfortable in the choice of posing and location, the photographer either not cognisant or not caring for the discomfort clearly visible with the subjects. "Well, whether these women were in uniform or not, the visual marker of their "particular existence within [a white person's] [wealthy] home and the defined purpose of their presence in that space" is signified by their blackness." (Thoughtleader.co.za, 2014).

If this was an isolated local incident it would still have been understandable but the international trend is also problematic with even top prizes in the recent World Press Photo going to a photographer with questionable ethics and even less empathy for his subjects (Duckrabbit, 2019). This lack of empathy is clearly seen in the work of photographers who seemingly still has a colonial mindset. The further problem is that journalists who report on photographic exhibitions seldom do any research instead choosing to just mimic what the photographer declared in their press briefing even it is mostly inconsistent or just untruthful. As an example we can look at a New Yorker article on Alice Mann's images of Drummies. "She retrofits the male-dominated genre of flashy sports photography to capture girls who are mostly from low-income families in the townships" (New Yorker, 2018).

Drummies by Alice Mann   (Alice Mann, 2018).

The writer, Anakwa Dwamena doesn't offer insight into what or how the photographer tried to capture the image, instead just quoting the photographer verbatim, content with what the photographer is trying to say, no further examination necessary. This form of photographic journalism without context is a blight on art and photography journalism and critique and something that reoccurs more frequently as journalists become younger and more overworked. Further thought into what the photos represent or what the photographer is actually presenting with the images are disregarded.

Italian photographer Marco Gualizzini is another prime example of this. Taking and publishing photos of woman and children who were raped he disregarded not only the laws of the country where the images were taken but also their safety as it is common place to punish such victims with stoning or burning in the places the victims live (Duckrabbit, 2019). It is a clear case of a lack of empathy or regard for the subject. Alice Mann's other work has shown the same lack of empathy. In a series of portraits of domestic workers, taken mostly in uniform in the homes of her rich upper middle class friends shows her lack of understanding of the complicated political issues involved in the work ignoring their clear discomfort to just capture an image. As Lwandile Fikeni put it "Well, whether these women were in uniform or not, the visual marker of their "particular existence within [a white person's] [wealthy] home and the defined purpose of their presence in that space" is signified by their blackness." (Thoughtleader.co.za, 2014).

Domestic by Alice Mann (Alice Mann, 2018).

The most important thing for me in the creation of these images is then that the creation shows not only a clear lack of empathy, but of the understanding of the background where the subject lives in or comes from. Stephen Shore explains in his book the Nature of Photographs that one of the four central ways a photos is transformed is in the area of flatness where a 3D image is flattened into a 2D object thereby creating relationships between objects that have not been there previously (Shore, 1998).   This relationship between the domestic workers and the background they were photographed in is problematic in that it shows a subject ill at ease in a place they would not generally inhabit in such an informal way. This ties in well with Szarkowski's idea of the importance of the vantage point and the the frame (Szarkowski, 1973) where the photographer makes the decision of what to include and exclude in the image. This lies at the heart of my images, as the decisions taken by the photographer can change a story in a remarkable way.   What I therefore aim to do is the create an image with the subject, not just of the subject. The idea that an image captures the soul of a subject is an idea that has been around for centuries but as Fabrice Dall'Anese so succinctly put it "I think the idea of portraying someones soul is pretension and an inherently wrong concept. Human beings are way to complex and multilayered." (Jaeger, 2007).   By giving the subject choices I would therefore attempt to step further than what is the norm when taking portraits by getting more involved with the subject, making it a collaborative effort. By giving agency to the subject I am further changing the relationship between photographer and subject, changing the dynamic. Niamh Walsh Vorster stated in the Mail and Guardian that "By learning of one's position in the greater social context, and then approaching a body of work in a way that is engaged, inclusive and self-reflexive, the final images are ones that do not take away from any person involved — nor do they connote powerlessness or violence." (Mail&Guardian, 2017). As a white man taking photos in a post colonial continent this is something that should always be remembered. By giving choices to my subjects I take a large part of the decision making away from the photographer and passing it on to the subject.

This idea of collaborative creation also clashes with the idea of deadpan photography. A portrait should have some form of emotional outreach to the viewer and this would be in direct contrast to the deadpan aesthetic which "moves art photography outside the hyperbolic, sentimental and subjective" (Cotton, 2014). Although she states that "our sense of what the photographers emotions might be is not the obvious guide to understanding the meaning of the image" (Cotton, 2014) the emotion portrayed by the

subject in a collaborative image means that it will be something beyond the photographers control. How to approach images then is one of my biggest questions. Approaching and giving the subject all the control is of course a tried and tested way that images like this has been created before.

SWEAT Portraits by Theunis Stofberg and Irene Grobbelaar, 2016

So how do I see and approach my own work? Realising and recognising the problems I have had with western photographers and their visits to my home continent I have had to change my thought processes. In a project I did in 2016 with the sex workers of SWEAT in Cape Town I realised the importance of agency and giving the subject choices. At that time I also decided to combine this idea with the separation between subject and background. Normal images of sex workers usually focus on their sad stories (of which there are many) or their dangerous living conditions, trying to eke out any type of sympathy from the subjects. By removing the subjects from this and giving them ample warning that portraits were going to be shot we gave agency to the subjects, letting them make the decisions on how they want to be portrayed. This worked remarkably well with some of the subjects dressing up for the occasion while others came as they were, content in what they were and who they were and satisfied with what the image they will portray.

My new set of images will therefore take guidance from this work and consist of a diptych featuring of a close up of the subjects face and then an image of where the subject

spends a lot of time, works or lives. This separation between the two will then also ask the viewer more questions as they now have to tie the two places together in their own head, asking the viewer to let go of the normal assumptions they make when viewing location portraits but asking more pertinent question about belonging and place. The choice of location where they want to be portrayed will also be given to the subject. This will allow my subjects some form of agency in the image, giving them the choice of what place they want portrayed, a place they are familiar with and a place they associate with.
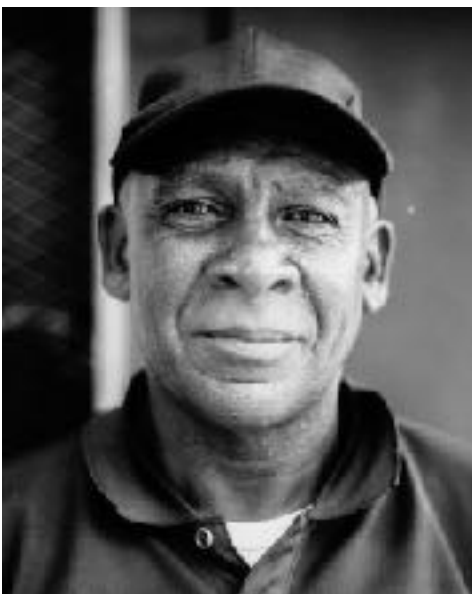

Bantu by Theunis Stofberg, 2019

  Do we know who and what Bantu is? No. In the deeper examination of the images we will be looking further than what we usually know. By contrasting the two images by using a large format portrait image with a high definition colour image I also want to ask questions about authenticity in a time where digital photography is seen as cheap and easy to fake compared to the "realness" of analogue photography like in the black and white image. Getting the viewer to make their own conclusions about the image and what the connections are between the person and place will be half the fun of the image.

Dissemination of Work

The dissemination of my work is a further potential problem. In a very small art market the value of photographs in this market is almost negligible. Through years of experience and multiple showings at galleries the question if people are willing to buy art photography is something that has still not been answered in my mind. Berger stated that "museums, by

choosing to display photographs, legitimises photography as an art form" (Berger, 2013). This is clearly a problem in a country where most art galleries are privately owned and the few museums that are public display mostly art as a form of historical cultural dissemination, choosing to display art for the western tourists rather than the local public. Whether this is due to a lack of clear curatorship or funding is not for me to judge but the main problem therefore arrives in the idea that private galleries featuring individual curators are therefore the tastemakers in the South African Art world. One has to therefore ask the question what would be their main motivator in showing photography in their gallery. The answer to that is short and clear: money. The financial incentives of displaying photography to a market that sees very little value in the photographic art is therefore minuscule with only a small percentage of most photos being sold. The indirect result of this is that I will therefore always struggle to find space to exhibit any images. Galleries I have exhibited with before show a further reluctance in publishing portraits word as it is not generally seen as something that sell, unless it borders on fashion photography or is very concept heavy. My current range of images was described by a

Ignatius by Theunis Stofberg, 2019

curator as "too academic". This is a problem that I will have to consider in the future as I expand my work and I have to therefore consider other options. For physical exhibition space I might have an answer in that I have a large space available to me through a NGO I work with but the chances of most of the work being seen in this space is little and the further financial implications of printing enough images to fill a rather large space is daunting and not financially viable.

Online dissemination through speciality websites is of course an easy option. The problem with this is of course the target audience and how to reach them. Although there are many websites devoted to photography that will in all probability publish portrait images the question on who the images will then reach is a difficult one. Most the readers of websites like this are other photographers and thus it really doesn't extend the reach of the images further than a very small circle.

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