AUTOBIOGRAPHY
CHRONICLES OF OUR TIMES
THE 5TH CAPE TOWN MONTH OF PHOTOGRAPHY
EDITED BY JENNY ALTSCHULER
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

CHRONICLES OF OUR TIMES

THE 5TH CAPE TOWN MONTH OF PHOTOGRAPHY
SPONSOR OF THE PRIZE FOR THE
~ BEST NEW BODY OF WORK ~
EXHIBITED DURING MOP5
MISSION STATEMENT

The South African Centre for Photography endeavors to:

Promote a broader understanding of the medium of photography in all its forms, nationally and on the continent, and to foster the development of its practice, teaching, scholarship and criticism through the establishment of sustainable programmes and exhibitions.

Promote photography through local, national and international exhibitions as well as related events.

Promote photography as a means of expression through formal and informal educational programmes and by establishing links with institutions and partner organisations.

Run pilot projects and skills-based training programs, placing special emphasis on developing communities and create sustainable models that can be used elsewhere.

Establish, maintain and grow a database of southern African photographic information.

Establish an online and physical library.

Maintain and expand a photographic print collection.

Network and dialogue with photographers, curators, collectors, writers, publishers and researchers.

Establish relationships with our counterparts worldwide.

Contribute towards setting and protecting industry standards.
AUTOBIOGRAPHY: CHRONICLES OF OUR TIMES
THE CAPE TOWN MONTH OF PHOTOGRAPHY 2012 MOP5

It is in the last two decades that the photographic imaging of world episode has become synonymous with the conveyance of personal experience. History, as we have come to realise, is perhaps better defined as versions of human stories: constructions generated by the parties in power. The camera, a mechanical recorder, capturer of latent pictures and simulator of reality, can do little without the generator, the energy of an operator, the photographer.

With agency comes personality, ego, identity and context, which, even without self-awareness, loads ciphers which colour the final creation. It is the aim of this festival to celebrate the subjective filter of the autobiographical account and acknowledge the move in the art community to value, increasingly, the consciousness motivating the creation of the image.

The world has experienced the photographer as explorer, discoverer, expounder, philosopher and medium through which the flow of life can be visualized, measured, deciphered and relayed. These roles seem to have increased importance again in the consideration of meaning within a photograph. It seems that the pendulum has swung towards the valuing of autobiography as a relevant construction of the representation of our world, running parallel with ‘official’ or public history, the filter of the self through which to focus upon our world.

CONCEPTUAL VARIATIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS:

The personal account of the public experience; The single or personal experience as emblematic of the public event/experience; Self exploration, the personal journey, the cycle of life;

Identity, the self; the mind, the spirit, the soul, the psyche, the body and heart in times of love, pain, struggle, peace;
Altruism, commitment, confession, conscience, consciousness, patriotism;
The family; the clan; the culture; the patriot, the global resident, personal stories, diary, witnessed stories, urban legends, fabrications of the mind, local portals;
The hobbyist, the magician, the artist, the expert; the master, the apprentice.

The filter of the self through which to focus upon our world.

This call and statement has been answered and supported in this year’s festival, MOP5, in a voluptuous and energetic manner. The showcase includes the participation of 175 image makers, a record number for the Cape Town Month of Photography, making their personal statement in a partnership of visual and textual statement, produced as image print series and in wide variety of other related media, including video, slide and physical walk-into spacial installations.

Jenny Altschuler
Festival Director 2012
While contemporary South African photographers consider the reception of their work in both local and international gallery spaces and art collections, less than twenty years ago this was not necessarily the assumed context nor the realistic aim of photographers due to the international boycotting of South African artists, the consuming subject of the anti-apartheid struggle and the nature in which photojournalistic images of struggle were consumed by the international audience.

According to Sanner (1999:261) as South Africa heals its wounds from the past, “photographers are channelling their energy into the exploration of other realms of experience” which include the personal experience. Photographers are now addressing broader concerns and personal issues, redefining the understanding of South Africa in a post apartheid environment and joining the global trends of photographic interpretation.

Autobiographical narrative resonates strongly as South African photographers are faced with a highly publicised past and an uncertain future attempting to place themselves within a fluctuating contemporary. The process of constructing an autobiographical narrative allows the individual to shape his or her character or persona through the process of both augmenting and recalling memories, experiences, and stories. As such, an autobiographical narrative can be considered as an “interpretation” that involves both real events as well as enhanced autobiographical memory, which works towards distorting, commenting on, and fabricating a constructed reality. This reality, in turn, helps to recreate and construct the individual’s character or persona. Therefore, while autobiographical photographs or images may be associated by some with empirical “truth”, or with a reflection of events, another dimension of verity is possible when a constructed reality and character are introduced allowing highly subjective interpretations.

According to theorist Maurice Halbwachs (1992: 7), ‘it is in society that people normally acquire their memories’ and it is also in society that people recall, recognise, and localise their memories. Halbwachs is of the opinion that autobiographical memory is made up of events that an individual personally experiences, and that memory can therefore not be separated from society, as society influences and shapes the very construction of memory. The narrator therefore does not function in isolation during the process of constructing an autobiographical narrative; he or she is strongly influenced by, and grounded in, the socio-cultural environment.

Ruth Frost (N.d.: 2) summarises the complexity of autobiographical memory by suggesting that autobiographies are attempts to construct narratives, which can readily result in a measure of tension between reality and fiction. It can therefore be suggested that the constructed autobiographical narrative may reflect the past but that it is more likely to suggest a constructed reality and a constructed central character, which means that neither reality nor the character are simply reflected; they are interwoven into a new stage of remembering.
This new stage of remembering can be explained in part by the fact that an autobiographical memory tends to fade gradually, particularly because it is not always collectively remembered and maintained, as is often the case with collective social memory. Constructing an autobiographical narrative, therefore, involves a continual process of recollecting fragmented autobiographical memories and combining a number of factors in order to create a new, somewhat fictional reality (Steiner & Yang, 2004: 16). Craig Barclay (N.d.: 15-20) notes that, “[w]e build a sense of self from our autobiographical memories, evaluating experiences and constructing stories”. However, the newly created and interpreted version of the autobiographical narrative cannot be said to be wholly “untrue” – interpretations of events may arguably also stand in for versions of said events.

Ashley Walters’s Dark City visually challenges stereotypes through ways of seeing the visible and the invisibility of the landscape. He explores the built environment and its effect on creating social constructs and influencing cultural behavioural patterns within the coloured townships. He believes social constructs are often judged by face value, in terms of what is visible, often neglecting the invisible. In this respect disregarding the duality of the social space encourages a misrepresentation of social class.

Fig. 1 – 4. Nel de Franca: Stills from Hollow Hallucination and Forgotten Family. Fig. 5. Nel de Franca: detail from Sacred Souls.

Fig. 6 – 8. Ashley Walters: Selected Night city scapes from Dark City.
In a series of self portraits, Liona Nyariri plays out the traditional and current roles expected of the black female in her series, Performing Blackness, questioning the validity of stereotypes promoting racist beliefs and discriminations, while Kali van der Merwe's Dark Light also using the self portrait, removes the female body from any form of cultural identity, allowing an

Fig. 9 - 11. Liona Nyariri: Performing Blackness.

Fig. 12 - 15. Kali van der Merwe: from the self portrait series, Dark Light.

Nina Joubert explores constructed and interpreted versions of events and memories in order to introduce subtle experiences that arise from the tension of merging an interpreted fabrication and past reality. Her narrative, The Constructed Self, recalls childhood and youth, strongly interspersed with tales handed down from her parents, grandparents and the media such as television and radio. Personal feelings, emotions and opinions are freely incorporated into the essence of a 1980s Karoo childhood. Joubert escapes into and not from memory, thus allowing for unique possibilities in terms of interpretation, fantasy and construction.
Dear Edward, family footprints by Paul Weinberg maps a personal journey into the family archives reflecting fresh insights and perspectives on an immigrant family's integration into the South African environment. The work encourages an enquiry as to ‘who write[s] history, and who is left out’ (Avusa Media 2012).

These photographers deal with intimate life and autobiographical narrative themes addressing issues in contemporary South African society as well as global discourses, by giving insight into their own personal experiences. They expose autobiographical memories, narrating personal perspectives and as such reflecting a vast cultural diversity highlighting the understanding of self in relation to community, sub-groups and within the larger South African social construct. The work of these autobiographical narrators tends to embrace the past and present, rising to the challenge of giving South Africa a more contemporary social identity.

Reference List:
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AUCTION 29TH NOV 5PM FOR 6:30PM

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