

## Disjunctive Dialogues - Conversations across Boundaries

Violence/Silence opened simultaneously in Durban and Nieu-Bethesda. Violence was situated in Durban, aka the Beirut of South Africa, a First World/Third World metropolis, one of the fastest growing cities in the world, and an obvious site for violence of all kinds. Silence found its manifestation in the quiet, untrammelled space of the small Karoo town of Nieu-Bethesda, some 50km from the nearest largish town Graaf-Reinet, off the N9 to Middelburg.

Despite the overt binaries of the terms and the geographical separation of the exhibitions, curator Greg Streak is interested in the interrelationship between the two themes - the way they interact and play off one another. The acronym hidden within the relational positioning Violence/Silence that, when abbreviated, produces 'vs', encourages the viewer to see the terms positioned not only against each other, but puts them in such close proximity that the friction between the two disturbs easy distinctions. It becomes evident that a complex, often interdependent, engagement exists between the two conditions - that violence is very often embedded in silence and vice versa.

The challenge for Streak was not to curate a show of extant works, but to construct a situation that encouraged the production of new work. The artists involved had to create work in response not only to the concepts but also the sites - a strategy that involved a certain amount of risk for Streak and put a certain amount of pressure on the artists to produce their works within a limited budget of R3000 each and in the space of only three weeks (four days of which were taken up by travelling).

Streak's choice of participating artists was determined by a number of factors. Historically, PULSE is linked to the RAIN International Artists Network and two of the four international artists: Ivan Grubanov (Serbia) and Marco Paulo Rolla (Brazil) have connections to RAIN via other artists run initiatives. The South African artists Luan Nel, Paul Edmunds and Carol-anne Gainer and the two other international artists Adriana Lestido (Argentina) and Bharti Kher (India) were selected due to their sensibilities and previous projects that Streak determined as having a connection to the exhibition's concerns as well as Streak's sense of what they might personally add to the dynamic of the project. Streak himself made up the eighth and final member of the team.

Largely eschewing the more obvious political readings in a South African context, the exhibiting artists interpret the themes Violence/Silence broadly. Often engaging with private and intimate meaning, they reveal that one of the oldest functions of art - that of witnessing - still has a powerful and relevant role to play in our understanding of the complexities of the world we find ourselves in.

Streak's own work neatly frames many of the concerns of Violence/Silence. His video for the Durban leg of the show tackles head on some of the implications of the 'truth' of witnessing. Directly entitled *Witness*, it shows a short but crucial sequence from the Peter Weir movie of the same name (starring Harrison Ford), where a young white boy sees a black man slit a white man's throat. Videoing the sequence and then videoing the retake again and again, Streak's piece both depicts violence and effects a 'violence' on the original, relentlessly destroying the primary image. Not only is the perpetrator of the crime never revealed, but what is seen continues to degenerate into a jumble of colours and marks, not unlike some modernist abstraction; only here, the 'essence' of the image, its pixels and signals on the video screen, serve not to reveal the truth, but further distance us from it, calling into question our memory of the original and our reconstruction of the 'facts'.

Another work that engages witnessing directly is Ivan Grubanov's *Reality 1 on 1 (1)*. Comprising a series of small ink drawings of people he has interviewed that have experienced violence, the pieces have a power well beyond their scale. In one particularly potent sequence, Grubanov interviewed and drew Greg Streak in a work that sheds some light on Streak's curation of Violence/Silence. Depicting Streak recounting his ordeal at the hands of hijackers when he had a gun inserted into his mouth and the trigger pulled, the power of the drawing lies not in any re-enactment of the drama but rather in the event, but in the cool, almost repetitive, images detailing

the narration. Showing Streak in the very same vehicle in which the event occurred, viewed always in profile, never looking at his interlocutor, the drawings present a man trapped by his own impotency in such a situation - his life and sense of self at risk.

Such images acknowledge criminality and an overt public violence. Whilst all violence will have private implications, some violence is perpetrated more discreetly than others, without an overt physical component. In Nieu-Bethesda, the site that carries the conceptual weight of Silence in the project, a different kind of violence is implicit in the very tourist attraction that gets visitors to detour off the beaten track.

Helen Martins' Owl House is the reason why many of the residents of Nieu-Bethesda now have a livelihood. The fame of its quirky and idiosyncratic occupant is what attracts visitors. Yet Martins was far from being celebrated during her lifetime. The violence perpetrated by a small town mentality on those who do not conform to the norm is well known. Seen to disrupt and hence threaten the social order, such 'outsiders' are shunned, ridiculed and sometimes physically harassed. In response to society's derision, Martins obsessively populated every surface of her domain with figures and emblems of light in a bid, it would seem, to keep the darkness at bay. This darkness encroached on her at a number of levels - social, psychological and physical. Not only spurned by the town, Martins was later afflicted by a blindness that eventually threatened to overwhelm her. Finally, the glittering lights of her glass, mirrors, candles, suns and stars failing her, Martins took her own life by drinking caustic soda.

Adriana Lestido responds to Martins' story in her *New Baptism*. Documenting in slides the journey from Durban to Nieu-Bethesda, Lestido punctuates images of the road with the cement figures that populate the Owl House.

The majority of her slides are of apparently incidental moments: car headlights in the pre-dawn light, the treetops silhouetted against the sky, shadows across the road. Mirroring Martins' fascination with light, Lestido mainly focuses on various manifestations of illumination: light reflected in a puddle, steely light bouncing off the hammered surface of the dirt road or caught at the edge of a metal star, the flare of the sun across the camera's lens. Such visual incidents are, however, more than luminous; they reflect transcendent moments in the ordinary, the numinous in the everyday.

Whilst potentially capable of succumbing to a generalised romantic spirituality, the images do not, however, sink into easy redemption. The recurring images of the Owl House figures with outstretched arms reaching for the sky, the moon, the light, are juxtaposed next to images of ill-determined landscapes in the mist, reinforcing a sense of the intangible, the unattainable - Martins' life and the violence of her self-imposed death echo in the mistiness of this landscape that refuses clarity.

Illumination and vision also inform Carol-anne Gainer's *Blind spot*. Three pieces of red transparent Perspex were setup in the ground not far from Helen Martins' Owl House. Two panels with the words 'desire' and 'dreaming' flank a blind spot test - when the sun falls on the panels, the glowing red shadow of the words falls onto the dust of the Nieu-Bethesda street. The reference to the lacuna on our retina suggests more than an inability to see physically - grounded between terms that designate the acts of imaginative engagement and yearning, the work alludes to an internal blindness, a place that calls for inner reflection.

Whilst Gainer was in Nieu-Bethesda, she picked up odd fragments of things that she found lying around. Taken back to Durban, she scanned and printed large these found objects: broken pieces of delft, a single bullet and an old disintegrating white rose from a funeral memorial (its plastic dewdrops now yellowed with age) became monuments in their own right to a non-specific but particular past. Evoking the lives of the European settlers in this remote part of Africa, the three images create a basic vocabulary of settlement: the need to make a home, the need to hnut/defend, and the need to remember.

Issues of home and remembering/witnessing in turn became central to Gainer's performance piece on the opening night of the exhibition in Durban. There she washed the feet of the woman who cleans for her, Beatrice Mazibuko. Presented as an archetypal gesture of humility and respect to a witnessing audience, it was both poignant and discomfiting. Whilst overtly acknowledging the historical violence and hierarchies of power perpetrated by the apartheid system within the domesticity of many white South African households, it was also a reminder of the complex relationships that still inform the lives of many South Africans, where these imbalances remain as a legacy of the past.

Brazilian Marco Paulo Rolla's performance *Breakfast*, directly afterwards, took the daily domestic ritual as terrain for a piece that literally shattered expectations. Engaging with the theme of latent violence in the quotidian, he held the audience in tension as he sat at a perfectly laid table, slowly, deliberately and silently eating his way through breakfast. Suddenly, without warning, he flung himself from his seat across the table and up the wall where he remained, as though pinioned, an inverted cruciform shape splayed out on the wall, the smashed crockery and still steaming coffee strewn across the floor.

The force and unexpected nature of the action acknowledged the pent-up frustrations and barely contained anger that often simmer beneath our carefully cultivated facades of socialisation. Literally climbing the walls, Rolla embodied the distorting nature of our everyday lives. The remains of the event were left to moulder on the floor, a continuing reminder of the provocative nature of the quiet internal festering that runs through many a person's average day.

If domestic violence within the material security of the middleclass is largely suppressed, domestic comfort within a violent world for others is hard-won. Adriana Lestido's second slide projection of the project *Durban* was of the homeless on Durban's streets. Photographing people beneath plastic as they sheltered from the rain, these figures, witnessed from outside, can only be partially discerned. Like sculptures under dustsheets, their form is intimated - pressed against the plastic, a hand or foot discloses itself, whilst the rest of the body disappears into a translucent haze. Obliterating identity, Lestido creates a memorial to the anonymous dispossessed that appear as ghosts beneath the semi-transparent sheets.

The dispossessed are also referenced in Ivan Grubanov's *Reality 1 on 1 (2)* in Nieu-Bethesda. A museum-like vitrine displays photographs taken in Durban. The images always juxtapose a luxury vehicle and a person of colour. The implication is of two disparate realities abutting one another, possibly intruding upon, threatening or violating one another. Whilst potentially evoking the traditional binary of white/black, haves/have-nots, the relation between the two is often unclear and the drivers of the cars rarely identified. The connection between the vehicle and the individual is, in fact, never quantified. Gratuitous prejudgement as to a simple black/white dichotomy may be simply speculative, not matched by a reality where a rising black middleclass breaks such stereotypical expectations. The images are silent, not answering our questions, but by that very silence, they encourage us to create our own fictions or, alternatively, question the construction of our previously held narratives.

Luan Nel's work also engages storytelling. *Nightlight*, a gallery installation that forced viewers to draw close and peer between two boards into a narrow passage piled high with earth creating a rising landscape with a plastic goose glowing at the far end, evoked the land of children's bedtime-stories. The white bird or goose is central to many children's tales: the Golden Goose, the Snow Goose and the Ugly Duckling, to name but a few. Most of these stories are designed to comfort the young mind before sleep. In their turn, nightlights are meant to create security for those afraid of the dark. Nursery rhymes and fairy tales, however, are also often full of grim and violent happenings that reflect the trials of growing up in a complex and hostile world.

At Nieu-Bethesda, Nel's *Wind* invokes other mythologies. There, he tied hundreds of white ribbons to the trees and bushes along the edge of the road, producing a calligraphic drawing that at night froze and during the day softened and fluttered in the wind like Tibetan prayers. This abstract 'writing' in the landscape tells the wordless story of the wind as the "creative breath of exhalation". The necessary counterpart of such cosmic breath is inhalation, or inspiration; the only element that

Plato grudgingly acknowledged allowed artists a connection to the divine. Lyrically evocative, the work engages the elements as transformative and calls upon nature as both source and collaborator.

Another direct engagement with nature in Nieu-Bethesda is made in Marco Paulo Rolla's two video works. Filmed with stop-frame animation, Rolla is seen falling naked onto the rough landscape. In *Landscape (with leaves)*, Rolla becomes subtly integrated with the landscape, gradually subsumed by leaves, his presence negligible. However, in *Landscape (with rocks)*, his body is slowly covered with stones, until he is interred in a cairn, a memorial and marker that remains witness to his presence.

Whilst both actions rely on the somatic experience, the different sequences have divergent implications. One is reminiscent of the romantic spirit of identification with nature where the self is holistically part of nature, whilst the other attempts to lay claim to individual presence within the world.

Whilst Rolla engages broadly with our relationship to the land, Paul Edmunds' work is highly site-specific. The very marks within the rocks themselves inform his work at both sites. Titled *Shallow Water Sediments*, the pieces are derived from the regular undulating geological stratification Edmunds noticed in the slate flagstones around Nieu-Bethesda. The result of fine volcanic ash covering the ebb and flow of shallow water areas, the works produce a subtle dialogue between the fiery violence of their inception and the quiet visual rhythms holding the memory of water in the rock surface.

After having identified 15 sites where these striations occur, Edmunds fashioned a rake that he applied to the dusty streets of the Karoo town. Like some Zen monk, he methodically raked the striations into the surface of the town, producing a work that in its process was meditative and in its realisation contemplative.

Edmunds' Durban version of the piece was a minimalist burnished steel plate with seven thousand holes at varying angles that produced the same subtle ripple effect of the geological striations he'd noticed in the Nieu-Bethesda rocks. The constrained quietness of the piece belies the forcefulness of its creation – hand-punched, the piece was hammered into being by Edmunds over a number of days. Suspended, its low-key presence is both beautiful and, given the sharpness of its edges and its subversive proximity to ankle level, vaguely threatening.

Another work that carries a double edge is Bharti Kerr's *Echo*. Two red plastic and chrome chairs are inserted into the landscape at a height that makes it just a little difficult to hoist oneself into them. Elevated above the valley, they provide literal viewing stations but are also places of imaginative engagement. Both the title and the placement of the chairs evoke memories of childhood games: calling out into the valley waiting for the sound of one's voice to return to one or playing 'king of the castle' - owner of all one surveys.

Such actions, however, have serious adult implications. The two chairs echo Henry Moore's *King and Queen* on the Yorkshire moors and the equally proprietary, quintessential image of the English landed gentry inscribed in their property, *Mr and Mrs Andrews* by Thomas Gainsborough. So, similarly, without compunction, European settlers came to Africa, saw and, hearing nothing but the echo of their own voices, claimed for themselves what they saw.

Back in Durban, Kerr's *The Bars On Your Windows* engages the terrain of gender, culture and power. Acknowledging her Indian heritagethe work comprises three wooden poles decorated with sperm-like bhindi dots swarming along their surfaces. The poles pin pelts to the wall. Whilst hunting and the predatory nature of sex seem to be male terrains, here masculine power is wryly subverted by the decorative and female presence of the bhindi. Female power, previously viewed as subservient to the male, is presented here in a new take. Kher seems to suggest that the prisons we find ourselves in might just be of our own making.

Last word might fittingly be given to Greg Streak's work for Nieu-Bethesda. Entitled simply *Drain*, the piece is minimal. Streak sunk a drainpipe with steel collar into the middle of the cement floor of an old abandoned reservoir. With the aid of some coal dust the interior of the pipe becomes fathomless, plunging into a deep blackness of unknown depth.

The empty reservoir reads as drained of its life-giving contents. It is both a salute to the harsh environment and the farmers, who battle the elements, as well as a powerful metaphor for psychological space. Whilst to drain is to make dry, discharge and carry waste, it is also to deplete and exhaust. Here, the drain can exist in the very centre of one's being. Streak notes that it is "a chamber - a cavity in the body of an organism" and hence, it reads as an image of a great emptying.

The disturbing power of Streak's piece lies in its deadly quietness that succinctly combines the unsettling dialogue of the exhibition theme of Violence/Silence.

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