

*Özgün Makale*

# The South African National Gallery's (SANG) Role in Social Change – Altering the “White Cube”<sup>1</sup>

Güney Afrika Ulusal Sanat Galerisi'nin Sosyal Değişimdeki Rolü - “Beyaz Küp”ün Değişimi

Ceyda OSKAY\*

## Abstract

This article traces the South African National Gallery's (SANG) journey through social transformation in South Africa. As South Africa transformed from pre-colonization, colonization and apartheid, to a post-apartheid state, this state art museum itself transformed, sometimes parallel to these changes, sometimes earlier. The museum was established as a colonial structure, but went through a process of transformation. As a national museum, it represented the state by default. Through several processes and curatorial championship such as Heritage Day, inheriting artwork from the Ethnographic Museum, and various socially-engaged projects, inclusion of black South African curators, the museum managed to transform itself into a more democratic institution. This is significant when studying museology, social transformations, post-coloniality, ideas of a white-wall white cube art museum, “primitive” art, and other fields as it touches upon and affects each of them and shows how these concepts can be better understood by studying their relation to one another, especially in the context of South Africa.

**Keywords:** Museologys, Nation-building, Social Inclusion, Social Transformation, South Africa.

## Öz

Makale, Güney Afrika Ulusal [Sanat] Müzesi'nin (South African National Gallery, SANG) Güney Afrika'daki ırkçı apartheid döneminin değişim sürecindeki rolünü incelemektedir. Güney Afrika, sömürgecilik öncesinde, sömürgecilik döneminde ve ırk ayrımı dönemi öncesinde sonrasında dönüşümü yaşarken, devlet sanat müzesinin kendisini bu politik dönüşümlerle bazen öncesinden, bazen eşzamanlı olarak nasıl değiştirdiğini gözlemliyoruz. Müze, daha çok sömürgeci bir yapı olarak başlamış, ancak zamanla bir değişim sürecine girmiştir. Devlet müzesi olarak devleti temsil etmiştir. Farklı süreçlerden geçerek ve farklı küratöryel inisiyatiflerle, örneğin Heritage Day (Gelenek Günü), etnografya müzesindeki eserleri kendi koleksiyonuna dâhil ederek ve farklı gruplarla sosyal bağlantılı projelerde çalışarak, siyahi Güney Afrikalı küratörler ve sanatçıların işlerini bünyesine dâhil ederek, müze, daha demokratik bir yapı hâline gelmeyi başarmıştır.

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\* ceyda.oskay@network.rca.ac.uk, ORCID: 0000-0002-5772-9025.



Bu makale, müze bilimi, sosyal değişim, sosyal uyum, sömürgecilik sonrası, sanat tarihindeki “beyaz küp” olgusu, “primitive sanat” gibi farklı alanlara değinmektedir ve her birini incelerken, bir diğeriyle bağlantısına bakılmasının da durumu daha iyi anlamak için önemini, özellikle Güney Afrika deneyiminde vurgular.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Müzoloji, Ulus İnşası, Sosyal Dönüşüm, Toplumsal Kapsayıcılık, Güney Afrika.

## Introduction

This article traces the South African National Gallery’s (SANG) journey through late social transformation in South Africa. South Africa is a nation state on the southmost tip of the continent of Africa, with Cape Town as the capital. The SANG is a state-museum that was exhibiting art mainly from Europe, which transformed itself towards a more integrated and democratic, and indeed revolutionary institution. As South Africa transformed from pre-colonization, colonization and apartheid, to a post-apartheid state, this state art museum transformed sometimes parallel to these changes, sometimes earlier. The museum was established as a colonial structure, but went through a process of change in terms of showing anti-apartheid artwork during apartheid. Through several processes and curatorial championship such as Heritage Day, inheriting artwork from the Ethnographic Museum, and various socially-engaged projects, inclusion of black South African curators, having public talks and other events, the museum managed to transform itself into a more democratic institution. In this way, the Gallery not only transformed its own identity, but actually also highlighted and blurred the definitions between art, culture, artifact, and more. Its history remains largely unknown, and yet is significant in the study of many fields. As a national museum, the Gallery represented the state by default. All this is significant when studying museology, social transformations, post-coloniality, ideas of a white-wall white cube art museum, “primitive” art, and other fields.

South Africa’s population includes whites, mainly of European or Russian descent and mainly Christian or Jewish, and black South Africans, mainly Zulu and Xhosa, as well as a group referred to as colored, who are mainly “Cape Malay,” and mainly Muslim, and a percent of Indian or other Asian. Thus, the discussion of diversity and representation, refers to these groups. The city also includes wide structural divides that make integration difficult – highways between two neighborhoods, etc... Around 2001, the District Six Museum had been established, and was a significant cultural institution composed of leftover objects from demolished buildings of the District Six neighborhood. The Mayibuye Centre is a museum documenting the South African racial struggle for equality since 1966. It is based on material initially being collected by the International Defense and Aid Fund (IDAF). The Archives are currently at the Main Library at University of Western Cape (UWC), funded by the South African Government’s Department of Arts and Culture (Mayibuye Archives, n.d.). Today, Cape Town also includes the Zeitz Museum Contemporary Art Africa, the MOCAA.

In examining the journey of the South African National Gallery, one can trace how the museum has been a site of colonial power and how its journey has reflected social change. Kathy Grundlingh, head curator of the National Gallery in 2001, examined the question of why the National Gallery, despite the formal democratization of the country, did not have a wider audience: “The austere façade reinforced decades of public opinion built up as a result of the politics and policies of the past, of an elitist organization catering to only to a small percentage of its popu-



lation” (2001, p. 13). The Gallery’s architecture itself includes two Classical Greek architecture inspired columns. The main audience until the 1990s, were white South Africans. The Gallery building itself was highly guarded, again until the 1990s. It was in this setting that these shifts and changes took place, with the consistent effort of curators and other staff, creating a more democratic space.

The museum’s placement at the Company Gardens, architecture, exhibitions, gift shop, and choice of music in the cafeteria, will all be looked at in order for a more inclusive sociological examination, rather than solely looking at exhibition histories.

## **Company Gardens - The Setting of the South African National Gallery**

The South African National Gallery is among a few buildings in Cape Town’s “Company Gardens.” The Company Gardens, currently a large park with various species of trees, each numbered with a label of its name, and Latin name, was the first colonized land in what is now called South Africa. The area was set up by the Dutch East India Company, hence the name “Company” Gardens. It was set up between the years 1652 and 1656 as a refreshment point, with gardens growing vegetables for Dutch ships to replenish and refuel before sailing off to other lands.

True to colonial practice, colonizers used this area to “collect” and analyze nature and objects they encountered. The structures in the Gardens include a parliament, museum of natural history, library, and the art gallery. Though these buildings were not originally made to house such institutions, they gradually became so. Initially, the buildings were used to store collections of ‘oddities’ the colonialists found. They later became nationalized museums. “Collecting, recording, classifying, and exhibition of ‘other’ peoples became a way of not only asserting dominance over the colonized and conquered but also of celebrating Europe’s culture as unique and triumphant (Adedze, 1997, p. 36)”.

## **History of the Establishment of the Museum**

As Marilyn Martin explains in detail in her Introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Contemporary South African Art 1985-1995* the first full steps towards creating an art gallery in South Africa were taken in 1871 by the South African Fine Arts Association which acquired property on New Street (later Queen Victoria Street), supported by a Thomas Butterworth Bayley bequest of forty-five paintings in 1872 (as cited in Bedford, 1995, pp. 1-10). This was not near what would later become the SANG, however these paintings were later bequeathed to the SANG, on condition that they would be on permanent display. The paintings are realistic oil paintings of men of high status of the time, looking more as though they belong in a historic building in England.

The years between 1870 and 1910 are sometimes called the “British Imperial Age.” These dates are a year before the Fine Arts Association mentioned above, and three years after the discovery of diamonds along South Africa’s Orange River. By the 1970s, the British Empire considered South Africa “in the same category as their neo-European colonies of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.”

By 1895, a South African Art Gallery Act was created and there were over a hundred works in the national collection. The Gallery Act was implemented the year after, incorporating the institution and declaring its property the property of the Cape Colonial Government. The newly established Board of Trustees then took over the building for educational purposes and it wasn’t until 1930 that the present building, designed by Clelland and Mullins, and F. K. Kendall was opened. The funds for this building were granted from the Government, the City Council, and



from the Hyman Liberman estate for additional halls and the memorial doorway, carved by Herbert Meyerowitz. By 1932, the Gallery was named by the Board of Trustees, as the “South African National Gallery,” a state-funded institution.

The apartheid government instituted a cultural ban in the mid 1980s because it felt threatened by the upsurge of vocal, degenerate and critical culture. Because of its “unthreatening” position and also because it told stories and presented points of view which could not be published in newspapers, visual culture offered a site of expression and communication on a different level than official declarations and writings. This space, though not explored in this paper, also included a lot of theatre, and street art, as well as graffiti and murals, banners, t-shirts.

## Gallery Archives and Identity

By providing a space for art and creating a place in which the arts can be displayed and presented in a regular, “framed” way, the Gallery has also defined notions of “high culture” and ideas of what art is and is not. As can be seen in the Gallery archives, in its early years, until the 1990s, the Gallery continually exhibited work that was brought from Europe, and on one occasion, work that was made by Black South Africans such as Gerard Sekoto, Azaria Mbatha and George Pemba, which were figurative, painterly oil colors. Kathy Grundling (2001) mentions these artists as the “pioneer black South African artists” (p. 15). Work from the Ethnographic Museum, and other undocumented, unattributed or attributed arts and crafts, would of course, add to this and we see that when looking through the lens now.

By focusing on this type of artwork, the “national” art gallery of the country, defined an identity of what it aimed to be, a “white” South Africa. Indeed, Emma Bedford identifies this in 1993 when writing:

Not only are museums places of education and experience, but museums are also instruments of power able to portray people and their cultures in affective ways, thereby shaping the visitors’ perceptions of their world and its people. How people are represented is therefore crucial because what is at stake is the articulation of identity. (Bedford, 1993, p. 10)

As Benedict Anderson argues through his analysis of flags, maps, national anthems and other in *Imagined Communities*, the way a nation-state is built and the way identity is constructed, includes the visual. The Gallery can be seen as one of the ways the South African state, formed a white identity.

Lisa Wedeen (1999) notes that examining politics in terms of the power of representation is also vital to understanding social processes:

Politics is not merely about material interests but also about contests over the symbolic world, over the management and appropriation of meanings. Regimes attempt to control and manipulate the symbolic world, just as they attempt to control material resources or to construct institutions of enforcement and punishment. (p. 30)

Although Wedeen is writing about Syria, the analysis could be used to examine the Gallery in South Africa in terms of the management and appropriation of meanings of a “national” museum and, in this case, a definition of what art and culture includes and excludes – both in terms of the actual Gallery, as well as in a broader term and more globally. As the Gallery begins to include more items traditionally considered “craft,” and to have more discussions and socially-engaged projects- notions of art and identity widen to being more inclusive. While in other parts of the world, the significance of this may not be seen so clearly, in the case of South Africa, as these terms (art, culture, “primitive art”) are so rooted and play themselves out so clearly, the importance of inclusion and ethically created socially-engaged projects becomes more apparent.



## The “White Cube” in Art History

Brian O’Doherty (1986), in his book, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, reflects on idea of the neutral art space and how this can never really be the case. His insightful passages are particularly striking in accuracy when looked at in the context of South Africa. He writes:

The white cube was a transitional device that attempted to bleach out the past and at the same time control the future by appealing to supposedly transcendental modes of presence and power But the problem with transcendental principles is that by definition they speak of another world, not this one. (p. 11)

In a similar way, most of the early years of the National Gallery, until changes in the 1990s, seemed to reflect another world, not the South Africa in which the museum was present. Art historically, the idea of the white cube, is a metaphor for the inside of an exhibition space, gallery, museum, etc... which is attempted to be made neutral, replicable, identical, and removed from other elements through the “neutral” white walls. Nowhere is the irony and complexity of this assumption more evident than when examining the South African National Gallery.

Thus, the “white cube” is a term used for what was considered the ideal art gallery space as a neutral, all white-walled space. It is uncanny how this description so interestingly can be used to examine the space of the South African National Gallery. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that as a spoof onto this idea, emerged the White Cube, an art critic duo in the UK, of Zarina Muhammad and Gabrielle de la Puente, who met as students at Goldsmiths University in London.

## The “White Cube” in Art History

In 2001, as one turned from one of the paths of the Garden to get to the Gallery, one passed through two columns with crosses on top of them, clearly later additions, to then be confronted directly in the middle of the path, with a monument of Jan Smuts. Smuts was the South African prime minister from 1919 until 1924 and again between 1934 to 1948 and was known to actively promote racial segregation. This path is being described as it serves to visually see the transitions and complexities of racial integration in South Africa.

Following the outline of the artificial lily pond to get to the Gallery, one was faced with yet another sculpture in the middle of the path, this one being a much more recently installed metal sculpture. On the side of one of the walls separating the Gallery’s space from the parking lot of the Annex building, is a drawing of an upside down bicycle. This drawing was made from the funding of various projects by young South African artists by the Gallery and by Marlene Dumas, a South African artist living in the UK. At the time, the Gallery was preparing to host Robin Rhodes’ work.

In 2021, some of the outer walls of the Gallery were also painted with Ndebele paintings. Ndebele is a region in northern South Africa where walls are painted with traditional designs. This is another way in which the Gallery tried to work with and transform its history, and create a more integrated space.

During this period of transition, labels of the objects inherited from the South African Ethnographic History Museum in Cape Town, were of social groups, unfortunately not of individual artists as some of the artists are unknown or unrecorded. The significance of ethnographic items were entering this museum in 2001, was also that the ethnographic items are being recognized as peers of paintings and other forms of art, thus, erasing notions of non-European work being



“inspiration” to modern masters like Picasso. The integration is also framing the question of whether a group is able to speak for, or represent another, and discussions of what is included in the definition of art, and of how works should be displayed. As the curatorial staff is also made more diverse parallel to this, these questions will likely be addressed through extensive dialogue.

## **Socially Engaged Practice**

The South African National Gallery’s beadwork exhibition titled, “Ezакwantu-Beadwork from the Eastern Cape” is an example of a more integrated and democratic exhibition. As Emma Bedford points out in this catalogue, “The South African National Gallery is becoming more of a forum, a place for confrontation, experimentation and debate (Bedford, 1993, p. 9).

Kathy Grundlingh (2001) mentions several exhibitions as examples of the way SANG is revolutionizing itself and Marilyn Martin notes that South African artists are revolutionizing perceptions of certain boundaries. “They [South African visual artists] have ... challenged the north/south, center/periphery binaries of Western domination” (p. 11).” Grundlingh gives the example of the somewhat socially engaged exhibition, *Positive Lives: Responses to HIV*. Although this exhibition was criticized for objectifying people living with HIV as they were present in the Gallery for questions and dialogue, it was an attempt at changing notions of art and working towards an inclusion.

Bedford notes that as late as 1983, a visiting art historian remarked on the “absence” from the SANG of “...the rock paintings of the San people, the enigmatic Lydenburg heads, the abstract mural art of the Ndebele, the brilliant variations of beaded patterns of the Zulu, the flamboyant body arts of the Xhosa” (1995, p. 18). By 2001, the Ndebele wall paintings were indeed commissioned, and ethnographic work was acquired.

However, the Gallery did take many risks during Apartheid. It exhibited a work by Paul Stopforth called, “Interrogators,” which went officially unnoticed as the title was changed when it was displayed. A portrait of Archbishop Desmond Tutu was hung. There was anti-apartheid artwork, by white artists, until the work of more diverse artists came in.

Additionally, while the Gallery still exhibited a primarily Western aesthetic, it sold an “authentically African” one. When one moved from the exhibition spaces into the Gallery’s giftshop, one moved into a space of carefully packaged handcrafted items from the Black South African communities amongst books about western art. All this points to how work is contextualized, decontextualized, or recontextualized in the National Gallery, and the complex politics and transitions and processes behind them.

## **Further Transitions**

The Gallery is in a position of officially changing its position as a colonial institution and is trying to play an active part in the change of society. As the director of the Gallery at the time, Marilyn Martin herself noted in an article by Bedford (1995):

We believe that we are doing more than passively holding up a mirror to society, that we inform, construct, change and direct the narrative – aesthetically, culturally, historically, politically – through our acquisitions and exhibitions, that we invigorate art practice and that the national art museum is integral to refiguring and reinventing South African art and identity (p. 18).



In *Grey Areas – Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art*, Martin writes, “Instead of “representing” and speaking for” we are learning how to be an instrument for interpreting and knowing our society.” She notes that the national museum is a repository for objects, and also “for contemporary cultural expressions, aspirations and assumptions (as cited in Atkinson and Breitz, 1999, p. 152).”

Ingrid de Kok, a South African lyric poet, who writes of the social role of art notes the particular function art has today in its ability to address issues in a way that political forums cannot. She points out the importance of examining the complexities behind issues today. She notes that before creating a unified “South African Art” identity, which is what I argue the National Gallery was trying to produce earlier, the fragments of South African society need to be addressed. “This gluing together may be the key function of art and cultural education in a time of social change, but it involves seeing and feeling the fragmented, mutilating shards, before the white scar can be celebrated” (de Kok, 1998, p. 62).

## Conclusion

While there will always be room to improve and develop, and social transformation is an ongoing process, it is important to credit the Gallery’s advancements in change in South Africa.

The question of the position of the National Gallery in South Africa forces one to examine issues of the power behind a cultural museum. The South African National Gallery is changing its policy of exhibiting “timeless” work to sponsoring ever-changing debate and dialogue about the politics of visual culture in a diverse society. Examinations of this process in South Africa bring to light larger issues of the political implications of cultural policy and museums, and make one aware of how by looking at the changes in the South African National Gallery, one also begins to see that the idea of an endpoint of a pluralistic society, cannot be an absolute goal in itself. Changes in a society are an ongoing process and different issues emerge or become noticed in different times. What seems revolutionary at one point may not seem as new at another point in time, or in another place. Societies must continually be in a position to re-examine themselves through dialogues with the public and each other. The boundaries that are overcome at one point, may create other boundaries, or point to different margins to be breached. Issues of domination and misrepresentation will inevitably arise if a continual forum of discussion is not established and maintained.

In conclusion, through examining the trajectory of the South African National Gallery, we not only see the place a museum can occupy in a nation state, in a transforming space, but it also helps us see where and how certain forms of art were and, in some contexts, still are, excluded. It helps us see more literally, how craft and other forms of production were excluded from seemingly formal art spaces for so long. By looking closely at the museum, how it was set up, and the physical space and gardens it is housed in, in Cape Town, we see how notions of art and culture shift, and how important this is in social integration and more. A more holistic view of art and who an artist is or can be, and what an exhibition is or could be –offers us another space not only of imagination, but also is the only way to be human.

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### **Personal observation and interviews:**

Internship at the South African National Gallery – August 16 – September 16, 2001. Specifically worked with Emma Bedford, Kathy Grundlingh, Zuki Mjoli.

Interviewed artists Jane Alexander, Sue Williamson, Kevin Brand, and Mgoneini Pro Spbopha and poets Karen Press and Ingrid de Kok.

