

Endnotes

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WAS IT A QUESTION OF POWER?

O my body, make of me always a man who questions!
— Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

There is a passage in Bessie Head's 1974 autobiographical novel, *A Question of Power*, in which a teacher hides in the toilet from the principal in order to take a few sips of his brandy. The blissful few sips turn into a few more, leading to intoxication. The hiding becomes reversed as the now drunk teacher opens the outward door, takes a few sips, closes the door, and looks for the principal inside the toilet. Perhaps the lesson here is: it is not that difficult for one to settle back into a position one tries to escape or reject.

Creating not only an alternative but an independent creative platform in a moment in time when the state of historically and economically established art institutions demands context and specific questions, such as that asked by art historian and writer Ashraf Jamal, "How do we commemorate, where does one begin?" may run a similar risk faced by Head's intoxicated teacher. The process of engaging with these questions can be deeply stimulating, indeed especially when it starts to cause a rupture within established systems, both physical and mental. Similarly, when the Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR) was conceived in 2010 as an artistic intervention, located in Johannesburg, its founding members were well aware of this danger—the nature of which is not unprecedented. This led us to locate our thinking process within a platform stretching over two years; a platform that draws from an event such as a biennial (taking place every two years)—in our case: the Johannesburg Biennale provided a historical reference from which to draw our questions. The approach itself is not so much a study of the biennial in a conventional sense, but a looking aside or awry in a Žižekian sense, in an attempt to see "the thing" in its clearest, most distinct form.

The Johannesburg Biennale, which only had two iterations (in 1995 and 1997), remains a specter in the South African art scene. Like most large-scale exhibitions of its kind, the Johannesburg Biennial was staged as an internationalizing platform emerging decades after the country's subjugation to a cultural boycott under apartheid, (this being much more apparent in the second version). Its phantom thus also exists outside of South Africa. Its memory haunts history. The phantom pains are mostly felt by a younger generation of visual arts practitioners, as well as those not so young, who were not so profoundly touched by it due to the remoteness of their situation at the time.

CHR was born, amongst other things, out of these phantom pains—out of the realization that through the Johannesburg Biennial platform, critical questions were being posed, many of which remain unanswerable and many more demanding new forms of engagement. Employing citations, transversal research processes, subversion, and mediation, CHR has conceptualized projects that create dialogues

between artistic practices in order to reveal how, within their constellations, certain histories are formed or formulated, repeated, universalized, and preserved. These strategies are employed to reveal how artistic and curatorial gestures could perform transformative actions in political spaces, which may not yet be recognized as sites of struggle and may thus be allowed to enter a refreshed political sensibility.

The yearlong platform *Xenoglossia*, a research project sought to foreground questions of strangeness from a starting point posed by Julia Kristeva in her essay 'By What Right Are You a Foreigner?', which appears in the catalogue of the second Johannesburg Biennial: *Trade Routes: History and Geography*. These questions grew over a period of time when the CHR space was being activated through events in which references from art, literature, film, popular culture, politics, and recent, as well as historical events, were placed in tension and conversation with one another. The questions continue to produce research "appendixes" through related interventions and events such as *Na Ku Randza* (September 2011), *Rechewed*, and *Fr(agile)* (both March 2012).

With each step of these research processes further questions arise and problems are encountered. In part they have to do with the mystery regarding audiences, partially because of expectations of deliverance, and partially the trap of sustenance. These problems cannot be left unattended—we turn to them and create a space for them to exist as sites of tension in which to be creatively engaged with. This is a challenge we continuously set for ourselves. One such challenge is the question of being a new institution among other emerging institutions within the African continent, as well as internationally. Invitations to participate in other forums locally and internationally often foreground institutional(ity/ism). With titles such as 'The Now Museum' (NYC), 'The Names We Give' (Cape Town), 'Other Possible Worlds: Proposals on this Side of Utopia' (Berlin), 'What does an art institution do?—Does size matter?' (Stockholm), 'Institutions by Artists' (Vancouver), and 'Condition Report' (Dakar), it becomes apparent that one need not just be an institution, but also a platform in order to question what institutions are meant to look like, to do, how, for whom, and most importantly, for how long and for how much money?

We are interested in stretching notions of being independent and alternative—of being a thinking concept more than a physical space and blurring binaries between concept and form, artistic and curatorial practices, education and production of knowledge. But even with this in mind, we have caught ourselves snoozing only to awake with the realization that we are on the verge of becoming just a venue. This is a problem. In a text titled 'Does this Window Have a Memory?' (a contribution to the book accompanying the *Other Possible Worlds* project), rather than foregrounding the physical space, I zoom into the large window located on the west side of the space we have been using for the past two years. To do so is to draw attention away from the promises and confines of the walls, the floor, the roof, as an attempt at contemplating that which faces us on a day-to-day basis. Through the window, CHR has allowed itself to be a coming-out rather than a staying-in space.

This gazing out has led CHR members to enter local structures in ways that are unprecedented. Donna Kukama and myself collaboratively lecture at the Wits School of Arts (WSOA), Johannesburg, as faculty members while traversing active independent practices outside of CHR and WSOA. Our former intern and new member Sanele Mangele has, for the past year, been curatorially managing a new commercial gallery space in Johannesburg. We interacted with the recently late photographer Alf Kumalo and his museum in Soweto by occupying his space and

vast archive through the seventy-two-hour residency *Fr(agile)*, while the volunteer curator and archivist Jabu Pereira has been actively archiving and preserving over sixty years of Kumalo's photographic work. Further, CHR member Kemang Wa Lehulere organizes and interacts with international partners while his career as an artist advances.

CHR's inclusion at the 11th Lyon Biennial, appropriately titled 'A Terrible Beauty is Born,' is ground to believe that after two years of existence, perhaps it is time not just to gaze through the third floor, west-facing window but to take a leap out and risk dying. As curator and writer Rasha Salti has remarked, "The death of an institution is not always as tragic as we think". Our "death" coincides with discourses of "the end of times" as discussed by Slavoj Žižek, and is influenced by beliefs associated with predictions of the end of the world. These are employed as time-trackers that question institutional time and facts. The Center for Historical Reenactments, as we have come to know it, has reached the end of a cycle.

CHR would like to thank the following individuals and institutions for helping us think through the past two years—providing us with numerous challenges as well as platforms to pose questions, to hear ourselves ramble on, and finally to be wise enough to know when and how to pause. Without the conditions you helped set for us, there would be no report.

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