

Representations of the “Other” in Southern African Art Praxis*

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Summary

This article considers if it is possible to move past the impasse of the political, the specifically cultural, religious and other constructed categories and structures that influence the identity of the non-human and human animal in contemporary South African society. Is it possible for the visual arts to contribute to a “discussion”, an emerging sensibility and understanding of what it means to be part of a specific species group, the human animal, cohabiting with the non-human animal? What role could the aesthetic representation of the non-human animal, of the “other”, play in the unfolding reality of a post-apartheid South Africa?

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bevraagteken of dit moontlik is om verby die politieke dooiepunte asook die spesifiek kulturele, godsdienstige en ander kategorieë wat die identiteit van menslike en niemenslike diere in die hedendaagse Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing beïnvloed, te beweeg. Kan die visuele kunste bydra tot 'n “bespreking” van die etiese probleme van wat dit beteken om deel te wees van 'n spesifieke spesiegroep, naamlik die menslike dier wat saam met niemenslike diere woon? Watter rol kan die estetiese heraanbieding van die niemenslike dier in kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse kuns speel in die ontwikkelende werklikheid van 'n post-apartheid Suid-Afrika?

The way that an animal is represented and constructed discursively has, as Wendy Woodward suggests in her book *The Animal Gaze* (2001), an interrelationship with the way that culture responds to the real animal. What this proposes is that representation has ethical repercussions – that artworks reveal social and culturally framed visual narratives describing both the human and the non-human animal body, flesh, reflecting the particular imposition of a hegemonic discourse that legitimates, and continues to allow objectification, commodification and ownership. The notion of blasphemy in relation to the representation of non-human animals in South African art is considered in the context of this article. As Donna Haraway explains,

[b]lasphe-my dares to challenge not ideas but beliefs, not thought but ideologies by which both ideas and thought are regulated to conform with dominant, vested interests. Blasphemy takes things very seriously and is, as transgression of the ideological unconscious that passes for common sense and agreed understanding, a creative and necessary undertaking to ensure knowledge and politics are not sacrificed to majoritarian belief.

(in Pollock 2004: 37)

How can we move past the impasse of the political, the specifically cultural, religious and other constructed categories and structures that influence the identity of the non-human and human animal in contemporary South African society? Art as a transformative encounter makes available a potential way to challenge beliefs, reveal ideologies that conform to dominant, vested interests, transgress what passes for common sense and challenge the viewer to consider different ways of seeing. But, some could question how one could create art in a contemporary era where there is a continuous need to try to process the massive effects of post-apartheid trauma and the pressing socio-economic needs of both the non-human and the human animal.

Bracha Ettinger suggests that the aesthetic response “carries new possibilities for affective apprehending and producing new artistic effects, where aesthetics converges with ethics even beyond the artist’s intentions or conscious control” (Ettinger 2006: 147-148 in Pollock 2010: 831). Here art becomes a trace, a transcription of trauma, a transcriptum. This is, as Ettinger describes, when an artwork exposes the forgotten traumatic memories of “the world”, transcriptomnesia, from within the same space. As transcriptum the artwork allows for the affective sharing of a collectively unspoken or unrecognised event, memory or experience (Ettinger 2006: 147-148 in Pollock 2010: 831). Reviewing artwork of the other in the South African context as transformative trace represents artwork as signifier of the unrecorded traumatic events of apartheid and the continuing trauma and wonder of the post-apartheid state; the ongoing, developing identity of a post-apartheid South African space and its subjects, both human and non-human animal.

Donna Haraway’s notion of blasphemy suggests that neither language nor artworks can be viewed as passive or neutral “instruments/objects/things”. Viewers enter into hegemonic circuits of power when gazing at a visual representation of a specific classified species, participating in the construction of the dominant narrative. While many contemporary theorists endeavour to deconstruct visual narratives that have framed the understanding and experiencing of the non-human animal, of the *other*, what must be acknowledged are the effects of Eurocentric hegemony on colonised peoples and “others”, which contains within it the perception of what it is like *for them* to be positioned outside the dominant discourse. In other words, inclusion in the deictic field designates a position from which it is possible

to enunciate as a subjective agent, i.e. I look at them, explain their reality for them, but this is a questionable ethical position.

To review the representation of the “other” in South African art praxis involves consideration of a widely contested ethical concern; if it is possible to write, speak or aesthetically represent the other. This becomes especially problematic when it is not acknowledged how I continue to embody a group whose subjectivity or identity is mirrored not only in the deictic domain, but also in the symbolic field. The symbolic field, as described by Karl Bühler, where the act of naming, the use of the personal pronoun, acts to contextualise the subject within the symbolic field (Bühler in Saunders 2007: 35). In the South African context “I” traditionally referred to a privileged human animal group whose subjectivity was elevated through the act of naming and the rigorous application of restrictive notions of race, gender and religious belief. This distinction was extended to the valued or less valued subjectivity of the human animal versus the non-human animal. There were, and in many instances still are, clearly understood distinctions drawn between “I”, “we”, the represented, and the *other*, the outsiders, unheard, invisible, the unrepresented.

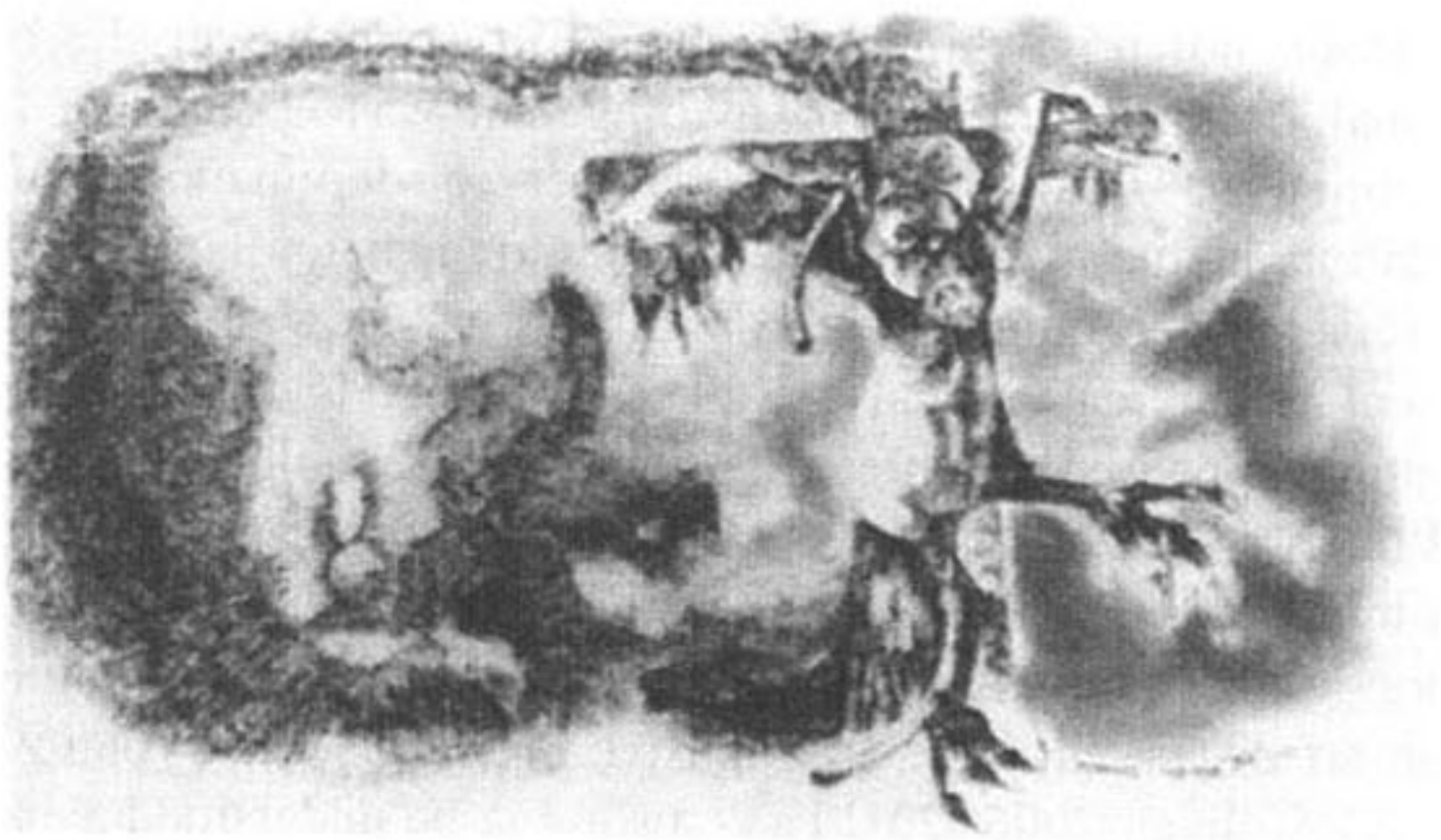
It is “clear”, as Steven Baker explains, “that Western society continues to draw heavily on symbolic ideas involving [non-human] animals and that the immediate subject of those ideas is frequently not the [non-human] animal itself, but rather a human subject drawing on [non-human] animal imagery to make a statement about human identity” (Baker 2001: xxxv). In this context, Baker continues, non-human animals are viewed as a rhetorical device and any understanding of the non-human animal, and of what this means to us, will be informed by and inseparable from our knowledge of her/his cultural representation. As he asserts, “[c]ulture shapes our reading of non-human animals just as much as animals shape our reading of culture” (p. 4). The term non-human animals “describes” animals as inclusive of all living flesh, not privileging one species of animal over the other in the traditional Cartesian tradition. Anything that was not human traditionally was framed as less-than-human, subject to domination and economic exploitation, including prevailing attitudes to the natural environment.

Where is the non-human animal in all of this? How does one consider the rhetorical term “real animal”? Rather than merely objects of the human gaze, animals can be interpreted as agents within culture. Agency, in Philo and Wilbert’s relational sense, says that “anything can potentially have the power to act, whether human or non-human” (2000: 17). Here it is suggested that non-human animals represented as subject in the examples of South African art discussed, have an intensive register, what Lyotard refers to as *tensor* (O’Sullivan 2006: 20). The tensor can be understood as precisely the affective side of the sign. The non-human animal as an affective sign when not regarded merely as sign, as signifier but in its materiality, because it “meets” our gaze, becomes a trigger point for movement, for a transform-

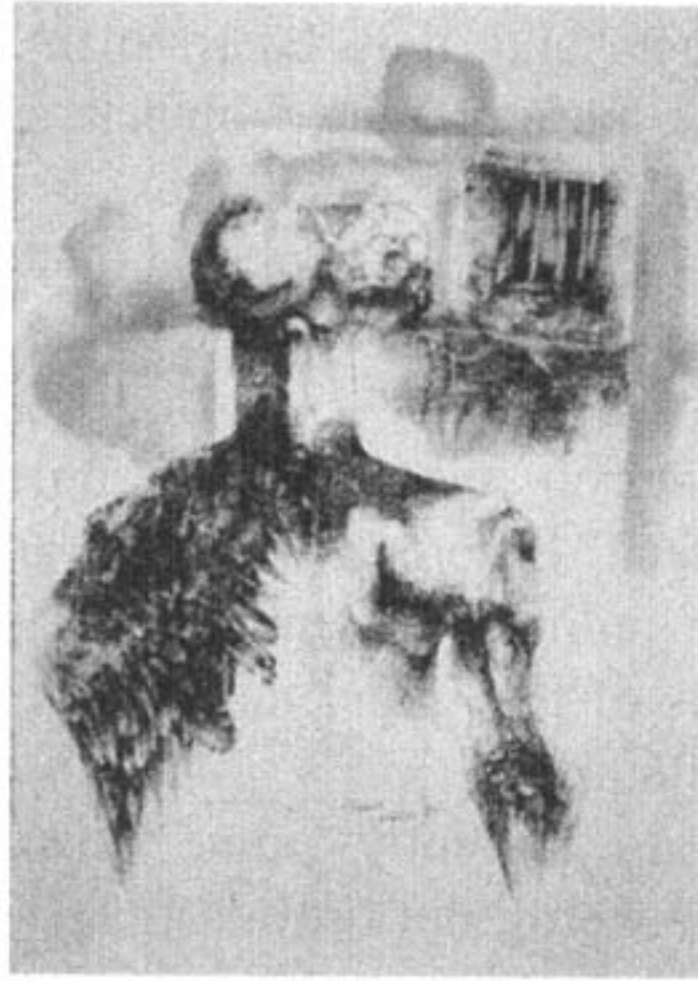
ative meeting of potential imagining and experiencing that moves the viewer to a new appreciation of being. Reviewing non-human animals represented through art practice rhizomatically then entails attending to what we might call its performative aspect, what it does, what it makes us do, as well as to its “knowledge-producing” aspects (p. 20). The transformative blasphemous potentiality of the aesthetic gesture is a way in which individuals can reorganise, or resingularise themselves in a creative, affirmative, and self-organising manner (p. 27).

The unmarked nature of the Eurocentric human animal as a natural, or normative, state means that the ways in which the other has been represented has mainly reflected the “dominant species” or colonisers’ point of view. However, this is not a nostalgic description of a possible return to some Edenic past where all lived in idyllic harmony and mutual respect, but considers that in the South African context, when the invading human settlers arrived there were not only indigenous human animal inhabitants already occupying this topographical space but also non-human animals. As Ashraf Jamal commented, “[t]he land was never an Eden, never a site for pure contemplation, never a sphere which affirmed the perceiver’s being in a manner which could be regarded as “pure”. Rather, the South African landscape has always invoked anxiety and fear, has always been subject to the “‘dreamwork’ born of cultural and material domination ... a boundless zone condemned to exploitation” (Jamal in Peffer 2009: 227), and, it is suggested, trauma.

Examples of artworks that incarnate the transcription of trauma, and contest or transgress the dominant ideology and narrative in the South African context are the “Chicken Series” completed in 1977-1979, with some additions in 1982, and the “Jail Series” by the artist Ezrom Legae.



Ezrom Legae, Chicken Series, Pencil and oil wash on paper, 1977, Permanent collection of De Beers Centenary Art Gallery, University of Fort Hare, S.A., courtesy of De Beers Centenary Art Gallery.



Ezrom Legae, 1981, from "Jail Series II" pencil and oil wash on paper, 40 × 30 cm, Permanent collection of De Beers Centenary Art Gallery, University of Fort Hare, S.A., courtesy of De Beers Centenary Art Gallery.

In these artworks, the non-human animal, the domesticated chicken, becomes the bearer of morality in the field of vision (Baker 2000a: 198). Legae's drawings of tortured, slaughtered bodies of chickens bring the massive transitive effects of enormous traumatic weight to the surface. The traumatic events that ruptured Legae's sense of dwelling in the world, forcing him to move, to create an aesthetic response that communicates the traces of this encounter, was the death of Steve Biko in police detention (1977) and the death of school children in the Soweto Riots (1976). Through these images Legae leads the viewer to the awareness that it is pointless to try and evoke the whole subject – it becomes a definite hindrance of encounter. In this series there is no neat split between subject and object; this representation of death becomes a shattering into particles, not only of the subject or object's materiality but also of a consciousness, an understanding and acceptance of what it means to be; what it means to dwell in the world.

The viewer becomes a participatory wit(h)ness to this traumatic pain-filled world. Pain becomes a metaphoric index of South Africa's socio-political condition (Hill 2005: 6). This pain is shared transtraumatically by all participants: the artist, the non-human animal and the viewer. Thus art becomes what Ettinger calls a transcriptum (Ettinger 2006: 147). Legae was unable to articulate his pain, politically or psychologically, using the official, socially sanctioned discourse of the time – racist apartheid ideology, so he was compelled to revert to the symbolic use of the non-human animal to express his horror, trauma and wounding.

The chicken is here understood as one of multiple beings, both as individual sentient being and, reduced by many contemporary viewers, to being one of multiple mass-produced objects specifically bred for human consumption and use. Using the chicken as subject in a series of artworks suggests many layers of the physical and metaphysical notion of multiplicity. This announces a different attitude to the world, an understanding of the latter as a plane of immanent connectivity and complexity. Indeed this multiplicity is not going on “elsewhere” in some “other place”, but is here, in our world, albeit “seen” differently (O’Sullivan 2006: 4). The role of art is thus an entry point on/into this smooth place, a line of flight from representational habits of being and thought on/into the multiplicity of the world (O’Sullivan 2006: 29).

Legae’s drawings are an entry point where the non-human animals represented are *in* our world, not only in their material physical reality but also as metaphors for the suffering of “his” *our*, fellow animals, both human and non-human. His use of the domestic chicken, a non-human animal that is an intimate part of most contemporary human animals and that lives in present-day society, allows for a meshing, an interweaving of sensory engagement and visceral echo of what it means to be complicit in the conscious or unconscious exploitation of fellow sentient beings. In an interview with Barbara Buntman in 1984, Legae stated: “You see, I used the chicken as a symbol of the black people of this country, because the chicken is a domestic bird. Now, one can maim a chicken by pulling out its feathers; one can crucify him, and even kill him. But beware ... there will always be another chicken” (Legae in Peffer 2003: 74). And again, according to Mary Nooter-Roberts, Legae describes how “[c]hickens and goats are the ultimate sacrificial animals of Africa, and yet they represent resistance and eternal life, because no matter how many are tortured, killed, or sacrificed, there will always be others” (in Peffer 2003: 74).

Legae emphasises the transformative state of being that accompanies pain, sacrifice and finally, death. His art reflects or represents not only the suffering and brutal murder of the human animal but also the confusion and pain of the non-human animal, here specifically chickens, and the “horror, grief, bravado, brutality and indifference” (Woodward 2009: 256) with which humans respond to the exploitation they are subjected to. His art allows for an entry point which presents the world as constituted by moments of, and differences in, intensity. The world is not an artwork merely to be viewed and does not suggest a representation of “essences, no theology but a ‘fundamental’ insubstantiality, impermanence and interpenetration of all phenomena” (O’Sullivan 2006: 31). There is no being, no stasis, no fixed point of permanence, but a becoming, an affective movement of unfolding understanding and intense empathetic moments.

Legae’s series of work evokes an affect of compassion, here art becomes a compassionate practice (Ettinger & Virtanen 2005: 700). But Legae under-

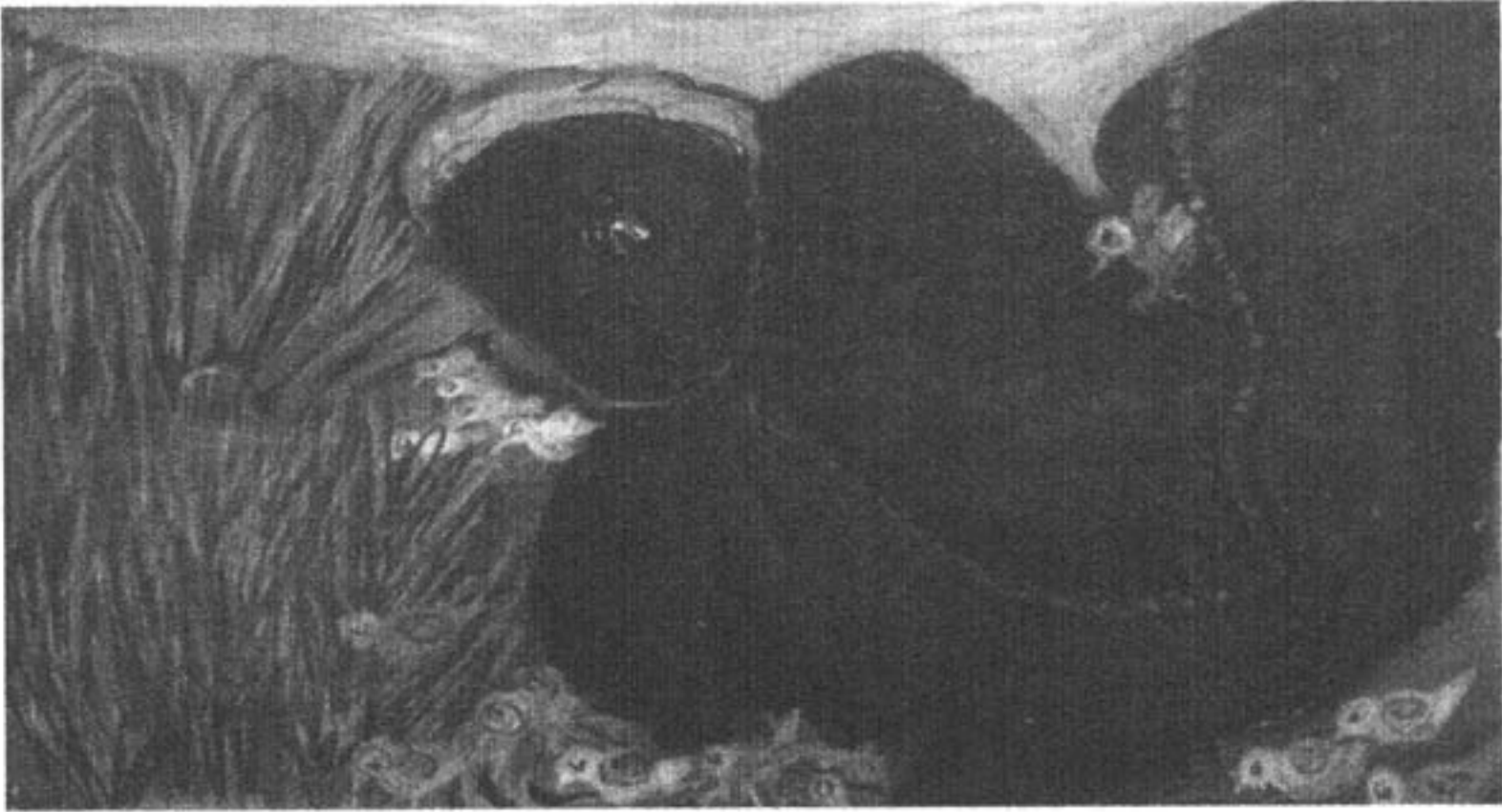
stood that compassion can be a site of resistance to the "power-manipulation machine" (p. 700) of the state. It is an ethical opening and allows for what Ettinger calls a "joining-in-differentiating and working-through", allowing for "a spiritual knowledge of the Other and the Cosmos to be born and revealed. Artworking and artworks create such knowledge. This understanding is reached by [where does the quotation end before the next one begins?] "borderlinking one's own soul-psyche to the breath of the psyche of the other and to the spirit of the cosmos" (Ettinger 2005: 708).

But the animal aspect does not merely stand in as a symbolic or metaphoric image of the broken and confined human body in these drawings. To borrow a term from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, they are "becoming animal" in a psychic and physical sense, rather than being merely symbolised by animals in the iconographic sense (Peffer 2009: 59). Nato Thompson in his book *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom* suggests that Deleuze and Guattari do not mean "becoming animal" as imitating an animal (2005: 3). It is not about given animal forms, but about animal capacities and powers. To become animal is to be drawn into a zone of action or passion that one can have in common with an animal. It is a matter of unlearning physical and emotional habits and learning to take on new ones such that one enlarges the scope of one's relationships and responses to the world (Thompson 2005: 23). Becoming animal does not involve mimesis but rather an enacted and embodied cutting across of Cartesian species and imagined social boundaries where the body becomes the site of a deviating, desirous, actualised rather than a symbolic event (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 300-302).

Steven Baker suggests that the relationship of non-human animal and human animal in becoming animal is one of alliance. "Separate bodies enter into alliances *in order to do things*, but are not undone by it" (Baker 2000a: 133). This alliance, this line of flight, is reflected in Gladys Mgudlandlu's paintings, particularly her paintings of birds. The artist viewed through this lens, reflects art's possible worlds that have the potential to traverse, mix, and disrupt binaries that maintain marginalised positions. Art practice from this intersection of rupture is both intensely creative and deeply political. Mgudlandlu's art is blasphemous as she challenges prevailing beliefs and the dominant racist ideology of that time.

In the 1960s and 70s when Mgudlandlu completed the main body of her work, it is suggested that black women were not viewed as "centred subjects" but as what Foucault calls "decentred subjects". This demands recognition that individuals are not always "free agents" and are not able to change, or "create" meanings at will (Baker 2000b: 26). "Once the body is regarded as abstract, conceptual, arbitrary, unstable,, and not as the site of a fixed 'real', it is more easily recognised as a prime symbolic site; the very site of identity" (Baker 2001: 223). This is, of course, constructed or framed by cultural and societal conventions This "site of identity", both of her

personal subjectivity and that of the animals she depicted, is something that Mgudlandlu continued to represent in her own deeply personal way, claiming both agency and individual creative purpose.



Mother and chicks also documented as Mother Love, 1963. 37,2 x 50,4 cm, crayon on paper; inscribed bottom middle "Gladys Mgudlandlu/ 1962" and verso "Mother Love". Permanent collection of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, courtesy of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Port Elizabeth.



Red Beaks also documented as Crows Asleep 1962. 37,2 X 50 cm, crayon on paper; inscribed bottom right "Gladys Mgudlandlu/1962" and verso "Crows Asleep". Permanent collection of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, courtesy of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Port Elizabeth.

Mgudlandlu observed: "I don't particularly belong to any school of art. It's a mixture of expressionism and impressionism – but I like to call myself a

Dreamer-Imaginatist!” (Miles 2002: 10). Her refusal to be branded as a particular kind of artist, or as belonging to a specific “school of art”, can be viewed as blasphemous, a syncretic force. Blasphemous as it disregards the bonds of singular identities in refusing or rejecting the very system of logocentric naming which justified the system of discrimination to which she was subjected – a system which forcibly restricted the choices she could make and the kind of art she was able to create.

Mgudlandlu the artist engages with her environment, not as an omnipotent outsider, but as a constituent part of it, with an embodied awareness. She understands animals and birds as “other”, in their otherness, and lets the otherness be. Mgudlandlu’s birds are not an enigmatic presence; they are bold embodied presences with the potential to circumvent what Margaret Fitzsimmons calls the “peculiar silence” (in Johnston 2008: 633) that characterises the presence of the “real” animal in the representations of its material and psychic presence. The silencing of nature by not being capable of recognising or acknowledging its agency, through the lack of expressive language and uninspired aesthetic conventions, is linked here to dominate ideological silencing of all “others”. Mgudlandlu’s birds “sing”!

Mgudlandlu developed an empathetic relationship with the rural African space she occupied as a child. Her deep personal encounters with birds, in particular, had a profound effect on her imagining and understanding of the world. This relationship was not that of a detached scientific “eye”, of seeing birds from a physical and ethical distance, but one of intimate engagement and mutual empathy. Her identification with what she called her “friends is reflected in her being acknowledged as unontaka or ‘bird lady’” (Miles 2002: 42). Mgudlandlu conveyed the affect of alienation in the social environment in which she lived and her feelings of isolation by suggesting: “Birds have always been my companions. I am a very lonely person. They are the only real friends that I have had. Sometimes I think I should have been a bird. I even paint like a bird. You will notice that all my landscapes are done from a bird’s view, high up and far away” (*Sunday Chronicle*, 18 October 1964 quoted in Miles 2002: 42).

Mgudlandlu’s imagined “view” of the bird can be seen in her paintings where many of her birds are represented with big strong feet. She explains how, as a child, she remembers inhabiting the shared space of the birds, being almost as small, and how their strong feet made an indelible impression on her (Miles 2002: 42) – an event-encounter which Mgudlandlu understood aesthetically rather than intellectually. Ingold describes this as a way of knowing the world without “knowing” it – “an aesthetics of knowledge based on a single anthropology, a perception, which places greater trust in the judgment of sensation, and less in the attribution of meaning” (in Johnston 2008: 643). Her artworks express the “transformed sensation” that Deleuze and Guattari attribute to the artist (in Rancière 2008: 3).

In spite of the limitations Mgudlandlu faced, both personally and creatively, there is an expression of wonder, of empathetically imagining what it means to become a bird, an ethical compassionate engagement with these symbolic and visceral animals, which connected her to her heritage. These images reflect formative memories of childhood and understanding of self; a self transported from a rural background into an urban cosmopolitan adult life. Her animals/birds are often viewed as nostalgic signs of a pre-colonial African life, evoking an animistic consciousness of a “natural world populated by animal familiars” (Peffer 2009: 49). But, it is suggested, her work reflects what Linda Vance characterised as “ethical behaviour towards nonhuman world”, a kind of joyfulness, an embracing of “possibilities” (Baker 2001a). “In animistic thinking, not only animals feel and think as we do, but even stones are alive ... And since everything is inhabited by a spirit similar to all other spirits ... because of this inherent sameness it is believable that man [sic] can change into animal, or the other way around” (Bettelheim quoted in Baker 2001: 123). An artist becoming animal, becoming woman.

It is proposed that both Legae’s mixed-media drawings and Mgudlandlu’s work can be considered blasphemous as they both contested and challenged the dominant narrative of the time in which the artworks were created – a time in which the “other”, both non-human animal and non-European human, were regarded as outside, beyond the boundaries which conferred value and full ethical sentient status; a time in which individuals’ subjectivity and agency were predominantly formed and framed by the prevailing apartheid ideology. Artwork that is blasphemous reflects the possibility that artwork *can* challenge and stretch constructed boundaries of understanding and beliefs. Blasphemous artwork has the potential to create an experiential space of “becoming”, allowing for a multivalent and evolving understanding of being, encouraging individuals to compassionately engage with all *others*: the human and non-human animal, the threatened ecological and natural surroundings.

Art thus becomes an ethical act, an ethical action. It is suggested that the blasphemous works of both artists reflect what Deleuze and Guattari named *becoming animal* which they explain “expands our possibilities for being and acting in the world, increasing our sympathies with, and relationships to, our fellow creatures, that are no longer essentially other than us but creatures from whom we can learn about the traumatic, the true, the good and the beautiful” (Thompson 2005: 24). An encounter with the non-human animal ruptures, it entails the opening up of new worlds, new territories (O’Sullivan 2006: 3).

While we cannot ethically speak *for* the “other”, cannot begin to represent aesthetically the other’s sensations of dwelling in the world, an ethical response as human artists is to explore what Catherine Johnston describes as “responsible anthropomorphism” (Johnston 2008: 647). She describes this

as “a way of knowing about and knowing with animals not based on our shared sentience, our shared place in the world or any other such abstract philosophical argument, but on our actual relationships, our day-to-day living and working” (p. 647). This demands that we engage not only from a theoretical distance with the culturally constructed “reality” of the non-human animal as subject, but physically participate in the phenomenological space of the non-human animal, to engage in real-life sensual engagements, revealing real-life sensual experiences, which are, by their nature noisier, smellier, messier and, in some cases, bloodier than we might like to think (p. 647).

Thus, it is proposed that the role the representation of the other, here specifically the non-human animal, can play in the unfolding reality of a post-apartheid South Africa can be seen in the reviewing of artworks by artists from the apartheid era, which serve as an aesthetic-artistic filter allowing a fragile and dispersed mode of co-poiesis. The artworks, as Bracha Ettinger suggests, leave memory traces allowing for the “joining-in-separating” of the collective, where “forgotten trauma becomes transitive, its traces wander and are shared affectively”, while allowing for a remembering of that which should not be forgotten. Artworks challenge what Foucault calls “the micro fascisms in everyone’s head” (in O’Sullivan 2006: 12); the propensity for hierarchy, fixity and stasis (or simply representation) with which we are all involved, but which, for Deleuze and Guattari, can stifle creative, and we might even say ethical, living (p. 12).

Gladys Mgudlandlu: “If more people in the world were artists, there would be more peace and understanding. They would speak the language of art, admire nature and beauty, and not seek to destroy it”.

(in Miles 1997: 14)

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