

SOUTH AFRICAN ART

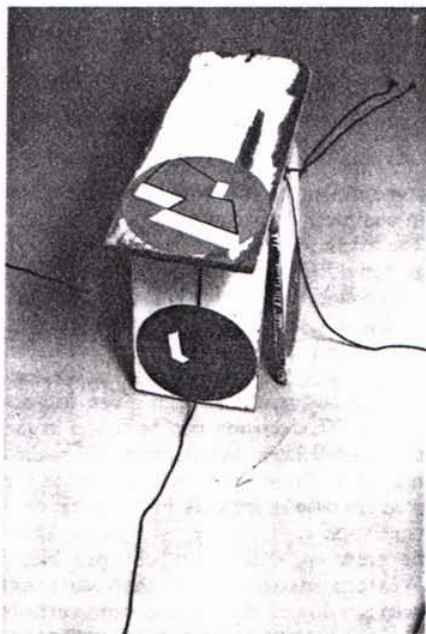
OUT OF TIME

BENJAMIN WEIL

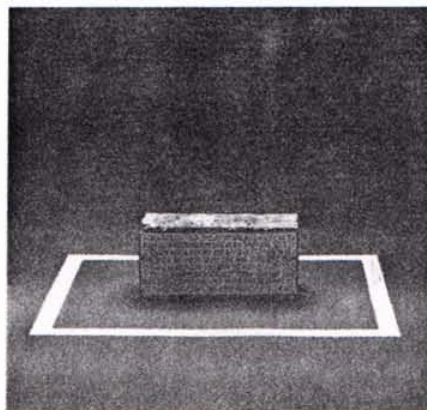
In an auction catalogue of a recent sale of African art, one could find a piece by Emmanuel Kane Kwei, a Ghanaian artist whose work was part of last year's Aperto at the Venice Biennale. The work was described and catalogued as a genuine work by a twentieth century African craftsman: at Aperto, the emphasis was on the fact that this very same piece was made by a contemporary artist. In Venice it was displayed in the same context as other works by contemporary artists who happen to be Westerners showing their work in a familiar context. This displacement for Kwei and his African peers was not posited as an issue. In both cases the presentation and/or contextualization might just be erroneous, as it omits the function and familiar context as part of the reality of Western art. The situation is symptomatic of the manner in which other cultures are represented in the Western world.

The situation in South Africa can be understood through this example of misinterpretation of art. The various coexisting racial communities have never really had the chance to create any interface of exchange. The native Africans, who constitute the majority, are treated as a minority and relate to their situation as such. Recent political developments might modify the present state of things; however, the economic and cultural discrepancies are so extreme that it might take at least a generation before they start to even out. The work produced by "native" artists therefore demands a particular exercise of concentration in order to understand how the context generates a certain attitude vis à vis its creative production.

On another level, the country has suffered a quasi complete state of isolation; the international community declared a total embargo which could not but affect culture alongside all other aspects of the social structure. The Western settlers



JOACHIM SCHÖNEFELDT, HONEY HOUSE, 1994, WOOD AND PAINT, 30 X 30 X 73 CM.



KENDELL GEERS, BRICK, 1988, PHOTOCOPY ON FOUND OBJECT, 22 X 70 X 11 CM. COLLECTION JOHANNESBURG ART GALLERY.

suddenly found themselves cut from their cultural roots and confronted with an environment completely alien to them, given that they never established any real form of exchange with the "native" community. Apartheid not only established geographical borders, but also consolidated the level of non-communication that existed ever since colonists first settled there. As a result, artists of Western origin have suffered a lack of confrontation with ideas at the fore in Europe and America. The observer is as if confronted with two uprooted communities which have never really had the chance to retrieve or to reinvent a new identity.

In the work of South African artists, one finds strong formal ties to Western art produced over the last thirty years. However, there is a strange sense of citation and appropriation rather than of spontaneous identification, as if living in a state of complete isolation had the effect of re-creating the world as it is in the homeland. That particular issue can be found in a work by Durban-based artist Simian Allen, who completed a display of his family's South African stamp collection depicting the country from a deliberately biased point of view. In a more confrontational manner, this same attitude can be found in the work of Kendell Geers. Quoting such artists as Marcel Duchamp, Robert Morris, and Joseph Beuys, the artist distances himself from these predecessors by adding a signification that radically strays from the work that inspired them formally. Geers addresses the level of miscommunication and resulting violence. Land art becomes a means to allude to the obsession with protecting and delineating territory as incarnated by blade wire and felt sculpture-cum-body bags.

Duchamp's wheel is covered with plaster and blood, while a brick is presented recounting a story of its use as a weapon. Here one could find an entirely new signification for the word "deconstruction": anything that can be used to build can potentially be a vehicle for destruction a well. This perversion of lan-

FACING PAGE, ALBERT MU NYAL DREAMS AND CLOUDS, WOOD, HIDE, HORNS, 117 X 120 X 157 CM. COURTESY TATHAM ART GALLERY, PIETERMARITZBURG, SOUTH AFRICA