Im Gespräch

„Seeing White" – Interrogating Whiteness with the South African Photographer Michelle Booth

An interview by Antje Schuhmann

Introduction

The South African photographer Michelle Booth exhibited her highly discussed show "Seeing White" in Cape Town (2003) and Johannesburg (2004) and Sao Paulo, Brazil (2004). Having been involved in anti-apartheid politics since the late eighties, she continued to be active in politics after 1994, hence with a changing approach. Being involved in close personal relationships with Black people increased her awareness of the continuing everyday reality of racism in Postapartheids South Africa.[1] Michelle Booth chose the arts as her actual medium of commitment towards change by identifying dominant concepts of whiteness as still highly problematic. The persistent chance of not seeing whiteness, taking it as a given centre, provides a non-fractured comfort zone of hegemonial white self-identification. A kind of invisible white inner space for those included, serving as a comfort zone/centre, that is defined by surrounding ethicized and culturally 'othered' groups which are excluded from within. Michelle Booth is publicly interrogating whiteness, intending to take away white comfort zones by visualizing them as such.

1 In this text I am using Black with capital *B* in accordance with various Black liberation struggles. Indicating, that the category "black" is not referring to any form of perceived physiological difference but instead pointing out that race is a social construct, hence with the concrete manifestations of racism. In such an understanding, the capitalised term Black inevitably links a formerly phenomenological category with antiracist struggles. Meanwhile white is as well a social construct, there is till now no powerful critical reference system on could apply to. Additionally, as a critique of whiteness intends to strip it from its political, cultural, social and economic dominance – hence it makes simply sense to me to castrate it for now at least symbolically and write it with a small *w*.

"Seeing White" is a compilation of black and white photographs, showing white people within casual everyday situations. Like codes of whiteness are inscribed in collective cultural sign systems and global power relations, Booth irremovably sandblasted citations dealing with whiteness on the shiny glass surface protecting her photos. The spectators face is mirroring in the glass, watching him- or herself meanwhile looking at the photos or reading the inscribed texts. This double, a direct and indirect gaze, creates a feeling of the uncanny, of *unhomeliness* in the sense of Homi Bhabhas adaptation of Freud.[2] The comments sandblasted on the glass surface of the framed pictures make it obvious that there is no unambiguous, genuine gaze available. Even seemingly harmless everyday situations are scarred by the 'burden of race'.

Antje Schuhmann: *I attended a workshop in Cape Town (in 2004). A Black woman was speaking about Black people being collectively traumatized when a white man stood up, demanding that his trauma of having been captured in the golden cage of apartheid has to be acknowledged as well. He argued, as racialized identities were enforced upon all, that he also was made a victim by being forced to be involved in something he disapproved. How do you conceptualize whiteness as a point of reference for social change in today's South Africa? How do you situate your art work in the context of debates around an anti- or non- or post-racial society?*

Michelle Booth: In this work I want to confront the still assumed 'normality' of whiteness, hence why South Africa continues to be an abnormal society. Whiteness – as a system of power relations – remains invisible to those who are white and consequently white privilege is largely taken for granted. There is no doubt in my mind that whites were also damaged by apartheid. Their humanity was distorted and they were denied the richness of sharing, creating and participating in a non-racial culture. Nevertheless white people need to be aware of their whiteness – not in the sense of being overwhelmed by guilt or of feeling powerless because they are trapped by forces of history bigger than themselves, but aware in the sense that they can take responsibility for the present and the future and not get stuck as 'victims' of the past.

The victim mentality of being white in the sense "I did not choose to be positioned like that" means inevitably to take advantage of the privileges that whiteness bestows and call it normal, choosing not to see that this is a construct of power which "makes its presence felt in black life, most often as a terrorising imposition, as power that wounds, hurts, tortures."[3] To be aware of your own situatedness – as an individual and as part of a dominant collective even if it is not a chosen position – and to take responsibility is difficult. Even white liberals are so often angry and defensive when attention is drawn to their whiteness

2 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture, London/New York 1994. In this book, Bhabha suggests to find the "location of culture" in the marginal, "haunting", "unhomely" and "hybride" spaces between dominant social formations.

3 bell hooks, Black looks. Race and representation, Boston 1992, 169.

or when they are accused of being racist. "Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness', even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think."[4]

We have to make whiteness explicit in order to be able to strip it of its power to deconstruct itself as the un-interrogated norm. Melissa Steyn speaks about this explicit awareness-raising in a different way. She says that "by becoming conscious of the narratives that inform our identities, we empower ourselves not to continue acting them out."[5] As whites, I believe that we must be willing and able to face ourselves in the way people who are constructed as being not part of the white collective and its privileges perceive us.

Non-racialism is about being sensitive to and aware of the fact that because of centuries of slavery and colonialism and apartheid, Black people experience the world differently to those who have white skins. It is to develop what Chinua Achebe calls "imaginative identification". Once you have begun to imaginatively experience how it might feel to be other than yourself, it is difficult to see the world in the same way. Non-racialism is then about deliberately and sensitively interacting with another person's realities and to risk being changed by it.

Mutual trust is imperative in order to deal with issues of power relations and it has to be earned. Given the history of oppression, the abuse of power by whites in the past and the continuance of racism in the present, whites need to be specially genuine and self-reflective in their intention and committed in order to make it worthwhile for Blacks to risk making themselves vulnerable in establishing new forms of interaction with us. It is a risky business for both parties.

Antje Schuhmann: *In your conceptualization of whiteness you stress individual critical self-reflection but you also depersonalise the state of being white, arguing it is a historically grown, structurally inscribed social system of privilege. I wonder whether dominant concepts of whiteness studies are not intrinsically very 'white', reaffirming what they intend to challenge. Let me clarify myself: as whiteness studies are originally an US-American scholarly phenomenon one could argue that most concepts of how to do whiteness studies as a form of "cultural exploration and self-discovery among white Americans ... on the premise that knowledge of one's own racial background and culture is essential when learning how to relate to people of other racial and cultural groups"[6] are shaped by a typical American concept: individualism. The critique of whiteness within this framework has certain limitations: focusing primarily on white identity*

4 hooks, Black looks, see note 3, 167.

5 Melissa Steyn, White Identity in Context. A Personal Narrative, in: Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin ed., Whiteness. The Communication of Social Identity, California 1999, 264–278, 266.

6 Centre for the Study of White American Culture. A Multiracial Organization, under: <http://euroamerican.org>, visited: 4. 10. 2005.

formations might lead to fade out other forms of violence. Forms of state organized racism like immigration and deportation policies for example or a class based social stratification, responsible for socio-economic inequality. These are all forms of violence intersecting with racism much more on a structural rather than on an individual level. Keeping this in mind, how do you think we should radicalize – if possible – the critique of whiteness, white privileges and what could this mean in terms of aesthetic expressions?

Michelle Booth: In a system that privileges whiteness, individuals loose their personal characteristics, their histories, relationships and choices. We can no longer "locate racism within the individual and not think institutionally or culturally about racism".[7]. This is why these images are not portraits. I am not interested in the individual that I have photographed. They just happen to appear at that place at that time. These individual whites have become signifiers of white people. In this sense I want to depersonalise racism.

At the same time I am also interested in debunking the myth of individualism – that at some level we can just be individuals, that we can imagine ourselves as separate from the broader social construct in which we find ourselves and which has shaped our racial identities. I have on purpose not chosen images that also include Black people – I want people to see white people as racialized without the presence of the other. I don't want to use the "non-white subject ... as a means for knowing the white self."[8] I want white people to be the object and not to have the attention drawn away by the inevitable focus on the relation between Black and white. I don't want to perpetuate an "impression that whiteness is only white or only matters, when it is explicitly set against non-white".[9]

The deliberate use of a plastic camera with very limited technical capabilities is an attempt to further suggest the ordinariness of the images – the ease with which images of whiteness can appear to be normal. I wanted images that portrayed the deliberate normality of every day scenes, which do not appear to have been interpreted by the artist. I want to present a familiar version of reality and then challenge it. My intention is to question 'the reality' which constitutes the set of assumptions of white South Africans.

But to come back to the other part of your question, one of the interesting things about being white and identified with a struggle that has as its aims to liberate Black people is that at many levels you feel that you no longer identify with the views, hopes and fears of the majority of white people. To some extent one makes a conscious choice to disassociate oneself from the community where one has come from, and yet at another level one is always associated with a white community because at a visual, external level one is white, one has friends and family that still operate within that community, one has a personal history that links one in with a social, economic and political history. It is easy to keep benefiting, to slide back into the comfort zone of privilege. One has to make decisions about

7 Alice McIntyre, Making Meaning of Whiteness, Albany 1997, 87.

8 Richard Dyer, White, London 1996, 13.

9 Dyer, White, see note 8.

how to ensure that one's complacency does not keep perpetuating a system that is implicit, insidious and seems to operate from some invisible de-centred centre.

Antje Schuhmann: *The textual aspects of your work are citing mainly scholarly statements on whiteness. In your work you create a kind of inter-textuality between the different authors you are citing on each picture, reflecting your transnational theoretical approach. Next to these obvious theoretical references – do you refer to other artistic expressions in South Africa or internationally? How was your show received and what does this say about still dominant perceptions of whiteness and?*

Michelle Booth: Several other South African artists, such as Lisa Brice, Brett Murray and the cartoonist, Zapiro, deal with whiteness, working largely with humour in a way that allows whites to laugh and cringe at themselves, to feel guilt and to have their common experiences expressed with sensitivity and irony. However, I feel that this work is not challenging enough for whites to be awakened out of their comfort zones. I wanted to make it difficult for white viewers to find an easy way out of seeing that whether they like it or not, they are bound up with this system.

I was interested in other artists who use images and words together, such as Duane Michals and Victor Burgin, among others and I got the idea of using the technique of sandblasting words onto the glass from the work of South Africa artist Senzeni Marasela who uses text and photographs in the work.

I used words to deliberately structure the viewing experience. The formal separation of the image from the text is significant for two reasons. Firstly, in some cases words already exist in the image, which then resonate with the text provided and create further layers of meaning. Secondly, the text is part of the framing of the image – how we view and understand the image. The words are embedded in the glass, a transparent medium that is made opaque by the words. Therefore the words serve to obstruct the transparency of the viewing; they serve to obstruct a reflexive understanding of the image.

The framing speaks to how we 'frame' or understand and look at our world. It speaks to the lenses of race, class, gender, education, religion etc that we look through and understand what we experience. In a way, I am forcing the white viewers to see themselves through the words of people we constantly construct as other and to experience what it might be like to be looked at and to be 'othered'.

For many people this was an uncomfortable experience. Many of them projected their insecurity onto me, blamed people like me who are prepared to take these difficult issues head on for the widening gap between Black and white, and said that I was neurotic. One of the visitors at the Johannesburg opening of the exhibition felt that the exhibition was ten years too late, that we had moved on and she felt personally very angry to have to deal with all of this again. For me this represented that attitude I was trying to get across. Centuries of racial oppression cannot be wished away or dealt with once. We all wish we could "just be human" but in reality it is my belief that it is only whites who have the lu-

xury of dreaming of that possibility. Black people are made to bear the burden of race all the time.

Antje Schuhmann: *Your pictures show mainly public urban spaces as manifestations of whiteness, but the overall image of South African urban life is that inner cities' public space is dominated by the majority of non middle class Black people, while urban middle and upper class white people are locking themselves up in shopping malls, gated communities and office towers. I think it is important to look at the intersections of race and class and how they structure access, for example in reference to urban public or semi-public or private spaces. Where did you take the pictures and what were your criteria for choosing the scenes, people and situations presented in your photographs?*

Michelle Booth: This exhibition grew out of my experience of living in Cape Town in the Western Cape Province, which has a very different spatial and social dynamic than other cities in South Africa. The Western Cape is the only province not to have elected an ANC government in the 1994 elections and has been most affected a legacy of slavery and by the apartheid policy of divide and rule. It is also the only province where Black Africans are not in the majority. It is still socially and culturally very divided and urban spaces are still dominated by whites, unlike the inner cities of Johannesburg and Durban which conform more to the stereotypical impression of South Africa cities. For some reason (which is the topic of many discussions among those for whom this is a problem) Black people feel unwelcome in many of Cape Town's public spaces, except ironically some of the shopping malls, and do not feel that they are able to claim these spaces as theirs. This contributes to the sense of still living in a bit of a white bubble. Also from a practical point of view, I wanted to take pictures of people without them being aware of me. This would have been difficult in other kinds of spaces.

I also wanted to explore the idea of private versus public identities in other words, the identities which we construct for ourselves based on our experiences and choices and those identities that are imposed on us by others, those that are socially constructed. Despite the kinds of choices that I have made as a white person in South Africa – when I am walking down the street, I am experienced as white, as having benefited, as being part of the system that benefits whites and oppresses others. This is the burden of race that we have to learn how to bear. I believe that these socially constructed perceptions will only change when there are sufficient individuals who take action to change themselves, their interactions with others and the institutions that affect the society.

In most of my works, there is something in the image that relates to the words. In the image where a woman walks out of a cafe next to a lotto stand, the words speak about how being white means that we have a choice of whether to do something about it, that mostly we can get away with not doing anything. Now the concept of the lotto is critical – we did not choose to be white or Black, the 'universal lotto of life' allocated us our skin colour. However, we do have a choice about what to do with it – to carry on perpetuating a

system which continues to privilege us, or to look at how we can ensure that we help to eradicate racism.

With reference to the image with the word "scar" in one of the photographs, I am asking us to reconsider what we think is normal about everyday white life. Especially in Cape Town, it is 'normal' to go out to a restaurant and there are no Black customers. It is 'normal' to go to the theatre and there might be a sprinkling of Black faces. It is 'normal' for there to be some Black kids in a mostly white school but not 'normal' for there to a few white kids in a predominantly Black school. What we take for granted as a normal experience is actually a white experience and it has been constructed by privileging whites and excluding Blacks. When we walk down the street, like this guy in the picture, we are having a normal everyday moment, one that we don't think of as having anything to do with race. The word "scar" reminds us though that we are fooling ourselves if we think that we have not been affected, scarred by living in very divided society, where race determined everything about our lives - and still does. We are all scarred by apartheid and its legacies in various ways because we were all racialized, even if many whites were not aware of being racialized due to the normative and privileging effects of being constructed as white.

Antje Schuhmann: *Next to the psychological consequences I would like to explore a little bit more the materialized effects of racism, for example in terms of having or not having access to all kind of resources. For many people – as in most countries world wide – the intersections of race, gender and class defines till today in manifold ways their access to spaces of representation as well as to physical spaces. In which spaces do you prefer to intervene when you exhibit your work: in public spaces or in the centres of cultural and economical white hegemony? Or to put it bluntly: do you choose street billboards or an established white cube/gallery – a centre of cultural and economic white hegemony?*

Michelle Booth: You raise some important issues. But in my situation it was my first exhibition so to some extent I had little choice and took whatever possibilities that existed to show the work. It was important though at some level to be saying these things about whiteness in, as you put it, the centres of cultural and economic white hegemony. Perhaps with a reputation and more confidence and experience I would be able to think about choosing to explore some of the other options in terms of where and how to show work. I was very conscious however, of having access to the resources to produce the work as well as paying for it to be shown. I was shocked at how little risk the galleries actually take. Artists are expected to pay a rental to the gallery, pay for the production and postage of invitations and hand over a percentage of any sales. How is anyone with no access to resources ever to enter the art world? I did not really expect the work to sell, so it was my own investment in something that I believe is important.

Antje Schuhmann: *I wonder to which extend whiteness is a universal global but yet also a very local phenomenon. When I was travelling for the first time to South Africa, a society I percei-*

ved as being racist in very different ways than I was used to within a German context, I felt I need to reconceptualize my understanding of being white to develop another antiracist approach. How context bound are the reflections on whiteness you use and produce in your work?

Michelle Booth: The majority of quotes that I used in the work come from British and UK contexts, as well as from a South African source, and made complete sense to me in the South African context so I would argue that I have used a more universal analysis.

Whiteness in South Africa exists in a global context. It has its roots in colonialism, which resulted in a particular set of power relations that I think is both similar and different to other colonised settings. Bizarrely, while white South Africans are aware of historically dominant forms of constantly racializing the surrounding, at the same time they live in denial about how this way of thinking could have possibly effected themselves, about how their own role in relation to the way that white power has and continues to exert itself. This is despite the fact that whites in different cities and provinces in South Africa will experience their whiteness in slightly different ways depending on the particular realignment of political and economic power in those places. In Europe, however, white hegemony exists in a different historical and cultural context but I think is still experienced to be hurtful, racist and discriminatory by those identified as Other. I think it is easier for whites in other countries where they are dominant culturally and politically to hide behind culture (we will tolerate you living here, but don't challenge us, you must fit in with our way of doing and seeing things and don't expect us to change), to not see that they are part of a global set of power relations that perpetuate white western privilege. Global economic power relations, I also see whiteness globally linked to Western capitalism, contribute to and reflect global race relations. In South Africa, we are less able to avoid guilt and issues of responsibility. We can not outsource the consequences of our privileges like Europe, the starkness of the economic contrast between the majority of Blacks and whites are right there.

Antje Schuhmann: *Gayatri Spivak says "history is larger than personal goodwill and we must learn to be responsible as we must study to be political"*[10] *Having this in mind, in the context of whiteness creating self-awareness about being white must inevitably lead to take over responsibility – not only for my individual behaviour but also for the collective I am are part of. What could such a sense of broader responsibility indicate in terms of fighting the complex system of racial, social, economic (to name only a few) privileges we are part of?*

Michelle Booth: I believe that we can't escape history and the consequences of what has come before us. I don't think that we can be choosy and say, I will accept those conse-

10 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Cultural Talks in the Hot Peace. Revisiting the "Global Village", in: Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins ed., Cosmopolitics. Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation, Minneapolis 1998, 329–448.

quences because I like them and they benefit me, but I won't accept these others because they make me feel uncomfortable. Also I believe that we are all interconnected and our futures are irrevocably interlinked. It is an attitude of splitting off our actions and beliefs from their broader consequences on others and the environment that contributes to the state of the world currently. My decision to allow something to continue, whether it is actively taken or passively in the sense of ignoring it or wishing it would go away, implicates me in the outcome. When we recognise that our personal is political, we are forced to take our personal choices and actions more seriously. It is individuals who can make choices about change and who impact on other people through relationships. When individuals come together with commitment, they can change larger situations. We all need to make an impact where we find ourselves and I do recognise that we all have different levels of capacity. But for many white South Africans seeing white is a good place to start.