Art and the End of Apartheid
John Peffer
339 pages, 2009, $29.95 USD (paperback)
University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis

Reviewed by Karen Ramsay Johnson, Indiana University-Indianapolis

John Peffer has produced a beautiful and insightful general work that will assist the reader in understanding how historical, political, and cultural themes in South African studies mesh with its visual art. It will also be very useful for those who wish to integrate a visual arts perspective into a more general examination of—or course on—modern South Africa.

Peffer's ambitious goal in *Art and the End of Apartheid* is to set modern and contemporary South African art "within overlapping contexts of the modernist reception of indigenous approaches to art, the draconian racial policy of the apartheid state, a culture of militancy and street violence, and the bipolar polemical discourse of the late cold war" (x). The central thesis of the book, that both the visual art and the communities of artists (both visual and not) prefigured and helped to shape a vision of post-apartheid South Africa, is certainly not new, but Peffer's interconnection of this vision to detailed discussion of specific artists, works, and artists' collectives gives it an exciting new depth. Primarily covering the years leading up to the end of formal apartheid, the book also develops a number of important sub-themes, most notably the location of art and artistic communities within grey areas, both literal and metaphorical, such as black Africans' position between traditional and cosmopolitan cultures and white settlers' location between Europe and Africa. He also explores the intricate and sometimes conflicted connections between international and African modernisms, definitions of resistance art and political conflicts surrounding what South African art should be and do, apartheid and its effects, and the use of art to explore and express identity, both personal and collective.

Peffer is skillful and concise in his presentation of the contexts for the art and artists that he discusses. While readers familiar with South Africa's history will not need his summaries of political events there, those who come to the book from an art background or who use the book for a course on South African literature and culture will find them helpful and evocative. As he admits, there is some overlap in these discussions, but it is not obtrusive. Scholars will find that the book's lack of a bibliography can make it difficult to locate full citations for references beyond the first, but the search is worthwhile, as Peffer uses a wide range of cogent and useful theoretical perspectives.

The chapters are to function both as a unified whole and as individual essays that can stand alone, and because of this—and Peffer's broad scope—the book does have a somewhat disjointed air. This is particularly overt in the final chapter, in which Peffer offers a brief history of photography that reads as an afterthought, especially as some of the themes in this discussion echo those in earlier chapters and might better have been integrated into them. Moreover, the book comes to a rather abrupt conclusion, with a few paragraphs at the end of the photography chapter serving as a conclusion for the whole. Again, an integrative conclusion that reemphasizes the more cohesive themes would be much more helpful for the reader. Ultimately, the book seems more like a collection of essays than like a sustained argument.

Nonetheless, Peffer's insights are considerable. In the introduction, Peffer introduces his central metaphor, "grey areas," taken from the cartography of apartheid South Africa; and chapter one both develops this concept and introduces the art historical aspect of his study, with a discussion of black modernism and a focus on the art of Gerard Sekoto and Ernest Mancoba. To illustrate the complexity of categorization in South African art, he also considers the "traditional" women's art of the Ndzundza Ndebele ("Maponga") people and the overlap of settler primitivism and "township art." This chapter also introduces the numerous forces, from poverty, poor education, and market influences that shaped black art in particular during the apartheid era.

Chapters 2 and 4 explore two themes in the art of the 50s through the mid-90s, the tortured body and the "mello-yello," a vernacular term for the armored personnel carriers (APCs) used by the South African police to patrol the black townships. The latter is the stronger of the two discussions, for in the former, Peffer sometimes conflates "becoming animal" (the title of the chapter) with human bodies that are simply not fully formed. Additionally as he introduces the Black Consciousness aesthetic, he also tends to focus on gendered forms and depictions of torture that do not immediately relate to his central conceit. These digressions do not, however, truly detract from his discussions of works by Sydney Kumalo, Dumile, and, especially, Ezrom Legae and Mmakgabo Mmapula Helen Sebidi.[1] All of these works and Peffer's treatment of them provide shocking and compelling evidence of the prevalence and power of the "human-animal metamorphosis" (48) theme. Further, he integrates background material on the nexus of art and politics, the influence of European modernism, and the interconnections between Black Consciousness writers, like Serote. Applying the theories of Fanon, Deleuze and Guattari, Taussig, and Scarry (as well as a host of art theorists), Peffer effectively treats what is a central theme in both the visual art and the literature of South Africa.

The Mello-Yello focus allows Peffer to shift focus to popular art, play, and humor. Despite the extreme fear that the APCs engendered—and that is reflected in political posters and art such as David Hlongwane's *Khayeltsha*—children quickly began making toy replicas of them, as well

as playing taunting games with the real thing. They were figures of fun in comics, and, in every case, Peffer argues, these images "harnessed the multivalent potential of the imagery of occupation against the violence of occupation itself" (99). This image-making found its apotheosis at the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 (the conflicted nature of which is briefly discussed), when artists from the Katlehong Art Centre constructed a full-size replica of an APC. Despite the celebration of the spirit of play in this chapter, however, Peffer concludes that the images of violence are still open to use for oppression as well as for resistance to it.

Alternating with these chapters are two that focus more broadly on movements in South African art. The first, chapter 3, centers on the Medu Art Ensemble and its Culture and Resistance festival in Gaborone in 1982, (which Peffer correctly identifies as a pivotal event in the history of South African art). Medu's exile space in Gaborone functions as the first extended example of his "grey areas," and his discussion of it centers on the group's self-conscious work to create a new kind of art's community. In doing so, they needed to transform traditional African culture into a form that would be defined by the nature of the revolutionary struggle. Along the way, Peffer also considers the many ways in which art and artists contributed to this struggle, from funneling money for revolutionary groups to coding messages in works themselves. Another legacy of Medu has been the debate it provoked over the proper function of the artist; Mnyele and others advocated the view of the artist as cultural worker, while others, like musician Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand) advocated greater creative choice.

Chapter 5, "Abstraction and Community" focuses on art during the states of emergency and on the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) and United States-South Africa Leadership Exchange Program (USSALEP) workshop, later renamed Thupelo. Peffer's theme here is the introduction of abstract art in the work of the Thupelo artists and their community, but, like Medu, Thupelo engendered a great deal of controversy, here centering on the problematic influence of Western art and the problematic behavior of associated Western artists, like Sir Robert Caro, a British artist and patron of FUBA-USSALEP and Thupelo, and several of the visiting artist/teachers, who knew little of the South African context, including the living and working conditions of their students. In Peffer's view, the modernist influence combines naturally with abstract elements in indigenous South African art, and he argues that the artists themselves both wanted and needed exposure to international artistic techniques. As with Medu, though, FUBA-USSALEP, Thupelo, and their offshoots most crucially provided an artistic community, in which "a pattern of cross-influences and interpersonal relationships . . . brought a *community of artists* into being" (152).

Chapters 6 and 8 present another set of topics—"everydayness" and iconoclasm as a response to censorship. In discussing the quotidian, Peffer concentrates the power of the everyday in resistance art and on various intersections of visual arts with other art forms, emphasizing found

objects, themes of identity and the prevalence of motifs such as "Africa as woman" (184) and "the black musician as a metaphorical sign of the condition of the race" (186). The discussion of iconoclasm focuses on three examples: "Wayne Barker's 'overpainting' of landscape scenes by Hendrik Pierneef, a striptease at the Voortrekker Monument in the pornographic magazine *Loslyf*, and a performance by Tracey Rose at a police monument in Oudtshoorn" (222). The *Loslyf* example is, however, problematic, as Peffer conflates the *Loslyf* stripper with the creator of the striptease spread and thus obscures the extent to which its iconoclastic effect depends on an appeal to male voyeurism.

The career of Durant Sihlali, the subject of chapter 7, spans the 1950s to his death in 2004 and thus nicely brackets the time frame of *Art and the End of Apartheid*. It likewise recapitulates many of Peffer's major themes, as Sihlali moves from a predominantly realistic style to a more abstract one. He personally experiences all of the major obstacles to black art that Peffer highlights, he views his art in terms both of his own personal artistic self-definition and of his preservation of the township life of his youth, he participates in an interracial artistic community that Peffer defines as central to the imagining of a post-apartheid society, and, in his later art, he sums up what Peffer sees as a central accomplishment of South African visual art as a whole: the creation of "an explicit and complex connection between the terms of the domestic/structural, the ancestral, the artistic, and the feminine" (212). Sihlali's transformation in the 80s and his subsequent work are particularly intriguing and well-described.

The final chapter, a history of South African photography, is regrettably brief. Peffer shows that many of the same trends and contexts that shaped the visual arts in general also apply to photography, and his examples of Zwelethu Mthethwa and Santu Mofokeng amply illustrate the complexity and interest of this art form, but the chapter seems like an afterthought, and the connections between its themes and those of the earlier chapters are not sufficiently developed to provide a strong conclusion to the book.

Overall, *Art and the End of Apartheid* offers a fascinating and often provocative introduction to the visual art of South Africa between the 1950s and the early 1990s. Readers will find themselves poring over the plates and figures, insightfully described by Peffer, and searching the web for those images that have not been included (Fort Hare University owns several very important ones and has not allowed them to be reprinted in the book). Readers with an interest in the literature of apartheid, resistance, and revolution will find numerous themes and connections that illuminate both literary practice and artistic community.

Note

1. Peffer also uses an alternative spelling for ³Mmapula²: ³Mapula.² I have encountered both in reliable sources.