

## DAVID GOLDBLATT: Intersections

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**Camera Austria**

### Interview with David Goldblatt by Mark Haworth-Booth (abstract)

"There have been many changes in South Africa since the demise of apartheid. Here are some that I have begun to look at: From 1964 until about 1986 regulations prohibiting trading by black people in white areas were rigidly enforced. Black hawkers and tradesmen were hardly to be seen on the streets of Johannesburg or other SA cities. But then as sanctions began to bite and the government found it more and more difficult to maintain its elaborate structures of control, small traders began to filter back onto the streets. When the dam walls were finally smashed after 1990, the trickle became a flood. Hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps millions, from all over Africa, poured into our cities, particularly into Johannesburg. Few had high skills or capital. Very many became hawkers. And with the coming of the cellphone a man with a paintbrush or a trowel could advertise his skills and phone number on sidewalks and be in business. Municipal government in Johannesburg. has so far been quite unable to manage the flood without resorting to prohibitions and raids strongly reminiscent of the apartheid regime. Whereas black people previously needed a 'pass' to be on the streets of Johannesburg, and were subject to arrest in its absence, they now possess the streets. Perhaps for the first time Johannesburg is truly an African city.

Many thousands of the influx gravitated to Johannesburg's inner city as big business and white residents moved north to new suburbs and office parks. Squatter camps flourished on empty land. Urban degradation rapidly advanced as apartments and even former offices were subdivided into cramped and costly living spaces in which nonetheless, people tried to make respectable niches for themselves in the city economy.

In the north there has been a manic pursuit of material wealth and of security from increasingly rapacious and violent crime. Walled estates, invariably in Tuscan style have sprung up like alien vegetation. Property prices have boomed not least because there are rapidly growing numbers of high earning black people seeking places in the suburbs.

With one of the highest rates of HIV infection in the world and a government that has been extremely tardy in meeting the crisis, we are suffering very large numbers of deaths due to AIDS and opportunistic infections. Since the infections thrive among those least able to resist them, the vast majority of deaths are among poorer, mostly black people. Township cemeteries are seas of raw earth-mounds. Few of these deaths are acknowledged as AIDS-related. A clue lies in the dates on the headstones. Few of the deceased were older than 45. There is a photograph of a grave in a black township. On it rests a cosmetic pack labelled 'Body Love'. I cannot say how this death occurred. Although the AIDS ribbon is not ubiquitous, it is seen increasingly across the land and becomes, inevitably, another banality.

Death by violence of mostly white farmers at the hands of invariably black intruders, is a matter of great contention between farmers and the government. The former maintain that most of these murders are not random attacks by robbers but are probably racially and politically motivated, and that farmers are not given sufficient protection by the forces of law and order. The government maintains that statistically there is no discernable trend for farmers that differs from the national average of murders (which is very high). Some maintain that farmers who are known to treat their labour well are unlikely to be attacked. Whatever the case, the murders are real and the violence of the attacks is often extreme. It seems probable that many of them have their roots in the dispossession of blacks from the land and a very high rate of unemployment.

New public monuments honouring people and events spurned or worse under the previous regime are beginning to appear in our towns and land. Then there are proliferating private memorials commemorating deaths by accident on roads and

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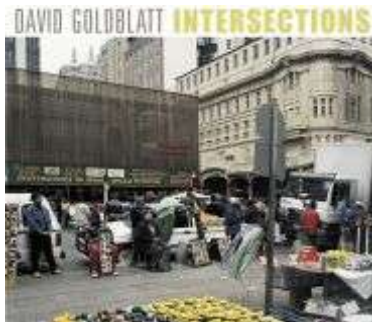
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coast. Like punctuation marks on the land they tell with peculiar poignancy of the particularity and yet the randomness of these deaths.

We have a new dispensation of municipal government. Where previously each town and village had its own municipal council and officials, there are now groupings of several towns and villages under one local municipality which in turn forms part of a larger body. The new bodies are virtually without tradition and their incumbents in office are new to the jobs and powers they are given. There are no mayors' parlours with 40 or 50 years of portraits of white, mostly-male, office bearers. In some of the new municipalities the system is working very well and there is a high level of idealism among the people who 'do it'. Others are bedevilled by corruption and inertia.

Asbestos was mined here over a vast area and for about a century. The mining companies were particularly uncaring about the health of those who worked it, those who lived with them and the land they mined - even after the dangers of asbestos to life were known. Hundreds of thousands of people have been affected, many have died and many more will. Our new government supported some 7,500 claimants in a class action in British courts against a major offender. I doubt this would have happened under the previous regime, officials of which were complicit in the rampant abuse.

I find that as I go along with this project its reach is extending into, for me, new areas. Primary is the land, its division, possession, use, misuse. How we have shaped it and how it has shaped us."



## **DAVID GOLDBLATT: INTERSECTIONS**

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