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SUSPENDING DISBELIEF:

WIM BOTHA'S BIBLE-CARVED CRUCIFIX

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Christianity occupies numerous incompatible positions within South Africa's profoundly conflicted history. The convulsive struggle of apartheid was not only social, political, and economic in character; it was also deeply theological. The most formidable arguments both for and against apartheid policy were made on the grounds of Christian theology.

Afrikaner Calvinist theologians in the Dutch Reformed Church provided the theological architecture and justification for the systems of racial segregation under apartheid, which in turn found support or nonintervention across denominational lines in large segments of the country's Christian population. The edifice of apartheid thus, in some strong sense, rested on "Christian" pillars. Yet many of the most powerful forces in opposition to apartheid were also Christian. This included outspoken and influential Anglican clergy (most notably Desmond Tutu), as well as numerous Roman Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans, Congregationalists, and Pentecostals. A variety of interdenominational Christian organizations produced trenchant theological critiques of apartheid and provided legal and material aid for detainees and their families.¹ Indeed the African National Congress (ANC) was founded entirely by Christians in 1912 (originally the

¹ See, for examples, the Christian Institute of Southern Africa (CISA), the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT), the South African Council of Churches (SACC), and the South African Bishops Conference (SABC).

SANNC), and many of its most significant leaders, including Oliver Tambo (Anglican) and Nelson Mandela (Methodist), appear to have maintained serious, even if private and conflicted, Christian faith throughout their lives. And we mustn't overlook the antiapartheid resistance that came from minority voices within the Dutch Reformed Church itself.²

Christianity thus haunts and is haunted by South African history in ways that remain contested. As the nation struggles to build a stable and inclusive mutuality on the ruins of apartheid, it finds itself still reckoning with the meanings of Christianity. One of the places this reckoning is visible is in the visual arts. Christian imagery appears regularly in post-apartheid art as artists of diverse religious persuasions wrestle with the religious dimensions of living together in South Africa today. Art curator and critic Okwui Enwezor has argued that “no significant work of art has been produced in South Africa that has not at the same time confronted the obdurate edifice of the politics of the country’s divided memory.”³ By any account, Christianity is directly implicated.

CHRIST AMONG US

A seminal artwork in this regard is Wim Botha’s *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* (2001), a life-size crossless crucifix made from stacks of bibles bolted together and carved into the form of Christ’s crucified body.⁴ The locations of Christ’s hands, feet, side, and forehead include bibles with red-edged pages (the kind one might find in a hotel room), some of which the artist has left

² Most famously: C. F. Beyers Naudé, Allan Boesak, B. B. Keet, and Ben Marais. A valuable place to begin reading about the religious and theological aspects of the antiapartheid struggle is John W. de Gruchy with Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, twenty-fifth anniversary ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

³ Okwui Enwezor, “The Enigma of the Rainbow Nation: Contemporary South African Art at the Crossroads of History,” *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, vol.1, ed. Sophie Perryer (New York: Museum for African Art; Cape Town: Spier, 2004), 42.

⁴ Sue Williamson, *South African Art Now* (New York: Collins Design, 2009), 196.

uncarved and visible so that blood seems to seep from the pages of Christ's wounds. Botha transformed thousands of pages of biblical text into a biblical figuration, creating a kind of visual tautology: the body of Christ appears as the body of texts by which he is known. Significantly, these texts include only biblical translations in the eleven official languages of South Africa.⁵ Thus the material/referent is not the Bible as such (as it might be if Hebrew and Greek texts were included), but the Bible as South Africans read it. Botha's material object is an artifact and "embodiment" of centuries of missionary efforts in this region to present the singularity of Christ in a plurality of tongues. But in a context where plurality has been so tied to racial violence and segregation, this singularity is riddled with difficulty.

In one sense, constructing a crucifix out of biblical texts is a theologically interesting thing to do. A pious interpreter might see an allegorization of Incarnation—the Word become paginated flesh. In turn, this "flesh" of the biblical text then discloses its central Word, the wounded body of Christ. It has become commonplace for critics to invoke "transubstantiation" to characterize the way this sculpture conflates the materiality of the texts with the presence of the One to whom they refer. While such a reading collapses into a rather literal illustration of "the Word made flesh" and leaves far too much of the work unaccounted for, it correctly registers a theological axis of meaning that the work opens (and leaves open) for consideration.⁶

In another sense, *Commune* produces real challenges for a pious interpretation. These bibles have been definitively "closed" and hewn down to a particular form. There is a violence

⁵ Karen von Veh, "Transgressive Christian Iconography in Post-Apartheid South Africa," (PhD Diss., Rhodes University, 2011), 57. Also see Carmen Estelle Truter, "Images In, Through and For 'The W/word': A Revisioning of Christian Art" (MVA thesis, University of South Africa, 2007), 80.

⁶ Botha's own words advise Christians against prematurely arriving at a theologically self-affirming interpretation of the work: "I like it that despite my ambivalent or different intentions people can still find beautiful meaning in something as banal as carving Bibles—that it could actually support their faith. The most amazing thing about that work is how people found a way to make it not monstrous. It seems that the possibility of my intent being to destroy Bibles was just too horrible to comprehend so they really stretched their minds around this to find ways of making it OK" (Botha, quoted in von Veh, 144 n10).

inscribed in this object, not only in the figurative imagery of an executed man but in the sculptor's treatment of scriptural texts as sculptural material. Botha has made Christ's body appear by fastening, cutting, gouging, and carving these texts—handling them as pliable, fragile paper things coerced into another form. The surface of the object displays conspicuous traces of the violent means by which it was formed.

But it is not just the bibles themselves that have been closed and damaged; more importantly, the *reading* of the text has been reduced (closed) to a singular form. This body is presented as a kind of “gestalt effect” of the biblical text: an iconic figure standing forth from the scriptures and summarizing them. The crucified Christ—and everything enfolded in “the cross”—might be a strong candidate for iconizing the scriptural narrative, but it does so reductively. In this sculpture the whole of the biblical canon has become concretized into a particular image of Jesus and a particular vision of suffering and atonement, such that (metaphorically speaking) all these pages of text and all these translations are made to say just this one particular thing. Systematic theologies must always do something of

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this sort, but in South Africa the power to present the form of Jesus—by way of some “handling” of the text—has been overtly coercive. Whatever allegory of incarnation Botha offers us is thus fused with an allegory of hermeneutical violence.

By including bibles in all eleven South African languages, Botha positions this as an image of Christ for the nation as a whole. Such positioning is inevitably problematic, and we are surely meant to recognize that this cruciform “Word made flesh” speaks in a distinctly European visual vernacular. The artist based the work on a carved ivory crucifix housed in the Treasury of

St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City⁷—its visual provenance is conspicuously European. Of course there is nothing objectionable (or racist) about European crucifixes in themselves. Yet, when exhibited in Johannesburg, far from a chapel in Rome, this culturally specific form conjures the unsettled ghosts of colonialism and apartheid. If this crucifix stands as an icon for South African Christianity, it does so violently. Botha's crucifix is the Christ of apartheid.

SUSPENDING DISBELIEF

Further complications ensue. The meaning of Botha's title for the work—*Commune: Suspension of Disbelief*—slips around wildly and doubles back on itself at every word. Are we to read “commune” as a noun (a collective group of people) or as a verb (intimate, spiritual communication)? The first of these meanings positions the work in a political frame whereas the second gives it a religious charge. Both interpretations are relevant, but their implications seem at odds. Similarly, the phrase “suspension of disbelief” generates divergent meanings. As the title of a sculpture held in midair by a network of cables, the phrase appears flatly descriptive: this is the suspension of an object of disbelief. The crucifix, the bibles, and the Christianity with which they are associated, have for many South Africans become unbelievable—disbelievable. In this sense, the sculpture is an emblem of incredulity suspended overhead for scrutiny.

However, we might also read the phrase “suspension of disbelief” in another way, as a direct reference to the familiar notion in literary theory that explains how fictional narratives are able to maintain rhetorical power. In this theory, readers are sustained in a narrative only to the extent that they are able to inhabit the logic of the world projected by the story and to “suspend” whatever disbeliefs arise from the incongruity between the story's world and the readers' world

⁷ Clive van den Berg, ed., *KKNK Catalogue 2001* (Oudtshoorn, South Africa: Klein Karoo National Arts Festival, 2001), 46.

of everyday experience. When this sense of the phrase is attached to Botha's crucifix, it not only highlights the incongruities that exist between Christian faith and South African experience, it also suggests that if the former is to continue, then disbelief arising from the latter must be negotiated and "suspended." In its crudest (and most cliché) form, the insinuation is that continuing in the faith is equivalent to indulging a fantasy. Conversely, and more interestingly, the title also cuts against this kind of conclusiveness. As we stand beneath Botha's suspended object of disbelief, we are pressed to question whether this thing truly accounts for the logic of these texts and the Christ to which they refer. We are pressed to consider whether it is in fact necessary to suspend the finality of our disbelief. Thus the "suspension" identified in the title suggests that judgment is both delivered and deferred. The work vacillates between declarations of incredulity and the postponement of conclusions. "Communion" with Christ—particularly at the level of the public "commune"—is here presented as both a closed and open possibility, remaining suspended and undecidable. Indeed, for Botha, it is crucial that the artwork perpetuates this ambiguity so that it "doesn't necessarily attract or destroy the import of religion."⁸

THE MECHANISMS OF STATE POWER

The political (critical) reading gains additional force when we note that the work is not only composed of the Bible-carved crucifix. It also includes closed-circuit surveillance cameras placed at various points around the room. Each camera stares at this image of Christ and the space surrounding it and distributes images of it to black and white monitors placed elsewhere in the exhibition. Some cameras zoom in on fragments of the crucifix while others stare from a

⁸ Botha, quoted in Enwezor, 69.

distance, and as these images are transmitted to the monitors, they switch between upright and sideways views and are progressively cropped and defocused into unrecognizable patterns.

Given the menacing presence of the surveillance equipment, South African art historian Karen von Veh characterizes the work as “a metaphorical commentary on the mechanisms of state power” which used “the socio-political regulatory structures” of Christianity to control South African society.⁹ In other words, she sees an essential continuity between the surveillance cameras and the crucifix: all are instruments of apartheid domination. However, this relies on a confused interpretation of the cameras as “mechanisms to disseminate cultural ‘truths’.”¹⁰ Botha’s low-grade surveillance equipment certainly connotes state power but of the paranoid, panoptic, regulatory kind (what Michel Foucault called “fragile” power), not the kind which disseminates knowledge and mobilizes desire (“strong” power).¹¹ And given that the surveillance images deteriorate into unintelligibility, Botha seems emphatic about the fragility and ineffectiveness of these regulatory “mechanisms of state power.”

Over against von Veh’s reading, I propose that we must see significant *discontinuity* between the crucifix and the cameras. The crucifix and its viewers are being watched and interrogated through the kind of closed-circuit network used to monitor public spaces. The connotations have nothing to do with advertising or mass propaganda but with limited-access, compulsive surveillance. The presence of these cameras is not, therefore, about the state distributing the crucifix to an indoctrinated public; rather, it is about the state monitoring the crucifix and the public’s reception of it. This is an image of Christianity under the conditions of

⁹ Von Veh, 57.

¹⁰ Von Veh, 142.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 59.

state domination, regulation, and control—a carved, violated biblical corpus kept under observation (even if through an ineffective system).

APARTHEID AND THE CROSS

Ultimately it is the crucifix, not the cameras, that deconstructs the system. As I've argued, Botha's crucifix represents a construction of the apartheid state—all the bibles of South Africa hewn into a particular Eurocentric form—but it is an unmanageable construction. Even

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if mobilized as an instrument of oppression, there is no more disruptive image to an apartheid power structure than that of the suffering Christ. The victims of belligerent state control ended up looking more like Christ than its enforcers ever did. This is the inverted logic of apartheid theology: the deployment of coercive power in the name of Christ causes the image of Christ to appear in those who are subjugated, and no greater amount of force or control can make it otherwise. The God-man executed on the outskirts of Jerusalem under the authority of the Roman Empire will always bear more resemblance to those abused in a Johannesburg interrogation room than to any of those principals of apartheid superintending their pristine categories of holiness and election. In some sense we might say that gathered into this form of the suffering Christ is the entirety of what Okwui Enwezor has called “the monstrous South African body.”¹² The state shipwrecks on this body, even if it was deployed and regulated for the state's own ends. The image is not manageable. Thus the need for surveillance.

¹² Enwezor, 40.

My argument is that the significance of the scrambled surveillance apparatus in this work is relatively superficial; it merely signifies the failure of apartheid's "fragile" (overtly coercive) power to regulate public meaning. The deeper logic of the work points toward the undoing of the theological heresy of apartheid.

Botha's *Suspension of Disbelief* is a deconstruction of "State Theology" but not of Christian theology per se.¹³ Von Veh claims that the net effect of this work amounts to "semiotically dismembering the very structure of religious discourse that underpins Christ's role as redeemer."¹⁴ This is nonsense unless the only version of Christ's "role as redeemer" allowed into view is the deformed one assigned to him by apartheid theologians. How does the dismembering in view here have any bearing on the Christianity of Desmond Tutu, for instance? Or Father Michael Lapsley? Apartheid "Christianity" is Christianity in a profoundly heretical form. Its unraveling is hardly an unraveling of the Christian gospel as such. If anything, apartheid collapsed from the internal pressure of the very gospel that it attempted to control.

Botha has left the bolts and threaded rods visible at the ends of all the limbs, which both accentuates the exercise of power over the biblical texts and also leaves open the possibility of dismantling the figure. The bolts might be unwound and the texts released to be opened once again. In fact, Botha is vocal about this intention: "It is important to me that the possibility of a partial recovery of the text exists."¹⁵ There may be considerable loss where the codices have been shorn down to fit the preconceived image, but if the texts were read alongside each other (in multilingual community) almost all would be recoverable and (re)readable.

¹³ This is a reference to the famous "Kairos Document" of 1985, written by a number of anonymous South African theologians challenging the "State Theology" of apartheid.

¹⁴ Von Veh, 139.

¹⁵ Botha, quoted in Williamson, 190.

The logic of Botha's *Suspension of Disbelief* pushes toward the undoing of the crucifix itself. Carmen Estelle Truter is correct when she claims that Botha's "approach to the Scriptures is iconoclastic" but for reasons other than the ones that she offers.¹⁶ The work passes no judgment on Christianity as such, nor does it comment on the future of Christianity in South Africa, other than to insist that the ruination of apartheid necessitates the collapse of its image of Christ and the reopening of the biblical texts in all of the languages of South Africa. Botha powerfully articulates a deep crisis of belief in the post-apartheid condition and enacts what is, in every sense, a "suspension of disbelief" in which the content of the Christian gospel is entirely in question even as it remains an object of longing.

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Image Caption

Wim Botha (South African, 1974–), *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief*, 2001. Carved Bibles and biblical text, surveillance equipment, installation dimensions variable, figure life-sized. Collection of Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.

¹⁶ Truter, 77.