PROMISE
Raél Jero Salley
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raël Jero Salley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums and Social Justice: Exploring Museum Education</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at Iziko Museums of South Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne Alexander</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-Suited</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zethu Matebeni</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spillages, Slippages, Overflows: Some thoughts on the body,</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>memory, national symbols and heritage in contemporary South Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay Pather</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Showing Promise</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raël Jero Salley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author biographies</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Raël Jero Salley, in association with the University of Cape Town’s Africa Month and hosted by Iziko Museums of South Africa and its Education and Public Programmes presents the contemporary art exhibition *Promise*. The exhibition presents new artworks that draw from past and present events in South Africa’s visual archive. *Promise* was first exhibited at the Iziko South African National Gallery Annexe from 22 May until 21 June 2013.
Promise conveys the rich history and cultural heritage of Southern Africa. Salley presents a group of pictures that imagine everyday life—past and present—with a mixture of awe and excitement. Salley’s work explores ways of seeing, interpreting and understanding. Promise draws on historical archives and collections. The aim of the exhibition is to commemorate and celebrate Black experience while provoking dialog about the spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional aspects of South Africa. Seeking to challenge inherited labels, Salley’s pictures offer moments in being and social belonging.

“Imagination is a key feature of everyday life; it shapes our visual culture and is indispensible to social and political activity,” comments Salley. Through a new series of pictures, the artist seeks to produce moments in which viewers may actively imagine and produce new visions. Unlike other art events, this exhibition concept offers an urbane lifestyle experience.

Raël Jero Salley is Senior Lecturer at the University of Cape Town and Visiting Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is an artist, scholar, visual theorist and writer, exhibits artwork internationally and curates exhibitions. Salley earned a Masters in Fine Art from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Doctorate in History from the University of Chicago. He is Founding Director of ‘the names we give’ public programmes and the innovative research initiative Africana Art, Culture, Theory and Society (ACTSA). In addition to serving as contributing editor to the Postcolonialist, he writes articles and books chapters that have been published in The Queer Africa Reader, Kerry James Marshall, Third Text, Social Dynamics and African Arts among other publications.
uRaél Jero Salley, esezisana nenyanga yokubhiyoza amaAfrika kwiDyunivesithi YaseKapa phantsi kweeMziyam ze Iziko eMzantsi Afrika kunye neeNkqubo zeMfundu noLuntu baniphathele umsebenzi wobugcisa omtsha kumbonisot ogama lingu Promise. Lo mboniso ubonisa imisebenzi yobugcisa emitsha ezekelisa ezembali ne ngoku leziganeko kulondolozo Iwezibonwayo Iwase mzantsi Afrika. Lo msebenzi ongu Promise uzakuboniswa kwi Iziko South African National Gallery Annexe ukusukela ngomhla wama-22 kuCanzibe ukuyotsho kowama-21 kweyeSilimela 2013.

“Amandla okuyila engqondweni yinto ebaluleke kakhulu bocomi bemihla-ngemihla; ibumba inkucbeko yokuthelele kwaye ayikwazi ukohlulwa kwimicimbi yoluntu neyepolitiki,” kutsho u Salley. Ngothotho olutsha lwemizobo yepeyinti, uzama ukuyila imizuzwana apho umbukeli azicingela khona ekwazibonela eyakhe imibono kuyo.

Ngokungafaniyo nezinye iziganeko kwezobugcisa, ingqiqo yalomboniso inikeza ngamava obomi basedolophini. Inkubo yokuvulwa izakuba nawo nomculo ka Bokani Dyer weqela labaculi be *Dyertribe* elizinikezele ekonyuseleni inkucbeko nenguqulelo yaseMzantsi Afrika, zwelonke.

Man Looking, 2013. 60x100cm
Museums and Social Justice: Exploring Museum Education at Iziko Museums of South Africa

Wayne Alexander
While museums are perceived as sites of thinking and learning – sites for social reconstruction – they may also be viewed as sites for the reproduction of broader social imbalances like social inequalities. This tension has concerned many and I have therefore located this paper within such a discourse, cognizant of the broader socio-political and cultural landscape. Museums exist within the broad context of local, national and international developments mindful of our responsibilities as ‘agents for social change’ and aware of contemporary issues that confront society.

Framing museums within critical thinking is about empowering the powerless and transforming existing social inequalities and injustice. The critical theory paradigm – as purported by (Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1989) – attempts to provide professionals with a better means of understanding the contributions learning institutions such as museums offer with regard to the perceptions of, for example, culture, race, class, disability, language and gender division. If museums are serious about transforming, their challenge remains to work towards all visitors feeling included and empowered in the process of thinking and learning, critical about what includes or excludes people from the broader museum experience.

At another level, critical theory offers the conceptual space for a social justice approach to museums that encourages diversity. In this regard, a humanizing pedagogy is to be grounded in the diversity of everyday life and must interrogate the human experience in the context of power, privilege and oppression to provoke action toward humanization and liberation (Freire, 1972, Keet et al., 2009). The approach is aimed at preparing people
from both the oppressed and the oppressor groups to become analytical and critical about their life circumstances and the social power relationships and stratifications which keep them oppressed or privileged at the expense of others.

Museums need to be sensitive to the ways in which dominance operates in society – often by excluding people from experiencing a full human life – and consciously display exhibitions and offer programmes which address and challenge contradictions, deal with contestations while also raising wider questions of access, status and power. It may be argued that through intergenerational dialogue, museum spaces may be used to talk about issues which keep people apart.

So, against this backdrop, I reflect on the exhibition *Promise: Art, Culture and South Africa*. The purpose of the exhibition was to showcase the work of the artist, Raël Salley as a means of creating more dialogue amongst South Africans. The exhibition consisted of painted images which counter a perceived trend in the contemporary South African art world of ‘blackness’ as equated with poverty and the abject, as well as raise concerns relating to the invisibility of black imagery in South African art archives. The exhibition concept suggests a lifestyle experience, making connections in different forms, time and space and in a way posing problems which generate more dialogue and thought.

At a socio-political level the exhibition allowed for deeper thinking related to issues of social justice, largely understood as being about distributive justice. An account of social justice that focuses narrowly on the distribution of goods however, may lose sight of the other issues which include poverty, race, social environment, health, status and class. The exhibition thus offered that space in a way where often neglected issues of domination and oppression operate with the purpose of excluding people from the recognition and social goods necessary for human flourishing. One
is reminded of taking the conditions necessary for living a full human life seriously, linked to social justice. Marked as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence, the established conditions for promoting self-determination and self-development are so pitted against domination and oppression. Furthermore, the authentic inclusion of a diverse audience raised wider questions of equality, access, status and power within museum and gallery spaces.

It has become critical that museums are cognizant of the apparent acknowledgement of human diversity while simultaneously silencing the issues of power relations that are intrinsically caught up in human difference. Some further argue that it is crucial for those who were advantaged and privileged to acknowledge that their cultural dominance was at the expense of indigenous cultures. The issues of race, culture and language remain challenges linked to structural inequalities, inadvertently promoted by museums. Museums must confront social issues and work towards a culture of inclusivity and social justice. In this regard, Museum Education takes an active, critical thinking and interpretive approach to meaning making, reflecting the multiple intelligences of humanity.

In South Africa, the term ‘culture’ has always been contested as it appears to be a guise to reinforce the protected interests of certain groups at the expense of others. This contested terrain places much tension on the role of museums in the light of socio-political and cultural changes in South Africa. Museums that align their role to an approach linked to social justice are creating the conditions for all to develop skills, knowledge and critical modes of inquiry aimed at their self-promotion. Museums are to become sites where people envision and enact democratic life, inclusive and not at the expense of the democratic commitments to poor and black groups. Soudien et al (2004), challenge the liberal notion of power-sharing which is based on discriminatory class and race practices.
The task of re-imagining museums as sites that serve the quest for social justice is not really foregrounded in what museums do. However, if we are to institute a culture of social justice, Paula Freire’s (1987) approach to base projects on the lived experiences of people themselves holds for museums and allows those deemed ‘other’ to reclaim their own histories and voices (Giroux, 1997). The museum space should continue to allow us to relentlessly strive for a strong sense of self and humanity and in different ways, contribute to social cohesion and nation building.

Museum Education practice that is defined by social justice and inclusivity ensures that museums will consciously apply values of equity, respect for diversity and community participation that is cognizant of the marginalized and powerless in our society. In a way, the exhibition *Promise: Art, Culture and South Africa* underscored the point that re-imagined ways of thinking about museums – characterized by raising consciousness, making connections and being creative – remain paramount to contributing to the everyday lives of people, while also drawing on their experiences.

Two Men, 2013. 60x100cm
Well-Suited

Zethu Matebeni
As I gazed at the painting of Two Men I remembered the bitter pleasure of reading Can Themba’s seminal short story, The Suit, set in Sophiatown, Johannesburg. The Suit tells a tale of Matilda, whose once-doting husband, Philemon, finds her with another man in their bed. Using the suit left behind by Matilda’s lover, Philemon torments Matilda to her death. Rereading it now still brings a chill, a cold reality of how love can be soul-destroying. But perhaps it is not only love that can be destructive, but also the ways of being human towards others.

Siphiwo Mahala, Zukiswa Warner and Makhosazana Xaba’s imaginations and intense emotions have been completely captivated by this story—each responding to The Suit through a rewriting. Compellingly, The Suit’s realness positioned materiality as a place from which to think, and write. What once brought Matilda joy, soon took her life. In the most devastating turn of events after an elaborate Sunday party that Matilda had prepared for guests at their home, Philemon arrived from a bar and found Matilda “curled, as if just before she died she begged for a little love, implored some implacable lover to cuddle her a little . . . just this once . . . just this once more”.

Most recently, in her award-winning and celebrated book, Running and other stories, Makhosazana Xaba rewrote the story, as a form of “literary revenge” to what she expressed as a “misogynistic” tale of this love triangle. In rewriting the story in two parts, Behind the suit and The Suit continued: the other side, Xaba brought all three characters back to life with a twist, where both husband and wife experience same-sex intimate
relations. At a time when love between Africans of the same sex is silenced and considered uncultural, Xaba delivers a liberatory text that transcends rigid norms on gender and sexuality. Most interestingly, the reader is enticed to let their imagination go wild with Philemon and his journalist.

It is Xaba’s revolutionary act of prioritizing affect in same-sex relationships that excited me when I saw Raël Jero Salley’s painting titled Two Men. The ‘queer gaze’ is a daring thing. Its ra(gay)dar is ungovernable. The intimate pose between the two men in the painting seemed very familiar. Without the possibility of threat or harassment in their presence, as suggested by the pose, Two Men evoked another photograph, Kgompi and Charles January (2007), by visual activist Zanele Muholi.iii In this portrait taken at Kgompi and Charles’ home, intimacy between two black men becomes real and material. Sitting closely to each other, Hompi’s left hand rests on Charles’ naked torso. Charles’s right arm lazily flows on Hompi’s crossed legs.

Hompi and Charles’s bold love had been a matter of public consumption elsewhere much earlier. Many years before the Civil Union Act was even conceptualized as a reality in South Africa, on the 13th day of the month of their surname in 2002, the Januaries took the bold step of walking down KwaThema’s streets, hand-in-hand in their wedding outfits.iv Hompi wore a white wedding gown and Charles donned in a blue-greyish suit. Their act of public love defied all cultural codes. Hompi was the bride. His mother had not liked the idea, but she eventually reconsidered when Charles paid lobola.

Resuscitated through the imaginative portrayal of Salley’s Two Men – which is based on a found archival photograph – love between black men, as literally portrayed by Hompi and Charles is often publicly unseen, barely written, and rendered materially irrelevant. It is in the documentary My Son the Bride that the relationship between Hompi and Charles is
defined in terms of who wears what. Charles’ suit, as Hompi’s bridal gown, signifies a material bond surpassing public policing of same-sex desire. For Charles, the wedding suit performs the ‘gift’ of manhood. Among other men, he can also talk of his bride. Similarly, Hompi fulfills the cultural expectations of any bride. Theirs is a wedding that suits everyone.

At another time and place my encounter with the suit was set in a Pretoria Central Prison cell. In September 2007 GALA (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action) published one of the most exciting reads from their extensive archive. A careful selection of many prison letters from anti-apartheid, gay rights and AIDS activist Simon Tseko Nkoli to his then partner Roy Shepherd, presented a gripping and intimate narrative of the Delmas Treason Trial of 1985-1989. Simon, a young man in his thirties, together with 21 other people, was charged with high treason. They were all later acquitted. His loving letters to Roy told of everyday life in prison, Simon’s preoccupations and his desires. He missed Roy, terribly. Amongst other things, Simon was particularly concerned about his wardrobe, or the lack thereof.

His wishes and desires contained, among others, details of clothing items: “summer pajamas, the short ones; morning slippers and a long gown – a gown of many flowers, a colourful one; running shoes, size 7; a pair of trousers and a jersey”. What intrigued me the most was his impeccable attention to aesthetics and self presentation. Roy often fulfilled Simon’s desires and sometimes also bought and sent unrequested clothes. Simon’s tastes changed with time. In his earlier letters after a few months in prison, he expressed a dislike for wearing suits. Twenty months inside jail, he desired a “brown suit...with a yellow or pink shirt and a brownish tie”. By the end of his second and into the third year in prison, he had been yearning for a suit: “a sky blue Carducci suit”. In his last letter to Roy in the archives, he still had not received the suit:
8 June 1987

My one and only Roy

...There is nothing I want more than a sky blue suit ... You will have to choose between the following – Christian Dior and Carducci. If you manage to get me the sky blue suit, please Roy get me a sky blue tie as well. If you don’t get the sky blue colour, then purple colour will do – The colour purple – both the suit and the tie...

Simon was released on bail shortly after this letter. It is unclear whether he received his one most desire in prison or not. However, he was reunited with his “beloved” and “dearest Roy.” The last letter is full of promise and anticipation for the future. Simon poured his heart to Roy in a breathtaking declaration of love: “you are the person that my heart chose, and your heart chose me...you are me – we are one – ... When I change my name I’ll be Simon Nkoli Shepherd or Simon Sherperd Nkoli”.

How the suit is stitched together is not often as neat as it looks. Each thread carries a story. The Suit outlived Matilda. The torture burdened onto the material was unbearable, both in the house and in public. Since the passing of the Civil Union Act in 2006, Charles could legally wed his bride Hompi. Their marriage happily continues and Charles proudly wears the suit in the relationship.

While researching for the 2008 exhibition Jo’burg TRACKS: Sexuality in the City, I went through personal archives of lesbian, gay and transgender activists in Johannesburg. One activist, Phumi Mtetwa, had a photo of herself with Sir Ian McKellen, Nelson Mandela, and Simon Nkoli taken at Luthuli House in 1995. This was three years before Simon died. I was disappointed when I noticed that Simon was not wearing a suit (or rather
a jacket). It was the waiting for the promised suit that tormented me. I wanted to see him wearing it. He did, at least, wear a blue and purple tie. I guess both promises were fulfilled after all.

Notes

i  This is the ending of the story, just before Philemon cried out “Tilly!” See Patel Essop (1985:96)


iii  The spelling of the one of the partner’s name is Kgompi in the photograph, but in all other documents it is Hompi. I have used the latter throughout except when referring to the photograph. For more on this portrait see the piece “Vulnerabilities” by Deborah Posel (2007).

iv  My Son the Bride (2002) by Mpumi Njinge, 26 minute documentary film directed by Mpumi Njinge follows the couple as they prepare for the wedding.

v  Shaun de Waal and Karen Martin produced this selection of letters for GALA.
References


Spillages, Slippages, Overflows: Some thoughts on the body, memory, national symbols and heritage in contemporary South Africa

Jay Pather
South African society is dividing in increasingly extreme ways. Artistic responses to the extremes have, likewise, been excessive—they have spilled into, interrupted the flow of, and overflowed into social space. The spillages, interruptions and overflows are the unintended consequence of a project of reason and restraint as described by Kant, and this attitude has characterized a great deal of work on our bodies, memories, and heritage in South Africa in the past 20 years.

I am interested in contextualizing a space in art making that can respond to the growing extremities, and here I hope to outline the shape of what that space might be.

Calls to reason pervade liberal interpretations of Nelson Mandela’s legacy, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and other national projects that include hollow and insubstantial, catch phrases such as ‘social cohesion,’ ‘diversity,’ and so on. For example, the original Government of National Unity touted these sort of things. The result is an imaginary South Africa in the present, a “Lala land,” populated by a social landscape built on gentrified fantasies about the possibilities of keeping the economic structure of apartheid in place and continuing on living with governance structures that are inept, historically unsuccessful, and disaffected. This imaginary is full of absences, paradoxes, obfuscations, denials, submergences—and all of this while expecting the people who live in an actual, day-to-day society built on such foundational inequities to suddenly (and blindly), hold hands while riding off into the sunset singing “We are the world.”
Considering the ways in which gentrified fantasies have been mapped onto our post apartheid society has led me to think about ‘the realm of the sublime’. In the context of contemporary South Africa, this realm may be the sublime’s extreme. The sublime’s extreme is that which is chaotic, actions that exceed the established frameworks of social and political life. Examples of this include performances by the EFF party in the space of Parliament and elsewhere; the Democratic Alliance’s tempestuous parliamentary walk outs full of affront; and an absurd yet real State of the Nation Address. Such extremities and overflows have had much more devastating and concrete expressions through large-scale service delivery protests and more recently, in xenophobic statements, displacements and attacks perpetrated by extremists.

A lot of the slippage has, therefore, involved the human body. The body features both directly and indirectly, in ways that are both actual and symbolic. Direct and deadly attacks on individuals actually happen, but symbols of the body are also active, such as the body’s waste. Excrement featured in protests by township dwellers, and the throwing of excrement as part of the #Rhodesmustfall movement signals an excess and spillage, this time of rage and shame. These are searing examples of spillage and overflow in extreme times.

Connecting these notions to larger tracts of the African continent, Sarah Lincoln’s analyses of postcolonial African literature includes writings from Ayi Kwei Armah, Ben Okri, Ngui wa Thiongo. Lincoln considers these texts in relation to Africa’s perennial status as a “remnant” of globalization. Africa is continually framed as a waste product, a trash heap of disposable raw material, and a degraded offcut of imperial and colonial processes that have greatly enriched, dignified and beautified their instigators and beneficiaries. Lincoln describes an “excremental” vision of African authors, artists, poets and filmmakers that reflects a critical consciousness about the
imbalances and injustices that characterize African societies and polities under pressure from monetized capitalism and domestic corruption. Superfluity, excess, destruction or extravagances are concepts gathered together under the sign of “waste,” and they are central themes, and indeed formal features, of many postcolonial African works.

So, in these extremities I see something about material reality, something about the volatile energy of disclosure, of revealing, of illuminating. Excessive action is part of a search for an appropriate response to pressure. The overflows match the weight, volume and gravity of blindness and silence. Maybe the overflows are not part of a search at all, but are instead natural, inevitable results.

The Rhodes statue at University of Cape Town is one example. The statue itself, its material form, is as benign as any other statue in the city. But the Rhodes statue became the active symptom of a disease, its placement and presence became a marker of an insidious silence, of what is not only unspoken, but also hidden from view. It is the thing that sits on one’s neck, or perhaps, on one’s forehead. It reminds the passing viewer of the disease caused by ideologies of liberal economics or Kant’s disinterested sublime. These frameworks are no longer able to contain or explain our everyday life, and the languages of politeness and gentrification, which are the building blocks of liberal thought, wrap up and hide the festering activity of the colonial project as it persists by means of cultural signs and symbols that at first glance appear harmless, inert, or impotent because, most often, they are just objects. These observations can only begin the process, because the signs and symbols are everywhere and permeate everything.

Questions emerge: What is it about a sign or symbol that makes it what it is? How do signs and symbols come to wield as much power as they do? Who is the architect of this psychological takeover? Why do these structures make us feel the way we do?
What are the possibilities in destruction and re-building? If the symbol is removed, as with the Rhodes statue, with what, if anything, is it to be replaced? What will inform such decisions?

I don’t know the answers to these questions, but I do think if we see the necessary task of responding to the issues as part of a larger process of transformation, none of it is easy. Another difficult example is recent xenophobic violence, which has shown us the social, political and cultural work that was to be accomplished in the 1990s either simply did not happen or was largely ineffective. Whatever promises were made then—between Nelson Mandela and de Klerk, between Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelof Mayer—did not happen. There were deals cut and promises made, but the work of transformation was not carried out. We now face violence, overflow, and spillage as the consequence.

When memory and the past are so willingly submerged and superficially resolved, the future is rendered with all the more force and bluster—the delivery of homes, land, jobs, racial equality, human existence for many are always only available sometime in the future.

Most South Africans live in a liquid, mercuric, oily state of promise, a suspended malaise, futures made sweet through politics of affirmation. Actively resisting of the past, denying the challenge of the immediate present, the good life is affirmed as something in the future. All of this makes everyday, lived experience a kind of unreality, a dissension, a fantasy of human being.

This living in future time always, is particularly wearing and has some significant themes about time and existential time that has no doubt been picked up by several artists.

A space for interaction between art and legacies of violence and public space still requires honest interrogation and re-imagining. Whether what we experience is the actual turbulence of a deeply unsettled society, or simply
the aftershock of the catastrophes that have come before, artworks force us to confront the need for something more integral to take root in our society. This may begin with far more significant transformations in material power, changes that afford all citizens the luxury of stable foundations, a ground that will never again shift, displace and expel.

The lack of a clear narrative of material progression, of development, of cause and effect, change that is felt in economic circumstance, a lack of any of this, reinforces a state of stasis, something that existential playwrights and artists have used in an expression of an absurdity of life itself. Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* dramatizes this absent future, but in South Africa, the daily asymmetries make the absurd the material reality.

South African artists seem to be asking abiding questions in a democracy with confounding, schizophrenic lacks. In the chaos and messiness of violence, how can the arts show the submerged processes that make fault lines? How can art make manifest promises that, for many South Africans, remain deeply lodged, un-nameable, unarticulated and mostly un-witnessed pains?

Artworks show us states of being characterized by kinds of schizophrenia and overwhelming despair. At the same time, art also allows us to hang on to an essentially human need—the *promise* of a better future.
Wedding, 2013. 180 x 200
Woman Smoking (After JT), 2013. 150x180cm
Kaleidoscope Dreams, 2013. 180x370cm
Man with Pipe, 2013. 180x200cm
Woman and Baby, 2013. 60x100cm
Boy with Hat, 2013. 60x100cm
Prizefighters: Johnson, 2013. 55x100cm
On Showing Promise

Raël Jero Salley
Promises are at the centre of an old story. Walking in the woods one day, a princess came to a pond and sat to rest at its edge. She carried along her favorite toy, a golden ball that she tossed into the air, catching it as it fell. As she was tossing her beloved ball ever higher, she missed a catch, and the ball fell into the dark water. Staring hopelessly at the water, seeing only her own reflection, she offered to no one at all: ‘Oh no! If I could only get my ball back, I would exchange it for all of my riches.’ An unexpected someone peered out of the water. It was a frog that peeked out and said: ‘I do not want your riches, but if you will love me, and let me live with you and eat from your golden plate, I will bring you your ball.’ Of course, the princess thought this was nonsense. After all, the princess thought, ‘this silly frog can never even get out of the spring to visit me, though he may be able to get my ball for me, so I will promise him whatever he asks.’

Surprisingly, the frog makes good on his promise, retrieves the ball, to the delight of the princess. Running home gleefully, the princess promptly forgets about the frog. However, her own promise brings with it a dark cloud that follows her home, and its fulfillment came like rain. When the frog appears at her doorstep and she is forced to explain to her father what happened, the father compels her to honor her word. Despite her devious intention to the contrary, the reluctant princess is compelled by authority to keep her promise. In due course, this performance works out very well for the princess, because the fulfillment of her promise transforms her frog into the prince for which her heart longs. Her begrudging compliance with
her verbal agreement prompts the prince to make yet another promise: he
marries her, and they live happily ever after.

This little old story surfaces a unifying thesis that threads through
the notions of promises that follow herein. Promises are premised on a
peculiar paradox. Few moral judgments are more intuitively obvious and
more widely shared than that promises ought to be kept. A promise is a
promise, precisely because of this obligation, or even more strongly, the
*inevitability* of the thing or action vowed, and so the promise is set apart
from other kinds of pronouncements. However, with the pronouncement
of a promise—already implying or even containing its form and its future
fulfillment, is the possibility of the promise breaking. This possibility for
rupture is also created and foretold in the same moment the promise is
uttered. Promises are acts demanding further actions and fulfillments
in ways that are seemingly intuitive. Counter intuitively, we put in place
structures, customs and laws, severe penalties and labours, to neurotically
guard against the temptation of the promisor to renege on her word.

Contained in a promise is paradoxical certainty and fragility, which
makes it the object of fascination, theory, folklore and depiction. We are
often invited to step back, to shake free from the fascinating lure of the
directly visible but ‘illusory’ promise, to look, to question, to test. Our
capacity for recalling promises in situations of despair can take on a
redemptive or even messianic character. By contrast, promises supported
by unreasonable customs or rules, lacking consideration, that is, having
neither the value nor the substance of a contract, can have terrible con-
sequences, and despite their gravity, enact nothing more than caprice.

We all make promises and are recipients of promises. Whatever our
individual feelings on specific promises, what is undeniable is that often-
times the role of the promise in general is that it is a sort of idea that sus-
tains our efforts to fight hopelessness and to promote agreement. Noting
this, we are compelled to look again, to search for the contours of an idea that generates illusory judgments. This is the starting point, perhaps event the axiom of the promise exhibition, and this book.

Three aspects of the promise are addressed here: The first is a visible or clearly articulated or performed assurance, such as a statement common in wedding vows, e.g. ‘I promise to love you all the days of my life’. The second is a ‘symbolic’ promise embodied in language and forms. Not explicit pronouncements, symbolic promises are obligations so mysterious David Hume once described them as the most ‘incomprehensible operations’ that can be imagined. Hume pointed to the ability of a certain form of words, along with a certain intention, to change entirely the nature of an external object. This inexplicable promissory activity is not only at work in personal relationships, but is central to social and political life, ethical theories and speech acts. Our habitual promissory utterances might enforce relations of social domination in ways that reproduce forms of violence that underlie language, actions, and imposed universes of meaning. In this sense, a promise is a special sort of power. The third sort of promise is what I call ‘potential’ promise, or the often-unpredictable consequences of capacities yet to be developed. As a frog, the prince was in no position to offer neither marriage, nor a kingdom to the princess. His future promise was contingent upon the fulfillment of his own promise first, then of the princess’s word second, of which he had no guarantee. The catch is that at the moment of his bold first offer, the future cannot be perceived from the standpoint of that present. This third sort of promise, the potential promise, or perhaps ‘promise as potential,’ is therefore premised not on what is presently possible, but rather on a transformation of the now ‘normal’, accepted state of things, the present. As such, the potential promise is held as a projection into a future, which at the moment, extrapolating from the present, is logically impossible. The potential promise has the character
of a memory of a future, not yet possible. It is a counterpoint to the present, which retains stubbornly strong legacies of the past. Potential promises, latent in actions and utterances (like that of the bold frog) are important if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ eruptions of the symbolic—promises, protests, revolts, violent reactions to the present as it is now—because they are oriented toward a future that (in the present) is not yet possible.

When the Congress of the People in South Africa formally adopted the Freedom Charter in 1955, it followed consultation with hundreds of thousands of people about the South Africa they would like to live in. It also called for a new order of life based on the will of the people, proclaiming that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white,” although the struggle for democratic government continued for another four decades. Six decades later, I write this chapter in between daily bombardments by media fueled social, political and economic unrest, ‘crises’ that pop up all over South Africa and the world, resounding and reverberating with ‘no’ to present futures. Perhaps it is worth bearing in mind that a particular crisis only explodes into visibility as a result of complex struggles over broken promises.

There is something in the practice of rule making and rule breaking that seems essentially human and societal. In the structuring of society, promising is beneficial to both groups and individuals, as it is a means for building trust, cooperation and coordination. A promise can sustain one through remarkable peril, and the promise of something better, less violent, more harmonious, is precisely what is offered by the pursuit of ideals such as democracy and equality.

Juxtaposing lofty ideals with material facts support claims about promises that ought to be kept. From such promised outcomes, the maintenance of conventions that support them slips between being pragmatically pre-
Portrait (Biko), 2013. 20x30cm
ferred and dogmatically prescribed through moral obligation. Sometimes it seems we keep promises because it is a good idea to keep a promise. In other words, we maintain the good of the ideal, and too much depends on this habitual maintenance, to tolerate the considered disruption of its path. The obligation, being good simply because of another ‘good’ it supports, is often soon reified as a ‘good’ in itself.

The cover story of The Guardian on 15 August 2014, for example, was ‘South Africa: two years after Marikana massacre, families still wait for justice’. This offered documentation on how in 2012, people died when police opened fire on striking miners, killing 34 and injuring 78. The police cover-up was a national scandal. Reporting on events from the Marikana commission of inquiry, the article recounted how relatives of victims spoke of men ‘with names, faces and families’, and about ‘what they left behind, what can’t be replaced’. The outrages and protests immediately following the events of 2012 had quieted, and life in South Africa returned to ‘normal’, as if the passing of time repairs the individual and collective trauma of wrongful death by police authority.

This ‘legitimate’ use of force by the police disintegrates the promise of democracy, while as the same time being justified by ‘the rule of law’. As with the promise, the legitimacy is intolerant to its own disruption. The law was used to mediate the tension between the promise of democratic freedom, and the promise of profit. With this and other broken promises, twenty years into its future present, South Africa re-emerges as the ‘heart of darkness’, a geographic and imaginary site of trauma that cannot be confronted head on but resonates beyond territorial borders on screens and papers across the globe, cut and caricatured for mass consumption.

Do we need further proof that promises are institutional artifacts, and thus promissory obligations are institutional obligations? As institutional artifacts they are over-determined by political obligations, and grounded in
the same manner as all such considerations. To wit, institutions are comprised of sets of rules that prescribe and proscribe certain behaviors for the participants in the institution. The dicta of the rules are the contents of moral obligations, which lead to, in a Rawlsian sense, at least two conditions on an action in order to be an institutional obligation (Rawls 1972: 112). First, the institution whose rule calls for the action must be decided to be just. Second, the individual person must have ‘voluntarily accepted the benefits’ of the institution. South Africa’s response to the first condition must be taken into account; by some measures it is the world’s most unequal society. The movement of global capitalism, generating wealth for nations, is setting even high-income countries on a new trajectory of growing inequality. In South Africa, the opening of local markets to the world has enabled both the creation of wealth and the deepening of institutionalized racial inequality. The jarring juxtaposition of symbols of affluence and the abject poverty of an overwhelmingly black underclass takes on particular characteristics in this (post)apartheid context. South Africa is home to generations of disillusioned and angry citizens, for the electoral cycle and its concatenation of promises are inadequate to process tensions. Protest is often used to give voice to demands to fulfill what, since 1994, is left still unfulfilled. Democratic freedom still lies beyond the possible, as a potential promise. Thembisa Nkuzo, an eyewitness in Marikana, observes: ‘All that has happened under democracy is that those who once fought for us have become rich by acting as our oppressors’.

Instead of confronting promise directly, the pictures of promise included in this volume cast sideways glances. Having stumbled upon an almost mystifying paradox in direct address or confrontation with the problem of the promise, a more playful or imaginative look offers a new opportunity for understanding. Pictures, insofar as their production is (seriously) playful and imaginative, offer a different kind of artillery for getting at promises.
The place and importance of imagination can be surfaced with reference to dialectical dynamics. The fundamental dynamic of any promise lies in the dialectic of Identity and Difference to the degree to which such a promissory act aims at imagining, and sometimes even at realizing, a system radically different from the one at hand, of the moment (Hegel in Jameson, 2005: xii). Our wildest imaginings are not only reflective collages of experience. They are also often constructs made up of bits and pieces of the here and now, traumatically overpowering us, preventing us from thinking, or worse, dismissed altogether for being ‘unrepresentable.’ A conceptual and artistic stance on promise might reduce the traumatic impact and add a critical element that is intelligible.

The imaginative power of the promise, unearthed in theory, may enable a space from which to rethink the process of history not just from the point of view of the ‘past-then’ and/or the ‘here-now’ (or significant to South Africa, the point of view of the colonizer), but also from the standpoint of what is ‘absent-now’ and/or ‘future-possible’ (and the standpoint of the experiences of those subjected to colonization in the name of history). For this to make sense, we need distinctions—between the discernable spatial location of what we see, and our moral feeling about it.

An appropriate approach to my subject seems to be one that permits sideways glances. Bergson’s idea for duration seems both helpful and significant, because Bergson offers feeling as a tool, a metric, for understanding. The feeling of sympathy, for Bergson, is a moral feeling (Bergson 1889, 2001: 18–19). Our experience of sympathy begins, according to Bergson, with our putting ourselves in the place of others, feeling their pain. But, if this were all, the feeling would inspire in us abhorrence of others, and we would want to avoid them, not help them. We noticed a similar relation between the frog and the princess: the frog sympathizes throughout, through the lens of its own pain; the princess is in a position
of privilege, and does not (or cannot). Bergson notes the feeling of horror may be at the root of sympathy. We realize that if we do not help this poor wretch, it is going to turn out that, when we need help, no one will come to our aide. Perhaps this is part of the king’s wisdom when he orders the princess to honor her promise. There is a “need” to help the suffering, but for Bergson, these two phases—horror and sympathy—are only “inferior forms of pity.”

In contrast, true pity involves not so much fearing pain as desiring it. It is as if “nature” has committed a great injustice and what we want is to be seen as not complicit, even in opposition to it. Describing the essence of pity as a need for self-abasement, “an aspiration downward” into pain, Bergson describes the result of this painful aspiration is a sense of being superior and the realization that we can do without certain sensuous goods. We manage to dissociate ourselves from the base object, and in the end, one feels humility. One feels humbled after being stripped of sensuous goods. I am cautious of overstating the relevance of Bergson’s description—the point is that there is a heterogeneity of feelings, and yet they cannot be neatly separated, nor synthesized. Furthermore, one does not negate the other. Duration is both continuity of progress and heterogeneity, for Bergson. The notion is useful here because it implies a conservation of the past in the present. One moment is added onto the old ones, and thus, when the next moment occurs, it is added onto all the other old ones plus the one that came immediately before.

The question, of course, is what kind of description is intended here? It is not a realistic or naturalistic description of the situation, but rather an analysis that produces an ‘inexistent (virtual) space of its own’. What appears to the viewer is not an appearance sustained by a ‘depth of reality’ behind it, but a decontextualized appearance that coincides with real being in the world.
My aim is to avoid a fake sense of urgency or the anti-theoretical or anti-intellectual edge that comes with the idea of looking or acting unthinkingly. Against the urgencies of the brief moment, my critical analyses of a promise offer little information, no clear solution, confused overlaps of time, no practical advice, nor ‘light at the end of the tunnel’. These pictures resist the temptation to engage directly, in favor of a sensitive, slow and critical inquiry.

Bringing our earlier example to an ending, the king (the father of the princess) in this example, intuitively understood a cardinal property of the promise: whatever agreement is made ought to be kept. Or, if it is not kept, something of similar value should be given in its stead. You may keep your favorite toy, but it will cease to bring the desired result unless you give something else, of equal or greater value, away. As it is passed along, the gift may be given back, but this is not essential. In fact, the happy ending of the story is when the promised gift turns into some new, third kind of present. The princess’ obedience fetched her a handsome prince. The only essential is this: the promise must be fulfilled so the momentum of the gift continues. There are other forms of acts and property that stand still or mark a boundary, but the gift must keep going.

Throughout this narrative, from beginning to end, happiness, in fact, is what the sensible frog offers. The happiness moves from the golden ball to the princess to the frog prince, to we imagine, an entire family and nation. The rolling momentum of the gift is transferred through a promise, and once fulfilled, the outcome is happiness ever after.

My hope is that some images of PROMISE give a glimpse of a present past, blur the distinction between the detail in photographic media and that of painting, and maybe offer a more important glimpse at a future present. Perhaps these works will suggest to you, as they have to me, that when the only truly practical thing to do is to fulfill one’s promises, doing so can—in
both idealistic and material ways—magically transform both our world and
us. All of this with the knowledge that if there is in fact a happily ever after,
at this moment it is incomprehensible.

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Acknowledgements

This book has benefited from so many people’s advice, insight and support—in part because it has taken me longer to finish than I would have liked—that I cannot possibly list them all. The project’s first steps were taken under the auspices of research funding received from the University of Cape Town in 2010, and developed at the Michaelis School of Art, in the context of the University’s Africa Month founded by Thandabantu Nhlapo. The folks at the South African National Galleries made the project possible, special thanks to Wayne Alexander, Riason Naidoo, Hayden Proud and Annette Laubser in Educational Programmes, part of the IZIKO Museums of South Africa. My research into art, culture, history and society was enabled by time at the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago until 2009, first as a student, then as a lecturer. The artworks and texts are inseparable from the various ideas established in those learning and teaching occasions, moments that are, for me, unforgettable. I’m grateful to research and production assistance from Richard Mabula, James Macdonald, Tim Leibbrandt, Kirsten Lilford, Abel Mputing, Simphiwe Ndzube, Jody Paulsen, Gabrielle Samson, Anna Stielau, Joshua Williams; to expert technical support from Stanley Amon, Kurt Campbell, Nadja Daehnke, Moeneeb Dalwai, Unathi Kondile, Kyle Moreland, David Southwood and Jared Thorne; beyond-the-call-of-duty effort from Kamey Butler; sponsorship from the effervescent Peter Wheetman of Societi Bistro; Irma Albers, Unathi Mantshongo and Simoné Benjamin of Distell beverages; Menzi Cele of Paddington Station PR; for the musical genius of Bokani Dyer and Shabaka Hutchings; and the irrepressible ebullience of Lauren Hermanus.
It would be impossible to give name to all of the individuals whose suggestions have been refused, inverted, or silently appropriated for this project. Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg were extraordinarily generous with advice and encouragement—it was one sunlit conversation with them that motivated me to take this book project seriously. Candida Alvarez, James Elkins, Kerry James Marshall, W.J.T. Mitchell, Stephan Palmié and Joel Snyder have stayed in my corner, showing me more ways of looking at the world. Huey Copeland, Jean and John Comoroff, Lewis Gordon, Fred Moten, Steven Nelson, Chris Holmes Smith and Krista Thompson have tried to make me smarter about cultural politics and life in general; Joost Bosland, Imraan Coovadia, Thembinkosi Goniwe, Gail Hughes, Shose Kessi, Zethu Matebeni, Achille Mbembe, Julie McGee, Jay Pather, Berni Searle, and Hank Willis Thomas keep me aware of what I don’t know but what is important.

I appreciate my colleagues at the University of Cape Town and elsewhere, and special thanks go to the students who helped me figure this project out. Though they may be surprised to find their names here, I have learned in various ways from Polly Alakija, Dawoud Bey, Omar Badsha, Lerato Bereng, McArthur Binion, Ian Bourland, Lisa Brock, Sabine Broeck, Dineo Bopape, Shauna Brown Leung, Gregory Coates, Angela Davis, Esther De Rothschild, Mark Dion, Pam Dlungwana, John Dobard, Darby English, Okwui Enwezor, Kate Ezra, Theaster Gates, Harry Garuba, Raimi Gbadamosi, Khwesi Ghuele, Michael Godby, Ramón Grosfoguel, Patricia Hayes, Hamani Henderson, Gail Hughes, Rashid Johnson, Mwenya Kabwe, Robin D.G. Kelley, Shose Kessi, Sandra Klopper,
Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, George Mahashe, Khanyisile Mbongwa, Santu Mofokeng, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Zanele Muholi, Celia Murray, Gabi Ncgobo, Steven Nelson, Nadipha Ntambo, Kwame Nimako, John Peffer, Kymberly Pinder, Johannes Phokela, Ciraj Rasool, Ed Schad, Josh Sellers, Penny Siopis, Nick Shepherd, Stephen Small, David Southwood, Tavares Strachan, Sherod Thaxton, Jill Trappler, Kemang Wa Lehulere. Special thanks are due for the inspiration, encouragement and excellence of two friends who have joined the ancestors: Colin Richards and Unathi Sigenu. It is my remarkable good fortune to learn and grow with George Gibbs, Tanya Tyler and the Salley family: Mazie and Pamela, Jerry and John, Ron and Will, who have always and already, been there.
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We all make promises and are recipients of promises. Whatever our individual feelings on specific promises, what is undeniable is that oftentimes the role of the promise in general is that it is a sort of idea that sustains our efforts to fight hopelessness and to promote agreement. Noting this, we are compelled to look again, to search for the contours of an idea that generates illusory judgments. This is the starting point of this book.

The imaginative power of a promise is intense. It opens a space from which to think and rethink history—not just from the point of view of the ‘past-then’ and/or the ‘here-now’ (or significant to Africa, the point of view of the colonizer), but also from the standpoint of what is ‘absent-now’ and/or ‘future-possible’ (prioritizing the experiences of people colonized in the name of history). For these ideas to make sense, we need distinctions to guide us through the discernable, spatial locations of what we see, and our feelings about it.

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