

South Africa - The Bigger Picture

An Interview with Conrad Botes & Anton Kannemeyer

Vanina GÉRÉ

Conrad Botes and Anton Kannemeyer are two important figures in contemporary political art. Visual artists as well as co-writers of the comics *Bitterkomix*, these two South-African artists came of age in the early days of Post-Apartheid South-Africa. In the following interview, we discover among other things how their art evolved from a scathing social satire against race issues in South Africa to a more global criticism of racism, political interference and military violence.

An introduction by the interviewer precedes the interview. A longer version of the interview can be found in the PDF files.

Upon the occasion of *Sharp Sharp Johannesburg*, the fourth edition of a yearly series of exhibitions and events organized by the Gaîté lyrique in Paris and focusing on a particular world capital – the first three editions centered on Berlin, Istanbul and Portland – the author was fortunate enough to interview Conrad Botes and Anton Kannemeyer, two luminaries in contemporary political art. In the interview, the globally renowned South-African co-founders of underground comics *Bitterkomix* discuss their artistic training and influences, their current and earlier work, its international reception and the controversies it has spawned, as well as the delicate matter of making political art – among many other things.

Showing comics that are also recognized as ‘high’ art is a bit of a damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t business. When promoted within the expected contexts of the bookstore or the library, on the one hand, their visual impact tends to be lessened – and one wishes for more proper institutional recognition. On the other hand, exhibit comic books in a museum, and you will hear rants against such fetishization of the medium – or on the contrary, complaints that the works appear too ‘illustrative’ or ‘narrative’ in comparison to the other artworks displayed nearby. At the core of the matter lie many

(still) unresolved binary oppositions of ‘serious vs. pop,’ ‘high vs. low,’ ‘elitist vs. democratic’ art, etc.

This kind of tension has never been an issue for transmediality veterans such as Anton Kannemeyer and Conrad Botes, a.k.a. Joe Dog and Konradski, co-writers of the outrageous, ruthless and necessary *Bitterkomix* – and the Gaîté lyrique’s transversal space turned out perfect to accommodate their work within the pluridisciplinary *Sharp Sharp, Johannesburg* program.

Now recognized artists, Botes and Kannemeyer are exhibited all over the globe for their fine art work as well as their comics – Kannemeyer for instance is represented by no less than Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, along his representation by the Stevenson gallery in Johannesburg (the latter also represents Botes.) The duo’s collaboration has spanned over more than two decades, and as they artistically came of age in the early days of Post-Apartheid South-Africa, they emerged in a context where the division between fine arts and comics was not very clear-cut – mostly because, well, before they made their remarkable entrance on the South-African cultural stage, the latter was virtually devoid of any adult comic books culture.

Since its début in 1992 as a relatively obscure underground comic, *Bitterkomix* is now regarded as one the most powerful testimonies as to the way comics can deliver a political message.

At first mostly offering a scathing social satire directed against race issues in South Africa – sometimes turning into dark tales of the country’s history in the case of Botes’s stories – and what both artists identify as the hypocrisy pervading the extremely morally repressive Afrikaner society, the work addresses the issues plaguing the still young South-African democracy like corruption. Yet, their work has also evolved towards a more global criticism of racism, political interference and military violence, as in Joe Dog’s *Pappa in Afrika* (2010), a vitriolic riff on Hergé’s *Tintin’s Adventures in the Congo*. Although Joe Dog/Kannemeyer originally started to borrow from Hergé because the latter’s style felt right to tell a personal story about his own childhood at the time (*Sonny*, 1995), Kannemeyer’s constant pastiche of earlier art forms brilliantly fits the purpose of suggesting how the (colonial) past keeps haunting the present. His use of Hergé’s “clear line” also makes his depiction of racist stereotyping all the more forceful – holding a mirror to the Belgian master’s brand of condescending racism. More generally, Kannemeyer’s crisp style is a most potent vehicle to convey the horrific dimension of his all too real subject matters.

Although just as chilling, Botes’s art is more expressionistic in style and darker in mood; endowed with the surreal aspect of nightmares, it recalls one of both artists’ favorite sources of inspiration – Francisco de Goya. (And in the past, the juxtaposition of Botes and Kannemeyer’s very different kinds of draftsmanship has most accurately conveyed the kind of psychosocial schizophrenia that stems from a system relying on racial segregation as Apartheid.)

Goya's influence directly appeared in Kannemeyer and Botes's mural at the Gaîté Lyrique. Entitled *City of God*, this monumental work, especially made for the exhibition, was composed of several panels – a reminiscence of the sequential arrangement typical of comics, while in terms of scale and visual impact, it conjured the tradition of political murals in urban centers. One of those panels, borrowing from Goya's "Sleep of Reason," – often quoted in appropriationist contemporary art – shows a stereotypical 'white male' in his bed, in the midst of a nightmare, while a stereotypical 'black male' lies wide awake his feet, on what looks like a hippo's skin. Both seem equally scared of one another, although at different levels – consciously vs. subconsciously, which underlines the way oppression feeds on self-victimization¹.

In another exhilaratingly disturbing panel, a brooding Christ, surrounded pin-ups and soldiers, holds no less than a giant erect penis in his arms – the articulation between white patriarchy and the instrumentalization of religion for repressive purposes are often targeted by Botes and Kannemeyer's devastating use of humor and the grotesque.

Although the Gaîté lyrique mural was the team's first show as fine artists in France, this was by no means their introduction to the French public: after a first appearance at the Angoulême comics festival in 1999, they were officially invited there in 2009, on the occasion of the launch of the French edition of *Bitterkomix*². While *Bitterkomix* had gone rather unnoticed in 1999 – partly because it was categorized as underground comics, and also, most likely because of the 'language barrier' issue – it certainly drew a lot of attention in 2009, especially after a controversy triggered by an attempt to have certain images censored, on account of their sexually explicit contents.

Bitterkomix and other works by the Botes-Kannemeyer team (namely *Gif*, "Poison," a sex comic released in 1994) certainly involve many graphic depictions of sex. Those can be in turn sarcastically funny or painfully violent – sex abuse is also on the artists' long list of nemeses – but they are almost always highly political. Here one must remember how the representation of sex has historically provided a powerful tool for critique in repressively conservative sociopolitical contexts – Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman having set a powerful precedent for such practices with their underground comix. No wonder then that the South-African duo, avid readers of *Raw* in the 1980s, chose to spell 'Bitterkomix' with an 'x.'

Their art is not only about the long shadow of Apartheid over South Africa, but also about the way organized fear and intolerance can damage each and every one of us.

The beginnings

¹ Racism is frequently described in its psychological dimension as both the product of and the effect on the characters' paranoid imaginations in *Bitterkomix*.

² Published by L'Association, the book includes essays by Andy Mason, Gregory Kerr and Jean-Christophe Menu.

Vanina Géré: I'd like to go back in time and ask you a few questions about your beginnings in 1992. I understand that when you began writing *Bitterkomix*, there were no comics for adults in South Africa, only comic books for children. And since you took up the Tintin imagery, I wanted to ask you what children's comics were in circulation back then. What comics would children read?

Conrad Botes: Comics like *Asterix*, or *Tintin*. Also, American comics were available in stores, like the Marvel comics...

Anton Kannemeyer: And remember that South Africa was linked economically to Britain, so there were also a lot of British comics, like *2000AD*...

Vanina Géré: Had you come across American underground comix – Crumb's, Spiegelmann's?

Anton Kannemeyer: We discovered that while we were studying.

Conrad Botes: *Raw* was published by Penguin, and so we could find it in a few bookshops. Anton, also, after he finished school, came to Europe, where his brother stayed, and so Anton introduced me to all the European comics. When I met Anton, he sort of introduced me to European comics, underground comics.

Anton Kannemeyer: French comics like Moebius's – *Métal hurlant*... In a way, when I was a teenager, some of that stuff filtered through. It was very difficult to get that kind of stuff because of censorship – but in Johannesburg, in Hillbrow (close to the city centre) for instance, there was a bookstore where they got into these weird publications, that we frequently went to with my brother, and we would buy whatever we saw there. Anything that was comic-related we bought.

Vanina Géré: What was the name of the bookstore?

Anton Kannemeyer: Estoril Books. And the thing is anybody from South Africa in the 1980s would know Estoril books in Johannesburg, it was *the* bookshop. And somehow, because it was small, it sort of fell under the radar of the censorship board. The thing is that it was such small-scale – you know lots of boxes would come in, so not everything was checked: it was the big things that were checked, you know, like, Stanley Kubrick's movie *The Shining*.

Vanina Géré: *The Shining* was censored?

Anton Kannemeyer: Yes, you would see the scene where the woman gets out of the bath and there's this big blur on her boobs. So you can understand the story, but you're not allowed to see the body of the woman. But I think this kind of censorship was common in communist countries as well.

Vanina Géré: Going back to censorship, body parts and sex, there's an image in your *City of God* mural of Jesus Christ holding a very, very large penis, surrounded by these very graphic-like drawings. I was reminded of Keith Haring's *The Great White Way*, which is this huge painting in the shape of a giant erect penis, with characters fighting and doing all sorts of atrocities to one another. Of course, the giant penis can be seen as the allegory of white supremacy as the source of global evil [and the title is also a reference to the nickname given to NYC's Broadway]. And Haring made some political images against Apartheid, so I was wondering if you were interested in his work to some extent, or if there were any correspondences?

Anton Kannemeyer: I am quite interested in his work, because there are some obvious comics kind of line references. And also he did street art: when Conrad and I started, we both did stencils and spray paintings on the street, so we were quite into that. I think at the art school where we were, he was pretty much admired.

Art education

Vanina Géré: So what kind of art education did you receive?

Conrad Botes: I wanted to study art in fine arts, but to get a job in the arts and do something else, I started graphic design. And then afterwards, Anton and I went into a Master's in Fine Arts. But then we were very much into doing comics, practical-involved comics, and the fine arts subject that we wrote about was comics.

Anton Kannemeyer: Yes, but I think our department was structured in such a way that we were very close to the fine arts students. I mean, we had the same art history courses.

Conrad Botes: We didn't do practical arts so much, you know, we could choose subjects: screen-printing, etching, and we did philosophy of art.

Anton Kannemeyer: We did a lot of illustration-oriented techniques.

Conrad Botes: And drawing, lots of drawing.

Anton Kannemeyer: I think, personally, because a lot of artists or comic artists feel they could switch to exhibiting in galleries and become more fine artists, I always felt we had a big advantage in that respect, in the way that we studied was that there was so much mixing. And a lot of our interests in illustration were in fine arts – we looked at Lucian Freud, etc. We were studying things like Dürer and Rembrandt's techniques when we learnt drawing, you know. So in a way, it wasn't a commercial design and illustration background, whereas I think that for a lot of people trained in commercial design, there wouldn't have been space for the kind of stuff that I made... So already, right from the beginning, I thought our education was already pivoting away from commercial art.

When we were in our first year, actually, we were painting with oil, when really we were not supposed to, but we were thinking, “It doesn’t matter.”

Vanina Géré: And what about your art history courses, were they your typically traditional art history curriculum – starting with the Ancient art, then Medieval art, then the Renaissance, etc.?

Conrad Botes: ... yes, and Modernism, Postmodernism, etc.

Anton Kannemeyer: We also had a program in philosophy and philosophy of art – art theory, rather than art history. We got a strong branding from that. I think that maybe, where other departments were pretty descriptive, ours gave us a lot of freedom. They were kind of keen to see where we were going. Even our lecturer said she didn’t know anything about comics, that we taught her everything. She even ended up publishing in *Bitterkomix* – her name is Paddy Bouma – she had regular stories. It was kind of interesting you know, because I know students want you to teach them everything and if you criticize their work they’ll answer “Well, but you didn’t teach that to me.” Whereas we were working on a completely triangular basis, because none of our lecturers knew anything about comics, so we just looked at comics and thought we’d do it this way.

Comics & Politics

Vanina Géré: Was there any space for art as a political tool at your school – were some of your instructors politically involved? Were political issues debated at your school?

Anton Kannemeyer: Yes. But a lot of the advice we got – for instance, when we made a comic about our repressed Afrikaner past, some of the lecturers would say, “This is self-indulgent, why don’t you make a comics about the black people living in the townships?” And we thought, “we can’t do that, because we don’t know – the people who should make comics about the townships are the people living in the townships.” So in that respect I thought some of the advice we got was not always the best.

Conrad Botes: There was a lot of political awareness on campus at the time. But I think in our school itself it wasn’t so much promoted or encouraged. In fact, our comics were targeted for not being African enough, for being European-derived. But it was very ironic that when a South-African political activist visited campus, and our department more specifically, we were asked to bring our political comics, so they could be shown as evidence that things were happening. Double standards, you know. They wanted us to make comics that looked African, you know.

Vanina Géré: Could you explain what you mean by an ‘African’ look?

Conrad Botes: Well, like I said, they thought our comics looked European.

Vanina Géré: So it was the medium of comics that was an issue.

Conrad Botes: Yes. We just felt we wanted to draw in the way that our idols did, like Moebius, for instance – we just tried to be like them. And they said, “No, you must be innovative, etc.” But what they didn’t realize, I think, was the potential of comics as a vehicle. So they didn’t encourage what we were realizing ourselves – they were encouraging us in a formal level instead of an intellectual level.

Anton Kannemeyer: The thing is, you can look at political involvement in many different levels. The way I experienced the department was that it was a space where they broke down the rules that existed in society. In society, it was a very conservative background, and this didn’t exist in the department. There was a lecturer there who would insist that we call him by his first name rather than “Professor,” which for me was a level of politicism already. And I know that a lot of them were involved in some exhibitions that were closed down by the government. The head of the department’s sons were very actively involved in anti-government and anti-Apartheid campaigns, and they were persecuted by the military police. So there was a strong presence of political activism... But for me, you know, the thing is on the one hand you can say, “I’m going to run out and throw a bomb somewhere,” or you can say, “I’m going to draw a comic.” Some people interpret the fact of drawing a comic as self-indulgent, thinking what you should be doing is running outside shouting “Fuck the police,” etc. We also did that; we were part of the anti-conscription campaign. We got called up every six months for conscription, and then we had to send forms to prove that we were still studying. That’s actually one of the reasons why we studied for so long, just to stay out of the army. But I think in the end we were better at drawing comics than throwing bombs.

Conrad Botes: And then conscription was abolished.

Vanina Géré: So there were definitely political statements within the art faculty and at the university.

Anton Kannemeyer: Oh, absolutely.

Conrad Botes: But that was also on a national scale – the early nineties and the late eighties bulked towards the end of the regime.

Anton Kannemeyer: Especially in the late 80s, I think protest was more vocal in universities – the rest of the country were afraid of what was going to happen or come in South Africa.

Vanina Géré: When you started writing comics, what was the South African art stage like? Because what we hear of now is big names like Marlene Dumas or William Kentridge, for instance.

Conrad Botes: I don’t recall the arts being politically controversial... Political art was something that emerged in the late 80s-early 90s.

Anton Kannemeyer: Well, there was Sue Williamson and Gavin Young... I remember there was a lot of posters and woodblocks...

Conrad Botes: I'm speaking for myself here, but I wasn't aware of half of it – it wasn't so obvious in the street...

Anton Kannemeyer: You must remember that censorship was pretty much still in force. When we started writing comics, people warned us and said, 'Listen, you're going to get censored with those comics.' But first of all, we published our first comic in 1989, with a very, very alternative Afrikaans paper, called *Stet*. But it was a very small print run. And it was circulated under a very small group of people.

Vanina Géré: How many copies were printed?

Anton Kannemeyer: 600 copies. After that, I think we continued publishing with them for two years, and then we brought out *Bitterkomix*. I think by the time *Bitterkomix* came out in 1992, things had changed, you know. The late eighties were a very troubled period – in 1985-86 there was the state of emergency in South Africa, everything was very, very tense, people were very afraid of the police and being spied on, or whatever. Then in February 1989 Mandela was released; and later in 1989 there was a referendum and the NP actually had to – they didn't have any money, you know, because of all the economic sanctions against South Africa – so they had to have this referendum. And then there was a five-year plan, at the end of which in 1994 there would be the first real democratic elections. So I think that in 1992, it was the end of the plan, things started relaxing. Things started disintegrating, you could see that. That's why in 1994 we made the sex comic magazine GIF [*Poison*], it was really like dropping a bomb. People were so offended by that. I had personal friends who never spoke to me again after that – they were so offended.

Vanina Géré: It seems that for *Poison*, you used a more expressionistic style than for *Bitterkomix*, which has more of a clear-line aesthetic.

Anton Kannemeyer: No, maybe what you've seen from *Poison* is images made by my brother – you see my brother worked with us and he came from a fine arts background, and his drawings were always more expressive. You also have to realize we were experimenting a lot – for the first four *Bitterkomix* there was a lot of experimentation in style, form. Especially *Bitterkomix* #3: it is a comic that at the time, when we brought it out, I was very unsure about, because it was so experimental. There was a section in it called "Abstract Comics," which was just lines and marks. There were two other artists – my brother, a fine artist, and a woman, who was actually a student of ours. Her style was to make those large charcoal drawings, that were not the traditional thing you would see with comics, you know. So there was a lot of experimentation, and I think we were trying to find our voice, really. *Bitterkomix* #1 was really fine. Then there was a lot of reaction on that. And for *Bitterkomix* #2 we thought we had to make a comic that answered these reflections on *Bitterkomix* #1, so *Bitterkomix* #2 we both felt was a very bad comic.

Maybe it's like with a writer who published his first book and then people say all sorts of nice things about it, but then his second book is shit [laughs].

Conrad Botes: All of a sudden, we had to try to make quality work.

Anton Kannemeyer: But then *Bitterkomix #3* was really an answer to *Bitterkomix #2* by being very experimental. Conrad drew stories that ran halfway and then he stopped and said "to be continued" and they weren't. I worked in various styles and my brother was making these wild, outrageous comics that didn't have panels. And then *Bitterkomix #4* actually was the first comic that both Conrad and I saw as something that was really value for money. I think our voice solidified, if you want. In the French *Bitterkomix*, there is a four-page story from those comics, which was pretty nice to see printed in color, because obviously when we started, we couldn't print in color.

Vanina Géré: Were all the first editions of *Bitterkomix* in black and white?

Anton Kannemeyer: Yes.

Artistic Influences

Vanina Géré: You showed a great image yesterday during your talk at Gaîté lyrique, and you said it was a revision from another image for printing – and you mentioned that you made the top part clearer and more bare than in the original image so there would be maximum impact in terms of visual communication. I want to ask you if you started pastiching Hergé because he invented the clear line, which actually came from advertising and commercial art, or if it was because of the racist contents in Hergé's comics?

Anton Kannemeyer: The top panel that you're referring to was drawn by me, and the bottom by Conrad. In terms of style, I think we like the clash of the two different styles – the more painterly style that Conrad uses as opposed to the clear style that I use. But the use of Tintin's *ligne claire*, for me, started with *Bitterkomix #5*, when I made a comic called in English "Sonny" that was actually very personal. When I started dealing with it, I thought, "How can I draw this?" because it was a very difficult topic for me. It dealt with when I was a small kid, you know, so the style of Tintin felt right because that is what I read when I was a small kid. It felt right going back to the world of Tintin; so at that time it didn't have anything to do with *Tintin in the Congo*. It had to do with the fact that I felt that through this way of drawing, I could go back to my own childhood and draw from there. But then obviously, that story has very dark shadows, lots of black to convey the atmosphere. The clarity just felt it to be a truthful style.

Conrad Botes: Going back to that cover, I would just like to mention that for both Anton and I, one of the influences of that image was Lynch's movie, *Blue Velvet* – cutting the lawn, with a focus on the insects. You know, in South Africa during the 80s white people wanted to wipe everything clean as if nothing was really wrong, but meanwhile, there's

this underground feel that everything's going to explode. So that's what the comics was about, you know, this quiet, clean surface, and underneath, all this turmoil.

Anton Kannemeyer: It's almost also like the towns themselves, you know, in the towns everything was very clean, and then there was curfew for black people, so you had this clean town that had been scraped clean by black people all day long and then they had to go back to the townships, where there were lots of people living in terrible conditions, without any parks for kids, or swimming pools, or anything! It was just little houses, mud streets... Once again, it's almost like the insects and the appearance of everything being white and clean on the other side.

Vanina Géré: You mentioned Moebius and Lynch as influences – I wanted to ask you about other artistic influences, or which contemporary artists you admire.

Conrad Botes: There are lots of them. But one person that has always been incredibly important for my work, and that I always go back to very often, is Goya - his *Disasters of War*, his etching series – for me, that's a major influence. Obviously, also French comics, and Robert Crumb...

Anton Kannemeyer: There are many, for instance Jacques Tardi. But there's a woman artist from the late 70s who drew these black and white comics – Chantal Montellier – she draws in a very clear line, and she made a couple of comics that really stayed with me for long – in one of them a shopping center shuts down because there's an atom bomb that falls on Paris and everybody lives in the shopping center and it becomes a sort of fascist government. I've only read three or four comics, but I really enjoyed her work. Of course there were lots of American comics artists as well – the guys from *Raw* – Kaz, Charles Burns, etc.

Conrad Botes: We were also interested in *Raw* because it incorporated alternative prints...

Anton Kannemeyer: But also *Raw* spilled over into the fine arts realm, it wasn't just the traditional comic long story. We were also very much interested in Gary Panter's sketchbooks. The rawness of it...

Conrad Botes: There's some amount of self-indulgence to that. I love reading other people's stories, I love reading other people's drawing books. It gives you a sort of an uncensored, unstrained view of someone else's work.

Vanina Géré: Have you read Chris Ware's drawing books? These are very much uncensored.

Conrad Botes: Oh yes, they're great. Also, I loved Ware's stories, like Chester Brown.

Vanina Géré: So your influences are mostly comic artists.

Anton Kannemyer: Also people like David Lynch. David Hitchcock, for me, is absolutely incredible.

Conrad Botes: And David Hockney.

Anton Kannemyer: Yes; you know, Hockney made all these lawns with the sprinklers, all these pools – a lot of things that we identify with white South-African suburban life. His take on it is completely different, of course. People like Lucian Freud are also very important to us.

Conrad Botes: And Daniel Richter's paintings.

Anton Kannemyer: But that's more recent. But if you asked me what my favorite artist was, I would say Rembrandt, you know – because of his combination of black and white in his etchings and his drawings.

Conrad Botes: Goya is my absolute favorite, I kind of *feel* his work.

Anton Kannemyer: Goya's themes, his political involvement are probably what makes him the bigger artist to us.

Conrad Botes: And also the way that he draws, I really appreciate the greatness of his technique.

Anton Kannemyer: But the way that Rembrandt sketches those figures are just incredible – his use of dark and light – well, we can't stop fighting about who's the greatest artist [laughs].

Conrad Botes: I saw an exhibition in Madrid in 1991 about the influence of Goya and Rembrandt's etchings on Picasso's etchings. And a Picasso, with either a Rembrandt or a Goya next to it, sort of disappeared. I bought various facsimile reproductions – notably of *The Sleep of Reason*.

Vanina Géré: You do quote *The Sleep of Reason* in the mural at the Gaîté lyrique.

Conrad Botes: There's another reference to Goya in that mural. In the first panel, there's the artist coming out of the ground, and he's making a drawing of *The Disasters of War*.

Vanina Géré: I am aware that the mural was first supposed to be on paper, but then, you decided to have it printed on fabric?

Conrad Botes: Well you know, it would have been these huge drawings that would have been shipped to France, so I just thought about issues like insurance, and so on.

Anton Kannemyer: It was practical consideration, also because the Gaîté lyrique is not really a gallery museum.

Vanina Géré: Are you familiar with all the artists and creators who are represented by the exhibition?

Anton Kannemyer: Some of them, for example Zanele Muholi, she's with the same gallery as we are in South Africa. It's always interesting traveling and all of a sudden you meet South-African artists and you're like, 'Oh, what do you do?'

Conrad Botes: The thing with South African artists that I've met like that – Rosa Berlin or Jane Alexander – is that we're more exhibited together in an international context.

Anton Kannemyer: I did a presentation of *Bitterkomix* once, in Zürich, and there were a large group of black women artists from South Africa, and somebody from the Swiss audience got up and asked what the Black artists thought of my work, the specific work that I showed, and this one Black woman replied, 'This is the kind of work that needs to come out of the Black community and be addressed' – the specific story was about sexual abuse, and they say it's a big problem in the Black community – but it's not something that I can make and sort of try to impose on somebody: it needs to come from the inside.

Vanina Géré: I saw that your work had been exhibited in group shows along with William Kentridge, for instance. Since he has a very graphic approach to fine arts – doing animations, etc. – did you think the parallel was relevant? Or was this just a case of the eternal, endless syndrom of showing artists nationally, when artists from the same country are lumped together, regardless of their styles and sensibilities? What do you think of national group shows?

Conrad Botes: Well, sometimes it amounts to lumping artists together, but some other times it can produce an interesting mix.

Anton Kannemyer: Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

Conrad Botes: Some of the most interesting shows that I've been in – and I'm sure you too, Anton – is where the work is not mentioned because it is South African but because of the nature of the work. For instance, there was an exhibition in Sweden, called *Victims and Martyrs* that I was included in, and there were other artists from South Africa in it. I found it was a lot more satisfying to be in an exhibition like that than to be in one of those "South African" group shows.

Anton Kannemyer: There was a group show in Helsinki of South African art, and the curators chose things that they felt would work together, and it thought that was very fine, that worked well. It really depends on the curator's choice. Also, this whole issue of censorship, when you were asking us about how we felt about being censored here in France, etc. – I was very opinionated about this when I was younger, and even now, I feel that censorship isn't right – but the thing is I also feel that one needs to give space to the curator and step back and say, "Listen, Ok, you've selected my work, you deal with it." Often people ask how I would exhibit my work and I say, "well, this is how I do it, but

you're the curator, so you decide." And in France, for instance, they say that a lot of kids move through the space, so they don't want a certain type of works there, and that's fine by me, it's not for me to say how it should be. But you know, we have lots of art in our house, for instance – Conrad's stuff, and other artists' – and some of it is pretty explicit. My kids grow up with it, and they sometimes ask me about it, or their friends will, and I say what I think and answer their questions. I think there's kind of a normalcy to it if they grow up with these images, because sex is part of life – whereas when *we* grew up, we were told that sex was evil, and it was unnatural and you must hide it. So I feel strongly about the fact that sex needs to be normalized, it's part of life.

Vanina Géré: And what is the current state of sex education for children/teenagers in South Africa now?

Anton Kannemeyer: I think it's pretty much the same thing as it would be in London, or Paris. I mean, we have children's books explaining how babies are made, obviously drawn in such a way that it's acceptable to the child. My daughter read this by the time she was six, whereas when we were fifteen, we still weren't sure how the hell it worked [laughs].

Conrad Botes: I'm not really informed about this, but I know there's a program on TV that basically encourages children to talk about sex and contraceptives, in order to stop the AIDS epidemics.

Anton Kannemeyer: Also, if you're knowledgeable about something, you're able to make the right decisions. If you don't know anything about anything, then you find yourself in situations where men walk up to you and say things to you and you feel confused, you feel ashamed, etc.

Conrad Botes: My sister tells me that at school, her children are told things like, "It's not your fanny, it's your vagina; it's not your willy, it's your penis, etc." Because when there's potential for abuse, it's a lot more powerful to say "that boy touched my vagina," for instance. So there's a lot of focus on information, which is new in South Africa.

Anton Kannemeyer: Oh yes. And sex abuse was – and still is – a big issue in South Africa. It was a big problem in the white patriarchal society that we grew up in. So I feel very strongly about sex education. But these are my personal views, and I know it differs from country to country, so when I come to France and they won't allow kids to see some of my work, I have no problem with that.

Comics and fine arts practice

Vanina Géré: My next question is about the relationship between your comics and your fine arts practice. You recently said that you didn't have too much time to draw comics anymore because your fine arts practice had taken over and was so much in demand.

Also, since there was a blurring between fine arts and commercial art in your training, how do you negotiate the passage from comics to fine arts now?

Conrad Botes: When I came to Stevenson gallery [a fine arts gallery] I think I was encouraged to put *Bitterkomix* forward. To a large degree, the comics fuel the fine arts and vice versa. I think that's the same for both of us.

Anton Kannemeyer: Yes, I think the difference is mostly practical: when we draw comics, unless we do it for a commission comic that we get paid for, we don't expect to get money for it. Whereas with fine arts practice, it's one exhibition after another, you know. There are real sales, it's real money, and we pay the bills doing the fine arts works. So I still do a lot of covers and posters if I can, because I like doing that sort of things; I like lettering, we studied lettering, and it's really something I enjoy, working lettering into a design.

Conrad Botes: I also think there's an increasing merging of comics and fine arts. Anton's representative of that, because he published a few books in which basically it starts with the comics, but it's mostly his fine art gallery work. And the borders between the two are often blurred. As far as I'm concerned, I often do comics where the boundaries between comics and painting are lost: I see each panel as a small painting, you know, with sort of sixty panels in a row, so I can paint in one and then sort of walk through. So the border between comics and painting comes down. Also, we've exhibited the comics so many times, in actual frames, with people reading comics on the wall instead of printed in a book, so that the comics took on another sort of form, looking like a drawing on a wall. And I think with the comics, it feeds the fine arts inasmuch as many times, you can make a painting that you want people to think about and try to decipher, and I think I am inspired to make my comics that way: it's not really clear to know what the hell is going on. You're drawn into a story in which strange things happen, so often you need to sit down and ask yourself what it is that you *mean*, you know. I like to work with allegory and I think being involved with painting where you make something that is kind of puzzling with a sort of hidden message – that school of thinking is also significant in comics, too. So there are many ways in which there's a marriage between the two.

Anton Kannemeyer: I think for me, it's a natural progression to make some works which are singular images, that is, large paintings, and then doing small comics again. There's a lot of freedom involved in that kind of way of working. So I'm very happy in the space between comics and fine arts in my practice.

Vanina Géré: I guess the reason I was asking that is – and I don't know how it is in South Africa – that in the US, or in France, there is still a big gap between fine arts culture and comics culture. People who read comics do not necessarily go to museums and vice versa, even though comic readers and museum-goers may also be the same. But there's still a gap between the comics artists community and the fine artists community. So the other issue linked to my question is that, when you're drawing a comics or making a piece of fine art, you're not necessarily making it for the same audience, and the circulation, the distribution of the work are not the same. Is that something you take into

consideration?

Anton Kannemeyer: You know, I spoke with two people – one from MoMA, and one from the Tate Gallery in London. I asked them both whether they were buying comics in their collections, because MoMA had bought eleven books from the *Bitterkomix* series, and they both replied that comics acquisition was something that was being addressed and that had been delayed, that they knew that they needed to work on it. In the case of MoMA, I think they were looking at people like Chris Ware to assist them build up this collection. And at the Tate Gallery, the person in charge almost became completely frantic, and said, ‘Yes, yes, we’re absolutely going to have to do it.’ So I think that issue is – and because South Africa doesn’t have a comic tradition - I think there’s a natural kind of acceptance that we’re regarded as artists, and therefore both art forms are accepted.

Vanina Géré: So in South Africa it’s more about creating than being a comics artist or a fine artist.

Anton Kannemeyer: Exactly. It’s very postmodern in that way.

Conrad Botes: I must say, I feel that the separation you mention is coming down, with the Crumb exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris.

Vanina Géré: Right, and there was Spiegelmann’s *Co-Mix* exhibition at the Bibliothèque Pompidou.

Anton Kannemeyer: And Crumb is now at the Venice Biennale, with his *Genesis*. So it’s getting there, it just needs to happen more.

The reception of the work in France

Vanina Géré: Since you’re in Paris, and you told me that you launched the French version of *Bitterkomix* and had a talk at the Centre Pompidou in 2009, I wanted to ask you what the general reception of your work has been like in France.

Anton Kannemeyer: I think at the time, it was pretty good, we were speaking to a lot of French comic artists. You don’t normally do a lot of press when you do comics, and I must say we did three-four interviews a day, it was really busy. We of course first launched in Angoulême, we were there for two-three days, and then we did some signings in Paris, at the [Pompidou] bookshop. But yeah, we had a lot of press. Because it was a launch then, you know, we don’t know exactly what people thought of it, but there seemed to be a lot of interest. The one thing that one journalist said, which I thought was interesting, is that he felt that the work was very contemporary, when he read it. And actually, I think 50 percent of these comics were drawn before 2000, you know: so they

were from the older *Bitterkomix*. And we were here [in France] in 1999 to share our comics with whoever was interested, and there was not that much interest, you know, they were like, “Yeah, it’s underground comics, bla bla bla.” I very much think it’s the format or the way that it was published, you know, coming with essays that Jean-Christophe Menu did. He obviously had a kind of vision of how this could be presented. Because I think it’s a difficult sell, you know, to get some obscure underground comics and to present that as something interesting to the comics reading public.

Vanina Géré: So there was less interest in your work in 1999 than in 2009.

Conrad Botes: Well, I think it’s pretty obvious why, because in 1999 we were just visitors to the Angoulême festival, and in 2009, we were invited: so people were aware of what we were doing. And there was also that controversy that happened .

Anton Kannemeyer: Oh yes, it was a wonderful thing that happened.

Conrad Botes: The director of the festival said that some sexually explicit images were too offensive for children, and he wanted to remove them.

Anton Kannemeyer: And he did, he removed some of the work, he removed four images. So it was front-page news in the local newspaper. And then there was an outcry, and then he put them back again. So everybody wanted to see the exhibition, you know, which was fantastic, but then of course they had a warning notice saying, “No kids allowed.”

Censorship

Vanina Géré: Is that something that often happens with your work – censorship? I mean, outside of the South African context? Have you ever had that kind of problems in the U.S., or in Germany, or Belgium, where you’ve exhibited a lot?

Conrad Botes: No, I don’t recall any, only in South Africa.

Anton Kannemeyer: In South Africa, it happened, but outside of South Africa, really, only in France... I mean, there was something with a poster that we made of a guy with a cigarette, which was in the underground and it was actually removed, which I think is pretty hypocritical, you know, to say “You have to remove the cigarette,” but images of violence and obvious sexually explicit images are shown everywhere. We were in the underground the other day, and saw an advertisement with these two people that looked that they were having sex, a naked guy kissing a naked girl and obviously you couldn’t see anything... I have no problem with that. But to say that you can’t show a guy with a cigarette is, I think, hypocritical.

Vanina Géré: Do you do artwork or comics on the issue of censorship?

Conrad Botes: Not really.

Anton Kannemeyer: I do. But it's always specific, it's not just in general, you know. So for instance, I made a work – in fact, a series of works, but there's this one in fact which comments on the fact that the South African government is trying to censor journalists from publishing certain information about the money that they're stealing in South Africa. So for instance, our President built himself a house that costs over two hundred million Rands, it's an incredibly big sum; for you guys it's about twenty million euros, so maybe you'd think it's not that outrageous, but for South-African standards, it is. And the thing is, now, because there was such an outcry about this, they kind of then said, "Well, the media, they're gossiping, they're saying all these things, it's not true, the information about the President is confidential, it's national security," and that sort of thing. So now they're passing the information bill in government, which means that the media can be arrested if they publish anything on, say, the ministers taking too much money for themselves. So it's very problematic, and that specific artwork or series that I made, was that the words that the old NP [National Party] used... there was this guy, P.W. Botha, he was the President [from 1984 to 1989], and his exact words, you placed them next to the exact words of ANC [African National Congress], they said exactly the same thing. It was amazing, it was like in George Orwell's *Animals' Farm*, at the end of which they cannot distinguish the pigs from the humans anymore because they look exactly the same. It's a very bad thing, in South Africa, because it seems as if we were almost going back to Apartheid – or rather, to the censorship that we had during Apartheid.

A global approach to racism

Vanina Géré: I was very sensitive to the question that the young journalist asked you yesterday after the talk [October 12, 2013, at Gaîté Lyrique], namely, that in the context of a Post-Apartheid society, could your work still have political relevance. But to me, your work is not just about South-African society and Apartheid; it is also about freedom of speech, debunking stereotypes, and racism in general. What really struck me when I first saw your work, is that it does not just address the political and social issues in South Africa, but it has a rather global approach to racism.

Conrad Botes: That's what I was trying to tell her in my answer, it's that in my work, although the trigger is the sociopolitical situation in South Africa, I try to present it in a way that is not specific to one place or one set of group of people, and it can be available to more people. There has been an evolution in the work, which has moved away from Apartheid-related issues, to being socially critical on different levels.

Anton Kannemeyer: For me, the archetype of the white male that I use and the stereotypes of the blacks – those become universals. But I don't use it deliberately in

order to become universal. I use it because I find that they narrow down the metaphors that I want to use. [...] Now, what you're saying, I think is true, because I use these images from South Africa, and we've shown in Finland, in Germany, and people get it; England is also a country where people immediately understand the colonial, whereas I find that in America, it's a bit more difficult.

Vanina Géré: Really?

Anton Kannemeyer: Yes, in America the white liberals, when they see that kind of work, they feel offended. They feel it's very hard. You know, my gallerist, Jack Shainman, told me about a couple of works that I had for that last exhibition [New York, 2011], "These are so hard." And he edited my show and said, "No, no, it's just too hard, I'm not going to put these up, for an American public, it's just too hectic." But I feel that African-Americans on the contrary, when they see the work, they're much more receptive. The white liberals are like, "Jesus, what are you doing?"

"White Niggers with Attitude"

Vanina Géré: I want to talk about Kara Walker. Her work is certainly a little less confrontational than yours, inasmuch as she uses a style and imagery that are borrowed from Disney cartoons, and pastiches old racist stereotypes, like Little Black Sambo, and so on, but transforming this imagery with the lyrical, pretty format of the silhouette, so that it's not *as* graphic as your images. Yet her work is still very confrontational – it's very much about violence, sex, and racism – but it's extremely well-received by white liberals.

Anton Kannemeyer: But the reason for that is because she's a black woman. She inhabits a space where there is a lot of understanding for what she's doing, whereas you know, we, I mean, my work is kind of strong, for a white person's. My gallery in South Africa, the Stevenson Gallery that I work with in Cape Town, says that when they bring my work to art fairs people always ask them, "Is this artist black or white?" They want to know, it's important for them. If it's a black artist, it's ok. You know, it's like the rap band called "Niggers with Attitude (NWA)." They can call themselves "Niggers with Attitude" because they're black, but if you have a white band.

Conrad Botes: You can call yourself "White Niggers with Attitude..." I should mention the thing about the attitudes towards our work... I went on a residency in Hudson, in New York, in the State of New York, in 2002. There was obviously like a curator who briefed the people that went there, and when I arrived, she said, "everybody thought you were black." I think it was because of the South African context, with many white people being racists – they easily deducted that I was black.

Vanina Géré: There's a fairly big assumption that white people aren't concerned by racism. If you're not part of the "oppressed minority," you should not talk about racism, or sexism, etc.

Anton Kannemeyer: I think that's problematic, and that was interesting to me. Because [at the Jack Shainman show] – I tell you, I was amazed – I was standing there and there were a queue of black people who congratulated me, saying "Thank you for making this work, because white people don't talk about race, they avoid it at all costs."

There were other artists who went in and bought the work, there was Wangechi Mutu who bought one of my works. The smaller works sell, but the big works... there were two black people who bought the work, each bought one painting, and I was very happy about it, I thought, "That's exactly the people that I would like to buy my work..." Because in South Africa that won't happen, you know, because we don't have black collectors.

Vanina Géré: You don't have black collectors in South Africa?

Anton Kannemeyer: No – not anyway, I think for fine arts .

Conrad Botes: There are some.

Anton Kannemeyer: But the big galleries in South Africa don't sell to them. I remember this guy who made a painting of Mandela or something, which sold for 1.5 million rands, and it looked like a laundering scam in the end, because this guy is a completely unknown artist who suddenly sells a work of art to a politician for 1.5 million rands, and you're like, "What's going on?" And the media would ask the galleries, 'What do you think of this?' And everybody would say, 'We don't know this guy.' So things happen. I guess what I'm trying to say is that you don't have, say, politicians going to the main galleries in South Africa buying work, you know, I haven't heard of that.

Conrad Botes: There are some who work with Monna Mokoena – a black gallerist, Monna Mokoena, gallery Momo, in Johannesburg. It's a bit of a situation like, you know, back in Apartheid occupiers support occupiers. The black businessmen like to support black artists. So the people that would buy would be Sam Nhlengethwa and Johannes Phokela, or lots of others. There's a lot of them with lots of money. But it's kind of very specific, it's kind of supportive of the black economic empowerment, the movement in South Africa. So the works that black collectors buy are very specific.

Vanina Géré: Your work is part of public collections, isn't it?

Anton Kannemeyer & Conrad Botes: Yes.

Vanina Géré: Is it regularly exhibited in museums and major public institutions?

Conrad Botes: No. Although some of our work is in collections, it's corporate collections.

Anton Kannemeyer: Those museums have very little of our work – our work is very much collected, but they may have one or two works and that’s it, so it doesn’t get regularly exhibited or so. I remember both of us used to work with a different gallery before we were represented by Stevenson gallery and I remember this gallerist who told me that one night she was at a government event – I don’t know, it was something connected to museums in South Africa and collections – and she asked people if they had any Anton Kannemeyer in their collections at the time and they said, “Who is he again?” And she replied, “He’s the guy from *Bitterkomix*” and they were like “Oh, *Bitterkomix*, oh, no no no.” So our work was at first offensive to the NP [National Party] government, and then it was offensive to the white community, and then it shifted to just being offensive to everybody, you know. On the other hand, certain works do make it into these collections – some which are, maybe, not as confrontational. It’s more private buyers who buy the really politically significant work.

I think this is one of the dilemmas that artists have, you know. As an artist, you ask yourself, “Do I make a work of art that will sell, or that will absolutely offend everybody?” And I think that the challenge is to make something that will be very offensive, very hard-hitting – that’s at least what I’m trying to make. So anyway, it’s a bit of a toss-up. (To Conrad): I don’t know, what do you think about that sort of thing – making work that sells or making work that is difficult to submit?

Conrad Botes: I don’t have a problem with that at Stevenson’s.

Vanina Géré: Is there work that your South African gallery won’t show?

Anton Kannemeyer: Oh, no, Michael, the more hard-hitting the work is, the more satisfied he is, he’s like “Yes, Yes! Come on!” And then if he sees something that will just sell, he’s not interested, he’s like, “Whatever.”

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