Santu Mofokeng

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- ¹ “This project has steered me to places where reality blended in freely with unreality, where my knowledge of the photographic medium was tested to the limit [...] I am not certain that I captured on film the essence of the consciousness I saw displayed. Perhaps I was looking for something that refuses to be photographed. I was only chasing shadows, perhaps.” Santu Mofokeng wrote these words in 1997 for a project he initially thought as a “metaphorical biography”. Titled *Chasing Shadows*,¹ it took the

form of an investigation into the possibility of images within the complex situation of South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. Mofokeng (born in 1956) readily repeats the anecdotes surrounding his first camera, and his work as a laboratory technician, a studio assistant, a precarious journalist for many press outlets, a member of the Afrapix collective, and as a photographer for the African Studies Institute. According to him it was all about rhythm: his ineffectualness as a journalist had to do with his “slowness”—others mention his modesty and his attentiveness. In the complicated and volatile political period in South Africa in the years running up to the first one-person-one-vote elections, a journalism coveting newspaper headlines could be summed up as making a spectacle out of an albeit caricatural and perverse situation. In such conditions, the photographer should make it his duty to ponder his subjects more than once. Santu Mofokeng opted for the narrative and book form, bringing in the “photographic essay”, starting out from projects based on the humdrum daily round. The series *Train Church* (1986) grew out of the constraints imposed by the migrant labour system under apartheid. During the endless journeys from his home to his work-place, Santu Mofokeng happened upon quotidian outburst of spirituality in unexpected places, such as a train compartment. In the way this space was put to use he saw an “architecture of the powerless”.² A similar simplicity of the means used gave rise, in 1997, to the *Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890-1950*, for which Santu Mofokeng inventoried the albums of ordinary people and observed how everyone chose to have themselves depicted, or else presented a life narrative. That project was initially exhibited³ using photocopies and slide shows—the usual tools of the researcher.

- 2 The years following the 1994 elections prompted the photographer to question the notion of memory in the South African context. Mofokeng talks as much about an absence of imagery of the past as about the urgent need for recollection—putting an un-photographed experience into pictures. How, using photography, is one to lay claim to one’s belonging to a landscape of which one has been dispossessed? Representing it says a whole lot about the way one sees it, and about one’s appropriation or non-appropriation of it. These images illustrate experiences, knowledge and personal histories lived through in these landscapes. With the aim of teaching himself to see that memory, Santu Mofokeng set out as a citizen of the world to discover Spain, Germany, Poland and Japan. His work was subsequently shown at the Jeu de Paume in Paris,⁴ he was an honorary guest at the German pavilion for the 2013 Venice Biennale, and he was later awarded with an Honorary Doctorate at Wits University, in 2016. For this “shadow-chaser”, the word “*seriti*” is especially meaningful, because it refers to the “unseen side of the picture”. “In everyday usage *seriti* can mean anything from aura, presence, dignity, confidence, essence, status, wellbeing and power – power to attract good fortune and to ward off bad luck and disease.”⁵

NOTES

1. *Chasing Shadows* (23 June-25 July 1997), Johannesburg : Gertrude Posel Art Gallery, University of the Witwatersrand.

2. Santu Mofokeng quoted by Sue Williamson with regard to the series Appropriated Spaces. Williamson, Sue. "Santu Mofokeng", 10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa, Cape Town : Bell-Roberts Publishing, p. 250.
3. At the second Johannesburg Biennial in 1997.
4. *Santu Mofokeng, chasseur d'ombres : 30 ans d'essais photographiques* (24 May-25 September 2011), Paris : Jeu de Paume
5. Mofokeng, Santu. "Invoice", Cape Town : South African National Gallery. Published in *Next Level* [Autograph ABP], no.16, 2008, p. 46-47