Art contre/against Apartheid at Lunds Konsthall: an Entangled History of Art and Solidarity from Paris to Pretoria

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Art contre/against Apartheid at Lunds Konsthall: an Entangled History of Art and Solidarity from Paris to Pretoria

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Abstract
This article concerns the international touring exhibition *Art contre/against Apartheid* originating in France and which reached Lunds konsthall, Sweden in 1984 and was to tour the world for ten years. The aim with this exhibition was to raise awareness of the apartheid regime, cause international protest and ultimately remove the repressive political system. Using histoire croisée as a method this article investigates the different interests and stakeholders in the exhibition at Lunds konsthall, including the critique of the exhibition as resting on white supremacy. The purpose of the article is to locate the different intersections regarding international art, international politics and local history manifested through this exhibition.

Résumé
Cet article examine l’exposition internationale itinérante *Art contre/against Apartheid* qui, partie de France, fut présentée à la Konsthall de Lund (Suède) en 1984, et devait ensuite faire le tour du monde pendant dix ans. Le but de cette exposition était de sensibiliser le public au régime de l’apartheid, de provoquer des protestations internationales et finalement de supprimer ce système politique répressif. En utilisant la méthode de l’histoire croisée, cet article étudie les différents intérêts et acteurs de l’exposition de Lund, y compris la critique que l’exposition reposait sur la suprématie blanche. Ce faisant, l’article cherche à identifier les différentes intersections où art international, politique internationale et histoire locale se croisèrent lors de cet événement.

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“… [the art works] range across the scale of human emotion, from anger to zeal to love and sorrow. Such works demand the viewer’s attention, they challenge our beliefs and values, they remind us of past errors but they also speak of hope for the future.”

—Nelson Mandela

In 1984 the international touring exhibition *Art contre/against Apartheid* reached Lunds konsthall, Sweden, making its second stop on a ten-year long world tour (Fig. 1). The aim of the exhibition, funded by the UN through the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid (UNSCAA), was to raise awareness about the South-African apartheid regime, to cause international protest and ultimately help remove a repressive political system. It was a campaign of international solidarity delivered through a vehicle of high-end art objects by circa eighty internationally renowned artists.

It all started with the French artist and political activist Ernest Pignon-Ernest (b. 1942) who teamed up with the Spanish artist Antonio Saura (1930–1998). Pignon-Ernest was active against the French war in Algeria, and Saura participated in the Anti-Francoist movement. They wanted to rally support for the oppressed people of South Africa and pulled together a wide network of artists mostly in Europe and the US. In the observation above, made soon after the exhibition had reached its destination and objective of a free South Africa, Nelson Mandela confirmed the narrative of hope that Pignon-Ernest and Saura had created. However, the project was questioned already at its launch in 1983, and continues to be so. Not long after, the UN funded an alternative exhibition with the title *Artists against Apartheid: Works for Freedom*, disseminated in 1986.

One argument against Pignon-Ernest and Saura’s concept was the high number of white, western, and mostly male artists. Only two South Africans were included, the artist Gavin Jantjes (b. 1948) who had left South Africa for a life in Europe, and the writer André Brink (1935–2015), who worked as a professor of literature at Capetown University. Another issue was that the very idea of an object-based museum to commemorate history including traumatic experiences, belongs to a western realm. One writer argued that the exhibition was never wanted in South Africa in the first place, describing it at the time as propaganda, and that the art was not sufficiently progressive.

Whilst the critique of *Art contre/against Apartheid* is integral to its history, it does not reflect the complexities at stake. For example, the exhibition raised different questions and actions depending on where

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in the world it was exhibited. The aim of this article is to analyse how micro and macro perspectives intersect regarding art, personal interests, a local art gallery and the anti-apartheid movement. This in turn will contribute to the history of exhibitions in the name of solidarity and instrumentalizing art beyond showing art for its own sake.

Entanglements

In the method Historie Croisées or entangled points of view, developed by the social historians Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, part of the method is to capture the multiperspectivity of history beyond compare and contrast analyses. In terms of Art contre/against Apartheid the Histoire Croisées method allows for an investigation of the ambition of the project without falling into a comparison of the pros and cons of its purpose and results, instead focusing on the different intersecting interests. The object of study in this article is the exhibition as it was presented in the catalogue. This contained essays and examples of art works, but also the idea of solidarity as it was manifested in the project including both the exhibition concept, and its dissemination. Throughout this article the concept of ‘interest’ is referred to, which here is defined as those agents that are key components in entanglements from organisations, galleries, to individual people, down to specific art works.

Benedict and Zimmerman stress the importance of situating the researchers’ perspectives for the entanglements to make sense. From the way in which this exhibition has been dealt with in the past, there seem to be different reasons to address its history and even find the exhibition in the first place. When the curators Kristine Khouri and Rashā Salṭī revisited Art contre/against Apartheid in 2018, it was driven by their interest in the phenomenon of solidarity movements in art exhibitions between early 1970s to 1980s. Another line of enquiry has been to address the western perspective inherent in the ideas for the exhibition, through for example a close reading of Derrida’s essay in the catalogue, or the bodies represented in the art works. In my case the exhibition was one of many hiding in the archives of Swedish institutions of modern and contemporary art, discovered whilst searching for a wider pattern of international art in Swedish post-war art history.

Organising Art contre/ against Apartheid

One starting point to begin unpacking the entanglements is to address how Art contre/against Apartheid came about. The exhibition emerged from the work and social engagement of the French Fluxus and situationist artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest. Throughout his working life as an artist, he has strived to create social awareness and political change by finding new spaces for his art. For example: using the street as a canvas, engaging in question such as workers’

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4 Kristine Khouri is a researcher and writer focusing on the history of arts circulation, archival practices and dissemination in particular regarding the Arab world. Rashā Salṭī is a researcher, writer, producer and curator of art and film.
5 In for example Japan the exhibition was instrumental in raising awareness of apartheid nationally and had a local effect, see “Maeda Rei: Interview by Kristine Khouri”, in Post Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity, and Museums-in-Exile, edited by Kristine Khouri and Rashā Salṭī (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 345–355.
7 Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée”.
8 When the curators Kristine Khouri and Rashā Salṭī revisited Art contre/against Apartheid in 2018, it was driven by their interest in the phenomenon of solidarity movements in art exhibitions between early 1970s to 1980s.
9 A project resulted in a survey capturing the heterogeneous nature of international art exhibitions in Sweden. Amongst the 668 exhibitions studied, most have passed under the radar of scholars. Some of these seem like curiosities from today’s perspective, some confirm the historical position of Sweden as a neutral location in world politics, and some are typical large-scale exhibitions with the ambition to make a mark and change attitudes, such as Art contre/against Apartheid.

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Artists united to alert the world about the acute nature of the systematic oppression with the aim to help bring down the apartheid regime. Ten writers, all men of international acclaim, contributed texts for the catalogue. Through this global manifestation all contributors intended to put pressure on the apartheid regime and the wider art community in the same way. It was felt that the arts had not yet listened. According to Pignon-Ernest he had teamed up with Saura and together they created the concept of the Art contra/against Apartheid including that it would tour the world until change occurred in South Africa. It ended up touring for ten years through circa forty-one countries. The UN welcomed the initiative.

There is no doubt of the level of ambition in this project: not only in its aim to stop apartheid, but also regarding the nature of the artworks. Some of them were large in scale and heavy, demanding substantial logistical effort to ship between many countries and several continents. Some of the artworks were graphic prints but a large majority were oil or acrylic on canvas. The Italian artist Titina Maselli (1924–2005) and Swedish Olle Kåks (1941–2003) sent paintings circa two meters wide. Of even greater sizes were German Wolf Vostells (1932–1998) triptych measuring 2.4 × 5.4 metres or Brazilian Mario Grubers (1927–2011) painting White Periscope measuring 3 × 3 metres. The French Arman (1928–2005) sent a bronze sculpture most likely heavy and Polish Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930–2017) a textile sculpture of 65 × 65 cm.


The exhibition contained artworks from artists across the world, and a notable feature was that the majority of the artists donated key pieces. Some of these art works addressed the atrocities directly, others participated with what Derrida described as a silent gaze. Another viewpoint is that some of the works have no relevance whatsoever to the cause of apartheid but were included because of the perceived importance of the participating artists. Some were already international stars, such as the Americans Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929), Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), Sol LeWitt (1928–2007), or Saura himself. In an interview Pignon-Ernest describes the dilemma he started to face as more artists donated works than they had capacity to ship around the world and he had to turn down his friends.

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13 The full list of venues is not yet retrieved, for its touring in the Nordic countries, see Line Elegaard, “Exhibiting (in) Solidarity: Art contre/against Apartheid” touring Sweden, Finland and Denmark in 1983–84” presentation of forthcoming PhD, University of Copenhagen, at conference Art Exhibitions as Intersections in Post War Europe, (Stockholm, 11–12th of May 2022).

14 Rashā Salṭī, “Ernst Pignon- Ernest interview by Rashā Salṭī” , in Art contra/against apartheid, 11–12.


16 Ibid, 35.


height, likely to be sensitive to transport, and exhibited inside a large wooden cage (Fig. 2). To make the required impact the exhibition could not be a marginal affair, instead it claimed floor and wall space. The art was impressive in its scope, it contained political themes and involved an impressive production in transport and insurance.20 According to an article in the New York Times the exhibition toured to amongst other places Denmark, Germany, Finland, Greece, Guadeloupe, Haiti, Italy, Japan, Martinique, The Netherlands, Spain, Tunisia, UK, and the US.21 However, it seems that the tour itinerary was not locked down from the beginning but was extended with more venues as the apartheid regime remained in place in South Africa. Forging a macro perspective of world politics and a micro perspective of local interests and opportunities was at the very core of this project.

Lunds Konsthall and International Art

The exhibition was inaugurated at the Fondation Nationale des Arts Graphiques et Plastiques, in the autumn of 1983, preceded by a smaller poster exhibition in March that year, at Galerie Maeght in Paris, with fifteen participants. The next stop was in Lund, in February 1984.

The project manager, Chantal Nonnet, described the venue of Lunds konsthall as a bit of a surprise: “I did not know where Lund was [. . .] but found a wonderful art gallery and a very interested audience.”22 Yet, for the audience in Lund this exhibition was probably no surprise at all. Not only were they accustomed to international exhibitions with ideological underpinnings, the anti-apartheid cause had enjoyed a significant presence in Lund since the 1960s.23 A couple of weeks into the exhibition the gallery director Marianne Nanne-Bråhammar wrote in a letter to Bonnet that it was a great success and they had already received over 17,550 visitors.24 The public program alongside the exhibition was ambitious with events every week ranging from lectures and music concerts to debates on the situation in South Africa.25 The visitor numbers confirm the engagement of the local audience. The findings from an archival search in turn confirm that the gallery audience had been acclimatised over at least

![Figure 2. Installation shot of Art contre/against Apartheid from Lunds Konsthall 1984](image-url)
two and a half decades to art exhibitions with political or ideological underpinnings.

The gallery had created its own history of a micro perspective, such as individual exhibitions, and a macro perspective, such as world politics. In the archives of Lunds konsthall from its inauguration in 1957 towards the end of the cold war period there are numerous examples of international exhibitions that instrumentalise art for other goals than simply showing it.

The first example is art and cultural diplomacy, a field of increasing interest in Nordic art history. Studies shows how art was used to build bridges between the west and the communist bloc in the East, with Sweden a rare neutral location in which such collaborations could take place. In the most cited case, the fight over abstraction, the CIA got involved. Cultural diplomacy however was in no way isolated to just occurring bilaterally between the US and USSR. It permeated public art galleries and museums for modern and contemporary art across the Nordics. The programming at Lunds konsthall is a great example of the full range of exhibitions which can be described as cultural diplomacy. This in turn has been defined as communicating political ideas and beliefs through cultural interchange occurring in both formal and informal relationships and across national borders. At Lunds konsthall there was a steady stream of exhibitions from Eastern Europe. Again, the gallery program is tangled up between macro and micro perspectives. Eje Högestätt, its director between 1957 and 1967, had a personal network amongst polish artists built together with his wife, Apolonia Bryska Högestätt, a Polish, Jewish refugee residing in Sweden. In one of his catalogues Högestätt describes how they travelled to Poland every year, meeting artists and understanding the cultural life in Eastern Europe. One such artist, with whom he collaborated throughout his career as a gallery director, was the Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz, who also contributed to Art contre/against Apartheid. Another example is the one man show with the polish artist Zbigniew Makowski (1930–2019) at Lunds Konsthall in 1965.

Another aspect of cultural diplomacy is the steady stream of official collaborations which took place at this gallery. Amongst the exhibitions with an overt diplomatic intention were Art from Cuba, 1968 and 1975, funded by the Cuban state and sanctioned by Fidel Castro with the aim to create understanding and interest for the nation of Cuba through its arts. Yet another type of exhibition, that could also be said to have served a cultural diplomatic purpose, were organised by artists’ organisations showcasing art from a country but not formally sanctioned at state level. One such example is the touring exhibition Polsk grafik och bokkonst (Polish graphic art and book illustrations), at Lunds konsthall in 1960.

The second example in the programming can be described as an interest for so called world art. For the art historian Hans Belting this is a western invention for western museums: “World art is an old idea complementary to modernism, designating the art of the “others” because, or although, it was mostly to be found in Western museums”. Marianne Nanne-Bråhammar, the gallery director at Lunds Konsthall between 1969-1990, seems to have harboured an ambition to bring the world to Lund. This was to both expand what kind of art was exhibited and to create understanding and

27 Myroslava Halushka, Localizing the Contemporary: The Kunsthalle Bern Model, ed. Peter Schneemann, (Geneva: JRP Ringier, 2018);
28 Frances Stonor Saunders, The Cultural Cold War, ed. Peter Schneemann, (Geneva: JRP Ringier, 2018);
29 Another example is the one man show with the polish artist Zbigniew Makowski (1930–2019) at Lunds Konsthall in 1965.
31 Konst från Cuba 9-29 febr 1976, (Stockholm: Kulturhuset; 1976), the exhibition was at Lunds konsthall in 1975.
32 Lunds Konsthall, Moderna gavelänger och aktuell grafik från Polen 15/1-5/2 1967 (Lund: Lunds konsthall, 1967).
empathy for different ways of life. To realise this ambition Nanne-Bråhammar collaborated with Kerstin Cruikshank, a commercial gallerist and connoisseur of middle east culture and folk art based in Gothenburg. In 1969 they curated two exhibitions of “world art” which were shown simultaneously: craft by Bedouin women from Iraq, Beduinvävnader (Bedouin Tapestries); and Glasmålningar av Abou Soubhi al Tinnaoui (Glass painting by the Syrian artist Abou Soubhi al Tinnaoui).32 A few years later, in 1973 they mounted the exhibition Kvinnorna i Uzdin, nai vister från Yugoslavi en (Women Artists from Uzdin, Naïvists from Yugoslavia). It presented folk art made by an all women collective from the rural village Uzdin in what was then Yugoslavia.34

The third strand of international exhibitions in the programming of Lunds Konsthall were those that aimed to show art in order to stand up for the oppressed. In 1971 two exhibitions were arranged to show solidarity with people in poverty or who had suffered from colonial oppression. One was organised by a Non-Governmental Organisation, Svalorna, showing and selling craft works by Indian people living in poverty. All revenues went to the NGO and the art gallery was used as a platform for manifesting the need for solidarity and help. The exhibition The Sami People (Samer), 1971 was produced by the curators of Lunds konsthall in collaboration with Sami artists and organisations. It was a manifestation of the Indigenous peoples’ art and craft, but also of their ways of living. The exhibition catalogue addressed colonisation but was also critiqued for not being explicit enough in its stance towards oppression of the Sami by the majority Swedish society.35 Another example is Grönländsk kunst idag, produced in Århus, Denmark which showed the art and crafts of the Inuit people of Greenland.36 Once again the purpose was to demonstrate a people whose art had survived the suppression of colonialization. And once again, the exhibition was criticized as marginalising the complexity of that same group. What is most striking in this context is the presence of these exhibitions in their time and the deafening silence surrounding them in subsequent writing on exhibition history of the period.

Art contre/against Apartheid was one of the largest exhibitions in the history of Lunds Konsthall and several converging interests were at play including a national debate in Sweden on racism and apartheid. In her review of the exhibition Lisbet Larsson, who later became professor of literature at Gothenburg University, takes a particular look at Derrida’s essay for the catalogue. In his text Derrida describes the racist system of South Africa as the worst, and hopes it is the last. Derrida addressed the need for Europeans to unite against the oppression on another continent, it was after all people of European decent that upheld the racist structures.37 Larsson points out that his way of writing racist structures is isolated to South Africa, and in doing so Derrida presented such structures as a problem very much “over there” and not occurring in Europe. Larsson asks what might happen if we try to see how racist attitudes lurk everywhere, even in Sweden, and not isolate them to the apartheid regime’s extreme form of systematized and legalized oppression.38

In its own national, cultural memory Sweden had a particular relationship with the anti-apartheid movement.39 In the early 1950s the journalist Herbert Tingsten, later the Chief Editor for the daily broadsheet Dagens Nyheter, reported on the racial oppression and segregation from South Africa. The writer Per Wästerberg reported on the segregation he encountered on his many trips and longstanding

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36 The listed artists are: Maria Balan, Florika Chet, Sofia Doolean, Anuica Dolama, Sofia Ionesco, Amuika Maran, Mariora Motrojescu, Ana Onco, Florika Puia, Steluta Taran
37 Katarina Wadstein MacLeod, “Curating Contrasts: Retrieving Solidarity from the Archives”, in Curating the Contemporary in Art Museums, eds. Kristian Handberg and Anuika Maran, Mariora Motrojescu, Anaica Dolama, Sofia Ionesco, Amuika Maran, Mariora Motrojescu, Ana Onco, Florika Puia, Steluta Taran
38 One reviewer described the objects on display as magnificent but taken out of context yet another colonial assault, Malis Stensman, “Grönland – ofullständigt”, Arbetet, December 2, 1974.
A Collection of Solidarity

Yet another entanglement is to be found in this particular manifestation of solidarity, that is to construct art collections for future museums in imagined future democratic societies. The concept of solidarity and its historical specificity is summarized and theorized by the human geographer David Featherstone as “a relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression.” The problem with solidarity is that it is associated with the political left but is not exclusively owned by the left. The hesitation to join the fight was the ANC’s communist alliances, preventing for example right leaning liberals to join forces against apartheid. Featherstone identifies five perspectives of solidarity that are at work at any given time. The first is described as a transformative relationship and finding ways to intervene. For example, translating solidarity from the history of unions and workers’ rights into exhibitions is not obvious but still informs the instrumentalization of the artworks that took place. The second aspect is that the solidarity efforts are established from outside or below, often by marginal or repressed groups. In this case the exhibition supported the cause from outside of South Africa, but also from outside the experience of racial oppression and not really representing marginalised experience, yet lending voice to make the repression visible. The third aspect is its transnational character, typically creating networks across nation states for a common cause. The fourth that the solidarity is constructed from uneven power relations. In other words, the location where geographic solidarity is constructed may impact its chances to be heard. Lastly, solidarity is defined by being inventive in producing new ways of configuring political relations and spaces.

A touring, international exhibition such as Art contre/against apartheid is a good example of how solidarity is forged across place, power and different interests. However, it was the last in a decade of solidarity exhibitions on the international art scene and predated by International Art Exhibition for Palestine on view in Beirut in 1978, and Art pour le Peuple du Nicaragua (Art for the people of Nicaragua), presented at Palais du Tokyo, Paris in 1981. Both of which were collections destined for museums in Palestine and Nicaragua respectively, in times of peace and democracy, and built from the donations of supporting artists.

In order to understand the different solidarity exhibitions that were organised during the decade Khouri and Salti suggest revisiting the blueprint for solidarity exhibitions: Museo de la Solidaridad (Museum of Solidarity) led by the Brazilian art critic Mário Pedrosa, then living in exile in Chile.

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42 Håkan Thörn, Solidaritets betydelse: kampen mot apartheid i Sydafrika och framväxten av det globala civilsamhället. (Atlas, 2010), 34–62
44 Thörn, Solidaritets betydelse, 31.
45 Featherstone, Solidarity, 30.
46 Ibid., 2-39.
Pedrosa’s idea, which came out of the Chilean and pro-Allende art movement in the early 1970s, was to gain international support by encouraging artists to donate artworks for a collection celebrating a free and democratic Chile. Pedrosa set up a committee with members from South America and Europe, all active on the international art scene. It was successful, with artists from across Europe, South America and the US donating their work to the cause. But it was a short-lived success: all was lost in the Coup d’état in 1973. The artworks and the archive never surfaced. Two years later the museum re-constituted itself under the name the Museo Internacional de la Resistencia Salvador Allende (International Museum of Resistance Salvador Allende – MIRSA), with headquarters in Paris. The latter constellation managed to secure a new donation of 1,100 artworks to be donated to Chile, once democracy was re-established and in 1991 the art was finally shipped to Chile.49

Just like MIRSA the Art contre/against apartheid collection was built on a network of activism and solidarity, employing art as a means to foster revolution. These solidarity exhibitions were fighting for justice, the participants held a belief in a permanent collection and the power and impact such commemoration would have. Moreover, some of the artists participated in several of the solidarity exhibitions such as Pignon-Ernest who took part already in the pro-Allende movement and had donated works to the Chilean collection at the Museo de la Solidaridad.50 However, there are further layers to the entanglements. In 1978 the Swedish section of the Chilean committee organized an exhibition at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, with 55 artists donating ca. 80 artworks to the Chilean cause. Björn Springfelt, then curator at the museum, testifies to the magnitude of this effort. This group of international artists contributed what was in Springfelt’s view the most ambitious works they had at the time. The exhibition toured twenty venues in Sweden, and according to this source, attracted large audiences.51

Museo de Solidad was involved with the art and politics of its time in more ways than one. It took a clear stance for Allende’s socialism, but also for socialist structures in the artworld and for the art itself to premier mass-produced prints. It was an international trend for artists on the left, also on national levels. In the first issue of the Swedish Marxist cultural journal Clarté in 1968, a group of artists wrote a manifesto against bourgeois art. They held a hard line against any art that was not affordable for the average worker or could be mass reproduced. The first manifestations of the Museo de Solidad held a similar stance: art had to stand against capitalist structures and the art market. As suggested by the curator and sociologist María Berriós:

> The Museo of Solidad was born as a museum against museums, an anti-museum: the basic notions of the proposed museum were an assault on existing museums, especially the prestigious and admired institutions of the metropolis; it questioned their geo-political monopoly by calling out the absolute incompatibility of their social function and the principles of the artworks (and artists) in their care.53

Whilst Art contre/against Apartheid came out of a shared solidarity in fighting an oppressive regime, the artworks donated were the opposite. The whole point was for the artworks to be of such quality that they in themselves would drum up an international interest.54

In the ten years that passed between initiating Museo de Solidad and the Art contre Apartheid the art world had changed and so had the template for which kind of art best fostered revolution. For

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48 Lebeau, Past Disquiet, 308
49 Ibid., 315
54 One Swedish critic argues how the quality of the art help facilitate the political and urgent message of the exhibition, Jan Teghammer, ”Bilder för ett breffrat Sydafrika”, Skånska Dagbladet, February 11, 1984.
the anti-apartheid exhibition artists donated works ranging from collages, ripped posters, printed works, large scale paintings, bronze sculptures and textile work. Derrida expresses a firm belief in the power of painting, and the universal power of art “…pictural idioms will be crossing but they will be attempting to speak the other’s language without renouncing their own.”55 Several artists donated pieces characteristic for their art, and a key factor, just as in the Stockholm exhibition, was that these were important pieces for the artists themselves. The artworks donated dated from the 1960s to the early 1980s, ranging in style, tone and expression. Arman’s New York Concerto, 1982, violas cast in brass, is a typical piece but with little obvious connection to the larger theme of anti-apartheid solidarity. Other art works dealt directly with the racism and oppression of South Africa, like Robert Rauschenberg’s collage No title made from black and white photographs of famous South African basketball players and labourers imprinted with the words ‘World artists against apartheid’ in graffiti style writing. Other examples are the oil painting by Mozambican artist Valente Ngwenya Malangatana (1936–2011) measuring 1.23 metres by 1.02 metres. The canvas is crowded with figures painted in red wearing tortured expressions, chained, clawed and animal esque. Other pieces were fit for the theme but painted for another cause, like the Italian Leonardo Cremoni’s (1925–2010) painting Torture from 1961.

Paris To Pretoria

This leads us to the question of where between Paris and Pretoria did this exhibition make its biggest impact? In her analysis of the Histoire Croisée method, the historian Silke Neusinger emphasises how the changing of an original phenomenon becomes visible in the intersections of different interests.56 The effects of Art contre/against Apartheid changed over and again in an interplay between micro- and macro-perspectives, from the participating artists to global trade. In Sweden the exhibition seems to have tapped into the ongoing support for a free South Africa, as pressure was already in place not to trade or consume South African products. In Japan it helped to initiate a national discussion on the merits of reducing trade with South Africa.57 Derrida foresaw the fluctuating nature of this solidarity project, that its effects must be indirect and that it was precisely Europe’s position of power that enabled the exhibition to have any effect at all. These were the merits of what he understood to be an inherent quality of the artworks: they communicated in a universal language, which attracted attention to the larger cause. Featherstone shows how for some thinkers the power was in the place from which solidarity is spoken. Once donated to South Africa and installed in the parliament building in the administrative capital Pretoria, the Artists contre/against Apartheid collection caused a debate.

In her contribution to the counter project Artists against apartheid the writer and curator Lucy Lippard considered the double standard in criticizing artists manifesting solidarity through exhibitions, even if she was deeply critical of the glaring omission of African and women artists in Pignon-Ernest and Saura’s project. “When irresponsible critics call responsible artists irresponsible, who’s a dupe and who’s an opportunist? . . .”58 Let’s not be duped, she wrote, to think that art alone will change the world. But if everyone contributes across all the professional sectors of society, things will start to change. The UN committee chairman wrote in the catalogue introduction to Artists against apartheid, the alternative solidarity exhibition to Artists contre/against Apartheid, that cultural action against apartheid is invaluable, and that the works in this second exhibition serve to educate international public opinion and refute the whitewashed protests against a racist South Africa.59 He referred to the whitewashing

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55 Derrida, "Racism’s Last Word", 19.
56 Neunsinger, “Cross-over!”, 17.
58 Lucy Lippard, “Not So Far From South Africa: Visual Art Against Apartheid”, 172.
of the first exhibition and that this time around the exhibition and publication showed art and poems by mostly South Africans and black Americans. The racism and anti-apartheid system was in this case dealt with by those directly exposed to it and exhibited in areas not usually targeted by high end exhibitions such as Harlem, Jamaica and The Bronx in New York. Its aim was to raise awareness of the apartheid system in South Africa and by doing so, also raise awareness of the situation for African Americans in the U.S.

Artists contre/against Apartheid follows the logic of what Stuart Hall has described as the West and the Rest. The rest are “over there and speak amongst themselves”. The West is “everywhere and heard when spoken.” It also adheres to the logic pointed out by Dipesh Chakrabaty in Provincializing Europe, of the ambiguity of critical thinking: “One of the larger points of PE [Provincializing Europe] is that critical thought both fights prejudice and carries prejudice at the same time.” One of the reasons behind this, he argues, is that critical thinking is intrinsically linked, again, to geographical place. This exhibition reproduced an intellectual discourse from Paris, despite the addition of some artists from African countries and other non-western continents. It was an exhibition with artists from across the world on a global tour but was not a voice for South African artists.

In a film produced by the Mayibuye Archives the curator Gordon Metz and the head of archives discuss the effects of the exhibition. The archivist Hamilton Budaza regrets there is no space to allow the works to be seen by the public, that the artworks still speak of its history, despite their sometime abstract nature. The curator on the other hand, who also took part in hanging the collection in the first place, as it arrived at the Pretoria parliament building, is more sceptical regarding the impact it had in South Africa. This exhibition, he argues, had more effect outside of South Africa than inside. It lacked representational value for a people largely deprived of art education. The purpose of the exhibition was to no longer have a purpose. When Derrida suggested that the only place for apartheid was in the archives, it was most likely not what he had in mind for the actual artworks to be packed up in crates and archived as a well-meaning but out-of-date European project.

Pignon-Ernest and Saura pulled together a powerful manifestation of artists that came from Brazil, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Nigeria, Mozambique, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, the UK and Yugoslavia. But whilst there were at least one or two artists from each country, the majority came from France, and were based in Paris. A dozen came from US and of those most from New York (such as Robert Rauschenberg, Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd and Roy Lichtenstein). Interestingly, a quarter of the artists had exhibited previously at Lunds Konsthall, such as Paris based Arman, Eduardo Arroyo, Christian Boltanski, Lourdes Castro, Erró, Allen Ginsberg, Jiri Kolar, Julie Le Parc, Roberto Matta, Achille Perrilli, Antonia Saura and Pierre Soulages, and Abakonowic from Poland.

In essence this was a Parisian exhibition, which was part of the problem, according to the Mayibuye Archives curator. He confirms that it was an applaudable achievement, but had very little to do with the people of South Africa. It has been met with criticism, Derrida’s text has been picked apart, and the exhibition is packed away in crates. Yet, it did create ripples in the many places it was exhibited during the touring years. The U.S. based counter project Artists against Apartheid: Works for Freedom, was a clear statement against the elitism of the Artists contre/against Apartheid exhibition but it seems that it was the elitism that managed to get the attention of art galleries and audiences in the many countries where it toured.

The Artists contre/against Apartheid project raises questions around the use of art in times of crisis. After all this was a highly politicised exhibition with

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blockbuster names such as Oldenburg, Rauschenberg, Saura and Arman that toured the world for ten years. It is an exhibition that tested the limits of solidarity and whether it is meaningful to raise your voice for matters beyond your own experience. These are questions without any simple answers. But by locating the different entangled interests that are generated by this exhibition I have demonstrated how international art, international politics, and local history are intertwined. The exhibition was not particularly wanted in South Africa, where it never made much difference. However, it made a difference for a world-wide audience, in different ways depending on where it landed: France, Sweden, Japan and beyond. The artists sent what they saw as their most emblematic work, an example of how they volunteered their art to be politicized for the cause. Furthermore, it leads to a history of contemporary art where the public art gallery willingly lent itself as a platform for ideological debate.