Is a South African Artist an 'African' Artist ? An Analysis of the Questions Raised by (South) African Art in Ivan Vladislavić's Curiouser

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Les Carnets du Cerpac n° 7, 2009, 83-104.

IS A SOUTH AFRICAN ARTIST AN 'AFRICAN' ARTIST? AN ANALYSIS OF THE QUESTIONS RAISED BY (SOUTH) AFRICAN ART IN IVAN VLADISLAVIĆ'S 'CURIOSER'

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Africa? Which Africa? Yours or mine?
Breyten BREYTENBACH. *Memory of Snow and of Dust*

Simeon Majara, the 'Young Lion of the South African Art Scene' and main character of 'Curioser,'[1] is challenged by a friend and fellow artist, Leon, concerning the origin of the African curios that form the raw material of his exhibition, '*Curioser*.'

> 'You're dealing in stolen property, you shit.'
> 'I'm hardly dealing. Mind you, it's quite a nice twist. If you consider how much African art has been swiped by the real dealers, the wheeler-dealers.'
> 'I'm sorry, you'll have to explain. How is this different?'
> 'I'm an African for one thing.'
> 'You mean you're black.' (131)

Wittingly or unwittingly, Leon's teasing calls into question Majara's perception of himself as 'African' and raises a set of serious questions. The reference to 'stolen property' of course evokes pillaging by Colonial powers, but the dialogue also raises questions that are particular to contemporary South Africa and its relation with the rest of the continent. The analysis that follows does not focus on the Postcolony and its theories, but is structured around the questions raised by this seemingly playful dialogue, questions that translate contemporary South African preoccupations: What is an 'African artist'? Is a South African artist an 'African' artist? In contemporary South Africa, does skin colour still come into play when one asks these questions?

Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View* consists of four thematically interlinked fictions, of which 'Curioser' is the third. Set in contemporary Johannesburg city, each text has a male protagonist who, through his work, faces the challenges of post-apartheid South

1. The references in this article are to Vladislavić, Ivan, *The Exploded View* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2004), of which 'Curioser' is the third fiction. Ivan Vladislavić is a writer and professional proofreader (he proofreads Antjie Krog's work in English) who has a particularly pertinent vision of contemporary South Africa. He was awarded the 2007 Alan Paton Literary Award for his recent *Portrait with Keys. Joburg & what-what* (Roggebaai: Umuzi, 2006).

Africa. The dialogue quoted above occurs at the party, or 'closing' Majara holds to celebrate the success of '*Curioser*.' The typically South African barbeque, held next to Majara's California-style lit swimming pool, is transformed into a happening by the 'spooky' presence of four-faced mask lanterns. They are produced on a last-minute impulse and are made from the left-over African masks that had served as the raw material for the successful '*Curioser*' exhibition. The eerie light from the mask lanterns seems to affect his guests and Majara's fashionable, multi-cultural group of friends starts challenging the authenticity of their artist friend's image. They question the origin of the masks—curios made in African countries and brought into South Africa through clandestine networks, bought in bulk by Majara to be sawed to pieces, 'transmute[d]' into Art (146).

By analysing descriptions of works of (South) African art, this paper proposes a reading of Vladislavić's reflection on South Africa's attempts to live up to President Thabo Mbeki's call for an African Renaissance. *Mayibuye iAfrica* (come back Africa), the rallying cry during apartheid, translated the idea of both a return *to* Africa and a return *by* Africa. Through a work of fiction saturated with the pictorial, Vladislavić confronts the reader with the political and social reality of illegal immigration from other African countries, and the preoccupations of 'angry youngish South African men' (139) in the transforming urban environment of Johannesburg.

Majara's 'African' image—both his perception of himself and the way he is perceived by others—will be analysed. We will attempt to demonstrate that Majara inhabits Thabo Mbeki's ideal South Africa 'attuned to globalisation' with ease, but leaves one in doubt to his being 'integrated with the African continent.'[1] To this purpose we will examine Majara's account of buying the curios and his uneasy dealings with Africans in Johannesburg. Are his excitement and his

1. Klopper, Dirk, 'Making a Difference, Thabo Mbeki and the African Renaissance', *Current Writing*, 11(2), 1999: 21.

fear, even terror, symbolical of South Africa's attempt at becoming part of the African continent early in the twenty-first century?

The analysis of a detailed description of the '*Curioser*' exhibition will have the double purpose of demonstrating Majara's conception of the curio as an object to be sliced, cut, sawn and reassembled and of trying to determine the artistic influences behind his '*Curioser*' pieces. Majara's consistent view of the curio as object to be transformed into Art by himself, ruling out the possibility of considering the curio as a work of art in itself, as well as his offhand dismissal of the makers of the curios, find an interesting echo in Simon Gikani's article, 'Picasso, Africa and the Schemata of Difference.' Gikani sums up Picasso's relationship with Africa as follows: 'The fact that Picasso had an intimate relationship with African objects is not in doubt; but there is little evidence of an interest in Africans as human beings and producers of culture beyond his general interest and involvement in anticolonial and other radical movements.'[1] It will be shown that the careful separation of the African art object from the African artist or craftsman characterizes Majara's dealings with the African curio and more generally, with the continent.

Leon is Majara's foil and interestingly it is his girlfriend, Amy, who insists on the person who made the curio, thus on 'Africans as human beings and producers of culture', to use Gikani's words. Finally, Amy's position will lead us to briefly consider Majara's '*Genocide*' installations in the light of his reflection, 'the gap between corpses and curios is narrower than people think' (106).

The omniscient narrator of 'Curioser' pokes subtle fun at the image '"S. Majara"' (between inverted commas in the text) has fabricated for himself. Majara's image of himself as graceful and modern is presented with humour and the careful attention paid to the

1. Gikani, Simon, 'Picasso, Africa and the Schemata of Difference', in Sarah Nuttall, ed., *Beautiful Ugly. African and Diaspora Aesthetics* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2006): 33.

pleasure he takes in wearing fashionable trainers, situates him in a consumer culture:

> Ever since Artslink had called 'S. Majara' a 'Young Lion of the Art Scene'—sarcastically, it is true—Simeon had discovered a feline streak in himself that was hard to suppress. The goatee only made it worse. So did the rubber-soled trainers, which looked more like a superior form of foot than a shoe, as if the body had magically projected its striated musculature onto the surface of his skin. Lately he'd taken to inserting something catlike into his gait, a version of padding, a leonine grace. (114)

The reader is led to consider Majara's financial success as partly due to the fact that he is a modern black South African. In post-apartheid South Africa, Majara-the-Lion is 'an industry' (125) and his old university friend, Leon, a struggling white painter, 'just another muddler' (125). Leon—whose role as foil to Majara is underlined by the wordplay 'Lion', 'Leon'—is characterized with humour too. He is the caricature of the white South African male. An expert with the 'braai' (barbeque), Leon wears 'a string vest in the middle of winter like a teenager just to show off his tattooed arms' (139). Both Simeon and Leon have a reputation for 'riotous behaviour, fist fights and gunplay' (139). Yet Simeon is painfully aware that Leon is the 'original' and he the 'copy' (139). It is because Majara measures himself against his friend in this manner, that Leon's seemingly playful questioning of Majara's identity becomes poignant. From Leon's point of view, Majara is clearly not 'African', but a black South African who furthermore, as the son of a diplomat, received his training in private schools and abroad (where he picked up tips on grace from 'Oprah during his years at the Art Institute in Chicago' (119).

Majara's success in the post-liberation South African art scene, however, seems to be due to his 'African-ness', a concept that is shown to be rather superficial. For a fellow (white) South African

artist who solicits his help with the interior decoration of Bra Zama's African Eatery, Majara clearly fits what Frantz Fanon would call a 'cadre préétabli'[1]: 'he knew more about authentic African style than she did—he was black, after all, never mind the private school accent' (106). 'Black,' according to this South African artist's pre-conceived notions, seems to equal 'African' (and she furthermore assumes that there is such a thing as *one* 'authentic African style'). Nevertheless, in a political context of the African Renaissance and black empowerment, Majara seems to be at the right place at the right time and has no scruples about making the most of his own 'African' image, the 'cadre préétabli' that people expect him to live up to.

It is his success in living up to an image that gets him invited to exhibit at the Kulturhuset in Stockholm. When Leon shows scepticism about the news, Majara's question with regards the patron of the arts who invited him, is: '"She's invited me because I'm black?"' This time Leon's sarcastic answer is, '"No, Sims, it's because you're an African,"'(151) implying that from the Swedish curator's point of view, Simeon Majara *is* indeed 'African'. This passage creates a discordant echo with Leon's earlier statement (quoted at the opening of this analysis) that Majara's black skin does *not* make him African.

If 'Curioser' does not invite the reader to simply condemn the financially successful Majara as a black South African bourgeois who has somehow betrayed the Negotiated Revolution, it does urge the reader to question Majara's indifference to the rest of the African continent. When he tells the story of where he found the curios for the '*Curioser*' exhibition, Majara's concern is with the entertainment value of his story and not with 'poor Victor' (128), the original owner of the curios.

1. Fanon, Frantz, *Peau noire masques blancs* (1952) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 'Points,' 1995): 65.

> It turned out to be very tricky finding masks, of all things. These guys are very protective of their turf. It's a whole big secret international network, passing mainly through back doors and legal loopholes. Then I met this guy at Bruma, one of the curio-sellers, name of Roger. A Malawian. He said he thought we could come to an arrangement . . .
> 'I've got what you're looking for, but it's difficult.' How so? 'The goods belong to my friend Victor.' Does he want to sell? 'Oh yes.' Perhaps we can go and see him together? 'Impossible.' You could ask him to call me. Does he have a cell? 'I don't think so . . . he's been dead for six weeks.'
> Laughter, loud enough to turn heads. Simeon had told the story before and was getting better at it. It helped that everyone was a bit tipsy. You could always count on the Sociable White. (127-8)

'Sociable White' is 'affordable plonk for sociable whites' after a few glasses of which, according to Majara, 'whites could be relied on to misbehave' (124). It is true that this passage reveals cynicism in Majara's attitude to his white friends. The main interest of the passage, however, lies in his cynical indifference to the death of an African man, the main character of his story (who remains unnamed until almost the end). Majara also states his distrust of the 'fence', 'the Malawian', and how he had been haunted by 'stories about Nigerian con men' when driving to the factory where the masks were stored, 'looking over his shoulder all the time' (128). It is not so much the truth or falsehood of these stories of 'routines . . . so standard that they had names and numbers, the "Black Money" swindle, the 419 scam' (128-9) that is of interest here, as the irony of Majara-the-African's fear, even terror, of his fellow 'Africans'. The context that is referred to is that of African immigrants' appropriation of areas of Johannesburg (the city centre or Hillbrow, for example). It may seem ironic that one of the forms that the 'Return *by* Africa' has taken in South Africa's post-liberation years, is that of mass ille-

gal immigration from African countries,[1] a phenomenon that most South Africans reject.

Majara falls back onto racial types in his attempt to define a 'Malawian':

> What did a Malawian look like? There had been a Malawian kid at school with him, a couple of classes below, the son of a diplomat—'from a diplomatic family,' his mother said. Was Freddie Chavula typical? He could hardly remember now what he looked like. The only other Malawian he could picture was Hastings Banda.
>
> (133)

A similar tendency to want to over-simplify people or things by wanting to make them correspond to a single aesthetic is evident in Majara's conception of the African mask. The first time masks are described in the text, they are seen through Majara's eyes:

> The face of Africa, he thought, the one made familiar by ethnographic museums and galleries of modern art, B-grade movies and souvenir shops. Everywhere you went in Johannesburg, wooden faces looked up at you from the pavements at the hawkers' stalls, a running catalogue of expressions that ranged between hollowed-out hunger and plump self-satisfaction, each flipping over into its opposite as soon as the weather changed. (103)

The irony of the passage is layered. The masks described here are not South African curios, but are produced in other African countries and clandestinely imported into South Africa, often to be bought by tourists as souvenirs of South Africa. As the story evolves, the reader realizes that Majara shares the general vision of masks as a cliché 'face of Africa': 'Africa' being the dark unknowable conti-

1. Immigrants from Zimbabwe alone are estimated at over 3.5 million in 2007. Immigration from African countries into South Africa is vaguely estimated at around 8 million immigrants. The Africa Institute of South Africa (based in Pretoria), together with Home Affairs and the International Organization of Migration, is having a conference on African Migration in March 2008.

nent, which produces not Senegalese or Zimbabwean or Congolese masks, but 'African' masks lacking any singularity. That this should be his vision is ironic in the light of Majara's proclamation, 'I'm an African' (131) and its echoes with Thabo Mbeki's famous 'I am an African' speech, delivered at the adoption of the South African constitution in May 1996. This speech, followed by the notion of an African Renaissance, is characterized by the idea of embracing the African continent and the diversity of its people—these notions have been incorporated into ANC ideology.

Underlining the foreignness of Africa for Majara, seems deliberately ironical. Once he has purchased them, Majara unpacks the masks from their crates, to find them wrapped in newspaper 'covered in French, and African languages *that were not at all familiar*' (134, my italics).

To Majara, the masks he buys in bulk exist outside any cultural field of reference and are mass-produced objects, 'like soccer balls or running shoes' (143), produced in sweatshops anywhere. The crates of masks and other curios, initially bought for the decoration of Bra Zama's, lead to the '*Curioser*' exhibition in which curios, 'the kind displayed for sale to tourists by hawkers all over the city' (101), 'ordinary clutter' (120), are cut up and rearranged so that the original model is completely metamorphosed. In his analysis of Picasso's use of African works of art, Gikani refers to Picasso's 'ability to make the primitive central to the aesthetic ideology of modern art while also transforming tribal objects in such a way that they were no longer recognisable as model' (Gikani 2006: 53). One may be tempted to read Majara's '*Curioser*' pieces as transforming and thereby modernising traditional African objects (if the curios are indeed traditional), which would also be in keeping with African Renaissance ideals. Interestingly, the texts offers detailed ekphrases of Majara's '*Curioser*' pieces, permitting the reader to visualise the process of their creation:

> The first small pieces were simply animal figures sawn into chunks and displayed like butcher's carcases on marble chopping boards. Then came a series of rhinos and elephants sliced into cross sections a centimetre thick, vertically or horizontally, and reassembled with variable spaces between the sections, so that certain parts of their bodies were unnaturally elongated or thickened. They were like distorted reflections in a hall of mirrors. Later, after he'd acquired the bandsaw which allowed for thinner cross sections and more precise cuts, he could graft the parts of different animals into new species, the head of a lion, the horns of a buffalo, the legs of a hippopotamus, exquisite corpses, many headed monsters for a contemporary bestiary. The pieces were presented in glass display cases with mock scientific seriousness, as if they were taxidermic specimens. The effects were uncanny—'spooky' was the description he came to—the studio turned into a museum of unnatural history.
>
> When he tired of tinkering at new creatures, he set himself another challenge: how far could a single curio be made to go? How thin could you slice it? In his three 'Baloney' sculptures (springbuck, impala, kudu) the cross sections were spread out like flat pieces of a puzzle, in sequence from horn to hoof. They were beautiful, everyone said so. Abstract images were constantly jittering off the surface, straining towards a figurative existence in three dimensions.
>
> 'Crazy paving', the centrepiece of the '*Curioser*' show, was laid out on the gallery floor. It contained cross sections of twenty different species and covered a surface of nearly fifty square metres. It looked like an aerial photograph of a newly discovered planet.
>
> (137-138)

If these detailed descriptions permit the reader to visualize the '*Curioser*' pieces, one is furthermore allowed such technical insight into the methods of production that, if a curio and a bandsaw had been at hand, one has the impression that one could imitate Majara's work. The stages the work went through are chronologically listed. In both the examples of the 'sliced' curios and the playfully reassembled mismatched animal body parts, compared to surrealist *cadavres*

exquis, the curios become objects for the artist to do with what he pleases. This accumulation and appropriation of the object, its destruction or dismemberment and its subsequent reassembly into anti-sculptures, call to mind the work of the 'Nouveaux Réalistes'. The sliced and reassembled animals are described in enough detail to evoke Arman's vertically 'sliced' and reassembled violins and other objects. The artistic stance of this Post Word War II movement consisted in approaching the real in a new manner in order to question the way we look at objects in a booming consumer society[1]. The objects of consumerism were at the core of their work.

The binary opposites 'destruction' and 'creation' were challenged in, for example, Niki de Saint Phalle's two dimensional works that were coloured by shooting at them in order to release the colour, or in Tinguely's machines that were destroyed at the end of (and as part of) a happening. De Saint Phalle's gesture of shooting at her paintings comes to mind when one reads the description of Majara's earlier '"*Bullet-in*"', 'a photographic sequence inspired by Huambo' (122) in which the shape of the human body was delineated by 'shots' fired at walls in some of the most war-ridden parts of the world. In reality, we are told, Majara made the bullet marks with his Black & Decker drill against his garden wall on which he put together 'Latin American colour schemes, tatters of Middle Eastern advertising, scraps of graffiti' and that he repainted and patched with 'Polyfilla' after each session (122), evoking a much tamer image of Majara.

One may be tempted to question the African-ness of Majara whose techniques seem anchored in Western movements, but that would be too reductive a reading of his work. The work of an artist

1. Their 1960 manifesto was signed by Arman, Dufrêne, Hains, Klein, Raysse, Restany, Spoerri, Tinguely, Villeglé. Other members were Niki de Saint Phalle and César.

like Hervé Youmbi using found objects and masks,[1] transforming the African object, is nevertheless considered as Cameroonian in a post-modern world where traditional boundaries are no longer valid. Being a global artist does not make an artist less African. It must be added too, that African curios or tourist masks are not 'traditional' or 'authentic' African objects, but objects produced for consumption by the Western world.

Majara's gesture of cutting and slicing the curio may be interpreted as a need to explore the curio, which could be read as a symbolic exploration of Africa through its culture, in keeping with Thabo Mbeki's encouragement of the 'rediscovery' of the African 'soul', through the rediscovery of Africa's major works of art, like the 'Benin bronzes and the African masks, the carvings of the Makonde and the sculptures of the Shona'[2]. Cutting up a curio, however, would seem a caricature of exploration. The general response to '*Curioser*', though said to be enthusiastic, translates the tongue-in-cheek tone of the narrator who adds 'that sort of thing' to his list of reported praise: 'Even people who were habitually sarcastic about his work thought he had achieved something remarkable, liberating the curio from its stifling form, cutting down to the core of its meaning, that sort of thing' (103). The text further demonstrates the danger of theorizing about art. In the following passage Philippa, one of Majara's friends, expresses her theory about '*Curioser*':

> 'You know what's amazing? It's like you're deconstructing the whole curio thing, which seems pretty obvious. But then you're saying, yelling actually: Look I'm deconstructing this curio! So then it's like

1. For a brief discussion of Youmbi's work and the detail of a portrait showing one of five tourist masks wrapped in filthy bandages, see Dominique MALAQUAIS, 'Quelle Liberté: Art, Beauty and the Grammars of Resistance in Douala', in Sarah NUTTALL ed. *Beautiful Ugly, op. cit.*, p. 124-163.

2. Thabo Mbeki's speech at the 'African Renaissance Show', broadcast live by the South African Broadcasting Corporation in 1998, quoted by Dirk Klopper, *op. cit.*, 30.

> you're deconstructing the deconstruction thing, know what I mean? That's really amazing.'
> 'I think it's more about *re*construction,' said John. It's about putting things together in new ways.'
> 'And how are you going to put something together again if you haven't taken it apart? That's what's amazing. I'm like, what is this thing? I'm looking at it and thinking: What am I looking at? What is it? Bits and pieces of elephant. Kudu salad. The do-it-yourself zebra. Know what I mean?' (125)

Direct speech is used very effectively to expose the traps one can fall into when analysing works of art. The term 'deconstructing' becomes meaningless because of its repetition and 'amazing' is similarly deprived of meaning (ironically so, for the speaker's purpose is to underline her point). In talking about 'deconstructing', Philippa's own sentences seem to come apart ('I'm like, what is this thing?'), so that by the time she concludes with her second 'Know what I mean?' any possibility of understanding the theory underlying her enthusiasm for '*Curioser*' has been ruled out.

In contrast, Amy's response to '*Curioser*' is personal and lacks any pretension to theory: 'I liked "*Curioser*"' (142) or 'I already told you I liked the show. I'd buy one of those "Baloney" things if I could afford to, I've got just the wall for it' (146). Leon's girlfriend Amy is the only character to comment on the beauty of the curios before their transformation by Majara. Her comments towards the end of the party about the beauty of each mask and her questions concerning their makers have a powerful destabilising effect on Majara. It is Amy who, at the beginning of the party, had wanted to know where he had found the curios. A final dialogue between Majara and Amy occurs in his study, transformed into a storeroom for the leftover masks. When Amy calls the masks, hung haphazardly on the wall, an '[i]nteresting installation' (140) a frank discussion on the almost accidental beginnings of Majara's artistic projects follows. But the manner in which Amy invites the creators of the masks into

his study comes as an unpleasant surprise for Majara. In the following dialogue, it is interesting to note Amy's insistence on the human being, in contrast to Majara's insistence on the 'thing':

> 'They're all the same,' he said. 'Mass-produced. Made in a sweatshop like soccer balls or running shoes.'
> 'The expressions are different'.
> 'These two are the same.' . . .
> 'They're not exactly the same,' she said, 'if you look at them properly. They're like *brothers*. There's a *family* resemblance.'
> 'Granted, they're not identical. But let's say the differences are unimportant.'
> 'They might have been made by the same *person*.'
> 'Not necessarily.'
> 'I'll bet the *people* who made these things can tell them apart. They would come in here and pick their own work off the walls just like that.'
> She clicked her fingers, three small firecracker explosions. Then she dropped her hand onto the mask and ran the tip of her finger along the ridged surface of its *lips*. In this tender gesture a *human being* became visible, a *man* with a chisel and mallet.
> Simeon turned away and perched on the edge of the desk, gazing at the mass of masks. By invoking the makers, the *hands* and *eyes* behind these things, she was changing them subtly, and it irritated him. He had become used to thinking of them as a single element, as raw material, and it suited him.' (143-144, my italics)

One notes the shift from the object to the person that Majara is forced to make in 'the *hands* and *eyes* behind these *things*' (my italics), yet he does not pronounce the word 'person'. These people are 'artists' according to Amy and 'craftsmen' according to Majara. Amy's final concern seems to be with the power imbalance between the third and the first worlds. Interestingly, according to her analysis, Majara represents the first world. She sees it as 'unfair' that Majara should 'carve up a cheap curio' and be paid 'a packet' for it (145). Majara, 'wearily' comes up with the following theory:

> 'The curio is in one system and the art work in another. If you move an object from one system into another, by the sweat of your brow, you change its purpose and therefore its value. There's no point in comparing the systems unless you want to understand the transmutation.'
> (146)

Amy's response that they 'seem to have read the same books' (146) seems once again to dismiss not only theories about art but also the classification of people: she, a white South African, and Majara-the-African, share a cultural background. In spite of Majara's personal view of Amy as 'the type' who 'gazed upon exploitation and oppression through their Police sunglasses' (149), it is Amy who has the last word:

> 'But I can't help being aware of the balance of power, the imbalance, one should say. The way you live here, the way the people who made these masks must live.'
> 'And you, poor thing, sleeping on a bench at the station.'
> 'Oh, I'm talking about myself too, you mustn't take it personally. It's just a question of awareness, of being conscious and *staying* conscious of how things are, even if you cannot change them. Especially then.'
> (146-7)

This conversation closes a sub-part of the narrative and it is left uninterpreted by the narrator. It does, however, remain one of the few serious moments from which Majara with his 'knack for publicity' (115), seems unable to escape with a witty answer. Is the reader to see the successful Majara as somehow betraying the makers of the curios? As if to undermine a possible reading of Majara as simply superficial and bourgeois, the reader has been informed that, '[w]henever he was accused of superficiality, he took comfort in a private conviction that the work was always received more superficially than it had been created' (115). Although the 'receiver' here would be the (fictitious) spectator of Majara's work, the reader is nevertheless made aware of her/his own status as 'receiver' and is

thus drawn into the literary space—and in the process made aware of the risks involved in pointing fingers.

After the conversation with Amy quoted above, in the next part of the narrative, Majara does not return to the party. Drinking a beer in the study, he recalls a conversation on mass production he had had as a student in a university canteen. A fellow student had accused Majara of being 'out of touch', 'as a black' kid (147). The caricature of the Marxist student with 'a patriarch's beard so luxuriant it looked false' (147) once again prevents easy side taking by the reader. Majara had stared at his plate of food, tin of Coca-Cola and plastic eating utensils and had had a revelation concerning their producers, 'bound together in a massively complex web of work, whose most surprising characteristic was that nearly all of it was invisible and unacknowledged' (148).

We are told at the beginning of 'Curioser' that S. Majara had made his name with three video installations on the theme of genocide, '*Genocide I*', '*Genocide II*' and '*Genocide III*', dealing respectively with Bosnia, Ahmici, Nyanza and that the '"*Curioser*"' exhibition had therefore come as a surprise to his public. If Majara's reflexion, 'the gap between corpses and curios was narrower than people thought' (106), seems cynical at first, it is redeemed by the even more cynical response to Majara's '*Genocide I*': 'Of course, people were intrigued that a black artist should be dealing with Bosnia, although one critic suggested that he mind his own business. Hadn't he heard of Idi Amin?' (104) A possible link between 'corpses and curios' is explored in the conversation with Amy, whose first response to the wall of masks is fear: '"There is something frightening about it. It's like a crowd, isn't it?"' Majara's chilling response, '"Yes." . . . "Or a mass grave. Cassinga."' (141) possibly explains his unease when Amy evokes the people behind the masks, since the individual human being disappears in his work, whether its core is massive production or destruction. Thus Amy reminds Majara that the invisible—and unacknowledged—human beings who are

absent from his work, are people killed in genocides and people eking out a living from the mass production of curios, in order to fight starvation.

A final ekphrasis, an imagined future exhibition, combines the themes of the '*Genocide*' series and '"*Curioser*"': 'A room full of death masks, dangling from the ceiling on fishing line—the average man is 1.75 metres, the average woman 1.63—so that the height alone invites you to press your face into the smoky hollow. The eyes are shaped like keyholes and television screens' (154). The identification with the absent person that placing one's face in a death mask would imply, reminds of the third of the genocide installations in which Majara had modelled the images on his twenty death shrouds on his own body. People 'saw it as vanity that he used himself as the measure for all suffering. Whereas he saw it as the opposite. It was a mark of humility, he said, to take yourself as the template, to immerse yourself in the other like an armature in a sculpture' (115). In the future exhibition described above, the *spectator* will be invited to 'immerse [him or herself] in the other' and to complete the work by fitting her or his face in the sculpted death mask, thus providing it temporarily with a living body.

If the reader is tempted to judge Majara throughout the text, she or he is inevitably made aware of her/his own voyeurism in the reference to the eyes shaped like 'keyholes' or 'television screens' (through which the first world observes the massacres in the third world). This idea of voyeurism is underlined by the numerous references to the television screen projecting images of the war 'in the Congo, he thought, but he couldn't be sure' (151) playing to the sleeping bodies of the 'diehard' (151) partygoers who end up sprawled in positions reminding of corpses on the couch and floor of Majara's living room.

'Curioser' raises questions, but refuses to accuse. By playing with the statements 'I'm an African' (131), 'you're an African' (151) the

reader is inevitably made aware of an echo with President Thabo Mbeki's famous 'I'm an African' speech and the African Renaissance it is associated with. These notions are explored with subtle humour by presenting a protagonist who seems to want to make the most of an African reawakening—a protagonist who is at ease with creating a work of art with video footage of the Nyanza massacre or with curios that belonged to an assassinated 'Malawian', yet fears the 'Africa' at his doorstep.

'Curioser' opens and closes with an image of Majara in his studio, improvising mask lanterns or dreaming, as opposed to being 'engaged in the serious business of making art' (101). The closing passage, describing Majara dreaming up future exhibitions, creates the impression of freeing the artist who has been held up for criticism and close scrutiny throughout the text.

One of the most striking features of 'Curioser' is the way in which Vladislavić produces a work of fiction of which large parts read like fictitious catalogues of exhibitions. '*Genocide III*', also referred to as the 'Nyanza shrouds', for example, is described with such attention to visual detail that the reader is able not only to visualize the installation, but can also draw its floor plan. The reader is tempted to forget that Majara's installations exist only in the space of fiction.

I shall briefly demonstrate one of the ways in which Vladislavić knowingly plays with the reader's expectations by referring to one of his works of non-fiction, the art book entitled *Willem Boshoff*[1]. When reading this art book on the South African artist Willem Boshoff, the reader has the uncanny impression of reading a work of fiction. Vladislavić introduces one of Boshoff's major works of art, *370-Day Project (1882-3)*, a wooden cabinet containing a 'diary' consisting of carved wooden blocks of three hundred and seventy different species of wood, by telling a story:

1. Vladislavić, Ivan, *Willem Boshoff* (Johannesburg, David Krut Publishing, 2005).

> The 31st of May 1983 was a busy day for Boshoff. While South Africans were either celebrating or denouncing Republic Day, depending on their political persuasions, he ran the Comrades marathon. It was an up run, from Durban to Pietermaritzburg, and the official distance was 87.7 kilometres. The records show that 6,637 runnners entered the country's premier ultra-distance event that year—the first time the number exceeded 5,000—and that 5,364 finished. The race was won by Bruce Fordyce for the third consecutive year. Boshoff was just 520 places back, in a very credible time of 7 hours, 26 minutes and 29 seconds, good enough to secure a silver medal.
>
> The other thing he did that day was carve the block depicted on the opposite page. It is a block of wood from the kapok tree, also known as the floss-silk (*Chorisia speciosa*). He carved it in Kloof, in the small hours when he should have been sleeping. He and his wife Denise were staying with her Auntie Hilda. He sat on the kitchen chair, with a piece of cloth across his knees, one part of his 'portable workshop', and carved the six angular symbols on the left of the block into its surface. Those symbols record the six routine tasks he had set himself for the day (in addition to running the marathon) (Vladislavić 2005: 34).

A literary analysis of this extract would go beyond the scope of this conclusion, but let it suffice to point out Vladislavić's attention to detail, from the distance of the marathon and the number of participants to Boshoff's ranking and the Latin name of the tree the block is carved out of on that day. This attention to detail playfully imitates the meticulousness characteristic of Boshoff's work. One is also aware of the author's concern with the layout of the printed page: he refers to the wooden 'block depicted on the opposite page' (rather than to a numbered figure). Boshoff is also known for a series of pictures he produced with the help of a typewriter, works which 'graphically preserve the process through which they were made'. Vladislavić says about these works that 'Boshoff approached the page the way an artist would approach a canvas, using the type-

writer as a "drawing instrument"' and furthermore imagines 'the artist bent over his typewriter' (Vladislavić 2005: 34). This is exactly the image that comes to mind in 'Curioser' when Vladislavić-the-proofreader, betrays his presence when he in turn uses the keyboard as a 'drawing instrument': 'CurioUSER, CURIOuser, [Curio]user, Curio_user, Curio»>user' (123). We are told that Majara 'had been through countless variations, riddled with characters from the little-used ranges of the keyboard. In the end: Curioser. Plain and simple' (123). Though the reference here is to Majara, one cannot help but visualise Vladislavić playing with his keyboard. It is striking, too, that such an interest in the keyboard should be attributed to Majara, who is not a writer.

The reader realizes that nothing in the world that Vladislavić creates is 'plain and simple' and the following conversation between Majara and Amy can be seen to mirror the game the implied author plays with an implied reader:

> 'I liked "*Curioser*".'
> '*Curio-user*.'
> 'Not "*Curioser*"? As in Alice.'
> 'No, *Curio-user*. As in user of curios.'
> This was a game he played. Whatever *pronunciation* someone chose, he corrected them to its opposite. (142)

A conversation concerning Tanya, a minor character in 'Curioser,' betrays Vladislavić-the-proofreader's presence in the fast-talking he attributes to his urban protagonists:

> Tanya, to say she couldn't make it, she'd been held up.
> At gunpoint?
> No really, Simeon, unavoidably detained. (132)

The tension of living in Johannesburg, which has not been the focus of this article, is introduced with the help of black humour. The dictionary definition of 'held up' seems to be playfully intro-

duced, but here one is reminded of another of Vladislavić's works of fiction, *The Restless Supermarket*[1], whose protagonist, Aubrey Tearle, is a fastidious retired proofreader with an obsessive love of dictionaries.

It is perhaps the auto-reflexive humour of Vladislavić's texts that enables him to successfully present us with characters that inhabit post-apartheid urban South Africa, a space still characterised by separateness. One cannot help but notice the repeated references to Majara who seems to exclude himself from his own party, who knows his guests' topics by heart, and from a broader perspective, one is aware of the delimitation of Majara's backyard with its California-style pool as separate and safe from an urban space where people are held up at gunpoint.

The urban zones described seem to allow for no space to engage with other Africans (Majara meets 'the Malawian' on a sidewalk and they discuss business in a shopping centre; they drive through an industrial zone to the place where the curios are stocked). In a context of xenophobia and fear—introduced obliquely and therefore all the more powerful—the question as to whether Majara is an African artist must remain unanswered for as long as South Africa fails to come to terms with its inclusion in the African continent.

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