

# Interview with artist Dan Halter, pt. 1

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South African-based artist Dan Halter

In December 2007, while on his honeymoon, Base partner Geoff Cook unexpectedly came across the work of Dan Halter. He was immediately taken by the combination of artistry, conceptualism and political commentary contained therein. Two years later, we decided to check in on Halter to see what progress he'd made since Cook's last visit.

*Base: You are Zimbabwean by birth. Your parents, like many white landowners, fled the country. Can you talk about your family's history and what brought you to South Africa?*

Dan Halter: My grandparents on my mother's side moved to Zimbabwe after the First World War from Switzerland where there was a recession. My father, fed up with the weather in Switzerland, decided to move to Africa. So I come from quite a small family unit in Zimbabwe without very deep roots. In the mid-1990s I moved to Switzerland to study art. This transition was very hard and I was very homesick. I returned home, and because art was not offered at the University of Zimbabwe – I moved to the University of Cape Town in 1998. I have been based there ever since. In 2005, I spent 6 months in Zimbabwe working on a body of work that was to become part of my first solo exhibition. Shortly afterwards, my parents were attacked and they have subsequently moved to Germany.



Halter, Dan, 1977 Zhingzhong Mother and Child, Resin and fibreglass. 33 X 18 X 10 cm, Edition 2 of 20, 2006.

*B: You were just back in Zimbabwe developing a new body of work. What is your feeling about your country when you go back?*

DH: I am working on a new body of work and I felt the need to spend some time at the Beitbridge border between South Africa and Zimbabwe. Together with collaborator Adam Davies, we set out to 'shift the goal posts'. Taking this expression literally we swapped one set of goal posts from a field in South Africa with ones from Zimbabwe. This and other works are currently in progress.

I also visited my hometown Harare and I found the situation there better and more optimistic than in 2005. This was in part because the introduction of foreign currency as legal tender has stopped the rampant inflation and goods have become available again. Morgan Tsvangarai has since left the Unity Government.



Halter, Dan, 1977 Stone Tablets / Bitter Pills 2005 Various stone including soapstone, black springstone and cobalt 13 X 13 X 7 cm, 2005.

*B: I'm ashamed to say that we, Americans, only really started learning recently about the strife in Zimbabwe. How do you see the future of the country vis-à-vis Mugabe?*

DH: This is a hard one to answer. I do not know. Maybe one positive outcome of Mugabe's policies of blaming and ousting the West / whites will be that at some point Zimbabweans will be able to take responsibility for their situation.

*B: Looking over your work, one sees recurring themes: oppression, race, epidemic. Are these themes conscious choices that you wish to address? Or is there a more "organic" course of inspiration that leads you to them?*

DH: I would say the inspiration is more 'organic'. Local anecdotes and expressions often form a starting point for my work.

*B: What do you look to for inspiration?*

DH: Everything.



Halter, Dan, 1977, Safe as fuck, AIDS ribbon, hypodermic needles, black foam-core. 81 X 101 cm, Edition 1 of 5, 2008.

*B: In particular, you've dealt quite a bit with AIDS, which has obviously had an immensely destructive impact on Africa. Can you talk in particular about these works (Safe as Fuck, Henry IV, etc)*

DH: 'Safe as fuck' is a turn of phrase that became popular in the 1990's in the rave scene, of which I was briefly a part. According to [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com) it means 'cool as hell', 'really rather fabulous' or it can be used as a farewell. Formed out of a continuous length of AIDS ribbon pinned into place with hypodermic needles this expression takes on another more sinister meaning.



Halter, Dan, 1977 HIV (Henry the Fourth), beads glued onto board by women at the Monkey Biz HIV clinic, 59 X 44 cm, Edition 1 of 5, 2007.

'Henry the Fourth' is coded slang for HIV in Zimbabwe. Typically it is a secret lingo that can be used by whites in the presence of blacks. It appears in Alexandra Fuller's book *Scribbling the Cat*:

...you find a decent gondie, you train them, and then the poor bastard gets Henry the Fourth and dies. Now how do you explain this?

The image of Henry the Fourth is taken from an old and mysterious painting by an unknown artist and has been translated into beadwork by women working at the Monkey Biz HIV clinic.

*B: Related question: What was it like collaborating with the women at the Monkey Biz HIV clinic on the Henry IV piece? DH: A friend of mine ran a workshop with the women from Monkey Biz and I documented this for him. Their stories touched me. It was after meeting these women that I decided to make HIV (Henry the Fourth). I allowed the women to translate my idea into an object through their method of beadwork.*

*B: Do you ever fear being eaten by a shark?*

DH: Not really, I am not a surfer. However I was walking through a shallow lagoon outside Cape Town a couple of weeks ago and I kept standing on sand sharks. It was not very pleasant.

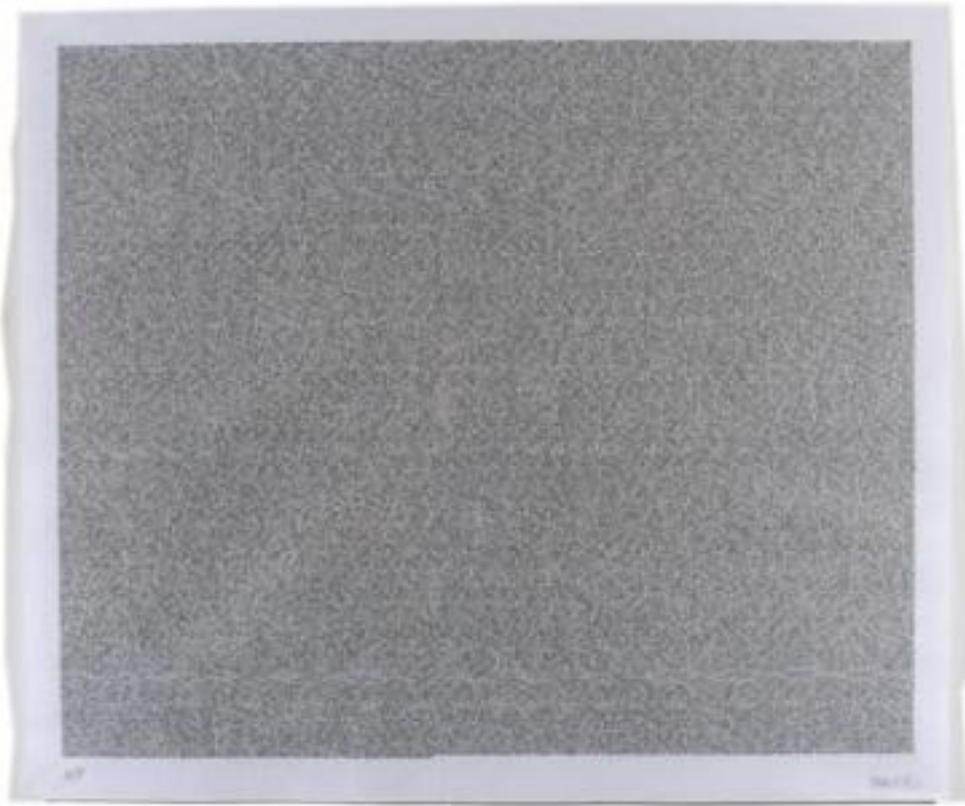


UNTITLED (ZIMBABWEAN QUEEN OF RAVE) | 2005 | VIDEO STILLS

Halter, Dan, 1977, Untitled (Zimbabwean Queen of Rave) – stills, DVD, Edition 2 of 10, 2005.

*B: Post-apartheid, how present is the “race issue” still in South Africa? To what degree does racism still exist?*

DH: Racism exists on many levels in South Africa in both directions. Whites however still hold a very privileged position.



Halter, Dan, 1977, Black and White, Digital print, 76.5 X 88.5 cm, Edition 2 of 10, 2005.

*B: It's a topic you deal a lot with, in for example "Black & White" and the fantastic "Monochrome Till Receipts". Can you talk a bit about these pieces?*

DH: I have grown up very racially conscious and am surrounded by the aftermath of a history of violent racism and oppression. But things are never black and white, things are more grey in reality. "Black and White" is simply a list of all the names of all the farms that were taken from white farmers in the name of redistribution. This list appeared in newspapers to alert farmers about the fate of their farm. The names are often poetic as they speak of the farmers' dreams on their essentially ill-begotten land.

The Monochrome Till Receipts are a take on a similar artwork by UK-based conceptual/minimalist artist Ceal Floyer. In her work "Monochrome Till Receipt (White), 1999" (a supermarket till receipt of white objects), she deals with minimalism in a conceptual way. I have taken her cool handling of white and used it in a Zimbabwean context. The colours become political and the prices allude to the economic situation there at that time. The till receipts are from my local supermarket in Harare, the Rhodesville Spar.

LILY'S ICE CREAM VANILLA\* 43,800.00  
 SS \* 14,700.00  
 WHITE BEANS KG  
 1301 13,129.75  
 FY 17,900.00  
 CHARM MILKO DAIRY RED SEAL ROLLER  
 MEAL 8 12,620.00  
 TIP TOP VINEGAR WHITE PLS\* 46,000.00  
 \* 26623111,577,386,000  
 LOBELS WHITE BREAD 8 11,500.00  
 LMACLEANS WHITENING T/PAST\* 12,100.00  
 MARLON WHITE ASPARAGUS 43\* 19,980.00  
 DOVE BODY LOTION NORMAL \* 124,200.00  
 BLUE RIBBON S/RAISING FLOE 102,630.00  
 HULLETS WHITE SUGAR 1KG 8 43,690.00  
 MARTINI BIANCO \* 887,700.00  
 KFETA CHEESE KG \* 172,500.00  
 \* 0.211 138,377.50  
 J&J BABY SOAP WHITE \* 116,500.00  
 FB Items 245300  
 VAT 1208,221,700.10  
 Cash Paid 1,600,907,407.75  
 Change 10.00  
 Thank you for shopping with us  
 We make Deliveries by arrangement

Halter, Dan, 1977, Monochrome till Receipt (White), Print of till receipt from  
 Zimbabwean supermarket of only white items. Edition of 100. 58.4 X 7.54 cm Edition  
 1 of 100, 2005