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9 March 2009

Dan Halter
Multiplication

As his contribution to the 10th Havana Biennial this year, Zimbabwean artist Dan Halter will be installing his work *Space Invader*—a matrix of large, red-and-white zippered bags—on the gallery floor. The bags, rectangular in cross-section, are arranged, pixel-like, in the form of a *Space Invader* from the iconic 1980s arcade game. On a nearby wall will be a photograph of the same structured layout of bags as Dan installed them where refugees, until recently, queued for their paperwork outside the Customs House in Cape Town, South Africa—and one of his trademark Zimbabwe maps, woven through with a million Zimbabwe dollars.

Dan has worked with multiple copies of identical items before, sometimes also arranged on the floor—*Zhingzhong Mother and Child* (2006), for example, was an array of cast plastic forms based on a common example of carved-stone tourist art from Zimbabwe, produced as an unlimited edition, multiplying across the floor. In the same exhibition (*Take Me to Your Leader*, 2006), enough Zimbabwe 20c pieces to make up one South African R2 coin cascade across the floor—ten thousand of them, in the piece *Exchange*. The Zimbabwe banknotes he often works with are also found (or bought) in multiples, which he cuts into strips and weaves into mass-produced maps of Zimbabwe, along with other material—telephone directories, works of political and colonial literature, lists of farms seized in Zimbabwe.

This multiplication draws from life—in Zimbabwe you do see dense grids of little stone sculptures lining the sides of the roads near tourist areas: tonnes of hippos, or elephants, or abstracted mother-and-children, waves of similar forms. At border posts, bus terminuses, and markets in South Africa you see dozens of the distinctive carrier bags which appear in Dan’s current work, carrying people’s possessions or merchandise. And of course everyone knows about the incredible devaluation of the Zimbabwe currency over the last few years, which has led to more and more money worth less and less.

This effervescence of money, this teeming, breeding mass of currency, must be an influence on Zimbabwean artists like Dan Halter. John Kotze, who represented Zimbabwe at the previous Havana Biennial, used thousands of old Z\$20 notes last year in Harare to create his piece *Dollar Falls*—a 10x5-metre reproduction of the picture of Victoria Falls on the Z\$20 note, made of money. Trails of zeros grow weekly on the end of figures written in Zimbabwe dollars, from millions to billions to trillions and onwards. Street talk in Zimbabwe speaks of ‘metres’ rather than Zim dollars; five metres today might mean five billion—next week, five trillion.

Like its currency within Zimbabwe’s borders, Zimbabweans themselves are multiplying outside its borders, fleeing to neighbouring South Africa and further, to England and Canada. It is from this, particularly the migrants and refugees who cross into South Africa, that Dan’s symbolism of the carrier bag derives. Mass-produced in India and China, and sold all over the world, they take on different names according to the group they are associated with. In England, ‘Bangladeshi bags’; in Nigeria, ‘Ghana must go’; in South Africa, ‘Zimbabwe bags’, because they have become associated with these migrants and travelling hawkers of handicrafts and goods who have appeared in South Africa’s cities.

South Africa’s fever of xenophobic violence last year, in which poor black South Africans attacked immigrants from other African countries, made international news. In titling his piece *Space Invader*, Dan is being provocative, ventriloquising the anxieties and hostilities of poor South Africans who feel threatened by this influx of newcomers to a pot which already feels too small. As it is around the world, complaints are of foreigners taking work, of immigrants for whom South Africans would not accept. “Many are what

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or working for pay that South Africans would not accept. Many are what development economists call survivalists, working long and difficult hours to earn the equivalent of an unskilled labourer's wage", wrote South African writer Jonny Steinberg in London's *The Guardian* paper last year. But, because of black South Africans' expectations of the State for a new dispensation after apartheid, and the frustration of those expectations, the foreigners also, "with their stalls and businesses and incessant work, ... seem to be taking something that ought to have been given to you, the patrimony owed to you as a person who survived apartheid and voted into power a democratic government."

There is something defiant in the title *Space Invader*—the implacable advance of the eponymous arcade game character, rank after rank. Resilience born of desperation, of nowhere to go—but yes, we keep pushing in, across your borders, into your space. Zimbabwe, like other African countries, supported South Africa in its liberation war, how can they not let us in now? The title, which associates a desperate journey in which people die, eaten by wild animals during illegal border crossings or killed by mobs in South Africa's townships, with a simple computer game, expresses bravado or a bleak humour; and perhaps also the scale of the problem, in which individual humans are reduced to blips on a screen, units of vast variables running in programs they have little influence on.

The dark humour of the title is expressive of a strand in contemporary Zimbabwean culture, which we can see in other of Dan's projects. His piece *Henry the Fourth*, a beaded portrait of King Henry IV commissioned from participants in a craft institution for HIV-positive women, refers to a slang term for the disease in Zimbabwe. During the first Gulf War people started to call bottles of traditional beer 'Scuds', in tribute to Saddam's home-grown missiles. And in Zimbabwe—it's an old joke now—everyone's a millionaire. There is a strand of dry humour and play with popular culture in Zimbabwe that is reflected in Dan's work.

While Dan's current work is a continuation of his past themes and ways of working—multiples of found and bought objects, Zimbabwe, the use of provocative and darkly humorous titles—, it is also in the process of transformation. This transformation in part reflects movements in Zimbabwe and in Dan's relationship to the country. Neither he nor his family lives there any longer. His presence in South Africa, which started at art school, has become extended, as going home becomes more difficult. Like many Zimbabweans, the means to make a living and follow a vocation are now outside the country. So his material and the focus of his work have started to expand, from within Zimbabwe to the experiences of Zimbabweans outside it.

His work is also reaching out from particularly Zimbabwean concerns towards the slightly broader symbolism and more abstracted formal language we see in *Space Invaders*. Is this piece about migrancy more globally than just between Zimbabwe and South Africa? Does it refer too to the tensions arising elsewhere, anywhere, from the perceived 'invasion' of richer countries by the inhabitants of poorer ones; especially as the richer nations start to seem less stable?

Dan's work is changing too in the way he works with people more than before. The bags in Havana belonged to Zimbabwean migrants, and they are torn and mended, stuck over with bus tickets, battered by their use. Dan exchanged them for new bags in Cape Town's street markets, where Zimbabweans sell their goods. He has started to meet with, pay, or exchange goods with the networks of Zimbabweans in South Africa. When offered a platform to speak about his work, he invited Zimbabweans who wait for labouring work by city hardware stores, sleeping rough on the streets, to tell their stories instead. He paid them for storytelling instead of manual labour.

His own increased movement internationally this past year, with residencies in Switzerland and Brazil, and now an exhibition in Havana have contributed to this expansion in his work. When on residency in Rio de Janeiro, Dan had tiles cut of every country in Africa, making up the whole continent, with the intention of dispersing them into Selarón's famous tiled stairway in Lapa. Selarón liked the tiles, but not the idea of dispersing the pieces of the continent—he wanted them all kept together; so Dan's work went into Selarón's work, but not exactly as Dan had wanted—and this he was open to.

Dan told me that he's grateful for these international, and funded, platforms for his work, because they enable him to work with less focus on material or valuable objects, and more on idea and process. He feels that he's in the middle of something, some transition in his practice—building on his work before, but also going into something new. As a result he says, and this seems only appropriate to this more complex terrain, "I don't get closure on things anymore—I'm feeling my way forward".

Born in 1974, the South African Ralph Borland does artwork and academic research that combine technology and activism. The holder of a degree in the fine arts from the University of Cape Town. with a master's deegree from the

University of New York, he is pursuing a doctorate in Dublin, Ireland. His work integrates the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art and has been exhibited at events such as the Next Wave Festival (Australia, 2006) and the 5th Digital Art Salon (Cuba, 2003).

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