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-childs, 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 not that South Africans would not accept. “Many ask what...
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 degree 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).