The white elephant in the room

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The extras, all eight or nine of them, are seated, backs stiff, waiting in silence for their cue to come, well, alive.

One of them, a debutante with soap-opera dreams, wears a yellow halter top and has a handbag shaped like a high-heel shoe. A voice, not quite godly, interjects from an invisible speaker in the fluorescent heavens of the cavernous SABC television studio where artist Candice Breitz has invited me to see the making of her latest work, Extra!

"We're going to change points," the voice says.

Queen Moroka (Sophie Ndaba) and Khethiwe Buthelezi (Winnie Modise), two key protagonists in Generations, the SABC's longest-running locally produced daily soap opera, greet the news with indifference. They continue to chat idly. The white floor producer speaks to the disembodied voice through his headpiece. The extras continue to do nothing.

The inertia suddenly yields: everyone is "good" to go on the set of producer Mfundi Vundla's post-apartheid television epic. Some of the extras are shuffled off set and told to wait for the signal.

Fighting and fucking

Generations first aired on February 4 1994. The broadcast included an appearance by pop icon Rebecca Malope singing at the funeral of Mama Moroka, a member of the waning Moroka clan, whose activities have formed the backbone of the Generations storyline.

In case you have missed an episode or more: Generations involves a great deal of fighting and fucking. No news there. Of greater interest is its explicit linking of political freedom to consumption: the Moroka clan's advertising agency, the precursor to the current Ezweni media empire, was called New Horizons.

Stripped down to its basic proposition, Generations is a drama about the vicissitudes of black professional life in a post-apartheid media industry. It is an industry to which Vundla claims a privileged insight -- his brother, Peter, is the founder of South Africa's first black-owned advertising agency, HerdBuoys.

Action.

The extras enter the set chatting animatedly, their exaggerated smiles reading like winces. Once seated, a waiter issues them with menus. I checked: Dineo's Restaurant, the location for this afternoon's scene, offers quiche, pork chops, lemon-and-herb chicken kebabs and tripe and onions with the option of pap or rice.

Queen, an anchor of the drama, and Khethiwe deliver their dialogue in a casual mix of isiZulu and English. Their acting is effortless. The scene is over before the illusory kitchen can prepare the fictional orders.

Ignoring Candice

"Okay, let's do a Candice take," shouts the floor manager, referring to a now routine extra take of each scene that requires the Generations cast to repeat their lines, albeit with the addition of a fleshy white prop that they must studiously ignore.

"Please do not look at Candice," insists the floor manager.
"Guys, ignore me completely," chimes the artist for the benefit of the extras.

Breitz's performances, the Johannesburg-born, Berlin-based artist's first role in front of the camera since 2003, adhere to none of the conventions of being an on-screen extra. Breitz, who completed her undergraduate fine-art studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1993 and left South Africa a year later, neither blends in nor play-acts. Her detachment is severe, comical, ridiculous, possibly even disturbing. The confusion is purposeful.

Watching and learning
Breitz spent a month in the bowels of the SABC working on Extra!, a work specially commissioned by Standard Bank. For two weeks she patiently observed and familiarised herself with the cast, crew and storyline of Generations, inserting herself into its filming over a subsequent two-week period, in tandem with the regular production schedule.

The finished work, which extends her long-standing practice of reworking found material from popular culture, will not be aired on television. Were it to be aired, fans would have to look past the artist's naked legs, bare feet and hands, which interfere with the otherwise seamless delivery of entertainment.

Breitz's insertion of herself into the action is sometimes deliciously absurd, as in an early scene in which the Khumalo clan visit their son, Sam Khumalo (Thabiso Mokhethi), and his editor wife, Sharon (Kagiso Rakosa), in Johannesburg. Like some lost yoga mom, Breitz's naked white legs reach for the sky, inexplicably filling the space between the old and young Khumalos.

Fitting in
Despite the occasional comedy prompted by her blatant positioning, Breitz is an expressionless presence throughout. At the outset she tried to be more Chaplinesque, but quickly settled for a routine that is Buster Keaton deadpan. Ultimately, her performance depicts a "pathologically nil", an expression I borrow from a New York Times review of Woody Allen's film Zelig (1983).

The Allen film is a red herring. Leonard Zelig is a kind of human chameleon, capable of adapting to any circumstance; he even has the ability to become black, albeit not in the way Antjie Krog means it. Ultimately, however, he apologises for his many indiscretions, the outcome of desperately trying to fit in. "I never delivered a baby before in my life," Zelig regretfully says, "I just thought that ice tongs was the way to do it."

Breitz's mysterious white body does not speak, does not joke, will not apologise for her presence -- a refusal compounded by the apparent inattentiveness of the actors to the white elephant in the room. The artist, who is intrigued by the ongoing whiteness debate, uses her body to make a visual argument that contributes to it.

It is an unstable argument, underscored by contradiction, largely because of the rickety verisimilitude of the Generations story to life outside the SABC's Auckland Park studios. Breitz explained it during a hasty wardrobe change, not yet finished with her ambitious new film, the centrepiece of her travelling survey show Extra!

Representational rights
She selected Generations deliberately because of its predominantly black audience and aspirational storyline, which eschews the white liberal critique of soaps as a subversion of the "representational rights" of poor black South Africans, a phrase used by film and media scholar Lucia Saks in her 2010 book, Cinema in a Democratic South Africa.

Verisimilitude is not why soap operas exist, or prosper. Nor is it what drew Breitz to insert herself -- sometimes subtly, often absurdly and to comic effect, but always without judgment or explanation -- into the fictional world of Generations.
By being radiantly white in this optimistically black fairy tale, by being a surplus presence, possibly useful, or not, she hopes to prompt renewed discussion about what it means to be a white in contemporary South Africa. Think of it as a request, not an injunction.

Candice Breitz's *Extra!* runs at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg from February 8 until April 5

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