

minnette vári

Serge Ziegler Galerie
Zurich

According to the Johannesburg-based artist Minnette Vári, "A fixed identity cannot work." Concerned with identity, history, and how they are narrated or remembered, Vári's art is strongly tied to the place where she lives, postcolonial South Africa, and the complicated journey her family undertook—from Hungary via the Netherlands—to get there.

The artist's new series of "videographs," entitled "Sentinel" (2002), takes up the theme of painful self-awareness, exemplifying diverse notions of history and time as connected to identity. The word *sentinel* comes from the Latin verb *sentire* ("to feel") by way of the sixteenth-century Italian word *sentinella* ("sentry" or "watch"). Indeed, looking at the works—with their wide perspectives of living gargoyles at twilight—the first thing that comes to mind is Quasimodo's view from the cathedral roof in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. Whether evoked deliberately or unconsciously by Vári, this iconographic metaphor does not stop on a purely formal level. Notre-Dame has stood in the heart of Paris for more than eight hundred years, a



silent witness to the tumultuous history of France. The panorama of history represented in "Sentinel" is no less painful, although the last twenty years have witnessed the end of the most unjust racist form of colonial suppression in South Africa. Vári seems to address here the subsequent and no less difficult milestone in the transition into the post-apartheid era: the forming of a new collective identity. In a country as pluralistic as South Africa, how is it possible to frame common expectations of the future when experiences of the past have been so different?

The tension between belonging to a former political minority of white oppressors and submitting to self-accusatory rituals remains Vári's main field of artistic engagement. Yet rather than putting herself into the works as she did in earlier video animations, the artist is now focusing on a more general, future-oriented level of collective anxiety. The fear of political and emotional homelessness, she seems to suggest, persists for all of those involved, especially in these times of globalization.

Catherine Hug

Minnette Vári *Sentinel I*, 2002, videograph on Agfa photographic paper mounted on aluminum, dimensions variable.