

## Things Fall Apart

An ambitious, devastating, revelatory survey at the ICP is the first of several upcoming museum shows to explore how South African photography evolved from a document into a blunt instrument

**O**kwui Enwezor has come to appreciate at least one quality of South Africa's notorious Department of Information—or, as the Nigeria-born curator likes to say, "Ministry of Disinformation." Like most repressive regimes, it was rigorous about its record-keeping.



Unidentified photographer, Part of the crowd near the Drill Hall on the opening day of the Treason Trial, December 19, 1956, a black and white photograph in "Rise and Fall of Apartheid" at ICP.

COURTESY OF TIMES MEDIA COLLECTION, MUSEUM AFRICA, JOHANNESBURG.

Over the last seven years, amidst his peregrinations to stage [major international exhibitions](#), his stint as Dean of Academic Affairs at the San Francisco Art Institute, and his move to Munich last year to run the Haus der Kunst, Enwezor spent a lot of time in those government archives as he crisscrossed South Africa in search of images of apartheid. With the instincts of a detective, he tracked down pictures at government agencies, nonprofits, universities,

newspapers and magazines, private homes, and other venues—reviewing, all told, about 30,000 items. With the rigor of a scholar, he edited them to some 500. These form the core of "[Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life](#)," the groundbreaking survey Enwezor organized with South African curator Rory Bester that opens at the International Center of Photography September 14.

"The inquiry of this exhibition," Enwezor declares, "is to explore the degree to which photography was present at the scene of the crime."

The exhibition includes films, publications, and other printed materials in addition to photographs by well-known names, including Roger Ballen, Peter Magubane, Kevin Carter, Guy Tillim, and Santu Mofokeng, along with many more who are not known in this country at all. Though such foreign photojournalists as Margaret Bourke-White appear in the show, the vast majority of the 70-plus photographers represented are South African. "Very few places in the world produced photographers in such numbers," Enwezor says. "They were not on assignment. They had all the time in the world. Most were underground, they lived there, they knew the back streets, how to get into certain areas."

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Jodi Beiber, Protest against Chris Hani's Assassination, 1993, black and white photograph. From ICP.

© GOODMAN GALLERY JOHANNESBURG.

“Rise and Fall of Apartheid” chronicles the sweep of history in South Africa starting in 1948: the rise to power of the Afrikaner National Party, segregation and its devastating legacy, the emergence of protest movements and the brutal violence against them, Mandela’s triumphant victory in 1994. Given that much of what unfolded on the streets and in society was hardly covered on the evening news, Enwezor notes, for many South Africans, photography took the place of television as a source of information.

Exploring the way these images were created, circulated, and ultimately used as regime-changers is the mission of the show. “The role of photography in the struggle against apartheid is far larger than we can really imagine,” Enwezor says. “It became one of the most persuasive, instrumental, ideological tools.”

At a time when museums have been rethinking the way they present art from regions beyond traditional centers of power—a process Enwezor has pioneered and championed—the relatively small shadow cast by apartheid in the cultural sphere shows how much territory remains to be explored. “We see so many exhibitions on Europe and D-Day,” he says. “I want people to take away that there are multiple theaters of history.”

In this country, it seems, apartheid-era photography is slowly coming into the spotlight, as two artists in the ICP show are slated for presentations at American art museums in the coming year. The first, opening at SFMOMA in December, is “[South Africa in Apartheid and After](#).” It’s a collaboration between photo curator Sandra Phillips and [David Goldblatt](#), éminence gris of South African photographers, who chose the work of two of his countrymen, Ernest Cole and Billy Monk, to hang alongside his own.



Ernest Cole, Naked Men (During group medical examination the nude men are herded through a string of doctors’ offices), a black and white photograph from his 1967 book *House of Bondage*.

@ THE ERNEST COLE FAMILY TRUST./COURTESY OF THE HASSELBLAD FOUNDATION.

Cole, a darkroom assistant at *Drum* magazine who taught himself photography, shot a spectacular and harrowing array of photographs across South Africa, traveling places blacks could not because he had managed to have himself reclassified as colored. “He set out to tell the world what it was like to be a black person living under apartheid, and he did it with a clarity and passion and a skill and a grace that was quite extraordinary,” Goldblatt told me from his home in Johannesburg. “I think it could be argued that [my photographs of Boksburg](#), which are in Sandra’s show, are the other side of the coin. I set out to tell what it was like to be a white, middle-class, reasonably law-abiding citizen under apartheid.”

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Cole sometimes worked with former New York Times executive editor [Joseph Lelyveld](#), then the paper's Johannesburg correspondent, on commissions. But most of his work "was self-assigned, with the idea of getting it published abroad," Lelyveld recounted on the phone from the Democratic National Convention. "It was too hot to be published in South Africa." On the pretext that he was going on a pilgrimage to Lourdes, Cole left the country, and brought his photos to Magnum. The result was the book [House of Bondage](#), published by Random House in 1967 and soon banned in South Africa. "It got a lot of attention, but attention lasts for 15 minutes," says Lelyveld. "Then Ernest was stranded. He never found a path to go forward." Though Lelyveld, who had been expelled from South Africa in 1966, helped smuggle out Cole's negatives, they later disappeared when Cole drifted into homelessness in New York. The photographer died in poverty in 1990.



Ernest Cole, Boys (location is possibly Mamelodi), black and white photograph. The image is in "Ernest Cole, Photographer," a retrospective that launches its U.S. tour at the Fowler next spring.

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Cole's pictures—restored to his original compositions from the cropped versions that appeared in his book—had a bittersweet homecoming two years ago, when a [traveling retrospective](#) of his work organized by Sweden's [Hasselblad Foundation](#) opened at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. (Some of his photos, along with Goldblatt's, are in "[Everything Was Moving: Photography from the 60s and 70s](#),"

opening at the Barbican in London next week.) In April, Cole's retrospective will open its U.S. tour at UCLA's [Fowler Museum](#) in Los Angeles. The show will eventually make its way to the [Grey Art Gallery](#) in New York, according to its director, Lynn Gumpert; other venues are still being finalized.



Billy Monk, The Catacombs, 31 July 1967, 1967, printed 2011, gelatin silver print. From "South Africa in Apartheid and After" at SFMOMA.

© ESTATE OF BILLY MONK./COURTESY OF STEVENSON, CAPE TOWN AND JOHANNESBURG.

The other photographer in the SFMOMA show, [Billy Monk](#), might seem like a less obvious choice, says Goldblatt: "I like the idea of putting some sand into the oyster," he remarks. Monk, who was white, worked as a bouncer in a Cape Town nightclub called Les Catacombs, where he photographed its habitués, who were also his friends, in uninhibited and often inebriated scenarios. His photos were eventually rediscovered by photographer [Jac de Villiers](#), reprinted, and hung in a show at Johannesburg's Market Gallery in 1982. On his way to see it, Monk was killed in a street fight.

The ICP exhibition marks his first U.S. showing. "He certainly had an eye, and applied it in a place that was quite extraordinary, especially in South Africa at that time," says Goldblatt, describing the portraits as having "an intimacy that went beyond the obvious."

These upcoming projects reflect a shift back in time from the post-apartheid era, which has been widely

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showcased in U.S. art museums in recent years. “The focus on post-apartheid strikes me as a-historical, in a weird way,” says Enwezor. “This exhibition is really to shift the focus slightly in a different direction.”

He argues that while photography of course existed in South Africa before apartheid, South African photography emerged in 1948. Pre-apartheid photography “in many ways was the province of the dominant European gaze on the African world,” Enwezor says, reflecting a kind of frisson in recording “the border of civility and primitivism.” That border collapsed after 1948, the year the government policy of racial segregation began, and a more indigenous style of photography “came to assert its place in the field of vision.”

As he brought the images together, Enwezor was struck by the transformations they document. Gestures change from the thumbs-up of the early nonviolent protests to the raised, clenched fist of the activists of the '60s and beyond. The language of protest signs, which get their own section in the show, evolves from “dialogue to confrontation.” The funeral space becomes a locus not only of mourning but also of solidarity.



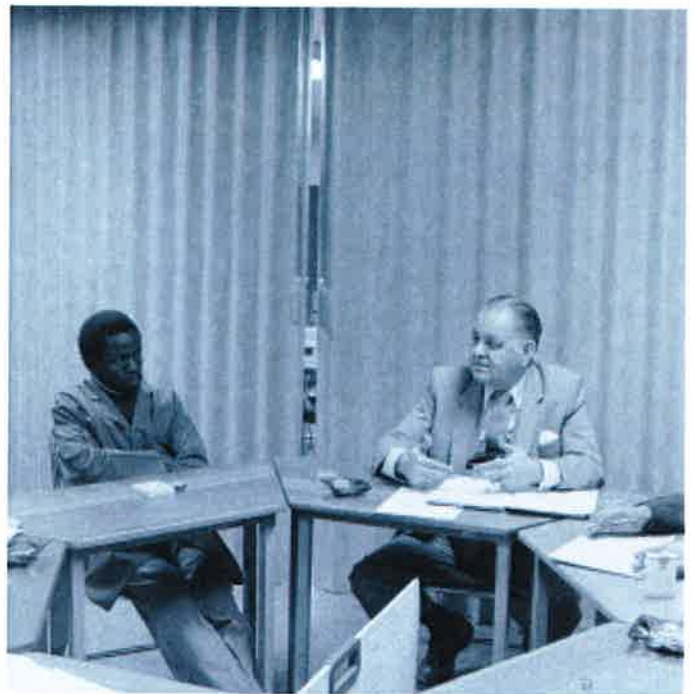
Greame Williams, *The '94 Election*. South Africa, Soweto, 1994, color photograph. From ICP.

© GREAME WILLIAMS./COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Though the show provisionally ends in 1994, when the African National Congress came to power, it

jumps forward in time to show how the artistic language of the apartheid era was passed to later generations of photographers, among them [Sabelo Mlangeni](#) and [Thabiso Sekgala](#). It also includes multi-media pieces by William Kentridge, along with work by Sue Williamson, Hans Haacke, Adrian Piper, and others who made art in or about South Africa.

The country hasn't produced so many conceptual artists, Goldblatt notes. “There is a fine-art movement here but it's much more muted than it is in the States,” comments the photographer, who founded Johannesburg's [Market Photo Workshop](#) in 1989. “People here take photos here largely because they've got something to say about this place and their lives.”



David Goldblatt, *Meeting of the worker-management Liaison Committee of the Colgate-Palmolive Company*, 1980, gelatin silver print. From “South Africa in Apartheid and After.”

© DAVID GOLDBLATT./COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GOODMAN GALLERY.

Given recent events like the killings in the Marikana mine, he says, it's “better to stop thinking in terms of apartheid and post-apartheid and start thinking about a society in transition. The continuities are

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evident, and the [ANC](#) has not done much to bring those to closure.

“The situation here is quite grim,” he continues. “We’re going to have to face some very serious social questions that won’t be easily solved or ameliorated. I’ve no doubt this will stimulate an outpouring of anger and frustration.

“I have no doubt,” he adds, “we’ll see photography that will attempt to deal with some of these things.”

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