

Seeing beneath the Surface: A Conversation with Photographer Pieter Hugo

I met Pieter Hugo in Rome, on the occasion of the opening of his exhibition *There's a Place in Hell for Me & My Friends*, in November 2012. I had been following Hugo's challenging work for some time and, as he kindly agreed to have a talk, we sat down in the white space of the *e x t r a s p a z i o* gallery in Trastevere,¹ surrounded by his new series of portraits, and started a conversation that traced the beginnings of his career as a photographer, including a rather long period in the north east of Italy (where I come from), and then moved on to discuss his engagement with the complexity of photographic art, and his most recent work.

Hugo was born in Johannesburg in 1976, grew up in Cape Town, where he lives,² and is part of a young generation of South African photographers (including Guy Tillim, Mikhael Subotzky and others) who are aware of developing a new photographic consciousness as regards the representation of Africa to itself and the West, and whose work is aimed at testing preconceptions about their own country and, more generally, the potentialities of photography itself.³ Hugo says he is drawn to and likes to shoot "that which we do not want to look at, be it the old or the terminally ill or the marginalized",⁴ as happens with his images of African albinos, his portraits of poor South African families in the Messina/Musina dilapidated borderland, or of people who died of Aids/HIV. As a result his photographs, which are displayed in important galleries around the world, have often been perceived as disturbing and controversial.

It has interestingly been suggested that his viewers' vexed response may be due to the fact that, as a photographer, Hugo straddles two aesthetics at the same time: the one campaigning, and the other shocking in its graphic depiction of transgressive subject matter. To an Italian viewer such as myself, this combination of activism and provocation somewhat recalls the artistic project of Oliviero Toscani and of Fabbrica, the Benetton arts and media centre in Treviso, where Hugo took up a two-year residency in 2002-2003, of which very little is known. That's why my interview starts from his Italian experience.

AO: Pieter, you come to Italy regularly and your pictures have often been exhibited here. I'm wondering whether your ongoing relationship with this country has to do with the beginnings of your career as a photographer, when you spent time at Benetton's Fabbrica in Treviso. I am particularly interested in your time there because I remember well the shocking advertising campaigns of Benetton in the 1980-90s, the groundbreaking work of Oliviero Toscani and of *COLORS Magazine* that led to the founding of this creativity hub,⁵ and I would like to know if your work has been affected and in what way by this experience, but also why and how you ended up at Fabbrica in the first place, and what you did while there.

¹ The interview took place on 17th November 2012. My grateful thanks to Guido Schlinkert, artistic director of *e x t r a s p a z i o*, for his generous hospitality.

² Detailed information on Hugo's life and works is available on his website: <<http://www.pieterhugo.com/>>, 12 April 2015.

³ A comprehensive survey of contemporary South African photography can be found in the catalogue of the exhibition *Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography*, curated by Tamar Garb and Martin Barnes and held at the Porter's Gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 12 April-17 July, 2011.

⁴ Sean O'Hagan, "Africa as you've never seen it", *The Guardian*, Sunday 20 July 2008, <<http://northeastwestsouth.net/africa-youve-never-seen-it-art-and-design-observer>>, 12 April 2015.

⁵ The research centre was created by Luciano Benetton and Oliviero Toscani in 1994.

PH: I ended up at Fabrica because of a friend I lived with in South Africa, who had been there to do some engineering. That was the time when I really started working for magazines around the world, when I got my career going. You know, the trajectory of becoming a photographer in South Africa is quite different from what happens in Europe. In South Africa you take a camera and just start doing it, you don't go to university to learn how to be a photographer. But at the time I was getting very frustrated with the kind of avenues of expression that you had in South Africa, I really wanted to leave the country, have a bit more of international engagement.

AO: And that was the early 2000s?

PH: Yes, just around 2001. The dates are a bit vague, because it all happened out of quite a long period ... the Benetton bureaucracy of getting accepted, submitting a portfolio, and ending up there actually took quite long, two years or so. I didn't even know that Fabrica existed, but then *Adam Broomberg* and *Oliver Chanarin*, as editors and photographers of *COLORS magazine*, approached me to be a correspondent for them in South Africa. So I started doing work for *COLORS* from South Africa, which was fantastic. At that time you could do an assignment for *COLORS* every two months and I didn't have to do any other work. In those days the dollar rate was still pretty good and I didn't really need much, it was fun. Through *COLORS* I got to know about Fabrica, then my friend ended up there, so I also applied to go. I went for a trial and a year later I got in.

AO: Were you offered a scholarship?

PH: A sort of residency. Fabrica defines itself as a place of study, but that's more for the bureaucracy of getting people into this space...

AO: Fabrica presents itself as a kind of lab or a workshop for the arts and the media. Can you say something about the way it works?

PH: The problem is that at the time it didn't seem to work, and my experience there was one of extreme frustration...

AO: Why frustration?

PH: Because before my time at Fabrica, if I wanted to go to Malawi and photograph something, I would just get on a plane and go. But then suddenly I was sitting there, and I felt a little bit held captive by this minimum-wage type of institution...

AO: How did you spend your time there? Did you learn anything?

PH: I learnt how to use a Mac and sat down in this amazing Tadao Ando building for two years not doing very much.⁶ It was really frustrating actually, but it's one

⁶ The headquarters of Fabrica are housed in a 17th-century villa near Villorba (Treviso), which was restored and significantly enlarged by Japanese architect Tadao Ando.

of those things that you don't realize, at the time you experience them, that you're benefiting a lot from them. In retrospect I understand how much I did learn by being surrounded by that structure. My experience didn't feel positive then, but thinking about it now it was actually fantastic, primarily because the approach there is graphic design-driven, and that allowed me to expand essentially as a graphic photographer. You cannot be clearer about what the communication there is doing, it is very efficient at its messaging, it's a hammer that's very hard and direct. That was very good for me and that appealed to me, and while I was there I saw that I could start using this and apply it to things which were interesting to me.

AO: What are these things, and are they related in any way to what Oliviero Toscani was doing?

PH: When I arrived at Fabrica, Oliviero Toscani had left already, so I've never met him. But what happened was... there happened to be a good balance between my wanting to be a portraitist and their offering this avenue of photographing subjects which essentially combines photography and engaging with the world, and which for me became a way of inserting myself into this space and looking at it anew. This way of doing portraits with testimonials really appealed to me, it was a very good way, different from the normal way I had to work in the past, which was more...

AO: ...more documentary?

PH: Yes, and this work is really what set things into motion for me. And on top of that, you probably know that the arts faculty's photography library at the University of Cape Town is smaller than my bookshelf at home? Instead in Treviso I had this fantastic library and, as I didn't have anything else to do, I just sat down and looked at books, and immersed myself into the medium organically.

AO: So, after all, it was a formative moment.

PH: Yeah, it was formative though at the time I kept asking myself, "why am I not in the field, why am I not in the field?" In retrospect, however, that was a good thing to do.

AO: So Fabrica was a way of putting together documentary, photography and something else: what is it? What is that something else?

PH: I think what Toscani, Broomberg and Chanarin tried to do (though I don't agree with what they've set claim to have done)... they worked in a way that put dignified importance on their subjects, they acknowledged their presence, and gave *verbatim* transcriptions of what people say, so as to give them space to speak. I guess it was a kind of 'slow journalism', which is interesting, though at the same time we all know that's totally manipulated anyway...

AO: Of course, we cannot think naively about representation... Talking about which, I would like to move from your early artistic explorations in Italy to your South African background. I'm referring not so much to your upbringing, but your 'imaginary' because, when discussing your work with South African friends or with scholars who know about South Africa, I've often come across comments that connect what they see as disturbing or grotesque in your photographs to what they perceive as an 'Afrikaner' way of looking at the world. I'm asking you because I can't quite see what they're actually saying or why they say it, why there should be anything essentially 'ethnic' about your own personal vision or your photography.

PH: Afrikaner way of looking? I don't know how to... I really don't know.

AO: Do you come from an Afrikaner family?

PH: I do, but I mean, I come from the urban detribalized!

AO: It's an idle question, isn't it? I think it hints at a taste for something 'weird' in your work, something strange that supposedly comes from roots...

PH: I'll tell you what I think: there is, particularly in a kind of Anglo-liberal academia at the moment, an incredible level of self-censorship to fit a politically-correct paradigm, which in fact comes across as deeply racist, because it's unengaged. The attitude is "rather stay away than actually engage", and I find this type of politically-correct self-censorship really vulgar in South Africa at the moment. I can't see anything good or constructive coming out of it in the long term. It's dishonest, it doesn't take any risk. I come from a background where I'm inspired by punk music, like "do it yourself", "Want to do something? Just fucking do it!" It doesn't have to be over-produced... I like stuff that's confrontational, the music I listen to, for example, I don't listen to music that makes me comfortable. If I look at art or read a book, I want something that is going to go into the depths of the human soul, which you don't see every day. That's what's interesting to me, otherwise what's the fucking point?

AO: Absolutely, I can see that in your work.

PH: There's this current wave of photography in South Africa, and a way of representing photography and a lot of other art, that is considerate, just and balanced, and fits the current political vocabulary.

AO: So your vocabulary is different...

PH: Well, I just find that very problematic.

AO: Surely your language does not come across as politically correct, and it's also pushing the limits of what one can say about 'the human', or being human, which is unsettling.

PH: Well, you know [*looking around at the portraits hanging on the gallery walls*], here are my friends – I've got black friends where I come from... The way I engage with race and things like that is by not dismissing anybody, but taking them on.

⁷ The title significantly comes from a famous song by English singer and lyricist Morrissey, "There's a Place in Hell for Me and My Friends" (in his second solo album *Kill Uncle*, 1991): "There is a place/ reserved/ for me and my friends/ and when we go/ we all will go/ ... / all that we hope/ is that when we go/ our skin/ and our blood/ and our bones/ don't get in your way/ making you ill/ the way they did/ when we lived".

AO: This new work, *There's a Place in Hell for Me & my Friends*,⁷ is an open statement on race, isn't it?

PH: Yes, in a way...

AO: It looks as if your intervention in these pictures occurs at the formal level: in your other series, images are far less 'manipulated', isn't that so?

PH: Yeah, there's quite serious manipulation going on here. As I explain in the introduction to the monograph, the colour process I used in making these pictures involves turning the digital colour image to black and white, while keeping the colour channels active. In this manner you can manipulate the colour channels and bring certain colours to prominence as greyscales. The pigment responsible for skin colour and appearance, melanin, is brought to prominence in this colour process. In this way the damage to people's skin caused by exposure to UV rays is shown up in their skin, along with capillaries and small blood vessels visible just under the skin.



Yasser Booley, Tamsyn Reynolds, Pieter Hugo, Anthony Smith in *There's a Place in Hell for Me & My Friends*, 2012. Courtesy *extra space* gallery, Rome.⁸

AO: Which shows that, after all, we're all 'coloured' under the surface? An interesting technique, bypassing the conventional filter of the skin external layer, producing a sort of hybridizing effect by which black and white disappears...

⁸ The catalogue of the series is published by oodee, London, 2012.

PH: And of course this technique is a fake medical technique, it's not real... there's a real way to do this, but you can't do the portrait with the eyes open, because the flash would damage your eyes. So my work reproduces a medical technique only up to a certain point. To me to do the portraits of people that are eyeless is just not appealing.

AO: Of course not. In all of your portraits the eyes of people are prominent, eyes are always a somewhat enigmatic focus... What's also different in this series is that the photographs are small. Why did you go for a small format?

PH: They're intimate.

AO: In the sense that they are portraits of friends?

PH: Yeah, these are un-heroic pictures, and I guess I also started to get a better grasp of my medium, a more balanced relationship with size.

AO: This means your intervention was not just in the idea of the 'hybrid', coloured faces, but also in the actual technical means of producing photography.

PH: Yeah, I'm an artist and also a craftsman. You can be both, like you can be a theatre performer and have an interest in the history of theatre. I think you have to, though it's certainly a peculiar position, the reading of photography, especially in Africa, where there's mostly documentary, though in many parts the world has moved to a post-documentary age.

AO: But even David Goldblatt's, is that documentary photography?

PH: I find that David's difficult to read...

AO: Do you relate to him at all?

PH: Yeah, when I saw his *In Boksburg* it was seminal.⁹ Just the first photo book I saw that related to my environment, and I said to myself, "This is amazing, this is a completely different way of portraying a narrative, it doesn't have to be all exclamation marks, it can be commas and hyphens...".

AO: So the grammar would be different.

PH: Yeah, and suddenly I realized I'd seen something there.

AO: And what about Boris Mikhailov? It seems the central inspirational event in your career was the encounter with his provocative images of Ukrainian alcoholics and down-and-outs...

PH: I love him, but I only like *Case History* [1997–98], I don't like his work after that. Funnily enough, at Fabrica I attended a workshop by Boris Mikhailov, which was the only workshop I enjoyed and actually got something out of. Mikhailov looked at my work...

AO: What did you show him?

PH: The editorial work, I showed him everything!

⁹ Goldblatt's series *In Boksburg* (1982) documents life in a South African suburb in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when, as the artist himself says, the restrictions of the system of enforced racial segregation rendered seemingly normal moments in suburban life "abnormal beyond belief".

AO: The albino series?

PH: I showed him that. And he saw that and said, “This art” (meaning “This is art”, his English is terrible!). And he went on, “Documentary as small picture [looks] odd. Make big picture, make big print!” And I made a big print and I realized something completely different.

AO: He could see it, right?

PH: And that’s the first time I could see: “Hey, I can be an artist, it can be much more fulfilling than being an editorial photographer.”

AO: Fantastic to have such a momentous encounter at the beginning of one’s career! But what about your more recent work, can you say something about where it is going now?

PH: Well, I’m busy with a project around South Africa and have been for the last three years. I plan to finish that by the end of next year.

AO: What kind of project is it?

PH: It’s something I started ages ago and it’s really about my ambivalent relationship with South Africa, and having had a child and deciding to live there, after being quite nomadic for a long time. I want to take next year and devote myself to this work. I’ve actually gotten quite involved...

AO: You travel around South Africa, shoot pictures, and then work on them? How do you select?

PH: What I do is I usually go for about ten days to two weeks and I just shoot. Then I process the initial images, make selections and live with them in my studio for about six months; I then take them off as I decide I like/I don’t like. The pictures that stick with me stay, then I edit. This is how I’m approaching this project and I’m in the fortunate position that I’ve got time, as it’s a long term one.

AO: It’s a privileged kind of job.

PH: Except for the fact that you have to know where to draw the boundaries, as the speediest you can go with some projects is ‘forever’, which is the case with David Goldblatt and his whole life: his work was one project.

AO: How many pictures will your South African series include?

PH: At the moment I've got down to 40-50 pictures already, but I think as a monograph it will be something much more substantial.

AO: I understand that right now you are in South Africa and you are interacting with your own environment. Is there an artistic kind of milieu in your country, which allows you to connect to other artists or photographers and to what they are doing?

PH: The arts world is so international now. My artistic community is not really South African, it's rather international, it's global. And as I travel a lot I get to see them all. For example, I've just had a quick shoot in the States for two weeks...

AO: What did you do there?

PH: I shot an editorial story for the *NY Times Magazine* and really enjoyed it. I went to what is called the "Northeastern Corridor", between New York and Washington, DC. It's a kind of land strip between the city of power and the city of finance that runs through 8 of the 10 richest counties in America. At the same time it runs through 6 of its most broken cities.

AO: Therefore you've been shooting the American province low life.

PH: Yeah. The Northeastern Corridor railway line runs through what used to be the manufacturing area of the US, which is now completely... over. Looking at these spaces, I recognize them, because they recall a sort of colonial experience, very similar in the way it looks to what you've got in South Africa. Whereas when I tried to work in Italy, for example, I couldn't quite relate to it. I don't understand it, I can't read it, I don't understand the experience here, what it means to be Italian, I don't know what to look at.

AO: An interesting sort of estrangement! Do you feel you can relate better to colonies, to post-colonies, or what? An Anglo-Saxon kind of environment? It can't be related to language...

PH: No, it's not the language. It's the fact that it's a sick old space and it is still contested, it hasn't become provincial yet, it hasn't sat yet, it hasn't become that deeply entrenched that...

AO: ...that it would have its own soul?

PH: Yes, and in the US it's all so transient, everyone is from somewhere else even if they've been there for a few generations, everyone moves all the time. I do

not find it an easy place to work in, but I find it visually easy, it was easy working even out of perpetuated clichés of looking.

AO: What other places would have a similar effect on your work?

PH: Some time ago I went to Israel to research a project I want to photograph there, and I found it a stimulating place. There's a deep dysfunctionality there, but it definitely makes for a full stimulating environment, the same as the US.

AO: There has been a strong connection with Israel throughout South African history, the parallels between their respective trajectories since 1948 are many and quite puzzling...

PH: You know, I recently read a book by British author China Miéville, *The City & the City* [Macmillan, 2009]. It's a book combining weird fiction with the police procedural, and it's set in a space simultaneously occupied by two cities, where the citizens exist on top of each other, and it's about how the twin cities' respective inhabitants learn to un-see that they are living on top of each other.

AO: Well, can I say that sounds very South African?

PH: Really, people can just completely decide to un-see what's in front of them every day. Instead as an outsider you can see, it is much more apparent.

AO: When you were a child, were you taught not to see?

PH: I went through Christian national education, so I didn't go to a private school, I went through the normal government form. My parents are not very political, but they're liberal, they're libertarians. When they were young they were more interested in having a good time than in the situation of the country... But differently from my parents, when in school I did raise issues of race and I was cut out, just shut the fuck up. Not by our teachers, it was by my own peers!

AO: It must have been liberating to find an artistic language in which you can not only say what you like, but invite others to look on, or shock them out of their own complacency.

PH: Yes, though some of the reactions are quite hyperbolic...

AO: Are you OK with people being shocked by your pictures?

PH: I would be very uncomfortable if they weren't.

AO: I mean deeply shocked.

PH: Yeah, I mean, that's a kind of a point, isn't it?

AO: A sort of suggestion perhaps – also coming from the portraits in *There's a Place in Hell* – that we should move beyond/beneath what we see on the surface?

PH: Yes, I guess so.