

# SEEING AND BEING SEEN: POLITICS, ART AND THE EVERYDAY IN OMAR BADSHA'S DURBAN PHOTOGRAPHY, 1960s–1980s

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## THE FRAMEWORKS OF DEBATE

During the 1980s when the political struggle against apartheid in South Africa was intensifying on various fronts, a photographic image began to circulate that was unusual in the growing iconography of the left (see [Figure 1](#)). It joined other social documentary and more overtly political images in press packs and other formats that entered local venues and solidarity networks abroad to muster support for the struggle.

Originally taken as part of Omar Badsha's own 'visual diary' in Durban in 1980, the *rathi* player is framed against the backdrop of the Grey Street mosque in Durban. Given the circuits that this photograph entered, and the importance assumed by the visual image in 1980s South Africa, it is possible to argue that Badsha was inserting a different universalism into a body of pictures that tended to be underwritten by the universalism of Christian martyrdom. South Africa's most famous image, for example, is Sam Nzima's photograph of Hector Peterson's slain body, taken at the beginning of the Soweto student uprising in 1976 and often likened to the *Pietà*. At least two other photographs from the 1980s have been captioned 'the crucifixion'. But here Badsha makes reference to another martyrdom.

Martyrdom is important in that as a young boy growing up in a Muslim Vhora home, we were brought up on stories – like young Christian kids – from the Bible. The martyrdom of [Hussein] had a profound influence on me when I was growing up, the rituals all took place around me in my district.

Badsha comments that it was only in retrospect that he began to understand the symbolism.

But what caught my attention as a child was the rituals, the excitement, mystery and most important of all the faith, sacrifice and martyrdom. In my adult life I began to explore the rituals and began understanding the significance of these

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FIGURE 1 *Rathi* players, Badsha Pir celebrations, Grey Street, Durban 1980

people – indentured workers] and the transferring of traditions and rituals and use of public space in the creation of identities.<sup>1</sup>

There seems to be a parallel between the photographer's partially acknowledged childhood impressions, for which he only finds a language later, and the process of opening up the iconography of a political struggle to more complicated readings. South African photography of this decade was deeply informed by social documentary visual traditions, as well as anti-racism, African nationalism, secular labour struggles and, sometimes overtly, Christianity. Given the strength of certain images and discourses with the anti-apartheid networks internationally, many would argue that the struggle against apartheid came to represent a new universalism of its own. But while this photograph might challenge the taken-for-granted embeddedness of Christian iconography, for many viewers it remained (and remains) opaque and illegible on many levels. There is a tension between its richness of meaning at a localized level and its wider potential to be read.

This essay addresses the genealogies in which a particular body of photographs are embedded, in both their content and form. It asks how they emerge, and what are their inter-textualities (or inter-visualities) at a period in South Africa when a variety of political struggles were gaining momentum. More generally, how do words (and life) inspire images and vice versa? The question issues an invitation to break down distinctions of medium and discipline that normally govern such matters.

<sup>1</sup>Omar Badsha, email communication with Patricia Hayes, 27 May 2006.

The point of departure is the Indian Ocean city port of Durban, and the interplays created between emerging political forces, social histories and the arts in the city from the 1960s onwards. The notion of ‘interplay’ comes from the photographer introduced above, Omar Badsha.<sup>2</sup> It starts with the everyday under apartheid, where ‘[e]veryday life is synonymous with the habitual, the ordinary, the mundane, yet it is also strangely elusive’ (Felski 2000: 16). It was Badsha’s sense of this elusiveness that triggered his mode of the visual diary, in a broader quest to push the social margins into the political centre and to shift dominant perception.

Badsha was one of the main architects of the Afrapix photographic collective set up in 1982, which created a framework in which many photographers of the 1980s came to operate and to reflect on their practice during large-scale political mobilization against apartheid. His personal trajectory was, however, much longer, coming as he did from a background as an artist, then trade unionist, with biographical roots in a highly particular South African ghetto in what is today KwaZulu-Natal. In fact, Badsha’s recollections about Durban between the 1960s and 1980s circle constantly around two things: politics and form. As he puts it, ‘Our interest was art; our interest was making revolution’ (Interview 2 with Omar Badsha).

What has intrigued several contemporaries is the perceived transcendent quality of Badsha’s photographs, even as he pushed himself and other photographers to document the political struggle in very straight documentary terms. This is regarded as an anomaly (Hayes 2007; Roberts 1998: 2–5). In this regard, the renowned South African photographer David Goldblatt argues that Badsha’s photography ‘has an amazing degree of complexity that the others didn’t attain’ (Interview with David Goldblatt). Such commentators have tended to construct dichotomies between art and politics, with documentary and ‘struggle’ photography the site of considerable debate in this regard.

And it’s a very strange thing . . . Omar is a political activist of an almost extreme kind, and yet his photography is extraordinarily dispassionate. In its approach. He somehow never allowed his political certainty to intrude on his photographic vision, in my opinion. (*Ibid.*)

Goldblatt’s notion of ‘dispassionateness’ implies that expressive power – ‘complexity’ – depends on a separation of the political and aesthetic spheres. But the issue is not as simple as ‘culture’ escaping ‘politics’, at a time when it was strongly argued that the arts should be in the service of the South African liberation struggle.

Instead of marking Badsha out as exceptional, it is more helpful to break down the polarized analytical space around these debates, and allow for the constant operation of aesthetic judgment in an unfolding social and political setting. In a

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<sup>2</sup>All interviews with Omar Badsha and other photographers and activists cited in this essay (see list in References) were conducted by the Project in Documentary Photography at the History Department of the University of the Western Cape (UWC), with the support of the National Research Foundation of South Africa. In addition, many of the interviews, correspondence and conversations with Omar Badsha took place in the context of the proposed republication of Badsha’s photographs under the title of ‘Narratives’.

time of political mobilization, photography was an important medium in an aesthetico-political regime with its 'system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible' (Rockhill 2006: 1). It is illuminating to shift attention away from the images in isolation, and to focus on the complicated roots, biographies and discourses of those who emerged as photographers within such conditions. This brings us to the matter of the production of the images, their connection to the material circumstances in which they were created and distributed (Carter 2004). Put differently, there is a relationship between the photograph and the pre-and post-photographic chain of events and ideas (Roberts 1998: 4). Badsha's 'complexity' does not simply come from the elevated, disjunctured act of pure photography itself – the mastery of a medium – but from the conjuncture of biography and representational acts in specific social and political settings, in this case Durban. Here we might find that not only does Badsha come with his own contradictory social positioning, but that documentary itself is more unstable and less unitary than has been allowed in the local critiques of 'struggle' art and photography.

#### SEEING AND BEING SEEN: BOYHOOD IN THE IMPERIAL GHETTO

Like so many others who were subject to the strictures of racial categorization, Badsha was undoubtedly marked by the experience of segregation and apartheid. In his case, however, there were also the traumatic events of 1949, the inter-racial riots in Durban where 'Indians' were scapegoated as an allegedly privileged group. Though he was a small child at the time (Badsha was born in 1945), these events presented difficulties around issues of conflict and identity, and laid the basis for the shaping of subjectivity and, later, political commitment, for many who grew up in the city (Interview 3 with Omar Badsha). Against a nineteenth-century background of indentured and 'passage' immigration from the Indian subcontinent, there was, at the time of the riots, a prior history in Natal of narrow Indian self-interest in relation to colonial government. However, this shifted during the Second World War, and also after Indian independence and the coming to power of the South African Nationalist Party in 1948, giving way to greater unity in political organization between Indian and African as well as other oppressed groups under apartheid. Badsha himself refers to the 'shadow of the race riots of 1949', and the 'heroic efforts' of communists and militant nationalists such as Dadoo and Naicker to attain an 'inclusive Africanness' as against 'Gandhi's legacy of Indianness' (2001: 5). Such efforts coincided with rapid post-war economic growth in Durban and Natal, which accelerated further in the 1960s – crucial years in Badsha's biography.

When Badsha speaks of the 'imperial ghetto' where he grew up, he is referring to the downtown area of Durban that was a residential and commercial area for those categorized as Indian. At its heart was Grey Street, parallel to Albert Street, traversed by Queen Street, Victoria Street and a maze of lanes and roads that made up a particular world. The historian Bill Freund describes this as the 'densely Indian urban environment around the Grey Street mosque and clustered shops' (Freund 1995: 39). But this colourful tableau needs some qualification. Among the residents of the neighbourhood, the dominant group traced their roots

to Gujarat and trade activities, as opposed to other backgrounds including south India, and indentured labour. At different moments, the matter of origins would have religious, cultural, class and spatial implications within Durban itself. In addition, because of its commercial nature and its function as the central transport hub for the black population of Durban, Grey Street and environs presented a heterogeneous space that included the presence of many Africans during the day.<sup>3</sup>

Living and working spaces for Indians had fluctuated with apartheid laws on 'group areas' that brought in total racial segregation, and before that, with British laws that, since the nineteenth century, had imposed limits on Indian and African settlement in Durban. But an essentially colonial ghetto such as the one Badsha grew up in was not fully subjected to forced removals under apartheid, unlike numerous other black or mixed enclaves in the country from the 1960s. Government plans existed, but were deferred for the Durban central business area. 'Plans to expel the Indians entirely from the so-called Indian Central Business District around the Grey Street mosque were never carried out. Thus... the centre of Durban retained a large, intensely urbanised population' (Freund 1995: 75). Badsha's imperial ghetto therefore constitutes a very particular urban story in South Africa, one among many.<sup>4</sup>

Badsha attempts to explain the stages in the formation of his visual sensibility, the way he came to *see* in this space:

[W]e grew up in a [Muslim trader] community where you were seen [firstly] as somebody who was there to exploit. You were seen as part of the trading class and a group that was very insular and didn't care about anyone else other than themselves. Did not mix with other people. And then secondly as an Indian, and then thirdly as a black. (Interview 2 with Omar Badsha)

It is from the experience of *being seen*, primarily, that one then sees others (see Figure 2).

So you grew up in that milieu and you had to deal with the issue of who you are... if you are then seen in this particular way, how does one now begin to deal with looking at other people? So it's a very central issue for us that grew up with racism to be in the margins. What it means to be in the margins. (*Ibid.*)

Implicit in this statement is the recognition of being on the margins of the larger struggle between whites and the majority of black people in the country, and the necessity of moving out of the margins to become 'part of the majority'.<sup>5</sup> Badsha's way of seeing things is refracted through a layer of self-awareness. After being 'seen', there is a second stage: to explore another way of seeing, which allows one to re-humanize those who have been seen in reductive and diminished ways. As he puts it: 'How does one then begin to put people back into the centre of things and see them as human beings? One deals with it all the time. I was lucky in that we

<sup>3</sup>I am grateful to Ahmedy Vawda for emphasizing these details. Personal communication, 9 and 11 January 2007, Cape Town.

<sup>4</sup>Ahmedy Vawda, personal communication, 9 and 11 January 2007, Cape Town.

<sup>5</sup>Email communication, Omar Badsha, 28 January 2006.



FIGURE 2 Storekeeper's son, Durban 1979

debated those issues' (Interview 2 with Omar Badsha). Indeed, Badsha was exposed to such debates from a very young age. His account suggests that this ghettoized political and artistic community was, to an unusual extent, able to 'reflect on the significance of seeing itself'. As W. J. T. Mitchell suggests, such reflection involves the attempt to 'overcome the veil of familiarity and self-evidence that surrounds the experience of seeing, and to turn it into a problem for analysis, a mystery to be unraveled' (Mitchell 2002: 231).

Badsha's own verbal accounts are barely able to disentangle personal biography from the political, intellectual and artistic traditions of the imperial ghetto. Some of his activist colleagues have described him as growing up in this environment as a tough street fighter,<sup>6</sup> though he himself is discreet in his own testimony about any hardships he may have endured.

I was born in a home where there were always photographs, paintings – an unusual home. It was a working-class family, a large extended family. But there was one room, and every other space was filled with some form of visual. My father's room, bed, was also his studio. And you walked in there, there were paintings in the process of being done or that had been done. There were hundreds of magazines, newspapers. My uncle was a photographer, a very unusual one... a larger than life character. He just loved pictures. He just loved taking pictures. He had no career other than taking pictures, but he was caught in that period where in the forties and fifties there wasn't very much space other than the ethnic papers where you took pictures and you get paid very little. So he

<sup>6</sup>Personal communication, Phyllis Naidoo, Durban, 7 December 2003 (with thanks to Rafs Mayet).

styled himself as a photojournalist and he was a news addict. You know he had hundreds of papers there. . . . So there was always that. I started drawing and things in the early sixties, '62, '63 and by '65, '66 we had a lot of debates going on about art, culture, and politics. We were a group of people who were very politically active and finding ourselves now in no-man's land in political organizations. (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha, edited transcript)

Precisely around 1964, Badsha talks about the regular Saturday evening meetings in this environment with local intellectuals and veteran activists, some of whom were banned and listed communists. The discussions roved around many issues, though a prominent one was art and its role in society. Ernst Fischer's *The Necessity of Art* (1963), as well as the writings of Lunacharski and other radical artists and theorists, were widely read in these circles and fed into study groups. Inevitably, race featured in these debates. In a retrospective moment, Badsha says:

In the sixties we began to critique white art, the white artist. Was it art for art's sake? And also the issue of identity. What is it? How are we represented in paintings and photography? And so one looked at pictures, and one wanted to now start looking and engaging with these issues . . . because you must remember you also grew up in a society which was racial and you are seen as marginal, totally marginal. And so your simple first point you make is that, look we are human beings like you. In art, for every black artist in this country in the sixties, that was the key thing. (*Ibid.*)

Badsha's trajectory as a self-taught artist, prior to becoming 'a photographer', had taken off with early recognition in 1965 when he won the Sir Basil Schonland prize in the 'Art South Africa Today' exhibition, which was the first non-racial national exhibition. His work appeared in the 'Artists of Fame and Promise' exhibition in Johannesburg in 1966, and he shared the Oppenheimer Award in 1969. He continued to draw and exhibit up to the early 1970s. A crucial figure in his life between 1966 and 1968 was fellow-artist Dumile Feni, who was starting to blaze his own incandescent path. Badsha is convinced that their work started to change the way 'the human factor' was introduced into South African art.

Steeped in 'that generation of the forties, of communists and others', a long tradition of debating issues was transported into the present, the now,

and those debates now became part of our debates. But it's also a way of, now how does one begin to express oneself in this new climate. . . . I grew up in that milieu. Our interest was art; our interest was making revolution. Both coincided, and we moved backwards and forwards between the two. By the time of the late sixties we had not only established underground groups with links to people outside, but also networks [inside]. (*Ibid.*)

At one level, certainly, Badsha and his peers were enmeshed in what Paul Gilroy calls a 'black counter-culture of modernity' (Gilroy 1993). But it was more than this, for implicitly they were breaking down canonical, disciplinary and public boundaries that would allow for some 'redistribution of the sensible' in the limited, elitist aesthetico-political regime of South Africa in the 1960s. Dumile Feni was the most subversive, according to Badsha, turning the 'work of art' on its head. Writers such as Mafika Gwala, Wally Serote and others reflected a new assertiveness that shook the establishment and fed into the politics of Black Consciousness in the 1970s, and this generation slowly discerned that a new

audience was crystallizing. In some ways, they were creating this audience, as well as the new political and cultural platforms that might influence ways of seeing. Badsha emphasizes the specifics of this period. ‘What you begin to see is the emergence of a school of resistance art but – unlike in the 1950s where the political formations were strong – in the sixties and seventies the artists-activists came to be seen as important political players.’<sup>7</sup>

Badsha stopped painting and drawing at the point where the revolt against the state took on an open and mass character with the formation of youth and worker organizations. In 1970 he became involved full time in the revival of the Natal Indian Congress, and in late 1972 in the revived independent non-racial and militant trade union movement, later making a decisive shift to photography within this activism. But both political expression and visual representation were in a constant process of formation for Badsha. As he puts it, ‘Your ideas were already formed . . . but the way that you express it is now different . . . these influences that you take, you internalize, reflect on, and you try and create something of your own. At the same time, I was learning to take pictures’ (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha).

#### POLITICS, EDUCATION AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Calane da Silva has commented that in the 1970s and 1980s progressive intellectuals in Mozambique needed to be ‘multi-disciplinary’.<sup>8</sup> Starved of the tertiary support needed to become specialists in their fields, and propelled by politics, this was the common fate of the politicized black intelligentsia across Southern Africa in that period. Badsha, for example, speaks of the intensification of political activity and mobilization in Durban in the early 1970s, and the acute demands which this imposed:

’73, ’74, ’75 was just really an extremely difficult period, but a very, very exciting period. Difficult, you learn to do everything, multitask, people were getting banned, and you worked on the premise that you were going to get banned or you’d have to leave the country. So you had to create a new leadership very quickly . . . you worked on the premise that you had a six months’ shelf life. Initially, the state banned all our colleagues, they banned all the whiteys because they reckoned these are the brains. (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha, edited transcript)

Innovations were being put into practice by this new generation coming from the ghetto. The theatre provides a useful analogy with its metaphors of the ‘casting call’, the role and the script (Peterson 2004: 3). By writing ‘scripts for people to follow’, political activists and union organizers in South Africa opened up “grooves of ideation” along which the political imagination could run’ (*ibid.*). This occurred through the extended domains of educational work in trade unions, study groups and community-based groups. Here the activists were interpreting

<sup>7</sup>Omar Badsha, email communication, 28 January 2006.

<sup>8</sup>Calane de Silva, personal communication, Maputo, 4 December 2005 (with thanks to Rui Assubuji).



political texts for the broader public, including Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Letters to a Teacher*:

Rick [Turner]<sup>9</sup> was one of the few people who began this whole thing about looking at text, looking at, not pictures so much, but text. ... How to read critically. You must remember we [had] quite a sophisticated reading and background. We were doing stuff that none of the universities were even teaching. (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha)

The point Badsha makes here recurs constantly in the testimonies of black photographers in Southern Africa in the second half of the twentieth century – their disappointment with the predominantly white educational and tertiary institutions, and the need for intellectual self-development outside of conventional structures.

Another dimension to consider is the cosmopolitan access that political and cultural activists enjoyed in Durban. Both Maputo and Durban were major harbour cities: like the photographer Ricardo Rangel in the colonial port of Lourenço Marques, Badsha (and his father and uncle) waited for interesting things to come off the boat. These included magazines with photo essays which they thought were more complex than Magubane's *Soweto* (1978). Photography was then situated within a trajectory of reading groups, artists, eccentric magazine collectors, comic readers, and consumers of the literary and visual global detritus washing up on the shores of the port city from the 1960s, which included the banned literature sold by independent-minded booksellers.

The shift to photography in Badsha's biography comes out of the 'backwards and forwards' dynamic between older discussions around art and revolution, but also derives explicitly from the need for political creativity at a certain juncture of intensity in the trade union movement.

You were forced to become a teacher, to put across ideas, to mobilize people, thousands of people. You know, after 1973, we just got inundated. There were thousands of people coming into the unions, and the majority of our members were semi-literate, and English was not their first language. Twenty-four hours a day we were working to deal with this influx of people all demanding your attention, demanding that you organize them, and demanding to know, wanting to know. It was quite an extraordinary period. (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha)

Photography came from the 'romantic' idea of using slide-tape shows in the trade union shop steward and leadership training courses. 'So I had to buy myself a camera. I lived with photography all around me but I never knew how to use a camera.' Badsha relates how he walked into a shop and asked the salesman for a good camera to buy. He found the recommended Pentax he bought difficult to work with. Two months later, he had the good fortune to obtain both a Leica and darkroom equipment from Cassim Amra.<sup>10</sup> Active in the South African

<sup>9</sup>Rick Turner was a leading South African radical philosopher and political thinker who trained at the Sorbonne, was close to Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, played a key role in the emergence of the Durban trade unions from 1973, and was assassinated at his home in Durban in 1978.

<sup>10</sup>Omar Badsha, email communication, 14 June 2006.

Communist Party, Amra was a photographer who had set up the International Photographic Club in the 1950s.

How did teaching, mobilization and photography function together in a trade union environment? Workers had to grasp the need to create committees, to understand ‘how representation worked, how you dealt with cases, how shop stewards had to represent, get mandates’.<sup>11</sup> One close account of worker organization through Paulo Freire’s methods comes from a Namibian trade union activist, Richard Pakleppa:

How do you do this? If you want people after a meeting to think about this, don’t leave their memory. I’d understood that you needed to leave physical signs, physical traces, of memory. No, not memory. Of things spoken of so that memory has support, so that memory can become a collective memory that can unify people in action and understanding.

Pakleppa goes on to explain: ‘trade unions existed inside the memories of people first and foremost. That’s when they’re real. So we needed these cultural [things]... we needed images, we needed images ...’ (Interview with Richard Pakleppa).<sup>12</sup> In the Durban case, in the early 1970s, Badsha talks about the way union organizers were constantly grappling with the problem of how to build strong factory-based leadership. It involved putting across ideas and using images – teaching, essentially – and this required alternative educational models. The politics of this Freirean educational mode entered into debate (if not contestation) with the position advocated by other African National Congress (ANC) cadres in Durban, notably Harry Gwala. ‘Their emphasis was mainly on the armed struggle and we argued that [it was] too much reliance on the armed struggle: without mass mobilization you’re not going to get anywhere’ (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha). Thus pictures were immersed in a complex field of communication and mobilization. The point to emphasize is that Omar Badsha did not come forward as ‘a photographer’ until a very late stage, and he did so in a process of emergence from the coagulation of different activities in relation to this ‘mass mobilization’. From here, we need to look at the particular and characteristic ways in which his photographs were produced, and how they circulated.

#### LETTER TO FARZANAH

Badsha states that he was self-taught as far as taking pictures was concerned. The crucial technical training which enabled him to process film came from an important figure, his wife Nasima, a biochemist. ‘Guys like us didn’t know how to mix, what percentage and things like that’ (*ibid.*). The publication *Letter to Farzanah* was Badsha’s first book, named after his new-born eldest daughter (see [Figure 3](#)). As the dedication puts it, the book is for ‘Farzanah and the children who march through this broken landscape’ (Badsha 1979). In 1979, the UN Year of the Child, Badsha had been approached by Fatima Meer about a publication.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Omar Badsha, email communication, 14 June 2006.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Pakleppa worked for the National Union of Namibian Workers from 1987 to 1989.

<sup>13</sup>Fatima Meer, born in 1928, was a political activist and academic in Durban who, in the difficult years of the 1980s, founded the Institute for Black Research at the University of Natal,



FIGURE 3 Cover photograph, *Letter to Farzanah* (1979)

I was photographing children, just a project of my own generally, and so when Fatima came up with this proposal I said, well I think I've got a body of work, and very naively pulled out all these terrible pictures and put them together into a book. And all of it was done again, all in I think a matter of a month or two. . . . [W]hen I was drawing, children, and women, and the mother and child was a very important theme in my drawing. It was an important theme, so I think I just progressed. (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha, edited transcript)

Badsha makes the following key point about his modus operandi: 'My pictures in many cases have always been part of a broad diary of what I do. Even at that period. So you get, "Can you put together something?" You never say no, you say yes. You put it together' (*ibid.*). This became a pattern.

Quite emphatically, Badsha's photographic work is rooted in the everyday, the everyday of a man deeply immersed in politics. As he himself says, 'I am not sure if one is able to tell the truth with a camera. All I can show is my involvement through the camera. Who I meet, when and where' (2001: 11). The 'what I do' of Badsha's 'broad diary' refers to political work; after *Letter to Farzanah*, Badsha was increasingly involved in the new community-based grassroots movement in Inanda on the fringes of Durban. The notion of the broad diary, the visual diary, had to be situated in the contradictions presented by momentous social changes that the social documentary method could tap into so effectively. These were striking moments of high modernism and capitalist contradiction in which

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and received several banning orders for (*inter alia*) supporting the African National Congress and also Steve Biko of the Black Consciousness Movement.

black-and-white realist representation could come into its own, and Badsha is an early practitioner of some of the important trends in the 1980s. To put it more strongly, through Badsha there is a conjuncture of the rise of trade unionism and political mobilization, and the rise of black and white documentary photography in Durban. But it is important to stress that this originated as a kind of *personal* documentation that was always under way. Badsha's transition from artistic expression to formal photography, reaching a decisive moment with *Letter to Farzanah*, signals a new intervention in – and attempted transformation of – the everyday, in a highly contested world which for him was always open to transformation. Very soon after publication, *Letter to Farzanah* was in fact banned, limiting the possibilities of people gaining access to the images through print culture. But, as we shall see, Badsha continued the struggle through other channels and further publications.

John Roberts highlights photography as 'a source of unofficial truths and experiences', and cites the 'class-consciousness of the realist tradition' (1998: 9). He argues that 'the photograph is not simply an effect of dominant power relations, or evidence of the optical unconscious, it is also a form of *practical* knowledge, an inscription of, and an intervention in, a socially divided world'. With Badsha, it has its specifics and immediacy, uncovering the 'built-in inequalities in our system' (Verster 1979). Roberts also speaks of the way in which radical artists and photographers have used the notion of the everyday to reveal 'the scars of modernity'. It is particularly in the urban photographs that Badsha makes visible the scars of a specifically South African modernity – a modernity predicated on a multi-layered racial stratification – and thereby both compounds and unsettles the sense of capitalist class formation and exploitation. Modernity for whom – when so many people are being left behind by capitalism, or lodged strangely in the interstices? If Goldblatt pictured the built environments of the rapid capitalist mushrooming of South Africa in the 1970s that is generic and without soul (Interview with David Goldblatt; see also Goldblatt 1975; 2007), then Badsha's work points to what is left behind or emergent in a range of ghettos, old and new.

### GREY STREET AND INANDA

In Badsha, the everyday emerges through the notion of the visual diary, where photographs are taken in passing, in walking through venues replete with the contradictory social conditions of high apartheid in the Durban ghetto, and on the urban periphery in Inanda. There is a movement between inside and outside, between private and public. All this is the result of setting up a darkroom in the city centre after 1976, and having to drive from the suburb of Overport back to the imperial ghetto – near Douglas Lane – and walking through Grey Street on the way to the darkroom every day. Already having a deep familiarity with these spaces, he looked upon them afresh as an adult and photographer. A point Badsha makes retrospectively, however, is that such 'documentation' originally served a more amorphous purpose: 'These photographs started life as a diary, a tool to help me map my way through the racial maze created over a century of colonialism, apartheid and my own "Indianness"' (2001: 5). It is only later that



FIGURE 4 Disabled worker, Lorne Street, Durban, 1981

the photographs enter the public domain. They were originally not intended as ‘struggle photos’; their initial purpose was open, personal, even meditative.

The statement about his ‘Indianness’ notwithstanding, Badsha is noted for photographing both Africans and Indians in this terrain, where, during the day, Africans occupied public spaces (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 27). His acute awareness of these spaces leads him to photograph the street, the interior of shops and factories, the backrooms and the residences above. In the taut body of the squash-racquet stringer holding himself still, for example (Figure 4), one has a sense not only of the tightening force applied to objects – which is work – but of another history of stretching and tensing, too: that of the lives of skilled workers, probably with old histories of indentured labour. The portrait suggests the kind of access made possible by a photographer who was also a trade unionist, familiar with many work environments. The tendrils of the strings in the background hang down like a screen or partial backdrop. Badsha argues that such photographs are ‘evidence of the discourse about art and struggle, as well as going beyond the frame and the heroic gesture’ (2001: 5). More suggestively still, Roberts points to how the “realist mode” is itself a contradictory formation; and therefore how it is able to “speak back” through the voices of its subjects in ways other than those ascribed by a theory of dominant ideology’ (Roberts 1998: 10). Such photography has a potentially ‘loosening’ effect, so that despite fixed appearances, things are in danger of constantly flying apart.

Grey Street is the immediate photographic experience from where Badsha goes on to photograph in Inanda. There, he follows a similar modus operandi, walking through certain areas on a regular basis, and then taking pictures: moving, seeing, pausing, photographing. Often he photographs as he participates, at meetings and events. Coming from an old ghetto, he is now active in the new ghetto. But, as

usual, the alibi is a political one, and begins in the nearby Phoenix Settlement founded by Gandhi.

I became involved in Phoenix Settlement in 1969, 1970, '71, '72. . . . We organized a number of workshops, work camps that looked at the issue of development, change, education, and brought in a whole lot of young people, university and high school students into these work camps . . . also a series of lectures from Marxism to African Socialism to Gandhi, all of that. (Interview 2 with Omar Badsha)

Political work later extended to the growing site of Inanda, also filled with historical resonance, but which had reached a crisis point with the forced removals and migrations of the 1980s:

by 1980 that area had grown enormously. There were thousands of new shacks. Thousands. I, together with others, [we] were involved in examining the possibilities of setting up community-based structures there. The medical students began the clinics, which were originally started by Biko and them in the seventies, early seventies. In that tradition, the students continued to work in the communities. (Interview 2 with Omar Badsha, edited transcript)

Why should we pay attention to the textures (and aesthetics) of politics, to the work of Steve Biko and others in these multiple locations inside and outside of Durban in the 1960s and 1970s, to the projects spreading out of the city and into the underground? Because for one, as John Tagg argues, the settings and institutions in which something like photography operates are important. Multi-layered historical outcomes are 'exercised by photographs only within certain institutional practices and within particular historical relations' (1988: 4).

[Inanda] was a new big squatter area so it was the ideal place to come and go. . . . [T]he area became extremely volatile. Huge contestation now between us and Inkatha structures that were being set up. So I began working in the area and while I worked I'd go virtually every second or third day. But largely on Mondays, when we had meetings and set up residents' associations who would start agitating for water and other services. While I was there I continued to photograph that area. (Interview 2 with Omar Badsha)

Badsha was not ducking in and out, as most photographers did in townships during the forced removals and agitation of the 1980s. He was not permanently there, but he was a regular part of the organizational landscape in these new social margins of apartheid that were appearing with such intensity. He was right inside the zone of the excluded, sometimes with his camera. And as he walked past a girl carrying the mud she would use to plaster her house, for instance, he asked to take her photograph (Figure 5).

This is a different landscape from Grey Street, but it reveals the same method of walking through a social and political terrain. Only, this time it is not as intimately known. It never could be, as it is unfolding day by day: a place where the huge demography of African informal settlement is occurring adjacent to the city under late apartheid, often on top of a body of settled Indian and African groups. It is the place where Badsha takes what he knows from his own experience of being seen – of being on the margins – and he expands this sense into making the people that he sees absolutely central to the composition. His visual sensibility has been formed from the racialized inner city which has made him aware of



FIGURE 5 Carrying mud to plaster newly built home, Inanda, KwaZulu-Natal, 1982

himself; but he now turns the sensorium outwards, and sees the situation of others caught between rural and urban, and then he attempts to inscribe it on the film in his camera.

I was working in Afrapix, I was working in Inanda, working on a number of levels, so the idea of an exhibition or a book [*Imijondolo*] became a logical way of drawing attention to some of the problems in that area. . . . It was an idea. It was something I had sort of decided to do. But also I was working consciously now around using photography as a way of drawing attention. (*Ibid.*)

This resulted in his next book, *Imijondolo* (1985).

It seems that, in passing, certain details are noticed that trigger the process of visual diarization. There is something strikingly visual as well as tactile about the image of the young girl smearing the walls of a house in Inanda. What does it mean to be a young girl in a place like Inanda in the early 1980s, responsible for this task? Her method is eminently practical, her manner matter-of-fact, and she appears naturalistic, but for the uneasy side glance – perhaps caused by others seeing the taking of the photograph. This awareness gives it an edge. We could leave it just there – merely an image of a young African girl as she smears a wall, an everyday occurrence in an informal settlement or squatter camp (*imijondolo*). But the interruption effected by the camera, the small disturbance caused by the photographer, opens up a ‘visual incision’ in history that fixes the spatial and temporal flow at one chosen point (Edwards 2001). The effect is to make an opening, to dilate time so that many visual and associated elements can rise to the surface. The viewer might fall back on historiography, on memory, on public or

personal knowledge, to think about how she comes to be there, and to be doing this. The mixing of earthy substances with industrial detritus to make a home on the edge of the city is also made visible through this interruption, and the need to synthesize in order to survive is revealed. The sticking of mud, clay, to her body suggests not only the relationship to earth and the things to which traditional life closely relates, but people's tenacity to stick close to the city. Beyond such symbolism, and on a more quiet level, the rough textures impart a tangibility to this kind of life.<sup>14</sup>

Urban adaptability and creativity come in some way from rural life, and also from the social formations which train young men and women into certain roles and practices. This is the once-rural everyday transposed into a new 'urban' visibility. The new ghetto is the rural brought to the edge of the city. This is a rapidly emerging landscape. It is a huge dwelling place that is a work-in-progress, with people preparing to 'extend themselves across a larger world and enact these possibilities of urban becoming' (Simone 2004: 3).

Badsha does not stop on the outside, but brings us the inside as well. These are frequently photographs taken in the midst of many other activities. Concerning the interior of a pensioner's home in Amouti, Inanda, Badsha says:

Again the traces of people's lives, you can see it in their clothes or their faces, but here you found in these areas, in these communities, like everywhere, it is what is in their homes which tells you so much about them . . . other than a bed, the only thing in the house was this little table with a few things. . . . A bread bin, and a lamp, and pilchards, and bread, and a mug with tea in it, and then the Christ picture, and then the hat with the Zulu beer strainer. . . . But it's again a way of getting to understand that community or people through their work situation or their home situation. (Interview 2 with Omar Badsha)

The structures of the inside, its textures and objects, are allowed to speak for the life of a person. In the absolute quietness of this domestic interior, these are the privacies and simplicities of Inanda (see [Figure 6](#)).

## RITUALS, THEATRE, PERFORMANCE

In his coverage of performance, of the dynamics of relationships, bonding and persuasion, the photographer comes to reflect deeply upon the very political theatricality he and fellow-activists have espoused. Still engaged in drawing people into the script, he also begins to look very closely at *how* people are in the script, whether their manner of being is religious—as in the Shembe religious followers—or whether it emerges from traditional social dynamics, or local political organization (see [Figure 7](#)).

For this particular picture I am sitting in a meeting and it would have been a Monday evening, late afternoon, early evening meeting of the association. . . . But I then just find the body language of this moment important and I take out my camera and photograph. Then there were, I think, if I remember, quite a number of other people speaking in this

<sup>14</sup>The photograph first appeared in Badsha, *Imijondolo* (p. 15 and cover), but was distributed very widely in the 1980s and later.



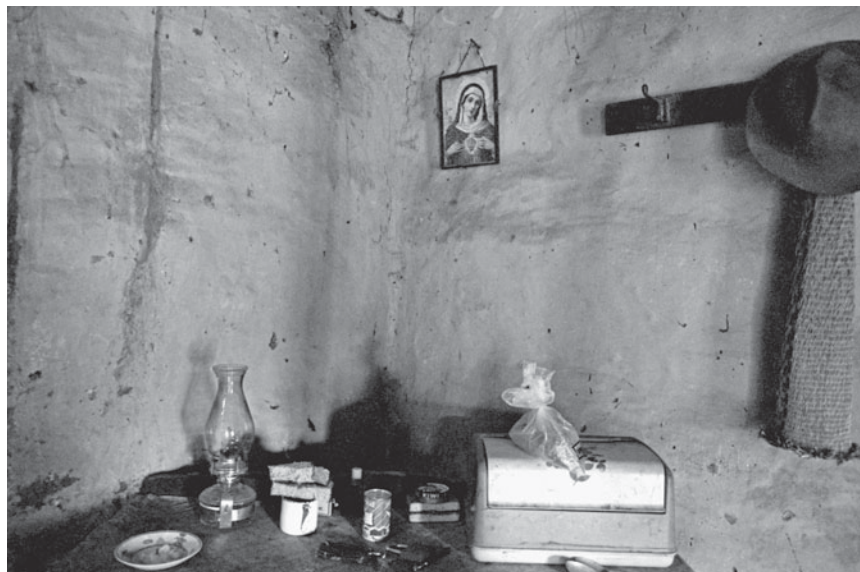


FIGURE 6 Interior of pensioner's home, Inanda, 1982

meeting and I found this situation very, very dynamic, the light was right and those people, and I took a picture. But I would have sat in other meetings like that and not have taken pictures. But that day something said, no I must . . . (Interview 2 with Omar Badsha, edited transcript)

Not surprisingly, Badsha extensively photographs workers' theatre in Durban. He is often absorbed in 'the ensemble of social practices that can be classified as "the political"' (Pollock 1999: 233), observing them, photographing them, and later making narratives out of them through subtle photographic selection.

I have . . . one picture of the ANC leadership sitting in 1991 [Figure 8]. Now, their body language is incredibly interesting, from Joe Slovo, there's Chris Hani there, there's Lekota there, there's Mbeki there, and Ramaphosa, Zuma, and they're all sitting, each one, you could see this relationship between them . . . this tension, incredible tensions, and the body language, and it was just after they were all elected onto a National Executive Council. . . that was for me a telling moment about that leadership and the tensions between the different groups. So I was always also interested and understood those politics that comes out and which I documented. So in my case I used that occasion as a comment about relationships between the people who led and those who are led. Those who lead and those who are led. It's also again very powerful moments where individuals are able to make people look up to follow, and grasp, and get carried into something. (*Ibid.*)

This concentration on the symptoms and gestures of political gathering and performance should ideally encourage audiences to see 'the domain of the political as a stage' (Pollock 1999: 233). In her critique of the more simplistic 'politics of representation' approach, visual theorist Griselda Pollock insists that '[R]epresentation should be understood through the metaphors of enactment,



FIGURE 7 Prayers before meeting of Amouti Residents' Association, Inanda, 1982

dramatization, performance, and masquerade', since these displace the 'typical notions of reflection or mirroring' associated with phrases such as 'images of ...' (1999: 234). Pollock's point takes us back to theatre as analogy, as metaphor, of course: but in this South African case, theatre is actually part of that interface of live mediums created by activists. Moreover, from his own exploration of expressive detail in the everyday, Badsha carries over a hyper-sense of seeing (intimately connected to power) into his portrayals of various figures: actors, politicians, activists, chiefs, religious figures, and their props. His photographs of theatre performances, meetings and rituals, then travel back into the various public domains, in that bigger effort to change the parameters of the aesthetico-political regime. Here however, today, Badsha admits that his own sense of always questioning the relationships between people and power may not have been very obvious in the 1980s.

This brings us back to the photograph with which we started, the widely circulated photograph of the *rathi* player against the backdrop of the Grey Street mosque in Durban. What is most striking, perhaps, is the spectacular nature of the ritual and the sheer visual power of the body in comparison with many other photographs taken by Badsha. But the heterogeneity (and proximity) of religious and everyday practices in the imperial ghetto are also evident, once the broad assemblage of signifiers has been registered as jointly Hindu and Moslem. The older ghettos in South Africa tended to have a similarly mixed quality, and Grey Street did not suffer the same fate of drastic forced removals that destroyed Sophiatown or District Six in the 1960s. But beyond this vibrant heterogeneity, and together with many other images of religious ritual, there remains that distinct fascination with the bodily expression of spiritual drama. This is in spite



FIGURE 8 Newly elected ANC leaders, Durban, 1991

of – or perhaps because of – a childhood in a Sunni Moslem context which played down such physical, overtly embodied elements.

[W]e would sneak out to the events because in our family – and many of the Sunni Vhoras – while they believed in the martyrdom, they were opposed to the Moharrum ceremonies, it was seen as not our thing, the display of public [sorrow] was frowned upon – [because these were] the rituals associated with [Shi'i'adom] and in the South African context the uneducated largely Urdu-speaking communities.<sup>15</sup>

What is revealing about these encounters is that after childhood exposure, Badsha returned to and reinterpreted ritual in his photography much later, after grasping the parallels with politics: '[M]y exploration was now also informed by my understanding of rituals in political formations (leaders and led), and the power of traditions and rituals as sites of power relationships.'<sup>16</sup> This assertion of political consciousness, overlaying the previously inarticulate experiences of witnessing such events as a child, attests to the later rationalization of barely conscious or latent elements, that are visually, aesthetically, always there.

#### CONCLUSION: VISUAL CULTURE AS A 'MARKER TO THE POSSIBLE'

Badsha's testimony constantly instigates the cultural in the political, and vice versa. His photographs achieve the same effect, though more quietly. For the

<sup>15</sup>Omar Badsha, edited email communication, 27 May 2006.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

aesthetic and the political are not the separate spheres that they are made out to be. What we seem to have instead are competing aesthetic regimes of politics:

And we were educating people about the image, directly or indirectly people were being now educated in mass ways about images. And that was the most I think also very important thing to understand, that people's sense of colour, of drama, and text, painting, and photographs, things that are possible to use, is all visual. So all of a sudden you get a whole society being educated outside the system. You had two different societies and two different visual cultures. (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha)

Badsha insists that cultural groups were key to mass mobilization. On the surface it seems that rather than pursuing an individualist career as an independent professional photographer, Badsha's tendency was constantly to organize. A further aspect of this was the training of other black photographers, an initiative pursued and debated within Afrapix. The latter as well as other cultural bodies reached out to diverse publics across South Africa and beyond, including the magazine *Staffrider*, and later the Centre for Documentary Photography at the University of Cape Town when Badsha and his family moved from Durban in the mid-1980s. But underlying all this activity lay the painful fact that Badsha more or less stopped taking photographs for some years after Inanda. He cites exhaustion, and the stress of being the target of surveillance and even assassination attempts, and constantly living in a war zone. All this left him 'without any anxiety' about the camera, however – and the release of political prisoners in the early 1990s also released his photographer's block.

Badsha attempted to harness the big debate around photographers within the activities of the Centre for Documentary Photography at the University of Cape Town, which had itself undertaken a major project of documenting poverty in South Africa. Together with academic Francis Wilson, the result was *The Cordoned Heart*, which incorporated young photographers (Badsha 1986). Badsha added a further layer of creativity to the created images, through interpretation, selection, layout, design – all of which was driven by visual efficacy, visual form, as well as content. 'It's not a very dramatic moment of anything. It's those quiet moments, but creating those interplays' (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha).

After *The Cordoned Heart*, Badsha and other photographers produced a further volume later in the 1980s, *Beyond the Barricades* (Hill and Harris 1989). Badsha recalls the discussion:

Beyond the barricades... what about the future, the culture, the new society? But you see, culture played an important role in all of our thinking and lives as a marker to the possible. And it was also something that united people right across, coming from a very divided, very fragmented society. It was that UDF period, that eighties that brought people together, whereas in the seventies Black Consciousness people brought... the youth together only. And then the working movement was only... working class. But the eighties brought all layers, every layer into the struggle. And so you now have to now confront what is this new, what is coming out of this? What are you now wanting to say about this new? And how do you say it? So culture was like saying, well this is the future, out of this will come a new type of culture, a new non-racial culture... I don't think it was that clearly articulated, but it was there. Because it was also part of our experience now... this new sense of hope. (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha, edited transcript)

This awareness of a new time emerging, which offered the possibility of extending new political and social alliances, needed expression, inscription, visualization, dissemination. But, as Badsha implies here, this growing awareness remained elusive, unfinished, half-articulated – like South Africanness itself.

This essay has charted Badsha's cumulative and multiple location across a series of institutions: the family, the Durban art world of the 1960s, the trade union sector and political organization from the 1970s, and the university from the 1980s. In documenting himself and politics – for he was intensely aware of the historicities of his own identity, and the departures of his activism from the conventional trajectories of his biography as an 'Indian' – he was far less doctrinaire than many other political activists in the mass democratic movement. While committing himself to certain positions, he himself came out of a broader, more critical tradition, which incorporated diverse influences and also allowed him to explore the less obvious political genealogies<sup>17</sup> – a more heterogeneous inclination that is perhaps paradigmatic of Indian Ocean histories (Hofmeyr *et al.* 2011).

That leaves one last question of identity in the debate around art and politics. One of the problems in South Africa is the way photography has been regarded as a specialized activity which has, as it were, been cordoned or partitioned off into its own discipline, divorced from other spheres. Badsha's life as a former artist, trade unionist, activist, publisher and photographer is itself one long 'interplay'. His own wry comment here is: 'You create your own persona as you go along and you find you fall by accident into a way. But I think it's only towards the end now that everybody begins to see the photographer' (Interview 1 with Omar Badsha, edited transcript).

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<sup>17</sup>This included a certain Trotskyist influence through exposure in the early 1960s to the Unity Movement (with thanks to Ciraj Rassool).

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## INTERVIEWS

- Interview 1 with Omar Badsha, by Patricia Hayes and Farzanah Badsha, Cape Town, 18 June 2003.
- Interview 2 with Omar Badsha, by Patricia Hayes and Farzanah Badsha, Cape Town, 6 January 2004.
- Interview 3 with Omar Badsha, by Patricia Hayes, Pretoria, 25 November 2005.
- Interview with David Goldblatt, by Patricia Hayes and Farzanah Badsha, Cape Town, 28 August 2002.
- Interview with Richard Pakleppa, former trade union activist, London, 16 June 2006.

## ABSTRACT

There is an assumption that the photographic iconography of the South African struggle against apartheid is universally known and familiar. It is however dominated by certain tropes and categories that obscure the many complexities and nuances of its origins, its practitioners and its effects. This article focuses on one photographer, Omar Badsha, and explores his own narrations about city and

family life in the Indian Ocean port city of Durban, and the artistic and political trajectories in which he was embedded that gave rise to his own photographic work and the organization of other photographers into the collective known as Afrapix. Badsha grew up in 'the imperial ghetto' of Grey Street in Durban within a rich legacy of radical political and cultural debate, becoming an artist and later a trade union organizer. It is the imperatives of the latter work that pushed him into photography as a medium of literacy. Many of his own photographs started as a personal visual diary when he re-explored the spaces of his childhood as an adult, and in the process became increasingly sensitized to the parallels between political and religious ritual. In particular he was fascinated by the dynamics between the leaders and the led, and the techniques and theatricalities of the different genres of mobilization. His work and the multiple forces and influences at play suggest that there were (and are) plural and competing aesthetic regimes during (and after) apartheid that are little recognized, mostly due to a deeply entrenched (and ongoing) separation between the domains of aesthetics and politics in South Africa and elsewhere outside the African continent.

#### RESUMÉ

Il existe une présomption selon laquelle tout le monde connaît l'iconographie photographique de la lutte contre l'apartheid en Afrique du Sud. Elle est cependant dominée par des tropes et des catégories qui masquent les nombreuses complexités et nuances de ses origines, de ses praticiens et de ses effets. L'article s'intéresse au photographe Omar Badsha, dont il examine les narrations sur la ville et la vie de famille dans la ville portuaire de Durban, dans l'Océan Indien, et les trajectoires artistiques et politiques dans lesquelles il s'inscrit et qui ont inspiré son œuvre photographique et la formation d'un collectif de photographes appelé Afrapix. Badsha a grandi dans le « ghetto impérial » de Grey Street à Durban, héritier d'une riche tradition du débat politique radical et culturel, avant de devenir artiste puis syndicaliste. Ce sont les impératifs de cette activité syndicaliste qui l'ont amené à la photographie en tant que support de culture. Beaucoup de ses photographies étaient au départ un journal visuel personnel, lorsque l'adulte qu'il était revisitait les espaces de son enfance et, ce faisant, devenait de plus en plus sensible aux parallèles entre rituel politique et rituel religieux. Il était notamment fasciné par la dynamique entre dirigeants et dirigés, et par les techniques et théâtralités des différents genres de mobilisation. Son œuvre et les multiples forces et influences en jeu suggèrent qu'il existait (et qu'il existe toujours) pendant (et après) l'apartheid des régimes esthétiques pluriels et en concurrence peu reconnus, essentiellement en raison d'une séparation profondément ancrée (et persistante) entre les domaines de l'esthétique et de la politique en Afrique du Sud et hors du continent africain.