CHAPTER 8

Thinking Through Things: The Transformative Work of the *Object Biographies* Project

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The theme of "transformation" has been a constant one in discussions around numerous aspects of society since the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994. In the field of schooling, the desire for transformation is frequently voiced, but the post-apartheid era has not seen the effective democratisation of quality education, from basic to higher, due to a range of structural problems in South African society. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns of 2015 and 2016 highlighted various ways in which South African universities are seen to be upholding the legacies of the past, the full burden of the failure of transformation seeming at times to come to rest on the shoulders of higher education.

The editors of the current book point out that this moment in South Africa is not unique in the history of thinking about education and society, and that there is a deepening dissatisfaction with the role schooling plays in effecting social change in different contexts around the world. Since the rise of formal and institutionalised educational systems accompanying the

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development of modern capitalist economies, numerous theorists have raised questions about the role of education in society. Paulo Freire (1970) and Antonio Gramsci (1971), two writers still frequently cited in debates around education today, both point to the role of education in the persistence of inequality in societies, inspiring a critique of the education system as disconnected from, and irrelevant to, everyday lived experience, instilling disengagement from societal problems. Ivan Illich (1970, pp. 2, 31) too speaks about schooling, which he sees as an institutionalisation of values, and its role in perpetuating inequality, and suggests that formal educational institutions need to be dismantled entirely and reconfigured as their "institutional inverse," which he envisioned as an educational web or network, which would "heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring," and consist of an "autonomous assembly of resources under the personal control of each learner."

In South Africa, challenges of transformation in the education system are linked to global processes combined with uniquely South African problems. As the country still battles to come to terms with the consequences of the highly divisive apartheid regime, transformation in education is often formulated in terms of a process of "decolonisation" (e.g. Habib 2015). Elsewhere, thinking about transformation is linked to questions around the position of universities in relation to societal development (e.g. Arvanitakis and Hornsby 2016). Richard Pithouse observes that "the battles over the future of our universities are complicated by both the imperative to transform our universities after apartheid and conflicts around the nature of transformation" (2010). Clearly, the question of how to address transformation in education is vastly complex, but one palpable area in which teaching staff in university contexts are well placed to intervene actively is in the field of "curricular transformation."

The aspirations for transforming university curricula put forward by the editors of this book derive from the critique of the higher education sector that has emerged in recent protest campaigns, summarised as follows: South African universities are seen to be failing to take sufficient account of contextual understandings, "rather reflecting ideas espoused from elsewhere and reinforcing ways of thinking and understanding that do not empower those disadvantaged," constituting "an environment that is more concerned with the canon of disciplines largely developed outside of South Africa" (R. Osman and D. Hornsby, personal communication, October 5, 2015). The editors asked us to think about pedagogical stances that

respond to this critique by integrating a sense of cultural pluralism, and moral and ethical purpose, in developing knowledge and understanding; encouraging learners to liberate themselves from existing power structures by fostering a desire to challenge and change the social system in which we live; and connecting the reality around us and its many problems to the knowledge-generation process. At a more general level, the editors asked us to think about formulating a pedagogy that is socially just, and one that prepares our students to be thoughtful, reflective and critical thinkers based on an African experience.

To this end, I examine here a postgraduate coursework project that we have run for several years in the History of Art department at the University of the Witwatersrand and reflect on the results of this project through the question of transformation. The project places students in direct, personal encounters with local museum objects, transforming students' relationship to sources of knowledge and processes of knowledge production.

The *Object Biographies* Project

The History of Art department at the University of the Witwatersrand began re-imagining its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in 2012, aiming to offer a fully reconfigured programme by 2015. Following the loss of several senior staff members, the reconfiguration corresponded with a realignment of curricular offerings with the research interests of new staff. The reconfiguration also sought to respond to calls for curricular transformation across the university. Within the History of Art department, this translated into a conscious attempt to re-interpret an internationally established discipline, often perceived as structurally Eurocentric, in terms of local needs and lacunae, through an overarching conceptual frame of "histories from here" (*Wits School of Arts* 2015, p. 66).

A course titled, "Writing Art's Histories" has for some years been a core unit for History of Art postgraduate coursework degrees. One of the objectives of this course had been to establish a firm footing in the discipline for postgraduate students that come from a range of different disciplinary backgrounds. In previous years, the course had been structured around a thematic exploration of a number of core art-historical texts, tracking recent theoretical developments in the discipline. But students had struggled to overcome the challenges they experienced with approaches to learning that were heavily driven by texts and by theory.

Also, even though a choice of readings might appear "transformed," and even though many students are able to assimilate and recount complex ideas contained in such texts, as Joni Brenner and Nicola Cloete (this volume) observe, they are not always able to internalise them or apply them outwards, onto other situations, or back into the reality of lived experiences.

I imagined a project where the point of departure was not the field of History of Art *per se*—the discursive elaboration of a scholarly discipline—but rather the basic materials that inspired the discipline in the first place: the products of human creativity, highly varied, but also patterned, across space and time. I was also encouraged by Mieke Bal's call for a return to the practice of "close reading," to re-connect with objects that otherwise tend to vanish in approaches that are overly concerned with the contextual and interpretative (Bal 2002, pp. 9–10). Keith Moxey also observes that the discipline of art history has been particularly interested in situating the work of art within its original context, but that a powerful transformation can occur in the directionality and temporality of interpretation if one pays greater attention to the "'presence' of the work of art—its ontological existence, the ways it both escapes meaning yet repeatedly provokes and determines its own interpretation" (Moxey 2013, p. 3).

In conversation with Laura De Becker, then post-doctoral researcher at Wits Art Museum (WAM) in charge of activating engagement with the collections, I began to formulate a project that would allow students to work directly on the collections, more specifically, on precisely those objects about which not much was known. Engaging students in direct encounters with museum objects was not a new approach in the History of Art department, as it had formed part of teaching strategies since at least the 1980s and so enabled students to have the experience of viewing tangible objects (Nettleton 2015, p. 115). With a view to finding suitable objects for the project, De Becker delved into the storerooms and came up with a list of candidates. Each student had to choose one, and research and write, for the duration of a semester, its "biography."

The object candidates for the *Object Biographies* project have ranged from historical pieces to contemporary works, from sculptural objects to pictorial ones (including photographs), from items that have a practical or prosaic function to items made more for aesthetic purposes (although this distinction is also highly blurry); the objects have also originated from different geographic locations, within South Africa and elsewhere in Africa. This choice of such a diverse array of objects is also

a conscious choice to challenge the conventional categories of objects normally studied alongside one another. WAM's collections have grown over decades, and currently comprise over 10,000 pieces, whose "history and origin reflect the genesis of African art scholarship in South Africa, itself a reflection of the country's history and the many narratives that comprise its past" (Charlton 2015, p. 40). Objects in the collections come primarily from Africa, with a strong focus on South Africa, and include several large sub-collections: the Standard Bank African Art Collection (SBAAC), the University Art Galleries (UAG) collection and the Wits Museum of Ethnology (WME) collection (Charlton 2015, p. 19). Over the years, students have worked on the biographies of a wide range of objects across the storerooms, of different cultural origin (sometimes unrecorded), of a range of materials (sometimes mysterious), from well-known artists to lesser known to completely anonymous ones: a David Goldblatt photograph, a fur-and-wire sculpture by Fanlo "Chickenman" Mkhize, a carved wooden figure by Nelson Mukhuba, a plaster-and-bone sculpture by Jane Alexander, a black-burnished beer pot by Nesta Nala, a beaded waistcoat from Bergville, a ZANU-PF khanga shirt from Zimbabwe, a hand-painted barbershop poster from Ghana, a pair of sausage-shaped charms collected in the Belgian Congo in the 1920s, a carved wooden snake mask from Burkina Faso, a pot with no recorded provenance or date, among others. Over and above seeking a diversity that is broadly representative of WAM collections as a whole, the criteria we have used for preselecting these objects included the presence of tangible "handles" that students could grasp: an archival lead, a body of work, a living artist or collector, a mystery, a compelling question. We have observed how important it is that students adequately "identify" with an object—that they find something that they are genuinely enthusiastic about researching—and in certain situations we have gone back into the storerooms in search of an object to suit the particular interests of a student.

While the object is the focal point of the project, we also attempt to provide a supportive theoretical scaffolding for students. We explore key texts in "object biography" scholarship, beginning with Igor Kopytoff's seminal 1986 article, "The cultural biography of things." Students will not usually have the benefit of published materials about their specific object, but each of the researched items can usually be connected to literature relevant to the object-type, broader material cultural field or the historical context of its production. In this way, published texts are

highly important, but not the focus of their work; rather, each student uses these texts to help guide their quest to uncover new information. Because the course consists of a number of structured group report-back sessions, students also learn from each other's learning processes. Each of the biographies is unique, produced from a unique and personal encounter, as the life of each student becomes embroiled with the life of their object, and each student grows into the role of expert on their particular object.

Working with students to achieve goals beyond the requirements of coursework is another way in which we seek to transform the curriculum. For two years running, Laura De Becker and I, together with Joni Brenner and Stacey Vorster of the History of Art department, transformed the resulting research into exhibitions that took place at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg, *Lifelines*, 2014, and *Life–Line–Knot*, 2015. For each exhibition, we produced a book comprising a bundle of object-specific chapters, each co-authored by a student together with one of us (Brenner et al. 2014, 2015a). The third exhibition in the series will take place at WAM in 2017 under the title *Lifescapes* (Brenner et al. 2016), and the project will continue to run in 2017 as a coursework project.[1]

Over and above these direct outputs, we have written several pieces reflecting back on our experiences in a book about different forms of engagement with WAM collections (De Becker and Nettleton 2015). De Becker (2015) performs an analysis of the standard-format label that accompanies an object on display, and how this label has the potential to be transformed through an "object biography" model of research. Each label presents a kind of summary of what is known about its referent, and so often in the field of historical African art places the objects into reductive categories, or reveals significant gaps such as "artist unrecorded," "date unrecorded" or "provenance unrecorded." De Becker writes about how the "object biography" research has filled some of these gaps in astonishing ways, for example the investigations of Masters student Susan Middleton into what was an apparently generic ceramic beer pot, formed by an anonymous potter, of unknown geographic origin and date (one of so many similar pots lying on storeroom shelves), powerfully transforming it into what we now understand to have been the vessel out of which King Mandume ya Ndemufayo (today one of Namibia's national heroes) drank his last sip of beer before dying in battle with colonial forces in 1917 in Ovamboland (De Becker and Middleton 2015).

Brenner and Vorster (2015) write about the social and collaborative nature of knowledge making. They point out a particular shift that

happens through the *Object Biographies* project, where students are encouraged to join the process of generating new knowledge alongside the lecturer, rather than being placed into a position where the primary vector is knowledge transmitted from lecturer, or authoritative text, to student (2015, pp. 169–170). Within each new cohort of students working together on individual object stories, unexpected connections between initially ostensibly unrelated items also begin to emerge, pointing to the potential for weaving objects together to tell a wider, collaboratively generated social history. Brenner and Vorster also observe a certain cumulative effect in the quality and depth of the projects from one year to the next, as students had the benefit of an increasing number of previous projects to look to as a model (2015, p. 183).

In my chapter in the same book (Wintjes 2015), I reflect on two pedagogical strengths inherent in the project. The first considers the "object biography" approach as a particular kind of inquiry into material culture that creates productive bridges between individual objects and larger-scale understandings of the world in which we live: the idea of a "world in one object" (Wintjes 2015, pp. 137–140). While objects are physically finite, they are potentially infinite in meaning, and through this kind of research they are revealed to be microcosms of the wider world in which they are embroiled.

This idea is closely tied to a second pedagogical theme, which is a concern for the creation of balance in the curriculum between theoretical and empirical approaches. Students learn that theory is not always something that is applied to the material, but can arise from it in a dynamic recursive relationship, and some of them ultimately thrive in learning to extend the "object biography" scaffolding to create a theoretical framework that is adapted to their particular object (Wintjes 2015, pp. 140–151).

Object Worlds

The transformative dimension of the project is rooted in the choice of an under-researched *object* (which can also be a picture) as the point of departure, rather than within an existing body of art-historical scholarship. The object itself exists in the first instance outside of, or beyond, or prior to, the realm of textual production, and we encourage students to begin by simply spending time with their object. Students are then tasked to formulate a certain number of questions. Guided by these questions, students begin to navigate through published texts, and at the same time to uncover that there are gaps, sometimes large cavernous absences, in the existing literature. Students also quickly

realise that there are many resources outside of that which is published in an academic form, and are encouraged to find knowledgeable people to consult, archival sources to consult, similar or related objects to examine, and generally to call on their own resourcefulness to find anything and everything that might shed light on their chosen object's life story.

Even though each object is usually relatively stable physically, students learn not to strive for a single, current or correct interpretation. Rather, they study the objects as things that have moved through different frames of meaning. Each object has travelled a particular, often convoluted, path to arrive in a collection of African art housed in a university museum, an institution that, although dynamically shaping itself in a democratic South Africa, can be seen to be the inheritor of colonial and western ideas and constructs. Students quickly learn that the objects are not responsible for the labels that either have or have not been attached to them (in the case of the "anonymous" artist for example). It is here that the project has the potential to work powerfully against essentialising and reductive abstractions, "reified in every database entry on African art which typically defines the individually made object in terms of a general group, type or region" (Brenner et al. 2015b, p. 13).

Students learn that they have the potential to fill real gaps in an object's story, that they can play a role in that object's future, and that they become a part of the object's life. Students are motivated by the pleasure and enjoyment of the detective-like nature of the work, and realise that they can also become active contributors to a field of knowledge.

Because of the closeness between biographer and object, this approach to research tends to foster in the student an affinity with the object, but also with other people attached to the object (the maker, community, collector and so forth), and in a certain way the work reactivates, and in some ways *remakes*, the object. The biographer has to grapple with the material and conceptual complexity of the object, which originates as an idea, and at some stage is made into a material thing, and is the entangled product of both making and thinking. An artist works in a lineage and occupies a position in history, and is only in a rather narrow "authorship" way the producer of something "original." The artist nonetheless creates something singular and unique at the scale of a single object; similarly, an art historian works within a large community of knowledge-makers, but has the potential to connect in an intimate, "insider" way to the maker of the object they are researching, thereby making a unique and personal contribution to the field. It is here that the *Object Biographies* project begins to blur the boundary between the maker, worker or practician of a technical, manual or artistic profession, and

the academic researcher who studies the products of making. There is also a discernible blurring of other disciplinary boundaries, as students often bump up against, and have to venture into, allied fields such as anthropology, archaeology, or literature studies.

In speaking with students about how to write their biographies, it usually helps to speak about the writing as a creative pursuit: it is a literary, even poetic, genre of writing. An object-focused story that unfolds as a chronological narrative, like the story of King Mandume's pot, is rare. Moxey points to the anachronic and heterochronic power of a work of art—its ability to inspire different, "incongruous" understandings of time, when considered beyond the horizon of its original context of production, "disrupting the orderly progression of instants into which duration has been plotted by cultural convention" (2013, p. 174). It is indeed much more common for a student to remain with many unanswered questions and gaps in the information collected, next to a host of unexpected discoveries that are often challenging to place into a time-based sequence. This was the case for the pair of "Luba" sausage charms collected in the Belgian Congo in the 1920s, researched by Caroline Thompson. The magical, esoteric properties of the charms in their original context seemed to contribute to other kinds of auras surrounding the charms in subsequent contexts, and even to cloud any possibility of clear answers to the questions they raised in the *Object Biographies* context. As a final resort, the student conducted an experimental micro-CT scan to see if the charms contained any recognisable structures. This unexpectedly produced pictures of whole seeds, opening up a new set of ethnobotanical questions (Wintjes and Thompson 2015). The story of the charms uncovered by the student is not a linear one, and might be likened to the field of "dark matter," an abundantly present hypothetical substance, not directly observable but inferred, next to a sparing number of visible, luminous elements.

The use of the under-researched object as focal point also raises the question of the limitations of knowledge. But rather than seeing those limitations as a problem, the project is premised on an acceptance of incompleteness and uncertainty as a viable theoretical position (see also Arvanitakis and Hornsby 2016, p. 19). Again, the example of King Mandume's pot is on one level a kind of best-case scenario, where the student was fortunate to stumble across an archival link that lead to virtually all of her questions being answered, but most students remain unable to answer all of the questions they have. The research invariably leads to some new information in each case, but certain items remain frustratingly opaque and mysterious. When starting out with their projects, students are often anxious about the amount

of information they will find (which is not known to anyone at that point). They are understandably fearful of the unknown—the empty space in which they are required to work—and have a sense that some objects will lead naturally to better findings, and assume that this will lead to higher grades. We always insist that, although students will need to show evidence of a thorough and systematic search, overturning every stone, it is not about what concrete information they find or do not find. It is about what they do with what they have, and it is about acknowledging and working actively with the indeterminacy, provisionality and uncertainty of knowledge (Smiles and Moser 2005, p. 11).

Themes of Transformation

The editors of this volume suggested that contributions to this book could be framed in terms of a number of different themes: the first is "bringing a different archive to the fore," the second is "philosophical/theoretical/conceptual threads," the third is "reimagining higher education through pedagogy" and the fourth is "curriculum and transformation: empirical interventions." The *Object Biographies* project arguably addresses all four themes.

The "different archive" that is brought to the fore in the *Object Biographies* project is in the first instance the objects themselves, a diverse, non-verbal, non-documentary, heterochronic assemblage of human-made objects, accumulated as much by design as by accident; the silent, and in some ways incongruous world of the storeroom. Because the student's task is ultimately to write the story of the object—to turn the object into a particular kind of text—each student ends up generating new materials and ultimately building up an archive around their object. These materials become in turn a part of the object's existence in the world, as students' findings are added to the museum's database.

The second theme, the notion of a "conceptual thread" clearly resonates with the metaphor of "line" that we have used to frame the various curatorial forms the project has taken—*Lifelines*, 2014, *Life–Line–Knot*, 2015, and *Lifescapes*, 2017. In *Lifelines*, the inspiration was the links made by people, the lines of meaning and survival, between objects and life. In *Life–Line–Knot*, we took inspiration from Kopytoff's "tangled mass" of knowledge (1986: 67) that is the result of following the (mostly faint) leads or threads of information, to think further about knowledge as a knot that calls to be undone but is at the same time always re-forming itself

from the loose ends that are leftover at the end of any enquiry. The framing of the third iteration—*Lifescapes*—we have formulated in terms of the ways in which the lines and knots unfold into a more open three-dimensional space, a landscape of lives and objects, an object-world. The theme of life is a conceptual thread that appears to create a strong model from one generation of postgraduate students to another. It is also a thread that students follow into the other courses they take, and into their lives beyond their studies (we reflect on the personal dimensions of the entanglement of students and objects in the introduction to *Lifescapes*, Brenner et al. 2016, pp. 1–14).

The third theme, "reimagining higher education through pedagogy," infers a grass-roots approach: transforming the university through working, doing and teaching. In my vision it is closely linked to the fourth theme—that of "empirical interventions" in the curriculum. The *Object Biographies* project is an example of a real and ongoing intervention in the curriculum, but it is also a project that brings a strongly empirical approach into teaching History of Art, centrally concerned with not only *what* is taught in the curriculum, but *how* it is taught (see also Brenner and Cloete, this volume). However, in this focus on experiential learning, the project has not generally appeared to create an imbalance for individual students between practice and theory, perhaps because of the specific way in which theory and practice support and feed back into each other. The stronger students in the group gain almost obsessive investigative momentum in this task, which has the potential to lead them into becoming self-directed researchers, but, because of the typically incomplete nature of their discoveries, they orientate themselves by looking to more general, or analogically or obliquely relevant, historical and theoretical texts, which help them to create bridges between the particular but fragmentary, and the bigger and more general picture. The interface between the known and unknown becomes a highly productive space. This work is strongly directed by the student. Each chapter published as a result of this project presents different responses and solutions to these challenges and opportunities (Brenner et al. 2014, 2015a, 2016).

Transformation and the Third Space

The project has a particular three-part configuration: the object, embodying a creative, visual and material mode of thought and incomplete in its documentation, the text, incomplete in its rootedness in the visual and

material world, and the student-biographer, who has to translate from the one to the other in order to create some sort of coherent narrative. This arrangement evokes Homi Bhabha's statement that "theory has no priority over experience and that experience has no authority over theory," the one causing "local skirmishes" at the boundaries of the other, and opening up a supplementary or interstitial space for articulation, or a "third space" (Mitchell 1995).

Homi Bhabha's notion of Third Space can help us to think further about the kind of transformative space that is opened up through the *Object Biographies* project. Although concerned in Bhabha's formulation with questions of cultural identity, and constructions of self and other, the notion of Third Space is also a somewhat open-ended concept that can be adapted for different purposes. But it also seems appropriate to think about Bhabha's notion of a Third Space within the context of this project, because of the strong personification of the object that takes place, the ways in which the object and student-researcher's lives becomes entangled, and the disruption to the normative relationship between the student and the production of knowledge. Exploring the notion of Third Space in a teaching and learning environment, Susanne Gannon suggests that we can imagine "pedagogy not as the effective delivery of knowledge, content and skills but instead as a series of particular encounters in relational, affective and embodied space where teacher as well as students are in a mutually constitutive space of becoming" (2010, p. 27).

Bhabha's Third Space is further explained as a hybrid space that responds to binaries such a general/particular, empirical/conceptual, universal/historical, from a third position that is in between, not the one or the other, but something else besides. To these binaries we can add some that are more relevant to the ways in which the field of History of Art has traditionally been framed: textual/material, intellectual/embodied, self/other, person/object, animate/inanimate, contemporary/traditional, colonial/postcolonial. The notion of a hybrid might be seen as problematic precisely because it upholds two distinct polarised positions or identities as a structural part of its formation, but Bhabha sees it as a productive space from which to examine the needs and implications of a binary code in the process of making meaning, and to search for ways to disrupt, displace and renew that code (Mitchell 1995). In Bhabha's statement that the Third Space, "though unrepresentable in itself, . . . constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same

signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (Bhabha 1995: 208), we recognise a space akin to the "object biography" research in which our students become implicated, where objects are read and re-read, and shown to be constantly shifting in meaning, changing the way we see the object as well as the way we think about the production of knowledge.

Thinking Things Through

The *Object Biographies* project fits in with other ways in which the History of Art department has responded to the bigger transformation agenda emerging across the University of the Witwatersrand, and South African university institutions more broadly, over the past few years. This response is discernible in various aspects of the department's reshaping of its curriculum, over and above its reliance on the pedagogical principle of writing "histories from here" (mentioned previously). As a discipline centrally concerned with the visual, History of Art naturally leads us to explore beyond verbal and textual modes of inquiry. In examining the power of the visual, we also delve into other sensory terrains as we guide students to learn about art through experiential learning. In this there is also a challenge to the authority of the published text, a breaking away from teaching through particular canons, movements or artists, or key moments in art-historical thought. At different levels, in working with colleagues in History of Art, I have experienced the department as a space that is almost post-disciplinary, even "undisciplined." We have often debated the matter of changing the name of the department (History of Art departments elsewhere have reshaped themselves as "Visual Studies," "Visual Culture," and so forth), however we have remained with History of Art for now, which roots us in a particular historical disciplinary lineage, and we use this space to counter and complicate the discipline's own foundational sets of knowledge while still dealing with issues surrounding constructions of the past. Although this sense of the discipline's own history unfolds naturally in any discipline concerned with the study of the past, it is a direction that we strongly emphasise.

Transformation and Time

The urgency in the task of transformation in South Africa was emphasised anew in the disturbances experienced in the higher education sector towards the end of 2015, and again in 2016, with protests connected to

the #FeesMustFall and related campaigns emphasising the inaccessibility of tertiary education for many, and the perceived slowness in "transformation" within university curricula. There are numerous ways in which the bigger project of transformation, in its varied forms, continues to fail more than 20 years into democracy—in the ways in which access to higher education is not reducing inequality, for example—such that our universities, in the words of Wits University's Vice-Chancellor Adam Habib, "remain at a tipping point" (Habib 2016). The #FeesMustFall movement in particular saw one great victory, namely that it "achieved in a matter of 10 days what vice-chancellors had been advocating for at least 10 years—bringing down the costs of higher education" (Habib 2016). Habib describes the shape the protest took to do this as a "multiclass and multiracial alliance," "organised beyond party and ideological divides," but observes that after this victory it broke up into a cacophony of fragmented voices, afflicted to its own detriment by reassertions of racial essentialism, the glib dismissal of the achievement of earlier generations of activists, and a propensity for violence. While the particular strain of transformative energy embodied by the protest movements appears to be dissipating at present, the bigger project of transformation continues elsewhere, because it is a vast social project, unfinished, and arguably unfinishable. It has to take on different forms and be mobilised at different levels of society, and it has to happen at different time scales.

For Baladrán and Havránek (*Monument to Transformation* 2009), "time is much more important than geography or geopolitics" for transformation to take place, and certainly some aspects of the kinds of curricular transformation that this chapter deals with are slow and incremental, and require the "patience and perseverance" that Brenner and Cloete (this volume) also speak about. Transformative curricular strategies produce returns that reflect this slow, processual kind of change, the kind of ongoing work that continues, behind the scenes and outside of the reactive moments of acute, sometimes violent, protest. The work of transformation must be taken further in the ways that students and teachers of all kinds collaborate in the bigger project of using knowledge, creating a generation of a different kind of scholar, transforming the formal educational process into an effective motor for change towards greater social justice.

But, as Pithouse (2010) warns, in this increasingly urgent call for social justice and wider access to universities, "it is also essential that the realities of inequality are not used to justify an agenda for research and teaching that ties all intellectual work to the immediate and instrumental needs of

the market and the state." He goes on to point out that "the bitter reality of poverty doesn't make open-ended intellectual pursuits a luxury." Within this context, our work in History of Art takes on another dimension of importance: even in the midst of severe inequality and injustice, people always find ways to reach beyond the material, in the aesthetic, poetic and philosophical strivings of human life. Many, indeed arguably all, of the objects we study in this close and biographical way provide examples of this.

Perhaps, in the meantime, considering the awkward relationship between urgency and patience in the current higher education sector in South Africa, we can start immediately by working towards bringing issues of transformation more explicitly into our reasons for what, why and how we teach.

Note

1. The project also has the potential to extend beyond WAM: for example, Stacey Vorster, who taught the course in 2016, elected to take fourth generation of objects for biographies from the art collections of the Constitutional Court of South Africa. We also encourage students to present and publish their work in professional contexts. For example, at the South African Visual Arts Historians (SAVAH) conference at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg (September 11–13, 2015), we organised an "object biography"-themed session in which eight students participated. Aside from the *Object Biographies* project, we have begun a program called "Papers into Publications," where we work with students to turn their research papers into journal articles.

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