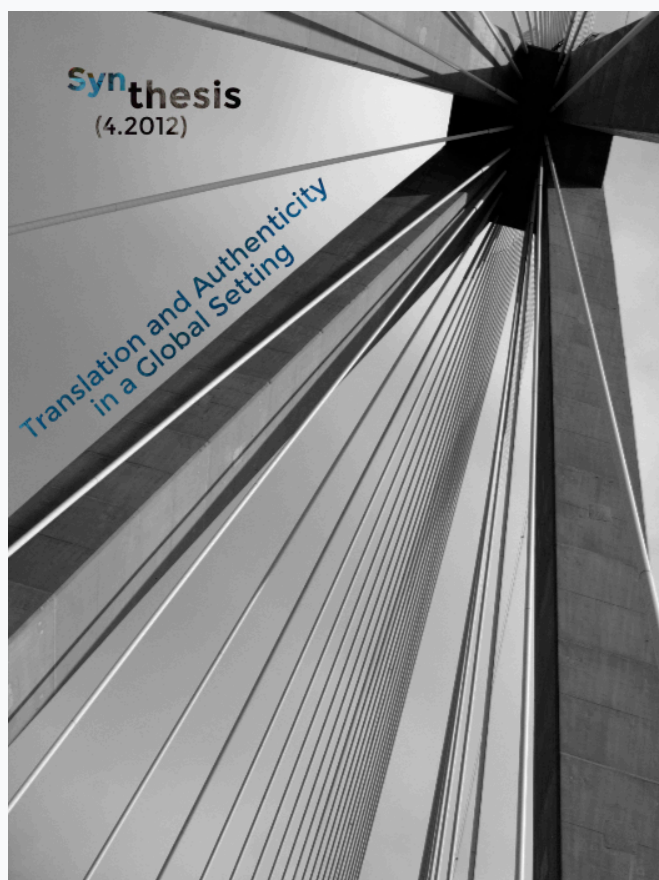


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### Anton Kannemeyer's Tactics of Translation as Critical Lens

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# Anton Kannemeyer's Tactics of Translation as Critical Lens

John Tyson

## Abstract

Anton Kannemeyer (b.1967) is a white Afrikaner artist whose work engages with translation: subject matter culled from historical archives, comics, and the mass media is transposed into different languages, artistic mediums, and styles. Kannemeyer's artworks use translation as a means of returning to and interrogating traumatic, historical events. The beholder is prompted to (re)engage painful aspects of the past, approached from the critical distance allowed by the deferral implicit in translation. By re-encountering history in the gallery, the viewer must confront her memory and reconcile or interrogate disjunctions proposed in the space of Kannemeyer's work. Thus, with the re-imagining of events as translations in a new language, there is the possibility for a renewed investigation of received histories and a working over of traumas of the past.

The 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying  
which leads back to something long known to us,  
once very familiar... An uncanny experience occurs either  
when repressed infantile complexes have been revived  
by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs  
we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.  
Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'"

Anton Kannemeyer (b. 1967) is a white Afrikaner artist whose work engages <sup>1</sup> with translation on multiple levels. The artist transposes subject matter culled from historical archives, comics, and the mass media into different languages, artistic mediums, and styles. This paper shall focus on two of Kannemeyer's recent bodies of work: the series the "Alphabet of Democracy" (2005-) and pieces shown in the exhibition *Congo Parody and Other Works on Paper*, which I see as possessing a common logic and will refer to collectively as the "Congo Parody" works. I read these artworks as operating with a potentiality described by Gayatri Spivak in a 2009 discussion on the new humanities: "every translation is a mistranslation." With this notion comes the possibility for new meanings to creep in to subsequent iterations of texts, images, or fragments of either. In Kannemeyer's works translation is a means of returning to traumatic, historical events. The beholder is prompted to (re)engage painful aspects of the past, now approached from the critical distance the deferral implicit in translation allows.

The "Alphabet of Democracy" consists of mixed-media works depicting events from the post-Apartheid period culled primarily from the mass media, which may be configured in numerous ways. Almost every piece depicts a recognisable image linked to a single letter (e.g. *A is for Apartheid Apocalypse*). Kannemeyer pulls myriad sources into the realm of painting in order to weave a contemporary history (see figs. 1-3 at the end of the essay). For subject matter he mines dictionary entries, local newspapers, TV, *Time* magazine, etc., in addition to drawing upon his own memory and imagination. Kannemeyer's alphabet is continually expanding, moving in and out of different languages, temporalities, and proposing multiple webs of significance. The series is not limited to twenty-six panels: some letters are repeated with different subjects; in other instances, when the language changes, the same subject inhabits the space of a different letter; some only exist in one language or refer to events that resonate very differently with audiences in and out of South Africa, pointing to spaces of untranslatability. Kannemeyer's representation of the 'Rainbow Nation' is not stable, nor celebratory. Like Walter Benjamin's notion of history as ruin, his 'tapestry' of history is necessarily full of holes and continually threatens to unravel with every new element knit in.

The constellation of art works I dub "Congo Parody" all use the style of Hergé's *Tintin*, specifically the racial caricatures of *Tintin au Congo*, in order to depict both contemporary and historical conditions in South Africa and the region that is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (see figs 4, 5). The viewer is confronted with depictions of horrific acts described in the 'innocent' *ligne claire* of the Belgian comics. Kannemeyer renders uncanny the colonial landscape of the internationally recognised boy reporter. In many of these works Kannemeyer depicts himself as a middle-aged Tintin. The artist is insinuated into the scenes in the dual role of oppressor and eye-witness. Operating as a

simultaneous translator-traitor, Kannemeyer implicates himself in the structures of power and muddies notions of the activist artist or newspaper reporter as purveyor of truth.<sup>2</sup>

Kannemeyer's career began with the controversial underground comic book, *Bittercomix* (a collaboration with Conrad Botes). Referring to this phase of Botes and Kannemeyer's careers, artist and critic Gregory Kerr described the duo as "outrage artists" (135). Despite its at times puerile, simply inflammatory, or misogynistic content, *Bittercomix* provided a counter-hegemonic space for alternative representations of (primarily masculine) Afrikaner identity, and the demythification and interrogation of received histories and norms of race relations. The hipness connoted by its underground status, notoriety, and political messages surely contributed to move the artists' pieces from the comic into galleries. In his critique of the exhibition Africa Comics, Peter Probst writes of Kannemeyer's general acceptance within the (South African) art world: "As founders of the legendary *Bittercomix*, both Botes and Kannemeyer have been able to frame and stylize their work in such a way that enabled them to become swallowed—and thus elevated—by the (South African) white cube industry" (88). As Probst notes, the artist's gallery work should be seen as operating in a kind of continuum with *Bittercomix*. In some cases, the distinction is marked solely by shifts in scale, framing, or medium. Although I mostly agree with Probst's assertion about the affects of the artists being consumed by the gallery system, I wish to underscore that while Kannemeyer's recent work may seem more easily digestible, it still contains jagged elements.<sup>3</sup>

With the shift to the art world context, the artist no longer trades primarily on 'outrage.' His mode of critique has become more refined. At first glance, Kannemeyer's work might seem to be rendered in the post-pop idiom Gerardo Mosquera dubs, "a sort of 'postmodern international language'... the echo of being exhibited in elite spaces on the island of Manhattan" (18-19). While he has exhibited at the Chelsea gallery Jack Shainman, Kannemeyer bucks some other trends outlined by Mosquera; the curator holds: "when the fine arts are discussed in very general terms, people tend to use the terms 'international artistic language' or 'contemporary artistic language' as abstract constructions that refer to a specific type of art and assume that English is the language in which today's 'international' discourses are spoken" (18). Inserted alongside more globally comprehensible elements, Kannemeyer employs local slang, writes texts in Afrikaans, or references specific parts of South African culture; by his use of Afrikaans, a language spoken by relatively few in the art world, he denies or barricades access to certain aspects of his work, resisting the pressure to speak only an easily comprehended or translated visual language. Additionally, as Danie Marvais observes, Kannemeyer's recent work provokes discomfort precisely because it is not politically correct and rarely strikes a clear stance (94). Instead it implicates the beholder, prompting considerations of his or her own geo-political or social position.

Kannemeyer's artwork asks the viewer to consider histories of both the 'semiotic' and 'symbolic' components of the languages he employs. In his insightful discussion of translation, Nikos Papastergiadis defines the aforementioned terms, stating that the former is, "the material, drive component of language" and the latter is "the conceptual and representational component of language" (136). He additionally holds that, "language is not only one of the strongest and most resilient media for shaping cultural systems but can also serve as a model for understanding how meanings are produced and transmitted within culture" (136). By conceiving of languages as also existing in the realm of the pictorial, we can comprehend that acts of misappropriation or misuse of these languages question received cultural norms. Continuing his discussion, Papastergiadis notes Julia Kristeva's contention that it is in the space between these two linguistic elements (the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic') that additional or new meaning can be formed. Hence, by prying forms and meanings apart or alternately forcing systems of signification to take on the shape of a distinct language, Kannemeyer opens sites of possibility.

With this aforementioned move, we see the violent, or at the very least deviant, aspect of translation pushed to the fore. Expressing a similar logic, Freud writes the following on the problematics of translation in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*: "*Traduttore—Traditore!* 'The similarity, amounting almost to identity, of the two words represents most impressively the necessity which forces a translator into crimes against his original'" (36). With this saying (the wit of which is lost in

the translation to English), we see the potentially treacherous or even treasonous nature of translations. Furthermore, following the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, inscribed onto the translator-traitor is the sense that this figure “is false to his allegiance to his sovereign or to the government of his country” (‘Traitor’). This schema of treason and treachery extends to Kannemeyer, who definitely is not blindly loyal to South Africa.

The story-teller, another deceitful figure Freud investigates, this time in his reflection on aesthetics in “The ‘Uncanny,’” also approximates Kannemeyer’s position. Indeed, as the analyst holds, the uncanny “in literature, in stories, and in imaginative productions...is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides” (18). Certainly, Kannemeyer’s artwork would qualify as the type of “imaginative production” that encompasses real life and goes beyond its bounds. Heightening the sense of blurred borders between reality and representation, Kannemeyer often inserts ambivalently coded depictions of himself into the work. Though he is personally implicated in the “Congo Parody” works, Kannemeyer’s subject position is always coming into being; his role ranges from victimiser to victimised. <sup>4</sup> Alternately performing insertions of different meanings, inversions, and re-codings, his work has the potential to destabilise the viewer’s prior associations or notions about the elements reconfigured. With this insinuation of the ‘improper’ into the familiar—an evocation of the uncanny (see epigraph)—we are prompted to consider distinct points of view or question naturalised fields of meaning. When beginning to engage with the concept of the uncanny in his eponymous essay, Freud turns to translations and dictionary definitions of the term in various languages (cf. “The ‘Uncanny’” 2-4). As I hope will become clear, Kannemeyer’s approach is not so far removed from that of the Austrian psychoanalyst.

### **Uncivilising mission: the alphabet of democracy**

As a point of entry into the “Alphabet of Democracy” series, it is productive to consider the alphabet itself: the basic components of (written) language. It is an alphabetic logic that governs dictionaries, themselves linguistic authorities and containers of official language. Although language is always in a state of flux, its flows are partially governed by authorising technologies like dictionaries. It is thus unsurprising that Kannemeyer interrogates dictionary definitions in his series as well. Kannemeyer is by no means the first to point out the way in which meanings inscribed into language project values onto people of different races. Nevertheless, the examples culled from the Chambers & Oxford dictionaries for *B is for Black* and *W is for White* (2008) are still quite striking, particularly the final element that the artist selected for the definition of white: “free of guilt” (figs. 3, 6). Guilt is a difficult issue in South Africa, one that present generations of whites are certainly not totally liberated from, once more raising questions about the dictionary’s assertions.

Debates over language have occupied a particularly charged position in the history of South Africa. Papastergiadis, citing the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir, contends, “We have become aware of the ways in which people who share a language also develop common ways of seeing the world” (127). In South Africa, this logic played out in multiple ways. In part as a reaction to British oppression of the language and continuing during the Apartheid era, Afrikaans became very closely related to an ‘imagined community’ of Afrikaners and an ideal Afrikaner identity. With the above term I invoke Benedict Anderson’s well-known theorisation of the importance of printed matter (hence, usually a specific language) in the production of national identity. The connection between the Afrikaans language and an authentic identity was formalised in 1875 when S.J. Du Toit, a Dutch Reformed Church minister, founded *Genootskap Van Ware Afrikaners* (the Society for True Afrikaners). Later, after the second Anglo-Boer war, British legislation would prohibit Afrikaans, which, “so provoked Boer reaction that the survival of Afrikanerdom was ensured” (Chapman qtd. in Lewis 438).

In order to mark the official declaration of Afrikaans as a separate language from Dutch, and coinciding with the centennial of *Genootskap Van Ware Afrikaners*, a monument to the language was erected in 1975. This, the Taal monument, is one of the few in the world dedicated to a language. It is a

physical representation of Afrikaans, intended, like most monuments, for commemoration. Monuments rely on complicit publics to exist. Indeed, James Young teaches, “as long as the public shares a regime’s desire for permanence or its formal self-idealizations, it suspends disbelief in the monument’s own impermanence and thus makes the regime’s monument its own sacred space” (244). While Jan van Wijk, the architect of the Taal monument, held that it represented “a language not a race” and hoped that its form might signify the hybridity of the language, this message was not always received clearly (Van Wijk qtd. in Goldblatt 247). The choice of the mode of commemoration implicitly disciplines the image of Afrikaner identity. Furthermore, by its timing, it seemed to reinforce connections between the community of white Afrikaner Afrikaans speakers and their mythologised past. Built into the form is a desire for fixity, which, by dint of the monument being devoted to Afrikaans, also extends to the language. For this reason, the Afrikaner writer and anti-apartheid activist Breyten Breytenbach saw the Taal monument as “a granite penis...an abomination” and “insult to the non-Afrikaner people of South Africa” (Breytenbach qtd. in Lewis 20n). In “Die Taal,” a 2001 *Bittercomix* strip, Kannemeyer expresses almost the same feelings: he juxtaposes a depiction of the Taal monument with a caption linking the phallic structure to the National Party; in a second blurb, Kannemeyer asserts that, “Afrikaans, the language of the Afrikaner, is ideologically pivotal” in relation to “the memory of Apartheid” (*The Big Bad Bittercomix Handbook*, 90). Nevertheless, despite the artists’ contentions, because publics themselves are not monolithic, there has always existed the potential for a wide variety of uses and understandings of the monument as well as the Afrikaans language (cf. Devarenne 107).

As Kannemeyer’s comic suggests, Afrikaans was also instrumentalised to shore up political power in South Africa. Attempting to increase Afrikaner control of the government in 1950, the National Party created a law favoring bilingual (Afrikaans-English) candidates for civil service positions. As Afrikaners were far more likely to speak English than English-speakers were to speak Afrikaans, the majority of government positions went to Afrikaners (Lewis 438). Pushed forward by future Prime Minister Dr. H.F. Verwoerd, the Bantu Education Act passed in 1953. One of the major affects of this piece of legislation was the institution of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in all subjects. With the Act, we see Sapir and Whorf’s “hypothesis” pushed to the extreme within the context of South African education: the enforcement of a world view and the conscripted learning of language were one of the functions of the school system. For as well as the linguistic mandate, this law also forbade criticism of the government by teachers at native schools (Lewis 438). Student resistance to Afrikaans as the sole medium for education was made manifest in the Soweto uprisings of 1976. These protests were met with harsh government reprisals. Hundreds of students were killed in the aftermath of rallies against the Bantu Education Act. The events surrounding the Soweto Uprisings helped to concretise the linkages between physical violence enacted by the state and its use of language as a mode of oppression.

During Apartheid a prevailing rhetoric encouraging purity surrounded language, culture, and society. Slang and Anglicisms were considered detrimental to the language and were eradicated from most official publications (Barnard 735). Despite the dominant ideological usage of the language, Afrikaans always possessed creole components and was never exclusively a white, Afrikaner language (Devarenne 107). It still is the first language of many colored people (107). Indeed, the potential for radical misuse of language was explored long before the end of Apartheid.<sup>5</sup> Kannemeyer’s heteroglot series, by no means the first of its kind, exists in a constellation of actions and works that deconstruct the hard, fast links between identity and language. Building from Rita Barnard’s assessment of *Bittercomix*, Kannemeyer depicts “the darker side of Afrikaans culture,” but simultaneously expands the definition of said culture by levelling a critique in Afrikaans (Barnard 44n). As the rhetoric of racial purity and an authentic Afrikaans identity have largely fallen by the wayside, so too have notions opposing the miscegenation of language. Hence, it is only appropriate that the “Alphabet of Democracy” contains both English and Afrikaans. With a shift in the political system, comes an increased possibility for a shift in the meanings contained within language. By upsetting fixed notions of alphabets, linked to history, there is a prompt to reconsider both.

Further evoking the problematics of bounded, rationally ordered language and knowledge is the fact that not all of the ideas contained in the series can be translated into English. *B IS VIR BOKKE!* is one such example (fig. 2). *Bokke* is the community of South African rugby supporters of the Springboks (the moniker of the South African side), an imagined community that historically tended to be associated with traditional values and an idealised masculine Afrikaner identity. During Apartheid, black South Africans would often root against the Springboks and hence did not form part of the *Bokke* community. Nevertheless, thanks to some shrewd politicking by Nelson Mandela, the space of *Bokke* identity was opened up in the period before the 1995 world cup to align more closely with a pluralistic South African identity. Mandela was able to convince the South African Sports Committee to maintain state support for the Springboks. The president performed this position himself, as he appeared in the national jersey to present his country's team with the Rugby World Cup trophy in 1995. The nationalist impulses were captured as a uniting force for a re-imagined South Africa. Kannemeyer's image evokes this moment, as the South African side is shown playing against New Zealand, the same match-up that occurred in the final. Although the term does not enter explicitly into Kannemeyer's alphabet, it is no coincidence that during this time, *amabokoboko* —the Xhosa word meaning Springboks— emerged (in print): national identity via rugby support was now accessible to distinct races and from multiple South African languages. The work might provoke a different recollection in an international public. The Hollywood version, *Invictus*, recently (Dec 11, 2009) brought this story to a wider audience, a demonstration of historical events being brought rapidly into the realm of the image, which in turn tends to obfuscate the original event.

Other works like *G is for Good Health! (to black economic empowerment)* (2008) and *Tjorts, manne, hier gaan hy!* (cheers, guys, here he goes!) attach a similar meaning to almost identical images from the space of distinct letters (and language) (figs. 7, 8). We see that capital interests can overcome linguistic or racial rifts. Nevertheless, the doubling in the series serves to underscore the continuation of male-dominated business dealings within the 'new' South Africa, a meaning transmitted in the artworks that becomes far clearer when viewing them in tandem. Without the doubling of the masculine nouns in the Afrikaans version, the apparently gendered aspects of black economic empowerment might not be grasped. Along the same vein, the white businessman's snout-nose in the English version could be overlooked or understood to signify solely his greed, rather than be read to signify that he is a 'male, chauvinist pig.' It is by comparing the disjunctions between the two works (as in the childhood game of spot the differences) that the viewer can more rapidly comprehend the strangeness of certain semiotic markers. With this understanding, gained from translation and the implicit call to look again, we see that the order depicted is not as 'natural or progressive as it first appears.

Derrida also posits links between changes in written language, systems of production, and government. Tracing the shift from the pictogram to phonetic writing, he suggests:

Letters, which have no meaning by themselves, signify only the elementary phonic signifiers that make sense only when they are put together according to certain rules. *Analysis substituting painting and pushed to insignificance, such is the rationality proper to the alphabet and to civil society...*The culture of the alphabet and civilized man [*l'homme policé*] correspond to the age of the ploughman. And let us not forget that agriculture presupposes industry (emphasis added). (*Of Grammatology* 299)

By bringing phonetic signifiers back into the realm of painting or the pictorial, a prompt to question the concept of civil capitalist society emerges. Kannemeyer collides letters with economic empowerment, but also with activities that unequivocally do not connote civility: murder, political corruption, and other criminal activities. The fact that these are deemed criminal suggests a notion of civil society, yet one that undercuts itself; the presence of criminality is the index of both incivility and a civil ideal. The alphabet is also a form and system inculcated, often as a song, during childhood and received for the most part uncritically. It thus enters the subconscious like the messages of hymns (in both Spanish and French national anthems are also hymns), other sung forms that when performed unite imagined communities. By deploying the alphabet improperly and linking it to the nation's history, authoritative structures are de-naturalised and their image destabilised.

One possible configuration of the “Alphabet of Democracy” begins with *A for Apartheid Apocalypse* (fig. 1) and concludes with *Z is for Zuma, not Zapiro*.<sup>6</sup> Both works are based on translations of news images, and in the case of *A is for...*, text as well. In moving from A to Z, the works also map onto the historic trajectory of democratic South Africa. *A is for...* makes visible an event that indelibly impacted many of the viewers who initially saw it reported in the global media. On the right-hand side are two images stacked one on top of the other. The pairing demonstrates the logic of a ‘before and after.’ In the upper right, three white, male figures, one, dressed in a style of shorts typical of many South African farmers (hence, potentially signifying a kind of authenticity and ties to the land), lay prostrate and bleeding next to a Mercedes (an almost ubiquitous symbol of power in many African countries).<sup>7</sup> Two of the men hold their heads up and look off to the left of the picture plane. The other appears to have already expired. Below, in the second translated photo, are the same components, only here all three men appear to be dead. Both scenes are rendered with clean, clear black lines. The flesh and blood are colored a flat hue of pink and red respectively. Three bands of color of the same size, in blue, cream, and orange, imbue the scenes. The cream colored section links both, with one half on each of the two rectangular sections. On the left side there are hand reproduced headlines as well as a first paragraph and part of a second, which describe the events depicted. The text reads:

On a roadside in the black homeland of Bophuthatswana –an ersatz nation created by the South African engineers of apartheid– the two men in khaki lay bleeding on Friday beside their bullet-riddled Mercedes. A third, stretched out beside the car, was dead from gunshot wounds. "Please help us!" pleaded Fanie Uys, a member of the neo-Nazi Afrikaner Resistance Movement, who was hit in the leg. "Please!" cried Alwyn Walfoort, hands outstretched. "Can somebody just get us an ambulance?" Moments later, a black soldier stepped forward. Before a stunned group of news photographers and TV crews, he calmly executed the men with an automatic rifle.

The three would-be warriors had been part of a doomed attempt to defend a remnant of apartheid even as South Africa transforms itself into a multiracial state. One of 10 remote domains created and recognized only by Pretoria's old leadership, Bophuthatswana - nicknamed "Bop" - symbolizes apartheid's failed ambition to confine South... (Makoe and Lacayo)

The text fragment is from a *Time* magazine article from Monday, March 21, 1994, ten days after the event it describes occurred. The images are quite faithfully based on associated press photographs of the same event. Despite their translation into drawn lines, they retain a sense of the photographic: the repetition of common elements in almost the same spaces, the framing of the central bearded figure, and the manner by which the car is cropped. The same is true of the drawn text, as it too maintains its mechanically-produced, branded essence.<sup>8</sup> With the use of common medium, equivalence between text and image is perhaps tacitly proposed. Above the headline, where we might expect a section heading or geographic location, are the words “A is for,” hence, both (siting and) citing the events within the space of the “Alphabet of Democracy” and vice versa. Furthermore, the bands of color refer to either the old Bophuthatswana flag or that of Apartheid-era South Africa. Most flags function as metonyms for imagined communities. It may be for this reason that the bodies exist subsumed by or embedded in the flag. Its colors as ground establish both a specific geographical location and a collective identity, one that like the flag, only exists as a trace.

By entering into the archive of world news, Kannemeyer presents viewers (of a certain age and economic status) with images they might well recall in addition to the beginning of the text, which further serves as a device to prompt memory and comprehension of the images. By his selection of *Time*'s coverage and associated press photos, Kannemeyer implicates a broader public, one that exists outside of solely the South African context. Many events are inscribed into the memory of contemporary subjects in the language of the global media. As Susanne Kuchler and Walter Melion propose, image “transmission itself is a mode of memory...a dynamic process informed by the cognitive experiences through which images are fashioned” (3). Derrida notes the possible issues with this relationship: should something that is not true be propagated, even in good faith (what he calls *contre-vérité*), it can be difficult to make corrections for the impact of the initially disseminated material (*Without Alibi* 54). Expressing ambivalent faith, Derrida writes, “the media as a space of

gathering, production, and archiving of public speech, must occupy a determining place in any analysis of the political lie and falsification in the space of the *res publica*" (*Without Alibi* 53). Nevertheless, the news media for Derrida is of great importance for its potential as archive, even coupled with its possibility for error.<sup>9</sup>

The particular incident depicted in *A is for...* is also striking for the way it was represented by the press, and hence, the manner in which it exists in the archive. The *Time* account is one of the most fair-handed, for at least in the initial reports propagated in other outlets, the reported occurrences are somewhat inverted compared to the real event (Smith McKoy 125). The men who are bleeding and then dead had in fact come to Bophuthatswana as part of a neo-Nazi militia thinking they were going to put down a black communist uprising; the barbarians of J.M. Coetzee's dystopian novel seemingly had finally arrived.<sup>10</sup> On the roads around Bophuthatswana the militia killed twelve civilians. Only after they began to fire on a crowd did the police take action. In all of the accounts I have been able to read the three white 'victims' are named, while the black subjects remain anonymous. Moreover, as Smith McKoy points out, the way the event is recorded betrays certain views on racial politics. She primarily takes issue with Bob Drogin's account in the *LA Times*. In this article the violence committed by the whites is described alternately in the passive voice or by the metonymic substitution of vehicles in the stead of human actors. In Drogin's account the white 'victims' are killed in a "cold blooded execution" by an anonymous "black man in police uniform" (A15). In addition, even the authority of the black subject as policeman is questioned: we are told he was dressed "in police uniform," rather than referred to as a (black) police officer —allowing for doubts about his authenticity (Drogin A15). The play of naming, along with the photographs, shifts the focus to the affect of the story, prompting the reader-viewer to sympathise with the men depicted. However, by his fragmentation of the text, which, as already mentioned, is operating as an equivalent to the images, Kannemeyer prompts a consideration of missing information. What else did the media fail to capture?

In his discussion of Derrida and Freud's work on the archive, film theorist Akira Mizuka Lippit holds, "For Derrida, the topology of the archive, its geography, requires one to think and write atomically... In the archive, or toward it, language becomes atomic —microscopic, *deconstructed*, splitting incessantly...Atomic writing produces another site of writing, another scene, space, or archive in which another writing, secret and divided, hides" (27). By breaking down the event and undertaking an analogous practice, atomic drawing or 'archival drawing' (as opposed to simply drawing on the archive), Kannemeyer prompts considerations of partially hidden meaning, the secrets contained in and between the strands of the fabric of the archive. By in essence mapping the terrain of the photographic-archival in the field of drawing, an abstraction occurs. The viewer is able to undertake a similar abstraction from the photo's subject. The photographic is deferred, and the presence it indicates becomes a degree more distant: the figures are robbed of *some* of their pathos. Regardless of the political leanings of the men, the idea of their death still seems reproachable, as they were wounded and apparently no longer fighting. This meaning is still understood from the image. The work criticises from various angles: retaining a sense of horror, but also shifting the gaze to the unseen, prompting questions about simply digested role reversal (white victims, black government oppression), complicating the terrain of the post-apartheid state.

The translation out of one set of signs into another system implies a break —it is in this gap between, this deferral or momentary lapse, that the possibility (or hint) of the real might be encountered. Discussing Jacques Lacan's "The Unconscious and Repetition," Foster writes:

In this seminar Lacan defines the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real. As missed, the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it *must* be repeated...repetition is not reproduction...repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also points to the real, and at this point the real ruptures the screen of repetition. (132)

Foster continues, asserting that Lacan's *tuché* (the point of aforementioned rupture) and Barthes' *punctum* (the element of a photograph that pricks a beholder) might be seen as parallel structures. He then proposes his own term for this effect when the photographic is translated into paint or print:



“pop(s)” (134). “These pops, such as the slipping of register or a washing in color, serve as visual equivalents of our missed encounters with the real.’ What is repeated,’ Lacan writes, ‘is always something that occurs...*as if by chance*” (Lacan qtd. in Foster 134). In *A is for...*, a work that like Warhol’s investigates death and disaster, the elements that ‘pop’ are the skin and blood of the men. Mizuta Lippit holds, following Derrida’s investigation of Freud’s archive that, “pellicular surfaces — skin and film— yield an archive marked on the body” (28). In the ground of Kannemeyer’s print we find both simultaneously implicated; a redoubling in which the notion of the trauma of racially motivated violence is returned to and reiterated.

Turning to a related Freudian metaphor, we might consider the analyst’s assertion that memory functions something like a ‘mystic pad.’ The ‘mystic pad’ Freud describes is a ground for inscription: he refers to the seemingly simple device consisting of a planar wax surface with a layer of wax paper and transparent, celluloid membrane above it. An unlimited number of messages can be imprinted upon this with a stylus. These can then be whisked away, leaving their “permanent —even though not unalterable” trace— only on the wax below the more superficial, pellicular surface (Freud, “A Note Upon the Mystic Writing-Pad” 21). With this device, we observe that the act of memory is understood to be prompted by translation onto a different ground and perhaps into another medium (if the wax is considered bas-relief) and by (re)inscription, both acts of doubling. But the process also involves disunion between perception and consciousness. Memory is translated perception; consciousness does not quite match with its double-other. By re-encountering events in the gallery, the viewer is confronted with an image that reflects her memory. However, because the artist has translated the images, a space of disjunction emerges when beholding Kannemeyer’s work. An engaged viewer is forced into a kind of parallax mode of viewing (and remembering), a type of vision which might train critical lenses upon both memories and artworks.

We must keep in mind one of Derrida’s first assertions about the archive: “the meaning of archive, its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded” (*Archive Fever*, 2). Precisely because it is translated, the return in Kannemeyer’s artwork is deferred. The events are not shown nostalgically, which would imply a kind of homesickness for the past (the term comes from the Greek *nostos* —a return home and *algos*— pain or suffering). Instead, impregnated with the doubt of disjunction, the images resist a single authoritative or authentic reading. The familiar of the archive is returned to in a similar, but ultimately distinct manner. By this, the event-memory is rendered uncanny; it is of utmost importance to remember that Freud’s *Unheimlichkeit* transmits a sense of the unhomey (which would oppose nostalgia). Though also linking the artist to his origins in comics (an homage to a 1950s comic *Haunt of Fear*), the title of his 2008 show in New York, *The Haunt of Fears*, possibly demonstrates an awareness of a kind of Derridean hauntology: the spectres of the past re-emerge to confront and destabilise the gallery goer (“Anton Kannemeyer/The Haunt of Fears”; cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*).<sup>11</sup>

### **Tintin unhomed**

During the course of his artistic career Kannemeyer has repeatedly mined the work of George Rémi, better known as Hergé (1907-1983), the author of the hugely popular comic book *Tintin* (selling some 150,000,000 copies since 1929). Kannemeyer uses the comic as a site to revise and recolonise. In various instances the artist occupies the role of a balding Tintin (implicating himself at the center of inherited systems of oppression). It is specifically the depiction of ‘Africa’ from *Tintin au Congo* that Kannemeyer samples in his representations of South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Kannemeyer mimics Hergé’s signature style and populates his scenes with the same natives, non-individuated African subjects with cruelly exaggerated facial features and generally over-determined blackness, all factors which locate them oscillating between the polarities of colonialist nightmare and fantasy. These figures are pure image, but as we know, there is a danger for images to slide over the real in the space of the imaginary. Indeed, the contents of *Tintin* are not presented nor understood as pure fantasy. Firstly, the drawn language connotes a certain truthfulness or impartiality: “*ligne claire*”

has been described as, “pure dispassionate contention” or “graphic impassibility” (Cáceres 50). Despite the fact he does little reporting, Tintin is a journalist, and we suppose that Hergé’s images will resemble the content to be presented in Tintin’s infinitely deferred columns. The Barthesian “*L’effet de réel*” —the notion that by the inclusion of numerous details a text can seem realistic and “true” —is further amplified by the inclusion of naturalistically rendered iconic edifices or monuments. Similarly, real historical people exist in Hergé’s imaginary world: Al Capone is linked to illicit activities in a number of the books. Hergé undertook exercises in intertextuality as well, adding certain authority to his accounts by including elements of purportedly truthful transmitters of facts, such as history or ethnography text books. Hergé translated faithfully from photographic and illustrated sources; the elements of his fictional realm are often only one step removed from photos, giving the terrain of the comic greater ‘credibility’ and linking it to presences in the real world. Describing this move in *Tintin au Congo*, Johannes Fabian states that the “relevant passage occurs in one of the frames that is completely filled with text and is obviously intended to be educational, imparting ‘ethnographic’ knowledge” (306). By putting himself in the role of Tintin, Kannemeyer uses similar tactics as those described above to transmit markedly different knowledge. Precisely because he uses a recognisable language to assert an alternate account, Kannemeyer’s artwork points to the necessarily constructed and subjective nature of histories.

Kannemeyer inhabits the cover art for *Tintin au Congo* in the works *Pappa in Afrika* (2009) and *Moulinsart Lawyers in the Congo* (2011). Both the forms of the covers and the interiors of the *Tintin* books are standardised. The interior images are alternately one-third or one-ninth of a page. By adopting these structures, Kannemeyer’s pieces insinuate themselves into the Hergé’s oeuvre as unauthorised revisions. As mentioned in the discussion of photographic translations above, the incongruence between childhood memory of Tintin and the translated, altered version provokes a shift in perspective. In addition, the comic image undertakes a literal move from horizontal to vertical consumption when hung in the gallery. Kannemeyer does not just represent the *colonie belge*; he rather points to the legacies of colonialism and the chain reaction linking to contemporary neo-colonialism. By colliding elements outside the purview of Hergé’s eternal colony, yielding a disordered temporality, a chaotic, yet specific history is evoked and the artifice of the image is clearly revealed.

*Pappa in Afrika* takes the central motif of the motor-car and the savannah, where the vehicle careens, directly from the original cover. The white and black subjects in the car have switched places. The colonialist Tintin now resembles Kannemeyer and has acquired a driver. The cargo in the automobile has been branded, speaking to the particular histories of intervention. The figure of cargo prompts thoughts of the potential for both insertion and removal, the spatial and literal translation of resources. The sack in the back seat links to American farmers who provide (read as dump) surpluses of genetically modified (GM) food to the nation. The emblazoned names on the crates speak to the natural resources from the Brazzaville oil fields that are captured by Shell and Texaco with the assistance of Halliburton Afrique. The presence of Halliburton doubly implicates the US government in the situation, in part due to the firm’s connections to former Vice-President Dick Cheney. We are further prompted to consider other planned US government interventions, like the plot to ‘eliminate’ Patrice Lumumba, former president of Zaire, ordered directly by President Eisenhower (Kettle).

Another change is the altered relationship of sky to ground: Kannemeyer’s land is proportionately larger. By focusing on elements obfuscated in most ‘aesthetic’ depictions of landscape (the lie of the land), Kannemeyer brings together the indexical traces of present and past violence. Presiding over the horrors is a manically grinning man in military fatigues holding an automatic rifle. He might be read as a member of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), the (initially) Ugandan rebel faction responsible for the maiming, raping, and killing of thousands. The figure exists both in and outside of the ground, his legs reaching the limits of the painting; he resists domination by the striation of space inherent in the rules of perspective and framing. The LRA are not the first to undertake unspeakable acts of terror in the region. Torture and the mutilation of bodies, particularly the removal of right hands, were strategies sanctioned by the harsh Belgian government of Leopold II and enacted by colonial officers and their minions in order to pacify labor and facilitate rubber extraction (Hochschild

164-81).<sup>12</sup> Co-opting the sense of truth connoted by Hergé's style, Kannemeyer recounts the traumatic histories of the region.

A final detail appears in *Pappa in Africa*: a small, upturned *colon* figure. *Colon* figures, produced in various West African nations, are wooden statues which, as their name suggests, generally depict colonisers in Western dress. Thanks to catalogues, exhibitions, and even scholarly research, *colon* figures, initially derided as 'tourist' art, now sell for significant prices in the West (Steiner 148; 154). This iconographic element reoccurs and is re-explored in far greater detail in *Moulinsart Lawyers in the Congo*. Moulinsart S.A. (aka The Hergé Foundation) is the firm with the rights to Tintin. Above the title Kannemeyer writes, "the post-colonial adventure of Tintin's successors." It is perhaps no coincidence that in his discussion of *colon* statues Christopher Steiner asserts that these appeal to collectors as they construct "a marketable fantasy of the colonial experience;" not so much an image of "a romanticised Other, *colon* figures stand for the Other's relationship to the West" (154). Considering these meanings, it is notable that Kannemeyer depicts improper manufacture of the statues, indicating the potential to capitalise on colonial nostalgia and simultaneously resist it. Four, almost identical, blond lawyers with suits and briefcases appear in the space of 'the Congo,' indicated as such by the huts and natives. The lawyers berate the black subjects, who are hawking Tintin *colon* figures (with a pedigree dating to 1937, according to the sign), stating respectively: "No! That penis will have to be removed!" "No More Sales! I told you yesterday!" "It's illegal to make Tintin sculptures!" "You cannot sell these any longer...You have no copyright!" In an insightful comparison of the paternalism of colonial language and law, Gregg Lambert holds:

It would not be an exaggeration to assert that most technical and administrative language, even in the first world, bears an historical relationship to the early techniques invented by colonial administrations – a language composed purely of "order-words" (*les mots d'ordre*), or a language of command in which the law finds its purest expression. (148)

Given Lambert's and Steiner's assertions, it is not difficult to comprehend how these lawyers, representatives of Western corporations, have inherited the role of Pappa, the colonialist-Tintin. Kannemeyer depicts the potential for engagement between distinct and even paradoxically opposed systems of cultural comprehension. As Steiner details in his discussion of traditional African art, traders and (Western) buyers attempt to outmanoeuvre one another in negotiations of artworks' authenticity and originality –labile, context-specific notions that greatly impact value. By incorporating images of *colon* figures, Kannemeyer seems to be engaging in a kind of reflection on his own practice. The artist too experienced a run-in with Moulinsart S.A. as a consequence of his own unauthorised exploration of authenticity and originality, categories he ultimately subverts (Kannemeyer).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the lawyers' sense of copyright and originality does not hold water when it is 'unhomed,' uncannily displaced to the post-colonial context: to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, there is a possibility for colonial truth to become post-colonial nonsense (175-98). With his revision, Kannemeyer also evokes the reception of *Tintin* in Zaire during the 1950s. The strip was very popular; however, rather than take the comic solely at face value, readers in Zaire enjoyed it because of what the images implied about their creator. Hergé's racial caricatures enabled "them to make fun of the white man 'who saw them like that'" (Hunt 94).

Let us turn one last time to the title "Congo Parody." As well as its more common meaning, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the word also contains the trace of darker significance: "A period of time; the termination or completion of such a period; *esp.* the end of life; death" ("Parody"). This secondary meaning perhaps gives us insights into how to approach a resolution between the tragedy and trauma contained on the surface and in the topography of the comic. By wresting the elements of the archive and memory out of shadow, forcing them through a process of illumination and interrogation new possibilities of understanding can emerge. As Proust wrote, "the only way to defend language is to attack it...every writer is obliged to create his or her own language" (93). The potential for surgical violence, duplicity, or treachery contained in the act of translation also bespeaks cunning and the chance of creativity and criticality. Gilles Deleuze holds in *Essays Critical and Clinical*:

A foreign language cannot be hollowed out in one language as a whole without in turn being toppled or pushed to a limit, to an outside or reverse side that consists of Visions and Auditions that no longer belong to any language. These visions are not fantasies, but veritable Ideas that the writer hears in the interstices of language, in its intervals. They are not interruptions of the process but breaks that form part of it, like an eternity that can only be revealed in a becoming, or a landscape that only appears in movement. They are not outside language, but the outside of language. (5)

By excavations that deploy multiple languages, his pressuring and testing of the limits of authority, and the sly tactics of mimesis, Kannemeyer's work alternately stampedes and creeps into the viewer's personal image *arkheion*, fracturing what was fixed and unhomeing the archive. In the breaks and pops of Kannemeyer's translated images, there is a potential to jar the viewer into critical awareness. There is no singular, authentic history; rather, when recounted in new languages, the past is always coming into being.

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<sup>1</sup> I am not the only writer to make this grouping. See for instance, Ehman and Benett. Nevertheless, Kannemeyer does not consider these works to be a series per se. I put the collective term "Congo Parody" in quotations to denote its slightly tentative status.

<sup>2</sup> As I note later, I refer to Freud's discussion of translation and transgression in relation to, "*Traduttori-Traditori*" in *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious*.

<sup>3</sup> While 'difficult' political messages are not totally absent from artwork shown in Chelsea, and might even help an artist's career, the majority of galleries exhibit work that is primarily consumed for its aesthetic qualities.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note a more Schmittian binary relationship to 'treason' and translation at the beginning of the 'new' South Africa, a time when old authority figures were indicted as criminals and prior enemies of the state, such as Nelson Mandela, became the rulers. Many in South Africa, like Kannemeyer, now take a more nuanced critical stand that implicates many different elements in country and the rest of the world.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Simon Lewis views Afrikaner poet Breyten Breytenbach's *Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, a work written in English, as an Apartheid-era instance of deliberate (and political) distancing from the Afrikaans language. Andries Wessels explores the liminal position struck by Olga Kirsch, a Jewish South African writer who composed her poems in Afrikaans.

<sup>6</sup> This was the order used in the list of works from *Haunt of Fears*, a 2008 show at the Jack Shainman Gallery.

<sup>7</sup> Short trousers have an array of meanings in South Africa. Unlike many other countries, it is acceptable for men to wear shorts in semi-formal social situations. As the British Colonial administrators did not wear shorts, the garment might be understood as a mode of differentiating the wearer from the coloniser. This stratum of significance is perhaps partially buried under other meanings; the shorts, in certain situations, came to signify not so much 'not British' and 'not indoor labor,' but rather Afrikaner farmer. Conversely, school boys and low-wage workers as well wore shorts. Hence, the garment had the potential to signify a lack of autonomy or potency. Similar rhetoric of infantilisation was used in language when referring to black men or women—who were often called 'boys' or 'girls.' In the context of South African prisons during Apartheid, black prisoners were issued shorts and given no socks, while their white counterparts received long trousers and socks. Here, following the account of prisons by Robert Vassen, the message transmitted by the short trousers was pellucid: "Boys wear shorts!" (1).

<sup>8</sup> The type face is just one element employed by advertisers, but also by distinct (commercial) publications, that asserts difference and has the potential to connote value.

<sup>9</sup> I note that Derrida's conception of email as a kind of archiving archive, which he discusses in *Archive Fever*, might be employed to understand digital processes of archiving. Should anyone return to a digital article in the archive, the corrections will have been re-written into the article, rather than exist on the pages of a different document in a letter to the editor or the corrections section.

<sup>10</sup> Coetzee's novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which might be read as an allegory of South African society, recounts the affects of an alleged threat of a barbarian attack on a border settlement. The almost certainly imaginary foreign threat is used to justify increasingly harsh societal controls, fortification of the borders, and a

military build up. In actuality in Bophuthatswana, much like in the novel, the only barbarians who emerge are those who prepare for the 'barbarian' attack. Along the same vein, Kannemeyer's most recent exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery was called *After the Barbarians* (October/November 2011). Like those of many of the artist's works, this title suggests various meanings: that Kannemeyer is operating in a moment after the barbarians' arrival and depicting images inspired by barbarians.

<sup>11</sup> With the term 'hauntology,' Derrida refers to a notion of ghosts of the past, which continue to haunt us, not totally absent or present and neither alive nor dead.

<sup>12</sup> Notably, Freud contends that severed body parts, which he sees as related to doubled bodies, are prime examples of the uncanny ("The 'Uncanny,'" 14; 22n).

<sup>13</sup> Kannemeyer was contacted by Moulinsart asking him to stop making a post-card in which he reproduced Tintin more exactly.

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Figure 1: A is for Apartheid Apocalypse from “The Alphabet of Democracy,” 2005. ©AntonKannemeyer, courtesy of Stevenson Gallery



Figure 2: B is vir Bokke! from “The Alphabet of Democracy,” 2005-6. ©AntonKannemeyer courtesy of Shainman galleries.



Figure 3: B is for Black from "The Alphabet of Democracy," 2008. © Anton Kannemeyer courtesy of Jack Shainman galleries.

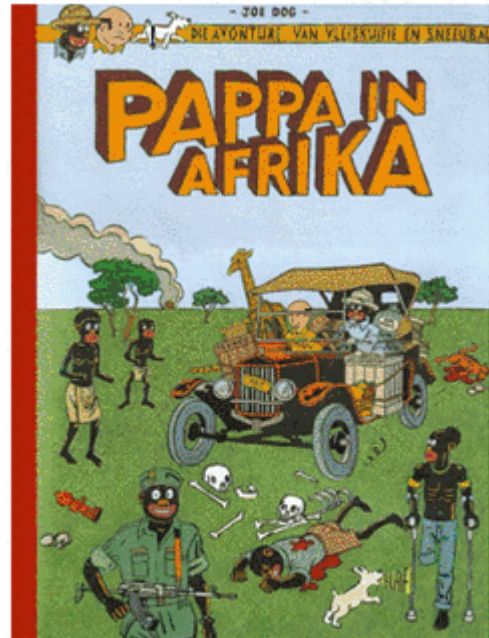


Figure 4: Cover image from Pappa in Afrika, 2010 (Jacana). © Anton Kannemeyer, courtesy of Stevenson Gallery

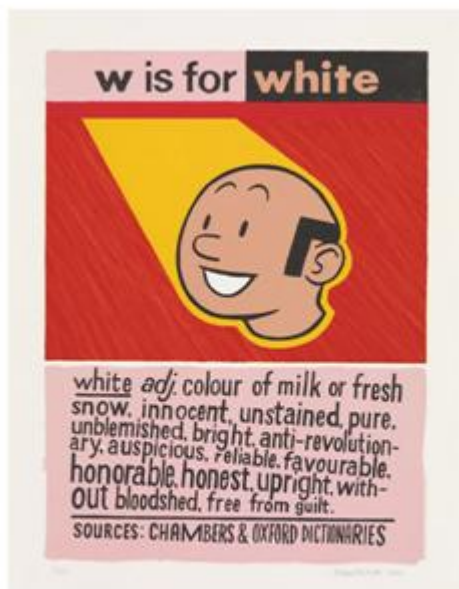


Figure 5: W is for White from the "Alphabet of Democracy," 2008. © Anton Kannemeyer courtesy of Jack Shainman galleries.



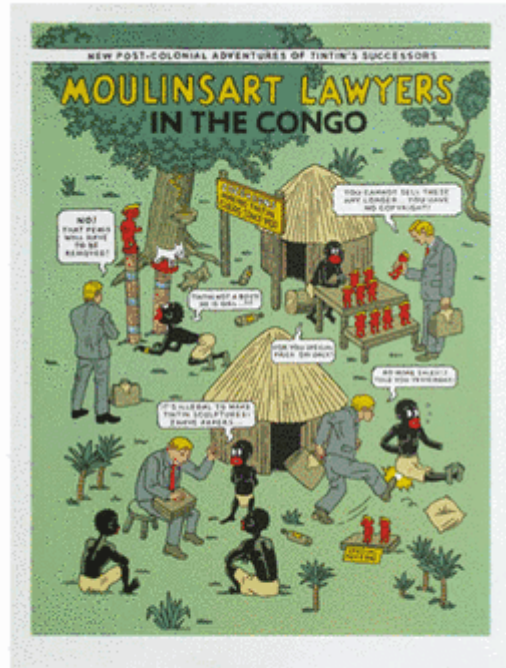


Figure 6: Moulinsart Lawyers in the Congo, 2011. © Anton Kannemeyer, courtesy of Stevenson Gallery



Figure 7: G is for Good Health! from "The Alphabet of Democracy," 2008. © Anton Kannemeyer courtesy of Jack Shainman galleries.



Figure 8: "Tjorts, manne, hier gaan hy!" from the "Alphabet of Democracy," 2005-2006. © Anton Kannemeyer courtesy of Jack Shainman galleries.