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THE APPROPRIATION OF AN ICON: *GUERNICA*, REMADE

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INTRODUCTION

Between 2009 and 2010, a women's community organisation in the Eastern Cape of South Africa wove a tapestry based on Pablo Picasso's 1937 painting *Guernica*. The work, known as the Keiskamma *Guernica*, repurposes the aesthetic vocabulary of Picasso's iconic painting, applying it to the group's experiences of the ongoing AIDS epidemic. Rooted in the everyday practice of the women responsible for weaving it, the tapestry offers a layered, complex response to the gendered politics of national and international HIV/AIDS governance, mediated through a craft and trade that is itself gendered (cf. Gregoratti 2018). Its appropriation of Picasso's original image can therefore be understood as a mechanism through which a domestic, 'feminine' craft takes on the privileged, public status of 'art' and/or 'iconography' – in which capacity it also asks questions of the processes by which its creators' voices are constituted as marginal to global politics. The Keiskamma *Guernica* thereby reconceptualizes the epistemic frameworks through which HIV/AIDS has objectified communities in the global South, and insists on the 'grievability' of the people lost to the disease in the Eastern Cape and elsewhere (cf. Butler 2010). As such, it represents an ideal site at which to examine the interweaving of popular art and gendered global power relations.

Picasso's *Guernica* was commissioned by the Spanish Republican government for their pavilion at the 1937 *Exposition Internationale* in Paris. Its reception was initially lukewarm. The pavilion's direct and unapologetically partisan references

to Spain's ongoing civil war were considered 'out of touch with the larger programme of the world's fair... [and] virtually ignored in the [accompanying] literature' (Herbert 1998, 33). Yet if the painting began life as a frustrated attempt at cultural diplomacy, it has come to assume significance as an instantly recognisable avatar for the suffering, loss, and grief caused by military violence. It has become what Lene Hansen (2015, 265) describes as an 'international icon': a 'privileged discursive/visual sign... that provide[s] a partial fixation to structures of meaning' about world politics (cf. van Hensbergen 2004).

An icon's status as a 'privileged discursive/visual sign' is often predicated on its taking on a general, symbolic meaning that exceeds the literal matter at hand. If *Guernica* can be called an icon, for example, it is at least in part because it is commonly held to denote more than the aerial bombardment of a Basque town on market day (Irujo 2015). In addition, the painting often serves as a reminder of the horrors of war, understood in the abstract. The tapestry reproduction that hangs in the Security Council corridor at the UN exemplifies this: it functions primarily as universal and therefore generic emblem of suffering and sorrow; a floating signifier evacuated of any and all specific content including that of the bombing of Gernika itself.¹ It does not follow from this that icons are meaningless, however, but rather that their meaning is malleable. When 'appropriated' – when recontextualized and inserted into new discursive and social situations – iconography can be re-imbued with concrete and affectively redolent meanings,

¹ For the sake of clarity, I use the Anglicized spelling 'Guernica' to refer to the painting and the Basque spelling 'Gernika' to refer to the town.

and brought to bear on one or another aspect of world affairs (Hansen 2015, 275-277). The Keiskamma *Guernica*, I will suggest, is precisely one such appropriation.

First, I offer a brief overview of account of the tapestry's creation, situating it within the wider context of the Mbeki administration's doubts regarding the efficacy of antiretroviral drugs [ARVs]. I then draw attention to a specific feature of the tapestry, namely the bull. I ask how the tapestry's appropriation of Picasso's visual language enables it to produce, bear and convey meaning about the AIDS crisis as experienced by women in Hamburg.

[IMAGE HERE]

CAPTION: The Keiskamma *Guernica* (2009-2010).

HALF PAGE SIZE

THE KEISKAMMA *GUERNICA* AND THE AIDS CRISIS IN HAMBURG

Founded in 2000, the Keiskamma Art Project employs over a hundred women from the area around Hamburg village in South Africa's Eastern Cape, who design and make articles for commercial sale as well as collaborating on large-scale artworks (The Keiskamma Trust 2018a). In this latter capacity the Project has produced three tapestries that draw on iconic works of art, including *Guernica*

as well as the Bayeux Tapestry and the Isenheim Altarpiece (The Keiskamma Trust 2018b). My focus here will be directed towards the first of these pieces, which of the Project's three major works is uniquely explicit about its political intentions: not only 'a lament for the dead', the tapestry is also intended to convey 'the injustices of our health system and the staggering grief experienced in Eastern Cape villages today'.²

As such, the Keiskamma *Guernica* offers a means of exploring the political possibilities, limits and complexities of popular art as a means of both engaging with and participating in global politics. By appropriating the representational language of Picasso's painting, the tapestry constructs a complex web of aesthetic, historical and political associations that bind together the everyday experiences of its makers and the iconography of the original image. In so doing, it asks questions of the ways in which the former are constituted as marginal to international relations and the latter as a universally-applicable representation of human suffering and grief. In particular, the tapestry provokes reflection on the gendered effects of AIDS by testifying to the ways in which the disease has exploited and amplified existing gender hierarchies within South African society.

Carol Hofmeyr, the founder of the Keiskamma Art Project, has stated that the Keiskamma *Guernica* was born out of a particular emotional state:

² As Judith Butler among others have argued, mourning is in and of itself a political act. Butler (2000; 2004; 2010); cf. Honig (2013).

When we made it in 2010 we were acutely disturbed. You can't bear those kinds of stories going on and on in your head of what was happening to people, and people experiencing very bad treatment in hospitals, people dying unnecessarily. From 2006 to 2010 that story just got worse and worse, and the anger – my anger, and other people's anger – at the fact that things happened that shouldn't have happened, when the government had a programme in place that should have been working (quoted in Ashmore 2018).

Hofmeyr laments the lack of a coherent governmental strategy towards AIDS that was particularly pronounced during the 1999-2008 presidency of Thabo Mbeki. Mbeki and his Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang frequently questioned the efficacy of antiretroviral drugs, and under their oversight 'government opposition to the use of ARVs for either prevention or treatment hardened' (Nattrass 2008, 158). It should be acknowledged that Mbeki's suspicion of biomedical AIDS science was motivated at least in part by an awareness of the role historically played by medicine in the subjugation of colonized peoples (cf. Fassin 2007; Fassin and Schneider 2003). Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that his government's failure to acquire and distribute medicines had catastrophic consequences for those South Africans who required ARVs but were unable to access them.

Within this strategic vacuum, problems of accessibility and availability were particularly pronounced in poor, rural areas such as Hamburg. Although

government-sponsored ARV programmes were finally rolled out in 2003, by the end of 2010 just 55% of South African adults in need of ARVs were receiving them (Schmahmann 2015, 9; Simelela and Venter 2014, 250). Although the Keiskamma Trust ran their own ARV programme in Hamburg, treating over 1000 people between 2005 and 2009, a lack of financial support meant they eventually had to cease operations (Ashmore 2018; Schmahmann 2015, 9). Patients who required medication needed thereafter to travel up to sixty-seven miles away – an impossibility for those without resources of money and time (Schmahmann 2015, 9). The Keiskamma *Guernica* was conceived and made as a response to this particular set of circumstances, and the widespread grief, loss and anger felt within Hamburg's communities.

The decision to appropriate the visual language of Picasso's painting lends itself to a number of interpretations. Foremost among these is an identification between the devastation wrought on Gernika by the 1937 bombing and that inflicted on Hamburg by AIDS. A crucial aspect of this association is the fact that the bombing of Gernika took place on market day, when the town was not just full but full of women. The bombing, in other words, exploited the gendered structure of Basque society in order to amplify its own destructive effects – a bleak truth reflected in *Guernica*'s emphasis on female and maternal suffering. In this light, one might similarly read the Keiskamma *Guernica* in terms of what it reveals about the gendered politics of sickness, health and everyday life in the Eastern Cape. This entails reading the tapestry in performative as well as representational terms. As the product of a female collective rather than a solitary male artist, the

creation of the Keiskamma *Guernica* is in and of itself a political act. The tapestry asks questions of the conventional associations between crafts like weaving and an anonymous, implicitly feminine domesticity that stands in contradistinction to the public realm of fine art, dominated by famous – male – artists (cf. Elias 2004; Hamilton 2016, 127-128).

I would like to draw attention to one specific detail of the Keiskamma *Guernica*'s design, namely the bull. The tapestry appropriates this particular aspect of Picasso's image in order to imbue it with new associations and meanings specific to Xhosa culture. In its semiotic complexity and richness, the bull demonstrates the significance of the Keiskamma *Guernica* as a piece of popular (and political) art. I offer three complementary and overlapping readings of the bull *motif* that map broadly onto three corresponding readings of the tapestry as a whole. Firstly, interpreting the bull straightforwardly as a bull enables one to read the Keiskamma *Guernica* as an appropriation of an already iconic image. Secondly, drawing an association between the bull and the cultural and historical importance of cattle to the Xhosa people allows one to read the tapestry as a specific, localised response to the destructive effects of AIDS in Hamburg. Finally, considering the bull in relation to the cow that serves as the logo of the Keiskamma Trust opens up terrain from which to consider the creation of the tapestry as a political act in its own right.

BULL, CATTLE, COW

The bull that occupies the top-left of Picasso's *Guernica* has variously been interpreted as a symbol of fascism and/or as an emblem of the suffering of the Spanish people (van Hensbergen 2004, 55). This ambiguity reflects that of the bullfighting popular in the Basque region and across Spain: both brutish aggressor and sacrificial victim, the bull simultaneously embodies multiple cultural meanings, all of which Picasso's bull gestures towards and none of which it explicitly endorses (Clark 2013, 248).

The continued prominence of the bull in the Keiskamma *Guernica* can be seen to reproduce this ambivalence. Yet in addition, it also gestures towards specific, local meanings that reflect the centrality of cattle not only to the Xhosa people but also to the Keiskamma Trust, whose logo is a cow. In the words of Unathi Mtshemla, the Trust's Government Liaison Officer:

All [the] different artists, they've got their own different style of making a cow... I think we've decided, as [the] Keiskamma Trust, to go for the cow because this programme is about bringing back Xhosa dignity, so our dignity is on the cow. Everything that we do... when you see a woman and then you want to get married to that person, you have to pay *lobola*, and then *lobola*, it's in the form of a cow, because this is our wealth (Ashmore 2018).

The Keiskamma *Guernica* thus does more than simply reproduce Picasso's representational vocabulary. In so doing, it recontextualizes the bull within Xhosa

culture, where it serves as a symbol of wealth, honour and dignity. The function of cattle within the Xhosa's dowry-based matrimonial system – as a determinant of women's societal value – raises a number of additional interpretive possibilities regarding the effects of the AIDS epidemic on the social status of women in Hamburg. Is the bull a marker of what is being destroyed, or is it a marker of resilience to destruction? Could it even be both? And what does it mean to repurpose a symbol of women's bridal value as the logo of a women's craft group that aims to provide its members with financial and social independence (cf. Schmahmann 2015, 17)?

In addition to these provocations, the bull also points towards a historical event of great importance to the Xhosa. This is the 'cattle-killing' of 1856-7, when the Xhosa slaughtered as many as four hundred thousand of their livestock in the wake of a series of prophecies promising an end to the deprivation and indignity attendant upon colonial conquest (Peires 1989, 138; Price 2008, 302). Over forty thousand Xhosa are believed to have died in the resulting famine (Price 2008, 336). The bull's presence in the scene of destruction displayed by the Keiskamma *Guernica* can therefore also be seen to gesture towards a previous occasion where the destruction of cattle was *literally* synonymous with the hardship, suffering and death in great numbers of Xhosa people.

If, as Nicola Ashmore (2017, 379) suggests, the Keiskamma *Guernica* 'involved finding *motifs* that could serve as local equivalents to Picasso's visual language', then the bull is notable for its ability to traverse the enormous historical and

cultural divide between 1930s Spain and 2000s Hamburg. Its appropriation thus refers not only back to Picasso's original but also to a number of social practices and historical moments of enormous cultural significance that have either been threatened, relied upon or agonisingly re-enacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The Keiskamma *Guernica* neither takes a definitive position on any of these questions and associations, nor arbitrates between their many possible meanings. Instead, it allows a provocative constellation of associations to converge between bull, cattle and cow between which it is impossible (and probably unnecessary) to adjudicate.

CONCLUSION

How might the Keiskamma *Guernica*'s appropriation of Picasso's iconic painting enable it to generate and communicate meaning about its creators' experiences of the AIDS crisis in their community? I have suggested a number of ways in which the tapestry's reproduction of the bull *motif* might serve this function. To conclude, I would like to ask what it means not just to reproduce Picasso's painting, but to reproduce it as a *tapestry*. Two answers immediately suggest themselves. Firstly, through the appropriation of iconic imagery the tapestry transposes a nominally private, domestic, feminine craft into the public realm, in the process at least potentially claiming for itself the classification of 'art-' as opposed to 'craft-work'.³ In so doing, the tapestry makes visible ideas, emotions and subjectivities that would usually be hidden from view. Secondly, if the

³ The Keiskamma *Guernica* is currently on display at the Red Location Museum in Port Elizabeth.

Keiskamma *Guernica* is to be understood as testifying to the destructive effects of the AIDS epidemic in Hamburg, then this act of communal making goes some way symbolically to counterbalance this devastation. It does this by materialising the grief and sorrow of a community of women, insisting on the value and ‘grievability’ of lives unnecessarily lost by incorporating them into an image commonly understood to occupy a privileged cultural and social space as an iconic representation of suffering and grief. I end with the Keiskamma Art Project’s own account of the tapestry:

While the foundations of a new wealthy and privileged society have been built up, we have dug countless graves. In our villages the suffering do not scream as they do in Picasso’s bombed-out scene, rather they ceaselessly mourn, pray and persist, but too often submit to the relentless disease, and die, un-recounted. In this [work] we try to tell the story of individual grief and struggle and also to tell of the resilience of the people we know (The Keiskamma Trust 2018c).

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