

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

Professor Colin Richards 1954 – 2012

An Obituary

Sue Williamson

It is with great sadness but also in a spirit of celebration of a life of extraordinary achievement that I write this obituary for Professor Colin Richards, one of the South African art world's brightest luminaries. Richards was a distinguished and visionary writer, an exquisite artist, and the hugely popular professor of art discourse at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town. He broke the ground for the practice of art therapy in South Africa, and he was also a close and valued friend.

If one had to name the five most important and influential writers on contemporary African art in the world, Colin Richards would be on that list. Making his debut into the field of art criticism with an acute analysis of *Melancholia*, (1986) a seminal painting by his wife, artist Penny Siopis, Richards first came to international attention with an essay entitled *Desperately Seeking Africa*. This piece, which interrogated the then newly fashionable (and now almost forgotten) term 'transitional art' appeared in the catalogue of the David Elliott curated show, 'Art from South Africa' (1990), the first large group show of South African contemporary art to go overseas under the auspices of the African National Congress cultural desk in London, opening at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and touring widely thereafter.

Richards' insightful essay attracted widespread critical attention, and many more catalogue and journal essays followed, including his 1991 landmark *About Face: Aspects of Art, History and Identity in South African Visual Culture*, in the journal

Third Text. More recently, he was included in the highly influential *Antimonies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, published by Duke University Press in 2008, and edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee. In his contribution, Richards explored the concept of critical humanism in his piece, *Aftermath, Value and Violence in Contemporary South African Art.*

To give a few brief glimpses into his writing in this essay:

On Africa: 'It may be that we in Africa seem always to be struggling in the half-life of some aftermath that cannot move beyond the catastrophe that occasioned it. But perhaps it is here that a distinctive value lies. Africa – a semiotic complex if ever there was one – seems to occupy a fertile, violent human space untidily bound by two ancient oppositions: one expressed by Ecclesiastes, “and there is no new thing under the sun” and the other by Pliny “... always from Africa comes something new” ’.

On the role of curators: 'Inasmuch as curators are public intellectuals rather than merely cultural brokers, establishing accurate histories and recognising key creative and intellectual continuities are surely important principles to follow. Erasing history, whether through omission or commission – both of which, ironically, are familiar to us through our experiences of different forms of colonialism – is an act of violence.'

(Richards himself was a curator - perhaps most notably of the much praised 'Graft' under the directorship of Okwui Enwezor for the Second Johannesburg Biennale at the South African National Gallery in 1997.)

On humanism: 'The imaginative perspectives opened on our art cultures by thinking through violence and the possibilities and disappointments of being human promise a great deal. This perspective will never say all that needs to be said about any artistic work or event, but right now it says much. To adopt a

critical aesthetic attitude seems to me to be essentially a form of intense noticing, mobilizing and sharpening different forms of attention.'

The distinguishing characteristic of Richards' writing was an intellectual rigour which left no conceptual or philosophical stone unturned. Texts were worked on and refined, referenced with copious footnotes, and polished until the subject was lit with a crystalline brilliance.

Possibly Richards' last essay was for the yet unpublished catalogue for the exhibition 'The Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Documentary Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life', which opened at the International Center of Photography in New York last year, and will move to the Haus der Kunst in Munich next month. His death makes the anticipation of reading that essay even more poignant.

Richards started his career as an artist as a medical illustrator at the University of the Witwatersrand's Faculty of Medicine in 1977, and began studying art through the University of South Africa at this time. The process of having to work in pen and watercolour to record in minute and accurate detail the bodily parts in front of him suited his perfectionist nature, and the meticulous techniques he developed as an illustrator were later carried into the broader field of contemporary art.

In 1985, he moved from the department of medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) to a position as lecturer in the Fine Arts Department, and in 1986 married fellow lecturer Penny Siopis, beginning a lifelong artistic and creative collaboration from which generations of Wits students benefitted. Siopis is recognized as one of most important painters this country has produced, and Richards' admiration for her work led him ever deeper into the art world. They were intellectual partners who would often vigorously argue a point but were

always greatly respectful of the others' work.

In 1987 Richards received a British Council scholarship to Goldsmiths' College, University of London to study art therapy. The following year, by mutual consent, he left his wife and their six month old son, Alexander, behind in Johannesburg in order to fulfill this long held dream. Choosing to study clinical art psychotherapy and education rather than pursue a purely academic course, Richards' placement during his studies was in the Child and Family Unit in Westminster Children's Hospital in Pimlico, London. At this time, too, he was a representative for the Art Psychotherapy Unit at Goldsmiths at the *Clinical Psychology in a Multiracial Society* conference in London (1988).

Richards saw an art therapy training as a way to begin to address the deep psychological problems created by apartheid and on his return to South Africa, alongside his lecturing at Wits, he started the Mokhele Art Therapy and Education Project in Soweto (MATEP), working with Mamatlakeng Makhoana through the Child Welfare Department.

To provide a dedicated building, Richards raised funds - from Northmoor Trust, UK, the Foundation for the Creative Arts, South Africa and private donors and a permanent custom-designed building was erected at the Othandweni Children's home in Soweto. Othandweni is part of the Johannesburg Child Welfare Society and the aim of the new project was to provide children from the community, some of whom were abandoned children, with a supportive environment.

Through different art processes and media, the children were enabled to express and contain their distress at a time when apartheid placed enormous stress on black families.. The hope was that the children would eventually internalise these processes and the creativity they embody in such a way as to be able to draw on these independently in times of need. The project also aimed to develop a model

of therapeutic and education practice which could eventually be used in broader communities in South Africa. The project continued in this form until the death of Mamatlakeng Makhoana in 2004.

Alongside the development of MATEP, now that he was a registered art therapist in the United Kingdom, Richards took on a pivotal role in the development of art therapy in South Africa. He worked hard for the accreditation of art therapy as a profession, and, along with the few trained colleagues in the country, formed the Art Therapists Association of South Africa (ATASA) in 1992, and was national chairperson of this committee from its inception until 1997.

He was a representative of ATASA on the Statutory Standing Committee for Arts Therapists of the Professional Board for Occupational Therapy (Intermin National Medical and Dental Council of South Africa). This committee was involved in developing criteria for professional accreditation and registration with the Medical and Dental Council for arts therapy.

In the context of the University and also in broader social settings, Richards gave many talks on art therapy. He presented a paper at the *First Scottish International Art Therapy Conference* at Edinburgh University in 1994, and in South Africa, working with director Theo Antonio, he conceptualized a full-length art therapy programme which was televised nationally on SABCTV in 1996.

In 2002 Richards received a full professorship at Wits. His enormous influence over his colleagues and students is expressed in this tribute received from art historian Jennifer Law, who worked closely with Richards whilst she was doing her doctoral research at Wits in the 90s. 'Colin always made me feel like what I had to say was important, that my words and opinions mattered, and that I was his equal, even when I surely was not. His warmth and humility was a gift and his inimitable intellect was completely without arrogance or pretence. He

taught me that true intellectual achievement did not rely on an institution or title and that critical engagement could be both rigorous and honest and still be compassionate.'

Said Pippa Skotnes, of Richards' time at Michaelis: 'Colin was a generous colleague – the kind of colleague who enriches one's academic life. And by generous I don't mean only that he was kind-hearted, or willing to share the responsibilities of the course, or talk through an issue – though he was all that – but generous with his time and ideas and insights, and with sharing the way these were formed through the complexities of his own life experience'.

In 2010, Siopis and Richards left Wits bereft when they decamped to the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town, where Richards took up a position as professor of art discourse and Siopis was appointed an honorary professor. By this time, their son Alexander had reached his final year in the art department at Wits, and at the end of that year, won the Martienssen prize for top student.

Arriving at Michaelis, Richards said, only half jokingly, that he knew he had made the right decision in moving when he opened the doors of his spacious new office and saw that all his bookshelves and his vast library of beloved books would fit in perfectly – 'a magic fit'.

Books and their wildly varied contents – Richards' interests could alight anywhere -- were not only his life blood, but a constant theme in his artwork. For the *Cold Literature* series of collages, Richards excised words and phrases from governmental Union Statute Books 1910-1947, pasting these tiny printed fragments into undulating lines to form a rough narrative, which was not pre-planned, but which Richards allowed to develop as he worked on it. One word was allowed to sit on top of the others to offer a subtle emphasis: Free

For the past two years, I have been one of a group of Richards' friends who

spent occasional weekends at Churchhaven, weekends which would invariably include a walk along a beach where one could pick up cuttlefish bones. Bags and bags of these were collected for an artwork Richards had in mind. The whiteness of the underside of the cuttlefish bone, its fluted shape and the gentle striations reminded Richards of an open book. On the last occasion, in the first week of December, he cut one down to a rough version of what he anticipated one element of the new work would be. It's a work which will now have to exist only in the imagination.

The original version of the obituary first appeared in www.arthrob.co.za in January 2013.

A small selection of Colin Richards artworks



'For Penny and Xander', watercolour on paper, (1988)



'He is Barehead ÔÇª', pen and ink on paper, (2009)



'Two Birds, One Stone', pen and ink on paper (2003)



'Slow Literature', watercolour on paper (2009)