

Dossier | African Ice : Avant Car Guard's Bling-bling

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Avant Car Guard, Robin Rhode, Not Alone, 2009. photo: courtesy of the artists



African Ice : Avant Car Guard's Bling-bling **By Andrew Hennlich**

Bling-bling presents a certain paradox in its journeys between Africa and the American hip-hop community where it becomes a marker of success. Bling communicates that an artist has attained a degree of wealth and power, signifying that they have “made it” in America so to speak. However, this image ignores the politics of the production of bling in Africa. American rapper Ludacris’ video “Pimpin’ all Over the World,” presents one such paradox. Shot in the resorts of Durban, South Africa, Ludacris is wearing a t-shirt bearing the image of Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey while taking women through the city’s tourist markets. Waving large piles of money to the camera and adorned with jewelry, Ludacris and collaborator Bobby Valentino present themselves as part of a successful American black culture returning to its roots in South Africa. The image of Garvey (who promoted African repatriation) contrasts with Ludacris and Valentino’s money representing the American self-made success story. Largely -ignoring the dichotomies in class that the resort town presents, the video is blind to the underdeveloped “townships” located on the pe-ripheries

of South Africa's major cities and the class disparities involved in the manufacturing of the jewelry that is at the core of the South African economy and draped around the rappers' necks.

South Africa's mining industry holds 80% of the world's platinum, 41% of its gold and South African multinational corporation De Beers (founded by colonial industrialist Cecil Rhodes) produces more diamonds than any other corporation in the world.(1) Subsequently, the bling purchased by the rapper goes back into large capitalist conglomerates held by a small elite in Africa and Western business concerns. Mining's impact on the economy and ecology of South Africa is a theme addressed by a number of artists. South African animator William Kentridge highlights the fact that gold transformed and defined the physical terrain of his native Johannesburg. Alongside of an interrogation of race and violence that occurred in the landscape outside of Johannesburg in *Mine* (1991) and *Felix in Exile* (1994), he highlights the fact that the hills that surround the city were formed by mining and were later reexcavated to extract more gold from them. Subsequently, mining creates the presence and disappearance of the physical landscape in Johannesburg. Kentridge renders the landscape with open pits, blasted for mining, and pylons rising up to demarcate property lines; it is a tarnished and sooty terrain scarred by the mining industry's interventions. In South Africa the narrative of social space is bound by this mining of precious materials for jewelry.(2)

A second intervention is British artist Simon Starling's *One Ton* (2005), a series of five photographs printed on platinum, each depicting the open pit where the ore was extracted. Starling's title refers to the one ton of ore used to produce the platinum that the photographs were printed on, highlighting the tremendous energy consumption and stress upon the country that mining platinum produces. Furthermore, *One Ton* provides a link between the artwork as a luxury good and the materiality of its production; this relationship extends to the connection between the raw materials that produce the bling that we see so effortlessly in the music video as a marker of the rapper's affluence.

Starling and Kentridge represent a different side to the production of bling-bling (in the form of gold, platinum and diamonds that are all a part of the economy in South Africa) as a luxury good. They highlight its commodity status, producing the artwork as a commercial good while also revealing the industrial narratives of bling's production and its relationship to the economic and environmental concerns. Durban's image as a luxury resort presented in the music video is a world away from the very real and difficult political and economic disparities of South Africa's townships. While rappers display their "ice" to prove they have made it, South Africa's most poor struggle to gain access to water in the newly deregulated economic terrain of post-apartheid South Africa.(3)

Despite the problematic image of the production of bling-bling in South Africa, its representation endures in the work of contemporary arts collective Avant Car Guard. Formed in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2005, Avant Car Guard's tactics for producing art seem concerned with what they see as a growing commodification of the South African

artist in a global art market, while at the same time engaging in the direct and often adolescent tactics of Young British Artists (YBAs) such as Tracy Emin or the Chapman Brothers. In a recent exhibition of paintings Avant Car Guard engage with bling-bling as a way of advancing their criticism. The Bitch Who Saw Tomorrow (2009) is a painting of a black and white dog with a skeleton in her mane, each shooting vectors of light from their eyes. The dog is wearing a tie and has two hands with pointer and ring fingers raised; one finger's tip suggests a phallus. The fluorescent imagery seems immediately vacant, having more to do with the ironic hipster pastiche of Brooklyn or London rather than engaging in any serious discussion of the role of the South African artist. Its fluorescent nature demands that one notice the artist and his output; performing the same function that bling-bling does for the rapper.

The fascination with tacky kitsch continues in Avant Car Guard's "blinged" out portrait of South African artist Robin Rhode. Rhode, currently residing in Berlin, is a South African artist who frequently explores spatial dynamics through schoolyard play. Rhode has recently come to international prominence through BMW's "Expression of Joy Campaign," where he used a BMW sports car to paint on a 200 x 300-foot canvas. Avant Car Guard renders their image of Rhode in Robin Rhode, Not Alone (2009), dressing their subject with a multitude of bling-bling. Rhode is in a white tank top with black top hat and white headdress beneath it, his hands are cocked mimicking gang signs; he also wears several rings, watches and four gold chains around his neck. One of the pendants on the chain is the BMW logo referring to Rhode's commercials and a second is a "lucky rabbit" of sorts. This rabbit's head bears resemblance to William Kentridge and is clutching a bottle of wine. The drunken, slumped over hybrid makes reference to a wine label Kentridge designed for a Cape Town vineyard to help fund extra performances of his staging of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, for underprivileged children in South Africa.⁽⁴⁾ However Avant Car Guard understand Kentridge's actions as part of an ever-expanding constellation of commercialism in South African art, pairing it with Rhode's BMW ads. The pairing suggests not only Avant Car Guard's critiques of their perceived commercialism, but points to the rising status both artists have received internationally.

While directly critiquing the role of the artist in South Africa, Avant Car Guard's work engages the question of what role the image of bling-bling plays within a globalized paradigm. Making claims against a brand of transnational aesthetics that purportedly leave South Africa out of the narrative of production, Avant Car Guard's work itself becomes a form of bling-bling and subsequently approaches a transnational aesthetic. Its flashy nature demonstrates its presence like the rapper's jewelry. Unlike Kentridge's rough hewn charcoal drawings whose very materiality (referring to coal) highlights the relationship between production and the history of mining and apartheid violence, Avant Car Guard's images represent an ahistorical mode of thinking. Their fluorescent structure incites for political reasons, but also for Avant Car Guard's own particular place within the South African art market (and presumably an international one as well). In doing so Robin Rhode, Not Alone

becomes a marker of the collective's own bling-blingness. The painting, like a chain or diamond -pendant that announces the power and money of the rapper, communicates a desire to be made a part of a particular grouping (a member of the South African arts community, or a multi-platinum artist bringing us back again to the relations between capital, success and precious metals).

The direct and demanding role of Avant Car Guard's desire for presence is often expressed through the rapper's shock tactics. Untitled (2009) bears simply the phrase "Fuck This/Fuck That" with the Avant Car Guard logo painted in the corner. Untitled is explicitly apolitical; it makes no claim for South Africa and its art outside of a direct refusal. Exhibited alongside of this image was *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World* (2009), a portrait of Goodman Gallery owner (one of Johannesburg's oldest and most prestigious galleries representing amongst others, William Kentridge) Liza Essers, reclining naked with the title: "Sometimes, when we fuck our girlfriend, we pretend we're really fucking Liza," written alongside of her portrait. This image brings us back full circle to the concerns of bling-bling that this essay addressed at the onset. Avant Car Guard reveals a confluence of capital and sexuality in much the same way that Ludacris contends in his video that his money allows him to display power through the acquisition of bling-bling and to lure women. By desiring Essers' body in this fashion, Avant Car Guard's claim seems to suggest that they wish to "fuck" her in two ways: sexually but also as a gallery owner perhaps through fiscal relations in the art market.

Returning to the original question, it must be asked: what does bling-bling do politically? It seems that in Avant Car Guard's case it highlights a particular paradox located in the divides between Starling and Kentridge's material concerns and the displays of power located in the hip-hop video. While the use of bling-bling in Avant Car Guard's work functions as a denigratory tactic against both Kentridge and Rhode, its claim through flash is that "we're here too." As Avant Car Guard seek to mark their presence within South Africa's galleries and to further establish their own place within an international and very post-modern aesthetic, they dovetail further with Ludacris' video. Ludacris attempts to establish some myth of origin by returning to Africa and its rhythmic structure that underpins hip-hop (which is represented through Zulu dance ceremonies in the video). Subsequently bling-bling's desire to undermine, flaunt, or critique the traditional standings of power structures within Africa does nothing but codify these orders. Ludacris seamlessly presents an image of Africa that is spectacle; the political divides of Soweto or the Cape Flats townships are missing from his representation of Africa, as an ahistorical image of tribal culture and urban resorts that look like Las Vegas meet in effortless bliss. Likewise, the multicoloured and garish images of Avant Car Guard scream for a desire of presentness. In both Ludacris and Avant Car Guard's work, bling-bling becomes an ideological screen that prevents a real analysis of what is at stake in these images, be it the rapper or emerging global artist such as Rhode. Bling-bling obfuscates a position of both accumulation and production at the core of the journeys to Europe made (or demanded) by Avant Car Guard and the shifts towards authenticity made by Ludicris.

NOTES

1. Stats as of 2007, see: www.southafrica.info/business/economy/sectors/mining.htm .
2. Okwui Enwezor, "Truth and Responsibility: A Conversation with William Kentridge," *Parkett*, 54 (1998): 165-66.
3. For a detailed account of the politics of privatization in South Africa, see Ashwin Desai and Richard Pitthouse's engaging essay "Dispossession, Resistance and Repression in Mandela Park," in Grant Farred and Rita Barnard, eds., "After the Thrill is Gone: A Decade of Post-Apartheid South Africa," a special edition of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103:4 (Fall 2004): 841-75.
4. www.artthrob.co.za/09may/reviews/witw.html