**Over-presence As An Aesthetic Strategy**

**On Peter Frank's "Sangomas" series**

By Gerhard Charles Rump

What we can't understand, we transform into models of explanation. These function rather well, at least for a certain time. Then they are superseded by more advanced constructs. In the sciences (as in the development of culture in general) this is characterized by acceleration. But we also have traditional strategies of explaining the world which hold on for a very long time without rejecting change altogether. (1) These fascinate still today just because of that long tradition and the necessarily archaic design. And, in addition to that, they do so because of their handed-down, all-embracing colorfulness in both meanings of the word.

The tradition of the South-African Sangomas belongs into that category. The Sangomas are the natural and spiritual healers, whose knowledge and practice has grown from a heritage of thousands of years. Deeply rooted in the African culture of the ancestors and spirits, the Sangomas bear an important part of the culture of their country and, practically, a whole continent. Peter Frank has been touched by the magic of the Sangomas. He sees that in the context of a faster and faster accelerating progress there is also the danger of losing this cultural heritage on the way. So he set off to capture the Sangomas photographically.

The documentary aims of this are there, but secondary. Of course the photos are important and revealing cultural documents. But that is not all. The Sangomas photos want to stress the importance of the history which manifests itself in them, also for the Sangomas and the South-Africans themselves, want to be "an anchor in these times of unfocused change" (2). The vision is Janus-faced: On the one hand the photos point at history and tradition, on the other they want to help to find a place for this heritage in society.

This, however, will not work without a special photographic aesthetic. Photos are images, and they underlie at least partly the same conditions like all other images. That means that aesthetic strategies have to show themselves, insistently organizing the subject matter sketched above. A simple likeness will not do. The images of the healers usually concentrate on the central figure, it's Holy Ground or their lifeworld given as the background when the figure, sitting or standing, is in the foreground (like Sangoma Nobomvu), or as the surrounding environment, when there is, in front of the figure, a little proscenium left (like with Sangoma Mhlonga). Of course the healers appear with all their insignia and attributes, just like the European rulers in the past in the official images never failed to do. (3)

The iconography of the image of the sovereign does come into play in a way in these photographs: They are nearer to that than to the bourgeois portrait. They do, however, remind us of portraits in the "Grand Manner" like by Reynolds, as the light in the image clearly supports the dramatization and the strengthening of the person's impact. This stresses the dignity and the force and the character of the Sangomas, but even more so it stands for the permeation by the supernatural, a feature of the Sangomas, as they are seen to be in constant contact wit spirits and ancestors.

Peter Frank uses long-time exposure as an aesthetic strategy here, with a moveable light added. Long-time exposure demands that the person is quiet and holds still for a number of seconds. The sitter has to concentrate on him- or herself, cannot lose him- or herself in contingent gestures. The person becomes essential. The colors of the environment grow stronger and more massive in effect, seem to be charged with existential depth. The moveable light serves to let the person (or things in the room) stand out more sharply against the background, to paint them with light, so to say. The aesthetic presence thus created is extraordinary and uncommon, as one cannot live through like situations in reality. Photography here is creating a world of its own, a world which in this way only exists in photography and only can exist in photography. Reality isn't just being recorded, it is interpreted, and expressively so with the means of photography. The images don't give any rational explanation, rather they make a deeper experience possible. To the beholder they do not appear to be a construct of thinking, rather they offer a sensual experience wit emotional depth.

To find an equivalence to the spiritual representation of the Sangomas, to show them in a way transcending the normal encounter including in images (as a counterpart or alter ego), Peter Frank has created a kind of over-presence, which means that they have a stronger effect and stand out more clearly than in reality. There are some parallels to that in painting, like in the works of Hellmuth Eichner genannt Der Eichner (1946-2012; e. g. "Saubermänner" (The Clean Guys) of 1981 or the triptych "Dynamitfischer" (Dynamite Fishers) of 1982, or in the early works of Francis Bacon, like in the triptych "Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion" (1944, London, Tate Britain) of in his "Study for the nurse in the Battleship Potemkin" (1957, Frankfurt am Main, Städel). Or, earlier, in Gruenewald's ascension panel in the Isenheim altarpiece (1516, F-Colmar, Unterlindenmuseum).

Controlling the visual presence is effected, in the case of Frank, Eichner, Bacon, and Gruenewald, at first by centralization and isolation of the figure. That is an important pictorial strategy, as in real life we hardly ever meet a counterpart as a central figure, especially not as an isolated one. That underlines the importance of this position in the image and elevates the depicted person into a special and meaningful position worthy of communicating with. And then there is the concentration of the figure in the medium, especially in the face, which is a typical, an enhanced and amplified experience of art, as in such a way one will practically never experience anybody in real life. Color, or, as it were, light, concentrates beyond any "natural" measure or the intensity and luminosity are increased to a mark far beyond the horizon of everyday experience.

One might discuss whether this, in Peter Frank's work, presupposes experience in consuming media images, in order to be able to understand (like in Sangoma Galada and Sangoma Sikoti) that the lighter parts of the faces aren't physically real existent characteristics of the persons but just an effect of lighting. It might help but it is also not necessary, as this spiritualizing, so called "transcendental luciferous light" (4) has been known since the times of Gruenewald. And it just this light which helps the Sangomas obtain their heightened presence and magical effect, creating an equivalent to their role in life.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Notes

(1) Religions belong to the most long-lived traditions of this kind; see, for instance: Emile Durkheim: [The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life](http://www.archive.org/details/elementaryformso00durkrich). London: George Allen & Unwin 1915, esp. Conclusion, II

(2) See: Peter Frank, www.peterfrank-gallery.com/sangomas

(3) This is lacking only in the less official, more intimate and private portraits, like in Titian's image of the sitting Emperor Charles V. (1548; Munich, Alte Pinakothek, recently ascribed to Lambert Sustris 1515-1591, who accompanied Titian to Augsburg as a member of his workshop)

(4) For the luciferous light, the not reflected light shining from within itself evoking the transcendental (transzendentales Leuchtlicht), see: Wolfgang Schöne: Über das Licht in der Malerei. Berlin 1954