

Art historiography and *Bildwissenschaft*: new perspectives on some objects by the Venda sculptor, Phutuma Seoka

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It is argued that the apparatus of western art history has been sharpened by the current media consciousness. Typical art historical tools are self-consciously harnessed in the process of scrutinising objects which resist and expand these methods and theories. The focus is on some objects of Venda polychrome sculpture which “took the South African art world by storm” in the 1980s when these specimens of rural craftsmanship in wood were deemed fit to enter the gallery circuit. An analysis of the Venda sculptors’ religious and social knowledge of the use of patterned decoration on ritual tools in wood, and of performances by firelight of myths of origin with wooden dolls during initiation rituals, informs my alternative interpretation of the modern polychrome sculptures steering away from issues of cross-cultural aesthetics, the dialectic of modernism and traditionalism and post-colonial studies. Rather, I interpret the works as medium-self-conscious objects which extend their own cultural and social agency to communicate more widely to a non-initiate audience which may include visitors to an art museum. This shift of focus from a history of art to a history of media effects an altered perspective on the objects themselves and on the methods used to interpret them.

Kunsgeskiedenis en *Bildwissenschaft*: nuwe perspektiewe op sommige voorwerpe van die Venda beeldhouer, Phutuma Seoka

Daar word geredeneer dat die gereedskap van die westerse kunsgeskiedenis deur die gangbare sensitiviteit vir media verskerp is. Tipiese kunshistoriese apparaat word selfbewus ingespan in die proses om objekte te ondersoek wat hierdie metodes en teorieë teensit en uitbrei. Die fokus is op ’n paar Venda polichroom beeldhouwerke wat die “kunsêreld op hol gehad” het gedurende die 1980’s toe hierdie voorbeelde van landelike vakmanskap geskik geag is om kunsgalerye te betree. ’n Ontleding van die Venda beeldhouers se religieuse en sosiale kennis van die gebruik van patroondekorasie op rituele houtvoorwerpe, en van rituele uitvoerings van oorsprongmites met houtpoppe by vuurlig gedurende inisiasiegeleenthede, is ’n bron van my alternatiewe interpretasie van die moderne polichroom beeldhouwerk en beweeg weg van vroeë kruiskulturele estetika, die dialektiek van modernisme en tradisionalisme en die veld van postkoloniale studie. Dit word eerder as medium-bewuste objekte geïnterpreteer wat hul eie kulturele en sosiale vermoë om wyer te kommunikeer tot ’n nie-geïnisieerde gehoor (wat kunsmuseumbesoekers mag insluit) uitbrei. Hierdie verskuiwing van ’n geskiedenis van kuns na ’n geskiedenis van media het ’n veranderde perspektief ten gevolg op sowel die objekte as op die metodes waardeur dit geïnterpreteer word.

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In this article long-established art historical tools are self-consciously harnessed in the process of scrutinising objects which resist and expand these methods and theories. From the perspective of an integrated *Bildwissenschaft*, art historical theories are complemented by image theories and I draw on the refinement of the concept of “medium” in current image theory. I assume that the apparatus of western art history has been sharpened by the current media consciousness. Authors such as Hans Belting (2001) and James Guillory (2010) have directed attention to the non-differentiation or lack of distinction, over many centuries, of the concept of medium and between image and medium. However, when Belting considers the medium to be the host which facilitates the intercourse of images among human beings, the constant process of the migration of images among media is adumbrated. In this light I re-interpret some sculptures from the 1980s carved in wood by the rural South African Venda artist Phutuma Seoka (1922-1997) (cf Figure 1) in comparison with a few other Venda objects which “took the South African art world by storm” in the 1980s.¹

Phutuma Seoka, born in Mojaji, near Duiwelskloof, Lebowa in 1922 left school after Standard 6 and worked in Johannesburg for 16 years. After having established a herbalist trade with patent medicines and remedies in 1953, he started making sculptures in 1976 when a sangoma suggested it as a cure for a recurring dream of a large mountain snake (Rankin 1989: 158, Younge 1988: 37). During his career the style and size of his works varied, and he produced

1 Stephen Sack (1988: 27) points out in his catalogue for *The Neglected Tradition* exhibition in 1988 that “during the 1980s the work of a number of sculptors working in the northern part of the country, Gazankulu and Venda, came to the attention of academic researchers and galleries”. When their works were exhibited at the Tributaries exhibition (1985) it “caused a significant stir, bringing what appeared to be a completely autonomous aesthetic, an art that was in no way mediated by the forces of the white market or white teachers” (Sack 1988: 27). Ivor Powell reviewing this exhibition for *The Weekly Mail* explains the bewitchment of the European art world with the indigenous wood carvers: “Part sculptor, part shaman, part curio maker, part utensil carver, these artists work inside and for the communities to which they belong. It is precisely because they have preserved this relation between art and experience, because they have avoided any identification with an abstract and alien art world, that they are in fact such powerful artists” (Sack 1988: 27).

prototypes for his sons to copy. This invited the scepticism of the art world and the popularity of his works declined as a result.



Figure 1: Phutuma Seoka, *Figures as Molotsi* (1985). Enamel paint on wood (Younge 1988: 37)

From the perspective of a history of medium some of Phutuma Seoka's sculptures are read against the grain of the western development of the aesthetic conception of art and of the gradual historical differentiation and strict distinction of the various art media in western art history, which was followed by the current deliberate manipulation of multimedial effects in the "new media" system of the arts. I endeavour to analyse the Venda sculptures as medium-self-conscious objects which extend their own cultural and social agency to communicate more widely and persuasively between people and objects and among people via objects (Alfred Gell 1998),



Figure 2: Phutuma Seoka, *Township walk* (1985). Enamel paint on wood (Younge 1988: 37)

including a non-initiate audience of visitors to an art museum. This entails investigating the processes by means of which known materials and established media are exploited in such ways as to extend the aesthetic functions of the carved objects; or inversely, the processes of transformation, translation and re-mediation by means of which a wider variety of spectators are reached and moved by evocative objects. Some propositions by Aby Warburg are reconsidered from the perspective of a history of medium in order to accrue a historical view of possibly relevant theories for current questions in global art history. This approach steers away from issues of cross-cultural aesthetics, the dialectic of modernism and traditionalism and post-colonial studies.

Two striking features of Phutuma Seoka's striding city slicker which has been titled *Township walk* (ca 1985) (cf Figure 2) motivate my

interpretation, and both relate to movement. The first feature is the enlivening of the sculpture's surface by the polychromy of glistening enamel paints. This animation is enhanced by painted circle, dot (or eye-of-the-crocodile) and chevron motifs derived from the carved surface decoration of traditional ritual utensils. The second is the suggestion of movement concentrated in the striding figure through the sculptor's choice of a single piece of wood and his decision to retain the integrity of its natural embranchments.

1. Surface qualities and decoration

The most conspicuous feature of Phutuma Seoka's sculptures, apart from their deliberate elongation and distortion, is the attention to surface qualities and decoration. Although the aspect of the polychromy of the Venda sculptures has prompted the most uncomfortable reactions from art historians,² it is to my mind the most suggestive indication of the density of their aesthetic meaning.

The wooden figures are painted in glistening commercial enamel paints in primary colours, and a distinct range of painted chevron and concentric-circle-and-dot motifs are added onto the painted backgrounds. The green clad figure of *Township walk*, for example, is decorated with what resembles scabs and teeth, respectively evoked by black angular patterns and white dots. The gaudy yellow and white painted surfaces of the other reptilian figures are covered in circle-and-dot patterns. These ornamental layers are suggestive of a range of tight-fitting suits of clothing of various textures and designs, and thus draw more attention to surface planes. Some of these areas seem to reverberate, suggesting movement reminiscent of "optic art" effects.

2 In *Images of wood: aspects of the history of sculpture in 20th-century South Africa*, Elizabeth Rankin (1989: 61) apologetically states that polychromy (discussed almost as an appendage at the end of the catalogue) "may seem to many to be one of the less acceptable techniques...", and from a formalist perspective that: "If Seoka's work might seem to be understood as a latter-day adherence to the principle of 'truth to material', this is contradicted by the bright enamel paint with which he masks the natural grain of the wood" (Rankin 1989: 52).



Figure 3: Door (*ngwena*). Venda, Makumbane. Wood, ca 120 cm high.
Photograph by Anitra Nettleton (Nettleton 1989: 75)

The mythic meanings that are transmitted through patterned chevron and concentric-circle-and-dot or “eye-of-the-crocodile” motifs can only be understood in the context of the social order grounded in Venda myths of origin. The deep cultural heritage of Venda decorative motifs is uncovered by an investigation of the non-figurative Venda woodcarving traditions associated with the decoration of divining bowls, wooden doors and hemispherical drums used in the royal court (*cf* Figures 3 and 4). Nettleton (1989: 67) conveys that until the 1950s large settlements in the Northern Transvaal still adhered to architectural, spatial, hierarchical and social structures based on an intricate cosmological symbolism. In Nettleton’s description, which

constitutes one recording among changing and varied versions, the central metaphor is of the chief as a crocodile in his pool (Nettleton 1984: 227). According to this version of the Venda myth of origin, the earth was created from the primal waters, of which Lake Fundudzi in Venda (today's Limpopo province) (*cf* Figure 5) is said to be a replica. It was created by Kwuzane who has withdrawn from human affairs, but Lake Fundudzi is said to be the “swimming pool” of his *alter persona* Mwari-Raluvhimba who is venerated by the Venda as the supreme spirit. The pool as well as the capital have at their centre the chief/crocodile and are bounded by the python. The python, like the crocodile, is said to “belong to the chief” (Nettleton 1984: 228-9). The lake becomes a symbol of the Venda nation with the python, writhing around the lake, the guardian of fertility and the real intermediary between the world of the spirits and ancestors present in the lake and that of the living (Nettleton 1984: 231). Compositions of patterns on doors and divining bowls not only imitate the texture of reptile skins (*cf* Figure 6), but ambivalently suggest both crocodile and snake, and through them the whole range of symbols associated with the lake (Nettleton 1984: 233-4).



Figure 4: Divining bowl (ca 1930) from Vendale, Northern Province (then Transvaal). Wood, 10 x 40 x 40 cm. Anthropology Collection, University Museum, Stellenbosch, South Africa.



Figure 5: Lake Fundudzi in Limpopo Province, South Africa (Photograph by Johan Human, May 2012)



Figure 6: Door (*ngwena*). Venda. From Stay (1931) *The Bavenda*, Plate XVI (Nettleton 1989: 74)

The meaning of the visual language of the objects decorating the royal court, as well as of the spoken metaphorical language of the court, is learnt at the major initiation ceremony, the *Domba* (Nettleton 1989: 67) which still takes place nowadays. The *Domba* is the last stage in a cycle of three initiation schools, primarily for girls (Nettleton 1984: 367). Roumeguere-Eberhard (Nettleton 1984: 373) views the *Domba* as the intermediary between a mythic and a social reality. So-called *Domba* dolls (cf Figure 7), the only figurative sculpture in wood and clay produced in traditional Venda culture, are used in the shows or so-called *matano* which constitute one type of instruction at *Domba* initiation schools. The instruction of the symbolic visual language of objects takes place through the manipulation of the stocky, thickset dolls in the manner of hand puppets, often in the light of the *Domba* fire.



Figure 7: Venda initiation figures (*matano*). Artists unknown (1978). Venda, Twinga. Wood, 20 to 30 cm. Photograph Nettleton (1989: 70)

There is little resemblance between the small, squat *Domba* dolls and Seoka's almost life-size elongated figures apart from the interest in

clothing and surface. The *Domba* dolls are often dressed in traditional attire made from animal skin. In other instances, painted surfaces suggest modern clothing. However, carved or painted ornamental motifs are not documented to have been used on the surfaces of *Domba* dolls as on Seoka's sculptures.

From a systematic point of view, the transference of ornamental motifs, traditionally carved into ritual objects, onto Seoka's figural sculptures in the form of paint entails not merely a translation from the medium of woodcarving to that of painting, but also the invention of a new evocative combination of sculpture and painting. I argue that by transforming decorative motifs previously carved into traditional objects such as drums and doors into painted surfaces on figural sculptures reminiscent of the clothing of *Domba* dolls, Seoka self-consciously generates a tension between materiality and illusion. The contrasting effects of the sculptural and painterly media draw attention to the materiality of the object, while simultaneously causing transcendence into a sphere of imagination and fiction. Thus the image gains in persuasive powers and the powers of evocation. The deliberate and self-conscious re-mediation or translation of known media and materials alters the reception of these objects when spectators react to this self-awareness of the object. This testifies to new understandings of the image as well as of image makers themselves and could either be described as a crisis or as a process of differentiation.

The aesthetic use of meaningful ritual patterns on objects designed for wider transmission to non-initiates entails an intricate process of the transfiguration of mythic beliefs. Paul Ricoeur (1967: 5) argues that when myth loses its explanatory function, its exploratory significance is revealed and it then contributes to symbolic understanding. Thus it becomes an important dimension of modern thought. By this he means that when myth is demythologised, it gains the symbolic function "of discovering and revealing the bond between man and what he considers sacred" (Ricoeur 1967: 5) and that this is part of a process of modernisation. The struggle which this process entails underpins my unfolding interpretation of the Venda sculptures.

The art historical significance of the decision to transfer motifs such as the "eye-of-the-crocodile" pattern, formerly used to decorate ritual objects, onto the surfaces of sculptural figures for a wider market

of non-initiates also needs to be articulated in terms of the history of polychromy. Polychrome sculpture has always produced tensions between structure and ornament, the natural play of light and shade on forms in the round (associated with sculpture), on the one hand, and the illusionary depiction of light and shade by means of colour (associated with painting), on the other. The strict distinction during the eighteenth century among the various arts is based on an aesthetic conception of art in the fine arts system that developed in the west since the Renaissance. Sensitised from this art historical perspective, Seoka's polychromy could be described as a combination of sculpture and painting similar to antique and medieval examples from "before the age of art" (in the sense of Hans Belting 1994). The distinction and over-specialisation of the various arts in the modern era in the west have sharpened the apparatus of art history to distinguish typical features and differentiate the characteristics of each medium in isolation; epistemological tools that benefit the analysis of the diverse objects which populate postmodern museums. Seoka's work is not strange in the context of the use of objects either coloured with paint or by glowing digital screens in modern and postmodern sculptures and installations (Manoni 2004).

However, art historical descriptions of polychrome sculpture often give a sense of its shifting and uncomfortable fit in the language of art history. Art historical descriptors of the trembling, shimmering, and glittering effects of paint on sculptural objects often connect it with a range of images suggesting hierophantic and visionary experiences, animation, magic and phantasmagoria. Animation has been implemented as a hermeneutic device to interpret the shimmering effects produced by polychrome ornamented surfaces at least since the prehistoric lighting of lard lamps in caves at Lascaux (Lewis-Williams 2002: 220), by eighteenth century viewers "violently" interpreting art illuminated by the light of torches (Bätschmann 1985), and at the time of Romantic phantasmagorias or magic lantern shows when both artistic and scientific images were meant to "glow jewel-like in the dark" (Stafford 1990: 158). An excellent example of an art historical description of the beguiling effects of polychromy is from Michael Baxandall's *The limewood sculptors of Renaissance Germany*:

Few of the great high altarpiece retables have preserved their original polychromy, but those that have are like nothing else. Seen at their

best, which is on a day of mixed sun and cloud, they become a sort of figured colour organ. Their instability becomes hallucinatory, contradicting any normal mental mechanism of size and colour constancy. They impose illusions of movement and of reverse depth: a light on a dark can suddenly become a dark on a light. Because one's usual perceptual skills are invalidated for a time, they effectively deny the mundane and become religious images of a singular kind (Baxandall 1980: 42).

The pulsating life suggested in Seoka's figures by the dance of light and shade over shaped surfaces, often decorated with seemingly shifting coloured dots, as on the snake-like walking stick in the work titled *Township walk*, and on the curiously alive hat in the work which has been titled *Snake dream* (cf Figure 8), recall the movement of the performative use of the *Domba* dolls during initiation practices by firelight. The suggestion of movement by the flickering flames playing over the manipulated dolls in use (Nettleton 1984: 374-5) is now evoked by the painted decoration on the sculptural figures, and spectators react to this self-aware use of the interplay between diverse media. By being reminiscent of the older medium of firelight the history of various image understandings is layered in the image itself. This attests to a new understanding of the persuasive powers of the image and a changing evaluation of the image as a medium of evocation. In the new type of image the effect and credibility of the image is more dependent on technical skills and artistic-poetic competence. It must be remembered, however, that these woodcarvers persist in producing objects with diverse image functions, for instance, objects for hire used in initiation ceremonies, sculptures for sale on the tourist market, and commissioned work for galleries and institutions. This differentiation of aesthetic functions should not be read as a progressive development favouring art images. Phutuma Seoka's work declined in popularity for the very reason that he did not conform to assumptions about the exultation of art objects above objects with other image functions from the western art world perspective.



Figure 8: Phutuma Seoka, *Snake dream* (1985). Enamel paint on wood
(Detail from Younge 1988: 37)

2. Evocations of bodily movement and empathy

The second type of motion I discuss in Seoka's sculptures is the evocation of bodily movement which distinguishes them from the stiff *Domba* dolls used in ritual performances. There is an ambivalence of optimism and fear in Phutuma Seoka's *Township walk* (1985), a woodcarved sculpture of an elongated body which seems to be dressed in a tight-fitting shimmering green faux leather crocodile suit. The eyes of the backward-leaning and dynamically forward-striding snake-limbed man are dilated in heightened awareness or dread. Similarly,

it is uncertain whether the reptilian outfit in another sculpture by Seoka, which has been called *Snake dream* (1985), is encumbering or energising. In spite of being burdened by an apparently oppressive cap resembling an ominously alive-looking python, the figure seems to energetically thrust its arm forward as it strides out. In a sculpture called *Crocodile head* (1987) (cf Figure 9) by another Venda artist, Johannes Maswanganyi, the headdress of a terrified figure with gnashed teeth has bizarrely transformed into an alive-looking crocodile head.



Figure 9: Johannes Maswanganyi, *Crocodile head* (1987) (detail). Enamel paint on wood (Younge 1988: 43)

I argue that the animate hesitancy, often mixed with hope, brought to mind by these representations of momentary bodily stances, is evocative of sutures or crossroads which “slow down” interpretation and direct attention to the act of interpretation itself. The indeterminacy

of the works solicits the expansion and re-assessment of older art historiographical approaches.

It was exactly this kind of unresolved image which interested Aby Warburg in his research on *Pathos formulae* in Renaissance art-art produced at a historical juncture when shifts were taking place to shape an as yet unstable and unformed concept of art. Warburg's assertion of the importance of movement to uncover the role of cultural memory in the transference of artistic meaning aids in uncovering various layers of contradictory and unresolved understandings of image functions embedded in the Vanda sculptures. When Aby Warburg (1866-1929) investigated the Renaissance paintings of Botticelli for his dissertation produced in 1893, he noticed the intensification of movement in the gestures and flowing windswept garments of the depicted bodies, in particular with reference to the preceding medieval period. He detected the source of these specific gestures of intense movement in ancient sculpture and asserted that such pagan bodily gestures in sculptural form were revelations of emotion and traces of a pagan apprehension of the world. Thus he argued that the transforming energy captured by the suggested torsions of the body unleashes cultural memory: "Wind and motion not only make the figures seem unveiled; they uncover a primal authenticity that other representations lack" (Foster 1999: 14). For Warburg the Renaissance became a battleground of ideas and forces, an age of transition and cultural upheaval. Works of art were no longer considered passive objects for beholders to deal with as they chose, but rather fraught with complexities and misunderstandings (Tomlinson 2004: 193, Foster 1999: 6-7, 13-9, 36). Warburg defined the phenomenon of the "irruption" of "alien figures", heavily charged with meaning, from remote antiquity into the world of the Renaissance by the concept of the *Pathosformel* (Dittmann 1967: 98). The pathetic movement of Seoka's figures may become clues for the empathetic reader to uncover more layers of meaning in the works.

Warburg is also known for his interest in theories of empathy, which extended to an interest in the discourse on mimesis in anthropology. Warburg devised an art historiographical method of active intervention in the process of understanding and interpreting works when, through his identificatory attention to specific gestures and motifs, antique nymphs were seen to come alive. For Warburg the

analogies between the historically remote periods and cultures of the Renaissance, antiquity and the modern observer are expressed and discerned in representations of agitated and passionate movement. On Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, the seemingly unlikely juxtapositioning of current and archaeological images was inspired by his method to enliven images in the present. Philippe-Alain Michaud (2004: 16) suggested that the images in Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, mounted onto black backgrounds in his library (cf Figure 11), use a technique of activating visual data that is comparable to those used in cinema.

An empathetic understanding of the evocation of movement in Seoka's work could aid in uncovering significant fragments of cultural memory. Seoka chooses to exploit the inherent suggestions of movement in whole branches of wood by carefully reworking and enhancing their expressive qualities to resemble moving limbs. Paul Ricoeur (1967) evokes the power of myth to manifest anew, or rather to remain an active ingredient, so to speak, of all symbolism. Whereas myths seek to account for the "crisis" in the bond between humankind and the sacred, he argues, when myths are no longer considered to be explanations, they are demythologised to become symbols, and thus remain a dimension of modern thought. Modern Venda sculptors' idiosyncratic use of the wood material acknowledges the plenitude of meaning of the mythical cosmos. Paul Ricoeur (1967) describes this mythical substratum as the "cosmic ground" of all symbolism. As in representations of Warburgian *Pathos formulae* this semantic saturation evokes lost or irrupting dimensions of symbolic understanding.

In art history the renewal of empathetic approaches by art historians such as Michael Fried, Susan Sidlauskas and Richard Shiff are informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological psychology of the 1960s (Esrock 2010: 220). As child of historicism, art history has been preoccupied with the distance between spectator and image that must somehow be traversed. Since the discovery of historicity in modern culture time has been considered a permanent source of new interpretations according to new convictions, applications and uses. The realisation that texts are not timeless promoted an awareness of historical distance, a sense of strangeness, and a need to bridge that distance (De Boer 2000: 165). The eighteenth century experienced a resurrection of myths of animation and a concomitant strengthening of beliefs in the power of images and spectators over each other. The

reappearance during this era of the Pygmalion myth testifies to the renewed belief in the powers of the spectator to become completely lost in the object, so that the distinction not only between subject and object, but also between living and dead becomes blurred.

Experiences of getting lost in the art object had a special appeal and involved an ambiguous mixture of fear and understanding. (Bätschmann 1985: 213). Descriptions of such experiences converged in nineteenth century theories of empathy, as well as in mimetic theories of anthropology (Esrock 2010: 218, Rampley 2001: 122-3). In recent research empathy theory has been reinforced by empirical studies as has been documented by Ellen Esrock (2010). Current global art history grapples with difference and estrangement not only across historical periods, but also across geographical zones and cultural divides. The recent revival of interest in empathy theories in cultural discourse (Koss 2006: 139) may partly be explained by the concern with the self-estrangement and destabilisation of empathetic experiences as a potential means to bridge cultural distance. In the context of digital imaging it is currently accepted that the animation of images is an anthropological constant and that immersive practices are not confined to any specific culture, but that more broadly it characterises the human use of images over many centuries.

We may now return to Phutuma Seoka's work to discover what an empathetic interpretation of Seoka's work may reveal. The ambivalence of optimism and fear in Phutuma Seoka's *Township walk* representing the snake-limbed man with dilated eyes, dressed in a crocodile suit and *Snake dream*, representing a man wearing a cap resembling an ominously alive-looking python, may suggest displacement. Are the reptilian cap and suit experienced as protective sheaths, as leftovers from an ordered rural traditional world, or are they modern-day transformations, examples of the re-enchantment of the new everyday reality of commercially available mass-produced fashionable clothing? If we consider the bodily experience or embodied action of sliding into a shiny fake animal suit, there is a two-way transfer at stake. The body inhabits and animates the shiny synthetic material, but, on the other hand, the suit channels and shapes the movements of the clothed body. Like the intermediary writhing python around the pool that negotiates between the known and the unknown, the reptilian clothes, themselves products of commercial capitalism, are animated

from within. The ambivalent two-way process of embodied sliding into a reptilian suit whereby the traditional and the modern are not replaced by each other is an aspect of modernism. The power of myth manifests anew, or rather remains an active ingredient of all symbolism (Ricoeur 1967).

In order to dramatise this process visually I hold up Phutumama Seoka's work as if in a latter-day magic lantern show, in comparison with Christian Boltanski's *Shadows* which was also produced in the 1980s (*cf* Figure 10). As elongations, distortions and enlargements of the small *Domba* dolls, Seoka's works ambiguously become both playful and sweet, and sinister and scary. Similar to the small objects in Boltanski's installation which become overpowering in projection, the group of almost life-size works produced by Seoka, a migrant worker who commuted between rural areas and Johannesburg by means of taxis, not only exudes vibrancy, self-confidence and playfulness, but also fear and bewilderment.



Figure 10: Christian Boltanski, *Shadows* (1991, 1992) (Manoni 2004)

In comparison with some other Venda sculptures of the period, Seoka's reptilian men seem more at ease. I have referred to *Crocodile head* (1987) by the Venda artist, Johannes Maswanganyi, in which the headdress of a terrified figure with gnashed teeth has bizarrely transformed into a seemingly alive crocodile head. Similarly, in comparison with *Sangoma* (1991) by the Venda sculptor Owen Ndou (cf Figure 11) which depicts a dreadful experience of entrapment and bondage, the fateful antagonism of constant struggle with inexplicable superhuman powers, Seoka's men seem more comfortable with the animal. Seoka, it has been argued, compares an immersive performance of mimicry, with the donning of a suit of clothes - in this instance, what seems to be a slick artificial leather outfit. Yet the juxtapositioning of Seoka's and Ndou's sculptures highlights the resemblances between the pairs of enlarged bare feet and fearfully dilated eyes. The open collar decorated with white dots of the gentleman of Seoka's *Township walk* begins to resemble a monstrous open crocodile mouth.



Figure 11: Owen Ndou, *Sangoma* (1991). Wood with acrylic paint
164 x 40 x 45 cm. Johannes Stegmann Art Gallery, UFS, Bloemfontein

Warburg's approach has aided in divulging in the sculptures the struggle of an unceasing iconoclasm; the transformation of conflicted image functions in all historical processes of image-making where different histories involve each other in varied understandings of history and time (Ricoeur 1965). Aby Warburg's assertion of the importance of movement to uncover the role of cultural memory in the transference of artistic meaning, and Paul Ricoeur's claim that the rich and charged language of symbols derive from their changeability and power to make mythic content return in a new way, have directed me in a re-interpretation of the medium self-conscious evocation of movement in some Venda sculptures. This approach has highlighted the significance of cultural memory for present interpretation and slanted the perspective on some current art historical concepts.

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