

Silence as an act of recovery

KATHLEEN MACQUEEN & JO RACTLIFFE

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landscape as pathology; travelling through unfamiliar terrain; being
without language; the ethics of silence; re-imagining war; listening without
the need for cohesive narrative.

“In their day,” writes photographer Jo Ractliffe in the introduction to her book *As Terras do Fim do Mundo* (2010), “Portuguese colonials referred to Angola’s interior as ‘as terras do fim do mundo’ – the lands of the end of the world – and it took them nearly 400 years to leave the coast and extend their exploits inland. Even later, during the struggle for liberation, it was understood that whoever held the port capital, Luanda, held Angola. The rest didn’t figure.” Neither did it figure for South Africa’s apartheid military, who for decades waged multiple wars against Namibian and Angolan opponents – mostly in Angola, a country steeped in its own pre- and post-independence conflicts. In 2009/10, Ractliffe travelled through Angola with a group of former soldiers, most of them South African, many returning to the battlefields for the first time since the region’s various wars. This conversation, between Kathleen MacQueen and Ractliffe, investigates and anatomises the photographs she made on these journeys, photographs that mediate between a land and its traumatic history.

Kathleen MacQueen Thinking about Susan Sontag’s early essays included in *On Photography* (1977), I question photography’s value as documentation of reality. After all, an image can only be a perception of reality processed through the influence of time, place, and awareness. Looking at your images, particularly this latest series, *As Terras do Fim do Mundo*, I consider a way of seeing rather than a documentation of fact. In this sense, the American geographer D.W. Meinig introduced in the 1970s a hypothetical landscape with ten viewers; each saw the same landscape differently: as nature, habitat, artefact, system, problem, resources, ideology, history, place, and aesthetic. He failed to foresee an eleventh viewer: you, who present a way of seeing landscape as *conscience*. Why landscape, why Angola, and why now?

Jo Ractliffe I agree, photography is very much about *seeing* – and being critically aware of what such seeing means. In her book, *Empathic Vision* (2002), Jill Bennett talks about a seeing that reflects upon “conditions of perception”. I like how this speaks to the contexts that frame how we perceive and understand things – and also, our felt response to what’s around us. But I don’t think it’s a question of reality *versus* perception. When photographing, I’m equally attentive to what’s out there and what’s in me: the ‘fact’ of that place and its emotional and projective impact. And, if I stay alert, something happens; it’s like entering a third space where things merge and the relationship becomes ambiguous. It’s interesting to think about this. I used to argue that photography was all about seeing; I used to resist the specifics of time and place – the

fixity of the photographic document. But I couldn't have made these images of Angola anywhere else, or at any other time. It may sound obvious to say this, after all – as you say – photographs are about the particularities of time and place and perception. But it's more than that. In Angola I entered into *something* with that landscape; it was like finding a match where there was no longer a question about what was in the landscape or in me, reality or perception.

So why landscape? I'm a little hesitant to even call it *landscape*; it's more about space and the ways space speaks to the things I'm interested in expressing in my photographs. And to be honest, I prefer working with space and structures and objects. I have difficulty with what it means to photograph people – the complex, often fraught, exchanges it entails. David Goldblatt says I like landscape because it doesn't talk back. I see landscape as a kind of intermediary; for all its silence and however it may seem resistant, even intractable, it is nevertheless very *present*. I also like the solitariness that comes with the process – the road, the journeys, time and distance.

My interest in Angola goes back to the mid-1980s when I was making the *Nadir* series and happened to read *Another Day of Life* (1976), Ryszard Kapuściński's account of events leading up to Angola's independence and subsequent civil war. It resonated with what was happening here in South Africa during the 1980s, a time of great political upheaval and mass mobilisation against the apartheid government, countered by severe state repression and violence. By then South Africa was also already entrenched in Angola, fighting against the Namibian liberation movement, South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), and the Angolan army (FAPLA, or *Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola*). But for most South Africans, it was a secret war conducted in a distant elsewhere known simply as "The Border". So one of the reasons for embarking on this project was an attempt to locate the imaginary of that war, to engage its myths and retrieve a place for memory.

But I'm interested in this idea of conscience. Curiously, when making this work, I had an idea of landscape as pathology. I'm not quite sure what I mean by that but it helped focus my seeing. Perhaps there's a connection with your idea; so how would you see landscape as conscience?

KM It is the sense of presence that your images enhance rather than obliterate. These spaces become palpably present, but they also have history written through them; they have witnessed actions, both generative and degenerative. Though I realise I cannot "read" these spaces with complete understanding – the forensic details being foreign to me – nonetheless the pervasive recognition is that the landscape breathes. It is



On the road to Cuito Cuanavale I, 2009

wounded terrain, but still living. It has a story to tell, and it is a story of trauma with both perpetrators and victims, both human and territorial. In looking at these images I distinctly sense that this terrain is not what it once was and that, rather than give us access to a nostalgic view of history, it is a visible warning of the impact of disregard, collateral damage, and even disgrace. I think of the markers as symptoms of trauma as a visible manifestation of an ordeal now buried or obscured. How then does this land become a metaphor for life both human and environmental? What could you discern from being there, and how did you learn to read its markers?

JR When I first entered southern Angola my experience was not unlike what you describe. I was very aware of being without language; sometimes I simply didn't know what I was looking at, or whether I was looking at something from 20 or 30 years ago, or just the month before. Of course, I had maps and I knew a bit about what had happened, where and when, and there were obvious signs – bombed bridges, broken buildings, shells of tanks and armoured vehicles. But those things didn't really interest me. What struck me repeatedly was a peculiar sense of collapsed time and a silence that was very powerful. It was more than the silence of absence; it was – as you say – a living breathing presence, like in Pablo Neruda's 'Furies and Sufferings' (1934): "There is one hour alone, long as an artery... and the patience of crumpled time".

So my experience in that landscape, literally finding my way into meaning, was something that came over time, over repeated journeys. Those roadside markers, for instance – and I must have photographed hundreds of them – were initially unfathomable, like secret signs open to all sorts of imaginings. And it was only on my second trip when I took a walk along a path, that I discovered they identified safe passages through minefields. Others remained mysterious, like the two memorial-like structures near Namibe. But whatever the reason, they registered the traces of a human presence as if to announce, like emissaries: "I was here. I did this." These are tricky questions, hard to put answers into words. So turning this back to you, as someone not from South Africa, Namibia or Angola, how would you read these images?

KM In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag suggests, "The memory of war, however, like all memory, is mostly local." She adds, "Most wars do not acquire the requisite fuller meaning." Your images mediate between a land and its history but they also reveal the present conditions – as well as existential questions – of the traces of conflicts. Physical distance does not always equal emotional distance. You describe the feeling of being without language and "finding [your] way into



On the road to Cuito Cuanavale IV, 2010

meaning” – the land did not want to give up its secrets easily but you gave in to being lost, of discovering the language of markers slowly and respectfully. This perspective has a great deal to offer anyone.

As for language, Meinig suggests that landscape can be read. I read your images as an effort to understand metaphorically the broad expanse of space but also to grasp the particulars of detail, location and historic specificity. You give us very precise text captions to a cruel historical era that appeared to be a local conflict but which you and I each came to realise, through our own investigations, was also a global scramble for resources. How ironic that a land full of natural resources has been laid to waste. How ironic that what is there (Angola) has been partially determined from here (the global economy). It is our choice to ignore what remains, or to open ourselves to their stories; it is a matter of being receptive.

Silence has so many implications and is an apt beginning for reading your images. Silence can evoke an absence or cessation of communication, but also a reflection or an accounting of the moment. We loudly fill our everyday lives in a panicked battering to understand, when in actuality we need silence to awaken ourselves to the conditions of others; it is a path to awareness. I am currently conducting a speech fast in all spheres of my life except writing, teaching and emergencies. This is a personal quest and a political gesture to understand the limitations placed on communication, but also to appreciate the act of silence. I don't know how much your work prompted my decision but I initiated this project after reflecting on the idea of finding one's way without language, so visible in your images. For a writer, you can imagine this is a significant process, to abandon language within even a portion of one's life.

You say you “like the solitariness that comes with the process – the road, the journeys, time and distance”. Your work over the years has focused on both political and personal spaces. Angola as a subject cannot avoid its political context. What is personal about these two Angolan projects, *Terreno Ocupado* (2008) and *As Terras do Fim do Mundo*? Where have they taken you as an artist and as a person? What emotions are carried in this land, both for you and for Angola itself?

JR I don't know where to start; there's so much to say about how it has all unfolded and what it has meant. I've spoken a bit about this collision of past and present in the landscape, but from the beginning it was also colliding inside me. I remember about a week into my first trip to Luanda in 2007, I was in Roque Santeiro market, and the thought struck me: “This is where *Mad Max* meets *The Canterbury Tales*.” In that moment I *recognised* the landscape of my *Nadir* series. I saw it, already there, in that



Unmarked mass grave on the outskirts of Cuito Cuanavale, 2009



Deminer near Cuvelai, 2009



Mine pit near Mucundi, 2009

place. It was like the world suddenly shape shifted and I knew where I was and what I was looking for. It has been like this ever since I started this work, as if I've occupied two parallel worlds simultaneously: real and imaginary, past and present. It has taken me back nearly three decades to a particular moment in South Africa's history and what it meant for me, both as a person and a photographer – then and now. It's impossible to describe. You know those lines from songs about everything bringing you to this moment? It is a bit like that – and, as you said earlier, “a matter of being receptive”.

Then there was also the actual experience of being in that landscape: travelling through unfamiliar terrain in the company of ex-soldiers who were going back to battlegrounds for the first time in thirty odd years. Seeing through their eyes, bearing witness to their experiences. These men are of my generation; were boys who left school in the 1970s and went to war. Being a girl, military conscription was not something I had to contend with. So going back to Angola with them was challenging, exhilarating, and painful – at times hard to stay in my own skin. But it expanded my understanding of myself, and also of people who come from very different ideological and cultural positions from mine. I'm not sure whether this could have happened in our usual worlds, but the conditions of that kind of travel, what it required both physically and psychologically, created a very particular trust between us, even empathy.

KM So there is a subtext to the visual manifestation of the project! There always is, isn't there, an undercurrent that prompts the telling of a story even if the story is manifestly different from the motivation? This is what trauma is and what dreams are made of, both latent and manifest content. How did these ex-soldiers read the terrain? Could they distinguish the markers? Could they recognise where they were now and how much did being in the environment trigger what they had experienced then? I found your sparse attention to human presence fascinating but in your closing image, *Soldiers training in the desert, near Namibe* (2009), a small band of figures – they are so small they are nearly imperceptible – walk along the horizon line of a vast expanse, much like the persons following Death in Ingmar Bergman's famous scene in *The Seventh Seal* (1957). What occurred in Angola, what continues to occur in conflicts around the world, will have apocalyptic effects as we awaken to the impact these seemingly insular traumata cause on our collective conscious as a human race.

JR Ah, the subtext... this could prompt a whole new conversation! I find it hard to speak about how the soldiers experienced going back into Angola. They had their



Soldiers training in the desert near Namibe, 2009



Burning field, Dombe Grande, 2010

individual reasons and they came with different experiences of the war, depending on the circumstances of their military service and rank, the operations they were part of and, of course, the battles they fought. (Incidentally, one trip included Angolan ex-soldiers, which introduced a very different view.) I'm not sure what they were looking for, beyond the immediate desire to return to a place that figured so powerfully in shaping them as young men, or even whether they themselves really knew what they were inviting in by going back. Many of the men I travelled with expressed their need to "reconcile the past". For some, that past symbolised pride, loyalty and duty towards country; for others, a deep wrong forced upon them. But regardless of your starting point, unexpected things happen on journeys. Many found themselves unsettled, provoked in ways they could not have anticipated – I admired their courage.

But your questions make me think of our discussion about silence. South Africa's Border War, as it is colloquially known, represents a fraught history that has, effectively, at least publicly, been shrouded in silence for decades. It is not the reflective silence you speak of, but rather a haunting silence, which blankets shame and disgrace, disassociation and abandonment. It is the kind of silence that dispossesses us of our past and the path to memory. We need to re-imagine that war, to hear its stories, in all their intricate and contradictory versions. And we need to hear them with openness and acceptance, knowing the task is not about finding a cohesive narrative, not about containing the impossibility of that war – but listening anyway.

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Unidentified memorial in the desert, south of Namibe II, 2010