

Extended Abstract - Andrea Stultiens

Making Space, Expanding Frames, Multiplying Selves

Activating people, poses and a place with the William Matlala Archive.

"My photographs show the love people that people give to themselves. The love that people 'behave' in front of the camera at that time. Though under severe pressure of the state. But, people wake up, look after themselves, and say I'm Alive. [T]hey went out to their daily chores [...] in a very clean, disciplined way and showed deep interest into themselves."

"This part, from this corner, to the corner there, was my studio, where I take thousands and thousands of photographs. The street was my workplace. I wake up everyday knowing that someone will need pictures in this corner."

William Matlala, Germiston, Gauteng, July 2025



The contribution I propose results from artistic research grounded in a methodology of collective making resonating with the subtheme of Care and Calibration. Visual experiments resulting from a collaborative activation of the William Matlala Archive, will allow us to think about the diachronic affordances of posed portraits as placeholders for a better life and public space as placeholders for the photostudio.

The space demarkated by William Matlala in gestures and the words quoted above does not look anything like a conventional studio. It is the front of a building, painted in shades of grey with yellow details, in George Town, Germiston, a largely industrial town of Gauteng's East Rand, in South Africa.

With a time based rendering of photographs, we will find ourselves in Germiston, and travel back to the 1980s, the last decade in which the state violence afforded by apartheid was formally in place. William Matlala was one of many young people looking for an income that could sustain his own life and in addition support his family living 300km further north in a rural part of the country. After working several other jobs, he landed at the Trimpak food packaging factory, where he would work as a machine operator, while developing his photographic practice.

Initially, William Matlala used a camera saved from being trashed by his mother who lived in a village in Limpopo. For the better part of the 1980s, William Matlala (SA, 1957) offered photographic services to the people around him which mainly consisted of fellow residents of the hostel in which he lived together with other precarious laborers, and his co-workers at Trimpak.

William Matlala and I met for the first time in 2024 and started a collaboration with the aim to find audiences for the portraits he produced of his co-workers. He hopes for these portraits to contribute to conversations about labour conditions and the potential of labour unions. Last July, William Matlala and I visited the site of the Trimpak factory and met two of his former colleagues, who were both happy that we kept "their memories alive".

Most prominent among the people who "needed pictures" were William's colleagues. They laboured side by side with William inside the Trimpak factory and, particularly on Fridays and Saturdays after they received their wages, would engage in the production of portraits. These pictures usually ended up as 4x6" in their personal photo-albums or were sent to family members as testimonies to their wellbeing.

William Matlala's colleagues not only dressed for the occasion, they also coordinated the colours of their outfits amongst themselves and would lend out accessories such as bags to one another to further enhance the testimony. Their 'photographic needs', then, involved a careful type of self styling, which in hindsight makes it possible, easy even, to remember elements of life under apartheid with the fondness South African historian Jacob Dlamini discusses in his seminal book *Native Nostalgia* (2009, p.13).

The portraits produced by William Matlala and the self-fashioning by his colleagues can be placed in a tradition that from the South African context was powerfully brought to the fore by Santu Mofokeng (SA, 1956-2020) in his seminal photo-project *The Black Photo Album / Look At Me* (2015), and in a contemporary relation with work by South African artists such as Lebohang Kganye (SA, 1990), and Lindokuhle Sobekwa (SA, 1995) who use photographs from their family collections to reflect on past and present day realities in more and less speculative and documentary ways.

These projects and practices activate a limited numbers of photographs. The spatial particularity and the quantity of photographs in William Matlala's archive, affords other reflections on space / portrait relations, on how a problematic, violent past can be accessed and reflected upon decades later in a nuanced way that I aim to bring to the fore through artistic interventions.

The proposed presentation will take the form of a film-render for the duration of the allocated times slot, with a verbally delivered narrative. The film includes the 'unruly frames' composed with two or more exposures in the William Matlala Archive, an experimental placing of portrayed people in a virtual rendering of the studio space, and possibly another rendering of the space using photogrammetry software which I hope to start experimenting with shortly.

Thanks to the close relationship between William and many of the people who made use of his services the viewer can develop a familiarity with them and with the space that would not be possible through singular portraits. The proposed presentation will develop from the ongoing experiments, and present momentary outcomes of an attempt to care for- and calibrate the affordances of the portraits in the William Matlala Archive. Through activating this archive, I will demonstrate, how the 'photographic needs' of William Matlala's colleagues become placeholders which allow us to reflect on a critical period in the South African past with appropriate wonder, empathy and generous forms of curiosity.



For (more) examples of the unfolding investigation please visit:
https://www.instagram.com/william_matlala_archive/

Keywords

Time Portal Portraits, Self-Fashioning, Unruly Frames, Archive Activation, South Africa,