



Apartheid as metaphor

From South Africa to the world. No country represents racial segregation as clearly as South Africa. For two reasons: firstly because an apartheid system was built there unashamedly and with absolute impunity; and secondly because the rest of the countries around the world used South Africa, which they subjected to an international boycott, as a paradigm of political and ideological racism, as if by focusing attention on the country they expiated their own sins of discrimination. By pointing their finger at the South African whites, the human-rights-defending first world nations concealed the functioning of discrimination mechanisms back at home and redeemed their democratic consciences. South Africa was a universal scapegoat, the prototype of evilness, necessary so that the others could bask in their own goodness.

Nothing of what was experienced in South Africa between 1948 and the early nineties was new. The history of racism went back a long way and the portrait of the propitiatory victims had been painted for years. Nazism had taken racial discrimination to the point of paroxysm. The smoke of the extermination camps was still subsiding when the South African government built ghettos to shut away the black and poor population. A double classic figure of racism. The revolt by the majority to break the chains took fifty years. And the marks of discrimination still exist today.

Equally, the end of apartheid in South Africa does not, by a long way, mean the end of racism and discrimination in the world. Rather to the contrary: the world today is governed by a global segregation system that has much in common with South African apartheid, to the point that the latter stands as a true metaphor of some forms of contemporary domination. There are increasingly few people who have everything and more who have nothing, the latter being subjected to a wide range of instruments of discrimination. Europe puts up fences – we need look no further than Ceuta and Melilla – to prevent those coming from the South from reaching the continent, while in contrast it builds motorways for those coming from the North.

It is from this global perspective that the exhibition visits South African apartheid and rummages around in it, through the testimony left to us by artists. Art is a peculiar form of knowledge that often discovers corners and dimensions that reason does not always have the instruments to understand. We have turned to art to break down racism's imagery and its political, moral and cultural epiphenomena. And to make us question ourselves and question the parameters presiding now in the globalised world. Because however much it may seem to us that the process of contracting space and accelerating time in which we live tends to mix us all together, however much ethnically pure societies have fortunately ceased to exist forever more, the mechanisms of exclusion continue to operate and break up the urban space itself. Johannesburg today, having overcome legal apartheid, still maintains a terrible discrimination between the rich neighbourhoods, which are mainly white, and the poor neighbourhoods, which are nearly all black. Is Johannesburg the past or is it the paradigm of the future? Ultimately, that is the question posed by this exhibition.