A temporary admission
A Reader

Edited by Bridget Baker and Storm Janse van Rensburg
Contributions by Clifton Crais, Linda Stupart,
Andrew van der Vlies
It being thus established that the mind perceives an object of three dimensions by means of the two dissimilar pictures projected by it on the two retinæ, the following question occurs: What would be the visual effect of simultaneously presenting to each eye, instead of the object itself, its projection on a plane surface as it appears to that eye? To pursue this inquiry it is necessary that means should be contrived to make the two pictures, which must necessarily occupy different places, fall on similar parts of both retinæ. Under the ordinary circumstances of vision the object is seen at the concourse of the optic axes, and its images consequently are projected on similar parts of the two retinæ; but it is also evident that two exactly similar objects may be made to fall on similar parts of the two retinæ, if they are placed one in the direction of each optic axis, at equal distances before or beyond their intersection.¹

This reader invites a close ‘reading’ of an image, of an object. We may ask how the ‘reading’ of images operate, how do we see, and more importantly how do we look? What mechanisms are at play when we contemplate the visual? What tricks are played in the brain, what pleasures are derived from optic illusions and what is the science of vision that feeds our gluttonous consumption of pictures?

Since 2010 Bridget Baker has built a body of work around a strange large cane woven object, a human transporter she first encountered in a photograph (fig. 1) found in the archive of the East London Museum in South Africa during research into early Settler history in the Eastern Cape (a larger history interwoven with her own personal biography). She commissioned the reconstruction of the human transporter from the Cape Town Society for the Blind, known for their cane woven work. The transporter’s original function was to provide a soft landing for British settlers arriving in Algoa Bay (and other parts of the Southern African coast) before harbours that could accommodate large vessels existed. Utilising a pulley system it moved passengers between large passenger ships onto smaller vessels, to be taken ashore.

In 2013 Baker acquired a stereograph (fig. 5) online, from a website dealing exclusively with the circulation of these Victorian oddities, misclassified under a section titled ‘Miscellaneous Military Stereoviews’². She beckoned the image on a journey akin to how it would have travelled when it was originally conceived, published and distributed (bar some technological differences). In one of our many conversations about this stereograph, knowing that we, and through this reader, are subjecting it to intense scrutiny, Baker said that maybe it is ‘nothing’. However, she pulled it into the now, the present. I want to describe this process as an act of rescue. Or, perhaps more strongly, as an arrest.

What does an image, produced more than a century ago and in various forms of circulation since, mean or tell us, or want from us after being disturbed from rest by an artist? What is implied by its various journeys through space and time when being returned to its place of inception, with its ‘nothingness’ interrupted? Do we project the calamity and burden of history onto it, or as W.J.T. Mitchell asks: ‘Are images the terrain on which political struggle should be waged, the site on which a new ethics is to be articulated?’³ Can and should the image yield this pressure, and does it want anything in return?

In the stereograph two almost identical photographs are reproduced side by side on a thick yellowing card, with a gentle concave curve, foregrounding the objecthood that the reproduction on the website it was acquired from belied. It’s rigidity and size, albeit small, allows it to be comfortably held by both hands, to be brought to one’s eyes for closer inspection, revealing its ultimate trickery and deceit. The act of looking comes in to play as Briony Fer states: ‘Part of what we are allowed to observe is our own patterns of observation. Looking becomes something to look at, something to watch.’⁴

Photographic stereographs were first made in the 1840s, based on scientific research published by Sir Charles Wheatstone in 1838⁵. The distance between our eyes results in us seeing everything from two slightly different angles, information which is processed by the brain into a single ‘image’ that has depth and dimension. If two similar images (each taken from a perspective approximately equal to the distance between our eyes) are placed next to each other, and viewed at the right distance, the two images will unify optically, creating the illusion of three dimensionality.⁶

This illusion allowed early consumers of stereographs a portal into distant and exotic places and events, transporting them through space and time. This revolutionary introduction to the pleasure of seeing, of fantasy and desire, coupled with a Victorian obsession with foreign lands, conquest and ownership (shaped in conjunction with the rise of the consumption of photography) contributed to the formation of an othering gaze.

The stereograph, the object of our study, was photographed and published in 1900 by Benjamin West Kilburn⁷, an American who ran a business in stereographic images and paraphernalia from Littleton, New Hampshire, USA. The concern made brisk business from 1865 onwards, through a network of distributors and a ‘growing arm’⁸ of salesmen peddling fantastical visions masquerading as vehicles of knowledge (enlightenment?); door to door, on public transport and at public gatherings. Stereoscopy slowly faded
Mitchell’s premise forces an adjustment to our understanding of images as things that do stuff, that have an agency and force. Our one-way relation with images as surfaces for projection for a myriad of historical, philosophical and empirical concerns are fundamentally challenged, and in effect, he asks that we reign in our insistence on their power. He states: ‘Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood and animation: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively; or they look back at us silently across a “gulf unbridged by language” (Berger, J.). The present not just a surface, but a face that faces the beholder.’

This echoing sits at the heart of Baker’s exhibition A temporary admission through its reconstruction as a physical, sculptural object in the work Wrecking at Private Siding 661 (2010–2011) and its ceremonial and symbolic role in the film installation Jetty SCOUR (2014).

Clifton Crais, in his essay Memory Work/Post-Colonial Lives sketches a vivid historical context of the time of the arrival of British settlers in the Eastern Cape. He links a distant past with contemporary realities, taking into consideration the social and political complexity this landing forced into being, spanning from extreme violence to contemporary labour practices.

Linda Stupart’s contribution, The Basket is Woven by Blind Women; The History of an Object interrogates historicist modes of representation, the application of image analysis in search of meaning, and in particularly the role of photography in making visible the past in the present. Intercut with subjective narratives/memories/flashbacks, the position of the critic, or historian as authority is problematised.

In [Wreckage, Siding, Landfall] Andrew van der Vlies narrows in on the impact and meaning of coming ashore, and brings to the fore the symbolic implications of the colonial or settler encounter on the coast of South Africa in this landing.

It is a significant moment to publish this reader and present A temporary admission, as we reflect on the celebration of two decades of democracy in South Africa. Baker’s interest in uncovering historic blind spots is closely connected to a revisiting of the legacy of our forebears in an entangled collective history. It is an attempt littered with difficulty, necessity and bravery whilst also attempting to remaining critically engaged. It seeks no absolution, no answers, but is a concerted effort at not forgetting, of not letting things slide into oblivion.

Lastly, I want to return to the stereograph and invite a second, closer look. In the left bottom corner of the images, a small boy hangs over a railing. Poised precariously and balancing excitedly as the basket hangs above.

Storm Janse van Rensburg was born in South Africa. He is an independent curator living and working in Berlin, Germany, and is Fellow at the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, University of Bayreuth, Germany. He was curator of the KwaZulu Natal Society of Arts (2000–2006) and senior curator at Goodman Gallery South Africa (2007–2012). He has curated a number of solo and group exhibition in Germany, South Africa and abroad, and has written for Art South Africa, Canvas and Metropolis amongst others.
They arrived in baskets. Through the weave of cane they could see the arc of white sand and rolling hills in the distance as they dangled over the sea like marionettes. Rope and pulley lowered the baskets into surfboats. African workers, some of the earliest wage-earning workers in South Africa, helped them onto shore, their first colonial relationship. The workers carried the emigrant’s belongings and goods—a keepsake from home, quill and paper, petticoats, dishes, teapots, guns, the utensils of empire. Soon the ships that had brought them thousands of miles down the Atlantic and along the Indian Ocean coast dipped below the horizon.

In the earliest years they would inhabit tents near the sea. For a short time they would live more like beachcombers, the men and women and children of boundaries and beginnings. How would they be understood? Symbols might be everything, but what were the words to describe their world? They had committed themselves to Africa. The beach marked the limit, the first frontier, another crossing, beyond which there could be no return. They would head inland to become colonists, settlers, and occupiers, renaming and remaking the land—Bathurst, Salem, Somerset East, Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth, East London, merino farms, furrows in the dry soil. The few remaining leopard or lion occasionally prowled their farms, as if reminding the immigrants that this was Africa.

Baskets and beaches... colonialism often begins so inexplicably, so fragility. Histories are made on beaches, irrevocable histories, pasts that adhere to the present. The French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch has written of 'un passé trop present,' the past that is all too present. Jankélévitch resists our temptations to create a distance separating past and present. The past is gone, we like to say; there is nothing more we can do about it. That was then. Forget and forgive. No wonder amnesia and amnesty...
share the same root, the casting of sins into the oblivion of forgetting. For the historian, this distance between the then and the now creates the past as an object of study, the putative condition for their objectivity. And for the perpetrator of injustice it becomes an argument for forgetting. ‘Let’s close the book on the past’, F. W. de Klerk said. Or as Chile’s dictator Augusto Pinochet hoped, ‘Both sides should forget’.¹

A temporary admission does not allow us to forget. It reopens a book that in fact was never closed. Here is a work of the haunting past, an inhabiting of a time ‘out of joint’. And perhaps also a labour of memory and mourning, the pasts that live within us even as the dead are long gone, but which inexplicably determine who we are.² The project reminds us of Derrida’s injunction that ‘the dead are just the departed and the departed do nothing’.³ The dead are in a past that has not yet disappeared.

The human transporter achieves this conjoined work of absence and presence, a re-enactment of a fragment from the Eastern Cape’s colonial past. Like the English settlers who began arriving in 1820, the work departed Europe. It has made its way across two oceans, and then from Port Elizabeth to Grahamstown, once the seat of the British Empire in Eastern Cape. In this sense the transporter and the exhibit itself retells part of South Africa’s colonial history. But the exhibition’s title, A temporary admission disquiets, inviting us to consider, reflect, and debate, when, how, and whether, the settler becomes a citizen. Is admission to South Africa ever permanent?

This reproducing of a nineteenth-century journey is much more than a re-staging, however, and more than an offer to recall the ways people were literally transported to South Africa’s shores. The transporter stands for a past and for memory itself. The very idea of a transporter unfolds as the doubled work of memory. Memory, after all, is a kind of time travel. Memory transports us to the past, but one that is slightly foreign precisely in its presentness, that sense of distance and proximity, that confusion of tenses. It feels here, but is gone. Memory, then, is a kind of frontier zone, the un-administered part of our minds, a place both of boundary crossing where pasts have not yet disappeared, and around which we make our lives.

Lives were made in the colonial Eastern Cape, and destroyed. Colonialism is, after all, a space of difference, places where distinctions are made and policed. The beaches of Algoa Bay were boundaries to be crossed, and the site of beginnings, but also of violence. The emigrants climbed out of their baskets into a new world, a world they had already decided was uncivilized, barbarous, most of all black, and sullied by Dutch-speaking colonists they dismissed as beneath them. How do we reflect on this less considered past?

Much public memory of English settlers in the nineteenth century remains tethered to South African liberalism. And for good reason. The British ended the slave trade. Three decades later they ended slavery itself. Our contemporary world of human rights began in the nineteenth century with such epochal events. It was the best of times, a triumph of the human spirit, the bright side of Enlightenment. Slavery is ‘so odious’, Lord Mansfield had declared in 1772, ‘that nothing can be suffered to support it’. And so it withered, slowly perhaps, but inexorably nonetheless. ‘Am I Not a Man and a Brother?’⁴

The Eastern Cape’s public colonial spaces—its churches, schools, libraries, the building that houses this exhibition—embody the progressive spirit of the age. But they belie other pasts, and of memories less forgotten as subjugated and displaced. The emigrants became conquerors though so often they pretended otherwise. Many became the colonizer who refuses, convincing themselves that their progressive ideas are all that remain from the histories they created. We know differently, of course. ‘Colonization is the march of mankind’, the Grahamstown Journal had proclaimed in 1840; many thousands were trodden under its feet. At the very moment of slave emancipation English settlers called for a draconian vagrancy ordinance. Years later they led the way in passing the oppressive Masters and Servants Act of 1856 that would continue in one form or another for more than a century. Earlier that decade ‘gentlemen’ galloped through the countryside setting fire to people’s homes and shooting as many as they could. They carried with them flags sewn by their wives and daughters with the word ‘Extermination’ stitched across its face.

The Eastern Cape became a space of extraordinary violence, some of the worst from a violent age of imperial conquest. Britain’s African empire began here: in the
frontier wars, in the dispossession of communities, in the laws emerging from conquest and rule, in the bales of merino wool shipped to Manchester, in the baskets transporting settlers to their new home. From this crucible of historical change was forged first black wage-earning working class, beginning so inauspiciously on the beaches that would become South Africa's docks and harbours where tens of thousands of men have toiled for nearly two centuries.

Empire's undoing would also begin here, so also struggles against racism and colonial subjugation and exploitation: Xele, who would turn the settler's bullets to water; chief Sandile, who would say that 'God made a boundary by the sea, and you white men cross it to rob us of our country'; the Kat River rebels who shot at the settlers waving their flags of extermination; and in later years the great labour strikes in the Port Elizabeth and East London ports organized by the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, the African National Congress, the Defiance Campaign, the Pondoland Revolt, Steve Biko. None of these pasts are gone. They endure in myriad ways, from the promise of democracy to the injustice of abject poverty.

The human transporter, a kind of aesthetic nomad, travelled halfway around the world empty, freighted alongside a plague of goods traversing the globalizing world. The age of settler colonialism it represents is over, though that history persists. But I wonder if a spectral past now fills the transporter? In its ostensible emptiness, has it become a container for memory's relics, for memory itself? Has the wicker become a weir through which time and memory flows and, somehow, gets snagged?

The images suffusing A temporary admission and the arrival of the human transporter documented in Baker's film Jetty SCOUR (2014) - the deployment of human transporters across the world, the work of international commerce in Port Elizabeth's harbour, the workers who form part of the long and continuing history of labour struggles in South Africa – invite us to do more than consider the Eastern Cape's colonial history. They enjoin us to consider more closely, and critically, the past that somehow arrives at our doors, surprising us with its power to awaken our senses in the recognition that all the time it has been right here in front of us, waiting for admission.

Perhaps like art itself, history and memory thus unfold as a kind of witnessing, not as a time past but in its tenacious present-ness. The human transporter, as object and as re-enactment, allows us to reflect upon this issue of witnessing and our engagements with South Africa's history and of the ways time folds in upon itself. The dead are gone, of course, but history isn't. It is all around us, at times clearly visible, but so often murmuring still beneath the surface of our lives.
She hates history.

As an opening line this is suicidal, since it becomes, she supposes, the thing it despises as soon as the second line (this line) is written; destroys itself. It's not like she's not interested in history; she appreciates objects and characters and even narratives, sometimes. It's the terrible linearity of the thing she can't get her head around: this comes before this before this. It's all just so terribly fatalistic.

But things come after other things, her boyfriend says, don't you believe in causality?

It's not that I want to forget things (#neverforget) or that I don't think stuff that's happened in The Past is important it's just that I prefer to think about history the same way I think about trauma – as an event that reappears in the present: A plot twist, a trap that comes up from under this narrative – a rupture that cuts into the present; an easily suppurating, infecting affecting wound. People get it wrong, she thinks, when they talk about Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (which she suffers from after a violent attack, in Grahamstown, at the National Arts Festival in 2010) because there can only ever be trauma or re-trauma, perhaps. History is like this too, only ever in the present, although photography and historians will try to trick us into thinking differently...

It is one of the primary functions of photography to produce the distance required to keep the past in the past – photography is our default memory, our default history. It relegates dead lives into the image. Spirit photography's principle magic is in the production and not the documentation of ghosts, after all.
A photograph of the landing basket is taped on the wall above her desk in a tiny study in London. It has been raining for four days. (The ‘photograph’ is in fact a low-resolution jpg printed in black and white on an inkjet printer.)

The landing basket, or human transporter, was used to help English settlers get from ship to land before there were harbours to aid their doomed colonial mission. On her screen she has the jpg image open in a browser tab so that she can see what you might call its ‘original’ sepia colour (fig. 5).

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.\(^3\) The punctum, after it has paused me, pricked me, opened me. The punctum is the possibility of history emerging in the photograph, despite its best intentions; the cut.

‘A cut is a cinematic term’, Hito Steyerl writes, ‘It separates two shots. It also joins two shots. It is a device that constructs cinematic space and time and articulates different elements into a new form. A cut is obviously also an economic term. It refers to a reduction. In the context of the current economic crisis, cuts mostly concern government spending on welfare, culture, pensions, and other social services. It can refer to any reduction in resources or allocations. How do both of these types of cuts affect bodies? And which bodies? Do they affect the bodies of artificial or natural persons, corpses or corpora-tions? And what can we learn from cinema and its techniques of reproduction that might help us deal with the effects of post-continuity cutting in the economic realm?’\(^4\)

The cut is also a kiss.

‘A kiss is a wager’, Steyerl continues, ‘a territory of risk, a mess. The idea of reproduction condensed into a fleeting moment. Let’s think of reproduction as this kiss, which moves across cuts, from shot to shot, from frame to frame: linking and juxtaposing. Across lips and digital devices. It moves by way of editing, exquisitely flipping around the idea of the cut, redistributing affects and desire, creating bodies joined by movement, love, pain.’\(^5\)

Susan Sontag once said that Devotion to the past is the most disastrous form of unrequited love.\(^6\)

When I relate this to my friend Gabriel, she says

Yes, I imagine so
It’s true
It’s full of dead people
Especially the far back bits
For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.  

A low res. GIF of Klee’s Angelus Novos is flapping its wings in an endless loop.  

[She] cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself [sic] is writing history.

The punctum, for her, in the basket image, sits on the surface of the image’s anonymous subjects, the landing basket’s supporting cast; the men (she assumes), wearing hats. The men (she assumes) wearing hats in the image, the men in the basket in the image appear to have dark skin, the men in the basket and the men on the boat, the men wearing hats in the image of the basket appear to be black men.

Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad.  

No totality here though after the shock, which is replaced by the assertion that there is something wrong with this picture. Probably this is her misreading or a misreading of time, a discolouration of the image itself; degradation.

(The good tidings which the historian of the past brings with throbbing heart may be lost in a void the very moment he [sic] opens his mouth.)

She searches for other images of the landing basket, or human transporter, online. At first all she finds (using the search term ‘human transporter’) is images of The Future; science fiction portals, cyborg lovers; aliens (like the settlers). But eventually she does find a reference to the object on a South African history website, where it exists in two sites:

The first explains how in 1882 regular mail services from England to Durban began, and describes ‘the Bar’, a sandbank barring entrance to the bay of Natal, which necessitated the use of the landing baskets in transporting passengers from larger mail ships anchored outside of the sandbank into smaller vessels able to negotiate passengers in and out of the harbourless port. Of the object, particularly, is written:

‘This contraption was made of wicker, with a door in the side through which the passengers would enter. The door would be secured on the outside and the basket winched up then lowered to the deck of the waiting tender. When the passengers emerged from the basket, it would go back for another group. Approximately eight to ten people could be carried each journey, depending on their size.’

The object is a wicker basket, which holds people; a container, a carrier bag.

In ‘The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’, Ursula Le Guin proposes that the container replaces the hero within story telling, which also means History. Le Guin builds on the prehistorical proposition that the first cultural device was probably a container of some kind.

‘But no, this cannot be’, Le Guin writes. ‘Where is that wonderful, big, long, hard thing, a bone, I believe, that the Ape Man first bashed somebody with in the movie and then, grunting with ecstasy at having achieved the first proper murder, flung up into the sky, and whirling there it became a space ship thrusting its way into the cosmos to fertilize it and produce at the end of the movie a lovely foetus, a boy of course, drifting around the Milky Way without (oddly enough) any womb, any matrix at all? I don’t know. I don’t even care. I’m not telling that story. We’ve heard it, we’ve all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news.’

The second link relates particularly to military use of the landing basket, writing:

‘From 1899, if your British ancestor served in the Anglo-Boer War, he may well have been loaded into the notorious basket contraption and lowered over the side of a ship into a waiting lighter.'
‘Your British Ancestor’? Her invisible fathers? (This is how history copulates, in the ever-straight line of her fathers.) Their histories now affirmed, now dulled, by the banality of representation, of the photograph.

‘It wasn’t an exercise for the squeamish, particularly in a strong wind and with a choppy sea causing the tender to bob up and down, not necessarily synchronised with the movements of the larger incoming vessel. ¹⁴

‘It’s clear that the Hero does not look well in this bag. He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato.’¹⁵

But back to the ‘Anglo-Boer Wars’ and perhaps her ancestors and their fight and their death and their reappearance, in the baskets: The two Wars of Independence (for the Afrikaners) or the Anglo-Boer Wars or the South African Wars were fought between 1880 and 1902. The Dutch and the British fought to so many deaths for control of alien soil, stolen land.

Postcolonial theorist and art critic Simon Njami is sitting at Kitchener’s, which is Joburg’s trendiest spot. Henry Kitchener is famous for inventing concentration camps during the Second South African War in South Africa. Photographs of him are all over Kitchener’s colonial-camp walls; and history is belched up into the present, a bad taste in her mouth.

She calls it the South African war as a way to remember that it was not only the Boers and the English who fought and who died and who suffered. Tens of thousands of black South Africans served as scouts, runners and soldiers in the wars. Black South Africans were put in segregated concentration camps to the Boers and at least 17,182 black South Africans died in these camps,¹⁶ although since most superintendents did not record the deaths of black inmates, this figure probably bears little resemblance to actual numbers. Thousands of black South Africans also died on both sides. None received medals, though, so there were no heroes, no histories.

Whose earth were they scorching, she wonders, those men in the hats in the basket that came with the mail?

Now is not the time for heroes or villains, perhaps, she thinks. But for the landing basket, the container, the woven bottle, ‘the slight negative space, the container as that which makes us who we are’¹⁷

‘[What is it] to somehow create the negative spaces in which to hold something, in to which something can be given? What is it to hold still enough [...] so that the pattern can be held onto and passed on, so that like it or not the pattern is in one’s hands and something must be done with it?’¹⁸

[...] time filled by the presence of the now.¹⁹

Linda Stupart is an artist and writer from South Africa. Currently a PhD candidate at Goldsmiths, University of London, with a project engaged in new considerations of objectification, Stupart is also an Associate Lecture in Critical and Theoretical Studies at London College of Communication and a Teaching Assistant for the MA Critical Studies and BA Critical Studies programs at Goldsmiths, University of London.

¹⁴) Ibid.
¹⁵) Le Guin.
¹⁸) Ibid.
¹⁹) Benjamin.
What does it mean to make landfall? For a ship’s crew to sight land for the first time since setting sail—or for a ship to disembark its crew and passengers? The latter entails, of course, approaching the shore so as to risk (as in earlier days) running aground, being blown from moorings, dashed against rocks.

Do we make landfall when the plane, the ship of the air (if not the airship) lands, its landing gear engaged, wheels touching the ground? Must we exit a cabin, step through a door (glimpsing first the seats we could not afford) before we are properly fallen? When I land at George Airport, the plane having coasted over the Outeniqua Mountains and circled the rocky coast between Victoria and Herolds Bay, I descend stairs to tarmac and walk like some aviation pioneer, adjusting sun-goggles, to the terminal. (Because of the mountains, people say, planes have crashed at that airport; for weeks, a few years ago, one sat marooned and ominously battered near the runway.)

Landing at Gatwick late one Friday evening in spring our captain tells us we are trapped aboard: the man who steers the airway, the land-bridge, the airport gangplank, is engaged elsewhere. The work is outsourced. Labour is thin on the ground. We have landed but not arrived, are not ashore, until we have stepped through the door.

To make a good—or indeed bad—landfall, the unedited entry in the Oxford English Dictionary tells us (not updated since 1909—is making landfall old fashioned?), is ‘to meet with land in accordance with (or contrary to) one’s reckoning.’

To reckon, to calculate, to judge; but to wreck on.
III

I look at photographs of landing baskets. An image from the Marschal Murray collection (fig. 9) shows a basket apparently over the sea, far from shore. It may be by design that the walls of the basket are so high. (Had some previous passengers baulked?)

A postcard from Durban (fig. 10) shows half a dozen passengers (bonneted women, light-hatted men) just aboard or readying to land, packed close in a basket whose walls are also too high to afford much view, to prevent alarm at being winched over water (transporters for a different space age, for a trek across seas rather than around stars: stand squarely, Madame, and remain calm, you will soon see a new world). Instead of dematerializers, here everything is tangible: a cable atop, two ropes to steady. Wearing felt caps, narrow brims angled against the sun, four black male deckhands are poised at the deck’s edge. Various white men stand by, ready perhaps to enter the carrier: wide-brimmed hats, khaki veld hats, even a bowler. The sea looks lively.

Those several black shapes may be birds. From the top left corner, appropriately oriented, the Queen Empress on her inverted stamp (‘Natal Postage’) sees the world askew: this fabricated detritus of colonial mercantilism.

In B.W. Kilburn’s sepia stereograph, #13687—Putting Passengers Ashore at East London, South Africa (fig. 5), the cables appear sturdier and the crewmen or deckhands seem to have helped ready the basket, looking proud of their work—or, I think again, simply nonplussed, mystified by the arrival of so many white bodies in such unlikely attire.

IV


It was as if the balloon had been sucked up the shaft, Phileas Fogg having made unexpected landfall in a Victorian hydraulic power station. But no, the basket was more of a palanquin, a litter for helping the petticoated or trilby’d from ship to boat as they came ashore in a different East London, Baker’s hometown, port of the wool merchants of Border (as we from Port Elizabeth, further west, called our frontier cousins’ buffer-zone: British Kaffraria; Queen Adelaide’s Province; the gap between those homeland labour reserves—Ciskei, Transkei—for the shadow people who had winched aloft and eased down the wicker transporters).

There was something delightfully steam-punk about the installation—even if transported Phileas was absent, transmogrified perhaps, somehow navigating those tubes to race late-Victorian villains. There was something poignant, too, about the conjunction of craft and machine power, hand-woven wicker-ware in the age of steel-spun cabling.

Hydraulic power relied, at its height, on over thirty million gallons of water a week coursing through nearly two hundred miles of piping beneath the cobbles and paving stones of London. The Wapping hydraulic station was built in 1890, the same year Baker’s great-grandparents made landfall in the Cape Colony. Unseen power beneath the streets, and the unmarked water paths of the soon-to-be-powerful (by virtue of their whiteness) in a country of colonizers: lanes of shipping, the moorings (from which the unseeing and unseen are transported ashore). Here a migrant, descendant of the outward-bound colonial adventurers, makes landfall, at the family’s point of origin, and it has not been a smooth landing.

The accumulating tower seemed like an enormous pressure valve.

V

One seldom hears about the mechanics of landing, especially in places without the accoutrements of docks and wharfs. East London had landing baskets, despite a navigable river mouth (a fact endlessly repeated in my school Geography lessons). How did they make landfall in Algoa Bay, site of my hometown harbour? Not with a landing basket in the days of William Burchell, traveller in the colony between 1810 and 1815. Describing graves at Plettenberg Bay, he noted that no safe landing place had yet been built there; similarly, ‘[a]t Algoa Bay there are several graves of our countrymen who have lost their lives in the same way.’

Burchell describes Algoa Bay as ‘the sea-port of the village of Uitenhage; which place lies at the distance of twenty miles inland.’ His account predates the city of Port
Elizabeth, which grew up on the shores of the Bay where some four thousand settlers famously (at least in South Africa) made landfall in autumn 1820. Still, Burchell’s description might amuse those of us from the Eastern Cape, for whom Uitenhage is Port Elizabeth’s land-locked backwater. And yet, for its time—and perhaps even for this—it is not inaccurate.

By the 1870s, 100,000 bales of wool, washed in Uitenhage by steam-driven machinery, were exported through Port Elizabeth’s harbour. Today, right-hand drive Volkswagen Polos leave Africa’s largest automotive plant in Uitenhage to be wrapped, like bales, and shipped abroad from the same docks.

Here they are, ready to be loaded. How many months will they spend at sea? How will they make landfall? I would ask an uncle of mine, who worked for Volkswagen, but he has retired, with his stories of business trips to China, and his parents’ emigration from Holland. They would not have been landed by basket, but I wonder now what gangway they walked from ship to shore.

I see the basket spinning on its cable, turning, and for a moment sliding backwards, bearing its white-clad cargo, angels of the new age, to landfall in a place they might barely comprehend. Or cars that look back to an age of abundant fossil fuels just as they move forward to environmental apocalypse.

Walter Benjamin’s famous musing on Klee’s small angel comes to mind, though these climes are not conducive to storms and wreckage, not on this particular day. Those days of fire and carnage will come, perhaps because this cargo slides backwards, is comfortably insulated, can not see above the rattan walls.

Later, Benjamin pens a “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’”. Fragments, written in 1940, they are not published in his lifetime either.

The saying that the historian is a prophet facing backward can be understood in two ways. Traditionally it has meant that the historian, transplanting himself into a remote past, prophesies what was regarded as the future at that time but meanwhile has become the past. ... But the saying can also be understood to mean something quite different: the historian turns his back on his own time, and his seer’s gaze is kindled by the peaks of earlier generations as they sink further and further into the past.°

It is images from the past that must be frozen, brought together, constellated, in a moment that might rekindle some of their revolutionary energy, in Benjamin’s messianic imagination. The angel of history looks behind, transfixed by the wreckage; the historian retrieves moments of past promise in the teeth of a future that is unimaginable.

And the artist, in this case? This wrecked basket, these images, they seek such constellation, such redemption, as they eschew the whole, the easy narrative, or absolution. We are encouraged to ponder afresh landfalls made, those soft landings, to wonder at what these cost the deckhands and those on whose land landfall was made. The weight of these baskets caused more serious, less tangible impressions than signs of sisal rope, leather cord, or metal lever in the hand.

VIII

There is no record of those who were carried, those who readied the landing gear, there is only now. The artist asks us to look back, for now has a future illuminated only by the past.

Wrecking. And a reckoning.

IX

Captain Moresby, C.B., reporting on the period in 1820 that His Majesty’s Ship Menai lay in Algoa Bay (having conveyed some of the settlers), noted that there were only two days on which a swell, whipped up by a southeast wind, prevented communication from the shore. ‘[N]ot a single accident happened in landing the settlers from England, (who amounted to 1,020 men, 607 women, and 2,032 children,) from the period of their arrival, in the middle of April, to the day of our departure, the 25th of June’. He would trust his ship to Algoa Bay through the year, he wrote, over Palermo Bay in Sicily, over Torbay in England.

George Thompson, who visited Algoa Bay shortly after the settlers’ arrival, recorded how one of the settlement’s two inns was crowded with the officers of a Dutch man-of-war that had ‘run ashore in a fog’ but days before, ‘eight men... drowned, and about twenty much hurt by being dashed.
by the surf upon the rocks'. Nor was this the only shipwreck, another had occurred shortly before: 'The Heworth, an English brig with Government stores and flour for the Settlers, went ashore close to the landing-place, and was lost. The flour had luckily been disembarked before this occurred; but being the first vessel from England direct to this port, the wreck in the Bay is considered peculiarly unfortunate.'

In the *Monthly Magazine* for April 1, 1821, T.L. Jones, newly returned from Southern Africa, describes a landing in Algoa Bay. 'On the morning after our arrival, preparations were made for landing as many of the women and children as possible, as there is a tremendous surf continually running here, so that ships' boats are not able to land, but convey their load to a buoy, from which there is a warp to the shore, passing through the stem and stern of the surf-boat, which here receives the contents, and thus conveys it within a few yards of the shore, where there are men in waiting, up to their middles in water, to receive the contents of her and convey it on shore.'

X

Coming ashore was not something anyone I knew did, in any style, in Port Elizabeth. The ill-conceived freeways had long since sliced off the centre, Main Street, now Govan Mbeki Avenue, from the docks, from the old railway station and from the Campanile erected to mark the centenary of the settlers’—elevated in romantic, mythic terms to ‘The 1820 Settlers’—landing. The shore was not a place for hats and gentilefolk in baskets swaying over the Indian Ocean’s brisk saltiness. Not in their day, and neither in mine.

I went aboard once, which would have entailed coming ashore, too, though neither journey was by basket. A cousin’s ex-husband served in Safmarine, as first lieutenant, then captain, and had us, my father, my mother, me, to dinner in the cramped quarters when his ship docked. I remember nothing of the food, only the gangplank and the metallic smell of the passageways. There was no view.

This cousin’s ex-husband now seldom docks. Super-container ships, his current work, spend months at sea, are even loaded at sea. Baskets, wicker, and most of what we consume, most of what we carry and what carries us from one point to another, by road or by sea, by air or by land, will now spend its time circling the world on one such ship. Hoisted in shipping containers by crane in one port and landed by crane at another, they are stacked at departure and arrival into the brickwork-like canyons of colourful metal where passengers and well-wishers no longer promenade in expectation of, in recovery from, or in mere contemplation of a voyage.

Andrew van der Vlies was born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. He teaches in the School of English & Drama at Queen Mary University of London, and is a Research Associate in the Department of English at Rhodes University in South Africa. A graduate of Rhodes and Oxford universities, he has published on South African writing, literary history, print cultures, cultural studies, and art.
Bridget Baker was born in East London, South Africa. Baker is a visual artist working across various disciplines such as filmmaking, installation, performance and photography. Her working process is research-based, resulting in a series of complex documented re-stagings that hover between documentary and myth creation. Baker has produced work for various solo presentations including at CAB (Spain), The Wapping Project (London), Diet Gallery (Miami) and MAMbo (Bologna). Her films have also been included on the 57th International Short Film Competition in Oberhausen and Rencontres Internationales Paris/Madrid/Berlin. Her works have been curated onto numerous South African and international group exhibitions including: Dak’art 2012 (Senegal), za. Giovane arte dal Sud Africa (Palazzo de Papesse, Sienna), Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art from South Africa (Museum for African Art, New York), and Contemporary Art Photography from South Africa (Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin and South African National Gallery, Cape Town).
A temporary admission
A solo exhibition by Bridget Baker
Curated by Storm Janse van Rensburg
Gallery in the Round, 1820 Monument
Presented by the National Arts Festival, Grahamstown, South Africa
3–13 July 2014

Images © 2014 Illustrations and photographs used in this publication are the property of their respective authors and institutional holders and credited in the list of illustrations as per available records. In case of any unintentional oversights or omissions, please communicate this with the editors.

Text © 2014 Clifton Crais, Storm Janse van Rensburg, Linda Stupart, Andrew van der Vlies
Design NODE Berlin Oslo
Printing Europrint medien GmbH, Berlin

www.bridgetbaker.co.za
www.stormprojects.de

Acknowledgements
We would especially like to thank the following for their enthusiasm and support: Capt. Brynn Adamson, Nina Allchurch, Bongiwe Chigumbu, Maureen de Jager, Christian Ferreira, Abrie Fourie, Sergio Frutos, Dr. Melanie Hillebrand, Daniel Isherwood, Michelle Lowry, Brenton Maart, Ismail Mahomed, Nomusa Makhubu, Emma O’Brien, Jay Pather, Serge Rompza, Lydia Sachse, Nicci Spalding, Kim Stern, Robert Strack, Dominic Thorburn, Mandie van der Spuy, Carol Victor, Derek White, Henning Wiethaus

Sponsors & Support
National Arts Festival, Clearwater, Transnet Port Authority (Port Elizabeth Harbour), Arts & Culture Trust, MACS Maritime Carrier, Zeeckla Traders (Port Elizabeth Steel Fabrication), Media Film Services (Johannesburg), New Brighton Pictures, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality Library, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality Art Museum

The publication of this reader has been generously funded by Transnet SOC Ltd, in its support of the arts in South Africa. Transnet SOC Ltd is wholly owned by the Government of the Republic of South Africa and is the custodian of the country’s freight railway, ports and pipelines. The company is responsible for enabling competitiveness, growth and development of the South African economy by delivering reliable freight transport and handling services that satisfy customer demand.