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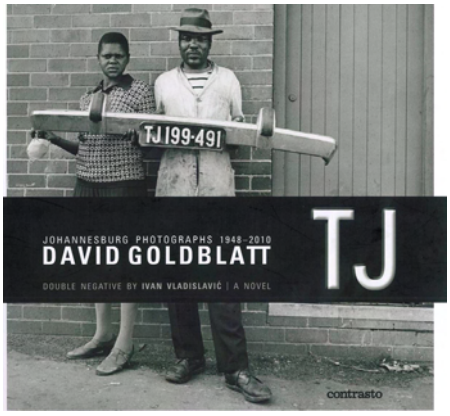
Double Negative and *TJ*: An Interview with Ivan Vladislavić



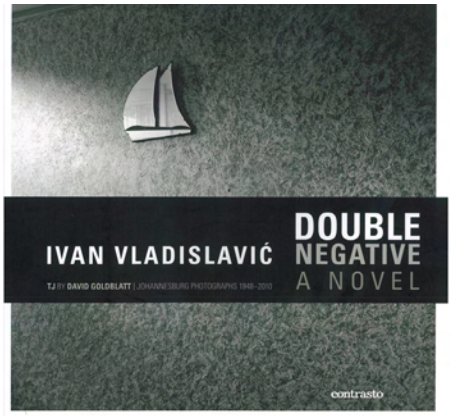


Fig. 1: *TJ/Double Negative*, courtesy of David Goldblatt.

TJ. Double Negative combines the work of two great contemporary South African artists: David Goldblatt, a photographer internationally known for his documentation of the changes in South African society in the course of the last sixty years, and Ivan Vladislavić, one of the most innovative voices in the literature of his country.[1] The combination is not casual. Both artists have devoted the greater part of their work to Johannesburg, a difficult and fragmented city, with a name, as Goldblatt puts it, that "does not easily slide off the tongue" and for this reason is often substituted by its inhabitants with abbreviations, nicknames and metaphors. The letters TJ which appear in the title refer to the no longer used initials on car plates which at one time indicated the region and the city: Transvaal, Johannesburg.

[1] (Roma: Contrasto, 2010; Cape Town: Umuzi, 2010)

The box published by Contrasto and Umuzi contains two volumes: the first, in large format, is a collection of several hundreds of Goldblatt's photographs, taken from 1948 – the official birth date of apartheid – to the present. Almost all in black-and-white (except for those in the most recent section), they make up an extremely valuable archive, which exposes the harsh reality of people, buildings, roads, homes, signboards, inanimate objects, with a force only photos can convey. The second, a smaller book, contains Ivan Vladislavić's new novel, *Double Negative*, set in Johannesburg like the author's entire production – three novels, two collections of short stories, various essays on urban building, and especially *Portrait with Keys* (2008): autobiography, reportage, cultural testimony all in one – which appears to be generated by a profound empathy with the metropolis.

The story narrated in *Double Negative*, set in the 1980s, with apartheid still at its height, is that of the discovery of a vocation or simply of an elective affinity between a University drop-out and a famous photographer, Saul Auerbach. Young Neville has no desire to study but finds himself forced to renew his University registration in order to avoid military service. He would like to be part of the adult world, find a job which would help him grow up, and studying seems to him to be a great waste of time. Meanwhile, although he does not share the militancy of many of his friends, he observes every form of injustice, criticizes the wishy-washy liberalism of the whites and the exploitation of the blacks, and

refuses the privileges of apartheid. Soon he accepts a job considered fit for a black man, the position of assistant to Jaco, an eccentric painter of signboards, zebra crossings and arrows in parking-lots. His father, alarmed at his son's lack of ambition and prospects, arranges for him to spend a day going around the townships in the company of the famous photographer, Saul Auerbach. The boy accepts reluctantly: he doesn't want to be preached at or to have to answer questions concerning his plans, and besides he has no interest in photography. But nothing of the kind happens. Auerbach takes him and an English friend with him in search of suitable subjects to photograph, addressing only a few sentences to him throughout the trip. After hours of driving through terrible heat they reach god-forsaken places just when the light has changed and they can't do anything. And yet the meeting leaves its mark. Soon after, in order to avoid military service, Neville moves to England where by pure chance he becomes a commercial photographer for advertising and periodicals.

Ten years later, at the time of the 1994 elections, his sense of belonging to South Africa is suddenly enhanced and he feels he has wasted the occasion to participate in the History of his country. The time has come for him to put an end to his self-imposed exile.

Back in Johannesburg, as if guided by an obscure instinct, Neville returns to the places he visited with the great photographer years before. He still has vivid recollections of his earlier encounter with the people of the township – ordinary people with their own sorrows and dreams, like the mother of triplets only two of whom are still alive, the collector of bizarre letter-boxes, the keeper of the package of undelivered letters, "dead letters", mutilated stories that can never be completely known like the snapshots that portray their protagonists. And it is these people he is still looking for. The repetition of the experience, implicit in the title of the book, *Double Negative,* shows how much Neville has matured, but many years will pass before he can call himself a photographer and summon up his courage to show Auerbach his pictures.

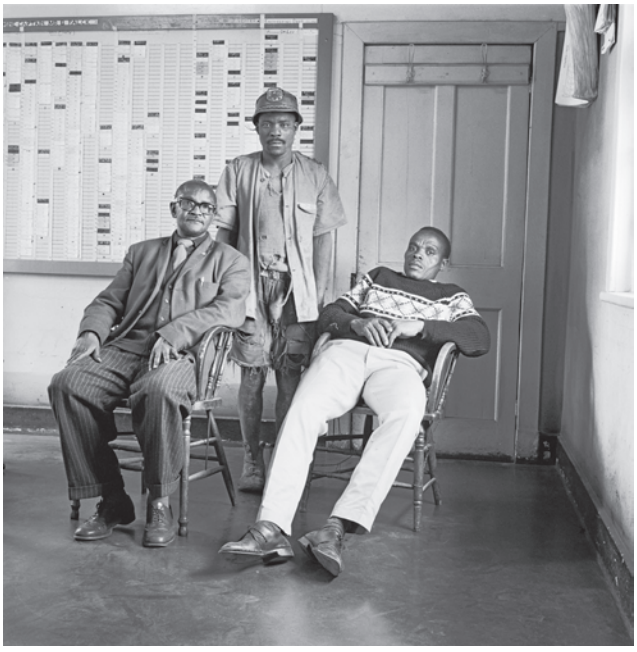


Fig.2:Time office clerks (they checked hours worked by each man) and a miner, City Deep Gold Mine. 1966, courtesy of David Goldblatt.

Though in *Double Negative* photography is both content and language, at no point does the text become didactic and try to explain what the art of photography consists in. When, for example, during the famous day trip to the townships, Auerbach's English friend – a typical opinionated photo-journalist devoid of any relationship with the reality in which he moves – asks him how one can understand whether a certain subject is worth photographing, the enigmatic answer is that it is the subject that summons him and imposes itself as 'image'. There are no rules. To take a good photograph one must be able to 'see' and know how to look, with respect and empathy. Few people succeed in this.

In the interview that follows, I asked Ivan Vladislavić a few questions about the genesis of the *TJ/DoubleNegative* project and about his work as a writer

PS: *It's an interesting fact that your first novel to appear in Italian should be not with a conventional literary publisher but with a publisher specialized in photography and visual arts. This says something relevant about the multifaceted nature of your work, which often relies on strong visual elements and objects. I'm thinking of all the maps, road-signs, photographs etc. scattered throughout your stories and novels, and of course of your longstanding interest in physical spaces, architecture and urban landscape, art and photography. "Double Negative" is described on the cover as the "visual part" of the "TJ project", revolving around the city of Johannesburg.*

Can you tell us how the project started?

IV: I felt an affinity between my work and David Goldblatt's for many years, and was pleased to discover that he shared this view. It's hard to say exactly what this quality is, except that we seem to find the same things interesting and see our surroundings in a similar way. In 2001, I was commissioned to write a text for *David Goldblatt: Fifty-One Years*, the catalogue which accompanied an exhibition of David's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona (MACBA). At the time, I was working on a sequence of short documentary texts on Johannesburg and so I put together a set of them for the catalogue. David gave me access to his archive of prints, and I became more familiar with his whole body of work. I already knew his books, but rambling through that astounding archive gave me a new appreciation for the depth and breadth of his photography. In the end, however, the texts did not comment directly on the photos: it was rather a case of arriving at texts that showed this affinity I spoke about earlier, that dealt with similar themes to the photos or threw them into relief. I think we were both pleased with the resonance between the texts and the photos. Perhaps from that time on there was an unspoken wish to work together again.

The idea of a joint project became concrete around 2006, when David began assembling a selection of his Johannesburg photos for the first time. I had finished my documentary book on the city, which was published in that year as *Portrait with Keys*, and wanted to return to writing fiction. In fact, I already had a half-formed structure for a novel in mind. Rather than writing a critical essay for *TJ*, I decided to pursue my own fiction towards a joint publication. In 2006, I spent a few days going around the city with David. I got some idea of how he works, and we also spoke a lot and got to know one another better. David then gave me a set of small prints, a partial selection of the photos he was thinking of putting into *TJ*, and I kept them on my shelf while I worked. I wrote the novel with these photos 'in the corner of my eye'. Sometimes I studied them very carefully; and then for months on end I tried to forget all about them, so that my writing could find its own course without being swallowed up in the images.

The actual writing of the novel took two or three years. Throughout that time, David went on refining his selection of photos and also making new work. It was

only when my text was at a fairly advanced stage that David saw what I was up to. We were then faced with the challenge of how to marry a book of photographs and a novel. Essentially they each demanded a different format, which made publication in a single volume impossible. We were lucky to find a designer – Cyn van Houten – who was able to resolve the problem so elegantly. And we were also lucky to find publishers, in Contrasto and Umuzi, willing to take on an unusual combination of books.

PS: *"TJ" is one of Johannesburg's many names: you have explored the city life more clearly in "The Restless Supermarket", "The Exploded View" and more recently in "Portrait with Keys", a book as much about the city as about yourself. But Jo'burg is not just the place where you live and the location of most of your stories and novels but also a sort of epitome of South African change. If you agree with this interpretation, could you explain how and why?*

IV: Like South Africa in general, Johannesburg is a huge work in progress. It is a young city – very young by Italian standards – having been founded as recently as 1886. It is also an unlikely city, in that it sprang from the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand, and its growth has been driven by mining and money ever since. From the beginning, the place was marked by extremes: it was a city where many people made their fortunes and their names; and where many others laboured in poverty and died forgotten. Like most people who call Joburg home, I was born elsewhere: I grew up in Pretoria, came here as a student in the1970s and have never managed to disentangle myself again.

The old apartheid barriers collapsed quickly in Joburg, and it is South Africa's most integrated city, in my view. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, one could trace the massive social and political changes occurring in South Africa in the changing face of the city, and indeed one's own neighbourhood. This was fascinating to me, as a citizen and as a writer, and is what drew me to reflect directly on the city in my fiction.

In the past, Joburg was cosmopolitan in a limited sense, in that it attracted white immigrants from abroad, along with people from elsewhere in South Africa, but excluded black people or severely restricted their access to and enjoyment of the city. In the post-apartheid years, the city has become more truly cosmopolitan – or Afropolitan as some people put it – with the arrival of many people from other African countries. This has not been a comfortable process, as the xenophobic attacks on foreigners in 2008 demonstrated. Nonetheless, Joburg continues to attract people in search of work, a better life, education, excitement, opportunity – even if they

Fig. 3: Arriving family, King George Street, circa 1955, courtesy of David Goldblatt.

don't always find what they're looking for. It's this openness to the new, the sense that here people can try on another identity for size, can transform themselves and their circumstances, with a bit of luck and hard work, that makes Joburg the quintessential South African city. It is a rough, tough place, difficult to like and impossible to live in, but it also rewards those who survive. It concentrates and magnifies both our best qualities and our appalling flaws as a society.

PS: *With "Portrait With Keys" and "Double Negative" your writing appears to be moving away from the conventional novel form. Is it a deliberate choice? If so, does it correspond to a sort of shift from the 'abstraction' or fictionality of your first works to a more hybrid but also more realistic kind of writing?*

IV: I'm not sure I can trace a shift in a definite direction in my work. What I can say is that I enjoy exploring different modes and styles. Rather than preselecting and imposing a style, it feels to me that the style of the work arises, in a more or less intuitive way, from the material or set of interests I'm dealing with. At one point in the late 1990s, I was drawn to a documentary style; I needed to record what was happening around me more immediately than I had done in the past. This is the impulse that gave rise to *Portrait with Keys*. After pursuing that for seven or eight years, I had a need to go back to fiction, to start making things up in a freer way. I try to listen to the mutterings of my subconsious on this score.

I have been working alongside visual artists in various ways for about a decade. I mentioned earlier that some of the *Portrait with Keys* texts were published with Goldblatt's photos. Others appeared in a book of photos by the Scottish artist Roger Palmer (*Overseas*), and in a quirky book on product design by the German design duo Jörg Adam and Dominik Harborth (*Helfershelfer*; or *Second Aid* in the English version). In all of these cases, the texts were written with the work of my 'collaborators' in mind. I put the word in quotes because the collaboration has strict limits: I don't have a say in my partners' work and they don't have a say in mine. Rather it's a question of writing within the magnetic field of another body of work and trying to create an interesting interplay between the two.

My novel *The Exploded View* was also written in this way. It was the most extensive experiment of this kind prior to the project with Goldblatt. The conceptual artist Joachim Schönfeldt asked me to write a text in response to some 'illustrations' he had made. Although he had something briefer in mind, I eventually wrote a novel called *The Exploded View* (2004). Extracts from the novel and Schönfeldt's images were presented together in an exhibition called *The Model Men*, but the full text and the images were never published together and always had a fairly independent existence. Working with Goldblatt, however, our intention was always to publish the two elements together.

This way of working may partly account for the shift you've noticed in my writing: my work has been nudged into new territory by the proximity of other visions and approaches. This is precisely what I like about it. Another body of

work, with its own forms and preoccupations, creates a kind of obstacle in the smooth flow of my own interests. One has to both incorporate and exclude the influence of the other work, and this takes one in surprising directions. It's like trying to step elegantly through a minefield.

PS: *Two strands appear to dominate your writing: an interest in social reality and a strong penchant for imagination. Without being either strictly political or evasive your writing has been described as both satirical and abstract, as a feat of imagination. Which description comes closer to your intentions?*

IV: This ties up closely with your previous question. I like to think that my writing is neither one thing nor another. When I was starting out as a writer, I had a youthful need to prove that I had an imagination, and also to resist the dominant realist tradition in South African fiction, and some of my early fictions are therefore quite extravagant. As I've grown older and marginally wiser, I've realised that these things are usually more complex than they seem. Some of the modes I dismissed in my youth now seem fascinating to me, and I find it harder to draw clear distinctions between them. A work that appears to be a model of realism might ignite a whole range of symbolic or allegorical or otherwise abstract readings. This is one of the many lessons one can take from J.M. Coetzee. In any event, I enjoy the challenge of doing something different in a new text. I do not want to solve the same crossword puzzle over and over.

Another point of resistance for me as a young writer was the rather heavy-handed preoccupation with social and political issues in our literature. As much as I wanted to deal with the world around me, which was shaped in every aspect by racism and apartheid, I wanted to invent and surprise. There are countless examples of writers who engage politics and power in their work with imaginative energy, but a few who were important to me in those years were Eduardo Galeano, Milan Kundera and Danilo Kiš. It is no coincidence that some of their books appeared in the marvellous 'Writers from the Other Europe' series edited by Philip Roth and published by Penguin in the early eighties.

PS: *Your favourite authors, as I gather from previous interviews, are Dickens, Stevenson, Borges, Canetti, among others, and their inspiration is clear in your work. But you also often mention the relevance of Afrikaans authors. How important would you say Afrikaans literature is for you?*

IV: Again, your question ties up neatly with the previous one. I studied both English and Afrikaans literature at Wits University in the mid-1970s. In those years, the study of English literature was still dominated by the Great Tradition. Given the ways in which literary studies have been eroded since then, I am grateful that I had to study Chaucer, Elizabethan drama, the Metaphysical poets, the Romantics and so on. Nonetheless, the conception of the canon was frustratingly narrow. In three years of study, I did one brief elective on the contemporary

novel (Bellow, Patrick White, Iris Murdoch and a few others) and that was it. Crucially, there was no South African or African work on the curriculum at all. The thinking at the time seemed to be that students would explore more recent writing on their own anyway, and to an extent this was true. But the total exclusion of local work undoubtedly created a sense that it was inferior and not worthy of serious attention.

In this context, studying Afrikaans literature was a tremendous antidote. By its nature, Afrikaans writing was more concerned with our world and aimed mainly at local readers. The 1960s were a vital period in Afrikaans writing, with the rise of the so-called sestigers like André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Etienne Leroux and others. This energy carried over into the 70s, and I was lucky to be reading and studying the work of these writers as it was being published. By another stroke of luck, some of my teachers in the Afrikaans Department at Wits, notably the novelist John Miles, were fine writers themselves. They also ran the oppositional publishing house Taurus, which published both Miles and Breytenbach. The work they published appeared in our seminar rooms hot off the press. This was exciting for a young person with ambitions to write: it demonstrated, very graphically, that the world of books was not at a distance in time or space, that the stuff of 'literature' did not only belong in England in the eighteeth century, if you like, but was here and now, outside the window, in the streets.

Quite a few of the Afrikaans writers I admired had lived or studied in France, the Netherlands and other European countries, and this influence showed in their work. To me it seemed more innovative and contemporary than the work of English-speakers steeped in the Anglo tradition. Again, I have come to a more subtle view of this over the years, as I've become more attuned to influence myself, but I still read the work of Afrikaans writers – Marlene van Niekerk, Ingrid Winterbach, Harry Kalmer and others – with great pleasure.

PS: *Back to "Double Negative": photography is as much a pervasive theme in "Double Negative" as a metaphor and a stylistic choice. In a way, the protagonist looks back on his youth under apartheid through the photographer's lens displaying a series of snapshots in front of the readers' eyes. If Neville can be considered a sort of double for the novelist how does the 'photography metaphor' in "Double Negative" reflect on your writing?*

IV: Let me try to answer this by saying more about the form of the novel and what inspired it. In 2006, just when David and I were clarifying our project together, I went to see the twentieth-anniversary staging of the play *Sophiatown* at the Market Theatre. Afterwards, I bumped into the social historian Jonathan Hyslop, and we spoke about having seen the first version of the play in 1986 and now watching it again in 2006. Jonathan told me, to put it simply, that something he found interesting as he got older was how he began to see the larger dynamics of history played out in the small compass of his own life. As you age, you revisit your earlier life with a different perspective, and the meaning of your own experience changes. This

conversation made an impression on me. I remembered the circumstances in which I first saw the play in 1986: we were under a state of emergency, I was working at Ravan Press, where our publishing programme placed a strong emphasis on 'revisionist history'. Watching the play again, twenty years later, more than a decade into democracy, I was struck by how much its meaning had changed because the context of its reception was so different. Out of this grew the idea of building a novel out of cross-sections through time – presenting three distinct periods and exploring how things change over time. I had this three-part structure before I found the story about the relationship between two photographers.

Then, to answer your question more directly, I saw an analogy between my proposed structure and photography. Geoff Dyer uses a wonderful phrase – 'the ongoing moment' – to describe the status of a photograph. Every photo is a cross-section through time; it freezes a moment, which then stays with us, the viewers, in a sort of perpetual present. When I look at David's work, it is extraordinary how much life, how much history folds out of one of those cross-sections. I hoped to do something similar in my text.

Another aspect of this is that the photos in David's book *TJ* are arranged decade by decade, starting in the 1940s and coming right up to the present. All these still moments, placed side by side, read one after the other, manage to set time in motion. The relationships between the photos, the changes or continuities they reveal when they are compared are just as important as the individual elements. I think I pursue a somewhat similar strategy in my work, placing texts side by side and allowing them to generate meaning through the ways they argue or agree with one another, rather than unfolding a seamless, linear narrative.

None of this is very startling. Photography and film have soaked into every fibre of the written word. I can hardly imagine how one could write now without the work being shaped somehow by our overwhelmingly visual frames of reference.

PS: *The unavoidable question: did you really meet Goldblatt/Auerbach so early on in life? And if so, did he have an impact on you?*

IV: I first met David around 1987, although I knew of his work long before then. I told the story of our meeting at the launch of the book a few days ago, and perhaps it's worth repeating. I was working at Ravan Press and we were about to publish a book of poetry called *Familiar Ground* by Ingrid de Kok. She wanted to use one of David's photos on the cover of the book, as she felt it

Fig. 4: Portrait photographer, Braamfontein, 1*955*, courtesy of David Goldblatt.

Fig. 5: Women washing clothes and singing in the Newtown squatter camp. 1 November 2001, courtesy of David Goldblatt.

captured the atmosphere of the small mining town where she grew up and which she wrote about in her poems. Then, as now, David was very fussy about the use of his images. Her letter to him motivating her choice of the photo must have been persuasive though, because he agreed to let us have it. It fell to me to drive over to his house to collect the photo. David had a reputation for being brusque and I was very nervous about meeting him. When I got there, he took me into his study – the same room where he keeps his archive – handed me the print, and then told me very firmly exactly what could and couldn't be done to it: it could not be cropped; it could not be reversed; it could not have type put on top of it, and so on. The clarity and seriousness with which he set these conditions was a lesson in taking responsibility for your own work which I have never forgotten. But if you had told me then that I would end up working so closely with David, and that we would publish *TJ/Double Negative* together, I would have thought you were mad.