

Bitterkomix

Outrage Art from Two *Laaities*



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[F R E D D E V R I E S]

Fifteen years ago the South African publisher Hond brought out the comic book *Gif* (which means poison), a side project by the makers of the ground-breaking magazine *Bitterkomix*. *Gif* appeared in April 1994, when an excited South Africa was about to hold its very first free elections. In May of that year Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as president, and the country proudly entered the democratic era. Not long afterwards *Gif* was banned, the first book in the 'New South Africa' to suffer that particular fate – an early, significant crack in the dream of a tolerant Rainbow Nation.

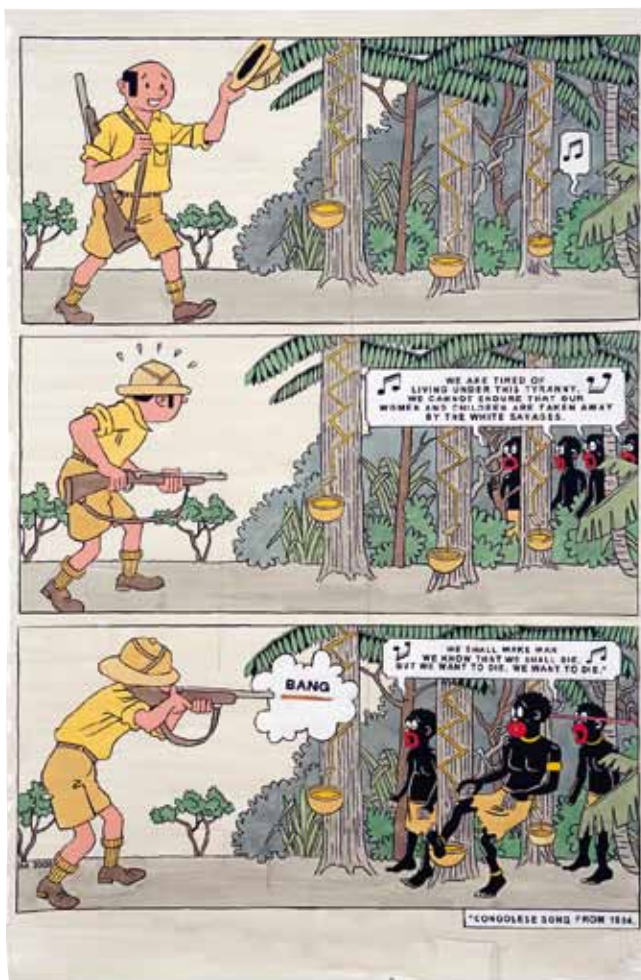
Gif's inspiration was a visit to Amsterdam in 1993 by three young South African cartoonists. The brothers Anton and Mark Kannemeyer and their friend Conrad Botes stayed in the Red Light District and shuttled back and forth between the Lambiek comic-strip shop, where they were holding a small *Bitterkomix* exhibition, and the bars and porn shops in De Wallen. With a mixture of titillation and amazement they stared at the half-naked ladies ogling them from in their windows. From there they went to Berlin and bought porn books till they couldn't see straight – strictly forbidden fare in South Africa.

They processed their impressions into comics. Mark and Anton in particular pulled out all the stops. A black man with an enormous cock penetrating a white girl, oral sex, anal sex, raping monsters, an exploding vagina – no holds barred. The idea, Anton and Conrad told me in Cape Town in 2004 after a sexually charged *Bitterkomix* exhibition, was 'to magnify male aggression' and 'to depict it as grotesquely as possible'. The reason why they drew the black man with an enormous cock was 'to emphasise racial stereotypes'.

Writing in the art magazine *ArtSA*, critic Stacy Hardy saw all those erections as a metaphor for the situation in South Africa, where the depiction of genitals had been banned for decades and where erect white willies looked downright pathetic after the loss of so much white power and influence over the past ten years.

Looking back at all the turmoil, Anton Kannemeyer now says, 'If you compare that Amsterdam porn to *Scope* (a South African girlie magazine in the 80s that used to censor nipples with stars), it was like entering a world where everything evil has been unleashed! Just what we wanted. I was of course very shy – all the girls in de Wallen trying to make eye contact etc... But yes, we subsequently made *Gif* a

Congolese Song (2009).
Courtesy of Michael
Stevenson Gallery.



hardcore porn comic, sending up Afrikaner values. I must admit in retrospect that Gif looks a bit dated to me now, more so than the other material in Bitterkomix.'

The story of *Bitterkomix* is the story of the twisted youth of three Afrikaner artists who grew up during apartheid in an oppressive Afrikaner milieu and survived, thanks to their escape into a comic-book fantasy world that they cobbled together out of laboriously gathered science fiction, underground strip cartoons, porn rags and rock music. Eventually they had enough ammunition to take revenge on the five-headed patriarch: father, teacher, clergyman, government minister and corporal.

The essence of that rebellion is recorded in the hundreds of pages of *Bitterkomix*. The first issue appeared in June 1992. Four years ago, the coffee table book *The Big Bad Bitterkomix Handbook* provided an outstanding summary of all fourteen issues. The importance of the drawings and street language, some of it quite shocking, has been exhaustively analysed in several essays by academics and writers who place the Kannemeyer brothers and Conrad Botes firmly in the tradition of 'outrage art', a line that runs from the French *Lettrists* via Dada, the Situationists and the Sixties underground to punk.

Nothing was sacred to them. They gave free rein to all their frustrations and obsessions in their bizarre, politically incorrect drawings. Now, seventeen years on, the two shaven-headed, bespectacled Kannemeyers and the bearded Botes are celebrated artists – the idiosyncratic Mark mainly at a local level, the worldly Anton and Conrad also internationally – with wealthy South African collectors and gallery owners in Italy and New York buying their work sight unseen.

It all started with Tintin

Anton Kannemeyer (1965) walks to a cabinet in his studio in Cape Town and takes out the first number of *Bitterkomix*, entirely in black-and-white and made by two students from the University of Stellenbosch: himself and his student friend Conrad. Mark didn't join them until issue three. They had a thousand copies printed, which was a lot for an unknown cartoon magazine written in Afrikaans. But they knew they had created something unique. For them it was a matter of life and death. *'It was like oh God, I hope I don't die before it's out on the shelves,'* says Anton with a chuckle, adding that collectors today will happily fork out 500 euros for that first issue.

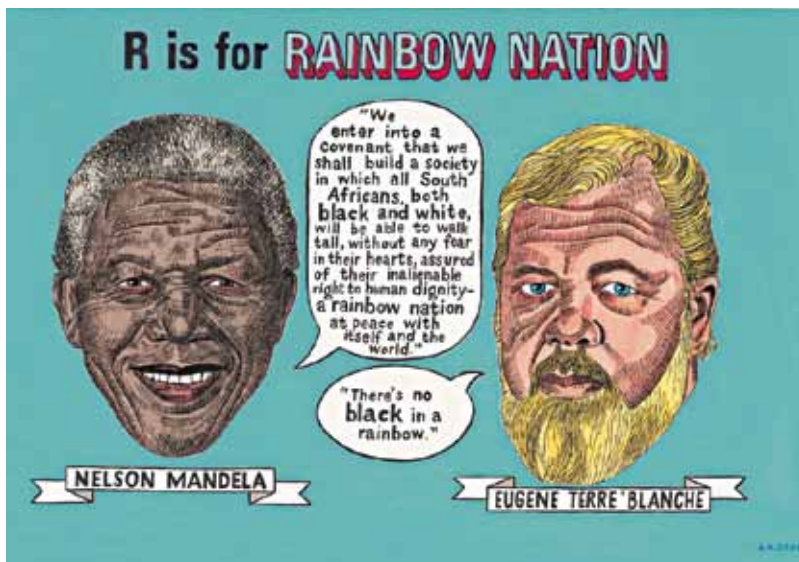
For Anton and his two-years-older brother, comics gave them a chance to stand up to the cramped, suffocating Afrikaner environment dominated by rugby, Calvinism and apartheid. School was hell. Anton pulls the second number of *Bitterkomix* out of the cabinet. He turns to the strip about the sadistic teacher Barries, who laid into a friend of Anton's with such regularity that the boy was permanently traumatised. Years later, after a bout of heavy drinking, the friend called Barries in the middle of the night and screamed at him, *'I'll fucking kill you, you asshole.'* *'That's how deep it was,'* says Anton.

As teenagers Mark and Anton rummaged through dusty second-hand shops in search of comics and music that had escaped the eye of the censor. Friends who going abroad on holiday were given lists of sought-after comics and records. That's how they discovered the French cartoonist Moebius and American outsiders like Ralph Steadman, Art Spiegelman and Robert Crumb.

But Dutch and Belgian artists were important, too, and not only the pornographic delicacies from Amsterdam. For Anton it all started with Georges Prosper Remi, alias Hergé. *'For me Tintin was a totally escapist thing. I guess for lots of boys all over the world. Especially in my pre-pubescent years Tintin was very important, it was just a way to get out of a very repressive childhood. As I got older I started looking more at American comics and Heavy Metal. But when I look back at my life it started with Tintin.'*

He also has a great admiration for the Dutchman Joost Swarte and the Belgian Ever Meulen. He praises them for their humour, wit and subtlety of style. No, he says, as a novice cartoonist in a lower-middle-class Afrikaner university town like Stellenbosch, despite all the correspondences of style and language he did not see them as like-minded souls or kindred spirits. *'No! They were more like Gods! Completely unattainable and living in this wonderful place where only talented people meet one another.'*

It was a major event when he finally met Joost Swarte in the flesh. *'It was like meeting Gene Simmons of Kiss, another of my teenage heroes – and he even said that he liked our work, which was very kind of him.'*



R is for Rainbow nation
(2008).
(from the series: Alphabet
of Democracy). Courtesy of
Michael Stevenson Gallery.

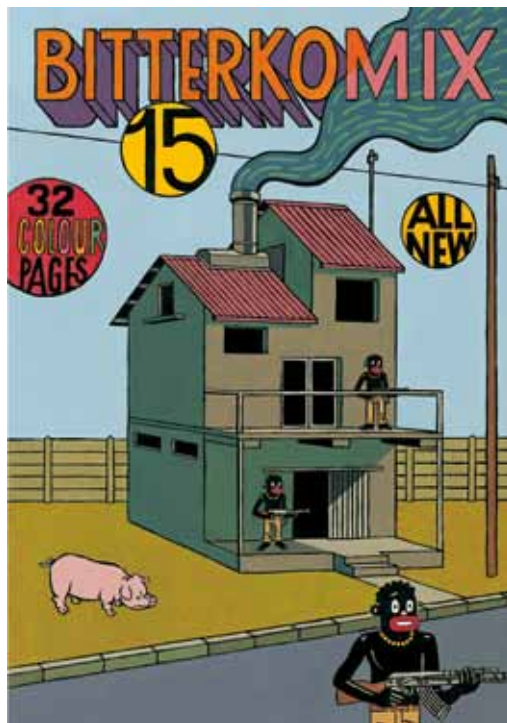
An important year for him was 1999, when he discovered the Dutch artist Willem. *'He is a great satirist and one of the best political cartoonists in the world today. At first his style did not strike me as very good, but once I got to know his work it really grew on me. I also met him in 2001 – a fantastic person with a very sharp wit and very critical of any injustice – certainly one of the most intelligent artists at work today.'*

You wouldn't think so to hear Anton talk, but at first *Bitterkomix* was largely apolitical. Like his father, the man of letters J.C. Kannemeyer, Anton regarded art as far superior to politics. For him it was art for art's sake. But for a South African in the eighties a political awakening was inevitable. Take the incident in the train going from Germany to the Netherlands, when the Dutch customs officer asked the passengers to show their passports. Everyone else got theirs back with a friendly nod – except Anton. When the officer saw it was a South African passport he hurled it to the ground. Grovel for it, you racist.

At home Mark was the rebel. He was the oldest, the first to embark on an obsessive search for the unconventional. Anton was cut from different cloth. In secondary school he was a model student. He was the class representative, good at sport and popular with his classmates. He even took a course in leadership. While the young Mark stubbornly turned left if he was told to go right, Anton would obediently make a right-hand turn. And whereas Mark forced his unusual taste in music (Kiss, Motörhead, Sex Pistols) on everyone within ear-shot, Anton left his punk records at home when he went to visit friends. But he too became subversive, though this was partly fuelled by opportunism.

When he was sixteen, he, like all the other boys, had to hand in a form for military service signed by his parents. Anton absolutely didn't feel like fighting *'terrorists'* far beyond borders or in the black townships. So as a clever class representative he offered to help the school's administration organise the completed forms and surreptitiously removed his own file and those of two friends. Three months later, when all his classmates received their call-up notices and numbers for military service, Anton chuckled with satisfaction at the sight of an empty mailbox.

Cover *Bitterkomix 15* (2008).
Courtesy of Michael
Stevenson Gallery.



In the first *Bitterkomix* he told a little story about a guitar-playing boy whose creativity and joie de vivre were crushed by military life. It's the story of thousands of South African white youths who were forced to fight in the sweltering heat deep in Namibia and Angola in a war that for a long time the authorities denied even existed, or riding in their Casspirs - armoured troop carriers - through the hostile townships where black kids pelted them with stones and Molotov cocktails. It led to alcoholism, suicide and depression.

After *Gif* the three began to specialise. Conrad excelled in narrative comics, often based on historical events such as the story of the notorious Foster gang who terrorised Johannesburg and the surrounding area in around 1914. Mark focused on absurd, almost abstract situations full of monsters and zombies. And Anton became, in Mark's words, 'Mr. Sex' One of the highpoints was his silkscreen *Boerenooientjies hou van Pielsuig* (Country Girls Like Giving Blow Jobs), showing the heads of six women ecstatically licking and sucking on penises. Under each individual drawing was a caption, for instance 'the mother of Johannes van Wyk', 'the daughter of Prof. Piet de Klerk' and 'Uncle Willie's granddaughter'. It was the coup de grâce for South African prudery; and extremely effective, judging by the furious reaction of one Fletcher Reed, who attacked the work with a can of spray paint at an exhibition in Durban in 1995.

Any anger left?

Anton's work was about Afrikaner hypocrisy. That chaste, pious granddaughter of Uncle Willie and that respectable housewife Mrs van Wyk, they just couldn't get enough.



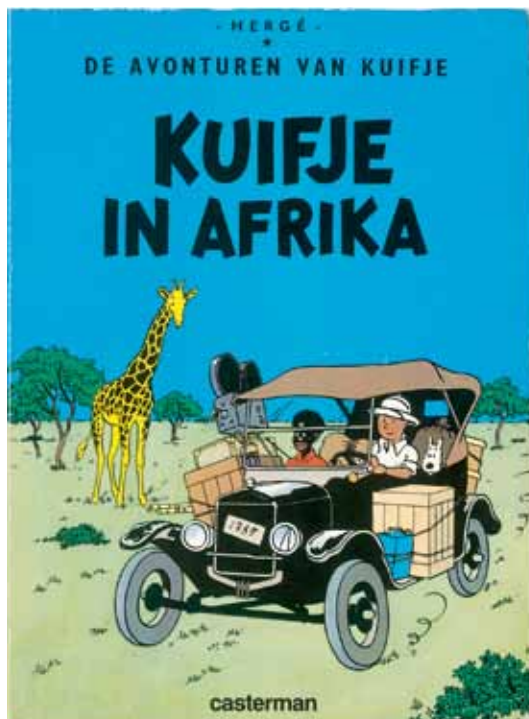
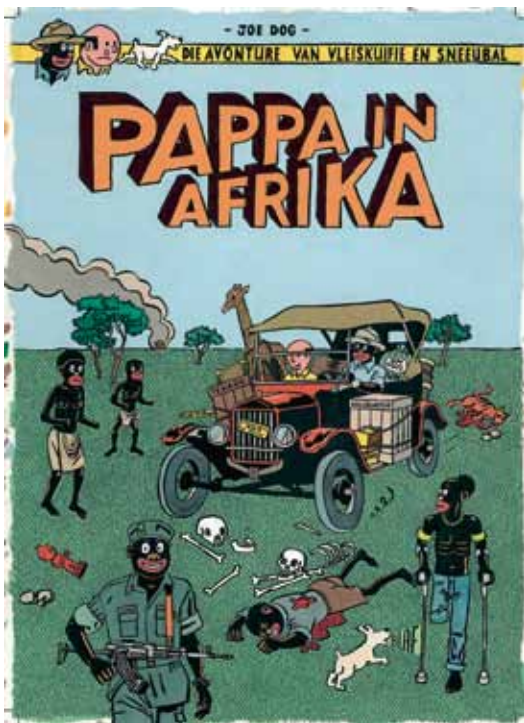
Pappa and the Black Hands (2009).
Courtesy of Michael Stevenson Gallery.

In the meantime, Mark had plunged into the punk and underground scene. His big heroes were American strip cartoonists like Robert Crumb and Gary Panter and uncompromising punk musicians like Mark E. Smith and Billy Childish. One of his most successful *Bitterkomix* creations was King Lizard at the Voortrekker Monument. The giant reptile has just relieved himself and is standing on top of the monument with a huge black erection, screaming, 'Ha ha! *Fokof laaities*' (fuck off, kiddies).

The Voortrekker Monument, an angular stone colossus just outside Pretoria, is holy to conservative Afrikaners. It was unveiled in 1949 to commemorate the brutal Great Trek in the early nineteenth century, when the Boers migrated northward from Cape Colony to escape English rule. When they defeated the Zulus, who far outnumbered them, at Blood River on 16 December 1838, they interpreted it as a sign from God: they, the Afrikaners, were the chosen people.

The Voortrekker Monument symbolises that heroism. A shitting, cursing giant lizard with a black erection was a not-very-subtle condemnation of Afrikaner nationalism, myth-making and machismo. The reptile is more masculine and aggressive than all those great Afrikaners, whom he contemptuously calls *laaities*. King Lizard was the work of a skinny, pale outsider with glasses whose health prevented him from playing rugby and who was now getting even for the humiliations and lies of his youth.

There were also personal scores to settle. In 1995 *Bitterkomix* 5 came out with a story about Boetie, Anton's pre-adolescent, Tintin-inspired alter ego. The story takes place in 1976. In one of the panels, the father figure hits a woman across the face. 'Mama doesn't live here anymore,' says the text above the drawing. Later on we see the same obese man crawling into bed with Boetie, supposedly 'for a midday nap' ...



Cover *Pappa in Afrika* (2009).

Courtesy of Michael Stevenson Gallery.

Tintin in the Congo (1931).

Father and son have not spoken since. Anton is cool about the whole thing. 'Well, I never walked around saying it's autobiographical,' he says. 'I suggested it. For me it's not about putting my father on the spot, but dealing with issues we had. So it's far more personal.'

We leaf further through the *Bitterkomix Handbook*, which feels like the end of an era. What now? The five-headed patriarch has been properly dealt with. Is there any anger left? Does 'outrage art' still have any reason to exist, now that Anton and Conrad are themselves fathers?

Of course it does. Post-apartheid South Africa has not become the fairy-tale land that everyone had hoped for in 1994 after Mandela's moving inauguration. AIDS and related diseases claim a thousand victims every day. Crime and violence have turned the cities into fortresses, where private security firms have taken over the job of the police (Anton says that not so long ago his studio was broken into, which explains the complicated alarm system and the many locks). African immigrants fear for their lives after the xenophobic violence of 2006. The Afrikaner language and culture are under pressure. White South Africans look fearfully at what is happening in Zimbabwe. The election of Jacob Zuma as the successor to president Thabo Mbeki was the decisive nudge that persuaded many of them to migrate to Australia.

In such a dystopian world, where ideas about race, ethnicity, native identity, nationality, security and sexuality are under increasing strain, the work of the three *Bitterkomix* men still resonates. Just look at their successful solo exhibitions.

In his most recent work Anton has returned to his childhood hero, Tintin, that cipher on whose white face everyone can project their own ideals, anxieties and frustrations. Kannemeyer now has Tintin walking around in a nightmare world

with primitive black men who break into his home, rape him and murder his father. As the poet Danie Marais wrote in the foreword to the catalogue *Fear Of Black Planet*: 'In Kannemeyer's work Tintin is a white African trapped in his own incriminating skin; a character who cannot escape his colonial past regardless of his personal political convictions.'

The work is about fears, about guilt and atonement, about ambivalence. When the recent publication in Great Britain of *Tintin in the Congo* caused such an uproar because of its racist connotations, Anton made his own version of the cover. He called it *Pappa in Afrika*.

You see Tintin with a black chauffeur driving through a Sierra Leone-like landscape full of soldiers with machine guns, bones, skulls and people with chopped-off limbs. Given Anton's rebellious past and the history of *Gif*, you would expect these drawings to be of protest against censorship and politically correct thinking. Instead, his explanation is strikingly sentimental and nuanced.

'When I was in Berlin recently, I bought a copy of *Tintin in the Congo* for my daughter Anna, because she loves to read about animals. And she did love the animals and seeing all the action. But then I realized there are certain stereotypes she cannot understand. Like she calls the black people "monkeys". And I don't want her to grow up with those stereotypes. I found it very difficult to explain that to her, and I find it problematic that that book is available to children if it's not in a proper context where it's clarified. So I did a parody on that cover, and that triggered everything. I'm now looking more broadly at the white colonialist in Africa and aspects of the stereotype. What does it mean? How does it visually translate? And how does it translate into language? ■

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

Black Gynaecologist (2008).

Courtesy of Michael
Stevenson Gallery.

