

STAMPS

The stamp is a kind of public-relations gesture—a highly self-conscious attempt to express through a single image some aspect of national identity. With this project, I sought to explore the political history and shifting identity of South Africa through the collection, cataloguing, research, and display of postal stamps released from the beginning of the South African Union in 1910 to the present. I intended to look at how the country, over time, had chosen to represent itself both within its borders and internationally, and in the process discovered that it is a history told in a succession of scenes, in a voice that is constantly relocating with subtle and dramatic shifts in political power.

The first version of *Stamps*, consisting of a found display case and my childhood stamp collection, was exhibited at the ICA in Johannesburg in 1993 and subsequently acquired by the BHP Billiton Collection. Some years later, a purchase of a few stamps in a small shop in Swakopmund, Namibia, soon ballooned into a mission to not only reconstitute the original collection, but also to track down at least one of every image issued as a stamp. This led me to accumulate massive quantities of stamps, and in doing so, I became intrigued with how postal cancellations on stamps were a sign of their use, and how their expanding numbers when displayed in a grid created patterns of color.

Stamps V opens and closes with the image of King George V, the first from 1910, the last from 2010. Arranged chronologically, the collection covers exactly 100 years and includes over 50,000 stamps with issues from British colonial South Africa, the period of rising Afrikaner political power, the apartheid era, and the postapartheid “New South Africa.”

Each stamp carries with it a subtext to its official message. A critical look at the collection reveals a persistent contradiction that exists between the images presented

on the stamps and the social realities of the period in which they were released. The stamps tell the story of the changing face of South Africa, revealing how the country, over time, has chosen to represent itself both within its borders and internationally. It is a fragmented narration that speaks not only through what is shown but also through what is not.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1993 | *Stamps*

Institute of Contemporary Art, Johannesburg, SA

1994 | *Vita 1993, Stamps*

Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, SA

2001 | *Imaging South Africa, Stamps I*

curated by Paul Brewer

Hemicycle, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

2001 | *Detourism, Stamps II*

curated by Hamza Walker

The Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL

2002 | *Context & Conceptualism, Stamps III*

curated by Lauri Firstenberg

Artists Space, New York, NY

2009 | *Imaging South Africa:*

Records/Newspapers/Stamps, Stamps IV

Durban Art Gallery, Durban, South Africa



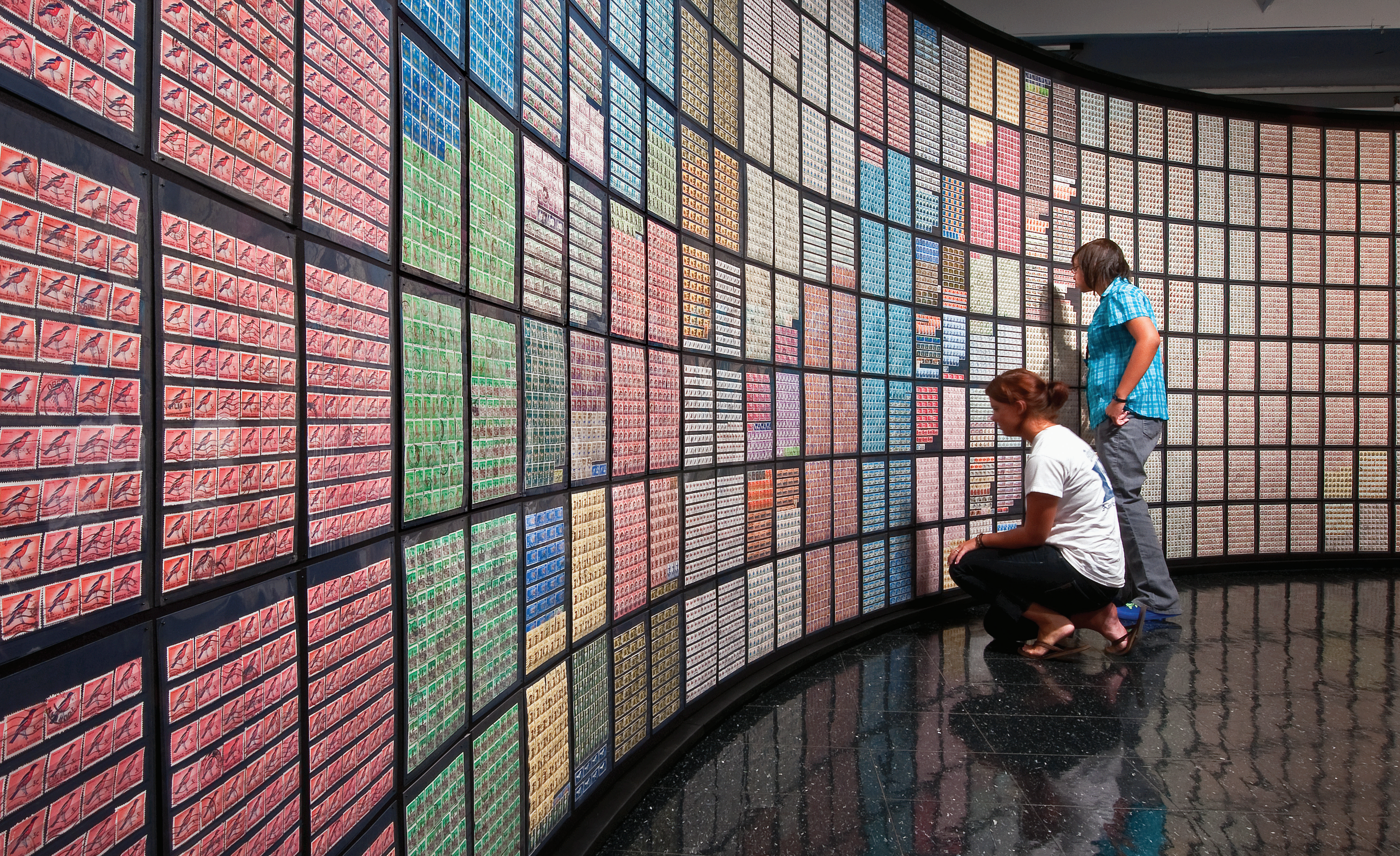
- left: *Happy 90th Birthday, Madiba*, miniature sheet issued July 14, 2008, SAPO. Currently 15 South African stamp issues show the portrait of Nelson Mandela, this stamp is the most recent.
- above right: *Stamps*, 1993. The original stamp display featuring my childhood collection. ICA Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa. BHP Billiton Collection, Johannesburg, SA.
- right: *Stamps I*, 2001. This installation was the first semi-circular presentation of the stamp collection and also the first time the title *Imaging South Africa* was used. Hemicycle, Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, DC



• left & next: *Stamps V*, 2010.
100 years of South African stamps (1910 - 2010).
stamps, pins, acetate, cloth, wood.
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA.

Notes on stamp details on pages to follow:

- p. 50: *H.F. Verwoerd Commemoration*, stamp issued December 6, 1966, SAPO.
This stamp was issued after the assassination of Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd, often viewed as the architect of apartheid.
- p. 51: *Golfer Gary Player*, stamp issued December 2, 1976, SAPO.
Player, who was inducted in the *World Golf Hall of Fame* in 1974, is probably one of South Africa's most famous personalities, and with this release became the first sportsman to be depicted on a South African stamp. During this period (1975 - 78) Player worked in secret with the Department of Information under Eschel Rhoodie to help counter negative images of South Africa by playing golf with international politicians and corporate executives. His actions were one part of a much broader clandestine operation organized by Rhoodie to combat South Africa's negative image during the apartheid period. Player's legacy as a successful promoter of South Africa's image abroad through golf can still be seen today where South African golfers, such as Ernie Els, Retief Goosen and Louis Oosthuizen, continue to out-image major South African politicians in the US press.
- p. 52: *World Heavy-Weight Title Fight: Knoetze-Tate*, stamp issued June 2, 1979.
Bophuthatwana was one of ten semi-autonomous "Bantustans" established by the apartheid government within South African borders as "homelands" for its black populations under its policy of separate development. Though these "countries" were never officially recognized internationally, four of them issued postage stamps. This setenant printing shows a classic face-off between American boxer John Tate and South African Kallie Knoetze, which took place at Sun City. Tate won the fight in the eighth round.
- p. 54: *Steve Biko, Chris Hani, Oliver Tambo, Robert Sobukwe, Walter Sisulu, 50th Anniversary of the Women's March to the Union Buildings, Solomon Mahlangu, Joburg 2010 International Stamp Show*, issued between Oct. 9, 2002 and Oct.15, 2009, SAPO.
Various miniature sheets commemorating heroes of the struggle against apartheid, the one exception being the re-issue of South Africa's very first stamp showing the portrait of King George V. Miniature sheets are designed for a collector's market and not generally used postally. Their usefulness in projecting an image is thus quite limited.
- p. 55: *President Jacob Zuma* stamp issued November 10, 2009, SAPO.
A full sheet showing South Africa's current and third president since the historic elections of 1994.





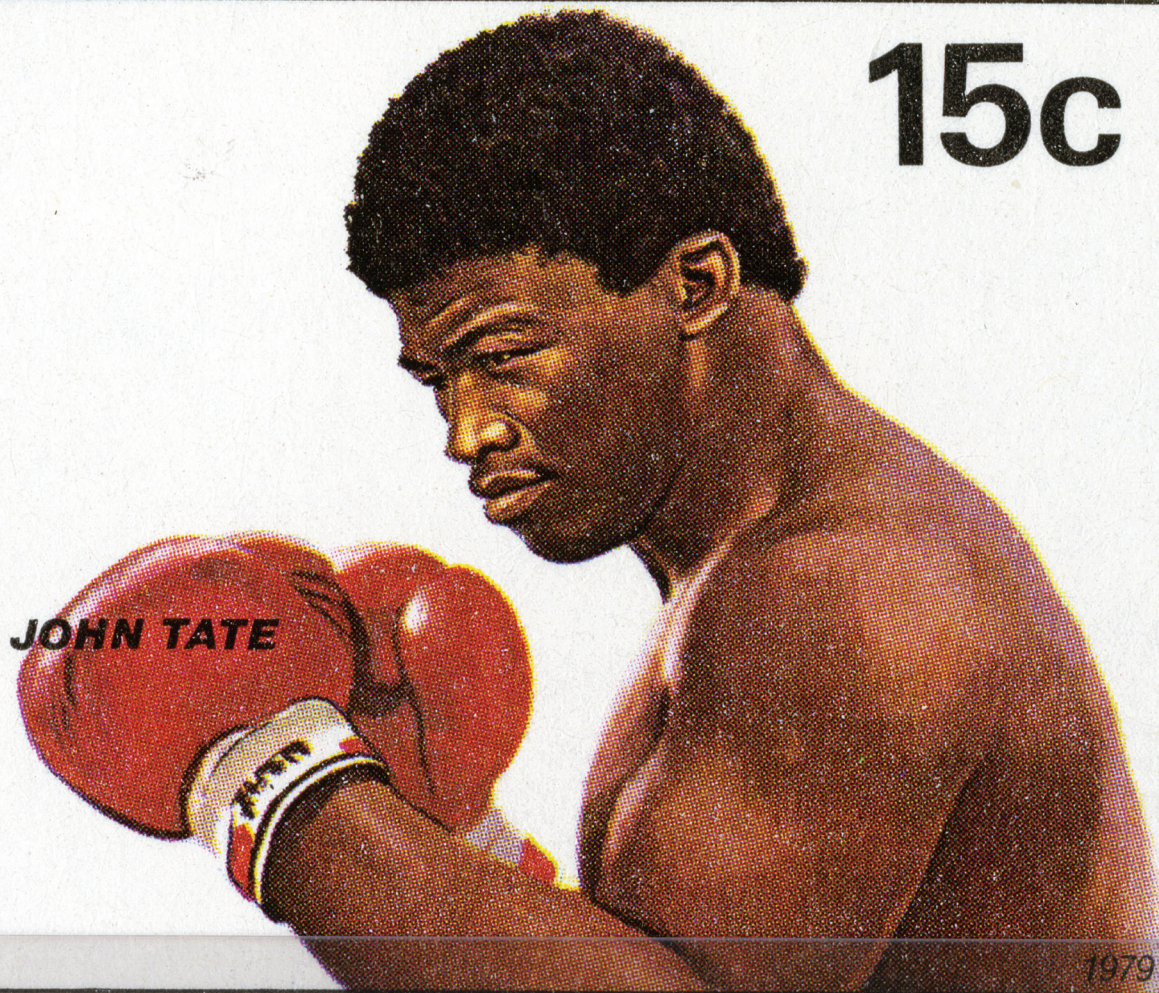
BOPHUTHATSWANA

15c



KALLIE KNOETZE

JOHN TATE



15c

BOPHUTHATSWANA

