

THE MARKET PHOTO  
WORKSHOP IN  
SOUTH AFRICA AND THE  
'BORN FREE' GENERATION  
Remaking Histories

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JULIE BONZON

# The Market Photo Workshop in South Africa and the 'Born Free' Generation

This study presents the history of the Market Photo Workshop (MPW) in Johannesburg and works produced by its new generation of photography students.

Founded in 1989 by internationally renowned documentary photographer David Goldblatt, the MPW has reflected upon South African political struggles and sociocultural changes since its creation. Its foundation parallels a moment in time when photography was considered a 'truth telling' genre and an essential source of documents deployed against the apartheid regime. This book reflects on the evolution of the MPW in the post-apartheid era and explores how its new generation of students engages the photographic tradition of this institution and the revolutionary times that accompanied its creation to question their present moment.

The book will be of interest to scholars working in art history, visual studies, photography, African studies, cultural studies and post-colonial studies.

**Julie Bonzon**, PhD, is an independent art historian and photography curator.

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# The Market Photo Workshop in South Africa and the 'Born Free' Generation

Remaking Histories

Julie Bonzon

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To Nicole, Martine and Marina



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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<b>Introduction. The photographic legacy of the Market Photo Workshop</b>	1
1. <i>Preliminary thoughts on the notion of 'born free'</i>	2
2. <i>On the genre of 'documentary' photography</i>	3
3. <i>The Market Photo Workshop in academic literature</i>	7
4. <i>The history of the Market Photo Workshop</i>	8
5. <i>The new generation of Market Photo Workshop students: a case study</i>	20
<b>1 The politics of remembrance: Lebohang Kganye's <i>Her-story/Heir-story</i></b>	29
1. <i>Her-story: ordinary aspirations</i>	33
2. <i>Heir-story: tales of displacement</i>	44
3. <i>Mimicry, morphism and doubling</i>	53
4. <i>Conclusion. Re-memory</i>	59
<b>2 The lost heroes: Siphho Gongxeka's <i>Skeem' Saka</i></b>	68
1. <i>A shared performance</i>	71
2. <i>A rebellious figure</i>	82
3. <i>The kwaito singer and the 'aborted' revolution</i>	90
4. <i>Conclusion. 'Born free' in protest</i>	96
<b>3 A place of return: <i>The Front</i> by Matt Kay</b>	104
1. <i>The Durban beachfront</i>	107
2. <i>The zone of the seam</i>	113
3. <i>Landscape, signs and photography</i>	116
4. <i>To overwrite the past</i>	118
5. <i>A 'borderless' world</i>	123
6. <i>A place of return</i>	128
7. <i>Conclusion. A turn to the self</i>	134

<b>4</b>	<b>Disruptions and sabotages: <i>Plastic Crowns</i> by Phumzile Khanyile</b>	<b>142</b>
	1. <i>Parodying Penelope</i> 145	
	2. <i>Domestic photography and the ‘unwanted’ photograph</i> 156	
	3. <i>Crafting a ‘new’ femininity</i> 163	
	4. <i>Conclusion. ‘If everything must fall . . .’</i> 171	
	<b>Conclusion. Working <i>through</i> the present</b>	<b>179</b>
	<i>Index</i>	<b>189</b>

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# Introduction. The photographic legacy of the Market Photo Workshop

Ranging from 2002 to 2018, the comments mentioned shortly reflect upon some of the challenges that the work of a new generation of students have generated within the context of the Market Photo Workshop (MPW), a training institution founded in 1989 by David Goldblatt (1930–2018):

Thinking back now I see there was a strong sense of social documentary at the [Market Photo] Workshop, (but) it seems to have loosened up a bit. People are having a lot of fun. The stuff (now) is a bit more flamboyant.

(TJ Lemon, 2002)<sup>1</sup>

If there is an increasing tendency towards self-absorption – navel-gazing – there is, still, a concern with social issues. What of the future?

(David Goldblatt, 2011)<sup>2</sup>

Photography has become a medium of the imaginary perhaps more so than it is a medium of reality. . . . Taking a picture of reality is not so ‘cool’.

(John Fleetwood, 2018)<sup>3</sup>

Photography was necessary at that time, now it is ‘chic’.

(Hlonipha Mokoena, 2018)<sup>4</sup>

The varying approaches compiled under the label of ‘documentary photography’ that I will address in this introduction – from a straight journalistic practice to a social, and analytical or a lyrical vocabulary – have forged the core identity of the school since its creation. How do young practitioners negotiate this photographic heritage from a temporal distance, while being immersed in a globalised and digital landscape? Articulated around photographs by MPW students working with or against this visual vocabulary, this study questions how photographic practices are currently being reshaped and rethought in South Africa. Lebohang Kganye’s series *Her-story/Heir-story* (2012–2013), Siphongxeka’s *Skeem’ Saka* (2013–2014), Matt Kay’s *The Front* (2014–2015) and Phumzile Khanyile’s *Plastic Crowns* (2015–2016) will be considered as contemporary responses to the MPW’s legacy. Each series is the result of a year-long mentorship with an established photographer, providing the opportunity to address how the aesthetic values inhabited by an older generation are engaged and possibly counter-acted by young students. The work of Kganye, Gongxeka, Kay and Khanyile, while distinct in their subject matter and form, also engage the history of the country – family archives, national

## 2 *The photographic legacy of the Market Photo Workshop*

tales of displacement, iconic and glamorous figures drawn from popular culture, or historically segregated landscapes – to address contemporary dilemmas and contradictions. Born shortly before 1994, this generation of students challenges the expectation of what it is to be born ‘free’ from the legacy of apartheid and revisits the MPW’s photographic heritage through a series of critical interventions. Working with digital or sculptural photomontages, blurring limits between fact and fiction, revisiting sites shaped by apartheid or disrupting the mechanism of the camera, each student selected in this book engages and/or challenges the assumed neutrality, objectivity and detachment of documentary photography. ‘Flamboyant’, ‘navel-gazing’, ‘imaginary’, ‘cool’ or ‘chic’ are some of many terms used to describe the work of new students by the older generation. It is the apparent tension between a ‘then’ and a ‘now’ that this research addresses.

### 1. Preliminary thoughts on the notion of ‘born free’

Produced between 2012 and 2016 within a teaching institution founded during the most violent years of the apartheid era, the photographic series at the centre of this study unfold against national debates on ‘the born free’ generation and decolonialised spaces of knowledge. The qualifier ‘born free’ has emerged during the recent years of South African politics, especially with regards to the presidential elections in 2014. For the first time in the history of the country, people who did not experience apartheid first hand were at the age to vote. Academic discussion diverges on the definition of this notion, which oscillates between identifying young people ‘who come to age politically after 1996’ and those ‘born after apartheid ended in 1994’.<sup>5</sup> Promoted locally and by the Anglophone press overseas, ‘the born frees’ as a group were nevertheless used critically to challenge the utopian aspirations of what the African National Congress (ANC)’s newly enfranchised elites termed ‘the rainbow’, as a ‘non racialist’ and equal nation. The assumption embedded in the phrase ‘born free’ – being born after the end of apartheid and therefore ‘liberated’ from its laws – generated counter reactions and discourses. Incoherence between the government’s promises and everyday life difficulties, but also the polarisation between middle and working classes, led part of this young generation to voice their concerns in the public and online domain.

The highly mediatised student movements #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, whose implications will be addressed throughout these chapters, contributed to the mobilisation and dissemination of the rubric ‘born free’. Followed by a fight against the rise in education fees, #RhodesMustFall succeeded in removing the Cecil John Rhodes statue from the University of Cape Town in 2015. The origin of the movement is commonly associated with the 9th of March 2015, when UCT student and activist Chumani Maxwele threw a bucket of human excrements onto the statue. Within a few months, student strikes took place across the country’s main cities – Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria. Marching on the streets, boycotting classes, chanting anti-apartheid songs and removing artworks judged derogatory from university buildings to set a few alight, the tactics deployed by #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall students were often qualified by journalists as reminiscent of the ones adopted by Soweto uprisings students in 1976. #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall quickly escalated into a national debate on colonial residues shaping educational structures – in South Africa and elsewhere – the lack of representation of black leadership figures in university campuses as well as on the degrading life-realities of many black students at home.

The phrase ‘born free’ is misleading. However, it is against the implications raised by the opposed adjective ‘free’ that the disillusion and concerns shared by a large part of this generation take shape. Strikes and public manifestations in 2015, but also writing material produced by people born after apartheid ended, challenged the previous generation’s loyalty towards the ANC and its role in liberation while stressing the discomfort in the expectation of freedom cast on their shoulders. In my discussion with historian and anthropologist Hlonipha Mokoena, she reflected on this malaise as ‘an unfair burden’, ‘the angst for a time’ and a feeling that ‘you missed out on something’.<sup>6</sup> While their parents witnessed tangible progress, she argues, young people are uncertain of what remains possible in a country where the legacy of struggle is more apparent than direct experience of conflict.

In a wish to revive and continue a revolution judged ‘unfinished’, the ‘born free’ discussion seems to be intrinsically embedded in a debate revisiting past models of resistance, inhabiting and revisiting the anger of past generations.<sup>7</sup> Historical figures are mobilised afresh in a discussion aimed at questioning the past and not taking promises of liberation for granted. Because of challenging beliefs and expectations of freedom, this generation is sometimes critically received by the earlier one who see themselves as having overcome the conflict. While the old generation is critical of the so-called born free’s dismissal of their own historical achievements, young South Africans argue against being held forever in debt and captive to them.

## 2. On the genre of ‘documentary’ photography

The Market Photo Workshop’s foundation is inscribed within the 80s and early 90s, a moment in time when photography is widely considered as a ‘truth telling’ genre and an important source of documents articulated against the structural and physical violence of the apartheid regime.<sup>8</sup> Taken between 1981 and 1986, four black and white analogue photographs typify this approach, which set out to illustrate the sociopolitical context, together with the visual premises of the MPW’s photographic training.

In 1981, Omar Badsha, founder of the collective and multi-racial agency Afrapix, photographs the funeral of a member of a Congress of South African Students (COSAS) (Figure 0.1). At a time when public gatherings were prohibited by the regime, funerals stood as meeting places for anti-apartheid activists and gave the opportunity for people to protest as a group. Standing at the front line of the march, Badsha depicts a group of students, some raising their fists high in the air, while holding on to loose belts in case of a police attack. The composition of the image is frontal, the facial expression of the students – ranging from sadness, outrage, anger and excitement – together with their political message, appear clearly depicted in the frame. In his capture of police attacks on youth in 1985, Gideon Mendel, at the time a member of Afrapix, positions himself at the heart of the action (Figure 0.2). The focus is sharp, the camera exposure is quick, and the two groups take equal part in the image composition. Mendel photographs the whiplashes, the punches, in what appears as a straightforward capture of the violent attack unfolding in front of the camera.

Included in the series *Structures of Domination and Democracy*, the photographic depiction of the bulldozed house of Luke Kgatitsoe by David Goldblatt in 1986 provides contrasting characteristics (Figure 0.3). Rather than capturing the moment of the destruction, the crumbling walls and the smoke rising from the ashes, Goldblatt photographs



*Figure 0.1* Omar Badsha, 'Students marching to funeral of COSAS member, KwaMashu, 1981'.

*Source:* Copyright: Omar Badsha



*Figure 0.2* Gideon Mendel, 'Police attacks youth in the morning on the day of the Pollsmoor Prison March, 1985'.

*Source:* Copyright: Gideon Mendel

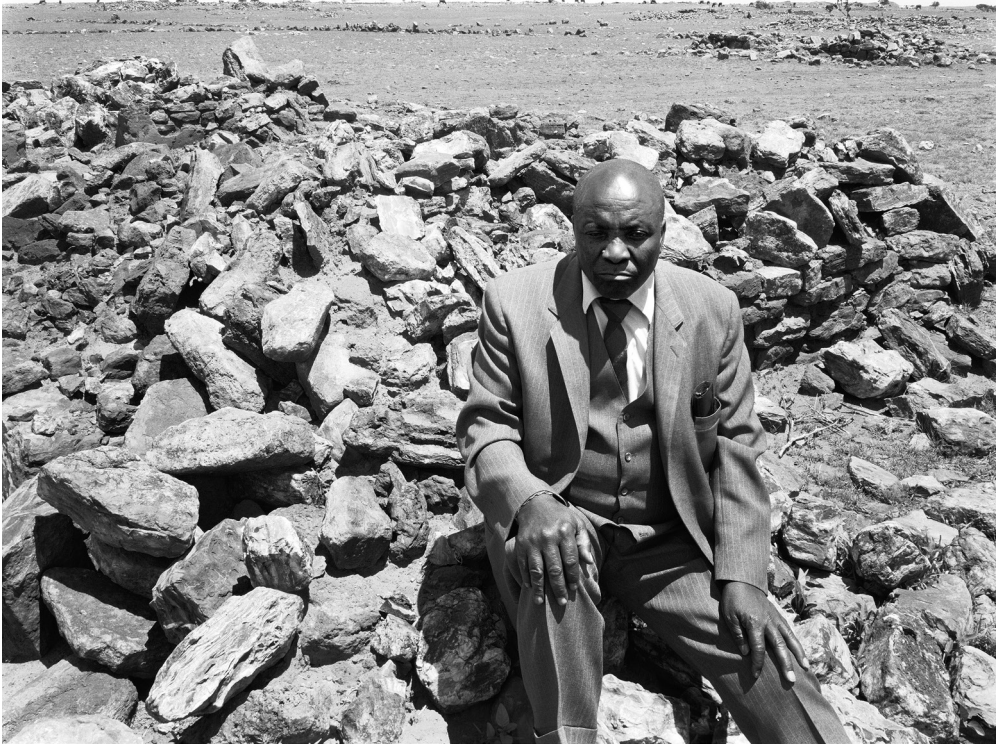


Figure 0.3 David Goldblatt, 'Luke Kgatitsoe at his house, bulldozed in February 1984 by the government after the forced removal of the people of Mapoga, a black-owned farm, which had been declared a 'black spot', Ventersdorp district, Transvaal, 21 October 1986', from the series *Structures of Domination and Democracy*.

Source: Copyright: Goodman Gallery for the estate of David Goldblatt

the ruins two years after the actual event (1984), the aftermath of violence. There is no spectacle or ambiguity in this picture, but a surgical attention to detail. Goldblatt's camera records every single element, from the tree's sparse leaves in the background, to the mineral surface of the rocks and the neat and ironed costume of Kgatitsoe in the foreground. The same year, as part of his series *Train Church*, Santu Mofokeng (1956–2020) photographed commuters praying in a crowded wagon (Figure 0.4). Instead of a sharp focus and clear vision, Mofokeng adopted a more lyrical approach. The representation is ambiguous. The vibrations induced by the moving carriage, against which each of the standing commuter struggles, play an essential part in the composition. Because of the slow exposure of the camera, the image is grainy and the figures are blurred, echoing the mystical character of the scene witnessed by the photographer.

These photographs by Badsha, Mendel, Goldblatt and Mofokeng demonstrate some of the subdivisions compiled under the historically constructed genre of 'documentary photography' in this country. Badsha's and Mendel's photographs are evocative of what has commonly been labelled as 'social documentary' and 'struggle photography'. Both Goldblatt and Mofokeng are usually singled out in the discussion, being referred to either as 'social documentary' or as documentary photographers. This might be in reason of their nuanced capture of violence, their skepticism towards the visual language adopted



Figure 0.4 Santu Mofokeng, 'Supplication, Johannesburg-Soweto Line, 1986', from the series *Train Church*.

Source: Courtesy: Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg. Copyright: Santu Mofokeng Foundation

by Afrapix (Mofokeng left Afrapix in 1988 and Goldblatt positioned himself against the tendency of its members to confound the camera with 'a machine gun') and their international success. The boundaries between each genre are permeable, ambiguous and not mutually exclusive. Documentary photography has retrospectively been associated with a progressive and liberal cause in South Africa. Mobilised with regards to civil rights and anti-war movements in North America, the adjective 'social' came to characterise 'committed' documentary photographic practices adopting an anti-apartheid agenda.<sup>9</sup> As an example, the publication *The Cordoned Heart* (1986), which featured the work of numerous Afrapix photographers such as Badsha, became emblematic of a so-called 'social documentary' style.<sup>10</sup> Despite the existence of documentary photographic practices marshaled to oppose apartheid since the 1950s, the qualifier 'struggle photography' came into effect in the 1980s in response to the increasingly violent and censored climate in which photography was taking place. It was applied to the publication *Beyond the Barricades: Popular Resistance in South Africa* (1989), which included Mendel's work amongst other Afrapix members, and retrospectively to the publication of Ernest Cole's *House of Bondage* (1967) and the work of African photographers published in the resistant and political *Drum Magazine*, initially *The African Drum*, created in 1951.<sup>11</sup> Distinguishing between these categories – social documentary, struggle photography and documentary photography – and organising them along a clear chronological storyline, is a frustrating enterprise. What therefore is the practice that seems to be eclipsed by the work produced by the new generation of MPW students? Primarily, I would argue, they challenge the assumption that subtends the photographic praxis adopted by Badsha,

Mendel, Golblatt and Mofokeng: that is an ethical engagement with photography's claims to truth, its use of the analogue, an aversion to any form of staging as well as a belief in the objectivity of photography. The nostalgia towards a former mode of representation and the perception of its disappearance prompts us to question the recent developments putting this visual tradition at stake.

### **3. The Market Photo Workshop in academic literature**

Documentary photography in the context of South Africa has been the subject of in-depth art historical and sociological investigation tackling the development of the medium as a reflection of the country's political events and historical trajectory. In line with a social reading of photography and its critiques formulated against the imperialist ramifications of the genre, its complex network of power and knowledge and its function of domination and control, scholarly research on the practice of documentary photography within the African continent has stressed its colonial structures, while engaging contemporary work by African-based practitioners as a response formulated against this visual heritage.<sup>12</sup> Not confined to the power dynamics at stake between a photographer, a photographed subject and an external audience, the display of photography and its circulation has also received scholarly attention. The formal qualities of photographs produced during the apartheid era have given rise to researches on the spectacle and consumption of violence, and on the impact of such images in post-1994 museums, physical landscapes and public consciousness.<sup>13</sup> The photographs by members of the Bang Bang Club in particular, a group of risk-taking, twenty-year old photojournalists, have often been mobilised in writings on the international circulation of graphic depictions of gruesome and bloody sceneries, usually in saturated colours. The interplay between memory and photography, and especially the way in which documentary photography has filtered the public access, understanding and remembrance of South African history, has been paralleled by researches on contemporary work that engages photographic archives by filling its gaps and casting light on its contradictions.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to 'struggle photography', the work of Santu Mofokeng in particular has been cast as an alternative and intimate take on the everyday life experience of apartheid, and at the same time as expending the formal characteristics of the genre of anti-apartheid photography in the country.<sup>15</sup> Writings on gender politics in South African-based photography have stretched the material commonly investigated to include photographs situated outside the professional margins – family and vernacular photography – directing scholarly attention from the streets to the domestic as an equivalent space of resistance.<sup>16</sup> Research on the genre of portraiture, especially in the work of South African-based practitioners active in the 2000s, has addressed the history and oppressive nature of anthropometry and ethnographic depictions of 'types', while opening up photography as a productive space to think about the formation of alternative subjectivities.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the formulation of photographic categories in a South African context has been accompanied by temporal delimitations. While photographic practices in the 1980s and 1990s were often labelled under the categories 'social documentary', 'photojournalism' or 'struggle photography', the notion of an 'identity decade' came to qualify portrait photography emerging from the 'post-apartheid' period.<sup>18</sup> Issues surrounding national and historical preservation with regards to archival and vernacular photographic material have recently been accompanied by researches on the impact of the Internet and globalisation on South African-based photographic practices – complicating the distance between Africa and the rest of the world

## 8 *The photographic legacy of the Market Photo Workshop*

and framing the work produced by the millennial generation of visual practitioners as an opportunity to question what the future of the country might hold.<sup>19</sup> This book is in great debt to this existing body of literature. It considers the photographic practices of MPW students in relation to the fruitful history of documentary photography in the country, their shared tendency to critically reflect on possibilities offered by the medium as well as the relation between their photographic practices and recent national and generational preoccupations. In addition, it complicates the temporal framing under which photography has generally been comprehended in this country, by pointing at similarities running across the work of various generations of practitioners.

The Market Photo Workshop has played a key role in the history of South African photography. The successive directors and administrators of the institution – Gillian Cargill (1989–1990), TJ Lemon (1991–1994), Jenny Gordon (1994–1997), Cedric Nunn (1998–2000), Germaine Horowitz (2000–2001), John Fleetwood (2002–2015) and Lekgetho Makola (2016–2021) – have cultivated and expanded the documentary legacy of Goldblatt, adding their own contributions and providing a training ground to generations of students. It is believed that about seventy percent of South African photojournalists active today have studied in this institution, almost a third of whom were women.<sup>20</sup> As Goldblatt recalled: ‘[A]lmost all of the photographers employed in newspapers in this part of the world are ex-students.’<sup>21</sup> This number is, of course, approximate but stresses the impact of the school on the photographic landscape on a local level. However, before the appearance of *Sharp: The Market Photo Workshop*, a collection of interviews with former directors, teachers and mentors, self-published by the MPW in 2002, literature on this institution is almost non-existent.<sup>22</sup> At the time of writing this book, the institution is well known to South African and international photographers, as well as Johannesburg-based philanthropists and photography amateurs, but does not seem to be well known beyond photographic circles. The MPW gained international recognition through the participation of some students in group exhibitions, such as *Snap Judgement: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, the International Centre of Photography, New York, 2006, *Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2011, *My Joburg*, La Maison Rouge, Paris, 2013, *Telling Time* showcased in the Bamako Encounters in 2015 and *Être là, Afrique du Sud, une scène contemporaine* exhibited in the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris in 2017. In 2007, the photography magazine *Camera Austria* dedicated its 100th edition entitled ‘I Am Not Afraid’ to the Market Photo Workshop and the trajectories of contemporary South African photographers, combining interviews with articles. A text by art critic Sean O’Toole on the young generation of photographers coming from the MPW was published in 2017 in the 207th edition of *Aperture* entitled ‘Platform Africa’, a special edition dedicated to contemporary photography from the continent. Outside these few examples, literature on the history and the influence of the MPW on contemporary photographic practices in the country is surprisingly lacking. The relationship between the work of the Market Photo Workshop’s founder, teachers and mentors and the new generation of students remains, to this date, unexplored. The social and photographic trajectory of the MPW, together with the history of its pedagogic system, is what I will now briefly address.

### 4. The history of the Market Photo Workshop

The Market Photo Workshop is primarily a training ground designed to provide what its directors and teachers refer to as ‘visual literacy’ to emerging photographers largely

excluded from previously designated ‘white’ art schools and training institutions. Through segregation policies affecting every aspect of public and private everyday life – from the places people lived and worked, to the person they could befriend or love to their education and leisure – the apartheid regime prevented racialised subjects classified according to the law from accessing and developing technical and creative expertise. The Bantu Education Act (1953–1979), forcing South African students to study in Afrikaans instead of English, had limited reading and speaking skills, together with access to foreign materials and knowledge. It was a pedagogic system, in Goldblatt’s words, ‘designed to deprive young people of the skills and curiosity needed in modern technological societies’.<sup>23</sup> Founded by Goldblatt in 1989, four years after the State of Emergency of 1985, the MPW stood in opposition to apartheid’s segregation policies and was designed from its inception as a non-racial pedagogic and cultural institution, following on from, and in collaboration with, the Market Theatre.

The Market Theatre was located within the walls of an Indian fruit market in Newtown, in Johannesburg’s city centre. It was conceived in 1976 in response to the violent military and police actions against the Soweto Uprising as an experimental and performance space, staging plays with multi-racial casts for a multi-racial audience.<sup>24</sup> In 1978, as part of the Theatre’s cultural programme, Goldblatt created a photography gallery in a small corner of the market. Every three weeks, the gallery exhibited the work of local and international photographers, such as portrait photographer Mike Disfarmer and photojournalist Alfred Eisenstaedt, both of whom followed a formal and ‘classic’ documentary approach and embodied an ethical commitment to photography’s capacity to expose social inequalities.<sup>25</sup> Goldblatt also exhibited his own work in this space, such as the photographic series *Structures* (Figure 0.3) displayed in the Market Theatre in the late 80s, prior to the creation of the workshop. The interest in photography shown by young black people visiting the gallery is what, according to Goldblatt, encouraged him to look for funding in 1986 in order to develop a photography workshop accessible to those students. By that time, South Africa was affected by cultural, sports and economic boycotts led by academics, activists and multinationals in opposition to apartheid. Kodak and Polaroid, potential founders of the MPW, had left Johannesburg in response to the embargo against the country. Jeremy Ractliffe, father of photographer Jo Ractliffe and director of the mining company Murray & Roberts, secured a grant for the MPW from the Douglas Murray Trust in early 1989. The first advertisement for the Market Photo Workshop featured in the ‘Tonight Section’ of the *Star* (Johannesburg). The displays of Goldblatt, Disfarmer and Eisenstaedt’s photographs in the gallery corner of the Market Theatre, together with the promotion of the institution in the *Star*, a newspaper employing photojournalists such as co-founder of Afrapix Peter McKenzie (1955–2017) and Bang Bang Club member Kevin Carter (1960–1994), framed the MPW early on as an institution cultivating a documentary, humanist and ‘committed’ spirit and offering training suited for aspiring documentary photographers and photojournalists.

The first location of the Market Photo Workshop was within the Market Theatre itself. The institution’s fee system – low or convertible into grants for students struggling financially – and its easy access made it especially attractive for young photographers coming from the Johannesburg townships. Photographer Gillian Cargill, employed by Goldblatt as a director and a teacher, used rehearsal rooms for classes on photography, which at that stage were primarily designed on informal discussions of images. In the early 1990s, with the help of the real estate investment and property management the American Home Property Company, the team and students of the MPW moved to the old Newtown post



*Figure 0.5* Darkroom assistant Themba Hadebe and director TJ Lemon pose at the entrance to the first Market Photo Workshop premises of 139 Bree Street, Newtown. Circa 1992. Photographer: unknown

office in Bree Street (now Lilian Ngoyi Street) in the Johannesburg city centre (Figure 0.5).<sup>26</sup> The racially segregated entrances of the building were blocked to give way to an alternative and shared entry for students and staff, the counters were turned into dark tables for the development of negatives. The interior, comprising a darkroom and an open lecture and office area, would accommodate the teaching activities of the MPW for the ten years to come. The location offered security, photographic material, electricity and space, in contradiction to the degrading realities of the poor suburbs. By providing cameras to black students, the MPW sought to redress their invisibility, while allowing students from distinct ethnicities and demographic backgrounds to interact with each other. The narrowed and crowded post office provided a space of knowledge-sharing and ultimately shaped the MPW as a multi-racial community and a ‘photographic society’ bringing together individuals sharing a similar political background. The desegregated old Newtown post office,