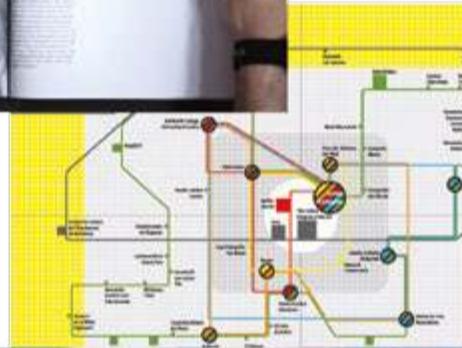


WIDE ANGLE

PHOTOGRAPHY AS PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE





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Preface

Wide Angle: The frame

In 2011, the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg, in collaboration with the Wits School of Arts and the Market Photo Workshop, initiated the development of *Wide Angle: Photography as Public Practice*, an innovative multi-platform project that reflected upon photography as a participatory, public practice, and which resulted in a colloquium in Johannesburg in March of that year.

The forum brought together a thought-provoking group of local and international practitioners and theoreticians, who spent three days together presenting photographic projects produced on different continents in a range of social, physical and political contexts and conditions. These were introduced around the broadly defined themes of research, advocacy, art practice and process, dialogue and social exchange. Artists and theorists showcased reciprocal and negotiated methods of creative interaction and interrogated amongst other things: the aesthetics, morality, ethics and power relations of participatory photographic practice, the relationship between social engagement and creative practice, and between politics and poetry. Questions were asked about the reading and meaning of photographs produced in these ways.

As cultural theorist Achille Mbembe has said in the context of the development of the arts in South Africa: “We need to keep re-inventing the relationship between community and culture. Public art still holds the possibility of providing the necessary imaginary resources our cities need as they try to foster between citizens the sort of convivial and reciprocal relations without which there is neither a vibrant public sphere nor civic life as such” (Mbembe 2009). This is the environment in which this publication explores the potential of photography and photographic projects to be used as a way to participate in the world; where ‘audience’ becomes ‘actor’, and experience and social interaction take precedence over documentary and observation.

The *Wide Angle* curatorial team has since worked towards this e-book that takes many of the issues raised in the colloquium and its subsequent discussions further. The contributions included here come at these questions from a rich variety of angles and positions – in relation to participatory photographic projects, and to the medium of photography itself. The political and ethical and ‘meaning’ status of photography is never uncomplicated terrain, and contributions in this publication critically engage with participatory practice and some of the subtler issues involved. These include power relations, ethics and the means of exchange that have to be negotiated between project leaders and project participants; a collateral exchange that is the nature of negotiations between a project and its funders or partners; the aesthetic dimensions of a socially engaged practice; and issues of intentionality, negotiated reality and ‘utopian’ pursuits.

Wide Angle: Photography as Public Practice sets out to provide the reader with a range of insights, commentaries, conversations and responses to issues raised on the subject of participatory practice and photography. But it also seeks to provoke. As Hans Ulrich Obrist offers in his Preface to Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar’s (2006) book, *Did Someone Say Participate?*, “‘Participation’ is a word that has been used a lot lately. What does this word mean today after it has been turned into a cliché so many times? ... At the beginning, participation was very ‘authentic’ ... Then it became politically instrumentalized and often degraded.” Our intention in this publication is to prompt a widening angle on the notion of participation – to rethink and critically expand its definition, uses and possible meanings – and to provoke these thoughts in practitioners, novices, teachers, funders and theorists working and thinking around the subject at all levels.

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Introduction

This is what we did (and will continue to do): Notes toward photography as participatory practice



Naison Dube

2010

Photographer

From *Border Farm* by Thenjiwe

Nkosi and the Dulibadzimu

Theatre Group

© Naison Dube/Dulibadzimu

Theatre Group

“Pointing the camera at the Israeli Separation Barrier-Wall involves a fundamental paradox: no matter how critical we are of its construction, once we choose to photograph it, we are colluding with its construction and preservation.” (Wigoder 2010:293)

“At stake here is the fabrication of a tight web of inclusion that cancels the authority of external gazes.” (Jaguaribe & Lissovsky 2009:203)

This introduction reflects on the *Wide Angle* project and also acts as a set of reminders or notes for a future-oriented set of practices as primary modes for how people *do*, following Ruben Gaztambide-Fernández (2013). Emerging from the *Wide Angle: Photography as Public Practice* symposium held at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in March 2011, one of the first prompts for the writing of this text was to consider both the ‘how to do’ of photography as participatory practice, and also to encourage a healthy scepticism of, and insistence on, these practices at the same time.

My experience of the participatory is, more often than not, associated with my interest in the relationship between artistic practices and pedagogy. There is something of this introduction that recalls this relationship. What I want from these notes is the beginnings of a reverberation board of sorts that registers the simultaneous doubts and imperatives for this form of practice – this bringing together of photography and the participatory – and all the contradictions and dilemmas that lie within, between and beyond.

I have drawn on many sources in thinking through this text in the hope of inducing a series of provisional conversations. To begin, I refer to the two quotes serving as an epigraph, noting that they are but two of a number that might have stimulated similar thinking. The first, referencing the taking of a photograph of the Israeli Separation Barrier-Wall, declares what might be understood as a tacit complicity and collusion in the act of taking a photograph. The second, referencing photographs from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, registers the photograph as a mode of working that interrogates and possibly overturns sedimented notions of power in the act of ‘taking’ a photograph.

The second quote is drawn from an article by Jaguaribe and Lissovsky (2009). In this article the authors reference three bodies of photographs from different periods of Brazil’s history, the most recent being a series taken as part of “communitarian projects of ‘visual inclusion’” (176). The authors argue that these photographs produce an “alternative gaze” (197) that has the power “to cancel the external eye that codifies the bodies and landscape” (202). The qualities of the photographs that allow for the manifestation of an inclusiveness and counter gaze are described as the presence

of “personal exchanges, face-to-face transactions, identification, and neighbourliness” (203). But it is the assertion of photographs with the capacity for the “self-fashioning” of lives “portrayed on their own terms” (207) that speaks most emphatically to the *Wide Angle* project and others of the same ilk.

Both epigraph quotes also serve as reminders of the complexity of the act of photography (Pinney & Peterson 2005; Azoulay 2008) and its “unruly ... hard to define” (Heiferman 2012:11) qualities that are deepened when considered in relation to the participatory. While both quotes relate to the act of photography, they both hint at a participatory presence and the myriad inflections that accompany this way of working.

In late 2010 I formulated a short framing paragraph and a series of questions to guide one of the panel discussions making up the *Wide Angle: Photography as Public Practice* colloquium. In retrospect they seem apt for inclusion here:

This panel focuses on the dialogical nature of photography as a social practice. ‘Dialogical’ in this instance is understood broadly as generating heightened and more precise levels of social exchange leading to the potential for transformed experiences, understandings and practices through collaboration. This panel situates photography as a social practice within these debates and interrogates its particular quality: What does photography afford these practices beyond a mechanical convenience? How is photography significantly different to the mobilising of other mediums in collaborative exchanges? Is photography a more apt vehicle for dialogical exchange than other modes? And does photography as a participatory practice afford a particular kind of political agency?

These questions remain in place for what follows, but perhaps there are further prompts that deserve a presence in this ongoing ‘doing one’s homework’ (after Spivak in Castro Varela & Dhawan 2009:328). As noted above, one of the initial prompts for this piece of writing was to address the *Wide Angle: Photography as Public Practice* project in terms of a ‘This is what we did’ framework. Should the ‘This is what we did’ be taken as a statement of fact?

Of celebration? Of admission? Of culpability? Of confession? Of complicity? Of deepened interrogation? Perhaps responses to all of these statements, given the complex terrain of photography and the participatory, and their meeting? These questions seem to open up what photography as a participatory practice *does*.

The symposium itself generated much in the way of shaping this introduction. Here I record but some of the provocations that have remained with me and continue to inflect my thinking and writing: Jennifer Bajorek's noting of the "utopian promise of photography" and its "living archive" quality that offers possibilities for "counter-hegemonic" practices that "counter government narratives"; Terry Kurgan's argument for a participatory photography that "put[s] oneself into a certain relationship with the world", one of "potentially ambivalent power"; Doung Jahangeer's challenge to "redefine and push the participatory"; Juan Orrantia's insistence on the "poetic, sensory dimension of memory in photography" and a recognition of the importance of those moments which "interrupted his voice"; Thenjiwe Nkosi's narrating of the "building of relationships around photographs"; Brenden Gray's challenge to understand "photographs as meeting places"; Rory Bester's surfacing of an "unproblematised naivete present in the use of photography in participatory practices"; Zen Marie's reminder to consider the "political implications of photography as a public practice"; Natasha Christopher's marking of the problematic relationship between "participatory practices and the liberal sensibility"; and Henrike Grohs' recognition of the "role of international organisations in facilitating dialogue across countries" with photographic practices being understood as a way of "forming images of each other and deconstructing and introducing other ways of seeing" (*Wide Angle* symposium 2011).

Following these recollections, how might the participatory be understood? Nigel Gibson's writing on Fanonian practices describes an activism that is "neurotically democratic, impressively diverse, steadfastly self-critical" (Cooper-Knock in Gibson 2011:226). In addition he challenges intellectuals to engage in similar ways. Could photography as a participatory practice take on this selfsame challenge as part of a participation that is an "in-depth, long-term exchange of ideas, experiences, and collaborations"? (Helguera 2011).

I register the thinking of *Wide Angle* in the “gap between art and life” (Lazzarato 2010:113). Here I propose that what the project and related practices offer as a future-orientation, is an addressing of John Kelsey’s question: “And what comes after the realization that contemporary artists no longer hold a monopoly on creativity?” and his subsequent challenge for artists to “risk their own definition” (2012:415). My locating of photography as a participatory practice in this interval is an injunction to trouble these ‘definitions’. As part of, and drawing from, the “digital revolution” (Bishop 2012:441), photography as participatory practice contributes to a “deauthoring” (Bishop 2012:441) or, to my mind, a collective authoring, that urges an extension of the aesthetic, a pushing back of the “non-aesthetic” (Said in Richards 2011:68) that at the same time invites a more inclusive access to the space of the gap, the interval (Lazzarato 2010).

What is it about photography that differentiates its place in participatory practices when considered in relation to other modes of practice? Here my thinking draws together Jacques Rancière’s “method of will” (1991:12) with the writing of Françoise Lionnet in a conversation to suggest how photographs have the capacity to *will* in ways that make them potentially critical presences in transformative participatory practice. Rancière’s ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ proposes that the acknowledgment of equality between two people in a space of learning creates a space for *the will* (1991:12). This *will* then, induces an altogether different engagement with the task at hand. This has, for me, implications for participatory practices. At the same time, there is a necessary, more forcible, engagement with the inequalities present – an ongoing grappling with the structures of power that are present. Lionnet’s writing on the Mauritian-based photographer, Yves Pitchen, makes a claim for how these photographs participate in a larger emancipatory project:

[A]nd as Virilio puts it, it is “more than the ... memento of a more or less distant past. It is in fact will, the will to engage the future, yet again, and not just represent the past”(64). This is exactly what the photographs of Yves Pitchen can do. They illustrate the ongoing blurring of spatial and cultural categories in creolization, revealing productive proximities

while also exposing the temporal disjunctures and scandalous colonial anomalies that persist in spite of independence. Pitchen's images will the viewer into an active engagement with the underlying problems that haunt history and fragment representation. (2012:105)

What qualities are necessary for a photograph to induce *will*? Lionnet identifies a number in the above quote. Jaguaribe and Lissovsky do so too. The emblematic photograph on the invitation for the *Wide Angle: Photography as a Public Practice* colloquium, drawn from the *Border Farm* project by Thenjiwe Nkosi and Meza Weza, does something similar. Here, in the reenactment of an act and an anticipation of another to come, others are evinced. Christopher Pinney, in his introductory chapter for *Photography's Other Histories* (2003), notes how Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie understands the photograph as having similar, generative qualities, being more like "a message in a bottle, or like seed: an object transmitted to the future, ready at any moment to burst forth" (2003:5).

Photographs, arguably, are often important acts in 'a stitching together' and in the releasing of capacities. Do all photographs *will*? Do all photographs have a future-oriented agency in their insistence on both recording and imagining? The *Wide Angle: Photography as Participatory Practice* publication challenges us to consider these questions and to engage the simultaneous scepticism and insistence for these practices at the same time.

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Critical questions: Photography as a medium

Every photograph of others bears the traces of the meeting between the photographed persons and the photographer, neither of whom can, on their own, determine how this meeting will be inscribed in the resulting image. The photograph exceeds any presumption of ownership or monopoly and any attempt at being exhaustive. Even when it seems possible to name correctly in the form of a statement what it shows – ‘This is X’ – it will always turn out that something else can be read in it, some other event can be reconstructed from it, some other player’s presence can be discerned through it, constructing the social relations that allowed its production.

Azoulay, A. 2008. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Zone Books: New York: 11.

**Arrested development:
Death in the expanded field
of the family album**

Where a [portrait] painting belonged to the family, one might from time to time enquire after the originals of the portraits. But within two or three generations the interest dies: the pictures, to the extent that they survive, do so only as testimony to the art of the person who painted them. In photography, however, one encounters a new and strange phenomenon: in that fishwife from Newhaven, who casts her eyes down with such casual, seductive shame, there remains something that does not merely testify to the art of [...] the photographer, but something that cannot be silenced, that impudently demands the name of the person who lived at the time and who, remaining real even now, will never yield herself up entirely into art.

Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography* (1931).

‘Be here now!’ was the exhortation. At the age of nineteen, under the sway of earnest, questing and not very entertaining readings in Existentialism and Zen Buddhism (neither of which was I to explore henceforth), I spent the ten weeks of my first grown-up travel experience trying to ‘live in the present’. The journey remains unrecorded, and – with the exception of a few mental snapshots – unremembered. Contrariwise, now in my (optimistically termed) middle years, I scarcely walk the dog in the oft-trodden fields near home without taking a camera or smartphone. This change in my own practice reflects one of the conundrums of photography: does it halt and embalm life, or prolong it? In capturing a particular, evanescent moment – in trapping its subject like a fly in amber – is photography a kind of little death, or does it redress lost time and memorialise it? And what has intervened between my two approaches to time and to image capture?

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1 Susan Bright suggests that the concepts of 'excess' and 'loss' as they pertain to digital photography, refer to the over-abundance in the field of the image versus the depletion in the field of the real. See Bright (2013:10). See also Kelsey (2013).

2 In her short introductory text to a book of photographs by Peter Hujar, Susan Sontag quotes from her first novel, *The Benefactor*, saying "Life is a movie, death is a photograph". Her sense of the proximate relationship between a photograph and death is explicit in this text, where she insists that photography converts "the whole world into a cemetery [...] The photograph-as-photograph shows death. More than that, it shows the sex-appeal of death". (Sontag 1976: Introduction).

3 "I shudder ... over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe." (Barthes 1980:96). Photographer David Green's comment that what he calls "the cloying melancholia" of a post-Barthesian era of photographic theory now haunts critical approaches to "all photography" is, I think misguided (quoted in Bull 2010:17). The broader point of Barthes' observation concerned itself with questions of temporality and the fact that the afterlife of a human subject in a photographic image extends far beyond the duration of that human life.

In the first place, digital technologies have erupted, with their facilitation and, indeed, encouragement of prodigious pointing and clicking. We live in an image-saturated, networked world where photographically documenting both private and public life is ubiquitous. The axes analogue-digital and private-networked, with attendant concepts of excess and loss, shape the evolving identity of the photographic object today.¹ Yet as I shall argue, this altered photographic paradigm has not dissolved the old association between photography and temporal arrest that has provided photography with a mnemonic role to play. We are still halted in our tracks by the effect of the real in a photograph, though *pace* Walter Benjamin, perhaps we also too readily yield up that reality into art. In the second place, a lifetime of working in, on and around images means that I coax even the truly banal to display itself to me as something to be snatched, archived, and possibly mined later. This idea of the conquest of a world – my world – *as picture* insures me against oblivion and feeds a hunger for continual crossings between my life and my work. I am, in short, seduced by the sheer pictorial quality of the ordinary, by the fact that reality so often presents itself to me as already framed.

In some senses, though I am fully cognisant of the manifestly constructed nature of photographic representations in an age of digital capture and proliferation, like many people, my immersion in photography comes from a traditional, historical place. I am smitten by the familiar gorgeousness of the everyday, and I wish to poach it as readymade, flatten it and make it my keepsake. I feel besieged by the future 'lostness' of it all, and yes, like every essayist on photography, my thoughts still return to the well-worn melancholy of Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, who both saw the still photograph as the very distillation of mortality.² I continue to be affected by Barthes' famous phrase: "by giving me the absolute past ... the photograph tells me death in the future". (*En me donnant le passé absolu de la pose ... la photographie me dit la mort au futur*) (Barthes 1980:96). Note, the photograph does not tell of death in the future: it is itself the document of a future-past, the testimony of an event – Barthes calls it a catastrophe – so certainly doomed to happen that one might say it has already taken place.³

4 An exhibition *Ego Documents: The Autobiographical in Contemporary Art* at the Kunstmuseum in Bern in 2008 brought together artists that included Mona Hatoum, Louise Bourgeois, Martin Kippenberger, On Kawara, Isabelle Krieg, Nicolas Nixon and Sadie Benning. Other – more specifically photographic – collections might include Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, Duane Michals, Larry Sultan, Hannah Wilke, Jo Spence, Sophie Calle, Anne Noggle, Elinor Carucci, Ana Casas Broda, Wolfgang Tillmans and Léonie Hampton.

5 Lucie Ryzova made this interesting distinction between family albums and peer albums as a distinct, homo-social genre in Egypt, ‘The Faces of Hosni: Textual and Visual Strategies in Mid-20th Century Egypt’ paper, delivered at the conference *Intimate Archives: Photography and Life-Writing*, Wolfson College, University of Oxford, 29 November 2013. I would argue that the principle applies broadly, if with culturally specific characteristics, and that online social networks are frequently employed as multi-user peer albums.

There are many artists today whose practice includes documenting and photographing their own daily lives.⁴ There is a continuum between such practice and the unassuming ubiquity of the snapshot: photographs whose place is in the personal or family album, or in what Lucie Ryzova (2013) has usefully termed ‘the peer album’, distinct in its specific content and usages from the family album.⁵ Such apparently unexceptional photographs serve a mnemonic role in the construction of social narratives and self-narratives that link the isolated moment – the singular incident – to its prehistory and also to its future, a link securing the association between photography and mortality. For artists working in and with the paradigm of the photograph as archival document, the camera is more than merely an instrument of refined empiricism. Rather, following Walter Benjamin’s famous theorisation of the photograph’s ability to tap an “optical unconscious” *inside* the visible, such works often also explore the notion that the camera records (in individual images, but also in series) what the eye does *not* see. But because photographs now so extravagantly and gratuitously constitute the visual culture of our received environment, they continue to grant us the sense (or illusion) of being a slice of life. Yet the mere existence of a photograph, analogue or digital – with all the conscious and unconscious, instantaneous and considered decisions that underlie its production – is a *staging* that hyperbolises relations (formal, social, psychic) in the perceptual field. The freeze-frame is life as you have never really known it.

It is now a commonplace of photographic theory that the special relationship between mortality and photography is a product of the singular, indexical status of early photographs, each being the material trace of a unique emanation of light from a particular object at a specific time. Barthes’ formulation of the implications of this remains as pertinent today as it was when he published *Camera Lucida* (La Chambre Claire) (1980). He famously described the characteristics of photographic image capture as the “quiddity” (or ‘thingness’) of the referent, its temporal quality being its ‘pastness’, the notion of ‘having been.’ Thus formulated, this modest artefact plays several roles. It is simultaneously a trace (a material, indexical sign that refers, by contiguity, to the past); a relic (the physical remnant of a past action that is charged with transcendental truth); and a fetish

(an object that stands as a substitute for the lost thing, and in doing so, both disavows and compensates for the loss itself). All three metaphors situate the photograph in a special relationship with the passage of time, one whose link to the empirical and the real is sustained by the discourse of magic. In this sense, photography is haunted by its referent not merely as a representation, but quite literally as a revenant, a ghost.

If I am stressing Barthes, it is because he so cogently described the intricate meshing of tenses in the circulation of gazes within photographic production. In an often reiterated passage in *Camera Lucida*, he begins rummaging through the photographs he finds in the apartment of his recently deceased mother; searching for something that he knows he will not fully find. Who among us has not sought, in the photographs of our own 'dearly departed', a clue to the mystery of the final vocation of all that vitality? Who has not been struck with an uncanny sense of the enigma of disappearance; incomprehension that *this* particular and idiosyncratic existence (a specific combination of bodiliness, intelligence and memory, humour and fear, desire and history, longing and satiety) – an existence that addresses 'us' across the surface of the photograph – has been extinguished?

In an old photograph of a young girl in a winter garden in Chennevières-sur-Marne, Barthes the adult son finally re-encounters his mother, whom he had nursed in illness as if she were his child. In this mysterious cohabitation of past and present, presence and absence, he mourns the loss not only of the mother, but also the loss of himself as a child, and the prospective loss of his very self: "From now on I could do no more than await my total, undialectical death" (72). Barthes scours the photographs of his mother from a time that belongs to History, which he defines as that time when we were not yet born. While this historical time excludes him, in this single photograph, he finds the desired *punctum*, that detail that, in piercing the photographic surface and extending out to prick him, also punctures the temporal cohesion of the photographic image. Walter Benjamin had foreshadowed this in his essay 'A Short History of Photography' (1931), speaking of the quest to find in the photographic image "the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the

6 Benjamin 1972 (Kindle 2011):@
Loc. 46%.

7 While there is an indefinite amount of information provided by a continuous-tone photograph, the extent to which information is lost in digital file compression – so called lossy compression – is the outcome of a compromise struck between image quality and file size.

picture [...] that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it”.⁶ There is little to add to this marvellous formulation; I would simply say that the *punctum* is the subjective combination of a particular detail with the spontaneous consciousness it arouses in a specific viewer – in myself – of the passage of time as it addresses me from the photograph.

It could be argued that digital photographs will never exercise such seduction: for one, their aging manifests not as marbled and mottled yellowing, but as pixelated degradation and noise.⁷ Their appearance is detached from any material support and is therefore free from the particularities of surface deterioration, though they are threatened with other forms of extinction (failure to backup, hard-drive crash and so on). Recently emerged (and emerging) digital technologies of image production radically alter the very nature of photography: as Fred Ritchin (2009:15) puts it at the opening of his book on photography in the age of digital reproduction, “photography, as we have known it, is both ending and enlarging”.

Emerging from principles that share nothing with the photochemical processes of film-based media, digital photography makes more manifest the possibilities of erasure and manipulation, more overtly vexing the truth value of the photograph, its status as document. With the move from grain (providing “an absolute continuum from brightest light to darkest shadow” (Benjamin 1931[1972])) to pixel (breaking up form into an even grid of its smallest elements), the assumptions concerning the indexical nature of photography, and hence, of photographic truth, are eroded. Consequent to such erosion, it may be argued, the powerful relationship between a photograph and a past event is also undermined, thus also loosening the intimate embrace between photography and mortality.

Indeed, there can be no doubt about the epistemological uncertainty into which we are thrown when we look at a digital photograph: an uncertainty about the very nature of what we are seeing. But I would argue that when a digital camera has been used to capture something – whether that be a spontaneously encountered scene or a posed arrangement – in much the way that a film camera is used (with editing programmes

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8 See Manovich 2003:242. See also Manovich 2002.

9 Baudelaire, trans. PE Charvet 1972:295.

10 See 'Deathless Data What happens to our digital property after we die?' In *The Economist*, 21-27 April 2012:68.

11 This is clearly different from Sontag's view that there is an ontological separation between the cinematographic and the photographic, see note 2 above.

like Adobe Photoshop deployed as a virtual darkroom), at present, much digital imaging preserves the cultural codes of the techniques it simulates (photography, cinematography). This is why for a critic like Lev Manovich, the category of 'digital photography' does not exist.⁸ Following Manovich, I would argue that the tensions between life and death, and the paradoxical ways in which photography seizes upon such tensions, may manifest themselves in a digital photograph just as they had in the earliest photographic experiments with silver compounds that Baudelaire (1972:295) had dismissed as a "trivial image on a scrap of metal",⁹ although we may not as yet have any guarantee as to how our virtual and digital property will be stored, accessed, or bequeathed upon our demise.¹⁰

Because of its unique contiguity with the time and place at which it was taken, the photograph is characterised by a transfixing immobility, one might call it a petrification. For some, this immobilisation of the temporal flow renders a photograph merely a fragment of a hypothetical, continuous whole. One may then consider the "freezing and slicing of the world into discrete chunks" to be an "insidious distortion" (Ritchin 2009:11) at worst, a constructed fiction at best. Gilles Deleuze regards the individual photograph as merely a segment in a succession of images constituting a putative filmstrip; a photograph waiting to be connected to others in a series. Time is that "with" which (Deleuze puts the word *with* in inverted commas) "images are made to pass consecutively" (Deleuze 1983:2).¹¹

This notion of the 'shot' as a fragment of a *durée* or temporal continuum is precluded from one particular, common genre of photography: the posed portrait which, in the traditional family album and on the Facebook page alike, is frequently used to commemorate an event and serve as its testimony and memorial. Here, not only has a gaze arrested its objects, snatched them from the flux of time and cast them into the perpetual present tense of photographic capture, but also, those objects have been complicit by immobilising themselves. Such formality underlines the conventionality of all photographic poses. Convincingly, Craig Owens (1992:210) sees in the pose something of a chilly deathliness inhabiting photographs. "I freeze," he writes, "as if anticipating the still I am about to become; mimicking its opacity, its stillness; inscribing, across the

12 Audrey Linkman 2011 brings together a memorable wealth of 19th and early 20th century post-mortem photographs, while also exploring the uses of photographs of the living for memorial purposes. See also Jay Ruby (1995).

surface of my body, photography's 'mortification' of the flesh." In her experimental first novel *The Benefactors*, Susan Sontag (1963[2009]:215) observes: "When one has a picture taken, the photographer says 'Perfect! Just as you are!' That is death". The mortification of which Sontag and Owens speak – both the subject's seizure from the realm of the vital to that of the image, and the rigid, statue-like arrest of the subject's body – resonates with Barthes' notion, in *Camera Lucida*, of death as the *eidos* of photography. "The Photograph", observes Barthes, "creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice." (11) It is a death-like arrest that constitutes the pose, Barthes tells us.

There is one genre of photography in which the mortification of the pose conflates entirely with the arrest of the photographic event, and that is photographs of the dead. Early posthumous photographs, which virtually coincide with the invention of photography as a medium, encapsulate the ways in which death is enmeshed with photographic meaning. Here, death was not merely the metaphorical underpinning of the photograph, it was one of its privileged subjects. The Victorian family album, for example, included photographs not only of graves and mourners (it was habitual to stop the funeral procession in order to pose for a group portrait), but also portraits of the deceased, disturbing the division between life and death by arranging them in compliance with the contemporaneous pictorial conventions of portrait photography.

Fastidious care in posing the dead was especially lavished upon photographs of dead children, tenderly laid out in the finest linen the family could afford. The simulation of peaceful sleep, or occasionally even the artful imitation of life itself (with eyelids skilfully retouched so as to make the eyes appear to be open), testifies to the family's desire to see and remember the person, or indeed to disavow the passing of that short life. The power of the photographic image to mitigate the finality of death was sometimes even anticipated, with photographers bidding potential clients to "secure the shadow, ere the substance fade", one of photography's earliest advertising *clichés*, appealing in particular to patients suffering from tuberculosis.¹²

The poignancy of this desire to memorialise a brief life that might otherwise have gone unrecorded, is nowhere so acute as in a photograph by Augustus Lupson, *In Affectionate*

13 See Linkman (2011:11), for a reproduction of this photograph.

14 The fact that for Freud, the paradigmatic lost object was the “mother’s penis” is here of no account: I am referring in particular to the structure and operation of the fantasy, rather than its content.

Remembrance Richard Nicholls Milliken Born Feb 11 1857 Died Dec 23 1861. Having no photograph of the child, his family settled for a metonymy, commissioning a photograph of his hat, to which the above inscription was attached.¹³ One cannot overlook the fetishistic implications of such a photograph, with degrees of absence and loss represented by objects that stand in for them: the inscription, the hat, the photograph itself. In the Freudian sense of that term, a fetish is a substitute that has been set up as a memorial to something traumatically lost, and as such, it is a token of triumph over that loss. Indeed, the analogy of the posthumous photograph with the fetish elides with the fetishistic nature of the photographic image *per se*: for Freud, the fetish is contiguous with the lost object, and its apprehension represents a frozen segment of a spatio-temporal continuum.¹⁴

Images of the dead – of corpses – bridge the gap, or fill the continuum, between photography as magic and photography as science, the first, in Allan Sekula’s words (1982:95f), “an arena of sentiment bounded by nostalgia on the one end and hysteria on the other”, the second endowed with the power to inform and elucidate, based on the photograph’s status as document. We are daily exposed to images of death in films, newspapers, 24-hour rolling news. Ariella Azoulay (2001:28) speaks of “television” as the “ultimate display showcase” of death, with the moment of death acting as the “one-time moment”, the photo-op par excellence. Yet despite this overexposure to death in the media, the sanitised separation of the dead from the living, not unrelated to an awareness, dating from the twentieth century, of how disease spreads, has made us squeamish about proximity with dead bodies. There is also an increased sensitivity to issues of agency and consent with regard to photography in general. For these reasons, the practice of posthumous photography often provokes waves of moral outrage.

The range of response tends to depend on the photographic idiom selected for the representation, and on the cultural and institutional context of its display; whether, for example, that framework is science (say forensic or medical), news or art (always the most contentious). Furthermore, the expanded field of photography has resulted in a dissolution, particularly in the blogosphere and on social media, of any hard and fast

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15 The choice is mind-boggling, and includes social network photo sharing, subscription based or peer-to-peer or peer-to-browser or mobile photo sharing, or web photo album generators: there are also dedicated apps for handheld devices.

16 Abigail Solomon-Godeau explores the “amorphousness of definition and epistemological” vagueness of the category “documentary”, but the distinction between ‘documentary’ and ‘art’ photography still serves as a rough shorthand for differing forms of photographic practice and the varied contexts of its circulation. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau (2003:169-183).

17 See Rudolf Schäfer and Jean Cocteau (1989).

distinction that may have existed between the private and the public spheres, and with the rise in popularity of memoirs, life writing that employs photographs and blogs directed at particular areas of personal experience, the desire to photograph and document the various stations of a life has itself gone viral. The family or peer album has spilled over into the networked world and finds its home on publicly shared platforms such as Instagram, Flickr, JAlbum and Picassa,¹⁵ not to mention in dedicated blogs (memorial blogs and virtual memory boxes, births, weddings, communions, bar-mitzvahs, graduations, all of life’s rites of passage now readily find templates easily tailored to individual requirements) that are either shared among designated viewers or enjoy open access online. This expanded field has resulted in a broadening of the publics of photography and in a diversification of its sites of display, from the amorphous ‘museum without walls’ of the blogosphere, through documentary reportage on websites and in photo-books, to the exhibiting circuits assigned to contemporary art.

It was in the 1970s that death became identified as the last taboo to be broken, first by documentary photographers, and then – if the distinction is to be made¹⁶ – in the circuits of the fine arts. Taking his challenge from Diane Arbus’s proclaimed lack of interest in photographing the dead, Jeffrey Silverthorne’s *Morgue Work* of 1972-4 explored, in an unvarnished way, the functioning of a local morgue in New York, including bodies lying in drawers and details of corpses (particularly striking and shocking is *The Woman who Died in her Sleep* and the *Torso of Murdered Man*) roughly sutured in autopsy. Others followed: Swiss photographer Hans Danuser’s *Medizin I* (1984) was equally matter of fact, focusing in the same dispassionate way on organs as on metal, steel and rubber; while in Germany, Rudolf Schäfer (1987) photographed the heads of the dead, discreetly framed by sheets, at pains to equate death with ‘eternal sleep’ in the Victorian manner.¹⁷

For Walter Schels, photographing terminally ill patients and juxtaposing these portraits with portraits of the same people shortly after their death in the project *Life Before Death* was meant to serve a cathartic or reassuring purpose, possibly because in these faces, death looks a little like peaceful sleep. But of course the mere juxtaposition of the living with the dead

18 See Walter Schels and Beate Lakotta (2004).

19 See Sue Fox (1997). The three artists mentioned in this paragraph – Jeffrey Silverthorne, Hans Danuser and Sue Fox – were all included in the groundbreaking touring exhibition of photographs, *The Dead*, curated by Val Williams and Greg Hobson, in 1995. See catalogue, *The Dead*, with essays by Val Williams, Greg Hobson and Elizabeth Edwards, Bradford: The National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, 1995.

20 There is an interesting parallel between Barthes' notion of the "quiddity" tapped by a photograph (a thing's 'thingness') and what James Joyce called the apprehension of the "whatness" of a thing, through which an object achieves its epiphany. See James Joyce (1963:213).

21 These issues are central to questions surrounding the photography of war and political violence, see Ariella Azoulay (2001), and Susie Linfield (2010).

does not address the metaphysical fear of the passage. The *telos* to which living with a terminal illness points is, by definition, death. From the perspective of that inevitable future event and the cadaver that will be its residue and testimony, the illness will have been the preamble, the process of arrival. Yet what Schels' work also tells us is that as an event, the moment of non-violent death is un-photographable,¹⁸ has no place in 'death's showcase'.

In the UK in the mid-1990s, Sue Fox took 1500 photographs of bodies in a morgue in Manchester; the exhibitions of these works were met with public outrage. Details of lurid, marbled flesh and extruded organs, a hand with a ring formed by the word 'Mum', a child's tagged wrist and filthy, curled fingers resting in a pool of thin, gluey blood; stitches and slabs and the abject chaos of the visceral spillage that is present once the integrity of the body has been violated: these images are both matter of fact and profoundly unsettling, for these quiet photographs bring into focus the material passage from body to corpse. Significantly, Fox compares the contemplation of these images to Vipassana meditation, where the subject focuses on a single object in order to 'see things as they really are', thereby gaining insight.¹⁹ Historically, allowing us to 'see things as they really are' was the ideologically freighted remit of photography: Fox's focus seems to suggest a continuum between an epiphanic revelation of a thing's 'whatness'²⁰ and the notion of tapping the optical unconscious to find what resides *inside* the visible.

The eruption of mortuary photographs in the context of the discourses and institutions of art proved to be even more controversial. At issue are notions of objectification, aestheticisation and the ethics of respect.²¹ The young Damien Hirst provocatively posing for a snapshot with a man's severed head in a morgue in Leeds (1991) sets the artist's agenda to explore the horror and beauty of death and to turn the pathways of pathology and microbiology into a medium for making art. Testing the limits of acceptability became a hallmark of Hirst's work. More consistently and provocatively using the mortuary as his studio and its contents as his palette, Joel-Peter Witkin fascinated and affronted viewers in equal measure, with his elaborately staged morgue tableaux: a ghoulish theatre of death born of Witkin's

22 Sally Mann, with John Ravenal (2010). The book *Proud Flesh* records the ongoing effects of muscular dystrophy on her husband Larry Mann; its unacknowledged *telos* is, of course, death. Sally Mann, 2009. *Proud Flesh*, New York: Aperture Books.

earlier explorations of deformity on the one hand, and of the sadomasochistic sex dungeon on the other.

But it was New-York based Andres Serrano's *Morgue* series of 1993 that really exercised the mainstream art world: large, close-up colour photographs of corpses. It is perhaps really in the context of his *Piss Christ* that Serrano offended the religious Right. For looking at his *Morgue* series now, one is struck by the reserve and tact of the works. Each close-up focuses on a particular section of the corpse, but the body in pieces clearly points to the fact of having once belonged to an integral body. In this way, the close-ups hyperbolise the very condition of the autopsy as a process that fragments the body. With their rich, sensuous detail, their baroque lighting and the chromatic range extending between black, scarlet and the tallowy hue of wax and skin, these images are less reminders of "the autopsy room as a cold and bloody place" (Williams 1995:14) than hushed and moving *memento mori* that quietly acknowledge Catholic iconography.

Finally, Sally Mann's *Body Farm* (2010), consisting of darkly aestheticised photographs of decomposing corpses at the Forensic Anthropology Center of the University of Tennessee proved as provocative as her earlier photographs of her own naked children at play. They must be seen as existing in a single continuum, constituting a lifelong, comprehensive project to record the body and its trajectories through healthy youth, to illness, ageing and death.²²

Whereas Victorian mortuary photographs were commissioned for private use in rituals or practices of family bereavement, contemporary photographic representations of the dying and dead play varied roles in private and public life. A case in point is the acclaimed and widely circulated monograph of Annie Leibovitz (2006), who, for this massive tome, decided to interleave images of the elaborate, theatrical, high-profile shoots of her portrait and fashion work for *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, among other popular, glossy publications, with her 'family album' work. At the intersection of these fields – and no doubt because of the role of her friend and lover, Susan Sontag, as a public intellectual – are the many black and white portraits of Sontag. During Sontag's final illness, Leibovitz stopped shooting, but she "forced herself" to "take those few

23 For a pithy discussion of the memoir, and of the self-serving 'mendacity' to which it may be prone, as well as to the way it undermines the division between private and public domains, see Daniel Mendelsohn (2010).

pictures" that circulated in the press and on the Internet, of Sontag with her glorious hair hacked off, bloated beyond recognition, lying on a gurney on life support, and equally shockingly, the stretcher with her corpse being raised into the aeroplane ready to leave Seattle in November 2004. The final, now famous sequence shows Sontag's corpse, cleaned up and arranged, swathed in a pleated robe-like dress (Issey Miyake?), culminating with a green-tinted composite image assembled out of photographs of the separate sections of her body. One searches in vain, in these images, for the power and vitality transmitted by all photographs of the living Susan Sontag; the confrontation is sobering and humbling.

In Leibovitz's book, these stark images of Susan Sontag contrast with the photographs that follow them, of the peaceful death of Leibovitz's father in his nineties (he was to die six weeks after Sontag); of his grandchildren shovelling earth onto his grave at the Judaeon Memorial Gardens in Olney, Maryland, where he was laid to rest in February 2005; of the birth of Leibovitz's twin daughters by a surrogate mother. The clue to how Leibovitz conceived the book/album is in its title: *A Photographer's Life 1990-2005* (with its dates bracketing the precise period of Leibovitz's relationship with Sontag). In its composition, Leibovitz skilfully and effortlessly weaves together the professional and the personal, ushering the reader into an immersive experience that suggests that all is flux, that life and death are naturally intertwined, and finally, in the pictures of her three children, providing proof that the future exists. Like Sally Mann's portrayal of her father's corpse (1988) amid strewn flowers, Annie Leibovitz's shot of her dead father captures something of the spirit of the Victorian family album, of the integration of death into family life.

Leibovitz's management of a smooth passage between the private and public realms makes her a typical child of the past few decades. With the spread of interest in micro-histories and the 'autobiographical turn' in the humanities, the cusp between private and public life has become a seam that is frequently mined. Moreover, the diffusion of the 'memoir' as a genre has had a correlative in photography and the visual arts, where the tapping of personal experience has become a *sine qua non* of a certain brand of authenticity.²³ In tandem with an

aesthetic that borrows an apparent sense of happenstance and casual placement from snapshot photography, the early 1980s saw the seeping out of the private family/peer album into the art-photography exhibition and/or book. David Wojnarowicz, Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin all used photography as a form of visual diary.

Various forms of political and cultural activism also contributed to this shift, from the feminist conviction that politics are played out in the private domain (where, more generally, ideology nestles cozily and treacherously), to the early experiences of the devastation caused by AIDS among gay communities. As other disciplines, such as social anthropology, began focusing on the local and the everyday, and as photography, “in the wake of widespread self-reflection, was abandoning the single image and instead producing series and sequences” (Stahel 1994:7), photographers began to document their own lives. Unadorned depictions of subcultures played a part in bringing into focus the queer intimacies that, in the early 1980s, were still feared and publicly shunned as putative sources of ‘contagion’ in the moral panic that accompanied the first spread of AIDS. Considering her role as the record keeper of this generation, Nan Goldin observed that “there is a popular notion that the photographer is by nature a voyeur, the last one invited to the party. But I’m not crashing; this is my party. This is my family, my history” (Goldin in Heiferman (1996:281)). As she has frequently stressed, her work is the diary of her life.

Of the three – Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz and Nan Goldin, it was Hujar who paid most attention to the performative aspect – the acting out – of the sitters, as well as the formal qualities of portraiture (positioning, framing, lighting, texture, the relation of figure to ground). All three needed photography as an instrument – a probe – and as testimony, something that “[remains] real, even now” (Benjamin 1931[1972]:43%). And in the work of all three, images of the dying and the dead appear not as tableaux, but as extensions of portraits of the living, and explorations of what it is like to live with dying, the stunned sadness, the loss.

There is stillness and formality in Hujar’s close-up photographs of the dressed corpses of friends in open coffins (Sidney Faulkner, 1981; Jackie Curtis, 1985). As with Diane Arbus, in

Hujar's work, the idioms of fashion photography and the expressions of personal vision overlap, not only in the ambiguous splicing of differently gendered identities, but also in the delight in hyperbolic, camp pose. This is nowhere so clear as in his now iconic portrait of celebrated transvestite *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed* (1973), overseen by a vase of glowing, overblown chrysanthemums (if ever there was a flower associated with death ...). Candy Darling, with her perfectly realised make-up, and a long-stemmed rose arranged on her sheet, seems to be posed in anticipation of witnessing the scene of her own extinction.

In contrast, David Wojnarowicz, who was himself to die of AIDS and who was Hujar's acolyte, one-time lover and caretaker when the latter was dying (Hujar died November 1987, Wojnarowicz in July 1992) kept a moving, intimate photographic archive of Hujar's last days, helping to bridge the gap between the personal memorial, the album and the public record. Clearly for him, photography is deployed as a form of visualisation, an *aide mémoire* in the painful business of grieving.

For Nan Goldin too, photography played a part in the process of mourning. She had acknowledged the relationship between her large series of photographs (curated in exhibitions as a slide show with a soundtrack), exhibited and published by Aperture as *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986), and the early suicide of her sister, imagining that to keep a close photographic record of her intimate life with all its joyous and, more frequently, bruising encounters, would be a form of staving off loss, of keeping herself and others alive. With the illness and demise of so many friends, Goldin became an archivist tracking that trajectory. In a series of moving photographs, for instance, various informal portraits show the French couple Gilles Dusein and Gotscho; the series ends, shockingly if matter-of-factly, with Gotscho kissing the closed eyes of the emaciated corpse of his lover (1993).

Goldin's portfolio of thirteen photographs of her close friend, Cookie Mueller, who, in 1989, died of AIDS at the age of forty, follows the exuberant, blonde Cookie through parties, children, friendship, marriage, the death of her husband Vittorio, finally to capture her prone in her own casket. About this loss, Goldin later wrote: "I used to think I couldn't lose anyone if I

24 See Pedro Meyer (2006).

25 This is the topic of an essay I am currently researching, on 'living with dying'.

photographed them enough. I put together this series of pictures of Cookie from the 13 years I knew her in order to keep her with me. In fact they show me how much I've lost" (Goldin 1989:256).

The trajectory from photography as amulet to photography as shrine is realised in Goldin's apprehension of loss *despite* photography. In a simple sentence, Goldin guides us from the notion that photographing everyone in order to mourn a dead sister and hold future loss at bay, to the realisation that 'I photograph in order to remember' may itself be a cliché, finally evacuated of affect. This chimes with Ann Cvetkovich's notion (2003:241) that archives of trauma "must enable the acknowledgment of a past that can be painful to remember, impossible to forget, and resistant to consciousness". Indeed, in a photographic project titled *I photograph to remember/Fotografía para recordar* (1991-2007), tracking the traumatic events around the almost simultaneous illness and death of his parents, Mexican (Spanish-born) photographer Pedro Meyer acknowledges a logic that is more akin to narration and storytelling than to mnemonic reassurance. Beginning its life as a sequence of photographs on a CD-Rom, the project now has a widely accessible web presence and is downloadable on a computer or handheld device. The heartfelt pledge to photograph in order to remember has a particularly complex texture when viewed in the context of the practice of a photographer who has done more than most to vex the veracity of conventional photojournalism through the use of digital manipulation.²⁴ Meyer's work consistently exposes the subjective and ideological nature of image making, suggesting – as do great works of literature – that it is sometimes fiction that tells the more profound truth.

I have argued that despite the loosening of the link between a photograph and indexicality, despite the broad scope of mimetic and constructed purposes availed in the expanded field of photography in an age of digital reproduction and manipulation, the bond linking the diverse artefacts we identify as 'photographs' to the mnemonic faculty remains a tight one. Several photographers have explored the relationship of the living to the dying; invariably the link is intimate (parent, spouse, lover, child) and the vision is achingly personal. I mention just one of these projects here,²⁵ Briony Campbell's heart-rending *The Dad*

Project (2009), the artist's "attempt to say goodbye to my dad with my camera".

When he was diagnosed with cancer, Briony Campbell's father agreed to collaborate with his daughter in the making of a short film during the last few months of his life. The series ends with a photograph of the dead father's waxy hand tenderly held by the daughter's living pink one. The father's collusion in the project, which combines film footage with still photographs; his declared wish to protect his relatives from the consequences of his death and his fear that they might not be able to look after themselves without him; and his wish to 'take the opportunity to learn a little bit more' about his daughter delicately establish the mutuality of the project. The habitual relations of power between the agent of photography and its object are unsettled. The work eases our apprehension about viewing the dead and the dying. This project was undertaken with the utmost reserve, both formal and ethical. The still photographs, often close ups of skin, thinning hair and fabric, are gentle and un-intrusive, yet they remain specific to a time, a place, a person now gone. As in the best mortuary photography, the result is not ghoulish, but rather tenderly touches upon the issues of life, death and memory that have inhabited the practice of photography since its inception.

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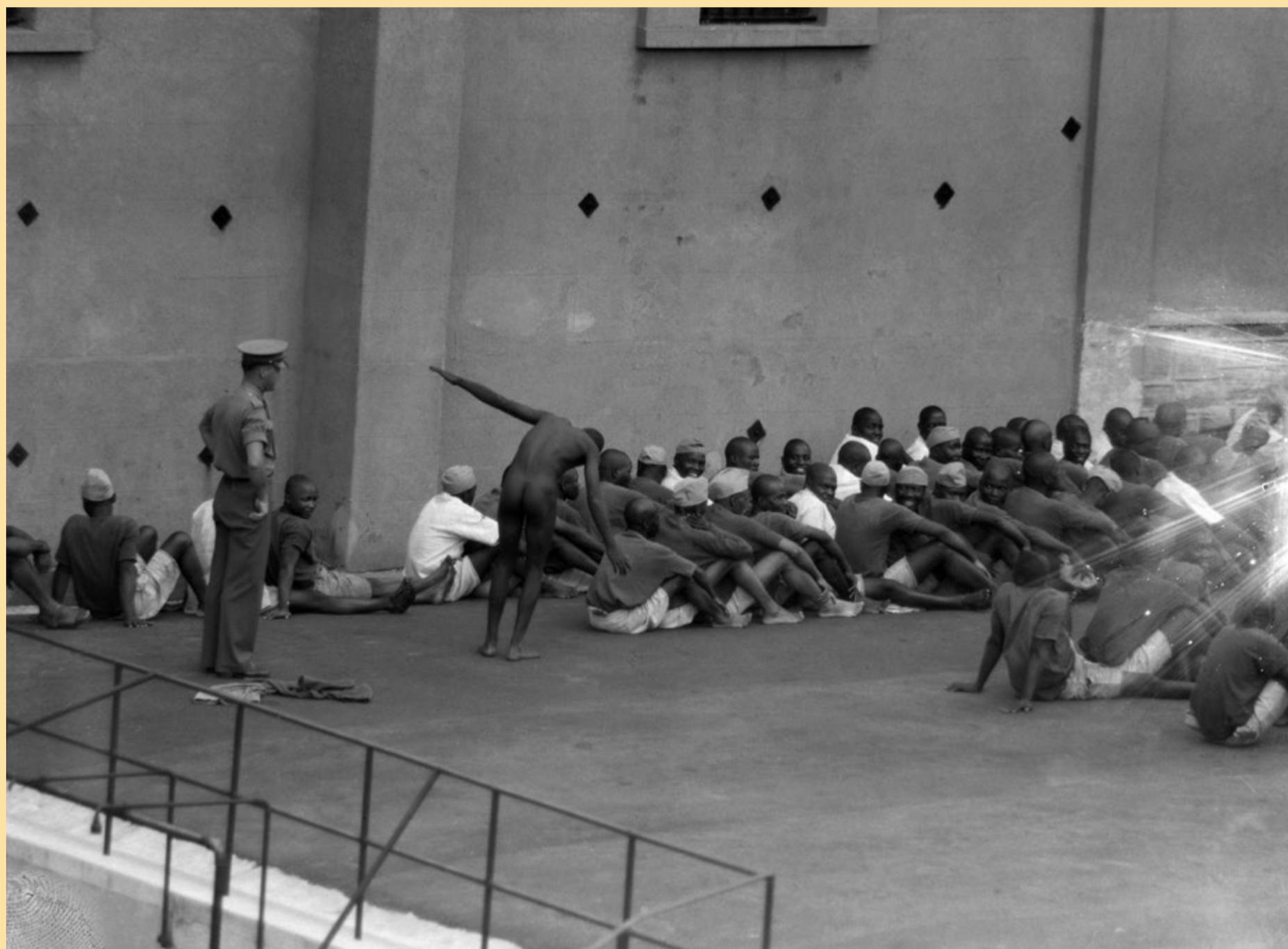
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**Tausa: The making of a
prison photograph and
its public**



Bob Gosani

1954

Tausa

First appeared in *Drum*, March 1954

© Bailey's African History Archives

A white prison warder is standing in uniform in the 'Number Four' prison courtyard in Johannesburg's Old Fort, his sleeves rolled up, hands on his hips and a military hat on his head. On the ground next to him are scattered some clothes. His feet are squarely planted as he looks directly ahead where, two metres in front of him, a naked black man is turning around, his back hunched forward and turned towards the warder, and his arms outstretched. Around him on the concrete courtyard floor sit rows of black men in short pants and t-shirts, each man with his legs around the man in front of him. Some turn their faces to watch the naked man spin in front of the warder. Others are looking directly up at the camera, smiling.

This image, an iconic representation of apartheid, was created by the *Drum* magazine photographer, Bob Gosani, in 1954. It was taken six years after the 1948 elections that mark the beginning of apartheid proper, and five years before the government signed into being its 1959 Prisons Act, which criminalised all unauthorised representations of South African prisons. Its publication in *Drum*, alongside an equally famous article by Henry Nxumalo, was a significant photographic event in the early days of apartheid. During the first four decades of the twentieth century, the prison had become an increasingly important institution in regulating black life in urban South Africa. With the mass-urbanisation of black South Africans during the 1940s, the prison (via legal strategies like pass laws, master-and-servants laws, and the expansion of criminal law for Africans) became the backbone of efforts by the white state to regulate and contain black movement, labour and political organisation. And it was fast becoming a necessary space of seclusion in which the apartheid state could carry out its most violent forms of repression. Gosani's photograph of the scene in 'Number Four' prison interrupted that seclusion. His photograph made the walled courtyard of the prison into a public space, and in so doing allowed for a public critique of the racial logics of incarceration and the centrality of the prison to the apartheid project.

Anthony Sampson, editor of *Drum* magazine during the early 1950s, describes in a memoir of his *Drum* years how Bob Gosani's photograph was taken. Knowing how dangerous it

would be to attempt to photograph an apartheid prison without permission, the *Drum* editorial team decided to stage an elaborate set-up at the site of the photographing. Sampson sent his secretary, Deborah Duncan, as a decoy photographer, with Gosani as her 'assistant' to carry an enormous telescopic camera onto the roof of a nurses' home adjoining 'Number Four' prison in central Johannesburg. Given the prison's location on the ridge overlooking the city, *Drum* had secured permission to use the roof of the nurses' home to take photographs of 'the Johannesburg skyline'.

Just before four, they drove to the nurses' home. The superintendent led them to the roof.

"What a glorious view!" said Deborah, looking down the side away from the jail, and focusing her small camera.

"We've even got the jail on the other side," said the superintendent.

Deborah looked down. Only fifty feet below was the prison courtyard. The prisoners had just come back from work, and had squatted four deep across the yard jammed against each other. At one end, a European warder in shirt-sleeves was standing with his hands on his hips. In front of the warder stood a prisoner, stripped naked. Suddenly the naked man jumped up in the air like a frisky monkey, clapped his hands above him, opened his mouth wide and turned around mid-air, so that he landed with his back to the warder. Then he bent down with his arms stretched out, while the warder watched him intently. The naked man looked around at the warder, who nodded; he picked up his clothes from the ground, and walked off to the cells. The next man in the queue, by now stripped naked, ran up to the warder and repeated the routine. This was the 'tausa dance', which we had heard about ... Deborah returned to the other side of the roof, and took pictures of the criss-cross streets of Johannesburg. She talked to the superintendent about the flowers on the roof-garden.

Bob pointed the cannon at the tausa dancer, and clicked. The prisoners waiting crouched on the ground noticed this odd shape being pointed at them and giggled. The warder at first was too absorbed in watching the naked men to notice; but then he looked up and saw the camera. Another warder arrived, and they began to stare threateningly at the roof. Deborah and Bob hastily packed up. Bob went back to the dark room to develop the picture.

What a story there was in that one photograph. (Sampson 1956:141-142)

Henry Nxumalo's accompanying article, 'Mr Drum Goes to Jail', could only have carried the weight that it did when read alongside Gosani's photograph. *Drum* understood its importance: "[We] were determined that Drum should investigate jails. But no article could be effective without photographs, which were our main weapon" (Sampson 1956:139). The incontrovertibility of photographic evidence, here rendered as a "weapon" against the white supremacist state, met the conditions for the burden of proof in a contested political climate, and provided an experience of witnessing that elicited political engagement. Nxumalo's article (March 1954) was based on his experience of spending five days in 'Number Four' for a pass law offence, one he deliberately committed in order to write a first-hand account of an apartheid prison. His vivid descriptions of the brutality inflicted by warders and long-term prisoners acting on behalf of warders for special privileges, on the bodies of black prisoners, caused a major public stir. In particular, it was the evidence, both written and photographic, of the *tausa*, the practice of searching prisoners returning from day labour outside of the prison by making them dance naked in front of a warder, that evoked public outrage and brought the prison dramatically into the public imagination as a political space. The fact that *tausa* had been banned in the 1940s, but was still being used in apartheid prisons, proved the disconnection between the niceties of apartheid policy spin and the real practice of the state.

Throughout the 1940s and '50s, before prison reportage was essentially banned by the apartheid state, the kinds of

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¹ Azoulay argues this despite the long history of creating property and ownership through and of photographs. This history is often marked by anxiety, failure, and temporariness, which arise out of the ontology of photography itself. She is clear to acknowledge the violence that often marks the relationship between photographer and the photographed. However the photographed event is not the same as the 'event of photography', which induces a set of relations in which the spectator is called to participate.

information that were significant to public debate about prisons took the form of exposé. The photograph was the most valuable in the repertoire of evidence because it created a degree of indisputability difficult to accomplish in writing, but to which writing about apartheid often aspired. Theorising the photography of the Israeli occupation, Ariella Azoulay (2008:26) describes the encounter with photographs as the "civil contract of photography", an encounter which "binds together photographers, photographed persons and spectators" in a required participation in the photographed event. This is particularly so, Azoulay argues, with photographs of or on the "verge of catastrophe", where the photographed event reveals the relationship between a person and the power that governs them. Photographic practice in contexts like Israel-Palestine and apartheid South Africa, creates a form of encounter that necessitates the relationship between photography and citizenship, drawing the spectator into political space and relation through participation in the photographed image.

What Azoulay is pointing to here in the nature of photography – and this is especially the case with photographs taken under historical conditions of violence and catastrophe – is that photographs create *plurality*, that is, they resist privacy. "[T]he concepts of property and ownership", she writes, "are ontologically foreign to photography" (2008:103).¹ This relational reading of photography implies that the witnessing of a photograph opens into a "dynamic field of power relations" (2008:109) in which a kind of 'mutuality' is always at play. In other words, the event of witnessing the photograph can draw the spectator into a citizen relation, that is a political relation, with the photographed subject. Here the civil contract operates through the work of visibility, of being confronted with civil responsibility by means of the logic of evidence in the image. Evidence functions not so much as a representation but as a sign in the ongoing negotiation of historical relations of power and governance. The challenge that this contract poses for the future actions of the spectator can be refused, but the experience of the encounter, Azoulay argues, remains as residue in the ongoing project of citizenship.

Apartheid was a spectacular experiment in the production of white blindness to black oppression. The ability for whites

not to see was itself a product of the system of apartheid, the logic of segregation producing a form of uncivil contract in which white South Africa was trained to ignore the implications of racist rule on black lives. A telling example of such blindness can be sourced from the social history of the prison compound containing 'Number Four'. Originally built behind the ramparts of the Old Fort on the edges of the city, the compound was for many decades concealed from view. During the second half of the twentieth century, however, the areas surrounding the prison mushroomed with high-rise apartment buildings built for a white, cosmopolitan middle-class. As these high-rises began elevating the view of their inhabitants, a new spatial calibration emerged between the prison and the city. Now city residents could look down onto the prison, even into the courtyards, and witness at least some of the movements and predicaments of life inside. This relation worried the apartheid state a great deal, and prompted repeated efforts to close down the prison and move its prisoners to another location. However, as one poignant story about an ex-prisoner depicts, the ability to look does not imply the willingness to see, as the new calibration began entailing the kinds of denialism constitutive of apartheid society.

There is a story about a man called Cecil Williams, a white gay communist theatre director who was detained here during the 1960 state of emergency, with a whole lot of others. He recalls one evening being in one of the recreation courtyards of the [prison] and looking up at the flats above him and seeing, on one balcony, a party in full swing. He actually recognised some of the people hanging off the balcony and drinking *parfait d'amour* and having a gay old party on a beautiful Johannesburg evening. But they couldn't see him. Or they wouldn't see him. It's a metaphor, I think, for how whites dealt with apartheid: it was under their noses, but it was invisible to them. (Gevisser in Nuttall 2004:507)

There is something about the tangibility of the photograph as artifact, its framing, its contextualisation in reportage or archive,

² Drawn from a lecture given by Ophir at the *Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism* at Wits in July 2009, titled 'What is the Political?'. Accessed at: www.jwtc.org.za

perhaps even the fixity of the image-as-evidence that can hold the gaze of the spectator, which beckons the implication of the spectator into the event of the photograph. In this regard, the photograph holds the potential of being a significant form in the relationship between looking and seeing, between spectatorship and citizenship. It has the possibility of evoking the mutuality of a shared experience, drawing the spectator into relation with the subjects of the photograph. In this sense, the photograph of apartheid could stage for white South Africa an intervention into the logic of blindness in segregation that the everyday experience of apartheid catastrophe could not often afford. These same qualities of plurality and mutuality of the photograph could also draw together individuated experiences of black apartheid subjects, constituting a public out of black experience. Indeed, black/progressive publications like *Drum* and the *Guardian* gave public definition to experiences to which many of the black readers of these papers would have been familiar, either through their own lives or those of family members and friends. The emplacement of this vast collection of personal experience into public commentary was important in the constitution of broad political claims.

My argument here, following Adi Ophir (2009), is that politics become possible when experience is made *public*. That the political occurs at moments of *public* problematisation of power.² Ophir argues that the public does not have to be a special space or sphere, but does require the establishment of a social (that is, not individuated) relation of argument or contestation. That is, the political is brought into being by the act of constituting some kind of mutual/plural reflection on relations of power. The political occurs when some form of collective troubling of power is at work. It is clear to see here how the enactment of a public creates the possibility for the political. A public, in other words, no matter how small, is a necessary condition for political action.

The importance of the photograph, then, is to be found in the relationship between visibility, publics and the possibility of the political. The kind of plurality that the photograph creates between photographed subjects, spectators, the photographed event and between spectators, generates publics. In particular,

photographs of enclaved, protected spaces do the work of displacing them into public space and thus opening them up for the possibility of critical engagement. Bob Gosani's photograph of the apartheid prison created an optic that elicited a large public, allowing for a mutual problematisation of apartheid power. Directly after the publication of the photograph, *Drum* was approached by an anti-apartheid legal team for a copy of the original photograph in order to bring a case against the warder in the photograph for contravening regulations. The warder was transferred to a more junior post, and accounts from prisoners in 'Number Four' at the time revealed that, as a result of *Drum's* journalism, many of the brutalities described in Nxumalo's article were suppressed by clearly nervous state officials (Sampson 1956:155-156). *Drum's* editors stated that the publication of Gosani's photograph changed the nature of their publication, as the readership of the magazine jumped dramatically to include African intellectuals who had previously only trusted other news sources. *Drum* journalists also began publishing more critical anti-apartheid material. Gosani's photograph stands as a classic moment in South African photography and in the history of anti-apartheid critique. It also stands as a challenge to contemporary work on prisons, spaces that remain secluded zones of violence, in need of political engagement. Gosani's photograph is instructive of how the making visible of the workings of state security apparatus, designed to function in semi-autonomous enclaves on subjects individuated from each other through the criminal justice process, can create the conditions for the reunification of civil space, and the politicisation of prisons and the forms of power and violence that animate them. To make visible and public that which operates invisibly should be understood as the premise of our political work.

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Photography in the 21st century: Seeing and being

Susan Sontag concludes the opening argument in her benchmark collection of essays, *On Photography* (1997:24) with the following observation:

Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted. Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies; it is the most irresistible form of mental pollution. Poignant longings for beauty, for an end to probing below the surface, for a redemption and celebration of the body of the world – all these elements of erotic feeling are affirmed in the pleasure we take in photographs. But other, less liberating feelings are expressed as well. It would not be wrong to speak of people having a compulsion to photograph, to turn experience itself into a way of seeing. Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form. Today everything exists to end in a photograph.

In the vast photographic subject that our world has now become, her words could not be more prophetic. It seems as if the social media were devised explicitly to enable the transformation of experience into photography. And, as Sontag points out, as with all such transformations, there are positive and negative outcomes.

It is by now a truism to say that photography is ubiquitous. The convergence of sophisticated digital camera technology with the world's foremost communications device, the mobile telephone, and the linking of the phone networks with the Internet, represent what appear to be the most significant technological and cultural breakthroughs of our era. The ability

to take pictures which are immediately manipulable in appearance, and to send them to receivers anywhere in the world, seems to represent the triumph of a singular kind of technologically led democratisation of the image, the creation of a new type of pictorial or representational economy, in which circulates everyone's pictures of their lives, without distinction between the famous and unknown, the rich and poor, those with knowledge and power and those without. The immediacy and availability of the photographic technologies and communication networks also seems to flatten out the hierarchies involved in institutions like mass media and government. Now, citizens can communicate directly with themselves, can organise social movements, can circulate news images before the mass media news networks can package them for consumption, and so on. The extraordinary explosion of photographic content on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others, seems to be symptomatic of the ultimate democratisation of the image. But is it? What does the convergent technology, and the massive proliferation of its use by ordinary people, tell us about the state of our culture, about photography itself, and about the differences, if they exist any longer, between images and words, photographs and memories, technology and culture?

From its origins in the nineteenth century, and now fuelled in the vast majority of cases by digital technology, people produce almost 400 BILLION images per year! And most of these images are shared on social media platforms, especially Facebook, where 70% of all activity is based on photographs, and where 300 million photos are uploaded daily. This means that Facebook has 10 000 times more photos than America's largest archival resource, the Library of Congress. What constitutes photographs of interest for the Library of Congress ranges widely from historical and documentary subjects, where the photographs act as an archival and memorial record, to photographs considered, often for widely differing reasons, as works of art. The uses of the everyday, therefore, exponentially outweigh the specialised or 'professional' uses of the photograph.

As Sontag (1977:8) puts it, "photography has become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing

– which means that, like every mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as an art. It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power”.

These parameters, or touchstones, for the uses of photography speak as much to the contemporary proliferation of digital images as they did when Sontag first formulated them 35 years ago, when the Internet and personal mobile telephony didn't yet exist. More than providing a set of uses for the medium, Sontag's observation also places the chief historical argument about the 'true nature' of the photograph in context – that is, the use of the photograph as both social document, whether prosaic and mundane or with journalistic rigour and intent, or as an artwork, usually in comparison with other forms of pictorial representation like painting. But perhaps these two polarities for understanding the popularity of the photograph are simply flags of convenience.

Let us first look at the idea of the photograph in contemporary social media as a 'mass art form', that is, as Sontag has it, one that is not practised by most people as an art. If not an art then, does the ubiquity and immediacy of photography in the social media space represent a somehow liberatory practice? I would contend that it does, in two important senses.

Firstly, it makes a visual understanding of the world and one's own experience available to potentially everyone – which explains the vast proliferation of images posted on social media already mentioned. It is in this availability that the positive democratising potential of photography in social media comes to the fore. Visual language, or simply the picture itself, is more suited to communicability. The shift to Internet access via convergent devices, usually the camera phone, has also undoubtedly done much to narrow the global 'digital divide'. This is especially so for Africa, for long the least connected continent, but now at the forefront of global innovation regarding mobile phone applications, and with a healthy percentage of handset penetration and use.

And yet technological availability is only part of the reason why experience and photography are now so synonymous. Another important reason is that people can in many ways now create their own cultural and experiential landscape through their photographs. And ironically, this verisimilitude of

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the image, this presentation of one's life and experience, while being more open than ever for many millions of people, is also more manipulable than ever. The convergence and accessibility of camera and editing technologies means that we have realised a dominant visual culture which is, as Jacques Attali puts it in his 1985 book *Noise*, "compositional" in nature. That is to say, the means of creating cultural production are accessible enough to be used and recreated by those who use it, turning them from only consumers into both producers and consumers of the image culture. An important corollary of this shift is the blurring of the boundary between the everyday, or 'amateur' photographer, and the technical, or 'professional' photographer.

An article on the Instagram phenomenon, in a December 2012 issue of South Africa's *Mail & Guardian* newspaper, illustrates the point. Journalist Verashni Pillay describes entering into a community of Instagrammers in South Africa, all of them united by their lack of high-end camera equipment or technical training in lenses, lighting, composition, etc. Noting their difference from professional photographers, she says: "The authenticity of traditional photography becomes moot: one is expected to change the image. As another Instagrammer's exhibition tagline puts it: he does not take photos, he creates them ... [D]ie hard Instagrammers aren't interested in making the jump to professional photography. The immediacy and ease of mobile photography is simply too addictive". This 'addictive' ease with which the social media photograph conquers the edicts of authenticity in traditional photography is of course a blessing and a curse. The history of the tension between the social snapshot – which acts as a purveyor of memory, a *memento mori*, as Sontag puts it – and the less trustworthy 'art' photograph (think Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void*, 1960), is instructive in understanding the radical nature of the shift which social media brings to photography.

One way to understand it in the technological history of photography, is to look at the work of the French scientist Etienne-Jules Marey, whose invention of photographic machines to record human and animal physiological activity – primarily motion – is credited with influencing such disparate figures as Marcel Duchamp, the Lumière brothers, Edison, the Futurists and Eadweard Muybridge; as well as the later

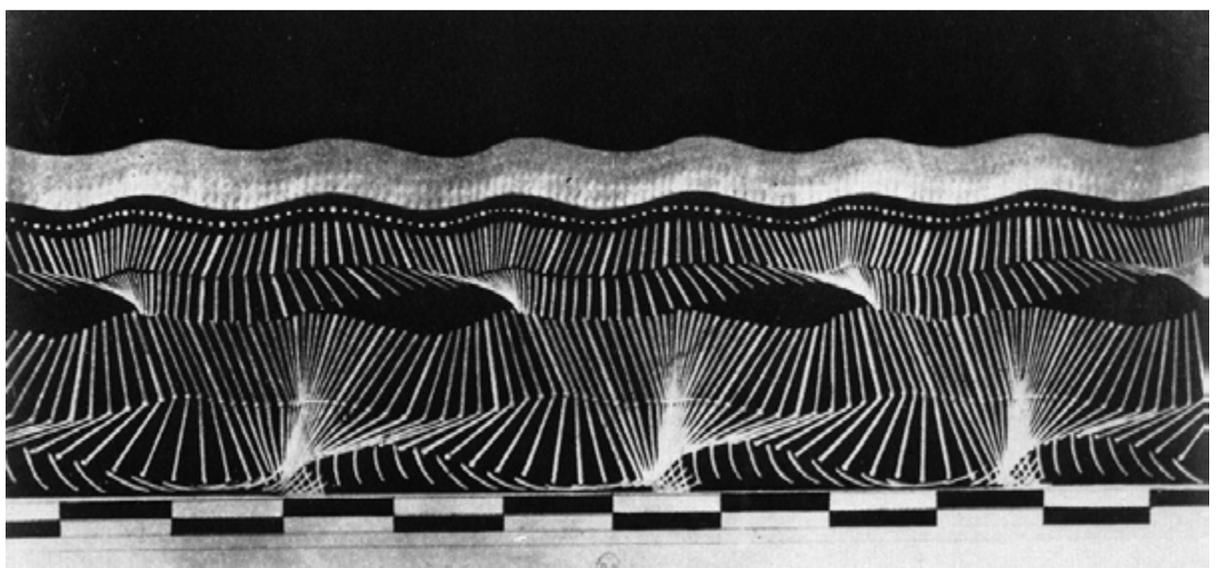


Etienne Jules Marey
Late 1800s
Motion Study



invention of the X-Ray by Röntgen. Marey is best known for his work in 'chronophotography', a technique said to have anticipated cinematography. The technique involved the attempt to accurately record, through multiple exposure, single plate photography, a full range of human and animal motion through time. Through the use of such techniques Marey was able to discover what he called an 'unknown language' of the body; that is, the decomposition of motion revealed the 'successive instants' which made up the duration of human movements, and also the various forms of physical extension through space. It was a graphic visual technology which aspired to the ever-increasing refinement of the record of successive instants, frozen in time, rather than the recording of continuity of movement which would form the basis of cinema technology, the chief leisure technology of the 20th century.

Such discoveries were scientifically surprising, and also had important philosophical and aesthetic consequences that stemmed from their reconfiguration of the body and subjectivity. Marey and other contemporaries such as Eadweard Muybridge were interested in using photography to 'decompose' and better understand human movement – thereby producing a more efficient relation between industrial machines and working bodies. Marey's chronophotographic technique linked the scientific, documentary aspect of relatively sophisticated early photographic techniques with a general logic of modernity – the beginning of the era of information overload, of 'speed and dynamism' as the Futurists had it, and ultimately that of our own digital culture. Marey's scientific pursuit of pure photographic representations of human extension and duration – which looked like this:



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thus had a mirror image in a far more metaphysical and aesthetic modernist zeitgeist – a zeitgeist which produced such iconic images as Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* (1912) (left).



– and the tribute to this work by Man Ray, one of the most influential surrealist and early art photographers, *Duchamp Descending a Staircase* (above). Both images draw on the inspiration of the new photographic medium.

As Francois Dagognet (1992) points out, what Marey's chronophotography discovered is that human movement is, in some senses, discontinuous. The secret of understanding movement was therefore also the realisation that the recording devices used to track it – the film camera and the photograph – were, in a sense, introducing a narrative continuity into the perception of movement. "Too much continuity dissolved and absorbed into a single sequence what came in jerks ... [I]t was necessary to capture protrusions, linkages and multiple phases (or the discontinuity of continuity itself)." (Dagognet 1992:100)

In effect, as Dagognet (1992:152) has it, Marey opened up new visual and aesthetic possibilities for the new photographic technologies:

Mareyism limited the artist's imaginary world and reminded him of the obligation to respect the real ... In another sense, it reaped the whirlwind and helped the plastic artist to express blinding speed and the uninterrupted.

The double agenda here – that 'Mareyism', or, specifically, photography – constrains representation to an atomised perception of reality, and also enables its freedom from those same constraints, is another version of the debate from antiquity about truth in representation. The debate, particularly in art, is reinvigorated at this time by technical innovations in photography.

The ambivalent position of the technology in this thickening of human self-knowledge is remarked on by Walter Benjamin in his classic essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1970:238-239), where he refers to the quintessential modernism of photography:

... a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored ... Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person's posture during the fractional second of a stride ... The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.

In its early years photography substituted for the painted portrait, and was from the first used, as Benjamin discusses, as an *aide-de-memoire*, and often also as a *memento mori*, to recall the faces of dead family members back to life. These uses of the photograph are more intimate and personal than the scientific deconstruction of human movement which they also enabled. Benjamin's point raises a further possibility: the photograph opens up a new dimension of human experience. In the concept of 'unconscious optics', seeing in a way we cannot consciously

do, we can begin to see why the photograph has become so central to human social experience.

Paul Virilio opens his 1994 book, *The Vision Machine*, with an example of the art versus photographic truth debate between the writer Paul Gsell and the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Gsell puts the technician point of view forward that photography is “an unimpeachable mechanical witness” (1994:1), and it is therefore art that distorts the truth. Rodin counters, argues Virilio (1994:2), by introducing the element of time to representation:

It is photography that lies ... for in reality time does not stand still ... [T]he artist condenses several successive movements into a single image. [The work of art] is true when the parts are observed in sequence ... The work of art requires witnesses because it sallies forth with its image into the depths of a material time which is also our own.

The idea that photography is a moment ‘frozen in time’ has become part of the popular imagination, but, as in the case of the discontinuous, ‘decomposed’ motion in the work of Marey and Muybridge, this puts the photograph at odds with conscious perception. It introduces the idea, as Benjamin points out, of an ‘unconscious optics’, a way of seeing the world we could not do without the camera.

The Weimar critic and associate of Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, further elaborates on the distinctive qualities of photography in relation to time in his essay ‘Photography’ (1993:50):

An individual retains memories because they are personally significant. Thus, they are organised according to a principle which is essentially different from the organising principle of photography. Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory images are at odds with photographic representation.

Kracauer makes the interesting point that memory and photographs, commonly seen as intertwined and even equivalent, are in fact 'at odds', in that memory lends meaning – 'significance' – to the space and time of the image, while the photograph, despite offering a view of a space and a moment in time, cannot imbue it with significance by itself.

Sontag has a different nuance on the relationship between the photograph and memory. "Most subjects photographed", she writes, "are ... touched with pathos. All photographs are *memento mori* ... Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt" (Sontag 1977:15).

The idea that the photograph is a testament to time's decay, rather than freezing memories as a timeless relic, perhaps gives us an inkling about their exponentially increasing popularity and use. In a world where attention is steadily minimised and cognitive distraction is the norm, people's investment in photographs is tied up with warding off the attacks on memory and engagement that our 24/7 infoculture throws up all the time. But photographs are not reliable witnesses to time or reliable engagements with the society around us – either as art or as social document. Sontag's book offers a long discussion of the work of Diane Arbus to suggest that, even as social chronicle, the photograph is framed by intentions and techniques that shape its apparently objective view of a social stratum or group of people – in Arbus's case, chronicling outsiders, social misfits and marginalised figures, an approach which local photographers like David Goldblatt and Roger Ballen have also taken.

The case of a famous photograph by Thomas Hoepker, apparently of a bunch of young New Yorkers chatting in the sun as the World Trade Center collapses in ruins in the background, across the Hudson river, illustrates the point that photographs are unreliable sites of meaning. The widely differing interpretations of the image – that it illustrates America's callous, let's-move-on attitude; that, according to one of the people in the picture, they were all actually watching in shock, for example – illustrates that the use of images as social documents, even without the ability of editing programmes to alter the content of images, is fraught with ideological and other hazards of interpretation.

With the photograph as a work of art the impact of truth and lies in the social sphere is less of a focus. But here too the photograph raises problems, most typically about the boundary between life and art. As Sontag argues, the camera essentially ‘industrialises’ the production of the image, making it possible not only to blur the boundaries between art and life, but to enable the lucky or enthusiastic amateur to see the world through a more aesthetic lens – a point that holds even more true for Instagrammers who immediately digitally manipulate the images they capture. One of the early fine art adopters of the photograph, the Surrealists, used it for exactly that purpose, to blur the boundaries between art and life, low culture and high culture, but artists like Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray remain marginal figures. Sontag uses the literal meaning of the term ‘surreal’ to indicate the widespread effect of photography as providing a ‘more real than real’ way of viewing the world. Even now, the attitude persists that the photograph, far from simply being a way of memorialising memory or documenting life and the world around us, is in fact the quintessential contemporary art form. In a recent blog post, the art critic of the *Guardian* newspaper, Jonathan Jones, opines: “Photography is the serious art of our time. It also happens to be the most accessible and democratic way of making art that has ever been invented. [G]reat art is a sequence of moving pictures of the human condition. Today, photography is the only art that seriously maintains this attention to the stuff that matters”.

The blurring of any previously existing boundaries between art and social documentation that photography enables is accelerated, as already suggested, by the convergence between phone, camera and the communications platform provided by ‘spaces’ like Facebook on the Internet, and by application networks/platforms like Instagram. But even in more traditional contexts, such as those of the gallery and exhibition, social document and art form converges. South African photographers are particularly adept at the crossover of an aestheticised approach to social documentation or photojournalism, a trend confirmed by a recent project around a key South African socio-economic issue, the politics of land, titled the Social Landscape Project. This resulted in an exhibition, *Transition*, and was accompanied by an open public call for photo-documentation of people’s own

perceptions of the land around them, called *Show us our land*, put out by the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg. The democratically open nature of compiling such an image archive could only be possible in the era of the photograph, especially the accessibility of the digital photograph. Another recent example, of a photography competition staged by various agencies and universities in Gauteng, asked entrants to photograph something about their life in Gauteng that resonated with them. The exhibition that resulted, shown at the University of Johannesburg, once more not only demonstrated the conviction with which the camera turns the image of the world into the experience of place, but also how easy – and presumably addictive – it is to do so.

On this quotidian and everyday level, the immediacy of the photograph makes it a profoundly social visual technology – again with the potential for both progressive but also undesirable uses. Any element of popular culture can now be distributed globally and immediately in the form of an image. These can be humorous pictorial comments on issues of the day or just people's daily lives, and, if they catch enough Internet users' imaginations, are distributed as what are tellingly called 'memes' – i.e. something that becomes part of a shared digital memory. As already mentioned, there are also many examples of the possibilities of digital photography being used in citizen journalism, political activism and in efforts to raise awareness of human rights issues. A good recent example is the so-called 'Woman in the Red Dress', a press picture of a woman in a red summer dress being teargassed by a policeman in the course of civilian protests in Istanbul against the autocratic rule of Turkey's prime minister Recep Erdogan. The image went viral in the course of the protests, and very quickly became emblematic of the entire course of the political turmoil. While the image serves as useful shorthand for the political action and the subsequent, and ongoing, crackdowns, it also stands in for a sustained political engagement with the causes of the particular political struggle. Far from simply being a peaceful people vs fascist police incident, the woman in the picture is an academic from a nearby university who lectures in urban planning. The protest is against the proposed official redevelopment of land in the city – some of it heritage land – into malls and commercial

property. These nuances are not just a backstory to a dramatic meme of a photograph, but are key parts of a political struggle which are elided by the seductive narrative of the photograph.

The disadvantage of these means for turning culture into a vast image machine relate to the same potential that the availability and accessibility of image production and distribution technology has for positive means of expression in the digital public sphere. Bigotry, race hatred, sexism and misogyny in particular are some of the disturbing outcomes of the democratic access to these technologies.

The uses and abuses of the ubiquity and accessibility of social media photography are unstoppable. To return to statistics, Instagram users now number over 200 million worldwide, and their continued spread and increase is certain. A crucial difference between these photographers and the legions more who post all manner of the daily ephemera of their lives on Facebook, is that Instagrammers (and whatever the next popular photography networking application will be that eclipses Instagram) seek to document and create – through editing applications and programmes – the world around them. The reality of their compositional culture is an essentially aesthetic one, even though it simultaneously blurs the boundary between art and social documentation.

In this sense, these phenomena of social media photography, digital convergence and the Internet distribution channels available to them provide a far more empowering aesthetic model for photography than any that have previously existed. But in another sense, the image culture of the social media, far from being an inflection point, is a kind of realisation, a culmination of sorts, of our ‘easy addiction’ to the image, both looking at it and making it. To requote Sontag (1977:24), “Today everything exists to end in a photograph”.

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Participatory photography and the inevitability of voyeurism

¹ *Speak English to Me* (2007–2009) was essentially a dialogical drawing project. Photographs were not intended to be published as part of the project, but in retrospect the photographic dynamics that took place in my interactions with research subjects were interesting and thus largely informed the concepts presented in this paper written in 2010. Simply put, this drawing project allowed me to reflect on photographic practices because it was a drawing project. I felt throughout the research process that the presence of the camera as data collecting instrument introduced power dynamics into the interactional context that drawing did not.

Aesthetics, a dead-end?

After completing my Masters in Fine Arts project, a dialogical drawing and photography project entitled *Speak English to Me* (2010),¹ that took place largely on the streets of Yeoville, I became despondent with the ideals of dialogical (Kester 2004) and relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 2004). It was clear, to me at least, that community-based artistic practice was a dead end. It seemed impossible as an artist to dialogically construct a new aesthetic of the everyday that was not already tainted by unproductive struggles for symbolic legitimacy, power and profit. Simply put, I found that an *aesthetic* project could only have purchase on the minds of the participants if it was either framed by them in instrumental terms, or legitimised by a culturally dominant external agency. It appeared to me, in 2009, that those writers and artists who at that time fashionably touted the ‘informal’, the ‘interstitial’ and the ‘liminal’ as ‘aesthetic’ spaces somehow existing outside the dominant discourse, were simply wrong. It was clear to me that struggles for legitimacy take place wherever and whenever communication takes place (Bourdieu 1991) and *especially* when communication is aestheticised, as it is in artistic projects. Further, an analysis of the speech of participants in the community art project, *Speak English to Me*, that I organised, suggested that while the struggle for legitimacy was indeed present, my invocation of the project as ‘art’ largely hid this from view. This insight made me uncomfortable, and I was simply no longer interested in functioning as an artist in public space again. It struck me as an inauthentic thing to do. I could imagine myself in the role of a researcher; an image maker and designer; as a social worker even, but not as an artist in the space of the ‘other’ and requiring the apparatuses of ‘legitimate’ culture to consecrate the voice of the participant. At that point of my creative and ethical life, it was simply out of the question.

Wide Angle

Critical questions:
Photography as a medium

Brenden Gray

2008

Speak English to Me

© Brenden Gray

Diogo Gaspar (not the subject's real name). With permission, I appropriated the name of the project from Diogo's placard "Speak English To Me". Diogo is a Portuguese speaking Angolan refugee who arrived in Johannesburg when he was eighteen. At the time of the project he was homeless, living in a lean-to he had erected on the perimeter wall of Yeoville Boys School on Muller Street, Bellevue. My interviews with Diogo centered on issues of visibility and invisibility in Yeoville.



Photography: a detour

It was at this point that the call for contributions to the *Wide Angle: Photography and Public Practice* forum was made. The thematic focus on photography rather than aesthetics came as a welcome opportunity for me to explore the problem of legitimisation and the visual from a different point of view. It further allowed me to understand that while community based aesthetic projects brought about their own problems of disavowing struggles for legitimacy, photography – generally considered to be a more heterogenous social medium – nevertheless came with its own baggage: this being its inherently voyeuristic gaze. Yet I continued to believe that photography, given its history as a practice, was still the best medium for an exploration of the legitimacy of the visual experience. The history of photography suggests that the medium has held in tension populism, technology, 'stadium', language and instrumentalism on the one hand, and aesthetics, culture and 'punctum', image and autonomy on the other. As such it suitably offered potential to re-imagine public and everyday visual practice. It seems to me now that between the political and revolutionary function Walter Benjamin assigned to photography, and the poetic/mythological qualities assigned



by Roland Barthes, lies a fertile space to examine not how photography can liberate 'participants' (as aesthetic practices set out to do), but instead how people come to construct their subjecthood and subjection through the production and consumption of photographic images.

Brenden Gray

2008

Speak English to Me

© Brenden Gray

Kadar (not the subject's real name) is a Ghanaian imam and Hausa speaker who, at the time of the project, worked as a tailor at the Yeoville Market on Hunter Street. The subject objected to having his photograph taken, but later agreed for it to be published as long as his name was changed.



By virtue of its reproducibility, affordability and availability, photography is an 'adaptive' practice (Bolton as cited by Kriebel 2007), a quality that makes it a prime candidate to examine struggles that exist in the production and consumption of images. It is a medium that is difficult to pin down in terms of social hierarchy (unlike painting, sculpture, installation). Photographic practice is pervasive and photographs are ubiquitous. It finds itself in many places; it functions variously according to context: it is at once ritual, hobby, practice, pastime, discipline and a profession. As a practice that is overtly social, I realised photography's potential to serve to further my original interests in dialogism and field dynamics. However, that being said, photography is also a voyeuristic activity and any dialogical project would need to take that into account.



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Brenden Gray

2008

Speak English to Me

© Brenden Gray

At the time of the project, Mzila had been working at Flamingo Drycleaners as a tailor on Rockey Street for ten years. Like many residents involved in the project he allowed me to interview him, draw and photograph him in his home.



Voyeurism is intrinsically linked to the practice of photography. Psychoanalysis identifies photography and also cinema as representing a fetishistic obsession with the act of looking (scopophilia). A psychoanalytic and indeed a social semiotic account of the practice of photography argues that images cannot be disentangled from power, specifically the transactional power invested in the act of looking. But why is it the case that figurative photography, power and voyeurism go hand in hand? And if this is true, what are the implications for photography that claims to be participatory?

Perhaps photography is linked to voyeurism because in order for a 'look' to be classified as voyeuristic it requires a frame, distance and a screen. In technical terms, the practice of photography provides these devices: the frame (viewfinder, picture plane, slice of time), distance (lens, processing in private space), screen (mechanical object interposed between two agents, refraction, mirrors). When the look is 'clothed' by various visual prosthetics, such as windows, screens, apertures, gaps, filters, it contains the potential to become a *gaze* and subsequently a voyeuristic gaze. A frame, a camera, and a screen are required for the photographer to believe that s/he is sufficiently well-concealed not to be seen by his/her subject.



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2008

Speak English to Me

© Brenden Gray

Abram (not the subject's real name) with his family at St Francis Church, Raymond Street. Abram discontinued his involvement in the project in the very early stages.



At the same time, these devices function to obscure the subject's sense of simply being used in the image as an object, a picture, or the impetus to create a fantasy, rather than an empowered agent in a direct transactional exchange.

If the camera produces a voyeuristic instrument, the process of exposure and development amplifies it. The photographer's act of composing a shot, waiting, focusing and locking on the subject, and pressing the shutter is conducted away from the immediate reality of the subject, inside the black box of the camera which in many ways is a miniature and portable private space or veil. Similarly, in the processes of privately producing a photograph in the darkroom, or on the screen, the photographer is offered a further opportunity to gaze upon the subject without that subject being physically present. Ultimately, the photographer, and also agents such as curators and gallery directors, further possess the power to set the terms under which that subject's representation is determined.

So how does the function of voyeurism in photography square with the participatory function of new forms of public photographic practice that encourage potential subjects to take on the role of producers themselves, beyond the function



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Victoria is a middle-aged Swazi woman who left her home village to live with her husband, Don, in Johannesburg ten years ago. From her converted garage, she runs a business as a dressmaker. The subject freely allowed me to photograph herself and her family members.



of simply 'posing' for a photograph? What happens when the 'subjects' of a photographic art project become 'participants' or collaborators? The endeavour on the part of contemporary photographic practitioners to reframe the subject in terms of participation is a critical attempt to combat the voyeurism inherent to photographic practice. Projects that ask subjects to image themselves or their circumstances, or that encourage subjects to exercise their voice and agency through photography, are clearly resisting contemporary practices that 'other' the subject or make the subject available to the voyeuristic gaze.

The voice of the 'participant' and their visual expressions are never transparent or objective: neither to themselves nor to those to whom they are addressing themselves. Both modal activities (speaking and image making) are framed, mediated, constructed and constrained in three senses, which makes their communications opaque rather than transparent:

- 1 Their speech is constrained by the discourses of the legitimising agency that authorises the 'participants' to speak.
- 2 Their speech is coordinated in relation to the 'market-place (field) of utterances' in which they find themselves speaking.





Brenden Gray

2008

Speak English to Me

© Brenden Gray

A typical scene in which sketching would take place. The subject would speak and narrate and I would sketch and later we would reflect and revise together over a number of iterations. This drawing was produced in an Ethiopian restaurant near the Yeoville Police Station. The subject, Desta (not the subject's real name), Oromo-speaking Ethiopian foreign national, vehemently refused to be photographed on the grounds that he may be victimised.

- 3 Their utterances are manifestations of their own habitus and class ethos.

Given this, we may assume that participants are not participants at all, but rather subjects acting within and because of discourse. Because of this, some subjects are more predisposed than others to speak with 'agency' and 'voice': which is determined, to a large extent, by their ability to 'play the game' of the legitimising agency, to master and control the given speech situation, and to examine their habitus and class ethos reflexively in relation to this. Subjects without agency and the prerequisite cultural capital required to activate it end up being 'spoken by the camera' and the project.

Photographic practices that ignore such a dialogical, critical self-reflexiveness run the risk of inadvertently buying into discourses that are at best reformist and at worst orthopedic, ameliorative and reproductive. The danger exists that, if public photography assumes that communication is simply transparent, project subjects will become alienated from the very activities that should de-alienate and empower them in the first place.

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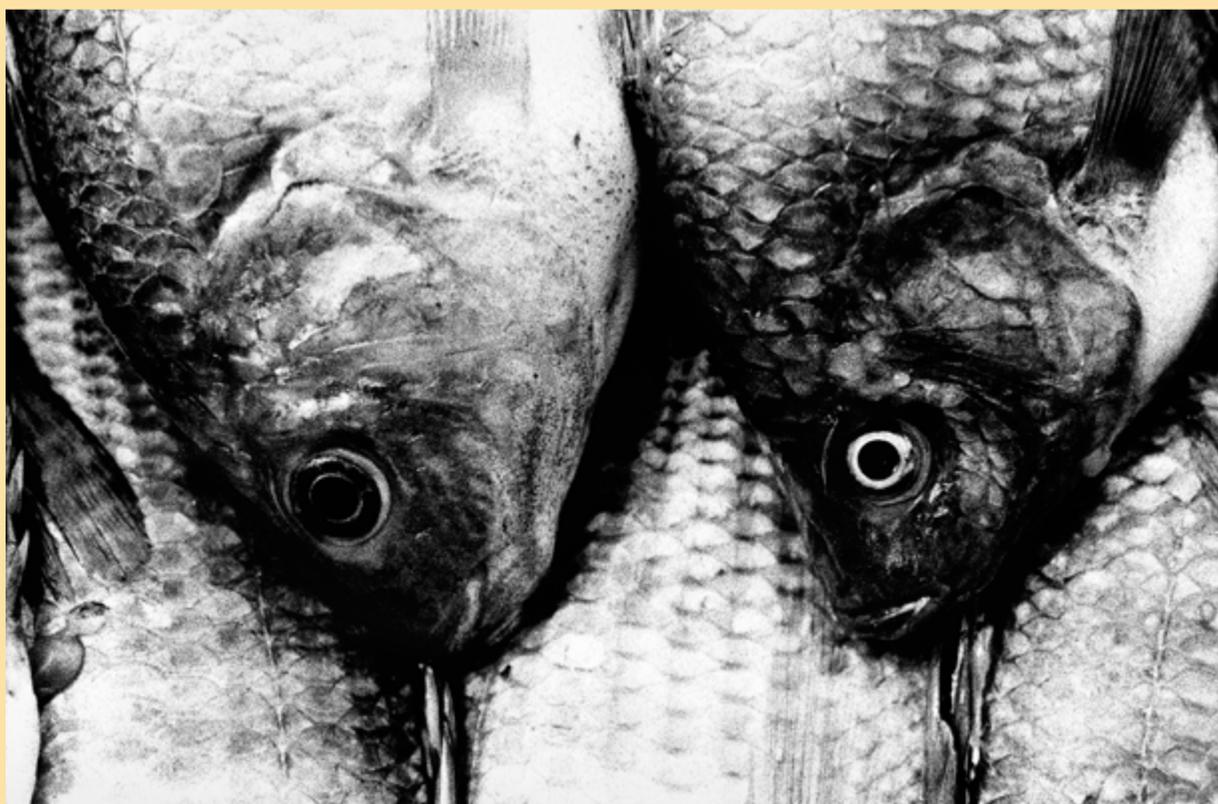
Normalcy

¹ The project also relied on the relationship between sound and/as memory. For the complete multimedia piece see: <http://orrantiajuan.wordpress.com/category/normalcy/>

In places where silence was once a central logic to both terror and its survival, the aftermath as an experience requires us to rethink documentary language. These are not situations where it is enough to 'record' what has been left after the events, years of practices of terror. Sometimes we also need to descend into the ordinary spaces that people are left with, their everyday forms of life marked or permeated, as they are, by a diverse set of expressions of a past that inhabits the present in banal, and sometimes unexpected ways. This, though, is a task that will sometimes require us to take a step into the in-between spaces where imagination and reality confuse one another. An act where abstract forms of reality articulate a dialogue with evocation as a form of documentation; where the poetics of a visual image, unbound to the direct representations and meanings of photojournalism or traditional documentary open to the possibilities of the expressive.¹

Juan Orrantia
2008
From the series *Normalcy*
© Juan Orrantia

As the paramilitary squad ventured into the swamp, they forced the fishermen they found along the waterways to lead them to the town. Along the way they dumped fish, and later bodies, into the water.



*

I remember losing myself in the mangrove forest for hours, sitting silently among the sounds of birds, insects, wind and water, and while doing so I simply imagined and let myself be lost in these imaginations with the substance around me. The workings of history found me sitting just a few metres away from where a dead man's body lay covered in mud and leaves. His body would only be found the next day. And as substances and time passed swiftly by, all I saw in my own bewilderment was the gaze of a fox that for a few minutes got caught, also, in my own gaze, as we stared at each other under the flapping of the vultures above.

The next day I learned that the body they had found had been literally left to rot, and hence disappear, just a few steps from the exact spot where I had spent this moment in the swamp. Three days after the murder that had been committed on the eve of Holy Friday, the body was taken to town and set on the church patio for its legal examination. The smell of rot was everywhere, emanating from this man murdered on the eve of the day when Christians weep for the murder of Christ. As they laid him on the ground, people spoke of the irony of his death on such a date, of the guts it takes to kill someone on a religious holiday. But, for believers and non-believers alike, this body became the fleeting image of the past gone by. Set on the ground in front of the church by police order, the body rested flat on what remained of his naked self, still blubber exuding its putrid odours into the air. This same spot was again impregnated by the visual and olfactory images initially released eight years before, when twelve other corpses had also been laid and photographed here, re-marking the sacred place as a place of death. As people gathered around the church patio to see the corpse, their faces fixed on the past.

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Juan Orrantia

2008

From the series *Normalcy*

© Juan Orrantia

The church and its patio, like the memories of the tragic event, are covered and uncovered by the stained waters.

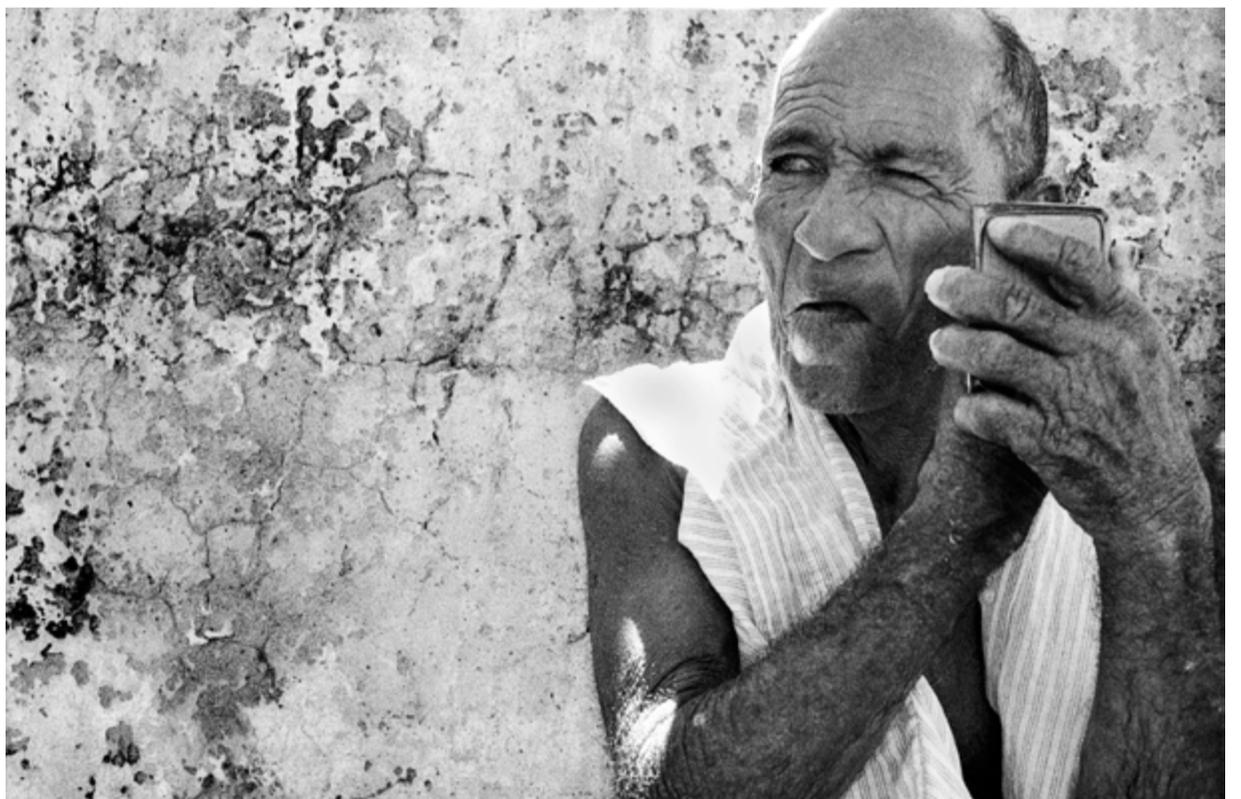


Eight years before, in 2000, more than thirty men had been killed in this small town along the northern coast of Colombia at the hands of right wing paramilitaries. Twelve of these men were left in a macabre show of order, lined up next to the benches just outside the entrance to the church, which in this case is also the plaza, the school playground, and the centre of town. After the killers had left that morning, women had to go and pick up their husbands', sons' and brothers' bodies – or what was left of them – load them into canoes and with them in tow, hurriedly leave, run and not look back. Other corpses, or their dismembered parts, remained in the water, rotting and dissipating into it with time. Dignity seemed to go with them.

At the time I was living my protected life in the capital city of Bogotá. But I clearly remember seeing the news of the massacre of the Ciénaga Grande, the image of those bodies lined up in front of the church – an image resembling yet other acts of terror committed by the paramilitaries during those turbulent times. Years later, when the apparent normality that seems to come with the course of time and the official idea of mourning and healing had settled in, I visited the town. As soon as I saw it, the image of that show of horror in front of the church was still the most palpable image of the past.



I remember recalling the image when I first saw the church. I thought about the lined up bodies as I walked across the place where they lay, and I wondered what it meant to live here, to walk past this place every day, to see others die here as well. But after spending some time and adjusting myself to the rhythms of the town, after walking the places and laughing over the spaces, I began to wonder about what lies within the walls of the church, and in the waters that surround it; in the porches of patios and the rooms where dead men once lay; as something beyond the image of one photograph. Rather, it was more about a narrative of uncontained meanings and imaginings, of unbounded possibilities. The feelings of this place, the stories of its people were also made of remains, resembling more a patchwork of moments entrenched in others, of fleeting images lingering below the surface, waiting for a moment to become a story, even a momentary one. This was not a story that could be told in the way that stories are usually told. The telling of this story depended on the very openness offered through the poetics of photography. And hence their stories, the stories of these walls surrounded by fermented water, are stories many times narrated in silence, forged from the very vulnerability of a time gone by, awakened by things that speak of that which was meant to remain shut.



Juan Orrantia

2008

From the series *Normalcy*

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Every day I photographed quietly, letting myself get driven by the boredom of long hot days, as women and men went on with their routines and I interrupted theirs pretending not to do so. I attended religious services. I lingered around. But I especially observed with simplicity, trying to imagine the times when the past interrupted these everyday routines. Sometimes this led me to follow sounds, their presence and their unexpected meanings. Other moments I felt led to think about and see the gentleness of water and what it once contained. These were not moments that could simply be captured in images that describe, frames plainly containing impressions of meaning and explanation; because, what images does one 'capture' when trying to represent the ghostly and yet so tangible feelings and unexpected presences of moments of terror that linger as memory in people and place?

Juan Orrantia

2008

From the series *Normalcy*

© Juan Orrantia

Since the massacre, many people in town believe they are haunted by evil spirits that cause physical pain.



Wide Angle

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Juan Orrantia

2008

From the series *Normalcy*

© Juan Orrantia

Sandra and her children pose for a portrait in their bedroom, on the spot where her first husband was killed the night of the massacre.



The story to tell then becomes the story of a town drenched in moments of memory that can only be told through their absence. A patchwork of nonlinear narratives and interruptions that allow for the juxtaposition of the present and the absent, where the images are nothing more than empty spaces filled with memories, of bodies loaded with visions and feelings waiting to be ignited, or not, by something like a sound, a flashback, a name, or a thing. Photographs where one thing steps in to fill in for another, but together they all speak of what is there – maybe invisibly, maybe silently, yet surely present. As such they take on the possibility of acting as sites where imagination, reality and truth are neither denied nor privileged, but rather entangled in one another. Documentary then becomes a meditation through the expressive, yet rooted in the real, in the hurt, in the dreams and nightmares of those who have seen something that we will never actually see, but can only imagine through the possibilities of poetic and evocative forms beyond the usual conventions of how information is shared. These are images of things that for us – those who did not see first-hand – produce something based in our own imaginations that resemble, if not the horror at least the idea, the sensation, of what it must be like to live with what remains, dissipated as it is in the continuation of life.



Juan Orrantia

2008

From the series *Normalcy*

© Juan Orrantia



Radiant landscapes

EDITORS' NOTE:

The poetics of activism

Because of its ability to attest to things there, or having been, photography is frequently used, and often readily exploited, as a powerful verification tool for advocacy. As such, its use has the potential to be crass, obvious, melodramatic. Veteran photographer Santu Mofokeng engenders his activism at an oblique angle; a type of subtle refocusing on how viewers of his work look at the images, as well as towards the issues that they delicately unwrap.



Santu Mofokeng

c. 1966

*Family Portrait: Ishmael Standing (rt),
Orlando East*

Silverprint

© Santu Mofokeng

Image courtesy Lunetta Bartz,

MAKER, Johannesburg



c. 1973

Ishmael comes through the gate, there is no gate. The fence by the gate is saggy and sad, as is the untended grass with the weeds. He walks the ten yards to where I am standing with friends beside the irritated pale blue Murella Paint washed walls of our two-roomed concrete *elephant*. He jostles me. I try to cuff him. He parries my blow and slides away easily, laughing as I bawl at him in reproach. He walks toward the kitchen door where my mother is busied with something or other, whilst chatting to my stepfather, Joe One-eye. Behind his back, they call my stepfather *Wolve* (Afrikaans for wolf).

Joe One-eye's conceit is legendary. He is forever bragging about his achievements in life. He boasts of having been a body-builder, a concert pianist, a consummate lady's man and a *Royal Reader* to boot! He takes himself utterly seriously, even though he is on the skids living with us in the Soweto pit that is known as White City.

As I curse at Ishmael, he turns and says; "Ag man! Don't be angry. I am only trying to check if you are drunk or sober. These days I cannot tell in what state you are, just by looking at you. The only way I can check this out is by the tone in your voice and desperation in your counter-attack when we tango".

2004

Now I am carrying an emaciated Ishmael to hospital. I know this is the last time I will see him alive. In the days when he could wrestle me to the ground, he was always particular in his selection of clothes. Judo and boxing were his sports, his pastime. I struggle to reconcile the image I always carried in my mind of my brother as Scylla the Rock, whom I grew up with looking up to, with this one of a frightened, swarthy, incontinent wraith of a dying child, no longer a man. Also, I am carrying this man-child, my brother alive for the last time. Hospitals are properly places of deliverance.

Move this image, push it one side for the moment and reel up to present time.

1 See also the slide show online at <http://mg.co.za/multimedia/2010-11-12-blood-gold-and-water> 'Blood, gold and water.' Media reports in South Africa have identified AMD (Acid Mine Drainage) or generally ARD (Acid Rock Drainage) as catalysts to a looming crisis of tomorrow – WATER SHORTAGE! Environmentalists and climate change activists and NGOs are calling on South Africa to take action now. Experts of all stripe: economists, scientists, engineers and ecologists are at the frontline in this battle to save the planet.

2 To be fair: why are the voices of people involved in social and cultural sciences and philosophers whose knowledge in matters culture and values not harnessed or heard in the battle to save the planet?

Radiant landscapes

2010 and now

I always held Soweto to be the compass with which I survey the world, the prism through which I see. I feel a peculiar sense of pride of belonging and feeling grounded in that space. Its welcoming bosoms embrace me whenever I am there. As a child I used to love playing around its 'white mountains', toxic mine-dumps. As an adult I have revelled in its chaos. But now my feelings toward the place as home have since changed. I feel fearful for the future of Soweto and similar places. Perspective, I guess.

The *Kliprivier* ('Stone River' in the English) is a river that meanders through Soweto. It is considered to be 'sewerage' by many healers and rightly so. If a healer, like my late brother, prescribed ritual 'cleansing' or a dunk in a river for congress with ancestors, they would counsel not to use the Kliprivier for this ritual.

Driving by the Klip River (as Sowetans call it) in Soweto recently, I was disturbed when confronted with the spectacle of people frolicking in this radiating sewer of filth and pollution. Yet, they frolicked. They wallowed in faith in ecstasy and in abandon. They were doing their businesses oblivious to the dangers of radiation and contamination.

At the time, I was looking at areas susceptible to pollution and radiation by effluents coming from disused mines and factories. Perhaps the people who conduct baptisms, church gatherings and sangoma rituals on the banks of the Klip River consider themselves to be immune to any afflictions and disease the river might carry. After all, they are communing with higher powers who will surely grant protection. A recent newspaper report (Kardas-Nelson 2010) calculated the Klip River's pH to be around 2 (highly acidic). Pure water has a pH of around 7.¹

According to township lore, a 'tornado' is called '*Mamlambo*', a serpent in Nguni mythology. The only people who can see it waltzing about the streets in Soweto are people who are imbued, 'touched' or those who have access to Mamlambo's power for their own use and mischief.²

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3 A Zulu term meaning witchcraft.

4 A Zulu term meaning the stealing of the soul in order to enslave it or to turn a person into a zombie.

Ishmael never admitted to me that he had AIDS. He was convinced if he ever contracted the disease it was never going to kill him since he is a sangoma. People in the townships say there are two kinds of the HIV virus and AIDS. There is the kind identified worldwide by epidemiologists, which responds to treatment using scientifically approved methods and medicines. The other kind is transmitted by a 'worm' and is passed on to a person by witches, enemies, jealous relatives and friends, etc. This kind of HIV and AIDS does not respond to treatment via medically approved routes. Ishmael attributed his illness to 'ubuthakathi'³ or 'ukuthwebulwa',⁴ the other kind of AIDS manufactured by witchcraft. He claimed to be in possession of powerful herbs and potions that guaranteed him protection and immunity. Ishmael felt impervious to any kind of attack: whether physical or spiritual.



Santu Mofokeng

2011

*Sangoma Cleansing Ritual at
Kliprivier, Soweto*

Pigment print

© Santu Mofokeng

Image courtesy Lunetta Bartz,
MAKER, Johannesburg

It is with all these realities, with this knowledge, that I tackle my recent project on climate change: its impact on environment.

Questions that plague me often are: Who lives in these rotten places once they decline in profitability or disasters have occurred and capitalists have left? Is proliferation of degraded environments a by-product in the profit-making business or



Wide Angle

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2004
*Ishmael inside Motouleng Cave,
Clarens*
Silverprint
© Santu Mofokeng
Image courtesy Lunetta Bartz,
MAKER, Johannesburg

5 News reports vis-à-vis kidney transplants scandals conducted in private hospitals in Durban and Cape Town: The Western Cape is known worldwide for surgical safaris, which are apparently sold as popular tourist packages. This footnote is owing to a report in News24 by Marelize Barnard, *Die Burger*/2011-02-28 10:40.

one of insouciance? Are these devastated environments factories or laboratories? Are places like Soweto, Penge, Emalahleni, Arandis etc breeding grounds for a new species comprising mutants? Maybe such landscapes are repositories for human cultivation in the interest of an Organ Harvesting Marketing Trade complex.⁵

The capitalist experiment is forging ahead inexorably with glee in this very finite planet. Mostly at the expense of us guinea pigs, or the socially vulnerable among us. Who can say if this tinkering with our environment by large and powerful corporations is another form of Social Darwinism with the bents? This is taking place as we watch.

25 years after the Chernobyl disaster, the international forum put together to analyse the area has concluded that, “The Exclusion Zone has paradoxically become a unique sanctuary for biodiversity” (Higginbotham 2011). Chernobyl is about to be opened to tourists!

Wide Angle

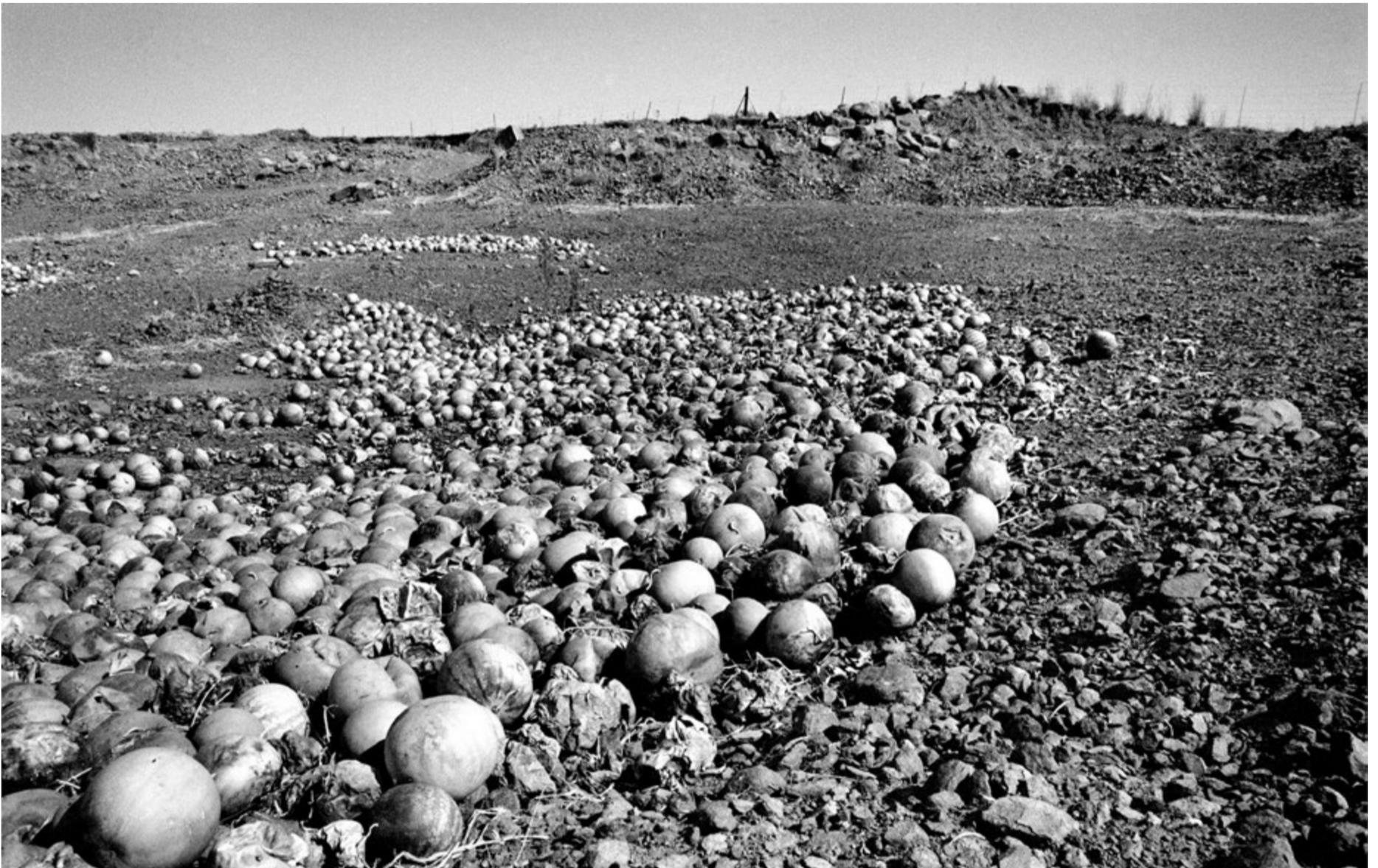
Critical questions:
Photography as a medium

Sometimes we protest but mainly we collude in these
giant ventures.

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Santu Mofokeng

2007

*Undersized, Stunted-in-growth and
Rotting Melons Dumped in the Veld
Outside Kroonstad, Free State*

Silverprint

© Santu Mofokeng

Image courtesy Lunetta Bartz,
MAKER, Johannesburg

Photography and the provocation of human exchange

Participation is war. Any form of participation is already a form of conflict. In war, enemy and adversary usually hold territory which they can gain or lose, while each has a spokesperson or authority that can govern, submit or collapse. In order to participate in any environment or given situation, one needs to understand the forces of conflict that act upon that environment. In physics, a spatial vector is a concept described by scale and direction; in a field of forces, it is the individual vectors that participate in its becoming. However, if one wants to participate in any given force field, it is crucial to identify the conflicting forces at play.

Miessen, M. 2007. The Violence of Participation: Spatial Practices Beyond Models of Consensus. In *Springer* 1 (2007) and *Eurozine*. Accessed at: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-08-01-miessen-en.html>

I don't want to relinquish the role and the necessity of witnessing and the photographic act as a response, a responsible response. But I also don't want to assume in a kind of naïve way ... that the act of the making of the image is enough. What's enough? And what can we know in this process of making, publishing, reproducing, exposing, and recontextualizing work in book or exhibition form? ... I can only hope that it registers a number of questions.

Meiselas, S. (2008) in Bui, P. 'In Conversation: Susan Meiselas with Phong Bui'. In *Brooklyn Rail*. Accessed at: <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/11/art/susan-meiselas-with-phong-bui>

**The whole truth, nothing
but the truth: Photography
and participatory practice**

Photography's 'relationship to the real' is what draws one into its frame. This 'real', what Roland Barthes calls "Photography's Referent" (Barthes 1981:76), is "not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (Barthes 1981:76). The relationship between the two – the referent and the photograph – is the reason we continue to desire and believe the photograph; the reason that we continue to use the photograph as evidence of something having "*been there*" (Barthes 1981:76).

Photography has always retained a convincing appearance, at face value. Its direct referencing of actual scenes/situations/people holds immense power, rarely betraying faith in the medium 'telling it like it is'.

Yet photography deceives as much as it verifies.

Just like most fiction relies on some 'real' reference to pull one into a story – even the most fantastic science fiction makes reference to something familiar – photography relies on this sense of the familiar or the known to give sway to its assumed veracity. These points of affinity, recognition or identification are necessary to draw the reader/viewer/listener into a narrative. Belief appears to be what we seek; the comfort of the norm is a starting point, an impulse, a reflex maybe. Even in a photograph of something that looks unbelievable, it is in one's exasperation that belief acts first; questions come thereafter. The possibility of doubt exists only because truth was assumed in the first place.

And so it is that scepticism and belief are partners in the game of photography.

Photography is an artful creature, ready to deceive at any moment. What sits between the prospect of truth versus fiction is a mental space where fact and fiction conspire to seduce. It is in this space where either the one or the other ruptures, where one's imagination is tested. Ultimately it is the place within

which a viewer may be persuaded or convinced (or not) by that which it purports to be 'real'. This is also the space that the photographer plays with – the space that makes photography so enticing. The photographer is charmed by photography, and the viewer follows suit. Because photographic images claim our trust through their mimetic qualities, the medium has the potency and power to lead or mislead us – it shows us one face, then slowly reveals another. We are beguiled because we expect whole truths when there are only ever partial ones.

Background

In a local South African context, 'Struggle' photography stands like a monolith inferring the history and backdrop to contemporary South African photography, with its political, social, and aesthetic values remaining an enduringly present feature of work still being produced. This further represents a pivotal impulse towards participatory methods in much contemporary work.

Political and social advocacy continue to be reflected in the work of documentary photographers who have been working since the 1980s. Examples include David Goldblatt's subtle and sometimes ironic photo essays, such as his *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then* – a series of images made during apartheid of architectural structures that show the physical forms for buildings and landscapes as representations or reflections of the ideology of state; Guy Tillim's images of government elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo; Santu Mofokeng's more recent work on climate change; and Cedric Nunn's revisiting of personal images as political statements. All of these examples contain discreet, but directed political or social undercurrents. Gideon Mendel's work on HIV, particularly his *Through Positive Eyes* project, is an example of advocacy work that has a more overtly social and political message, and that clearly relates to and references a particular cause.

This interest in and impulse towards a subtle (or in Mendel's case, a more explicit) activism, or issue-based practice, continues to filter down into the attitudes towards photography and the images being made by a younger generation of South African photographers, many of whom have been schooled in this photographic history and aesthetic. This legacy is evident

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David Goldblatt

1983

'South Africa: The structure of things
then' series

*Landscape with 1500 lavatories,
Frankfort, Ciskei. 12 July 1983.*

Silver gelatin photograph on fibre-
based paper

© David Goldblatt

Image courtesy David Goldblatt and
Goodman Gallery



in the work of photographers such as Sabelo Mlangeni, Musa Nxumalo and Zanele Muholi, all of whom trained at the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg – an institution whose teaching focuses on photojournalism and social documentary as it upholds the influence of its founding member, David Goldblatt.

Patricia Hayes' view in her essay, 'Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography', 2007, echoes the assertion that the work of the 1980s in South Africa set the stage for current photographic practice. She says,

... the documentary archive in South Africa does not simply become the 'detritus of lapsed passion'. People, even those who claim to have departed from it, cannot quite leave what is called 'documentary' behind. Powerful traces of political awareness, economic dynamics, socially affected landscapes and above all, empathy with – or at the very least, dignified reference to – human subjects, inflect post-apartheid sensibilities on one level or another. I want to insist that photography now could not have happened without the documentary impetus of the 1980s, which was the breeding ground for a number of contemporary photographers. The need to mark the social in some way persists,



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the need to get into closer proximity with those on the receiving end of history. (Hayes 2007:30)

Hayes goes further in her reference to South African photographer Guy Tillim, suggesting that:

It is doubtful Guy Tillim could have taken the African photographs he did after 1994 if he had not come from the Afrapix generation. Moreover, it is doubtful he could have taken the South African urban photographs he did recently about inner city tenements, without having first photographed the postcolonial ruins of Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. He more than most has bridged the temporalities between then and now, between Africa and South Africa, by keeping close to the human beings who cross those lines. As he himself puts it, he has gone from being a documentary photographer, to being a 'photographer of interesting spaces'. (Hayes 2007:40)

Guy Tillim

2002

Mai Mai militia in training near Beni, eastern DRC, for immediate deployment with the APC (Armée Populaire du Congo), the army of the RCD-KIS-ML, December 2002.

Portrait I

Portrait II

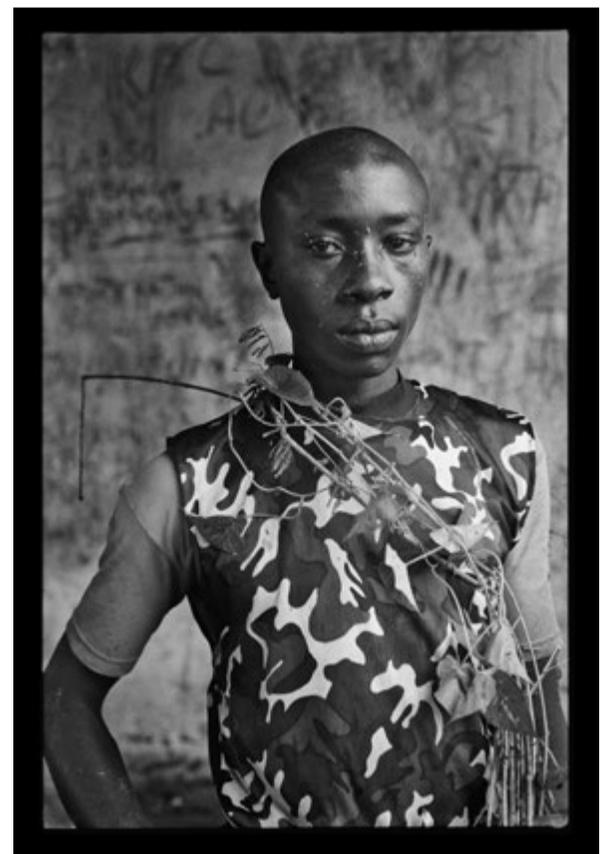
Portrait III

Archival pigment ink on
cotton paper

© Guy Tillim

Images courtesy Stevenson

Cape Town and Johannesburg



Tillim's comment about being a "photographer of interesting spaces" as a move away from being a "documentary photographer" is telling. It implies a difference in his ways of working, suggesting a more nuanced approach to his photography, one that holds fascination for him and seeks deeper understanding of a subject, rather than one that spells out an immediate message. This is where the social cause (of struggle), develops into a new practice, one where the photographer asserts his own identity as image-maker. Hayes endorses the relationship between contemporary photography and earlier imperatives for social change as a purposeful relationship, one that can lead towards a positive development, a progression in the photographer's oeuvre. Hayes' comment might be read as encouragement for the work being produced by the photographers she mentions. However, her argument might also be understood as an apology for the single-mindedness of 'Struggle' photography in its engagement or understanding of issues of representation, a defence that comes with the growing awareness of and sensitivity to the politics of representation today. This desire to establish an equitable relationship and agency between the photographer and the subject has become part of the working process for many photographers who seek devices and strategies to deal with the problems inherent to the act of representing.

For these photographers there is ultimately a desire for intimacy in relation to their subjects – for more meaningful exchanges and more effective strategies towards neutralising the power hierarchies between photographer and subject. The photographer looks for intimacy because intimacy implies a diffusion within that power relationship. The photographer seeks equitable exchange in the ways s/he thinks and operates in relation to a subject. While these are challenges that are always implicit to photography as a medium, ironically, the problem becomes most apparent precisely when the photographer tries to solve it. What commonly tends to happen is a false staging of equality. The photographer is ultimately in control of the image, whether s/he is behind the lens, or directing the participants.

Gideon Mendel's *Through Positive Eyes*, in which he 'gives' the participant the camera as a means of their presence being registered, and their agency being foregrounded, is an attempt to achieve and claim authenticity. Yet Mendel's presence within

the equation inescapably remains. Mediation is a fact of the photographic process. A photographer's position is always implied when they photograph, no matter the strategies and devices that they may consciously and well-meaningly employ to disguise their presence. When making photographs, the 'truth' that is represented is the truth of the photographer's agenda or narrative. And therein lies the rub. The well-intentioned desire or motivation for intervention or impact to be advocated through a photograph is embedded in a certain liberalist ideology, with the problem of a 'liberal' sensibility that Martha Rosler speaks about in her essay, 'in, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)'. According to Rosler,

Documentary photography has come to represent the social conscience of liberal sensibility presented in visual imagery ... Photo documentary as a public genre had its moment in the ideological climate of developing state liberalism and the attendant reform movements of the early-twentieth-century Progressive era in the United States and withered along with the New Deal consensus some time after the Second World War. (Rosler in Bolton 1996:303)

Documentary photography buys into the scheme of 'correcting the ills' or, at least, exposing society's ills. Yet as much as that position infers a consciousness, the question might well be posed as to who benefits most? Is it the cause at hand, or is it ultimately the authorship, i.e. the photographer, that is lauded, and his/her product consumed and commodified in a global market?

'Struggle' photography, however different in its ideological position, has its roots in the tradition of early twentieth century social documentary photography in the USA (Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, the Farm Security Administration photography of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, etc) that Rosler refers to. Photographers in South Africa at the time tended to be schooled – albeit informally and outside of the institution – in the histories and conventions of social documentary practice of the United States, England and Europe. The influence can be

seen very directly in the 1985 exhibition and book *The Cordoned Heart* by Francis Wilson and Omar Badsha, produced in conjunction with the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in South Africa.

During the struggle against apartheid, documentary photographers were 'called to action' – as if being called to war. In that instance, however, the weapon they were required to shoot was the camera.

In a special edition of the anti-apartheid literary magazine, *Staffrider*, published in 1983, titled 'South Africa Through the Lens: Social Documentary Photography', the magazine editors state their ideological position:

'The camera doesn't lie.' This is a myth about photography that, in South Africa in the '80s, we won't swallow without questioning. In our country the camera lies all the time – on our TV screens, in our newspapers, and on the billboards that proliferate in our townships. Photography can't be divorced from the political, social, and economic issues that surround us daily. As photographers we are inextricably caught up in those processes – we are not objective instruments but play a part in the way we choose to make our statements. The photographers in this collection do not look at our country through the lens of rulers. They show a South Africa in conflict, in suffering, in happiness and in resistance. They examine the present and beckon the viewer to an alternative future ... The photographs span the universal concepts upon which the social documentary genre exists. Themes like sadness, dignity, strength, privilege and power: these prevail. But the images go beyond this. They locate these themes in a divided, struggling South Africa. These South African photographers project a vision of the realities which they confront. (*Staffrider* 1983:2)

The photographer's presence in the political landscape described above, is important. In this context there was a task, a mission for the photographer to fulfill; a clearly defined right and wrong; an ideological right, and left. The photographers that the *Staffrider* editors refer to participated in the war against apartheid by making and exporting images of an alternative

truth to show the world another *reality* of the country, whilst also advocating their aspirations for political and social change.

The paradox in the *Staffrider* quote is, of course, the simultaneous acknowledgement of truth and lies as they perceive them to exist in photography in the country during that time – the apartheid state camera lies; the anti-apartheid camera reveals the ‘truth’. Photography in this instance is actively used to speak for and against itself. When the ‘real truth’ ultimately prevails, it seems that photography retains its status as a faithful document. The ‘real truth’ here is the other side of the story, the opposite face of what the apartheid state presents in its propaganda photographs. Implicit in this is the understanding that the ‘Struggle’ images show what is happening below the surface, in the *real*. The concerted decision to penetrate this skin, to go into the tissue, the muscle, the bone – to get to the evidence – is a conscious construction towards political and ideological ends.

This construction was not, however, without its own problems. Ideological tensions and mistrust existed even within strong, supposedly like-minded collectives – the tensions between perceived voyeurism versus genuine personal investment were ever-present. Questions of ownership and benefit by and for whom, or the ‘capturing’ of images of tragedy towards outcomes of personal fame and recognition, are not new paradoxes in social documentary photography, neither is the critique of liberalism that surrounds it. The ‘Bang Bang Club’, as it became known, was one such instance where a group of photographers was lauded for their images of strife and for the personal risk they placed themselves in to capture images that could tell the world brutal stories of apartheid South Africa’s *reality*. At the same time, there was criticism against such lionisation of photographers, as it went against the ethos of the Struggle.

A number of photographers who were working during that era have subsequently entered formal ‘art’ spaces to show their work – art galleries, art biennales, art fairs – where their work may be read differently, and where the intent of their contemporary output may have altered in favour of more nuanced approaches that have become palatable to the global art market. The work of these photographers has arguably always blurred the line, never being one-dimensionally ‘documentary’.

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Goldblatt's work has always been refined, restrained and cerebral – it was never, nor has ever attempted to be, the hard-hitting journalism of the 'Bang Bang Club'. During the late 1980s Santu Mofokeng was photographing everyday life in Soweto and Bloemhof. His focus on quotidian life in the township is a narrative that received recognition only after apartheid began to implode. Similarly, Cedric Nunn exhibited the 'personal' work he had been making for years during apartheid for the first time only in 1997.

Nunn's *Blood Relatives* is an exploration of his identity through a series of photographs of his extended family, that consider his history and ancestry. In a formal sense, this work quite strongly followed the aesthetics of black and white photography of the socio-documentary tradition of that era. However, the content was unique in that it addressed political issues of racial classification through a personal means – this personal engagement opening up fresh territory for other photographers working in South Africa at the time.



Cedric Nunn
2002
*Harry and Bertha Hartley. Mangete,
KwaZulu-Natal*
Silverprint
© Cedric Nunn



Cedric Nunn
1986
*Rural cafe in the community of
Mangete, home of the descendants of
transfrontierman John Dunn*
KwaZulu-Natal
Silverprint
© Cedric Nunn



Cedric Nunn
1996
*My father, Herbert Nunn, and his
granddaughter Giovanna Perez
Cassanova. Mangete, KwaZulu-Natal*
Silverprint
© Cedric Nunn

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Santu Mofokeng

c. 1988

Concert at Sewefontein, Bloemhof

© Santu Mofokeng

Image courtesy Lunetta Bartz,

MAKER, Johannesburg

In Mofokeng's *Concert at Sewefontein, Bloemhof* (1988), the diffusion of the figure-ground relationship through his use of tone, cropping, blurring and scale invites one into the image. There is a sense of the photographer being within the frame, rather than looking in as an observer external to the situation. The gaze of the central figure engages the viewer directly, and reciprocally the photographer's gaze towards him is inferred. Mofokeng does not appear to be trying to defend the 'truthfulness' of the image; he photographs to capture an experience in a photograph rather than trying to claim an unmediated exchange.

David Goldblatt's detailed and obsessive documentary titles for his similarly detailed photographs present another type of ideological standpoint in relation to representation. This mode suggests an equivalence in the image – both positions represented matter-of-factly – to some degree neutralising his power position, and inferring a sense of unadorned reality. For example,

Victoria Cobokana, housekeeper, in her employer's dining room with her son Sifiso and daughter Onica, Johannesburg, June 1999. Victoria died of AIDS on 31 December 1999, Sifiso died of AIDS on 12 January 2000, Onica died of AIDS in May 2000.

In the photograph, one's eye moves over each detail – from the broom in the foreground, to the central figure of a mother and her two children, to a light fitting, artifacts on the wall, and the edge of the floral curtain on the right side of the frame. Detail is consistent and equal throughout the frame – nothing is treated differently. Goldblatt defuses the hierarchy that one might expect in a portrait. There is, however, one element in this image that shifts the balance: the round window glows like a halo behind the woman's head creating a mother-and-child-like trinity. The focus on the woman comes not from her face or her disposition, but from the 'halo', and what the halo traditionally references. While the detailed title suggests a certain objectivity, the 'halo' declares the photographer's authorship.



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Photography and the provocation
of human exchange

David Goldblatt

1999

Victoria Cobokana, housekeeper, in
her employer's dining room with
her son Sifiso and daughter Onica,
Johannesburg, June 1999. Victoria
died of AIDS on 31 December 1999,
Sifiso died of AIDS on 12 January
2000, Onica died of AIDS in May
2000.

© David Goldblatt

Image courtesy David Goldblatt and
Goodman Gallery



In Goldblatt's 2008 exhibition *Intersections Intersected*, he paired images from essays produced during apartheid with photographs from his post-apartheid work. The pairing creates a relationship between past and present. Goldblatt does not establish a new or 'convenient' aesthetic in his work – he draws on, extends and reiterates a life's work and visual oeuvre, considering all of the elements that comprise his photographs, from their subject matter, context, aestheticisation, or deliberate non-aesthetic. His *Intersections Intersected* series is a key example of how every image he takes remains part of an ongoing conversation he has with himself in relation to photography, and with his audience and the history of photography as a medium generally.

Ten to fifteen years after apartheid a new generation of photographers, such as Mikhael Subotzky, Zanele Muholi, Sabelo Mlangeni, Pieter Hugo, emerged and began to produce work in similar visual and aesthetic terrains – both deferring to



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Zanele Muholi

2010

*Nhlanhla Esther Mofokeng, Thokoza,
Johannesburg*

Zanele Muholi

2010

*Ayanda Magudulela, Braamfontein,
Johannesburg*

Zanele Muholi

2010

*Mpho Mtsweni, KwaThema, Springs,
Johannesburg*

Silver gelatin prints

© Zanele Muholi

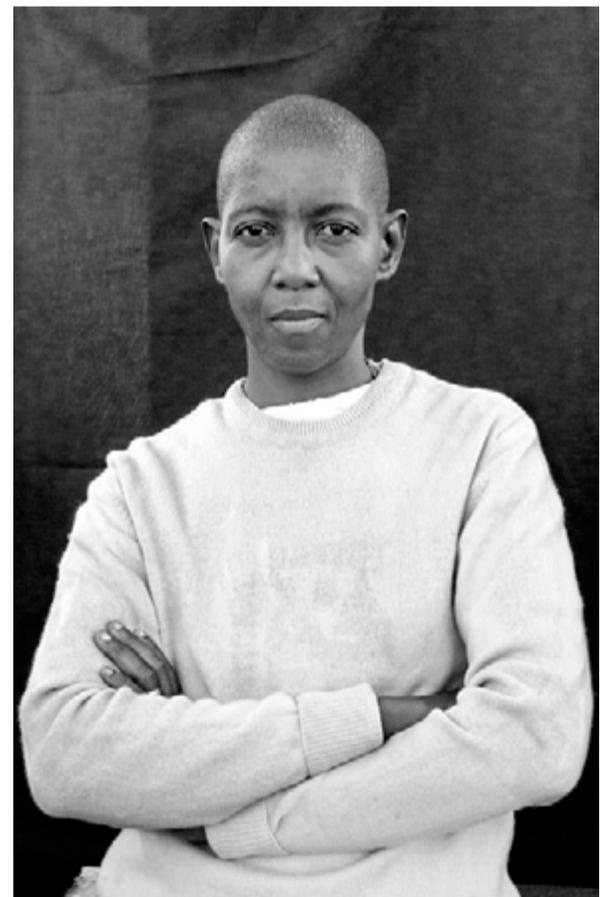
Images courtesy Stevenson

Cape Town and Johannesburg

those traditions, and questioning them. These artists draw on the aesthetics of documentary, and yet their motivation, intent and contexts are different to where those earlier aesthetics established themselves for often very different political and/or ideological reasons.

One might question, for example, how documentary-type images shift in meaning when exhibited in highly aestheticised gallery contexts. Or, in fact, that a documentary practice can now begin to function specifically for/within those spaces. In many cases the purpose of the work becomes more ambiguous and the documentary imperative gives way to the individual photographer's voice.

Zanele Muholi's portrait series *Faces and Phases* functions in a slightly different way. Muholi calls herself a "visual activist" (Muholi in Maunac & Santos (eds) 2011:93) – immediately the function of her work is stated. There is no apology. Muholi's work engages with a longer-term project. The photographs go beyond individual portraits and speak directly to her activist imperatives. While creating visibility in the context of "black



female sexualities and genders” (Muholi in Maunac & Santos (eds) 2011:93), Muholi uses the gallery context to further the cause, yet maintains a strong identity as author.

The social, political and ameliorative objectives in historical social documentary photography are not dissimilar to some of the imperatives in ‘participatory’ art practice trends. These social and political aspects referred to relate to the desire to work with a social or political cause. The ameliorative has to do with the wish to correct a situation by drawing attention to it, making it visible, and the desire to ‘correct’ a situation, which, I have suggested, operates within a ‘liberal’ domain, representing a desire to ‘bring good and truth to the world’, to remediate and repair. Often, however, this operates at surface level only. In many instances it does not serve to break apart the mindsets and structures that create those situations. Strategies engaging participatory practice do not necessarily solve the photographic dilemma of finding ways to grant equal agency to both subject and photographer. In fact, these strategies often captivate the audience with a feigned authenticity, one that only serves to create another layer of ambiguity in the ‘truth factor’ of the photograph.

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Signs of the City – Metropolis Speaking

¹ *Signs of the City* was initiated and organised by the Berlin-based urban art association urban dialogues. Partners in this European project have been the Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmiths College, University of London, the Watermans Gallery London, House of World Cultures in Berlin and Hangar in Barcelona. It took place between September 2007 and December 2008.

The city is an ocean of signs. In our modern, urban society, we are surrounded by a culture of glittering signs and images: commercial and political hoardings, private messages, spontaneous markings, bombastic graffiti and penetrating advertising, rules and regulations. They seek an addressee.

The urban youth art project *Signs of the City – Metropolis Speaking*¹ was a practical demonstration of interdisciplinary urban experience, of how studying the city can be an educational tool for young people, as well as a remarkable research field for artists. An urban experience combining a creative process need be no more than a walk through the city with a camera: the simple act of being a tourist in one's own environment. The project offered both a methodological and goal-oriented introduction to hands-on work with new media, as well as a dynamic field of research through an encounter with the city. By producing a high profile artistic product, the young participants gained considerable experience in developing their personal and professional skills. The work entailed sharpening their individual perspectives on the world. Identity construction became an



Photo: Ivaylo Petrov
Photographed in Sofia, Bulgaria,
during a workshop led by Andrei
Rashev
© www.citipix.net

increasingly important backdrop for them to consider as they developed a clearer understanding of language, expression and the system of signs.

Digital photography offers a wide range of possibilities for the conscious scrutiny of one's own environment. The camera creates distance between one's personal space and the object under examination, while at the same time providing the photographer with an opportunity for creative perspective. Simply put, what emerges is an estranged point of view towards what would otherwise be commonplace objects. The digital camera creates space in that the classic form of photography is combined with the speed and dynamics of new media, and in so doing, a new sense of memory emerges in which an image may be read like a page in one's own psychic landscape.

Understanding my image

Employing digital cameras and GPS receivers, groups of young people aged 12 to 25 explored the sign systems of their cities and documented their urban life. Nearly 300 young participants from Berlin, Barcelona, London and Sofia investigated their respective urban environments photographically, guided and accompanied by 30 professional artists in over 30 workshops. The workshops created a multifaceted view of these four cities – interior views of urban public space from the perspective of the young city dwellers. Rather than collecting coincidental snapshots, however, this visual research was carried out on the basis of the conceptual blueprints and creative learning techniques developed by the artists, which are outlined below in broad terms.

A core objective of the project was to impart skills in the handling of images, such as their description and interpretation. To see and perceive the world are for the most part automatic processes operated by our sensory systems. Today's world is, more than ever, dominated by images, and their already overwhelming presence is, if anything, on the increase. We are socialised through images; they imprint themselves on our memory; they epitomise significant moments of our personal and collective histories in a media-based world. This given, it is a paradox that a corresponding set of skills that manage and deal with images in an emancipated way, are not consistently



Photo: Sara Ramirez
Photographed in Berlin, during a
workshop led by Britt Hatzius
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² The iconic turn is based on the fact that images today are more present than ever. Photography, mass media and computer technology have eminently increased the impact of images on culture, society and science. See WJT Mitchell. 1986. *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago/London.



Photo: Oliver Kummer
Photographed in Berlin, during a workshop led by Diego Ferrari
© www.citipix.net

taught to young people. How can we learn to use images meaningfully, to understand and also, perhaps, to be wary of them if these things are not brought into consciousness? In the tradition of the 'iconic turn',² *Signs of the City – Metropolis Speaking*, sought to incite and encourage young people to engage closely with images and photographs, to scrutinise and interrogate them. They were guided to consider questions such as: What perspective has been chosen? What elements are prevalent in the image? What does the producer of the image want to express?

Signs of the City – Metropolis Speaking consciously deployed the high-speed medium of digital photography, a medium that usually creates an excess of images – an outright pictorial congestion. All too often, the experience of digital photography ends with the moment of photographic exposure. Frequently, the images are not even looked at afterwards. They lie dormant and decay on USB sticks and hard drives. The digital image, in comparison to analogue photography, risks becoming radically devalued. Arguably, however, if we teach combined techniques of observing, describing and interpreting images, conveying to young people how to grasp and comprehend images, we equip them with 'visual competence' (a process that has often, and rather infelicitously, been called 'visual alphabetisation'). *Signs of the City – Metropolis Speaking* explores these questions through an active and critical engagement with visual signs and images. To attain visual competence is not exclusively reserved for art historians; everybody should have the opportunity to hone their visual literacy.

Understanding my city

The city as a cultural conglomerate is made up of a myriad segments and stories. By way of its photographic explorations, *Signs of the City* strove to make the participants aware of their everyday engagement with their urban environment. They were prompted to ask questions, such as, "What does my city look like? What stories do I want to tell about it? How can I 'read' my city and translate that into a photograph?" Facilitating this exercise in *translation*, of an internal engagement with the city into an externalised image, was the key role of the participating



Photo: Antonella Palmowski
Photographed in Berlin, during a
workshop led by Diego Ferrari
© www.citipix.net



artists. The results allowed for a publicly accessible view of the city, and a re-discovering of those environments by a young generation of city dwellers, for whom the city is their main habitat.

The variety of methodological approaches offered in the different workshops provided participants with cultural competencies, such that they not only learnt to read the city and its images, but moreover gained valuable experience into how to reconfigure their own images using a number of creative skills, such as editing the visual landscape, producing personal narratives of place, or expanding their personal geographies by exploring new areas of the city.

My city as an assembly kit of images

A system of signs is a necessary inner structure of the urban community that both regulates and gives communal meanings to our everyday life. Some of the workshops looked into how sign systems both create and bestow meaning. Pictograms and symbols, logos and emblems, but also the more subversive signs of a city, such as graffiti and tags, stickers and cut-outs. All of these may be read as the 'visual grammar' of a city, and became the real objects of examination in the project.

While countless messages and signs around cities, at least indirectly, instruct city dwellers on what to do and how to act, they do not allow reciprocal feedback. Graffiti and street art





Photo: Douglas Nicolson
Photographed while conducting
a workshop with GPS-Loggers in
Hackney, London
© www.citipix.net

culture in contemporary big cities is often understood as a protest to this unilateral and seemingly unequal relationship in public and mass media, in which people receive many more messages than are able or allowed to send. But it is particularly when engaging with the topic of graffiti, the (ostensibly) subversive signs of the city, that young people are generally happy to take on basic principles of communication and to pay attention to the complexity of urban sign systems. However, marketing specialists have been quick to turn the originally subversive nature of graffiti into the near perfect advertising platform.

Educational processes and reflection

Signs of the City sought to work with artists and young people to gain an in depth understanding of the city as an arena for cultural phenomena and experience, and to explore this through artistic methods. The project's goals were in line with Susan Sontag's commentary on the nature of photography, in 'In Plato's Cave' (1979:3):

In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most



grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads as an anthology of images.



Photo: Hedwig Gaukler
Photographed in Berlin, during a
workshop led by Stefan Horn
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By participating in *Signs of the City*, the participants not only acquired the skills to produce an abstract anthology through the use of photography, but also acquired the technical skills involved in uploading their own images onto the Internet. They were directly involved in the production of a seemingly substantial view of their living environment.

The development of skills capacity, and the ability to engage and begin to solve personal issues of identity for many young people coming from a disadvantaged background, is at the heart of any social urban regeneration programme. Citing Sontag again (1979:4), “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power”. Once young people realised how powerful these media tools could be, and to what extent they can be utilised, they could actively attempt to make their own voices heard and their experiences visible through the noise and clutter of the city. They became equals with their artist facilitators and began producing their own material. This visibility was extended through their photographs being shown first on the Internet and then in other public spaces, from underground metro stations to art galleries. The effect was one of empowerment.

There is a serious educational challenge in attempting to teach somebody to “capture signs of the city”. To tell someone to shoot random snaps can quickly result in an overload of images that, instead of successfully narrating the city, falls rather into the trap of uncritical image taking, where the tool speaks louder than the thought. Our fieldwork methodology was specifically designed to encourage the collection of those images that clearly and deliberately narrate a version of the life of the city.

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Evocations: Photography and public practice

¹ I use the word ‘practitioners’ loosely, to mean not only photographers and artists, but architects, urban planners, policymakers, curators, and administrators in the employ of commissioning bodies, whether governmental or non-governmental.

² See, for example, Rosalyn Deutsche (1988: 3-52); Deutsche (1992:34-53); and Deutsche (1996); Patricia C Phillips (Dec 1988:92-97); and Malcolm Miles (1997). Lucy Lippard’s several volumes of essays on art and feminism are all relevant here. No doubt, one reason that so much art was beginning to be called ‘public’ at this time was not only for political or ideological reasons, but because there were seismic shifts in patronage and commissioning – that is, in who was paying, or being asked to pay for it. On the rise of ‘percent for art’ programmes in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, see Miles. There was a parallel rise in programmes to fund public art in many cities in the US in the same period, although the policy approaches were of course very different. See Deutsche, particularly 1988 and 1996, for a discussion of New York City.

1. The inadequacy of modernist and liberal sensibilities to account for photography

The turn of the last century saw a resurgence of critical discussion of concepts of the public, and of public space. Theorists in diverse academic disciplines and practitioners working outside the academy,¹ sparked a new conversation about public art and (what is not always the same thing) art in public space – then understood largely as an urban phenomenon and an epiphenomenon of the built environment. By the late 1990s, many of the broader theoretical concerns that had been raised by philosophers, feminist theorists, queer theorists, and critical race theorists – who had subjected concepts of the public and public space to renewed critical scrutiny – had been translated into the fields of art history, architecture, and urban sociology. These in turn inflected analyses of images and explicitly visual spatial practice. Writers such as Rosalyn Deutsche, Lucy Lippard, Patricia C Phillips, and Malcolm Miles all brought concerns about social justice and the marginalisation of groups that had previously been silenced – or made invisible by liberal concepts of ‘the public’² – into analyses of contemporary art. With the exception of a handful of writers who were also photographers, such as Martha Rosler, few theorists who were reflecting on publics and public space in the sphere of contemporary art or urban space paid much attention to photography.

It would not be until a decade later that photography would assume centre stage in the critical and theoretical redefinition of public space – and arguably the public sphere – in a vastly expanded field. This broke definitively with earlier definitions of public space that had located both visual and spatial practice in relation to overly narrow concepts of both the public and its site.

Today, we draw on the statements of writers and artists as diverse as Ariella Azoulay, Phil Collins, Harun Farocki, Walid Raad, or the Black Audio Film Collective to frame our claims

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3 These are only some of the names that were invoked during the *Wide Angle* symposium and are indicative of only some of the frames of reference that were in play.

4 Montage, collage, and other constructivist techniques associated with international surrealism and Russian avant-gardes were notable if short-lived exceptions to this rule.

5 Erin Haney has written about networks of photographers in coastal west Africa in the late 19th century, locating them in an emergent tradition of creative internationalism that was specific to the west African region. She has also written about networks of images in collections on the continent and in Europe, tracing particular images through trans-Atlantic and trans-African relays. See Erin Haney (2010), and Haney (2004). My own research on the history of photography in west Africa is similarly concerned with photographic mobility and an analysis of the traffic in photographs between different African cities. See Jennifer Bajorek (2010(a):160-171), and Bajorek (Dec 2010(c):435-456). In the contemporary moment, interactive media artist Graham Harwood has carried out preliminary research on what he calls 'networked images'. Personal communication with Graham Harwood, London, England, 2008.

about the civil or civic, archival, documentary, *and* the fictive or poetic elements of specific photographic images and projects that engage the public, or with concepts of the public, in innovative ways.³ Many of these artists are not photographers in the strict sense. Their work moves freely between photography, film, video, and back. This heterodoxy as to medium is not incidental. But many of these artists had already embarked on their most important projects in the 1990s (apart from the Black Audio Film Collective, founded in the early 1980s, whose *Handsworth Songs* was already out in 1987, and Azoulay, whose influential book on photography was not published until 2008). If there has been a time lag in the broader appropriation by theorists of these artists' and writers' lexicons to describe photography as a form of public practice, it cannot be blamed on a lack of theoretical resources, which have been gathering for some time.

How, then, are we to understand this lag?

One, admittedly very tempting, explanation is that throughout the 1990s, photography was still being thought along modernist lines. I am referring here not only to the now well-known formal and aesthetic limitations of modernism, but to the physical and material limitations that had been imposed by modernism on photography, and to its unimaginative approach to the photograph as a material object. For those who could accept photography only as a kind of stepchild of painting, the limited edition print remained the supreme photographic object.⁴ The limitations of this understanding of photography, which nonetheless remains that of many art historians even today, are still readily apparent.

Others will argue that photography had to wait for the digital revolution before it could move to engage with concepts of the public or of public space extending beyond a demarcated, regulated, mappable, and hence readily visualisable site. Yet, if we accept that photography has always been a multi-perspectival and multi-sited practice, one that moreover thrives on transit, mobility, processes of identification and dis-identification in the moment of its production (to say nothing of the endless opportunities it affords for appropriation and re-appropriation after the fact), we must concede that the power to create and, at least potentially, construct networks and propose new publics, has always been essential to the medium.⁵ Photography's

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6 The catalogue was published in 2002. See also the special section on recent photography theory that I edited, with Vikki Bell (Dec 2010:155-160). Contributors discuss the relationship between the photography and the state in the early years of republican Brazil, Mexico in 1968, contemporary Israel/Palestine, and post-apartheid South Africa. Scholars working in many other parts of the world have also examined the relationship between photography and the broader visual and spatial dynamics of state power in earlier historical contexts: Christopher Pinney in India and Pakistan, Karen Strassler in colonial and postcolonial Java, Clare Harris in Tibet.

pre-digital incarnation is therefore just as extensive, distributed, and difficult to delimit as its digital one. We may note as a case in point that, around the same time that an earlier generation was revamping concepts of the public and public space that they had inherited in the fields of art history and architecture, a project of collective critical reflection on the technologies and codes of surveillance was emerging. The resultant analyses, which were truly interdisciplinary, set out from the optics (and aesthetics) of surveillance, policing, and crowd control before taking on the more general visual and spatial dynamics of state power. Consider, for example, the *Ctrl(Space)* exhibition, which opened at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2001.⁶ Regardless of the media in which they were realised, these projects, which extended from Jeremy Bentham to satellite imaging technologies, were, I would argue, thoroughly photographic. The technologies and codes they interrogated had become increasingly pervasive, diffuse, and invisible owing to new developments in the photographic apparatus.

Picking up a different thread, leading us to a completely different genealogy, journalism, and its alleged offspring photojournalism, have sometimes seemed to offer a counter-narrative and a different framework for the types of public engagement and advocacy that informed a lot of very well known, and very 'public', photographic practice throughout the twentieth century. Yet the notions of public opinion, argument, and collective intelligence underwriting liberal paradigms of press freedom and free speech, which continue to inform contemporary understandings of 'responsible' journalism, were only ever half-grafted onto discussions of the aesthetics and politics of the photographic image in photojournalism, which has furthermore never encompassed the entire field of documentary practice.

Susan Sontag (1977:17) famously summed up the inadequacy of liberal discourse to account for the civic or public face of photographic images when she argued, in 'In Plato's Cave', that a photograph cannot make you think something new or change your mind: "A photograph that brings news of some unexpected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude". Photography, if and insofar as it can make you think anything, she argues, can only make you think what you were

already thinking. Insofar as photography can show or convince, it can only show you or convince you to take a moral position that you were, it turns out, already going to take: “Photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one ...” (Sontag 1977:17) It is symptomatic that Sontag chose the photographs taken by the Allies in Bergen-Belsen and Dachau (which she remembers seeing in a bookstore in Santa Monica, California in 1945, at the age of twelve), as the ultimate archive on which to base this early and, by now, rather infamous argument (Sontag 1977:19-20). The photographs, she argues, in a bizarre syntax, changed her life irrevocably – without serving any purpose, or changing anything else. It is symptomatic that this is the archive on which she bases her argument, given the monumental role played by photographs, interpreted as documents of atrocity, in the development of human rights discourse and their ever-increasing importance as evidence in war crimes tribunals and dossiers for humanitarian aid.

While reflecting on this early moment of photography theory, we may also recall the two photographs by Koen Wessing, taken in Nicaragua in 1979, discussed by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. Despite the presence of heavily-armed soldiers, evidence of civil war, a corpse, a ‘father’ being arrested while two individuals identified only as mother and daughter stand by sobbing in distress, Barthes (1981:23-24) is not moved to any feeling or action by these photographs: “Did this photograph please me? Interest me? Intrigue me? Not even. Simply, it existed ...” He describes several further images taken by Wessing in Nicaragua: a child’s corpse covered by a white sheet, frightened little boys standing in front of bombed-out apartments, a trio of Sandinistas with their faces partially covered. For all the detailed descriptions lavished by Barthes on these photographs, he insists that, as photographs, they say, and do, nothing: “[T]hey were fine shots, they expressed the dignity and horror of rebellion, but in my eyes they bore no mark or sign ...” There is nothing in these photographic images that was not already determined by what Barthes calls the field of cultural knowledge (of *studium*) in advance.

And so it was, in fact, already established from a relatively early date that photography, incapable of argument, is abandoned in the world of journalism, a kind of stray, a foreign body

lodged in the space of information, itself surprisingly foreign to the free exchange either of public opinion or of ideas. A photograph may be exposed to a public, and seen and interpreted by a public – one that is, moreover, deeply engaged, as a matter of conscience, politically or morally – but, for both Sontag and Barthes, it can neither address nor produce a public, beyond the one that already existed.

Such interpretations do not bode well for a reflection on photography as public practice. We are far from the usual ideas about journalism as a public good, and from liberal concepts of the public sphere construed as a space for the ‘free exchange’ of information or ideas. If these interpretations, which continue to exert a powerful influence on us, attribute any power to photography, it is a decidedly weak power.

I do not mean to suggest that nothing has happened since Sontag and Barthes. If anything, I want to suggest just the opposite, while simultaneously underscoring the clear, if generally unremarked, affinities between these early theorists’ observations about photography’s relative weakness when it comes to making arguments or intervening in public opinion and a core element of so many of the photographic projects that interest us today. Counter-intuitively, it is, I suspect, this continuity that accounts for a certain sense of theoretical belatedness as we turn to the question of photography and public practice today. If modernist theories of art and liberal theories of speech have not been adequate to describe either photography’s publics or specifically photographic forms of ‘publicness’, it is simply because there is something in photography that has always escaped both art and speech – because what Sontag and Barthes both effectively identify as its weakness has always been its power. That is to say, when photography is most interesting, and most distinctive, as or in the space of public engagement, it is precisely insofar as it refuses to try to shape public opinion or to convince us to take moral positions. The claim is modest, but it skews the dominant framework, and encourages us to ask some rather different questions about photography and public practice.

2. Fiction and evocation

These are the questions that are being asked so insistently by the most exciting projects, and that were in many cases a common ground of the projects that we came together to discuss at 'Wide Angle'. These projects were concerned with widening participation but never with controlling discourse; with opening up the spaces of memory, and of diverse forms of autobiographical and historical narrative, while suspending, or deferring, the moment of evaluation or judgment. Many of these projects were designed by, and for, a community, and they were frequently grounded in some very strong ideas, even ideals, about community, without succumbing to prescriptive or normative definitions of the community whose needs or interests might ultimately be served. Some of these projects asked explicitly about inequality and asymmetries in access to power, the relative lack of a voice or visibility in public space or public discourse, inequalities in access to government or public services, without falling prey to naive notions about the power of photography to right wrongs, give a voice to the voiceless, and directly address social ills. And so the questions, which were rather different if not entirely new, that were being posed by these projects were indeed questions about inequality, injustice, and invisibility, but they were posed explicitly in the language of photography. One thing this means is that they allowed for fictive and evocative

Juan Orrantia

2008

The stained waters of Nueva Venecia

From the series *Normalcy*

© Juan Orrantia





elements, elements of chance and experimentation, moments of playfulness and a relative lack of commitment or engagement, as well as moments of deep engagement and experiences of loss and of mourning to enter in – and to inform their aesthetics as well as their methods. Far from sliding into empty arguments about ‘affect’ – or even into arguments in a more ordinary sense – these projects encourage us to reflect in a more rigorous and thoughtful way about the power of photography to rally fiction to the cause of action (whether political, ethical, or moral), and to use evocation as effectively as revelation or exposure, from which it cannot, of course, be separated in the end.

Because there isn’t time or space enough to treat every project in detail, one will have to do.

Juan Orrantia’s project, *Normalcy*, involved a community that had sustained a massacre carried out by paramilitaries in that small town in the Colombian Caribbean. The project was notable for how little it had to do with projects of collective, cultural, or public memory that force us to ‘remember’, so as not to forget or repeat. Orrantia introduces the project by describing that he was drawn to work with this community in part out of his interest in the nature of memory. He was aware that, because these people continued to live and carry out the tasks of their daily lives, in the place where their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers had been massacred, they had to walk past, and

Juan Orrantia

2008

*An image, a spark, the past fleeting
by in unexpected moments inhabiting
the present*

© Juan Orrantia



live with (sit next to, eat and sleep in the same room with) the markers of massacre every day. The project was, on the one hand, deeply engaged with the documentary potential of photography, yet it simultaneously adapted this potential to a central problem rarely addressed by more conventional approaches to photography as document: namely, that these people could not possibly remember the events of that day every time they walked past, or were in close proximity to, these markers. The memories evoked by these markers would necessarily have been layered with those of other experiences.

Rather than construing the photograph as a form of visual evidence in the conventional sense – in which one seeks to produce the kind of evidence that could then stand as proof of the fact, or nature, of past events – the project was concerned with the opportunities afforded by photography for recording serendipitous experiences, and of the ties binding the past, through memory, to experiences in the present. In one of the most striking series of images by Orrantia from this project, memories were not ‘captured’ in any narrative sense, but were instead allowed to work themselves out on the surface of the photographic image, which became overwritten with abstract compositions of color and form. The photographs are documents of a massacre, and of the traces left by a massacre in the community in which it took place, yet they break with the conventions we have come to associate with the genre. These are photographs that “bring news of some unexpected zone of misery”, yet their connection to the making of arguments or taking of positions is suspended, in view of the modes of memory explored.

Photography has the power to provoke new forms of interaction and new modes of memory, as well as approaches to documentation that allow or foster experimentation with different modes of memory. Orrantia’s design of the project in Nueva Venecia taps into ideas about archiving, memory, and counter-memory, many of which have become identified with a kind of utopian promise of photography.

Photography, given free reign in its expanded field – as a kind of crowd-sourced community media *avant la lettre*, as a living archive, and as an unofficial, para-state or counter-hegemonic archive – is increasingly identified with this utopian

⁷ Azoulay herself does not accept the distinction between the aesthetic and the political, and she has written explicitly against it. See Ariella Azoulay (Dec 2010:239-262).

promise in different contexts around the world. Many of us have been drawn to this utopian promise, insofar as it gets posed as an alternative to hegemonic forms of recording or of writing memory and history. But we should also be wary. The very same qualities that have become the basis of this utopian promise – the same qualities that allow photography to evoke different modes of memory and produce an archive without a fixed telos or a monolithic intentionality – ensure that it is not immune to appropriation and co-option by those with very different intentions.

This poetic dimension of photographic documentation that Orrantia has called ‘fictional’ and ‘evocative’ – is directly linked to the unsettled quality of photography’s public or publics and its powers of public engagement. And it brings us back to the heterodoxy as to medium that we came upon at the beginning of this paper. Indeed, if we consider the work I referenced earlier (Collins, Farocki, Raad, the Black Audio Film Collective), or the images analysed by Ariella Azoulay, which she draws from an art-world gallery context as well as from documentary or photojournalism (she does not distinguish between them⁷) – none of these could ever be mistaken for documentary or reportage. Yet all of these artists and writers cite the conventions of these genres, as well as actually use documentary and archival images as part of their repertoire, although these are often mixed with other types of images, including those that have been staged, faked, or doctored. When they simulate reportage, or ‘live’ coverage, of events, and when their images are at their most fictional or evocative, it is often these projects that we find most provocative, and therefore the most profoundly public or publicly engaged.

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Urban Mirror: The rhetoric of participation and the rise of Upendo Hero

Every day the rhetoric of participation becomes increasingly dangerous. 'Participation' is now even used to request North American intervention into Uganda; the Social Network Age can easily be translated into a new age of neo-imperialist expansion. And whilst participation can be used to support an antagonistic agenda, it is critical that we recognise that it can also fortify the agenda of the establishment.

¹ Nokia N8 Photo Competition. UK. <https://www.facebook.com/nokia.uk>
² Referring to the NGO, Invisible Children, and their campaign against Joseph Kony. <http://www.kony2012.com>

So, before entering into a 'participatory project', we must first understand the broader context of that participation. Are we, for example, participating in a competition hosted by a mobile phone brand that asks consumers to go around the city and take photos of their favourite urban places in order to win the latest model of that phone?¹ Or are we participating in signing a petition to the US Congress demanding military action in Africa to catch a dangerous criminal, so that he can be judged by an international court that the US itself does not recognise?²

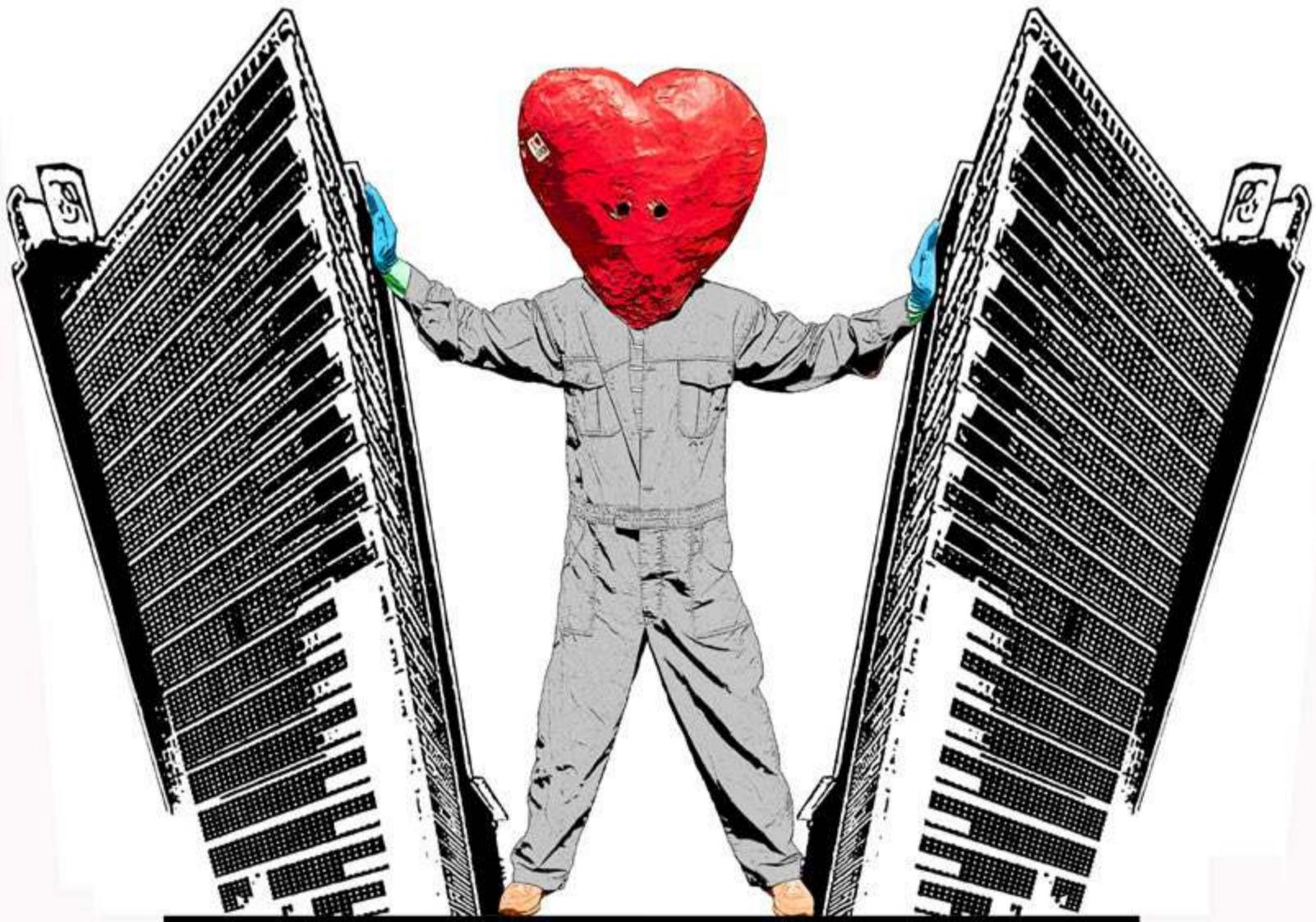
Participation is involved in both these projects, but the question is why? A participatory photo project does not necessarily democratise the way we see the world. Participatory digital photography, in and of itself, does not necessarily have a positive impact on the way media are shaping the world. Online petitions can be fantastic participatory tools, but what we are asking for by using these tools is far more important than the tools themselves.

These given examples of participation do not in themselves contain any significant form of political antagonism capable of challenging the established order. These projects may operate under the guise of participation, but ultimately they simply perpetuate the violent system that we are living in: the digital participatory photography project is simply another neoliberal marketing initiative; the e-petition is another manifestation of a neo-imperialist political agenda. The automatic association

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TWENDE BERLIN

no public space

no love

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3 The *baraza* (pl. mabaraza) is a feature of Zanzibar's 'public sphere'. In organisational terms, a *baraza* may represent different degrees of formality and informality, institutionalisation, and abstractness. A *baraza* might be a simple (informal) 'meeting' of people, but it could also be a 'council', or, in historical times, the 'audience' of the Sultan of Zanzibar. Finally, it could refer to a vast range of clubs, unions or associations. In spatial terms, a Baraza is a public or semi-public space where people meet to chat, communicate, quarrel, sit – similar to a 'Piazza' in Italy, 'Agorà' in Greece, or the 'Majlis' in Arabia. *ISIM Review* 16, Autumn 2005.

that is often made between participation and democracy can be, and is, ruthlessly exploited. A pertinent example from Kenya might be the way in which the British colonial administration co-opted the Mabaraza in the early twentieth century (Haugerud 1997).³

Having said all this, we, as a collective of artists and activists, started a participatory project with a very specific objective, namely, to challenge the way in which people think about public spaces in Kenya. Our project, *Urban Mirror*, started in 2009 with a very clear vision: to advocate for public spaces, and for artists who wish to explore public space in their work. *Urban Mirror* further has a clear and openly stated antagonistic objective; this being that we are trying to develop an alternative narrative which does not see shopping malls as public spaces, and which calls upon artists to create public spaces – places in which all citizens, regardless of wealth, religion, gender, sexuality or ethnicity, can enjoy life freely. *Urban Mirror* produces a new narrative about the importance of 'the commons': a 'common-ist' narrative. We advocate for the protection of existing 'commons'



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4 *Urban Wasaani* (meaning Urban Artist in kiSwahili) was organised by the Kuona Trust and curated by Sam Hopkins.

as well as the creation of new ones, in contrast to the neoliberal narrative that is pushing our society to privatise everything.

We are just as wary of art as we are of participation. Art is not a neutral concept for us, and we do not believe that all artists are necessarily good people. Artists, like any group, are varied. There are those who work with public museums, those who work with private galleries, those who work in public space and those who work in different spheres at different times. We are interested in artists who work in the public realm, but then again, we are not interested in everything they get up to there. The 'new public art' of the '80s, objects which attempted to confer legitimacy to redevelopment and gentrification projects, for us is an irrelevant practice (Deutsche 1998). We seek art that produces and engages an audience, art that acknowledges the political dimension of public space; art that questions, art that provokes, art that reflects. We are not interested in art that promotes narratives of exploitation or in artists who are merely interested in participating in a market.

We want to be clear about our own agenda. *Urban Mirror* is a participatory platform. Public art, public space, participation and democracy are huge terms, and we are open to discussion about what these mean, but we are not open to a discussion about their relevance. Those who are interested in our narrative can participate in this project; those who are not, do not have to. As individuals, of course we are open to discussing everything (and will maybe even change our minds). But as a collective, we have an established framework and we believe that it is important that we explain this openly.

Urban Mirror started when an international group of musicians, filmmakers, writers, artists and activists found each other at the *Urban Wasaani* workshop in 2008.⁴ During the workshop, the public space artists/activists, who were mainly European, shared their narratives and visions about public space and pragmatic anarchism with the musicians, who were largely Kenyan. Both the culture of squatting and the role of the public square within European culture were analysed. These were compared with correspondent concepts and places in Kenya to understand how to develop a locally relevant project about public space.

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During this process the concept of a *Maskani* emerged. *Maskani* is a Swahili word that can be used to describe: a community space, a public space, or a private space, which has been kept public for the community, usually by a member of that same community. Some of the participants of the *Urban Wasaani* workshop developed the idea of recording a song and shooting a music video about *Maskani*. The song was recorded in one night, and the music video was shot across different *Maskani* in Mombasa during the course of one week. Using all footage and recordings, the documentary, *Maskaniflani*, was produced. This film became something of a manifesto of the artists collective. The documentary concludes with a public space performance in which the 'ten commandments of public space' are declared by the protagonists of the film, ending with the national anthem of Kenya.

After this initial phase of activities, *Urban Mirror* went through a process of formalisation, establishing itself as a collective with a constitution and registering as a community-based organisation (CBO). Its next project, in Nairobi, was to set up an online platform to register public spaces and sites of cultural production, and then to gather proposals from different artists to produce or develop a project in or for these public spaces. The launch of this project at Goethe-Institut Nairobi in May 2009 was such a success that *Urban Mirror* went on to host a series of similar events at different sites throughout the city. Commissioning local artists to create site-specific works related to different urban areas, *Urban Mirror* introduced the practice of public art as a means of interrogating and exploring ideas about public space amongst a young, creative and dynamic Nairobi audience. A whole spectrum of concerts, installations, videos, performances and other artworks were produced in this process.

But it was *Upendo Hero*, an artwork that emerged from a local artist in collaboration with *Urban Mirror*, who changed our organisation's strategy with regard to participatory art projects going forward. *Upendo Hero*, a public space superhero, was born out of the '*I Love NRB*' campaign, and became a new vision for Nairobi: a defender of public space, a lover of Nairobi, a sworn enemy of gentrification and a soldier against the privatisation of public space. *Upendo Hero* became the new



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protagonist of a series of videos made in Nairobi about the battle for public space. He was, however, not limited to Kenya, but began to spread his message across the world. *Twende Berlin*, a new documentary made by the people who made *Maskaniflani*, documented the start of this new global phase, both for *Urban Mirror* and for the *Upendo Hero* project. So, instead of creating participatory events, *Urban Mirror* created a participatory character. *Upendo Hero* became an open source, public space superhero – free for anyone to use as their own; an identity open to everyone. In that vein, *Twende Berlin* has further become a new propaganda tool for Berlin’s public space activists. A group of Norwegian activists has also made another documentary about *Upendo Hero* in Nairobi, *Upendo Hero: Battle for Public Space*. *Upendo Hero* has even been seen in Buenos Aires and at *Occupy Wall Street*. He seems to have a contemporary resonance, and



5 Cavallo, V. 2010. *eParticipation and Game Theory*, Phd Thesis, IULM.

increasingly, more and more artists are starting to play with his character. *Upendo Hero* is perhaps one of the first participatory heroes in history!

And this helps us to further reflect on the role of participation in our society. We believe that participation should be considered as a space in which different actors are fighting or cooperating to use narrative to gain, expand or maintain their power of influence.⁵ In this sense, our participatory hero, *Upendo Hero*, is the way in which the Urban Mirror collective tries to gain and expand its power of influence to support a new politic of 'the commons' or 'common-ism'. We would like to invite all the artists who support and share our narrative to use *Upendo Hero* in their work and to spread the culture and love for Public Space and 'the commons'.

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**'When the war fell down':
Idelio's Freudian slip when
talking about the fall of the
Berlin Wall**

¹ South African vernacular for trainers or running shoes.

As you drive down 24 Julho Avenue into Maputo, you would probably miss the Jardine MadGerman – a public, or rather the relic of a public park, which screams metaphorically of Mozambique's tumultuous transition, and the ensuing long trudge to shake off the indelible effects of postcolonial demise and civil war's long reach.

What you may notice though, are the long rows of shoes claiming pride of place on the incredibly broad sidewalks that once flanked the broader boulevards of this city – and which today are the tracks of breakneck speed taxis battered to a state that just barely hold the passengers inside. These missiles continuously offload relieved passengers onto what's left of the pavement, providing a constant stream of potential clients for the eager vendors taking brief respite under what's left of the shady trees; sleeping off the morning's hangover or engaging in bursts of bravado over some footwear dispute.

Shoes. The smart loafers, *takkies*,¹ heels made for more even surfaces, long pointy shoes beloved of the aspiring classes, knock-offs of the modern kind; a motley collection of no fixed origin. The second-hand trainers which prove to be the most desired because of their degree of authenticity – arriving in containers, likely as charity from richer places – with quick footwear turnaround driven by first world consumer vagaries. Their sidewalk neighbours of the *fong kong* variety, are in turn roughed up on already roughed up pavement to give the impression of having being used. The metaphor knows no boundaries as the rows of wares wait to be walked or run off – something the locals have become accustomed to.

For the locals indeed have a long history of walking, or running: first from their colonisers; then from the protracted civil war, and now on to promised freedom. Maputo is a rural city that over the years has earned a reputation for, amongst other things, its high turnover of inhabitants – all coming and going

for a myriad pressing reasons, but mostly to survive, or escape; or to find better lives.

The reality is of a characteristically African city dreariness: derelict high rise apartment blocks without lifts; stuttering electricity supplies, unruly traffic, bustling masses eking out possibility. There is fierce competition for passing trade, everyone living from one day to the next with no respite on the busy horizon.

But if the lure of comfy feet or the possibility of elevation from the ever-present dust with the help of higher heels lures you, you may, as you peruse the rows of shoes, look across and beyond the derelict garbage-strewn playground, through swing and seesaw skeletons – unrecognisable even to the children – and see a solitary public part-time toilet/part-time kitty for rot-gut vodka, and the headquarters of the MadGermans!

The MadGermans are the remnants of a group of Mozambicans who were once the recipients of the German Democratic Republic's socialist fervour to help African developing socialist countries. About 16 000 Mozambican men, and a few women, travelled to the GDR in the 1980s, ostensibly to learn skills that they could bring back to their country. The agreement was that they would be paid half of their salaries for subsistence in the GDR and the balance on their return



to Mozambique. But they were duped. On their return in the late '90s, they discovered that their money, about \$16 million, had been used by the Frelimo government to start, of all things, a bank. And ever since, they have been sitting around in the Jardine MadGerman on 24 Julho Avenue waiting for their money; their boredom punctuated by weekly protest marches through the city.

Enter the public art project, *Shoot Me* – a cooperation between Mozambican and South African artists.

'Shoot Me'? What?! In a park that has seen a MadGerman 'assassinated' by the police, and which also sees regular violent harassment of the street vendors by the authorities?

The 'Shoot Me' project's main focus was to explore the possibility for dialogue and the development of narratives that might be catalysed by the act, the process, and the challenge of photography in public spaces. The question it posed was a challenge: what really happens when someone says to a camera-wielding snapper; 'Shoot Me'? All the conventional meanings to such a request, endowed over time by war and crime, are brought to bear, making it a risky business.

Mindful of this, the artistic team's strategy was to foreground cooperation between all the stakeholders of the project – the shoe vendors, the MadGermans and the creative team, which comprised a motley group of video artists, photographers, a dancer and graffiti artist. Extensive and intensive consultations amongst these groups ultimately yielded cautious partnerships, ideas and interventions that could be productively pursued.

Maputo, as a consequence of rapid and intense urbanisation, is often referred to as a rural city. This became a base concept for the group, who conferred a status to the Jardine of an urban village: an interdependent community with the shared purpose of survival – echoing the sentiments of an old African saying: 'The village is always with us'.

The *Shoot Me* team worked in the area for a period of two weeks. After some initial reticence, we gradually managed to gain the trust and cooperation of the Jardine folk. The dancer danced, the graffitist sprayed, the photographers made images and filmed. The original team was joined by a sculptor – world famous for turning weapons into art – but whose passion in this

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2 Mozambican currency,
abbreviated MZM.

instance was instead to fix the swings and the seesaws, so as to finally bring delighted children back into the park.

Interviews with the area's inhabitants revealed their stories, and gave us insight into their frustrations and aspirations. In this way, all members of the project gradually sketched a blueprint: mapping potential for what could be, if receptive, authoritative ears and eyes were to be found. They hoped that perhaps the authorities would finally understand the passion and tenacity of the MadGermans, and of their justice denied? Perhaps they would grasp their innovativeness and endurance? They hoped that their need for simple, basic social repairs would be understood, and that the potential of the MadGermans to bring value to society would be grasped and welcomed – and welcomed with offers of dignifying work and the crisp reward of 2 metical² when their labours completed.

The 'Shoot Me' project finally came together at a public screening in the park one night at the end of the two-week intervention. Jardine MadGerman folks braved the marauding mozzies to 'look at themselves'. They viewed a short film and photographs of themselves 'shot' and immortalised in the echo of the shutter's release.

But why? And to what end? What is the purpose and function of this kind of collaborative public art? What is its impact on the disposition and lives of the people that have been 'shot'? What sustains or justifies this kind of intervention? These are possibly less comfortable questions to try and answer.

Yet these questions nag, because in spite of gaining a certain degree of trust and cooperation, while stoically confronting the initial ire of people who didn't want to be photographed, we as project organisers were not ever really, in spite of concerted attempts, able to explain to them what the project was trying to achieve.

An objective overview of the project might recognise the following as small gains: the creative crew did manage to bring children back to the park by rehabilitating the swings and seesaws; the artists documented the survival strategies of the vendors, who have been pioneering new urban behaviours and spaces; they acknowledged, documented and propagated the MadGermans' plight as a reference between past and present,



and as a fact of the country's history. The project further initiated a dialogue amongst the area's inhabitants, catalysed by the camera and its potential for self-reflection; it creatively addressed and challenged inhabitants of the city with the construction of a *Not For Us Without Us* shoe sculpture; and it enriched a dialogue offering practical, on-site, short-term interventions that could, given sufficient resources, have longer term effects.

But ultimately, what the project in the Jardine MadGerman seems to represent is a store of metaphor, and of the potential of creativity's tools. We cannot claim to have achieved anything big. But we did manage to set in motion some proposals that analyse, and try to provide some insight, with each step informing the next: to never be complacent; to be ever vigilant; and to be prepared and receptive to the richness that can be discovered in poverty and hardship, and in the possibilities inherent in challenges, and in instances of hope.

**'Public practices':
Project Space at the
Substation, Wits School
of Arts**

***dialogue / social responsibility / exchange / private
/ personal / aesthetics / ethics / intention / disregard
/ negotiation / interrogation / utopian / criticality /
participation / context / ownership / authorship /
power / control /***

The visual essay that follows is an attempt to address the nuances at play in curating an exhibition that presented a series of process-based projects, interactions and dialogues. The photographers and artists who participated in the *Wide Angle* forum as well as the *Substation* exhibition, worked with and within primarily vulnerable communities, such as with sex workers and immigrants, and with some people affected and infected by HIV/AIDS. In other instances their practices engaged a social conversation with children and tertiary students, encompassing a broader aim of mapping our social landscape through photography.

What follows is a series of images and excerpts quoted from the *Wide Angle* forum discussions that foregrounded some of the larger questions we encountered regarding what social role photography has or could have in relation to the realities that confront individuals globally.

As co-curators, by way of contemplating the projects to present, we asked ourselves: Is it possibly disingenuous to host an exhibition about photography that is aimed at social practice?

What is this utopian, even naïve, idea that artists are obliged to engage social responsibility?

How does an artist even begin to gauge the degree of responsibility inherent in her/his own practice?

And ultimately, if we set out with the idea that a socially responsible artistic practice is not about an end product, then how or why do we, curators, attempt to create an exhibition or display that seeks to speak to an inclusive audience?

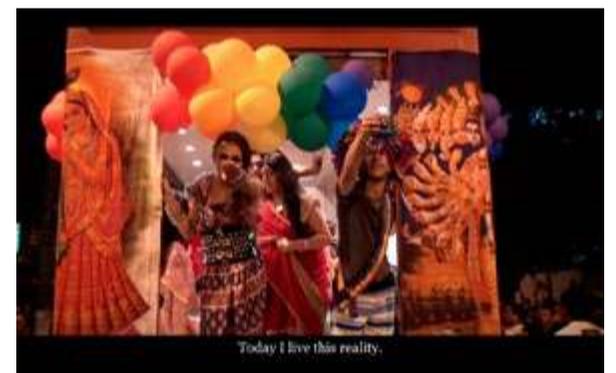
With these thoughts ever-present in our minds, what followed was a presentation that, for the duration of the forum, operated as a kind of novel space to neither deny nor reduce the social positioning of the works that formed part of the overall *Wide Angle* forum.

ADVOCACY

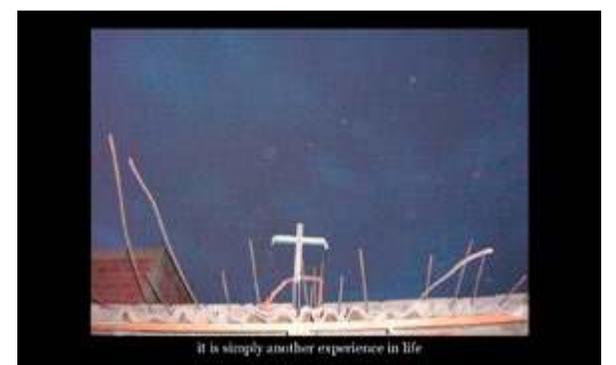
Gideon Mendel: *Through Positive Eyes*

Audience member (unidentified) during the forum comments to Gideon Mendel: "I'm just a bit surprised that we haven't raised the issue of voyeurism yet. When you think of photography, you often think of voyeurism and the gaze as being crucial to how photographs work in terms of power. Which made me then think that if I'm a photographer and I'm photographing someone who doesn't know I'm photographing them, I've got control over them because they can't gaze back at me ... So that's non-participatory ... If their gaze meets the camera, then there is an element of participation. But the question is what happens when the subject is behind the lens, is that also a form of voyeurism? What's going on there?"

What is the difference between voyeurism and participation?



Gideon Mendel, *Through Positive Eyes*, Brazil



Gideon Mendel, *Through Positive Eyes*, Mexico

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Gideon Mendel, *Through Positive Eyes*, South Africa

Andrew Esiebo: *My Eye My World* (MM)

My Eye My World was a participatory project meant to encourage homeless and vulnerable children to express and divulge the nature of their world through photography.



Doung Anwar Jahangeer commented during the forum: "When we talk about advocacy, we talk about wanting to speak on behalf of someone, or a community (through photography, architecture or whatever the medium or creative platform might be). The question that we need to ask is: is there a responsibility attached to that? ... When we are dealing with people's lives in extreme environments, then participation can really border on social engineering, especially within the field of architecture, where I come from. The notion of getting people onboard to [allow us] to do what we want to do anyway ... has me starting to understand that participation is the beginning ... a dialogue. This dialogue starts to set a momentum for a relationship and

that relationship then eventually starts to create the platform where the possibility of participation may arise. If it is forced upon people, or demanded of them, this is where we are on dangerous ground.”

Gideon Mendel posed the question to other presenters and practitioners at the forum: “What is your desired audience for the work you do? Who do you want to get to see your final projects?”

Terry Kurgan: “There was a spirit of reciprocity to the project, but I never felt as though there was an equal distribution of agency ... Claire Bishop says something to the effect that participation is not an end in itself, instead it delivers a messy knot of concerns, including asking questions about who can be involved, in what ways, under which circumstances, and at whose expense. This pretty much sums it up for me.”



Terry Kurgan, *Hotel Yeoville*

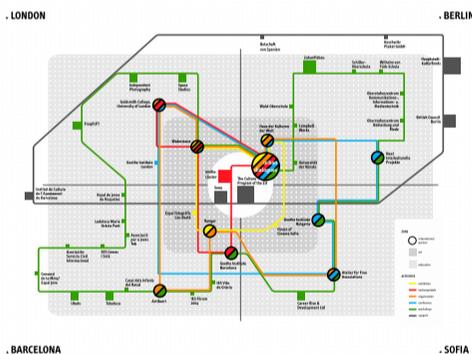
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I'm speaking about my country Congo, D.R.C

You and I we live as one.
Because Congo is our country
So, I love you!



Terry Kurgan, *Hotel Yeoville*



Stefan Horn, *Signs of the City*

Rory Bester posed the question regarding the perception versus the actual reality of photography being an inclusive medium and practice.

Zen Marie addressing Stefan Horn and Diego Ferrari commented during the forum: "I think the one thing that struck me ... was the idea that an art photo has the capacity to perform some kind of social change. I was wondering whether that social change was built on a set of politics – [and whose politics those were] ... and how flexible those [and the politics of the project itself] were? Because if you're working in participatory processes I suppose it is possible to get a participant who has very different political ideas than you do. As a facilitator, how do you take that on board? How political is the basis for the work? And how do you engage with difference?"



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Zen Marie posed a further question: “[Regarding] research, and understanding the similarities and differences between photography as a project in and of itself, and of photography as a component of a bigger multidisciplinary project, [what are] the implications this may have for research in terms of how one shapes a research focus, how one works collaboratively, [how one develops] a consciousness around methodology, how one constitutes narrative and the relative values of the aesthetic, poetic, political and evidentiary? What about the making and shaping of archives? And what is the role of photography in connecting archives and publics?”



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'Public Practices'



Thenjiwe Nkosi, *Border Farm*

Acts of intimate exposure: The making of Hotel Yeoville¹

1 Some of the material in this chapter is drawn from: Kurgan, Terry. 2013. 'Public Art/Private Lives: AKA Hotel Yeoville.' In Terry Kurgan (ed). *Hotel Yeoville*. Fourthwall Books: Johannesburg.

Hotels are often the mainstay for complex multi-plot stories. Culture constantly returns to the malevolent or celebratory quality of hotels: Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) being an example of the former, while Leonard Cohen's wistful reminiscences of the Chelsea Hotel recall the furtive, sexual potential inherent in even the most dingy of cheap rooms. Hotels are deeply introverted agglomerations of transient private space, rewritten over and over again – amnesia, courtesy of freshly folded bed linen.

Shumon Basar, 2010

Introduction

My body of work includes a series of site-specific projects that engage with Johannesburg's rapidly changing inner city, and at times, enlists public participation in an art practice that produces human interaction and social experiences. This work is always a process of collaboration and engagement with a range of other professionals, and with the public associated with the site. These projects have been located in spaces as diverse as a maternity hospital, a popular shopping mall, an inner city park and a prison, and are linked by a continuum of concerns – or obsessions – that constitute the conceptual threads running through my larger body of work over many years.

The strongest preoccupation that binds the various projects and spaces is related to a private/public tension – to do with pushing at the boundaries between what is considered to constitute 'the private' and 'the public' in the South African cultural domain. I have an enduring faith in the importance of telling very 'little', personal and intimate stories that *seem* to belong to the domestic realm – in the public realm, because I am sure that these are the stories which have repercussions in much broader social, political and moral spheres.

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2 This section of the introduction, is drawn from and discussed in greater detail in the journal article: Dodd, A. & Kurgan, T, 2013. Checking in to Hotel Yeoville: Public Narratives About Feeling Foreign at Home. In *Third Text, The Art of Change: Special Issue, Culture and Transformation in South Africa* 27 (3): 343-354. <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctte20>

Right at the beginning of what was then our brand new democracy, in a passionate essay on the art, and spectacularly controversial life of late South African pop icon Brenda Fassie, Njabulo Ndebele (1996) discusses the power of pop culture to transform and humanise our public sphere. A prominent South African novelist, educator and public intellectual, he speaks of the urgent necessity, as our society undergoes such radical change, to pour “personal feeling and thinking into the public domain” in order to create a more human and trusting “public home”. Building upon this, scholar Kerry Bystrom in a provocative essay ‘Johannesburg Interiors’ (2013), discusses the complex meanings of notions of home, and the need to explore the makings of a “public private sphere” in the South African public realm. She states that “sharing intimate spaces and stories – making them habitable in public – may be a way of breaking down distances between people in the imaginative realm that can and does cross over into the realm of physical space, potentially opening up new ways of thinking and feeling as well as moving, acting, and relating to others”.

Hotel Yeoville was a participatory public art experiment that explored the capacity of what Bystrom calls “acts of intimate exposure” to enable people to make human connections with others. It was a web-based, technology driven project that I directed and produced over a period of three years, in close collaboration with a large and diverse cast of others. Our work took place in Yeoville; an old, working class suburb on the eastern edge of the inner city of Johannesburg, largely inhabited by disenfranchised micro-communities of immigrants and refugees from other parts of the African continent whose primary engagement is with each other and home in far away places.

The initial research phase of the project coincided with a wave of violence that swept through South Africa’s main urban centres leaving 62 people dead and tens of thousands displaced.² The targets were overwhelmingly, although not exclusively, foreigners from other African nations settled in poor neighbourhoods. Those who crowded into the government shelters set up to protect them told of being attacked and seeing their houses burned and their property looted. Throughout, it



Mark Lewis
2010

*Gugu House, A Ghanaian Restaurant,
Yeoville*

© Hotel Yeoville project



was clear that intolerance of foreigners was at the root of the violence (Citizenship Rights in Africa Initiative 2009).

Resulting from the impression that foreigners were taking jobs from citizens, the attacks laid bare the vast economic disparities that underlie the celebrated yet contested South African ideal of libertarian multiculturalism. Just over two years later, rumours began circulating on taxis, trains and in places of trade that a new wave of xenophobic attacks would take place once the 2010 Football World Cup was over. The rumours were persistent and widespread, and only days after the final match, shops belonging to foreigners were looted on the Cape Flats and in the areas surrounding the Western Cape winelands. Hundreds of people bundled together their belongings and joined the droves of refugees on the highway heading north out of South Africa (*Mail & Guardian* 2010). Since then, reports of xenophobic attacks emerge intermittently in the news, from Pakistani-owned shops in Modimolle, Limpopo, being looted in May 2012 (Matlala 2012), to the Zanokhanyo Retailers Association threatening to burn down and destroy Somali-owned shops, which have newly opened in Khayelitsha's Town Two since 2008 (Damba 2012).

In this context, *Hotel Yeoville* attempted to produce social spaces, both actual and virtual, in which people in the pan-African suburb of Yeoville felt safe and welcome to narrate their experiences of nationality, geography, foreignness, difference and what constitutes a sense of being at home.

The project evolved through a series of activities, including a research process, the design and building of a website, and finally, an immersive, digital and interactive exhibition installation which was housed inside a brand new public library located in the centre of the suburb's vibrantly busy shopping and business district. The exhibition environment developed along a concentrated, circuitous trajectory of research, planning, and exhibition-in-progress that welcomed audience participation in a space of intense production. It comprised a series of private booths in which visitors were invited to document themselves through a range of analogue and digital interfaces, interactive media and online applications – bringing various forms of both personal, individual expression and intimate experience into public circulation.

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Unlike the authority and control that curators and artists are able to exercise when it comes to museum or gallery-based curatorial and exhibitionary practice, past experience had taught me that working collaboratively – and unpredictably – in the public realm involves being able to build relationships and trust, and in good faith, aim to navigate one's way through a complex set of power relations and negotiations; between artists, other professionals, partners, funders, stakeholders, residents, participants, and audience that eventually, for better or worse, animate and bring the work into being. This shifting grid of relationships forms the delicate foundation onto which everything else is layered and is as much a part of the final product as everything else that is produced along the way. The inevitable negotiation with reality that characterises participatory processes and multi-agency working meant, that we designed, and were also immensely designed *by* the process.

We also wanted to offer a more flexible model for the telling of personal histories in the public domain, and to avoid the literal conventions of documentary photography and the popular media's focus on the marginalised and unwanted 'other' in embrace of more liminal, lateral modes of engagement with real-life situations. As critic and writer Alexandra Dodd (2013:10) reflects:



Terry Kurgan

2010

Facilitator, Brittany Wheeler, and
Participants, Hotel Yeoville

© Hotel Yeoville project



Rather than replicating the explorations of the local news media into the factors that led to the attacks on foreigners, rather than focusing on the wrongdoing, *Hotel Yeoville* attempted to step outside of that jarring feedback loop. Instead it used participatory photography, interactive and social media to counter restrictive binary modes of representation and open up the paradigm to new ways of reflecting on our actions and ourselves.

On Rockey Street

In early 2007 I found myself on a commission with an urban planning colleague on Rockey Street, the 'high street' of the Johannesburg suburb of Yeoville. He was researching a newly commissioned urban upgrade plan and my job was to identify and photograph the blurred and interesting boundaries between public and private spaces.

Yeoville was first proclaimed a suburb in 1890 and is only four years younger than the city of Johannesburg itself, which was founded after the discovery of gold in 1886. From the outset – when the area up on a ridge overlooked a gritty, 'wild-west' mining town – Yeoville has always attracted waves of migrants from abroad seeking a new and better life in South Africa.

The area was advertised as a 'sanitarium for the rich' in which the air was purer because it was up on a ridge overlooking the dirty, smoke-filled mining town that had sprung from nothing out of the (then) Transvaal bushveld. However, the rich did not buy into the suburb. Instead it became a multiclass area, one to which many poorer people living below the ridge in Doornfontein aspired (Yeoville Bellevue 2012).

It was always a foothold for new residents of the suburb, before they moved north and upwardly mobile into other parts of the city. By the 1970s, it had a predominantly Jewish character, with a number of synagogues, and Jewish delicatessens and bakeries in the main business street. Today, the majority of the suburb's estimated 40 000 inhabitants are forced migrants: micro-communities from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Democratic

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Republic of Congo, Angola, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda and other parts of the African continent.

The diversity of the neighbourhood was immediately very striking. I was interested in the detail; the many different languages, the throbbing street life and conditions on the high street; a lively hub of new and old shop fronts, bars, restaurants, Internet cafés, and, in spite of Johannesburg City authorities' attempts at intervention, layer upon layer of street traders. Sitting on a bench in the shade outside *Newnet Internet Café*, we chatted to Ginibel Mabih Forsuh who grew up in Limbe in the South West region of Cameroon. She had studied Business Science at University, and then in 2005, just graduated and 22 years old, followed her fiancé, who had moved to Johannesburg a few years earlier. "Ce chien de menteur!" (The lying dog!) He had taken up with somebody else in her absence, and so Ginibel found herself stranded, in a foreign city, and needing to rely upon her own wits and resources. Our conversation curved around a wistful turn from looking for love to looking for work. Taking up a perch alongside us, Frank Assimbo, formerly a teacher of French literature and philosophy at the University of Kinshasa, sifted through his folder of papers and pleasantly joined in on our conversation. He had come to the store to photocopy his degree certificates for a teaching job application he was optimistically making. Unable to practise his profession

(top) Terry Kurgan
2008
Leadernet Internet Café, Rockey Street, Yeoville
© Hotel Yeoville project

(bottom) Terry Kurgan
2008
Ginibell Forsuh and Frank Assimboh Outside Newnet Internet Café, Rockey Street, Yeoville
© Hotel Yeoville project



because of his refugee status these past many years, he had, in the interim, been running adult computer literacy classes. He introduced us to some of his friends as they passed by, and then we all drifted off to the local Afro-themed *Nando's* for a Coke.

Television and print media relentlessly direct our gaze towards the violence and conflict between South Africans and Africans who have come here from other parts of the continent. It is rare that a successful immigrant, with an ordinarily mundane and repetitive domestic life is reported upon. The images of migrants and refugees that we are presented with, are usually abject and universalised types, standing in for oppression and (always noble) suffering, and are of course integral to the representational politics that surround mobility; symbols of a *much* bigger argument.

I started to think about making a new project in Yeoville. Something that responded to this specific location, enabling representation of some quotidian common ground, or finding ways to talk back to the contentious, abstract political story with little, intimate stories about this *particular* person's loss, or that *particular* person's dreams, or his great hairstyle, her exquisitely styled shoes, and enduring search for the perfect man!

The African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS), a graduate research and teaching programme at the University of the Witwatersrand welcomed a trans-disciplinary approach to their terrain, and with interested colleagues and an apposite home base I was able to shape and frame a project brief and secure our initial funding.

My practice is to come to a new project first, and then to find the right medium, and space for the job. *Hotel Yeoville*, before it became a virtual and physical 'thing' embedded in its specific locale, had an 18-month history of research, development and planning.

Exploring the ground

Our first small research team spent several weeks walking the suburb grid and talking with anybody who responded to us as they went about their day. We kept our focus on drawing upon what we might find, and noticed two things most particularly. The first, wrapping around a large supermarket, was a whole

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Terry Kurgan
2008

*Community Wall, Cnr Bedford and
Rockey Streets, Yeoville*
© Hotel Yeoville project

suburban block of wall space covered in notices; small sheets and scraps of multi-coloured paper with hand-written notices in English and French; offering and seeking shared accommodation, employment, money transfers, lounge suites; religious congregations, romance, marriage and more. And interspersed amongst these were hundreds of other small printed flyers and notices; advertising business and translation services, language classes, religious events, HIV testing, abortions and a host of other services.

The second thing we noticed was the unusual density of Internet cafés. We counted thirty cafés distributed between just four blocks, all of them filled with customers at every terminal. Most of the cafés were owned and run by foreigners and had very specific national identities. Mr Abbas, Congolese owner of the *Timbuktu Café*, explained to us, somewhat ruefully, that competition had driven the rate of Yeoville's Internet cafés down to R5.00 an hour, which didn't bring in nearly enough revenue when coupled with high space rentals and extremely high telecommunications costs. The cafés plugged this hole by offering diverse ancillary business and hospitality services. These ranged from a tasty plate of food or a haircut, to assistance with composing a CV or your refugee status application form; effectively turning these establishments into something between a



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Mark Lewis

2008

*Timbuktu Internet Café, Times
Square, Yeoville*

© Hotel Yeoville project



3 This is a term Hilton Judin ((2000: 53) uses to describe architects Cohen & Judin's approach to their design of the Mandela Museum in the Eastern Cape; instead of simply providing storage and display spaces representing the life of Mandela, the museum project brought a plentiful and common source of running water (and a structure designed to contain it) to the people still living in the village of Mvezo, where Mandela was born, so that women and children would no longer have to walk to the distant river to collect water. This is a legacy that more definitively presents his struggle.

cozy club lounge and a business centre. Interesting social spaces had been created –seemingly effortlessly integrated into the serious business and daily needs and routines of many of the people living around them.

Culture as infrastructure³

Between the poignantly communicative supermarket walls, and the modus operandi of the many Internet cafés, we decided to work with web technology and the familiar language of social media as our medium, and to design an interactive, customised website aimed at the online, café culture of the suburb. We imagined the site, as something that on the one hand enabled a largely invisible group of pan-African Johannesburg residents to write themselves into being, and on the other, was a useful resource that helped new arrivals to navigate their lives through and around the rules of the city.

We set out to map the number and location of Internet cafes in the suburb, and then to evaluate their business practices and technological needs. We were interested in computer and Internet literacy, user numbers, patterns and needs. And there were also a group of questions that engaged people in conversations about their personal histories, individual desires, dreams, and needs. We asked these questions not because we thought we might be



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Terry Kurgan

2008

*Newnet Internet Café, Rockey Street,
Yeoville*

© Hotel Yeoville project

able to change the world, but because we wanted to be grounded in a greater knowledge of the social environment within which we were working, to better understand how we might fashion a creative response to it.

We discussed and analysed our results and experiences, and then, worked toward creating a meaningful and useful journey through a 3-dimensional website.

The framing concept for the design and development of the website was our view of the political importance of the minutely observed details of personal, everyday life. We emphasised subjectivity and personal identity, and designed and built the site's structure and navigation through 'normal' everyday life categories. Our next challenge was to come up with an effective means of launching and marketing our website within the suburb.

Going live

Working together with interactive digital media artist Tegan Bristow, we made the decision to transform the virtual spaces of the *Hotel Yeoville* project's website into a real-space and real-time exhibition experience.

Bristow designed and built a tender and beautiful series of playful, self-documenting applications – each to be housed in its own dedicated booth. The question remained as to where we would house our physical project. It needed to be in a densely



trafficked public and social space that we could both afford, and secure. The preferred option was to build into and operate out of a small shop front in the middle of the suburb's main shopping area, effectively blending and merging with the many other small businesses in the area. After several weeks of tramping the pavements and talking to leaseholders and property owners, it became clear to us that this was beyond our project's means.

And then one day, the hoarding surrounding the new public library building under construction came down, and there it was: a refurbished and transformed double storey electrical sub-station. The solid brick building in the suburb's bustling hub had been made more welcoming with the generous use of glass, and its interior playfully washed in bright pink. One conversation led to the next (and the next) and the library, with its dedicated exhibition space located in a vitrine-like glass box hanging over the street, became the venue for the *Hotel Yeoville* installation. It seemed to be a perfect fit in terms of the library's public function, and its location in the middle of so much 'passing trade'. Alex Oppen and Amir Livneh of Notion Architects joined the team at this stage, and worked sensitively and inventively with our ideas and the shell of the new library such that the exhibition became an inclusive and intuitive user experience.

At the beginning of 2010, *Hotel Yeoville* opened to the public, and elegantly suspended, was both visible to and from the street below: brightly coloured during the day, and lighting up at night with pink fluorescent lights advertising the project's presence and the website address.

The exhibition's carefully considered surfaces and spaces not only functioned as invitations and prompts for the users of the exhibition, but in fact relied on the traces and gestures – the engagement and participation of visitors – to produce both the website and the exhibition's content. Visitors could write about Johannesburg, home, childhood, love, hopes, dreams and fears; map their origins and journeys across Africa and beyond; generate a series of portrait photographs, or make a short movie. All the content created in our documentation and story telling booths was uploaded to the website and mixed together with the resource content: migrant and refugee survival guides for Johannesburg, online discussion forums, classifieds, and an extremely popular business listing directory.

Wide Angle

Photography and the provocation
of human exchange

Alexander Oppen

2010

Hotel Yeoville Under Construction

© Alexander Oppen



As discussed above, immigrants and refugees find it very hard to normalise their legal status in South Africa and are forced to live on the almost invisible edges of South African society. The law in their regard is deliberately hostile, bureaucratic and obstructive, and rampant corruption persists in the government department designed to deal with what are ironically (in this instance) termed ‘Home Affairs’. Ensuring *Hotel Yeoville* participants’ anonymity was therefore one of our major concerns.

We encouraged pseudonyms and tried as much as possible to avoid asking for anybody’s personal data. Upon reflection, looking back from a distance at the hundreds and thousands of products that comprised the composite art work that *Hotel Yeoville* ultimately became, “in its fictions lie truths that would not have become part of this representation, and this broad, collective impression if anonymity had not been made possible at its core” (Bristow 2014).

In an essay that responds to the *Hotel Yeoville* project, writer Caroline Wanjiku Kihato (2013) discusses the ways in which it enabled people to interact with each other in profoundly moving ways:



Wide Angle

Photography and the provocation
of human exchange

Terry Kurgan
2010

Visitor to Hotel Yeoville
© Hotel Yeoville project



Hotel Yeoville was a platform where visitors chose a voice and asserted themselves, taking control of how they are represented and the messages they send 'out there'. In a context where migrants are demonised and held responsible for South Africa's high unemployment and crime rate, *Hotel Yeoville* provided an opportunity for them to re-script their roles, expanding not only the characters they play, but also the spaces they occupy. Take for example the post by a Mozambican man:

The love of my life lives in Xai Xai close to her family. That's in Mozambique where I was born. Near to the sea. We grew up in the same village but I am working in Joburg and I go backward and forward a lot for many years now. I am sending her love and will see her soon ...

This message is at once mundane and evocative. Two subjects we do not usually associate with each other, love and the migrant worker, are put together in an unfamiliar way. We look differently at the construction worker, miner, or farmhand – he is also the lover sending a message to the love of his life in Xai Xai. The tenderness in this map story ... is personal, in a way that humanises the migrant



experience and occupies a deeply political space that resists how we know, or think we know, migrant families and their personal lives.

Who wants what

While one measure of the impact of the project is contained within its thousands of analogue and digital products, and in its enthusiastic take up by people in the neighborhood, it was also reflected in the number of people who came up the stairs to ask questions and criticise, or to argue with us about our politics, our formal means and ideas. Right from the start, the project's name, *Hotel Yeoville*, bothered some community leaders who needed to see the suburb as a cohesive whole, rather than a disparate group of South African and immigrant communities with their own very clear and separate national identities living alongside each other by happenstance.

Several university academics and Yeoville community activists wanted us to align the project more strictly with activism and human rights. When this pressure was coupled with the human rights abuses that certain of our visitors reported, it was sometimes difficult to keep firm and steady on our original path, which was more open-ended, conceptually risky and about the potential of intimacy and private lives being accorded the most public of stages. We were trying to think the aesthetic and the social/political together and steer clear of the vocabularies of human rights discourse with its more certain hold on social roles and categories.

While the physical project ran out of the library, its value oscillated backwards and forwards between questions of aesthetic autonomy and social-political potential. We noticed that after the photo booth, the booth that people used most was the directory booth – a classifieds, directory, business and resources centre. It was our experience that a large number of South Africans and immigrants using our project really wanted it to be able to improve their lives. Many immigrant residents of Yeoville are skilled entrepreneurs, and given the barriers to their participation in South African society, have urgent economic imperatives. People often interacted with us in terms such as: “OK, this is very nice, but what's in it for me?” In terms of our

projects means of exchange, participants took a duplicate set of their photographs (made and printed in the photobooth) away with them. They also had online access to everything they and others produced and uploaded to our site. They contributed to and made use of a growing neighbourhood directory. There was a spirit of reciprocity to the project, but there was not an equal distribution of agency.

In a post on the culture/technology/digital arts website *Vague Terrain*, Jaenine Parkinson (2011) writes an article in anticipation of the 2012 publication of Claire Bishop's book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*:

Participation is not an end in itself, instead it delivers a messy knot of concerns including asking questions about who can be involved, in what ways, under which circumstances, and at who's expense.

Complicated issues arise when you try and embed your artistic practice in a social context through a collaborative or reciprocal relationship to that site. It does not necessarily make everyone and everything equal.

These issues notwithstanding, for just short of a year, the project ran five days a week and generated enthusiastic public engagement, and unusual social experiences at the same time as it produced a very distinct body of work.

Photography, Facebook and human rights

Hotel Yeoville, similarly to many of my other projects, draws attention to the political and social role of very ordinary, everyday domestic snaps. It is the afterlife of these images that preoccupies me most – their relationship to the meaning we make of our lives, and the fact that they exist at the very threshold between private and public space. These personal, utterly commonplace images have the power to resonate in much broader public and political spheres.

There's a wonderful text that the great American photographer Richard Avedon (1987) wrote in the late 1980s, called 'Borrowed Dogs' where he talks about his own family photograph albums. He says that his family took very great

and detailed care with their snapshots. They dressed up; they posed in front of expensive cars, and homes that weren't theirs. They borrowed dogs. He recounts how in one year of family photographs he counted eleven completely different dogs. His family never in fact owned a dog! He talks about the fact that in his family albums all the photographs revealed a lie about who the Avedon's really were, but a truth about who they really wanted to be. This inherent paradox, and the many questions around what kind of evidence domestic snaps actually supply, has always intrigued me.

With so many millions of people globally now armed with camera-equipped cell phones and instantly uploading their photographs to Facebook and Flickr, the commonplace snapshot is more than ever the genre of our times. And, with these images almost entirely framed by screens and social media platforms, they are integral to the way in which we socialise and participate in public life, and one of the primary ways in which we perform (and form) our fleeting, transmittable and mobile selves.

In the context of a large group of people, who are often living below the radar, the performative, evocative and expressive potentials of popular social media platforms, like Facebook, Flickr and YouTube, were particularly significant. On the one hand, we were maximising their viral capacity (and the ease and familiarity with which people in Internet Cafés seemed to be using them), but more importantly, we were banking on the fact that social media networks appear to straddle both public and private spheres; they paradoxically encourage a private and often, intimate performance of one's self to be delivered in what is ultimately an extremely public sphere. In the context of our project, using the language of these platforms enabled people to safely 'show themselves' in a way that did not threaten their residence in the city, but at the same time boldly asserted their presence. For example, this message, one of many left behind with a series of photographs shot in our photo booth that read: "Hello People! I AM HERE. I am Jean-Pierre from DRC and they call me JP! This is me, or something I can tell you about me, at any rate! JP a.k.a lover boy".

Ariella Azoulay rethinks the political and ethical status of photography in her groundbreaking book, *The Civil Contract*

Wide Angle

Photography and the provocation
of human exchange

Terry Kurgan

2010

Photo Booth Strips, Hotel Yeoville

© Hotel Yeoville project

of Photography (2008). She theorises the importance of the agency of the subject in the photograph as well as the need for spectators to ask themselves what the subject in the photograph is asking of them, and discusses the way in which photography itself creates space for a different, more liberating kind of citizenship. And finally, borrowing from these ideas: *Hotel Yeoville* was about producing ways to participate in the world by contrast with observing it, or being observed. The upbeat and performative products of our photo and video booths demonstrated the success of this most keenly. While offline and online exhibitionism runs the risk of being criticised as narcissistic display, it is my view that in this particular context the products of the photo and video booth interaction ended up affirming the unique condition of the photographic image. But, not in the well-honed sense given to it by so many theorists speculating upon the unique melancholy of the photographic image; of the photograph as the sign of something or someone that once was. Rather, in this context, the 'picture' serves to testify that this particular person is here now, claiming space, asserting identity, possibly even citizenship, and what's more, is *very* pleased to meet you.



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Participatory practice as advocacy

My own reaction to the place [where I arrived to make a project] is itself subjective: it is a bit of a dance in between my own concerns or obsessions that I carry with me over there and their meeting with that place, that clash that will eventually lead to a concrete reaction, a piece, or nothing. And it is never just about the place. Let me make a personal remark: the cases where I feel that I have been successful in offering an answer to the local situations encountered, where the proposals did 'hit a nerve', in the local community, and sometimes abroad, these happy cases did not occur because one proposal was necessarily better than another. It is more because my own concerns at the time happened to coincide with the concerns of a certain place at a certain moment of its history.

Francis Alj's, 2010. *A Story of Deception* edited by Mark Godfrey et al. MoMA: New York: 35.

The imposition of help¹



Regina Kramer
2014
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¹ This essay has been developed from my PhD chapter, *The Artist as Social Worker vs Artist as Social Wanker*.

Advocating for art's functional role in society is not a new proposition, but it has come to the fore over the past decades along with the rise of participatory practices, with theorists like Grant Kester (1995:n.p.) writing:

Both the community artist and the social worker possess a set of skills (bureaucratic, diagnostic, aesthetic/expressive, and so forth) and have access to public and private funding (through grants writing, official status, and institutional sponsorship) with the goal of bringing about some transformation in the condition of individuals who are presumed to be in need.

In Kester's proposition, he merges the idea of Social Worker with that of Artist because of his perception that social workers, and artists who work in 'community' in participatory ways, have the same primary objective: to improve the situation of people who might be 'in need'. I find this idea somewhat problematic.



2014

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2 The residency was part of the Nine Urban Biotopes project, an international, socially engaged art project delivering artistic research and cultural exchange between South Africa and Europe. Nine different socially engaged art practitioners worked in nine different city contexts with the aim being to “establish both a ‘trans-local’ and ‘trans-continental’ dialogue. It did so in order to expose, discuss and share different ‘intentions, methods and techniques’ of imaginative urban practices for building ‘sustainable cities’”. (Accessed at <http://www.urban-biotopes.net/>)

Firstly, and on a simply practical level, to collapse the two fields into one another, merging aesthetic and social narratives, devalues both; it disavows the unique but quite different specialities, training, infrastructural support, broader contexts and relationships that are necessary to each. This does not suggest that the separate worlds can never collide, only that it would be dangerous – as Kester suggests – to view them as one and the same thing.

Secondly, it is my opinion that art projects which aim to ‘help’ others, are often conceived and built upon patronising notions of presumed disparity, and further beg the question then, upon ‘whose authority’ does that artist help?

I would like to explore the above points by discussing a project, developed while on a residency² in Johannesburg, titled *Art Cannot Help You*.

To a newcomer to Johannesburg, the Central Business District (CBD) appears to be an extremely complex place – characterised by its neglect since the flight of white business to the office parks and malls in the North of the city in the late 1980s, and by its crime, poverty, informality, its ‘bad’ and squatted buildings and the fact that it is almost completely devoid of any white daytime pedestrian traffic or residents. On the other hand, and at the same time, the inner city is also vibrant with culture, diversity, a deep and rich history, and is undergoing the patchy and uneven process of urban regeneration and gentrification.

The Maboneng Precinct, in the heart of the CBD, is an example of this latter, and has developed, over the last five or so years, into a trendy and creative cultural and entrepreneurial haven with artists occupying old industrial buildings and joining developers in their drive to rehabilitate, but in my view, inevitably, to gentrify the area in a fairly homogenous way. Under the premise of social and urban renewal, the precinct currently provides a safer and desirable destination for citizens of Johannesburg to have reasons to (‘safely’) enter into the edgy CBD to participate in Sunday brunches, rooftop salsa dance sessions, and hot yoga classes, or to visit art galleries, and frequent the food and craft markets, global cuisine restaurants and boutique shops that have sprung up within the neighbourhood.

Unfortunately, much of this has happened at the expense of local communities and people who used to live in many of these buildings. These people can now no longer afford to live directly in the area and have been quietly forced out by squads of private security guards into alternative housing further afield. The impression that I gained is that Maboneng has become an island of privilege within the more neglected and ‘deprived’ areas of the CBD that still surround it, but nonetheless is touted as a best practice model of ‘art engaging in social renewal’, ‘helping the local community’ and ‘making things better’.

I would argue, however, that ‘making better’ in this particular neighbourhood, actually means making it desirable for an extremely homogenous and particular group of young hipsters and middle-class people with disposable incomes – and that there is very little analysis of what sort of ‘renewal’ is actually occurring and who it is that benefits from this gentrification.

To probe this I made a large sign reading, 'Art Cannot Help You', and walked from my temporary studio in Braamfontein, through the CBD to Maboneng (about a 4 hour walk) to encourage conversation, debate and dialogue about how art is being framed as 'help' – and to ask questions about whom it was supposed to help. The statement existed as a challenge and over the course of the performance I had various engagements – with the homeless, shopkeepers, police, pedestrians, and residents of the area. The discussions I had with people who stopped to talk to me generally revolved around the notion that art could help if it was used as a means to a financial end. My response to this, of course, was that in this case, it wasn't the 'art' that was helping, but rather the 'money' that was made as an outcome. My performance was only 'helping' by asking questions, and it did not change, nor did it seek to change, the socio-economic inequalities that impact on the lives of most citizens of the CBD. My project was not social work, but art; and while the conversations were sometimes discordant, they were generally very civil, the exchanges often ending with handshakes or with thanks for interesting viewpoints and shared discussions.



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3 Quoted from a member of the public during performance, 17th September 2014, Maboneng, Johannesburg.

4 It is not known to me whether they were weekend visitors to, or residents of the area.

5 The extent of the attack latterly reminded me of the scene in *Macbeth* where Lady Macbeth's murderous guilt is insinuated because "the Lady doth protest too much".

My experience upon entering Maboneng, however, was that I was sworn at, had offensive gestures directed towards me, and was attacked for apparently presenting an "intentionally provocative and incendiary"³ proposal. These comments and gestures came from specifically white people in the area.⁴ I had imagined my performance as a direct challenge to what I believe to be Maboneng's current narrow ideological framing; and the hegemony of the social renewal model, and I found it interesting that the challenge provoked such vitriolic attacks within the 'socially renewed' area, but no aggression from people within areas presumably still in the long queue for 'social renewal'.⁵

It was my intention that, as an artwork, *Art Cannot Help You* would provoke and challenge accepted power dynamics and expose a lack of critical reflection on who is actually being 'helped'.

In this sense, the project aimed to 'reveal' the flaws in the system, rather than 'fix' them. Art that aims to 'help' people and create a situation where individuals are 'fixed' is like a utopian type of social engineering where the artist or institution decides on how a society should ideally be, and manipulates people towards that goal. He/she tries to create a common consensus, in the same way that Maboneng is about creating agreement between neo-liberal, middle-class consumers in a neighbourhood





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that will eventually have no place for the displaced, or the poor. Art in this instance is being harnessed to the creation of a homogenous social order.

In contrast, I would argue that art should be about dissensus: it should be about asking difficult questions about how we all live our lives and the systems that control and sustain that order. This often means, however, needing to be a little disrespectful to those in power. In the CBD of Johannesburg, I believe that artists are being co-opted into the service of gentrification, with the unfortunate outcome – more so in the contemporary South African context – of limiting social diversity.

For me as an artist, this is categorically not aligned with notions of ‘helping’. I emphatically challenge those notions that derive from a philosophical aesthetic of ‘niceness’, which insidiously recapitulate normative behaviours of active hegemonies. Art is not always ‘nice’; nor should it have social engineering remits. Ultimately, let it be said: Art cannot help you!

I conclude with a quote by Claire Bishop (2012:26) whose critique of Kester’s ‘social worker’ methodologies are clear, as she states that the flaw of ameliorative art lies in an “aversion to disruption, since [aversion to disruption] self-censors on the basis of second-guessing how others will think and respond. The upshot is that idiosyncratic or controversial ideas are



subdued and normalised in favour of a consensual behaviour upon whose irreproachable sensitivity we can all rationally agree. By contrast, I would argue that unease, discomfort or frustration – along with fear, contradiction, exhilaration and absurdity – can be crucial to any work’s artistic impact”.

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Border Farm

1 <http://www.bdlive.co.za/national/2013/03/15/sa-will-not-extend-zimbabwean-document-drive>

2 The question of what kind of collaboration this was was addressed by the author and a collaborator in the in a self-interview entitled, *Return to Border Farm*.

3 *Border Farm* (2011). A docu-drama about the migrant experience in South Africa.

Border context

The border between South Africa and Zimbabwe is a famously porous one. Despite the wide Limpopo River, with its strong currents and marauding crocodiles, a series of razor wire fences, and a heavy army presence along the banks of the river on the South African side, hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans have risked their lives to cross the border illegally in recent years. The meltdown of the Zimbabwean economy, and the continuing unraveling of livelihoods, social services, and personal security for the majority of Zimbabweans (Rutherford 2008) since 2000 specifically, has meant an intensification in migration out of that country into neighbouring states, and most particularly, into South Africa. Some estimate that there are approximately two million Zimbabweans in South Africa,¹ and the South African government's failure to present a consistent policy on the immigration crisis increases the sense of instability for those coming and for those already in South Africa.

The majority of the 'border jumpers' beat a path to the cities, but many remain close to the border to work on farms in the far north of Limpopo Province. The *Border Farm Project* was a collaborative² art project that took place on a farm on the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa over the period from late-2009 to mid-2010. The project was jointly conceived by Zimbabwean writer, farm worker, and community spokesperson, Meza Weza, and myself, a South African artist and filmmaker. Our multidisciplinary project produced several outcomes: the Dulibadzimu Theatre Group was formed on the farm, a film³ was made and photography exhibitions were held in Musina and in Johannesburg.



Thenjiwe Nkosi

2009-10

Loophole

© Dulibadzimu Theatre Group

4 This interest stems in part from my own history: I was born in the United States to a South African father who was living in exile and a Pontic Greek mother, whose parents were refugees from Turkey.

Border stories

The story of the project, from my point of view, starts in late 2009. Driven by an abiding personal interest in migrancy and displacement, and how people respond to the pressures of exile,⁴ I began researching the situation on the farms in northern Limpopo. I was curious about how Zimbabwean migrant workers were organising themselves socially and/or politically, in either formal or informal ways. I read articles and spoke to people working in the field of migrant issues, including a number of academics and Zimbabwean human rights lawyers living in South Africa. A common theme emerged: relative to other African migrant communities in South Africa, Zimbabwean migrant workers seemed to maintain lower levels of community organisation. A complex

Participatory practice as advocacy?

⁵ We later learned that there was, in fact, a soccer team that he had helped to organise, but that only men of a certain age participated in that.

⁶ Discussion with the author (2009).

variety of possible reasons were advanced for this – including the often temporary and uncertain nature of their presence here, as well as a desire to maintain a ‘low profile’. My reading led me to contact Canadian scholar Blair Rutherford, whose work on Zimbabwean migrants and belonging (Rutherford 2008) I found of particular relevance.

After speaking to Blair, I travelled from Johannesburg with my friend, photographer Raymond Marlowe, to visit a farm some ten kilometres from the Beit Bridge border post on the South African side of the Limpopo River, near to the town of Musina. I had no specific agenda at this stage other than continuing my research and asking questions about the Zimbabwean migrants’ social organisation. Blair had given me the name of Meza Weza, a Zimbabwean farm worker, and writer, whom he had met and worked with during his time on the border. Raymond and I met with Meza while he was working in the tomato fields. We introduced ourselves as artists and asked Meza how – if at all – people organised themselves on the farm. Meza confirmed what I had heard and read. He said that aside from church activities there weren’t any organised activities.⁵ He told us that he was the unofficial spokesperson for the farm workers, and that this was really the extent of the organisation of workers on the farm.

We asked Meza if there might be interest on the farm in the idea of working on a collective project that would bring people together, possibly forming a group that could be used for a variety of purposes. He said that he would speak to people and find out who might be interested.

But he also expressed his own view that he thought it would be a useful endeavour, since people working on the farm needed something ‘to come together’ around.⁶

Raymond and I met with Meza again later that week, and he told us that people were indeed interested. It was at this second meeting that he told us about a script for a play he’d been working on, which was about life on the border, and he also told us that there were others on the farm who were interested in acting. We spoke about the possibility of realising the script into a film that we could make together, and using this as a way to bring people together.

Participatory practice as advocacy?

7 The core facilitators were Thenjiwe Nkosi, Raymond Marlowe, and Tapiwa Marovatsanga, who at the time was completing his Masters in Applied Drama. Tapiwa is also Zimbabwean and is a professional actor.

This ... was an opportunity that I had been waiting for. I had written a script about the plight of migrants but I did not know where to take it to. When this chance presented itself, I had to grab it. I also wanted to be part of developing something in my community and putting it on the map. (Weza 2012)

The following day, Meza and I proposed the idea to the entire farm working community, which consisted of more than 200 people, and invited them to a first meeting to take place five days later. About 25 people showed up at this meeting.

Thus, the idea for the art project that developed – realising Meza’s script into a film – emerged from ideas that farm group members had already begun to think about themselves, and that we, the artists from Johannesburg, with our knowledge of film-making and film technology, could help them to shape and achieve.

Traditionally, farm communities have been neglected – never seriously considered – and through our project I wanted to prove the world wrong and change that attitude. I wanted to present the best-honed art work: unique, touching and so strong that it would linger in people’s minds. We wanted also to use the project to form a strong theatre group that would develop the members’ different talents and ultimately generate income. (Weza 2012)

We set the first shoot date some months in the future, and began to work towards it. The Joburgers travelled to the farm every other weekend, so that the group on the farm would have time to create their own working dynamic in-between without us. We structured the process into a series of workshops in writing, drama and photography. Each weekend that we were there, the farm worker group and core project facilitators participated in workshops led by different visiting creative practitioners.⁷

Our strategy was to use different modes of expression and dialogue to prepare for the film. The intention was that as we worked together towards the film, and through various modes of dialogue to develop the content, group cohesion would also develop in this process. The main modes of expression were

Participatory practice as advocacy?

8 Men who control the crossing of the Limpopo River. “[A] term that translates as people who seek to make a living through dubious means ... they are more widely known for preying on the border-crossers, robbing, beating, raping, and at times killing their victims” (Rutherford 2008).

writing (developing the script), photography (developing a sense of an image-based narrative) and drama (rehearsing the acted sequences). We worked under a tree in the farm compound, and other members of the compound community and passersby were free to join or leave the process as they pleased.

Many people wanted to see the outcome from very early on, so I had to make an extra effort to encourage my project peers to keep them involved and participating. My job on the farm was demanding, so I had to work hard to balance both sides. Disappointing was the fact that the turn-out of volunteers from the farm was low, and there was dropout from the group both during and after the project – mainly the result of high expectations of financial reward by these participants, even though it had been agreed from the beginning of the project that the process was a voluntary one. Another factor that led to dropout was discouraging comments from other people within the community, which also affected the strength of the group’s motivation to continue. (Weza 2012)

Filming took place over two weekends in January 2010. It was at once a culmination of everything we had worked towards and a development of our methodology as a group. Assigning roles for making the film was discussed at length and decided on collectively. I was nominated to be the director as I had the most experience in video and film. Group members from the farm took on a range of acting roles. Meza, for example, took a leading role as one of the *magumaguma*;⁸ Ephraim Neema’s role was that of a border jumper who gets caught by the South African army. Crew positions were filled by group members from the farm as well as by the visiting Joburgers. These included a sound engineer (Honest Mabula), second camera (Naision Dube), on-set photographer (Mildred Banda) and assistant director (Daniel Browde).

Even though most of the ideas regarding filming and acting skills came from Thenjiwe and her crew, we were nevertheless all equal: we respected one another’s opinions and accommodated every member warmly. I received strong

Participatory practice as advocacy?

9 For me, implementing an exit strategy meant addressing, as early and clearly as possible, the idea of the end of the Joburgers' participation in the group. We defined an end point at the beginning of the project, talked about "the end" openly throughout the duration of the project, especially in the weeks before the shooting of the film.

10 I felt it was essential that plans were made for future projects without the Joburgers.

11 Dulibadzimu refers to a gorge along the Limpopo River where local Venda people believe their ancestors dwell.

12 This project, which I initiated, had as one of its aims a desire to link the relatively isolated artists on the farms (such as the members of Dulibadzimu) with artists in the town of Musina, some 10km away.



Mildred Banda

2009-10

Procession

© Dulibadzimu Theatre Group

support from the rest of the group as well as from the farm owner, who showed me great respect. They listened to and considered my requests and their contributions were substantial and helpful. (Weza 2012)

The resulting film, *Border Farm* (2011), is a docu-drama about a group of Zimbabwean 'border jumpers' who make their way across the Limpopo River from Zimbabwe to seek work on South African farms. It portrays the multifaceted drama of forced migration. The scripted 'fiction' film, which enacts a journey by a group of people from Zimbabwe to South Africa across the Limpopo, and along, and through, the border fence itself, is interspersed with interviews with group members about their actual experiences of crossing, as well as footage of the workshop process leading up to the film.

Leaving Border Farm

After filming was complete, the artistic process around which we had come together had run its course. There began the difficult process of winding down the project.⁹ On our next visit to the farm we sat and spoke about the inevitable shift in group dynamics that might now take place, addressing questions of leadership, and whether everyone felt they had a role to play in the group's future.¹⁰ The last official Border Farm trip was made in April of 2010. At that stage, the group was a clearly cohesive unit that had named themselves The Dulibadzimu Theatre Group.¹¹

Some of the core members of the Johannesburg contingent continued to visit every couple of months after that, and met with Dulibadzimu for the duration of another project they were producing in the region, called *MADE IN MUSINA*.¹²

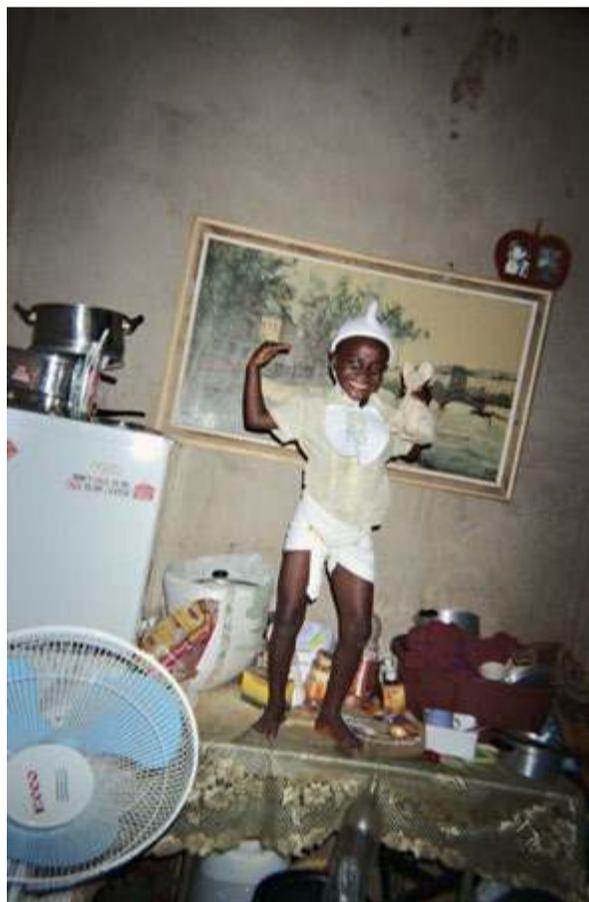
The Dulibadzimu Theatre Group managed to develop relationships with local NGOs, and looked to use theatre to boost health education campaigns (specifically HIV/AIDS awareness) in the area. The group has subsequently worked sporadically, but successfully, on surrounding farms and in Musina. They also performed in the first MADE IN MUSINA Arts Festival in April 2011. Two years on, the Joburg artists and Dulibadzimu have remained in contact.



Participatory practice as advocacy?

13 The infamous weekend in 2008 of xenophobic violence around the country was still fresh in people's minds when we worked on this project.

14 Self-interview, entitled *Return to Border Farm*, carried out with the author.



Meza Weza

2009-10

My Child

© Dulibadzimu Theatre Group

A note on the film. While the formation of a sustainable group was my driving intention – as it was for Meza and some other group members – there were others who were far more interested in the film as a final product. Many people who joined the group saw the film as a way to tell people, and South Africans in particular, about their experiences as migrants, and many expressed their hopes that the film would address some of the issues contributing to xenophobia that was becoming rife in South Africa.¹³ Consequently we have tried to get the film seen as widely as possible. It has aired nationally on Soweto TV, and in festivals and galleries in Johannesburg, London, and Lisbon. The film also went viral in Musina and has been distributed across the neighbouring farms.

Reflecting on the process in 2012, Meza said he felt that, in general, the project had had “a positive impact”. “Those who have come across our artwork, and those who took part in making it, have learnt and benefitted from it,” he wrote. “It has left a strong impression on many people, and we will be remembered.”¹⁴

Photography and Border Farm

The project provided a space for all of us involved to see each other in new ways. The workshops, with their base under the tree, created a space where group members re-imagined their daily lives and histories. Photography in particular allowed people to take the project into their homes, to frame and capture images of their own choosing, and to share these with the group and beyond.

The photography workshops that were conducted focused on the narrative power of photographs. While for most group members photography was not new, the idea of photographs being able to tell a story was. Considering storytelling through images was an important part of preparing for the film, but it also gave group members a chance to use photographs to reflect on their own lives and to tell stories rooted in their own experiences.

The photography workshops happened concurrently with the drama and writing workshops. One of the most powerful parts of the project for all of us was the rehearsing, filming and photographing of the re-enacted river crossing. This was



something that those who had actually crossed the river wanted to rehearse over and over, and something that they insisted on filming in the place where it happened, through the Limpopo River. We rehearsed the actions of crossing: how people hold hands to keep together as they wade through moving water, how they are led across the river by an untrustworthy guide, how some get swept away when the current is strong. These rehearsals took place in the safety of the group project, and for the most part, on dry land.

When the time came to film the crossing, the group re-enacted, and in some sense, relived, the experience of their crossing – this time, however, in a safe part of the river where the water was low and the current relatively weak. In the words of group member (and film narrator) Norman Masawi: “The experience of crossing the Limpopo, it remains in our life, you will remember it all of your life. Rehearsing it several times, it can relieve us of certain stresses. Because it will always torment you.”



Raymond Marlowe

2009-10

Crossing

© Dulibadzimu Theatre Group



The photography workshops also offered something that the drama and film workshops did not, which was complete artistic autonomy – a chance to make an individualised statement. All the other media, including working together to develop Meza's original script, were collaborative efforts and everyone contributed bits of their own lived story to help the script grow.

Raymond noted that the photography workshops also provided the opportunity for connection with people on the farm who had not joined the group, noting that the photographs served to encourage a positive view from outside, which in turn built up the group's confidence and cohesion inside. He further noted that the pictures that people liked most were those they took of one other – some giving their photographs to others in the farm compound.

The photograph taken of Raymond Marlowe, the photography facilitator, by Naison Dube, serves as something of a metaphor for my experience of this project. The fence visible in the photograph is the border fence between Zimbabwe and South Africa. Raymond is caught up in the fence.

In Raymond's words:

I was in a situation where I had my camera and I needed to get out of this mess. And Naison saw me there, saw that I needed help – but he chose instead to take the photograph. Why didn't he come and help me? I think Naison thought: Raymond is crossing, that is an experience that we have. He saw himself in me, crossing the fence. He thought: This guy is South African, he's got his camera, he's struggling to cross the fence. Then he took the photo of me, and I was the guy leading the workshops.

I read in this image some of the methodological and ethical questions inherent in a project of this nature – some of my own unresolved feelings about my role as an artist and facilitator in this project. In working across boundaries – of class, race, language, and ethnicity – there are so many different ways that you can lose your way and become entangled in razor-sharp contradictions. You can reinforce hierarchies, you can objectify and exploit people, you can unintentionally do all kinds of harm.



Naison Dube
2009-10
Photographer
© Dulibadzimu Theatre Group

But this picture also inspires me. I feel challenged and encouraged when I look at it to continue working towards greater clarity in this regard.

The photographs that emerged from the workshops reflected a part of Musina that people in the town and further afield generally do not know a lot about. They reflected the collective as well as particular realities of the migrant experience in northern Limpopo and were the main feature of an exhibition that was held midway through the project. A key objective for the travelling exhibition, that also included some of my own and Raymond's photographs, was to make a show that would present the creative and collaborative process of the project in progress, but would also be an artistic reflection of the stories and day-to-day life on the farm.

We held one exhibition in Johannesburg, at the Bag Factory Gallery in Fordsburg, and the other two in the Musina Municipal

Buildings – in the town of Musina and in the adjacent township of Nancefield. The exhibition was well received in Musina, with people leaving comments to the effect that it showed important stories that until then had been untold, while other migrants expressed their surprise and excitement at identifying a reflection of their own personal experiences in images hung in the halls of the municipal buildings.

In 2012, two years after the completion of the project, I asked Meza and myself a series of questions, the aim being to find out whether, upon reflection and during the intervening time, the project had taken on different meanings for each of us. Some of the answers (where noted) have been used in the writing of this article.

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Remaining in difficulty with ourselves

1 Eduardo Galeano was forced into exile to flee a dictatorship after Uruguay's 1973 military coup.

2 For interesting discussion, see Gray, B. Making Art in the Wrong Place: Violence and Intimacy in *Speak English to Me*. In *Critical Arts* 24 (3), 2010. And Eleonora Belfiore, Art as a Means of Alleviating Social Exclusion: Does it Really Work? In *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 8 (1), 2002. Also see Blackman, M. 2013.

Let us be wary of applause. Sometimes congratulation comes from those who think us harmless.

Eduardo Galeano, 1977

Eduardo Galeano's *In Defence of the Word* is a treatise on creative action in the face of political hardship, but also in the face of the inevitable irrelevance of the arts in societies that have big problems. Galeano writes, in 1977, as a banned and exiled author¹ and thus writes from the position of dis-ease and distress about Latin America at that time. While condoning the political happenings of much of Latin America then, he despairs of the levels of poverty, illiteracy, class inequality and elitism – which he feels situate writing, and creativity, in a non-space that remains illegitimate, regardless of good intentions. Many correlations might be drawn with the arts in South Africa, as with many other parts of the world.

But Galeano is most interesting in his choice to 'defend' what is, rather than 'imagine' what isn't. This is significant because Galeano is writing as an exile, from the position of being unwanted and unwelcome and one imagines, wishing for another kind of world where he might be able to write freely, within the bounds of his home and within an environment where there are sufficient means available for those for whom he writes to access his work.

Yet Galeano seeks rather to exist in the world that is, to defend its reality and its possibilities, choosing to take it on. Galeano seeks to engage. And engagement means making mistakes, getting one's hands and heart dirty, losing the plot, and over and over again, failing. This is not a case of seeking to 'imagine a better world'; it is not invested in fictions, nor is it a utopian project. It is important that we make clear these distinctions.

Participatory practice as advocacy?

³ The northern suburbs of Johannesburg are largely populated by comfortably middle class residents.

For often art practice that engages with communities, in South Africa and the world at large, seeks to encourage community participation, and works towards an involvement beyond the clear confines of the 'fine' in fine art. It is seen as a utopian quest, the imagining of a better world: an attempt at bringing people together, in 'dialogue', in 'collaboration', in 'participation' and many other such buzzwords that have sought the legitimisation of art – particularly in countries, cities and neighbourhoods of the poor, the marginalised, and the under-resourced.² This is, however, a misconception on the part of practitioners and their viewers. For this type of art has as much possibility for betterness as does a painting created by a solo artist in a studio in the northern suburbs.³

What is more likely is that this kind of art practice will bring about angst, conflict, divergences, inconsistencies, mistakes and again, failures. Marginalised communities – and I speak of South African communities as these are my experience – are wary of outsiders, of helpers and do-gooders. People in these communities may have little visual training, but are well-versed in the discourse of exploiters, chancers and even well-meaning fools. Practitioners of this kind of art can expect from their 'participants' mistrust, the pushing of buttons, the asking of very difficult questions. And whether these 'participants' decide to continue or walk away, either way, by the end of it one is unlikely to believe in the utopianism of the active and engaged community developing art project.

By contrast, when we gather on sexy corners in trendy neighbourhoods and sip red wine amongst familiar company, we conjure for ourselves little parts of scary places where we might feel relevant, clever and important and part of something special. When we produce work in basements and refurbished factories and show them on clean white walls, we create for ourselves meaning and legitimacy of which, in the playgrounds of politics, religion or service delivery, we would otherwise be robbed. In the enclaves of galleries, the sentinels of public sculpture and the hamlets of knowledgeable peoples, we have produced a utopia, performed another world, created fiction. To paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, utopianism is believing we can go on this way.

Participatory practice as advocacy?

4 For a very interesting article on the shift of the political in art internationally – and in relation to participatory art – see Grant Kester’s Response to Claire Bishop’s *Another Turn* in *Art Forum*, May 2006, as well as: <http://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/bishop-claire-artificial-hells-participatory-art-and-politics-spectatorship.pdf>

5 A cursory glance at any recent books on South African art, from Sue Williamson. 2009. *South African Art Now*. Harper Collins: New York, to Sophie Perryer (ed). 2004. *10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa*. Bell-Roberts Publishing and Struik: Cape Town, will list a majority of artists dealing predominantly with identity issues – though from various angles and with many complex aspects: from more established artists like Willem Boshoff, Candice Breitz, Steven Cohen, David Koloane and Sam Nhlengethwa, to Tracey Rose, Mary Sibande, Nicholas Hlobo and Zanele Muholi.

6 It should be noted that though there has been significant growth and interest in this field in South Africa since mid-2000, there were early projects that ran when it was not so fashionable, such as the Joubert Park Project.

Perhaps this fictionalising is a reaction to the crisis of purpose experienced by our struggle art forebears. Perhaps it is the unrelenting angst of the vacuum of selfhood post-1994 that has resulted in the perpetual identity art of the contemporary market. It is also likely influenced in part by a shift into the international trends of postmodern practice that scorned the political agenda of the ‘80s and ‘90s, only to have changed its mind again more recently.⁴ But by and large, South African art that today achieves success on the market is about selfhood – race, gender, sexuality and the combination of these in the complex and often angst-ridden socio-political space that is South Africa.⁵ Post-1994, with the end of the struggle art era, art that cared about others was not so cool. Yet lately it seems to have become so again. And it is within this context that practitioners in participatory art now function. We should be wary of the terms under which community based or participatory art has become an accepted, even celebrated, part of the establishment rather than simply being relegated to the craft of beaded baskets, as it was some years ago. In some ways it is a welcome inclusion, not having to pretend this is a distanced analysis, nor an internalised ‘exploration’. But as Galeano suggests, we should be wary of applause. Two particular points of caution:

1. Part of the mainstreaming of community or participatory art that has occurred more recently⁶ has seen a trend of engaging individual narratives, and focusing on localised voices. Grounded in the relativist perspectives of postmodernism, this approach initially arose to indicate the limitations of the historical canon’s grand narratives and to disturb the mainstream voices of those who owned the voice boxes. However, of late, the individualised narrative of ‘ordinary people’, singular and personal experiences, and claims of the personal being political, have come to act as a wide path through which to express varied positions: they leave much space for meaning, are open to multiple instances of interpretation, and speak of experiences and aesthetics rather than ideologies. Effectively, they afford the artists the luxury of never being wrong (uninteresting perhaps, but never wrong). Often these singularised, individualised works have a more poetic

aesthetic sensibility – such as Stephen Hobbs and Marcus Neustetter’s *UrbaNET Hillbrow-Dakar-Hillbrow*, which saw these artists attempt to deliver letters from immigrants in South Africa, to people still living in Dakar, with only hand-drawn maps of memories from ten or more years before for guidance. While quite moving, and conceptually very interesting, the work appears to accomplish little more beyond the delivery of a letter.

2. Another aspect of the postmodernist turn that ensures all doors are left open and all channels are possible, is that much contemporary art ‘asks more questions than it answers’. A rhetorical phrase that many artists, including myself, are guilty of, ‘more questions’ is the stuff of participatory art – an indication of its inability to leave something particularly tangible behind; an attempt by the artists to afford it some currency, some worth. In comparison to *UrbaNET Hillbrow-Dakar-Hillbrow*, a work such as the *Made in Musina* Project by Rangoato Hlasane and Thenjiwe Nkosi saw the development of an arts network, through the *VANSA Two Thousand and Ten Reasons* project, in a border town with otherwise relatively little arts connectivity. This project afforded wider possibilities for further production and ongoing creativity to a large and possibly growing number of people, and importantly, the work does not end at the point that the initiating artists walk away.

But frankly we have asked enough questions, and we are at the point where we need answers. Creatives should be leading the pack with possibilities, new ideas, dangerous thinking. Perhaps it’s time we began to think again on a grand scale, and took the chance on previously failed plans and big ideas gone awry. For otherwise we might remain localised, might continuously ask questions, yet never get any further. And it might remain cool; we may even discern applause. But ultimately we remain harmless and ineffectual. We do little other than gaze at our own navels – only now we do so in the presence of ‘ordinary people’ and sex workers and gangsters and school children and prisoners and the sick and the dying.

Galeano's *In Defence of the Word* is despondent; it struggles to find solutions, and seems somewhat resigned to its own contradictions. But it maintains the need for literature to attempt disruption, to find a place of unease: "a literature which does not set out to bury its own dead, but to perpetuate them; which refuses to clear up the ashes and tries on the contrary to light the fire". Accordingly, I suggest an art that is not utopian, that it does not remain within the easy bounds of what is accepted as art by the galleries, their patrons, nor those that seek their applause. I'm not giving particularly tangible suggestions here; I'm working on it. But I think that step one is to let go of 'imagining a better world', and not to see ourselves as do-gooders. We need to recognise that the work we do is messy and difficult. But we also need to take greater chances, and not remain within the safe confines of easy boundaries – perhaps venture into the political, the ideological. For the bravest of us might well engage the grand narratives and not cower in their ability to make us look rather stupid. Let us resolve to remain in difficulty with ourselves, to challenge our relevance head-on in the midst of those who question us and to deny again and again the right to feel comfortable – particularly in the imagining of easier, better worlds.

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Who wants what

A camera brings interested parties together. It attracts and repels according to circumstance or whim. A camera makes me interested in you and you may be interested in me. In this sense it's all about love. And exploitation.

Phil Collins. 2005. *Phil Collins: yeah.....you, baby you*. Shady Lane:
London: 16.

**Funders, partners,
participants**

One of the Goethe-Institut's focus areas for engagement in sub-Saharan Africa is to enhance pan-African exchange and support platforms for the arts. *Wide Angle* was one such cultural project that the Goethe-Institut initiated, especially because of the project's focus on photography and participation as forms of creative public practice.

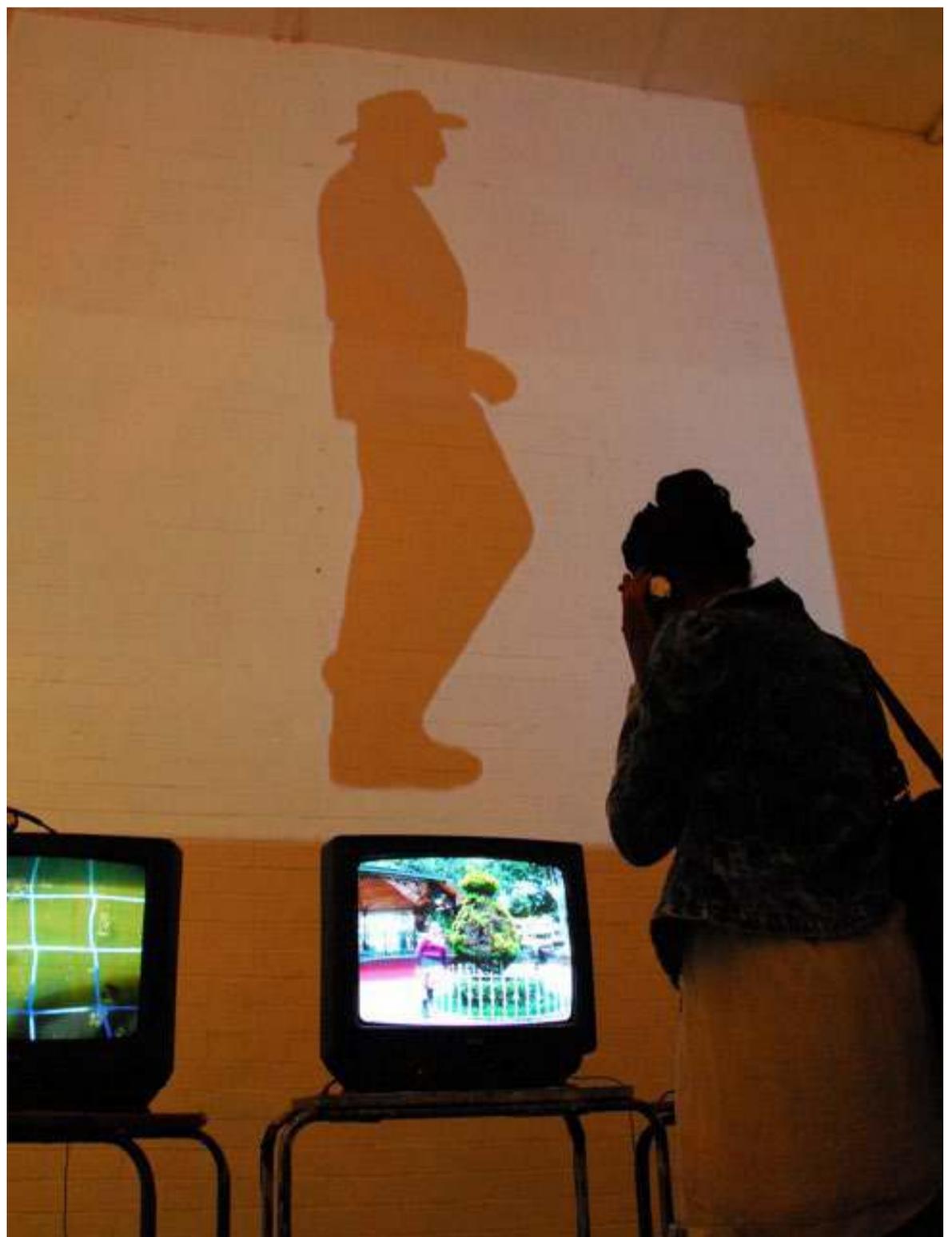
The forum offered an important opportunity to engage and reflect, at different levels, on photographic public practices, but also on the notion of participation more generally, and from the diverse perspectives of the various 'players' involved. It was therefore significant, and also a particular strength of the project, that the forum was conceptualised, through an act of collaborative participation, by representatives from a range of different institutional and practice-based 'angles', including David Andrew and Natasha Christopher from the Wits School of Arts – a formal tertiary educational institution; John Fleetwood, director of the Market Photo Workshop, a school of photography and space for cultural exchange and production, Terry Kurgan, an independent artist; and myself, representing the Goethe-Institut – each bringing our own area of expertise and set of questions to the table. Also worth noting is the fact that discussions and issues raised during this process resulted in the members of the collaboration feeding back and informing discussions in their respective learning environments, to their students and colleagues, and in their professional practice.

The culture of participation is one of the key themes for the Goethe-Institut's engagement in the field of cultural exchange. This focus considers the capacity of artistic approaches to the processes of shaping and envisioning the future; and seeks to enhance participation in social and political processes via artistic means. Photography plays a crucial role in the way we see and perceive each other. In a world that seems more and more dominated by images, the ability not only to produce,

but also to read and question photography has become a necessary skill. Participatory photographic projects enable us to deconstruct the images that surround us, and also to explore and introduce other kinds of narratives.

As an institution that supports – financially and creatively – projects of this nature, the concept of participation, as explored in *Wide Angle*, therefore took on added significance for us.

For the Goethe-Institut – as initiator, funder, as well as partner and participant in *Wide Angle*, the colloquium was an important step towards questioning and shaping our own terms of engagement with the projects we undertake as partners.



As the then head of the newly formed Department of Culture and Development in sub-Saharan Africa at the Goethe-Institut, based in the regional office in Johannesburg, it was important to explore the role that the Goethe-Institut plays as partner and funder in these negotiated processes. Through such reflection we hoped to be better able to critically analyse both our own choices and the constraints inherent to involving ourselves in participatory projects and processes.

Participatory photographic projects have become a popular approach to engaging public practice over the last decade. They have often involved low-tech disposable cameras being given to participants to document aspects of their lives, framed and guided by an artist, activist or educationalist, and usually under the auspices of well-meaning intentions. Political activism and the language of empowerment or development have frequently played a strong role in outlining these processes. Images emerging out of such projects regularly form part of advocacy campaigns bringing visibility or voice to marginalised groups, or representing the engagement of development agencies themselves. Whilst from an artistic, scientific and social research point of view there have been interesting and challenging outcomes, there have also been equally challenging questions that have presented themselves with regards to the ethics, contextualisation and power relations enacted in many of these 'participatory' projects.

Some of the questions that have required critical thought and engagement include interrogating the means of exchange amongst all players in a project: what, for example, is the currency of the negotiated exchange, and does it have a social, cultural or economic value? What are each player's projected needs and desires? This is an exchange that concerns all parties involved: from the funders/partners (the Goethe-Institut prefers to identify itself in projects as a conceptual partner, rather than merely as a funder), to the initiators of a project, to participants. Each party has its own agenda and expectations.

Other considerations to explore include: questions of value and power – does 'giving' to a community assume one-way power relations and value? Who does the 'giving' ultimately serve? Who gives and who owns? How is the original vision of a project impacted by funding negotiations – conceptually,

Naadira Patel / Colleen Wafer
2011

Wide Angle: Photography as Public Practice symposium, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
© Naadira Patel & Colleen Wafer



narratively and aesthetically? Who questions and who answers? Who ultimately directs and authors the project, and who is its audience? And where does the process end? Participatory processes do not easily fit into funding cycles and project targets. The Goethe-Institut's role therefore needs to be navigated with care and clarity – we constantly need to balance our own mandates and institutional programme objectives with sensitivity to the needs and objectives of our project partners and the processes unleashed.

This publication provides examples of projects that have managed to open up spaces for interaction – with and in-between different individuals, communities, audiences and cultures. A constant reflection on the ways we see and perceive each other – within institutions and as individuals – is crucial to creating productive cultural dialogue and exchange. The interdisciplinary approach of *Wide Angle*, which has encompassed artists, social scientists, cultural activists, international agencies and public participation, has provided us with an important forum and laboratory as a base upon which to build the Goethe-Institut's future engagements.

**Ethical riddles, linear
agendas and assumed
positions: A perspective on
participatory photography
projects from the Market
Photo Workshop**

The Market Photo Workshop was founded in 1989 to broaden access to photography training primarily among black South Africans, but also with the clear and allied goal of giving young people from all race groups in the country an opportunity to gain better understanding of each other.



Tracing Territories_Makweteng Heritage Project exhibition in Newtown Park, Johannesburg
© Market Photo Workshop



Jacklynne Hobbs (JH)

¹ See for example, the Makweteng Heritage Project (images above and below)

Courses in photography and visual literacy were, and remain, the mainstay of the school. Alongside these, however, the Photo Workshop has for more than a decade been training students to work on participatory photography projects.¹ Efforts in this regard have stemmed from an awareness that communities at the furthestmost remove from social and economic power in South Africa remain largely excluded from meaningful interaction with photography. Constraints on time, mobility, finances, and perhaps imagination, raise the odds against a sex worker, a street photographer, someone from a rural area walking through the doors of an educational institution that teaches photography – even the doors of the Photo Workshop. Clearly, the net needs to be cast wider, particularly at a time when digital proliferation has recast the meaning and significance of the photographic image in such dramatic fashion.

If participatory photography projects are a creative response to this situation, they are also replete with challenges. Here, Photo Workshop Head John Fleetwood speaks to Jacklynne Hobbs about the opportunities and obstacles encountered by those who plan, fund and collaborate in participatory initiatives undertaken by the school.

John Fleetwood (JF)

Perhaps a good starting point for this discussion would be a review of how participatory photography projects get underway at the Photo Workshop. For all that these initiatives speak to notions of communality, it's often a single, highly motivated individual who is the impetus for a project – even in the collaborative setting of the school. What is important to keep in mind from the outset is that the energy and focus of this individual comes bundled with a range of different – and sometimes conflicting – agendas.

JH I think it is really important to foreground positions and intentions inherent to how a project often comes into being. And that is an initiator or a project manager has an idea that sets in motion this kind of project. The idea is considered and developed, and the moment then comes when this person or institution goes in search of possible funding.

This, I think, sets up a power relationship between an initiator and funder in relation to the eventual participants. I think

what happens here is that the initiator or project manager starts to consider their role in terms of future projects. There's an alignment of current and future objectives that plays out in the mind of the initiator: "If this project is successful, this funder might support me in future". And that's quite important, because often you would get project initiators that are career project managers, and they have to consider the longevity of themselves in their own careers.

I think sometimes individuals in funding agencies also have very particular scorecards and goals that need to be met. They want to achieve something that instils their own vision into the understanding of an organisation, which enables them also to move forward in their careers. I think those goals are important because they can be helpful in moving projects forward and in building sustained support for participatory initiatives. But, they also shape the project in a way that can sometimes – at least in the initial stages – have more to do with their own personal and institutional aspirations perhaps, than the essential requirements of the project.

JF All of this plays out in the larger sphere of development aid where relations between donors and recipients are typically presented as partnerships or collaborations. This doubtless forms part of an attempt by funders to address a history of often fraught interactions with aid recipients – but it is somewhat at odds with the foregrounding of positions you mentioned earlier. I sometimes take issue with this terminology, with funders that call themselves collaborators or partners. I think the term collaborator becomes ambiguous when there is no integration of intention, or of working process.

Participatory projects evolve in different ways. Sometimes people become collaborators, sometimes participants, sometimes equals, and then at the other extreme there may be a very strong hierarchy that exists. We need to understand that these different roles and positions of power should be (preferably) quite conscious and transparent, and not prevent the project from realising its aims.

Insisting that we are collaborators and partners ties the project manager to a particular mode of interaction that might

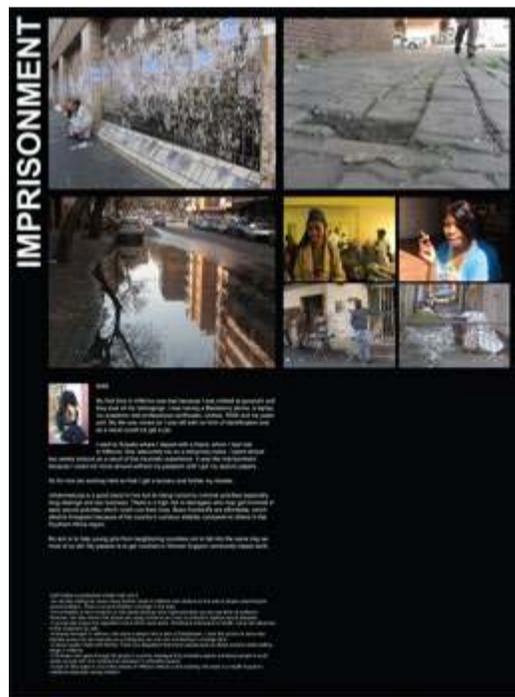
not be sustainable by the funder, and can be disappointing to the participants in a project.

JH To what extent is it necessary – or feasible – to raise these agendas and power dynamics with project participants?

JF I think this is probably one of the most complicated issues within a project. You want to have engagement and transparency, so yes, you have to give some indication of how each party in the process benefits, why they benefit and how they benefit: the project manager, the funder, the participants. The question would be how upfront are you? To what degree? Do you for just one instance share details of something like the entire budget? Ultimately, my feeling is that while everything should be as upfront as possible, one's approach should be sensitive and adjust in relation to the conditions and publics participating in each project.

Also, there should be a contract between the participants and the project manager that clearly outlines what can and can't be expected with respect to hoped-for benefits. These things need to be argued in a transparent, thorough and vigorous way, bearing in mind that what people believe to be fair at the beginning of the project might not necessarily be perceived as fair towards the end, because their expectations of the initiative might change as the project unfolds.

Essentially, there is an ethical riddle at the heart of every participatory project that relates to those who have power addressing those in a situation of relative powerlessness. I think it helps to solve the ethical riddle if we are aware of this and understand that an agreement or contract is not developed from a place of arrogance, but rather from a place of awareness of some common project goals.



Poster from the Working the City project
© Market Photo Workshop

JH So a variety of goals are at play at the inception of a project. How is this reflected in the way that participatory initiatives are structured and implemented?

JF Once the project manager or initiator has reached alignment and agreement with the funder, there is typically a very particular, linear agenda drawn up that for various reasons – in terms



of governance and funds – we have to stick to. To a large extent, this agenda fixes the scope and the outcomes of a project in a manner that challenges ideas of democratic participation, or of any spontaneous deviation from a set path. But the well planned linear agenda is also the most logical route to a successful project outcome, desired by initiator and funder alike.

I want to add though that a project should also have the right to fail. The project organisers should be able to say: “Looking at what was initially intended, we have found, through our working process, that actually this initiative is not going to work”.

I think such a failure, if it must be described as such, can be mitigated through careful project design: setting several smaller goals for the initiative that are real achievables alongside a larger, ambitious goal that may not prove workable. Without suggesting that shortcomings in a project should be rationalised, it must be remembered that there is not only one outcome for a participant in a project.

Participants might not necessarily learn a particular skill that was part of our intention to teach. But their experience, in any event, may shift their understanding in a creative and productive way.

JH The Photo Workshop tries to break with the prescriptive power of the linear agenda in various ways. For instance, you typically bring an organisation (other than funders) on board a project that has acknowledged expertise in the social trends at issue, to ensure a diversity of viewpoints. You also understand the power of a skilled facilitator.

JF Absolutely. The facilitator needs to know when to be assertive about the direction of a project, and when to step away, take a back seat and allow different forces and different energies to move to the centre. It’s kind of hands-on, hands-off.

Also, the agenda needs to be revisited on an ongoing basis. We have to go back and ask: Has it worked? Should we make shifts? You need to have a very good understanding of where people are at during all points of the process and of where they think they are headed.

JH What happens, though, when matters really go off track and participants want to depart from the agenda in a significant way?

JF In these moments one has to ask new questions and find ways to move around the impasses, and you have to respect the voices of the participants.

An example of such a situation would be the project *Working the City* – a project that we did with sex workers in Hillbrow, in collaboration with the African Centre for Migration & Society and the Sisonke Sex Worker Movement. There was an understanding with participants that an exhibition of images produced would be staged at the end of the project. So we dealt with issues around anonymity and confidentiality of subject matter right at the beginning of the initiative.

But as the project drew to a close and we prepared to design and print posters for the exhibition, participants suddenly realised the magnitude of exposure that goes with a public project, and were very hesitant to move forward at that particular point around certain images.

This was very problematic. But it's also necessary to understand that agency is one part of what most of these projects hope to achieve. And the moment when people really take up that agency might be counter-productive for the project and the outcome of the project. We edited the photographs further and many photographs we had hoped to make public were in the end not shown through a decision making process that the sex

JH workers took themselves. This is probably the most valuable lesson that I think we've learned in such projects: that what we want is not really what we want; yet that is also what we want.

JF The Photo Workshop constantly grapples with the issue of inadequate language skills as an obstacle to agency among students. This is also a problem within projects.

I don't think that sufficient thought is really given to the matter of language in the context of projects, and how teaching and learning are often compromised through misunderstandings of language. With the often marginalised groups that we work with, it's a real challenge for many participants to understand

English – not to mention complicated terminology that talks about point of view and vantage point and other formal and visual concepts. Language can be a critical barrier to the movement of people from the periphery to the centre.

So we need to be mindful of this fact and design processes that do not embarrass people who do not fully understand the language of the project, and enable them to express this, and to become more assertive, to become more articulate in terms of their own language and needs.

JH What we also need to mention is that there is traditionally a second group of participants in a Photo Workshop project: students at the school and alumni that are offered the chance of involvement in these initiatives as photographers, and also as training and facilitation assistants.

JF What we hope to do is to expose students to the world out there, to particular aspects of this world that will give them some kind of depth of experience – a better understanding of how society operates.

I thoroughly believe that by meeting people and having to deal with them, stereotypes are broken down. Of course,



*Tracing Territories_Makweteng
Heritage Project Exhibition at the
Photo Workshop gallery*
© Market Photo Workshop



students may also have their stereotypes reinforced; but at the very least a debate on a potentially delicate issue will have been generated in a controlled manner.

JH And what is the experience of participants with the inclusion of students in projects?

JF Well, in the case of the project with sex workers, there might have been a presumption (by the sex workers) that the students might view them in the negative light they are sometimes viewed – in other words, how most of the world sees them – and those perceptions would have been adjusted by them learning about how some of the students really see or understand them. The students of course would largely gain this understanding through the work they conduct together on the project.

What I have always found amazing is that our students are truly quite diverse. They don't have one position. And therefore this multiplicity of positions is thrown into the mix of all the participants in a project, and everyone has to respond to this multiplicity. I think that there are gains for both sides to learn from each other around what is real, what is truth, what is really out there – and what is perception. This forms part of the larger aims of all projects conducted by the Photo Workshop.

On the one hand, what we bring is a sense of some hard-core skills around photography: not skills that will enable people to go out and earn a living as a photographer necessarily, but a coherent sense of the mechanics of photography.

On the other hand, we bring critical skill that enables people to evaluate their society and find a position for themselves within their world.

And that is really the skill that they might want to learn, that enables them to go and study something else. It opens the door.

JH In closing, I'd like to turn for a moment to the images that are produced during a project. You've identified a trend in images which typically emerge from these initiatives that you term the "aesthetic of the mundane"...

- JF** There is an expectation in a project of the aesthetic of the everyday: an aesthetic of images that at surface level might appear to have no particular meaning, but might hold great importance for the photographer. Somehow the photograph's importance or power is unlocked by understanding why the participant made that image, rather than looking at a photograph as a two-dimensional object.
- JH** It occurs to me that complications may arise when the aesthetic of the mundane is not, in fact, in evidence – that is, when participants produce photographs that are unexpectedly graphic perhaps, or simply obscure. Such images might not easily lend themselves to illustration of project evaluations or funder materials.
- JF** The difficulty with photography is that it is a subjective tool, and that as much as we all have our own sense of what a project should produce in the end, it needs to find its own expression through the images that are made.
- Often the outcomes are not described in terms of aesthetics. They might be described in terms of social or political issues. So the outcome is not: "Give us 30 photographs that are beautiful". It is much more: "Give us 30 photographs that have got meaning in terms of a particular group of people and their reality". I think this sets up a particular relationship which quite clearly underlines the fact that these projects are driven more by socio-economic narratives than by aesthetic, art project related imperatives.

Relational politics: Zen Marie and Terry Kurgan in conversation, June 2012

Zen Marie The ideas that frame my interest in *Hotel Yeoville* are collaborative processes of working, and working in the city. Johannesburg has hosted many projects that engage with urban spaces in a variety of ways. Friends from Cape Town often joke, “Why do you guys do so much work in the city. Do you ever see us working with Table Mountain”? The idea of engaging with your environment as the prioritised framework is for some reason really strong in Johannesburg. What do you think this impulse to work in the city is about? Why do public, site-specific work?

Terry Kurgan Well I think these sorts of practices have proliferated around the world for the past fifteen years or so. Perhaps firstly as part of a contemporary art continuum that is always asking questions about what art *is* or *can be*. And then in response to shifting social and political realities in different parts of the world. For me, it’s never just about the city. It’s always about making public work or work in and about the city that interacts with private life. I suppose you could say I use the city and public space as part of my process and medium? Njabulo Ndebele writes about this. In a passionate essay called ‘Thinking of Brenda’, he talks about the art of the late South African pop icon Brenda Fassie, but much more about the significance of her highly publicised and sensational private life, which spilled out all over the place and attracted more media attention than her music. He thought that what Brenda did was radical, brave and important, and his essay is about the necessity for all of us to pour “personal feeling and thinking into the public domain” in order to create a more human and trusting “public home”.

I was fascinated by the open parliamentary hearings that were held in 1997 in relation to overturning the abortion laws. Those were such heady, optimistic days. We had this great constitution and everyone was feeling very up about what might

be possible in the new civil society we were building. I attended most of the hearings and followed the press. An incredible and unusual public conversation ensued about very personal stuff relating to women's bodies and pregnancy, but also to sex and rape and personal lives. Many people had something to say. So in relation to your question, why engage with the city, with participatory public art projects? I suppose my interest is always in the tension between the public and private realms, in public culture versus private experience. The best and most interesting art often has to do with incredibly small personal dramas and intimate experience that have repercussion in much bigger political, moral and public spheres.

ZM The first time we met, you kept apologising for the nostalgic elements in the project, for a kind of 'changing the world' agenda. That's what you called it, you said, "this is not a project that's trying to change the world".

TK Nostalgic? Did I say that? About changing the world though, I probably said that because all the way through the project I felt a tension between social and aesthetic narratives, and between what I knew I wanted from the project and what other people seemed to want from the project. It bothered me that because the project engaged with social and human rights issues and had some good intentions, it was judged or evaluated only on those grounds, and never on aesthetic grounds. I was making the project as an artist, not as a social worker or political activist.

ZM But what's wrong with social work?

TK Nothing, in and of itself. But that's not my business. And not what I was doing here. I wanted the project, principally, to engage ideas of collaborative contemporary art practice and representation, and what photographs, and images mean, and can do, once they are out in the world. And also, the possibility and potential of private lives being given a public stage. I remember seeing a piece in the *Mail & Guardian* arts section headed 'If there's one thing you have to do this week'. They had an interesting blurb on the project, but I probably only paid attention to

ZM the part that I didn't like. They said "you have to drop in on the 'feel good' *Hotel Yeoville* project". It did have a feel good aspect to it, but that was deliberate and for many carefully considered reasons, and I didn't want that to be the defining way the project was experienced or seen.

TK In relation to a lot of other South African art, especially under apartheid, you talk about your generation coming a bit before mine. That generation grew up through apartheid and produced very confrontational, provocative, maybe even masculine work. So it's not about feelings or intimacy. It's about bigger political issues, it's very serious. From the Bang Bang Club to Sue Williamson and Kendell Geers. They are all very hardcore. I think, relative to that, your work has a *softer* edge.

ZM Were you going to say 'feminine'? Women are always stereotyped as being able to talk about personal stuff, and how they feel. But maybe that's what it is. My work is not cool in temperature. It's warm in temperature. And I think South Africans still have a really hard time with that.

I was asked the question, in the middle of *Hotel Yeoville's* run, "Why do you make work like this"? This was an artist colleague who has a dedicated studio practice, and who only ever makes work for gallery projects and seems to have this very calm, much easier to contain and control, everyday life. It was during the hardest time of our project. We had some difficult technical and practical problems. The roof of the library was leaking badly, all over our installation, and I just couldn't find my way through the public works systems to somebody who actually cared.

But, going back to the macho white public arts approach, are you saying that this sort of project isn't a confident, macho, strident project by contrast?

TK Yes, I think it's not on many levels. It was never permanent. It's about something ephemeral, it's about narratives. There's a fleetingness to the project that sets it up as different. And there's a general tone in its set up, which is different even to some of the work that you've done with Jo Ractliffe that is much



Terry Kurgan
2007
Original inspiration: community noticeboard outside the Shoprite supermarket, corner Bedford and Rokeby Streets, Yeoville.
© Terry Kurgan

harder-edged. I'm crudely simplifying these things... I know what you mean. The project was pink, warm, inclusive and happy. But this was a deliberate and self-conscious frame that we made, in an attempt to create distance – a poetic distance – from politics, and to free the work from the repetitive, abstract and looping way that the media represents xenophobic violence. We were very consciously framing *Hotel Yeoville* as a utopian or idealised space.

But then there are other reasons for the tone. One is my personality, and we know I have my early childhood to blame for that. The dynamics in my particular family have made me someone who really needs to engage with other people. I'm gregarious. I find studio practice quite lonely. I do that as well,

but I need to combine it with working with other people in relation to social issues and public spaces that are not part of my everyday life in a leafy Johannesburg suburb. I like meeting new people and talking to them about their lives, finding out something about what drives them.

I fall in love with people easily. My projects usually enable quite personal conversations. Public issues and private lives, I suppose that's me. Looking at what can and can't be said in the public realm. And then pushing at the boundaries.

ZM It seems always to come back to a very personal set of impulses and I see that I am trying to push towards a more political reading. Is it that clear for you, that it's not a political project?

TK It is *also* a political project, would be a better way to put it. There are aesthetic, social and political issues at stake. I think I often work with this tension. The political issues are to do with South Africa's utter lack of hospitality to people coming to live here from other countries, usually because they have to, and not because they want to. And they come here with jobs and skills and we should make it easier for them. Also a project like this, really, is to do with that well-worn but still very expressive cliché, that the personal *is* political.

ZM The more you say that this isn't about changing the world, the more I start to think that if you compare the success of *Hotel Yeoville* to the government's official initiatives on immigration and xenophobia, quite possibly you could find a space that argues that this project *does* change something, not the world, but a particular dynamic with a very small group. It's not national in scale and scope and it's not pretending to effect change but it is inserting a set of ideas and processes into a community.

TK It's responding to a political and social situation that I think is going nowhere. When I walked around the suburb of Yeoville and saw educated people unable to use their qualifications or professions, and successful businesses where South Africans were even being employed by foreigners, I thought, Jesus, how can we do something about this? There's that impulse – how

can I use what I do to engage with these issues in an interesting and unusual way? But it needed also to meet my needs and interests as an artist and connect to threads and concerns that preoccupy me anyway.

My original ambition was to leave the resources and social networking aspect of the project behind and for it to take off and take care of itself, and if I had been able to attract or leverage the right business interest I would have tried to turn it into a real-life, small business project like I did in Joubert Park with the photographers. One of my urban planning colleagues developed a feasibility study and business plan for *Hotel Yeoville*. So I suppose there is a part of me that tries to effect change and make things better. With the *Joubert Park Project*, the first Johannesburg public art project that I did, as much as it was an artist's work, an interpretation and response to the economy and culture of the park, so too was it a good small business idea. Had I not had my own financial imperatives and work to get on with, I might have pushed it as I was being encouraged to do by many people. I could have turned it into some kind of good small business idea for other people, but that's not what I want to do.

ZM How does working through the framework of contemporary art – 'fine art', however you want to define it – change projects that could be considered social work, community activism etc? Does the prism of fine art contribute any benefit to that process?

TK Well, I think the context, objectives and audiences of these different sorts of projects (i.e. art and social work/activism) are completely different. I felt that my particular project was about trying to start and hold a conversation with several communities, or circles, or groups of people at the same time. And one of those was very definitely an art world audience. But if I understand you correctly, you're asking me whether 'the art project' benefits the community or social/public context into which it is projected?

I think this is complicated terrain, if that's a general question about participatory public art projects. Some do and some don't. There are always questions of power and legitimacy and who wants what, that circulate all the time. I know that with

Hotel Yeoville, I tried to do both things at the same time, working with the notion of culture as infrastructure. While the project ran, its value as a *thing in the world*, oscillated all the time between questions of aesthetic autonomy and socio-political potential. I noticed, during our run, that the part of the project, after the photo and video booths, that people liked best, was the business booth – a classifieds, directory and resources centre. It was my sense that a large number of South Africans and immigrants using our project wanted it to be able to improve their lives. In simple and practical ways. A sort of ‘help me get on with my life desk’. I bump into people all the time, in Yeoville and elsewhere, who tell me how sorry they are that the installation in the library is closed. They are really puzzled by this. And I suppose that does answer your question in a way. I really wanted to leave the useful resource aspect of the project behind to sustain itself, and turn *Hotel Yeoville* from an art project into a small business idea, but keeping the art project intact. I really tried hard to do this.

ZM It’s clear how this project can work, or be misinterpreted, as community activism, just in the manifestation of it in the site, and in people’s responses to it. Is it problematic that they don’t respond to it as an artwork? I suppose I am being presumptuous in saying that they don’t. But there’s seemingly a gap between this as an artwork and this as a point of engagement with the community. The community probably appreciated it as a point of engagement and a facility to give a human space in a very difficult context. They didn’t see it as art. Maybe it’s a question of to what extent they do see it as art.

TK I think our visitors and participants saw the project as something curious, something interesting, helpful and definitely fun. In their own interests. They loved the digital interactive technology and hospitable environment we had built. There were many messages left behind in the space that record pleasure at being ‘seen’, at being able to put something out there in the company of like-minded others. In fact the messages became a little embarrassing in their praise of the project. We really wanted a blunter-edged reflection at times. But I think you’re right.

They didn't see it as an artwork. But very complicated issues arise when you try and embed your practice in a social context through a collaborative or reciprocal relationship to that site. It does not necessarily make everyone and everything equal. I kept thinking that this participatory art project was doing one thing within this suburb, and another amongst those who understood the language of this sort of practice.

ZM Then when it's manifested in the book, through the design, through the choice of Fourthwall Books as publishers, it situates itself as artwork. What is the aim of the book?

TK The book is the place where all of this work, these many products and processes, are interpreted and reframed and seen alongside and in relation to each other. And where a particular approach to participatory public art practice is articulated. I can see much more clearly now, while putting the book together, that the project had two distinct parts to it. The first part was an elaborate, participatory process and 'object' that we made, in relation to a research process, in order to gather material and images to make the second part. The first part of the work and the complex social interactions and experiences leading to its production 'belonged' – if I can put it like that – to all collaborators and participants. And the second part of the work, representing and reinterpreting it in this book, or for exhibition elsewhere, belongs to me. One example helps here: one of the most interesting outcomes of the project, and only really visible when looking at everything en masse and in retrospect, was the relationship between the platforms we used and identity performance. It was very interesting in this context, to sort through and edit hundreds and thousands of photographs in which almost everyone was performing a version of themselves. There were so many mini-celebrities, with AKA aliases, *doing* TV. There is a very distinct way of performing oneself to the world for social media platforms and this really interested me because of how it connected to my interest in performance in relation to photography. And so the book is where some of this material is reframed to tell another story. The project was so many research processes that informed the making of something. And then the thing we made produced new research all over again.

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The Miss Yeoville 2010 organisers used *Hotel Yeoville's* Video and Photo Booths as part of the competition process.

Poster © Mercier Design

- ZM** The question of ownership is a potentially contentious one. It could be argued that artists (as well as NGOs or activists) who ‘rely’ on sickness, poverty or social issues, make their living on the backs of this suffering. How would you respond to this critique?
- TK** I think that really depends upon one’s means of exchange. Immigrant residents of Yeoville are of an entrepreneurial bent and, given the barriers to their participation in South African society, are driven by some urgent economic imperatives. People often interacted with me (and my team) in terms such as: “Okay, this is very nice, but what’s in it for me”? I had to think about that a lot. The British artist Phil Collins is always a tourist in the space of ‘the other’, just the way we were in Yeoville. But he is always very clear about his means of exchange and hires and pays people for their participation in his projects so that the products are unequivocally his. I am thinking, for example, of a video installation he made with Palestinian teenagers in Ramallah, called *They Shoot Horses*, for which he paid nine kids to dance continuously to pop music for eight hours. Francis Alÿs is another artist who works collaboratively in public space with others. For a work called *When Faith Moves Mountains* he paid 500 people to move a sand dune a few centimetres, which process he documented and then presented in galleries. I have read that he considered these participants to be the executors, but not the authors of his work.

In terms of our project, participants took a duplicate set of their photographs (made and printed in the photobooth) away with them. They also had online access to everything they produced and uploaded to our site. They contributed to and made use of a growing neighbourhood directory. There was a spirit of reciprocity to the project, but I never felt as though there was an equal distribution of agency. In a recent post on the culture/technology/digital arts website *Vague Terrain*, the blogger Jaenine Parkinson writes in anticipation of the publication of Claire Bishop’s new book, *Artificial hells: Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*:

Participation is not an end in itself, instead it delivers a messy knot of concerns including asking questions about who can be involved, in what ways, under which circumstances, and at whose expense.

This sums it up very well for me.

ZM You do talk about the research process. It's foregrounded in your methodology that this is about research.

TK It is how I come to a project of this nature. I start somewhere with no clear idea of where I might end up and it goes along with a great deal of self-doubt and uncertainty. That's my process, but again, also probably my personality. I'm inspired by muf, an all-women art and architectural practice based in London. They do fantastic projects in relation to unusual research processes, like one in which they bring sheep and meadows to a terribly glum housing estate in London. A chapter called 'Room for doubt' in a monograph about their practice has only one paragraph that goes like this:

In English there is a phrase, 'room for doubt', meaning that there are some questions that do not have a 'yes' or 'no' answer and that there is a space of doubt, of questioning. I think for us success can be measured in the confidence we have not to give a simple answer but to give space for that uncertainty.

This really resonates with me, especially as I do the reflection that is necessary for putting together this book.

ZM muf putting sheep in a housing estate – it's a provocation!

TK I think that had you seen the project in its context in the Yeoville neighbourhood, rather than in documentation only, you would have found it to be a provocation in much the same way. It was warm, hospitable, pink and glowing in the middle of some very tough and contested urban terrain. Most immediately, the library staff resented it being there in the middle of their space. I tried really hard to win and charm them over, and make them

feel as though they owned it, but they minded the extra crowds and upbeat energy it brought into their space and it disturbed their lethargy and equilibrium. I also think they had their own very definite views on a project that tried to get South Africans and foreigners talking to each other about personal life experience. It was very depressing to see them inhabit this brand new library space with so little enthusiasm or initiative. I think this is part and parcel of public service culture in South Africa at present. Maybe, if we had been able to put it in a shop front, which is where we wanted to put it, it would have been more of a provocation in your terms. We wanted to put it on the street, but we couldn't afford to. The library, with its dedicated exhibition space, hanging over the street in the middle of the busy shopping hub was in certain ways a compromise solution.

ZM How do you develop that provocative edge when your medium is people's stories?

TK Well, I think perhaps we did. If you think about the social and political context in which we made this project, then a warm, pink Photo Booth portrait of a 35-year-old Nigerian man cuddling his beaded and braided three-year-old daughter, annotated with the wish that when she grows up she will read and use the library, that is provocative, don't you think?

'Same time' – Photographic practices in the inner city

The term 'same-time' is used to describe the practice of the large group of photographers working out of Joubert Park in the inner city of Johannesburg, and describes their ability, by using portable digital photo printers, to instantly print and deliver the photographs they shoot of their clients.

The Wide Angle colloquium in March 2011 included a day of field trips led by a range of 'guides' or 'brokers' working in the fields of art, performance, photography and architecture. Forum participants were able to choose from six different walking tours that explored and interacted with the various photographic practices and services on offer, and all conducted, within the densely populated precinct surrounding Joubert Park. These included the park photographers, ID and passport photographers, print shops and photo studios. Each field trip followed the paths of people who generate images for different purposes in the city where each location, route and intersection produces its distinct rhythms, rules, networks, and imaginings.

'Same Time' was developed by Dorothee Kreutzfeldt for *Wide Angle*, in collaboration with Donna Kukama, Nhlanhla Mngadi, Emeka Udemba, Hannah Le Roux with BAS (Honours) students, Lungie Photographers, Oscar Khumalo, Nkosiyabo Ndlovu and Rita Potenza.

FIELD TRIP 1

Delvers Street with Hannah le Roux

This walk followed an urban line, and unfolded it at points. Delvers is a one-kilometre long North-South street. The walk directed participants straight down the street, between the Ethiopian area at Bree Street, to where it peters out into vacant land near Faraday Station, via the so-called Fashion District, the ABSA precinct, social housing, Albert Street and industrial zones, representing a cross-section through the city's diversity.

The mission

This linear exploration of change was to be punctuated with documentation of places that participants come across en route, where they would stop to take multiple images that explore and unfold the space around particular station points. After returning by taxi to the Johannesburg Art Gallery, participants would then print out these clusters of images and assemble them as scaled collages laid out along a line. The intention in making this collective work was to create a narrative of the city both bigger and smaller than the scales that architects and urban designers often focus on. It crossed at least four precincts that have been ghettoised by design or by neglect, and at the same time opened up and amplified the sheer effort through which people make place for themselves across such boundaries. All in all it intended to provide an image of the street grounded in use, rather than ownership, legislation or investment.

Hannah le Roux works in Johannesburg at the University of the Witwatersrand, and practices, curates and writes about architecture. Her doctoral thesis, *Lived Modernism*, is based on the observation of the change over time of modernist spaces, and proposes and maps designerly practices that could catalyse the social appropriation of space.

FIELD TRIP 1 Craig Heath



FIELD TRIP 2

Market Tour with Emeka Udemba and Lungi Photographers

The mission

This team set out to investigate visual elements in the process of continuous transformation within the urban space, as well as to explore how images and signs evoke urban and social realities. Their working strategy was to sieve through the various competing interests and vistas that make up that space. The walk began in Joubert Park and moved along to Lungi's residence in Hillbrow, then followed street markets in Twist Street, Noord Street, De Villiers Street to Park Station and back to Joubert Park (Wanderers Street and Klein Street, ending at King George Street). During the course of the walk, photographs would be taken at strategic corners, interacting with what was on offer.

Emeka Udemba is an artist who lives and works in Germany and Nigeria. In his recent works Udemba investigates public space not just as a creative zone but as spaces of transformation, interaction, discourse and conflict. *Lungi* is based in Joubert Park and works as a portrait photographer, while selling 'same time' photographic print machines and other related merchandise.

FIELD TRIP 2 Gideon Mendel



FIELD TRIP 3

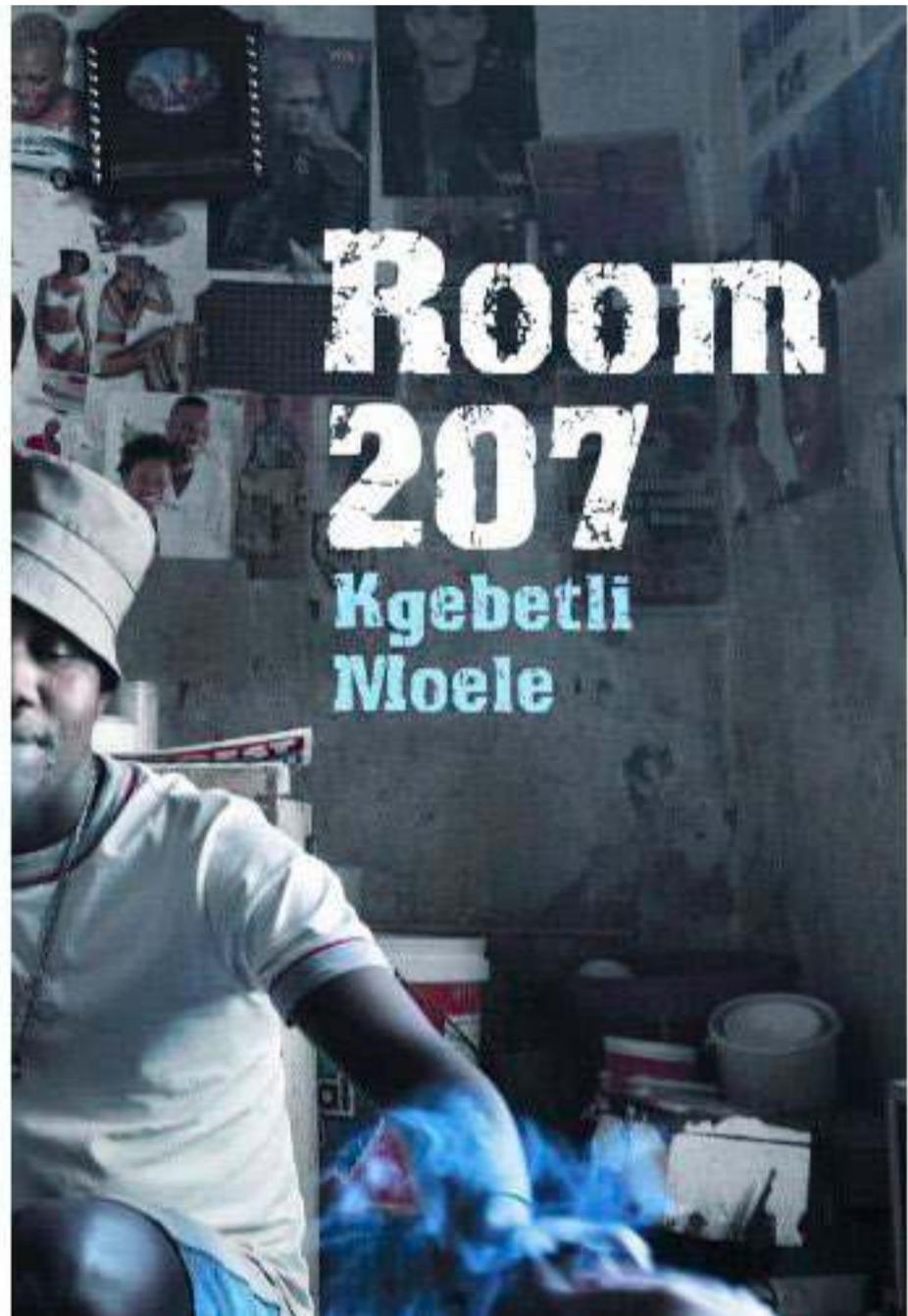
Room 207 Tour with Donna Kukama and Nicoh Vundla

The mission

The tour was designed to use Kgebetli Moele's novel, *Room 207*, as a starting point, and as a lens through which to experience Hillbrow (a suburb of Johannesburg's inner city) – a book based on the lives of six young men sharing an apartment in Hillbrow, and which provides descriptive portraits of the characters and their lifestyles. It is this imagery that the walk set out to recreate during a tour past informal street corner businesses, print shops, a boxing gym, an ID studio, interior spaces, and a bar, amongst other accidental discoveries en route. The tour would begin with negotiations to purchase or borrow existing images from park photographers in Joubert Park. The specific images participants would be looking for would be those that they believed most closely resembled the book's main characters. Participants would be encouraged to consider the park photographers' aesthetics, which are interesting not only in relation to how people are portrayed in their images, but the choices that the photographers make when using the Johannesburg Art Gallery and adjacent park as backdrops for a 'Johannesburg experience'. It was this ability to create real images of an imagined city existence that drew Kukama into working with Nicoh and his partner Nkosi Ndlovu. Their route started along Wolmarans Street, up Claim Street, deeper into Hillbrow, past 'The Base' and back to Joubert Park. Photographs would be taken only according to given instructions at particular places. Participants were warned to expect a tour as fast-paced as the book, with long stopovers and moments of detailed imagery, that would function as a way to get closer to the book's narrative and navigate the different 'texts' of Hillbrow.

Donna Kukama is a practicing performance, sound and video artist. She has participated in numerous exhibitions both locally and internationally, and is currently based in Johannesburg. **Nicoh Vundla** is a portrait photographer based in Joubert Park.

FIELD TRIP 3 Kgebetli Moele



FIELD TRIP 4

The Souvenir Tour with Rita Potenza

The mission

The Souvenir Tour encompassed two old photo studios in the city centre and a picture framing and print business in Jeppestown. The proprietors, customers and premises were all considered of interest from a cultural, religious and political perspective, historically and in the city today. The route meandered from the Johannesburg Art Gallery along Jeppe and Troye Streets, and met up with Main Street, where a taxi transported participants to the multi-tiered framing shop.

Rita Potenza freelances as a picture researcher, working across different genres of photography, with a special focus on social documentary. She teaches at the Market Photo Workshop and drives a great car.

FIELD TRIP 4 David Mohale



FIELD TRIP 5

Point of View/Different Reality with Nhlanhla Mngadi

We all engage the city from our own personal point of view; even the realities that are foisted upon us we interpret in our own way. However we interact with the given, or whatever we seek out, our approaches remain very subjective, whether concerning self-portraits, religious figures, videos (of gospel singers, Nollywood, mainstream or pornographic movies), political figures, down to the kinds of hairstyles we want.

The mission

The route for this walk was designed to be circular, starting east of Joubert Park, towards the Doornfontein train station – where the followers of the Shembe faith usually gather on Saturdays for prayer, worship, social exchange and collective meals, and where there is also the sale of various church paraphernalia, including photographs of church leaders and holy places. The tour then proceeded past several churches, nightclubs, hair salons, markets and street photographers. The intention was to explore how photographic practices define signage, and to take a look at the many products on sale, to consider how religious, erotic, 'Western' and 'African' images intermingle in the everyday. From the Doornfontein side, the fieldtrip then moved back towards Joubert Park, via the historic Drill Hall, cutting through the Noord Street taxi rank, engaging different aesthetics, codes and practices, such as the sales of pirated DVDs and the display and marketing of different hairdos that enable prospective customers to make their choices.

Nhlanhla Mngadi freelances in the field of photography, music, journalism and film. He trained at the Market Photo Workshop, and subsequently worked as a photographer and picture researcher contributing to different magazines and agencies, including *New Age*, *Move* magazine, *PictureNET Africa* and *Chimurenga*. He is currently working on an archival project on traditional healers and diviners.

FIELD TRIP 5



FIELD TRIP 6

Jeppie Street with Dorothee Kreutzfeldt

This route began with two group portraits directed by a park photographer according to their most ideal setting in the park or (Johannesburg Art) gallery. From there participants would explore the interior Ethiopian and Eritrean markets on Jeppie Street (Africa Mall/Majesty Wholesale), as well as a Chinese-owned digital photo studio where images are often Photoshopped into different backgrounds, for specific purposes and products.

The mission

The idea was to focus on signs/images that call up other real or imagined places, while serving as document, advert, clock or landscape, or decoration. Offering an entry point into the area, filtered by a way of looking at how images and spaces intersect, reveal themselves and disappear – similar to the way in which the movement of goods and people are present/absent/networked – the process would have participants accumulate various pictures and objects, that would serve towards a kind of construct of the tour and themselves, as a here and an elsewhere.

Dorothee Kreutzfeldt lives and works in Johannesburg. She lectures at the Wits School of Arts. Her practice involves painting and collaborations, often across different media and disciplines and with a strong interest in urban space and its contradictions, ironies and socio-political complexities. In 2013 she published the book *Not No Place. Johannesburg – Fragments of Spaces and Times* in collaboration with Bettina Malcomess, a five year book project which extended into workshops, conferences, presentations and exhibitions in different forms, (Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, La Maison Rouge Paris, Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau Dresden, Goethe on Main Johannesburg, ISA Congress of Sociology, Yokohama).

FIELD TRIP 6 Dorothee Kreuzfeldt and Bettina Malcomess



Contributors

David Andrew is Associate Professor and Head, Division of Visual Arts, in the Wits School of Arts. He lectures in Fine Arts and Arts Education courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Current research interests include the tracking of histories of arts education in South Africa and southern Africa more broadly, and a collaborative project mapping arts education policies and practices across the African continent. His most recent one-person exhibition, *Misc: Recovery Room*, was shown at the Standard Bank Gallery in 2009. In 2014 he published 'An aesthetic language for teaching and learning: multimodality and contemporary art practice' in the volume *Multimodal approaches to research and pedagogy: Recognition, resources and access* edited by Arlene Archer and Denise Newfield, published by Routledge.

Jennifer Bajorek writes about literature, philosophy and photography. Her publications include a book on Baudelaire, Marx and Benjamin, *Counterfeit Capital* (Stanford, 2009); translations of Sarah Kofman, Bernard Stiegler and Jacques Derrida; and essays in *Critical Inquiry*, *Diacritics*, *Aperture*, *Autograph ABP* and *History of Photography*. Her current book manuscript, *How to Write a Visual History of Liberation: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in Africa*, was awarded a Creative Capital Arts Writers Grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. She has taught at the University of California, Berkeley, Goldsmiths, Cornell University and Rutgers University and is currently a Research Associate in the University of Johannesburg's Research Centre Visual Identities in Art and Design. In 2013, she co-founded Resolution, a non-profit organisation dedicated to the preservation and promotion of photography and photography collections in Africa: www.resolutionphoto.org.

Vincenzo Cavallo has been working in Africa in the fields of media and culture since 2007. In December 2010 he obtained his PhD in Communication and New Technologies from IULM University. He studied how power dynamics are influencing the development of the Kenyan media landscape, including the production and circulations of media contents such as contemporary music and video productions. He is the co-founder of Cultural Video Foundation, a media NGO based in Nairobi, and of Los Pasos, a video production unit based in Santiago de Chile. He has produced and directed films,

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documentaries and TV series on music and culture in Africa, Latin America and Europe. <https://vincenzocavallo.wordpress.com>

Natasha Christopher is an artist working in photography. She teaches Fine Art at the Wits School of Arts, with a focus on photography. She has won a number of awards, including *The Wits/Everard Read Art Award* and three *ABSA Atelier Merit Awards*. Solo exhibitions include *Mine* (2010) Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg; *It's your picture, but my image* (2005) at the Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg; *River* (2004) at the Substation Gallery, Wits University and *Folly* (2013) at the FADA Gallery, University of Johannesburg and MuseumAfrica (2014). Her recent work explores the use of plant life in Johannesburg as an absurd evocation of the city's socio-political history. Christopher's photographic work consistently evidences her search for intimacy and the personal in all subject matter, whether in the city or the personal domain, keenly considering her position in relation to these subjects, as well as her implicatedness as photographer in the broader power contentions and problematics of photography as a medium.

John Fleetwood is the Head of the Market Photo Workshop (MPW), a school, gallery and project space in Johannesburg. He is also convener for the Joburg Photo Umbrella and an independent curator. MPW runs extended courses and multi-layered public and development programmes that respond to the complex conditions of South African education, culture, and identity within a contemporary understanding of photography, while Fleetwood spearheads the educational and artistic frameworks of the school and gallery. Most recently, he was the co-curator for *A Return to Elsewhere* (Lathigra/Sekgala) (Brighton & Johannesburg, 2014) looking at the construction of communities and photography's factual and fictive modes, as well as *Photoquai 2013: Africa* (Paris, 2013). Fleetwood's key interests are in the developing mode of documentary photography and the possibilities for photography within the aesthetics of advocacy. www.marketphotoworkshop.co.za

Kelly Gillespie is a senior lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). She obtained her PhD from the University of Chicago in 2007 and joined Wits in 2008 as a political and legal anthropologist.

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Her research focuses on the criminal justice system in South Africa, in particular the ways in which criminal justice has become a vector for the continuation of apartheid relations. She also writes about sexualities, race and the teaching of social justice in South Africa. She is a cofounder of the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism (JWTTC) <http://www.jwtc.org.za>, an experimental project based in Johannesburg that seeks to reroute and rethink critical theory through Johannesburg and other places and conversations across the global south.

Brenden Gray is a Johannesburg-based researcher, critic, educator and visual practitioner. He is a graphic design lecturer in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg. He holds a PGCE in Art Education and Applied English Language Studies teaching and a Masters in Fine Arts. As part of his MAFA at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2007/2008, he initiated *Speak English To Me*, a project based in Yeoville, Johannesburg that investigated the dialogical potential of drawing in participants' homes and in public spaces. He has published in various conference proceedings, books and journals, with his research interests centring on arts and design education and dialogical visual practices.

Henrike Grohs is the director of the Goethe-Institut in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. From 2008 to 2013 she worked for the Goethe-Institut in Johannesburg, in the regional office for sub-Saharan Africa, as head of culture and development. She is trained as a social anthropologist, has lived in various countries in Africa working on projects related to arts and culture, and has often co-curated exhibitions on photography. From 2003 to 2008, she was the programme manager for the education department of the Berliner Philharmoniker. She has also taught at the Institute of Art in Context, University of Fine Arts in Berlin (UdK) on cultural mediation and management. Prior to that, she worked as a cultural manager through her agency Next-Intercultural projects for various cultural institutions in and outside of Germany with a focus on arts in education and intercultural exchange, especially for the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin.

Sam Hopkins is an artist whose work orbits around issues of public space and the negotiation of participatory practice.

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Recent projects include Slum TV, a grassroots media initiative that he co-founded in 2006, and Urban Mirror CBO, a group of public space activists, of which he is an active participant. His work also encompasses more lyrical responses to the city, as can be seen by interventions as part of the Usually4 collective and his exhibition in Nairobi, *sketches*. After initially studying History and Spanish in Edinburgh and Cuba, he proceeded to postgraduate studies in Contemporary Art in Oxford and Weimar. He lives and works in Nairobi. <http://www.samhopkins.org>

Stefan Horn works internationally as a freelance curator, project manager, set and exhibition designer and in the field of visual communications. His background and training are in drama and philosophy, sociology and political science, which he studied at the University of Vienna and the Free University of Berlin. Since 2000 he has been the artistic director of the Berlin-based art association, urban dialogues, which engages with all manner of change and flux in relation to urban issues through site-specific and community-based art projects and urban interventions. Horn's latest commissions have been from the German National Theatre in Weimar, National Gallery – Baden-Baden, Academy of Arts, Berlin; House of World Cultures, Berlin and Sparda-Bank Art Foundation in Stuttgart. He has initiated and directed projects that have been partnered and supported by the European Union, within their Culture Programme, the Lifelong Learning Programme and the Europe Aid Programme, the Federal Cultural Foundation in Germany, the Berlin Senate Department of Urban Development and the Environment, the British Council, the Spanish Embassy, Sony Europe, Siemens and Allianz amongst others. Since 2010 and ongoing, he is a lecturer in the faculty of cultural work at the University of Applied Science in Potsdam, Germany.

Doung Jahangeer is a Kreole-Mauritian. He is an architect. He is not an architect. His experience of the 'profession' led him to broaden his definition of architecture focusing on space – on what he calls an architecturewithoutwalls. In 2000, he conceptualised and implemented the CityWalk initiative as a way of directly engaging and observing the flux and mutability of Durban, his adopted city. The CityWalk now includes 13 major cities internationally. He works in multimedia, including live performance, film/video, sculpture, installation and

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architecture. He has instigated projects of diverse nature with organisations and artists locally and internationally, including site responsive architectural installations that engage the urban fabric, often in an openly critical and sometimes provocative manner. In 2008 he co-founded dala (<http://www.dala.org.za>), an NPO that engages artarchitecture for social justice. He recently published in *Urban Future Manifestos* (Hatje Cantz 2010).

Terry Kurgan is an artist, curator and writer based in Johannesburg. Her artistic interest is in photography, and in the complex and paradoxical nature of all photographic transactions. She explores this through a diverse body of artwork that foregrounds notions of intimacy, pushing at the boundaries between 'the private' and 'the public' in the South African public domain. Her projects have been sited in spaces as varied as a maternity hospital, a public library, an inner city park and a prison. She's been awarded many prizes and grants, and has exhibited and published broadly in South Africa and internationally. Her book *Hotel Yeoville* was published by Fourthwall Books, Johannesburg in 2013, and recent exhibitions include: *Public Intimacy: Art and Other Ordinary Acts in South Africa*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) with Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) (2014); *Sharp, Sharp Johannesburg*, La Gaité Lyrique, Paris (2013); *Public Art/Private Lives*, Gallery AOP, Johannesburg (2013); and *Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography* at the V&A Museum, London (2011).

She is a Research Associate in the University of Johannesburg's Research Centre Visual Identities in Art and Design, and a writing fellow and artist in residence at WISER, Wits University, where she is producing an artist's book in relation to the evocative power of photographs as objects.

<http://www.terrykurgan.com>

Zen Marie: Photographer/artist/writer/lecturer
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Peter McKenzie is a member of Durban-based multi-disciplinary art collective, dala. He recently co-founded the Durban Centre for Photography (DCP) at the KwaZulu Natal Society for the Arts (KZNSA), where he also serves as Council President. The DCP hosts regular workshops, student projects and exhibitions. In 2013 he exhibited on the *Rise and Fall of Apartheid* exhibition at the International Center for Photography in New York, and on three shows in France during the French/SA Seasons. He has lectured at the Durban University of Technology, Tshwane University of Technology, the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism and the Market Photo Workshop (MPW), and has facilitated photography workshops internationally. He is a council member for the Market Theatre Foundation and Advisory Board Member at the MPW. He is chief photographer for the pan-African agency, Panapress, in the SADCC region. McKenzie has exhibited extensively and his writings on photography have been published widely. His present preoccupation in Durban is with the re-imaging of urban space and a study of the history of African photography.

Santu Mofokeng is a Johannesburg-based photographer whose documentary work deviates from conventional subject matter to include photographic enquiries into spirituality, an interest that has continued throughout his photographic career, and which, amongst other series, has produced the evocative series *Chasing Shadows*. His explorations of landscape invested with spiritual significance form part of a wider enquiry into space and belonging, as well as the political meaning of landscape in relation to ownership, power and memory. In his recent photographs of urban landscapes, he goes beyond political and social commentary, considering the “existential madness – the absurdities of living”. Noting that “billboards have been the medium of communication between the rulers and the denizens of townships since the beginning of the township”, his work featuring billboards ascerbically highlights the impoverishment of the citizenry they importune. Mofokeng has been the recipient of numerous awards. In 1991 he won the Ernest Cole Scholarship to study at the International Centre for Photography in New York. He was awarded the first Mother Jones Award for Africa in 1992. In 1998 he was the recipient of the Künstlerhaus Worpswede Fellowship and three years later of the DAAD Fellowship, both in Germany. In 2009 he was nominated as a Prince Claus Fund Laureate for Visual Arts.

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His first international retrospective opened in May 2011 at the Jeu de Paume, Paris and subsequently travelled to Kunsthalle Bern (2011), Bergen Kunsthall and the Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg (2012). In 2013 he participated in the 55th Venice Biennale as part of the German Pavilion. <http://www.santumofokeng.com>

Thato Mogotsi is an independent practitioner in the visual arts based in Johannesburg. Her practice spans several domains, including curating, writing, archival photography research and project management. She received training in photojournalism and documentary photography from the Market Photo Workshop (2005-2006) and later joined national daily newspapers, *Sunday Times* and *The Times* (2006-2010), as assistant photo editor and online picture researcher, respectively. Her projects include being the photo/text editor for the *World Cup Rural and Urban Photo Diary* ((2010); the *Wide Angle Forum on Participatory Photography Practice* (2010-2011) and *Split Facades* (2012), a photographic exhibition of works by emerging photographer Kutlwano Moagi, that she curated at the Goethe on Main project space in Johannesburg. She has also been aligned with Stevenson Johannesburg as gallery assistant, as well as with the Wits School of Arts as exhibitions coordinator in the Division of Visual Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Molemo Moiloa is Director of the Visual Arts Network of South Africa (VANSA), and one half of artists collaborative MADEYOULOOK. She has a Masters degree in Social Anthropology, writes sometimes, and is interested in popular social pedagogies and the everyday socio-political imaginary. She took part in the Wide Angle project under the auspices of the Market Photo Workshop.

Tracy Murinik is an independent art writer, curator, editor and occasional filmmaker based in Johannesburg. She has written and published extensively on contemporary art from South Africa and the continent, in books, catalogues, journals and newspapers, and for film, including *Art Cities of the Future: 21st Century Avant-Gardes* (Phaidon, 2013, edited by Kari Rittenbach); *10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa*, (Struik, 2004, edited by Sophie Perryer); *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art* (Museum

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for African Art, New York and Spier, Cape Town, 2004) and *Caderno Sesc_Videobrasil 'Uses of Memory'* (Associação Cultural Videobrasil, 2015, edited by Elvira Dyangani Ose). She was the Content Producer for the award-winning series of thirteen documentary films on South African art and landscape, *A Country Imagined* (SABC & Curious Pictures, 2010).

Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi was born in New York and has lived in Harare and Johannesburg on and off since the early 1990s. She is a painter, video artist and filmmaker who divides her time between studio work and navigating the field of art as social practice. Her work investigates power and its structures – political, social, architectural. Implicit in her examination of these structures is an interrogation of the invisible forces that create them, and an imagining of alternatives. Her paintings and videos have been shown at the Ifa Gallery in Berlin, the South London Gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rio de Janeiro and the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg. She obtained her BA from Harvard University and her MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York. www.thenjiwenkosi.com

Juan Orrantia's photographic and multimedia practice reconsiders ideas and histories of the document(ary), especially in relation to questions of time, memory and movement. Engaging with the history of genres such as the film essay and its translation into still photographic forms, his work seeks banality and imagination as places from which to address the aftermath of violence and terror; the affects of postcolonial cities and experiences; memory, fear, biography and the cocaine trade; the traces of anticolonial thinker Amílcar Cabral, and more recently the erasure of solidarities between India and Africa. Awards include the Tierney Fellowship in Photography, a photo-writing fellowship at the WiSER Institute, Wits University, and residencies at Khoj International Workshops and SARAI (India). He has exhibited in Berlin, Colombia, and South Africa, and participated in group shows including the New York Photo Festival, Le Cube (Paris), Cape Town Month of Photography, Bonani Africa Festival of Photography, Ethnographic Terminalia (New Orleans). He has presented on platforms and had his work published in, amongst others, *Anthropology and Art Practice*, *Warscapes*, *Hive* (Guild Gallery Mumbai), *Iconos*, *Sensate* and a journal for experiments in critical media practice, *Fototazo*. <http://www.orrantiajuan.wordpress.com>

Contributors

Kaj Osteroth lives and works as a visual artist in Berlin. After finishing her Fine Art degree at the Universität der Künste, Berlin as a master-class student of Stan Douglas (2006), and writing a Masters thesis in Anthropology at Freie Universität (2008), she was involved in the programmes department of the Goethe-Institut, Johannesburg from 2009 to 2011. This experience was followed by the self-initiated, *ifa*-funded research project, *Vanilla Facts 1 to 4 – connecting artists from Johannesburg and Berlin* in 2013/2014. As curatorial assistant and editor of the accompanying catalogue, she was part of the long-term exhibition project *re.act.feminism – a performance archive* (2012-2014).

Since 2007 Kaj Osteroth has collaborated with Lydia Hamann as the feminist painter collective hamann_osteroth (www.fleeingthearch.org). In the last quarter of 2014 the collective was in residence at the Bag Factory Artists' Studios in Johannesburg. They are currently producing a picture book for teenagers on feminist, female or female identified artists around the world.

Naadira Patel is a Johannesburg-based artist whose work intersects the mediums of painting, photography, video and installation, with a focus on the relationship between fear/desire/control, working with spaces of fantasy and entertainment, amusement parks and playgrounds. She completed her undergraduate BA Fine Arts Degree at the Wits School of Arts in 2010, worked as the Exhibitions Manager in the Division of Visual Arts at the Wits School of Arts, managing the Substation project space from 2011-2013, and is currently pursuing an MA in Comparative Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam. www.vimeo.com/naadirapatel

Ruth Rosengarten has been based in England since 2001. She received a degree in Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and a PhD in History of Art at the Courtauld Institute, London. She lived for twenty years in Lisbon, where she was actively engaged with both art history and art criticism, teaching on various undergraduate and MA courses and writing for weekly and monthly publications. Studio practice since the late 1990s has focused on drawing and photography, while in her recent theoretical work, she has explored concerns with memory and the archive in contemporary art, especially (though not exclusively) in photographic works. She

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has exhibited her work and published widely, as well as curating several large exhibitions.

She is currently a Research Associate in the University of Johannesburg's Research Centre, Visual Identities in Art and Design. <http://ruthrosengarten.com>

Anthony Schrag is an artist, based in Edinburgh. He was born in Zimbabwe, and grew up in the Middle East, UK and Canada. He completed his MFA in Glasgow in 2005. Within the 'participatory arts realm', he has worked internationally and across the UK. He has been the recipient of numerous awards, including The Hope Scot Trust, Creative Scotland, the Dewar Arts Award, Standpoint: Futures, British Arts Council, as well as a Henry Moore Artist Fellowship. While also being a practicing artist, he is currently completing a PhD at Newcastle University, exploring participatory projects and conflict. The artist Nathalie De Brie referred to Schrag's practice as "Fearless". The writer Marjorie Celona once said: "Anthony, you have a lot of ideas. Not all of them are good".

James Sey is a writer, and Research Associate in the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre of the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Johannesburg. His occasional blog, *A Compendium of Imaginary Wavelengths*, is at <http://jsey1.wordpress.com/>.

Project partners

WIDE ANGLE has been conceptualised and produced in partnership by the Goethe-Institut, Wits School of Arts and the Market Photo Workshop. The aims and objectives of the project intersect with the teaching, practice and cultural programming of each of these three institutions in the following ways:

GOETHE-INSTITUT: Germany's globally active cultural institute encourages international cultural cooperation, promotes knowledge of the German language abroad and conveys a comprehensive image of Germany. The Goethe-Institut in South Africa is particularly interested in enhancing pan-African exchange and creates platforms for the arts throughout sub-Saharan Africa, in cooperation with its partners in South Africa and abroad. The forum *Wide Angle* forms part of the different cultural activities of the Goethe-Institut on photography as it relates to training, presentation and dialogue. In a world that seems more and more dominated by images, the ability to read and question photography has become a necessary skill in negotiating between the different realities we live in. With the forum *Wide Angle* we aim to explore and reflect on different ways of fostering dialogue and exchange through the arts.
www.goethe.de/johannesburg

WITS SCHOOL OF ARTS is situated in the vibrant heart of Johannesburg, and is one of the top multi-disciplinary arts institutions in Africa. We offer programmes in fine arts, digital arts, music, dramatic arts, film and television, history of art, and arts, culture and heritage management, to students at undergraduate, graduate and doctoral levels. These programmes reflect our commitment to engaging critically with the rich and diverse cultural possibilities of contemporary Africa. We emphasise a comprehensive professional training combined with intellectual and academic rigour. The *Wide Angle* forum and exhibition engages both staff and students in ways which productively complement and challenge practices in higher education institutions. The partnership with the Market Photo Workshop, the Goethe-Institut and the Hotel Yeoville project demonstrates our increasing need to connect with outside agencies in order to produce an environment that prepares students to act independently and collectively in the world. <http://web.wits.ac.za/Academic/Humanities/WSOA/>

Project partners

MARKET PHOTO WORKSHOP is a school of photography, gallery, and space for cultural exchange and production. As a school the Photo Workshop has played an integral role in the training and development of South Africa's photographers for over twenty years, ensuring that visual literacy reaches those in neglected and marginalised parts of our society. The Photo Workshop Gallery, situated on the same premises as the school in Newtown, is dedicated to the exhibition of photography as a medium and provides a platform not only for students and emerging artists' exhibitions but features work by celebrated photographers both locally and internationally. Through the development of an extensive and far-reaching public programme, which uses photography as a tool for transformation and cultural interrogation, the Photo Workshop seeks to engage and empower a wider community with broad-based skills that have a lasting impact. The dynamic combination of the Photo Workshop's diverse functions is embodied in our involvement in the *Wide Angle* project. Through encounters with the public practice processes, students are challenged to think more critically about key issues affecting the communities they reside in as well as the spaces they regularly negotiate and move through in their daily lives.

www.marketphotoworkshop.co.za



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Thank you too to all of our contributors for allowing us the use of their images, as well as the following who have kindly facilitated or granted us permission to reproduce their work: Lunetta Bartz of MAKER, the Dulibadzimu Theatre Group, David Goldblatt, Goodman Gallery, Mark Lewis, Gideon Mendel, Santu Mofokeng, Zanele Muholi, Cedric Nunn, Naadira Patel, Stevenson Cape Town and Johannesburg, Guy Tillim, Urban Dialogues and Colleen Wafer.

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And finally, a big thank you to our designer and publishers, Oliver Barstow and Bronwyn Law-Viljoen of Fourthwall Books, for the thoughtful and creative energy and endurance they have brought to allow this publication to finally be realised in (virtually) tangible, and beautiful form.

Terry Kurgan and Tracy Murinik
Editors

This publication is an extended conference proceedings, arising out of the conference: *Wide Angle: Photography as Public Practice*, held at the University of the Witwatersrand from 23 to 26 March, 2011.

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