

Chapter Abstracts

1

Re-imagining Johannesburg: Nomadic Notions

This chapter provides a recent sample of performance art in Johannesburg inner city as a contextualising prelude to the book's case study to follow and introduces some of its key protagonists. *New Imaginaries*, an artistic trilogy that during 2012 explored public space in the same geographical ambit, shares with these cousins a performative trait. The evanescent and nomadic character of the art interventions inspire new city readings that ultimately contribute to a growing discourse around the commons.

These ephemeral works also offer a timely critique of South Africa's new arts strategy that effectively validates the sector economically, Yet in this economic heart of the city, some of the most compelling contemporary art resists capture – financial and otherwise. The chapter sets out why this city of the global South may be of interest as a case site and foregrounds the research proposition to follow: that imaginaries count even when they cannot be counted.

2

Curating the Ephemeral City

New Imaginaries project trilogy at different times during 2012 explored public space in Johannesburg by artistic means: *Shoe Shop*, through walking, movement and migration, *A MAZE.Interact*, via gaming and new media, and *Spines*, a dual-

performance art module that played with the city's transport lines. This chapter provides an overview through instructive examples of artistic interventions that prefigure dedicated project reflections to follow. It offers theoretical and contextual links while joining thematic threads and making evident some latent factors in curating the ephemeral. *New Imaginaries* offers a reconsideration of public space as common space instead that is daily negotiated, enacted and performed, and public art thus towards an art of the commons. A musical trope inflecting the text is an effort to find narrative form commensurate with subject matter.

3

Walking the Footloose City

This chapter reflects upon the first *New Imaginaries* module, *Shoe Shop*. It was broadly themed around movement, walking and migration through personal narratives from a roving perspective. Its art interventions ranged from photographic installations in largely overlooked Johannesburg spaces to artist-led city walks, a film festival, performances, workshops and dialogues. *Shoe Shop* could be understood as offering an intimate and embodied notion of public space, through a series of inner space vectors towards finding common ground. This chapter provides instructive examples, ranging from art in public space to performance, while reflecting upon the role of the artist in a politically charged broader context. The political sphere speaks to the book's public policy riposte and also offers a foundation to begin threading different notions of the common. A notable thread in this project is a play between presence and absence in the daily *rapprochement* of city life, where the text concludes.

4

Playing the Cyborg City

A MAZE.Interact, a six-day experimental festival of multimedia art, gaming and music in August and September 2012, was underscored with a punk thematic of deep play. This summary chapter draws attention to less evident episodes in the festival that may offer new meaning in reflecting upon the activation of new imaginaries and public space in Johannesburg. In this broader analysis, it builds upon a developing notion of third space into hybrid fusions and conflations with the body as mediator – a cyborg city. This elasticity is conferred back onto a fictive cityscape through an interactive perspective with intangibles like imagination, effort and narrative as key. *A MAZE* sets up the *New Imaginaries* trilogy to move from Huizinga’s notion of *Homo ludens* or ‘man the player’ (1949) to what he describes as *Homo tantum* – the grounded concerns for the multitude of ‘anybody’ that composes the human community.

5

Performing the Spectral City

Spines, the final of the *New Imaginaries* project trio, comprised two parallel performance art projects that explored the spines or transport routes of Johannesburg. *United African Utopias* re-imagined inner city Johannesburg as utopia in a participatory play using a variety of transport modalities and sensory activations, while *In House Project* engaged minibus taxis to visit domestic and multipurpose sites activated through artistic interventions. *Spines* conflated temporalities, localities and validities with a trickster spirit. The performative nature of everyday life became

apparent and the porosity between city and stage intensified. This ultimately proposed a performative idea of ‘publicness’: public space as common space that is daily enacted and negotiated rather than conferred. In this resulting conurbation is conjured a spectral city, its ephemerality contributing towards the notion of a counter commons and the art created in its threads towards an art of the commons.

6

Silo-breaker: Art and the Uncertainty Principle

This chapter offers examples from *New Imaginaries* on artistic responses to uncertainty and ends with a short discussion on risk. Each anecdote is linked to the next by geography, aesthetics or conceptual thematic, connecting the trilogy in a speculative map – an archipelago of meaning. This narrative play attempts in part to demonstrate imagination as connective tissue. A nomadic disposition, it suggests, responds to mobilised forms of life. The chapter speaks out to other disciplines interested in city imaginings and the public sphere by showing how uncertainty, ambiguity and a general state of ‘not knowing’ is often embraced as part of artistic practice. Uncertainty also permits an academic and artistic register to shake hands in the precarious step towards new knowledge. The echo or refrain is proposed in this process as time signature of a shared imaginary.

7

Towards an Art of the Commons

This chapter brings together key research findings from an analysis of *New Imaginaries*, an ephemeral and nomadic art trilogy that explored public space in Johannesburg and suggested common space instead – daily negotiated, enacted and performed. The animating hinge between this space and a shifting public sphere is art as affective encounter, joining subjective imaginaries in common. The capacity of the trilogy to conflate aspects of experience is key, in order to stoke imaginative possibility. This is achieved through intangibles like effort, narrative and deep play that incorporate uncertainty and resist modes of capture, including financial. The case study thus offers in this reflection a riposte to public policy that privileges an economic validation for the sector and suggests instead that imagination counts even when it cannot be counted. The chapter begins with an architecture of the imagination and ends with an emergent research agenda for public art, towards an art of the commons.

8

Living the City

This short coda acts as a confessional narrative with respect to methodology that deliberately places the researcher in the project locus of the case study *New Imaginaries*, in Johannesburg's inner city core. It cues in a different way the topic at large, of public space and the urban commons, and signals a lived register from a resident author. It in effect frames the framer, spanning the same time period the case study played itself out. Its thematics also tie together some threads that are variously woven throughout the text at large. The burnout, collapse and eventual razing of a heritage building in Johannesburg inner city during 2012 was still, one year later, a

site of uncertainty awaiting planned urban renewal. Against this tumbled concrete reality is set the unlikely narrative of mattress-makers who continue to operate from its ruins, with fierce hope for new accommodation in whatever structure replaces it.