

# A Walk In The City

a solo exhibition by Sandile Rabebe  
curated by Kim Gurney

15 October - 25 October 2014  
National School of the Arts, Braamfontein, Johannesburg  
<http://walkinthecity.withtank.com/>



Left: National School of the Arts Gallery entrance 2014.

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## Overview

‘A Walk in the City’, the inaugural solo exhibition by practising Johannesburg artist Sandile Radebe, is hosted in October at the [National School of the Arts](#) in Braamfontein. This secondary school, which specialises in design, visual art and performing art education, is significantly rooted in Johannesburg’s cultural arc. It is perched on a ridge that interfaces the inner city on the one side and looks to Johannesburg’s northern suburbs on the other. Its art gallery encapsulates this feature, a remarkable circular structure that is both inspiring and challenging for exhibitions curated within its rounded walls. It opens out to a distinctive view over the city that offers a unique reflective space for artists interested in engaging the city of Johannesburg as subject matter. Its architectural properties are also a boon for three-dimensional and site-specific practice while offering latent acoustic potential.

The space is therefore a perfect forum for the work of Sandile Radebe, who in this exhibition visualises graffiti in abstract sculptural forms that take the place of alphabetic lettering. In ‘Walking the City’, he transforms the gallery into an imaginative maze for the viewer to navigate that evokes the artist’s own experience of walking through Johannesburg, inspired by the bustling activity of informal traders, taxi ranks and specific architectural features. At the exhibition’s heart is a tower made of reconceptualised graffiti tags, as model for a public sculpture. The viewer is thus encouraged to think about graffiti and indeed language in a new way while also conjuring the city ‘out there’ through an internal creative navigation in both time and space. Sandile also exhibits two-dimensional works in an annexe, which link to his general thematics.

--Kim Gurney, September 2014



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Left: Exhibition shot. 2014.

## 'A Walk in the Mind'

Today, I went for a drive to Sea Point promenade to see for myself the pair of giant sunglasses *Perceiving Freedom* that has caused consternation in Cape Town. The graffiti intervention had vanished but this in no way diminished its popularity among passersby. A shiny oversized sculpture looking out to Robben Island greeted me, positioned adjacent a playpark on the one side and an exercise park on the other. Children sprawled on top of its bridge and slid down one arm. A father followed suit, walking up and over the public sculpture as if it were a jungle gym. Upon closer inspection, there were no more lenses in the frame either. The surface upon which the Tokolos Stencil crew had graffitied its Marikana protest art had disappeared so that all signs of the collective's objection to Michael Elion's artwork had now vanished -- except for social media where the debate was still alive and well. The backstory, in a nutshell, is a corporate-sponsored public artwork that leverages the legacy of Nelson Mandela, which has raised significant ire including that of Tokolos who promptly defaced it. The same collective recently attended the opening night of a group exhibition at a commercial gallery with a porta-potty (chemical toilet) to expose 'bourgeois' gallery-goers to the smell of faeces.

A South African art critic recently proposed in response to the sunglasses sculpture defacement that graffiti is no longer radical, that it has been appropriated by corporate interests to beautify public spaces and has thus lost the power to be truly subversive. 'A Walk in the City' suggests otherwise. This solo exhibition by Sandile Radebe provokes new readings with a singular device: an aerial view of the city grid, transformed from the built environment into graffiti block lettering. Radebe has manifested this into a maze constructed from tape that covers the floor of this striking circular gallery and partially climbs its walls. Depending upon your orientation as viewer, these letters can be differently read and even morph into integers instead. It is a hopeful gesture, to posit that language is the building block of reality and we can construct our cities or sense of 'citi-ness', as the coined term goes, by making our own meanings and linking them together. Urbanist Teresa Caldeira has pointed to the informal ways people construct their own houses over time amid stark circumstances in cities around the world, in a fashion she calls 'auto construction'. In similar vein, Radebe's visual provocation suggests we auto-construct perceptual cities in our minds. It starts with our own orientation and we can change this by simply standing in another place to take in a different view.

That is a compelling thought. What is more, this graffiti of the mind cannot be reversed by scrubbing or physically removing a lens. Radebe's work is a timely evocation for a country challenged with a neo-apartheid hangover spatially reinforced, as Edgar Pieterse reminds us, and a worsening condition of inequality that academics such as Jaclyn Cock term 'slow violence'. In the effort to disassemble and reassemble such stubborn fixes, we need new ways of looking and forms to describe what we see; Radebe is an imagineer who takes us some place new.

--Kim Gurney, November 2014



Page 8-16: Process Images







## Build up

The Build up to the main installation was a playful exercise between myself and Jabulani Matthews Tshuma. After following a design that I had sketched earlier on to build a tower out of cardboard, I would ask Jabu for a letter and then would make a building with duct-tape on the floor, playing with the notion of a city footprint. After some time we could so comfortable with this method that we would randomly choose words to build this footprint of the city. Ultimately we populated the space with letters that played along the footprint of the city as it would appear on 'google earth'. This was to play with the idea of how we read the city.

Depending on the viewer's orientation, the letters change, sometimes they morph into other letters, sometimes into numbers. The city plan in its ambiguous form and sense changes in its meaning, its behaviour and ultimately nature. The conventions of writing, or the point of the alphabet, the purpose of transcribing, and indeed the purpose of reading, all get stretched to a new and unexpected end.

This aesthetic locates the city as a urban metropolis embellished with writing among many of its constituents, but the writing in this case is the city itself. The city blocks make up the alphabet which tempt the viewer to construct a word, two words, or possibly a sentence. You might find yourself communicating with the perceived city, or the idea of a city. In this act of searching for meaning or some order in the alphabet, one reconfigures the conventions and a finds a personalised meaning of what a city is, may be, or ought to be.

Relying on the logic of blocklettering to navigate this terrain of the alphabet, I find a new aesthetic and a new feeling of the city that I share with the city in many ways. Deciphering the graffiti that embellishes the city, the street etiquette, the lingo, the sounds of foot traffic, the vehicles, the trucks, the taxis, the busses, the police sirens. The smell of food, the smell of urine, the smell oil visible on the tarmac on the streets. It's sunshine piercing through the buildings and its shadows or projected by it. It's nighttime, and all of it, encapsulated in a line to facilitate marking my presence as a part of the city.













# Artist's Statement

One might recall Kazimir Malevich's *Red Square* (1915) and *White Square* as total detachment from anything figurative. Similarly, our alphabet makes no reference to the natural world and therefore its meaning is attributed rather than inherent. It is an abstract series of codes assembled and then attributed over time with meaning that accrues to establish a literary sense. My aim is to reconfigure attributed values in pursuit of developing a new graffiti language devoid of stigma.

My rendition of graffiti is in one sense not graffiti at all, and this is precisely my intention -- to make graffiti that does not subscribe to the conventions of 'bombing', 'racking', being sited in public spaces, as well as 'piecing' with a spray can. Private exhibition space allows me the opportunity to create an imagined location, to re-enact my experience of walking the city reading graffiti and translate this into three-dimensional form that invites the viewer to do the same.

Graffiti works conventionally aim to create awareness about the socio-political climate through slogans. In the 1950's, a group of South African politicians calling themselves 'the Picasso group' painted political slogans as a form of resistance to the apartheid government buildings that excluded black people. In South Africa, graffiti had political ends virtually all the time.

This political terrain has now arguably shifted to access of space. This ranges from trading purposes for street vendors or minibus taxi owners' negotiating routes or individuals merely being able to walking freely within the city. Ultimately my aim is to use this medium of visual communication to help stimulate a public domain so that users of public space develop a critical appreciation and a more expansive engagement with their surroundings.

--Sandile Radebe, 2014



Page 17-19: Exhibition opening Images





# Exhibition Opening

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“...And this body of work re-reads the city, in my view at least, through what I would call a hip-hop aesthetic and a graffiti sensibility. And as a result, he is able to turn maps into mazes, buildings morph into humungous letters and numbers, letters buildings can reflect and double up, multiple identities, multiple if you will, elements of language, of grammar. And the cartographic lines morph effortlessly into symbolism. And so what happens when you stack all of these things together and you move between these different representations, is that the city get re-represented and re-imagined, in this almost endless language game with the multiplicities of grammars and this facility to invoke a different grammar that I think is really, really important and exciting...”

--Edgar Pieterse, director of African Centre for Cities at University of Cape Town, opening speech for A Walk in the City- October 2014





# ‘Untitled’ Triptych

The ‘*Untitled*’ triptych is a play on two dimensional versus three dimensional representation of letter forms. The tag/inscription that would be normally placed on a flat surface would manifest in three dimensional form as maquettes for public sculptures, installation or mazes. The letter ‘s’ as used in the “untitled maquette for public sculpture” becomes translated onto a flat surface, a reversal of the process of translating letter forms into sculptural forms. The aim is to imagine a new way at looking at the letter ‘s’. Cut out in masonite and tactile in nature, the letter gets morphed into something non figurative and becomes a painting.

Engaged in an exercise to discover elements that constitute the letter that I might have previously overlooked, because like most literate people I would like to think that I know the alphabet. These exercises allow me to rediscover the alphabet from a calligraphic or design point of view.

The paintings documented on the next pages are a result of such an exercise. Through making the same markings on a masonite that I would normally make before I cut out pieces for a maquette, I fill in the complex series of patterns and shapes that emerge from these markings. These shapes and patterns sometimes create other letters and a entry point to a world of a new form of inscribing the alphabet.

I later then add colours that are complementary to these patterns, in search of some order. Mostly compositional order. I also like to leave other parts of the masonite board uncovered so as to make this process transparent.



Left: *Untitled* (Triptych), 2014. Acrylic on masonite. 120 x 60 cm

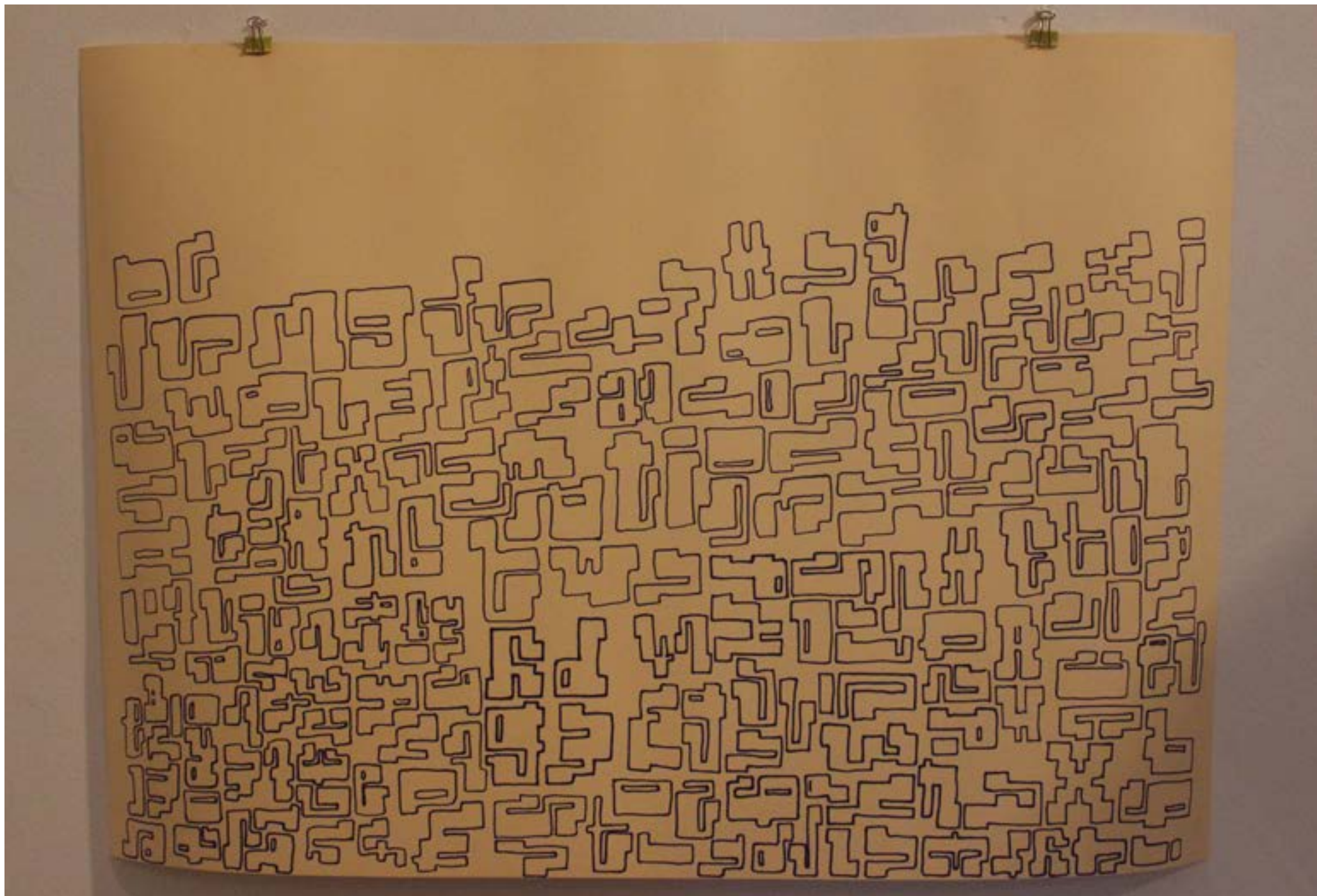


Left: *Untitled* (Triptych), 2014. Acrylic on masonite. 120 x 60 cm

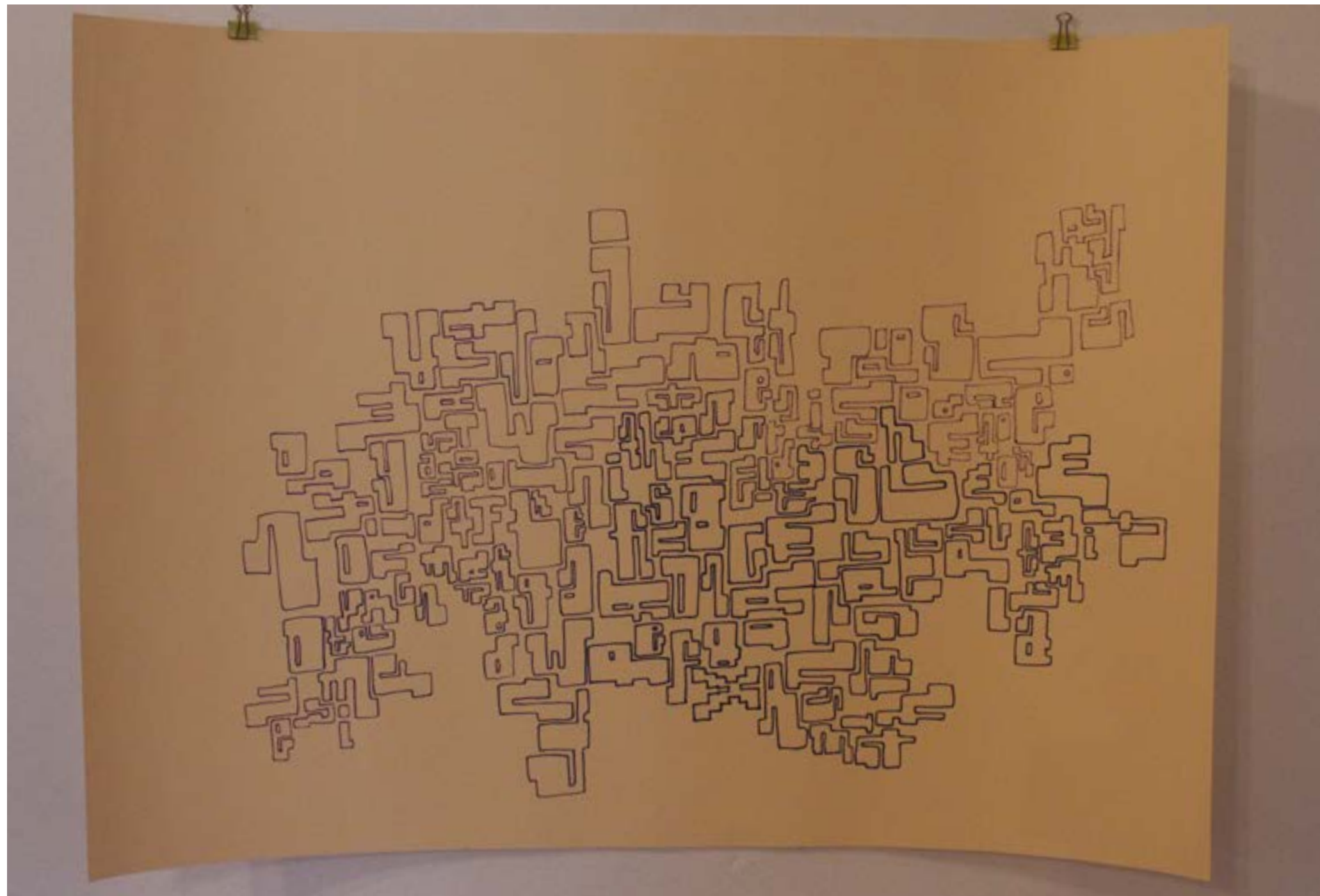


Right: *Untitled* (Triptych), 2014. Acrylic on masonite. 120 x 60 cm



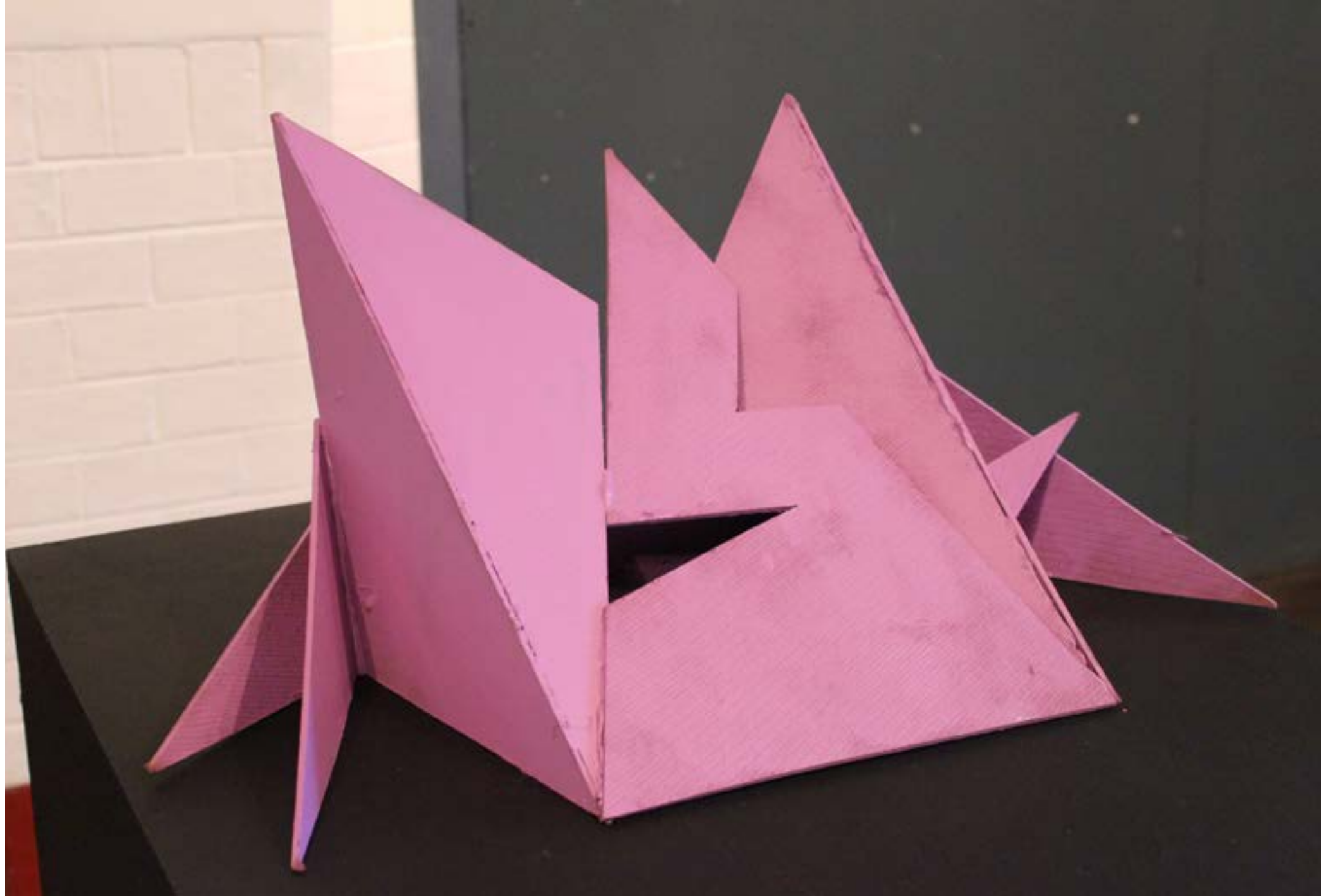


Above: *Blocklettering I*, 2014. Marking pen on paper. 69 x 86 cm



Above: *Blocklettering II*, 2014. Marking pen on paper. 69 x 86 cm





*Untitled*, 2014. Masonite

## Maquette for Public Sculpture

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The maquette for public sculpture is a proposal for Afrika Burn 2015. The design of the maquette mimics the process of sketching in the language of graffiti. In a manner similar to how a writer might spend hours on end exploring the alphabet, seeking to develop a new style. I spent time sketching as well as exploring new ways that I could use this style. Based on triangles I decided to use the structural strength and stability of the shape to build a structure that would provide shade and protection from the harsh winds of the desert. This is my way of stretching the function of graffiti beyond making political statements and adorning our public spaces with colour and form, into that of providing shade and protection with colour, form and material.





# Profiles

## Curator:

Kim Gurney is an artist, journalist and researcher, based in Cape Town. Kim has held two solo exhibitions in Johannesburg and participates annually on group exhibitions - the most recent at Iziko SA Museum ('Suspicious Mind', 2014). She engages with other artists primarily as a curator of experimental and emergent work. In 2012, for instance, she curated 'Sounding Out' with Thato Mogotsi at the Bag Factory — a riff on music and visual art that included pirate radio airtime as exhibition space. She founded in 2012 a nomadic offspace, guerilla gallery, which doesn't have its own bricks and mortar. That is how she came to know Sandile Radebe, who participated on its inaugural project, Elgin Rust's 'Appeal 2012', held in a Doornfontein warehouse with a dozen participating Johannesburg artists. Kim also writes selectively as a freelance journalist and for the past three years has been affiliated as a Research Associate to UCT's African Centre for Cities, and UJ's Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre. A book on art, space and publics is forthcoming (Palgrave Macmillan).

## Artist:

Sandile Radebe is a Johannesburg-based artist whose main area of interest is art practice in both public and private spaces. Sandile explores these spaces through stimulating a new reading of graffiti and, more broadly, the way language works to help construct our realities. Sandile studied BAFA (Honours) at Wits School of the Arts (2002-2006). He furthered his studies at the same institution in 2009 with a Postgraduate Diploma in Arts and Cultural Management.

Sandile has participated in various group exhibitions including the 'Assemblage Pop-Up show 2.0' curated by Mika Conradie (June 2012), Elgin Rust's 'Appeal 2012' curated in collaboration with guerilla gallery (September 2012), 'Basha Uhuru' curated by Kalishnikovv Gallery (June 2013), collaborated with Mandy Johnston for 'Diptych' curated by Assemblage (September 2013) and most recently exhibited at the Turbine Art Fair (July 2014). He has also executed public interventions 'Lest We Forget' at the Drill Hall, Johannesburg, in collaboration with Jabulani Matthews Tshuma (February 2014) as well as an installation intervention 'Graphoasis' at Afrika Burn in collaboration with Elgin Rust (May 2014). In February 2013, Sandile participated as an invited speaker for the Goethe-Institut's 'New Imaginaries/ New Publics' symposium convened by UCT's African Centre for Cities (ACC)



Kim Gurney  
Research trip for 'Cape Town Under: The Third Voice' (2013)  
Photo: Matt Weisse



Sandile Radebe  
Untitled Pillar (2012)  
cardboard  
Process image: 'Appeal 2012'  
Photo: Kim Gurney



# Acknowledgments

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Professor Edgar Pieterse, the Director of the African Centre for Cities for his opening speech;  
Jabulani Matthews Tshuma for being reliable honest and insightful throughout. There are many elements of the show that would have been absent had Jabu not pointed them out, offered suggestions and stayed late to ensure that everything happened according to plan;  
Kira Kemper for volunteering to design the flier for the show;  
My family whose support is undying and constant;  
Friends that believe and support what I do;  
The general public for showing interest and seeing value in what I do.

- All pictures taken by Sandile Radebe and Jabulani Matthews Tshuma unless stated otherwise
- All text by Sandile Radebe unless stated otherwise

# Recent Work

‘Golden City Plan’ public intervention, a guerilla gallery project- November 2014  
‘A Walk In The City’ solo exhibition, curated by Kim Gurney- October 2014  
One Dot Zero/Cascade collaborative installation- September 2014  
OPENLab 2014- The Art Of Being Public Residency- July 2014  
Turbine Art Fair-Group Exhibition- July 2014  
Afrika Burn 2014- Collaboration with Elgin Rust- April/May 2014  
Absa L’Atelier Awards- April 2014  
‘Lest we forget” -Collaboration with Jabulani Matthews Tshuma- February 2014  
‘Diptych’ group exhibition curated by Assemblage-Collaboration piece with Mandy Johnston- September 2013  
Trinity session Braamfontein alleyways proposal workshop- September 2013  
‘Basha Uhuru’ group exhibition curated by Kalashnikovv Gallery- June 2013  
Absa L’Artilier Awards -April 2013  
‘New Imaginaries/New Publics’ :Africa Centre for Cities and Goethe Institut symposium, presentation on ‘Public Domain’ - February 2013  
‘Appeal 2012’ Collaborative exhibition by Elgin Rust- September 2012  
Assemblage pop up show 2.0 curated by Mika Conradie -June 2012

# Online Links

- [Appeal 2012](#)
- [Jhb-live interview-2012](#)
- [Guerilla Gallery review of Appeal-2012](#)
- [Voice of America Interview-2013](#)
- [OPENLab 2014](#)
- [OPENLab 2014 art south africa review](#)
- [NSA solo exhibition 2014](#)
- [Solo exhibition process images](#)
- [Golden city plan 2014](#)

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