

Being in Public – International Symposium

Belfast School of Art, Ulster University, Northern Ireland

Title: 'Performing the Present'

By Kim Gurney, Research Associate: African Centre for Cities at University of Cape Town

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[STARTS]

1. Prelude

Good evening. It's wonderful to be here, all the way on the other side of the world from South Africa. A big thank you to my hosts Ulster University and Bbeyond for inviting me; to Cherie driver, Brian Patterson and Siobhan Mullen in particular, and the audience tonight for this generous opportunity to share some thoughts. It's my first visit to this city. I won't offer any trite observations from a short introduction to a highly complex context. But I cannot resist just one parallel, if you will indulge me. On the superficial side, we have a Belfast in south Africa too. Our Belfast is a tiny little town in a province called Mpumalanga, and it's best known for its trout fishing conditions! On a more serious note, both of our societies sought peace agreements within four years of one other, and are evidently still working out how to weight the

past in the present. How arts and culture relate to this *recalibration of the public sphere* is a key question. My talk tonight cuts into this. It's about *Performing the Present*.

I will make three moves through time and space. First, to set some conceptual ground, we head to the streets of Johannesburg for an overview of a curated trilogy of artistic interventions called *New Imaginaries*, which explored notions of public space. I will highlight some key aspects of research I conducted into that trilogy, within a framework of the commons. Next, we will head underground with a brief diversion to Cape Town and a collaborative sound art intervention between myself and another artist in a work called *Cape Town Under: The Third Voice*, which differently animates some of these ideas - from a network of tunnels. Finally, we emerge to track the second life of a recently banished artwork in the same city, a colonial-era sculpture on a university campus, to reflect upon its performative afterlife that culminates in a recent occupation led by fine art students late last year. This conflagration connects us back to where we started – considering how art can help make sense of the contemporary moment and re-imagine city futures.

I myself work across disciplines as a researcher, writer and art practitioner so this multimodality informs my outlook. In short, I think about artwork as a vector of inquiry into the world. In this larger sense of mobility, all art is potentially *live art*, on the move, taking us to unexpected places, venturing into the unknown, and working with uncertainties. Its beginnings and endings are more elastic than we often suppose. Performance art, for instance, may start when a work is given over to the receiving public to carry; in that same sense, it never really ends. Art has a series of second lives that are unforeseeable and quite wayward. An intervention releases multiple trajectories beyond measure. This is perhaps part of art's incommensurability. once released into the world, it is 'live' – it goes on a journey, full of multiplicities, twists and turns. Likewise, dead art may be undead, as we will see ... Zombie art perhaps. What we think of as ephemeral may have an enduring knock-on effect; and what we regard as concrete may be knocked off its plinth. It is perhaps more meaningful to think of art *in motion* – as a vector, a conduit, that

conducts the making of meaning and insight, potentially new knowledge. Art can also conduct wishful thinking, it's a way to speculate about the future, and this notion of aspiration is where we will end.

2. Introduction

[Slide] The past as mentioned has a way of reinserting itself into the present. Back in South Africa, we are grappling with this in a very charged way right now – how to deal with what some activists are calling “the Afterwards”. What they mean by that is a whole new generation of South Africans have come of age (48% of the population is under 24 years) who thankfully have no experience of lived apartheid, which ended officially in 1994. They were born in a democratic era – we call them the born frees – and yet are hugely frustrated. They are frustrated because they are not seeing a political miracle translated into a socio-economic miracle at fast enough pace. What they are seeing is different kinds of inequality and how that permeates society in so many ways that it reinscribes a politics of the past.

They are not prepared to accept the reconciliatory moves of yesteryear and they are drawing a line. They are saying ‘enough’, pushing Eject, and this is often in conflict with currently vested power. The mode of this dissent is performative, perhaps best understood as interruptions of various kinds, and vectors of this unfinished business have increasingly included artworks. One artwork in particular caught the public imagination these past two years, ignited by an act of performative rage that first lit a student body and then a tinderbox of issues that basically launched a national movement for systemic change to redress continued inequities. I’m going to come back to this sculpture at the end of my talk. But in brief, it was eventually taken off its campus plinth, a public heritage site, and remains at a secret location while its future fate is debated. Meanwhile, however, its spectral presence is helping to re-imagine the public sphere. The artwork is “lit”, in popular slang. Continued student protests bring me here on a tide of disruption from our universities and beyond. This is our ‘afterwards’ and we are still busy working it out. What is certain, in these unclear times, is that art has a role to play.

I will start by stepping back to offer a bit of context for expressions in South African public space, and then head into artwork examples.

3. Context

[slide] South Africa post-apartheid has made great strides since 1994. Along with some of the finest rights and a fantastic Constitution, 3.7 million housing opportunities have been created – that’s a mix of houses and stands; 86 per cent of households are electrified (up from 50%); 73.3% of the population now has access to water; 79.5% to flush sanitation systems; 64% to refuse removal; life expectancy has risen to 62.5 years while the infant mortality rate has decreased; perhaps most importantly 17 million people are now supported in a vital social security net of grants, up from 4 million. But south Africa is a place of paradox. It is also well understood that the country remains a markedly unequal society in various respects. One of the highest Gini co-efficients in the world reflects this disparity in income terms. To put the situation bluntly in broader wealth terms: 20 years after democracy, the two richest people in South Africa had the same wealth as the bottom half of the population, according to Oxfam's report *Even it Up* (Seery & Arendar 2014: 38).

It is perhaps less appreciated how these inequities are *spatially replicated* in the present tense. This relates to a series of spatial segregation laws through land dispossession. The Native Lands Act of 1913 was a cornerstone of that racial jigsaw but the story spans back to Dutch colonial settlements from the 1600s onwards. Moreover, this spatial inequality is re-inscribed in contemporary South Africa through continued urban sprawl that generally keeps a privileged minority in economic centralities and a majority to urban peripheries. You only need to visit Cape Town, landing at the airport and drive towards the CBD to see for yourself how the geography of the city is still very segregated into pockets. Zackie Achmat, who heads up a social justice movement called Ndifuna Ukwazi, gave evidence at a commission of inquiry into policing in Khayelitsha that looked into daily township

realities, where he outlined this effect of spatial segregation. "We need to take seriously that we are forcing black African people ... further and further out of the city instead of creating an integrated city - and that has an impact on policing ... on education ... on service delivery" (2014, online).

Added to this, the world is fast urbanizing, which intensifies these dynamics. By 2050, two thirds of the world's population is expected to live in cities. In 1800, only three per cent of the global population lived in urban areas. The African continent is at the sharp end of this urbanisation dynamic with sub-Saharan Africa more than doubling its population between now and 2050, and its urban areas growing by almost 800 million people, according to the Brenthurst Foundation (2015: 3). Its cities in turn become nodes that surface related issues -- an agglomeration of so-called wicked problems. Some of these imbricated issues fall beyond what is easily measurable - for instance, the register of informality in which global South cities often operate. This is where an artistic register can be particularly helpful. Both the arts and geography are further expanded fields, according to Harriet Hawkins (2013). One of these intersecting fields is public space.

Ash Amin points out that the achievements of public space presuppose other dynamics of inclusion, notably provision of the means to ensure humans can participate as fully-fledged social subjects in urban life. Amin says in *The Good City* that many urban-dwellers have yet to acquire this right. This is particularly evident in the global South, he says, where urban planning practices are driven by the needs of the economically and politically most powerful and in the eviction or stripping down to bare life of the masses (2006: 1017). Without a guarantee of rightful citizenship, he goes on to say in an online text for 'Inclusive Cities' project (2006), interventions in public space will amount to no more than tinkering on the edges.

This is something to keep in mind as we move among our projects. Many of the interventions themselves critique these very same issues and bring associated invisibilities to the fore. Amin's words also trigger for me a cautionary note about the ethics of participatory techniques which artists need to give special attention to

when working in spaces of power imbalance where people have complex histories of being written over. In the *New Imaginaries* project to follow, the curators pursued an immersive technique where they spent a lot of time studying spaces, taking their creative cues from the environment itself along with consultative engagement with locals rather than imposing a preconceived idea. In this sense the space was itself a creative agent.

4. *New Imaginaries*

The African Centre for Cities (ACC) at University of Cape Town, which had a Public Culture lab at the time, set up a collaboration in 2012 to academically shadow a project trilogy called *New Imaginaries*, which was conceived by Goethe-Institut, a cultural organisation. Its aim was to explore notions of public space in Johannesburg through independently curated artistic intervention. I was appointed by ACC as researcher to reflect upon this trilogy, and articulated the outcome in a book, titled *The Art of Public Space* (Gurney 2015). The book's narrative form takes a musical cue, inspired by Rosi Braidotti's *Transpositions*, a term for shifting a composition from one key into another.

New Imaginaries happened in different parts of Johannesburg, primarily the inner city. It may be helpful to understand Johannesburg inner city suffered capital flight during the 1980s and 1990s as commercial interests, bar some exceptions, generally left the CBD for securitised northern suburbs. This in turn made room for the takeover of vacated buildings by low-income residents looking for somewhere closer to job opportunities, and entrepreneurs who have made the innercity their home. *New Imaginaries* took to heart a provocation by Achille Mbembe about a perceived crisis of imagination. Later, in a 2012 public lecture, Mbembe elaborated on this: "There is a close relationship between the imagination and meaningful future expression. Today, the future has almost disappeared as a philosophical concern. The future has become a scarce resource for all sorts of reasons. It is very difficult to enchant the present ... Ways to re-enchant must not only come from the economy

but also from arts and culture. But for this to happen, we must have an idea of how to theorise the present” (author’s notes)¹.

The first project, called *Shoe Shop*, was a month-long exploration about movement, walking and migration – a kind of ambulatory thinking about being on the move. It was told through personal narratives, and engaged with different forms of getting about - the processional parade, a street bash, guided city walks, gatherings and public transit routes. It was co-curated by Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and Cara Snyman. *Shoe Shop* included photography on boundary spaces such as taxi ranks and overlooked walls, performances, film projections from various African filmmakers and directors, and related workshops – plus an anthology.

Shoe Shop’s concerns are best evident in a series of Saturday city walks led by artists who mapped the urban fabric in novel ways. Doung Anwar Jahangeer of the *dala* collective described in his walk an arc through the cityspace, conceived of as “an architecture without walls”, a transient architecture that travels with people as they move. He highlighted overlooked aspects of public space and proposed a humanising politics of 'the inbetween'. This began at the symbolic site of the famous Constitutional Court and meandered through the densely populated innercity neighbourhood of Hillbrow, ending at a park and lunch adjacent a nearby taxi rank. Jahangeer spoke about the city in terms of interstices -- road, pavement, boundary wall, alley. [slide] He demonstrated how in these tangible gaps, like the road meeting the pavement, control becomes lost and "cracks in the asphalt" appear, where realisations start to happen; or at inbetween sites, like a traffic island where people have reclaimed the grass as public space to sit and chat, they find their own way of "humanising" themselves on the street.

[slide] Here you see the start of an artist’s walk led by Rangoato Hlasane also known as MC Mma Tseleng, a walk around Hillbrow, showing how the roots of the kwaito

1. 12 April 2012. *The Politics of Imagination in Contemporary South Africa*. Wits School of the Arts: Open Lecture Series, University of the Witwatersrand.

music genre are based in this innercity borough. He walks us from place to place and brings various sites alive through the stories and musical tracks he weaves, playing them on a retro boombox and subverting stereotypes as we go.

[slide] Another sonic tour of Saturday morning stores with names like *Style Diva* and *Mista Fashion*, that entice shoppers with musical performances from karaoke to bell ringing, was led by artist Donna Kukama. It was also a kind of audio installation but using found sounds, an immersive experience of noting how music was a way of claiming territory in the city. This walk also brought out other ways territory is marked and enforced when Kukama and Anne Historical, otherwise known as Bettina Malcomess, enacted a 'shoe shine' performance at random intervals along the way. This led to bemused interest from passersby who formed a quick crowd around the two. But it also triggered altercations with both traders and security personnel who appeared from apparently nowhere to end the performance -- in one case, first filing a farcical incident report back to headquarters stating: "They are making art here!" The experience revealed the conflict between public and privatised space in downtown Johannesburg and the reality that the apparently free sidewalk is often invisibly regulated while the script for tolerated behaviours circumscribed.

The walks suggested different notions of public space as literally shared ground and hence the possibility for public art also to derive less from a sanctified validation and perhaps more just out there for the seeing - an "art of the commons". By traversing some of the most highly densified and diverse communities in Johannesburg, they were also an effective means to transfigure perspectives and find common ground along the way. *Shoe Shop* in short suggested to me another way of conceiving of public space as common space instead, an intersection where public and private interests conflate and sometimes contest.

Shoe Shop was largely concerned in various ways with absence or presence as the curators first mentioned in an early meet. I won't go into more of its artistic interventions now but some of them engaged directly with migrancy and its more

harrowing experiences, instigating in turn the stories of passersby – many themselves migrants in innercity Johannesburg with their own narratives to tell. Who is present and absent in our idea of a public? It made visible through changes in tempo and emphasis those "cracks in the asphalt" that Jahangeer spoke about, the pauses in the musical score of our transposition becoming a vital part of the reading. It also resisted our soundbite culture of making sense in quick and easy steps amid superficial relations from the sheer volume and velocity of our communications, as articulated by Sherry Turkle, in *Alone Together* (2011). It demanded instead a long circuitous walk, a loitering in fact, to immerse in that inbetween space where different sensibilities can co-exist. This didn't mesh with everyone -- some found the open-ended nature of the project, which refused to be pinned down, difficult to grasp. But others understood this as poetic: "I think it's about life's journey," said one.

[slide] The second event, *A MAZE.Interact*, was a five-day fusion of art, gaming technologies and music underscored with an idea to 'play the city' in both analogue and digital ways, curated by Thorsten Wiedemann. This indie festival included a game jam, exhibition, machinima (films created from computer games), symposium, workshops, a club night and street games. It basically elasticised ideas about public space into more hybrid combinations. In this image, you see a screengrab from a game jam where participants were challenged to create a videogame in 48 hours based on Johannesburg. It was based on a theme of 'chop shop' – about recycling and resampling, common activities in the city. This particular game, called *Reconstitution Hill*, inverted the idea of the inner city which is often prejudicially feared in a way as dystopia - the inhabitants there were the only ones that survived in a futuristic cyborg battle. The player must keep their humanity index as close to 100 as possible as they go about their mission: to prevent the incorporation of cybernetics into humanity. As this humanity index drops, vulnerability to the negative influences of the city increases.

Reconstitution Hill provokes a further definitional elasticity of what we earlier started thinking about as common space. New media art is no longer about a

computer terminal and a mouse but "entering public space, projections and physical computing, and interacting between people", according to A MAZE artist Andrej Boleslavský². This is akin to Amin's discussion about stretched geographies of association (2006). But in this stretch, the body is still the key interface to an immersive experience. University of Witwatersrand academic Judy Backhouse, speaking at a public lecture³, emphasised this visceral nature of digital worlds.

[slide] An A MAZE module that effectively demonstrated this corporeal element was the streetgame *Flipside*, by performance artist Anthea Moys and Sebastian Quack of Berlin's Invisible Playground, which devises games for cities and publishes their rule sets freely online. *Flipside* was a collaborative game of teleported reality between Johannesburg and Berlin using green-screen technology. The premise was to make sense of two places at once while giving a new meaning. Each team represents a TV production crew competing against the clock to teleport themselves into different places, to capture scripted stories received by instructors called 'reality dealers' and show them to the world. The scripts are devised from real storylines in Berlin and Johannesburg and the greenscreen technology transfers the skits back between cities. Teams get extra points for things like using their props well or including members of the public in their skits – "to spice up reality a bit".

The game conjures a participatory encounter that conflates different dimensions and modes of being to facilitate a co-produced kind of *thirdspace*, as articulated by Edward Soja, following Henri Lefebvre. It's neither the material space we experience nor a representation of it but "a space of representation ... bearing the possibility of new meanings, a space activated through social action and the social imagination [where] unexpected intersections possess liberatory potential" (Crawford 1999: 29).

In the broader analysis, A MAZE builds upon a developing notion of third space into hybrid fusions and confluences with the body as mediator – a cyborg city. Intangibles like imagination, effort and deep play are key. Thus, through a gaming trope, an idea

² Personal interview. 3 September 2012. August House, Doornfontein

³ 26 July 2012. *Thoughts on a Technology-enabled, Disembodied Future*. Wits School of Arts. Author's notes.

of a "transparent city" begins to take root, as conceived by Atkinson & Willis (2009). They say this more mutable hyper-realism conflates the authentic and game-world elements in something called 'slipping', when we start to read the city in terms of our game, or 'seguing' if that effect is more sustained (Vanolo 2012: 285). Simulation opens up a new vantage point "in which play, interactivity, experimentation and fantasies of elective identity produce subtly different ways of engaging with, and re-imagining, urban space" (Atkinson & Willis 2009: 403) – what the authors call an "interactive turn" in the urban experience. This roleplaying world has its own notions of validity.

[slide] The third event, *SPINES*, comprised two parallel performance art projects held over three days each to explore the transport lines of Johannesburg. The first, *United African Utopias*, was a fantasy play that walked participants through Johannesburg inner city to reimagine it as utopia, with artists staging interventions at regular intervals and to Alexandra township – on foot, by elevator, bus, taxi, dancing, on a highspeed train, a bicycle, and finally, a blindfolded short walk. The narrative script was broadcast in real time over pirate radio, fusing en route notions of reality and fiction, past and future, here and there – as one participant put it, the radio let you own the experience and keep you present. It was curated by João Orecchia, Tanja Krone, Hans Narva and Mpumi Mcata.

This utopian journey started at *RentAWreck* car hire in Doornfontein, a mixed use innercity neighbourhood, where we were greeted by costumed guides, dressed evocatively like air stewards from the future. On our city walk, in well-policed alligator formations of twos, we experienced along the way a mix of interventions that ranged in tempo and pitch. We were stalked by artists with quiet stagings like an acupuncture of the space [slide]; then hailed by a guide with megaphone, commenting on passing architectural features. Events were precisely cued, like a bus pulling up just on time to collect us streetside, and the whole experience was shaped like an alternate reality. Our quick pace, transience, other-worldly props and evident humour were the balm. [slide] This is a map of the route.

In House project, the second partner project in *Spines*, took participants inside people's private homes where artists staged interventions that took their cue from the immediate surrounds to experiment with the idea of private and public space, and performance itself. It was curated by Sello Pesa with Brian Mtembu and Humphrey Maleka. They are interested in asking through *In House*: "What are the common things we can talk about?" Performance, says Pesa, puts us in the same place and creates an equal platform with nobody above the other. Participants went on a four-hour journey by hired minibus taxi between different neighbourhoods, from Soweto township to Observatory suburb and the inner city to Alexandra, each day a different route. And artists differently activated the destination points of private or sometimes multi-use spaces, in a range of registers and modes. For myself, the experience of *In/ House* was fundamental in completing a shift of perceptions of public space already triggered by the preceding trio -- what it is, who has access and in particular how it could be differently conceived as *common space* instead.

For instance - on a Friday in November during a preparatory research trip, we made our way through a tiny passage in Alexandra. [slide] This is an image from that trip. Sello Pesa was showing me one of the sites where a performance would later take place. The path led from a roadside site and then we walked up through a tightly congested alley between nested homes knitted together like a Tetris puzzle and arranged with a sculptor's logic: a door literally wedged as a wall, we walked up an incline and over a puddle. Three men played cards at a bench on our right as we passed in necessary single file. Hanging washing was catching a breath wherever it could. Children mingled. Wares competed for sale with hand-lettered signage here and there. An overhead structure necessitated a duck. Greetings were shouted and returned. The passage flowed and five minutes later came abruptly to an end. We popped out the other side, my perceptions having measurably shifted. Brian Mtembu, who is an Alex resident, said these spaces belong to no-one and everyone. So for *In House*, the choreographers knocked on every door to that alley, explained the project and asked to effect the performance piece there. Without fail the

residents said yes, feel free, the space is public. Afterwards, the choreographers revisited and thanked the same.

In addition to being an ethical way to work in public space, I thought the alley effectively demonstrated common space. In part, it was the conflation of public and private, a third space mentioned above, activated through social action and unexpected intersections. But also because it belongs to no single authority -- everyone has claims to the same degree and these are contested and must continually be negotiated. Most strikingly, it led me to consider how publicness was not an inherent or given characteristic of a space. Rather, it is one possible dimension of the spatial. Publicness is a quality that is *enacted, performed and negotiated*. It is not a characteristic of the space itself, then, but the dynamics within it, which are latent and can be manifested on a sliding scale. The Alex passage was not only a thoroughfare but an unlikely space of placemaking, albeit one where people are forced into sharing certain acts they may very well wish to have other kinds of spaces for. It demonstrated to me a different kind of thought about public space, what architect Henning Rasmuss calls "leftover space" between things or objects. He told a Trinity Session public art conference that public space was just "space where people do stuff"⁴ - the glue around everything else, he says, and not these small discrete pockets of designated areas.

[slide] It is no coincidence, then, this resilient alley staged one of the most compelling performances from Common Sense duo Stan Wannett and Leila Anderson – a staged accident on one side of this alley, on the pavement, as if Stan has tripped and spilt both his eggs and his egg-head. At the other end of the alley, Leila lay supine on a stretcher as if a medical procedure had gone wrong, mirrors reflecting the audience. Both were events frozen in time. They kept restaging a kind of disaster scenario at intervals, Leila kept picking up the dropped eggs, nursing them, dazed and seemingly traumatised, the audience was immensely curious and

⁴ November 2012. *Public Access: Johannesburg's Second Conference on Public Art*. Trinity Session: Maboneng

speculated – about what they thought had happened in the storyline to how Stan lay so still for so long and whether they used blood to get wax that shade of pink. Curiosity. That was in large measure the response to these interventions on the whole, as well as a willingness to guess and not fully understand.

Reflecting on these works, the first thing to say is the *New Imaginaries* projects taken as a whole were ephemeral, transient and nomadic. In this, they suggested to me a riposte to current creative economies discourse that validates art economically – because in their ephemerality, the interventions could not be captured, financially or otherwise. And that is the essential argument, if you like, that my book makes. It offers through its shadowing of the trilogy an alternative proposition for why art matters, building an accretive case towards an art of the commons. As a researcher, trying to write about ephemeral artworks is another challenge but we will put that one aside for now. Linked to this critique of financialisation is the issue of uncertainty, a key thematic in my research. I devote a chapter in the book to this topic, to speak to other disciplines interested in city imaginings by showing how ambiguity, coping with paradox, and its transfiguration is often embraced as part of artistic practice and visual thinking.

Briefly - a prevailing trend in current arts policy including our own in south Africa, holds that art must contribute to the economy's GDP, grow jobs, bring in foreign exchange, that it must justify itself in material and measurable terms. South Africa's arts strategy is called *Mzansi's Golden Economy*, which tells you everything you need to know⁵. It follows a well developed Euro-American discourse based in turn on the creative city idea. But it's an instrumentalist notion that sidelines the non-measurable effects. In the UK, it is interesting to note, there has been a recent spate of long-term inquiries around cultural value.⁶ In South Africa, there is currently a review process on the White Paper on Arts and Culture so we await future direction on this approach.

⁵ The idea is "to grow the economy, create jobs and build sustainable developments", according to a Department of Arts and Culture spokesperson.

⁶ These include: *The Cultural Value Project* (AHRC); the *Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value*; and *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society* (Arts Council England).

The second point to underscore from *New Imaginaries* is that all these projects can be said to have a performative aspect. From this I draw a key conclusion, quite obvious by now, that *public space is daily performed*. Public space is a dynamic, alive and negotiated living thing and not a static, pre-ordained entity granted by definition. It is instead contested and reconstituted by people making their own worlds, in what the book calls common space. This belongs to everybody and to nobody; competing claims at the interface of material realities and structural conditions must be constantly negotiated anew. These kind of actions Paul Chatterton calls *commoning*. To quote: "The common is full of productive moments of resistance that create new vocabularies, solidarities, social and spatial practices and relations and repertoires of resistance" (Chatterton 2010: 626). Alive and mutable - hence the title, performing the present. We will move onto the rest of the talk in turn building upon this basic insight, looking at urban space as performed space.

Visual art practices since the 1960s have opened themselves up to a theatricality that suggests processes of art production and reception as performative, with meaning enacted through interpretive engagements rather than a static object with prescribed signification (Jones & Stephenson 1999). Such visual art practices tap into the shifting nature of the city's multiple modalities and what academics refer to as a broader 'performative turn'. Forms of life, we might say, are now mobilised, writes John Urry, who identifies an emergent mobility complex from long-distance leisure to manufactured goods, foodstuffs and friends (2010: 199).

So - let's apply the performative turn to my home city for a brief change of scenery. We will visit a sound art intervention called *Cape Town Under: The Third Voice* that differently animates what we're talking about, from the undercommons. [Slide]

5. *Cape Town Under: The Third Voice*

[slide] Many cities have secret underground lives (Dobraszczyk et al 2016) and Cape Town is no exception. Unbeknown to most of its citizens, it has a lattice of tunnels running underneath its roads. This secret network stretches from the famous Table Mountain down towards the sea. Built during the Dutch colonial era primarily for sewerage purposes, these were later canalised and then built over by the contemporary city. These days stormwater gushes through.

I conceived *Cape Town Under: The Third Voice* as a performance artwork manifested in collaboration with Pauline Theart who uses her voice as key medium. This sound intervention from the underground was performed for a 2013 arts festival themed around the issue of land. That in turn was hinged to the 100-year-old Native Lands Act cited previously, and its contemporary endurances. In our collaborative response, Pauline performed a looped lullaby for an hour from three different tunnel sites over one November weekend. Our key challenge was to negotiate an agreed way to interact artistically with this intriguing yet heavily burdened space, that still allowed other histories to speak. The end result was to strip the proposed lullaby of its vocabulary and repeat only its musical form. This let the tunnel co-create with its own echoing character – a third voice. The solution was generated in rehearsal by the site itself when Pauline projected her voice around its chambers and found it cut off cold in places while in others it looped back in bold phrasings. [slides 1-5]

The three live performances of improvisation surprised passersby in public space with song emerging from street manholes as improvised speaker system. In two of the three sites, Pauline was unseen, positioned below a secured but uncovered manhole interface. The third site was a trapdoor into the military bastion of Cape Town's historic Castle, a fort built in the 1600s. Here, she was visible to crouched viewers - standing on a plank across stormwater rushing through the tunnel lattice. [slides 1-9]

Power structures, similar to the stormwater, underscore our daily lives but are often invisible. *Cape Town Under: The Third Voice* made evident hidden infrastructures dating from the colonial era through an ephemeral gesture of song. The endurance

lullaby performance was a feminine act emerging from a militarised built environment - a fort and former military parade ground. It conflated ideas of private and public space. It emerged from the hidden underground into congested public space above to ignite spontaneous dialogues that triggered keen curiosity in unexpected ways.

The Grand Parade - today a busy public square is best known as the staging for Nelson Mandela's first public speech from the adjacent City Hall, when he finally emerged from prison a free man. The square is adjacent a major transport hub and the audience for that intervention was primarily a commuting public en route various destinations. They were generally intrigued to catch a surprising glimpse of tunnels from a temporarily open access point. Through this surprising rupture in public space, and a lullaby stripped of the particularities of language, we were able to find some common ground. [slides 19]

I've referred to this as a kind of undercommons. Harney and Moten, in their text of that name say entering the undercommons is figuring out ways of being together, they call it *study* but say it's any kind of rehearsal really - from jamming to working in a factory to sitting on a bench. "I believe in another world in the world and I want to be in *that*" (Moten 2013: 10).

[audio clip 2'30'']

6. #SomethingMustFall

[slide] And now for some performative rage to wake you from your slumber! Emerging from the literal underground to a political underground, we will fathom how a dead monument came back to life as tinder for a nationwide protest movement. It became a vector of resistance and radical re-imagination of the public sphere, and hence a way to reconsider city futures. We view its fate and understand the wake of its disappearance through the performative turn outlined above, ending with the latest manifestation of this afterlife -- a student occupation of University of

Cape Town (UCT) fine art and drama campus. A quick recap of events will bring you to this current moment.

April 2015. A student wearing a bright pink construction worker's helmet, barechested and blowing a whistle, threw the contents of a portable toilet canister over UCT's statue of Cecil John Rhodes. This artwork of a colonial era mining magnate and statesman was created in the 1930s by Marion Walgate. Chumani Maxwele protested "white arrogance", written on a board around his neck, by throwing human faeces onto the sculpture in a performative gesture [slide]. The public artwork looks out over the southern suburbs from its elevated central position on the campus, a public heritage site, where students daily file past. Maxwele's action set off a series of further interventions on the statue itself and daily student meetings at its feet, which in turn spurred action against other so-called dead monuments at campuses and other public sites across the country. Within this ripple effect, a Twitter hashtag became a social movement '#RhodesMustFall' in a digital second life. His performative act erupted into a national call for structural transformation, not only regarding universities – around the tagline #FeesMustFall – but also society at large to recalibrate the public sphere twenty-one years into democracy. The cause of the Fallists, as they've become known, which includes decolonisation of the curriculum has also resonated globally with struggles in other spaces and places. There have been ongoing protests, occupations, inquiries and other activations since.

An important interlude here: Maxwele's act of throwing shit at a statue has a political context. According to social justice movements in the Western Cape, inadequate sanitation constitutes infrastructural violence. Academic Jacklyn cock speaks about slow violence. Similar tactics with spilled sanitation cannisters – colloquially called 'laptops' and 'portapotties' - have been used at the airport and the provincial legislature among other sites to literally raise a stink in public space. This in a city where some communities are still forced to use bucket systems and informal sanitation solutions. The underlying idea is to link this slow violence and

security, in turn show up widening inequalities that, while global in reach, are acutely felt in contemporary South Africa.

In this sense, the UCT Rhodes artwork is not only historical but for many symbolically re-inscribes a contemporary reality. An artist who regularly works in public space described it to me this way: "It has deep psychological impacts that last a lifetime and [the statue is] in this public space ... It impacts on a person's quality of life, perceptions of self, how they feel, relations to the world they live in" (personal correspondence, 2015). This act of rage also relates to the unspeakable. As Njabulo Ndebele puts it, the dual effects of poverty and inequality are deeply felt but in ways that are often difficult to articulate.

The statue was subsequently crated and temporarily banished while its fate is decided but its second lives have continued apace, allowing meaning to be renegotiated in the performative present. It is this spectral afterlife of the artwork that is of most interest to me and I've been documenting its constant mutations.

[Slides 1-14]

The empty plinth poses a question: what do we do with the unfinished business of the past? It's about the politics of the void and what comes next – because as we can see, the void is not empty. Malcolm Miles says the history represented by statues is "a closure" inhibiting the imagining of alternative futures by denying the possibility of alternative pasts. But if it's an opening in society's received structure of values, dislocating the assumptions of an 'official' history, it is an act of resistance" (Miles 1997: 50). Seen through a more ephemeral lens, zombie monuments demonstrate a mobile dimension of spectral meaning, a mutability that supercedes their materiality. The latest re-enactment took this artwork's afterlife into the heart of the art cognoscenti in the city in an intriguing intervention, which is where we end this evening's talk.

Conclusion: wishful thinking

[slide] In October last year (2016), Fine art and drama students of UCT turned their satellite campus into an art protest. The entrance to Michaelis School of Fine Art, which is located in Cape Town's CBD, and where I also studied, was barricaded to create a formal shutdown as part of the broader *Fees Must Fall* movement. [slide] Beyond, an occupation called Umhlangano, which means 'gathering', renamed key campus venues. Naming was a big part of the exercise. Its premise was a safe space from which to work, live and create artworks, performances and discussion on how to move things forward. A large part of this student body comprised an LGBTQI collective and the intervention included a rolling series of artworks created from whatever materials were to hand or donated. The campus literally became a live art installation. It was theory in practice.

Some of these makeshift artworks (including balloons) were forcibly removed at one point by security guards who deemed them illegal structures that contravened a court interdict. The Michaelis art gallery became a dual protest exhibition and sleeping area while campus grounds were a shifting installation. The first point on a declared talk agenda for Umhlangano was the politics of space. "#OurSpace" read a cardboard sign next to a series of inverted chairs. The occupation eventually came to an end in late December 2016 when students reached a broader agreement with UCT about a way forward, in a formal reconciliation process. There was a third-party facilitator to assist with this. The art school truce seems to be holding at this moment, a few months later, while a national convention looks into broader issues.

I am told that the formal dialogues on the art campus between staff and students, while very difficult, operated according to the same sensibility as the occupation: there were performances and interventions during these talks, so they functioned like an artwork. David Andrew, who heads up the visual arts department at the Wits School of Art in Johannesburg, has written a thesis on this topic –how the classroom can potentially function like a work of art. It thinks about the classroom as an installation, for instance, and celebrates the artist's multimodal sensibility. This kind of thinking – in, through and with art, like artistic research – perhaps offers an imaginative way forward for our challenges in South Africa as we reconsider how the

curriculum works and how the university itself might function. The qualities Andrew cites include Appadurai's "capacity to aspire" which he says is a cultural capacity because it's about *dissent, value, meaning and communication* (2008). Another quality is Appadurai's observation we live in an age of an "ethics of probability – an avalanche of numbers", and he urges rather an *ethics of possibility*. Not probability but possibility ... This, surely, has to do with imagination. And so we are right back to where we started: with *New imaginaries*, the capacity to aspire, or what I suggested at the start as wishful thinking. It can be helpful to read the city with the configurations people make for themselves as indicators.

Some wishes expressed by Umhlangano can be identified through their artworks and an anecdote. The first day I went to look for Umhlangano, a body was lying on the tarmac exhausted next to a body-length list of '10 things I want to change' and topped with an array of colourful magic markers. The list was entirely empty. The woman was motionless lying next to this unwritten list as if just contemplating it were a task too overwhelming. This was emblematic for me because the students were literally putting their bodies on the line and it was quite evident at each visit how plainly exhausted they were.

The artworks. [slides]. 'Looking for land'. A list of rules about how to treat people with dignity. A lot of re-naming of venues with gaffer tape erasing present white male names and renaming with black women (and men). Deflated balloons. The chalked outline of a dead body. A sign saying 'Don't tell the black body what to create'. A sculpture making lighthearted fun of the Vice-Chancellor. The aesthetic was rough and ready – paper, cardboard, glitter and glue.

Recall Mbembe's words at the beginning, about a crisis of imagination regarding the future. At a more recent public talk, with reference to Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko, he said they were both preoccupied by one very important question: *What time is it?* And what is the nature of the time that is ours? I favour Giorgio Agamben's thoughts on time; he says to be truly contemporary means being somewhat out of time, adhering to it and keeping a distance. The students leading the *#RhodesMustFall*

movement are time- travellers, LeighAnn Naidoo tells us. "Their particular, beautiful madness is to have recognised and exploited the ambivalence of our historical moment to push into the future. They have been working on the project of *historical dissonance*, of clarifying the untenable status quo of the present by forcing an awareness of a time when things are not this way... hallucinating a new time" (2016: 2, original emphasis).

The Rhodes public artwork, since its disappearance, has ironically entered public space in a new way and its performative wake is helping forge ideas about tomorrow. It's enacting new understandings of how things could be, just out the bounds of rational thought, somewhere art has the capacity to transport us, to a place that has no time signature yet.

To close: we have seen in our triple move through public space in Johannesburg and Cape Town how public art may help surface issues of power - the 'hidden transcripts' of James Scott (1992). Scott also addresses the hidden electricity when such transcripts are publicly spoken out. artworks in public space have the capacity to be vectors of that current, sites of resistance and re-imagination that can help recalibrate a public sphere. A significant genre of art, in South Africa, is underway on the performative edge. In its efflorescence, it cannot be captured and so resists commodification. It is pertinent to consider this mode of artmaking and why it matters, particularly in a current moment of financialisation and creative economies dialogue that increasingly puts art, and the academy, 'to work'. This kind of critical art practice does not manifest in a language that easily lends itself to collectivist ideas of representation. Rather, it experiments with a counter public imaginary more concerned with articulating invisibilities and communicating something of the ineffable instead. It has a nomadic sensibility that responds to an underlying flux rather than a monumental rigour of certainty. It's an imaginary that aspires towards the city as a more meaningful commons, and makes of us all wishful thinkers.

ENDS

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