

Symposium 'New Imaginaries'

Date: Thursday 21 February 2013
Venue: Goethe-Institut Atrium, Jan Smuts Avenue
Convened by African Centre for Cities (ACC), University of Cape Town
Hosted by Goethe-Institut Johannesburg

Rationale

November 2012
Author: Kim Gurney, Research Associate, ACC
E: freelance@telkomsa.net



Artists At Work installing Jodi Bieber's photographic poster series outside Central Methodist Church on Pritchard Street. *Shoe Shop*, 'New Imaginaries', May 2012.
Photo: Kim Gurney

The Symposium: a synopsis

Goethe-Institut and African Centre for Cities (ACC) will host a one-day symposium hinged to 'New Imaginaries', a project trilogy manifested during 2012 that variously explored public space in Johannesburg by artistic means: *Shoe Shop, A MAZE. Interact* and *Spines*.

ACC was commissioned by Goethe-Institut to carry out research on 'New Imaginaries' as an academic component to reflect upon the project series. It has been a fairly open-ended endeavour that has crystallised along the way with a general intent to analyse and explore the 'New Imaginaries' trio with respect to broader contexts including relevant bodies of theory. Research findings will be presented as part of the symposium, to be followed in 2013 by a publication to articulate more comprehensively research outcomes.

The symposium encourages public discussion on issues relating to the urban imaginary triggered by a series of short speaker-led provocations on session topics spanning artistic research, city futures, city makings and city publics. Public art is the fulcrum, with the day's proceedings framed by a project trilogy that privileges the transient and nomadic encounter over concrete and material form. Its structure is underscored by two key strands: how to harness the power of imagination in weaving a future urban fabric and how different registers of engagement across disciplines might work together in so doing. The event thus gathers a spectrum of stakeholders and other parties for interdisciplinary discussion around the public sphere, from the 'New Imaginaries' project curators to academics, policymakers, cultural practitioners, media professionals, city-makers and imagineers. All are welcome.

For more programme details visit <http://africancentreforcities.net/planner/278/>

'New Imaginaries': an overview

'New Imaginaries' is a Goethe-Institut trilogy of projects that manifested at various times during 2012 to broadly explore public space in Johannesburg by artistic means: *Shoe Shop*, *A MAZE*.*Interact* and *Spines*.

*Shoe Shop*¹, curated by Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and co-curated by Cara Snyman between 4 May and 1 June 2012, comprised multiple events and project nodes on the topic of movement and migration. These ranged from photographic installations in public space around Johannesburg, making particular use of walls and overlooked surfaces, to city walks, a film festival, workshops and dialogues nested around a project hub in Braamfontein. The project as a whole broadly celebrated movement through personal narratives that reflected upon the complexities of a roving life and an accompanying anthology *Shoe Shop* gave this literary form. As Snyman put it at the opening event: "Our idea is that the exhibition is really a roaming exhibition - it's about a roaming life and a walking life." Earlier, she elaborated that it's about people and movement through space, both the physicality of walking and its representation politically including the inequalities of space but speaking about it in a different way and "making the road as we walk it"².

*A MAZE. Interact*³, curated by Thorsten Wiedemann, was a five-day convergence of art, media and technology, held between 28 August and 2 September 2012 in various Braamfontein venues, which was designed to playfully bring multimedia expression to the public in new ways. As Wiedemann described it a year before its manifestation: "It's a kind of interdisciplinary, playful, experimental, visionary festival." *A MAZE* comprised several parallel modules: an exhibition of artistic computer games, interactive installations and video documentations; screenings including an open-air of *machinimas* (cinema, machines and animation); public play such as street games; a symposium on the convergence of media art and games; various workshops; a 'jump 'n run' party including DJs, VJ, live acts,

¹ See <http://www.shoeshopproject.co.za>

² Gutberlet M & Snyman C, Curators, 1 March 2012. Gurney, K. Personal interview.

³ See www.amaze-festival.de/interact-2012

performances and interactive installations; and a concert, all preceded by a 48-hour game jam.

Finally, *Spines* comprised two parallel projects held between 30 November and 2 December at multiple sites across broader Johannesburg, with the two projects literally intersecting at Park Station in Braamfontein. Sello Pesa, Humphrey Maleka and Brian Mtembu of Ntsoana Contemporary Dance Theatre took participants on a journey, framed by their ongoing *In/House* project, that was differently routed using minibus transport each day, starting from Park Station and visiting along the way the intimate environs of homes contrasted with specific public sites. Artists activated these spaces through performative interventions with the project aim of taking performance into lived urban and suburban spaces, triggering new perspectives through a common artistic reference. Joao Orecchia, Mpumi Mcata, Hans Narva and Tanja Krone took the audience on another kind of daily 'tour' with *United African Utopias* that conflated reality and imagination, here and there, present and future. It started at 'Rent-a-Wreck' car hire in Doornfontein and took participants on a scripted play narrated on a pirate radio frequency to imagine Johannesburg as a present-day utopia. Artists activated cityspace at key points on the guided tour with performative interventions that privileged participants' perception of fictive lands⁴. The journey was effected through a combination of public transport modes, explicitly linking to the *Spines* thematic of transport lines.

The 'New Imaginaries' series as a whole is about questioning the existence of public space and access in a city of parallel worlds and attempting to bridge this through artistic intervention, according to the Goethe-Institut's concept document. It states that a fragile intermediate zone has emerged between defined social spheres, "a delicate open space" that is also a creative space. 'New Imaginaries' thus aims to imaginatively source alternatives to conventional exhibition and performance spaces.

⁴ See <http://www.united-african-utopias.com>

It was inspired partly in response to a perceived crisis of imagination, as variously articulated by Professor Achille Mbembe. He told a Wits Open lecture, for instance, that certain realisations in contemporary South Africa were exacting a heavy toll on the country's psyche⁵. Mbembe said that for a very long time, South Africa had tried to produce an idea of itself in two registers -- the language of exceptionalism or the language of the miraculous. But the country has discovered that after all it is an ordinary place and there was no miracle but a political stalemate. He identified in question time "a crisis of imagination" and a difficulty to say something meaningful about the future. "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," he said.

'New Imaginaries' may be understood as a contribution towards such re-enchantment. As Dr Katharina von Ruckteschell-Katte, regional director of Sub-Saharan Africa of the Goethe-Institut, told participants at the opening of *A MAZE*, Johannesburg holds unique potential in the world's cities. And events like *A MAZE* "deal with everything that you can imagine".

--November 2012

⁵ Gurney, K. 12 April 2012. Lecture notes. From: Mbembe, A. *The Politics of the Imagination*. Wits School of Arts, Open Lecture Series.