

**Site Specific Art in Johannesburg**  
**Aesthetic Practice, Political Contestation and the**  
**Urban**

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*A Proposal for a Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art*

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***Site Specific Art in Johannesburg***  
***Aesthetic Practice, Political Contestation and the Urban.***

*Living just enough, just enough for the city*

Stevie Wonder, 1973<sup>1</sup>

***Aim***

This is a proposal for a PhD that aims to explore and critically question forms of art making practices that are crafted with an integral connection to the space and time in which they are made, distributed and received. In the terminology of contemporary art, this is known as *site specific art*, or referred to simply as *site specificity*. These practices are contingent, relational and often part of critical or socially engaged cultural or political projects.

I will focus on selected forms of site specific work within Johannesburg, after 1994, in order to assess the extent to which this form of art practice with its attendant methods, theoretical frameworks and conceptual genealogies, represents a form of aesthetic research and critical practice that is able to engage with and challenge prevailing cultural, political, economic and social orders. Johannesburg is the site that I intend to explore from this political and aesthetic vantage point<sup>2</sup>.

This project will problematize contemporary art and urban theory within the European and North American canon, in order to question their function, operation and relevance in the context of Johannesburg, South Africa. These canons allow some things to be legible and only in certain ways. They also render invisible forms of creativity and urbanity that exceed or do not cohere within their terms of possibility. More so, and somewhat ironically, they also define and make possible the potential for agency, insurgency or subversion. The urgency here is to begin to understand the ways in which knowledge is produced, and to ask after the effects of such production. This will be to

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<sup>1</sup> With apologies to AbdouMaliq Simone

<sup>2</sup> I refer to the aesthetic in terms of its expanded usage, in ways that are perhaps similar to Jacques Rancière who defines it following Kant (with interventions through Foucault) as, "*the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.*" (Rancière, p8, 2000) Aesthetics, or the aesthetic, is then not simply a form of judgment, appraisal or evaluation of beauty or form, but is what I will pursue as the necessary and appropriate form of enquiry, critical questioning and mode of operation present within the contemporary arts.

ask how and what kind of Johannesburg is produced through successive frames of colonial, apartheid and neoliberal globalised discourses.

My response to this established range of theoretical frames and prefigurative discourses will be to not only locate site specificity, avant-garde art practice and the relevant urban theories within the geographic, historical and political frameworks in which they emerge, but importantly also to confront them with the contingencies of an African cosmopolitan context. I will argue that concepts of aesthetic practice and political contestation as developed in Africa are productively mobilised alongside these dominant and conventional modes of articulation. As such, I will read concepts such as Negritude, Ujamaa, Chimurenga and Black Consciousness in terms of how they engage with forms of power, and enact strategies of resistance<sup>3</sup>. Specifically, I will look for accounts of how arts and culture (the aesthetic) is figured as part of a radical anti-colonial or de-colonial project. In this way, African aesthetic theory of the avant-garde and the urban will challenge existing concepts and demand that new vocabularies are needed<sup>4</sup>.

In addition to critically writing into the established literature of art history and urban theory the project will carry out two further actions; on the one hand this will be to develop a preliminary archive of case studies that exist as important and revealing forms of site specific practice in Johannesburg from 1994 to the present. This archive will be configured from the point of view of the urgent and critical questions that I will formulate through the literature. In addition to this, I will curate a series of collaborative interventions, designed in conversation with invited theorists and artists<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> These four concepts are identified as points where forms of activism, philosophy and political critique coalesce. Some of these concepts are readable through specific authors, e.g. Léopold Sédar Senghor (Negritude), Julius Nyerere (Ujamaa), or Steven Biko (Black Consciousness), others like Chimurenga are less easily pinned down. While I will focus my reading around these concepts, I do not discount important work by Aimé Césaire (who also had important contributions to make into French surrealism), Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, Fela Kuti, Ngūgĩ Wa Thiong'o and others who propose important positions on the role and nature of the intellectual, artist, poet, musician or writer in Africa.

<sup>4</sup> This aspect of the research is a trajectory that is crucial to take up more fully. In pursuing this line of argument, the structure of this project could invert, so that the aesthetic and urban theory proposed by African anti-colonial or independence movements would become central and the 'western' theory would be read in relation to this. Similar comments could be made about the relationship of the practice to theory and the relationship of Johannesburg to the texts that produce it.

<sup>5</sup> I use the verb curate in the broadest possible sense. In fact, my role of curator will be that of an artist-curator. In chapter four I will engage with the work of Chus Martinez, Paul O'Neil, as well as the edited volume, *Cultures of the Curatorial* by Von Bismarck, Weski and Schaff and others

These interventions will be sustained over a year-long period, and organised around a working group which will respond, provoke and contest both the theoretical and practical ground of the project.

The interventions of this working group will be carried out parallel to, but always finding moments of intersection with, the theoretical revisions and case study analysis. In this way, the proposed PhD is one that employs a mix of tactics and methods from contemporary art and conventional academic research. The three intertwined trajectories of theory, case study, and practice will all be approached and problematised as forms of writing, analysis, methods of articulation and tactics of criticality. As such this PhD is conceived as a complex text or 'thick description' that deploys all the forms of making, doing, seeing, thinking, reading and writing that already takes place inside the Art School within a university, both in South Africa and abroad. I intend to evoke the notion of 'thick description' developed by Clifford Geertz (1973) as a response to conventional anthropological research and ethnography. Geertz in turn develops this concept through the work of Ryle, Wittgenstein, Weber, Ricoeur and others. I mention this not because I wish to move into the space of equivalences between anthropology, ethnography and art, in the manner of Hal Foster and others, but rather to reinforce the point that artistic research is not alone in being unsatisfied with conventional research methods and modes of analysis. In fact, the injunction to critically rethink and rework epistemological procedures must be at the heart of any research that takes its critical potential seriously. In this way, I turn my attention towards the urban.

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to think through the kinds of actions, and positions that curating in the expanded sense entails. This will necessarily have implications and challenges in thinking about issues such as authorship and agency.

## ***Why Johannesburg?***

*There must have been something here, where Johannesburg stands, before the gold rush, but it was never recorded in history. So Johannesburg became and remained, by default, an instant city, periodically growing and being torn down as the gold seams shifted course in one direction or another and the needs of fickle residents changed.*

John Matshikiza, 221, 2008

Johannesburg has been written to death. It has been mythologised, re-mythologised and then demythologised by hordes of urban theorists, historians, anthropologists and the like, wanting to study informality, emergence, recombination, assemblages or rhizomatic and fragmented urban conflagrations. It is a modernist city, but it is not. It is an African city, but it is not. It is a global city, but it is not. Curated masses of artists and art students have also desired the city, for its edgy and provocative mixedness of aesthetic and visceral potency. Johannesburg, the city of gold, manages to be chaotic while still retaining remnants of 'civility'. *African urbanity 101, you should practice in down town Jozi before heading off to Kinshasa or Lagos – which is real Africa.*

Johannesburg the eternal "not – no-place" is for me not the negation of Kinshasa or Lagos. It is the negation of Durban, my city of birth. Like all good Johannesburgers, I travelled to the city from somewhere else. In 1986, I left the warm coast of KwaZulu-Natal and ascended 1753 meters to the dry and dusty plateau that is Johannesburg. I searched for a water source that was not there. I looked for lush greenery that never appeared. Little did I know that this was to be found in abundance in what is the world's largest urban planted forest with each house in the northern suburbs their own pool installed.

Johannesburg revels in factoids like these; largest manmade forest, or two billion-year-old histories of the asteroid that impacted the Vredefort dome – the largest known single energy release event in the earth's history which churned the innards of the earth and forged the reef of gold that makes Jo'burg possible at all.

I have always been drawn to the story of Nongoloza, the freedom fighter (or cattle thief) who was the legendary founder for the violent Numbers prison gangs. He

also came from the coast, and sought refuge in the rocky outcrops of Johannesburg's ridges. He was the kind of transgressive, anticolonial, therefore in some way righteous, hustler that fantasy takes to. He is for me the appropriate first citizen in the story of this gold rush town. A story whose sadism is often matched by its masochism. Those who have been here for a while take a devilish pride in recounting the petty crime that they managed to escape from, while the accounts of violations that leave scars that are not fit for dinner parties remain hidden.

Johannesburg, like any other city, can be described as fragmented, multiple, even schizophrenic. While it has a particularity that is framed by historical and geographic contingency, my reasons for attempting to write from or through the city are based on the fact that I have been engaged in a long, sustained and perhaps dysfunctional relationship with it. I have ridden its taxis in a blazer going to high school. I have skated its pavements and climbed its double decker highways to have a smoke and watch the sunset. I have photographed it, written about and tried to understand why this severe and at times violent city is a point of fascination that I am fixated by.

Over the years I have made work in this city. It was the ground on which I tested my practice as an artist and engaged with political and aesthetic debate. It is a natural progression that this PhD revisits and rethinks a city that is familiar, but is at the same time estranged, complex and dynamic. Johannesburg provides an appropriate mix of criticality and fascination. In this way, I locate, situate, disrupt and challenge the work to follow within the sprawl that is Johannesburg.

## ***Contested Theories - Contested Sites***

*All intellectual work is highly dependent, whether one wishes or not, on the social context in which it is produced.*

Manuel Castells, vii, 1977

The overwhelming majority of work on Johannesburg draws on a European or North American tradition, with its attendant sets of methods and theoretical frameworks. My aim is to disrupt this theory by drawing on concepts such as Negritude, Ujamaa, Chimurenga and Black Consciousness in proposing important political and aesthetic positions that emerge in the fight against colonial rule. I do not intend to jettison the work of conventional art history or urban theory, but to critically read these archives from the perspective of decolonial or independence movements.

Critical engagements with established urban theory is not new. Books such as *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008), by Nuttall and Mbembe, *Not No Place* (2013), by Kreuzfeldt and Malcomess, *Taming the Disorderly City* (2008) and *City of Extremes* (2011), by Martin J. Murray, *Writing the City into Being* (2010), by Lindsay Bremner and exhibitions such as *Blank-Architecture, Apartheid and After*, by Judin and Vladislavic, (1998) *My Joburg* (2013) by Aisemberg and Galbert, as well as conferences such as *Urban Futures* (2000) and site specific art projects such as *UrbanScenographies* (2009), *New Imaginaries: Shoe Shop, AMAZE, Interact and Spines* (2012) among numerous others have with varying success intervened into existing theoretical fields. The *Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism*, a project I was a co-convenor of for five years, took on Johannesburg as a kind of prism or lens with which to refocus theory from the 'global north' in terms of urgencies, priorities and positions from the 'global south'<sup>6</sup>. I quote from the website:

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<sup>6</sup> The terms global south and global north are terms that have become fatigued with overuse. As clumsy as they may be, they are still preferable to older terms such as first or third worlds. As much as I try to avoid their usage, they can be useful at times to refer in shorthand to discourses, histories and accounts of power that sediment around north American and European axis and those from the parts of the world formerly under colonial rule of one sort or another.



The Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism is an experiment in global conversation based in the South. Located in Johannesburg, we seek to be a critical node in the re-territorializing of global intellectual production.

<http://www.jwtc.org.za/>

While the attempt to disrupt and challenge these constructions of the city is a necessary and important one, they are hardly ever sufficient to displace or dislodge as Johannesburg is continually written in the shadow of the modernist enterprise of urbanity. The pitfalls of essentialisation, instrumentalisation, and fetishism of the 'African cosmopolis in the global south' and the attendant paternalising and patronising gestures involved in such manoeuvres of re-territorialization, are numerous and by now fairly well charted. Even so, I will get stuck into some of them as I see them as not only unavoidable but more so, I intend them to be productive in developing contingent forms of historical, theoretical and practical modes of writing in relation to and through Johannesburg. More than this, I will draw on literature from resistance movements across Africa, in order to find parallel and alternative modes of writing to the conventional art historical and urban theory. Again, I see my contribution to these existing and established forms of scholarship and practice designed around a triangulation of processes developed through theoretical analysis, case study work and embodied or performative actions.

### ***Site Specificity the Avant-garde and Africa***

Part of the critical analysis will locate site specificity as an extension of avant-garde practices in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup>. While much of the existing literature especially by Nick Kaye (2000) and Miwon Kwon (2004), locates the emergence of site specificity in relation to minimalist sculpture, I will follow the likes of Claire Doherty (2009) and Grant Kester (2004) who propose a different orientation, by locating the emergence of

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<sup>7</sup> The avant-garde in terms of aesthetic or art traditions is a concept that will need further and sustained elaboration. It emerges particularly in relation to European discourses of art practice and is normally associated with parallel seismic political events. Examples are the Russian revolution, Paris 1968, or the anti-war movement in the USA, which all were influenced by and also influenced artistic interventions. Traditional accounts of the avant-garde will draw on work by Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) Clement Greenberg's *The Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939), Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Theodor Adorno's *The Culture Industry Revisited* (1991) and John Berger's, *Art and Revolution* (1969).

site specificity within avant-garde and political orientations of art and aesthetics more broadly<sup>8</sup>.

My aim here is to draw on a broad historical reading of aesthetic practice that has been mobilised in service of political contestation and cultural production. This will effectively ask after the role of the avant-garde in artistic practice. Beyond the traditional articulation of a European avant-garde, there are histories and accounts of this kind of practice in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. However, these accounts are largely underdeveloped or if developed at all, only minimally come to inform conventional art historical accounts of the avant-garde. This revisionist reading of the avant-garde and art is a crucial intervention that this project seeks to make.

An example here would be how anti-colonial or de-colonial texts by Lèopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, Julius Nyerere, Steve Biko, Chief Albert Lutuli and others, can be read for a consideration of the role of the aesthetic or arts and culture within resistance movements. Concepts like Chimurenga, Ujamaa, Negritude and Black Consciousness all included important aesthetic concerns that were directly mobilised in the fight for liberation from colonial powers and independence movements. I will look for these moments of radical politics in projects such as Dak'art in Senegal, institutions such the Makerere University, Uganda and Fort Hare University in South Africa as well as in revolutionary movements across the continent.

In South Africa, the work of artists like Dumile Feni, and Thami Mnyele and Selbourne Mvusi will be important to consider. So too will accounts of the role of art and culture in the South African anti-apartheid struggle come to figure as important moments in the mobilisation of the aesthetic in service of a radical politics of contestation<sup>9</sup>. In this sense, the cultural, theoretical and political work of the anti-

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<sup>8</sup>, Miwon Kwon, Nick Kaye and others locate site specificity within minimalist sculpture, particularly in the work of Richard Serra. My main reason for re-reading site specificity in this manner is that I find the critical ground in art practices that were developed in contestation of some form of power to be more productive. I will argue that Russian Constructivism, the Situationist International and conceptual art (among other movements) are more consistent with the overtly political aims within site specificity. Kwon and Kaye would no doubt agree with me in this last point, even if they still read Richard Serra at the heart of site specificities emergence. Kwon especially seems to be concerned with the articulation of site specificity as a set of practices within a U.S. continuum, while I wish to open the category up to a range of more global urgencies.

<sup>9</sup> The work of Sue Williamson (Resistance Art in South Africa, 1990), Gavin Young (Art of the South African Townships, 1988) John Pepper (Art and the End of Apartheid) will provide a useful base from which to start this work, however, these remain accounts that are problematic in

colonial struggle in Africa will necessitate a re-reading and questioning of the applicability and operation of the avant-garde. A key question here is if we can retain the denotation of avant-garde – and if we do find it useful, what are the implications and limits of its usefulness? Ultimately this question will be extended to a critical review of site specificity as well as of the urban. In other words, I propose to mobilise these accounts of the aesthetic as a mode of political contestation in re-readings of conventional histories of the avant-garde but will also extend them to an engagement with site specificity the urban and urban theory.

My aim will be to draw on these overlooked archives that exist at the margins of art history, in a re-reading of the more conventionally privileged accounts of avant-garde movements. In this regard, I will especially look for the avant-garde within, Russian Constructivism, The Situationist International and Conceptual art<sup>10</sup>. These critical readings of art history, I argue, provides the appropriate cultural and political context from which to proceed, as site specificity emerges in formal, conceptual, tactical, and political ways out of a trajectory charted by these avant-garde movements in alternatively direct or indirect ways.

While the entire thrust of site specificity is one that places an integral and fundamental emphasis on contingency and ‘locatedness’ within sets of spatial, temporal and conceptual coordinates, the practice nonetheless bears traces of its emergence as a function and operation, perhaps even sub-genre of contemporary art practice.

I will extend this formative context of site specificity in order to question its operation within a specifically urban configuration. My argument here is that it is

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their essentialisation and appropriation of forms of aesthetic practice in terms of rather fixed and rigid definitions of what constitutes art. In fact, there are numerous practices that this standard art historical work misses and omits. I am thinking here of the function of art and culture in Black Consciousness, in the trade union movement and in feminist activism in the anti-apartheid struggle. These all include forms of creative aesthetic practice that are in fact really exciting areas to consider but undervalued or over looked in conventional art histories. These areas will be important to address in developing nuanced accounts of art in service of politicized forms of action in Africa.

<sup>10</sup> This conventional or normative history of the avant-garde within art is vast and also suffers important omissions and oversights in its writing. This history contains many movements that I will not have time to explore, such as, dada, fluxus, cobra, performance art, futurism, feminist radical practice, the Bauhaus, art povera, and a number of other radical critical groups and collectives. My reading of this history will aim to be inclusive, but in no way will attempt to be encyclopaedic or comprehensive. What is notable is that the conventional writing of this history excludes in the main anti colonial collectives or groups. Developing this omitted history in relation to ‘the canon’ will be important in this project.

precisely because contingency and criticality are its self-avowed defining features that we are compelled to question how, in what forms and to what ends this mode of art practice operates when it is enacted in Johannesburg, South Africa. Even while site specificity proposes a practical and theoretical framework that is responsive, relational, reflexive and immersed within the micro and macro politics that exist each time a site specific project is proposed, it is important to question the extent and the implications of the latent or residual formal and subjective histories that the practice nonetheless carries.

In this sense, it is necessary to question the extent to which site specific contemporary arts practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Johannesburg rely on conventional historical/conceptual modalities or to what extent they build on parallel, local and perhaps hidden historical/conceptual narratives. It is necessary here to continue the work of *Global Conceptualisms: Points of Origin, 1950's – 1980's* by Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss, who develop parallel and related histories of the emergence of conceptual art outside of the U.S.A. but with more expansiveness and focus on South Africa, and in this case specifically within Johannesburg<sup>11</sup>. There is a clear and urgent gap in the existing literature that will need to be developed by primary research, in the consolidation and gathering of strands of practices and writing<sup>12</sup>.

This will be to assess and to ask, how and through what genealogies site specificity is formed through discursive, conceptual and aesthetic constellations of ideas and practices. Analysis and research of this kind, then provides a platform from which to question how site specificity is able to respond to issues of power and agency within an urban context such as Johannesburg<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> *Global Conceptualisms* is divided into chapters that each engage with a specific geographic region. Africa is treated as one region, which necessarily means that the ability of the writer (Okwui Enwezor in this case) to go beyond a preliminary and broad elaboration or analysis is limited.

<sup>12</sup> This aspect of the project will take the form of initiating an archive dedicated to site specific art practice in Johannesburg. The archive is proposed as both a digital online platform as well as a resource that is physically located at a library.

<sup>13</sup> The question of agency or the potential for subversion will be read in part through De Certeau and his distinction between strategy and tactic, the Situationist International and their methods of urban subversion of *détournement* and *dérive*. I will extend these forms of subversive potential to an engagement with Spivak's *enabling violations* (2004), Butler's *performative disobedience* (1993) and Homi Bhabha's (2009) distinction between the *Performative and Pedagogic address*. What is at stake in this formulation and operation of power is the ability or possibility for a range of unexpected, unpredicted or subversive, deviant or insurgent actions in relation to the demand or structure of the form of power.

Site specificity exists as a set of practices and conceptual structures that are malleable and responsive, perhaps even reclusive and soft, as they often work in the background. Certainly most artists whose work fits into this category of aesthetic practice do not rally under its flag in overt ways. It exists as a kind of anti-genre, or at least, not a genre as we conventionally understand the term. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, site specific practice begins to work across all forms of contemporary art as a commonly assumed and taken for granted position. Reflexivity, contingency and relationality are the norm for most contemporary art projects and are certainly part of any project that aspires to social, cultural or political engagement. In this scenario, it becomes important to re-read this form of practice in order to assess if the explicitly political ambitions within site specificity are still at work, especially as it becomes generalised into somewhat of a trend.

Miwon Kwon flags some of the complexities at play in *One Place After Another*, a text that has become one of the seminal works on Site Specificity,

[...] the unspecific (miss)uses of the term “site-specific” are yet another instance of how vanguardist, socially conscious, and politically committed art practices always become domesticated by their assimilation into the dominant culture. And this argument would insist that if the aesthetic and political efficacy of site specific art has become insignificant or innocuous in the recent years, it is because it has been weakened and redirected by institutional or market forces.

(Miwon Kwon, 1-2, 2004)

Miwon Kwon, Martha Rosler and others have shown that the radical critical ambition that accompanied site specificity is diluted once it becomes part of a commercially driven project of city rejuvenation, city branding, gentrification or urban regeneration. I intend to elaborate on, deepen and nuance these critical positions, by extending an analysis of the historical and contemporary dimensions of site specificity by reading it as it appears on the streets of Johannesburg post 1994. This will be achieved via case study analysis, theory, and importantly in practice.

Site specific work, along with forms of public art and community based cultural work have become important and increasingly more common modes of working in contemporary art. This is evidenced in the work of Grant Kester (2004), Claire Bishop

(2006 and 2012), Martha Rosler (2013) as well as in the edited volume, *Situation* by Claire Doherty (2009). These U.S. or U.K. based accounts of participatory, socially engaged practice in contemporary art are ambivalent in relation to forms of development or activist thinking and work. It is unclear if such modes of creative activity have any real impact in terms of social, economic or cultural urgencies. Furthermore, it is unclear how this kind of work is appraised from the perspective of conventional art criticism or the commercial art world. Projects that do not always place emphasis on the final object or product of the art work, and rather focus on the process, sometimes find themselves at odds with forms of aesthetic critique especially from the vantage of the commercial art world (Kester, 2004)

In similar ways to these accounts from abroad, there is a substantial body of cultural practice in Johannesburg since democracy, geared towards engagements with a diverse range of spatial, economic or political matters such as housing, transport, labour, xenophobia, gender, race or sexuality. These practices have operated through discourses that come from community development, political activism or social entrepreneurship<sup>14</sup>. In all of these cases, the political function of the aesthetic or of 'art' is one that needs some critical elaboration. Creative practices are often deployed as thinly veiled methods of gentrification or reductively instrumentalised as either colourful background or even worse are insinuated to add a veneer of critical or participatory practice into processes that are clearly driven by top down interests in service of artists' egos, big capital, property developers or city manager agendas. In this way, the survey and archive work that will be carried out through the selected projects will critically analyse these relationships between aesthetics, activism, development, entrepreneurship, urbanism or city making and site specificity.

I propose that site specificity, and questions of its potential challenge or critical intervention into a field of social, economic or political contingencies is an important area of study in ways that are not only restricted to the field of contemporary art or the history of art. What is at stake are broader questions of the role of culture within the

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<sup>14</sup> The NGO, development and social entrepreneurship discourses in relation to site specificity is likely to be a point of some particularity in relation to Johannesburg. While the community arts development register is present in site specific work in North America, the forms of development discourses enacted in South Africa are likely to be much more present, imaginably in much more paternalistic ways due to the structure of European or North American agencies and organisations seeking to operate in Africa through a series of well-meaning gestures of philanthropy and benevolence.

realities of city making, urban planning as well as cultural, social and economic activism more broadly. This project is one that occupies space, contributes to and intervenes within inter or trans disciplinary formations both historically and in the contemporary. In addressing the gaps in existing literature around site specific aesthetic practices in Johannesburg the project of critically re-reading the history of these practices and theories in terms of a city within the 'global south' is once again posed.

Closely aligned to these core objectives, will be a critical examination of conceptual frameworks that operate within Eurocentric or North American discourses of 'art', 'urban' or 'cultural' theory and practice. I aim to do the work of situating and testing these theories and practices within the context of Johannesburg South Africa. This is to demand that theory and practice developed in the *global north* come to take stock of their travelling into the *global south*. As such, Johannesburg is a space that engages with this rather clumsy phrasing of north and south in compelling ways. As with any city or urban configuration at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Johannesburg exhibits aspects of the global north and the global south, simultaneously and perhaps even at times schizophrenically.

### ***Urban Theory and Johannesburg***

That Johannesburg is located on the continent of Africa means that the cosmopolitanism that it exhibits must be read from the perspective of sets of narratives, histories and conceptual matrices that are peculiar to it. An important part of this project is, therefore, to critically explore the discursive construction of Johannesburg, drawing on - but seeking to push beyond - the existing literature that produces it and is produced by it.

The overarching question at stake here is one that pursues the value, meaning or role of the site, the object or the particular locale or context in relation to forms of knowledge and forms of practice that are developed at great temporal and spatial distance. This is a question of the ability of knowledge or practice to be reflexive, relational or engaged within the context in which it attempts to intervene. It is a question of the extent to which the object of analysis is determined, constrained or produced by or through the theoretical frameworks and conceptual genealogies that seeks to articulate it.

The core of the urban theory that I will mobilise comes from what are now standard texts that are routinely enacted in relation to the city, especially within contemporary art circles. Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin and Michel De Certeau form an important base not only for contemporary art's engagement with the urban, it is evident that their reach goes beyond this. At various times in the work of Lefebvre, Benjamin, and De Certeau, the everyday, the moment, the market and walking form kinds of tactics that are performed in response to the strategy of the city as sites of action or agency within emerging sets of capitalist infrastructures. In their work the urban is privileged as a form where these ideological constructions emerge, are consolidated and proliferated. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift highlight the importance of this urbanism of the everyday as it underlies a "sense of the need to grasp a phenomenality that cannot be known through theory or cognition alone" (Amin, Thrift, 9, 2002).<sup>15</sup>

In addition to theories that engage substantially with the aesthetic, experiential or everyday phenomenon of the urban, I will also look to thinkers who develop their work in a much more Marxist, globalised urban context that foregrounds relations of social justice, political economy and attendant structuring's of the urban. David Harvey, Manuel Castells, Edward Soja and AbdouMaliq Simone provide a different view of the city that takes on ideas of infrastructures, globalisation, postmodernity, networked realities and more<sup>16</sup>. Again, I will look for moments in these bodies of work that address forms of push back to power, resistances and potentials for resistance within urban networks of power. An important extension and expansion here will be to re-read this theory from the perspective of a body of literature from the continent. As mentioned earlier, this will be to read texts from archive of anti-colonial or de-colonial literature and bring this to bear on how the urban is produced as an object of knowledge. In this way, I propose readings of Negritude, Ujamaa, Chimurenga and Black Consciousness in order to chart the manner in which urban form is developed within the continent of

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<sup>15</sup> This will be taken up further when I make the move from theory to forms literature and film and finally to modes of aesthetic practice.

<sup>16</sup> The admittedly crude gesture of dividing this urban theory into two camps – that which deals with the aesthetic and emerges from the Frankfurt school or French poststructuralism and that which is derived from a more geography or urban planning register that engages with forms of Marxist political economies does not mean that there are no overlaps. Henri Lefebvre is perhaps the figure more than any other whose work is marked by an intense mobility across discipline, form and registers of articulations.



Africa<sup>17</sup>. The mobilisation of this archive of writing to explicitly engage with the urban, and further to extend this to a reading of the importance of site in terms of an arts based avant-garde is relatively uncharted. Uncharted that is, in the specific way that I wish to mobilise this archive in relation to the urban and the avant-garde.

In this theory, I will ask after what kind of city or *urbanness* is conjured up, produced, imagined and articulated<sup>18</sup>. This city, imagined through the theoretical frame of the urban, will then be circumspectly read in relation to Johannesburg. Of course, the question that arises is, where, how and when do we locate Johannesburg?

It should be clear that recourse to an *authentic, real* city or urban landscape is impossible here or anywhere else. Urbanity is predicated on forms of multiple realities and lives that intersect, overlap, collide, and exist in parallel or in isolated separate spheres. There are narratives that come from official city branding agencies, which work in dubious support of property developers, there are propertied middle classes, homeless squatter camp dwellers, migrant labourers, factory workers, blue collar / white collar office bearers, CEO's, taxi drivers, prostitutes, drug dealers, evangelical priests, entrepreneurs, hustlers and artists who all lay claim to the city. The city they lay claim to and urbanity they produce is a product of a combination of lived experience, dreams and desires of the city in relation to infrastructures (both formal and informal) as well as the ability to access and manipulate these technologies<sup>19</sup>. As such, the city is produced and reproduced *ad infinitum*.

In line with this, I will attempt to develop Johannesburg as a textual configuration that is produced out of a multiplicity of texts. In this bricolage of historical and theoretical readings, literature, film and contemporary art practice, Johannesburg

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<sup>17</sup> The urgency for revisionist historiographies and revised theoretical orientations is a much-needed area of elaboration within this research area. While it is admittedly underdeveloped at this stage, it will be a crucial area of investigation going forward, that has important political as well as aesthetic repercussions. To reassert, this will be to re-read and displace existing conventions and canons of art history and urban theory from the perspective of bodies of knowledge that emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Africa, in response to colonialism and in building independence movements on the continent.

<sup>18</sup> The Urban comes to replace the city, as a way to indicate much broader and inclusive sets of power relations that extend beyond what is conventionally regarded as the city. This is especially evident in the work of Henri Lefebvre.

<sup>19</sup> This is reminiscent of Henri Lefebvre's triad of relations at work in the city, that of spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces. (Lefebvre, 1991, p40 -50) I will elaborate on this later especially in chapter two, in relation to how representational space provides the potential for kinds of agency, even if it is severely 'displaced'. (Lefebvre, 1991, p50)

will be produced as a multiplicity of imaginary cities that exists within and across multiple schizophrenic zones, orders and disorders.

Again, the question that emerges is to what extent a structure developed through a mix of European and North American theoretical and aesthetic precedents can take account of realities in Johannesburg South Africa. Bettina Malcomess and Dorothee Kreutzfeldt take account of this in the introduction to their book, *Not No Place*:

At question here is how texts and ideas, so strongly located in a Western, European milieu, translate to the lived context of post-colonial, post-apartheid Johannesburg in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Malcomess and Kreutzfeldt, 14, 2013)

Malcomess and Kreutzfeldt go on to propose that the texts and ideas that they draw on will be used as 'points of departure' and not as full blown methods or theoretical positions. They propose that their working process be defined rather by the delay and deferral of structure. (ibid) This approach makes sense in a project that is modelled on Walter Benjamin's Arcades project and I will expand on both the work of Benjamin and Malcomess and Kreutzfeldt in chapter two.

Lindsay Bremner, in a slightly different manner, also flags the dangers of *losing* the city underneath the morass of instruments and techniques of knowledge production, she says of the city:

On the one hand, it is an object, an artefact and a process. It can be studied, measured, quantified, written about, theorised, mapped, designed and interpreted. In order to do so, some representational language, be it words, images, diagrams or maps may be used, all of which put into effect a negative/positive substitution of abstract ideas(s) for the real thing. The city disappears and is replaced by the language(s) in which it is represented. (Bremner, 43, 2010)

Bremner argues for a 'literary' approach – to treat the city as book, in order to put into question issues of authorship and interpretation to develop a kind of open structure that, following De Certeau, is figured as a kind of walking. While Bremner does not articulate the same concern as Malcomess and Kreutzfeldt about the 'importation' of

theory and practice from Europe and North America, she raises important questions about method, scope and the inability to totally capture a city with any proposed work. While I share these concerns and follow the opening disclaimers made within each project I believe that this is not enough and that we need to go beyond these disclaimers in asserting forms of knowledge on the urban that have been produced from the continent. So alongside the conventional theories on the urban, I will read Mamadou Diof, on Dakar, Senegal and Ato Quayson on Accra, Ghana in order to develop a more engaged and critically aware range of theoretical and political projects that speak to questions of the urban in Africa<sup>20</sup>.

These questions of 'travelling theories' or 'travelling concepts', to invoke the work of Mieke Bal, is one that is at stake throughout this project<sup>21</sup>. There will indeed be many travels between the north and south, object and analysis, between theory and practice as well as between disciplinary locations. In order to push this concern for an epistemological formation that is politically, reflexive, contingent and that can move beyond facile forms of interdisciplinarity as it critically engages with conventions of theory and practice, the 'practical' component of this project is crucial.

This will begin with the deliberation of what kind of space is appropriate for a site specific *workshop* designed around collaborative modes of working with artists, theorists, researchers and students in proposing a series of interventions within Johannesburg. The naming of this working space, its conceptual framework, and the curation of people to collaborate with will importantly be developed in relation to the theoretical, conceptual and case study work. While this *laboratory/observatory/studio/incubator* (the process of deciding on a descriptor is a crucial part of the work to be done) will build on the historical analysis and theory, it will further propose a practice based research moment where the aesthetic work carried out will be a critical point of intervention into the project, at which stage the analysis and theory would in turn have

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<sup>20</sup> Some of this work is present in volumes such as Simone and Abouhani (Eds.) *Urban Africa: Changing Contours of Survival in the City* (2005). My task will be to draw on this material as well as to more fully research strands of similar work in order to counter balance urban theory from the north, as a way to more fully develop a ground from which to analyze site specific contemporary practice in Johannesburg.

<sup>21</sup> Mieke Bal, in *Travelling Concepts* (2002), engages with how concepts move between disciplines, this will be taken up further in chapter four when I look at various structures for containing research and practice, such as the studio, the observatory, the laboratory, the incubator or the workshop. Each term comes from a specific disciplinary location, and as Bal warns, it is important that you follow this movement carefully as concepts often carry inadvertent residual meanings in their travelling.

to respond appropriately. The manner in which these relationships are mapped will be an important point of research design and methodological relevance<sup>22</sup>.

In addition, (or in fact within or through the terms of this workshop) I will seek to develop a mode of analysis, reading and writing through the form of the remix or re-enactment. I propose to remake five seminal site specific works but relocated in Johannesburg. The works I will look at were originally made in sites as diverse as; London England; Mexico City, Mexico; Salamanca Spain; Jerusalem, Israel and one from Johannesburg, South Africa. The remakes, remixes or re-enactments will question the dimension of site as well as scrutinising all the other aspects of the construction, selection, and decision making processes within the works fabrication and performance. The remake here will function as a form of analysis that situates the process of making the work as fundamental. To remake the work anew, is to reject the art historical or art critical mode of analysis that is situated *a posteriori* and reads the surfaces, textures and contours of the work *qua* object, event or action that exists or is proposed in advance of the critique and analysis. By remaking the work, I will importantly pursue and foreground the process, the logistics and the contingencies of practice that the work entails. These five remakes will function in the mode of the remix and be drawn into engagements with the other dimensions of the project.

This PhD project thus aims to address multiple and converging aesthetics and politics of the urban, in order to ask after the spaces of subversion, contestation and agency within structures that are complex and technocratic and within a global economy that seems to be securely rigged. It is within these moments of performative push back that the work will attempt to theorise, historicise, enact and perform.

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<sup>22</sup> The relationship between these different components will not be designed as a matter of causality – rather the process will be a circulation or triangulation of terms and processes that feed into and off each other. Perhaps the most intriguing conceptual form to play with here is Deleuze and Guattari's *Rhizome*, (1988) which would begin to map the relationships between theory, practice and case study or object of analysis in ways that allow for feedback loops to meaningfully exist. This will be taken up later under method as well as more fully in chapter four.

## ***Method and Mode of Analysis***

*Wherever I lay my hat that's my home*

Marvin Gaye, 1961

Doctoral research must necessarily critically intervene into the methods, practice, analysis and ontology of knowledge production in whatever discipline it is located within. New and critical contributions to epistemological form with all its attendant functions and procedures is the responsibility of any PhD – artistic or otherwise. It is therefore, in line with these broad aims that I assert that this is not a practice based PhD, but a PhD that takes practice seriously as a form of method, as a form of writing, perhaps even as a form of literature review and as a mode of analysis. This ambition is most clearly seen in the final two chapters where I engage with processes and practices that are more explicitly located within the sphere of contemporary art practice. As such the final two chapters will rely heavily on visual material, that will be constituted by forms of documentation as well as works in themselves.

While this PhD thesis makes use of historical surveys, textual analysis, discourse analysis and conceptual genealogies to critically explore the field of site specific art in Johannesburg between 1994 and 2016, it will also take site specificity seriously as sets of practices and forms of research and knowledge production in itself. In this sense, while site specificity is ostensibly the object of analysis and research, it will also importantly exist as a point of methodological enquiry, theoretical framing and as an active mode of critical analysis.

As such, the research design includes both conventional and practice based research methods. Besides the relevance that these questions raise for an on-going inquiry into how aesthetic, creative or practice based research functions, and contributes to a changing epistemological (and pedagogical) landscape, I see this 'mixed' theoretical framework and methodological structure to be one that necessarily and integrally operates within this research area in a way that does not relegate site specificity to mere object of analysis but takes on and mobilises the forms of questioning and action located at the centre of site specific practice in order to address the question of its political relevance and critical potential.

The PhD will move between forms of writing and research conventionally regarded as academic postgraduate work and forms of practice that are more often seen in contemporary art. It is the aim of this thesis that what appears to be two distinct and are perhaps considered even diametrically opposed positions of knowledge production will be made to take of stock of their perceived intractability as they are brought into proximity with each other. In this sense the structure, design, methodology, theoretical framework and final form of publishing will court a certain novelty by way of its engagement with what is described as the practice based or creative PhD.

There are many rich debates around practice and theory, research and epistemology that I will draw on in designing the research and practice based process as well as in analysing the theoretical and aesthetic material. As such the project will be one that brings theory and practice into confrontation within the space of some kind of *workshop, studio, laboratory, incubator or observatory*.

Important here is the manner in which this space is able to generate readings, actions, theory and practice in relation to the city of Johannesburg. William Kentridge, in *Six Drawing Lessons* (2014) has contributed much to an examination of the studio as a space for doubt and not knowing, for exploration and experimentation. Others Like Brian O'Doherty (2007) and Jens Hoffman (2012) critically engage with the studio in less utopian ways in critiquing the economy of the studio and its relationship to the gallery. Certainly the artist's studio has morphed, following Sarat Maharaj (thinking with Agamben and Deleuze) into a kind of 'any space wherever' that pops up in shapes or forms contingent to the artistic project at hand in pursuit of what he calls *xeno-epistemics*. The studio has increasingly become dislodged from a physical space, the atelier now operates in the structure of analogy. It is increasingly common for artists to declare 'my laptop is my studio'.

While the studio is the appropriate place to begin an exploration for the appropriate name of the space that work proceeds from, I will by no means stop here. The analogies of the *laboratory, incubator or observatory*, similar to the studio, are in no way neutral designations, they come with conceptual residue that will be important to develop and think through in this exploration.

The analogies from science, astronomy and medicine can be instructive at times, but all carry residual conceptual and operational artefacts from their disciplines that need to be engaged with. For example, the laboratory, while most times deployed as a

fairly loose analogy of a space where experimental work is carried out, carries residual implications of rationality, sequencing and a specific kind of ordering. This would be very different to naming the space a *factory*, which would call upon processes of production and manufacturing, or a *workshop*, which would allow for a range of practices and organisations of space and ideas that a laboratory would not. A laboratory also pre-empts or pre-figures a specific kind of utility to the work being carried out before the work is able to figure out what the end point of the research or practice should be. Similarly, the spatial form of the studio, derived from fine art practice needs also to be questioned as it is conventionally figured as a space where work is always in process, incomplete and waiting to be finalised by its exiting into the discursive and economic field of the gallery. This final push of 'completion' triggers a range of art critical and commercial mechanisms that operate in a way that is by now quite familiar<sup>23</sup>.

This questioning of the appropriate space for work to ensue is importantly one of method as well as a concern for theoretical framing that is pivotal to the project. The function and naming of this space will be deliberately left open and an important part of the work of the research will be to question the analogous forms that are brought to bear in the construction and design of such interdisciplinary spaces.

In developing the name, structure and aim of the space for working, it will be important to amplify the aspects that are useful and to dispel aspects that are not, from the series of related forms that we could possibly rely on. In fact, none of these terms in themselves are fully sufficient, as the analogy sometimes never goes far enough and at other times goes too far altogether.

For now, it will suffice to call the space a *working group for site specific urban research and practice*. It will be constituted by a group of fine arts Honours and Masters students, who are invested in exploring critical positions in creative practice and urban theory. In this way, the working group will be explicitly situated within my teaching practice that is part of my portfolio at the WITS School of Arts. The working group will decide on the specific modes and processes that they will engage with. The work will be

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<sup>23</sup> There is substantial literature on this subject, as mentioned above. I will engage with this literature in more depth in chapter four. The studio is displaced and critiqued in this literature as a particular construction of high art, and includes critiques of modernism and the commercialisation or rarefication of the art object. This critique runs more or less parallel with new politicised forms of art practice.

at times collaborative, and at other times participants will work on their own. In essence the formation and organisation of the working group will be around what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari refer to as rhizomic thought and practice. (Deleuze and Guattari, 3 -25, 1987) As such it will aim to shift and fluidly adapt to a developing and contingent series of interventions.

A further series of interventions will be proposed by invited visiting artists or theorists. These residencies should take place for a period of 4 weeks or more<sup>24</sup>. In this time, in a process of collaborative thinking and conversation, reading groups and seminars, as well as working agendas will be formulated and enacted in order to engage with aspects of the theory as well as to carry out moments of action or intervention within the city.

In the first instance these actions will be 'live'. This liveness cannot be underestimated, as it will directly engage with the intersection and mapping of temporality, spatiality, body and form in terms of the urban. In addition to this liveness, the work will necessarily include a focused engagement with the method, mode and medium of its documentation. This process of mediation will not be relegated to an afterthought, but will itself be configured as a crucial and vital component of the work, theoretically, conceptually and formally<sup>25</sup>.

It will be important to consider, in the process of the activity of this working group, the broader point of restitution, publishing, dissemination or submission. Here submission is not taken as a sign of surrender or defeat, but is taken as a point of catalytic engagement with form and (infra)structure. It is clear that for all the honours as well as Masters students, the modes and manner of submission of their research is fairly clearly defined. Similarly, within this PhD there are requirements to be fulfilled

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<sup>24</sup> This dimension of the project will be developed as an NRF Thuthuka grant (that I will apply for after the acceptance of this proposal) to enable junior academics to complete their PhD's. In this sense I will meaningfully align this research to the pedagogical demands that my position as lecturer entails. This dimension will add an institutional substance to the broader project.

<sup>25</sup> This issue of art and documentation is especially raised in the literature around the debate between performance art and photography or video – or performed documentation. Marina Abramović, Rosalee Goldberg, Philip Auslander, Barbara Clausen, Nina Krick and others contribute to this debate, some like Abramović occupying the rather fundamentalist position that performance by definition must be live. I will engage with this debate only in so far as it assists in negotiating the relationship between very specific and loaded moments of action, reception and dissemination. Certainly at work through all of this is the role, function and power of the audience, spectator or in some instances participant, especially in relation to subsequent renderings in photography or video.



and standing orders to be adhered to. What should not be taken for granted in this working, is that the standing orders governing post graduate work are open enough to require a demand of each post graduate candidate to assert and position their work in a manner that is appropriate to the formal and conceptual agenda and priorities that exist within the core of their research questions. It is to this injunction that this PhD project and the working group attached to it will adhere as it seeks to challenge post graduate work in order to pursue this form of critical contingency.

The working group will deploy a range of arts based practices such as performance, video, photography, installation, intervention and others in order to engage with the questions and concepts at work in the project. In addition to this, the workshop will also engage with conventional academic methodologies such as archive work, conceptual genealogies, literature reviews, close readings and discursive, as well as aesthetic textual analysis.

The forms of site specific work that will emerge out of the working group and in the final chapter on the remake, will in effect be important points of intervention and exploration of forms of method, analysis, reading, writing and theoretical production. The mix of these forms will constitute the core practical and theoretical interventions at work in the PhD.

The ultimate texture of this PhD is proposed as a text that is able to work across these conceptual and formal ranges. In this sense the project works across what convention accepts as either practice based or conventional doctoral work and in fact the questioning of these categories becomes part of the work that the project takes on.

## **Chapter Outline**

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### ***Johannesburg as a Site for the Re-enactment of Imaginaries***

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- Urban Theory and the Canon
- Anti-colonial or De-colonial Theory and the Urban
- The Urban as Aesthetic Texture and Narrative
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### ***The City Working Group for Site Specific Urban Research: Between and Beyond the Workshop, Laboratory, Incubator, Observatory and Studio***

- Practice Based Research and the PhD: Power, Aesthetics and Epistemology
- Any Space Whatever: In Search for An (in)appropriate name: *the Workshop, Laboratory, Incubator, Observatory and Studio*.
- Any Space Whatever: In Search for An (in)appropriate Methodology
- Any Space Whatever: In Search for An (in)appropriate Literature Review
- Any Space Whatever: In Search for An (in)appropriate Mode of Analysis

- Chapter Five

***Five Easy Pieces: A Practice Based Analysis.***

***Repetition and Difference: The Remix, The Remake and the Citation***

- Steve McQueen, *Exodus* (1992/1997) London, UK
- Francis Alÿs, *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing* (1997) Mexico City, Mexico
- Santiago Sierra, *160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People...* (2000) El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo, Salamanca, Spain
- Tracey Rose, *San Pedro V: The Hope I Hope* (2005) Jerusalem Israel
- Donna Kukama, *The Swing (After After Fragonard)* (2009) Mai Mai Market, JHB

## Chapter One

### ***Johannesburg as a Site for the Re-enactment of Imaginaries***

*Each urban encounter is a theatre of promise in a play of power.*

*(Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, 2002)*

Radical theory, particularly in Europe from the end of WWII onward, increasingly shifts focus away from forms of high culture. There is conversely an increasing concern with popular culture, politics, practice, and even theory that are lowbrow (like pub culture or wrestling), seemingly disorganised (like the market place or the street) and marked by the quotidian or the everyday. The reasons for this are numerous, and such a list of causal factors would certainly include the emergence of the fascist state, increasingly accurate and efficient technologies to conduct war, the growing brutality of communism under Stalin and then later the emergence of nascent forms of globalised capitalism. There was an intense dissatisfaction and push back against structuralist theory, which professed to know and act from the vantage of the grand narrative.

Theoretical writing during this period becomes more 'literary', more personal and more idiosyncratic. So too does the site or space for radical action become more prosaic. Walter Benjamin looks to chaos of the market and the passages of the arcades, Michel De Certeau looks to the everyday and practices of walking, Henri Lefebvre also highlights the everyday as he privileges the *moment* in a displacement of Bergsonian linear real time or *durée* (Merrifield, 27).

This chapter aims to engage urban theoretical texts, with the view to a critical appraisal from the perspective of Johannesburg. While there are many ways to approach this body of literature, my interests prompt a line of entry via theories that explore forms, structures and narratives of the urban. So while I insist that issues relating to social justice, political economy and infrastructure are crucial to explore, especially as they emerge within a growing discourse of urbanity in the growing south, I will necessarily move away from some of the more explicitly 'developmental' or 'planning' based work in search of material that allows me to open up dimensions of the city that align with my project of thinking about site specific contemporary art in

Johannesburg, South Africa<sup>26</sup>. To phrase it another way, I am less concerned with hard-nosed policy than I am for thinking through (and with or alongside) work that explores coordinates of spatiality and temporality, in relation to objects and bodies via the multiple soundscapes, vistas, connections and disconnections that emerge within the urban. In many ways, this can be developed as theory that has a concern for the aesthetic<sup>27</sup>.

What emerges within this kind of theory is a concern for the everyday. Amin and Thrift develop the everyday as an important tradition in urban studies in order to propose what they call a *new urbanism*. Drawing on a mix of Lefebvre, Benjamin, De Certeau and Massey, they articulate the tradition of everyday urbanism around three central tropes, *Transitivity*, or the spatial and temporal openness of the city, *Rhythms* which take up daily encounters and multiple experiences of time and *Footprints* which relates to “imprints from the past, the daily tracks of movement across, and links beyond the city” (Amin, Thrift, 9, 2002).

The core aim of this chapter is to rethink these seminal theoretical texts on the urban from the perspective of Johannesburg. I will extend my analysis to important contemporary works on Johannesburg. Malcomess and Kreutzfeldt’s *Not No Place*, (2013) Lindsay Bremner’s *Writing the City Into Being*, (2010), sections of Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe’s *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008) as well as selected writings of AbdouMaliq Simone<sup>28</sup> and others. These more contemporary texts engage

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<sup>26</sup> To say that the literature on the urban is vast is an understatement. The masses of literature have given rise to a number of useful edited volumes that engage with spaces outside or beyond the west, such as *Urban Theory Beyond the West* (2012) by Edensor and Jayne, *World Cities Beyond the West* (2004) edited by Joseph Gugler and *The Spaces of the Modern City* (2008) edited by Prakash and Kruse. These edited volumes attempt to compile anthologies in an effort to address the dearth of writing on urbanity that specifically looks at urban centres outside of the global north. They therefore work in line with but also as antidotes to western centric edited volumes such as *The City Reader* (fifth edition published in 2011) and *The City Cultures Reader* (2000), huge tomes that work as primers or text books, and include what appears to be everything that is worth reading on the subject of the urban, but in shorthand through brief selections of writings. My project in no way attempts this kind of encyclopaedic view, rather my concern is to read those texts that are pertinent to thinking about contemporary art in urban Johannesburg.

<sup>27</sup> The aesthetic is a term that will importantly need to be critically unpacked at some length. I earlier began to define the aesthetic through Ranci re, a provisional definition that will no doubt need some intervention within.

<sup>28</sup> Simone is a compelling figure in urban studies in South Africa, there is kind of mythology built around him, as his method of working was intense, varied and spiced with anecdotes and accounts of risky and dangerous encounters. His most often quoted work is *People as Infrastructure* which appears in *The Elusive Metropolis*, but he has written on African cities in a

with the specificity if not singularity of Johannesburg and while doing this, engage with readings, and critiques of canonical theory produced elsewhere. The intention in this chapter is to develop the conceptual ground and attempt to craft some form of theoretical framework from which to proceed. Importantly, I will aim to re-read much of the established and 'canonical' texts in relation to urban writing from the continent. Mbembe, Nuttall, Simone, Diof, Quayson and others will be drawn on to expand on notions of urbanity in a particularly African context. Part of this will include reading selections of older literatures from the continent in order to develop an ontology of African urbanity that is historically complex in ways that allow for increasingly contemporary fluidity.

The contemporary writings all share the characteristic of highlighting the elusive, the fluid, the speculative, the fragmented, the contingent, open ended, uncertain, spectral or informal and immanent aspects of the city. Each time statements are made on the city, either writing, images or actions are put forward, a specific kind of city is produced. Following from this, we can read the various texts on Johannesburg and ask: what kind of city is imagined? And be certain that each time we will yield a different urban configuration that bears the marks of the authors disciplinary locations, their intellectual and political positions or agendas, their points of departure or desires in terms of the objects and issues that they locate as central to their arguments and analysis.

In this way the city is approached as a kind of fiction, from Jorge Luis Borges's fictional world of *Tlön* (1940), Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972), Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to the fictional cities of *Mega City One*, *Metropolis* or *Gotham* inhabited by Judge Dredd, Superman and Batman respectively<sup>29</sup>. The fictional city is one that carries a specific kind of value in thinking and understanding the urban. Certainly, Johannesburg has produced its fair share of fictions and given rise to a wild range of fantasies. In this way, I will engage with fiction in terms of film and literature.

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more sustained manner especially in the book length study, *For the City Yet to Come* (2004), he co-edited the volume *Urban Africa* and in a range of more recent articles on urbanity from the perspective of radical black politics.

<sup>29</sup> Surprisingly, Spiderman is not given a fictional city of his own and lives with his aunty and uncle in Queens, New York. This would seem to be a feature of the Marvel brand, which used real American cities while District Comics (DC) created fictitious cities, which were in fact thinly veiled amalgamations of New York, Chicago or Los Angeles, the archetypal U.S. mega cities.

The movement from discourses located within the logics of planning or political economy to ones that are concerned with ‘the cultural dimensions of city life and form’ (Nuttall, 740, 2004) is a movement that has included a concern for the literary, with fiction or even with science fiction. This is also evident in various ways in the work of Bremner (2010), Kreutzfeldt and Malcomess and others. *The Elusive Metropolis* importantly has a section titled *Voice Lines* that posits texts that are written in a non-theoretical or literary register following a selection of more conventional academic texts. While this juxtaposition feels too much like a bifurcation of forms of knowledge, I follow this movement from theory to fiction as it is an important manoeuvre in offsetting the importance of certain kinds of knowledge production over others. As Akbar Abbas puts it, “Cultural forms, too can perhaps also be regarded as a rebus that projects a city’s desires and fears. Although it is likely to be a rebus of a particularly complex kind” (Abbas, 1, 1997). Following Abbas, the forms of fictionalisation of the city can be thought of as a kind of play between presence and absence, as soon as the city is represented or configured through some form of writing or the other, it recedes at the same time in other ways. To look for the city across academic, literary and filmic registers is to attempt to access the city with necessary and increasing complexity.

Certainly the work of Phaswane Mpe, Don Mattera, Peter Abrahams, Niq Mhlongo, Ivan Vladislavić, Lauren Beukes and others produce and articulate the city in ways that are immersed within narrative, space and time that in many senses exceeds what theory is able to do. In this way a corollary aim of this chapter is to read the city of Johannesburg from the perspective of these fictions.

In addition to this, I intend to track the representation of Johannesburg as it is portrayed in big budget science fiction film. The films I will look at here alternatively directly portray Johannesburg such as in *District 9*, or use the city as a kind of *mise en scène*, prop or backdrop to create a properly fictional city, e.g. the latest *Judge Dredd* builds a CGI Mega City One onto location shoots within the city. The use of cities in science fiction is in itself a sub-genre within this literature that is worth exploring, take for example the assemblage of references that are lifted from contemporary Tokyo, Hong Kong and New York that informs the future Los Angeles in Ridley Scott’s 1982 *Blade Runner*. The Wachowski’s 1999 film *The Matrix* famously shoots on location in Sydney, Australia in order to render an urban landscape that would seem foreign and dislocated to audiences familiar with American or European cities. Sydney looks and

feels familiar to American cities but is at the same time unfamiliar. In this way, Johannesburg becomes the ground for an elaboration of imaginations and desires from outside and within. It bears the marks of the modernist grid but at various points consistently does something unexpected.

While the core function of this chapter is to review the pertinent literature related to urban forms of power, control and resistance to this power, it will also provide an important set of coordinates from which to develop the theoretical framework from which to approach the four case studies. More so, the theory developed in this chapter will allow for a conceptual set of markers to emerge that will be mobilised in relation to the structure and operation of the working group and the remakes that follow.



## Chapter Two

### ***Site Specificity, the Avant-garde and the Contemporary***

*Now if 6 turned out to be 9  
I don't mind, I don't mind*

Jimi Hendrix, 1969

*The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible [...]*

Hannah Arendt, 1958

In developing the conceptual and historical precedence for site specificity, it will be necessary to chart the history of avant-garde movements and practices in art from the early 1900's onwards. I argue that to fully understand site specificity, we need to explore this history as a necessarily complex and politically loaded field. The standard histories of the avant-garde rely on accounts of a familiar range of politicised, anti-institutional practices such as Dada, Fluxus, Surrealism, Constructivism the Letteriste International (which became the Situationist International) as well as conceptual, minimalist and performance art etc. All of these movements emerge in relation to some form of super structural power or moment of radical contestation. This can be seen in Russian Constructivism in relation to forms of Stalinism, the Bauhaus to German fascism, as well as the global ranges of mobilisation around American capitalist imperialism that echoed across the world in 1968.

As such, avant-garde projects of the 1900's and their political and critical responses to the emergent forms of capitalism and communism in a global sense will be developed as the ground from which to locate site specificity. In all of this, the spectre of Marcel Duchamp and the Dada group exists as a focal point for the subversive and anarchic potential of the avant-garde and art. Duchamp's urinal, more than any other work, exists as short hand for the disruptive and appropriative anti-art art that allows a range of other potentialities to emerge. The writing of the history of avant-garde and revolutionary movements will be a writing with and against the hegemony of the *pissoire*.

It is clear that the political and revolutionary potential of art (and culture more broadly) was also mobilised in Latin America, Africa and Asia, as ways to contest power, either imperial or colonial. The histories of these avant-gardes are largely absent from conventional art histories. It will be my intention to read these movements, specifically to look for strands of avant-garde art practice in Africa in relation to standard or authoritative and conventional art histories.

Much of the research on Latin American, African and Asian avant-gardes still needs to be done, and will proceed using *Global Conceptualisms: Points of Origin* as a point of departure. My focus here will be to develop historical accounts of particularly African avant-gardes and their development in response to independence movements and projects of decolonisation<sup>30</sup>. There is much to work still to be done here and this revisionist reading of these historical texts in relation to standard art histories is new and important work.

My reading of conventional histories of avant-garde art practice will be orientated around Russian constructivism, The Situationist International and conceptual art. Russian constructivism, as developed in the Soviet Union in the early 1900's was an art and architecture movement that sought to establish a practice and related series of philosophical and theoretical texts that would put art in service of social and political processes. The work of Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko and Vladimir Tatlin among others will be looked at in relation to this form of revolutionary art. The writing of Naum Gabo, especially the 1920 *Realistic Manifesto* will be read alongside other more recent texts such as the art historical work of Stephen Baum (1974), Christina Loder (1983), George Rickey (1995) and others in order to develop the political and aesthetic concerns of the movement, and to extend this in relation to how it forms the basis for other movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ultimately to indicate

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<sup>30</sup> The role of art and culture is an important, yet at times overlooked element in de-colonial, anti-colonial or independence literature. An example can be seen in Aimé Césaire who asserts in text *Présence Africaine*: "And this is why we must create ... Yes in a word, it is the poets, the artists, the writers, the men of culture who, by blending memories as well as hopes in the everydayness of suffering and denials of justice, must constitute those great reserves of faith, those great silos of strength where, in critical moments, the people can draw the courage to assume their own destiny and to shape their future." (Aimé Césaire 1959) The liberatory potential of art and culture will be tracked across a range of texts, and importantly in relation to aesthetic practice at concurrent moments. The project here is not to develop a range of 'schools' or 'movements' analogous to those found in the west, but rather to develop an aesthetic vocabulary and range of practices that emerge in response to empire and colonial rule.

how this contributes to a contextualisation of the political, cultural and social concerns of site specificity.

The Situationist International have been written and elevated to the position of 'the benchmark against which all would-be avant-gardists must measure themselves' (Ford, 9, 2005). This art, urbanist and architecture collective, led by Guy Debord, were active in France, mainly Paris and Strasbourg, between 1957 and 1972. They were influenced by the events in the build-up and fallout of Paris '68, and like the other groups at the time made intense connections between theory, activism and politics. Henri Lefebvre was often present in their meetings, and the influence of Lefebvre on SI, and vice versa, can be seen. Again, like constructivism, this avant-garde movement, can be seen as a mix of theory, writing and practice. Guy Debord himself wrote considerably on the movement, in his book, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, but also in the journal *Internationale Situationniste* which produced twelve issues. Other secondary texts such as Simon Ford's *The Situationist International: A Users Guide*, and the edited volume by Tom McDonough will be used to develop the manner in which this group influenced not only avant-garde art practice but also makes important incursions into urban theory.

The SI would seem to present a form of urbanist anti-geography, in their surrealist and dada inspired psychogeography, with methods of *dérive* and *détournement*. Important here is to explore the writing of the city through the concept of the 'spectacle' (Debord, 1994) as a series of processes that come with the progression of capitalism to capture images and ideas via the very fabric and technology of the city.

Conceptual art, with its range of attendant practices such as minimalism, land art, performance art, and concerns with language and institutional critique emerges as a practice in the 1960's and 1970's primarily in the U.S.A. The writing of its history and its emergence is often closely tied to the cold war politics that are present at the time. In addition to the cold war, with its technologically sophisticated war machines and intelligence communications systems, the rise of capitalism and the grip of communism produced forms of avant-garde or politically motivated work inside of contemporary art practice.

Just as the superpowers at the time have harnessed atomic energy to the extent that it is possible to totally destroy all life on earth with the flick of a switch, artists obliterate the objectness that has become the naturalised focal point of art. While the

object is dematerialised, it is replaced by a series of thought exercises and ephemeral interventions that challenge ideas of language, institutional structure, notions of skill and the very operation of art itself within constrained and conservative (symbolic and material) economies.

While conceptual art no doubt was influenced by developments in prior avant-garde movements, it seems to function in a strange kind of isolation, perhaps due to the cold war, but also perhaps due to the very localised if not parochial nature of the American art scene. New York was big enough to be the world without having to go too far outside of it. As Lucy Lippard puts it:

The New York avant-garde in the mid 1960's was deliberately provincial. Minimalists denied their European predecessors such as constructivism or Bauhaus, not because they were ignorant of that history but because they couldn't relate to it. The Oedipal desire to kill off the ancestors in order to arrive at a tabula rasa, or clean slate, led to the denial and suppression of art-historical predecessors.

(Lippard, xii, 2012)

Lippard goes on to indicate how, contemporary movements like the SI, which were operating at the same time, received little attention. The same myopia existed with parallel movements even closer at hand in Latin America let alone anywhere else in the world. So while the force of such developments in the critical mobilisation of language, information, performance, and ephemerality are important as they circulate around the *dematerialisation* of the art object, it will be necessary to extend forms of conceptual thinking in art to a more global stage (as mentioned earlier). This historical work has not been carried out in any sustained manner, but it will be important to explore attempts to do so such as *Global Conceptualisms: Points of Origin: 1950s - 1980s* by Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss (1999), whose exhibition and edited volume "challenges the canonical perception that conceptual art was simply one movement which spread internationally" (Camnitzer, Farver, Weiss, inside cover, 1999)

In developing an account of conceptual art through the conventional literature as well as expanding this account in terms of a broader more global critique that engages with similar moments of political aesthetic production outside of the west, I aim to

secure a platform from which to develop the forms of practice that can be called site specific art.

The term site specificity itself is only one among a range of terms that could be used. Grant Kester prefers to use the term 'dialogical' in describing such work. He arrives at this term following Mikhail Bakhtin, "[...] who argued that the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation – a locus of meanings, interpretations and points of view." He continues to usefully outline the broad parameters of such practices in his book *Conversation Pieces* and flags a cluster of similar practices such as *Littoral* art following the practice of Ian Hunter and Celia Larner, which places an import on the 'hybrid or in between' nature of the work, and *Relational Aesthetics* following Nicolas Bourriaud which foregrounds 'communication and exchange'. The list goes on: Tom Finkel Pearle refers to *dialogue-based art* and Homi Bhaba through an essay from the *Conversations at the Castle* project in Atlanta in 1998, speaks of *conversational art* (Kester, 9-10, 2004).

Rather than attempt to interject into this field by coining a neologism to add to this mix, I will continue to rely on site specificity, as it seems to allow some mobility and openness, while still being importantly and firmly located within the tradition of avant-garde art practice. For me this acts as a warning that flags the heritage and lineage of this practice. It is not neutral. And while its operational logics are predicated on a contingency, this contingency comes with a symbolic and economic residue that needs to be constantly questioned and negotiated. More than this site specificity seems to be the term that is most commonly in use and as such most urgently in need of pursuing. I will look for this complex field of political or institutional critique, engagements with the everyday, social, cultural and political issues within four examples located within Johannesburg.

## Chapter Three

### ***Site Specificity in Johannesburg: 4 projects***

*One step forward, two steps backward  
Down inna Babylon  
Onward, forward, don't step backward  
Step out of Babylon*

Lee Scratch Perry, 1976

This chapter aims to explore four case studies that represent forms of site specific practice in Johannesburg. The case studies selected are all collaborations, mainly between artists, but sometimes drawing in other energies. Collectively they are projects that span the period between 1994 and the present, and are different enough in position, objective and tactical orientation to provide a range of methods and modes of response to working with or against structures in the city. All the projects have some sense of social political objective or agenda at work in relation to how they deploy aesthetics in the complex terrain of the city. While all the projects perhaps would not self-identify and are certainly neither categorically nor completely site specific, they will be read in terms of this term by virtue of their broader interaction with the city.

While this may in some cases not be their avowed goal, I will take the liberty to nonetheless orientate their work from this vantage point. In all the projects the city appears, written, re-written, consumed, constrained and coordinated. And in some cases confronted.

I propose to look at the Joubert Park Project (JPP), The Trinity Session, the Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR) and Keleketla! Collectively these projects will allow me to look at a range of conceptual and physical spaces, as well as relevant aesthetic, political, economic, and organisational strategies.

The extent to which these projects have been documented or written on varies. Certainly for older projects like the JPP sources are few and sporadically exist spread across personal and organisational archives. In contrast, projects like CHR have an extremely well organised website with links to press clippings, published texts and have collected all of their projects within an online archive. In all cases, the need exists to consolidate material in relation to the type of questions that this project asks. I will also need to carry out interviews and access a range of archives for all of the projects. I propose to begin the work of consolidating the raw data, the interviews, the images and

documents from personal archives into a form that can be stored and centralised for future researchers to work with. This would take the form of a digital online platform as well as one that is located within one of the WITS libraries. The intention is that this would be the beginning of an archive dedicated to site specific contemporary art in Johannesburg.

### ***Joubert Park Project (JPP)***

The JPP was initiated by a group of artists, activists, researchers and students in order to engage within the city from the perspective of contemporary art. They state their objectives as follows:

We develop and facilitate collaborative projects with artists and non-artists from a diversity of fields, driven by a shared spirit of curiosity about the peculiarities and specifics of the city. We seek to bring the strategies and instruments of the contemporary arts to bear on the complex and conflicted environment in a manner that asks questions both of arts practice and the complicated reality of this shifting urban context – in relation to the country South Africa and global linkages.

[http://urbanscenos.org/?page\\_id=212](http://urbanscenos.org/?page_id=212)

Their project was seemingly modestly orientated around ‘a shared spirit of curiosity’ however this belies some serious work that the project performs in provoking and administering changes within a very fluid urban landscape in the mid 2000’s. While the work by the JPP has not been marked by a hard-nosed or sustained engagement or relationship with city managers and property developers and may well be marked as modes of practice that can be described as performative, ephemeral and fleeting, this belies a serious focus to forms of administrative engagements. These include the facilitation of community projects, the management of historical buildings or heritage sites, and attempts at community building using ‘contemporary arts’ and its attendant strategies to bear on a ‘complicated and shifting urban context’.

In an analysis of the JPP, I will explore the ways in which they propose to use forms of contemporary art strategy and practice as catalysts, provocations or modes of

facilitating or critiquing urban politics. The JPP, largely a group of white artists and activists, propose to go beyond developmental discourses in mobilising methods, modes and practices from contemporary art to engage with the project of city making. The group is important to look at in that they seem to refute a more entrepreneurial business model, and certainly dissolve at a time when property developers more fully enter the picture.

### ***The Trinity Session***

*The Trinity Session is a contemporary art production team that investigates the relationships between art and business, collaborative practice and network development.*

VANSA art map online <http://artmap.co.za/187/trinity+session/>

The Trinity Session was formed in 2001 by Steven Hobbs, Kathryn Smith, Marcus Neustetter, and Jose Ferreira. Today, remaining members Hobbs and Neustetter orientate themselves explicitly as a business working with private property developers and local city government. They are 'focused on urban regeneration through public art' and 'creativity as commodity' (ibid). The no-nonsense business orientation evident in their work develops around similar forms of urban entrepreneurial modes found in 'devil may care' property developers or self-styled 'inner city cowboys' who take high risk gambles with potentially big pay offs<sup>31</sup>.

Interestingly, while the language and posture of the Trinity Session is in the mode of the macho entrepreneurial urban hustler, they often do more than pay lip service to consultative participatory processes. In fact, the language of most of their inner city public art projects is couched in this speak. And it will be important to look more clearly at the relationship between community building or city making and entrepreneurship.

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<sup>31</sup> This form of speculative investment into the inner city of Johannesburg is well documented in Rehad Desai and Darryl Els's *The Battle for Johannesburg* (2010) The hyper masculine forms of identities that are depicted in the film is quite stark and it will be important to think through how the city or the urban exists as a text that privileges such machismo. Lindsay Bremner engages with the nature of her gender in walking through the city. This dimension of gender can certainly be opened up with more depth as it has bearing on the kinds of narratives that are allowed to emerge within urban public space.



Through the work of the Trinity Session, we can track the efforts of an exclusively white group of artists who are committed to mobilizing creative arts processes in the service of urban regeneration. The racial dimension is critical here. While the patterns of property development, land purchasing and ownership are similarly exclusively white – which is a feature that is never addressed – rather the focus is placed on how projects such The Trinity Session or others draw in non-white community involvement through participatory processes, a feature that requires some attention and elaboration. The Trinity Session has been consistently engaging local city governance structures as well as working with private stakeholders since 2001. In this sense to track The Trinity Session, means to develop a narrative of a city that has rapidly and increasingly resorted to varying means of privatization to solve the many gaps in public resourcing.

In this account of Johannesburg, the local city government itself can be seen to be promoting this kind of development as at the moment the city functions as an agglomeration of a series of parastatal companies that report to the city manager – a position that is not dissimilar to that of a CEO of a company.

### ***Keleketla!***

*From the on-set, the whole idea of Keleketla! as a space is just that of experiencing art and exploring what art does in life, how does it end and how does it become relevant. [...] This form of informal exchange simultaneously expanded Keleketla's networks and widened our definition of a library – a place of production.*

From Keleketla's Website <https://keleketla.org/about/>

Keleketla! was initiated in 2008 by a group of artists engaged with the collective 'innacitycommunity'. Notably this included Rangoato Hlasane, Malose Malahlela, Kagiso Mnisi and Mogomotsi Gae. The formation of Keleketla! is a history tied to that of the ending of the JPP, the space of the Drill Hall and a once off project and residency by Bettina Malcomess around literacy<sup>32</sup>.

While Keleketla! emerged as a library and space that filled a very important gap in the lack of an after-school program for inner-city school children, the project has

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<sup>32</sup> This was ostensibly the start of what would become the book *Not No Place*.

moved on to become one of the most exciting collectives circulating on the international art circuit.

The exploration of Keleketla! draws in the development of an arts collective of young black artists who use the registers of both development and contemporary art to not only engage with the changing realities and urgencies within inner city Johannesburg, but also as a way to stage interventions within formal educational structures and the global art scene more broadly.

### ***Center for Historical Reenactments***

*The Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR) is a collaborative platform based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Since its founding in 2010 CHR has responded to the demands of the current moment through an exploration into the historical legacies and their resonance and impact on contemporary art. By addressing current urgencies, which have grown over the debris of the issues of the past CHR has embarked on activities (events, seminars, exhibitions, residencies, interventions, etc), engaged local (South Africa) and international practitioners and raised questions about the political potentials of artistic interpretations of histories.*

CHR Website, <http://historicalreenactments.org/index3.html>

The Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR) was conceptualized in 2010, by Gabi Ngcobo and Sohrab Mohebbi and founded by core members Kemang Wa Lehulere, Donna Kukama and Gabi Ngcobo. CHR has since led the way in a form of practice that engages a program of contemporary art that is motivated to make often deft and incisive political interventions but without being onerous, labored or fitting into the “doe eyed and desperately sincere” mode of some forms of leftist art activism.

Taking history to task through a program that is often unexpected and innovative the project moved from strength to strength at its headquarters at August House. In 2012 CHR committed institutional suicide in the event *We Are Absolutely Ending This* and further in the event *After-after Tears* at the New Museum in New York. The project continues today and is currently located at the WITS School of Arts. Closely linked, but distinctly different to CHR, is NGO.

### ***Nothing Gets Organised (NGO)***

*NGO – NOTHING GETS ORGANISED exists as a forlorn and contemplative\_\_\_, a \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ twirl in a moment of bewilderment. The platform functions as a space to reflect on shifting and uneasy entanglements. NGO is interested in un/conventional processes of self-organising – those that do not imply structure, tangibility, context or form. It is a space for (NON)SENSE where (NON)SENSE can profoundly gesticulate towards, dislodge, embrace, disavow, or exist as nothingness!*

<http://artthrob.co.za/2016/11/15/c-ngo-nothing-gets-organised/>

NGO, is a project initiated in 2016, and more so than any of the previous projects exhibits a fluid, speculative anti-organizational structure. The founding members, Dineo Bopape, Gabi Ngcobo and Sinethemba Twalo often take a back seat in a program that resists regularity and coherence. NGO is important to add to this survey of arts collectives / organizations, precisely because the ostensible aim of the group is to contest such collectives and organizations.

The attempt to mobilise art as a form of city making and community building is one that is fraught with problematics. And through the archive work and analysis of these five projects, I aim to develop ways of thinking about the city of Johannesburg as it is produced in terms of these projects.

At all points and in terms of all of the projects, I aim to situate theories of site specificity as well as forms of deployment of contemporary arts as a kind of intervention into the landscape of the urban. Each project in its specificity, will contribute a unique point in unpacking these dynamics and complexities.

## Chapter Four

### ***The City Working Group for Site Specific Urban Research: Between and Beyond the Workshop, Laboratory, Incubator, Observatory and Studio.***

*I'm not a minister  
I'm not a philosopher  
I'm not a politician  
I'm in another category*

Sun Ra, date unknown

The search for an appropriate methodology, literature review, mode of analysis and space for working as well as dissemination in the visual arts is a process that is fundamentally peppered by multiple contingencies. In this process site, medium, mode of address, coordinates of time and space, bodies, eyes and ears, lighting, acoustics etc. are all crucial and integral to the production of meaning in ways that exceed the debate around form versus content.

As Chus Martinez asserts in one of the introductory essays to *The Book of Books*, part one of three published accompaniments to Documenta 13:

This exercise of accepting the riddle of ambiguity, the constant alteration of the relations between matter and words, time and meaning, defines a research manner that calls for a radical reconsideration of the role of language, of straightforward conceptions of how things interact, as well as the inventory of monologues produced by serious forms of meaning.

(Martinez, 2012)

Martinez expands on this provocation to carve out the 'maybe' as a non-concept that is intended to introduce difference into the relations that define knowledge (ibid). In this way Martinez seeks to estrange art from the capture of rationality, coherence and institutionalisation. She seeks to rescue forms of action, reflection, objects and events from an entrapment and ossification within language. The correlation, relationship or mapping of pathways between objects, images, actions or performances and written text is a precarious and often biased one. Biased to the side of the written text overriding or dominating the relationship, dictating terms and setting agendas. To take

this complex relationship seriously, I will attempt to not overburden or over determine this aspect of the project with too many prescriptive or prefigurative words. Its meaning needs to emerge out of the context of the project as framed thus far and in the spirit of Sarat Maharaj's *xeno-epistemics*, a foreign, nameless non-knowledge of no-how (rather than know-how). A space that Maharaj describes following Deleuze and Agamben as "any space whatever" (Maharaj, 2009).

In this spirit, I will leave open the work(s) that will populate this part of the project but mark them with the search for forms that could perhaps function as spaces, methods, literature reviews and modes of analyses. By way of some clarity, however, I will by means of citation, posit a previous project as an example. The project is one that I initiated, designed and managed in collaboration with Naadira Patel. *Dislocating the Studio* aimed to draw multiple publics into the core WSOA program at WITS, via a call to disrupt the studio.

The project was run as a series of residencies with invited artists taking on the schools 'gallery space' and running it as a studio. I quote from the framing text that I wrote for the website:

The Substation Residency: Dislocating the Studio is a pilot project that is structured as a challenge to the space of the studio. The artist's studio or atelier in its modernist incarnation is a pseudo sacred place where rarefied art objects are produced. Implicit in this configuration is a hierarchical, elitist and commodity driven view of the fine arts. Objects within the studio are open to manipulation, they are transitory and in process of becoming. Once the object leaves the studio however, it becomes fixed as Artwork. This standard operation of the studio and artwork is one that has increasingly been challenged and rearranged as artistic practice becomes less tied to object production and more orientated to processes of temporality and relational encounters. The studio is not simply an atelier but can look more like a library, a playground, a meeting point, a laboratory or even a research facility.

<http://dislocatingthestudio-blog.tumblr.com/>

It is strange to read some six years later that the concerns that I foregrounded then are not dissimilar to those I wish to pursue now. In fact, the series of residencies that I now propose are in many ways an extension of this earlier project.

## Chapter Five

### ***Five Easy Pieces: A Practice Based Analysis.***

#### ***Repetition and Difference: The Remix, The Remake and the Citation***

1. *The artist may construct the piece.*
2. *The piece may be fabricated.*
3. *The piece need not be built.*

*Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.*

Lawrence Weiner, *Declaration of Intent*, 1968

This chapter takes on the practice of appropriation, remix, sampling, remaking or citation. The title for the chapter is in fact a citation within a citation that produced a further citation. I lift it from Steve McQueen's *Five Easy Pieces* (1995), a 16mm black and white film. McQueen, (the artist/director not the actor -although both have won Oscars) was in turn referencing the 1970 Jack Nicholson film (that was nominated for 4 Oscars but didn't win any). To compound this quagmire of citationality further, Marina Abramović re-enacted the work of other performance artists in *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005). To add to this metanarrative cluster, I propose in this final chapter to re-enact five site specific works under the title *Five Easy Pieces*. While I doubt this will be easy it certainly is a set up that is far from simple.

In the classical pedagogy of the Royal Academy of Art, copying master's works was compulsory before students were allowed to assert their own creative agenda<sup>33</sup>. It was through the work and at the feet of the masters that artistic training ensued. While I similarly intend this chapter as an homage to Tracey Rose, Donna Kukama, Francis Alÿs, Steve McQueen and Santiago Sierra, who are in many ways contemporary masters in the form of the antihero whose work I believe to be important to learn from, there is something else in operation and substantially more at stake.

While the selection of these works specifically is me asserting the kind of work that I believe to be important to consider in thinking through site specificity, the remaking of these works is my contribution to a manner and mode of practice based

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<sup>33</sup> In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Walter Benjamin not only speaks of this process of copying, but also can be useful in thinking further through the status of the reproduction.

analysis and critique. In the remake or copy, the methods, tools and processes of artistic practice are mobilised and deployed in an effort to understand better, critically unpack or even deconstruct the operational logics (logistics) of the work in a way that goes beyond and far deeper than formal analysis, historical, political or biographic contingency or any other mode of analysis that proceeds from a time after the work is made. This form of reading is an analysis of object, event or action after the fact. In the remake I propose to return to the beginning and to develop an analysis through the making of the work from the ground up as it were. This will be to engage with the micro concerns that are based on a selection of and engagement with the new space/site for the re-enactment as well as a range of choices that will require an assessment of how and which details or elements to mobilise. These assessments and decisions will move from the logistical to the conceptual as the work is remade in relation to urban Johannesburg.

Each of the works present forms of citationality in themselves, or perhaps to be more explicit, I can read forms of citationality within them. McQueen's *Exodus*, which is made when the artist happens to see two men carrying palm trees while riding a London bus has echoes of Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* of 1969. Santiago Sierra's line tattooed across the backs of four prostitutes can be seen as a complex bundle of citations, from actions like Piero Manzoni's (1961) *Signing of 'a living sculpture'* to Duchamp's famous signing of a urinal with the signature R. Mutt in 1917.

Francis Alÿs's *Paradox of Praxis I: Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*, is cited on his website as a 'settling of accounts with minimalist sculpture' (francisalys.com) and if read in this way, it is a satirical and parodic manner in which to approach a cube like form. Alÿs pushes this rectangular cube of ice around Mexico City in a Sisyphusian manner, with all the necessary futility and pathos.

Within Tracey Rose's *San Pedro V The Hope I Hope*, there are references to Jimi Hendrix, but perhaps also if one wanted to (and I do want to) it could be linked to Richard Serra's famous *Tilted Arch* of 1979. The *Tilted Arch* that caused so much trouble for the government employees who worked around Foley Federal Plaza, who ultimately after a protracted court case were successful in getting it removed ten years later in 1989. The apartheid wall dividing Israel and Palestine posed much more serious an obstruction than Serra's did, but it still remains. Rose, painted pink and playing an electric guitar urinates on this most unholy of monuments to state oppression. Donna



Kukama's *The Swing (After After Fragonard)* is itself a remake of a remake. Here Kukama remakes *The Swing (After Fragonard) (2001)* by Yinka Shonibare MBE which itself is a remake of the Rococo painting *The Swing* by Jean Honoré Fragonard from 1767. Kukama's swing is in her remake, not painting (the original) nor a sculpture (Shonibare's remake) but this time an action at the Mai Mai market in down town Johannesburg. Kukama herself swings suspended from an elevated highway, throwing money to spectators below. My remakes will have to take account of the complex play of referencing and citation, thinking all the time about the ways in which the work changes in relation to the site it is located in.

The play across citationality is, as Nicolas Bourriaud calls it, a play with postproduction (2007). In this spiralling of citationality, remixing and remaking, I aim to set in motion what Deleuze calls *difference and repetition* (1994) as a mode of practice orientated analysis that goes beyond the general and seeks to uncover the singularity that exists within the art work and to extend this into a confrontation with space/site and the urban configuration that is Johannesburg in the multiplicity of ways that I have attempted to articulate it.



**Steve McQueen**

*Exodus*

(1992/1997)

8mm Colour Film transferred to video

no sound, 1 minute 5 seconds

London, UK



**Francis Alÿs**

*Paradox of Praxis I*

*Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*

(1997)

action, with video documentation

Mexico City, Mexico



**Santiago Sierra**

*160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People...*

(2000)

action, with video documentation

El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo, Salamanca, Spain



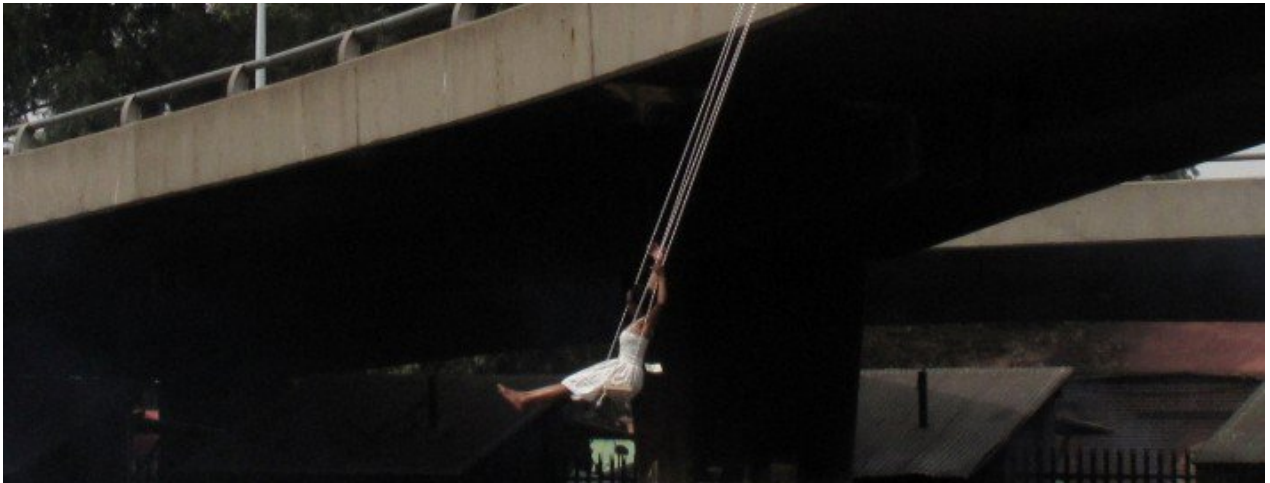
**Tracey Rose**

*San Pedro V: The Hope I Hope*

(2005)

action, with video documentation

Jerusalem, Israel



**Donna Kukama**

*The Swing (After After Fragonard)*

(2009)

action, with video documentation

Mai Mai Market, Johannesburg

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