
Leora Farber

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT:

BELONGING AND DISPLACEMENT

IN THE WORK OF

SOUTH AFRICAN VIDEO ARTISTS

BIOGRAPHY

Leora Farber graduated with a BA Fine Art from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1986 and with a MA Fine Art (cum laude) from the same university in 1992. In 2007, from her position as Senior Lecturer in the University of Johannesburg's Visual Art Department, Farber was appointed as the director of the University of Johannesburg's, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture Research Centre entitled *Visual Identities in Art and Design*. Farber has been exhibiting her artwork nationally and internationally since 1993.

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→ **In this essay**, I discuss the work of artists represented on the second screening of the video programme *Too close for comfort: belonging and displacement in the work of South African video artists*. The first screening formed part of the *Johannesburg and Megacities Phenomena* colloquium. The second screening, which represents some of the artists featured on the initial screening, as well as some artists who have been added to the programme, is, at the time of writing, to be shown at the Hebbel Theatre Berlin, on 20 September 2008 and at the Goethe Institute, Johannesburg, on 28 November 2008.

Selected definitions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ provide a framework through which I explore how the artists featured on this second screening re-conceptualise, re-negotiate and re-imagine their relationships to Johannesburg and particularly to its inner-city. I suggest that most of these artists occupy dual subjectivities in relation to the city, working from positions of inclusion – insider (inhabitant) and exclusion – outsider (immigrant), and at times, occupy an in-between space of ambiguity between these subjectivities.

The transition from apartheid urban space to – something else – draws our attention from the fixing moments of these historically divided cities to experiences of mobility, interaction and the dynamism of spaces ... Can we begin to shift our experiences and our visions to capture and understand the world of always moving spaces? What do the spaces of change and dynamism look like? (Robinson 1998:7D)

The video programme, *Too close for comfort*, was first shown at *Intermission*, on the 19th floor of the Lister Building in the inner-city of Johannesburg, as a complementary event to the *Johannesburg and Megacity Phenomena* colloquium. The video programme offered colloquium participants a glimpse of how issues affecting Johannesburg and its interface with megacity phenomena have been, or are currently being, explored in selected works by contemporary South African video artists.¹ The video programme therefore offered a view of Johannesburg through South African artists' lenses and subjectivities. In this essay, I focus on works from the second screening of the programme, which took place at the Hebbel Theatre, Berlin, on 20 September 2008.

Although it is a well-known phrase, the first part of the title of this programme derives from John Peffer's interview with Minnette Vári (Peffer 2003:28). Referring to Vári's relationship with the inner-city of Johannesburg, the author draws on the words of the founder of the study of sociology, Georg Simmel, who claims that the situation of the 'stranger' is "the product of a permanent dislocation but also nearness in a social setting. A group or a person is in a position of estrangement precisely because they are near to another." To this, Vári replies: "Exactly, too close for comfort."¹

Richard Ballard (2004:51) uses Zygmunt Bauman's definition of the stranger, which correlates with Simmel's conception thereof, to reference ways in which 'otherness' has been incorporated into the post-apartheid life world of 'white'² South Africans. In so doing, Ballard problematically draws sharp distinctions between white and black; suburb and inner-city; 'self' and 'other', setting these up as dichotomies.

According to Bauman (cited in Ballard 2004:51) these 'others' are strangers:

The stranger undermines the spatial ordering of the world – the sought-after co-ordination between moral and topographical closeness, the staying together of friends and the remoteness of enemies. The stranger disturbs the resonance between physical and psychical distance: he [sic] is *physically close* while remaining spiritually remote. He brings into the inner circle of proximity the kind of difference and otherness that are anticipated and tolerated only at a distance – where they can be either dismissed as irrelevant or repelled as hostile.

Accepting Bauman's register of 'the other', Ballard draws on the bad press associated with the inner-city in the 1990s, when it was perceived by many living in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg as a place of poverty, crime, and urban decay. Ballard (2004:58) controversially argues that the kind of separation between 'self' and 'the city' as emblematic of otherness is applicable to post-1994 experiences of 'white' South Africans. He argues that some of the uncertainty experienced by 'white' South Africans in the 1980s and 1990s stemmed from a fear of unregulated access by people previously excluded from what they considered as 'their' cities. Unregulated access included street trading in the Central Business District, which changed that space from a semi-European city to what was perceived as a Third World or 'African' marketplace, and squatter settlements along the periphery of the city. These were seen as infringements; breaches of the segregated Modernist planning of the apartheid era. Spaces which had been 'infiltrated' were perceived as undermining western identities and thus promoting a degeneration of 'standards'. Ballard (2004:58) concludes that as a result, 'white' South Africans experienced feelings of alienation and displacement, which prompted their

avoidance of areas, such as the inner-city, where they felt a lack of control.

Yet, as Ballard notes, the basis of ‘white identity’ as ‘civilised’ and ‘modern’, and as realised through spatial segregation, was, for some, created by the presence of others. He cites Robert Wilton’s (1998:178) exploration of this through use of Sigmund Freud’s notion of *das Unheimliche* or ‘the uncanny’ (literally, translated from German as ‘the un-homelike’):

Spatial proximity weakens the social distance between self and other and challenges the integrity of individual identity. What is normally projected beyond the ego can no longer be completely distinguished from the self ... if we read the ‘unheimlich’ as unhomely, what produces anxiety is an encounter in a place we think of as our own with people who don’t appear to belong. Yet the reaction we experience is not just because people are different and out-of-place. It derives from the fear that they might not be different enough.

French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1991:1) brings this conception of the stranger, or the foreigner, closer, in her articulation of the relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’: “Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time when understanding and affinity flounder. By recognising him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself.” These differing conceptions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ provide a framework through which I explore how the artists featured on this programme re-conceptualise, re-negotiate and re-imagine their relationships to Johannesburg, and to its inner-city in particular. As curators, we chose to work within the parameters of the video medium, given that video offers the potential for motion, sound, temporality, and imagery, allowing for a viewing experience which might, to an extent, allow viewers to ‘enter into’ the representational, aural and temporal space that the artist has set up.

Our initial curatorial aim was to collate a programme

of video works by South African artists, which would not involve the tired trope³ of ‘self’ in relation to ‘city as other’ – as Ballard proposes – but rather that the works would open up a more complex dynamic of the order that Kristeva describes. This recognition and interaction with ‘the other within’ allows for the in-between spaces of interchange; a fluid conversation wherein the conventional opposition of ‘self’ and ‘other’ might be disrupted, or at least, disturbed. In curating this second screening of the programme, conceptual threads which complicate the simple binary of ‘self’ and ‘other’ inadvertently began to emerge. Of these, perhaps the most resonant is that of belonging (familiarity) and displacement (unfamiliarity, alienation) in relation to Johannesburg.

Broader, Modernist and historical themes of the individual’s alienation to/from the city, particularly the Modernist city, are well known. As I noted in the introduction to this collection, Jennifer Robinson (1998:7D) draws a useful analogy between South African apartheid cities, with their Modernist, segregationist architecture, and French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) conception of ‘abstract’ space. Robinson (1998:7D) defines the latter as signifying “a geometric and homogenous space of separation and power, built upon a dominance of the visual, of formal relations amongst objects organized on the basis of technical knowledge.” Abstract space is based on principles of homogenisation and division, and is a dominant spatial structure of the modern city. It encompasses capitalist commodification of land, and the construction of alienating environments in which potential alternative spatialities are repressed. (Robinson 1998:7D) In contrast to abstract space, Lefebvre (1991:137) proposes the concept of differential space – a heterogeneous space of difference and diversity. He comments that

A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological



superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses. A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space.

As Robinson notes, the conception of abstract space has overt resonances with South Africa's segregated apartheid cities. Similarly, their post-1994 transformations may be related to Lefebvre's conception of 'differential' space. As discussed in the introduction to this collection, Johannesburg has evolved from a regulated, apartheid city to a Pan-African city, characterised by complexities of hybridity, heterogeneity and diversity. Lindsay Bremner (2004:2) sums this up with her observation that within this Pan-Africanist 'third space', "The old oppositions between urban and rural, public and private, residential and business, black and white merge in indistinguishable new combinations; boundaries are porous, peoples merge; the city is vitally, colourfully grey."

Working from their experiences of post-apartheid, post-colonial Johannesburg as 'new' terrain, I propose that for many of the artists featured on the programme, the rapidly accelerated and continual changes in the physical environment of the city, combined with ever-shifting processes of psychological and cultural transformations encompass the potential for ambivalence, uncertainty, and alienation. As curators, our interest lies in how contemporary South African video artists renegotiate, inhabit, re-claim, are rejected by or re-imagine fragile spaces of physical and psychological uncertainty. For, as Ballard (2004:51) notes, "our sense of space and sense of self are mutually constitutive. As much as we try to shape our worlds to fit in with our identities, our environments also shape us, challenge us, and constrain us. We attempt to find comfort zones within which it is possible for us to 'be ourselves.'" This emergent city disrupts the apartheid city's false sense of security, while allowing for new conceptions of space, identity, place and new ways of being to be articulated.

Stephen Hobbs (cited in Machen & Hobbs: 2008) speaks of his interest in "cities in flux, whose identity is about a state

of becoming". This liminal state of 'in-betweenness' – an unfixed position between being unformed and definitiveness – gives rise to a sense of constant transformation and instability. These rapidly accelerated, transformative changes in the physical environment of Johannesburg are visually and metaphorically played out in several works. For instance, in Mocke Jansen van Veuren's and Theresa Collins' work *Minutes* (2008) (Figure 1), the dual projections depicting diverse public areas of Johannesburg, appear as dynamic, ever-changing, ever-moving scenes. Through their use of time-lapse photography and experimental sound recordings, the city is shown as being in constant states of motion and transformation; its workings and dynamics captured on video as transient and random temporal moments. Compression of time through time-lapse photography reveals usually unseen, 'invisible' rhythms of everyday life, such as street cleaners completing their shifts in the early hours of the morning. This 'invisible' data is rendered visible in the traces of flux; meeting points and human interactions – with each other and the city space. In this sense, viewers may be prompted to re-evaluate their daily experiences and assumptions around patterns of spatial usage, as these hidden moments and spaces are brought into our perceptual field. (van Veuren & Collins 2008) The camera becomes an observant, analytical tool, albeit that the artists do exercise subjective choices in terms of selecting the site, viewpoint, time of day, and duration of frames.

In their recording of the city's rhythms, van Veuren and Collins take up what appears to be a voyeuristic position, as they capture activities within potentially hostile urban spaces, transitory spaces, spontaneous or orchestrated occupation of spaces, and the mingling of lives in public recreational areas. This kind of 'voyeuristic' viewing might be likened to surveillance; the visual recording of users of the space who are unaware that they are being videoed and will later be viewed. Van Veuren (2008/09/17) comments:

Although many of the places we film are familiar to me ... the relationship changes when the camera separates ... the object



fig 1 Theresa Collins
& Mocke Jansen van
Veuren, stills from
Minutes, 2008
Time lapse photography,
18 min
Courtesy of the artists



fig 2 Sam Nhlengethwa,
Townships Re-visited,
2006
Video, 4 min 18 sec
Courtesy of the artist
and the Goodman
Gallery

in front of the lens from the real or implied, current or future viewing subject; images are literally ‘captured’ for a later gaze with undisclosed intentions ... I have had to reconcile myself with the fact that, once the camera is engaged and running, it has become in some ways an instrument of surveillance, covert and alien, operating outside the awareness, consent or comprehension of its subject. Whenever a person has featured prominently we have been at pains to request permission to film, but ... it is difficult to transmit the purpose of the work, and in any case hundreds of others pass in and out of the frame without any awareness of the camera.

Yet, as van Veuren points out, the settings they choose on the camera tend to obscure or “smudge” the identities of people in the shot; moreover, the subject, “is not an individual or group of people” but rather the interaction of “space, time, movement, rhythm, generated by human presences, bodies and minds engaged in the task of passing the day, governed by habit, culture, law, commerce, desires, roads, architecture ... [and the] cyclical transitions between day and night.” (Van Veuren 2008/09/17)

Patterns of spatial usage are differently articulated in Sam Nhlengethwa’s *Townships Re-visited* (2006) (Figure 2). This work is similar to *Minutes*, in that through filming everyday public spaces in townships around South Africa and ‘collaging’ these digitally, Nhlengethwa presents kaleidoscopic views of constant, dynamic movement. He depicts a bustling world of movement in multiple directions within the same temporal frame, with counter-trajectories of taxis, hawkers, pedestrians, and sidewalkers crisscrossing the terrain. As in *Minutes*, a sense of ‘belonging’ predominates; one has the sense that those being videoed have established themselves as ‘users’ of the space and that they comfortably claim ownership thereof.

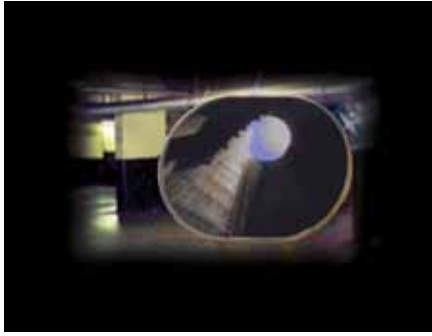


fig 3a

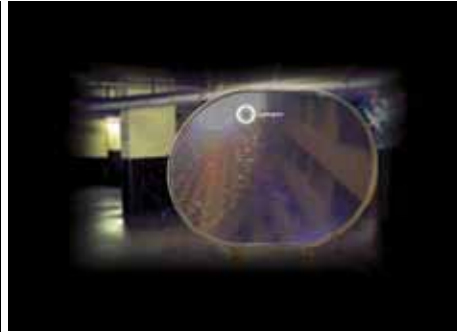


fig 3b



Stephen Hobbs's and André Pretorius's collaborative work *Out of Order – A User's Guide to a Dysfunctional City* (1997), compresses space and place, urban and suburban, into a subjective geography of Johannesburg. Hobbs (cited in Machen & Hobbs 2008) highlights his engagement with Johannesburg, noting that its "suburbs and inner-city have intrinsically formed me as a person and an artist, the forming process coming out of a range of intense types of experiences linked to and in the city. These experiences have been translated into my making and thinking processes."

The first scene of the three-part sequence⁴ might be seen as an extreme response to the condition of urban alienation. The artists assume the subject position of a suicidee through the camera lens, by dropping a film camera from the top floor of the Ponte⁵ building in Hillbrow (Figure 3a). The building is notorious for the number of people who commit suicide by jumping from the top floor down its central, hollow core. Yet, while the artists approximate the suicidee's subject position in the filming process, in the post-production, they position themselves (and the viewer) as *voyeurs*, as the passage of the fall is framed within a makeshift signboard. In the background, one can make out that the signboard is positioned in an underground parking garage – a quintessential site of urban violence and anonymity.

Hobbs (cited in Machen & Hobbs 2008) states:

City centres – spaces of grids, regularity, order and determinacy, intertwined with flows and distilled points of human interaction and usage – provide the potential for the imagined and the fantastical. It is in this sense that my work explores the ongoing possibilities for discovery and meaning in urban space.

Although these words are written in relation to his recent solo exhibition titled *D'Urban* (May 2008), they are also applicable to the second scene of the

sequence, wherein the intersection of Bezuidenhout and Jeppe Streets in Newtown is chosen as the site for the erasure and restoration of road markings. In the scene where road markings (signs of order and regulation) are present (Figure 3b), it is as if they are invisible – cars move across stop signs, pedestrians jaywalk in front of cars and taxis. In contrast, in the scenes where road markings have been erased, the opposite holds true – cars, taxis and pedestrians behave as if the road signs are clearly demarcated and as if they still function as signifiers of control and regulation. Through this visual disruption, Hobbs and Pretorius speak of their re-negotiated relationship to the city – in which the familiar is rendered unfamiliar and the unexpected becomes the norm. This intersection becomes metonymic of a city which is

conflicted by first world ordering and control systems and so called third world informality. The meeting place of these tendencies has the potential for transformation, a repurposing of the present in order to service the future experience and reality of cities. (Hobbs cited in Machen & Hobbs 2008)

The third scene of the sequence develops these themes of ideas around belonging and displacement, through reference to South African concerns about domestic safety and security. The simple occurrence of an innocuous golf ball, hit by an inexperienced golfer, which breaks the window of Hobbs' flat and enters his private space, is visually likened to a burglary. His comfort zone of 'home' is disrupted, rendering the space as violated. Accompanying this are feelings of fear, insecurity and vulnerability, as well as the longing for private and personal safety which, given the city's notoriously high crime rates, forms an integral part of everyday life for Johannesburg's inhabitants.

Steven Cohen's video *Chandelier* (2001-2002) (Figure 4) evokes different forms of displacement. Dressed in a carefully wrought chandelier, fashioned into a tutu-like

fig 3a & b
Stephen Hobbs, *Out of Order: A User's Guide to a Dysfunctional City*, 1997-2000
Screengrabs from interaction sequence
Interactive CD-ROM
600 x 800 dpi
Courtesy of the artist

skirt, and wearing a corset and stockings with his buttocks exposed, Cohen walks through an informal settlement in Newtown, which is being demolished by the men colloquially known as ‘red ants’. These men, so named because of the red overalls they wear, are employed by the government to demolish makeshift squatters’ homes and evict illegal tenants from buildings. Of this performance, Cohen (cited in de Waal & Sassen 2003:71) writes:

A white man in high heels wearing an illuminated chandelier tutu and improvising movement amidst a community of black squatters whose shacks are being destroyed by city council workers in their own ballet of violence ... is very South African. ... I felt displaced (hectic in heels and a strange place to be near naked).

Different kinds of belonging and displacement are emphasised. Cohen’s performance of his ‘queerness’ and deliberate (dis)placement of himself as a marginalised queer in another marginalised community is provocative. The community of squatters are being literally displaced through removal of their homes, yet the kind of displacement Cohen speaks of is social, cultural, and political. Intertwined with displacement is its corollary – belonging – which raises questions such as: who has a right to public space? What signifies a claim to space? What signifies cultural ‘belonging’ (as opposed to being ‘othered’)?⁷

Whereas Cohen’s work presents a disjunctive interweaving of public and private domains, William Kentridge’s *Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old* (1991) (Figure 5) seamlessly slips between personal and public histories in the years of transition leading up to the official demise of apartheid. Kentridge (cited in Cameron 1999:8) speaks of his influences as being “... my South African background; my family background” but more specifically, that

I have never been able to escape Johannesburg, and in the end, all my work is rooted in this rather desperate provincial city. I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings and films are certainly spawned by, and feed off, the brutalised society left in its wake. (Kentridge cited in Christov-Bakargiev 1998)

Kentridge’s films function as part-diary, part-autobiography by giving equal weight to the personal aspects of his life, as well as to their



fig 4 Steven Cohen, stills from *Chandelier*, 2001-2002
Video projection
16 min 37 sec
Courtesy of the Heure Exquisite (Lille) and Latitudes Prod (Lille)
with grateful acknowledgement to Henri Vergon and Les and Sheldon Cohen



fig 5
William Kentridge,
stills from *Sobriety,*
Obesity and Growing
Old, 1991
Editing by Angus Gibson
Music: Dvorak's String
Quartet in F, Opus 96
Choral music of South
Africa: 'm'apparai aria'
from Friedrich von
Flotow's *Martha*
16 mm animated film
8 min 22 secs
Courtesy of the artist
and the Goodman
Gallery



figs 6
Minnette Vári,
The Calling, 2003
2-channel video
installation (panoramic
projection) 3 min
Courtesy the artist and
the Goodman Gallery

intersection with history and current socio-political events. *Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old*, forms part of the *Nine Soho Eckstein Films* which Kentridge produced from 1989-2003, which feature the emblematic figures of Soho Eckstein, the randlord who embodies greed and avarice, combined with world-weary pessimism; the anxious and guilt-ridden Felix Teitlebaum – who is Eckstein’s alter ego, and, like Eckstein, is based on Kentridge himself (Smith 2007) – and Mrs Eckstein, who cuckolds Soho with her liaisons with Felix. These self-referential characters are set against an ever-growing presence of the faceless crowds of protestors marching through the Johannesburg cityscape.

In *Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old*, Soho’s mining empire collapses, buildings implode, crowds march over the horizon. Soho’s empire crumbles as that which he had gained through exploitation is eroded. Socio-political change has psychological ramifications for both Soho and Felix. For Soho, these effects are alienation and displacement caused by his loss of power. Felix experiences feelings of guilt, anxiety and anxiousness. For these dualistic characters, the

‘other’ – signified by the faceless masses – is too close for comfort. For Soho they represent threat; for Felix, they act as traumatic reminders of injustices perpetrated under apartheid and his own complicity therein by virtue of his whiteness. Kentridge’s technique of erasure of charcoal images from the paper surface leaves traces which suggest temporal shifts between event and memory. (Smith 2007) These temporal shifts are enhanced by the non-linearity of the scene sequences, which shift backwards and forwards from the first three images. The constant erasure of an image as it is formed on a page, and its transmutation into something else, speaks of the partiality and fragility of memory, as well as of the fluidity between political and personal expressions of struggle.

Minnette Vári’s video, *The Calling* (2003) (Figure 6), provides a similarly personalised reading of the artist’s complex relationship to the urban metropolis. Vári represents herself as part-monster, part-gargoyle and part-cyborg, engaged in a process of negotiating precarious terrain from an aerial vantage point in the midst of the cityscape. While the cityscape is a composite of different cities,

including New York and Brussels, it was shot from the 19th floor of the Lister Building – the same venue as the first screening of the video programme. The “imaginary, broken metropolis” (Peffer 2003:28) Vári presents is based on her conceptualisation of Johannesburg as “the goudstad, the promised land, Monomotapa, a golden kingdom.” (Vári cited in Peffer 2003:28) However, while this implies a utopian vision, Vári’s cityscape is a strange, ambiguous space which lies in the in-betweenness of a possible dystopia and an “estranged utopia.” (Peffer 2003:24) As James Sey (2005:77) notes, through evocative use of the video medium, Vári creates a “liminal, compelling, new universe ... where a deconstructed monumentalism meets a technological dream of what was once human bodies and societies.”

Partially naked, except for a mass of objects strapped to her body, one of which resembles an old film projector or butter churn, and with wings and a wooden horse’s head, Vári’s body appears as if it has mutated into a Quasimodo-like, part mythological, part-technological form. The objects seem to meld with her flesh, creating the sense that Vári herself is ‘other’ – a grotesque hybrid. The Rorschach-like mirroring of the moving imagery creates an impression that she is looking at herself as ‘other’ in a self-reflexive manner. The scene is filmed in black and white, in the early hours of a foggy morning, just before daybreak. This represents a liminal time of ‘in-betweenness’ – not yet day, no longer night. The greyness of the foggy air renders the city and her body ambiguously indistinct. Her contorted, probing movements suggest a sense of physical discomfort and associated psychological trauma. For Vári, this work represents a dangerously close physical and psychological interaction with an ‘otherness’ within. She (cited in Peffer 2003:28) states: “*The Calling* brought me to strange places, not only at odd hours of the day. I put myself, my body, in physical peril by literally going on top of really high buildings and sitting on the ledge of the uppermost level, a bundle of paraphernalia on my back, shifting my centre of gravity.” Vári’s occupation of the physical ledge (edge) might be read as a border or a threshold; a liminal, transitional space between ‘self’ and ‘other’. This transitional state is precarious, for as Lynda Nead (1997:6) notes, “All transitional states ... pose a threat; anything that resists classification or refuses to belong to one category or another emanates danger ... it is the margins, the very edges of categories, that are most critical in the construction of ... meaning.”

Through visually and conceptually layered, evocative imagery, Vári metaphorically points to certain underlying formations of tension, violence and dis-ease below the subcutaneous layers of the city; tensions which seem to threaten volcanic-like eruptions. She (cited in Peffer

2003:26) speaks evocatively of this process: “Out on a ledge, I had this vertiginous notion that the more I try to get under the skin of the city, the more I am in fact outside of it; that my attempt to speak from within its walls is turning me inside out and making me vulnerable, as though I myself am being mined.” For Vári (cited in Peffer 2003:26), ‘getting under the skin’ of Johannesburg creates “crowded encounters of perverse nearness where interpretation becomes a personal risk.” For her, the inner-city is both home (physically a space where she lives) (Peffer 2003:28) and yet, as she states, “Even though I would like to consider it my home, going into the city was like venturing into something very foreign, a place that perhaps has become foreign even to itself.” For her, the work becomes a means of working ‘around’ Johannesburg; “trying to encircle it via this fragile itinerary the length and width and depth of belonging; a spectral home, an elusive destination.” (Vári cited in Peffer 2003:27)

Kristeva’s (1982:4) by now almost naturalised concept of abjection as a site of ambiguity “... which disturbs identity, system, order” might be usefully applied to this liminal space between ‘self’ and ‘other’ which Vári evokes. Elizabeth Grosz (1990:87-88) notes that

The abject is that part of the subject ... which it attempts to expel. The objects generating abjection – food, faeces, urine, vomit, tears, spit – inscribed the body in those surfaces, hollows, crevices, orifices, which will later become erotogenic zones – mouth, eyes, genitals. These corporeal sites provide a boundary or threshold between what is inside the body, and thus part of the subject, and what is outside the body, and thus an object for the subject.

For the subject, the fear of losing one’s identity, to have one’s borders transgressed, to be re-immersed in an undifferentiated oneness with the mother, is the innate terror of abjection. Noelle McAfee (2004:48-49) comments that this loss of identity may be likened to Freud’s concept of the *Unheimlich* mentioned previously. Here spatial proximity weakens the social distance between ‘self’ and ‘other’ to the extent that what is normally projected beyond the ego can no longer be completely distinguished from the self. McAfee quotes Freud as saying: “We can understand why linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* [‘the home-like’] into its opposite, *das Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind.”⁶ (2004:48) Kristeva (1982:3-4) observes that whilst “the vulnerability of the borderline is a threat to the integrity of the ‘own and clean self’; it can also offer a liminal space where self and other may intermingle.”

My contention is that through her ‘othering of herself’, her precarious placement on an edge or border, use of her body as a performative medium and through her evocation of a liminal space of ambiguity, Vári presents an interaction with the city which blurs definitive bodily/psychic boundaries; she becomes enmeshed with ‘the foreigner within’; that hidden face of her identity. By challenging her own tenuous borders of selfhood, she enters the space of Kristeva’s ‘foreigner’ or Freud’s *Unheimlich*, and evokes a visual equivalent of the semiotic.

The semiotic is one half of the process of signification, the second being the symbolic.⁷ McAfee (2004:18) comments that for Kristeva “the semiotic aspect of signification signifies what is ‘below the surface’ of the speaking being.” (2004:18) In McAfee’s (2004:17) understanding, the semiotic is “the extra-verbal way in which bodily energy and affects make their way into language ... While the semiotic may be expressed verbally, it is not subject to regular rules of syntax.” Kelly Oliver (1998) details Kristeva’s conception of the semiotic, which originates in the unconscious, as “the bodily drive as it is discharged in signification. The semiotic is associated with the rhythms, tones, and movement of signifying practices.”

Entry into the semiotic has correlations with the realm of the unconscious, in that both work to disrupt the logic of the symbolic order. The unconscious consists of material which does not form part of the symbolic order and thus cannot be expressed in words, as it is formally excluded from the conscious world of language. Abstract space, which is similarly based upon rationality, cannot comprehend the realm of the unconscious, which it excludes from, and subordinates to, “the ordering regimes of the visual, the geometric, the planned.” (Robinson 1998:7D) Lefebvre thus argues that the excluded, subordinated, repressed realms of emotions, affect, dreams, the unconscious, and physical sensuality can act as signifiers which have the potential to disrupt the visually based orderings of abstract space. (Robinson 1998:7D) In her evocation of a liminal, subterranean space, Vári draws on dream imagery, which has contact with the space of the unconscious, as it is also beyond the realm of the symbolic. Robinson (1998:7D) notes that dreams are “unpredictable space[s] of unusual and innovative juxtapositions or overlays, strange associations and disturbing images.” Looking at Vári’s evocation of dream-imagery, the unconscious and bodily affect, it is possible to suggest that in her work “... there is a real possibility of imagining and shaping new kinds of space, of finding spaces transformed, moved, shifted into strangeness ...” .

In Nadine Hutton’s works *Night Watch – Zion* (2006) and *Vusi* (2008) (Figure 7), abstract space is similarly transformed,



fig 7
Nadine Hutton,
stills from *Zion*, 2006
Soundtrack by Boris
Vukasović
Stop-action animation,
4 min 37 secs
Courtesy of the artist

through shifts into a liminal, dream-like state of the unconscious. Hutton's videos depict African Zionist communities worshipping in an empty school hall in the inner-city of Johannesburg. The rhythmic swaying, spinning, chanting and whirling of the worshippers cause their bodies to merge in the videoed representation. Bodies appear to blur into one another, forming a visual equivalent of trance-like, heightened spiritual states of being. The bodies engaged in worship meld, giving a sense of the urban fabric of the city and body as integral to each other and thus proposing a remaking of the space. As in *The Calling*, Lefebvre's conception of the body as a lived, sensual realm, dreamlike imagery, the semiotic, and the unconscious are drawn upon as disruptive forces to the rationality of abstract space and the symbolic order.

In these works, one is aware that as videographer, Hutton is an outsider to the scene and as such, she places the viewer in a similar position. We watch worshippers within their private and collective unconscious spaces whilst they are oblivious to our gaze. Hutton (*Too Close* 2008: forthcoming) openly acknowledges her position as *voyeur* with regard to these works, noting that "*Night Watch* is a series of stolen pictures about the streets and surrounding buildings ... The public domain of the streets sets the *voyeur's* stage, the intersections and uncurtained windows the frames." The fact that she has filmed the worshippers through a window distinctly sets her, and us, as viewers, up as *voyeurs*. Yet, in contrast, in her video, *Ignore Me* (2008) she attempts to reverse this relationship, providing a space which gives voice and visibility to those living on the margins of the city – the 'unseen', anonymous street hawkers.

Anthea Moy's videos *Gautrain Series: Ophelia* (2008) (Figure 8) and *Gautrain Series: Tunnel Shout* (2008) encapsulate many of the themes of dislocation and alienation touched on thus far. Both works are filmed on building sites – transitional sites which point to the 'in-betweenness' of being in construction and which are in processes of becoming. *Gautrain Series: Ophelia* obliquely references John Everett Millais' painting, *Ophelia* (1851-2). Moys lies in a self-dug 'grave' of sand in the construction site, appearing almost doll-like in relation to the scale of the heavy-duty graders around her. In her artist's statement (*Too close* 2008: forthcoming) Moys speaks poignantly of the futility of digging a hole in which to lie while being surrounded by heavy-duty graders, and the sense of powerlessness that this evoked for her. Her powerlessness and vulnerability are conveyed to us, as viewers, as we watch the mechanical shifting of earth taking place at close proximity to her body. The smallness of her doll-like scale enhances this

sense of helplessness and draws attention to her femininity, referencing the incongruity of her female body in a conventionally masculine environment.

Moys (*Too Close* 2008: forthcoming) likens this sense of powerlessness which she evokes in the work to a broader sense of powerlessness which she believes "a lot of South Africans are feeling at the moment." She wears a hard hat and safety clothing for protection, which she sees as a metaphor for the need for protection when walking in the streets of Johannesburg. Yet, within this seemingly hopeless, or even suicidal act (if we take the reference to Millais' *Ophelia* more literally) of 'burying' herself, lies what she acknowledges to be quiet acceptance of her own powerlessness. For her, it is through "acceptance of uncertainty and change that we manage the world we live in. In this acceptance ... is also a quiet celebration of the potential, of what is to come."

In his conceptualisation of new, urban specialities, Lefebvre draws on the body, and particularly its rhythms of walking, breathing, heartbeat, as having the potential to offer alternatives to the rationality of abstract space. (Robinson 1998:7D) Citing Lefebvre, Robinson (1998:7D), notes that

In their everyday activities, subjects are witness to the possibility of other forms of spatiality through their bodies and their movements, as well as in their imaginations, in the dynamism of the inner worlds which are both made through, and themselves make, the 'external' spaces of the environment. The body, the unconscious and our inner worlds clearly play an important role the production of the meaning of space, and in its potential transformation.

In these works, the artists, as subjects in relation to the city, draw on a variety of means, including those of bodily rhythms, movement, imagination and the unconscious, in their re-negotiations and re-imaginings of space. Most of these artists occupy dual subjectivities, often looking at the city from positions of inclusion – insider (inhabitant) and exclusion – outsider (immigrant); home and displacement, and at times, occupy an in-between space of lived experience and distant voyeurism. On one hand, this kind of voyeuristic relationship might be seen as analogous to the artist's sense of dis-location and alienation from the city. For example, alienation is poignantly represented in Moy's work *Gautrain Series: Tunnel Shout*, in which her calls of 'hello', down the underground tunnel are returned with little but the eerie echo of her own voice. Her attempt to call however, points to a desire to make contact with 'otherness'. On the other hand, for artists such as Vári, the in-betweenness or ambivalence of this space between

fig 8
Anthea Moys,
*Gautrain Series:
Standing with
Graders # 2, 2008*
Site-specific
performance
Courtesy of the artist
Photograph by
Alastair Mclachlan



inclusion and exclusion allows for a fluid slippage between 'self' and 'other'. Vári's use of the video medium, which emphasises slow, continuous, and seamless fluidity of movement, enhances the sense of liminality and immersion between herself and the city to a point where boundaries between them seem to blur. Hutton's use of actual blurred imagery, created through the speeding up of footage, achieves a similar sense of liminality, albeit through speed as opposed to slow motion. For Kentridge, constant slippage between 'self' and 'other' is achieved through the ongoing erasure and re-emergence of imagery; through reprises and returns, in a non-linear unfolding of imagery. As in Vári's work, this non-linearity evokes a dream-like quality as well as forms of visualisation associated with the unconscious such as free-association, projection and remembered experience. In *Chandelier*, it could be argued that Cohen 'others' himself, through the vulnerability of his displacement within an 'othered' community, and through conscious use of his body as spectacle for the viewer's gaze. We watch Cohen perform his queer identity, which he puts on spectacularised, yet painful display.

The differing kinds of liminality created in Vári's and Hutton's works, contrasts with use of movement in works such as *A User's Guide to a Dysfunctional City*, and *Minutes*, both of which employ fast-frame time lapse photography. In these works, the fast forwarding of captured and lost frames (information which the camera does not capture) creates a repetitive sense of accelerated motion. Although this sense of accelerated, rhythmic motion references bodily rhythms, creating a sense of bodily identification for the viewer, it conversely, discourages a sense of intimate engagement for both the artist and viewer.¹⁰ This more distant kind of engagement might be contrasted with *Townships Re-Visited*. Within Nhlengethwa's work, footage is rendered in 'real' time – not speeded up or slowed down. This creates a sense of identification which is closely linked to the 'natural' rhythms of the body. In his work, these rhythms play out in multiple ways. People walking; environmental sounds, overlaid music tracks, the proximity of bodies inhabiting space and interactions between people combine to create a sense of shared communality. This might be likened to an 'opening up' of space through the intertwined

rhythms of daily life. This use of space prompts a sense of humanness – an organic interchange between users of the space, the artist as subject and viewers of the work.

and familiar, embodied in, contingent upon, and subject to the flux and transition of societies and artists as individuals within them.

In the works, ‘self’ and ‘other’ thus become negotiated, dynamic spaces which are explored through investigations of sameness and difference; inclusion and exclusion, foreign

Endnotes

- The evening included the following works:
 - Judith Erasmus: *Homelessness and Hope – Ponte City* (2007)
 - Ismail Farouk: *Majesty Wholesalers* (video installation) (2008)
 - Stephen Hobbs: *Out of Order – A User’s Guide to a Dysfunctional City* (1997)
 - Nadine Hutton: *Vusi* (2008); *Night Watch – Zion* (2006); *Ignore Me* (2008)
 - Moeke Jansen van Veuren & Theresa Collins: *Minutes* (2007)
 - William Kentridge: *Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old* (1991)
 - Alastair McLachlan: *Coke Light – The on-off side of life* (2007)
 - Anthea Moys: *Boxing Project* (2007); *Guarded Relaxation* (2007)
 - Jo Ractliffe and Sebastian Diaz Morales: *One Year Later* (2001)
 - Minnette Vári: *The Calling* (2003)
 - Rat Western: *Tarot of Johannesburg* (performance) (2008)

An adapted version of the video evening was re-screened as part of the *Performing South Africa Festival* (18-27 September). After its showing at the Goethe Institute, Johannesburg, on 28th November 2008, the programme will be rescreened at the David Krut Gallery in New York in February 2009. The programme is accompanied by a catalogue, which has been produced in collaboration with the RC, the Goethe Institute, Johannesburg and David Krut Publishing.
- Significantly, Vári (cited in Peffer 2003:28) continues: “I think that sort of proximity just highlights disparity and I often feel compelled to sew together two sides of the ravine.”
- Ballard sweepingly uses the term ‘white’ South Africans, problematically denoting homogeneity within a grouping which is culturally and ideologically diverse. His article is largely informed by a 2003 focus group which he facilitated on behalf of the *Washington Post* and Kaiser Family Foundation. (Ballard 2004:65) He refers to a group of respondents/interviewees, who seem to have been interviewed from 1996-1999, and cites extracts from these interviews, but provides no information as to where and how they were conducted.
- Much theoretical ground has been covered about the ethics of representing, speaking for and speaking with ‘the other’. These debates emerged prominently in South African visual culture nine years ago, with the critical reviews that led up to, and the subsequent publication of *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art*. (Atkinson & Breitz, 1999) Debates on representation of the ‘other’ have found currency in many international and local fora. Within South African artistic practices, these debates could be said to have led to a position where artists feel comfortable only imaging and ‘speaking for’ themselves, and as having turned to using their own bodies as subject. Whilst this has opened up a necessary and important space for artists to position themselves as speaking subjects, and to express their own subjectivities or narrative voices, as curators of the programme, one of the questions we ask is if it is still useful to frame our debates in such dualistic terms.
- This work is ‘narrated’ by Stephen Hobbs in the photo-essay on his work titled ‘Dystopia in Johannesburg’ on pages 132-145 of this collection.
- Built in 1975 as a hollow cylinder, Ponte has always been a furnished rental block, comprising 470 flats. Soaring to 173 metres or 54 floors, it forms an integral part of the Johannesburg skyline and has become an icon of the city. When it was first built, Ponte was seen as a symbol of modernity and prosperity in the ‘City of Gold.’ However, as crime rates prompted many businesses to move out of the inner-city in the 1990s, Ponte was increasingly inhabited by immigrants from other parts of Africa. It developed a reputation as a haven for violent gangs and for drug-trafficking. This reputation was cemented by the grimy crime thriller *Ponte City*, written by the German author Norman Ohler, which centres on the story of a young woman who falls in love with a Nigerian drug lord. (Panoussian: 2007)
- Hobb’s and Pretorius’s process of erasing the street markings and other signs of order is discussed in Hobb’s photo-essay ‘Dystopia in Johannesburg’ on pages 132-145 of this collection.
- In larger trajectories, this work highlights the complex problem of dwelling in Johannesburg. The appropriation of space by the city’s homeless and immigrant populations contrasts markedly with the security enclaves of Johannesburg’s northern suburbs. Squatter camps and sprawling informal settlements around the city’s periphery speak of changing ways in which homes are being made, under conditions framed by insecurity, fear, migration and an increasing sense of “not-at-homeness.” (Bremner 2004:20)
- McAfee (2004:49) comments that for Freud, “the uncanny is something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it.” She continues that whereas Freud named this “the return of the repressed”, Kristeva labels it “maternal abjection” in reference to the infant’s process of separation from the mother in becoming a separate, autonomous being.
- The semiotic is the evocation of the speaking being’s emotion or bodily energy, the non-referential, liminal aspect of signification. Conversely, the symbolic is the mode of signification that relies on “language as a sign system complete with its grammar and syntax.” (Kristeva 1984:27) In her formulation of the symbolic, Kristeva draws on Jacques Lacan’s theories of the symbolic order which Dino Felluga (2003) details as:

The social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law ... once a child enters into language and accepts the rules and dictates of society, it is able to deal with others. The symbolic is made possible because of your acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father, those laws and restrictions that control both your desire and the rules of communication. [Through this] you are able to enter into a community of others.
- I use the term ‘distant engagement’ advisedly, acknowledging that both Hobbs and van Veuren openly discuss their close and interactive personal engagement with the city. Their closeness to the city is borne out in their quotes cited in this essay.



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fig 9
Anthea Moys,
Tunnel Shout,
2008
Site-specific
performance
Courtesy of the artist
Photograph by
Alastair Mclachlan