

---

**CITIES IN CRISIS:**

**CITIES, PHOTOGRAPHY**

**AND RESEARCH**

→ *Rory Bester*

**In this review of the *Cities in Crisis* exhibition, I consider the constitution, status and effect of the ‘research’ exhibition in visual art. Focusing primarily on examples of photography exhibitions and individual bodies of work by photographers that variously explore themes of urbanism and city-ness, this review argues for the significance of three issues in research exhibition production and circulation: the acknowledgement of the value of the visual and the power of visibility, the exhibition’s ability to mobilise research questions, and the exhibition’s ability to evolve itself as part of a project of ongoing research.**

---

Globally, the creative overlaps between art, design, and architecture are testified by the number of interdisciplinary collaborations between practitioners from these different fields, as well as the extent to which individuals themselves work in highly innovative interdisciplinary modes. Locally, these fields are more disconnected from each other, and there is a marked unevenness in their critical engagements with differently constituted publics. If there is one area where this difference between the fields is especially marked, it is the extent to which art, more so than design and architecture, is able to consistently engage in theoretically informed modes of critical public address through the exhibition format.

Locally, architecture is the field that comes closest to art in its ability to critically engage publics in this manner. Hilton Judin's *blank Architecture, Apartheid and After* (1998) is still the outstanding post-apartheid example of critical address within the field. South African architects have produced significant critically engaged projects for the São Paulo and Venice Biennales, and most recently, 15 architecture students produced *Hillbrow Not Just Now* (2008), an exhibition that utilised the lens-based documentary processes of photography and video to identify sites and explore design strategies and propositions for public social engagement.<sup>1</sup> However these examples are too few to claim that the architecture field has found its substantive critical exhibition voice in public.

South African design has been largely inadequate in its ability to put the field on exhibition display with any degree of self-reflexivity. While some might ascribe this absence of critical public address within the field to design's status as a 'professional' or 'commercial' practice, architecture's bondage by similar constraints has not inhibited its ability to call a critical exhibition public into being. Pre-eminent forums such as the *Design Indaba*, while inspirational in its offering of global design creativity and dimensional innovation, are largely lacking in a local willingness to showcase design histories and contemporary practices in critically engaged exhibition formats.

The constitution of the exhibition as a form of critical public address is often at its sharpest in what might loosely be called the 'research' exhibition. To understand the work that the research exhibition does, it is instructive to invoke a set of examples that are form- and content-specific. Here exhibitions of photography and other lens-based media have played a significant role in not only imagining the city, but also circulating different senses of city-ness in public. And within the framing format of the research exhibition, photography has played an important role in shaping the discourse on differently located and constituted cities. In relation to research exhibitions, and especially their use of photography in thinking around cities, there are three issues worth considering here. The first relates to the meaning and value of the visual as an act of visibility within the context of research, the second to the nature and extent of the questions that underpin a research exhibition in visual art, and the third to the changing face and identity of ongoing research exhibitions.

Research is often orientated towards the generation and status of evidence that makes particular findings visible. The ability of visual media to make visible what is otherwise invisible or unintended is one of the unrecognised and underutilised strengths of visual art. It is in these visualisations, in this making visible, that mediums such as photography can begin to claim an important place in urban studies, and more specifically, thinking around the meaning of cities. While urban planners often imagine the model of a city from above, photographers working with the city as their subject often re-imagine the city from below.

The potency and impact of this initial act of visibility, in the form of the photographic act, is strengthened by another act of visibility. This is the circulation of the photograph in exhibitions. This photographic view can be as much subjective as objective, and in terms of its orientation towards the city, can focus as much on structures as on people in its generation of the meanings of city-ness. Here, there are two critically important recent examples of the photographic view of the city of Johannesburg: Guy Tillim's *Jo'burg* (2004)<sup>2</sup> (pages 237-239) and David Goldblatt's *Joburg* (2008).<sup>3</sup>

While Goldblatt's city is certainly peopled (mostly peripherally), and the main exhibition space is flanked by portraits of overlapping intensity and poignancy, it is the structures within the wider city that dominate his often-brutal reading from the streets of Johannesburg. Here his photographs of the Hillbrow Tower (from 1975) and the South African Reserve Bank (taken in 1999) are especially claustrophobic in their framing of – and making visible – a particular form of structural city-ness. Quite differently, in Tillim's earlier seminal essay, physical structures are largely in the background, and the meaning of space is derived mostly from the presence and movement of the people who inhabit these buildings. This photographic visibility is one of a peopled collation of the city, in which there is an abiding sense of a temporality that is bound by the temporariness and transition of human habitation.

In their different aesthetic formulations of the city, both Tillim's and Goldblatt's photographs are sometimes bleak, even shocking, in their representation of the architectural and human politics of Johannesburg. However, what both of these projects imply, and even suggest, is the importance of neighbourhoods and communities in a broader sense of city-ness; that the wider city is less a hierarchy of centre and periphery and more a network of neighbourhoods and communities with different and often competing senses of what it means to be visible and invisible in a particular city.

Furthermore, what these two examples make clear is that the relationship between aesthetics and politics, traditionally a vexed and suspicious co-existence, needs to be rethought to grasp the critical contribution of photography in public. Following Jacques Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2006),<sup>4</sup> it is useful to understand the act of visibility implicit in the aesthetic of visibility as a political act against invisibility. By conjoining the aesthetic and political effects

of the visual act in this way, photography comes to have additional potency in the research context. As much as aesthetics might reduce the shock of what is made visible, it also often has the effect of making people stop and look (and in many instances keep looking).

The power of this kind of looking lies in the extent to which looking can initiate the complexity of engagement and debate. Of course, while photographs are arresting, to the extent that they make the viewer stop and think, the photographic image treads a fine line that can easily slip into the unchallenging and unchanging passivity of voyeurism that in turn sinks into invisibility. The strength of the photograph, and photography more broadly, is that it is at the nexus of aesthetics and politics, but also circulated in the context of the research exhibition, must increasingly rely on the collapse of traditional boundaries between fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, and between documentary and art. Visibility requires easy and wide circulation to be effective, and these traditional boundaries often do more to hinder than facilitate the circulation of photographs.

The second issue relating to research exhibitions is the nature and extent of the questions that underpin such an exhibition. Resisting a research question can often put the curator and exhibition in somewhat of a bind. If one uses the example of photography, it is noteworthy that, more than most other visual mediums, photography slips and moves with consummate ease between disciplines and fields. While this can be seen as a strength in and of itself, it is also of concern that photographs have rapidly shifting and often dramatically different values in moving across these different fields. On the one side of the bind, photographs are too often treated as a limited ancillary to the consummate weight of text-based analysis. Particularly in social science research, photographs are often little more than mere illustrations. But on the other side of the bind, it is in particular visual art's reluctance to mix up its humanities-orientated philosophical deliberations with social science-orientated critical research that unfairly relegates photography and exhibitions to this bit-part status.<sup>5</sup>

One of the more successful recent examples of question-driven research exhibitions in an art context was the *Global Cities* exhibition (2007) at the Tate Modern in London.<sup>6</sup> Framed conceptually and visually by a statement – “In 2007 for the first time in history 50% of people on earth are living in cities” – the exhibition combined questions and question-derived statements about ten global cities, including Johannesburg.<sup>7</sup> These questions, graphically designed to emphasise particular words and numbers, were displayed large and repeated in different parts of the exhibition. Some of the questions included: Can cities promote social justice and greater equality? Does the shape of cities affect the future of our planet? Can cities be improved by design? How can cities accommodate billions of new urban dwellers?

What is important about the tone and tenor of the questions that

framed the *Global Cities* exhibition is that they were not didactic, and did not seem to shut down discussion and debate about global cities. The questions and statements, as well as the exhibition's five themes – size, speed, form, density and diversity – provided visual scaffolding for artists and architects to not only interpret these ten cities, but also pose a number challenges for their futures.

The exhibition not only locates Johannesburg within a network of global cities, but also positions it within a research framework that is about reading cities through pattern and recognition. There were two photographic projects representing Johannesburg: Kendell Geers' *Suburbia* (1999), and the above-mentioned *Jo'burg* (2004) by Guy Tillim. Through these two bodies of work, the exhibition offered a fairly alienating view of South Africa's largest city. An Antipodean visitor to the exhibition said of Geers' photographs of suburban security in South Africa: “It's a different world that we can't even begin to relate to.”<sup>8</sup> But then, this is probably a comment that many visitors made about cities on the exhibition that were very different from their own.

The third issue worth considering in relation to research exhibitions is the changing face and identity of ongoing research exhibitions. When grappling with exhibitions that address themselves to a set of ongoing critical questions, there are at least two curatorial issues that need to be considered. The first is a possibility for exhibitions that can and should be pushed, and the second is a limitation in display that needs to be overcome.

The first curatorial issue is the extent to which the exhibition changes as it moves from one venue to the next, less as a result of a change in venue (size of the venue, display conditions, and so on), and more as a consequence of the evolution of thinking within and around the exhibition. A case in point here is the example of *Memorias Intimas Marcas* (1997), an ambitious exhibition that used the 1987 Battle of Cuito Cuanavale in southern Angola to explore questions of archive, memory, truth, and reconciliation in post-conflict societies. What started out as a personal journey by three artists from countries involved in the conflict – Fernando Alvim (Angola), Carlos Garaicoa (Cuba) and Gavin Younge (South Africa) – became an exhibition of the artists' works produced out of this journey.

The exhibition first toured Cuito Cuanavale and Luanda in 1997, before coming to South Africa. The South African leg of the exhibition, which included Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Pretoria, not only saw substantial additions to the list of exhibiting artists – including South Africans Lien Botha, Moshekwa Langa and Colin Richards – but also changes to the mode of display. In Pretoria, Alvim created what resembled a military field hospital inside the warehouse space of the National Cultural History Museum, and each of the works on exhibition was displayed in a section of this ‘hospital’.

One of the hesitations about this kind of evolution of the exhibition stems from a desire to protect the consistent identity of an exhibition;

that by changing the content and even the framework of the exhibition, it loses a sense of itself, and consequently, so does the public. But by liberating the exhibition from a fixed identity, one is able to address the second of the curatorial issues raised at the beginning of this section, relating to the question of repetition.

Globally, in exhibition practices that are preoccupied with contemporary art, there is pressure to exhibit what is new and/or what has not been shown before in the city in which the venue is located. This attitude prejudices research by eliminating work which might make powerful contributions to the exhibition's critical focus but is excluded because it has recently been on exhibition. This is, of course, quite easily overcome, by a curatorial sensitivity that takes account of the view and approach to the work in a space, and how the viewer might encounter with the work in the context of other works. It is a question of the curator and viewer walking meaning into space.

However, what is much more difficult than this is the repetition of an exhibition in the same venue or city. While individual works can and do return to the same venue in the guise of different exhibitions, the politics of exhibition practice often disallows the repetition of the same exhibition at the same venue. The exhibition, and with it the research, is always forced elsewhere. But by relinquishing the fixed 'identity' of an exhibition, one can begin to seek out the possibilities for repetition of visual knowledge.

The grappling with three issues in research exhibition production and circulation – its acknowledgement of the value of the visual and the power of visibility, its ability to mobilise research questions, and its ability to evolve itself as part of a project of ongoing research – can be seen in *Cities in Crisis: Photographs of the South African Urban Landscape* (2008), an exhibition on photography and cities curated by Michael Godby and Dave Southwood.<sup>9</sup>

The exhibition was part of a colloquium entitled *Johannesburg and Megacities Phenomena*.<sup>10</sup> Combining a wide range of interdisciplinary fields, the colloquium sought to engage questions around Johannesburg's places within international urban studies research on megacities. The colloquium not only included two days of conference presentations, a one-day city tour, and a video evening,<sup>11</sup> but also the *Cities in Crisis* exhibition. Unlike the city tour and video evening, the exhibition was complementary rather than an integral part of the colloquium, having been conceived before and independently of the colloquium.

The occasion of the *Cities in Crisis* exhibition, and its perhaps underutilised status within the context of the colloquium, prompts a number of questions regarding the role of exhibitions, and more specifically photography exhibitions, as forms of practice-based research. This is particularly relevant in the context of the colloquium's inclusion of a city tour which was led by different people with vested interests in different part of the city, and the extent to which *Cities in Crisis* offered another kind of 'city tour', through the eyes and interests of

the photographers who were included on the exhibition.

Within the ambit of the three issues raised above, there are a number of questions that need to be considered when grappling with the place, role, and effect of the research exhibition in public. For example, how can such exhibitions contribute to larger projects – outside of the field of art – that are addressing specific research questions? How can exhibitions seek to engage research questions on a more scholarly level? And what roles can exhibitions play in contributing to critical public debate? These questions of course assume that exhibitions are themselves asking research questions that are posed in order to be grappled with – variously and with contradiction, rather than unanimously or emphatically – through the presentation of different layers of visual research.<sup>12</sup>

Significantly Godby and Southwood (2008) mark out Guy Tillim's *Jo'burg* photographs as the starting point for his own thinking around *Cities in Crisis*, and have naturally included the photographer's work in their exhibition. But the curatorial selection from *Jo'burg* is one that emphasises the overbearing effect of architecture in the construction of city-ness, rather than the people who tend to dominate Tillim's body of work as a whole. It is not surprising then that Godby and Southwood (2008), acknowledging the influence of David Goldblatt, chose to focus *Cities in Crisis* on structures, environments, and landscapes as the primary drivers in the production of the spaces of the city.

Of course people are in the photographs on exhibition – cities are not cities without people – but they are largely peripheral and implied in the work, at the sides or in the distance of the photographs. If this curatorial emphasis were more obviously stated, it would have certainly enriched a reading of the exhibition. In prioritising a particular kind of photographic looking at the city, it has the important effect of framing and directing the ways in which the exhibition's visual research contributes to engagements with city-ness.

However while *Cities in Crisis* might focus on how structures rather than people make the meaning of cities, this emphasis does not lessen the complexity of what it makes visible. One of the strengths of the exhibition's range of photographic content is its juxtaposition of versions of the city, especially in the form of neighbourhoods and communities. There are four examples that stand out in this regard.

The first (and most powerful in the context of the exhibition's particular interests) is Svea Josephy's 2007 *Barcelona* series (page 222), which poignantly captures these versions of the named city in the wider, global context of similarly attributed – but otherwise utterly disconnected – city neighbourhoods. In something like a diptych, Josephy combines an extensive cityscape of Barcelona in Spain with an aerial photograph of the Barcelona informal settlement in Cape Town. Her work raises critical questions about spatial and social patterns within and between cities, leaving the viewer with a sobering

question: in the context of the exhibition's emphasis on pattern and recognition, is the meaningfulness of the cohesion that is the word 'Barcelona' about a local geography or a global overlap of other social cohesions such as race and class?

The regulating effect of urban planning and structures on the landscape, so redolent in Josephy's photographs, is repeated in the second outstanding example in *Cities in Crisis*: Mikhael Subotzky's photographs of low-cost housing in Toekomsrus (Beaufort West) (2006) and Delft (outside Cape Town) (page 236). Here Subotzky uses aerial shots and close cropping to emphasise the dehumanising effect that comes from imagining home as a space of regularity and order alone.

Jean Brundrit's *A Walk Around the Block with Goliath* (2003) (pages 218-219) is a sharply constructed anthropology of dog-protected suburban properties, where the construction of boundaries is as much physically structured as animally walked and guarded. This third example is one of the few bodies of work on the exhibition where the production of space, and its consequent meanings, is derived as much through the movement of people as it is through the imposition of structures. Here it is powerfully not only walking that makes meaning, but also the visual and (implied) acoustic responses to this walking that produces belonging in suburban space.

And finally, Jane Alexander's *Adventure Centre* (2000) (pages 216-217) uses her characteristic photomontage to create different habitations – and by implication, different versions – out of the same city view. As in Brundrit's photographs, there is a sense of the effect of bodies in space, and similarly, Alexander's constructions juxtapose who 'naturally' and 'unnaturally' belongs within a particular neighbourhood or community. What Alexander makes plain, and what Brundrit implies, is what Michel de Certeau (1988) so powerfully explores in his essay, *Walking in the City*, namely the extent to which different people can and do read contradictory meanings into the same physically structured city.

In bringing together this particular group of photographers *Cities in Crisis* there is no doubt that Godby and Southwood's manifest a curatorial interest in the city that is an active exploration of spatial

identities. However at the same time, the potential for research questions to underpin the rigour of *Cities in Crisis*, and for the exhibition to do the work of positing photography's contribution to research on cities, is limited by a passive curatorial reception and reliance on current debates in photography, especially around questions of representation and subjectivity. Here Godby (2008) speaks of an immense respect for South African photography: "It has strong voices and immensely strong bodies of work." The effect of the state of local photographic practice on the conceptualisation of the exhibition is reflected in the choice of artists and an admirable curatorial desire to balance international reputations with lesser-known photographic voices. But this overriding deference to photography and its emerging history can sometimes be distracting to a conceptual and curatorial focus on city-ness.

There is enormous scope for photography and visual art exhibitions to play a substantial role in research that addresses itself to critical questions in both the humanities and social sciences. The meaning and value of the visual, and especially photography, to situate itself in exhibitions as critical acts of visibility, is the foundation of its potential and possibilities for research. The framing of the research, and more particularly the use of the question to do the work of framing, is something that is unevenly embraced within the visual art context. Nevertheless the value of encompassing one or more research questions can have immense effect for the use of photography in research. This is one obstacle that needs to be overcome. The other is the nature of the exhibition itself, and especially its changing identity in circulation and repetition. In harnessing this potential and overcoming these obstacles, photography and visual art research exhibitions more broadly can come to play a substantial and significant public role in knowledge production.

## Biography

Rory Bester is an art historian, curator and critic based in Johannesburg. He has curated a number of exhibitions on photography, migration and diaspora studies, and contemporary African art, and regularly writes essays and criticism on photography, urban studies and contemporary art. He is a Research Fellow in the University of Johannesburg's Research Centre, *Visual Identities in Art and Design*.

## Endnotes

1. The exhibition, by Honours students from the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand, was held at the Premises Gallery from 10-17 May 2008.
2. Tillim's photographs were produced in 2004. As recipient of the 2004 DaimlerChrysler Award for South African Photography, Tillim showed these photographs as part of the award exhibition in South Africa. See also Guy Tillim (2005) *Jo'burg*. Trézélan: Filigranes Éditions and Johannesburg: STE Publishers.
3. David Goldblatt's exhibition was held at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, from 26 April to 24 May 2008.
4. See Jacques Rancière. 2006 [2004]. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London & New York: Continuum.
5. This raises the important question of the role of creative arts in research questions that are traditionally the domain of the social sciences rather than humanities. For example, in the fields of migration and diaspora studies - two areas critical to questions of city-ness - the former tends to dominate social science studies, and the latter tends to be the preoccupation of the humanities. It is critically important that research questions begin to move between the humanities and social sciences when they are engaging the same or similar areas of enquiry.
6. The *Global Cities* exhibition ran at the Tate Modern from 20 June to 27 August 2007. The initial version of the exhibition was first shown at the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale.
7. The other nine cities included Cairo, Istanbul, London, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Mumbai, Sao Paulo, Shanghai, and Tokyo.
8. I heard this comment while viewing the exhibition in London in June 2007.
9. The exhibition was held at the FADA Gallery at the University of Johannesburg, from 10 April to 9 May 2008. The artists and photographers on the exhibition included Jane Alexander, Jean Brundrit, Dennis Gilbert, David Goldblatt, Svea Josephy, David Lurie, Brent Mestre, Sabelo Mlangeni, Sam Nhlengethwa, Jo Ractliffe, Mikhael Subotsky, Dave Southwood, Guy Tillim, Garth Walker and the Impilo Yethu Group.
10. The colloquium, held from 9 to 11 April 2008 at the University of Johannesburg, was organised by the *Visual Identities in Art and Design* Research Centre, in association with *The New Encyclopaedia Project*. Under the auspices of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*, this wider project is considering the effect of globalisation and digitisation on the production and circulation of knowledge.
11. The full-day city tour, hosted by Neil Fraser, included visits to 'Fietas', Braamfontein and the Cultural Arc, Metro Mall Taxi Rank, Kliptown's Freedom Square, the Drill Hall and Johannesburg Art Gallery. The video evening included screenings of works by Judith Erasmus, Stephen Hobbs (in collaboration with Andre Pretorius), Nadine Hutton, Mocke Jansen van Veuren and Theresa Collins, William Kentridge, Alastair McLachlan, Anthea Moys, Jo Ractliffe and Sebastian Diaz Morales, and Minnette Vári, as well as a performance by Rat Western and an installation by Ismail Farouk.
12. It should be stated that the curators of the *Cities in Crisis* exhibition resist the idea of 'research questions' underpinning their exhibition. Curators Godby and Southwood prefer to think of the exhibition as 'looking intelligently'. All quotations attributed to Godby and Southwood are from personal interviews with the curators, conducted in person on 8 May 2008 and 11 August 2008, and by email on 8 June 2008.

## References

- DE CERTEAU, M. 1988 [1984]. Walking in the City, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 91-110.
- GODBY, M & SOUTHWOOD, D. 2008. Interviews conducted in person with the curators on 8 May (Johannesburg) and 11 August (Cape Town), and by email on 8 June.
- JUDIN, H & VLADISLAVIĆ, I (EDS). 1998. *blank Architecture, apartheid and after*. Rotterdam: NAI.
- RANCIÈRE, J. 2006 [2004]. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London & New York: Continuum.
- TILLIM, G. 2005. *Jo'burg*. Trézélan: Filigranes Éditions & Johannesburg: STE.