
Stephen Hobbs

DYSTOPIA IN JOHANNESBURG

BIOGRAPHY

Early on in his career, Stephen Hobbs recognised the need to produce and publish across the disciplines of artistic production, curatorial practice and cultural management. He graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg with a BAFA(Hons) in 1994. He was the curator of the Market Theatre Galleries, Johannesburg from 1994 to 2000. Since 2001, he has co-directed the artist collaborative The Trinity Session. Living and working in Johannesburg, Hobbs views the city as an African metropolis of perplexing contradictions and unpredictable developments in the social, urban environment. Hobbs draws on urban vocabularies of images and signs to point to transformative qualities within cities, which are often invisible and ineffable. He has worked with video, photography, and installation to 'record' such 'interstitial ensembles' as human interactions, meeting points, or merely the traces of sites of transformation in city environments.

→ I have mapped and documented inner-city Johannesburg since 1994 through a combination of media, but most specifically video and photography. Reflecting on my multi-functional role as a cultural producer, I explore some of the tensions and contradictions that inform my photographic approach to the city. This photo-essay emphasises how personal artistic engagement with a city in flux and transformation prompts the development of a personal iconography and vocabulary of images and signs; which, in turn, I use to construct a new or alternate reading of the city.



fig 1



fig 2

Since finishing art school in 1993 and starting out as an artist and gallery manager in 1994 in Johannesburg's inner city, my work has functioned as a means of self-orientation. At a distance, Johannesburg's city skyline reads like that of a modern city, reassuringly so. However, the urban legend internal to that space abounds to such high levels of exaggeration that a creative person certainly is prompted to interrogate it further. Indeed it is a complex space of uncertainty and contradiction that has motivated me to continue to read and re-read the urban space of Johannesburg, to immerse myself in it and to systematically extricate myself in order to evaluate Johannesburg, as a place of enormous beauty and generosity, yet one of anxiety, fear and pain.

In retrospect, the most critical period of my engagement with the city was between 1994 and 2000 in so far as my on-the-job learning as an artist, gallery manager-turned-curator at the Market Theatre Gallery exposed me not only to the dysfunctional inner workings of a non-profit creative and cultural institution such as the Market Theatre, but to an open-door policy to anyone off the street.

The streets of Johannesburg central had been changing from the regulated apartheid city of the 1970s and 1980s, to the congested downtown of the mid-1990s. Certainly it was this openness that led to my meeting numerous artists who knocked on my office door with the expectation of selling works and getting an exhibition. Soon this exchange led to ongoing studio visits, taking me to specific parts of the city, in many instances individuals' homes where phenomenal production was taking place within such a disorienting and confrontational urban setting.

Hence my early years at the Market Theatre Gallery served

as an organic method of personally engaging with the city. I soon realised that the dynamic of driving the city and surrounds to see and learn from other artists impacted on the type of exhibition programming that would unfold at the gallery. After a long history of political resistance theatre and art in that institution, the Market Theatre Gallery would, post-1994, provide a platform for young and emerging artists as it had done since the late 1970s. The critical difference post-1994 was that this platform was instrumental in defining and shaping trends in contemporary visual art practice at a time when 'we' were being welcomed internationally. An intense period thus emerged in the 1990s, when the radical transforming African city that Johannesburg was becoming, represented a critical context within which to witness and unpack new identities for art and for the city on a global scale, for the first time in about 30 years.

Interestingly, my job permitted me many freedoms, to the extent that I could weave my own urban observations and investigations into the conceptualising and designing of exhibitions. My memory of this time is one of coping with a vertical knowledge climb, and being relatively free to develop and extend my findings on the city through my video and photographic work combined with the discipline of exhibition design and gallery programming, in relation to a new set of audiences and new thinking on contemporary art practices.

For this photo-essay, I have selected a series of mixed media photographic and more traditional photographic works, as well as an early interactive CD-ROM, entitled *Out of Order – A User's Guide to a Dysfunctional City* (1997-2000), to reflect on this notion of self-orientation in the city.

fig 1 Stephen Hobbs,
Installation view M23 70,
1994-2003
Wall painting and hand
colour prints
5 x 2.5 m
Courtesy of the artist
and Photo ZA Gallery

fig 2 Stephen Hobbs,
Grey Area, 1996
(catalogue detail)
Workers Library and
Museum, Johannesburg,
Mixed media drawing
20 x 30 cm
Courtesy of the artist

fig 3 Stephen Hobbs,
B6 67, 1995
Postcard
10 x 15 cm
Courtesy of the artist

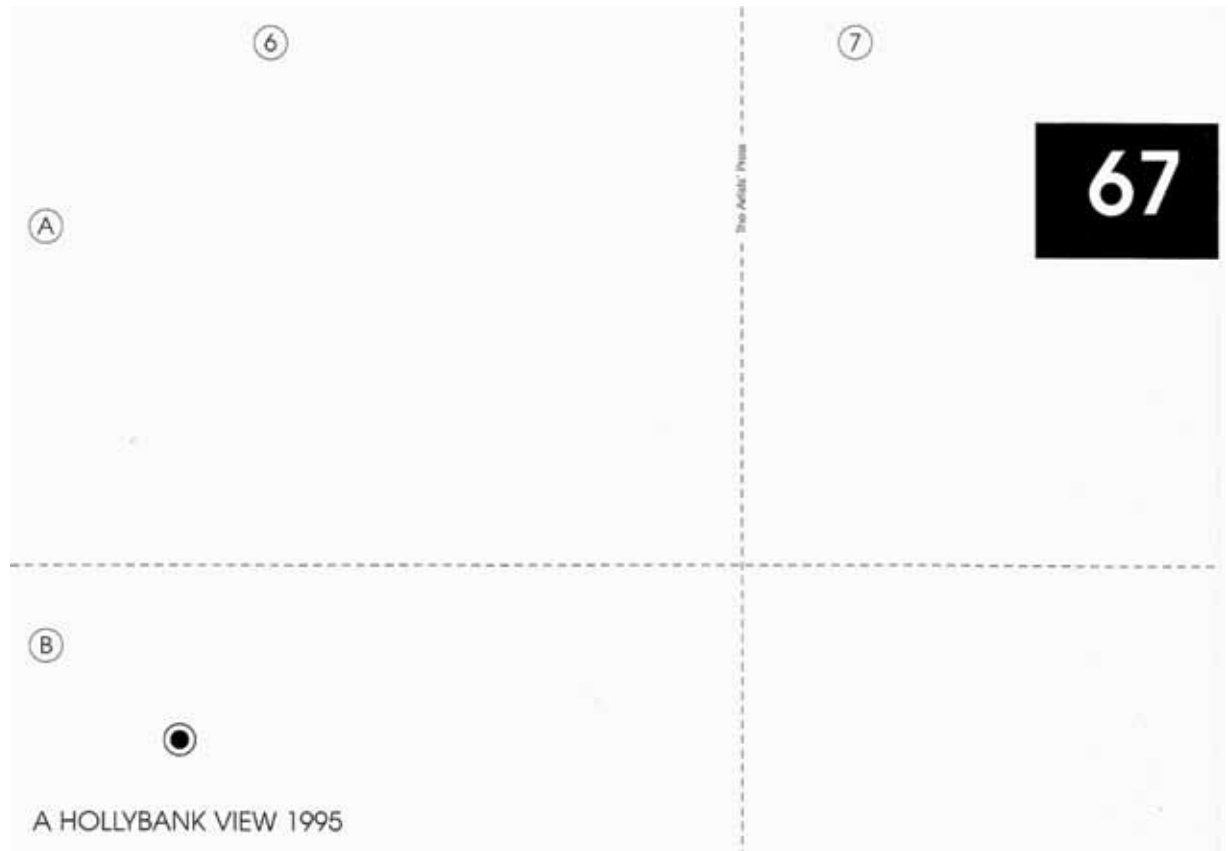


fig 3

The first work I present condenses a number of my concerns with translating conceptions of orientation through photographic and mapping techniques. For instance, in the postcard work *B6 67* (1995) (Figure 3), the map on the back, which locates the view on the front within a pseudo street map layout, suggests a position from which to gain this view. The image was taken from my apartment looking onto a generic T-junction with a golf course in the background. The sense of placelessness that I often felt in this apartment, prompted me to make a thousand copies and mail them to various addresses in the telephone directory.

Out of Order (Figures 4 & 5) was produced in collaboration with Andre Pretorius. Originally conceived as an alternative multi-media demonstration game, *Out of Order* escalated into an experiment in reconstituting the city of Johannesburg through various works previously presented as single channel video pieces. Our objective was to tie these videos together through a series of digital photo collages, reconstituting and assembling familiar parts of Johannesburg, which would then serve as scenes through which the user could navigate.

Each of the video works and many of the photographic collage scenes have a somewhat dystopian quality. In order to frame them appropriately, an 'other' Johannesburg was conceptualised and digitally constructed. This 'other' city, whose primary point for orientation is a turning circle, is suggestive of a repetitive and absurd space. This notion of absurdity is reinforced by the repeat return to the landing page, where one sees a yellow Volkswagen City Golf spinning around the turning circle. As users navigate their way through the virtual 'tour guide', the sequence is constructed to deliver the user to and from each scene, but always to return them to the spinning City Golf, until they are prompted to exit into the city. The 'tour guide' is described in the following sketch:

Landing page: Yellow Citi Golf (Volkswagen Golf) drives speedily around a traffic turning circle.

Click through: Citi Golf takes a turn down a main street arriving at a pavement edge.

Click through nine static photo vignettes through a storm water drain into an underground parking garage. Sign post plays video extract from Ponte City video MS (1996). End of sequence user encounters a 'jumper', prompts 54 Stories suicide film (1998).

User is returned to Citi Golf.

"... near death experience" (flashes through the windscreen).

Return to landing page: Citi Golf drives speedily around a traffic turning circle.

Citi Golf takes a turn down a main street arriving at a building entrance.

Click through five photo vignettes to top of the building and look down on a busy traffic intersection.

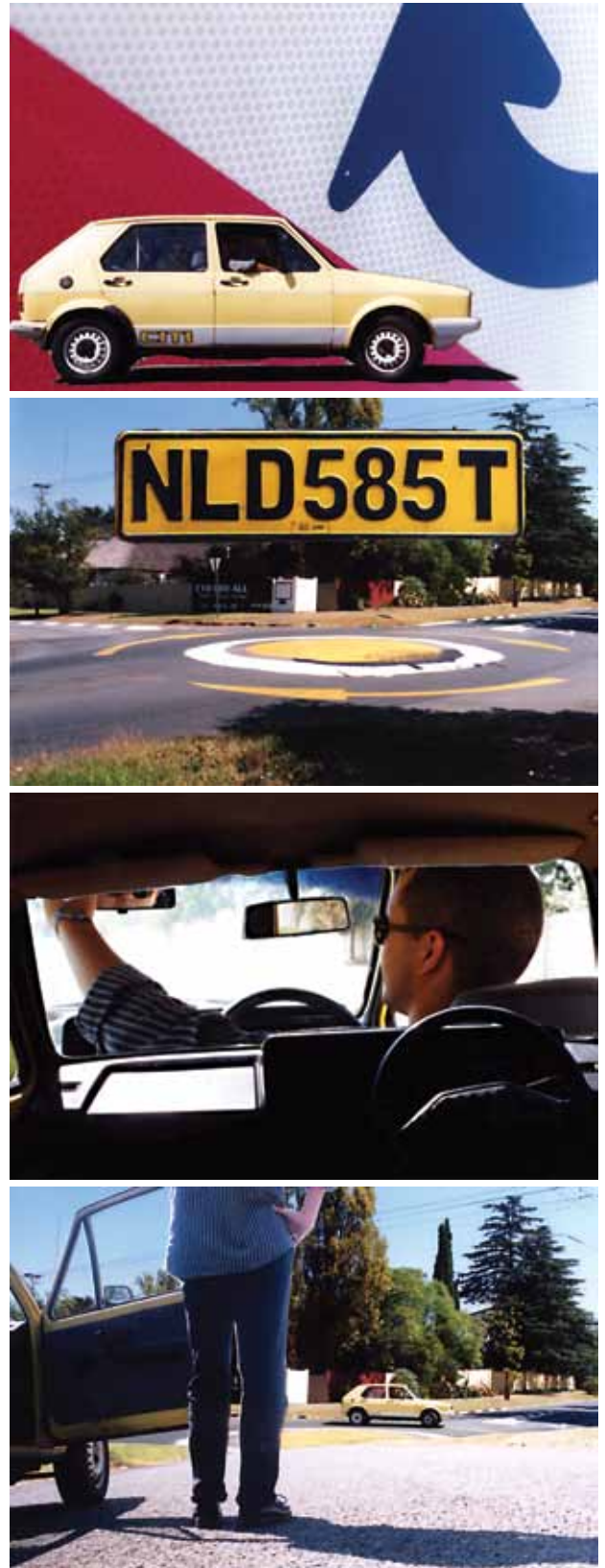


fig 4



fig 5

fig 4 Stephen Hobbs,
Studies for *Out of Order:
A User's Guide to a
Dysfunctional City*,
1997-2000
Photo collage
10 x 15 cm
Courtesy of the artist

fig 5 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

The production of interactive CD-ROMs in the mid to late 1990s in South Africa, was still something of a novelty. Macro Media software such as Director 7, which we used to build the animation sequences and interactivity in this work, was relatively unexplored in the South African art media landscape. Thus, using what was then relatively 'groundbreaking' digital media, we set out to realise through a number of themes, a solution to building a virtual exhibition platform in both a conceptual and entertaining manner.

During the making of the CD-ROM, the idea of erasing street markings was executed and tested in actuality, along a 100 metre stretch of road in Cape Town's city centre. All signs of order and regulation, including road markings, traffic lights and so forth were either wrapped in plastic or painted out using black paint. However, we always imagined the total vision of such an intervention as being for Johannesburg Central. The making of this scene in particular was especially time consuming, in that all aspects of the animation; the cars and people crossing the street intersection, were individually cut

out and then coded to the animation timeline. This crude, yet amusing treatment of multiple photographs underscores the overall aesthetic solution for producing the landscape within which the interaction and videos play out. The virtual realm afforded us the opportunity to present and make 'real' the impossible, and in so doing, to generate a new type of user consciousness within a city where systems of order and structure seem to fail on a daily basis. The user, who is 'captive' during interaction, becomes locked into experiencing this relative absurdity, which is further exacerbated by scenes of suicide and visual discord.

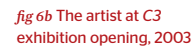
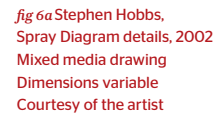
Hence the vista that is Johannesburg in this work, is sourced from field photography of suburbia as much as the inner city. And herein lies the overarching contradiction within this work. White flight from downtown Johannesburg from the early 1980's onwards resulted in massive neglect of the city. For those, such as myself, who lived in the suburbs but worked in the city, the contrast between the two contexts seemed unfathomable - and it is at this juncture that the project was born.



Increasingly the notion of a photograph serving as an index to reading contradictory urban space, coupled with mapping exercises such as 'spray diagram' drawing, has led to a convergence of the two forms. Both of these forms have, in turn, influenced my representation of the urban landscape.



For instance, in the mixed media installation that I produced for the DaimlerChrysler Creative Photography Prize in 2004 (Figure 7), using spray-diagram-like text arrangements, painting and multi-unit photographic



LEFT AND BOTTOM LEFT
fig 7 Stephen Hobbs,
Digging for Gems, 2004
Mixed media photographs
18 x 2.4 m
Installation view at Museum Africa:
DaimlerChrysler Creative
Photography Award
Courtesy of the artist

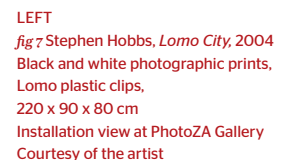


fig 8 Stephen Hobbs, *Organising Cities*, 2006
Black and white photographic prints,
Lomo plastic clips, powder coated steel
220 x 90 x 80 cm
Installation view at Obert
Contemporary, Braamfontein
Courtesy of the artist

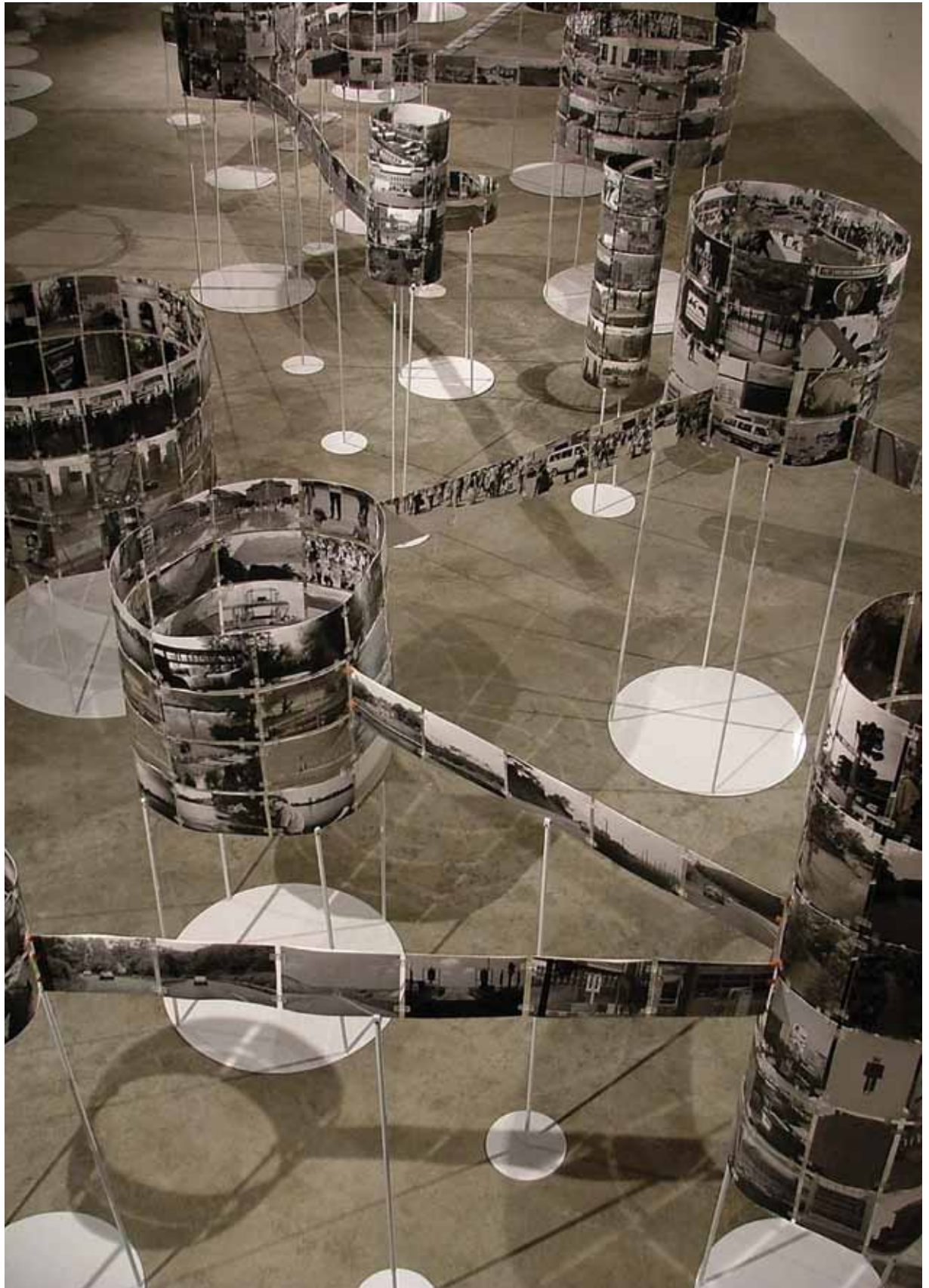


fig 8

assemblages, I deliberately set out to fragment and disorientate the viewer. Playing on the notion of the 'long' and 'short' end of the lens, the viewer was required to either assemble the presentation through a wide view reading of a detailed situation or enter into the field of vision and interact directly with the clusters of photographs. In contrast to this mixed-media approach, I have attempted to alert the viewer to the material make-up of cities, where form and scale are abstract and potentially dehumanising properties, through use of framed single-unit images consolidated in the traditional exhibition format. But within this, there has been a concern to unearth or isolate beauty within the fragmentation and disorder. Hence the *Mirror* and *Light Camouflage* series' (Figures 9-13), ongoing since 1996, attempt, through a constant looking for visual ambiguity in the city, to build both an archive and a vocabulary around visual and spatial contradiction.

Hence my process to date has balanced on a set of contingencies, where viewing an artwork in isolation has done little to make the connections that I am interested in; between the city as an immersive, experiential, and psychological field, and media to translate these perceptions of that field.

Further concerns lie in the actual physical scale of the city and the reliance on video or photography to capture a sense of that scale. My approach to date has rarely been about a painstakingly considered framing of figure/ground relationships, where the photographic image supposedly holds all the elements



fig 9



fig 10



fig 11

fig 9 Stephen Hobbs,
Mirage City, 1997
Hand colour print
100 x 66 cm
Courtesy of the artist

figs 10 & 11 Stephen Hobbs,
Glass Camouflage, 2007
Digital print
30 x 40 cm each
Courtesy of the artist



fig 12

fig 12 Stephen Hobbs,
Light Camouflage, 1997
Hand colour print
100 x 66 cm
Courtesy of the artist



fig 13

fig 13 Stephen Hobbs,
Light Camouflage, 2008
Digital print
30 x 40 cm each
Courtesy of the artist



fig 14

together, but rather to see the photograph as an object and objectifier of particular urban phenomena. Hence, through scaling up images to human body size, or looking for opportunities to see the image put in its place, so to speak, as with *Signs of a Transforming City* (2002) (Figure 15), a billboard located at the corner of Rissik and Fox Streets in downtown Johannesburg, I begin to question the field and scale of the image as a catalyst for confronting the city.

While photography remains my principal means of archive building, and a tool for drawing or tracing the city, my primary concern has been to extract the contents of the photograph and realise new artistic forms from them. Hence my current work sets out, through assemblage sculpture and installation, to approximate some of the phenomenological qualities of the city captured in photographic series' such as the *Mirror* and *Light Camouflage* works. This departure, in artistic terms, has been the most liberating, in so far as the dogma surrounding photographic practice is sidelined and a more open space for the exploration of visual language between two- and three-dimensional formats is created. Nevertheless the tension between decay and beauty remains a constant source of investigation.

I have lived and worked through Johannesburg's radical identity transformation from apartheid to Pan-African city, and have attempted to represent through multiple cultural practices, a city in flux. Yet, the artistic challenge of responding to and understanding such places remains elusive and enigmatic, to the extent that the only realisation is that one sustains one's focus on the subject for as long as possible, exercising the necessary comparative analysis between cities and aiming to consolidate a body of visual research which aims to extend and promote a discourse around aesthetics and the city.

fig 14 Stephen Hobbs,
*Citizens of the Mirage
City*, 1998
Lambda prints
1.8 m x 1.2 m each
Courtesy of the artist

fig 15 Stephen Hobbs,
*Signs of a Transforming
City*, 2002
Billboard located at
corner Rissik and Fox
Streets
8 m x 3.5 m
Courtesy of
Stephen Hobbs and
Johannesburg Art City



fig 15

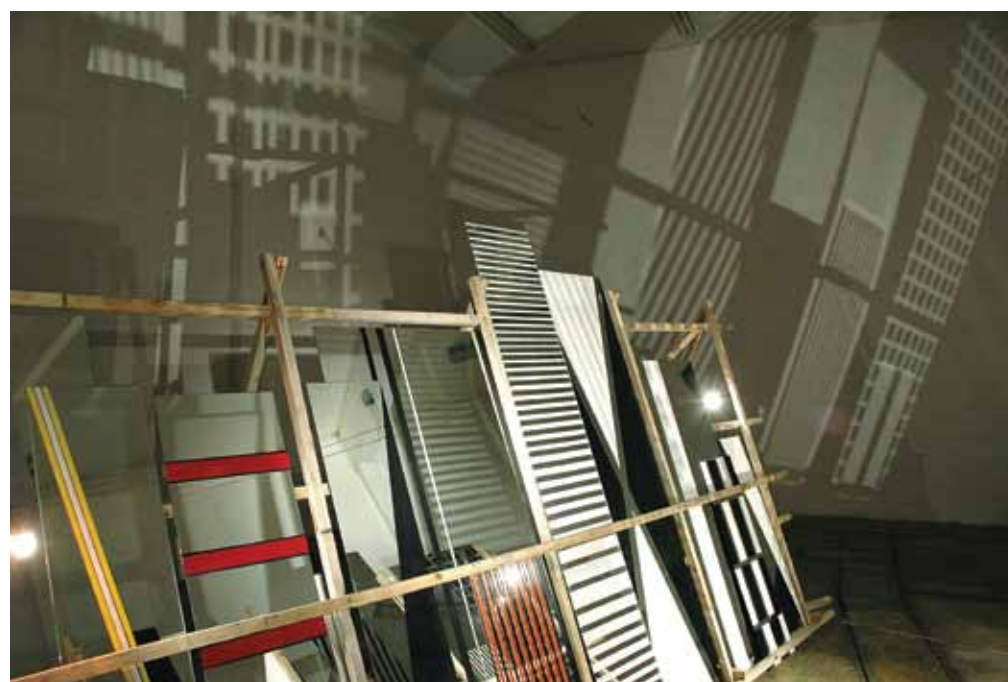


fig 16

fig 16 Stephen Hobbs,
High Voltage, 2007
Mirrors, wood, duct tape,
Dichroic lamps
10 x 4 x 2.5 m
Courtesy of the artist
Installation view at
Wits Substation

