Elfriede Dreyer

DYSTOPIA IN KUDZANAI CHIURAI'S REPRESENTATION OF GLOBALISING JOHANNESBURG

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Elfriede Dreyer is an interdisciplinary arts educator, artist and curator, who teaches full-time at the University of Pretoria in the subjects of Fine Arts and Visual Communication. She completed her Masters' studies in Fine Arts and Doctoral studies in Art History at the University of South Africa, and holds an international diploma in interactive multimedia. Elfriede is the recipient of several bursaries and grants and has a special interest in discourses on new media, globalisation, utopia/dystopia, deconstruction and the intersection of philosophy and art.

In addition to being a practising artist who works in mixed media and new media, Elfriede has curated several exhibitions in her capacity as university lecturer and the owner-curator of Fried Contemporary Art Gallery in Pretoria. She is well-known as an art adjudicator, an external examiner in the disciplines of Visual Arts and Art History, and as a public speaker.

→ **At present** transnational diaspora and metropolitan *flâneurs* are paramount attestations of the globalising impulse in South Africa. Due to raging political changes in sub-Saharan Africa over the past few centuries, cities have become cosmopolitan and identities manifest as hybrid, nomadic and pluralist. The depiction of urban dystopia, which contradicts the ideologies of globalism, is evident in many South African artists' work dealing with themes of urban collapse, violence, forced separation of families, transitivity, loss of identity through the intermingling of different cultures and languages, and the production of divergent patterns and styles of living. In this essay, I investigate the dystopian impact of globalisation processes on Johannesburg, as manifest in the paintings of the Johannesburg-based artist, Kudzanai Chiurai, with specific reference to volatile identity. As incognito *voyeur* of and *flâneur* in the hub of transcultural and cosmopolitan activity, Chiurai experiences xenophobia and loss of identity, being in the city and part of it all, yet at the same time *not belonging*.

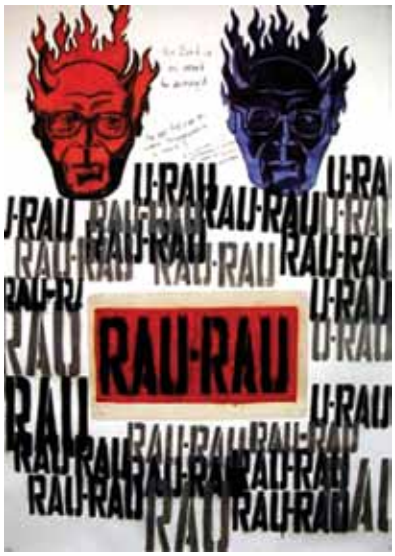

fig 1 Kudzanai Chiurai, *Rau-rau*, 2007
Mixed media on board
180 x 120 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Obert Contemporary Gallery

The patterns of the changing morphology of late Modernism, which create a new sociology of urban space, are most evident in the public arena of display. In the inner cores of globalising cities, postmodern differences and the grand narratives of citizenship are mostly collapsing into blurred, contested identity spaces and engendering new vocabularies and forms of social agency and structure.

Such an inner-city space is Newtown, a vibrant, mixed-use area with a unique character located in the western sector of Johannesburg, which has been a main source of inspiration for the artworks of the Johannesburg artist, Kudzanai Chiurai, a Fine Arts graduate of the University of Pretoria. At the turn of the 20th-century, the Newtown precinct was known as Brickfields. By 1896 about seven housand people of all races already lived in the area, later renamed Burghersdorp. As this land was close to the centre of Johannesburg and the railway line, many businesses and immigrants bought stands in Burghersdorp. Chiurai's artworks speak of a new social hierarchy emerging in this precinct that has replaced the traditional order, and where the previously Othered mix with diasporas of different kinds – the artist himself is a fugitive Zimbabwean.

Chiurai is a controversial young artist who, from 2002 to 2005 at the onset of his career after graduating, produced politically inspired work that caricatured President Robert Mugabe (Figure 1) and the oppressive regime of Zanu-PF, which led to his being banned from his home country. In an interview with Bongani Madondo (2005) about his first solo exhibition in Johannesburg, Chiurai said:

> **I might sound brave, but I am very disturbed. I am concerned about my family. I am torn apart … you see, my mother still lives in Zimbabwe. I also love the country. I still want to go back. It's been three years since I last went back. The country is in my bloodstream.**

Since 2005, the artist has explored pertinent issues related to the mass media, inner-city rejuvenation and xenophobia – evident in a recent exhibition entitled *Graceland* in September 2007 at Obert Contemporary in Johannesburg and in his work at the 2007 Dakar Biennale. Newtown, which Chiurai has renamed 'Graceland', is rendered as a jumble of cut-outs and silhouettes of anonymous, obscure figures carrying AK47 look-alikes; hip-hop culture; technology images of film projectors and pinball machines; imagery of human organs and sex ('How to operate your projector in a nutshell'), and catchphrases expressing ambiguity and differences in communicating ('We say one word they say another') (Figure 2).

Chiurai's urban spectacle, a "pleasurable display, fascinating view, the enticing game of shapes and colours" (Bauman 1994:147), depicts a volatile globalising South African cultural landscape. His large canvasses depicting urban shopping in Newtown in Johannesburg present a transnational amalgam of trade and culture that reveals communality as well as disparity and difference (Figure 3). Images of street vendors, political slogans, commuters, violence, and informal architecture fuse in showing the volatility of the South African multicultural, globalising landscape. His works are intricately layered with stenciled characters, poetry, slogans, and graffiti, which comment on urban geography as politicised space where the anonymous individual can express resistance to political and sociocultural domination – quite reminiscent of the expressive style of American artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Chiurai's use of and approach to the contemporary city is reminiscent of Saskia Sassen's (1997:61) view that new city users make immense claims on its space by reconstituting strategic spaces in the city in their own cultural image, which seems to be becoming more and more globalised. Similarly, Janet Wolff (1994:128) maintains that:

> **With regard to the city itself, James Donald puts the case at its most radical: 'The city' does not just refer to a set of buildings in a particular place. To put it polemically, there is no such *thing* as a city. Rather, *the city* designates the space produced by the interaction of historically and geographically specific institutions, social relations of production and reproduction, practices of government, forms and media of communication and so forth ... *the city*, then, is above all a representation.**

fig 2

Roland Robertson (1992:8, 27) observes the process of globalisation at work especially in spaces where cultures and groups are squeezed together and the world becomes one place (planet) and on (global) nation, "driven towards increased mutual interaction" (Cohen & Kennedy 2000:24), which affects the construction of identity as well as our understanding of space and time when the world becomes one place (planet) and one (global) nation. In the same way, the rich social landscape of the cities in developing countries reflect the expanding scale of globalisation and social relations, which manifest in a range of conditions, activities and occupations (Cohen & Kennedy 2000:147), such as the physically disabled, the insane, pickpockets, apprentices, thieves and prostitutes, who mix with elegantly dressed, fast-moving, aloof business people. This scenario reflects Sassen's (1995:62) view of globalisation as a "process that generates contradictory spaces, characterised by contestation, internal differentiation and continuous border crossings".

Third-world metropoles such as Johannesburg have become cosmopolitan and the contemporary physical and structural geographies of urban space reflect national identity and *Zeitgeist*, just as the design and construction of cities have always been inspired by imagined better living conditions, ideals of prosperity, and utopian theories. A particular space such as Newtown reveals global processes at work in the formation of transcultural identities, geographies, and the emergence of transnational diasporic communities. Owing to raging political changes over the past few centuries and battling with unemployment, poverty and crime, many sub-Saharan Africans are incapable of sustaining a self-sufficient life and have become nomadic by migrating to areas which they perceive to be safer, where there are more work opportunities, and as an attempt to escape war, violence and forced relocations. The consequences of these social forces entail the formation of diaspora in many countries, described by social theorists as a process of "epic, historic proportion" (Harrison 1981:145).

fig 2 Kudzanai Chiurai, *Sex*, 2007
Mixed media on board
200 x 122 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Obert Contemporary Gallery


DOCTOR
AVALABLE
Sleep

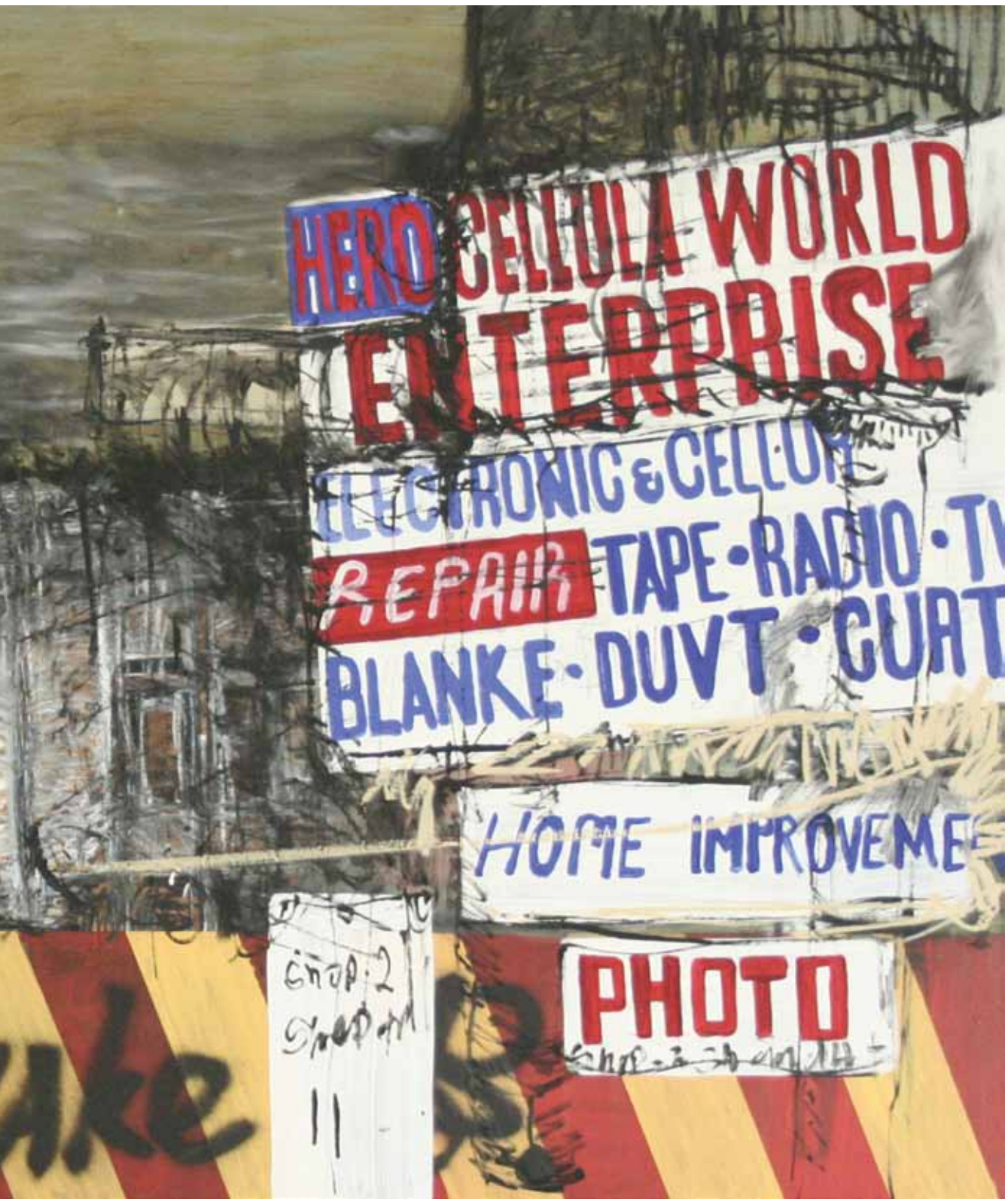

fig 3 Kudzanai Chiurai, *Sleepwalk*, 2007
Mixed media on board
120 x 240 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Obert Contemporary Gallery

fig 4 Kudzanai Chiurai, *Graceland,* 2007
Mixed media on board
120 x 240 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Obert Contemporary Gallery

In the crowded streets of large metropoles such as Johannesburg, such diasporic patterning is evident, as Walter Benjamin (cited in Bauman 1994:147) observed, the rhythm of the *flâneur*'s[1] life resonates with the pace of the big city and in the streets things are in flight. Individuals, as *flâneurs,* stroll through the streets and congregate in anonymous crowds; they keep their distance from each other and don't exchange a word with Others. The *flâneur* moves through social and urban space, but can also 'disappear' and become invisible in the city – both as a survival strategy and as a kind of response to the dominance of artifice and what could be described as a 'posthuman' form of existence.

Likewise, Chiurai's dystopian *flâneurs* stroll aimlessly in the unchartered territories of the city and are constantly in transit. His depictions of the nomadic urbanite express a human condition in which the boundaries of the self are constantly transgressed and violated, morphing and unfolding (Figure 5). His strolling figures are restlessness incarnate, living an "obscure existence with a yet-undiscovered essence, looking around in hope to find the predication that has-not-yet-arrived; the hope on a hunting expedition in the aim is the game" (Bauman 1994:139).

The fluidity and nomadism in identity encapsulated in the global transitive body imply endless potential for interfacing differences: "For Braidotti's nomad, identity is serial; many different styles of being or thinking may be used as needed and then set aside. The parallels with Butler's universe-roaming, hybridizing, shape-shifting aliens are not difficult to trace" (Jacobs 2003:95). The nomad implies free agency, which Naomi Jacobs (2003:93) defines as completeness in the self, entailing impenetrable and inviolable boundaries, while not relinquishing the postmodern self as decentred, fluid, and multiple. "A person may believe herself to be bounded, complete, and independent; but this sense of unity or self-identity is itself a mark of the extent to which the subject exists in a state of subjection and is penetrated through and through by Otherness." (Jacobs 2003:93)

The artificial habitat of the global *flâneur* is a fragile, volatile place where dreams and hopes of utopia, even if flawed, have been traded for commodities in the survival game. The onset of materialism and artifice (as Others to the natural world) implies a convergence of different 'reals', such as sensory 'reals' with technological and virtual 'reals'. A theorist such as Massimo Negrotti (1999:11) views the thrust behind the construction of the artificial as grounded

in the real, arguing that "[the] world's events enter the mind through channels which are compatible with it, and, in the same way, the mind processes the events in the world in ways that derive from its nature and from its individual and species history, including the cultural." This theory reflects the view of Robert Park (1996) who argues that the city is not only an artificial construction, but also a state of mind and a space that reflects customs, traditions, attitudes and sentiments.

Individual experience seems to be intertwined with the corporeality of the dystopian city which, as Aušra Burns (2000) suggests, is continuous with human life. An aspect such as homelessness within the confines of the cities of Africa, for instance, affects the individual on a fundamental level. Another traumatic aspect is the high incidence of violence and crime in the inner urban core of Johannesburg that, supports the postulation of the dystopian city as containing elements of nightmare. However, this is not a recent phenomenon and was already encountered in pre-20th-century literary examples such as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and in early 20th-century literature such as Orwell's *1984* (1947) and Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). For Jenny Mecziems (1987:97) the nightmarish element can be found in texts in the extent to which the utopian fiction deviates from the natural, sensory world we know into the world of artifice, thus extrapolating the idea of the corporeality of artifice.

The Greek notions of the city as a pleasurable spectacle and as an ideal space of civilisation and protection seem to have mutated into a dystopian ontology of transitivity and violence in many cities entrenched in globalism. As a consequence of globalisation, in spaces where traditional political power intermingles with transcultural ideologies embedded in new identity geographies and diasporas, dystopia is playing out themes of urban collapse, violence, forced separation of families, transitivity, loss of identity through the intermingling of different cultures and languages, and the production of divergent patterns and styles of living. Stefan Morawski (1994:181) argues that, traditionally, "[w]e live notoriously harboured in familiarity with our past and actual surroundings, accustomed to our unshaken at-homeness in the world", but the destabilising processes described above have led to uprooted solidarity in cultural identity. As an incognito *voyeur* of and *flâneur* in the hub of transcultural and cosmopolitan activity, Chiurai – through his art – reflects xenophobia and loss of identity: being in the city and part of it all, yet at the same time the nightmare of not *belonging*.

The question can be posed as to whether globalisation itself is a force that contributes to social marginality. If globalisation is recognised as driven by humanistic and not materialistic principles, and life is considered as having the potential to be fulfilling if only enough people would insist that poverty, disease, and degradation are *not* the portion allotted to human beings (Sargent 2003:229), the answer would be 'no'. Yet, the key deprived groups, according to Cohen and Kennedy (2000:135), are workers in de-industrialising areas, peasants, refugees, and the urban poor who, within the global perspective of haves and have-nots, have become redefined as the new Other. Nigerian art critic Olu Oguibe (1996) describes these new kinds of Othering and empowerment as follows:

> **Electronic mail and the web browser, with all their unarguably positive potentials, nevertheless become veritable tools for the construction and fortification of another world, outside the borders of which everything else is inevitably consigned to erasure and absence. In connective South Africa the majority of the population fit most perfectly into that category of the inconsequential revealingly known in cyberspeak as 'PONA'. They are, indeed, a people of no account.**

This situation has drastically altered, however, since this viewpoint was expressed in 1996. Today there is abundant use of digital technology and electronic components in South Africa, which is evident in contemporary artmaking, for instance. The Other as the 'have-not' – or the victim – is actually the economically poor person who has neither work nor technology, or someone who has become impoverished through an illness such as AIDS. Colonialist and apartheid constructs of race as Other have mostly become obsolete in the rush for material, economic gain and survival. Such desire for a foothold in the global economy and absorption into the global elite of the 'haves' is rendered in Chiurai's work in images of informal vendors, shops, technology and product advertisements, but the dire impact of globalisation is also unmistakable in the form of losses in social cohesion and personal distinctiveness.

Another critical problem in globalisation entrenched in modernisation theory is, as Andrew Feenberg (1995:27) argues in *Alternative Technology: the Technical Turn in Philosophy and Social Theory,* that "[i]n the postcolonial era, modernization theory … cheerfully predict[ed] the passage to Western style modernity on a world scale." Modernistic utopian ideals become problematic when considered in relation to a country such as South Africa, which displays an amalgam of residues of traditional belief, customs and moral systems of the third world with first-world visions of technology, markets and

commodities. Often for practical reasons, such as effective communication and commodity exchange, globalisation implies a flattening of important cultural differences and a conflict between local and global values (alternatively phrased as a dichotomy between the particular and the universal). Globalisation as a powerful web could be so densely woven that it becomes a *mise en scène* for a dystopian configuration, where the cultural self cannot be expressed freely any longer and individuality is generally destroyed.

Chiurai's work does seem to retain a sense of local identity within the macro-globalising world, albeit an Africanised version of the globalising city and citizens; generally speaking, the nature of contemporary artmaking in South Africa increasingly seems to become more international and less indigenous. Yet, it is crucial to continue to assess the pros and cons of the uniforming strategies of globalisation together with the strong force of the modernising impulse within the context of identity and culture. Both these processes often seem to entail a destruction of traditions and differences and to create a new kind of global human hybrid encompassing more losses than gains.

fig 5 Kudzanai Chiurai, *Displaced*, 2007
Mixed media on board
120 x 240 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Obert Contemporary Gallery

Endnotes

1. The term *flâneur* is derived from the French term verb *flâner*, which means to stroll and wander. Inherent in the concept of the *flâneur* is the idea of the *detached observer* as well as Guy Debord's (1958) concept of dérive, which is the practice of an itinerant stroll that is neither determined, nor teleological. In the 19th-century Baudelairian sense, the *flâneur* was a refined male city stroller, a concept that laid the foundations for many theoretical and philosophical deliberations on the new artificial habitat of the urbanite. From this time onwards, the urbanite has been viewed as a *flâneur* who plays a key role in understanding, participating in, and portraying the city.

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