TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT: BELONGING AND DISPLACEMENT IN THE WORK OF SOUTH AFRICAN VIDEO ARTISTS

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BELONGING AND DISPLACEMENT IN THE WORK
OF SOUTH AFRICAN VIDEO ARTISTS

Curated by Leora Farber, Lee-At Meyerov and Lucy Rayner

Featuring
Stephen Hobbs
Nadine Hutton
Sam Nhlengethwa
William Kentridge
Mocke Jansen van Veuren and Theresa Collins
Anthea Moys
Steven Cohen
Minnette Vári

At HEBBEL AM UFER, Berlin

Grußwort des Bundesministers des Auswärtigen, Dr. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, für die Broschüre zur Veranstaltung „Too Close for Comfort: Belonging and Displacement in the Work of South African Video Artists"
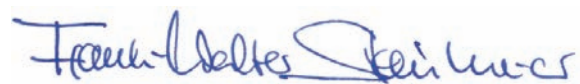
Afrika scheint uns noch immer weit weg zu sein. Ich meine: zu weit! Wir wissen zu wenig über diesen Kontinent, dessen Länder und deren Gesellschaften. Wie nah können wir denn den Menschen dort kommen, fragen Sie zu recht. Heute machen zehn Videokünstler aus Südafrika mit ihren Arbeiten den Anfang. Mit ihren Filmen zeigen sie uns das ehrliche, das ungeschminkte Gesicht von Johannesburg.

Wir erleben, wie sich einzelne Stadtteile dieser größten Metropole im südlichen Afrika entwickeln, wie die Menschen dort mit ihren großen und kleinen Sorgen zurecht kommen. „Too Close for Comfort" – die Bilder werden Sie packen, werden Ihnen vielleicht auch unter die Haut gehen. Viel eindringlicher als Worte lassen sie uns teilhaben an den Problemen, die auch beispielhaft für den gesamten Kontinent gelten können.

Diese Arbeiten sind darüber hinaus Ausdruck für das große kreative Potential Afrikas. Mehr als die Hälfte der Menschen auf dem afrikanischen Kontinent ist jünger als 18 Jahre alt. Es sind vor allem auch die Jungen, die – getragen von schier unerschöpflicher Energie – die Ärmel hochkrempeln, anpacken und damit die Zukunft gestalten. Die Ergebnisse sind beeindruckend und machen vor allem deutlich: Afrika ist ein Kontinent der großen Chancen.

Mir liegt gerade dieser Aspekt sehr am Herzen: Dass wir Afrika endlich als einen lebendigen Kontinent mit großen Perspektiven erkennen. Und dass wir gemeinsam daran gehen, durch kulturelle Projekte wie dieses Brücken zu bauen zwischen den Menschen und damit auch zwischen den Kulturen. Der interkulturelle Dialog ist der Schlüssel zu gegenseitigem Verständnis, zu Toleranz und Achtung voreinander.

Für diesen Weg steht auch unsere „Aktion Afrika". Wir wollen damit die Menschen unmittelbar ansprechen, durch Sport und Schüleraustausch, durch Stipendienprogramme oder durch Kulturwochen wie diese. Ich wünsche Ihnen allen viel Freude bei „Too Close for Comfort: Belonging and Displacement in the Work of South African Video Artists".

Dr. Frank-Walter Steinmeier
Bundesminister des Auswärtigen

Message of Greeting from Dr. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, in the brochure for "Too Close for Comfort: Belonging and Displacement in the Work of South African Video Artists"

In our minds, Africa is still a long way away – to my mind, too far! We know too little about this continent, about its countries and their societies. How close can we get to the people there, you may rightly ask. A first answer is provided today by ten video artists from South Africa. Their films show us Johannesburg in its pure, unadulterated form.

We are shown how individual districts in this huge metropolis in southern Africa are developing, how the people there get by with their worries big and small. The images of "Too Close for Comfort" will grab your attention, and might even get under your skin. Far more powerfully than words, they allow us to vicariously experience problems that could be seen as illustrative of those of the whole continent.

Above and beyond this, these videos are an example of Africa's great creative potential. More than half of all Africans are less than 18 years old. It is above all the young people – with their almost inexhaustible energy – who get stuck in and down to work, and so shape the future. The results are impressive, and demonstrate clearly that Africa is a continent of great opportunities.

Precisely this aspect, the need to finally view Africa as a lively continent with good prospects, lies close to my heart. As does the need to work together to build bridges between our peoples, and thus also between the cultures, by means of cultural projects such as this one. Intercultural dialogue is the key to mutual understanding, tolerance and respect for one another.

This is the route that our "Aktion Afrika" programme seeks to follow. Our aim is to talk directly to the people – through sport or school exchanges, through fellowship programmes or through cultural weeks such as these. I wish you all an enjoyable screening at this event: "Too Close for Comfort: Belonging and Displacement in the Work of South African Video Artists".

Dr. Frank-Walter Steinmeier
Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs

Foreword
Peter Anders
Goethe-Institut, Johannesburg

The ongoing cultural exchanges between the Goethe-Institut and our South African partners fundamentally occur within an urban context and seek to address the many social and cultural concerns that surround city spaces.

In this series of videos, several South African artists turn an unflinching eye on Johannesburg, creating images of the city that not only illuminate its realities, but also address the ambiguity with which it often appears in contemporary Western mass media.

Each artist represents the city from a personal vantage point; thereby providing a number of distinctive interpretations of what it is like to live in a metropolis such as Johannesburg.

My hope is that viewers from across the globe will take advantage of this incredible opportunity to engage with the diverse realities of the South African urban landscape through art.

Doppler Effect: Performing South Africa

Dr. Stefanie Wenner, Curator, Theater Hebbel Am Ufer, Berlin

The Doppler Effect describes the change in the frequency of a wave emanating from a source that is moving relative to an observer. A study proving the existence of this phenomenon was presented in 1842 by Christian Doppler, after whom the effect was named. If the transmitter of a wave moves in relation to the receiver, a shift in frequency is brought about. As long as a siren is moving towards a listener, it gains in pitch; the instant it begins to move away, the pitch is lowered. The same effect comes into force when the receiver moves relative to the transmitter. The location of the observer co-determines that which is being observed.

That something can be brought about by the act of description is a central finding of the philosophy of performativity, and the idea that speech is action was underpinned by John L. Austin in his lecture *How to Do Things with Words* in 1955. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, if not earlier, scientists have worked on the premise that the observer of an experiment co-determines its result. Ethnologists have applied this finding to their own research, including Michel Leiris whose journals – travelogues that always centred on the observer who defined and, at the same time, performatively produced the object of contemplation – became famous.

One must bear in mind that while nineteenth-century physicists like Doppler were pondering the question of perception, Africans were being exhibited as curiosities at fairs in the northern hemisphere. Ethnological show business has been around for over five hundred years, as evidenced by the exhibition of Eskimos in Bristol in 1501, or the native village that Brazilian Indians were permitted to build in Rouen around 1550 as a tourist attraction. At the fairgrounds and on the stages of the Western world, South Africans (especially the Khoi people – known as "Hottentots" at the time) were displayed next to the world's "fattest woman" or "strongest man". The spectrum of the ethnological shows ranged from pure exhibition of black bodies to displays of daily or ritual life such as eating, sleeping or wedding ceremonies, to performances with dance and song. Traces of this representational tradition can be found in musicals like André Heller's *AFRIKA! AFRIKA!*, which are now tourist attractions in a number of major European cities. A new musical, *Tarzan and Jane*, opens in Hamburg later this year and is a renewed attempt to use boulevard theatre to romantically transfigure colonial history for a mass audience.

Ethnologists have coined the term "fakelore" to describe ethnological show business of this kind. Already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was a boom in "faking" authentic culture. Since first-generation Africans were not always available, North Americans of African descent were occasionally asked to mime the "savages". An invariable factor was, however, the establishing of a visual hierarchy that sought the "missing link" between human and animal, as it came to be described in the nineteenth century in various interpretations of Darwinism. In other words, Africans were put on stage in order to isolate them from the rest of humankind – not so much a Doppler shift as calculated racist manipulation.

The rise in the number of so-called "passport shows" is, however, not confined to the visual arts. Theatre, too, is increasingly providing showcases that re-stage, in a cultural setting, the political debates surrounding questionable concepts such as "nation" and "regionality". By searching out works that might be of interest to audiences back home, curators establish a perspective on a country and performatively co-produce, with a demonstrative gesture, an externally imposed national identity. These journeys resemble the ethnological expeditions of the last two centuries in that the image later represented in travelling researchers' home countries was largely shaped by their prior assumptions, a factor that still influences contemporary curatorial expeditions. A similar doctrine was propounded in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl who, in the early twentieth century, attempted to approach the nature of a perceived object through *époché* – the withholding of prior knowledge. As a symbolic form, perspective imprints its stamp on the object of perception.

My perceptions have certainly been imprinted on the art from Africa presented here. How, then, is it possible to present a festival of work from South Africa while avoiding the pitfalls of neo-colonialist strategies? How does one arrive at the decision of what pieces to show or which artists to feature, and what legitimates such choices? The legitimation is ultimately personal, since

this presentation is the result of individual research and perspectives. We also do not assume that we have avoided neo-colonialist tendencies. Yet, despite all our reservations, we see the visits from the participating South African artists and intellectuals as a chance to thematise the process of perception itself. The traditional transfiguration of Africa as well as the proverbial fear of the Dark Continent is addressed. The question of what "blackness" can mean today, without racist undertones, is as central as the chance to establish a perception of the Other, here and in Africa. The agenda includes questions that are posed locally, yet possess relevance beyond the local context: just as South Africa is undergoing a process of democratisation and globalisation, so the chances and limits of democracy and the globalised economy are being debated in Germany.

In fact, Germans have much in common with South Africans, and not just with regard to the question of how to deal with culpability and history. In his *Diary of a Bad Year,* JM Coetzee states that the "generation of white South Africans to which I belong, and the next generation, and perhaps the generation after that too, will go bowed under the shame of the crimes that were committed in their name". His words have a familiar ring to German ears. Coetzee is the descendant of Europeans who emigrated to Africa centuries ago. How is his place in such a history defined? Young adults in South Africa were not the founders of Apartheid, and many will scarcely have consciously experienced that era. One therefore needs to ask what their involvement in the history and the crimes of Apartheid are. What legacy is passed to the subsequent generations, of whatever skin colour, in South Africa? And how do the states of the northern hemisphere relate to the colonial history indelibly imprinted on the world, its traces neither eradicated nor appeased?

These are questions that cannot be answered in the scope of the video programme curated by Lucy Rayner, Leora Farber and Lee-At Meyerov, or even our entire festival. But we can turn our attention to them, and join forces to take stock of, and present, the current situation. According to the Doppler Effect, perception depends upon a specific location, and in the course of a movement (be it of the source or of the receiver)

the frequency of a signal changes. Changes in position alter the perception not only of the person in motion, but also the process of perception itself. *Performing South Africa* is sited in the space between these shifts in perception and the possibilities offered. The very act of bringing their art to Germany fundamentally alters the artists' work. What we see when we see art from Africa is shaped by our expectations of African art. Such prior assumptions are among the things we put on show and, in a philosophical sense, we ultimately employ the performative arts to modify perception. In view of this, we would like to thank Lucy Rayner very much for organising the video programme *Too Close for Comfort*.

Stephen Hobbs
In technical collaboration with Andre Pretorius

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 Wits University 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 artists' collaborative, The Trinity Session (www.onair.co.za).

Living and working in Johannesburg, Hobbs views the city as "an African metropolis of perplexing contradictions and unpredictable developments in the social, urban environment". Johannesburg was once the powerhouse of South African business, its Manhattan of glittering skyscrapers, but in recent decades corporations have moved into the suburbs to escape high crime rates. After apartheid laws that prevented blacks from living in the city were abolished, many made the inner city their home. Today, Johannesburg no longer has the feeling of the policed white capital that it once was; it is clearly an African city, a powerful index of transformation and a site of innumerable transformative moments. Hobbs draws on urban vocabularies of images and signs to point to cities' transformative qualities, 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.

In the work presented in this programme, Hobbs collaborated with Andre Pretorius. Pretorius is the owner of a new media company called StringLite, which delivers services and products focused on electronic communication. He creates interactive multimedia projects both offline and online.

***Out of Order – A User's Guide to a Dysfunctional
City*** (1997-2000)
By Stephen Hobbs
Produced in technical collaboration with Andre Pretorius
Interactive CD Rom, Beta Version
15 minutes

Originally conceived as a multimedia demonstration CD Rom, Hobbs and Pretorius collaborated for two years on an ad hoc basis to develop an expansive virtual landscape composed from field photography of the city of Johannesburg. The digital collage suggests any urban space in a state of disorder and decay. More subtly, the composite landscape is Johannesburg, a consistent muse in all of Hobbs's cultural production since 1994. Underlying the basic click-through interactivity of the work is the idea that the user, navigating the city in Hobbs's Volkswagen Citi Golf, is embedded in the subjective experiences of Hobbs's encounters with the city and suburbs of Johannesburg. For Hobbs, this experimental project has served as a virtual solution to the notion of an artist's retrospective. It has also embedded his experimental video and film works in the fabric of the buildings or landscapes from whence the individual artworks where 'recorded'. In addition, the animated and interactive capabilities of Macro Media Director 7 (in 1997) allowed for a range of Hobbs's more conceptual takes on the city to be proposed, such as his ongoing interest in signless cities and erased road markings as evinced in Scene 2 of the CD Rom.

What intrigued Pretorius about the project was the creation of structured chaos. Users would have different experiences visiting the same locations whilst navigating through the city. Although the journey appears to be out of control and random, the events and triggers are well structured, eventually leading all the users to the same destination.

Given that this work was never fully realised according to the collaborators' original objectives, it remains a fragment, perhaps a suitably subjective document to contemplate Johannesburg's post-apartheid transition.

Nadine Hutton

Born in Johannesburg in 1976, Hutton has been a photographer and photojournalist for eleven years. Recently she has begun looking at ways to move beyond the constraints of the still image and the language of photojournalism to explore stop-frame animation and video as media of expression. As a photojournalist, her interests are directed towards the in-depth documentation of stories that may not seem newsworthy: stories that are generally neglected but that have important implications for the understanding of South Africa. Her work is concerned with social issues such as the rights of women, the dispossessed, and those whose voices are rarely heard above the furor. She explores how identity is constructed through photographic representation. Photographs are a means of self-representation; they tell our stories and shape our understanding of our world and ourselves. She strives towards an ideal where all participants are agents of their own representation, rather than simply subjects. Her work is a process of collaboration rather than strict observation.

Her artwork is in the collection of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and has formed part of several group exhibitions including Spier Contemporary 2007 and Women: Photography and the New Media; Imaging the Self and Body through Portraiture in 2006 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Nightwatch: Zion (2006)
By Nadine Hutton
Soundtrack by Boris Vukasovic
Stop-action animation
4 minutes 37 seconds

Ignore Me (2008)
By Nadine Hutton
Video
2 minutes 34 seconds

Night Watch is a series of "stolen" pictures from the streets and buildings of Johannesburg. All shot on a digital stills camera, the video is a stop-action animation of these stills – similar to how they appear when viewed from the LCD screen at the back of the camera. It is a documentation of what happens at night, when a city is deserted by its daytime visitors. The public domain of the streets sets the voyeur's stage. On Saturday nights, God comes to town, carried in by faithful followers in uniform. Zionists set up a temporary house of worship in an empty school and for the next twelve hours engage praise and worship, spinning, chanting, whirling dervish-like, steaming up the windows until the sun comes home.

Ignore Me shows two people who, like many others in South African cities, stand at traffic lights to sell goods, beg or offer other services like window washing or trash collection in return for small change. They relate their stories of life at Johannesburg's busy traffic intersections. Everyday thousands of people pass Gavin and Sylvia.

Most never make eye contact, staring blankly ahead while cocooned in their automobile bubbles. *Ignore Me* gives these two roadside "entrepreneurs" the opportunity to address those that have never listened to their stories.

Sam Nhlengethwa

Sam Nhlengethwa was born in 1955 in Springs, east of Johannesburg. In 1978 he received a Fine Art diploma from the Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift in KwaZulu-Natal. After graduating he taught part-time at the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) in Johannesburg. In its early days, FUBA was an agency for black artists who wanted to make their work known in South Africa and across the globe. Currently FUBA provides instruction in music, singing, fine arts and theatre for more than 3000 children every month. Once seen as one of South Africa's leading resistance artists, Nhlengethwa has grown from this and adjusted the style and content of his works to explore other themes such as music (especially jazz) and the mechanics of everyday living. He incorporates recollections of township life works though found printed images from posters and magazines into his imagery.

Nhlengethwa was urban-born and raised and therefore relates intimately to township life, as can be seen from his collages and prints. He has received various awards and has attended workshops in New York, Senegal and Cuba. He has participated in group exhibitions since the 1980s in Germany, France, the United States and Botswana. Nhlengethwa has had many solo exhibitions at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, as well as several two-person shows. His work is represented in major public and corporate collections in South Africa and abroad. In October 2000, he was invited to be artist-in-residence at the College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

Townships Re-visited (2006)
By Sam Nhlengethwa
Video
4 minutes 18 seconds

Nhlengethwa focuses on the theme of townships around South Africa. Historically, townships were under-developed urban residential areas created for 'non-whites' by the Apartheid government. They were places of riots, unrest and violence but also of great music, fashion and style. They were monumentalised in the paintings of Gerard Sekoto and George Pemba whose depictions of the townships have inspired Nhlengethwa's work.

Nhlengethwa was interested to see how life in the various townships of South Africa had changed over the years. Whist working on this series of artworks, he revisited, photographed and filmed areas and townships in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, North West and Gauteng provinces. Nhlengethwa describes how "as autumn set in 2005, I embarked on the townships project. As part of my research, I visited different townships in the six provinces. I discovered during my research that each of the townships I covered, has its own character, depending on where it is."

Nhlengethwa describes townships situated near metropolitan cities as different from townships that are near less densely populated towns and rural areas. They have a more hybrid character, are fast-paced, and do not have a homogenous or clearly distinguishable origin or cultural essence. Townships, generally speaking, have a similar infrastructure and architecture and their casual vibrancy is evidenced by the different characters in the video.
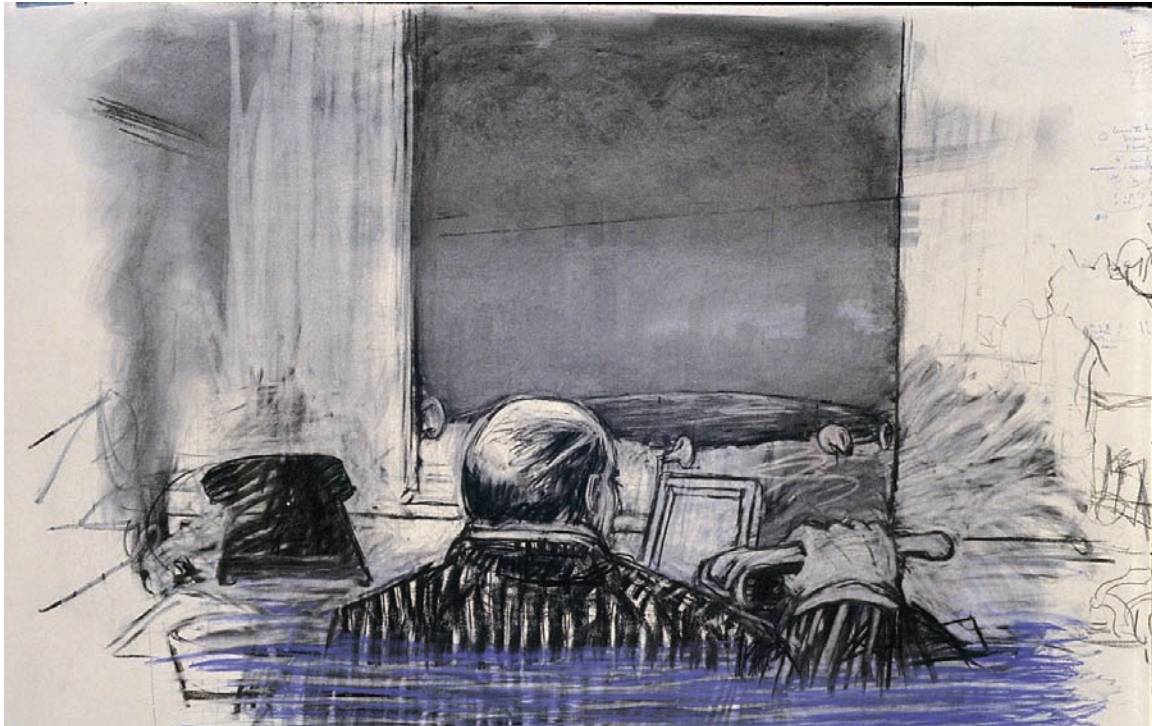
William Kentridge

Since his participation in Documenta X in Kassel in 1997, solo shows of Kentridge's work have been shown in many museums and galleries around the world, starting with the MCA San Diego (1998) and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1999). In 1998, a survey exhibition of his work was hosted by the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, continuing to museums throughout Europe during 1998/1999. 2001 saw the launch of a substantial survey show of Kentridge's work in Washington, traveling thereafter to cities in the US and South Africa. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev curated a new retrospective exhibition of his work for the Castello di Rivoli in Turin in January 2004, which went on to museums in Europe, Canada, Australia and South Africa.

The shadow oratorio *Confessions of Zeno* was commissioned for Documenta XI in 2002. The installation *7 Fragments for Georges Méliès*, *Day for Night and Journey to the Moon* was presented at the 2005 Venice Biennale. April 2005 saw the premiere of a production of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*) at the Théâtre de La Monnaie in Brussels, with Kentridge directing and René Jacobs as conductor. The production toured to cities including New York, Naples and Johannesburg. In October 2005, the Deutsche Bank Guggenheim, Berlin presented *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, a miniature theatre piece with mechanised puppets, projection, and original music by Philip Miller.

William Kentridge received the Carnegie Medal for 1999/2000, the Goslar Kaisserring (2003) and the Oskar Kokoschka Award (2008). He has received honorary doctorates from a number of international universities.

His recent works include *Telegrams from the Nose*, a collaborative performance with composer Francois Sarhan; and for the Sydney Biennale of 2008, both *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, a solo lecture/performance piece, and an installation of the same title comprising eight film fragments. Kentridge is currently working towards a production of Shostakovich's opera *The Nose*, to premiere at the Metropolitan Opera, New York in March 2010.

Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old (1991)
By William Kentridge
Editing by Angus Gibson
Music: Dvorak's *String Quartet in F*, Opus 96, choral music of South Africa; *M'appari* aria from Friedrich von Flotow's *Martha*.
16mm animated film
8 minutes 22 seconds

Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old forms part of the nine Soho Eckstein films by William Kentridge. These chronicle the battle between Soho Eckstein (property developer extraordinaire) and Felix Teitlebaum (whose anxiety flooded half the house) for the hearts and mines of Johannesburg. The characters and some of the interactions came directly from two dreams. What there is of a narrative was evolved backwards and forwards from the first key images – the procession through the wasteland; the fish in the hand. In *Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old*, we witness a showdown in the Soho Eckstein, Mrs Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum trio. Soho's empire collapses, buildings implode, the crowds march over the horizon. In the face of a storm-racked policy, Soho longs for a calm domestic haven.

Mocke Jansen van Veuren

Theresa Collins

Mocke Jansen van Veuren was born in 1976 in Johannesburg, South Africa and has lived in various parts of the city. While studying Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, he started experimenting with animation, graduating in 1999 with a BA Fine Art. He has worked in educational publishing and arts research in the non-governmental sector as a professional animator and, since 2002, as a lecturer in Multimedia at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). Throughout this time he has continued to produce experimental films in various media. In 2003, he started a collaborative project with Theresa Collins, using 16mm film to document aspects of Johannesburg's life via time-lapse photography. This project has grown to become the Minutes Project, an ongoing study of the city through film and audio recordings. He currently divides his time between the development of an analytical body of research and writing around *Minutes*, educational materials development, sound composition and production for stage performances, and lecturing at the UJ Multimedia Department.

Theresa Collins lives and works in Johannesburg and graduated in 2002 with an MA Fine Art degree. The video, film and photography-based work she produces engages with elements drawn from her urban environment. She intends to expand her research and explorations of the city through these media and field research. She has worked in collaboration with Mocke Jansen van Veuren over the last three years and their preferred medium, time-lapse photography, lies somewhere between documentary film-making and animation. Their interest in time-lapse photography stems from studies in, and a passion for, the animation medium. Collins has also researched and taught aspects of animation over the last five years.

Minutes (2004)
By Mocke Jansen van Veuren and Theresa Collins
Time-lapse photography
18 minutes

Minutes is a collaboration between Theresa Collins and Mocke Jansen van Veuren, both based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Through time-lapse photography and experimental sound recording, the Minutes Project aims to create a dynamic portrait of the city. The compression of time reveals rhythms of everyday life and allows us to re-evaluate our experiences and assumptions of the everyday. The work presented here – commissioned by the sharpCITY group of architects for display at the 7th Saõ Paulo Architecture Biennial in 2007 – explores intersections of public and private spaces with an added focus on movement, time and patterns of spatial practice.

The films trace a conceptual journey, illustrating the appropriation of potentially hostile urban spaces; transitory spaces; the spontaneous or orchestrated occupation of spaces; signs denoting desires for the ownership of space; the mingling of lives in public recreational spaces; and the simulation of public spaces within privatised enclosures.

Anthea Moys

Photograph by Alastair McLachlan

Anthea Moys was born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa. She recently completed her MA Fine Art, focusing on the enactment of play within performance in the public domain. Her interest in performance began in 2005 with *The Trolley Project*. She works predominantly in the media of performance and video. She explores 'play' through constructing performative and sometimes collaborative situations in the public domain. In December 2005 she participated in the MAPS (Masters of Arts in the Public Sphere) programme in Switzerland. She has held several "play, performance and public space" workshops at Wits, the Funda Community College and the University of Johannesburg. She has also co-managed and curated several events and exhibitions such as Kazoo – it's a live art thing (2006) and Have City Will Play (2007. Currently, she is participating in the Urban Concerns project and creating performances in the public domain for the New-town Women in Arts Festival 2008.

In the work *Gautrain: Ophelia* Moys is referring, though obliquely, to John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851-2). Performed at a Gautrain (underground railway system) construction site in Johannesburg's inner city, she investigates ideas of the in-between, manifested in this work that speaks of these transitional sites as spaces of potential.

Gautrain Series: Standing with Graders #2, site-specific performance, 2008

Gautrain Series: Ophelia (2008)
By Anthea Moys
Video
3 minutes 59 seconds

Gautrain Series: Tunnel Shout (2008)
By Anthea Moys
Video
3 minutes 59 seconds

Moys says of her work: "I am interested in the idea of 'play' as an act, which operates in a potential or transitional space. Through this interest, which can be seen as an underlying factor in my work, I create and direct situations that involve performance and participation. From performer to editor to public game designer, I take on various roles to extend my idea/action to the audience. My work is a continuous exploration into the relationships between play and performance, usually enacted in the public domain. I am also interested in the 'pathetic' or 'useless' and the juxtaposition of these notions to ideas of urgency, goal orientation and determinism. My works are created in and inspired by the tension that lies between experiment and safety.

For me, public space is a space where I can test out numerous possibilities in order to find a means of expression through action. Sometimes I create all the instructions for my performances, but then invite others into my domain where I would like a collaborative act or 'event' to take place.

My experience in performance began in Sierre, Switzerland where I took part in the MAPS (Masters of Arts in the Public Sphere) programme for eight months in 2005. I made several works there. When I returned I continued to work with performance, specifically in the public domain, as well with video."

Steven Cohen

Steven Cohen's work provocatively confronts issues of identity. Best known for his live performances, Cohen appears not only on stage and in galleries but also, uninvited, in public spaces. His work deals with outsider identity, using his own and others' bodies to create "living art" that references sculpture, contemporary dance, drag and performance art. These events are designed to force his viewers into recognising him and ultimately accepting him for what he is: a Jewish faggot. Beyond the personal, his work is a call for the recognition of all those outside the confines of straight society. With ELU, a dancer and choreographer, he created a series of performance pieces (*Living Art* 1998, *Crawling* 1999, *Flying* 1999, *Kudu Dance* 2000, *Broken Bird* 2001, *Chandelier* 2002, *Dancing Inside Out* 2004, *Maid in South Africa* 2005). The project *Living Art* received the prestigious Vita Art Award and pioneered a new direction in performance art in South Africa. After a choreographic research residency with the Ballet Atlantique-Régime Chopinot in 2003, Cohen joined the company in September 2003. He continues to develop his own independent work.

Chandelier (2001-2002)
By Steven Cohen
Video projection
16 minutes 37 seconds

Steven Cohen spent several months in 2001 reconfiguring a wrought iron chandelier into a wearable tutu in a studio in Newtown, Johannesburg, a short walk from a squatter camp under the M1 highway. During this time, the artist made a point of walking through the informal settlement regularly and when the chandelier was ready, he chose this location for its inaugural performance. When the artist arrived wearing his chandelier, teetering on fetish black heels, with a bare bum and his face painted, he discovered men wielding crowbars employed by the government to evict the squatters and destroy their makeshift homes. Cohen's performance was not planned to coincide with the forced removal of this community. However, the event was to some degree fortuitous for the artist because it made the contradictions of the "new" South Africa, which he wished to expose, even starker.

Minnette Vári

Minnette Vári lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa. She obtained a MAFA from the University of Pretoria in 1997. She works predominantly with digital media and large-scale video projections, often including performance elements by inserting her own body into reworked media and documentary footage. Her work has been thematically linked to exhibitions and conferences exploring themes of identity, transition, politics, mythology, trauma and history.

Vári's first solo museum show was at the Art Museum Lucerne, Switzerland (2004). Other solo shows include Goodman Cape (2008); Elga Wimmer Gallery, New York (2007); the Victoria H. Myhren Gallery, University of Denver, Colorado (2006); Corkin-Shopland Gallery, Toronto (2003); Chimera (black edition) with Galerie Renée Ziegler at Art Unlimited, Basel (2003) and Beyond the Pale at the Galerie d'Alliance Française, Johannesburg (1998). Group shows include the 5th Seoul International Media Art Biennale (2008); the African Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2007); Afterlife, Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town (2007); Diva Streets: Digital and Video Art Fair, New York (2006); Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art, Museum for African Art and the Cathedral Church of St John the Divine, New York (2004); New Identities: Contemporary South African Art, Museum Bochum, Germany (2004); the 1st Seville International Biennale of Contemporary Art (2004); Transferts, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (2003); Dislocation: Image and Identity: South Africa, Circulo de Bellas Artes, Madrid and Sala Rekalde, Bilbao (2002); the World Wide Video Festival, Amsterdam (2001) and The Plateau of Humankind, Venice Biennale (2001). Vári has been selected to participate at the 10th Biennale of Havana (2009).

Her work is in various public collections, including Billiton SA; the gordonschachatcollection; Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp; the Art Museum Lucerne (Switzerland); Rand Merchant Bank (London); Sindika Dokolo Collection of Contemporary African Art (Luanda, Angola); Iziko South African National Gallery (Cape Town); the Standard Bank Collection (Johannesburg); University of South Africa (Pretoria) and Zürich Versicherung (Switzerland).

The Calling (2003)
By Minnette Vári
2-Channel video installation (panoramic projection)
3 minutes

The Calling is a two-channel video work that presents an imaginary, broken metropolis, created from personal and found historical footage of, Johannesburg, New York, Brussels and other places. It looks at what lies behind the human creation of, and search for, utopia, and plays these myths off against the harsh realities of survival in cities such as Johannesburg. Historical and literary references are conjoined to create a journey without beginning or end in which destiny is lost, found, questioned, denied, invented, dissolved, longed for and called upon from afar.

Discourses about inclusion and exclusion, belonging and exile, are pervasive in human culture. In the old folktale of the good and evil sisters, the good sister is rewarded by having jewels and flowers tumble from her lips whenever she speaks. In contrast, the evil sister is punished and has to live with the curse of snakes and lizards slithering from her mouth with every word she utters. On account of this, she is sent to live in the dark and tangled woods. Argentinian writer Luisa Valenzuela retells the story from the perspective of the evil sister and equates this condition of being made an outsider to that of being an artist. What one has to say as an artist is not always easy to say nor, for others, easy to hear. In order to speak one's own truth, one is sometimes called on to produce something grotesque.

Detail from *The Calling* (2003) by Minnette Vári

Too Close for Comfort: Belonging and Displacement in the Work of South African Video Artists
By Leora Farber

> 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, 7D)

The video programme, *Too Close for Comfort*, was first shown at Intermission, on the nineteenth floor of the Lister Building in the inner city of Johannesburg, as a complimentary event to the Johannesburg and Megacities Phenomena colloquium. The colloquium was hosted by the University of Johannesburg's Research Centre, Visual Identities in Art and Design, in collaboration with the editors of the New Encyclopedia Project – Ryan Bishop, Mike Featherstone, John Phillips and Couze Venn. With Johannesburg and Megacities Phenomena as the colloquium theme, delegates reflected on the challenges that an African megacity such as Johannesburg poses to interdisciplinary urban studies, as well as the benefits and the possibility of participation or action that it offers to such research. The video evening offered colloquium participants a glimpse of how these issues have been or are currently being explored in selected works by contemporary South African video artists. As such, the video screening presented a view of Johannesburg through South African artists' lenses and subjectivities.

Although it is a well-know phrase, the first part of the title of this programme derives from John Peffer's 2003 interview with Minnette Vári. In reference to Vári's relationship to the inner city of Johannesburg, Peffer draws on the words of the founder of the discipline 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" (Peffer, 28). To this, Vári replies: "exactly, 'too close for comfort.'"(Ibid.)[1]

Richard Ballard uses Zygmunt Bauman's definition of the stranger, which has correlations 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 (51). In doing so, Ballard draws sharp distinctions between white and black; suburb and inner city; self and other, which sets these up as dichotomies. According to Bauman 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 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. (Cited in Ballard, 51).

Accepting Bauman's register of "the other", Ballard draws on the bad press associated with the inner city in the 1990s, where it was perceived by many living in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg as a place of poverty, crime and urban decay. Ballard 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 the unregulated access to what they considered as "their" cities (by people previously excluded from such spaces) (58). 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 market place (ibid.), and squatter settlements along the periphery of the city. These were seen as breaches of the segregated Modernist planning of the apartheid era. Spaces which had been "infiltrated" were perceived as undermining Western identities and thus as promoting a degeneration of standards. Ballard 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.

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. Ballard cites Robert Wilton's exploration of this through use of Sigmund Freud's notion of "*das Unheimliche*" or "the uncanny":

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. (58).

French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva brings this conception of the stranger or 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" (*Strangers to Ourselves*, 1).

These differing conceptions of self and other are pertinent to my discussion of the video work to follow, as they 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 as well as 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 that would reflect their individual positionings in relation to the city. Our hope was that these video explorations would not involve the tired trope[3] of "self" in relation to "city as other", 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 where the conventional opposition of self and other might be disrupted or, at least, disturbed. In curating the second screening of the programme shown at the Hebbel Theatre, Berlin (20 September 2008) and the Goethe-Institut, Johannesburg (28 November 2008), 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, historical themes of the individual's alienation to/from the city, particularly the Modernist city, are well known. Jennifer Robinson draws a useful analogy between South African apartheid cities, with their Modernist, segregationist architecture and French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's conception of abstract space.

Robinson 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" (7D). 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 (ibid.). In contrast to "abstract space", Lefebvre proposes the concept of "differential space" – a heterogeneous space of difference and diversity (137).

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 a result of colliding and conflicting social, economic and political forces, Johannesburg has evolved from a regulated, apartheid city, designed and built on principles of control, segregation and exclusion, to a pan-African city, wherein identities are seen as polyglot, heterogeneous and complex. New emphases on transnationality align conceptions of identity with issues of space – personal, cultural or/ and geographic – implicating issues of belonging, displacement, nomadism and the Diasporic. Dissolving constructs, states of flux, heterogeneous social forms and negotiated identities characterise Johannesburg as a new, hybrid space. As Lindsay Bremner notes, 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" (2).

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, reclaim, are rejected by or re-imagine fragile spaces of physical and physiological uncertainty. This new, emergent city in flux disrupts the apartheid city's false sense of security, whilst allowing for new conceptions of space, identity, place and new ways of being to be articulated.

Stephen Hobbs speaks of his interest in cities "in flux, whose identity is about a state of becoming" (cited in Machen and Hobbs). 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 and Theresa Collins's work *Minutes* (2007), 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 fleeting, random temporal moments. Compression of time through time-lapse photography reveals the usually 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 spatial field (Jansen van Veuren and Collins). The camera becomes an observant, analytical tool, though the artists do exercise subjective choices in terms of selecting the site, viewpoint, time of day and duration of frames. Yet, in their recording of the city's rhythms, Jansen van Veuren and Collins take up what appears to be a voyeuristic position as they capture activities within potentially hostile urban spaces; transitory spaces; the spontaneous or orchestrated occupation of spaces; as well as the mingling of lives in public recreational areas. Furthermore, this kind of voyeurism 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.

Patterns of spatial usage are differently articulated in Sam Nhlengethwa's *Townships Re-visited* (2006). This work has similarities to *The 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 side walkers crisscrossing the terrain. As in *The 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.

Stephen Hobbs and Andre 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 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" (cited in Machen and Hobbs).

The first scene of the three-part sequence might be seen as an extreme response to the condition of urban alienation. Through the camera lens, the artists assume the subject position of a suicidee by dropping a video camera, anchored and tied to rope, from the top floor of the Ponte[4] building in Hillbrow. The building is notorious for suicides committed by people who jump from the top floor down its central, hollow core. Yet, while the artists approximate the suicidee's subject position in the videoing process, in the post-production, they position themselves (and the viewer) as voyeurs, as the passage of the fall is framed within a side-view mirror of a car. Hobbs 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. (Ibid.).

Although these words are written in relation to his recent solo exhibition D'Urban (May 2008), they are also applicable to the second scene of the sequence, wherein the intersection of Bezuidenhout and Jeppe streets, Newtown, is chosen as site for the digital erasure and restoration of road markings. In the scene where road markings (signs of order and regulation) are present, it is as if they are invisible – cars move across stop signs and 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 metonymomic 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 and Hobbs).

The third scene of the sequence develops these themes of belonging and displacement through reference to South African concerns around domestic safety and security. The simple occurrence of an innocuous golfball hit by an inexperienced golfer, which breaks the window of Hobbs's apartment and enters his private space, is visually likened to a burglary. His comfort zone of home is disrupted, even violated. Attendant on 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) evokes different forms of displacement. Dressed in a carefully wrought chandelier, corset and stockings with suspenders, and with his buttocks exposed, Cohen walks through an informal settlement in Newtown, which is being demolished by men colloquially known as "red ants". These men, so named because of the red overalls they wear, are employed by the government to demolish make-shift squatters' homes and evict illegal tenants from buildings. Of this performance, Cohen 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). (De Waal and Sassen, 71).

As alluded to previously, different kinds of belonging and displacement are fore-grounded in *Chandelier*. Cohen's performance of his queerness and deliberate (dis)placement of himself as a marginalised queer in another community which is marginalised, is provocative. The community of squatters is 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)?[5]

Whereas Cohen's work presents a disjunctive interweaving of public and private domains, William Kentridge's *Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old* (1991) seamlessly slips between personal and public histories in the years of transition leading up to the official demise of apartheid. Kentridge states:

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. (Christov-Bakargiev).

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 intersection with history and current socio-political events. *Sobreity, Obesity and Growing Old* forms part of the nine Soho Eckstein films that Kentridge produced from 1989-2003. These

films 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 constitutes Eckstein's alter ego and, like Eckstein, is based on Kentridge himself (Smith, online); and Mrs Eckstein who cuckolds Soho thorugh her liaisons with Teitlebaum. These self-referential characters are set against the 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 and anxiety. 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 that suggest temporal shifts between event and memory (Smith, online). 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), 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. Whilst the cityscape is composited from different cities, including New York and Brussels, it was shot from the nineteenth floor of the Lister building – the same venue as the first screening of the video programme. The "imaginary, broken metropolis" (Peffer, 28) Vári presents is based on her conceptualisation of Johannesburg as "the goudstad, the promised land, Monomotapa, a golden kingdom" (ibid.). Whilst this implies a utopian vision, Vári's cityscape is, however, a strange, ambiguous space that lies in the in-betweenness of a possible dystopia and an "estranged utopia" (Peffer, 24).

Partially naked, except for a mass of objects strapped to it, 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 the early hours of a foggy morning, just before daybreak. This represents a liminal time of in-betweeness – 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 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" (Peffer, 28). 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 Linda Nead 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" (6).

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 towards volcanic-like eruptions. She 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" (Peffer, 26). For Vári, getting under the skin of Johannesburg creates "crowded encounters of perverse nearness where interpretation becomes a personal risk" (ibid.). For her, the inner city *is* home (physically a space where she lives) (Peffer, 28), yet, she states that 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" (Peffer, 26). 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" (Peffer, 27).

Through her othering of herself; her precarious placement on an edge or border; her use of her body as performative medium; and her evocation

of a liminal space of ambiguity, Vári presents an interaction with the city that blurs definitive bodily/ psychic boundaries and 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 and Freud's *unheimlich*, evoking a visual equivalent of the unconscious. In her evocation of a liminal, subterranean space, Vári draws on dream imagery, which has contact with the unconscious, as it is also beyond the realm of the symbolic. Robinson notes that dreams are "unpredictable space[s] of unusual and innovative juxtapositions or overlays, strange associations and disturbing images" (7D). In 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 …" (ibid.).

In Nadine Hutton's works *Nightwatch: Zion* (2006) and *Ignore Me* (2008) abstract space is similarly transformed, 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.[6] The rhythmic swaying, spinning, chanting and whirling of the worshippers cause their bodies to merge in the video representation. Bodies appear to blurr in to one another, forming a visual equivalent of trance-like, heightened spiritual states of being. Hutton represents the city as enacted through the body – the context of the school hall and 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 and the unconscious are drawn upon as disruptive forces to the rationality of abstract space.

In these works, one is aware that as videographer, Hutton is an outsider to the scene and as such, 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 openly acknowledges her position as voyeur with regard to these works in her artist's statement printed in this catalogue. She states that "*Nightwatch* 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." Yet, in contrast, in her video, *Ignore Me* she reverses 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 Moys's videos *Gautrain Series: Ophelia* (2008) and *Gautrain Series: Tunnel Shout* (2008) encapsulate many of the themes of dislocation and alienation touched on thus far. Both works are filmed in 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's 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 printed in this catalogue, Moys speaks poignantly of the futility of digging a hole in which to lie whilst surrounded by huge vehicles and the sense of powerlessness that this evoked for her. Her powerlessness and vulnerability are conveyed to us as we watch the mechanical shifting of earth taking place close to her body. Her smallness enhances this sense of helplessness and draws attention to her femininity, referencing the incongruity of her female body in a masculine environment.

Moys likens this sense of powerlessness evoked in the work to a broader powerlessness that she believes "a lot of South Africans are feeling at the moment." She wears a hard hat and safety clothing for protection, seeing these as a metaphor for the need for protection when walking in the streets of Johannesburg. Yet, in this seemingly hopeless – even suicidal – act (if we take the reference to Millais's *Ophelia* more literally) of burying herself, lies quiet acceptance of her own powerlessness. Moys explains that 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 many of these works, the artists occupy dual subjectivities: they look at the city from positions of inclusion – insider (inhabitant) – and exclusion – outsider (immigrant) – thereby occupying an in-between space of the intimacy of lived experience and distant voyeurism. On one hand, this kind of voyeuristic relationship might be seen as analogous to a sense of dis-location and alienation, poignantly represented in Moys'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-betweeness or ambivalence of this space between inclusion and exclusion allows for a fluid slippage between these positions. In the works on this programme, self and other thus become negotiated, dynamic spaces which are explored through investigations of sameness and difference; foreign and familiar, embodied in, contingent upon and subject to the flux and transition of societies and the artists as individuals within them.

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Notes

1 Significantly, Vári continues: "I think that sort of proximity just highlights disparity and I often feel compelled to sew together two sides of the ravine" (Peffer, 28).

2 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. 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 (65).

3 Much theoretical ground has been covered regarding 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 the publication of *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art* (Atkinson and Breitz). 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 use of 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 seek to ask is whether it is still useful to frame our debates in such dualistic terms.

4 Built in 1975 as a huge hollow cylinder, Ponte has always been a furnished rental block, comprising 470 apartments. 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 initially 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, it became a haven for violent gangs, was often dominated by immigrants from other parts of Africa and developed a reputation for being a site of drug-trafficking. This reputation was cemented by the grimy crime thriller *Ponte City* by the German author Norman Ohler, which centres on the story of a young woman who falls in love with a Nigerian drug lord.

5 In larger trajectories, this work highlights the complex problematic 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, 20).

6 African Zionist are Christian churches that combine elements from various christian denominations with traditional African beliefs.

Curators

Leora Farber received a BA Fine Art from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1986 (majoring in painting) and an MA Fine Art (cum laude) from the same university in 1992. Her first solo exhibition was at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg in 1993. She began teaching as a part-time lecturer in the Fine Art Department of the former Technikon Witwatersrand in 1994 and was appointed a full-time staff member the same year in the painting and drawing departments.
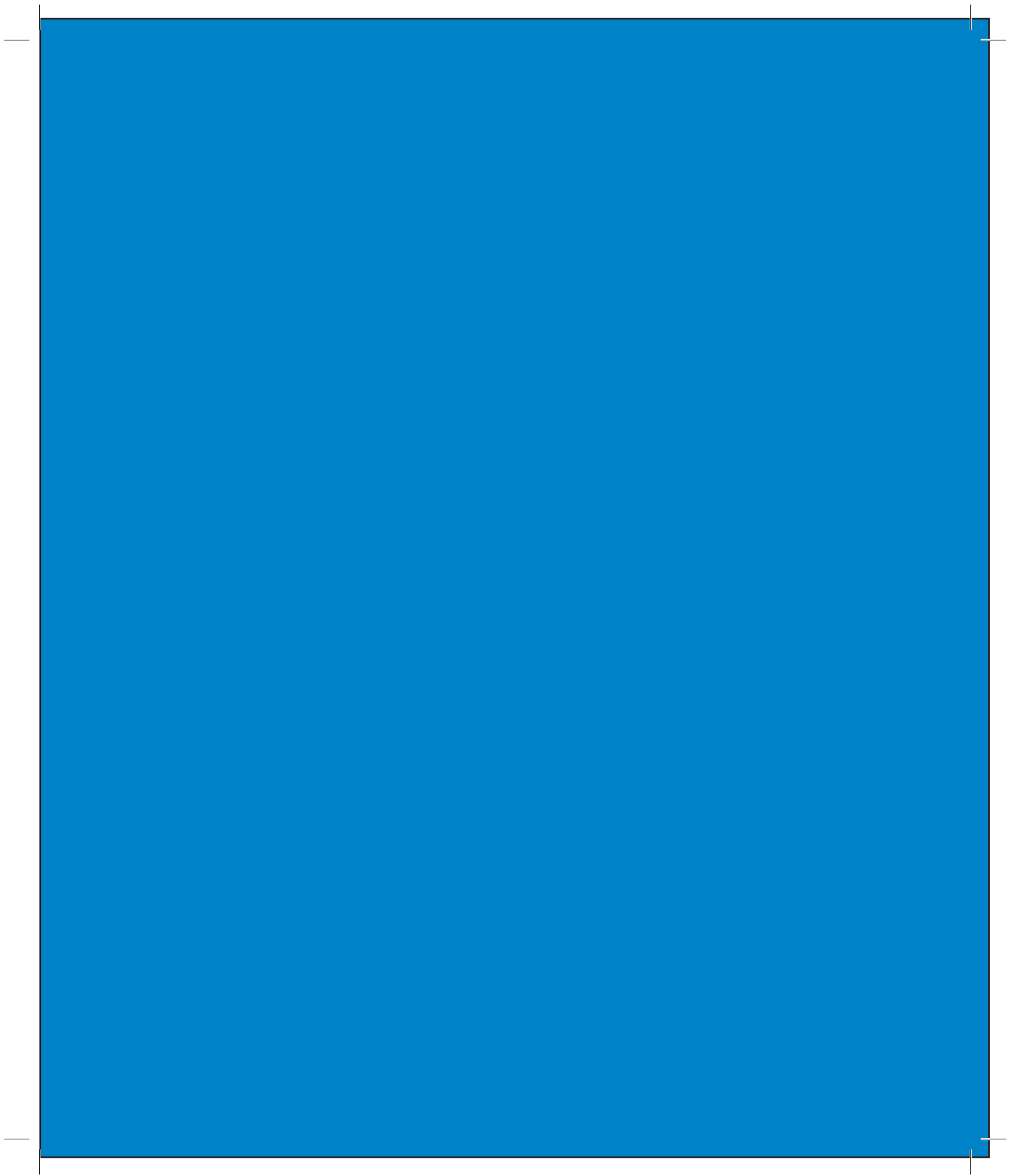
In 2007 Farber was appointed Director of the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture Research Centre titled Visual Identities in Art and Design. She has published articles in academic journals such as *Cultural Politics, n. paradoxa* and de arte, and has been the recipient of funding awards from the National Research Foundation, the National Arts Council and other bodies. She is currently registered for a practice-based PhD in Visual Art at the University of Pretoria. Her *Dis-Location / Re-Location* project forms the practical component of this degree.

Farber has been exhibiting nationally and internationally since 1993. Her works are housed in several South African public and private collections.

Lee-At Meyerov lives and works in Johannesburg. She graduated with a BA Fine Art from the University of the Witwatersrand in 2003 (majoring in sculpture and installation), and an MA Fine Art from the same university in 2007. She is a lecturer in Visual Studies in the University of Johannesburg's Fine Art Department and works part-time at the university's Research Centre for Visual Identities in Art and Design. She is a practicing artist who has exhibited on various group exhibitions and is currently working towards her first solo show to be held in Johannesburg in 2008. Her works are included in the Sasol collection as well as in several private collections.

Lucy Rayner is currently pursuing her MA in Fine Art from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As Gallery Director of David Krut Projects, Johannesburg for the past three years, she has curated numerous exhibitions including The New Spell, a group exhibition of South African artists in New York (2008), Drawing Show, a group exhibition of commissioned works by leading South African graphic designers and illustrators (2008); Avant Car Guard, a performance by Zander Blom, Jan-Henri Booyens and Michael MacGarry (2008) and Digital Surrogates, an exhibition of portraits by international collaborative Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.org (2007). She has worked with several other artists including Colbert Mashile, Deborah Bell, William Kentridge, David Koloane, Diane Victor, Andrzej Nowicki and New York-based Mike Houston and Martin Mazorra.