

***Transient site-specific art practices and the problem of the 'participative' city: a critical appraisal.***

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## **Abstract**

One may assume that the participative city ideally necessitates public art works with an impactful purpose to transform stagnant, dead and/or dangerous aspects of the city or realign values, attitudes and behaviours as these become currency in public space. This paper considers the problem emerging through selected transient performative site-specific art projects and asks the over-arching question: to what extent do these creative activities impact meaningfully and purposefully on the urban space of the city? What social and cultural issues impact on or contribute to the city as “participatory”?

The paper will consider the problem of transient or incidental (and possibly even accidental) site-specific art practices (as opposed to permanent installations). The analysis of selected works by local Johannesburg-based artists and art collectives uncovers a problem in the way time- and place- specific works assume a certain public inclusivity but falter in their objective to transform the localised public inner-city experience. What happens once the performance ends; once the site-specific intervention is realised? What then? Is the participatory city simply a series of incidental and fragmented actions or is there a meaningful collective and connective resonance in the way public site-specific works embody and enable a transformative function and purpose? This paper investigates selected current South African (Johannesburg-based) public art projects and holds this creative trend accountable in relation to the idea of the city as “participatory”.

**KEYWORDS:** Site-specific art practices, public art, urban space, transient site-specific art

## Introduction

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One may assume that the participative city ideally necessitates public art works with an impactful purpose to transform stagnant, dead and/or dangerous aspects of the city or realign values, attitudes and behaviours as these become currency in public space. In one sense site-specific art in public space often involves a confrontation of one sort or another. Anthea Moys for example, engages directly with the materiality of the site through various bodily interactions. William Kentridge and Gerhard Marx play with optical illusion recalling past and present fleeting moments, interactions and experiences of the inner city. Paul Cooper and Landi Raubenheimer randomly approach participant members of the public in down town Cape Town in an installation entitled Wishing Wall and in doing so deliberately undermine any given claim to authorial specificity in this work. But site-specific practices can also be quiet, meditative and persistently tactile and even sensorial. This we find in the gentle and at times hilariously funny performance works of Gerald Machona.

By definition then, and for the purposes of this paper, the ‘participatory city’ suggests a regenerative urban space of integrated functionality and purpose; a public space of multi user experience; a space in which collective experience is prompted through its infrastructure, its design and its art. This paper considers a potential problem emerging through the enactment of selected transient performative site-specific art projects and asks the over-arching question: to what extent do these creative activities impact meaningfully and purposefully on the urban space of the city? To demonstrate these points I will briefly analyse selected works by South African artists Anthea Moys, Paul Cooper and Landi Raubenheimer, Gerald Machona as well as Gerard Marx and William Kentridge. These South African based artists produce site-specific works that address critical social and cultural issues but to what extent do they impact on or contribute to the city as ‘participatory’?

I will focus exclusively on what one may term transient or incidental (and possibly even accidental) site-specific art practices (as opposed to permanent installations). The analysis of selected works by these artists concerns the way time- and place- specific elements assume a certain public inclusivity but, which may falter in their objective to transform the localised public inner-city experience. What happens once the performance ends; once the site-specific intervention is realised? What then? Is the participatory city simply a series of incidental and fragmented actions or is there a meaningful collective and connective resonance in the way public site-specific works embody and enable a transformative function and purpose? Can a temporary or time-specific engagement with place suffice?

### Transient site-specific art practices

Transient / incidental (accidental) art practice is a growing field of creative potential in South Africa and signals a critical shift in the way artists engage with not only the urban environment of the city but more importantly historical, cultural, ideological and social aspects as these inform the interface between community and urban space; identity and ‘place’; ownership and site. In all the examples I discuss with exception to Kentridge and Marx’s *The Fire Walker* (2009), the performances or installations are temporary and impermanent. A common theme of transience underscores the way these artists work with

aspects of the urban built environment. But the word 'transient' also evokes a sense of things outside of their mere physical manifestation in space. It also describes abstract moments of detachment, flux, change, transition or transformation. The question I repeatedly return to is: can transient site-specific art in urban space replete with all its impermanence, fleetingness and in some cases whimsy, still add value in what we consider to be the 'participatory city'? To what extent are notions of place, self, community and citizenship articulated in these works?

To begin with: A certain irony persists: Although the work is transient the seemingly permanent nature of the site as a fixed place requires that we understand the works to have a lasting effect. All the sites selected for the works under discussion here recall a violence, an injustice or a radical (perhaps even violent) change or some sort. In this sense place, community and memory become important concepts in realising the fractious space of the city. Scholars such as Deutsche, Hayden and Casey confront this issue directing particular studies in the social, political and historical significance of urban space and place. Deutsche (1998) alerts us to the significance of confrontation as an important ingredient in the recipe for what we understand a democratic space to be: "...conflict, far from the ruin of democratic public space, is the condition of its existence." Later she elaborates this point further when, following Lefebvre's critique of social space, she writes: "In the tradition of radical site-specific art, public art must disrupt, rather than secure, the apparent coherence of its new urban form" Deutsche (1998:xiii and xvi). Elsewhere Hayden draws our attention to the function of 'place memory' in how a community operates collectively to reinforce a sense of historical significance in its inherent identification with 'place'. Hayden (1997:46) writes that: "Place memory encapsulates the human ability to connect with both the built and natural environments that are entwined in the cultural landscape. It is the key to the power of historic places to help citizens define their public pasts: places trigger memories for insiders..." Further to this I am also reminded of Edward S. Casey's (1997:xv) notorious assertion that:

*The question is, can we bring place out of hiding and expose it to renewed scrutiny? A good place to start is by a consideration of its own complex history. To become familiar with this history is to be in a better position to attest to the pervasiveness of place in our lives: in our language and logic as in our ethics and politics, in our bodily bearing and in our personal relations. To uncover the hidden history of place is to find a way back into the place-world — a way to savor the renaissance of place even on the most recalcitrant terrain.*

## Fire Walker

A change in topology in this sense parallels a change in how we identify a site as place. If physical infrastructure is altered to the point that it is no longer recognisable can we still understand the site as a place of cultural significance or social ordering? To what extent do transient site-specific works act to reinforce this identity or identifying process with place? In some cases this manifests itself in a permanent structure such as *The Fire Walker* (2009) by Marx and Kentridge especially since this is a structure that changes optically as one moves in, around and through the site and the work.



**Figure 1. William Kentridge & Gerhard Marx, *The Fire Walker* (2009); selected views.**

Site-specific art can be seen as part of the fabric of the changing space of the city – an urban space under constant levels of construction in varying degrees. *The Fire Walker* (2009) is a collaborative project between William Kentridge and Gerhard Marx. It is a large scale, 10 meter high image of a woman carrying a burning brazier on her head. It is made from welded and painted laser-cut steel panels each forming part of a bigger illusion of abstract shapes. The site itself is situated at the confluence of a main through fare in and out of the north gate of the city as one moves across the Queen Elizabeth Bridge towards the CBD and is in close proximity to a large public transport precinct including the Johannesburg station and the Noord Street Taxi rank.

Its close proximity to these two hugely important public transport hubs is significant. It references a past time when the site on which the work is installed was used by women who roasted mielies (corn cobs) and cooked 'smilies' (sheep's head) on open braziers to be sold

to passing pedestrians hurrying to catch a quick snack on the way to work or looking to stop briefly for a quick meal. The braziers were lit elsewhere and brought to the site. As these women moved in and around the area with the burning braziers on their heads stopping at selected points to rest or pause to sell their wares to passers by. Interestingly, the braziers (containing red hot coals) were carried to the site by the women by balancing these dangerous objects on their heads. This makes perfect sense – with enough head protection and with sufficient innate balancing skills, the braziers were easily transported sometimes vast distances.

The site is significant also not only for the daily struggle of making a living but more positively, it enacted an intense and familiar social enterprise – people would gather at the site to briefly chat and catch up on the news of the day before hurrying on to work. The site therefore historically and purposefully signals a place through which people would move facilitated by the 'The Fire Walker' women. Although geographically fixed in time and space the place itself was transient not only in its metaphorical association with pedestrian movement through the site but also in the way it transformed from a place of informal trade to an empty lot (as peak hour passed and the women backed their belongings and headed home for the evening).

This theme is picked up in the arrangement of the steel lazer-cut panels that make up the structure of the work. Initially they appear as random abstract black and white shapes. One is guided around the work via a broad paved area. With this movement around the sculpture the panels transform optically into various abstract configurations and eventually when viewed from the North, resolve into the compelling collage-like silhouetted shape of a women with a burning brazier balancing on her head. There is a clever play at work in this site-specific sculpture. Its form, while permanently fixed, remains forever transient. From any fixed viewing point one will always see a process of visual transformation as panels optically glide and shift towards their final iconographic realisation.

## Gautrain: Ophelia and Tunnel Shout



**Figure 2 Anthea Moys, *Gautrain: Ophelia* (2008); selected views.**

In three recent works, *Gautrain: Orphilia* (2008) and *Tunnel Shout* (2008) Anthea Moys's bodily alterations of and physical engagements with the Gautrain earth works sites in Rosebank, Johannesburg suggest a certain confrontation with place itself – but this is not a fixed place, it is a transitional or transient place – one in the process of transforming into what eventually became the Gautrain Rosebank station. In her engaging performances, Moys can be seen scratching and digging and in one particular case burying herself in the red earth,



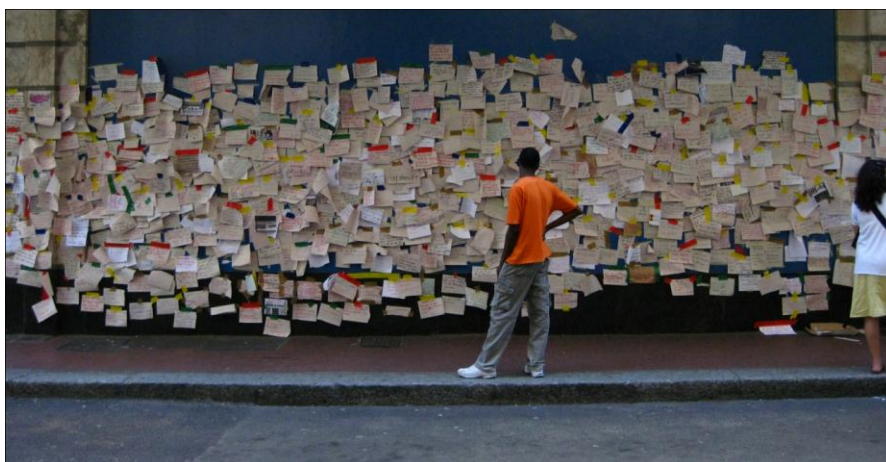
subtly (and in many ways seemingly pointlessly) emulating the violent excavatory actions of the large and omnipresent earthworks excavators on the site. There is a vulnerability about her actions – a desperate and deranged attempt to reclaim lost ground; to ‘play’ in the massive sandpit of urban space. Moys ([Sa]:np) explains that these works:

*...explored the symbolic dimensions of the monolithic Gautrain project at a more human level. These sites are transitional spaces of tremendous potential, but also threat. The futile act of digging with my hands, as giant graders and bulldozers remake the landscape around me, was an admission of the helplessness that many South Africans feel in the face of change, but also an attempt to be part of that change.*

In so much as the performance brings attention to the changing shape and topology of the site, the works powerfully signal an impermanence in the way actions capture specific moments in time that are lost forever once the site is eventually developed. Notions of transience are not only embedded in the actions she performs but more importantly in the way these evoke bigger mechanisms of change and transition as the site slowly transforms. This theme notably underpins the bizarre act Moys refer to as the ‘tunnel shout’ in a performance of the same name.

In ‘Tunnel Shout’ (2008) Moys stands tenaciously in front of a large air vent and enacts a series of loud and shrill shouts. Air blows up through the large vent and past her, ruffling her dress. In a video of the work her shouts include: “hello...”, “Is anybody there...?” “Hello...?” “You-hooo...”, “Hey....!” Moys enacts a gentle but persistent interaction with an inanimate architectural object and in doing so humorously brings this object to life – a large bent and protruding steel worm connecting a rapidly transforming surface with a cold and musty interior. Her shouts echo back at her suggesting a rather strange interaction with herself mediated by the pervasive steel ‘worm-harbinger’. Her echoes bellow up and out from the very bowels of the earth itself and end as quickly as they are enunciated. The blowing ‘air-vent-monster’ returns to its inanimate architectural self, fixed and un-moving.

## Wishing Wall



**Figure 3 Landi Raubenheimer and Paul Cooper *Wishing Wall* (2011); installation view.**

In Raubenheimer and Cooper's work entitled *Wishing Wall* (2011), temporarily preformed and installed on the corner of Adderly and Hout Street in Cape Town as part of the 2011 Infecting the City Arts Festival (February 2011) involved a random engagement with members of the public calling on them to write wishes on bits of paper and paste them to a wall surface. The written messages recall the unconditional and uncensored thoughts of willing participants. In some instances these messages speak of challenging emotional and personal circumstances in others they reference explicit acts of violence. In their proposal submission, Raubenheimer and Cooper (2010: np) outline some of the strategies inherent in the work. This is a lengthily quote but worth citing in full:

*The wall opens up possibilities of involving the spectator in the artwork's creation, and instead of the artwork being static, as it would be in a museum or gallery, it becomes fluid and changes, renews itself, and takes on a life of its own. The internet and the practice of blogging has presented such possibilities to internet users, but in South Africa many people do not have access to such technology. The wall also in this sense functions in terms of nostalgia, for a tactile world (instead of virtual), reminding us that the physical world is as interactive as the virtual one, and that it is transient in a visceral manner.*

*The wall becomes an interventional site capturing wishes, experiences, emotions, opinions but also identities and histories. Everyone willing to engage with the wall has immediate and direct access to everyone else's thoughts, desires, aspirations and needs. In this sense it recalls sites of mourning but also sites of healing eg, the visual effect created through the laying of flowers and cards and memorabilia at geographically specific places of conflict or trauma, or informal advertisement walls where notes are left detailing the availability of inner city accommodation.*

Part of the allure of this installation is the manner in which the artists' critically interrogate precarious notions of authorship. The public site in which the work is temporarily installed necessitates a re-negotiation of the artist's claim to authorial control. In many ways this subverts the established convention of traditional forms of site-specific art works that elevates authorship as a primary identifying factor in the conceptualisation and enactment of the work. In this case the public-ness of site and the necessity for public interaction and intervention prompts a revision of notions of authorship suggesting yet another means by which the work is understood for its transient nature. On the matter of authorship as it plays out in this and other versions of this work, Raubenheimer and Cooper (2011:58 ) explain:

*The undermining of authorship (sometimes through the elevation of the importance of the site) means that both the artists and objects involved in the work were subverted. Theoretically this is a process which presumably emancipates the spectator through an induction into the frame of authorship or collaborative authorship. Does this work in practice? Do spectators understand or even benefit from their new - found authorial role? Claire Bishop (2006) takes issue with site specific and relational art in saying that it often confuses the spectator rather than creating an empowering experience, because it presupposes that the spectator has knowledge of authorial practices in contemporary art.*

With dispersed (or decentred) and complex or multifaceted authorship as its central identifying characteristic, *Wishing Wall* (2011) can be understood as a problematic work in which notions of transience are inscribed not only in its process and outcome but more significantly in the precariously and risky un-fixed nature of its making. Implicated in this is an ethical dilemma that the artists needed to confront. This is best articulated as a question: To what extent does a willing and participating public find ownership in a work orchestrated through the sole agency of the artists? This remains an unresolved and contentious issue.

## BRT



**Figure 4. Paul Cooper, Design for the Rissik Street station, Johannesburg, Bus Rapid Transport system (2011); installation view.**

Cooper's contribution to the designs for the Rissik Street station of the inner city BRT system references the hustle and bustle of the city but motivates too for professional circumstances that are fraught with change and unpredictability. For this site-specific project, the artist selected fragments from his diary as a means to comment on the Rissik Street area of the Johannesburg CBD as the established cultural, historical, political and economic heart of the city. Diary fragments are an important aspect of the visual outcome of these designs. It is on the pages of his daily business diary that meetings are scheduled, work commitments are recorded, personal notes and ruminations are penned, meetings are planned and deadlines are fixed. Yet these pages also speak about change, flexibility, and in some cases open chaos as dates and events are scratched out, rescheduled or obliterated altogether. In my mind the chaos of the diary signifies a metaphorical link to the transient nature of the supposedly ordered and rational space of the inner city. In some ways it also references the spatial fragmentation and dis-ease of a fractured and historically damaged past but at the same time recalls a present space in a perpetual and cyclic state of decay and renewal.

The designs underscore a need to understand the city as an ever evolving, ever changing entity. A living organism with systems that make it move, breathe and live. Transient site-specific art must be understood in relation to this. In my mind an African city such as Johannesburg embodies notions of the participatory city as less of a consistent, collective, integrated and consolidate phenomenon and more a multi-dimensional space comprised of fragments of events, situations and activities that preside within but also significantly from without its built infrastructure. Site-specific art often interrogates such boundaries especially in the way these prescribe and reinforce cultural, social and ideological circumstances that effect a sense of self and identity. Gerald Machona's performance work targets social barriers through evoking specific references to the provocative antics of the African dance tradition known as Gule Wamkulu.



## Ndiri



**Figure 5. Gerald Machona, *Ndiri Series* (2010-2011); selected views.**

Machona's performances are provocatively public. The works explore notions of risk and confrontation but this is underscored through a humour and a certain compulsive tenacity that forces a participating audience into an unpredictable and arguably risky dialogue with the artist and his many alter egos. Almost all of these involve the use of masks in one way or another recalling the masquerade tradition of the wandering Gule Wamkulu which derives from the Nyau performers of Malawi (Machona [Sa]:np). At the center of his work is an emphatic confrontation with notions of foreign-ness, especially evoking a powerful response to recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The harshness of this theme is deliberately undercut and undermined through humour as the masked figure in his performances provokes and unwittingly yet gently taunts the unsuspecting, participating audience. He explains:

*This body of work explores concepts of foreignness and alienation experienced by African foreign national living in South Africa, in relation to the xenophobic violence of May 2008. A history of immigrant labour in Zimbabwe created a diverse society. I remember being surrounded by 'people from far away', the most memorable encounter was of the 'strange' practice of Nyau, performed by Chewa people of Malawi. The masquerade figure wore a mask of feathers that fully concealed his face and moved to the rhythm of a drum, provocatively kicked dust into the air. In a Zimbabwean context the Nyau and its 'strangeness' was used by the Chewa to imagine identities that subverted derogatory labels projected on them as foreigners. I have adopted this spectacle as a performance strategy to engage a local South African audience on issues of Afrophobia. Zimbabwe's economic collapse, lead to the exodus of economic migrates to South Africa, targeted during this xenophobic violence. I attempt to narrate this experience in a series of artworks titled *Ndiri* (I am), which incorporate the Nyau as a performance strategy with masks made out of Zimbabwean dollars and performances of popular occupations associated with Zimbabwean migrants (Machona [Sa]:np).*

In the work *Ndiri* (I am) (2010-2011) and *Ita Kuti Kunaye* (Make It Rain) (2010) ordinary day to day places become highly volatile sites of personal and bodily (and possible ideological) moments of contestation. In various *Ndiri* persona, Machona enacts a confrontational character. In one instance he is the security bouncer at a night club, in another he is a Barman. The familiar is undercut in Machona's performances setting in action a process of cause and effect – action and reaction in which Machona subjects himself to unpredictable and at times unexpectedly positive but at times also negative public response. In *Ita Kuti Kunaye* (Make It Rain) (2010) Machona is shown dancing dangerously on a boundary wall as money (worthless Zimbabwean dollars) slowly begin to emerge

fluttering from his hand as he gradually returns the wad of useless cash to his jacket pocket (the video is in fact an action in reverse, as it turns out). The dance suggests a certain tongue in cheek snub at the social boundaries evoked metaphorically in the architectural feature on which he performs. Further, by presenting the performance in reverse, Machona significantly undermines the ideological agency of worthless 'urban' capital.

## Conclusion

Whether fixed permanently, installed temporarily or performed on site for only moments of time, site-specific art engages with the social, cultural, historical and ideological infrastructure of the city. These interactions resonate permanently as fixed assets or in documented forms such as video and still photography. This resonance is bound up in an empirical and tactile but also sensorial experience of place. In my mind this is not the sole determining factor when considering the place of site-specific art in the participatory city. Can transient site-specific art change the city or add value to it in some way? Perhaps. Can it assist in the way we seek to redefine the city as a collective and inclusive space? I would like to think so. Is it a means to engage with and possibly over turn deeply entrenched protocol through action based confrontation? Most certainly, yes. Above all, the city is participatory as it brings into its own transient and creative activities and experiences. While these mostly do not take the form of permanent installations, they do offer a critical perspective that is vitally important in the on-going revision of what we understand to be public space and the identities and social encounters that circulate in and through these spaces. As Deutsche (1998:80) asserts: "The city can be a work of Art. The city, or the experience of the city, influences the subject matter and form of works of art." Transient site-specific art is a necessary and defining element of the city's infrastructural and social fabric enabling a critical platform to confront present and past histories and ultimately contribute to the embedded potential for an on-going transformation of urban space.

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