

# *Metromusings*

## Curatorial preface

Starting to write from the towers of academia this preface for an exhibition presenting visual musings on the city, reminds me of Michel de Certeau who in 1980 starts to write the chapter, 'Walking in the city', for the original French version of *The practice of everyday life* (1984) whilst looking at Manhattan from the now destroyed 110<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Centre and describes New York City as follows: "Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding" (De Certeau 1984:91).

These words aptly describes the spectacle of South African cities brimming with inner-city movement on the streets and sidewalks and reflecting a rich cultural mix of people, styles and goods. "Is the immense texturology spreading out before one's eyes anything more than a representation, an optical fact?" he (De Certeau 1984:92) asks. And the answer is yes, since as he continues to argue, the panoramic city is nothing more than a visual simulacrum whose very condition is that of oblivion, since the "ordinary practitioners" of the city "down below", walk as *Wandersmänner* "whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text" and make use of spaces that they are "blind" to. It is here that *Metromusings* operates and attempts to uncover and transmute our everyday 'blind' or unthinking manner of engagement with South African urbanity into artworks in a varied array of artistic media and ideas.

Urban studies and the visual arts have shown a dynamic interrelationship since nineteenth-century Haussmannisation of Paris and the subsequent writings of Walter Benjamin, for instance, who set up productive relationships between the artist as public figure, the artwork as public object and the urban or street culture of the time. Notions of the street walker or the *flâneur* have become extraordinarily significant in the visual arts since Baudelaire's nineteenth-century male stroller in the city, accompanied by a dedicated embodied take on the city reflecting the philosophical urban musings of, for instance, De Certeau, Lefebvre, Zukin Tuan, Mirzoeff and many others. As Joe Austin

(2010:33) argues, since the early twentieth-century turn towards the everyday, there has been an adjustment of the analytic lens to centre on the mundane experiences within urban walls and streets, including aesthetic experiences, and artworks have since dealt extensively with this local urban place-scale in response to the human-scaled city experience.

Curating the city in its sprawling urban context means to identify a milieu and to produce an event with a built-in mechanism that will be instrumental in allowing visual, aesthetic and conceptual engagement with, for instance, a place or site's key role in its history and the socio-political and -cultural developments of an area or country; to relate to or contest existing conventions and styles of artistic expression and presentation; and of critical significance, through the former elements to make visible, communicate and render a specific vision of contemporary (and historical) urban life. Curatorial practice thus does not merely imply collecting a selection of works together and displaying these; Hans Obrist (probably the most important living curator of our time) considers the curator a *passeur*, a different kind of *flâneur*, stroller or walker who passes through the culture and histories of a country and facilitates a view thereupon by way of artworks. In this way curatorial practice aims to produce new views, relationships and possibly 'erasures' in terms of the city in order, maybe, to discover layers of and links to histories of engagement and, hopefully, new ways of looking at the city. Curatorially conceiving the contemporary city is thus essentially concerned with ways of imaging and imagining the city and subjectivities associated with these processes.

In the context of academia, the curator's role seems to have been implicit to some extent in the form of the curating of staff or student exhibitions. Yet, too often, these exhibitions have been the product of a compilation of available or existing work, without any intervention of a conceptual kind. An outdated, binarist view of the curator concerns either the curator-as-artist, that is, as understanding media, space, technologies and processes, or the curator as theorist as understanding concepts and theories. Since the late twentieth century the curator has come to be seen as engaging with all of the afore-mentioned as well as with art history, therefore as a progression to the late nineteenth-century mediation of the avant-garde, challenging the status quo and enabling many an emerging artists into the art market. Curatorial practice is a

relatively recent offspring of visual arts practice that has become far more than a mere preservation of looking after collections of art and artefacts, and functions on a level beyond the static and site-specific collection. The contemporary art curator has become more like an "artist-at-large, representing the world" (Chaplin & Stara 2009:1) *through* the work of artists. As spectacles and events, exhibitions and their histories appear to have been inseparable from modernity's greatest collections of art and exhibitions have become the primary site of exchange in the context of the cultural and political economies of art.

In an interview of The Design Observer Group with Kees Christiaanse, the chief curator of the 2009 International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam with the theme of 'Open city: designing coexistence', his take on the contemporary city is described as entailing a "condition, usually found only in fragments, in parts of cities, where a fragile balance between integrating and disintegrating forces is maintained" (Curating the open city 2009). Just as Christiaanse's idea of an 'open city' is somewhat utopian relating to a translation of the ideals of an 'open society' and "a society ... where interaction leads to cultural enrichment and innovation, and where the market flourishes" (Curating the open city 2009), the contemporary art curator today acts as a dynamic and critical navigator of culture in terms of its meanings, directions and interfaces. The curatorial objective with *Metromusings* is to present recent work of permanent and part-time lecturing staff of the Department of Visual Arts of the University of Pretoria, that in open-ended way thematically engages with our Faculty of Humanities' research theme of 'Capital cities'. Recoding a diverse and massive - 'invisible' - archive of stories and experiences, the exhibition offers visual representations of reflections on urban environments (and Pretoria in particular) that have been "shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces" (De Certeau 1984:93).

*Metromusings* endeavours to present a visual mapping of the social and political power geographies and complexes that dominate cities and how urban culture can be voiced, claimed, negotiated and contested. In paintings, drawings, sculptures, performance, photography, printmaking and video, a defining question in the context of the city is how space can be translated into place. Guy du Toit's street sign works comment on the change of street names in Pretoria and therefore the uncanny defamiliarisation of the familiar. As such significant places associated with specific names are turned into

'unfamiliar' spaces that needs to be recoded again. In Carla Crafford's work, the subjective gaze and viewpoint of the spectator and the city's ephemerality in terms of being a depository of spent ideas, designs and paradigms are rendered in images of 'ghosts', fleeting appearances and memories. She poetically depicts the change of season from summer to winter and how it affects both humans and birds. In almost audioscapes, she tries to decipher apparitions and ghosts, and how she has become the very ghost in her own dreams. The pigeons correlate with citizens: how they nest and how a place can often become empty when the fledglings have left. Such ephemerality is also encountered in Diane Victor's use of transient media that speak about frailty of life and temporality as an echo of life in the metropolis typified by the agitated movement and rapid rise and fall of the 'short lives' in the world of artifice and manufacture in the city. In their artists' statement, Celia de Villiers and Elsa van der Klashorst speak about a city that is never complete by being in a constant process of being produced by everyone who lives in it and weaves their stories into the collective narrative. To them, the urban space of the inner city has become a site for contestation and constantly changing identities. In similar vein, Joao Ladeira's work deals with a large portion of the urban population, the migrant workers, that have made a 'home' on the derelict periphery of the city.

De Certeau (1984:93) identifies urban practices that are foreign to the "geometrical" space of the city, and instead refers to another kind of spatiality that is anthropological poetic and mythic. It is a 'blind' and 'opaque' mobility where the migrational city "slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city" (De Certeau 1984:93). These ideas seem to be prevalent in several works on the exhibition, such as Berco Wilsenach's, that deal with the relationship between location and mobility, and patterns of movement into and through the city. The artist presents a visual diary that delivers a chronology of his travel itinerary from place to place. Magdel Fourie's *Concrete Conversations* reflects her sense of having a nomad identity, denoted by experiences of fragmentation and fluid change. Being psycho-geographically liminal due to her father living in New Zealand, her mother in Johannesburg and her brother in Hong Kong, makes her feeling displaced and her life as "constituted by blurred notions of home, place and belonging, posited in memory and experienced through short, personal visits and the availability of technology (such as *Skype*, sms and telephone conversations)" (artist's statement).

The play between entities such as here and there; dream and reality; copy and real; and concrete and human being in the context of the city is used as tropes in Pieter Swanepoel's work where the source for the paintings is a photograph. In the process of production, one reality is substituted for another, and it is doubled and mirrored in the one being reflected by the other. "Hence", the artist states, "in the deliberately constructed image of Pretoria the one panel of the divided painting is flipped around ... as a way of looking through the image of Pretoria at Pretoria." Swanepoel's double perspective becomes a reading of the past through the present, and as such addresses histories and cultures embedded in the city. This conceptual approach to the landscape and its histories reflects Yi-Fu Tuan's (1977:122) view that "space is historical if it has direction or a privileged perspective. Maps are ahistorical, landscape paintings are historical."

Leana van der Merwe's sculptural installations of found materials comment on the consumerism and commerciality of the urban environment and its experiences, articulated especially through products, experiences and entertainment. To her, 'making' or 'building' correlates with one's own existence and thus one's understanding of oneself through embodied interaction with materials and forces. In her assemblage works, the interaction of found materials objects creates new meanings and relationships that defy the meaninglessness and neutrality of manufactured goods. Frikkie Eksteen's works on exhibition become Debordian psychogeographies in the observation and experience of places and spaces that articulate home, belonging and identity. In his artist's statement he says that his relationship to Pretoria "is one that I take for granted. I am here because I am not somewhere else. I have been habituated to this environment and perhaps that has blinded me to what makes it what it is." Memories of landscapes, places and spaces fill the artist's head, which are then 'remade' in his paintings. In *The Poetics of space*, Gaston de Bachelard (1994:48) states: "But the complex of reality and dream is never definitively resolved. The house itself, when it starts to live humanly, does not lose all its "objectivity". ... First of all, these old houses can be drawn - we can make a representation that has all the characteristics of a copy." Similarly, to Eksteen, traces of the original form of the place remain, but keep on changing, becoming a kind of fantasyscape. According to Andreas Huyssen (2003:15) the "fault line between mythic past and real past is not always easy to draw - which is

one of the conundrums of any politics of memory anywhere." To him (Huysen 2003:101), cities are after all, "palimpsests of history, incarnations of time in stone, sites of memory extending both in time and space." Eksteen's portraits become existential coordinates of positioning the self in a globalising space.

Sikho Siyotuyula's work entitled *The matrix of entanglement* is a reflection on the entangled cultural matrix of the city and the dimensions thereof. Such entanglement she finds in the metropolis "where 'different' pathways, histories and futures relate, collide or conjoin" (artist's statement). Her work reminds of Edward W Soya's (1989:102) view of the urban built environment as "embedded in the restless geographical landscape of capital, and specified as part of a complex and contradiction-filled societal spatialization that simultaneously enhances and inhibits, provides new room and imprison, offer solutions but soon beckons to be destroyed". *The matrix of entanglement* is rendered in caul fat signifying human or animal presence in the concrete jungle, and according to the artist, survivalism in the urban maze of cultural fusion. Kai Lossgott and I both produced work that comments on water as an essential element in a city - not only the reason for its initial establishment, for also for its continued health and survival. In Lossgott 's *Read these roads*, the film opens with the words: "I stopped in this city / to drink sweet water". The words infer a personal narrative, but simultaneously hint at the human exploitation of natural resources. A dystopian narrative of global overcrowding and gradual impoverishment accompanied by governmental neglect of resources essential for survival and vigorous livelihoods is recounted in poetic form, maybe as a soft-option critique and resistance.

The artwork will always remain a space between the lines or the buildings for that matter. It is a memory space that will always be fragile and speak softly like the flow of the river in the distance. Perhaps this statement by performance artist, Loraine Beaton, encapsulates the collection of musings on the city included in the *Metromusings* exhibition as follows:

On behalf of the city, the artist pauses and wilfully observes and questions. This process results in an offering that provides a busy city with a moment of clarity, a glimpse of themselves and a chance to consider the next step. A performance, a song or a painting can take viewers to inner places they wouldn't have managed to find on their busy own.

Elfriede Dreyer (curator)

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