Performing (In)Visibilities in Public Space: Reflections on the Social and Aesthetic Agenda of Contemporary Performance Art in Johannesburg

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Introduction

Visitors to Johannesburg are confronted with a paradoxical situation if they wish to explore and become familiar with the city: while images from the 2010 World Cup or Johannesburg's city marketing evoke a transparent, multicultural, cosmopolitan place in the process of transforming from a formerly segregated and racist regime to a colourful, lively and particularly "African" city, guide books, news media and rumours warn against crime and grime and recommend to better not enter the historical city centre. This appears even more absurd given the large number of inhabitants: how do more than five million residents survive this supposedly dangerous place?

Like many cities across the world, but perhaps mostly African metropolises like Nairobi or Lagos, Johannesburg reveals contradictions between the way people live and act in their everyday life and the images and imaginaries they evoke when talking about certain places. While some would warn foreigners against going into a particular park or neighbourhood, they, for their part, traverse it on a daily basis. Others dissuade you from visiting a place they have never visited before, relying on rumours, news reports, or hearsay. Again others believe to know something about the residents of a particular building, just by deducing from the visual appearance of its façade.

I am not interested in defining what is true or not, or what is the "right" perspective on a city, for the simple reason that images and imaginaries are a social fact as valid as empirical verifications and statistics. When it comes to understanding a society, its agency, its modes of thought and ideas, images and imaginations are as much part of the social reality as the built environment, the economic situation, or the social relations. Imaginations of a place may influence the experience of, and the agency within, a city and reveal insights into a society that go beyond the visible. Because of its long history of segregation, Johannesburg perhaps is one of the richest places to examine exactly these diverse ways of how a place, or a social group inhabiting it, is known, experienced, or just imagined.

This essay examines a particular kind of city dweller and his/her (self-)reflective mode of agency: the performance artist. In particular, I will focus on artists who engage with the city of Johannesburg through their own body and capacity of interaction.[1] Theirs is a practice of performative intervention into spatial and social contexts in order to question given ideas of the city and to unlock new potential spaces of sociability, even normativity.

I ask on what assumptions the performances are based, and with which strategies the artists attempt to visualize given ideas about the city. Looking at the city "through the artists eyes" allows us to discuss it in a rather phenomenological, subjective and reflective manner. Rather than relying on discourses which consider the city as a built body that needs governing, it allows us to look at places in the city, its residents and their imaginations, as well as ideas of the city in public discourse and within parts of the art scene. Thus the approach is equally sociological and phenomenological, considering visibility as a reference not only in terms of visuality in arts, but also in terms of visibility in social discourse.[2]

This contribution thus avoids scientific or literary narrations and tropes in its description of the city (Morris 1999; Murray 2008; Beavon 2004; Nuttall and Mbembe 2008); instead it seeks to trace the way two performance artists – Athi-Patra Ruga and Anthea Moys – engage with the urban situation, the levels of reflection they manage to create, and the rather subjective perceptions and (in)visibilities they attempt to disclose with their action. It asks how they engage with factual and perceived notions of what and how the city is, or is supposed to be.

After an introduction presenting major features that mark Johannesburg's transition over the last twenty years and the debates that came along with it, I propose a concept including three categories of (in)visibility that allow for a closer analysis of the intersections of visible and invisible aspects in urban experience. Case studies of performances by Athi-Patra Ruga and Athea Moys typify this interplay of the visible and invisible in social imaginary and the particular role the performance interventions play in analysing, reflecting and influencing urban imaginaries within a particular (South) African urban setting.

A City in Transition

Johannesburg has undergone intense political and social transformation which is mirrored largely in the topography of the inner city.[3] Inner city neighbourhoods, which used to be for "Whites only" during apartheid, have turned into almost exclusively "Black" neighbourhoods, many of them – such as Yeoville – comprising predominantly African immigrants.[4] While apartheid regulated everyday life and thus produced a racially defined "common sense" in regard to the city's public space, the post-apartheid city authorities abolished the unjust and racist regulations and introduced, instead, an urban policy that matches the requirements of a democratic nation. However, this new, post-apartheid, democratic, also liberalized city of Johannesburg first had to catch up from the neglect it had been exposed to by the city authorities as well as by property owners and companies during the first years of political change. The unexpected influx of new residents, who not only claimed the public space but also housing and employment opportunities in Johannesburg, produced a state of precarity, often forcing them to self-organize and replace former and failing infrastructure with new improvised, non-official and sometimes even illicit modes of management. As AbdouMaliq Simone has repeatedly shown in his essays on African cities, the inner

city of Johannesburg kept working just *because* of these informal practices that jumped in for the dysfunctional formal infrastructure. Thus, Johannesburg neither is, nor was, just a place of decay and neglect, in fact, many rather invisible forms of infrastructure exist and work on a daily basis (Simone 2002 and 2004). Those, however, who prefer to rely on the institutional governance through the city authorities, often maintain a negative attitude towards these "informal" activities. Also, the city government of Johannesburg – gradually recovering from its previous failure – is keen on eliminating informal infrastructures through by-laws, a part of the "urban renewal" process that is not passing off without yielding victims and critique.[5]

Many factors contributed to the discourses deploring the ongoing social and economic shifts in central Johannesburg, which includes massive immigration from other African countries, overcrowding and "lawlessness" (Fu and Murray 2007: 122) resulting in one of the highest crime rates in the world.[6] The struggle for space, but also over normative ideas of how a good citizen should conduct him- or herself, continues to this day. Many of these conflicts are experienced on a daily basis, some become manifest in specific situations, others are only heard of in the media.

Thus the perception of transition ranges from horrific apocalyptical visions to romanticized utopias of a new, alternative society.

While Johannesburg has been a segregated city since its early days, its perception as a *divided city* gained momentum during apartheid and especially in the context of post-apartheid urban studies. Cultural products visualizing the division, for example, in fine arts, photographs, maps, or movies, often bear traces of a topographical exploration on the basis of the polarization between "White" and "Black" life. In recent post-apartheid years, however, contemporary artists have observed an increase of conveyed prejudices within the city, on the one hand, and a blurring, a relativization, and a constant reorganization of spatial reality, on the other.

Drawing upon a high social awareness from recent South African history, performance artists in Johannesburg tend to engage with factual and perceived notions of what and how the city is or is supposed to be. They explore the legal as well as illegal, formal and informal, urban space either by enacting their one-man-performances in the streets of Johannesburg or by engaging in specific interactions with the diverse communities. Thus, they explicitly or implicitly deal with questions of mental and cultural topographies, attributions of space, social fears and practices of in- and exclusion – all phenomena which, at times, become visible, but more often exist in the invisible realm, as mental images, personal nostalgia, xenophobia, or emotional ties to certain places charged with memory. With their art, performance artists manage to make visible – or tangible – not only the realities in which such mental images are embedded, they also reflect more abstract, invisible feelings and imaginaries. These imaginaries consist not only of the images which artists create of a city, but also of the ideas they and their co-citizens bear in mind when they traverse the city.

The Visible, the Invisible and the Imaginary in Urban Contexts

There are two major reasons why it is particularly interesting to look at the city through the eyes and practices of performance artists. Firstly, most performance artists in Johannesburg are younger than forty and therefore experienced apartheid only in their childhood or youth. So, even if some did not grow up in the apartheid system, they certainly will have consciously experienced the change in politics and population, the "greying" of the inner city, the exciting move of new groups of black South Africans into the inner city, and the arrival of African immigrants bringing with them previously unknown ways of urban life. In this context, several black artists have had an experience of the inner city quite different from that of their white colleagues, but for both, the (re-)discovery of the city was a step away from what their parents had known or imagined with regard to the model-apartheid city of Johannesburg.

A second argument for the "different" stance of performance artists is their profession that allows them to adopt a perspective that is somewhere located between outsider and insider – between urban planner and the self-organizing, inner-city dweller: as artists, they have a sense for their society and what happens in it, they reflect on it in a socially and politically critical way. Most of the time this reflection also includes their own position within that context referring to questions of identity and their place and role in society.

In the particular case of performance, artists relate to their thoughts and interpretations by means of their body. They incorporate, or better, they "embody" something in the strictest sense of the term (Tonkiss 2005: 94–112). In order to be seen, they have to act very differently from visual artists working with photography, painting, or sculpture. Their visibility is ephemeral, bound to one moment in one place and thus extremely dependent on witnessing spectators. While an image can be shown in a museum for a long period where it is visited by a more or less changing audience, the performance artist must look for his or her place and his or her audience in the cityscape. They must consider what audience they want to attract, what audience they would like to speak to, and what they actually want to say. The range of possible publics (Iveson 2007) is much wider than the usual museum audience, because the performance may take place in a park, in a street, on a public square, in domestic settings *and* in museum contexts.[7] Performance in public spaces and/or publicly accessible places is above all an act of being seen and becoming visible.

In order to understand the assumptions of the artists, it will be useful to reflect on notions of social visibility and invisibility, their impact and the expectations they engender. The following discussion is based on a concept including three categories of visibility and their conceptual counterpart, invisibility:[8]

A. *The social (in)visibility of interaction and marginalization*
B. *Secondary (in)visibilities and discourses*
C. *(In)visibility reflected in performance art*

In the following, the three categories and their specific role in terms of (in)visibility are introduced:

A. *The social (in)visibility of interaction and marginalization:* This form of (in)visibility is grounded in the actual everyday activities of urban residents, places and people they encounter and know, and other places which are unknown or taboo to them. Social (in)visibility can be traced with questions such as: Who is visible and to whom? Who sees, and who does not? Do interchanges of gazes or interaction happen among certain groups of people and between them and other parts of society? Do they want to be seen, and by whom, or do they prefer to hide?[9] What strategies do they use?

B. *Secondary (in)visibilities and discourses:* The secondary (in)visibilities are more difficult to trace because they are often incorporated in discourses and reveal their meaning only there. How, for instance, can we speak about the invisible if we do not see it? What markers – secondary visibilities – do we refer to? Who perceives them, and how do they relate to imaginations of their meaning? What discourses evolve from these secondary (in)visibilities? Do they stand for the invisible or rather for assumptions and prejudices projected on it? This category explores ideas, discourses and imaginaries related to city experience.

C. *(In)visibility reflected in performance art:* How do performance artists reflect these mechanisms of (in)visibility? What are their own strategies of being seen or unseen, and how do they relate to the (in)visible with their body and through action? How do they map spaces and ideas in and of the city, and what audience do they aim to address with their own visibility?

Of course, these categories are conceptual categories which, in reality, are much more diverse and flexible. Even the idea of invisibility as an opposition to visibility is in fact just a model. From an empirical point of view, the categories presented here intermingle. They are hardly separable and thus also contribute to the complexity of the mappings and images of the city based on visible and invisible social realities and imaginaries. The categories of visibility are understood here in a broader sense, which could also be summarized as different modes of experience in which the act of seeing and being seen plays a major role. They help as an analytical tool for the discussion of the performances.

Two Case Studies: Performances by Athi-Patra Ruga and Anthea Moys

#### Athi-Patra Ruga: Exploring and Shaping Space in Hyper-Visibility

Athi-Patra Ruga (*1984 in Umtata) is interested in public space as a place of interaction and confrontation, very aware of the heterogeneity of potential audiences.[10] Knowing that nobody traverses a city without a certain idea of what is "normal" (Popitz 2006; Förster 2009) or "common sense" (Geertz 1983; Giddens 1984: 334–43) and without fearing to encounter what is apparently senseless, dangerous, or even deadly, Ruga explores the diverse levels of how you can act – but also of how you will be perceived – in the streets of cities such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Kinshasa, Dakar and Zurich. Parameters such as gender, sexual orientation, ways of moving and dressing, race and ethnicity, paths chosen, and encounters sought or avoided,

aggregate to distinct ways of perception and reaction. Ruga is highly aware of how the body, its appearance and movements are signifiers of cultural and social codes which, on the one hand, are influenced by the surrounding space but, on the other, also have the force to challenge or reshape places and the urban space. Key to his performance practice and a means for his exploration of the urban space is his unusual appearance. It bears numerous polysemous codes which are not reducible to one single interpretation.

In a series of performances carried out in 2008, Athi-Patra Ruga performed the character of *Beiruth*. The name refers to the city of Beirut as a contested city, but also to Ruth from Moab in the Book of Ruth who, after her husband's death, altruistically decided to live as a foreigner with limited rights in the land of her mother-in-law, Israel. One of the incidents, among others, that motivated the artist to produce this work was the series of xenophobic attacks which took place in May 2008 (called 5/11 in the vernacular) in townships all over South Africa as well as in the inner city of Johannesburg, but also the sexual assault of a young woman by taxi drivers and roadside hawkers (Siegenthaler and Ruga 2008).[11] In the following, I will discuss two performances from the trilogy.

In *The Naivety of Beiruth,* a performance that is documented in a series of photographs, the protagonist wears an immense wig and helmet and explores the city in an apparently playful, indeed naïve manner. S/he[12] appears out of manholes and corrugated iron structures (fig. 1a), or climbs the walls surrounding the Johannesburg Central Police Station (formerly John Vorster Police Station; fig. 1b).

Acting in these surroundings and interacting bodily with their architectures, *Beiruth* refers to different forms of social knowledge and collective memory. For instance, repeatedly homeless people were reported to either store their bundle of possessions in a manhole or sometimes even to try and find shelter there in the cold season. Corrugated iron shacks, in turn, are the common form of housing for thousands of people in and next to the townships, often migrants from the rural areas of South Africa or from other African countries. These "informal settlements" as they are called, are rapidly growing and represent, in the eyes of most urban planners and authorities, a zone of marginalization as well as an undesirable trend in urban development.[13] Lastly, in the John Vorster Police Station people were detained for interrogation during apartheid. It is notorious for the many alleged "suicides" of detainees who, in reality, were pushed out of the window by police officers and their accomplices. For many citizens it still is the embodiment of pure horror although police practices have changed significantly. For the migrants moving into the city since the abolition of apartheid, this police station represents another form of repression, but also of protection. *Beiruth,* the stranger, in her apparent lack of knowledge about the historical role this police station once played, sets off to explore this space. S/he appears not to know about the social and shared meaning of these physical signs in the city – examples of the secondary (in)visibility described above. Instead, with her special behaviour s/he directs attention to herself and her performative way of ignoring this urban
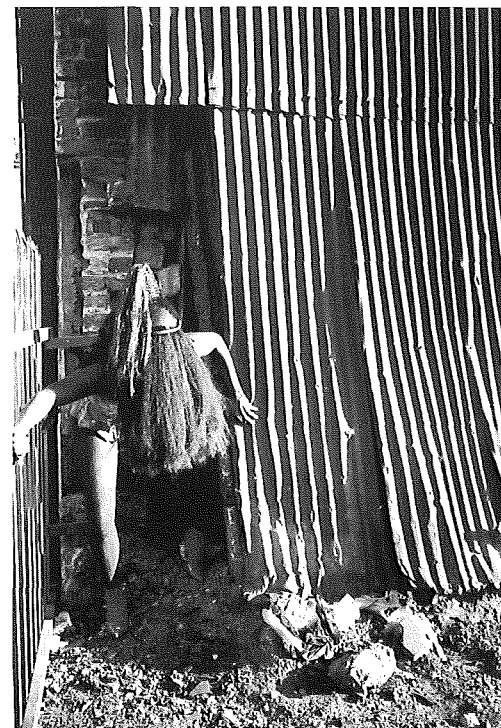
Figs. 1a and b: Athi-Patra Ruga: *The Naivety of Beiruth #5,* 2008 (left); *The Naivety of Beiruth #2,* 2008 (right). Photographs: Chris Saunders. Courtesy Whatiftheworld Gallery and the artist.

knowledge. Thus, s/he provokes responses which make visible, or at least perceptible, notions of what is considered to be common sense in different parts of South African society.

While the passers-by's reactions are not visible in the performance photographs, they are in the documentation of the first part of the *Beiruth* series, … *after he Left* (fig. 2). Here, s/he catches a night taxi to the township called Atlantis,[14] dressed in drag and with her head covered by a lamp shade. S/he walks through the minibus station in her usual eye-catching dress style: black-and-white net stockings and red high heels are topped by a skin-tight red wrestling suit showing the bare male chest, arms and shoulders. A wide black belt presses *Beiruth's* waist into a female shape. This and the way *Beiruth* moves lend her a feminine or androgynous touch, whereas the leather wristband alludes to camp, punk, or dominance. The unedited performance video film shows reactions of taxi drivers and commuters, ranging from amusement to rather aggressive jostles. It shows us, among other things, a young woman playfully flirting with *Beiruth* and a man who appears to develop an aggression and nudges the performer with his shoulder. While the woman uses the encounter to perform her own femininity, the man appears to share in existing prejudices against cross-dressers who often are identified with homo- or trans-

Fig. 2: Athi-Patra Ruga: ... *After He Left,* 2008. Camera/Film Still: James Tayler.
Courtesy Whatiftheworld Gallery and the artist.

sexuality. He is no exception in his reaction. Although South Africa has had one of the most progressive constitutions in the world since 1997, including legalization of same-sex relationships and marriage (since 2006), in social perception homosexuality is often still a taboo, considered abnormal, perverted, or "un-African" (Tucker 2009).[15]

The onlookers, in this case an involuntary and random audience, witness *Beiruth's* hypervisibility which responds to the invisible but very present discourses of homophobia and misogyny,[16] and they partly feel encouraged or provoked to take action against or in support of the performer. It is these mechanisms taking place at a taxi station that Ruga brings to light through the performance itself, but also by means of the video documentation later shown in an art gallery context. The visual codes of his attire and behaviour are associated with gay culture, to the effect that he as an individual is considered to be gay. Thus, the secondary (in)visibility comes into play here: certain signs are associated with discourses, but also prejudices, which become visible in the commuters' reactions in the video-documentation.

Beiruth ignores taboo zones in the city, and through her special behaviour s/he directs the attention to herself and her performative way of ignoring mental boundaries within the cityscape. It is quite obvious that *Beiruth* acts *as if* only s/he existed, but s/he provokes responses that make visible, or at least perceptible, notions

of what is considered to be *common sense* (Geertz 1983) in different parts of South African society. Walking in drag through a taxi station and the ensuing reactions remind us of prevailing prejudices against gay or just "effeminate" men. Climbing the wall of the former John Vorster Police Station addresses the horrors connected to the memories of this place, rendering them banal and highly relevant at the same time, considering that many South Africans still suffer individual traumas that go back to the apartheid system and its brutal practices. It is the common sense – or, rather, its contestation, owing to the plurality of cultures in the city – that Ruga reflects in his work, precisely by acting as an alien. *Beiruth's* very clothing and her blackness emphasize this. Ruga has painted himself blacker than he is, an act full of imaginable reasons: it could be that he would actually like to be blacker, or that he is aiming at taking on a colour which may be neutral in other settings, but not in South Africa, or he may be alluding to immigrants from other African countries who are often described as "very black", even "too black", especially by black South Africans.[17] Rather than othering people or social groups, Ruga "others" himself in the role of *Beiruth.* In contrast to feminist or post-colonialist critique of othering subjects into objects, in this case the Other is highly subjective and acting on its own; it does not represent the gaze of others on itself, but acts as a transformer, questioning normativity and offering an opportunity to consider strangeness as a subjective agency.

The notion of *counter-penetration* that appears in the title of another performance series, *Even I exist in Embo. Jaundiced Tales of Counter-Penetration* (2007), probably best describes Ruga's artistic practice: it challenges territorial and social notions of common sense through a hyper-visible intrusion into supposedly given spaces, and in doing so, it questions prevailing discourses of normativity in the urban environment.

Anthea Moys: Connecting and Familiarizing through Playful Interaction

The majority of Anthea Moys' (*1980 in Johannesburg) performances bear similarity to happenings and are often community-oriented. She takes on the role of a temporary, playful leader, leading groups into spaces that have a bad reputation or are unknown to them. Her aim is to create shared, communal space – even if it is only for a moment. She is interested in how interactive play implicates and involves the audience more readily, invoking a three-way dialogue between herself, her audience and the sites in which her activities take place. For this, she often uses places which basically have a communal function, such as parks, sport clubs, or cultural institutions. Many of these spaces have, although considered as "public", a long history of exclusionary practices based on a lack of familiarity, on distrust, fears and prejudices, dating back to apartheid times. Moys tries to overcome this partly self-imposed exclusion by bringing certain target groups into areas which they, for different reasons, normally ignore, avoid, or even fear, owing to the danger of crime, supposed or existing, to neglect, or simply to habit and everyday routine. She does this predominantly with playful interventions.

Fig. 3: Anthea Moys: *Boxing Games: Fall Down*, 2007. Performance project with George Khosi and his boxers at Rhema Boxing Club. Photograph: Chris Saunders. Courtesy the artist.

Fig. 4: Anthea Moys: *Jozi's Golden Girls: Jump!*, 2008. Performance with The Women's League of Health and Fitness. Photograph: Chris Saunders. Courtesy the artist.

Boxing Games began during Anthea Moys' participation in the *Kin:Be:Jozi* project in May and June of 2007 (fig. 3).[18] The artist asked George Khosi, owner of the Rhema Boxing Studio in Hillbrow, to train her and a colleague in boxing for two weeks. Hillbrow is a neighbourhood well known for its high percentage of immigrant African population and a predominantly informal lifestyle and economy. For many, especially white South Africans, contemporary life in Hillbrow stands in sharp, and often intimidating, contrast to its previous white middle-class lifestyle of apartheid times. However, many of today's residents also regard the inner city as dangerous and challenging. So, how does one equip oneself for such an environment? Boxing seems an appropriate solution – not because of its brutal nature, but owing to its social potential.

During training, Anthea Moys designed a *Boxing Game,* which was played at a one-night event in Hillbrow and later on the top of an apartment block on Bree Street, below Intermission Gallery, on the occasion of her solo exhibition *Interruption.* Prior to the event, Moys looked for participants within the art scene as well as among residents of Hillbrow who had been following the art project. However, during the bout it turned out that the boxing rules followed a logic of their own. Rather than designating victory or defeat, the start or end of a match, the different types of whistle blows meant: change your boxing partner with the one to your right, change partner with the one to your left, fall to the floor, and so on. The *Boxing Game* was indeed a game, not a fight; fighting against each other resulted in playing with each other. The expe-

rience led to the growth of a close relationship between some of the people from the art scene and Hillbrow residents, thus encouraging encounters which otherwise are not necessarily taken for granted in the Johannesburg context.

In a similar attempt, Moys invited a women's dancing group from the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, the *Jozi's Golden Girls,* to present a show on Mary Fitzgerald Square in Newtown on the occasion of Women's Day in August 2008 (fig. 4). Newtown is an upgraded and quite safe neighbourhood in the heart of inner city Johannesburg, known for its many cultural institutions such as the Market Theatre, the Market Photo Workshop, MuseumAfrica and a number of music clubs. Most of the participants had not visited the inner city of Johannesburg for more than fifteen years, in fear of the daily crime reported in the news media. With her event, Anthea Moys rendered visible to the inner city a social group which seemed to have vanished entirely into the suburbs. At the same time it gave her the opportunity to give the visiting women at least partial insight into the Newtown neighbourhood and show them "what it is really like". Her aim was to create a level of trust between diverse population groups who, for various reasons, had not maintained any form of contact before.

An innovative aspect of this performance is that Moys turned her attention to a rather wealthy and economically "established" group of people. In most of the scholarly writing, but also in art activism dealing with urban transition, there is a tendency to reduce the perspective to marginalized groups such as urban poor, informal

traders or migrants who are, time and again, considered either too visible or more or less invisible in the city streets. In the proclamation of the "right to the city" (Mitchell 2003), often the economically weak segment of society appears to be the only group affected by urban regeneration programs. In turn, groups considered "socially included" (through economic and social stability, political rights, etc.) are almost entirely excluded from discussions on urban decay. Only when urban planners consider strategic gentrification as a means to upgrade a neighbourhood, do these groups come in (Tonkiss 2005: 80–93). Therefore, a striking fact of city life and its perception in Johannesburg is that not only inner-city residents are considered by residents of richer suburbs to be marginalized, the opposite is also true, namely the better-off are equally cut off from the view of the inner-city population. The performance of *Jozi's Golden Girls* made it clear that not only poor or excluded groups within the inner city have a marginal status of perception, the same is true of residents in the wealthy northern suburbs.

While Athi-Patra Ruga has to disguise in order to visually *appear* as an alien, as he does in performing the *Beiruth* character, Anthea Moys, without disguise, is also perceived as an "alien" in the inner-city setting of Johannesburg. Her white skin signals to the majority of inner-city residents that she can impossibly be from the neighbourhood.[19] It is rare that a white woman walks the streets or occupies places in downtown Johannesburg all by herself. Under these conditions, her acting acquired significance, especially her interaction. It is a mode of creating connections and exchanges among diverse actors from different social contexts. The interaction goes beyond questioning notions of common sense; ideally it contributes to changing them into new ideas of what common or shared space and behaviour might imply. In terms of the categories of visibility addressed above, Moys acts predominantly in the realm of the first: by bringing groups together who consider each other to be "at the margin", she shifts the perspective from the prevalent second/discursive level directly to the first. Making the groups visible and perceptible to each other through interaction, her actions contribute to the deconstruction or questioning of assumptions and prejudices developed by secondary (in)visibilities. She does so by superimposing, even interweaving, her own visual appearance on the existing visual reality in public space, thus opening the gates not only to "witness" the secondary signs of a neighbourhood, but to create direct interaction between the people involved.

All the works discussed here clearly demonstrate the artist's awareness for the role of the visible and the invisible in community building and its counterpart, dissociation. The visibility created in Moys' work guides people to mutual perception and thus, hopefully, facilitates interactions that may constitute moments or relations of acknowledgement, perhaps even trust.

Performance – Transcending (In)visibility

With their performances, Anthea Moys and Athi-Patra Ruga manage to reflect the links between the different categories of (in)visibilities presented at the beginning of this contribution. Both of them make use of their visual appearance – Moys with her

whiteness and Ruga with his alienating costume – in a context in which they are not necessarily expected to be seen. They claim a primary visibility in topographical and social contexts in which white South Africans or black cross-dressers are seen only rarely, and thus relegated in the imagination of many residents to the sphere of secondary (in)visibility that consists of discourses and prejudices projected on assumed but not verified facts. While Ruga is the lonely performer and primarily aims at provoking reactions, Moys seeks a group with which she can interact and cooperate. Starting in the role of playful leader, she often transforms leadership into group cooperation on equal terms in the course of the process. Her intention is not so much to penetrate a space in which she is considered not to belong, but rather to facilitate interaction between different and segregated groups of Johannesburg's population. And, while Ruga claims his hyper-visible subjectivity through strategies of intrusion and penetration, Moys acts as a playful mediator between groups that she intends to render visible to each other. Both artists thus shift and transform the categories of (in)visibility, albeit from different starting points, and into different directions: Ruga emphasizes his own primary visibility in order to challenge notions of normativity and thus makes visible social imaginations that more often than not remain enclosed in the invisible realms of secondary discourses. Moys, in turn, gets different groups to know each other and strengthens their primary visibility in order to counter projections and imaginations that are habitually lodged in secondary discourses.

However, in spite of the different grades of interaction and the different emphasis in aim and strategy between the two artists, they share common traits. By means of performed hyper-visibility, penetration and interaction the artists firstly direct the imageries of the city from its visible spaces and inhabitants towards the invisible discourses and assumed *common sense.* Thus, secondly, they show how socially constructed meanings, fears and prejudices are linked to specific places and their very (in)visibility. Thirdly, by interlinking the city's primary and secondary (in)visibilities, they redirect the gaze towards a potential of new visibilities and imaginations.

Conclusion

Performance art and happenings have become an important means of artistic expression in South Africa over the last years. Presented in a contested public space, they have moved away from the stage and the museum context into the urban space.[20] Due to their presence in the spaces of everyday life, in streets, in shops, on public squares, they have developed a very specific mode of dealing with visibility and invisibility, which goes beyond mere representation. In taking up often unspoken or visually non-representable topics, rumours and fears, and answering with forms of agency in the public space, performance artists contribute to a form of visibility that accommodates but also facilitates multiple perceptions in a plural and heterogeneous society. This practice is often motivated by the aim to contribute actively to a better and safer city. Instead of superimposing architectural or urban planning structures on people living in the inner city, performance artists reflect actual everyday behaviour

and internalized assumptions, and sometimes even actively encourage (as in the case of Anthea Moys) people to reconsider their attitude by experiencing someone, something and someplace new.

The performative act becomes a moment of visibility or visualization, but also a discovery of invisible knowledge, assumptions, or prejudices. It visualizes the invisible through the explicit and ephemeral act of becoming and being visible, through the very act of claiming visibility.

Through their performances in public space, the artists themselves become visible within the urban society of Johannesburg, but in their performance practice they also reflect their own social observations. They try to uncover discourses and ways of thinking and create a space that has the capacity to serve as a space of reflection, even for those not directly involved.

An interesting aspect common to the performance strategies of both Moys and Ruga is their attraction to parts of society that have a background different to their own – socially, economically and also professionally. When visiting places in Johannesburg that are historically or socially charged, Ruga chooses to play the role of an alien. Coming from a middle-class family he never suffered homelessness, and, due to his age, he only knows through narratives what the John Vorster Police Station once stood for. Moys, whose family used to live in the inner city during apartheid but then moved to the northern suburbs and never returned, re-explores this area and its new African residents. Indeed, it often is the "other" or a segment of society that laid concealed to them for many years that captures the artists' interest and encourages them to observe and interact, and thus gain insight into social realities.

Visibility and invisibility in a city like Johannesburg is closely linked to the notion of public space. A frequently heard assumption is that the claim for presence in public space results in social visibility and also social acceptance. This notion has a long history and was voiced by many activist artists in the USA in the seventies and eighties. What is visible can be regulated by authorities or institutions, therefore it can be kept under control or even be supported in its aims. However, there is also the other side, the invisible, which often seems to have an uncanny, threatening effect on those who cannot see it – probably because the invisible escapes our control. Ruga and Moys face these uncertainties by rendering parts of the population or their thinking and (re-)acting visible to others. As an artistic intervention, these actions are successful because they not only find a spontaneous audience on site, they also reach an art audience, either through direct involvement in the happening or through their photographic or filmic documentation in exhibition spaces. However, what effect their performances have on the social setting in which they take place remains an open question, because processes of mutual perception, acceptance and exchange sometimes need more time and continuity to develop. Performance art in public can have an immediate impact that involves the addressed community directly and on a long term basis. At times, however, it is self-sufficient at the very moment it takes place, neither intending nor achieving immediate social change or urban transfor-

mation. Visibility is always limited to a particular intended or random audience. Performance artists have the ability to attract attention at unexpected moments from unsuspecting audiences but they may also fail, especially when the audience ignores or is not prepared to de-code the intention behind the actions and intrusive visibility. For this very reason, performance in public space and the diverse categories of (in)visibility it deals with are an interesting and helpful means for looking at and analysing heterogeneous urban societies in Africa and elsewhere.

NOTES

1 In differentiation to *performing artists* such as musicians and dancers, I view *performance artists* as artists who practice a performance art that has a specific history in visual arts. Performance art has been highly interdisciplinary from the beginning, including music, sculpture, literature, theatre, and more. However, latest since the 1970s it has been considered a genre of its own within the visual arts. See also Goldberg (1988 and 1998), and Jappe (1993).

2 Visibility, therefore, is distinct to vision or visuality, but overlaps in some respects, especially as regards the postmodern notion of visuality conceiving of "sight as a social fact" (Foster 1988: ix).

3 For a detailed history of Johannesburg, see Beavon (2004).

4 According to AbdouMaliq Simone (2004: 411), roughly ninety per cent of Johannesburg's inner-city residents were not living there ten years before.

5 During the last few years, the City of Johannesburg has been implementing its regeneration plans as defined in 2000. The approach and the results are highly controversial.

6 These descriptions and characterizations are also used for other African and South American cities; to a part they have been inherited from the European stylization of metropoles such as London or Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also from American culture (Fu and Murray 2007). In contemporary literature and visual arts, these tropes are reactivated and, most of the times, adjusted to the specific African context. Especially in South African literature, Johannesburg has been pictured since its very foundation as a place of "dreadful delight", full of promises and catastrophic dangers.

7 Here, the public and the audience are understood as comprising diverse publics and audiences. Therefore I use the plural form as proposed by Iveson (2007).

8 The number of categories could be extended to five, including D. the (in)visibility of the performer to diverse audiences, and E.

the (in)visibility of performance relics in exhibition and other spaces. Both are related to this discussion but would shift the present focus and therefore are left out. I am aware that there are some affinities with Henri Lefèbvre's (1974) concept of social space as perceived (*espace perçu*), conceived (*espace conçu*), and lived (*espace vécu*). While it would certainly be interesting to put it into relation to the concept of (in)visibilities presented here, space limitation commands to shelve this for another occasion.

9 AbdouMaliq Simone shows with great insight how certain immigrant groups in Hillbrow either demonstrate their presence publicly in the streets or prefer to remain unrecognized, for business or other reasons (Simone 2004: 412–14).

10 For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Ruga's performance work and the public space, see Siegenthaler (2009).

11 See also O'Toole (2010). As is the case with many of the titles Ruga uses for his works, the connection between the work and its title appears rather obscure at first sight. However, there are connections. For example, the status of immigrants in South Africa is comparable to that of Ruth in Israel. The performances as well as the name of *Beiruth* allude to the autonomy of a city or state and to the autonomy of the (foreign) body moving in it. On xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa in general, see Neocosmos (2006).

12 It is not absolutely clear whether *Beiruth* is male or female. While the artist talked about a "he" in his interview with David Brodie (Brodie and Ruga 2008) it was a "she" in the conversation with me (Siegenthaler and Ruga 2008). This ambivalence is peculiar to the very Trickster-like character of *Beiruth* whom I prefer to look at as an intersexual being. In the following, I will therefore refer to *Beiruth* as a s/he.

13 A large part of the controversially discussed film *District 9* takes place in such an informal settlement – the place where the "prawns" are temporarily housed. While the film can certainly be read historically referring to forced removals during apartheid, it

can also be interpreted as a parable describing the current state of many migrants in South Africa.

14 This township some forty kilometres north of Cape Town was founded by the apartheid government in the late seventies for "Coloureds", as the apartheid terminology defined people of mixed race. It has the reputation of being the absolute opposite of the utopian place of mythical Atlantis and suffers from social isolation, poverty, unemployment, drug abuse and – according to information by Ruga – child rape and child murder (see also Clayton 2007).

15 Frequently it is also related to witchcraft and therefore becomes an issue concerning the social group as a whole because a person who is bewitched is suspected of doing harm to his or her community. This social stigma is encountered in church communities, schools, and taxi ranks alike.

16 Newspapers have reported several incidents of discrimination and assaults on female commuters. For example, see the article "Abusive, sexist taxi drivers criticised", *Independent Online,* 28 February 2008, http://www.iol.co.za (accessed 26.05.2011).

17 Statements I encountered during my fieldwork in 2006, 2008, 2009 and 2011 in Johannesburg at various occasions, especially from cab drivers.

18 More on the *Kin:Be:Jozi* project, see: http://kinbejozi.blogspot.com (accessed 26.05.2011).

19 During my observations while researching and partly living in the inner city, I in fact never encountered a white woman walking around alone. In Newtown one may encounter groups of young white women, but usually they are in company. Other neighbourhoods, like the banking district, have been or are being upgraded; here the likelihood of meeting white women during working hours is rising.

20 I am speaking exclusively about the South African context. There are many similarities to the performance art and happening culture, for instance, in US-cities such as Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles in the seventies and eighties. Often, they evolved

from similar urban and social conditions as found in Johannesburg today.

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Reading Urbanity: Trans-Urban Assemblages in the N'ko Literacy and Healing Movement of West Africa

Joseph Hellweg
Sory Kourouma[1]

N'ko: Spelling the Social Imaginary

In 1949, a man named Souleymane Kanté invented an alphabet in which to write his mother tongue, Manding.[2] He did so in one of Côte d'Ivoire's early colonial capitals, Bingerville,[3] far from his home in the Batè region of Guinea, on the outskirts of the regional capital, Kankan (Oyler 1997; Oyler 2005: 87–89). More than an alphabet, N'ko became a social formation. Through N'ko, Kanté articulated the rules and tools for a kind of discourse that reflected and transmitted the urban circumstances in which he lived to those Africans excluded, under colonialism, from the urbanity of the French Republic's "civilizing mission". This *mission civilisatrice* ostensibly justified colonization by introducing Africans to literacy in French, along with other purported benefits of colonialism, such as access to biomedicine and public health (see Kelly and Kelly 2000; Conklin 1997).[4] Through the promotion of literacy in N'ko and the use of N'ko to record medicinal plant remedies, Kanté imagined an alternative to colonial urbanity in which West Africans controlled literacy and healthcare as well as the systems of education, publishing and healing that literacy sustained in colonial hands. After independence, Kanté's alphabet gave shape to a social network that gave Africans new access to alphabetic writing and healing in spaces beyond immediate state control, especially in urban areas where schools and hospitals were most prominent.[5] Kanté's project emerged from his experience of colonial urbanity but in contradistinction to it, in the interplay between encounter and distanciation that Till Förster (2013: 244) has described as definitive of urban life:

"Encounter is, preliminarily understood, an interaction where both actors perceive and recognize the difference of the other, respect it, and try to build on it in their relationship. Distanciation … stands for … an interaction where two actors adopt a disruptive attitude toward the other, trying to secure an independent agency."

Kanté's resolution of this tension through writing gave birth to a transnational network of practitioners who make urbanity available to those most removed from it (see Oyler 2005: 146), namely, Africans living in urban and rural areas who lack access to the educational and healthcare systems that manifest the state's presence in daily life. Kanté's alphabet, and its associated healing practices, internalized, in teachable form, the dynamics of encounter and distanciation definitive of urban experience in West Africa.

In this article,[6] I (Hellweg) follow Förster's (2013: 244) approach to African urbanity by reading N'ko as more than a "flicker" of urban creativity, for Kanté

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Schweizerische Afrikastudien
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Herausgegeben von der
Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Afrikastudien (SGAS)

Édité par la
Société suisse d'études africaines (SSEA)

Band/Tome 10

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The world we live in is marked by rapid urbanization. Already half of the world's population resides in urban settlements. This transformation is most dramatic in the global South, with Africa featuring the highest urbanization rates worldwide. However, to this day urban studies are largely informed by cities of the North which are taken as the standard. Only recently there has been a paradigmatic shift towards understanding the cities of the South not as a deviation, but as ordinary cities. It is in this context that the Centre for African Studies Basel, one of the University of Basel's centres of competence, chose urbanization in Africa as its joint research theme. Since 2008 the steadily growing number of PhD theses and other publications by members of our network points to this commitment and adds to the growing body of literature in the field.

This volume is based on contributions presented to a thematic conference of the Europe Africa Group of Interdisciplinary Studies AEGIS. The conference held in October 2010 brought together established and young scholars whose contributions give a good idea of what is going on in the field. As conveners we were particularly concerned with the creative tension at the interface of processes of intervention and invention in the rapidly growing African cities. What potential for the cities of the future can be created at this interface? What can be learned from the fast growing and often institutionally weak African cities and how can this new understanding inform policies and interventions, which work with – and not against – the inventive potential of urban dwellers? These questions, which at the time formed the core of a major funding application, informed eight panels focusing on urban management, landscape, post-conflict governance, health, creativity and tensions. A pre-conference held in cooperation with the Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries KFPE was concerned with the translation of urban research for development. The keynote lecture by Jo Beall of the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town seized on the question of invention and intervention directly and linked the two events.

On behalf of the editors I would like to thank Nigel Stephenson who did an excellent job on the copy-editing and proof-reading of the contributions at a stage when our energies were absorbed far too much by our daily duties, and Andrea Grolimund who administered the early stages of the publication project. Tilo Richter applied his great experience in the design and production of books, transforming a stack of academic texts into an appealing volume. This publication would not (yet) have seen the light of day if Brigit Obrist had not devoted a large part of a well-deserved sabbatical to the project. In this regard we would also like to extend special thanks to the contributors for bearing with us.

Basel, 29 July 2013