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Re-imagining Johannesburg: Nomadic Notions

Inhabiting the city

A manual labourer strides across a busy street on the eastern end of Johannesburg’s inner city. Head wrapped in a scarf, he disdains the tumultuous traffic and is seemingly another pedestrian making his way home at dusk. Utility vans and minibus taxis dice the dual-lane thoroughfare past scores of similar walkers shaving the road’s edge. The only question mark in this typical daily street scene is the audience, seated on either side of the road on plastic chairs, who eyeball one another and wonder what is going on. They politely wait, averting their noses from the rotten stench of an open drain fouling the March summer air.

The labourer returns. The reverse of his red jacket reads HOUSES FOR SALE. The distinctive colour evokes the city’s eviction team, dubbed ‘red ants’, summoned in extreme cases to remove tenants from illegally occupied inner city buildings that, in local parlance, are hijacked. His recurring presence signals that he is a performer, Sello Pesa, and the audience becomes more alert. A towering trolley bulging with plastic for recycling, pushed by a passerby, now seems vaguely familiar. The man in the blue sweater has also walked this way before. A pedestrian holds an umbrella in one hand and a bucket in the other, a casual incongruity that takes on gravitas. Another passerby precariously balances an oversized plastic bundle on her head. It is suddenly not altogether clear which part of this city is consciously enacted and which part is not, who is on stage and who is watching. Amber street lighting flickers on to add a theatrical
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glow as an edginess hovers among viewers of Dance Umbrella 2011, a week-long performance event in this South African metropolis of the global South.

Inhabitant, by Ntsoana Contemporary Dance Theatre, goes on to test ideas around risk in an everyday urban environment. The performers roll their bodies across this noisy rush-hour street, closely timing lulls with traffic, attracting casual hoots from passing motorists and drawing slack jaws from the plastic chairs. The intensity builds: a man drags his helmeted head against a rough wall to emit the urban equivalent of nails down a chalkboard while Pesa works himself into an apparent fit, lying in a disused metal oil drum at the kerbside. The denouement, when it comes, is like a slowly lowered volume dial. A speech broadcast behind a high wall cites Johannesburg’s patterns of demolition and development. The invisible orator quotes the City of Johannesburg’s 2030 vision statement, peppered with references to its current official tagline of ‘world class African city’, as the performers in contrast work themselves into sated collapse and the audience into conflicted attention.

Inhabitant is a key entry point for this book because it is emblematic of a growing group of contemporary visual artists in South Africa’s economic hub working in a performative mode. This is also true of the book’s case study to follow, New Imaginaries, which is a trilogy of art projects that explored public space in Johannesburg with different curatorial ends; they shared the key performance art trait of ephemerality along with a nomadic sensibility. These qualities run counter to the concrete world of the built environment in which these artistic interventions are set and contrary to more monumental public art that takes permanent, material form. They celebrate the temporary, fleeting and diffuse – an anti-memorial, if you will, that speaks to developing notions of counter publics rather than shoring up collectivist identities. They signal instead the shifting nature of the city’s multiple modalities and a broader ‘performative turn’ acknowledged in theory more generally and by human geography specifically in the 1990s (Dirksmeier and Helbrecht, 2010). As James Clifford writes in his book Routes, ‘Everyone’s on the move and has been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel…a view of human location constituted as much by displacement as by stasis’ (1997, p.2). It is not solely those who have travelled for one reason or another, good or bad, who inhabit the migrant life, writes Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, ‘it is