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Walking the Footloose City

Introduction: Shoe Shop

What is the role of a contemporary artist? This key question arose during the manifestation of Shoe Shop, a month-long project to 1 June 2012 around the politics and poetics of migration through walking and journeys, and continued to inform much of the New Imaginaries trilogy at large. That in turn was borne from discussions about cities and public space, according to Lien Heidenreich-Seleme, the head of Goethe-Institut cultural programmes Sub-Saharan Africa. ‘These raised questions…about whether there is public space in the city and who does it belong to or who owns it,’ she said at the project’s opening event on 4 May. Citing recent comments by Achille Mbembe regarding a stalemate in South Africa and a crisis of imagination, she added: ‘This is in a way our response together with a lot of partners…It is trying to imagine the city of Johannesburg in different ways’.

Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and Cara Snyman devised for Shoe Shop multiple events across project nodes in the city. These ranged from a processional parade (Figures 3.1 and 3.2) to photographic installations in public space, in particular walls and other boundary surfaces, to artist-led city walks, a film festival, workshops and dialogues centred around Braamfontein, a mixed-use central suburb. The project as a whole broadly celebrated movement through personal narratives, and an accompanying anthology Shoe Shop gave this literary shape. As Snyman put it at the opening event: ‘Our idea is that the exhibition is really a roaming exhibition – it’s about a roaming life
and a walking life.’ Earlier, she elaborated that it’s about people and movement through space, both the physicality of walking and its representation politically; it’s also about the inequalities of space, speaking about it in a different way and ‘making the road as we walk it’ (interview 10).

Rather than asking ‘where do you come from?’, the frame as such imagined a future instead and asked ‘where are you going?’, according to Goethe-Institut’s programme description. A plausible answer through the varied responses elicited in this exploration of public space could be: in search of common ground. This project overview articulates ways in which such a search became evident and how. It is a seed that evolves through the trilogy into a mooted form of common space through the third and final series, *Spines*.

**City affects: a walk that is not a walk**

Caroline Knowles brings the abstractions of globalisation theory into concrete terms through following ‘ordinary objects and routine journeys’ from people to a pair of flip-flops, along globalisation’s back