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Performing the Spectral City

Introduction: Traversing Spines

Edgar Pieterse, interviewed in Gary Hustwit’s Urbanized documentary, comments on the topic of cities and utopias:

I think the last five years or so there’s been a shift in the general awareness or consciousness about this urban question and I suppose it’s this hype around ‘we are now 50 per cent urban as a species’. It has in a way induced again this yearning for a utopia, that there is a kind of design solution that can deal with the environmental question... It has been interesting for me as a non-technical person to just see both at the level of these eco-cities, massive reinvestment in this very old idea that there is somehow waiting out there this perfect form and shape of the city that can solve all our problems and also this idea that somehow you can get rid of the messiness of urban life. And in a way, what makes cities interesting is that they’re messy and unpredictable and chaotic and crazy and they throw up the unexpected, which is what fuels us, right? (2011)

Spines, the third and final component of New Imaginaries, was a three-day performance art festival held over the first December 2012 weekend. It played with Johannesburg’s transport lines, or spines, as part of the trilogy’s broader exploration of public space. Participants, who had to sign up prior to both projects, were taken on parallel journeys that geographically intersected at Braamfontein’s Park Station, a
public transport interchange, but otherwise each took its own trajec-
tory through greater Johannesburg. Both these projects engaged with
Pieterse's sentiments, fuelled by the 'messy and unpredictable' nature
of cities, propelling us into possible futures by taking an imaginative
leap in the present and throwing up the unexpected.

United African Utopias, choreographed by João Orecchia, Tanja
Krone, Mpumi Mcata and Hans Narva, comprised a scripted narrative
journey through the inner city on foot (Figure 5.1–5.4). It ended with
a trip by high-speed train to Alexandra township, which lies immedi-
ately adjacent to the wealthy northern suburb of Sandton, and back
again to an inner city closure via blacked-out taxi with ambient music
playing. The key in this play was to imagine Johannesburg as utopia
in the here and now and participants experienced various forms of
traversing it, from walking to dancing to taxi commute and train. The
group was also immersed in a spectrum of sensibilities, from fantast-
tical guides wielding megaphones and umbrellas to blindfolded sen-
sory deprivation. The utopian play conflated along the way a sense of
fact and fiction, here and there, present and future, fear and desire.

Its sister series In House Project, curated by Sello Pesa and his
colleagues Brian Mtombu and Humphrey Maleka at Ntsoana Con-
temporary Dance Theatre, took participants in hired minibus taxis to
a variety of private homes and mixed-use sites where artists staged
various performative interventions. Its core idea, according to its
curators, was to encourage people to see from a new perspective and
find common things to talk about.

Spines as a whole played further with the notion introduced in
Chapter 2 of a fictive city, a multifaceted Johannesburg with no
clearly defined edges. These fractal worlds were bridged through
performative and evanescent encounter rather than concrete and per-
manent form – a New Imaginaries trait. Artistic interventions in public
space offered a novel way of reading the cityscape through deliberate
shifts in pace, direction and mood. How it is possible to move about,
and with what ease, is infused in Johannesburg with social, politi-
cal and economic significance. Space and power in South Africa are
integrally linked, weighted by an apartheid past and neo-apartheid
present, as flagged in Chapter 1. Spines cued such socio-spatial issues
through juxtapositions and artistic approaches that evoked in equal
measure curiosity and bafflement, intrigue and bemusement, wonder
and discomfort.