

Research Project

Visualizing Transformation: Contemporary Art in Johannesburg

Third-party funded project

Project title Visualizing Transformation: Contemporary Art in Johannesburg

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Organisation / Research unit

Departement Gesellschaftswissenschaften / Visuelle und politische Ethnologie (Förster)

Department

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Status Completed

This project is an extension of project no. 55947 and resulted in the PhD thesis "Imageries of Johannesburg. Visual Arts and Spatial Practices in a Transforming City" by Fiona Siegenthaler. It was submitted on 20 October 2011 to the Faculty of Philosophical and Historical Sciences of the University of Basel and approved in March 2012. Publication is in preparation.

The project's guiding question is:

- How do artists in Johannesburg perceive and reflect urbanity, social change, and transition in Johannesburg within their work?

Johannesburg has experienced a strong impact of urban and cultural change since the end of apartheid and the introduction of democracy in 1994, and many artists have been eagerly observing, commenting and reflecting this change in their work. To understand the reasons and the reasoning of individual artists to depict the city in the way they do and in what relationship these visual forms stand to the personal everyday experience of the city and of transition, is the aim of the thesis. It thus tries to uncover the interrelationship between existing imageries and discourses of the city, what role they play in the artists' own perception and reflections, and the imageries they in turn produce in their artwork. It answers questions such as where the artists are based, what they know about the city, and what discourses they perceive and reproduce. What relation do they have to the city in terms of spatial practices, modes of commuting through the city, in terms of social networks and location of their home or studio? What narrations and discourses underlie their works, and what moments in their biographies made the artists deal with Johannesburg?

Social transformation, spatial reshuffling, and ensuing new visibilities and invisibilities have all had an impact on the artists' perceptions of the city of Johannesburg and receive particular attention in this PhD project. It also attempts to offer an insight in how still today, in the post-apartheid era – albeit in new forms –, spatial practices shape imageries and discourses and vice versa. The focus lies on a specific city, Johannesburg, in a particular moment in time. However, aspects like contested public space, migration, the formation of new identities and the circulation of local, national and global aesthetics, markets and art histories are common to all major transforming cities worldwide.

Given the topic, the methodical approach is interdisciplinary. It is based on a combination of perspectives and methods from art history and anthropology, meeting in the recent discussion of visual culture as an emerging, interdisciplinary field of scholarly enquiry. A selection of artistic positions dealing with urban and social change covers different media like painting, photography, performance and more, and

thus provides for a concept of diverse, historically influenced “art histories” as well as a perspective on differing notions of public space in a transitional city and its role in the artists’ agency.

By bringing together the three aspects of social transformation, spatial practices and new formations of the visual and visibility in particular, I emphasize the interdependency of firstly the transitional social and political context, secondly the imageries produced from this context, and thirdly the everyday spatial practice and perception of the artists.

Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Till Förster (University of Basel) and Prof. Dr. Philip Ursprung (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich)

Field work in Johannesburg was carried out in 2006, 2008, 2009 and 2011. The PhD project was funded by the SNF (individual 6 month grant 2008; project grant 2009-2011), by the Freiwillige Akademische Gesellschaft (conference participation 2008) and by the University of Basel (conference participations 2006-2007).

Keywords Contemporary art, Johannesburg, urban change, spatial practice, visual culture, performance, photography, painting, printmaking, activist art, art in public space, installation

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Follow-up project of [55947 Visualizing Transformation: Contemporary Art in Johannesburg.](#)

Add publication

Published results

1017986, Förster, Till, Neue Medien - neue Wege: Imagination und das Leben der Bilder in Afrika, Leviathan. Berliner Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft, Publication: JournalArticle (Originalarbeit in einer wissenschaftlichen Zeitschrift)

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ID	Kreditinhaber	Kooperationspartner	Institution	Laufzeit - von	Laufzeit - bis
1276993	Förster, Till	Nettleton, Anitra, Prof.	University of the Witwatersrand, School of Arts	01.02.2008	30.09.2011
1276995	Förster, Till	Ursprung, Philip, Prof.	Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule ETH	01.08.2010	14.03.2012