



Relational Politics
~~***Zen and Terry go to lunch***~~

 Zen Marie

&

 Terry Kurgan

in Conversation, June 2012

ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 20:13 : INSERTED
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Zen Marie

> The ideas that frame my interest in *Hotel Yeoville* are collaborative processes of working, and working in the city. Johannesburg has hosted many projects that engage with urban spaces in a variety of ways. Friends from Cape Town often joke, 'Why do you guys do so much work in the city? Do you ever see us working with Table Mountain?' The idea of engaging with your environment as the prioritised framework is for some reason really strong in Johannesburg. What do you think this impulse to work in the city is about? Why do public, site-specific work?

Terry Kurgan

> Well I think these sorts of practices have proliferated around the world for the past fifteen years or so. Perhaps firstly as part of a contemporary art continuum that is always asking questions about what art *is* or *can be*. And then in response to shifting social and political realities in different parts of the world. For me, it's never *just* about the city. It's always about making public work or work in and about the city that interacts with private life. I suppose you could say I use the city and public space as part of my process and medium? Njabulo Ndebele writes about this. In a passionate essay called 'Thinking of Brenda', he talks about the art of the late South African pop icon Brenda Fassie, but much more about the significance of her highly publicised and sensational private life, which spilled out all over the place and attracted more media attention than her music. He thought that what Brenda did was radical, brave and important, and his essay is about the necessity for all of us to pour 'personal feeling and thinking into the public domain' in order to create a more human and trusting 'public home'. ~~We cannot tell what kind of public it will be, but we do need to release more and more personal data into our public home to bring about a more real human environment: more real because it is more honest, more trusting, and more expressive.~~ I'm of the generation before you, and grew up in apartheid South Africa. I left South Africa with my family when I was nineteen and lived in America for ten extremely formative years in cities like San Francisco and New York. I remember that when I returned to live in South Africa in 1989 (of course, following my heart) that it was still really not permissible to let your personal or intimate life, or sex, or beauty or pleasure be at the front of your agenda.

I was fascinated by the open parliamentary hearings that were held in 1997 in relation to overturning the abortion laws. Those were such heady, optimistic days. We had this great constitution and everyone was feeling very up about what might be possible in the new civil society we were building. I attended most of the hearings and followed the press. An incredible and unusual public conversation ensued about very personal stuff relating to women's bodies and pregnancy, but also to sex and rape and personal lives. Many people had something to say. ~~Of course,~~

TERRY KURGAN, 22/06/12 10:36 : DELETED

'We cannot tell what kind of public it will be, but we do need to release more and more personal data into our public home to bring about a more real human environment: more real because it is more honest, more trusting, and more expressive.'

ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 08:42 : DELETED

I'm of the generation before you, and grew up in apartheid South Africa. I left South Africa with my family when I was nineteen and lived in America for ten extremely formative years in cities like San Francisco and New York. I remember that when I returned to live in South Africa in 1988 (of course, following my heart) that it was still really not permissible to let your personal or intimate life, or sex, or beauty or pleasure be at the front of your agenda.

TERRY KURGAN, 22/06/12 10:50 : DELETED

Of course, abortion's one of those things people just can't agree upon.

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~~abortion's one of those things people just can't agree upon.~~ So in relation to your question, why engage with the city, with participatory public art projects? ~~My first public art project, *Maternal Exposures*, which I made for Groote Schuur and Mowbray maternity hospitals in Cape Town developed out of this conversation and tried to push it further.~~ I suppose my interest is always in the tension between the public and private realms, in public culture versus private experience. The best and most interesting art often has to do with incredibly small personal dramas and intimate experience that have repercussion in much bigger political, moral and public spheres.

ZM

> The first time we met, you kept apologising for the nostalgic elements in the project. ~~And you kept on saying that they're not all nostalgic.~~ You kept apologising for a kind of 'changing the world' agenda. That's what you called it, you said, 'this is not a project that's trying to change the world.'

TK

> Nostalgic? Did I say that? ~~You sure I didn't say sentimental? That might well have been my concern.~~ About changing the world though, I probably said that because all the way through the project I felt a tension between social and aesthetic narratives, and between what I knew I wanted from the project and what other people seemed to want from the project. It bothered me that because the project engaged with social and human rights issues and had some good intentions, it was judged or evaluated only on those grounds, and never on aesthetic grounds. I was making the project as an artist, not as a social worker or political activist.

ZM

> But what's wrong with social work?

TK

> Nothing, in and of itself. But that's not my business. And not what I was doing here. I wanted the project, principally, to engage ideas of collaborative contemporary art practice and representation, and what photographs, and images mean, and can do, once they are out in the world. And also, the possibility and potential of private lives being given a public stage. I remember seeing a piece in the *Mail & Guardian* arts section headed 'If there's one thing you have to do this week'. They had an interesting blurb on the project but I probably only paid attention to the part that I didn't like. They said 'you have to drop in on the "feel good" *Hotel Yeoville* project'. It did have a feel good aspect to it but that was deliberate and for many carefully considered reasons, and I didn't want that to be the defining way the project was experienced or seen.

ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 08:44 : DELETED

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TERRY KURGAN, 22/06/12 10:54 : DELETED

And you kept on saying that they're not all nostalgic.

TERRY KURGAN, 27/06/12 15:16 : DELETED

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ZM

> In relation to a lot of other South African art, especially under apartheid, you talk about your generation coming a bit before mine. That generation grew up through apartheid and produced very confrontational, provocative, maybe even masculine work. So it's not about feelings or intimacy. It's about bigger political issues, it's very serious. From the Bang Bang Club to Sue Williamson and Kendell Geers. They are all very hardcore. I think, relative to that, your work has a *softer* edge.

ZEN MARIE, 18/06/12 14:18 : INSERTED
Kendell Geers

TK

> **Were you going to say 'feminine'? Women are always stereotyped as being able to talk about personal stuff, and how they feel. But maybe that's what it is. My work is not cool in temperature. It's warm in temperature. And I think South Africans still have a really hard time with that.**

ZM

> ~~There's a race thing in here which I also really want to get to. Is it a missionary impulse? Is it a sense of guilt, of needing to reconcile something that's not quite coherent in terms of white experience in SA? There's something about that which is really a question of whiteness in relationship to the city.~~

ZEN MARIE, 18/06/12 14:19 : DELETED
ZM

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TK

> ~~I'm going to answer that question as best I can for now.~~ **I was asked the question, in the middle of *Hotel Yeoville*'s run, 'Why do you make work like this?' This was an artist colleague who has a dedicated studio practice, and who only ever makes work for gallery projects and seems to have this very calm, much easier to contain and control, everyday life. It was during the hardest time of our project. We had some difficult technical and practical problems. The roof of the library was leaking badly, all over our installation, and I just couldn't find my way through the public works systems to somebody who actually cared.**

> I'm going to answer that question as best I can for now.

TERRY KURGAN, 22/06/12 12:04 : INSERTED
We had some difficult technical and practical problems.

But, going back to the macho white public arts approach, are you saying that this sort of project isn't a confident, macho, strident project by contrast?

ZM

> Yes, I think it's not on many levels. It was never permanent. It's about something ephemeral, it's about narratives. There's a fleetingness to the project that sets it up as different. And there's a general tone in its set up, which is different even to some of the work that you've done with Jo Ractliffe that is much harder-edged. I'm crudely simplifying these things ...

TK

> **I know what you mean. The project was pink, warm, inclusive and**

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happy. But this was a deliberate and self-conscious frame that we made, in an attempt to create distance – a poetic distance – from politics, and to free the work from the repetitive, abstract and looping way that the media represents xenophobic violence. We were very consciously framing *Hotel Yeoville* as a utopian or idealised space.

But then there are other reasons for the tone. One is my personality, and we know I have my early childhood to blame for that. The dynamics in my particular family have made me someone who really needs to engage with other people. I'm gregarious. I find studio practice quite lonely. I do that as well, but I need to combine it with working with other people in relation to social issues and public spaces that are not part of my everyday life in a leafy Johannesburg suburb. I like meeting new people and talking to them about their lives, finding out something about what drives them. I fall in love with people easily. My projects usually enable quite personal conversations. Public issues and private lives, I suppose that's me. Looking at what can and can't be said in the public realm. And then pushing at the boundaries.

ZM

> It seems always to come back to a very personal set of impulses and I see that I am trying to push towards a more political reading. Is it that clear for you, that it's not a political project?

TK

> It is *also* a political project, would be a better way to put it. There are aesthetic, social and political issues at stake. I think I often work with this tension. The political issues are to do with South Africa's utter lack of hospitality to people coming to live here from other countries, usually because they have to, ~~because of war, or economic need, or other political and economic instability in their home countries~~ and not because they want to. And they come here with jobs and skills and we should make it easier for them. Also a project like this, really, is to do with that well-worn but still very expressive cliché, that the personal *is* political.

ZM

> The more you say that this isn't about changing the world, the more I start to think that if you compare the success of *Hotel Yeoville* to the government's official initiatives on immigration and xenophobia, quite possibly you could find a space that argues that this project *does* change something, not the world, but a particular dynamic with a very small group. It's not national in scale and scope and it's not pretending to effect change but it is inserting a set of ideas and processes into a community.

TERRY KURGAN, 22/06/12 12:51 : DELETED
because of war, or economic need, or other
political and economic instability in their
home countries

ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 08:56 : INSERTED
official initiatives

ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 08:57 : INSERTED
community





TK

› It's responding to a political and social situation that I think is going nowhere. When I walked around the suburb of Yeoville and saw educated people unable to use their qualifications or professions, and successful businesses where South Africans [were even being employed by foreigners], I thought, Jesus, how can we do something about this? There's that impulse – how can I use what I do to engage with these issues in an interesting and unusual way? But it needed also to meet my needs and interests as an artist and connect to threads and concerns that preoccupy me anyway. ~~I did try, not to 'change the world', I use that here again flippantly! But I did try to think art and politics together.~~

My original ambition was to leave the resources and social networking aspect of the project behind and for it to take off and take care of itself, and if I had been able to attract or leverage the right business interest I would have tried to turn it into a real-life, small business project like I did in Joubert Park with the photographers. One of my urban planning colleagues developed a feasibility study and business plan for Hotel Yeoville. So I suppose there is a part of me that tries to effect change and make things better. With *Joubert Park Project*, the first Johannesburg public art project that I did, as much as it was an artist's work, an interpretation and response to the economy and culture of the park, so too was it a good small business idea. Had I not had my own financial imperatives and work to get on with, I might have pushed it as I was being encouraged to do by many people. I could have turned it into some kind of good small business idea for other people, but that's not what I want to do.

ZM

› How does working through the framework of contemporary art – 'fine art', however you want to define it – change projects that could be considered social work, small business entrepreneurship, community activism etc? Does the prism of fine art contribute any benefit to that process?

TK

› Well, I think the context, objectives and audiences of these different sorts of projects (ie art and social work/activism) are completely different. I felt that my particular project was about trying to start and hold a conversation with several communities, or circles, or groups of people at the same time. And one of those was very definitely an art world audience. But if I understand you correctly, you're asking me whether 'the art project' benefits the community or social/public context into which it is projected?

I think this is complicated terrain, if that's a general question about participatory public art projects. Some do and some don't. There are

ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 08:59 : COMMENTED

What is strange about this situation to qualify the 'even'? it appears that it is somehow 'wrong' for South Africans to work for foreigners. We wouldn't say that about S.A. citizens working for Makro – which is owned by Walmart?

TERRY KURGAN, 10/07/12 12:51 : DELETED

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TERRY KURGAN, 24/06/12 13:28 : INSERTED

developed a feasibility study and business plan for *Hotel Yeoville*.

ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 09:04 : INSERTED

How does working through the framework of contemporary art – 'fine art', however you want to define it – change

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small business entrepreneurship

ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 09:06 : INSERTED

context

ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 09:05 : INSERTED

and audiences

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always questions of power and legitimacy and who wants what, that circulate all the time. For one small example, we hosted the contestants of a Miss Yeoville competition in our Photo and Video Booths at the request of a local events organiser. I know that with *Hotel Yeoville*, I *tried* to do both things at the same time, working with the notion of culture as infrastructure. ~~I went up and down about the project during its run. About how it was doing. And even though there was an incredibly enthusiastic uptake I kept wondering whether it was answering interesting questions for me, issues that run through my practise about representation. I am really only able to see that now, while editing and auditing the enormous number of images and other things the project made.~~ While the project ran, its value as a *thing in the world*, oscillated all the time between questions of [aesthetic autonomy and socio-political potential]. ~~You know, this is also always complicated by one's responsibility to one's funders and their agenda. It's interesting to note that our principal funders, the Ford Foundation, who were really wonderful by the way, and who gave our project legs, their funding came from both their human rights and their arts and culture portfolios.~~ I noticed, during our run, that the part of the project, after the Photo and Video Booths, that people liked best, was the Directory Booth – a classifieds, directory and resources centre. It was my sense that a large number of South Africans and immigrants using our project wanted it to be able to improve their lives. In simple and practical ways. A sort of 'help me get on with my life desk'. I bump into people all the time, in Yeoville and elsewhere, who tell me how sorry they are that the installation in the library is closed. They are really puzzled by this. And I suppose that does answer your question in a way. I really wanted to leave the useful resource aspect of the project behind to sustain itself, and turn *Hotel Yeoville* from an art project into a small business idea, but keeping the art project intact. I really tried hard to do this.

ZM

> It's clear how this project can work, or be misinterpreted, as community activism, just in the manifestation of it in the site, and in people's responses to it. Is it problematic that they don't respond to it as an artwork? I suppose I am being presumptuous in saying that they don't. But there's seemingly a gap between this as an artwork and this as a point of engagement with the community. The community probably appreciated it as a point of engagement and a facility to give a human space in a very difficult context. They didn't see it as art. Maybe it's a question of to what extent they do see it as art.

TK

> I think our visitors and participants saw the project as something curious, something interesting, helpful and definitely fun. In their own

TERRY KURGAN, 25/06/12 12:36 : DELETED

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ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 09:10 : COMMENTED

These ideas of aesthctic autonomy and political potential seem to lead to another question: how do you define them? How do they work across the registers of contemporary art and activism? I'm not sure if we have space to open these issues up here?

TERRY KURGAN, 27/06/12 13:38 : DELETED

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TERRY KURGAN, 25/06/12 12:39 : INSERTED
and resources





interests. They loved the digital interactive technology and hospitable environment we had built. There were many messages left behind in the space that record pleasure at being 'seen', at being able to put something out there in the company of like-minded others. ~~People said this in many different ways.~~ In fact the messages became a little embarrassing in their praise of the project. We really wanted a blunter-edged reflection at times. But I think you're right. They didn't see it as an artwork. But very complicated issues arise when you try and embed your practice in a social context through a collaborative or reciprocal relationship to that site. It does not necessarily make everyone and everything equal. I kept thinking that this participatory art project was doing one thing within this suburb, and another amongst those who understood the language of this sort of practice.

ZM

› Then when it's manifested in the book, through the design, through the choice of Fourthwall Books as publishers, it situates itself as artwork. What is the aim of the book?

TK

› The book is the place where all of this work, these many products and processes, are interpreted and reframed and seen alongside and in relation to each other. And where a particular approach to participatory public art practice is articulated. I can see much more clearly now, while putting the book together, that the project had two distinct parts to it. The first part was an elaborate, participatory process and 'object' that we made, in relation to a research process, in order to gather material and images to make the second part. The first part of the work and the complex social interactions and experiences leading to its production 'belonged' – if I can put it like that – to all the collaborators and participants. And the second part of the work, representing and reinterpreting it in this book, or for exhibition elsewhere, belongs to me. One example helps here: one of the most interesting outcomes of the project, and only really visible when looking at everything en masse and in retrospect, was the relationship between the platforms we used and identity performance. It was very interesting in this context, to sort through and edit hundreds and thousands of photographs in which almost everyone was performing a version of themselves. There were so many mini-celebrities, with AKA aliases, *doing* TV. There is a very distinct way of performing oneself to the world for social media platforms and this really interested me because of how it connected to my interest in performance in relation to photography. And so the book is where some of this material is reframed to tell another story. The project was so many research processes that informed the making of something. And then the thing we made produced new research all over again.

TERRY KURGAN, 27/06/12 15:26 : DELETED

People said this in many different ways.

ZEN MARIE, 18/06/12 14:23 : INSERTED

What is the aim of the book?

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ZM

> The question of ownership is a potentially contentious one. It could be argued that artists (as well as NGOs or activists) who 'rely' on sickness, poverty or social issues, make their living on the backs of this suffering. How would you respond to this critique?

TK

> I think that really depends upon one's means of exchange. Immigrant residents of Yeoville are of an entrepreneurial bent, ~~(they would have to be, to have got and settled here in the first place)~~ and, given the barriers to their participation in South African society, are driven by some urgent economic imperatives. People often interacted with me (and my team) in terms such as: 'OK, this is very nice, but what's in it for me?' I had to think about that a lot. The British artist Phil Collins is always a tourist in the space of 'the other', just the way we were in Yeoville. But he is always very clear about his means of exchange and hires and pays people for their participation in his projects so that the products are unequivocally his. I am thinking, for example, of a video installation he made with Palestinian teenagers in Ramallah, called *They Shoot Horses*, for which he paid nine kids to dance continuously to pop music for eight hours. Francis Alÿs is another artist who works collaboratively in public space with others. For a work called *When Faith Moves Mountains* he paid 500 people to move a sand dune a few centimetres, which process he documented and then presented in galleries. I have read that he considered these participants to be the executors, but not the authors of his work.

In terms of our project, participants took a duplicate set of their photographs (made and printed in the Photo Booth) away with them. They also had online access to everything they produced and uploaded to our site. They contributed to and made use of a growing neighbourhood directory. There was a spirit of reciprocity to the project, but I never felt as though there was an equal distribution of agency. In a recent post on the culture/technology/digital arts website *Vague Terrain*, the blogger Jaenine Parkinson writes in anticipation of the publication of Claire Bishop's new book, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*: 'Participation is not an end in itself, instead it delivers a messy knot of concerns including asking questions about who can be involved, in what ways, under which circumstances, and at whose expense.' This sums it up very well for me.

ZM

> You do talk about the research process. It's foregrounded in your methodology that this is about research.

ZEN MARIE, 27/06/12 09:13 : INSERTED

The question of ownership is a potentially contentious one. It could be argued that artists (as well as NGOs or activists) who 'rely' on sickness, poverty or social issues, make their living on the backs of this suffering. How would you respond to this critique?

TERRY KURGAN, 27/06/12 14:50 : DELETED

, (they would have to be, to have got and settled here in the first place)





TK

› It is how I come to a project of this nature. I start somewhere with no clear idea of where I might end up and it goes along with a great deal of self-doubt and uncertainty. That's my process, but again, also probably my personality. I'm inspired by muf, an all-women art and architectural practice based in London. They do fantastic projects in relation to unusual research processes, like one in which they bring sheep and meadows to a terribly glum housing estate in London. A chapter called 'Room for Doubt' in a monograph about their practice has only one paragraph that goes like this:

In English there is a phrase, 'room for doubt', meaning that there are some questions that do not have a 'yes' or 'no' answer and that there is a space of doubt, of questioning. I think for us success can be measured in the confidence we have *not* to give a simple answer but to give space for that uncertainty.

This really resonates with me, especially as I do the reflection that is necessary for putting together this book.

ZM

› Muf putting sheep in a housing estate – it's a provocation!

TK

› I think that had you seen the project in its context in the Yeoville neighbourhood, rather than in documentation only, you would have found it to be a provocation in much the same way. It was warm, hospitable, pink and glowing in the middle of some very tough and contested urban terrain. Most immediately, the library staff resented it being there in the middle of their space. I tried really hard to win and charm them over, and make them feel as though they owned it, but they minded the extra crowds and upbeat energy it brought into their space and it disturbed their lethargy and equilibrium. I also think they had their own very definite views on a project that tried to get South Africans and foreigners talking to each other about personal life experience. It was very depressing to see them inhabit this brand new library space with so little enthusiasm or initiative. I think this is part and parcel of public service culture in South Africa at the present. Maybe, if we had been able to put it in a shop front, which is where we wanted to put it, it would have been more of a provocation in your terms. We wanted to put it on the street, but we couldn't afford to. The library, with its dedicated exhibition space, hanging over the street in the middle of the busy shopping hub was in certain ways a compromise spatial solution.





ZM

> How do you develop that provocative edge when your medium is people's stories?

TK

> Well, I think perhaps we did. If you think about the social and political context in which we made this project, then a warm, pink Photo Booth portrait of a thirty-five-year-old Nigerian man cuddling his beaded and braided three-year-old daughter, annotated with the wish that when she grows up she will read and use the library, *is* provocative, don't you think?

TERRY KURGAN, 27/06/12 16:23 : INSERTED
warm, pink

This interview was commissioned for and first published in Terry Kurgan's book *Hotel Yeoville* (Johannesburg:Fourthwall Books, 2013).

Terry Kurgan lives in Johannesburg. She runs an active studio and public sphere practice and has created a diverse body of artwork that explores notions of intimacy, pushing at the boundaries between 'the private' and 'the public' in the South African cultural domain. She works across a broad range of media from drawing, printmaking and photography to enlisting public participation in a practice that produces human interaction and social experiences. Domestic photography is a central theme in her practice. For more information about her work: www.terrykurgan.com

Zen Marie is an artist based in Johannesburg, South Africa. He lectures in the visual art department at the WITS School of Art. While trained in photography and sculpture, he works in a range of media from textual to performative modes of expression. For more information about his work: <https://sites.google.com/site/zenmarienow>

Hotel Yeoville

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