

Public Art/Private Lives
A.K.A.
Hotel Yeoville

Terry Kurgan



The city is a kind of interlocutor. It was just about listening to the music of the city. The second stage was to build some kind of archive of all the different sonorities that the railings and architectural patterns could offer, a kind of repertoire. Once that has been done, the logical step was to start playing with the instrument, to improvise, to see how far this could get me ...

– Francis Alijs¹

Prologue

Hotel Yeoville was a public art experiment: a multi-platform project that I directed and produced over a period of three years, in collaboration with a large and diverse cast who will introduce themselves across the pages of this book. Our work took place in Yeoville, an old, working-class suburb on the eastern edge of the inner city of Johannesburg, which has always been a foothold for newcomers to this city. Yeoville is now largely inhabited by micro-communities of immigrants and refugees from many other parts of the African continent. Isolated and excluded from the formal economy and mainstream South African society, their dominant engagement is with each other and with home in faraway places. In this inhospitable public domain, *Hotel Yeoville* explored the capacity of ‘acts of intimate exposure’ to enable people to make human connections with others.²

The project found its forms through a series of probes and interventions, including a research process, the launching of a website and, importantly, an interactive exhibition housed inside a brand new public library on the suburb’s vibrant Rockey/Raleigh high streets. But this was not a linear exercise. It developed along circuitous and iterative trajectories of research, planning and exhibition-in-progress that welcomed audience participation in a space of playful and active production. The exhibition installation was comprised of a series of private booths in which visitors were invited to document themselves through a range of interactive

¹ This 2006 interview with James Lingwood is included in Stephen Johnstone (ed.), 2008. *Documents of Contemporary Art: The Everyday*, London: The MIT Press with Whitechapel Art Gallery, 140.

² Kerry Bystrom, 2012. ‘Johannesburg Interiors: On Homes, Hotels and Hospitality’ in special issue of *Cultural Studies Journal*, *Private Lives and Public Cultures in South Africa*, Kerry Bystrom & Sarah Nuttall (eds.).

digital interfaces and online social media applications, thereby bringing various forms of personal expression and intimate experience into public circulation. All the content produced populated the real-world, physical space that the project occupied, and then was subsequently mirrored virtually on a website.³

This book reflects upon the process and products of the *Hotel Yeoville* project. It documents and articulates a particular approach to art practice in the public domain; a way of working in the world that turns ‘audience’ into ‘actors’; where experience and social interaction take precedence over documentary or observation. We unpack the project’s starting points, philosophical underpinnings, our intentions, and a sense of the context. We describe our engagement, some acts of resistance, and the body of work produced. This book also binds the work. Itself a new object and product of the project, it is a point of navigation through the many inter-related processes that brought the work into being, and the one place where these are re-presented and interpreted in relation to each other.

Hotels

*Hotels are often the mainstay for complex multi-plot stories. Culture constantly returns to the malevolent or celebratory quality of hotels: Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) being an example of the former, while Leonard Cohen’s wistful reminiscences of the Chelsea Hotel recall the furtive, sexual potential inherent in even the most dingy of cheap rooms. Hotels are deeply introverted agglomerations of transient private space, rewritten over and over again – amnesia, courtesy of freshly folded bed linen.*

– Shumon Basar⁴

It’s curious how sometimes things collide and connect, or just very simply cross paths. I came across this quotation while doing online research on Thomas Hirschhorn’s projects. I noticed he had made a work called *Hotel Democracy*, and, curious to see what his version of ‘hotel’ meant, I googled the project. Halfway down the page was an *ArtReview* blog post by Shumon Basar, a review

³ www.hotelyeoville.co.za.

⁴ ‘Blogging Basel: Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Hotel Democracy* Open for Business at Art Unlimited’, <http://www.artreview.com/profiles/blog/show?id=1474022%3ABlogPost%3A257827>.

of Hirschhorn's work on the 2008 edition of Art Basel. This article by the London-based curator and writer immediately attracted my first click, because in preparation for my introduction to this volume, and in trying to formulate my (rather intuitive) approach to participatory, public realm art practice and my own tendency to 'actively trespass into neighbouring or alien fields of knowledge'⁵ I was reading an interesting book Basar co-edited: *Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice*.⁶

I was, at the same time, reading Patti Smith's *Just Kids*,⁷ a moving and tender account of her intimate relationship with the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe in the epochal days of New York City and the Chelsea Hotel, home to an extraordinary cast of characters through the 1970s.

In the late eighties I was fresh out of art school in California, and my first job was in a book design studio directly across from this legendary hotel on 23rd Street. I remember long hours working with images, columns, copy and fonts, and every now and again, looking down at the iconic red neon to see whether I could spot anybody famous at the entrance, and also wondering who those rooms across from my desk might remember. I had been brought up on so much of their glamour and greatness.

In Basar's formulation, Hirschhorn's version of hotel was 'a more violent clash of the private and the public' than either our project or the quote above describes it, but nonetheless, his graceful meditation was at once synchronous and evocative, and resonated for me in terms of both the artistic and social space of *Hotel Yeoville*: the poetry that is often there in the shadows of things, like beauty in sadness, and then of course, in terms of the many fleeting encounters, fortuitous coincidences and intimate revelation that our own 'multi-plot story' engendered.

Joubert Park to Rocky Street

Hotel Yeoville developed, as do many of my projects, out of my interest in the often-unpredictable possibilities of working in the public realm, and out of questions raised by two earlier works, *Joubert Park Project* (2001) and *Park Pictures* (2004).

5 Quoted from the back cover blurb of Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar (eds.), 2006. *Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

6 Ibid.

7 Patti Smith, 2010. *Just Kids*, New York: Ecco.

These projects, about photography and migration, were made with a group of forty street photographers who operate from fixed positions out of a rare green space in the dense inner city of Johannesburg. Joubert Park is surrounded by what was once a thriving residential, retail and business centre for the city's white middle class, who abandoned it in the early eighties for the suburbs, with their decentralised malls and business parks. During the last fifteen years and more, there has been a great surge of migration to the centre of the city, with large numbers of South African migrants and African émigrés claiming it as their own; often living under precarious and overcrowded conditions in slumlord-owned apartments, and in mothballed former office buildings. The photographers respond to the desire of their clients to be imaged in the city that has probably only recently become home. Their own status as migrants often corresponds with the lived experience of their clients, at whose disposal they place a visual technology capable of rendering potentially shared aspirations concrete. Each photographer carries around, as a matter of course, a huge number of still-to-be-claimed photographs.⁸ When they showed me their stored packages of unclaimed or rejected photographs, I was interested to see the difference between who they were photographing ten, fifteen years ago and the diversity of the clientele they were photographing in 2004.

While much of the detail of these projects is outside the frame of this text, some of the social conditions and aesthetic questions that arose in their making found their way into the early thinking of *Hotel Yeoville*.⁹

The park photographers constitute a complex and highly organised informal business sector – and operate according to their own set of rules, exchanges and regulations. They all have their roots elsewhere, and the inviolably fixed position that each person occupies is dependent upon far-reaching networks and flows of complicity, cooperation, family and other affiliation.

8 At that time, it was the photographers' practice to cover their costs by charging clients fifty percent of the fee on the day that the photograph was taken. They would issue a receipt, and get paid the other half upon collection of the print. They told me that at least half of all the photographs they shot were never claimed.

9 For a more detailed discussion see Louise Bethlehem and Terry Kurgan, 'Park Pictures: On the Work of Photography in Johannesburg' in Lynn Schler, Louise Bethlehem and Galia Sabar (eds.), 2010. *Rethinking Labour in Africa, Past and Present*, London: Routledge.



| Ginibel Mabih Forsuh and Frank Assimbo in conversation outside Newnet Internet Café, Rocky Street, Yeoville 2008.

The right to occupy a particular wrought-iron bench, large rock on the grass, or low wall perch along a cobbled pathway, is often purchased or negotiated as far away from the inner city of Johannesburg as a rural village in Mozambique or Zimbabwe. My projects in the park brought me into contact and conversation with many people from other parts of the African continent often living here against very difficult odds.

Two years later, I found myself on a commission with a colleague in the suburb of Yeoville. Until the early 1990s Yeoville was a densely populated, working-class, student and immigrant white neighbourhood. It was always the place that white immigrants started from before they began their journey – both

north and upwards into the middle classes of Johannesburg. After the first democratic elections in 1994, its proximity to employment and the city centre made Yeoville the preferred destination for a predominantly black, working-class population now rapidly moving to the city from the far-flung black townships and rural areas of South Africa, and from elsewhere on the African continent. As a consequence, white residents slowly began to move away, taking their business and their money with them.

My colleague was researching a newly commissioned urban management plan, and my job was to find and photograph the blurred and interesting boundaries between public and private space. The diversity of the neighbourhood was immediately

very striking. A mixture of South Africans and immigrants from countries like Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Somalia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

It was a languid, muggy Johannesburg summer day, and sitting on a bench in the shade outside the Newnet Internet Café, I chatted to Ginibel Mabih Forsuh, who grew up in Limbe in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. She studied business science at university, and then in 2006, recently graduated and aged twenty-two, she followed her fiancé, who had moved here a few years earlier. 'Ce chien de menteur!'¹⁰ had taken up with somebody else in her absence, and so Forsuh found herself stranded in a foreign city, needing to rely upon her own resources. She started work at an Internet café owned by a Cameroonian she had met through 'home' networks, and within a year had saved enough to initiate a partnership and her own Cyber Zone business on Twist and Van der Merwe Streets in Hillbrow. Ten months later, after repeated police and landlord harassment, (both taking advantage of Forsuh and her partners' vulnerable temporary residence status), they were forced to close their modestly profitable business.¹¹

Our conversation curved around a wistful turn from the vagaries of looking for love to the difficulty of finding work. Taking up a perch alongside us, sharply dressed Frank Assimbo, formerly a teacher of French literature and philosophy at the University of Kinshasa, sifted through his folder of papers and pleasantly joined in our conversation. He had come to the store to photocopy his degrees for an application for a teaching job. He had, by this time, spent several years trying to obtain South African residential and work permits and, in the interim, was running computer literacy classes for adults from his apartment on Yeo Street. They introduced us to some of their friends as they passed by, and then we all drifted off to the Afro-themed Nando's on Fortesque Street, for a Coke.

10 'This lying dog!'

11 'There were some cops that already came to my place a few months ago and they made me so angry! Anyway, their arrival this time was the last straw! I was already having problems with the landlord who was always giving me unreasonable issues. The cops, this time stole all of my stuff. I didn't know that the cops in South Africa have the right to steal? They stole my jewellery; they stole the flash drives, DVDs, and all the other goods I used to sell in my business. They also took about R3000 in cash from me. Yaah. So we just decided to close the shop.' Quoted from a recorded conversation, with kind permission of Ginibel Mabih Forsuh, August 2008.

I was interested in the detail: the throbbing street life and conditions on the high street – a lively hub of new and old shop fronts, bars, restaurants, Internet cafés, and, in spite of Johannesburg City law enforcers' efforts to demarcate confined spaces for informal trade – dense with layer upon layer of street traders. We were browsing through a pavement display of music CDs when a crew of policemen began to conduct a raid half way up the block, aggressively netting people who did not have the requisite documents. In less than a heartbeat the block had emptied and I was once again struck by South Africa's far from welcoming response to movement down the continent. I was also left reflecting, after numerous casual and friendly conversations with many interesting people we had met through the day, on the extraordinary level of education, the entrepreneurial skills and the willingness to take risks that many migrants bring here with them.¹²

Television and print media relentlessly direct our gaze towards the violence and conflict between South Africans and Africans who have come here from other parts of the continent. Very rarely is a successful immigrant, with an ordinarily mundane and repetitive life, reported upon. The images of migrants and refugees that we are presented with are usually of abject and universalised types, standing in for oppression and (always noble) suffering, and are of course integral to the representational politics that surround mobility – symbols of a much larger argument.

Laying the Ground

A few ideas began to churn. I started to think about making a new project in Yeoville, of finding ways to talk back to this big and abstract story; taking it away from the body politic to little, intimate stories about this particular person's loss, that particular

12 'Whereas many South Africans arriving in central Johannesburg are from rural areas and peri-urban townships, 'more than 95% of non-nationals have spent their lives in cities or towns before leaving for South Africa. Foreign migrants also have disproportionately higher levels of technical and academic qualifications and bring with them the skills needed to survive in cities.' C. Kihato, C. Landau and L. Landau, 2006, 'The Uncaptured Urbanite: Migration and State Power in Johannesburg', the Forced Migration Studies Working Paper Series, Working Paper# 25, http://migration.org.za/research/downloads/papers/25_kihatolandau.pdf.

person's dreams – his great hairstyle, her exquisitely styled shoes and her determined search for the perfect man!

My practice entails defining a new project first, and only then finding the right medium and space for the job. This research involves looking at physical and social conditions 'on the ground', paying attention to the details of the built environment and also to how people live in and move through this space, accommodating it to their own needs.¹³

I find affinities with the procedures of artist Francis Aljys, who describes his interaction with a new context thus:

My own reaction to the place [where I arrive to make a project] is itself subjective: it is a bit of a dance between my own concerns or obsessions that I carry with me over there and their meeting with that place, that clash that will eventually lead to a concrete reaction, a piece, or nothing. And it is never just about the place ... you arrive with a series of little sparks. You try them out in your mind when you're there and they quickly light up or die away. To begin with you have a kind of pen pal relationship to the place, you imagine all kinds of potential scenarios, but really it is only on location that you understand what might be relevant.¹⁴

I was mindful of my position as an uninvited outsider (a 'tourist'), and of the pitfalls of parachuting a project (or a large object) into a neighbourhood that had not asked for it in the first place. With these thoughts on the back burner, I turned toward the equally challenging trajectory of very practical tasks like drawing together a start-up project team, writing (many) funding proposals, imagining possible research processes and partnerships, and finding the right institutional base.

The African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS), a graduate research and teaching programme at the University of the Witwatersrand, welcomed a trans-disciplinary approach to

13 This accommodation is particularly evident in Yeoville. With white middle-class residents having moved away from the suburb, property owners began to neglect their properties because of uncertainty about their value in the context of this demographic change. They also tend to exploit the vulnerable and tenuous status of their new tenants – massively raising rents and neglecting to provide essential services.

14 Klaus Biesenbach and Cara Starke, 2010. 'Francis Aljys: A to Z', in Mark Godfrey and Klaus Biesenbach (eds.), *Francis Aljys: A Story of Deception*, London: Tate, 35.

their terrain and with interested colleagues and an apposite home base we were able to secure our project funding.

Past experience had taught me that working collaboratively in the public realm involves being able to build relationships, and in good faith, to navigate one's way through a complex set of power relations and negotiations – between artists, other professionals, project partners, project funders, stakeholders, residents, participants and audience – that eventually, for better or worse, animate and bring the work into being. This shifting matrix of relationships forms the delicate foundation upon which everything is layered and is as much a part of the final product as everything else that is produced along the way.

The London-based, all-women art and architecture practice, muf, who are committed to working in public space, have this to say about collaboration:

Collaboration operates across a range from the accidental to the deliberate, from the shadowing or paralleling of work to various kinds of wanted and unwanted interference ... although it sounds obvious to say it, collaboration is about difference, otherwise why bother? Acknowledging difference opens up a space to recognise what you don't know, what you do know and what you didn't know you knew!¹⁵

Our initial project team comprised John Spiropoulos, an urban practitioner, with whom my early thinking about the project developed; George Lebone, a Yeoville community activist who facilitated our initial access to people and places in the neighbourhood; Jean-Pierre Misago, a PhD student at ACMS from Burundi who helped us design a first research process aligned with his own enquiry into the experiences of migrant communities in Johannesburg; and Belinda Blignaut, an artist and designer who came up with the look and feel of our first website. *Hotel Yeoville*, before it became a physical and virtual 'thing' embedded in its specific locale, was incubated in an eighteen-month history of research, development and planning.

The project's name came to us very easily. We were thinking about 'hotel' as a place that offers intimate and temporary private space to people from many different places of origin; and Yeoville, a place where many people we met seemed to have a tenuous

15 Rosa Ainley (ed.), 2001. *This is What We Do: A muf Manual*, London: Ellipsis, 29.

hold on both. But, it bothered some Yeoville community leaders and activists who needed to see the suburb as a cohesive whole, rather than a disparate group of South African and immigrant communities with their own clear and separate national identities living alongside each other by happenstance. It also brought several people rushing up the stairs, clutching references that attested to their experience of working in hotels. And there were floods of emails from manufacturers of ashtrays, reading lights and bedside tables in China. But, it was the one and only thing about which we were ever absolutely certain. For the rest, well, it felt, much of the way, like a wildly experimental (and risky) blind date. In a sense our first relationship of trust had to be with the process, and the unfolding of an unpredictable project.

So This is What We Did

1 Walking the Grid

We spent several weeks methodically walking the suburban grid and talking with anybody who smiled at us as they went about their day. It was our sense that the word ‘community’ was not a very useful one in the context of Yeoville. We met a heterogeneous mix of people from almost every country on the continent. There was also a distinct pecking order. South Africans, and then Nigerians, on top, and everybody else in-between, with Zimbabweans at the bottom, and blamed for everything.

We kept our focus on drawing upon what we might find, and noticed two things most particularly. The first, wrapping around the Shoprite supermarket,¹⁶ was a whole suburban block of wall space covered in notices. Sheets and scraps of multi-coloured paper with hand-written notes in English and French offered or sought shared accommodation, employment, money transfers, baby clothes, lounge suites, faith, romance, marriage and more. And interspersed amongst these were hundreds of small printed flyers advertising business and translation services, language classes, religious events, HIV testing, abortions and a host of other services.

The second thing we noticed was the unusual density of Internet cafés. We counted thirty cafés distributed between just four

blocks, all of them hosting customers at every terminal.¹⁷ Most of the cafés were owned and run by immigrants and had very specific national identities. People often seemed to come in just to chat, see who’s who, and meet up with friends and familiar others.

Gorgeous Mr Abbas, Congolese owner of the Timbuktu Café, occupying two large apartments on the third floor of a building overlooking Times Square, explained to us, somewhat ruefully, that competition had driven the rates in Yeoville’s Internet cafés down to R5.00 an hour, which didn’t bring in nearly enough revenue when offset against exorbitantly high rents and telecommunications costs. The cafés plugged this hole by offering a wide range of ancillary services that turned an establishment into something between a cosy club lounge and a business centre. You could make long-distance phone calls, have your CV designed and typed, commission somebody to do research for you, or simply get help with your application for citizenship or refugee status. You could hire a DVD, order a plate of food, have your hair cut or braided, and find your way around the city and its authorities. It struck us that large numbers of people seemed to depend daily on communal café spaces to use the Internet and the telephone, many making repeat visits at different intervals during the day.¹⁸ These were interesting social spaces, seemingly integrated into daily needs and routines, and the serious business of many of the people living around them.

Between the communicative supermarket walls and the modus operandi of the Internet cafés, we decided on web technology and the familiar language of social media as the medium of the project, and to design an interactive, customised website aimed at the online café culture of the suburb. The site was imagined as something that would enable a largely invisible pan-African group of Johannesburg residents to write themselves

17 In late 2007, when we began our research, most people relied on PCs to get online. In 2012, following global trends, the cell phone habits of South Africans have changed dramatically as smart phones, mobile applications and the mobile Internet have entered the mainstream. This doesn’t seem to have affected the customer base of Yeoville’s Internet cafés.

18 This situation arises in low-income neighborhoods such as Yeoville because of the high cost of connecting to the telephone and Internet from home (South Africa has amongst the highest telecommunications rates in the world). Added to this, many residents have a particularly tenuous grasp on ‘home’ and are often at the mercy of corrupt landlords who take advantage of their vulnerable status in this country.

16 The Shoprite supermarket is on the corner of Bedford and Rocky Streets.



into the public domain, and at the same time serve as a resource that would help new arrivals to navigate through and around the rules of the city.

Central to this early concept was the idea that the website should become the default homepage when any café visitor began their browsing, but in as smart and savvy a business environment as this one, we knew we would have to come up with an incentivising and reciprocal offering to the café owners – something that added value to their business!

So we embarked on two simultaneous processes. One was to find out something about Internet café business practices, and the informational and virtual context of these physical spaces. What were people doing online? And what might they like to be able to do online in this city and suburb? The other was a lengthy and parallel (and infinitely more difficult) process: to persuade one or other of the big telecommunications companies of the hidden value in this invisible local market of communal Internet café users completely ignored in major quantitative South African surveys on both Internet and cell-phone access and use. We hoped to offer them unusual and far-reaching marketing opportunities through engaging with our project, in exchange for broadband and telephony packages at competitive rates.

2 'Culture as Infrastructure'¹⁹

Digital-media artist Tegan Bristow and web architect Jason Hobbs had, just a few years earlier, produced some contextual research on Internet cafés and their users in Braamfontein, Yeoville and Soweto. When Bristow joined the project her expertise in interactive digital media became indispensable to the exhibition environment we designed. Hobbs joined this phase of our work to explore the sort of information architecture our website would require, and to identify a more or less typical café client. He

¹⁹ This is a term Hilton Judin uses to describe the approach of his practice, Cohen & Judin, to their design of the Mandela Museum in the Transkei: instead of simply providing storage and display spaces representing the life of Mandela, the museum project brought a plentiful and common source of running water (and a structure designed to contain it) to the people in the village of Mvezo, where Mandela was born, a legacy that more definitively presents his struggle. Women and children would no longer have to walk to the distant river to collect water. Hilton Judin, 2000. 'Culture as Infrastructure' in *Journal Architektur Aktuell* 245, 53.

helped us to design paper and online questionnaires aimed at Internet café owners, their staff, users and people on the street. We gathered a research team comprised of South Africans and immigrants from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, D.R.C. and Cameroon, all resident in Yeoville, and set out to map the number and location of Internet cafés in the suburb, and then to evaluate their infrastructure, services, business practices and technological needs. Café owners, managers and their customers were curious and responsive. Our process produced a useful sense of a more or less typical café client. But interestingly, we discovered that, contrary to the popular notion of a 'digital divide' in developing countries, *this* large Internet café user base actively embraces, shares and maximises technology as a survival strategy. They are just not doing it from work or home, which are the only spaces ever considered when statistics about Internet usage in South Africa are compiled.²⁰

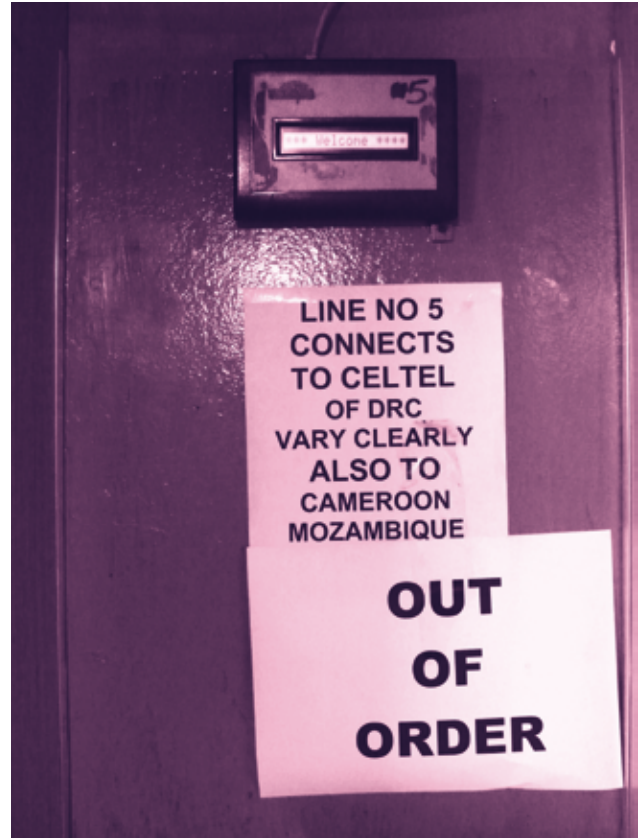
We shared, discussed and analysed our results and experiences,²¹ reviewed our imagined project, and then worked toward creating a meaningful and useful journey through a 'three-dimensional website'. The framing concept for the design and development of the website was our view of the political importance of the minutely observed details of personal, everyday life. We emphasised subjectivity and personal identity, and designed the site's structure and navigation through 'normal' everyday life categories. Freud has often been quoted as having said (although neither Google nor anyone else can accurately identify the source!), 'love and work are the cornerstones of our

²⁰ This is discussed in greater detail in Jason Hobbs and Tegan Bristow, 2007. 'Communal Computing and Shared Spaces of Usage: A Study of Internet Cafés in Developing Contexts', http://www.jh-01.com/research/communal_computing_shared_spaces_of_use.pdf.

²¹ The research questionnaires included a section on what users might want from the website. The following received the highest votes: information on immigrant and refugee rights and resources; the ability to advertise and seek accommodation and jobs; a personal profile on a community website; the ability to share experiences and stories and to leave messages for friends; and information on local sport and religious congregations. When asked what their hopes and dreams were, these were the most popular responses: a desire to invest in the local economy; a wish for the despotic leaders of their home countries to be removed; to be able to live and work in South Africa without fear; to be able to work in a chosen profession for which the subject was already qualified; to be able to help others in need.







humanness.' Onto these we layered home, faith, play and more, and these themes became the vehicles of navigation through the website. We also decided to incorporate popular social media platforms such as YouTube, Flickr and Facebook, maximising on their viral capacity and also on the ease with which people were using them in Yeoville. We took our wire frames back to the Internet cafés for feedback, amended them in response to comments that were made, designed and built the site, and then tested and amended it all over again.

Our next big challenge, while I worked on and waited for a response from the corporate world, was to come up with an effective means of launching and marketing the project and its website within the suburb.

I have to add at this point that, at times, the implementation of my project felt like an epic mission, like being a player on a 'quest' in one of the popular, real-time online games like *World of Warcraft*, where in order to succeed, you have to 'build your character' by acquiring talents and a multiplicity of skills and new professions as you get deeper into the game.

3 Going Live

It was decided to transform the virtual spaces of the *Hotel Yeoville* project's website into a real-space and real-time exhibition experience. Tegan Bristow designed and built a beautiful series of playful, self-documenting applications, each to be housed in its own dedicated booth.

The question remained as to where the physical project might be housed. Our preferred option was to build into and operate out of a small shop front in the middle of the suburb's main shopping area, effectively blending and merging with the many other small businesses in the area. After several weeks of tramping the pavements and talking to leaseholders and property owners, it became clear that this was going to be beyond the means of our project.

The Johannesburg Development Agency, an agency of the City of Johannesburg that stimulates and supports area-based economic development initiatives, had undertaken an ambitious urban regeneration programme with regard to several of Yeoville's community and public facilities. One day, the hoarding surrounding the new public library building under construction came down, and there it was. A refurbished electrical sub-station transformed into a pink and brick and glass double-storey building in the suburb's bustling hub. One conversation led to the next and

the library became the venue for the *Hotel Yeoville* installation. It seemed a perfect fit in terms of its function, and its location in the heart of so much 'passing trade'.

Alex Opper and Amir Livneh of Notion Architects joined the team at this stage, and sensitively and inventively designed an exhibition environment that became an inclusive and intuitive user experience, enabling people to interact with each other in profoundly moving ways. At the beginning of 2010, *Hotel Yeoville* was installed in the new public library, visible to and from the street, inside its dedicated vitrine-like exhibition space. There it hung, elegantly suspended, brightly coloured during the day, and lit up at night with pink fluorescent neon advertising the website address. The exhibition's surfaces and spaces not only functioned as invitations and prompts for the users of the exhibition, but in fact relied completely upon the traces and gestures – the engagement and participation of visitors – to produce both the website and the exhibition's content. Participants could write about Johannesburg, home, childhood, love, hopes, dreams and fears; map their roots and journeys across Africa and beyond; generate a series of portrait photographs or make a short movie. We were trying to build knowledge, and so all the content created in the documentation and storytelling booths was uploaded to the website and mixed with the resource content: migrant and refugee survival guides, online discussion forums, classifieds, and an extremely popular business-listing directory.

Acts of Resistance

Enlisting human participation and working in the public sphere is neither straightforward nor predictable. An inevitable negotiation with reality characterises both public art processes and multi-agency projects.

On a purely practical level, we installed the exhibition in the library in early January, which is the height of the Johannesburg season of summer storms, and discovered, to our horror, that the brand new roof leaked. Worst of all was the group of leaks directly above our installation. Aside from temporarily dressing the whole thing up in rain gear, we had to find our way through the extraordinary lethargy and recalcitrant chain of command of the City's system of public works. In the end, inevitably, we had to make our own plan. There was also theft, theft again, and many plucky local entrepreneurs scoping the joint, wanting to know



| The Yeoville public library on Raleigh Street. *Hotel Yeoville* is visible through the windows of the second floor.

what we were going to do with our technology and equipment when the project came to the end of its run.

While a measure of the impact of the project is contained within its hundreds of analogue and digital products, and in its enthusiastic take up by so many people in the neighbourhood, it was also reflected in the number of people who came up the stairs to ask questions and to argue with us about things like our politics, our formal means and ideas.

Several university academics and Yeoville community activists wanted me to make the project more strictly about activism and human rights. When this pressure was coupled with the terrible human rights abuses that some of our visitors reported, it was sometimes difficult to keep firm and steady on my original path, which was more open-ended, conceptually risky and about the

potential of intimacy and private lives being accorded the most public of stages. I was trying to think the aesthetic and the social/political together and steer clear of the vocabularies of human rights discourse with its more certain hold on social roles and categories.

While we relied on participatory practice to lead the product, we had very carefully and methodically created a frame, an authored situation that fused with social reality, and this too heightened the tension between aesthetic and social narratives that is inherent to working in this way. In an attempt to create a poetic distance from politics, and also to free the work from a referential dependence upon the harshness of xenophobic violence, we very consciously made *Hotel Yeoville* a utopian or idealised space. The frame we produced was warm, pink and



happy. How to pose, or when to click the shutter was the subject's choice. But, as the makers of the project we stood in for the photographer. If we accept the claim that all photographs bear the trace of the encounter between the photographer and the photographed, then some of the trace that these images carry is that utopian desire – a world in which power (us) and citizens (our participants) existed on a plane of co-dependence and equal exchange.

For just a few weeks short of a year, the project ran five days a week and generated public engagement and unusual, extraordinary social experiences at the same time as it produced a distinct and tangible body of work.

Photography, Facebook and Human Rights

The most popular destination in our library installation was undoubtedly the Photo Booth. As one part of the project's means of exchange, every photographic session generated a set of four photographs that were immediately printed out in duplicate. Visitors took one set away with them and left the other set on the photo wall together with a note in the knowledge that both would be scanned and uploaded to the website's Flickr space.

Not unlike some of my previous projects, *Hotel Yeoville* draws attention to the political and social role of very ordinary, everyday domestic snapshots, their relationship to the meaning we make of our lives, and the fact that they exist at the *very* threshold between

private and public space. But it is the afterlife of these images that preoccupies me most

In a wonderful text written in the late 1980s called *Borrowed Dogs*, the photographer Richard Avedon talks about his own family photograph albums. He says that his family took very great and detailed care with their snapshots. They dressed up; they posed in front of expensive cars and homes that did not belong to them. They borrowed dogs. He recounts that in one year of family photographs he counted eleven different dogs. His family never in fact owned a dog! He talks about the fact that in the albums, all the photographs revealed a lie about who the Avedons really were, but a truth about who they wanted to be. This inherent paradox, and the many questions around what kind of evidence domestic snaps actually supply, has always intrigued me.

With so many millions of people globally now armed with camera-equipped cell phones and instantly uploading their photographs to Facebook and Flickr, the commonplace snapshot is more than ever the genre of our times. And, since these images are almost entirely framed by screens and social media platforms, they are integral to the way in which we socialise and participate in public life, and are one of the primary ways in which we perform (and form) our fleeting, transmittable and mobile selves.

In the context of a group of people who are often living below the radar, the performative, evocative and expressive potentials of the popular social media platforms that they could access on the *Hotel Yeoville* website and computers, like Facebook, Flickr and YouTube, were particularly significant. It was not simply the viral capacity of these social media networks that was being maximised, but their agility in straddling public and private spheres: they paradoxically encourage a private and often intimate performance of self to be delivered in what is potentially an extremely public sphere.

The project offered ways to participate safely in the world by taking charge of your own representation within the framework created. You could be as frank or elusive, as visible or invisible as you chose to be. The upbeat, performative images people made in the Photo and Video Booths demonstrated this most keenly. While this offline and online exhibitionism runs the risk of being criticised as narcissistic display, it is possible that, in this particular context, these images affirm the unique condition of the photograph – but, not in the usual, well-honed sense given to it by theorists like Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, of the

photograph as a trace or sign of something or someone that is no longer there. Rather, in this context, the 'picture' serves to testify that this particular person is here in the present tense, claiming space, asserting identity, and possibly, even citizenship.

In her groundbreaking book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay theorises what she considers to be the innate relationship between photography and citizenship in situations where human rights are infringed and suffering is politically induced.²² She argues, in this context, for photographs as a space of political relations, and for a civil contract enacted between all the participants in the act of photography: the photographer, the photographic subject and all the users of photography, including and especially, spectators and displayers. She pays particular attention to the importance of the subject's agency in the photograph, as well as the need for spectators to ask themselves what the subject in the photograph is asking of them. 'Why are these men, women, children and families looking at me?' asks Azoulay of the photographs of Palestinians exposed to the rule of Israeli occupation that she sees in her daily Israeli newspapers.²³ We might very well ask this question of all of those who took photos of themselves in the Photo Booth of *Hotel Yeoville*. At whom were they looking? And who are they looking at now? Do they see a civil space in which the makers of the project, other photographed subjects and the viewers of these share an interest? Recognition of their personhood, their presence, their identity? Well, perhaps.

While the subjects are very definitely addressing an imagined viewer, they are also addressing themselves. Performing their very best selves for the platform of the project but also for the familiar platform of the social media networks onto which they will be uploading their images. The photographed person assumes the existence of a viewer and knows, within the frame of the art project, that there is an actual and a virtual community exchanging glances out there too.

Hotel Yeoville engaged contingent communities of desire – many private desires that congregated, recognised and for the most part complied with each other. And photography was not an end in itself, but the necessary pretext for something else to occur: the camera was a trigger, a facilitator for a most particular interaction, a protagonist whose presence is one of the main

subjects of the photograph itself. This is best expressed by a message, one of so many hundreds, left behind in bold black permanent marker, with a series of photographs, posted to our physical and virtual walls. It reads:

'Hello People! I AM HERE! I am Jean-Claude from DRC and they call me JC! This is me, or something I can tell YOU about ME, at any rate! JC a.k.a Lover Boy x x x.'

²² Ariella Azoulay, 2008. *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York: Zone Books.

²³ *Ibid.*, 16.