

## SKIP

Present Company Included: A space between 'private' and public

By Kathryn Smith

A blond child, dressed in a bright red jumper and denim pedal pushers, plays a solo game of jump-rope with a pink skipping rope, her mouth moving as she clears each round. She counts as she moves forward in slow motion, in front of a wall from which the paint and plaster peels. The frame of a video camera remains locked off as she exits to the left, her rope leaving a blurred pink trace behind her.

"She's trying to get to one thousand" was the answer Terry Kurgan offered when I asked why her daughter Jessie obsessively jumps rope. Watching her daughter skip and count, paying little heed to anything else going on around her as she strives towards her self-imposed goal, moves Kurgan. It was here that Jessie seemed completely 'in her own world', totally within herself.

Not to disregard any sense of victory or self-satisfaction Jessie may feel if she actually reaches one thousand 'skips', but the number, if not unrealistic, is neither here nor there. What is compelling however, is what Kurgan manages to capture in filming this rather futile, yet unremitting action. Operating within a visual language system that utterly defies yet runs oddly parallel to that which underpins the 'home movie', the video captures not just the image of Jessie and a pink skipping rope, luminescent and animated against a decaying building, but materializes and amplifies the passing of time and associated loss, through its repetition. Through the publicising of a relatively 'private' or personal process, the work holds (in the sense of containing) a profound space of desire, intimacy and memory.

The physical design of the work *Skip* (which is also the title of the exhibition) co-operates beautifully with the conceptual imperative behind the work, that of refraction. Projected onto a series of silk screens, making an elegant reference to her award-winning piece *Lost & Found*<sup>1</sup>, *Skip* is projected on a series of silk screens that recede into depth, hung 50cm apart such that the image loses focus and enlarges as distance increases. The image that reaches the final surface is the vaguest and most elusive 'ghost' of its former self. Another ghost is offered as a preview in the form of a smaller screen 'veiling' or perhaps pre-empting the field on which the image is the most sharply focused. On this small plane, the image appears shrunken and unfocused. Kurgan defines her frame not only as the space in which the action is played out, or the size of the surface against which she projects, but also the depth at which the image can carry itself. Setting up two points, the image only finds true purchase in one specific spatial zone as the light which produces it is intrinsically bound to its relationship with another object or body, in this case, the silk screen. The distance won't contain the view.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurgan won the FNB Vita Art Prize in 2000 with *Lost & Found*.

The work is as much about the actual interregna between each silk screen as it is about how the image 'skips' logical continuity/cohesion to offer a physical manifestation of 'the space between'. For photographers like Kurgan, this issue of 'the space between' is a particularly charged one, perhaps because of how photographs are seen to function and communicate, both privately (for individuals) and publicly (collectively) within the context of a society that has a compounded and complex self-image.

*Skip* backs up against a re-presentation of another of Kurgan's recent projects, the creation of a mobile photographic studio with the freelance photographers of Joubert Park in Johannesburg. This project was initiated and produced within the context of the Joubert Park Public Art Project, and was Kurgan's response to a brief which called for engagement with the culture and economy of the park precinct, which includes the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Being a single entity, the two halves of the installation are linked spatially but entered separately. A slide show tracks the development of the Joubert Park photographic studio project as a visual narrative, including images of initial concept meetings with the photographers, their sandwich boards advertising the particular styles of each photographer, the environment they work in, the portable studio itself, how to erect and dismantle it, lessons in the use of studio lighting, choice of backdrops, the studio's launch and finally, images by Kurgan and the photographers using the studio.

At first glance, this project would seem very far removed from its partner in this exhibition. *Skip* is, by design and intent, a work for a gallery, a space that, compared to the very public nature of Joubert Park, may be considered 'private', or at least 'semi-public' in the sense that it is contained, and frequented by a specific group of users. This juxtaposition reveals Kurgan's intention with *Skip*, the exhibition: to bring together in a shared space the two aspects of her practice that, despite materializing in very different contexts and intended for different users and 'functions', are conceptually integrated.

Kurgan's practice over the last number of years has been characterised by two overriding concerns. Firstly, her interest in the complex relationship of domestic and family photography to personal and cultural identity and memory; and secondly, her interest and commitment to public realm/public space projects and collaborative practice. She says: "Photographs are usually one part of my formal means through most of the projects I've undertaken in the last six or seven years. I'm particularly interested in what they mean, how they mean, how to read them, how we use them, their power and ambiguity – the complex structure of the messages they convey". This intellectual interest in, and emotional response to photographic images underpinned *Lost & Found*, which was the starting point for *Skip* (the video), as well as *Family Affairs*, a series of works that won Kurgan an equal amount of critical attention and controversy.

The 'work' and space of the photograph, a medium which is easily 'read' and understood according to a visual language system that is associated with the realm of the 'real', is consistently applied in Kurgan's practice to a diverse range of both public realm projects and gallery/museum installations, including most recently, a series of three

collaboratively produced installations on Johannesburg's latest and most ambitious urban regeneration and heritage project, Constitution Hill.<sup>2</sup> The private and public are linked here by virtue of the photograph as agent, as active visual communicator. Kurgan says, " by reading through and around the surface of a photograph, layers of meaning can be peeled away, revealing not truth (of course), but rather, for that moment anyway, a certain sort of self-knowledge and narrative of identity."

Her interest in collaborative practice refers first to building working relationships with the subjects of the work, whether it's the park photographers in the photo studio project, mothers and their newborn babies in the *Maternal Exposures* project (1999), or former prisoners for *Three Women* (2002), the Women's Gaol exhibition on Constitution Hill. It is also characterized by a burgeoning practice in the production of contemporary South Africa art that tries to define and develop the 'space between' art and business in a proactive and productive manner. Collaborative in this sense refers to establishing relationships with clients, contractors, and other professionals, including architects, graphic designers, writers, composers and so on. Many of Kurgan's diverse range of projects over the last few years have been conceptualized and spatialised in collaboration with Nina Cohen of the innovative architecture and cultural exhibit design practice, Cohen & Judin.

In addition to this, collaborative working relationships must be established with the public or stakeholders associated with the public space in which or with which Kurgan and her team is engaged. The photograph re-enters this space comfortably, as the 'realness' of the photographic image is inherently connected to effective branding, design and marketing, ironically for the same reasons it presents itself as a compelling medium for reflecting on how we create and present 'truths', whether personal or collective.

In Kurgan's realm of production, projects for public or semi-public spaces run in direct parallel to producing work intended to communicate in the 'safer' spaces of museums and galleries. But then, museums (unless privately owned) too are public spaces, containing collections of object, images and archived information that constitutes national (public) heritage. Where some artists keep commissioned (read 'commercial') work discrete from their gallery-based practice, Kurgan immerses herself in the often messy and undifferentiated spaces of where these two apparently separate realms come together, selecting and designing respective projects in such a way that with the benefit of hindsight, they offer trenchant commentary on each other.

While researching for the Constitution Hill project, Kurgan came across a statement by all-female art and architecture practice muf, based in the UK. They state:

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<sup>2</sup> The Constitution Hill series of installations were produced by Ochre Communications for the Johannesburg Development Agency when the site first opened to the public in August 2002. The curatorial team for the installations comprised exhibition designer Nina Cohen, writer Mark Gevisser, , TV producer Lauren Segal, and Kurgan.

“ If democracy requires that we each have an equal relationship to one another, then the only place where we remain sufficiently free of definitions, unlike home or work, is the public realm. This is not to say that the public realm is anodyne and free of meaning, but it is the space where, more than any other, we are able to experience those unexpected encounters of momentary wellbeing that confirm for us the inclusive pleasure of being a citizen. Public space is the place of a lived experience of democracy”.<sup>3</sup>

For a number of reasons, contemporary South African artists are beginning to engage with the public realm critically and with an energy strangely absent from much gallery practice. Perhaps this is because there are few galleries in South Africa that encourage or can ‘hold’ this kind of work, which exists in the realm of experimental for the moment, meaning that there are few local models or discourses that frame this kind of practice.

But perhaps on a more immediate level, if the culture and character of South Africa’s cities, particularly Johannesburg’s, transforms daily, so it make perfect sense that the public realm is recognized as a rich opportunity to engage with histories of the present. And as David Koloane has proposed elsewhere<sup>4</sup>, the notion of ‘public space’ *could not* exist in South Africa pre-1994 as space was controlled, restricted and portioned according to Apartheid principles. So working publicly is about reclamation, both of a collective sense of community, but also a personal space of agency.

Kurgan’s work with the Constitution Hill team is particularly resonant here. A site which stands for the ideals and principles of this country’s new dispensation, and which is being designed as a public heritage site, is previously the site of the Johannesburg Fort, a space of incarceration, oppression and intensely private experience for those imprisoned there whether for political or other crimes. One of the installations Kurgan consulted to was the Rampart Walk, a series of semi-translucent image and text screens erected on the northern perimeter of the fort and one of the highest vantage points in Johannesburg. Not only does this rampart mark the historical boundary between what was once ‘semi-public life’ (under Apartheid) and private hell (in prison cells), but is now conceived of as a semi-permeable membrane between Constitution Hill and new public life. It is interesting that the rampart overlooks Hillbrow, an area famous for its classification as ‘grey’ (it wasn’t subjected to the Group Areas act) and also the first area to become a symbol of Johannesburg’s status as an African metropolis.

An image that resonated with me, particularly in the context of this exhibition, was a statement about the status of urban housing. Through this panel, one of Hillbrow’s many

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<sup>3</sup> Shonfield, Katherine (2001) This is what we do – a muf manual. Ellipsis, UK.

<sup>4</sup> See David Koloane’s essay in Enwezor, O. (ed) (1997) Trade Routes: History and Geography, catalogue for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Johannesburg Biennale.

apartment blocks was directly visible. Juxtaposed with this panel was an image of the family in one of the apartments and their 'view' of the site from their window. This conflation of private desire and public space is a thread that is interwoven throughout Kurgan's engagement with these kinds of projects.

With the changing nature of what constitutes public space in South Africa, and the reality of public monuments being vandalized (I prefer recycled) for their material rather than symbolic value, we remain entirely cognizant of the notion that "public space should not become a residual space that is left after all private interventions in this space". Kurgan's work recalls Michelangelo Pistoletto's directive to artists participating in his BIG Social Game (Turin Biennale, 2002) that they should "play together" at changing society, through the production of 'implicated' art.

With this exhibition *Skip*, Kurgan constructs a circuit of visual and conceptual interrelationships that reflect a working methodology/ethos that is self-consciously and critically engaged in the space between public projects and private work. In so doing, and through the image of daughter Jessie, she confronts head-on all the internal paradoxes of the notion of 'skipping' when read against this kind of work. Skip is to skim the surface, to pass over or omit something that results in a break in continuity, or to surreptitiously make a getaway. 'Skip' is ironic in this instance, but this irony is evocative and revealing, as it is quite the opposite of what characterizes Kurgan's relationship to her imbricated practice. In her negotiation of the space between the private and public realms, Kurgan attempts to hold onto present experience. Her work with the photographic image, whether family images or in consultation with the Joubert Park photographers, renegotiate these visual records that always seem to simultaneously evoke both presence and absence, life and death, love and loss, either through capturing the image of another, or choosing how we should represent ourselves in a portrait. Likewise, the slippage or skipping across private and public also brings to the fore the dual action of the photograph: the act of recording and the act of looking, both of which manifest differently, yet equally importantly, in both realms. Or rather, qualities of the public resound in the private and vice versa. In trying to articulate this discontinuity through the metaphor of skipping, Kurgan succeeds in eloquently articulating the productive space between.

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