

Working in Johannesburg for “Hong Kong, etc.”



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The making of the Johannesburg Biennale of Contemporary Art is by destiny an extremely particular experience, or a veritable challenge. In a context like Johannesburg, where the hope for a New South Africa confronts the everyday difficulties of a society *in historic transition - economical and social crisis, poverty, violence, radical inequality between social classes, urban explosion, quests for national identity, etc.*, Okwui Enwezor's choice to focus the Biennale on the issue of Globalisation and its historical root in this part of the African continent is obviously relevant and inspiring. Entitling the biennale “Trade Routes, History and Geography”, it points out an effective way to understand the recent, highly mediated changes in the country and their colonial-postcolonial historical background. More importantly, it leads us to grasp the current, theatrical shifts caused by the Globalisation at the end of the century and the formation of a new cultural cartography which results from a general resistance to and deconstruction of Eurocentric Universalism which has been the dominant ideology in the modernist culture. How to renegotiate with such a historical

context and invent new solutions to deal with a postcolonial, postmodern (in the largest sense of the term) and globalising reality hence become an inescapable and urgent challenge to all of us. It appears to be even more crucial in a context like South Africa since, like other non-Western countries, it is raising up as new power to counterbalance the Western superpower. In fact, the issues evoked here have already become a central concern shared by numerous contemporary artists across the world. It is based on such a reality that the Second Johannesburg Biennale has succeeded in presenting a completely refreshing and *innovative landscape of creation, with hundreds of new names and faces with considerably high quality and a unprecedented variety of languages and expressions.*

The Global City, or more exactly the network of Global Cities across the planet, which is becoming new centres of economical, political and cultural activities in our world, is no doubt the most decisive element in the reformation of the world order. Critical observations of and interventions in such a network can of course reveal the most fundamental process of restructuring and mutation of our world. Johannesburg and Cape Town, where the Biennale takes place, are certainly



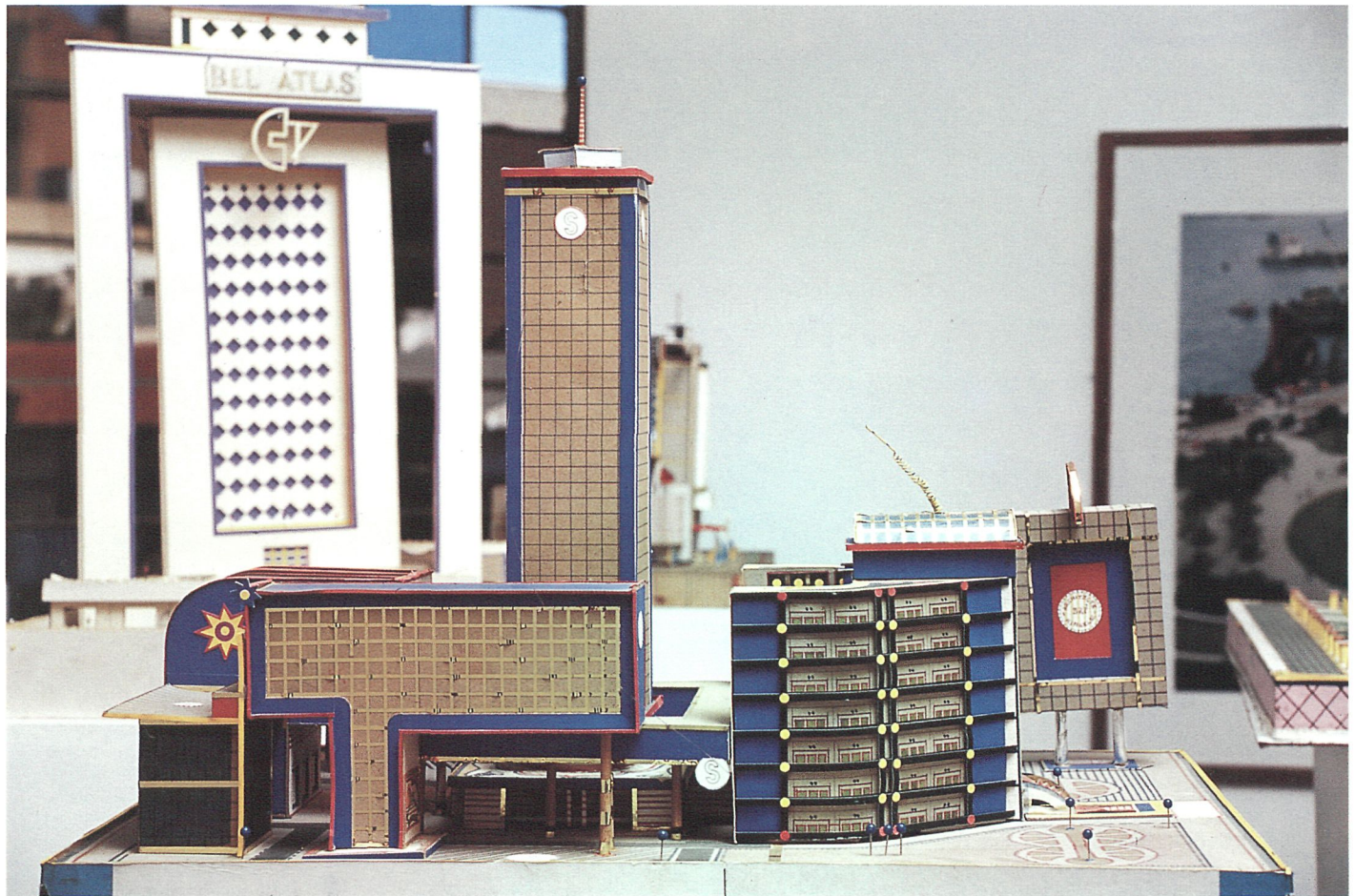
Arni Haraldsson (Iceland/Canada). *Tiffany Ridge and The Harvey Residence*, 1993. Colour print. 102 x 122 cm. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Hong Kong, etc.* Photo: Wayne Oosthuizen.

among the most active and dynamic in the network today. It is therefore evident that discussions on the issue of the Global City via an exhibition project taking place here become not only significant but also necessary.

Re-negotiation of relationships between old “Global Cities” like New York, Paris, London, Tokyo and new “Global Cities” like Hong Kong, Johannesburg, Beijing, Shanghai, Sao Paolo and so on, reflect clearly to these mutations. These new global cities represent the erection of new economic, cultural and even political powers which are bringing about a new world order and new visions of our planet in the coming century whilst the older ones have to re-adjust their own positions to adapt to the changes of power rapports. Apart from classical characteristics of global cities, such as being the most active elements in the world market and communication, maintaining various, multicultural and technologically advanced urban culture,

“internationalized” modes of life, wide and reliable inter-connectivity, etc. these new, Non-Western global cities also hold their own specific characteristics: their own cultural traditions, historical backgrounds, which are mostly connected with the Colonial past and neo-colonial present, and hence new claims for developments. But, the most important is that, with their specific legacies, they become new and original spaces in which new visions and understandings of Modernity, and new possibilities of “Utopian/dystopian” imagination, can be elaborated and invented. The tension between the Global and the Local, between Modernity and Tradition, between History and Future, etc. is now generating new forces of innovation. It is perhaps the most decisive aspect of the global mutation that we are experiencing at the turn of the millennium.

The exhibition project “Hong Kong, etc.” that I curate for the Biennale tends to use the current transition of Hong Kong



Bodys Isek Kingelez (Zaire). *Swissair*, 1993. Sculpture in cardboard, 60 x 40 x 40 cm.
 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Hong Kong, etc.* Photo: Wayne Oosthuizen.

(which is perhaps the most significant event in 1997) as a metaphor of the new stage of globalisation that we discussed, especially in terms of envisioning new global cities. The transition of Hong Kong not only marks the end of the “Classical colonisation” but also reveals a new prospect of Globalisation itself. Again, as pointed out above, Johannesburg, sharing a similar colonial past (which was actually a recent past), and rapid developments, is of course a relevant place to discuss the issue. At the end, it goes perfectly well with the general issue of the Biennale “Trade Routes, History and Geography”.

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Obviously, the intention to introduce discussions on the transition of Hong Kong is by no means based uniquely on the

specific and temporary situation of Hong Kong itself, not to say the spectacularity of the event itself. Rather, the discussion are supposed to unfold along the network links between Global Cities, especially between non-western Global City in order to become globally meaningful.

One should notice that an exhibition project as such is not a simple and artificial articulation of theoretical issues, but a part of reality in which we live today. In the 1990's, at the end of the century, artists, architects and intellectuals are among the first to react to the new shifts. Globalisation is also a process of breaking all kinds of frontiers, including those between art and other disciplines. In the exhibition, I try to introduce, on the one hand, architects, writers into the field of “visual arts”, and on the other, bring together the “cyber world” (the internet) and the real. An internet web site has been created to present projects by artists, writers and architects, and multimedia

installation works are presented in a gallery space at the same time.

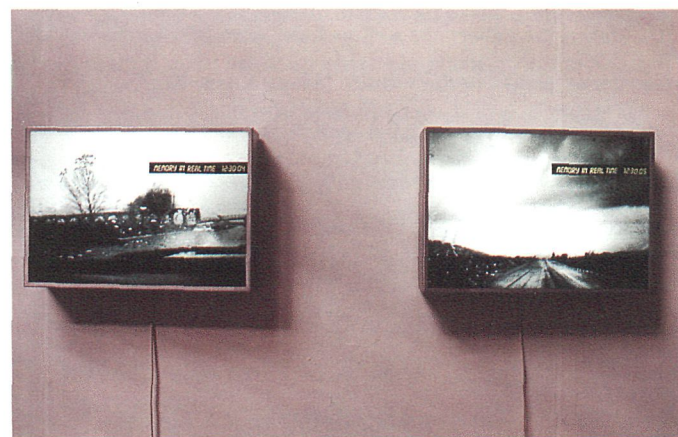
In the meantime, more direct and intimate connections with the actual context of the city of Johannesburg and its neighbouring areas, especially the townships where the true stories of the South Africa reality occur, should never be ignored. In other words, it is in investigating the real and dialectic connections between the Global expansion of “modernisation”, driven by the dynamics of liberal, multinational Capitalism, and the Local reactions, resistance and re-canalisation of the pressure of Globalisation that an exhibition like “Hong Kong, etc.” as well as discussions on the issue of the Global City can be relevant and meaningful. As a matter of fact, more and more artists in the 1990’s, understanding the necessity to restructure the established institution system as well as art languages, tend to practice their work in the real, often urban and social contexts, and hence develop new strategies to go beyond the framework of institutions and dominant discourses. Based on such an understanding, I choose to realize the exhibition project, apart from the virtual space on the internet, in two very specifically selected context for physical presentation of the works.

The first one is the Rembrandt Van Rijn Gallery, which has become a symbol of cultural resistance of the South African intellectual and art world because of its activist actions and presentations during the Apartheid. The second is public spaces where people of different social classes, strata and values encounter each other. These include restaurants, coffee shops and pubs, situated from the Johannesburg downtown to suburban townships. Here the messages that the project tries to transmit can be accessed by different communities from the urban bourgeois to working class.

The Rembrandt Van Rijn Gallery, which is run by a group of young artists under the direction of Steven Hobbs, is situated as the entrances of two theatres of the New Town cultural complex. The gallery space is actually two passage spaces where the theatre audience gathers and spends a brief moment before going into the performance spaces. In its history, this artist run space has been playing a remarkable rôle in

resistance of Apartheid by providing a forum for multi-cultural and multi-racial expressions. Its very physical characteristic of being a passage reflects, somehow coincidentally, an image of the current transition happening in the city of Johannesburg. Accordingly, some extremely interesting changes are also happening in the South African art world to make it increasingly exposed to the international art scene. To make an exhibition in this context, it is natural to take account of the cultural meaning of such a physical condition. The whole space can be turned into a temporal “Micro-Global City” in constant shifts. Therefore, I decide to install the works in such a way that they, being formally and conceptually extremely diverse, all enter into very interactive dialogues. None of the works can be separated from another. Involving different kinds of techniques, forms, movements, lights and sounds, they are all physically interwoven. Together, they break down the conventional museum presentation of artworks as fetish object in white cube spaces. The openness of the gallery windows provides wonderful views of the city of Johannesburg. On one side, one can appreciate looking at the spectacular forest of Skyscrapers, while on the other, the busy highways cut through the city with speedy traffic. These views are actually integrated as part of the exhibition’s “background”. A close link between the meanings of the works and the reality of the context is thereby created.

In such passage-like spaces, video works by Fiona Tan and Roderick Buchanan, with the tension between speedy



Rivka Rinn (Israel). From series *Memory in Real Time*, 1995. Photoseriography in lightboxes. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, *Hong Kong, etc.* Photo: Wayne Oosthuizen.



Zhu Jia (China). *Forever*, 1994. Video.
2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Hong Kong, etc.* Photo: Wayne Oosthuizen.

movements and the moments of suspension, create different kinds of psychological ambiances of transition at the two entrances of the exhibition. Installations by Huang Yong Ping and Ellen Pau, in completely different ways, deal directly with the historical moment of Hong Kong's transition. Rivka Rinn, Nobuyoshi Araki, Arni Harraldson, Andreas Gursky and Zhu Jia contribute their diverse visions and experiences of travelling between Global Cities where Utopian projects confront crucial realities. Bodys Isek Kingelez provides us a fantastic urban vision of a postmodern Global City which is alternative to the existing Western metropolis models.

As a continuation of this section, two multimedia projections by Keith Piper and Feng Mengbo are presented in the Museum Afrika, where the urban history of Johannesburg is exhibited.

From the gallery, as well as from anywhere in the world, one can get access to the website "Hong Kong, Etc." (www.aica.co.za/hk) designed by Eric Arlix. This website is in fact the very core of the whole project itself, evoking historical, sociological and theoretical discussions on the issue of the Global City in postcolonial transition. Consisting of two major sections — "The City as the Real", "The City as Dystopia" as well as a section for public discussion— the website opens a virtual space for analysis and imaginative projects, contributed by writers, architects, urban planners and artists Saskia Sassen, Rem Koolhaas, Arata Isozaki, Yung Ho Chang, Chen Zhen, Jun Jieh Wang, Deepak Ananth/Tony Brown, Oscar Ho, Desmond

Hui, Hannah Le Roux, Ken Yeang, the magazine *Art Asia Pacific* and a group of young artists from the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam. At the same time, the general public can also express their opinions through participating in the Newsgroup discussion on the internet.

Another part of the project is mentioned above: interventions into the urban public meeting points such as coffee shops, restaurants and pubs. A program of video works, both specific films and performance records, by Steven Hobbs, Randolph Hartzenberg, Lin Yilin, Henry Bond, Fiona Tan, Saskia Janssen, Owen Oppenheimer, George Kosmit and so on, are presented on the existing television monitors at those "non-art" venues. This brings the art works most directly into the everyday life of the local inhabitants. It is important to point out that the venues involved spread throughout different areas of the Johannesburg region, especially townships like Soweto, West Bury and Alexandra. It is in these places where art never goes that one can encounter the most enthusiastic and surprising reactions from the people. On my first visit to one of the public venues, a coffee shop "Oom Jans Inn" in the township of West Bury, I encountered the owner of the coffee shop, Oom Jan (Uncle Jan) who was a white haired black man at his 60's. When he noticed that I was a Chinese from Canton, he started talking to me in Cantonese! Never having left his country, he learned Cantonese from a Cantonese family with whom he grew up. *It's a matter of fact that the trade route has always existed. Globalisation has always been a part of our common history.*



Rivka Rinn (Israel). From series *Memory in Real Time*, 1995.
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