

ASYMMETRIES: ITERATIVE CINEMATIC CARTOGRAPHIES

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Abstract

The article functions as an exegesis for the installation project on the city titled *Asymmetries* (2018/19/20). The installation and its various iterations is conceived as a making-thinking-spectatorial research project on the urban premised on strategies developed through modes of artistic research. The project explores various forms of contemporary film practices in order to explore and re-imagine city life beyond the confines of teleological conceptions. In particular, the writing and its iterative explorations relates to cinema aesthetics and its political confrontation with the mono-focal conception of cinema and its projection norms. The work invites the reader to momentarily suspend the position of the passive spectator and assume the position of a collaborative explorer or experimenter in various acts of cinematic cartography. The suspension of the inactive spectator position might lead to the re-examination of equivalences between the reader's learned gaze and of epistemic prompts offered in this artistic research project on the city.

Keywords: Cinema, Cartography, Material-Thinking, Xerography, and Entanglement.



Fig.1 *Asymmetries* (2018) Installation View at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018).

Introduction

In this text, I offer an exegesis about the creation of a large scale creative installation project on selected cities of the global south, titled *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020). I present the three iterations of this work that were presented over three years in different spatial contexts as a way of mapping and thinking through the possibilities of artistic research as a cogent mode of inquiry. The writing, in the first instance, explores the conceptual, aesthetic and epistemic underpinning of the research project on the city. To this end, I offer a brief articulation on Cinematic Cartography and Material Thinking as praxical knowledge frameworks from which my artistic research work emanates.

I will then offer exegetical vignettes about the three itinerant iterations of the *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020). The first iteration was presented at Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (2018), the second one was presented at Michaelis Galleries in Cape Town (May 2019) and finally I will consider the *Asymmetries* performance lecture I presented at the Arts Research Africa Conference 2020. I hope that the discussion of these three instantiations will provide a generative

map about my praxis as an artistic researcher who works in the interstices of filmmaking, pedagogy and urban studies.

The installation, *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020) was conceived as a making-thinking-spectatorial research project on the urban premised on strategies developed through modes of artistic research. The approach is inspired by AbdouMaliq Simone's (2013) enquiries which capture the difficulties of theorising many quarters of African cities; where complex social interactions challenge normative modes of research methods in urban spaces.

The creative project offers tentative, situated, epistemic sketches explored through various artistic practices. These practices contest normative and oft-canonised registers for conceptualising and visualising African urbanity. In artistic research methods, practical knowledge is made visible, and its process made evident, which serves to challenge epistemological research paradigms.

Asymmetries (2018/2019/2020) functions as a multi-channel installation; the artwork consists of images projected onto mobile sculptures designed in the motif of the icosahedron suspended on beams. The multiple mobile screens offer various registers of mapping contemporary urban beings and their objects. The installation project demands a different conception of the relationship between the screen, the image and the viewer. I present the assemblage of images from various cities which requires a framing; reframing; and de-framing that defies a totalising whole. Instead, the experience evokes tentative, incomplete and constantly moving-evolving ideas that at times move together, move against each other and on occasion allow for coalescence.



Fig. 2 *Asymmetries* Installation View at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018).

On Cinematic Cartography

The ideas charted in this exegesis play with mapping metaphors which seek to dislocate the assumptions of a reader and spectator of urban cinematic texts. I use the cartographic ruse to converse with the entangled aesthetic and socio-political projections that characterises contemporary urban experience in the selected cities of the Global South.

Asymmetries (2018/2019/2020) draws on Roberts (2012, p.70) postulation that cinematic cartography should be understood as an assemblage of overlapping practices and critical perspectives which might inform a greater understanding of the relationship between space, place and moving images cultures. The discourse draws attention to the shifting spatialities of a film as manifest across disciplinary fields and epistemological framings. It is with this emancipated sense away from the dictates of disciplinary and discursive confines that the *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020) installation explores affinities and tensions of artistic interventions from varied contexts and urban conditions of Johannesburg, Maputo, Lusaka, Freetown, Nairobi, Accra, Cairo, Lagos and Addis Ababa.

Other than offering cartographic imagery (representations), the mapping activity in this document endeavours to explore systems of knowledge(s) and 'related events, inventions, actions, episodes, activities, experiments, interventions, infiltrations, situations and ceremonies', as intimated by psychogeographer kanarinka (2006, p. 25).

What are the contours of the systems of knowledge flowing from Global South perspectives and how do we read the events and experiences as legends and keys in this mapping activity? We have to think of this mapping activity that is not only entangled in the regional geographies but is also acutely aware of the messy registers of the imaginary that characterises the contemporary moment.

Cinematic practice on the city is considered here as a form of mobile cartography, a way of site-seeing and sense-making of different registers by which urban architectonics reveal and conceal themselves. The idea of *site-seeing*, as opposed to sightseeing mobilised here, emphasises the scopic problematics of the perspectival, optical geometry that characterises the gaze regimes of film practice.

In this exegesis, we will travel with motion images through the screens, folds, cracks, creasings, and depths of urban sites and situations. Conley (2007) intimates:

the act of cinematic cartography traverses what Christian Metz calls a 'mobile topography'. In other words, the 'changing geography' underscored when speech or gesture is discerned in the context of the explosion of camera angles, intertitles, voice-in and voice off, films within films ...
(Conley, 2007, p. 343)

Following Bruno (2002, p. 8), the formulation of cinematic space in this project is construed 'as a space that moves not only through time and space or narrative development but

through inner space. Film moves, and fundamentally moves us, with its ability to render effects and, in turn, to affect’.

The epistemic invitation before you is merely one that asks you to enact for a moment, a position of a drifter, to be part of mapping alternative itineraries and subverting dominant ‘academic’ readings and authoritarian regimes of seeing. The terrain you are drifting in this text is primed for wandering, as it is not composed of a single layer. It’s palimpsestic topography involves the superimposition of various independent layers, one upon the other, to produce a heterogeneous and ‘thickened’ surface as per Corner (2011. p. 235).

The ‘thickened’ field offered in *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020) is evinced through the layered fragments of forlorn spatial rituals of love lost/gained in the streets of Braamfontein, Johannesburg (South Africa). The rituals are superimposed on a polemical dialogue with the soldiers of The Nest Collective (Nairobi), which are stitched on the patchwork fabric of Ga Jamestown (Ghana) plugged into the spatial-visual genius of Chale Wote Street Art Festival (Ghana). The mapping activity jostles with the ebb and flow of the surge of Makola Market (Accra) while dancing to the lyrical poetics of Maputo (Mozambique).

I present writers dreaming about a Freedom Station in Westdene in the midst of pondering the exigencies of urban design in Slovo Park (Johannesburg). The tracing is refracted through the dramatic speculative prompts of Lusaka (Zambia) and its space travel aspirations.

I traverse the ‘thickened’ field in this document with the aid of rhizomatic mapping sensibilities. Writing on ‘the rhizome’, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) remind us:

The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. Unlike the graphic arts, drawing, or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome

pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight.

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 21)

Following from the formulation on the rhizomatic, my creative work provides tentative connections, switches, relays, and circuits for activating and navigating multiple ‘sites’ and temporalities mapped in this research project.

I explore in the material construction of the installation, the idea, Corner (2011, p. 250) describes as ‘scaling’. It involves ‘the displacements, reduction/enlargement and the multiplication of prominent textual figures to remove any fixed and stable reading’. As we traverse the field of the *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020), textures such as city soundscapes are re-orchestrated while furtive city images are minusculed and multiplied to create complex spatiotemporal visual topography dislocating the spectator’s scopic confidence.

Another approach to mapping as a cogent motif for appropriation in this exegesis would be working with Harmon’s (2009, p. 10) formulation that ‘maps can act as shorthand for ready metaphors such as seeking the location and experiencing dislocation, bringing order to chaos, exploring ratios of scale and charting new terrains. Maps (mapping) act as backdrops for statements about politically imposed boundaries and territoriality’.

Finally *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020) draws from Hito Steyerl’s notion of ‘free fall’ as the structuring device of thinking through the conceptual and aesthetic choices offered in the project. Steyerl (2014, p. 46) argues that ‘the view from above is a proxy perspective that projects delusions of stability, safety, and ultimate mastery. In as much as the linear perspective establishes an imaginary stable observer and horizon, the perspective from above invents an imaginary

observer and an ideal stable ground'. I would like to invite you, the reader, to conceive and imagine this installation as the one staged in a time, to paraphrase Steyerl (2014), that is 'out of joint', in which we no longer know whether we (you) are objects or subjects as we spiral down in an imperceptible conceptual 'free fall'.

On Material Thinking

Following Carter's (2004, p. 5), conception of material thinking, in which creative collaborations individually create indistinguishable blots; my creative research process in *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020), was characterized by collaborations with various art practitioners from selected cities of the Global South. The collaborations made possible new conversations and as per Carter, out of these implicated processes, a third apprehension emerged, which constituted material thinking.

In a foreword to *Studies in Material Thinking*, guest editors Rosenberg and Fairfax (2008) describes Paul Carter's notion of material thinking 'as the plots of all of those individual or singular journeys that have been taken intersect, they gather, coagulate and ultimately produce a blot on the map; a thickening at those points of intersection between the various passages. The individual journeys are arrested in the swelling of the blot'.

I mobilized the field research material from Johannesburg, Maputo, Nairobi, Accra, Cairo as processual spatio-visual artistic experiments that emerge in *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020) as blots, which disrupt the easy reading of the cartography of the cities of the Global South. This structuring device of blots on the map furthermore follows Sullivan's (2010:159) idea that conceives 'contexts of contemporary art and cultural production as expanding and opening new sites for research'. He argues for the potential of artists to be directly involved in diverse research communities which means they take on

increased responsibility as theorists. Moreover, Sullivan argues that the space between theory and practice becomes a site for making art and doing research while positioning creative enquiries beyond disciplinary boundaries, cultural borders and technological divides. The artist-theorist makes use of the transformative power of art and resistance practices as a means of individual and cultural change.

My writing follows Barbara Bolt's (2007) postulation of the function of an exegesis. In artistic research, 'written commentary' is described less in terms of the explanation of the creative work; in fact, the original work can produce an eloquence of thought inherent in the form of the artistic work. The role then of the complementary writing is to reveal or expose something of the work that is not present in the form of the artwork. Furthermore, Miles (2008) elegantly argues for the reconceptualisation of exegesis, he writes:

Writing is no longer the retrospective and teleological reporting of the discovered, realised, or already understood 'had-been-thought', but is the very event of a material thinking in itself. A sketchbook, if you like, for a sort of scholarly activity that is primarily situated within the milieu of writing as the site of its practice. (Miles, 2008, p. 2)

I offer the above about the nature or method of my exegesis, acutely aware of the debates and considerations that such conception opens up. Sullivan (2010, p. 221) elucidates the challenges of presenting art practice as research within the structure of the thesis or exegesis. He states that, rather than occupying the high ground in the theory-driven enterprise, philosophers of practice have in recent decades moved amid the empirical underbrush to reinvigorate the nexus between theory and practice. Therefore, this brings up the issue of the documentation and delivery of research. Sullivan raises questions about how art practice as research might be conceptualised as a dissertation argument and where this theorising might

be located – ‘within the realm of the artwork produced, within the contextual form such as a related exegesis, or in some combination of the two, as Katy Macleod (2000) suggests’.

The presentation of the three iterations of the *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020) this article stages a dialogic engagement between art practice and theory. In some nascent fashion, the writing seeks to demonstrate that the distinction between artistic practice and theory is neither a stable nor an interesting epistemic dichotomy.

Moreover, my work is in conversation with Sullivan’s (2010, xiii) key features that distinguish art practice as a viable mode of research. He states that ‘visual art is elegant in its simplicity but also profound in the in-depth issues and activities it covers. When conceptualised within the languages of research, there is a theoretical complexity, because artistic enquiry covers an almost unlimited scope’. It is within this understanding of the range of creative experimentation that I ask the reader, to join on a voyage that covers multiple urban conditions, that transgresses disciplinary boundaries, and weaves cartographies from pixels, voices, arguments, geometric and epistemic objects situated in both the spaces of the imaginary and are terra-bound.

Thinking about the independent identity of artistic research, Sullivan (2010, xiii) elegantly argues that ‘creative and critical inquiry responds to research demands by exploring *the unknown*, and this presents an essential vantage point of critiquing *the known*’. This means, according to Sullivan, that the goal of the research of constructing new knowledge can be arrived at from variegated vantage points and iterative practices.

At the centre of my praxis in both form and content, there is an itch that would not be scratched away without exploring and disrupting the coordinates of what is known about the selected cities of the global south. To achieve this, it is essential to start from the point of the unknown, the marginal, and the

un-canonised. Through acts of cinematographic cartography, I insist that when a spectator opens herself to multiple and fragmented points of views, the practice might raise interesting questions and conjure up new epistemic possibilities.

The complementary writings and images in the next section of this article seeks to illuminate the making and thinking process of the creative project *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020). This writing is neither an exercise of providing a solid summation of the project, nor a reporting of findings of the ‘research data’. Rather, the writing traces the processual nodes mobilising multiple conceptual and aesthetic registers that offers entry and exit points to the creative work.

First Iteration - Asymmetries at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018)



Fig.3 *Asymmetries* Installation View at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018).

Entangled Cartographies: Projecting the Imaginary

At this point of arrival at Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg, I return to the figure of the cartographer, albeit a slightly cautious one, with the tentative knowledge on the entangled nature of things, intimacies, distances, spaces

and times circuitously resisting the confident linearity of my metric scale rulers and geometric 'seeing' and 'sensing' of my cinematic lenses. Nuttall (2009) intimates that the notion of entanglement is:

a condition of being twisted together, or entwined, involved with: it speaks of the intimacy gained, even resisted, or ignored uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or a set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldness.
(Nuttall, 2009, p. 1)

The set of spatio-visual prompts which resulted in the installation *Asymmetries* (2018), are explorative of the very messy and rich concept of entanglement. Furthermore, if mapping is about the figurability of our present times; the creation of the representational imaginaries, what are the stakes in cartographies arising from the artistic praxis located from the shifting perspectives of the urban Global South? The mobilising of the idea of *the imaginary* in my installation work draws on Glissant's (1997) conception of the imaginary, which he articulates as:

Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of people, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realised.
(Glissant, 1997, p. 189)

Therefore, the installation is a conscious resistance to the idea of urban theory (dissertation) as a withdrawal into a dimensionless place. The reality of field research trips across selected cities of the global south; the various acts of material thinking/making; and varied poetics and politics of my

cinematographic cartographies are conceptual registers by which I experiment with Glissant's idea, *the imaginary*.

Moreover, inspired by Steyerl's (2012, p. 72), notion of the rapture, I instantiate through *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020) iterations, a form of cinematic politics which are decidedly post-representational. Like Steyerl's instigation, my project articulates the crowd in space and time, while submerging it in partial invisibilities and then orchestrating their dispersion, movement and reconfiguration. I replace the sovereign spectator of the white gallery cube with the incomplete, obscured, fractured, and overwhelmed vision of the spectator-as-labourer.

Using the poor still images from the films I multi-projected into the icosahedral mobile structures of the *Asymmetries* (2018) installation, I will reward the reader, with textual/visual vignettes that account for the agrammatical logic by which the projected and installation objects produced the emancipated crowd/viewers/spectators in time and space.

I reflect on the digital film material for projections in relation to the icosahedral objects, framed under the conceptual ruse of the cartographic nomenclature of 'the north arrow, data frames and legends. The certitude of the cartographic nomenclature is then disavowed through the poetic and political demands of the right to opacity as articulated by Édouard Glissant (1997) accompanied by Hito Steyerl's (2012) instigations in *The Wretched of the Screen* (2012) and Sarat Maharaj's *Xeno-Epistemics: Makeshift Kit for Sounding Visual Arts as Knowledge Production and the Retinal Regimes* (2002).

(i)The North Arrow, Data Frame and Legends: re- framed.

Fig.4 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018).

In cartographic terms, the north arrow or the compass rose is primarily used for orientation, allowing the map reader to determine the direction of the map as it relates to the purported due north. This section of the installation was composed mostly of documentary interview materials from audiovisual field research notes. Traditionally in documentary films, the voices of experts or 'talking heads' in filmmaking parlance, are treated as privileged sites of enunciation and orient the film's core arguments.

I am interested in destabilising the certitude of the expert voice or the 'talking heads' (architects, urbanists, academics and arts practitioners), by charting out the asymmetrical antinomy between perspectives on the urban emanating from the global north and those located from the artistic practices from the global south.

The cartographic conceit of the north arrow is invoked here ironically to call out the hegemonic and epistemic intrusions that come from elsewhere in the project of reading African urbanity. Instead of a single stable talking head framed in a single screen, I present multiple frames of talking heads moving in oblique directions across the icosahedral objects. I render

the images in various scales, continually weaving myriad perspectives into an enmeshed discursive cacophony.

I weaved the talking heads interview imagery with textual references/production sketches and diagrams resulting in a palimpsestic and unstable visual document foregrounding its construction, while demanding the right to opacity as per Glissant's (1997) epistemic provocation:

If we examine the process of 'understanding' people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that the basis is the requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. I have to reduce. (Glissant, 1997, p. 189)

Allar (2015, p. 51) asserts that Glissant conceives the idea of opacity as a textual weave that must be created by collectivities. The refusal to penetrate the 'nature' of the text speaks quite directly to the material image of an opaque text, whose incomprehensibility disrupts penetration to a 'deeper meaning' and rather draws the attention to its corporeal surface; its 'texture.'

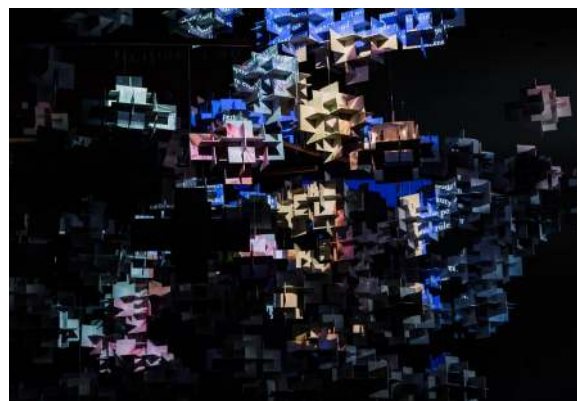


Fig. 5 *Asymmetries* Installation view at the Point of Order in Johannesburg (May 2018).

The installation work therefore is a deliberate textured weave of resistance against the reductive logic of canonised urbanisms from elsewhere and the transparent and masterly voice of the 'expert'. Moreover, once projected on the icosahedral mobile sculptures, the talking heads (data frames) are further fragmented, and the authorial voices and visions of mastery are dissipated and re-configured by the spectator's heuristic meandering across the installation space.

(ii) Agglutinative Legends and Data Frames: Farewell to Retinal Reason.

Dempsey (2011:sp) defines a legend as the cartographic element that serves as the decoder for the symbology in the data frame, the map. A data frame is the portion of the map that displays the data layers and is the central focus of the map document. Descriptions detailing any colour schema, symbology or categorisation are explained in the legend. Without the legend, Dempsey claims, the colour scheme on the map would make no sense to the viewer.

With these cartographic definitions in mind concerning the visual sense-making of a map, consider Sarat Maharaj (2009) ideas of the agglutinative thinking through the visual. The internal logic of *Asymmetries* (2018) is premised on mobilising poetic and epistemic blots into the symmetrical taxonomy of title, scale bars, legends, map frames, neat lines and borders of the cartographic nomenclature. The composition and compositing of the assemblage of visual and aural elements are characterised by Maharaj (2009, p.4) postulation of visual arts conceived as a form of knowledge production that offer instances of 'chopping up flows of information, experience and thought into combinatory bits, modules and units configure them in algorithmic sequences'.

In the still image below, the composite of agrammatical layering is evinced. The bodies of images of a Johannesburg couple in the post-coitus embrace floats in the waters of

the Atlantic, seen from the vantage point from the shore of Ga Jamestown, Accra. You see a silhouette of the woman surveying and recording the contours and cadences of the projections. You hear the sound of her voice as she speculates about afro-futurity in combinatory poetic bits and polemic units. The construction of soundscape in this part of the installation is conceived as per Maharaj's postulation cited in Enwezor (2002, p. 72), that 'sound is a corrective blast against retinal surfeit, the glut of image-sheen. It is a deretinalising force, blowtorch, or paint stripper – pivotal to visual arts knowledge'.

Furthermore, following Maharaj instigations, I designed the soundscape that is experienced not so much as an additive to the image, but as sound-image fusions and fissions – a scene of maceration where moving images, stills, sonic stuff telescope into seeing-hear sequences, into speak-listen-look sensations. This, according to Maharaj, echoes out the everyday, shopping mall experience of sound-image meltdown – a feature of our tele-electronic immersion.



Fig. 6 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018)



Fig. 7 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018).

A split screen, on the left a Finnish woman is gazing and imaging the bodies of men and women in Makola Market in Accra through her iPhone. On the right are x-rayed images of the arteries of a human heart superimposed with text from Mignolo and Vazquez (2013). The animated text reads:

Decolonial aesthesia departs from an embodied consciousness of the colonial wound and moves toward healing. It is an historico-embodied move; it perceives the wound of coloniality hidden under the rhetoric of modernity, the rhetoric of salvation. Decoloniality is at once the unveiling of the wound and the possibility of healing. It makes the wound visible, tangible; it voices the scream.

(Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013:sp)



Fig. 8 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018)

A shot of a Nigerian man reading a poem about urban ennui covered with projections, interviews of the women who run the Makola Market. To the right of the frame, the frame scale of the gazing iPhone subject is reduced until it turns into a blur.



Fig. 9 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018)

Cut to the aerial shot of Tahrir Square, I struggle to reconcile the images of the symmetrical and the heavily securitised square to my imaginary of crowds at the height of the Arab Spring in 2011. Then again, I remember that Glissant (1997, p. 199) argues that ‘the imaginary works in a spiral: from one circularity to the next, it encounters new spaces and does not transform them into either depths or conquests. Nor is confined to binaries...’ The imaginary, argues Glissant, becomes complete on the margins of every linear projection. It creates a network and constitutes volume. Binaries only serve as conveniences for approaching its weave.

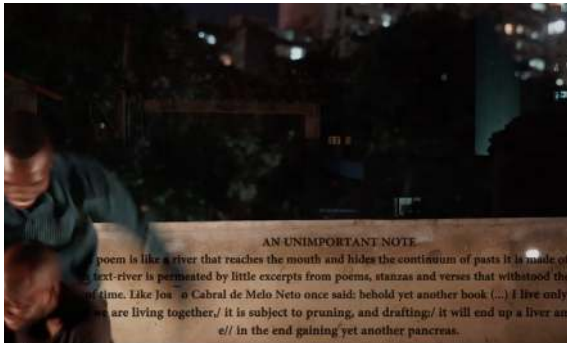


Fig. 10 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018)

On a humid night in Maputo, by the rooftop of a building in the city centre, I train my camera lens onto two bodies dancing, singing and mourning the loss of home. The actors are performing sections of Mozambican poet Rogerio Majente staging the poem titled 'The Red Scar'.

Malanga:
 green smell of bush in the air
 When bush is no more only people
 There are no flowers or butterflies
 There are stones made of people
 That blossom and dance in them capulana's heart
 There are stones made of people outside those capulanas hanged-out dry
 Waving the wind:
 Married objects, in bed, dreaming the same
 Nightmare:
 One hand pulling their memory away to shape into a ball, edible, playable, danceable, flyable, callable
 Hushing my verbs:
 A toy of this sort of new, unknown god:
 Despite the millennium...
 (Rogerio Majente, 2017)

The work is an ode to Rogerio Majente's childhood home in the Maputo neighbourhood of Malanga. I had spent the previous day with him walking the streets of his childhood and meeting his people. The performed poetic text, however, transcends the spatial coordinates of the everyday troubles of the deserted and marginalised people in post-independence Mozambique. The performance and text resist easy reading and demand the viewer to navigate the skylines of Maputo, superimposed on the kinetic bodies of performers, the voices of revellers in the adjacent barracks (informal drinking section) combining with Brazilian poet João Cabral de Melo Neto's words.



Fig. 11 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018).

You have arrived in Ga Jamestown (Accra) beckoned by the white and red lighthouse; you may decide to climb to the very top and experience the city from above. Conversely, you can walk on the high street and meander into a multi-sensory experience of artistic practices during the Chale Wote Street Art Festival. Two boys are engaged in a gladiatorial boxing match, I look away and see another crowd encircling, I wonder if this is another boxing match, but to my excitement, it is a duel of a different nature. A duel of portrait artist named Realpen Pencil and his standing model.



Fig. 12 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018)

Realpen Pencil is a young Instant Live Drawing artist with a photographic memory, living and working in Accra. This description does no justice to the extraordinary ritual of creation I experienced while witnessing him working in the streets of Ga Jamestown. This was not an artist in his studio, drawing a supine model; but a public act of creation in which, for hours, the artist was surrounded by cheering and at times impatient audiences. The artist danced, scribbled, cajoled the portrait of a black young woman into being, in techniques that are illuminating about the processes of creation. Beyond the kinetic beauty of his performance, the Realpen Pencil seemed to remind us of the embodied nature creating works of the imagination. In this, our Instagram times of instant gratification, in which the ubiquity of image-making structures and mediates our experience of things and times, it is essential that makers such as the Realpen Pencil exist. His process reminds us that the act of looking and capturing does not always have to be mechanical and venerated through digital filters, but we can spend some time searching and capturing in visceral and engaged unfoldings.



Fig. 13 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018).

The idea of mobilising text as a graphic form is central to my practice. The aesthetic treatment of text on screen beyond the practical needs of titling and anchoring images in cinema informs how text is used as a textural and rhetoric device in the *Asymmetries* (2018) installation. In the conceptualisation of this element of my setup, I return the cartographic nomenclature and its labelling and organisational coordinates of map citations. Dempsey (2011:sp) describes citations as the portion of a map that constitutes the metadata of the map. This is the area where explanatory data, sources and currency, projection information and any caveats are placed. I am very interested in the idea of caveats and explored the idea of using motion text graphics, not as explanatory data, but rather a further blot on my cartographic experiment.

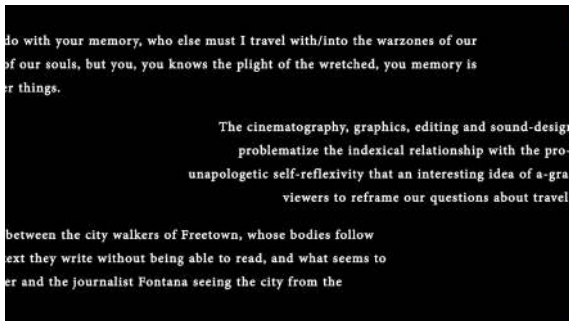


Fig. 14 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018).

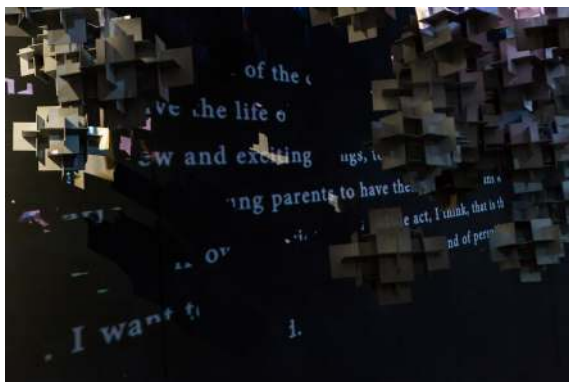
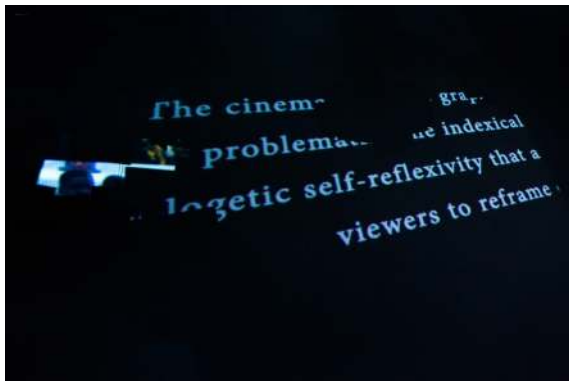


Fig. 15 *Asymmetries* Installation View (Video Detail) at the Point of Order Project Space in Johannesburg (May 2018).

The movement of the motion graphics, colliding with images on icosahedral mobiles creates a fluid palimpsest; an invitation or reminder to the spectator to conceive of the written text as a fluid and unstable model open to many ways of reading.

As intimated at the beginning of this section, the objective exegesis is neither to offer a conclusion nor description of the processes, it is a cursory glance into the development of the project. The composition of these vignettes are in concert with Allar's (2015:47), writing on Glissant's early poetry, in which he states that 'a great number of dialectical opposites do not resolve into neat syntheses but rather propel the expression into a space of deliberate disorder, for the collision of such elements as light and dark or fluid and solid calls into question the very epistemology that separated them in the first place'.

My project *Asymmetries* (2018), in its iterative spirit, is an act of imagining possibilities that are still emergent and contingent on how each element, or blot, generates new ocular and 'emancipated' spectatorship. Furthermore, the first iteration of the *Asymmetries* installation in Johannesburg, instigated a rhizomatic proliferatory movement, resulting in the second destination in Cape Town's Michaelis Galleries in May 2019.

Second Iteration - Asymmetries Michaelis Galleries Cape Town May 2019

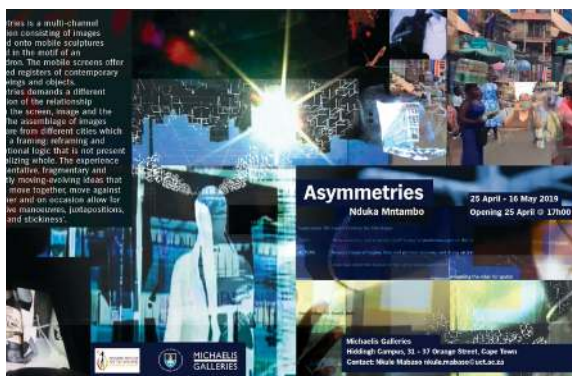


Fig. 16 *Asymmetries* Poster at the Michaelis Galleries in Cape Town (May 2019).

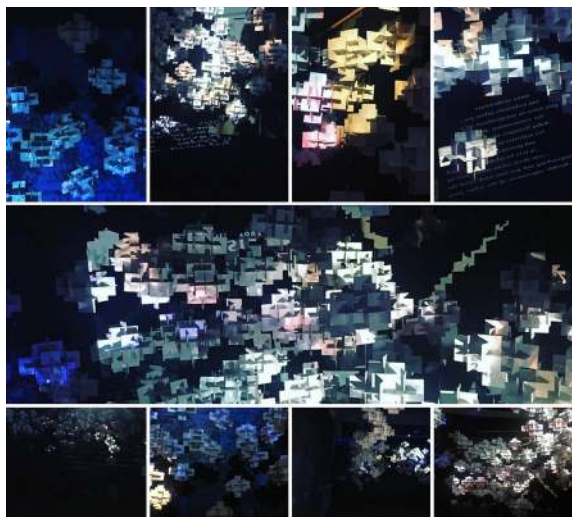


Fig. 17 *Asymmetries* Installation Views at the Michaelis Galleries in Cape Town (May 2019).

The Michaelis Galleries' iteration allowed me to interrogate the question of opacity in a gentler and less absolute way. Although the three-dimensional icosahedral objects were still

the primary surface of projection; the video work projected on two-dimensional gallery walls wove in a visual texture that was not present in the first iteration in Johannesburg. The audio design of the interview material was remixed in a new form (different from the previous display at The Point of Order) to give a more vivid intelligibility to the voices of the experts, whilst still forcing their ideas to collide.

Somehow the two registers of absolute opacity from the icosahedral structures and the visual generosity of the gentler level of opacity seemed to coalesce effectively to produce new meanings and possibilities for the 'emancipated spectator' and myself - now as a spectator viewing the work in a new context.

Moreover, in the Michaelis Galleries iteration, the video images and motion textual graphics had greater prominence on the two-dimensional surfaces of the gallery walls, which offered the spectator a different entry point into the work.

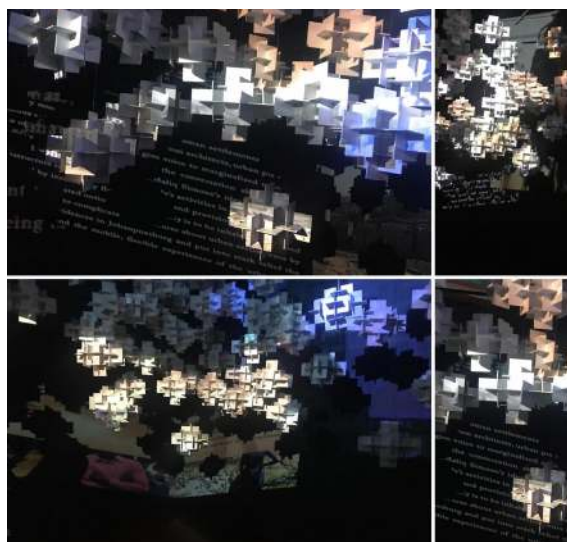


Fig. 18 *Asymmetries* Installation Views at the Michaelis Galleries in Cape Town (May 2019)

The Third Iteration - Asymmetries Installation Performance Lecture at Art Research Africa Conference 2020, Johannesburg



Fig. 19 *Asymmetries* Installation Lecture Views at Art Research Africa Conference 2020, Johannesburg.

Perhaps most provocative of all, the artist and experimental South African filmmaker, NM, delivered his lecture/paper presentation to an empty auditorium, while his “audience” experienced his deconstruction of the single-camera view by walking through an multi-screen cinematic installation on the stage behind his lectern.

Doherty (2020:vi)

I presented the third iteration of the *Asymmetries* Installation at the Art Research Africa Conference 2020; whose theme was ‘How does artistic research decolonise knowledge and practice in Africa? A big part of the *Asymmetries* project has been to disrupt and contest the axiomatic coordinates of how knowledge production about urbanity flows from the Global North. The poetics and politics of the installation lecture drew inspiration from Comaroff & Comaroff (2012:5) ‘global south’ analytic framework, which they argue, creates a rich new site of knowing-and-being that can inform and transform theory at its self-appointed centres, and to trouble its assumptions

about the motors, mechanisms, and pathways of history in our late modern times. The presentation format of the installation as a performative lecture in a proscenium styled hall in front of conference ‘audiences’ offered a possibility to rethink the spatial reconfiguration of the work. The relationship between installation work, the spectator and the maker became an interesting discursive cornerstone from which the questions of art praxis, research and decoloniality coalesced



Fig. 20 *Asymmetries* Installation Lecture Views at Art Research Africa Conference 2020, Johannesburg.

In this iteration, the question of spectatorship was central, I drew from Ranciere (2009, p. 2) problematization of the role of a spectator. Ranciere proposes that

viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and the reality it conceals. Secondly, the spectator remains immobile in his seat, passive. To be a spectator, therefore, is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.

(Ranciere, 2009, p. 2)

The performance lecture facilitated the suspension of the position of a passive spectator and invited the conference audiences to assume the position of a collaborative explorer or

experimenter in the act of mapping and engaging with urban texts from the global south. The suspension of the inactive spectator position led to the re-examination of equivalences between conference audiences' learned gaze and exteriority of epistemic prompts offered in the installation.



Fig. 21 *Asymmetries* Installation Lecture Views at Art Research Africa Conference 2020, Johannesburg.

Emancipated spectatorship, argues Ranciere (2009, p. 13), begins 'when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting'. The viewing, therefore, is also an action that confirms and transforms the distribution of positions.

I conceive of the reader/spectator as someone in a place to observe, select, compare and interpret the mapping activities in this installation in relation to their own cartographic compositions. The spectator's plot theories, trajectories in the forest of things, acts and signs that confront and surround them in the installation.



Fig. 22 *Asymmetries* Installation Lecture Views at Art Research Africa Conference 2020, Johannesburg.

The spectator meanderings in the installation is (dis)oriented through Ranciere's (2009, p. 17), induction that 'there is no privileged starting point; everywhere there are starting points, intersections and junctions that enable us to learn something new if we refuse the distribution of roles between spectators, texts and their makers'. Put theatrically, every spectator (reader) is already an actor in the story, every actor, every man, and woman of action (cartographer), is a spectator in the same intellectual and artistic adventure.

Summary

The project *Asymmetries* started with a simple frustration about the limitations of a single mono-focal screen to account for complexities of my city, Johannesburg. The experimental potentialities offered by artistic research mode of enquiry allowed me to map the epistemic and aesthetic journeys across diverse urban sites and conceptual positions. Emboldened by the iterative spirit of artistic research; my research project on the city deliberately remains incomplete and contingent on the vagaries of spaces, subjects and objects encountered in the conceptualisation and the realisation of *Asymmetries* (2018/2019/2020). Instead of presenting a summation of the project that attempts to be definite in its

findings; the anti-teleological textual strategies offered in this exegesis explores discontinuities, displacements, and discoveries within the complex and mobile cinematic cartographies in selected African urban millieux.

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