

Visualizing Transformation Contemporary Art in Johannesburg

Fiona Siegenthaler, Institute of Social Anthropology (Fiona.Siegenthaler@unibas.ch)

This PhD thesis asks how contemporary visual artists in the city of Johannesburg perceive, reflect, and represent urbanity and social change. Focusing on the last 15 years of transition, it analyzes works in diverse artistic media including painting, photography, and performance in public space. First findings show that engaging with the city is relevant in diverse art traditions and that not only the urban space, but also the artists' strategies and the visual aesthetics have changed in the years of post-apartheid.



Visit at the studio of Kudzanai Chiurai, 31.7.2008

- Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Till Förster
- Funding: Swiss National Science Foundation
- Duration: April 2009 - September 2011
- Selected Publication: Siegenthaler, F.: *Schichten des Transitorischen: Oberflächen und Reflexionen in der zeitgenössischen Fotografie in Johannesburg*, in: www.kunsttexte.de, Sektion Gegenwart, August 2010
- Keywords: Contemporary Art, Johannesburg, Urban Change, Visual Culture, Performance, Photography, Art in public space, Installation, Painting
- Link: www.unibas-ethno.ch/forschung/

Background

Urban change is a dominant theme, not only strongly experienced but also debated in the big cities of many African countries. Much has been written about these urban transformations, but only little research has been done about the way in which these transformations are perceived and reflected by visual artists. Johannesburg as a city has experienced a great change from an urban and cultural perspective since the end of apartheid and the introduction of democracy in 1994. The inner city of Johannesburg is an intriguing space for many artists, fascinated by its unique history, its social tensions and its urban myths.

Objectives/Research Questions

The central question is: How do the artists perceive and reflect urbanity and social change in Johannesburg within their work, and to what extent is transformation not just visually represented but also identifiable in terms of aesthetic changes in the contemporary development of visual arts in Johannesburg? How are the imageries related to so-called local, urban, national or global art histories?

Methodology

The approach is based on a combination of perspectives and methods from art history and anthropology such as work analysis, interviews, and participatory observation.