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# The Changing Now of Things

Raél Jero Salley

It seems that to focus on the ‘now’ of things requires working out several issues at once: what is at once both past and remaining; how a lingering ‘before’ appears in a contemporary moment; and how ‘this’ moment – and our understanding of it – will soon change to accommodate future demands.

Several contemporary visual practices begin to launch responses to the demands of contemporary life in South Africa, and in this article I seek to highlight recent works by artists that seek to adjust, record and arrange viewing events so as to re-order *chronologies* – links between self-presentation, visual narrative and temporal understanding.<sup>1</sup> My argument is that the artworks discussed here may be seen to develop a notion of change that is bound up with cause, motion and time. These complexities are demonstrated in artworks that alter, revise or re-enact both historical moments and contemporary experience. As they operate, the artworks begin to open new conceptual spaces in which politics of identity appear and may be worked through, thereby elaborating tangible forms of ‘transformation’ and the concomitant re-imagining of racial, national, gendered and sexualized identities.

In each of the artworks discussed in this article – by visual practitioners who include Dineo Bopape, Lerato Bereng, Nathalie Bikoro, Donna Kukama, Nástio Mosquito, Ismail Farouk, and Gabi Ngcobo – there is a *theory of temporal awareness*. This is a threatening sort of awareness, because its absence means to be without a sense of self as a subject fully present to itself.<sup>2</sup> The threat appears in deferred action, in events that have never been given as fully present, happenings experienced only after the fact. On this point Daniel Birnbaum refers to Jacques Derrida’s article ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’: ‘Derrida sums it up nicely: it is thus the delay which is in the beginning.’<sup>3</sup>

What has inspired me to write this essay is the optimistic idea that in different ways each of the practitioners discussed seems to be in search of situations in which developments could have taken alternative roots (and routes!), where layers of significance are present but may not yet be activated. The artist’s enquiries into constellations of technology, ideology and art are never pursued in the interest of some all-encompassing final

1. An introduction to the issue of change and inconsistency may be found in Chris Mortensen, ‘Change and Inconsistency’, in Edward N Zalta, ed, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, fall 2011 edition, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/change/>. On ‘Chronology’ see Daniel Birnbaum’s *Chronology*, Lukas and Sternberg, New York, 2005, a key reference for this article.

2. Birnbaum, op cit, p17

3. Ibid

synthesis; rather these works display fracture, tensions that may, in hopeful moments, appear superable but can never be fully redeemed.

### *DREAMWEAVERR*

Dineo Bopape's *Dreamweaverr* (2008) is a digital video projection, a nearly eight-minute-long segment recorded in black-and-white digital video. The setting is part warehouse, part workspace. Perhaps the most curious aspect of the scene is the singular figure that emerges from the darkness. Initially the form is a blurry irregular mass that bounces up and down. Enveloped in a bulbous skirt made of stuffed plastic bags, she sports white-rimmed sunglasses and a beard, and holds a single bare lamp and an umbrella in one hand.

She spins clockwise holding the lamp that is the only source of light. The billowing costume produces a shadow that trails behind the movement. Because this dance happens in front of a camera that moves only slightly, there are moments of darkness when the figure faces away as she makes a rotation or reverses direction. It is the movement of the actor that dictates the amount of visible light and the rhythm of the dance that determines the regularity. The dancing rhythm introduces temporal breaks and repetition; sometimes it is in harmony with the audio samples that accompany the video, at other times it is not. The figure repeats a gesture clockwise, is interrupted, and restarts the movements. Disjuncture appears as the motion repeats, then gives way to slower sweeping actions, restarts, repeats.



Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Dreamweaverr*, 2008, digital video, 4 mins, photo courtesy the artist and Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, RSA

4. *Ibid*, p 16

5. 'That Old Black Magic' (1942), 3 minutes 17 seconds, is a song written by Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen and is an often recorded standard. The version Bopape uses is a 1955 recording by Sammy Davis Jr (1925–1990) recorded by Decca records. Davis Jr encountered racism throughout his life and supported Civil Rights causes. In the 1950s and 1960s he was one of the few black American entertainers who achieved mainstream success. In Bopape's video, it is love, magic and blackness that seem to be significant thematic references. The lyrics are as follows:

That old black magic has me in its spell  
That old black magic that you weave so well  
Icy fingers up and down my spine

That same old witchcraft when your eyes meet mine.  
That same old tingle that I feel inside  
When that elevator starts its ride  
'Round and 'round I go, up and down I go  
Like a leaf that's caught in the tide...

6. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Gabriel Rockhill, trans, Continuum, London, 2004, p 25. This passage is quoted by Joost Bosland in the notes on the exhibition 'This is our Time' (2010) in which he notes that, historically, political art in South Africa has been primarily concerned with voicing protest, but that a new crop of artists are now engaging in complex, nuanced forms of 'resistance through form'. On nationhood and time, see Nuala Johnson, 'From Time Immemorial: Narratives of Nationhood and the Making of National Space', in Jon May and Nigel Thrift, eds, *TimeSpace: Geographies of*

These fissures in time seem to partition zones of temporality, moments set apart but allowed to touch in ways that offer a kind of syncopation.<sup>4</sup> As the moments collide, it is less easy to understand when one gesture gives way to another, how fast or slow the figure is moving, what such whirling actions represent, or where or how to find the 'old black magic' suggested by the soundtrack. Bopape's video samples the opening seconds of the jazz standard: 'That old black magic has me in its spell...' but pauses, cuts, repeats it, and cuts again. The visual directs the aural here, as the 'round and round I go, up and down I go' of the classic lyrics are performed by the whirling actor.<sup>5</sup>

My first impressions focused on disjuncture: between the visual activity and the aural fragments, the misalignment of a strange character, ritualistic action and a banal setting. The timing is out of joint, but perhaps that is to be expected if we identify one theme in this strangely rhythmic video as *temporality*.

Any attempt to visualize temporality opens conceptual dilemmas. For one, to think about time is to notice our own time and yet attempt to step outside of it. The struggle is particularly acute when focused on the contemporary moment. For instance, Jacques Rancière argues that the contemporary conception of art is first of all a new regime for relating to the past. For Rancière, contemporary art:

... actually sets up as the very principle of artisticity the expressive relationship inherent in a time and a state of civilization, a relationship that was previously considered to be the 'non-artistic' works of art.<sup>6</sup>

This 'relationship' is grounded in specific local practices and cultures.

A further challenge is that descriptive lexicons for dealing with time are intimately bound up with the vocabulary of space. An example of this is powerfully captured in Johannes Fabian's observation that in the nineteenth century Western adherents to evolutionism treated travel to distant *places* as if it were travel to earlier *times*. Such conceptual slippages resulted in depictions of 'non-Western' contemporaries as 'primitive ancestors'. Fabian notes that historically times past have become the resource for nationalist movements, cultural imaginaries and social narratives of far away and long ago.<sup>7</sup> Bopape's artwork demonstrates sensitivity to multiple movements, narratives and imaginaries, and responds by offering colliding moments. In these instances, the viewer is able to imagine a self, a subject that is awkward, misaligned, costumed, even vanishing – a subject not fully present to itself. In this sense, Bopape's *Dreamweaverr* is an instance of contemporary visual practice that addresses cultural imaginaries as they change and develop. As it makes its address, it also demonstrates the potential of narrative video experiments to impact on coherent self-presentation.

## PERFORMANCE AS TEMPORAL SITUATION

Delay, tension and hope mark Bopape's *The Performance Has Been Deferred* (2008). The artist describes the situation as a performance with the concerns of the 'Black Womanhood' show in mind. Curated by Barbara Thompson and organized by the Hood Museum of Art, 'Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body'

*Temporality*, Routledge, London, 2001, p 89.

7. Johannes Fabian, *Memory against Culture: Arguments and Reminders*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2007, pp 3–32

was a major travelling exhibition that examined the historical roots of the black female body as an icon in contemporary art.

The premise of the exhibition was that only through an exploration of the origins of prevalent stereotypes of black womanhood can new light be shed on a powerful revisionism occupying contemporary artists working with these themes today. To explore this issue, the exhibition was organized around three main historical themes: the traditional African, the colonial and the contemporary global. Contextualizing the exhibition, Thompson argues that the visual objects reveal a common preoccupation with themes of ideal beauty, fertility and sexuality, maternity and motherhood, identities and social roles that enable us to peel back the layers of social, cultural, and political realities that have influenced stereotypes of black womanhood from the nineteenth century to the present.<sup>8</sup>

For Bopape's part, she offers a performance that is concrete in its scrutiny of selfhood (in context, black womanhood) and searches for instances in which a particular development could veer off in an alternative direction – where significance is present but not yet activated. Bopape explains:

The curators had invited me to do a performance with the concerns of the show in mind, on a day during which there was a symposium. . . Instead of myself acting, I hired an actress acting as one of the audience members to go on the raised green stage/platform adorned with a microphone, spotlight and speakerphones, 5–10 minutes after the crowd had gathered, seated and standing around the stage and announce that 'the performance has been deferred,' thereafter go back into the crowd of people. The day of the event also happened to be my birthday, I had also hired another actress to announce that Dineo Bopape was celebrating her birthday downstairs, and anyone is welcome to join!<sup>9</sup>

Bopape offers viewers direction in the form of a birthday celebration, complete with balloons, streamers, music and cake. The viewer would recognize an event happening, but that recognition comes with a dissonance or meaning. An 'event' takes place, but if the birthday celebration is understood as the artwork, it neither resolves into a clear view of self-identity (an actress plays the celebrating 'artist'), nor does it explain how the audience is unwittingly absorbed *into* the performance through the workings of deferral and disjuncture.

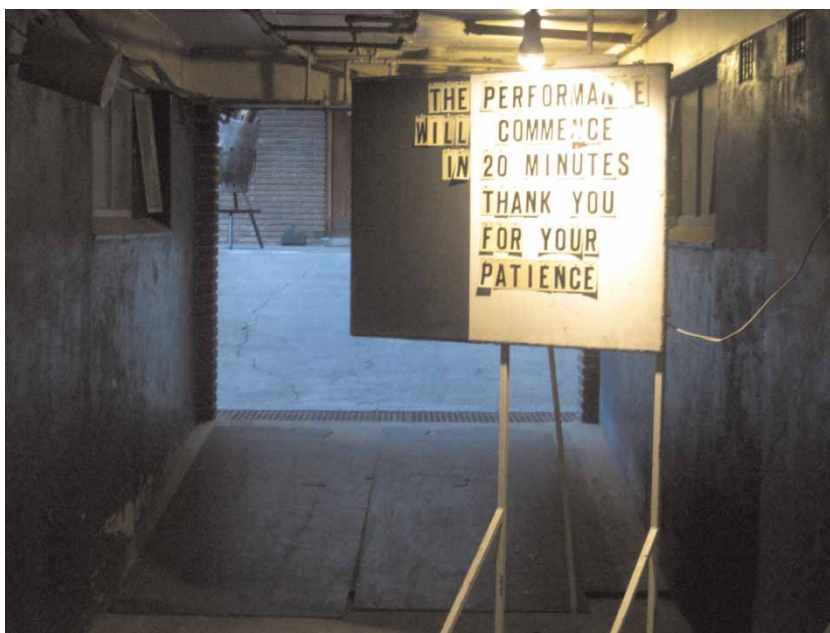
The clarity that arrives in the form of birthday celebration narrates bounded chronology, verifiable event (the artist's birth date) and hopeful moments of stable temporality delivered in the guise of a party. *The Performance Will Commence in 20 Minutes, Thank You for Your Patience. . .* (2010) is another installation and performance that makes it a point to 'put off'. In an irregular pattern of announcements viewers are informed that a performance is to commence twenty minutes *later*. Before or after the specified time has elapsed, the same announcement is repeated, and then again, ad infinitum. The viewer's expectation of artistic experience is defeated – unless any such expectation is updated. This time, no alternative narration appears and deferral of a beginning is taken to an extreme. The grand opening of the performance is at once a paltry closing (or more accurately, inconsequential continuation). Such a situation throws traditional viewing experience out of joint and towards expectation because the performance is kept out of sync

8. The exhibition featured over one hundred sculptures, prints, postcards, photographs, paintings, textiles and video installations. This approach was intended to promote a deeper understanding of the ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality that inform contemporary responses – of both viewers and artists – to images of the black female body. See the exhibition catalogue *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*, Barbara Thompson, ed, Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, New Hampshire, 2008, <http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/exhibitions/blackwomanhood/>, accessed 21 June 2012.

9. *Ibid*



10. Futurism and Afro-Futurism feature innovative communication and technological progress as linguistic constitutions of the self. The early twentieth-century artistic movement had political implications and embraced not only the visual arts but also architecture, music, cinema and photography. Futurism expressed disappointment felt in Italian artistic and political circles at the apparent lack of progress by Italy since its unification in the mid-nineteenth century. Stress was laid on modernity and the virtues of technology, machinery and speed. The Futurist style had considerable influence abroad, drew on a number of sources and favoured faceted forms and multiple viewpoints allied to a sense of movement and speed. If Futurism enunciated a white European virtuosity, Afro-Futurism better describes Bopape's work, which I believe articulates a Black African counter-aesthetics. As in Scott-Heron (the pioneer of Black hip hop aesthetics), Bopape's approach to authorship actively challenges modern European protocols of historical origin and identity. In so doing, Bopape multiplies identities, drawing on a wide range of sources to produce her narratives. In this the artist bears greater resemblance to a hip hop DJ's hybridity than a European artist's search for authenticity. Bopape's recombinant narratives produce new possibilities for mobility and agency. See 'Futurism', *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*, Oxford Art Online, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t4/e759>, accessed 30 September 2011; Alondra Nelson, 'Introduction', *Social Text*; vol 20, no 2, summer 2002, p 1, p 16; and Paul Youngquist, 'The Afro-Futurism of DJ



Dineo Seshee Bopape, *The Performance Will Commence*, 2010, performance with sound and sign, photo courtesy the artist and Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, RSA

(temporally and visually), leaving any distinction between artistic experience and anything else out of focus.

This indeterminacy characterizes other works by Bopape, to varying effect. In *The Eclipse Will Not Visible to the Naked Eye* (2010), images on dibond, artificial plants, plaster, linoleum, paint, ribbons, fabric, mirrors and other 'miscellaneous objects' combine with video on flat screens. The viewer is treated to tiny narrative moments that appear or vanish depending on viewing angles, moments of attention and spatial orientation. The overall effect is perplexing, awkward and incoherent. Once more, the viewer is left with the sense that a story has just begun, is about to begin, or has just been missed.<sup>10</sup> No explanation arrives. But a clue may be found in the title, which echoes Gil Scott-Heron's classic recording 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' (1970). Scott-Heron's lyrics were directed toward facilitating listeners' personal and collective political awareness and engagement, and critically marked a self that no longer has a sense of its self, a self that is missing a link to its own voice. Scott-Heron's work appears in the context of Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and directly addresses people of African descent. His words are a linguistic articulation of a self that is collapsing under the weight of formulaic systems of consumption. Through his lyrics, Scott-Heron resists the power of consumption and laments its impact on other forms of cultural convention, including Black Power:<sup>11</sup>

The revolution will not be right back after a message  
about a white tornado, white lightning, or white people.  
You will not have to worry about a dove in your  
bedroom, a tiger in your tank, or the giant in your toilet bowl.

Vassa', *European Romantic Review*, vol 16, no 2, April 2005, pp 181–192, p 12.

11. Black Power ideology appeared in the mid-1960s as Black Americans reacted against structural inequality and injustice in society. For an overview and explanation, see Winston Van Horne, 'The Concept of Black Power: Its Continued Relevance', *Journal of Black Studies*, January 2007, vol 37, no 3, pp 365–389, p 24.
12. Gil Scott-Heron, 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' (1970), 3 minutes 7 seconds, recorded as a single and later included on album of the same name, Flying Dutchman Recordings, 1974
13. Birnbaum, op cit, p 14
14. I mean black here in three senses: expressivity of black culture in a visual mode, expressions of black vernacular, and black cultural forms. Black is but one mode among many available to perception, the full range of which would bring the article round to historical visions of race, gender and authority. Here I simply flag the 'disproportionate influence of a past that creeps forward to speak in the present's voice; a vision that understands this past in terms of both limitations imposed and freedoms won'. See Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p 31; and Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008.
15. For discussion of an 'Africa-centred' paradigm see C Tshloane Keto, *Vision and Time*, which attempts to provide a framework for the centring of knowledge about

The revolution will not go better with Coke.  
 The revolution will not fight the germs that may cause bad breath.  
 The revolution will put you in the driver's seat.<sup>12</sup>

It is a story that has just begun, or is about to begin, that aligns the spaces of Scott-Heron and a less collectivistic Bopape. Rather than overstating similarities, it is enough to highlight the question of a *future* subject, one that is not naturally given, but is historically and technologically conditioned and constructed. Viewing Bopape's work may be described as the demonstration of the viewer's capacity to apprehend (and even achieve) moments of (radical) *difference*.<sup>13</sup>

Catching this moment is not satisfying unless our apprehension is made more specific. My idea is that the sensations involved in these works of art may be analysed as different instances of becoming a subject, and they do so by mobilizing problems of chronology and temporality. This idea leads to further questions: How do problems of temporality link to varying concepts of subjectivity? What sort of time encompasses the existence and experience of black African subjects?<sup>14</sup> What is the relation between an autonomous African subject and the problem of freedom? Such are the questions provoked by the artworks explored in this essay.

## ENTANGLEMENTS

General notions of thinking about time may not synchronize with the historical and technological conditions of blackness and Africa. The problem is that prior discourse offered principles of language and systems of classification that exercised authority and assigned a 'special unreality' to expressions of blackness or Africanity, which become features of being nothing at all.<sup>15</sup> At stake is the orientation of human perceptual apparatus, which is historically and technologically conditioned. The tools of understanding determine the very ability to apprehend and re-negotiate the form of subject.<sup>16</sup> Addressing discourse on Africa, Achille Mbembe attends to these negotiations by envisaging *subjectivity itself* as temporality. Mbembe recalibrates categories of time by analysing links: between time(s), the bonds of subjugation, the ways domination is validated, the collapse of historic 'possibles', the symbolic constitution of the world, limits of the human and relations to transcendence. On this basis, Mbembe's analyses of problems of chronology and the subject in and of African history offer conceptual devices that can help us work through the distinctive and particular changes addressed by the artists assembled by this article. Of particular usefulness are the ideas of *entanglement* and *displacement*.

Mbembe demands awareness that we are engaging not a simple category of time but an *age*: 'a number of relationships and a configuration of events – often visible and perceptible, sometimes diffuse, "hydra-headed", but to which contemporaries could testify since very aware of them'. An *age* encloses multiple *durées*: temporal consciousnesses made up of 'discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelop one another'.<sup>17</sup> In an attempt to write directly to the problem of freedom Mbembe describes this sort of temporal consciousness (identified above as *chronology*) as

Africans, at home and abroad, on the experience of Africans as subjects of history in which Africans occupy the centre and are therefore the *subjects*, the *main players* if you wish, and the *makers* of their own history rather than peripheral players who inhabit the margins of other peoples' histories. C Tsehloane Keto, *Vision and Time: Historical Perspective of an Africa-Centered Paradigm*, University Press of America, New York, 2001, p xii. See also Mbembe's comments on Afrocentric theses in Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2001, p 12.

16. Birnbaum promotes Walter Benjamin's 'experimental constructivism', the idea that the human perceptual apparatus, far from being a natural given, is historical and technologically conditioned. Birnbaum, *op cit*, p 25. See also Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn, trans, Schocken, New York, 1969, p 236.
17. For a discussion of the 'hydra' in historical context see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, 'The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century', in Daniel Segal, ed, *Crossing Cultures*, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, pp 105–141
18. Achille Mbembe describes this time of entanglement in the context of 'postcolony', which is a combination of several temporalities that raise the problem of the relationship between temporality and subjectivity with three postulates: 'First, this time of African existence is neither a linear time or a simple sequence in which each moment effaces,

*entanglement*; time that is appearing, passing, but also of existence and experience.<sup>18</sup> The subject thereby emerges, acts, withdraws or is removed in the act and context of *displacement*: forms of living in the concrete world, subjective forms that make possible the validation of its contents and objectify it. Without claiming to speak in anyone's name, Mbembe theorizes:

In Africa today, the subject *who accomplishes the age* and validates it, who lives and espouses his/her contemporaneity – that is, what is 'distinctive' or 'particular' to his/her present real world – is first a subject who has an *experience* of 'living in the concrete world'.<sup>19</sup>

The living of the 'distinctive' as a condition of experience is useful for narrowing our view on becoming a subject. The story of 'living in the concrete world' is left painfully incomplete, but for now it must suffice to say that temporality is manifest in consciousness in further and more intimate ways.

## ON SIMPLICITY

If the present is now, it would seem our view of becoming a subject should be conceptually simple – a rule of simplicity as choosing your form of being. If simplicity could be elegantly understood as a way of shortening time, space and relativity, then could simplicity be an exposé for a moment of inner intensity and intimacy between people and spaces? Such notions set the tone in *Featuring 'Simplicity' as an 'Irrational Fear'* (2010), a project and exhibition curated by Lerato Bereng. Bereng's concept of 'simplicity' in contemporary art takes form as an interactive project that includes performance-based installation and an online blog. The installation appears in a traditional gallery space and viewers encounter a series of active laptop computers on plinths or tables. Viewed on the screens and heard through headsets, participating artists Nathalie Bikoro, Donna Kukama and Nástio Mosquito perform as characters who address and re-interpret the idea of simplicity. The artists are physically absent from the exhibition space but are seen and heard using video conferencing through voiceover internet protocol (VoIP). Viewers in Cape Town stand or sit and become immersed in the performance activity that is seen on the screen, the accompanying sound heard in the headphones and the conversation in which the viewer participates.

Bereng describes *Featuring 'Simplicity' as an 'Irrational Fear'* as 'an exploration of the concept of simplicity and its impact on the direction of contemporary art discourse'.<sup>20</sup> Linking simplicity to accessibility, Bereng observes that neither is readily available in this current climate of contemporary art: 'Concepts are often times over-complicated in the circumlocutory pseudo-intellectual babble that creeps into discussions, perhaps out of some irrational fear that once it is all decoded, then nothing is left.'<sup>21</sup> In my view, it is the human experience that is the crucial feature of this interactive project. In a simple arrangement, the video images materialize the capacity for perceiving images formerly possible through human perceptual apparatus alone (moving images in real time).

Each artist performs in 'real time' – in London (Bikoro), Johannesburg (Kukama) and Lisbon (Mosquito). The result is a direct presentation



annuls, and replaces those that preceded it, to the point where a single age exists within society. This time is not a series but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones.' Mbembe, op cit, p 16

19. Ibid, p17

20. Lerato Bereng, 'Conversations on Simplicity as an Irrational Fear', <http://www.fearofsimplicity.blogspot.com>

21. Ibid

22. Mark B N Hanson, *New Philosophy for New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004, p 235

23. Noting a 'radical unevenness' in the nature and quality of time itself, Jon May and Nigel Thrift describe spatial variation as a constitutive part rather than an added dimension of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of social time, what they call *TimeSpace*. See Jon May and Nigel Thrift, eds, *TimeSpace: Geographies of Temporality*, Routledge, London, 2001, especially pp 3–6.

24. Bereng, op cit

of *intensive time*. Intensive time is the time of digital information flow – where arrival and departure happen without check-in, queuing, take-off or landing – it is the time that eliminates space.<sup>22</sup> Viewers are shocked when digital convergence renders obsolete the distinction between a moment of perception and our bodily experience – our lived *timespace* is compressed (if not simplified) into a singular actualization of data.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the problem of temporal awareness, as described by Jon May and Nigel Thrift, may be approached more simply. Viewers are not only directly aware of what is present but experience changing moments and images by remembering the past and anticipating the future. This observation seems straightforward enough. But the present, strictly speaking, is momentary. So if our awareness is confined to the present, the viewer's awareness must *itself* lack temporal depth. The viewer's chronology – that is, a sense of *self* – appears as time-less. This leads to the conclusion that direct awareness (in and of the present) cannot possibly encompass phenomena possessing temporal extension (in and of the past, future or both). Viewers are thereby presented with a conundrum: it seems visual awareness must extend over time, but it also seems it simply cannot.

In *Featuring 'Simplicity' as an 'Irrational Fear'*, the observation that the viewer's awareness cannot extend over time is charted by Bereng's arrangement of the laptop stations which makes it difficult for a viewer to 'physically' engage with all three artists simultaneously (although this could be made possible through three-way video chat). The necessity of moving from one station to another and the momentary interval required for this change cause the viewer to shift temporal awareness – which exposes fractures, openings in chronology. By perceiving the subtle movement between digital time and physical space, the task of digital video and web-based applications is also illuminated: to interface information for human consumption. Accordingly, *Featuring 'Simplicity' as an 'Irrational Fear'* unpacks the dynamics of a viewer's perception of time and space. It highlights where and when shifts take place in order to produce temporality in consciousness. Viewers are encouraged to notice direct (simple) time, temporality beyond the space of a frame or a predetermined set of images that may be framed. Bereng describes this oscillation:

Ironically, simplicity is not quite as one-dimensional as one may expect. It is engulfed in concentric skins that seemingly lead right back to complexity. Simplicity itself becomes a slippery subject with multiple personalities but nonetheless one that is tackled head on.<sup>24</sup>

In *Featuring 'Simplicity' as an 'Irrational Fear'*, a multitude of characters are discovered through discussion between Bereng, Bikoro, Kukama and Mosquito. As viewing participants, viewers notice delays in their embodied relationships to time and space. Perhaps more significantly, the viewer is also encouraged to notice the accessible and distinct experience of living in a concrete world.

## CONNECTIONS, DELAYS AND COLLISIONS

The scene opens at an intersection on a busy urban street corner. The digital video is blurry with movement, but it is possible to make out

details of the overloaded urban centre of downtown Johannesburg: public transport, a street packed with vehicles, pavement stalls, building façades and roadwork construction. A man, identified as Keith, wearing a cap, T-shirt and fluorescent green safety vest, answers questions:

25. Ismail Farouk, *Trolleycam2* (urbanconcerns), performance, 17 August 2008. See also *First Trolley Road Test*, 17 March 2009; *Trolley Pushing and Life in Zim*, 17 January 2009; performances documented at <http://ismailfarouk.com>.

What happens is that they just corner you on the street and they ask you. That's when they take you away for loitering. What happens is that they just corner you by the street and they ask you: Where are you coming from and where are you going? If you don't have an answer, then they take you away in their police car. That is not good for the people who are just walking around, and the others who are doing informal trading.<sup>25</sup>

26. Ismail Farouk, 'Urban Regeneration and the Struggle to Formalise Trolley-Pushing Activity in Downtown Johannesburg', in Ntong Edjabe and Edgar Pieterse, eds, *African Cities Reader 1: Pan African Practices*, Chimurenga, Cape Town, 2010, pp 239–246

In the *Trolley Works* project (2008–2010) temporality is manifest as a bodily phenomenon. A multimedia project led by Ismail Farouk, *Trolley Works* is organized to explore the potential for the arts to impact on community planning, 'to develop a comprehensive profile of the informal trolley pushers and related economic activities in the greater Joubert Park area (Johannesburg)'.<sup>26</sup> Trolley-pushers, Farouk explains, are urban porters who use recycled supermarket trolleys to schlep heavy loads of luggage around the city for a small fee. Because their trolleys, most often rented from unforgiving 'trolley lords', are essentially stolen, the police harass by impounding them and fining or



Ismail Farouk, *The Trolley Works Project: Protest*, 2009, participatory artwork, photo courtesy the artist

locking up their drivers. Initiated in December 2008, the *Trolley Works* project has sought practical ways to regulate and legalize trolley-pushing in Joubert Park and its environs.

In Farouk's explicitly interventionist work, photographs and videos document evidence of abuse and register people and their experience.<sup>27</sup> The presentation of the work itself is not technologically complex, rather it is the technology of urban geography that is of interest:

By mapping the informal economic activities and the organically generated diversity [in the city], the project aims to bring about awareness of the potential role of migrant-controlled business in contributing towards the economic and cultural regeneration of the inner city of Johannesburg.<sup>28</sup>

The charting of distinctive time-spaces has long featured in accounts of urbanization. Mike Crang notes that one story of the city told in terms of space and time 'could be the conquest of time through space and the creation of conditions of co-presence'.<sup>29</sup> The story is of density, proximity, planned and unplanned contact, hustle and bustle. The popular account and recurrent motif of metropolitan life is one of increasing pace, but such overarching theses typically suppress other urban temporalities: dismissing cyclical time, or opposing a modern Western time to a traditional rural time. Farouk's project rethinks these tendencies by trying to understand the city through its patterns, the *rhythms* of the city. Influenced by Henri Lefebvre, Farouk presents the city not in terms of a singular quickening tempo but as an assemblage of different beats.<sup>30</sup> The cause, motion and times of the developing, changing city are presented in visual narratives that show colliding multiple temporalities.<sup>31</sup>

Often built around on-camera interviews that are conducted in an attempt to unpack the privatization of urban space, Farouk's video pieces are documentation of the daily experience of street vendors as they confront policing in urban space. These *entanglements* include the coercion to which people are subjected and the sufferings inflicted on the human body by scarcity and destitution. They also embrace the re-ordering of society, culture and identity, and changes to the way power is exercised.<sup>32</sup> Farouk notes that the introduction of new infrastructure is in keeping with the government's agenda to support processes of transformational development and gentrification in the inner city:

There seems to be single-minded focus on physical infrastructure upgrades and a lack of institutional support for local organizations. The city regeneration plans also disregard migrants and the informal sector, who are not considered part of the desired future in the re-imagining of the city.<sup>33</sup>

In *Trolley Works*, the problem of temporal awareness is extended beyond individual practice to collective action. The use of trolleys, interviews and informational workshops reframes experiences that are 'all too often considered disposable'.<sup>34</sup> Such documentation of the public structuring of the city space is political in that it produces an observable relationship of distance between subjectivities. It offers evidence of abuse, it registers people and it stabilizes everyday experiences. The viewer becomes directly aware of what is contemporaneous, but is also made to notice uncertainty between representational structures (official urban futures) and the flow of experience (informal urban presents). In Farouk's works it is the inter-

27. Cara Snyman, 'Artistic Work *with* and *in* Space: Urban Geographer Ismail Farouk Analyses the Logics of Inequality', in Peter Anders and Matthew Krouse, eds, *Positions: Contemporary Artists in South Africa*, Steidl, Göttingen, Germany, 2010, p 167
28. Farouk, 'Urban Regeneration', op cit, pp 239–246
29. Mike Crang, 'Rhythms of the City: Temporalized Space and Motion', in May and Thrift, op cit, p 188
30. Henri Lefebvre, 'Elements of Rhythmanalysis', in *Henri Lefebvre: Writings on Cities*, Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, eds, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995, pp 219–240
31. Barry Dainton explains that in grappling with a 'paradox of temporal awareness', different philosophers have proposed quite different accounts (or models) of the structure of temporal consciousness. Simplifying somewhat, the most commonly favoured options fall into three main categories: the Cinematic Model, the Retentional Model and the Extensional Model. See Barry Dainton, 'Temporal Consciousness', in Zalta, op cit, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/consciousness-temporal/>.
32. Mbembe, op cit, p 66
33. Farouk, 'Urban Regeneration', op cit, p 240
34. Snyman, op cit, p 167

section of lived time, time as represented and urban space that makes *chronology* visible.

### NEW BEGINNINGS: A CHANGING NOW

Are there artists who confront the conditions that govern the ‘changing now’ of present experience? I believe so, and the visual projects I have been trying to outline here confront the issue of temporal awareness. It is not simply a matter of mapping past time on to present spaces, particularly when time appears through the production of space. But these projects (and others) offer the possibility of difference rather than repetition, because they enable views of temporality and subjectivity.

The Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR) anticipates a close to this essay. An independent creative platform and collective based in Johannesburg, South Africa, CHR members are Kemang Wa Lehulere, Donna Kukama, Sanele Manqele, Gabi Ngcobo and Jabu Pereira. CHR aims to look at history ‘to investigate how, within a particular historical hegemony, certain values have been created, promoted and subsequently sublated into a broader universal discourse’.<sup>35</sup> Employing citations, transversal research processes, subversion and mediation, since 2010 CHR has conceptualized projects that create dialogues between artistic practices and curatorial models in order to reveal how certain histories are formed or formulated, repeated, universalized and preserved. The stated aim of the platform is to use these strategies:

... to reveal how the visual arts could perform transformative effects in political spaces that may not yet be recognised as sites of struggle and thus enter a refreshed political sensibility.<sup>36</sup>

CHR prioritizes the process in historical narrative; that which requires one event to give way to a successor, or the recognition of an event or performance continuing on from moment to moment. CHR members declare: ‘No doubt, historical constructions play essential, almost central roles in the formation of the apparatus and what... has been taken for granted as a given in the dominant world order.’<sup>37</sup> CHR makes explicit the processes I have been highlighting throughout this article.

Temporally extended occurrences feature in our immediate experience. It thereby seems natural to conclude that our awareness must be capable of embracing such temporal intervals or events. This is problematic. While a viewer may remember the past and anticipate the future, the viewer is only directly aware of what is present. The present is strictly momentary. So if visual awareness is confined to now, that awareness must itself lack temporal depth. One result is that the viewer may conclude that our direct awareness cannot possibly encompass phenomena possessing temporal extension.<sup>38</sup> This has implications for transformation – the term that describes long-term and ongoing attempts to change institutions and their structures after moments of socio-political change. The challenge lies in activating temporal depth to produce radical chronologies. Radical chronology may be difficult to assemble, but it is crucial in order to initiate meaningful conceptual change. In various ways, the artworks introduced above indirectly respond to

35. Center for Historical Reenactments Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Center-for-Historical-Reenactments/151490281528008?v=info>

36. Ibid

37. Ibid

38. See Dainton, op cit.



issues of transformation, because artists and curators imagine *emancipatory* conceptual devices – indirect methods of dealing with extended temporal consciousness. The artworks are oriented in this way to enable forms of experience that operate beyond established parameters.

The chronologies dealt with by these artists are not distinguishable pasts, presents or futures, but constellations of technology, ideology and art that chart realms of possibility. Through exhibitions, performances, events, seminars, and by local and international engagement, the artists discussed here present revised intersections of self-presentation, visual narrative and temporal understanding. The visual phenomena operate throughout to transform the ways in which understanding is produced through vision and offer conceptual devices useful for seeing anew. The changing now is no longer what can be expected. The works discussed in this essay respond by adjusting, recording and arranging viewers' awareness towards a new sense of freedom, change and contemporary experience.