

The Trinity Session

281 COMMISSIONER STREET | JOHANNESBURG



BELOW LEFT The Trinity Session, City and Suburban/Troyeville, 2012, digital photo projection

BELOW RIGHT The Trinity Session, Temporary Museum of Art, 2012, performance intervention/single-channel video HDV projectio

FACING PAGE The Trinity Session, Black-Out, 2009, PVC banner, 5 x 8m



Stephen Hobbs and Marcus Neustetter are well known in the South African art scene, in particular in Johannesburg, where they have been involved in many of Johannesburg's public art programmes. Previously ensconced in The Premises, a gallery space in the Civic Theatre building, the duo made the decision to venture out of that context and into a more focused engagement with public art and space, and with mobile and ephemeral interventions in it. This engagement has variously involved acting as a commissioning intermediary for public art projects, putting together large-scale public art interventions, usually collaboratively, and making and performing their own interventions and projects. The particular interests of the two diverge, but methodologically overlap: Hobbs is focused on urban space and an almost traditional kind of psychogeographical art, while Neustetter works more closely with technology and distributed information networks.

The recent exhibition *10YrsOnAir* saw The Trinity Session celebrate ten years in existence with a compendious review show, involving elements from many previous interventions, exhibitions and projects, as well as research material from their work, transformed into projections onto the surfaces of a building in the Maboneng Precinct earmarked for development as the new Museum of African Design.

The exhibition provided insight into the singular space occupied by The Trinity Session. A selection from the intervention entitled *Borderless* (2011) has a group of artists from Alexandra, Zimbabwe and Mozambique collaborating on performances

highlighting issues around xenophobia. This involved herding goats from Alex into Sandton Central, followed by a multimedia performance at the unfinished site of the Alexandra Heritage Project. A project in Martinique is also included. In this, drawings of the small town of St Pierre before it was devastated by a volcanic eruption in the early twentieth century were projected on clouds of smoke manufactured from the floor of the ruined theatre in the town (see *Art South Africa* 10.3). Another project with ruined architecture at its heart is *ENTRACTE*, a series of video, photographic, laser and sound projections against the surfaces of a derelict building in Dakar scheduled for redevelopment. The intervention was intended to reflect on the ways in which public art redefines public space in "less regulated urban situations".

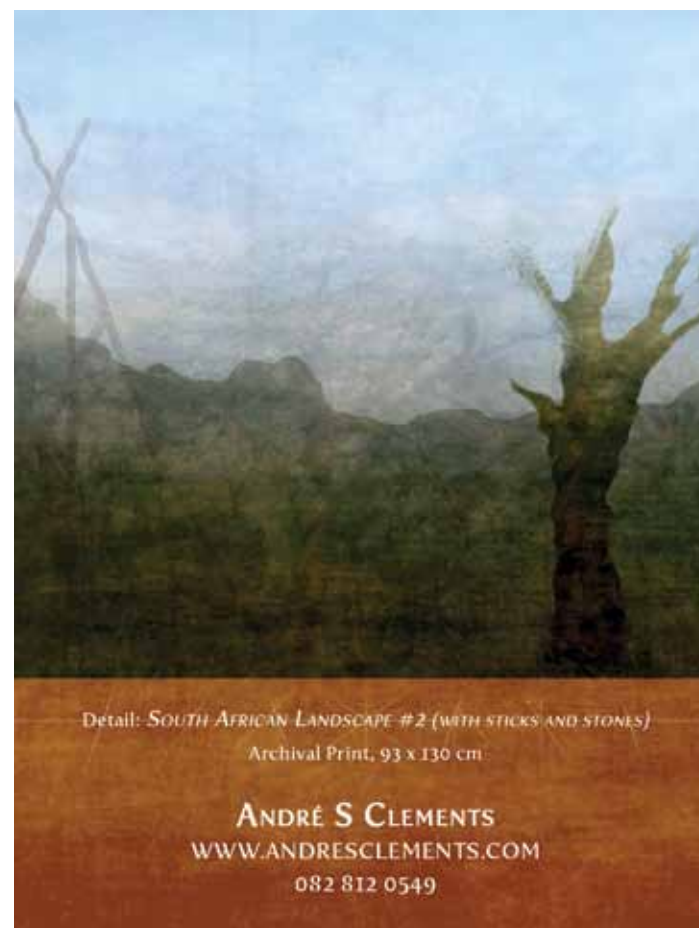
Even in this brief overview the centrality of urban space and its transformations and rearticulation is of obvious importance to The Trinity Session's methodology and aesthetic. The duo has carved out a singular and anomalous institutional space in the art world, moving between roles and responsibilities that often do not sit well with each other. Their model often allows them, for example, to exploit networks of business and public sector patronage built up as commissioning agents and consultants on both urban development and art projects and on public art and collections in order to realise collaborations and projects in their own creative practice.

The ways in which their work draws on both physical urban interventions and extended

information networks around the world allows the collective to connect to other psychogeographical artists in other "developing" or variously liminal, sites and societies around the world. Thus they can generalise their position in one of the world's most mutating and palimpsestuous cities, Johannesburg, to reflect on the realities of changing urban and aesthetico-cultural experiences worldwide.

Their own political positioning is felicitous, and has captured them the institutional artistic high ground over the last ten years – a position which they will no doubt entrench in time to come as the art world grows more aware of the expansion of the unregulated and unstable spaces in which we live in our contemporary world.

James Sey is a Johannesburg-based writer and art theorist, and an Associate Researcher of the Research Centre, Visual Identities in Art and Design, in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Johannesburg.



Anton Kannemeyer
Die Antwoord lithographs

Yolandi Visser. Hand printed lithograph, 38 x 57 cm. Edition 20.

Ninja. Hand printed lithograph, 38 x 57 cm. Edition 20.

The Artists' Press
Box 1236, White River, 1240 • Tel 013 751 3225
mark@artistspress.co.za • www.artprintsa.com



A disused car workshop is used as the setting for the Trinity Session's retrospective. The building has become part of the work. Here footage from Troyeville has been projected onto buildings across the street. PICTURE: ANDRÉ PRETORIUS

THE BUILDING at 281 Commissioner Street is not in a state of utter dilapidation. Nor has it quite been absorbed into Maboneng, the name Jonathan Liebmann, the property developer, has given his aggressive gentrification scheme on the east side of Joburg's inner city. Water drips from the ceilings and there are holes in the floor. The aroma of car oil discreetly lingers inside but it is the signage - "Park Here" - and the raised ridges on the bare concrete floor that evoke its previous incarnation as a car workshop. Weeks before the opening of the 10-year retrospective of the Trinity Session, an art collective-cum-art management company, the floors, walls and windows had been caked in grime. Hard labour was required to extract the layer of decay.

The building was once emblematic of Joburg's cycle of decline. Housing this exhibition marks the beginning of its regeneration and appropriation as a cultural art institution - it will be called the Museum of African Design, Moad for short - providing yet another playground for the city's arts community and followers, who have been encouraged by the likes of Liebmann to reclaim pockets of the city.

It makes perfect sense that the Trinity Session's exhibition, *On Air Review*, be held in a building on the cusp of a cycle of renewal; its work over the last six years has been focused on driving, managing and implementing public art in the inner city as part of scheme to regenerate it. The most recent contemporary art initiatives by the duo that make up this collective now, Stephen Hobbs and Marcus Neustetter, deal with this liminal period of transition when a building or place exists between two points of its evolution and how this impacts on identity.

Entracte (2010) was part of a project in Dakar, Senegal, that centred on a dilapidated building earmarked for demolition because it was deemed unfit (by Western standards) for habitation, according to a prescriptive set of rules. The artists were struck by the irony that the inhabitants were maintaining a construction that was slowly disintegrating and would be demolished. In response to the unseen future and past of the edifice, the duo laser-projected images evoking these states onto its exterior. Filmed footage of



Entracte (2010) involved projecting images onto a derelict building in Senegal, Dakar, that was earmarked for demolition.

this "performance" is projected onto a screen hanging in the cavernous interior of Moad, among other screens showing these ephemeral works.

A similar kind of "performance" played out at the ruins of a theatre in St Pierre, a hamlet on the west coast of Martinique, which had been destroyed during eruptions from a volcanic mountain nearby at the turn of the last century. This time, drawings of the building in its heyday were projected onto clouds of smoke, creating a faint spectral form in the vacant cavities of the ruin.

These works evince a desire to animate solid, seemingly immovable constructions in such a way that gives expression to their shifting lifecycles. The need to conjure an absent form - such as the ruined theatre - evokes not only a sense of nostalgia and loss of identity but the intangibility of a once unyielding form that housed experience and defined a sense of place.

Fittingly, these projected films and "the performance" of them and other activities that support them are ephemeral in a number of ways; film has no physical form - it is only the surface on which it is projected that creates the illusion of substance. Projecting onto smoke draws attention to this illusion. The

temporary nature of these site-specific performances is guaranteed by nature of the fact that "the screens" - the buildings - no longer exist or are about to be destroyed.

Hobbs and Neustetter are aware that a recording of a performance becomes quite another kind of (art) object because, by its nature, a performance's only life is in the present. Yet, they can't resist keeping record of these works. Neverthe-

less, these filmed records aren't banal. They have filmed and edited them in such a way that they have become standalone artworks - the footage of the performance in Martinique is quite abstract, it's a disorienting experience. In this way the artists have created quite another kind of visual encounter via their documentation.

In its own precarious state, this disused car workshop is more than

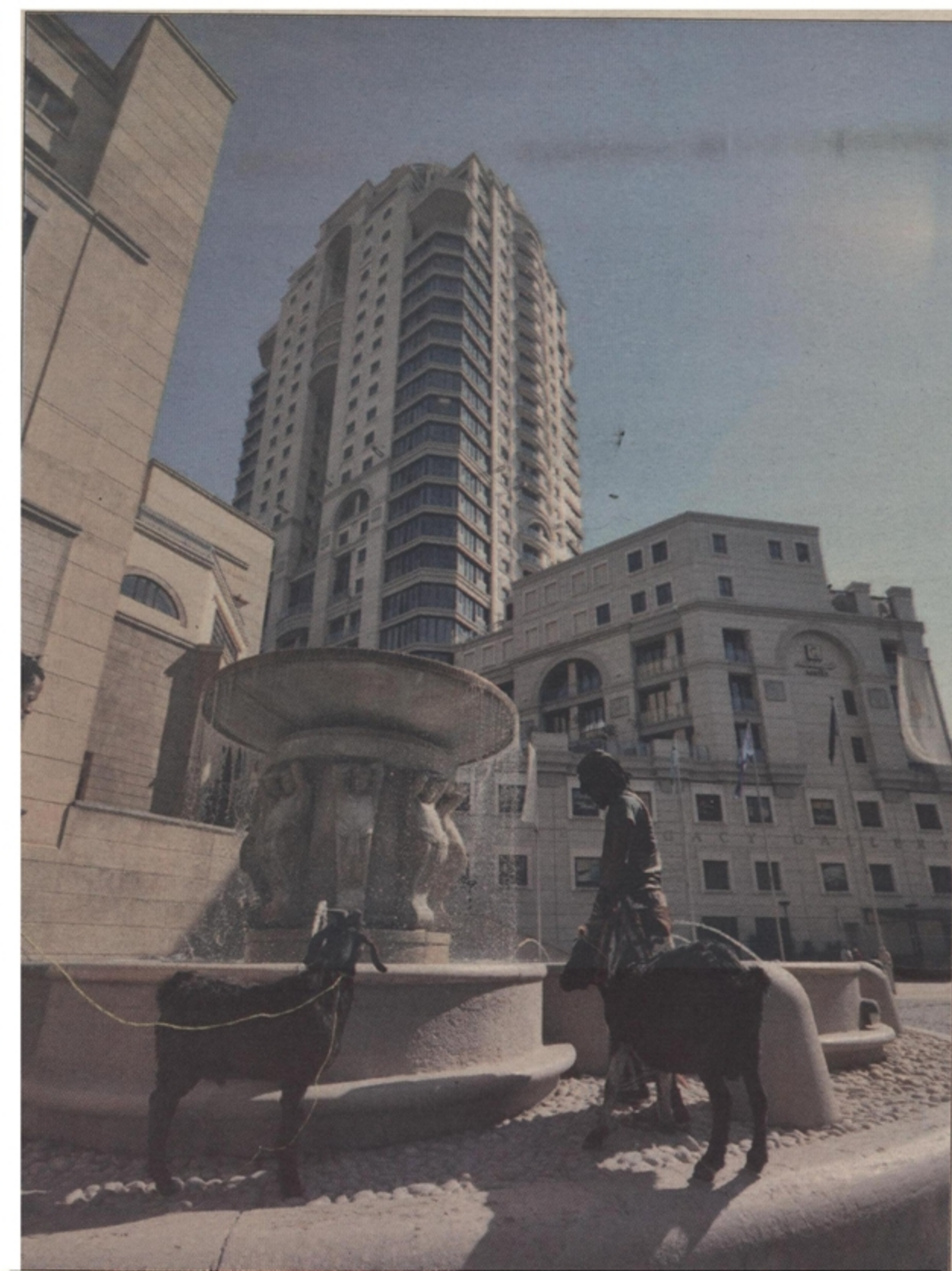
just an appropriate receptacle for this extraordinary work, it is another tool, or medium, of manipulation in Hobbs and Neustetter's hands. A floor-to-ceiling garage door has been left open, so as to connect the display to the environment outside and to allow for footage of a Troyeville streetscape to be projected onto a dated building from the turn of last century. This act of projecting footage of buildings onto

buildings is a way not only of condensing urban landscape - knitting it together - but also works at creating a palimpsest that evokes the layers of history, in such a way that the boundaries between the past and the present collapse.

This kind of work expresses the way in which the duo are concerned not only with the politics tied to spatial and architectural entities, but with time itself.

Building a Reputation

Mary Corrigan writes about the 10-year retrospective of the Trinity Session and how it reflects and suppresses the many incarnations of its history as an art collective



Borderless, a project which saw goats from Alex drink from fountains in Sandton. The artistic duo have always been interested in connecting diverse places and the relationship between them.

This preoccupation isn't new - its beginnings can be traced back to their *Dakar/Hillbrow/Dakar* project of 2007, which included multiple-destination performances (of a kind). The duo attempted to navigate Dakar via hand-drawn maps by a group of Senegalese immigrants settled in Hillbrow who plotted paths from memory. As per usual the essence of the experience, and relational exchange between Hobbs and Neustetter and the immigrants took place outside of a gallery. Though documents pertaining to the project went on display at the gallery at the University of Johannesburg, the "work" had occurred somewhere else. This fact emphasised the theme of dislocation/relocation that informed this work. It also served to highlight the fairly unconventional nature of their practice; in this era of accelerated commercialisation this kind of work has little marketable value.

This is part of the attraction for the duo yet it contradicts the close alignment between art and commerce that informed the Trinity Session in its nascence. Much was different about the collective in those early days. For starters, when they first began to conceptualise forming a collective it boasted five members, which included Kathryn Smith, Susan Glanville and Jose

Ferreira. In 2001 only Hobbs, Neustetter and Smith remained part of this amorphous organisation that refused to claim its precise function. Smith had academic acumen and had made a name for herself as an art critic. Hobbs had been managing a gallery (the now defunct Rembrandt Van Rijn gallery at the Market Theatre) and Neustetter was pioneering "digital art" - exploring how new media could serve art-making. Glanville had identified the need to "find an alternative mode of practice outside the gallery system", recalls Hobbs, though he intimates that it was in the absence of a booming commercial art scene that the collective was born.

Determined that they were not going to teach or spend their lives writing funding proposals, the trio set out to explore how their creative or artistic sensibilities were marketable in corporate arenas. They took on a variety of different assignments. They designed installations for the Apartheid Museum, managed the "Cell C for The City" billboard project and consulted for a diverse list of corporate and development organisations from Spier, MTN and the International Labour Organisation to Unesco and TBWA.

"Red Bull couldn't define what we did. We spoke a corporate

language and an artistic one. We were conceptualising, managing and finding creative solutions for everyday challenges," observes Neustetter. Reinvention was Trinity Session's only consistent characteristic. "That is how we survived. We tapped into different networks. Why do the same project twice?"

Their determination to avoid replicating activities, projects, would eventually constrain the collective's growth as well as prompt it on a new path. Despite their fluid identity, they eventually arrived at a place where they were attracting lucrative offers to supply hotel chains with (decorative) artworks. Initially the work had been rewarding; they were providing artists with an income. "We saw artists buying cars on the back of these projects," recalls Hobbs. The artworks were corporate commissions and, in retrospect, the duo concede these works might not have enjoyed the artistic merit of work one would encounter in a gallery. They were willing to make compromises but when long-term relationships supplying this kind of work were on the table they rejected them.

"If we were into making money, we would have been in advertising," reflects Hobbs.

This was an early phase of Trinity Session's lifespan. Reference to

the work of that era is cursorily dealt with at the exhibition in a display that consists of dated overhead projectors transmitting a list of highlights of these corporate ventures onto walls at the entrance of Moad. Characteristically, there is no material evidence of this phase of Trinity Session's existence.

Interestingly, the next chapter of their evolution, for which they are most famous, isn't given any prominence at this exhibition. It was when the trio moved into The Promis, a gallery space given to them by Bernard Jay, the chief executive of the Joburg Theatre (previously the Civic Theatre), that the collective reinvented itself again.

The gallery saw the threesome curating exhibitions, creating a space for artists excluded from the commercial gallery scene, but it was the location, Braamfontein, that would provide the catalyst for the collective to become a public art management operation. By this time Smith had left the collective to pursue a PhD.

Conversations between Trinity Session and the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) would culminate in the "Juta Street" trees and the Eland, a concrete sculpture by Clive van den Berg, which has quickly become a Braamfontein landmark. Soon after, Hobbs and Neustetter became two names synonymous with public art projects in and around Joburg - they have recently spread their tentacles as far as Port Elizabeth. Last year the two were appointed as curator-coordinators for all city public art commissions in Joburg until 2013.

Only one installation in the exhibition makes reference to this aspect of the Trinity Session's work. It is a numeric-sculptural work that reads "1%". It is placed on a boardroom table, surrounded by chairs, evoking the corporate world. One percent is the amount of money companies are obliged to contribute towards Joburg's public art programme from their property development or renovation budgets.

There is no documentation on display pertaining to the public art practice that has been their bread and butter for almost a decade. This may have something to do with the fact that the results of this work are permanent and therefore already on display in the public realm.

However, I also sense the artists have retained distance between their recent international performance-cum film projection works and their public art practice in an effort to create the space in which to critique and analyse the nature of urban renewal. Both artists acknowledge that the rhetoric driving Joburg's regeneration has provided, the material not only for their individual practices - both are aligned to commercial galleries now and regularly show art related to this theme - but the ideological context for these ephemeral projects, which meditate on the fragility of the urban landscape and the politics of renewal - and place itself.

The one common thread that unites the work in this exhibition is the relationship between places, not just Joburg and Norway or some of the other African cities, but the dynamic between the different lifetimes contained in a single building, which for them are always present. Undoubtedly, even when Moad becomes populated by suburbanites and hipsters and is filled with art and design objects, its former incarnation as a car workshop will linger, though in various degrees as time goes by.

● *On Air Review* is showing at Moad, at 181 Commissioner Street in Joburg, until tonight.

CELEBRATING TEAMWORK

Artists Hobbs and Neustetter look back

Edward Tsumele

ONE of the most illustrious and artistic collaborations between two excellent visual artists will be celebrated in central Johannesburg from March 16 to 25.

Trinity Sessions, a collaborative concept between Stephen Hobbs and Marcus Neustetter, will celebrate their decade-old collaboration through an exhibition.

It will take place at 281 Commissioner Street, soon to be branded the Museum of African Design – a bold addition to the Maboneng Precinct.

And some of the stuff is thought-provoking.

Last May, Hobbs and Neustetter worked with 10 artists from Alexandra in Johannesburg, and six partner artists from Zimbabwe and Mozambique on an experimental intervention that looked at xenophobia, border crossings and contextual value systems.

The first part entailed herding goats from Alexandra into Sandton.

A 30-minute intervention and photo shoot was done at the entrance of the Michelangelo Hotel.

For the second part, the public was invited to an experimental multi-media performance event at the Alexandra Heritage Project. The incomplete building served as a stage and backdrop for music, performance, dance, poetry, live actions, stunt bikes and projections.

From Johannesburg to Dakar, from Martinique to Mali and from Mozambique and Sandton, Hobbs and Neustetter have extended an investigation into social and electronic networks and varied urban terrains.

For South African art lovers, this is a rare opportunity to see the Trinity Session's ground-breaking work on local territory.



CROSSING BOUNDARIES: A goat at the Michelangelo.