Johannesburg as Imaginarium: Public Art and Placemaking in in the City

Goethe-Institut, Johannesburg, 119 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parkwood, Johannesburg

Wednesday 11 March, 18:00 for 18:30 - 21:00. Refreshments will be served.

Speakers:

Dr Kim Gurney, Malose Malahlela, Stephen Hobbs, Thireshen Govender

Moderated by **Dr Anthea Buys**

Background:

Since the early 2000s, transformations in the urban fabric of Johannesburg have often been accompanied, or even shepherded, by artworks in public space. The majority of these interventions have been calculated, deliberate, permanent and, often, on a grand scale. Devised and funded by private and public initiatives, sometimes in collaboration, public artworks have often been at the centre of spatial and narrative reinventions of certain areas in the city. How do these narratives hold up in the present, and where might public art practices in Johannesburg be headed in the future? And how might cultural policy adapt not only to a city that seems to be in a perpetual state of self-invention, but also to art practices that are increasingly ephemeral, community-based, and participatory?

This roundtable discussion will bring members of the public and the arts community together to talk about Joburg's art in public spaces, both temporary and permanent, and both in the past and in its possible futures. Together, we will consider the fairly recent history of public art practices in the post-apartheid city, and look at how these practices have contributed to placemaking and urban transformations over time.

The event will take the reflections of four art and urbanism experts as a starting point for a conversation about belonging, visual culture and urban heritage, and the role art plays in shaping urban identities.

This gathering is supported jointly by the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg and IFAS, organisations that have played integral roles in facilitating important cultural projects in Johannesburg over the last thirty years.

About the speakers:

Thireshen Govender is an architect and urbanist based in Johannesburg whose work operates at the intersection of crisis, informality, and institutional failure. A Chevening Scholar and graduate of The Bartlett, University College London, he founded UrbanWorks in 2008 as a design-research practice committed to speculative yet materially grounded responses to post-traumatic urban conditions.

He is co-author of *Township Economies: People, Spaces, Practices* (2020), which reframes informality as a generative spatial and economic system rather than a residual condition. Govender has taught and lectured internationally, including as a tutor at the inaugural Venice Biennale College (2023). His teaching and research—spanning the University of Johannesburg and the African Futures Institute—deploy cartography, critical observation, and radical speculation to interrogate hidden power structures and emergent institutions shaping African cities. He is currently undertaking a practice- based PhD and serves as an Independent Director at the Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation.

Stephen Hobbs received a BAFA (Hons) degree from the University off the Witwatersrand in 1994. Between 1994 and 2000 he served as gallery manager and curator of the Market Theatre Gallery. In 2001 Hobbs co-founded the artist collective The Trinity Session which specialises in large scale public art and placemaking projects as well as special projects focused on the intersection between digital art, technology and science. Between 2004 and 2009 The Trinity Session curated the purpose built exhibition space The Premises at the Joburg Theatre. Hobbs held a part-time lecturer position at AFDA between 1996 and 2003, and is a visiting lecturer and critic at the Graduate School of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg. Hobbs has curated numerous international projects through The Trinity Session and as an independent curator and has had numerous solo and institutional exhibitions in South Africa and abroad. He has participated in residencies in North America, Europe, and Africa. His work can be found in public and private collections in South Africa, Europe, and the USA. Hobbs is a fellow of the Ampersand Foundation and Leadership Forum Johannesburg.

Malose Malahlela is the co-founder and artistic director of Keleketla! Library, founded in 2008 along with Rangoato Hlasane. Keleketla! Is a practice deeply rooted in the intersection of storytelling, cultural advocacy, and spatial justice. Their work emerges from a critical interrogation of South Africa's postapartheid urban landscape, where issues of land, infrastructure, and governance remain deeply contested. Through the Skaftien series, they have constructed a unique methodology that navigates the entangled relationships between cultural production and civic responsibility. Documenta 15 in Kassel provided the platform to amplify this approach, situating it within an international discourse on equitable urban futures. In the past, the initiative participated in progressive international networks and addressed their themes and issues, for example, the 10th Berlin Biennale 2018, the Chicago Architecture Biennale 2019 and Art Basel 2019.

Selected publications and releases over the last 10 years include: *69 Years to the Treason Trial: The Drill Hall Arts Advocacy Project* (2025, with Haus der Kulturen der Welt & Archive Books); *Wondering Hands and Spirited Ink: Snapshots into the Black Public Humanities* (2024); Keleketla! studio album (2020, with Ahead of Our Time/Ninja Tune); *Thath'i Cover Okestra Vol. 5* (2018, with the Berlin Biennial of Contemporary Art); *58 Years to the Treason Trial: Intergenerational Dialogue as a Tool for Learning* (2014).

Dr Kim Gurney works at the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, in its Iyatsiba Lab, which is an interdisciplinary postgraduate hub in Woodstock. Kim helps to convene a new research platform focused upon Culture & Technics while extending her ongoing explorations into independent art spaces in Africa, to better understand their network effects. Kim has published four single-author books over the past decade that variously follow artists and artworks as storytellers of resistance and reimagination – in public space, from artist studios, across multi-city artist-led collectives, and delving into backroom archives. More here: www.linktr,ee/kimjg

Dr Anthea Buys (moderator) is a researcher, curator, and writer living in South Africa. She is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the SARChI Chair in Art and Visual Culture at the University of Johannesburg, and is interested in collective fabulation, unlikely place-making and the intersections of art and philosophy. Her PhD looked at *New Babylon*, the interdisciplinary life's work of the Dutch artist and architect Constant Nieuwenhuys, and her current research addresses public art practices in Johannesburg since the official end of apartheid.

Her most recent curatorial project is a retrospective exhibition of the South African, France-based performance artist Steven Cohen (S*teven Cohen: Long Life*, Iziko South African National Gallery, December 2025 - June 2026).