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Public digital art and publics: The case of Hotel Yeoville (2010)

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2014-08-26
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Interview with Terry Kurgan on the *Hotel Yeoville* Project (2011)

Conducted by Londiwe Langa

Londiwe Langa : So you come from a background of photography?

Terry Kurgan : Of actually of fine art, not of photography. I come from a visual arts background, drawing, printmaking. Fine art and umm I, eh photography is just one of the medium I use, it depends on the project. I'm often called a photographer but I'm really not a photographer with a capital P. But I have used photography.

Londiwe Langa (L.L) : And one of the projects, I remember seeing in one of the articles that you, umm, had mentioned a project prior to this one that kind of is like a step…

Terry Kurgan (T.K) : A catalyst.

L.L : Yes a catalyst, in leading into this one, about Joubert Park.

T.K : Yes. Yes.

L.L : That was specifically a photography, or was it mixed…

T.K : That was , umm. You may have seen there's a book that came out of that project. (Terry grabs book)

L.L : I'm not familiar with the book.

T.K : It's a project that I umm, curated together with Jo Ratcliff. You do know Jo Ratcliff?

L.L : Yes

T.K : So it's a project that I curated with Jo Ratcliff. That project was a project based in Joubert. It's easier to sort of tell you about it by showing you this (the book). You know when I first moved to Johannesburg I was invited to make a work. There was a project called Joubert Park Public Art Project, this was in 2001. I was invited to participate with 50 local and international artists. Well invited to make work in relation to the park, Johannesburg Art Gallery and the surrounding precinct, connecting to the culture and economy of this area. And so the first project that I did was that I, together with a core group of photographers who had been working in the park. Street photographers whom, for many years we designed a portable studio with backdrops. It was a sort of connected with cultural economy in that it was a small business idea. And it ran for many years until it disintegrated. But I came back to it in 2005, and by 2005 so many more people had come to live here from around the continent after the Rwandan genocide. There were just more and more people coming to Johannesburg, as life in their countries…

L.L : And Zimbabwe.

T.K : Yes Zimbabwe particularly. And so I became very conscious of how the photograph of these photographers…. So what you see here, each of these dots maps the position of a photographer. Many of these photographers like John Makua had occupied that spot for upwards of 20 years. John Makua had in 2005 been on that spot for 22 years. You know so he's spot number one, there, and he'd occupied that spot 22 years. And there were two things, there was this sort of intensity of occupying a fixed position while life moves around you at an extraordinary pace. You know the city changes around you and the demographics of the population whom are coming to the city, change around you. So there was that image in my mind, like people moving through the park and down the continent. And so I collected, I made portraits of each of the photographers. This project has just been included in a very nice exhibition in London on South Africa. So in this context I would be considered to be a photographer. But I really just used photography in that particular project.

So I made a portrait of each of the photographers and an abbreviated life history, I was interested in where they came from and how long they had occupied this spot. And then I collected from them as many of their unclaimed photographic commissions as they were prepared to give me. I bought them. As if I were the missing client, I paid the other R5. The way they worked at the time was that you put down R5 and then you come back the next day to get your print and pay the other R5. This was all pre-digital, pre-all the photographers having digital cameras, so they used to go to photo labs. So this project was a catalyst for the next one because it really drew my attention to migration and its impact on the city. It drew my attention at looking at the informal archive of photographs. Informal, it wasn't organized.

L.L : Ok

T.K : But by looking back, like John Makua had photographs that had not been claimed for fifteen years, and you look at who he was photographing in 2000 and then you look at who he is photographing in

L.L : Yes, the difference altogether…

T.K : Yes its extraordinary. I mean in 1995 and 2005, the ten year difference is really interesting. And then I got a straightforward commission in Yeoville. I'm not from Johannesburg so a lot of white Jewish people of my age have a past with Yeoville. It was often where the immigrant… You know most as I say white Jewish people of my age are first generation or second generation. I'm first generation so my parents would have come here during the Second World War fleeing the Nazi Europe. Most people of my age and stage from Johannesburg lived in Yeoville when they were students or their grandparents lived in Yeoville when they came here from the old countries or from Europe. Yeoville's always been a neighbourhood where migrants sort of start their lives in Johannesburg, and it is particularly such a neighbourhood now.

L.L : I suppose it's just a change of demographic now.

T.K : Yeah it just keeps filling up with new migrants and I think its also got to do with the character of the neighbourhood. It's not a very expensive neighbourhood, there's a lot of free standing houses, lots of small blocks of flats, it's close proximity to the inner city to work.

L.L : Yeah it's a very busy space.

T.K : Yeah busy buzzy space yeah and so I was given a straightforward photographic commission and I noticed that the entrepreneurial character of the neighbourhood and the pan-African character of the neighbourhood. You know these were not abject pathetic looking people the way they are depicted in the media after xenophobic attacks or not sort of hoards of anonymous… you know they were people getting on with their lives.

L.L : People getting on with their lives..

T.K: And I just thought it would be very interesting to think of some way to make a project, a public art project in relation to this little small. Use this neighbourhood as a dipstick. It's not so particularly that my interest is in Yeoville, it's that this particular neighbourhood…

L.L: there's something happening there…

T.K: that would make interesting… one could reflect upon in interesting ways if I came up with the right form, for the project to take.

L.L : I can see that .. so your choice of, umm I mean public art for as long as I can remember is often associated with other artistic mediums, why the particular choice of digital interactive media?

T.K : Ok because my practice as an artist I have over the last fifteen years moved from between, and I think quite productively, moved between public realm practice and studio practice. By studio practice I mean I make drawing and prints and things for galleries, and I still do I just had a show of drawings. When it's public realm practice. What was your question I was about too….

L.L : Umm, why the choice of interactive media?

T.K: Because each time I do a project and the project is sort of linked to issues that are public space, socio-political, public realm issues. And the project, I imagine the project has to have a sort of a life outside in public space. I try and find a way in which to insert the project so that it's not disconnected to peoples everyday life and what they're doing during their day. And so with Yeoville for example one of my first public realm projects was inserted into, it was in 1999. The research for it began in 1997 which was the year that there were two huge public hearings and they were considering umm reversing the anti-abortion, umm abortion was legalized. Big issue, big issue that interested me, and it was the first that because it was about

abortion which has to do with women bodies, sex came up, pregnancy came up, rape came up. Everything to do with the physical body that was normally reserved for conversations in the bedroom.

L.L: Private…

T.K: Yeah private space and so that was the first I made an installation. I won't go into detail about it but when I thought through what I wanted to do I inserted it into a big public hospital. Its still there today and still working and still doing what it was meant to do.

L.L : Is it on your website?

T.K : Yes it's called maternal exposures.

L.L: Ok I'll have a to look again, I may have not seen it.

T.K : Have a look under sites, it's called maternal exposures. And that was my, when I think about it my first public realm project.

L.L : Where you even thinking about it like that, like this is going to be public art. Or do you go with what's inspiring you in the moment and it's almost like a by-product that it's regarded as studio work. You know what I mean you go with the inspiration at the time.

T.K : Yeah but why the internet and why I.T in Yeoville was because struck by several things. I was struck by the incredible entrepreneurial character of the neighbourhood, and people were really at it. All sorts of things were clearly going on and I mean I could only as an outsider only see a fraction of it. My visits to Yeoville were facilitated by Goerge Lebone, who is a very active ANC member but a very active community activist. He just loves… I mean I don't share his political views but I share his kind of interest in people and community and so on. He would just show me around the neighbourhood, we'd go into blocks of flats and we'd see behind some doors people were living; behind some doors were Internet cafes. But I was struck by the fact that there were more internet cafes here, literally next door to each other in three, four square blocks than there were anywhere I'd ever seen. And they weren't Internet cafes the way you'd find them in European cities when you're traveling. I mean this is before… it's amazing how technology has advanced and changed things. Now if I'd started this project this year the picture would have be quite different. In 2007 when I began this, that's four years ago now. In April 2007 we had much less broadband and not every second person had a smart phone and wireless. So people were really dependant upon Internet cafes to use the Internet. You know you couldn't take the Internet with you the way you can now. So that's really changed and all these wireless connections have changed things. At the time there was an incredible density of internet cafes and each café was housed in a little space that had so many other ancillary functions like hairdressing, food endless numbers of way in which you could hire somebody to write letters for you, do research for you, business partner. And they very specific national identities these

cafes, so it became very clear to me that internet café was the space and that the web should be our medium. And if I wanted to design, and very importantly this was always going to be a participatory project. In other words I was never going to go in there as a documentary photographer or filmmaker or artist and ask people questions. I wanted to produce something that enabled people to, if they wanted to respond.

L.L : Yes to respond…

T.K: And stay below the radar, because of our draconian rules and regulations about migrants and home affairs.

L.L : Yeah it's a very sensitive one.

T.K: It's a very sensitive one. So people need to be able to participate…

L.L: Yet still feel safe

T.K : Yes and still feel safe.

L.L : Another question I'd like to ask. So umm, I think you did kind of skim, and briefly mention some of these things. What did Hotel Yeoville specifically set out to do?

T.K : Well I think, I mean… I read your proposal, it didn't set out to, it never thought. I mean I never thought that I could achieve social change or… I'm not sure that art can change the world. But along the way it occurred to me that what we have , if it were. You know it's very, very hard to design successful interactive umm software, interactive websites. I mean even facebook, it's a whole world

L.L: It's constantly changing.

T.K : And it took a while, and I'm not saying we ever, you know you need really sort of people who are doing that, you know like geniuses like Mark Zuckerberg, whatever his name is. But it's very difficult; I really looked into interactive websites and interactive technology and it's very difficult. But I did along the way as our project progressed and parts of it worked, parts of it worked fantastically and parts of it failed miserably. It became clear to me that we had something but if we had better software designers, web developers we could really design something that would be part sort of cultural project. Enabling people to network and perform their various selves online in the way they do anyway.

L.L: Uhmm.

T.K : And a very interesting business idea. I would need to make it my life's work and I would need to spend many years developing it and the point at which I closed it down in the library. I was just exhausted it was three years; I had run out of funding and out of steam. But it's definitely a project that given with the right

environment and partners I will take into phase two. And I'm thinking of doing that at wits.

L.L : So just to see whether I got what you are saying. It was more of a project that was a reflective process initially when you set it up as opposed to. I'm just trying to understand.

T.K : Are you asking what we hoped to achieve, should I go back to that?

L.L: Yes that's what I'm trying to understand.

T.K: Ok what we hoped to achieve was this. It was a much smaller a goal, what we hoped to achieve was. To … you know I forget what her surname is Pumla G….

L.L: Pumla Gqola?

T.K: No, it's a double barrel surname, the woman who wrote that incredible book about the TRC. I think it's Madikizela. It's a woman in her fifties. I was listening to her the other day she was talking about an artwork that was made in relation to the TRC. But she was talking about the intimacy of public space and I wrote that down 'the intimacy of public space'. My work, my whole body of work… I'll get to answering your question. My whole body of work is always about the tension between… I suppose the private and the public, the individual and the group. My work is always about trying to make, I suppose public space more intimate. And I was very struck you know by how many people I was meeting from other parts of the continent. And how hard it was for them to get on with their lives. I suppose personally my own grandparents were professionals, university graduates, who lost their degrees, they were lawyers and pharmacists and they came here having been on the run for five years. Even though we are white they still never managed to recover. And I say even though we were white because they came to South Africa where if you were white at that time…

L.L: There were some privileges that came with being...

T.K: Many, many privileges. So I don't know I just always had a sensitivity and an interest in migration and people that come in from other places. My own childhood was filled not so much stories of the past as this like dead silence and the sense of this huge past life that could never be recovered. So I've always been interested in my own family and I suppose I became very interested in the stories of the people who had come here from all over the show. I got involved with Caroline Kiatu, a Kenyan woman who had lived here for about fifteen years who was doing her Phd on women, and migration and how women navigate the city of Johannesburg. She asked me to help her come up with unusual ways of producing her own research. So through conversations with a group of women, who came from respectively Rwanda- terrible story of this woman, who was the only survivor of a family of sixty four- a woman who came from Cameroon because she followed her heart, followed a man, it didn't work out and decided to stay.

L.L: I think I saw that, you had like print outs in the library. Yeah I read her story, the Cameroonian girl.

T.K: So Caroline Kiatu and I worked with a group of migrant women. Their stories and their photographs were just like yours and mine. The spoke about such sort of intimate stuff just like yours or mine. And I thought it would be so interesting to produce a project with people voluntarily participating, where the told like the little stories. You know the big story about migration, is Xenophobic attacks, its like people just glaze over at that and all those people and their stories are sort of like anonymous and quite abject…

L.L: Lost somewhere…

T.K : Yes lost somewhere. But when you somehow find a way that is not sentimental or clichéd, you know I remember an example. Did you see Philip Miller's *Rewind* on the TRC? I think Gerard Marx who he worked with, visually imaged some of the most terrible Apartheid stories we ever heard. And instead of telling the big story you would see for example you know during the student protests in the 70's. A mother, a child came home from school for lunch and was making himself a slice of bread with peanut butter. As usual he left crumbs all over the counter, which I can totally identify with, that's what my kids do. And the mother in recounting the story tell how he came from school at break he cut himself a slice of bread, he smeared it peanut butter, he left crumbs all over the counter and the next thing she heard were people in the neighbourhood calling her name. Yeah and so the big, big story there is Apartheid, an 11 year old child loosing his life, her lose and all of that. And the images that went with that were just simply a loaf of breadcrumbs, I heard him speak about this recently and it made me think that that was what I was trying to do there. It was to get people to tell very personal simple stories. You know for example our journeys booth , somebody would login on Google maps and they would suddenly land on a house, they probably didn't know that you could zoom in that close. And they would see a house that they'd last been in ten years ago and it could be quite possible where a mother still lives or a lover still lives. You know and those kinds of stories and umm… the point was to try produce an ordinary conversation with people from other places that was alternative to the public discourse about migration and xenophobia that persists. That was really it and also to try and experiment, for me personally it was to use social media and a platform. Why IT? This also answers your question about IT, it was to use social media platform already incredibly well designed for a whole generation who are now performing themselves. Rather than relating the way we are doing now, we're talking to each other, I'm saying things you're saying things, we're talking to each other. You know Facebook, twitter …

L.L: It's a new culture on its own.

T.K : Yes it's a new culture and it's performative in it's nature.

L.L : Yes definitely.

T.K: I was really curious about using that platform.

L.L: and the fact that you know, you also choose your own network, you choose who you want to be in touch with, what group you want to be part of. So it really is an interesting platform in that regard.

L.L: Did you encounter any problems explaining what the exhibition was about to user? If yes did you find ways to work around that? You were on site sometimes.

T.K: A lot, I was on site everyday at some point. Sometimes for a long time and sometimes to just pop in to sort out problems but I was on site everyday. That was another thing, it was nine months going there everyday accept for Sundays, I went there on Saturday mornings. Did I encounter problems? Sometimes, you'd need to be patient and show people through and also language was some ties a barrier. We had multi-lingual facilitators, so we had facilitators from the DRC who could speak French, Lingala, English and we also had a South Africa facilitator who could speak a range of African languages for South Africans who couldn't speak much English. But for budget reasons and just for this phase because English was kind of the denominator we did the whole project in English. I think if it grew we would need to do it in English and French…

L.L: Ok that's interesting, so that…

T.K: To connect it with all the francophone countries in Africa. Ummm… What did you ask me… ummm, whether I encountered problems. Sometimes you know people are very reluctant to let you simply take their photograph. You know sometimes people would say very nice, what a nice project but not want to contribute. It would have to do with either being shy reticent people by nature or just not wishing to put themselves online on websites.

L.L: Like what you were saying earlier on, also just the fear of what will happen to me if I expose that I am not from here. I mean people are obviously coming from a very vulnerable history here, with the xenophobic… a lot o questions come to mind about what's going to happen now that people officially know that I'm not from here, that I'm actually from Zambia.

T.K : Absolutely and you know it wasn't for everybody but it was for enough people that it worked.

L.L: It was definitely, for me what I encountered with it, was that it was definitely a good start for conversations and it just… I was more hungry to see responses from South Africans and I suppose that is something that umm will be looked into aggressively in the next phase. Maybe it needs a great deal of resources and support, so that South Africans are also… I know this wasn't really focused on the xenophobic attacks and what not, the traumatic experience but a lot of those experiences took place in the townships. If anything that is were the wrong idea of the African immigrant is.

T.K: Yeah I know, nobody gets to see these communities of people.

L.L: Exactly, which is interesting. Anyhow what was the working relationship between Wits Forced Migration and yourself, what role did they play?

T.K: Ok, so I'm and independent artist, I work from my studio. In order to produce a project of this scale, I needed an institutional base and I approached the Head of the Forced Migration Studies Programme because it thought… he had approached me before that about the first project that I showed you, the photography project its called Park Pictures. He was interested in Park Pictures project and had asked me to exhibit it at a Force Migration Studies programme event and I had spoken about it a few times at conferences. I proposed it to him and he said he'd love to house the project and he made me the research fellow, associate research fellow at Wits and I need that institutional base to fundraise. Particularly with a big funder like Ford, you don't get any funding as an individual and so the funding I got was actually to wits, the Forced Migration Studies programme and I lead the project. So that was my relationship, I would have liked more wits graduate students to work with me on it. Perhaps I didn't try well enough, I was so overwhelmed by the scale of the project you know and they were all very busy with other things. If I had to do it gain I would do it as a teaching project to involve students.

L.L: Did the team of art specialist being the architects and Tegan as well with the digital media, what level of autonomy did the perform or did you come with a sort of an idea of what should be created and could they create it, no, can they work around it?

T.K: The overall sort of ideas when it came to working with Tegan. By the time I got to work with Tegan we understood that we had to produce an exhibition and that we needed to make our virtual spaces actual and physical. So she was quite autonomous when it came to designing, building the applications but we worked out what they should be together it was very collaborative and she was great to work with. It was sort of like both our ideas but the actual physical build was hers.

L.L: So through conversations and the collaborative discussions back and forth with her, you would have obviously come to the decision of specifically using platforms like Youtube, blogging, spaces which are very uhmm are free spaces on the internet. As opposed to choosing maybe some platform that people would have to pay for. I noticed that, that was also for kind of like an empowering part of it, that people could also continue with the skills or whatever they impart with from the project within their own private spaces or wherever they choose to go. That's why I asking that where did that decision come from to use public…

T.K: I'll tell you were that came from. The website that now exists is already our second website, we ad already designed and built a first website. And we made the mistake of trying to reinvent the wheel. So we had instead of using flickr, which exists and works, we had our own space where you put up photo's, it didn't work that well. Instead of using Youtube we used our video application. It suddenly

occurred to us this is completely ridiculous, we should use free web sites and insert and connect it to already existing social media platforms that are tried and tested and are free to use. So it came from trying and not succeeding the first time and doing it better the second time. There are still glitches its very very hard, technology to work with and you need a lot of money and the best developers and the best… you need too either be those things yourself which I am not nor is Tegan. And so we've got lots of, whats the word for people who fix things… Gremlins! We've got lots of things that don't quite work as well as they should but well enough for the first phase of the project. And it was highly collaborative, I mean I worked with Alex Opper and Marry who are architects. I worked with so many people on this project, theres whole list.

L.L : How did you select these particular artists that you worked with.

T.K: In the very early phases somebody mentioned to me that I should meet Jason Hobbs, the brother of the artist Steven Hobbs. Somebody mentioned that I should meet Jason Hobbs because he was a web designer, architect, sort of a web architect who was thinking about the internet cafes. I went to meet him and he had with him Tegan and the two of them had done collaborative research on internet cafes, they had mapped internet cafes and internet cafes use in Johannesburg. And that was I met Tegan, I didn't know her from before and then I discovered that she worked at Wits and was artist, and a digital artists and interactive artist and I just knew that I wanted to work with her, someone who was already in the space and thing about internet cafes as interesting spaces to work in. So that's how I met her and then she introduced me to Alex Opper, when I met them I had already been working an urban planner John Spiropolous, I'd been working with wed designers and developers uhm planners. One person lead to the next and the project and the project also was incredibly research driven and each research phase would result in making something. We did a research phase then produced a website, the website didn't turnout the way we'd hoped and then we produced an exhibition and another website. An know we've, well the exhibition has produced all the content we'd need for a book so each one has lead into the other. We kept moving backwards and forwards between a research process driving and our making process, and then our making process would produce new research. So the book feels like the final product but it's not just a document it's also new.

L.L : Are you tracking the activity on the website?

T.K: Yes in a very sort of peripheral way. I get stats on it every week. The number of people who are visiting the site has grown but its mainly people using the directory. People aren't using the interactive part of it at all, which s also evidence that it really needed the exhibition installation and facilitators to keep it going. People are using the useful parts of the website they're going to for example the page the page that gets the most hits is the Refugees Survival guide: Laws for Human Rights..

L.L: Which is great… that that is what it's…

T.K: It's big sort of booklet that you can download and full of useful information.

L.L : That means possibly that until Hotel Yeoville came it might have possibly been a hard document to get a hold of.

T.K : I think so because i get, as editor, there's no webmaster the site's not being maintained. For this to have carried on and kept going in the public imagination we would have had to carry on upgrading the website, aggregating the website, you know spreading… you know somebody needed to work on this fulltime. So it's just kind of simmering there on a back burner. Umm and the other thing that people do a lot is write sort really sad letters to the editor, can you help, can you help. I don't respond…

L.L : Yeah that's not your function.

T.K: But that is another pointer to… what one could do with a project like this.

L.L : It's amazing how almost in a way, if it had been posed as a strictly African Immigrant, lets say that's what you called it Forced Migration People, and what kind of response would have been there. And whether people would have gone there onto the website, I just wonder how not posing it, being upfront about the trauma that comes with moving between spaces, coming from a civil war and you know. Almost looking for the brighter from the darkness. I don't know this is how I felt when I visited the project, trying to put myself in the shoes of somebody who's from Zimbabwe. I wouldn't possibly always want to surround myself with talk of xenophobia all the time, I'd like to be brought on board in something as someone from outside but in a playful way. And as a by-product there were facilities that catered to those serious things, but I would want to be approached in that because you're already surrounded by so much… it's hard enough surviving. I also wonder whether it's that friendly approach to the project that maybe it might have encouraged people to even let each other know and spread the word. I don't know.

T.K: Were you there on busy days.

L.L : I was there for two days. On the one day it was busier than the other.

T.K: Yeah it had its good days and it's bad days, and on the busy days it was fantastic you could really get a sense of what the project could possibly. At the end of the day the project was a really good model for, it could really, and should be built upon. It was a shame that I had to take it down, it was a little house we had built there. We took it down it was just too difficult to sustain, you know

L.L: But i suppose it goes back to that thing I said earlier just like you got tired of seeing those images how much more for who are living the experience of constantly being represented in a certain way. And then here's a project that offering a otherwise, that on it's own is applaudable. It's amazing.

L.L: Why the title Hotel Yeoville?

T.K : Because Yeoville was a neighbourhood that reportedly had forty thousand people living there more or less, Bellevue. Seventy thousand of whom were from the African continent and such a transience uhm… people coming and going from so many different places. And in the very heart of Yeoville near the Shoprite, there's this big wall full of notices, and lots of removal vans, twice a month you just see people loading up their belongings and moving to their next abode within the suburb. And there was just a sense of checking in and checking out, checking in and checking out and the city of Johannesburg not really allowing anyone to have more than a very tenuous hold on home, a temporary home. So it seemed like a very obvious home for the project, Hotel Yeoville, it was both like welcoming but temporary. Home but not home.

L.L: Home but not home. Yes that was one thing I actually noted, when I tried to describe the project, the title. With the Hotel there's always a sense of temporality. And then Yeoville is a suburb; it obviously was built with the intention of homemaking, settling. Its almost like these two words are countering each other. Yes so that is what I noted so I just wanted to know where that came from on your end.

T.K: And the residents of Yeoville like the old residents of Yeoville hated the title cause they were all about build building community and permanence. They hated that we came to Yeoville and called it Hotel Yeoville.

Interview with John Spiropoulus on the *Hotel Yeoville* Project (2011)

Conducted by Londiwe Langa

Londiwe Langa (L.L): Hello John. From what I understand you were part of the team from the beginning, from the minute the project took off until the end. Did you often visit the site and have a look and see people's reactions and responses to the environment?

John Spiropoulus (J.S): Yes I did but obviously the main person was Terry. I mean she was driving it and did all the work, but we talked regularly at least once a week and I went to the site. I did a lot of the fieldwork, with the research about the internet cafes. Ummm it's an interesting thing that happened when we started the project Facebook and all these social networks, they were just beginning.

L.L : This is 2007?

J.S : It was 2007, yeah they were taking off.

L.L : I don't think I was on Facebook yet by then.

J.S : So by the time we got to implement this project it was like popular technology. We recognised the need for that type of online social networking. So we designed a website, our first website we had, had its own rudimentary social networking component and then at one point we actually realised that this website was outdated, archaic. All the functionality that was needed was there already, available through different little applications that we could just bring in and that's what we did.

L.L : It's amazing how quickly it changes. You could literally create something this year, current and give it several months and it would already seem outdated and way out of it's place. So it's interesting because it's one of those projects that constantly need bodies involved that are constantly on the look out for change of technologies and adapting the technology.

J.S : We need two days. I tell you we need two days to go through all different ideas we had, me and Terry with you. Because we went through everything.

L.L : And you learn through trial and error I suppose.

J.S : Yes we did. Well one of the… well let me tell you what interested me. I couldn't really contribute in a way, in an artistic way nor technical way and what interested me anyway was the urban theory component which is already in hand.

L.L : Urban Theory component?

J.S : Yeah we can talk about that later, but lets at the moment

L.L : Ok lets shelve it

J.S : Yeah at the moment lets talk about the internet cafes and the idea that I had was that somehow it's possible to make these things …ummm. Commercial viable. With a whole lot of backup and technical support…

L.L : Resources…

J.S : online and telephone, all in as a resource. So the idea was to network the internet cafes. Provide the same…

L.L : In Yeoville?

J.S : No all over Johannesburg. We spoke to one of the cell phone companies and we also talked about different models on how to this. We tried to get funding from it. The idea was, and the research has been done, which shows that public space internet is going to be the big growth area. Cause a lot of people in South Africa, the only way they can access the internet is through the internet cafes. They might be able to get computers but they may not be able to get the telephone connection. Or they're living in circumstances where it's much more viable to just go into the internet café. So the idea of the internet café was to look at it as a community centre, but a commercial community service centre. So you could go in there and get your C.V written up and it could function as job centre, you could register your qualifications, and you could write a letter and you could get help to write a letter, or look for a job, or get the scores of the latest soccer, or where you could meet your friends. A whole lot of services that are related to the media.

L.L : Of the internet?

J.S : Medium of the internet. Accessing information, accessing resources, being able to communicate in one way or another. Telephone, Internet, voice over IP whatever it is and that becomes something is enormously valuable as a resource to the community. Public policies could be communicated through it all sorts of things.

L.L : It's interesting that you say that because I did ask Terry what was the… well whether she was tracking the activity on the website. And the page that got the most clicks or visits was the one with the legal documents. What's it called the migration documents. So I find that really interesting that people we associating with that space, that they could access that kind of information because they were coming back time and time again.

J.S : Did you see the booth with the adverts.

L.L : Yes , what was it called again? Directory booth?

J.S : The directory booth. Getting people to advertise what skills they had.

L.L : Yes, and exchange and what they need.

J.S : The story booth, aahh it was beautiful.

L.L : Yes I read several stories, poems actually that were entered there. There were some lovely piece there, I think I recall one by a little boy there, but I don't exactly remember what it was but I was really touched by it.

J.S : I spoke to Tegan once and I don't think she understood what I was talking about. You know at some point I felt, and Terry I think supported it. That this need to be put into a network of people, of younger people who had the time and the interest and the motivation and the energy to make this a network project so that its not just me and the project team.

L.L : A lifestyle project…

J.S : It's a group of maybe ten, twenty, fifteen, maybe a growing network of people who are able online be able to drive this project which is a community information… it's the representation of self, it's the reflections and ideas the ability to communicate stories and poems. A whole multitude of different things, which could be taken up by different people.

L.L : It's interesting that you say, you think that younger people… it's an interesting observation you made or idea that you had. Because I read an article by this Senegalese writer who was here for a literature fest and he went to see the project and he said that he thought that it was a lovely project. Yet he really felt that it was something that would be great for a younger generation, and you know I just kept thinking about that and what exactly about it. And then obviously it was because of the newness of the technology and just how the younger generation has taken to this technology way stronger.

J.S : I think you're right but it's not just the technology. Ummm I mean there's no doubt that people like me, my age, are more awkward and uncomfortable with it. I'll do it but I'll do it with a push whereas when I take my son and daughter they won't have a problem. But it's not just one thing it's having the interest and the time to spend in developing these ideas. I've got and so does Terry and other people my age, we have unfortunately responsibilities to earn income, pay for debt and houses. All that stuff and we can't afford to spend a lot of time which has got no …

L.L : Comeback…

J.S : yes comeback and Terry in particular spent an enormous amount of time…

L.L : I know she was there like everyday.

J.S : She didn't get remunerated for it at all. But she couldn't sustain it, it had to be a project, this needs to be venture that grows on it's own, almost like yeast and grows on it's own. Where people are taking it on, Viral.

L.L : Yes I understand what you are saying it needs to, in other words if I understand what you are saying it needs to reach a point were you no longer having to work to

make it accessible to people. Where people are doing that work for you, the network is doing it for you.

J.S : The network is doing it. Not necessarily voluntarily but they have a part of it, and there's a system worked out on how to share the benefits of it. Not necessarily commercial benefits only but also financial benefits of it. You could have someone because they work in a HR company they are able to take the responsibility of running the job centre database and finding money from the IDC and various other sources to finance what they do. There's a central administration but that network leg does that, and somebody else does the poems and the stories and maintains that. So it's all brought together. You know there's Skiro, a wireless… they've got a billing system with that wireless connectivity you could partner with them.

L.L : And I mean it's… as you are saying it's wireless, I am thinking to myself I barely understand the technology myself and I'm supposed to be a new generation person. It just looks like the continuation of the project really needs resources in the sense that people who end up being a part of it, and being there daily running the space are so in tune with the language of the technology and how to communicate it effectively. Yeah so that they can drive through the message about how this can benefit the day to day visitor.

J.S : You know the postnet, I was modeling it on the postnet model. Which is like a franchise. You know postnet? So you would have all the software and machinery as white label machinery, what they call the white label machine. And you make that available to someone who takes a license for it.

L.L : For a certain amount of time?

J.S : And they put their look and feel there, and it's their own individual website in their internet café. But the backend is all the same.

L.L : Under the same umbrella.

J.S : Under the same webs structure and maintenance and operation. So that would be a possibility to do, one could do that with the likes of Skiro running the wireless connectivity and providing the bandwidth and the billing system.

L.L : Yes but for many of them it's very money orientated so it's kind of hard to drive through this kind of project with business bodies. But I mean they also have their role to play as being a part of this country and co-exist.

J.S : What other question do you have.

L.L : With regards to Hotel Yeoville what did you understand the aims to be, what it set out to do.

J.S : Well I think it had many different objectives and you speak Terry she'll have different ones to what I imagined them to be what Tegan and Alex Opper did, we all saw it differently. And we all saw it from our own ends I terms of what we wanted to

get out of it. For me the objective was to produce a public space where people were able to interact and provide content, their content and be able to see themselves and others in that. So that was the one objective, is to provide that medium for, medium as an infrastructure. Ummm as a cultural infrastructure, where people could go and write their poem and story and be able to use that as an infrastructure, as a way of representing their ideas. Whether it art or not, it's just a way of communicating and seeing life and seeing themselves and others in that medium. So that was one, the other was to see whether this medium could be a community resource through the directory and Google. Another object was just to make something beautiful. It was beautiful, so well designed and put together. So those were the objectives broadly.

L.L : You touched on it begin just a human experience for the community because obviously the angle that I'm looking at it from is from this research, is that for a long time especially for the African Immigrants that have been living in South Africa have been made to look almost inhuman and alien in a sense, it was almost like a platform for them to humanize themselves and author that identity, and author that image. Yeah, it's really great, there was this video by these two girls who had a Congolese father and were praising him, and those are stories we often don't hear, of a black mixed cultural family structure, in such a good light. It was very good.

J.S : And it wasn't contrived at all, it was very natural.

L.L : Even though it was a light space there was also room for people to share the experiences that were dark and not so pleasant to talk about, never mind the fact just living with. So that was interesting.

J.S : And there was the rapper.

L.L : The poet, the Indian boy? So what do you think was a possible barrier of the project not getting through to immediate community or the people it targeted.

J.S : Look i think we had a resource constraint. It was an ideal location but there was a resource constraint. You know with a much bigger resource base and effort we might have got a wider group of people to come and visit the site. But you know it was always going to be a place where people had to go to and people don't have the time during working to take time off to go. So Saturday mornings were good but the library close in the afternoon. Half day. So we really got children, lot of children and youngsters, school going children but we didn't get a lot of adults, so that was a barrier the resources and timing. Look I think for me it proved itself, it needn't… we designed it with the hope that it would become sustainable but actually what it could have been is just one event.

L.L : It could have been one event I'm not sure I understand.

J.S: Well I'm not being very clear here I'm just buzzing a bit. We designed, I in my mind it was something that you needed to continue, in internet café's and elsewhere because it had to continue and be sustainable to be able to enrich itself. You couldn't

really get the comfort within the community in a three month long period, it takes a long time before people...

L.L : You'd have to prove yourself.

J.S: They interact and the word goes out and so on. I imagined it, I thought we had designed it to continue for a couple of years and we wanted it to continue for a couple of years and therefore the whole thing was planted in a public library, a public space where people would go. And it was designed for an on going… but the resources weren't there. We didn't manage to get the resources to continue long enough. What I mean is that if we had designed it for a three month period.

L.L : It would have been different.

J.S : It would have been different project, but it not a criticism but these things you only learn as you do it. And I think our idea of making it sustainable was the right idea but maybe too ambitious.

L.L : It needed more time. Resources are one of those problems across the board in all disciplines. Well it's a shame.

J.S : I always say and Terry agrees that this was the first phase and really what we need is to find the energy and the people for the idea to be taken up and maybe extended to other places, to Hillbrow, to Fordsburg…

L.L : The townships

J.S : Even the townships, to Orange Farm. Orange Farm has an enormous foreign community.

L.L : Co-existing

J.S : Co-existing

L.L : That interesting because that is not often the stories one is told.

J.S : And Alex, is another place.

L.L : Yes Alex.

J.S : And you know there's lots of international interest.

L.L : I also wanted to ask you about the title itself, Hotel Yeoville.

J.S : Ahhh, there's such a nice story behind that.

L.L : Oh yes, go ahead.

J.S : There's a place in Rotterdam, in Holland called, and it's a project called Hotel Transvaal. Now Hotel Transvaal is in an area of Rotterdam, which has got about seventy or eighty percent foreign immigrants…

L.L : South African?

J.S : No they're from North Africa and all over. That area, the street is called Paul Kruger street. It was an area it was named after the Transvaal because the Dutchman, Hollanders from that area joined the Boer Army fighting the British imperialists, at the turn of the 20th century. It was a left wing working class area, syndicalist area that joined the Boers to fight the British. You know the Boers had a big international brigade, of Irishmen and Dutch.

L.L : Ok so they were all united against the British. They've never had good blood between them.

J.S : Anyway it's a long history and there's a very good book by Jonathan Hyslop that you might want to get, it's called Notorious Syndicalist. You Jonathan Hyslop?

L.L : No

J.S : He's a historian at Wits. He used to be at wits he's now at Pretoria University. There's a little bit of that history. Just to get back at he name, when I went there a while ago ummm a friend took me around that he described, which I never saw until later. Which was internet project, that put internet terminals in various shops on the high street. And people would go in and they would look for accommodation via the internet in the neighbourhood. So it was, I have a home, I have a bed you can come stay for a few days, you know it was advertising, a very similar idea to what we did so that's why we called it Hotel Yeoville because their project was called Hotel Transvaal. But also for me the idea of a hotel as a place you come into…

L.L : and you leave, a transitional space

J.S : A transitional space in Yeoville was an interesting one, it's like a hotel but it isn't because it's a permanent hotel, it's this feeling of permanence but there's an enormous amount of movement in Yeoville. People move from flat to flat, on a weekly basis.

L.L: Terry was telling me about those trucks, that every month end they park there and they…

J.S : So that's why…

L.L: That's interesting, I didn't know about that. From the other interviews that I did it wasn't really mentioned that much.

J.S: No it was something that Terry and I conjured up, in the early stage we didn't really tell anybody why.

L.L : Well one of the things I did pick up on when I tried to do a description of the Project. It was one of the things I assumed as well just from my perspective, to

understanding why this title. Was because of the… obviously the temporality of a hotel space and then Yeoville it has a double sided meaning. Because Yeoville is a suburb, and suburbs are built for settling of families, and then here you've got a family space which is like a hotel, so it's almost like a for populations to kind of transit through.

J.S: Yes you've got it. I think that if we've achieved that through the name then it describes the project very well.

L.L: And as well there was great emphasis on that particular population, the immigrant population.

J.S: well you know there was but our intention was not to exclude. You know if you look at the text really it was saying residents of Yeoville. Another term that Jonathan Hyslop referred to years ago when I had a chat with him was that Joburg is a city of foreigners and strangers. Now who in Yeoville has lived in Yeoville has lived in Yeoville for more than twenty years. I don't think you'll find many. Maybe ten percent, if that, of South Africans or foreigners.

L.L : It's a very transitional space.

J.S: My parents came to Yeoville and they happened to stay there, but a lot of my family moved out of there. It's always been a transitional space.

L.L : I keep saying this cause I don't want to loose it, it's a portal space. I don't know but that's what I'm picking up, but I mean … where people are coming in, in almost like a very virtual way as well, there's networks from that space that extend to other parts of the world, more strongly so than other suburbs because obviously the populous there is… has a much great obligation to those networks outside of this country because of their nationalities. As opposed to maybe Rosebank, you'll find that most people there are South African.

J.S: I think it's a matter of research, an it think it doesn't really matter, it's not relevant. I think your point is correct but I would be interested to look at places like Rosetenville for example, I the South.

L.L: Rosetenville has a strong Angolan.

J.S: And Fordsburg. You know Fordsburg you'll find Ethiopians, Somalis and Pakistani and Bangladeshis. There's a very strong foreign Muslim community. Hillbrow has a big foreign community; maybe it's not as substantial as Yeoville. So, a mapping exercise to see where people are locating and why they are locating and what networks are there. It's a very interesting geographic project.

L.L: Wow that sounds like there's so much that can be done. There's still so much to explore and engage with. This is a great project obviously.

J.S: But I guess the more urban question is how does the city, government, how should it be responding. And that as an urban planner, for me that's a big question. How it needs to anticipate and respond in someway.

L.L: I think nothing beats conversation, first and foremost if I try to address what you are raising.

J.S : But it needs a responsive attitude to accommodate and adjust the space, the physical space whether it a building or a street or whatever, to enable a better human interaction. You no the built environment is superfluous in a way, it's something that's bricks and water and human population shapes it. We shape it, we take the bricks away and we break them down, we break walls, we adjust things. So how do we adjust the city for this new population? Does it need adjustment? How do you respond to it, is it new or is it different? You there's this thing of ordinary and the special.

L.L : It's not new, it's been happening for decades on end. It's now a different kind of migrant population that occupies that space and you know for reasons unclear to me as well the attitude is by far worse than what it used to be, from your governance and your people I power to make the changes.

J.S: I think that this has happened so fast. Ummm and it's a big city and therefore city government has to look at the big picture all the time, and therefore it loose the focus on the locality such as Yeoville, Rosettenville and so on. It can see it because it's working on a bigger scale, so there needs to be a way of bringing the particular of that settlement that location, more focused, up, and responded to.

L.L : Thank you so much John you've been very informative.

Interview with Alexander Opper on the *Hotel Yeoville* Project (2011)

Conducted by Londiwe Langa

Alexander Opper (A.O): You know the way in which the exhibition components were arranged. You obviously went to the space.

Londiwe Langa (L.L): Yes I did, I visited twice.

A.O : So you remember when you enter at street level you climb up those stairs around the atrium and there was that large green board that greeted you and then took you to the space at large with various booths. They Journey's Boothe, the Love Boothe, the Video Boothe, the Business Boothe and the Stories Boothe, and then the washing paper wall on the side with the view onto the street. This is maybe useful for while we chat through your questions *(Alex presents an A3 plan of the project space from birds eyeview)*.

L.L : Yes, well first things first Alex. What was your particular involvement, how did you get involved with this project?

A.O: Terry approached me when she became aware of design work I had done in the context of my practice, which is called Notion Architects.

L.L : Meaning? So what's the...

A.O: Well notion means idea. Well I think it's just a very good, as an architectural firm we wanted to pick a name that talked about possibility or ideas rather than a fixed way of designing or an absolutist way of designing. So the name that we use captures essential our approach to design as a process driven experimental platform to come to certain outcome which is not predefined. That talks about our attitude as designers we're a very small firm, it's me and my partner his name is Amir Livneh. You should definitely mention him as well if it's important. So we established this small design practice in 2007 and because I'm a full time teacher and he works for another practice, we have this collaboration as a kind of project space that allows us to do small projects when they appeal to us and when we have the time. So it's not a big practice, it's an ideas space.

L.L : But I mean like you say, it sounds like you guys bridging across different discipline with your architectural skills because this as far as I understood was a public art space, a public art project. I'm just trying understand with the way you designed with the project, what element did you address the public-ness of it through your design? How did that play out?

A.O : so just to go back to you first question Terry saw some work that we did. We designed a book stand for the Joburg Art Affair in 2009 which the idea was based on the city. So the core of that scheme was to design a public square and the books became the things that was showcased in the public square within the context of the exhibition and the shelves kind of framed the space. So she liked that and we told her about other projects so she asked us to collaborate and design this. So she had

the idea for the project and she'd done a hell of a lot of research since 2007 and we came on board in 2010, in the being to the middle of that year. And then we collaborated with her and Tegan Bristow, who's was responsible for the sort of digital interactive media side. The way, the metaphor that we used for this exhibition was to reference the street as a, especially in the context of Yeoville where the street is used very consciously by the people who live in that neighbourhood as a way of accessing information. So also the street as an important social spin as any other African city. So Rocky\Raleigh is an example of the same kind of condition you'd find where a lot of the people who live in Yeoville come from so Lagos, Kinshasa, Addis Abba. So a lot of the diasporic inhabitants of Yeoville would be familiar with and have a strong influence on the way the street works. And it's a successful space it's a really successful space, that kind of allows people to act out their daily lives, to encounter other people with similar diasporic histories. So we kind of walked up and down the street at the beginning of the project trying to get a sense of how we could translate that real space into another real space as a metaphor. The idea behind this exhibition was to translate the virtual space of the website into a real experimental space for the primary audience which are the diasporic inhabitants of Yeoville. Of course it was completely open to a much larger public of potential visitors including South Africans. The notion of translation of the virtual product as a Hotel Yeoville website into a real project that connects to the website in very conscious ways. So along this wall (*pointing at image*) there would be these two here, and these two and within the various booths represent interfaces between the exhibition as a physical space and the website, so the idea is that you live. The idea with this wall is a mark making one, so the wall invites you to register with your own hand, chalk in this case, so an analogue device, where you come from and possibly a hint of what Yeoville might mean to you not of choice but by necessity for many people who live here. I think most people who live here would have much rather not have had to leave their original homes.

L.L : Yeah it's one of those things I actually did note because one of the tasks I had taken on was to try and describe the project obviously without having encountered the proper facts. And I did pick up on the flow of the space and how, the wall on its own, the curving of is kind of like a very welcoming way to draw you into the space.

A.O : Exactly that's what it tried to do.

L.L : Yes that's what I picked up on and my experience was that this was space for discovery, where you had to actually navigate the whole space to know what lies in there because you couldn't see the video booth from this end (*pointing at drawing*), you wouldn't have known it was there unless you ventured the space. For me feel like, well it had an element of… like an adventure.

A.O : Or like walking through a new city or a street that you've never visited before.

L.L : I can see that.

A.O : That's a notion about a vanity that if you're traveling and you're in a new place and everything is new so it took that idea, and I described these booths as addresses. Like the way you would if waked down Rocky/Raleigh there's Kimaleba where you can have a certain meal, and there's an internet café where you might have a friend so in your mind in your own psychology of the city those become addresses or fixed points of familiarity. And also these reference that idea. Also these weren't designed to be used linearly depending on how much time you had, if you had heard something about the video boothe you could go directly there and experience that and make a contribution in terms of a video. If you had lots of time you could kind of meander through the whole experience. It was meant to work on both levels, some people wouldn't necessarily like, they'd be too self-conscious for the photo booth.

L.L : Or the video booth.

A.O : So we tried not to be too prescriptive. It's a framework.

L.L : So in your understanding what did Hotel Yeoville set out to do?

A.O : I think in a nutshell based on Terry's initial intentions we tried, I think primarily it tried to change the view of the media or the view of the larger public who don't necessarily live the lives that the inhabitants (*inhabitants of Yeoville*) or Diaspora do. To change the perception of a desperate population, what the media often portrays as a desperate kind of apologetic situation, as a positive uplifting celebration of life.

L.L : And also a populous that actually contributes, you know as opposed to the general attitude that the diasporic population when they come here they take.

A.O : Yes, the xenophobic view, and turning that around. So I think that's the crux of the project, we tried to make the exhibition reflect that. You would have noticed the colours used in the exhibition, they reference a lot of the colours and signage that you find on the streets in Yeoville and other African cities. So William Melki did all of the sign writing, maybe it would be really important to speak to him. You should really speak to him cause he brought another layer into this project, but the colours were decided on collaboratively by Tegan, Terry and myself.

L.L : I just want to know what was your working relationship with Terry? I understand she was the carrier, the author of the project. Obviously everybody else came on board in support of her vision. S

A.O : She was the author and the project is her brainchild but then she collect expertise , so from designers to information architects and someone like Tegan who has a strong Digital background, in order to bring their strengths to the project. So my relationship would have been that of a collaborator as a spatial practitioner, that's what I could bring to the project.

L.L : Initially when you looked at the library space, how did you with relation to the public of Yeoville, did you think that that site worked well for this kind of project? Or did you think it could have been in another space, did it feel as public as the space is assumed to be?

A.O : I think it was an experiment with that space, it was a great space because it was generous and large and importantly in a public building that accessible to anyone. That was crucial but I think if I remember correctly Terry's intention was possibly to have it in a space that was more directly related to the street. But there would have been cost evolved with that and other complications. The fact that the library was new and the opportunity to inhabit it was something positive and uplifting. I think the fact that it was on the first floor was problematic because it wasn't directly accessible from the street but the project also relied on word of mouth. It wasn't an exhibition in a conventional sense, you know not a white cube convention. I think it had pro's and con's being in that space.

L.L : It was a good prototype leading to the next phase because from what I hearing Terry would really like to take it to a second phase, hopefully with a stronger serge of resources and sponsorship. So would that be something you would wish to be considered in the next phase? Or what else do you think in the next phase should be done different?

A.O : well I know that the website continues, that it's live but i wasn't aware that it was going into another phase. I was under the impression that the exhibition was complete because it is incredibly time consuming to run. It was like a full time job for her. But I would support it if it continued in whatever form.

L.L : I think she wasn't specific about that it would still take the form of a exhibition but she was hoping that it could in future still continue to span off other possibilities in different form or maybe the same form whichever one felt right. Obviously looking back at the research that has accumulated through the exhibition and seeing how that could be taken forward. What dimension do you think the interactive media brought to this project? I'm it's very rare for public art projects to take that kind of form, people would rather make that kind of project in an art gallery where the environment is restricted and elitist where you are bound to have a group of people that would more likely understand the technology. What do you think that element brought to this project?

A.O : I think it was quite clever because it used the platform of the internet with social media Facebook and Twitter, which people are even if they don't have computers or direct access to internet, those facilities are more and more available on cellphones. In a sense it made the project more, even though in the larger context of Africa there is possibly the notion of computer illiteracy and inaccessibility to the internet, but its improving. In a country like South Africa it's problematic because there's a monopoly on internet, service providers in terms of costs which is kind of absurd. I think it was a clever language to use the internet and digital interactivity in the context of this project because it is a language that more and more people are

versed at and use. It's a crucial connector between Yeoville and all the other places in Africa were people come from cause that how people communicate with their original homes. It was an incredibly successful part of the project and it allows this physical part of the project to live on in the internet as a virtual project, so I think it not only was a clever decision but also a necessity for this project to work at all. The project stems out of the mapping of internet cafes that Terry did in Yeoville, where she found like forty internet cafes, as a very important way of communicating and as an import social space because it's an internet café, it's a shop, it's a salon a social space where the people gather.

L.L : So there's a demonstration of a lot of networks happening within that internet café space, which is also reiterating the notion that people are constantly in communication with one another. Whether it be business wise or skill orientated, language orientated or identity orientated. That's another thing that I through the interviews I've picked up, is that everyone was saying that there was a very strong national identities within the internet café space. You would jump from one internet café and you would pick up on a distinct, probably identity presence and then you move to the next café and it's Nigerian, and then the next one is Cameroonian. That was interesting and something I would like to look into with more detail, time allowing.

A.O : In terms of the internet and the digital what's interesting about this project as well is that it tried to combine analogue ideas of mark making with the hand and these contemporary tools of the internet. So it's a merging of those two modes. This handwriting that you would find on washing paper, which is also a representation of identity. It's quite a nice dialogue between the real and the virtual.

L.L : Yes that's a good point.

A.O : Anonymity is an issue. The project was also contradictory in a sense because it allowed people who wanted to be invisible and stay beyond the radar because of their status to make themselves heard and visible on another level. It would be interesting to speak to users of the exhibition in terms of your research.

L.L : I've attempted to reach some of them but it's kind of hard because I started this research long after the exhibition dates, so the only contacts I could get were from the directory page. That doesn't necessarily mean that people who made entries on website directory page did experience the exhibition.

A.O : But that's also very important because the exhibition was designed in collaboration with Terry, Tegan and myself, in a sense we were authors, so in a way what we put down was a framework. The authorship of the exhibition, what the exhibition produced, was the user. So it's important to get some of those voices into your research. You just have to preserve more.

L.L : I also wanted to know what's your take on the title Hotel Yeoville.

A.O : I like it for various reasons. A hotel is strong metaphor for a place where people pass through. I think it's a very useful title, it talks very much to the fact that the existence of most of the audience the exhibition is very tenuous and very difficult to predict. The title reflects that idea. I've never really spoken to Terry about that.

L.L : But that's exactly what I am picking up from everyone, that's how I understood it myself. The temporality that a word such a hotel suggests next to the Yeoville, which is a suburb that represents stability and settling of families. So what you are getting is families moving into Yeoville looking to settle down, however the circumstances around identity and nationality lead into this transitional movement. You also touch on a point, Terry and I spoke about it in depth, how people had a sense of when they entered the space they were afraid of revealing themselves on a public platform. Do you think people understood that the information they were logging in or sharing would be on display in a global community.

A.O : I think the did because Terry was very careful to have three or four guides who manned the space, and those guides would brief visitors of the exhibition around notions of confidentiality and public-ness that were intrinsic with what they communicated through the exhibition. I think they made it clear to visitors.

L.L : Another thing I picked up from reading an article, this one guy commented that he thought that the project was brilliant especially for younger people and good for keeping them off the streets. What about the project do you think might not have appealed to the older generation as opposed to the younger. Do you think it's the technology, or the content? Because also just looking through the video's and photo's, it was general a younger populous that was making entries and taking to that space.

A.O: I think that links with the early comment I made, because it's a library, younger people would be using it after school for instance. Perhaps older people in the mornings but primarily the library would be used by younger generation of users. I think that had the exhibition been in another space it might have attracted a better range of participants so I think that just came with the territory of where the exhibition took place. I wouldn't value it positively or negatively on that score, think it had a lot to do with the positioning.

L.L : I spoke to John Spiropolous yesterday and he mentioned that another factor that was possibly hinder the older crowd from visiting the exhibition.

A.O : I can see that and I suppose they aren't as precious anonymity in the context of an exhibition like that. So the notion of play would come into it, like the photo booth might appeal to some purely because it's something novel. I don't know but that's quite speculative.

L.L : And it's also become culturally cool to be on these platforms. The now generation is very clued in on the possibilities of it, I mean careers are being established, especially with the international crowd a lot of careers are actually

sparking from these social media sites, and people are making a living from this technology.

A. O : And your study what's your background?

L.L : Well i came from Media Studies, through Dramatic Arts at Wits. So I did Film critic, film studies at most, African film studies more specifically. After that I decided to take postgraduate studies in Interactive Media. I am actually trying to understand this technology from a social scape. What is public art in a social scape such Yeoville, what does it mean. I guess there's a lot of question and I don't have the answers to them yet. It's an interesting one because that's where culturally we are moving towards, we are all going digital, if you are not within the digital frame of things then you kind of don't exist.

A.O : Another aspect of the project which is interesting in terms of public art as a genre is that I think it's a valuable, because it allowed the production f the content via the participants or the users of the exhibition, they could also be viewers of the exhibition they weren't required to participate, verses the traditional model kind of modernist version of public art which is a static object in so called public space that doesn't necessarily make a contribution on a deeper level. I wrote an article on public art, which I can try to send you.

L.L : I also wanted to ask about language because a lot of the project was conducted in English. Do you think that factored in a way.

A. O : I think that's very important because English is part of an Imperialist influence on the continent so it tends to be the standard requirement for communication across border. It's insufficient in terms of a project like this but it's kind of the language of the internet, and the internet was the language of this project, so I think it was inevitable to use it as a driver. But I don't think it was sufficient on the very simple level of the languages that belong to the people who participated in the project, the mother tongues of those people whom one can't assume are fluent in English, so that's a challenge that the project would maybe have to address in the future. The internet is a very useful platform in terms of it's capacity to translate various scripts into other languages but I don't know how that would work.

L.L : Terry did actually mention that if anything should would like to introduce French, because of the presences of identities that come from francophone countries. But then I guess it's also like a very tricky one because it still is a language of the coloniser but it's also hard because you've got to find a common ground, 'common ground' meaning one that could access people across spectrums. It's also tricky because I'm one those people who feels strongly about language but sometimes you've got to think about practicality as well and there are many factors to it.

Interview with Tegan Bristow on the *Hotel Yeoville* Project (2011)

Conducted by Londiwe Langa

Londiwe Langa (L.L) : Hi Tegan.

Tegan Bristow (T.B) : Hi Londi.

L.L : How are you?

T.B : Fine Thanks.

L.L : Great. I just wanted to know about your involvement with Hotel Yeoville, I mean how that came about and what role you played? Maybe the first question I'd like you to answer is how you got involved with Hotel Yeoville?

T.B : Ok, in 2007 and 2008 I was doing with Jason Hobbs, who's a information architect on the internet cafe's in Braamfontein and in the inner city. So what we were doing was looking at the internet cafes as a form of trying to understand the kind of practice and people were using computers and internet so that Jason could put down some principles for design for that kind of community. So what were their needs, basically what are the needs of shared computing so if somebody doesn't have their own computer and they're using a public computer what then, how then for instance would SARS design for them to be able to do their taxes where the filing system is different, could they use a shared USB, would they need an online space to upload stuff etcetera. So it was kind of looking at a shared computing design orientation. And the other thing is that we were also trying to get an understanding of how many users there are and those spaces, and what those users were trying to do there. Because the standard kind of ICT studies or surveys only really look at kind of home users and business users and don't really count those guys as... in their surveys. So we were trying to understand this other user group.

L.L : Oh low income shared computing community and stuff.

T.B: Yeah we kind of wanted them to be included into those surveys, rather than being excluded or not really existing.

L.L : Why?

T.B: Well Jason is an information architect so he's really interested in looking at how to build websites for people like that and what kind of needs they have for information architecture on that level. And I was really interested in the cultural aspects of it and I found that most of the cafes were run by foreign nationals and most of the cafes act as cultural clubs so that was really interesting. Another thing that intrigued me was that a lot of low to middle income people that move through the city, so they might live in the city or not live in the city actually learn about how to use a computer and how to access the internet for the first time through those cafes. So they become a very interesting learning space as well. A lot of people

graduate through those cafes onto their first computer so the kind of technical support those cafes give a community is really huge.

L.L : That's really interesting.

T.B : So they'll often refurbish old computers and sell at good prices so that people can take a computer home and use, and buy then from them. So they offer a really good service as well.

L.L : When you say that there was national club identities like what exactly are you... could you give me an example of what distinctly would stand out to you about this internet cafe from the other that would kind of speak to a nationality of sort?

T.B: I don't think there was anything specifically physical it was more the people that were hanging out there. One cafe you'd find like everyday like all the Congolese people would go there. And that became like a community group, where as well as a section where they could communicate with their diasporic community of Congolese people in other places. So it was like an extended group really.

L.L : And ahh your involvement with Hotel Yeoville specifically as an interactive media designer and application builder.

T.B: Yeah well Terry kind of found our research and when she decided that Hotel Yeoville should be web orientated, she found our research and she got hold of us and asked to get involved in the initial design process of the website cause we had done research with the community already. She ran an initial survey in Yeoville pretty much like the survey we had done, so Jason and I kind of took the survey stuff that we had done and done it in that community and then Jason got involved in very much the information architect of the initial site. I stepped away from the project because I was really busy and I didn't really have a space to get involved in the project so that happened and then when Terry… it was kind of on and off communicating and kind of on the periphery of the project that whole time but not really getting involved directly. And then when Terry decided to do the installation in the Yeoville library we started working together much more intensely. So we uh… Alex Opper from Notion Architects, me and Terry got together and designed the whole flow of it and looked at how there was communication between the website and the installation. Then I designed and build some of the interactive installation, so I designed and built the mapping project with the photo booth, the video booth and the writing thing. I didn't make all of them myself, the video and writing one I wrote myself the photo booth I worked with a guy from the states called Alec Benett, he was very helpful, he pretty much had developed the software already, he gave me a version of it which I then adjusted. And then one of the guys from Kagiso, the guy who was doing the website a Kagiso urban management, he did the back end for the map.

L.L : Ok so there was several people, a network of people involved. And then I mean your… obviously you got involved at the, like you were saying at the last leg of the project when it had to take the form of an exhibition, the installation, and that was

your specific field an your specific skill that you bought on board. I was just interested in understanding what level of autonomy you had. Did Terry have an idea what she wanted you to do and maybe you just translated that into a physical product.

T.B : No not at all. At the way Terry works, I've worked with her before, it's very inclusive so she uhm... We basically started at naught. Like we walked into the space and she was like I want to have a place where people can access the site and initially it was like we'll have some computers and then we kind of discussed it further and further and looked at potentially people could interact with the space, people could have an activity there, people could come and actually do different things. Then we started looking at compartmentalizing those activities and how there were already different compartment activities on the website. And the she was also interested in the life categories that she had on the website like love…those kinds of things. So she was looking at compartmentalizing each one of those into a separate space. Did you ever see the?

L.L: Yes I saw the website.

T.B : So the installation had like booths, little rooms where different things happened. Through discussions with Alex, so we basically…it evolved through discussion and trying to find a way to bring the different aspects of the website into the real world.

L.L : Umm I did visit the installation, sorry. It was colourful it was a very nice experience as well. Another thing I wanted to know was during the process of the project, actually the duration of the project, the installation. What problems did you guys encounter as a team, where you had to come in and get involved, perhaps for a bit of trouble shooting or where you not involved. Did you just strike up in the initial opening of the exhibition and then kind of back off and let the remaining team run the project. Or did you still go back like every now and then and do some trouble shooting?

T.B : Yeah absolutely. I think I was in there at least every two weeks over the whole like five month period. And the other thing was that Terry was unexpectedly needing to nurture the installation a lot more than she had expected. So in a way I tried to help her but I couldn't obviously cause I've got a full time job, as much as I could, but I would go in and we'd download content on a weekly basis, we'd collate all the videos, collate all the other stuff. I would do that

L.L : So that's like editing, you'd be editing what was being loaded onto the website.

T.B : So I would and download all the content the stuff that couldn't go directly onto the website and then that I would give to Terry and she would edit it out and then

we'd hand that over to one of the exhibition managers who would sit during the day whilst they were in the exhibition, and upload everything.

L.L : So it sounds like it was quite time consuming as well. It needed a whole lot more resources than what was available. Obviously which is kind of like backing from different bodies so that money can be available to hire people to do certain things.

T.B : Yeah so I think the entire thing happened very organically. So when we started out there wasn't a set idea of what exactly it was going to be, it kind of evolved and became something. The same process, once he installation was up we realised issues that people needed guidance, ummm… exhibition managers. I mean it's also the nature of an exhibition and the nature of a long term exhibition, I mean things will go wrong, the electricity will go down.

L.L : Did that happen?

T.B : Yeah it happens all the time, I mean it's standard practise here in South Africa, the electricity goes out. Cameras get stolen, you know things do happen and if something is on for that amount of time it definitely does need management. There's no other way around it.

L.L : Ok I think I've covered pretty much every thing I wanted to know. Thank you.