



Under construction

Whether working in collaboration or on his own practice, Stephen Hobbs has always remained faithful to a singular subject: the city. A former director of the Market Theatre Gallery and cofounder of The Trinity Session, a public art consultancy based in Johannesburg, he talks here about waiting tables, becoming a curator at age 21, the influence of Gordon Matta-Clark, and producing visual work inspired by the ineffable qualities of intensely urban agglomerations.

In 1993, Stephen Hobbs came to public prominence with [untitled], blocks of refrigerated ice placed on a pedestal and left to melt. Shown on his degree exhibition at the University of the Witwatersrand, the work was acquired by collector Pierre Lombard for R300. Success, however, was nominal rather than actual. With little by way of a contemporary art market to tap into, Hobbs continued working as a full-time waiter at Café Royal in Hyde Park. In his spare time he worked on his first experimental film, *Audiovisual* (1994), which was later shown on the 1994 Weekly Mail Film Festival. A conference to discuss the programming of the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 prompted him to take a two-day leave of absence from waiting tables. At this conference, during a break, Hobbs was approached by Andrea Huxham: "Your name has been put forward to run the Market Theatre Gallery, would you be interested in an interview?" He was. On April 20, 1994, Hobbs was officially employed as the gallery's manager and curator. He was 21.

SEAN O'TOOLE In many ways the Market Theatre precinct, and your gallery in particular, was the pivot around which the South African contemporary art scene revolved during the 1990s. Would you agree with this statement?

STEPHEN HOBBS To be perfectly honest, I believe that gallery never saw a period like that of the mid to late 1990s. Indeed the gallery went through some historically radical times, but my sense from those who knew the gallery during the late 1970s and 80s is that it's rebirth during our new democracy was significant, the energy that ran through that space during the 1990s was profound. We put on some seminal shows: Sandile Zulu, Robin Rhode, Joachim Schönfeldt and Kendell Geers, Kevin Brand, Titus Matiyane, Jo Ractliffe's *Shooting Diana* installation.

SO How did you meet Robin Rhode?

SH I was invited as a guest lecturer to crit third year students at Wits Technikon in 1997. Robbie was a student. I say this with respect to Robbie, and I think he would agree: I recall during that studio visit, he was working on a really ugly sculpture which struggled to improve itself. The following year the gallery hosted a graduate exhibition for students at Wits Tech, which included Robbie. He did a performance piece where he drew a bicycle on the wall – for the first time publicly, for an art audience – and attempted to ride the bicycle.

SO How was it received?

SH The audience loved it. It was very special. For what it's worth, there's a little piece of genius born. It was a no-brainer. If he could just multiply this conceptually, he would be in business. Look where he is today.

SO In 2000, you gave Robin his first solo exhibition, *Living in Public*. What was your involvement?

SH He took care of the whole thing himself, I merely participated in a number of conversations before. I was travelling during the course of his lead up to the exhibition; in fact, I think I arrived on the day of the opening. I had hooked him up with Levi's, the jeans brand, and he did some things in their store. He brought some of that concept into his show. If I remember correctly, he had a series of drawings on super wood boards, also a treatise on the usefulness of a Black Label quart bottle; there were also canvas suits with drawings on them that made reference to the fashion stuff he was doing with Levi's. (These were worn by performers on beer crates and served as the focal point for the opening.) I think the show was an important show but my sense is that it wasn't quite as important as the bicycle piece of two years before.

SO You gave Moshekwa Langa his first show. How did you meet him?

SH Moshekwa arrived at my office with a bundle of papers underneath his arm and said, "I've read about you, and I've come to talk to you about your

work." My response was, "Well, who are you?" He showed me those cement bags that he had treated with wet tea bags and bitumen and displayed in his mother's back garden on the washing line. He also brought me a photo album. They are the most bizarre books, filled with objects he collected. After seeing those things I drove out to where he lived, to see the backyard – not only the washing line but also a fractured car screen that we exhibited on bricks. He was actually poaching for interest. He told me that Ricky Burnett had offered him a four-part show at the Newtown Galleries. I looked at Moshekwa and gave him an ultimatum: 'Do you want a solo show with me or do you want a four person show with Ricky?' Two days before his show opened – we were in the middle of setting it up in the gallery – Moshekwa, in his typical, mercurial, almost stubborn way, said: 'What if I told you, I don't want do this show?' I said, 'Well then, Moshekwa, we're going to have to sit down and have a very serious fucking conversation.' He was 19 at this point. 'We're two days away from the show, the invitations have gone out, and now you're holding me to ransom? Are you fucking mad? We're having this exhibition whether you like it or not.' We became friends. The opening was decent enough, but it was the word of mouth after the opening that mattered. We had visits from about a dozen or so people who registered in my opinion as so called players in the art world. Boom!

SO Being a young artist yourself, working on your own practice at the same time, who were you looking at and learning from?

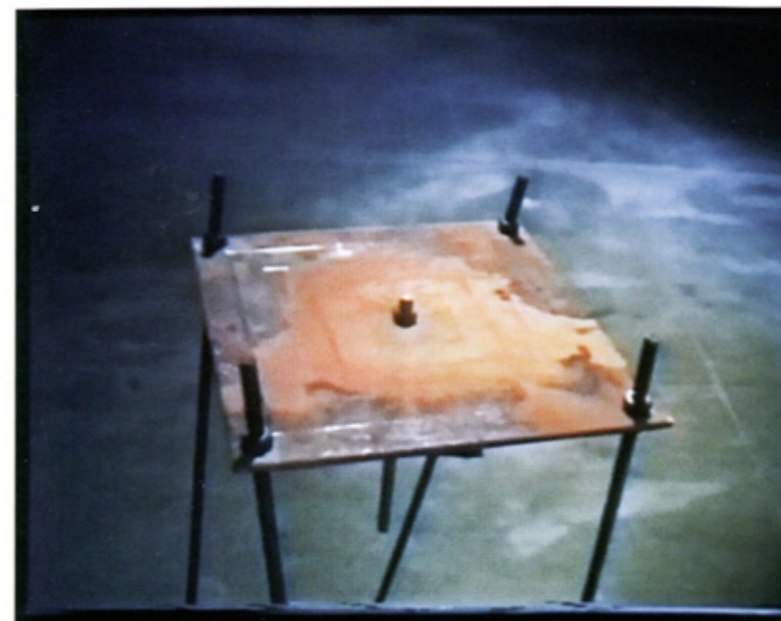
SH Moshekwa and Robin. They have such a defined sense of materiality, a sense of furtiveness, a sense of lightness of conceptual work. Lightness in the sense that complex poetic thinking can translate in a myriad of ways.

SO Your tenure at the gallery [April 1994 to December 2000] coincided with the two Joburg biennales. This must have been exciting.

SH It was. One was privy to a whole lot of play in art in a very experimental city that didn't even realise its experimental potential. There was this incredible sensation of import, of importance. In 1997, we hosted curator Hou Hanru's contribution to the second Johannesburg Biennale, the show *Hong Kong Etc.* It included work by the Congolese artist Bodys Isek Kingelez. I'm a great fan of his models of cities.

SO Working in what was essentially an administrative position, wasn't there ever the desperation or urge to move on and get on with your own thing?

SH I was very fortunate – I was able to manipulate my job functions into a number of creative paths. I only started to feel what you describe in the late 1990s. Up until then I was so turned on by the experience of multitasking. I was 21 years old when I took up the position. Shortly afterwards, the *Mail and Guardian* ran a feature on me and I was on the cover of *The Star's* Tonight section, my first solo show of that year sold out on the opening night. I was propelled into an instant fame bubble. You get off on that as a young artist and you're very seduced by the whole ego thing. Plus I loved curating. I really loved managing that space, I loved the dynamics of the city, I loved Newtown.



LEFT & RIGHT As part of his undergraduate degree show in 1993, Hobbs exhibited this untitled work, a block of ice displayed on a mild steel plinth
OPENING PAGE SPREAD Stephen Hobbs, *Citi Assemblage*, 2007, model car, dowel sticks, cable ties, 70 x 70 x 70cm (approximate)

Early on in his practice, the city figured as a central subject in Hobbs' work: Johannesburg in particular, but also the city as a global phenomenon and conceptual construct. Film was a central means for articulating this interest. "I was watching it, collecting it, teaching it, practising it; it was integral to my sense of self as an artist in the 1990s," he says. Notable early projects include the crude, stuttering films *MS* (1996) and *54 Stories* (1998). Moving image aside, Hobbs also began to use photography and make site-specific interventions. For his exhibition *Torque of the Town*, hosted by Cape Town's Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet in 1999, Hobbs obscured street signs and road markings to present a signless city, a city without control. The initial seed for this work evolved out of his experience commuting into a rapidly altering inner city while working at the Market Theatre Gallery, and more directly from a 1994 invitation by Henri Vergon, then with the French Institute, to contribute a project page to their quarterly publication, *Newtown Zebra*. It was here that Hobbs proposed – in visual terms – the idea of a city of abstracted signs and free-floating signifiers, of imposed logic and intuitive practice.

SO I mentioned to someone that I would be interviewing you and they said, 'You know his medium is Joburg'.

SH I would accept that as a fair description: my medium is urban space.

SO Is it urban space in Joburg, or is it the city generally, the city as a noun?

SH In the 1990s it was Joburg itself. In the 2000s, I realised if I'm going to expand my production and my intellectual pursuits, I need to understand Joburg within a broader context. Joburg remains my primary muse, but it is a muse set against Caracas, Dakar, Mumbai and Tijuana. It's about trying to make those links if and when possible.

SO In understanding Joburg who would you identify as the key conductors, the lighting rods that made you look at the city and understand it in a different way?

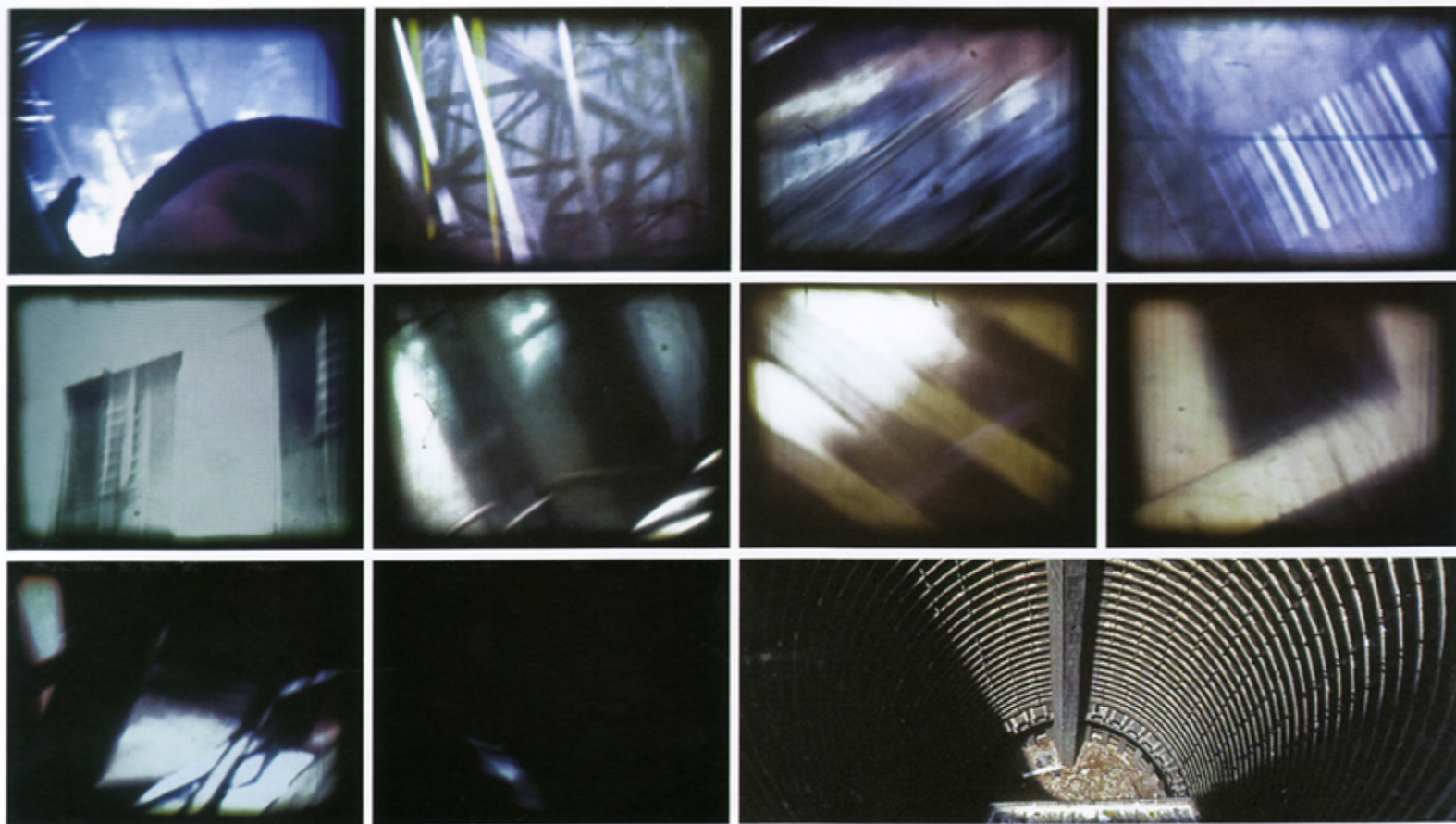
SH Lindsay Bremner, Hilton Judin and Rodney Place come to mind, people whom through conversations, collaborations and special exhibition projects helped me to formulate my own thinking on the city. An odd memory: during the early 1980s my parents were exhibiting at Rand Afrikaans University (now University of Johannesburg); I was overwhelmed by the concrete brutalism of the architecture and the city-like nature of the campus, a city within a city where walking distances between its extremities were planned to be equal when maintaining one's pace. This kind of cognitive interaction with a building made me think more precisely about the formal nature of cities and of Joburg's regulatory nature in particular.

SO What was your first engagement with Ponte City?

SH The property managers of my flat in Illovo were based in Ponte and I had to travel there to pay my rent. Once, when the lift wasn't working, I discovered that Ponte was hollow. The work unfolded from there. My first video work around this subject was *MS* (motion sickness). Tracey Rose filmed it. It's about the route from my flat to pay my rent, just paying homage to my route. Shortly after making that film and showing it at a couple of gigs I thought, 'You know what, it's bullshit.' I was just paying lip service to a much stronger idea, which was throwing a camera down a building and destroying it. I got very sentimental about destroying my camera. *54 Stories* evolved out of that. The work is a perfect example of a process of distilled observation. Up until that point I had been exploring Ponte using a whole vocabulary of media, mainly taking pictures, but also making drawings and videos. The repetition brought about a shift. Once you do enough pictures, enough drawings, enough films, eventually you realise you need to throw a camera down the centre of Ponte. All those things that preceded this moment were merely a formalistic reorientation of the building – nothing comes close to the singular concept of suicide.

SO How exactly did you make the work?

SH A Dutch journalist was doing a documentary on South African artists and she included me in her portrait. I used her as the decoy to get on top of Ponte. She wanted to get cut-aways for her documentary from the roof. While she was filming with a friend of mine, I taped-up the video camera and mounted the parachute. It was freezing fucking cold that day. I went



FACING PAGE Stephen Hobbs, *54 Stories* (stills x 10), 1999, 8mm film transferred to VHS, 36 sec, (digitally remastered 2008)

FACING PAGE BOTTOM RIGHT Inside core of Ponte City (detail)

THIS PAGE As part of his exhibition *Torque of the Town* (Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet, 1999), Hobbs temporarily removed road markings and obscured traffic signals on Cape Town's Bree Street: intervention detail showing paint roller on road surface



up to the very top, right underneath the rigging of the coke sign, and threw the camera down the core.

SO Aside from the hedonistic thrill of making this film, what were you trying to achieve with *54 Stories*?

SH Radical filmmaking. I was committed to experimentation in filmmaking and, of course, I am totally preoccupied with the notion of suicide and how such a phenomenal piece of architecture – and architecture like that all over the world – prompts this behaviour. It was an attempt through film to articulate the absurdity of that type of sick environment.

SO When you say experimental film, are we meaning Stan Brakhage or Michael Snow?

SH No, we're talking artists like Frances Picabia, or some of Duchamp and Man Ray's experiments.

SO They are all modernists, which is interesting. Your work is deeply infused with a modernist sensibility.

SH I love modernism! Modernism is a great subject to debunk and it's a great subject to criticise, but what always remains in my extractions of modernism is the grit, and the grit is a psychological thing, it's a rational thing, it's a physical thing, it's a formalistic thing, it's an ordering principle.

SO How would you say this statement is reflected in your intervention at Shane de Lange's outlet gallery?

SH In a number of drawing experiments that unpack the classic city grid, a-la Manhattan or downtown Joburg, blacking out the building blocks on a white ground produces the illusion of grey dots at the intersections. By treating The Outlet gallery and surrounding buildings with a dazzle pattern, like the camouflage applied to battleships in World War One, the optical field of those buildings is disrupted, their geometry is skewed and the viewer has to consciously reassemble the buildings in their minds. Both

effects described here are graphical metaphors for cognitive experiences of Joburg in particular, where based on fear, anxiety, limited knowledge, the field of vision of this urban space is distorted.

SO One of the leitmotifs of the last *documenta* was the provocation, "Is modernity our antiquity?" It's an intriguing question. How would you characterise your engagement with the legacy of modernism?

SH Well, I've always looked at modernism primarily from the architectural point of view, in the way that one understands the principles of design and how modern cities are designed. I think of Charles Jencks and Robert Venturi, also Gordon Matta-Clark, whom for me is the god of modernist deconstruction. His work does not exist without the grid, and that's the whole point. *Splitting* (1974), in my opinion, is his most poetic work: he's literally shifting the axis of an X and Y grid, just by cutting a house in half. You can call it drawing, you can call it deconstruction, but it doesn't exist without the box or the cube, which he is dissecting. That's the point of entry for me into modernism. All of my work has remained true to that idea. Take the erased road markings as an example. They were about the idea that the grid of an African city goes against the natural tendency of Africans – and it's not just Africans, it's all human beings. We don't walk in grid patterns; we walk along well-trodden paths – desire lines – which are the expression of the shortest, most economical route. *54 Stories* is about the idea of responding to a building that is so hostile to one's psychology that you can use it as a suicide tool. This is a bizarre set of conditions when you consider that Ponte City was conceived as the highest expression of a modern lifestyle. Of course, these fantastical notions of construction go back as far as Vladimir Tatlin and his *Monument to the Third International*. They continue to prosper in the work of architects like Norman Foster. It's like trying to be god on earth, and I think that that's a fantastically pathetic reality to inhabit.

SO Did you ever feel that your interest in architecture and film were antithetical?

SH No, architecture and film are inseparable. You can't experience cities

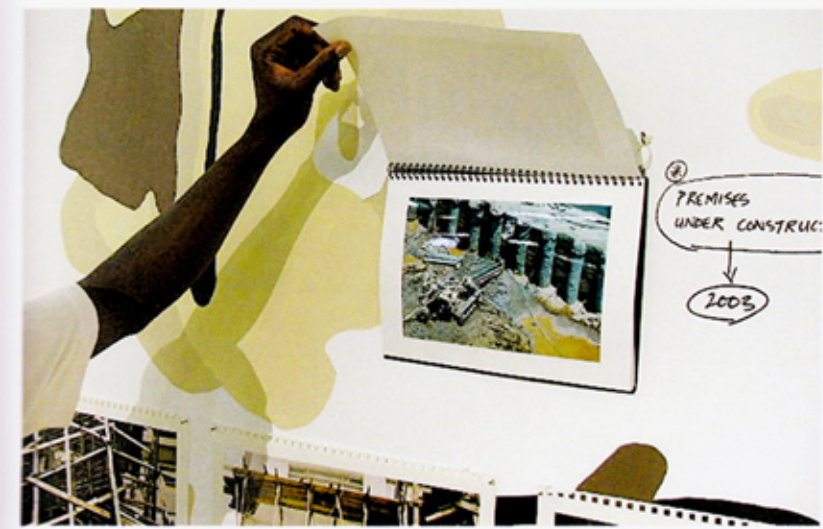
Founded in 2000 by artists Jose Ferreira, Kathryn Smith and Hobbs, The Trinity Session is an arts consultancy and project management initiative that has over the last decade become an important liaison for urban planners, architects and artists interested in public art. Hobbs's involvement in this company (which is now a duo, with artist Marcus Neustetter) was prefaced by a large-scale collaborative project titled *Tour Guides of the Inner City*, which he describes as his "curatorial swan song" to the Market Theatre Gallery. The project formed part of the *Urban Futures* cultural programme and included contributions from 36 artists, including Robin Rhode, Jo Ractliffe, Rodney Place and Clive van den Berg. "As its starting point, the exhibition took into consideration the fact that the fragmented, disordered states of Johannesburg could be revisited through the visual interpretation of artists," Hobbs wrote in October 2000. "More specifically though, the exhibition aimed to interrogate the spaces left behind after apartheid. How is the city used today? And what can be learned from its evolving identity, from once-white-owned metropolis to present day African City." It could be argued that this insight informs the ongoing work of The Trinity Session, in spite of the occasional lapses into monumentality of the public art projects it has facilitated.

without moving through them. The city itself is a perpetual framing device, from high-rise walls down main streets to window frames in buildings. If you are a visual person you are constantly grappling with the idea of capturing that movement and the constant framing. If your preoccupation is with the representation of cities and their phenomena, cinema is a logical connection – like photography. William Kentridge demonstrates it so eloquently in some of his works because he uses animation in such a self-conscious way to talk about that embodied sense of moving through space. My preoccupation is with the phenomena of space, not so much with its psycho-socio-economic register, even though I have done lots of projects about that stuff. I'm interested in form and texture, which is inherent to phenomenology.

SO There is an obvious dissonance between your own fairly experimental formulations of city-ness and the projects you do with The Trinity Session. Do you find it hard to reconcile, practically and conceptually?

SH It is very hard to reconcile. Maybe, if I was braver, I wouldn't do what I do in The Trinity Session and I would be a full-time starving artist, but I

have a much bigger ego than that. And I'm a much more competent artist: I can actually run a business, make money and also continue to make my ephemeral projects. You must also understand that my motivation for doing the public work with The Trinity Session is not ultimately the end goal. I'm interested in the story of the documentation of the processes we're involved in, the between stuff of the projects. It's a form of organic research into the psycho-social dynamics of the particular urban contexts we are planning in. The Trinity Session work is a strategic way of immersing oneself in the grit of city planning. It's about knowing the city that you live in so that you can know it on a very embedded level. Working collaboratively, Marcus and I have often stood back and addressed the numerous findings from our public art curating and management projects in independent projects. As it is, I'm not concerned with being perceived as an artist in the hallowed sense of the meaning. I'm interested in employing the appropriate knowledge methodologies in time and space within an urban setting when they present themselves and drawing on whatever lessons possible. All I'm interested in, really, is whether or not my intervention stays true to my preoccupations with phenomenology. Whether I'm doing that as a curator or as an artist or whatever is not really important to me.



LEFT Installation view of *Digging for Gems*, lambda prints, notebooks, acrylic paint, 2003 DaimlerChrysler Arts Award, which focused on creative photography: Hobbs was one of eight shortlisted finalists



RIGHT Stephen Hobbs, *Dazzle*, 2009, site-specific intervention using acrylic paint on exterior walls of Outlet Gallery, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria. **FACING PAGE TOP** Exterior installation view of *Highvoltage / Lowvoltage* including *Dar Scaff*, 2007, PVC print, steel scaffold, 800 x 400 x 300 cm, Wits Substation gallery, Johannesburg. **FACING PAGE BOTTOM** Interior view of main installation of *Highvoltage / Lowvoltage*, 2007, mirror, tape, branding, dichroic lamps

SO This might seem like a big jump, but in a sense your answer here is also a response to the critics of your photography. I remember a lot of negative remarks about your contribution to the Daimler Chrysler Award in 2003.

SH Well, in a way that was a very tacky presentation, but conceptually it was an interesting installation.

SO I suppose people – formalist photographers, of which we have over many in this country – want photographs to declare themselves.

SH This is such a frustrating part of the conversation: I really don't give a fuck what people want. No, I mean that. And I'm not trying to say my photography is good, I've never ever set out to do that. What I've set out to do is document a particular urban space and reconstitute it through my photographs so that we see it differently. So for me, the greatest compliment that I can get is when someone makes a connection between my light and glass camouflage prints for example and the reflections and bounced light in the city, and get excited about seeing the city in a particular new way. I totally agree that there is a limit to that work, I won't dispute that, but I'm not going to apologise for the aesthetic power of it.

SO One of the problems I have with documentary photography in this country, and this is a crude generalisation, is that there is no metaphor in it. It is purely illustrative and descriptive. "Documentary literalism," Okwui Enwezor calls it. I know this is something Jo Ractliffe rebels against, and I would argue you do too.

SH I think you're right. Up until my exhibition *Highvoltage/Lowvoltage* (2007), bar a couple of projects, there was a potential for descriptiveness in my work, a potential for observation for the sake of observation and not helping us beyond the point of observation. I think that what

informed the Substation process was a conscious decision to get more arty. And what I mean by that is to draw from the non-language based things that happen in a studio – intuition, the unconscious, the pre-conscious, the non-verbal. In those states there's a less self-conscious processing taking place; your inherent skills take over. You could liken it to chemistry and alchemy. Artists who tap into that space produce remarkable works. Of course, making statements like this, here and now, after all we've been through, is problematic. It's bound up in clichés of genius and all that sort of shit. Self-consciously, when I embarked on that body of work, I realised the need to access some level of magic. The obvious problem was how to consciously and unconsciously describe a furtive beauty – reflections, glimmers, lines, reflections observed in a city – in a material form.

SO So how did you?

SH I read Jorge Luis Borges. I'm not a great one for literature, or not necessarily magic-realism. In his short story "The Aleph" (1949), he describes this 2cm diameter sphere that he encounters during a dinner party in a basement. What he describes inside that sphere, which is measurable yet universal in scale, is a tirade of worldly, almost visceral experience: from poetry to bodies, to sunsets and ancient landscapes to fucking sand dunes, whatever. I'm not doing it justice. But when I read it, I registered that same sense I have when I scour Joburg for that special piece of graffiti, or that singular reflection, or that road marking that is so spectacularly contradictory. And that is how I relate to the Borges text. In a sense he's describing the sublime, that thing that overwhelmed Wordsworth, an extensive godly naturalness. It's a way of relating to place, to space. On a more practical level, it involved extracting the best of my mirror photography and making an installation in a room that could evoke this elusive, intangible beauty.

The ensuing conversation touches on many issues, including Hobbs's thoughts on his custodianship (with Neustetter) of The Premises Gallery, which first hosted first solo exhibitions by Zander Blom and Michael MacGarry, amongst others. The discussion also broaches the "phenomenal archaeology" and "raw frontier town-ness" that defines Joburg as a city. Not averse to self-critique, Hobbs admits that, "There's an obvious need to pontificate over Joburg's presence and value on a global stage." Surprising, too, given his commitment to lens-based media, is his revelation that he once painted. He forsook the medium in 1992. "It is one of those radical things you have to do as a young art student – you have to reject painting," he says. "It's like an avant-garde prerequisite." The two-hour long conversation closes with an imprecise series of statements (by both parties) on the source of creative and imaginative work. A simple yes/no question ends the matter: Do you believe in magic? Hobbs: "Ja. Why not?"

