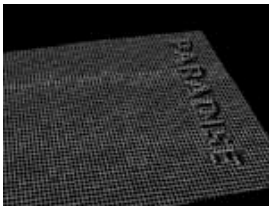




Bruno Tremblay  
HIV Virus 2006  
pencil on paper  
70 x 100



Philipp Gasser and Bruno Tremblay  
Improvising on Truth 2006  
floor projection  
dimensions variable

## Philipp Gasser and Bruno Tremblay at the Drill Hall

by Michael Smith

The arrival of Basel-based artists Philipp Gasser and Bruno Tremblay in South Africa is yet another sign that the exchanges between the local art scene and artists from beyond our borders are becoming more and more meaningful. Here as part of an exchange programme initiated by Pro Helvetia, IAAB (International Exchange and Studio programme Basel) and the Joubert Park Project, the artists have engaged in talks at Wits University (part of that institution's DIVA series of artist's talks) and run workshops at the Market Theatre about the use of digital photography and Photoshop in art. They've also met with numerous Johannesburg artists and activists like Dorothee Kreutzfeldt, Joseph Gaylard, Jo Ractliffe and Bie Venter, whom they credit with helping them integrate and feel welcome.

The culmination of their residency, however, has been the production and exhibition of a collaborative digital media work entitled *Improvising on Truth* (2006). Shown at the Drill Hall for one night only, the work is a digital animation with electronic sound, and attempts to process and comment on some of the dynamics and issues the artists have observed as significant during their stay here.

While the work was an entirely collaborative effort from conception to completion, duties were divided, with Gasser working on the visuals and Tremblay on the sound. The result is an intense seven-and-a-half minute floor-projected digital video, its monochromatic palette powerfully augmented by subtle, calculated use of sound. The work opens with a beguiling play of diagonal white lines across a black screen, entering at irregular moments. However, they soon criss-cross into a matrix, and charm turns to solemnity as one realises that the lines have become a fence. The artists speak of their initial surprise at the extent of SA's security paranoia, at the omnipresence of structures used for maintaining personal safety.

Gasser talks of his realisation that so much of Johannesburg life is dictated by grids: fences, burglar guards, and a fairly rigid matrix of town-planning that underpins the area of inner city Jozi where the two were resident. Furthermore, Tremblay speaks of his sense that the grid communicates a very particular way of seeing the world, one in which mathematics and statistics dominate. Any reasonably well-informed visitor to SA will certainly be aware of our eye-watering crime statistics, HIV infection rate statistics, poverty statistics etc, but both artists see such ways of quantifying as only telling part of the story.

Yet it is not all gloom: the visuals shift into a *Tron*-like artificial landscape, morphing and undulating to suggest hills and valleys, and the soft voice of Bie Venter filters in, reading a poem by her father, poet De Waal Venter. The Afrikaans poem sounds like a love poem (the artists later tell me that they came to regard it as a light-hearted ode to Johannesburg: 'Jy's glad nie te sleg nie'), and in its colloquiality is interestingly at odds with the rigidity and universality of the grid. This is taken even further as one section of Bie Venter's voiceover has her singing the line 'ek kielie die wolke blou' (I tickle the clouds blue).

Soon, however, a deep, resonating note takes over the sound, and sections of the grid rise up to form words: iconic words like 'power', 'fairness', 'truth', 'greed', 'opportunity' and 'neighbourhood' form at any of the four sides of the projection, now privileging one viewer's position, then another's. Formally, this device works much like the emergence of landscape elements: the viewer has a real sense of being physically integrated into the work. But I felt that these words, chosen presumably for their catholic relevance, were possibly too general, too simplistic to speak of issues of such massive gravity. Given that language is such an interesting issue when international exchanges like this occur, I felt that an opportunity to play with the matter and idiosyncrasies of words was lost, glossed over by overused 'hot-button' words.

Nonetheless, the willingness of these artists to engage with SA's emerging democracy was made all the more compelling given their citizenship of probably the most politically evolved democracy in the world. A willingness to avoid eurocentric cultural paternalism and really observe, seem to have been the hallmark of their involvement here. They appear genuinely fascinated by our country.

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LISTINGS	REVIEWS	NEWS	ARTBIO	WEBSITES	PROJECT	EXCHANGE	FEEDBACK	DIARY
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