

# Review

*minutes 2010*

*Time, movement and rhythm in Johannesburg*  
*Theresa Collins and Mocke Jansen van Veuren*

*Reviewed by Karl von Holdt*

This is an installation that makes our city strange, and strangely exhilarating. The artists, Theresa Collins and Mocke Jansen van Veuren, present hyper-speeded-up videos of daily life in the city – taxi ranks, swimming pools, school sports fields, a cemetery – each running over a 24-hour cycle compressed into less than ten minutes viewing time. The viewpoint is fixed, the camera in each case is located somewhere unobtrusive and filming automatically without the intervention of cameraman or director.

The result is a city slipped from its moorings, dissolved into a furious rush of people and vehicles and then recomposed into a cyclical ebbing and flowing as dawn gives way to frenzied day which in turn sinks into slowing night and stasis – before dawn summons people and machines into whirling life once more. The centrepiece is a stereoscopic 3-D vision of the cavernous Bree Street taxi rank. This reveals a strange visual shift in the relationship between vehicles and people over the cycle of a day.

During the early morning and evening peak hours, the taxis become a barely visible blur as they rush in, disgorge or swallow passengers, and rush off again, while people emerge from the blur as they wait in long queues for the taxis, giving the camera time to register their solid physical



presence. During the off-peak middle hours of the day the balance shifts, as the taxis slow down and spend long hours waiting for customers, while the people, no longer forced to wait for a ride, turn into blurred and ghostly presences.

The city is revealed as a place of logistics, massive movements of people and vehicles. The first metaphor that comes to mind is of the circulation of fluids in a body. Then comes the metaphor of breathing. It is as if the city is breathing like a vast creature, breathing people and things in and out in its own slow rhythms, a feeling amplified by the soundtrack of the video.

Strange how the grinding and revving and hooting of machines, and the babble and shouts of human voices, turn into a murmurous roar like a sea when hours are condensed into moments. Strange how the mind turns to metaphors of nature – blood, breathing, the sea – in an attempt to grasp the patterns of urban motion. Strange how the frenzy of taxis which we all see as harbingers of chaos resolve into an orderly dance moving to regular cycles. Strange how the chaotic and frenzied rush hour turns into a wonderful poetry before which one sits, mesmerised.

I tear myself away from this endlessly intriguing vision to look at the other videos that are showing. The camera posted under water in a public swimming pool reveals another world. Much of the time the light-filled blueness of the water is undisturbed. Every now and then blurred agitations become visible for a few moments, then calm returns. After a while I realise that these are people plunging in and splashing about or swimming and then exiting.

As one watches a strange reversal takes place. The swimming pool becomes a presence in itself, calm and restful and blue and self absorbed, and people are mere fleeting disturbances, portents of a different and agitated reality that barely registers on the life of a pool. I am tempted to carry on watching through the endlessly repeated day in the life of a pool, absorbing something of its calmness and emptiness, abandoning my life of action and agitation.

The final screen shows, on the right-hand side, a sequence of suburban scenes. A highway teeming with traffic, a school sports field dreaming of birds and leaves and then enduring the rushing back and forth of an afternoon of school sports before dark falls, a city skyline. And on the left-hand side a stone statue of the Virgin Mary in a cemetery, hands clasped and stone eyes fixed on heaven. The statue never moves, hands ever clasped, eyes ever fixed on a vision beyond. The branches of the shrubbery behind it do move, dancing jerkily in the breeze. The light moves. The seasons change, the branches of the shrub are bare for a while, leaved for a while. But the stone statue never ceases its vigil. To the right people are a passing agitation. To the left the statue prays day and night, winter and summer.

This is an extraordinary show in the attention it pays to the endlessly repeated frenzied patterns of everyday life and to moments of enduring stillness in the heart of the city. The blurring, erasing and reappearing of people in a constant process of composition, decomposition and recomposition references the work of William Kentridge, the supreme artist of Johannesburg,

whose self-conscious ghostly marks of erasure serve as a metaphor for memory, for the way in which what is happening in the now is always the product of what has gone before.

Yet where in Kentridge this process is constituted by the collision between a highly personal, idiosyncratic and even whimsical subjectivity and the forces of history, in the video installations of *minutes 2010* it is produced through mechanical and automated processes of filming and the compression of time. This gives rise to contrasting visions. In Kentridge's animated films the present is tangible, intense, personal, but accompanied by the ghostly presences of memory, history, nostalgia. In *minutes 2010* the present is fleeting, blurred, insubstantial, finding its form and meaning only in the arcing patterns and rhythms of time past and time future, time as continuous flow.

*minutes 2010* unseats our city and makes it new, at the same time commenting on processes of representation of the city in the visual arts. It is a bold and innovative project. The only pity is the transience of its presentation to the public of the city. Some or other public gallery ought to establish a space dedicated permanently to representations of Jo'burg, such as those of Kentridge and Collins and van Veuren, in film and video installations, so that we know we can always go again and sit entranced before our city transformed. <sup>UB</sup>

*Karl von Holdt is a senior researcher at the Society Work and Development Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand. 'minutes 2010' and other videos were shown at Sci-Bono Discovery Centre in Newtown Johannesburg at the end of September 2010.*