



RECLAIMING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Oscar Hemer



The Fear Industry is certainly one of today's most lucrative businesses, providing secure jobs, turning private homes into little fortresses and enforcing the ongoing transformation of our cityscapes: Public life moves from street cafés, parks and other open spaces to supervised shopping malls.

This trend can be detected all over the world, but nowhere as clearly as in South Africa, where fear and suspicion of the other has been state ideology until little more than a decade ago. Apartheid was one of the most elaborate projects of social engineering –in its repressive brutality comparable only to the grand modern projects of fascism and communism, and one of its most devastating features was the deliberate destruction of all public spaces where interracial encounters might occur.

The white South Africans' paranoia is notorious –and of course not without reason: Afrikaans and English speakers alike, they have enjoyed the privileges of racial segregation all their lives, and the brutal violence of crime in South Africa today bears the accumulated anger of the humiliated and oppressed. During apartheid, the black majority was excluded from the city centres and locked up in peripheral townships and illusionary "homelands". Now, the white minority and the new affluent black middle class live locked up in their fortified homesteads, terrified of being robbed or murdered.

Mauritian-born artist and architect Doung Jahangleer came to Durban in the mid '90s and was immediately caught by the atmosphere of fear – which is not an exclusive phenomenon of the white community. Durban is the city with the largest Indian population outside India, and in the South African racial hierarchy, "Indians" and "Coloureds" were the middle categories. Durban, and all of KwaZulu-Natal, were also the epicentre of the deadly antagonism between Inkatha and ANC, which in the early transition process escalated close to civil war.

In order to overcome his own fear, Doung went walking into the no-go areas of Durban, exposing himself to the violence, literally asking to get hurt. What he experienced was, however, rather the opposite: The same people that he had learned to dread welcomed and even embraced him. Thus, he started to explore the forgotten urban non-spaces systematically and invited others to share his experience. He initiated City Walks as a form of combined artistic exploration and political intervention, trying (in

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vain) to convince the municipal authorities to direct attention to what he calls the in-between zones.

He takes us –a group of fifteen participants in the *Memories of Modernity* project– on the 5-hour tour. It starts in Musgrave shopping centre in a predominantly white suburb built on the ruins of former Cato Manor – Durban’s equivalent to the romanticized multicultural townships Sophiatown (Johannesburg) and District Six (Cape Town)– and ends at the BAT Centre in the harbour. Doung leads us along the heavily trafficked N3 freeway, on a parallel pedestrian highway with scattered sweets and cigarette vendors. We make a short cut through an area of deserted apartment blocks, where some time ago the homeless managed to chase away the drug lords, only to be brutally evicted back into the street by the police. We arrive at the Warwick Triangle, the true heart of Durban: a conjunction of crossing freeways, railway terminal and microbus station where, according to Doung, some 600,000 people pass by every day. I have passed it a hundred times in car or taxi on my three visits to Durban, but never on foot –and it is truly a completely different experience. The passage has become a bustling marketplace. The air is thick with petrol and diesel fumes, scents of herbs and dried animals in the medicine stands, and nauseating odours from the food-tents where cow-heads are being axed and boiled. There is also an almost palpable tension in the air. We are obviously out of place.

This is a non-place, invisible from a car’s window, and consequentially these are non-people. Even South African tourist guides warn visitors to the nearby Victoria Street Market never to go beyond the limits of the market building.

Walking the streets of Durban becomes a revelation. It changes my entire perception of the city and of South Africa as a whole. I discover things I never saw before, and I move with a new kind of casualness. Even in Johannesburg –one of the few places in the world where I have really felt afraid.

What does this tell us about communication and social change? Well, maybe it points to the limits of mediated communication. Public spheres are the prerequisites for any kind of democracy, but they require physical public spaces where people actually meet and confront each other. Information alone cannot combat fear. It is necessary to cross the invisible lines and walk out in the urban wilderness, even at the risk of “getting hurt”. There is no other way to reclaim the public sphere.

