





A Janus face

The *Spier Contemporary* is back again, this time in an urban location. For the second instalment, the organisers dolled-up a familiar landmark, the old Edwardian City Hall building, which in 1990 famously hosted Nelson Mandela shortly after his release from prison. Much, though, has changed since then. By **Ruth Simbao**



TOP Chris Swift, *Aspire*, 2009-10, 250 sections of discarded Robben Island maximum-security prison fencing, 400 picket fence slats, 800 cable ties, 600 x 240 x 240cm **FACING PAGE TOP** Kurt Campbell, *Memorial to Vlakplaas: Head crushing cradle for two*, 2010, steel and leather, 42 x 381 76cm **FACING PAGE BOTTOM** Eugene Arries, Jonathan Cane and Zan Marie, *Flyover: An Ethnography* (video still), 2010, mixed media installation **PREVIOUS SPREAD** Cape Town City Hall during renovation for 2010 *Spier Contemporary*, February 2010 Photo: Africa Centre/Spier Contemporary

In Roman mythology, Janus is the god of gates and doorways, a threshold figure with two faces. He looks forwards and backwards, peering into the future as well as the past. He symbolises change and transgression, endings and new beginnings. Similarly, in Congolese mythology, *zinkondi* sculptures representing dogs often have two heads, mediating between the present and the past – the realms of the living and the dead.

The site-sensitive exhibition, *Spier Contemporary* 2010, can be read as a Janus portrait of a threshold moment in South African art. The site – Cape Town City Hall – was deliberately chosen for its transformative value, and its European-styled façade reveals a face lined with both the pain of colonialism and apartheid, and the wisdom of eventual change. Central to the portrait of this Edwardian-building-in-Africa is the balcony from which Nelson Mandela delivered his first public speech after his release from prison in 1990. Standing on the balcony today, one realises that the charge of that euphoric moment has given way to the day-to-day grind on the street below as taxis are boarded and meagre livings are eked out on the markets of the Grand Parade.

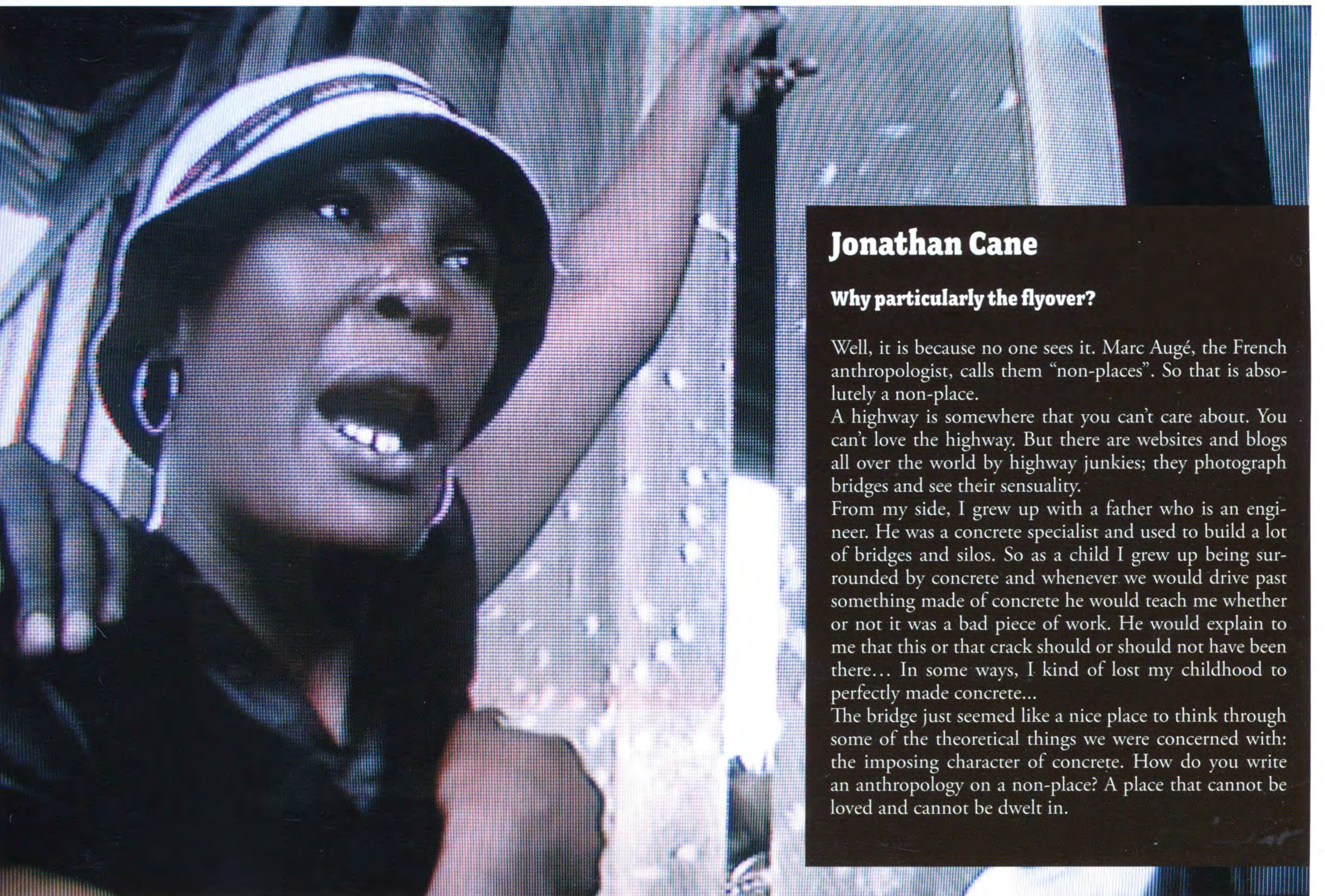
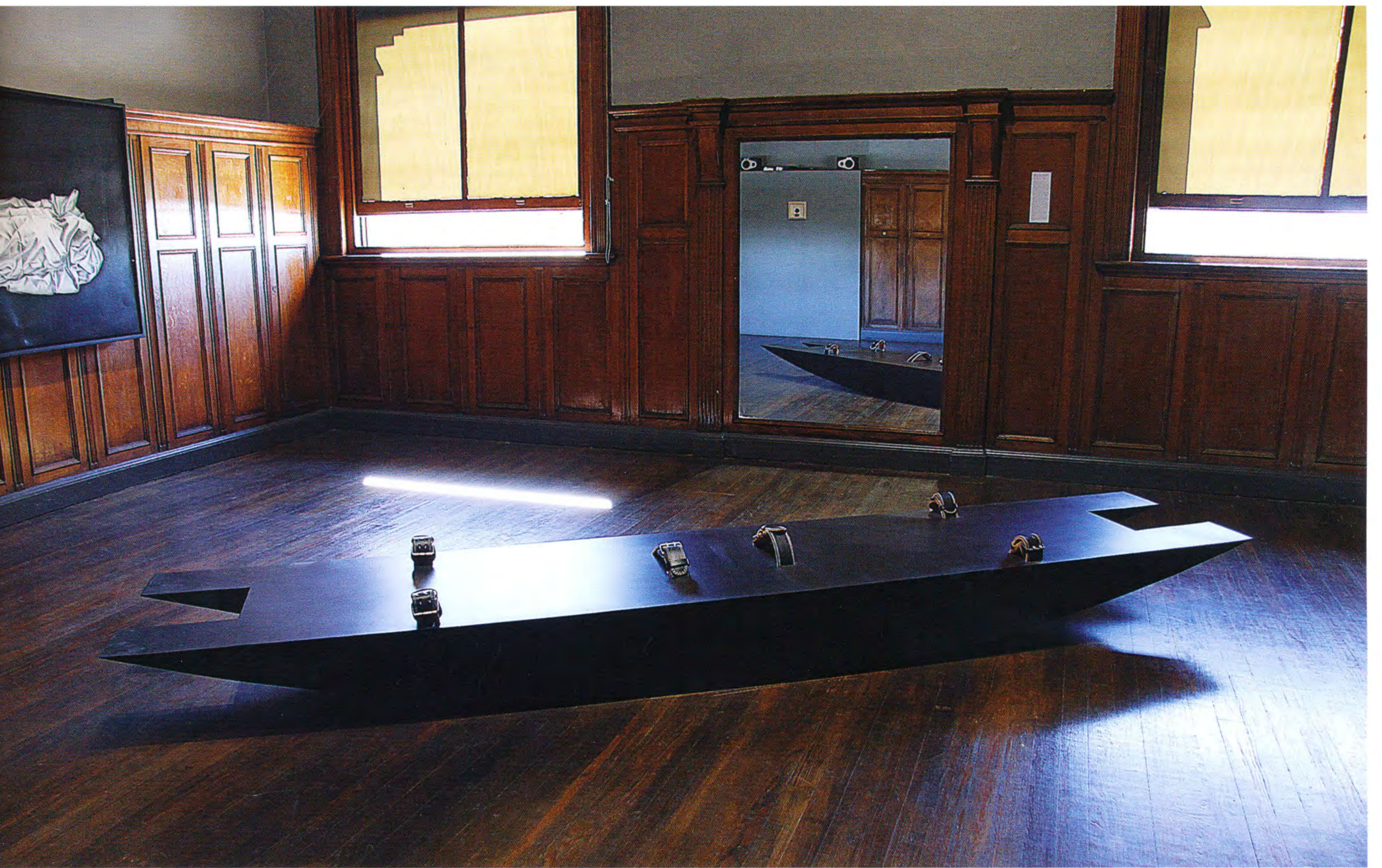
From Mandela's vantage point on the balcony, the perceptive viewer can see an X on the top of Christopher Swift's sculpture, *Aspire*, built from Robben Island maximum-security fencing. The X, the mark of the voter that holds out the promise of democracy (and change), is not visible from the street, and while it symbolises the aspirations of a once hope-filled nation, its poignant positioning atop a metal tower that alludes to a prison watchtower reveals the reality that little freedom has trickled down to those below.

The aim of the exhibition is to capture the contemporary moment of artists working in South Africa today. It is a threshold moment, between the past and the future, between no change and *actual* change. While the exhibition as concept and site depicts a stunning portrait of architectural repositioning (from stuffy library to edgy art gallery in the CBD), much of the art is

stuck at the threshold; sometimes glancing back, but seldom reaching ahead in its commentary of the past. As *Spier Contemporary* catalogue essayist Andile Mngxitama suggests, there is a current political lull that easily renders art impotent. Attempts to engage with the grime of South African society tend to be facile, as in Cameron Platter's *The Battle of the Cinema Privé and Casino and Grill in Rorkes Drift*, a so-called homage to John Muafangejo, and Janine Allen's *The Island*, which uses the UFS/Reitz hostel race discrimination incident as a

In contrast, there are two particularly strong works that look to the past in sophisticated ways: Kurt Campbell's *Memorial to Vlakplaas: Head Crushing Cradle for Two* and Kurt Pio's installation *Restoration I*. Campbell's steel and leather sculpture poises between the representation of horror and a sleek aesthetic. The smooth cradle rests calmly on the ground, at first suggesting an unruffled "rock-a-bye baby" lull. But if the 'cradle' were activated as an instrument of torture and two strapped-down bodies were rigorously rocked back and forth, human skulls would easily be crushed. This potential violence alludes to the torture and death that took place at Vlakplaas, a farm near Pretoria that was the headquarters for the apartheid police counterinsurgency headed up by Eugene de Kock. Leather straps on the sculpture are for tying people down, but the contemporary aesthetic that moves the work beyond an earlier aesthetic of dissent, allows for another layer of interpretation – that of sexual bondage and play. Curatorial gestures extend this, for the cradle rocks between tragic death and mischievous sex in the form of Lucy Pooler's charcoal and chalk drawing, *The Work of Mourning*, placed on one side, and Arie Kuijers' cabinet containing indexed homoerotic porn, *Solitaire/Alleenspel*, on the other.

Pio's site-specific installation, *Restoration I*, also recalls the stain of the past in subtle ways. He produces a series of silhouettes on the wooden floor that take on the shape of chairs. Chairs, says the artist, are record-keepers of



Jonathan Cane

Why particularly the flyover?

Well, it is because no one sees it. Marc Augé, the French anthropologist, calls them “non-places”. So that is absolutely a non-place.

A highway is somewhere that you can't care about. You can't love the highway. But there are websites and blogs all over the world by highway junkies; they photograph bridges and see their sensuality.

From my side, I grew up with a father who is an engineer. He was a concrete specialist and used to build a lot of bridges and silos. So as a child I grew up being surrounded by concrete and whenever we would drive past something made of concrete he would teach me whether or not it was a bad piece of work. He would explain to me that this or that crack should or should not have been there... In some ways, I kind of lost my childhood to perfectly made concrete...

The bridge just seemed like a nice place to think through some of the theoretical things we were concerned with: the imposing character of concrete. How do you write an anthropology on a non-place? A place that cannot be loved and cannot be dwelt in.



TOP Installation view showing Kurt Pio's site-specific installation *Restoration I*, 2010, Cape Town City Hall **FACING PAGE** Maurice Mbikayi, *Voices*, 2010, promotional still for performance

taste and fashion, and tracing the styles of eighteenth century chairs of the colonial Cape he alludes to Dutch, English, French and Far Eastern heritage – a provenance of colonial twists. While these wooden objects might appear restored in museums, Pio uses these objects to unpack the transformative restoration of the City Hall itself by ‘drawing’ on the ground, removing layers of dirt, sanding away the grime that has been trodden into the floors of a building with its own colonial provenance. As he scrapes the layered patina, he begins to strip away the singular readings of a building that still annually houses the performance of *Messiah* by the German-English composer Handel, but that, through (free) art attempts to draw in a new public, a public that would not typically attend an oratorio, spend time in a library or visit a museum. In a historical African context, chairs such as royal stools are potent symbols of seats of power, and in the Bamum court, for example, certain stools were, according to Harvard scholar Suzanne Preston Blier, used as “memorials to late rulers”. In a building forever changed by the image of Mandela punctuating its façade in 1990, the silhouettes of chairs created through the stripping away of the floors alludes to the removal of certain past seats of power.

Mandela's words, though, were not triumphalistic, but were an appeal to continue working to make the freedom movement a political home for all. “The sight of freedom looming on the horizon should encourage us to redouble our efforts,” he said. The *Spier Contemporary* is an important exhibition, for it is a more accurate reflection of what is happening in the art scene *within* South Africa, compared to exhibitions that emphasise current tendencies to triumphalise diaspora. What we see here – *this* contemporary moment – is an in-between, a political lull in which artists are unsure of how to rock the boat. Clearly, though, South Africans are not entirely free and the freedom movement never became a political home for all. In the impasse of this threshold moment, a moment in which we do not yet see what Janus might look towards at the horizon, it is not surprising

that the richest works are those produced by artists relatively new to South Africa, those trying to find a home in the contradictory space of the still-Eurocentric African city of Cape Town.

Two performances stand out. In *Voices*, Congolese artist Maurice Mbikayi wanders around the perimeter of the Grand Parade on horseback. He is out of place. Neither an authoritative police figure, nor a grand royal on a horse, he is wrapped in bandages – wounded – and is trailed by a figure in a gas mask who randomly hands bandages to passersby. Importantly, though, he breaks through stereotypes of the typically racialised South African horse scene, as he views, from the stance of this grand creature, his new ‘home’ that is simultaneously, to him, a rich, cosmopolitan space and a place of threat and uncertainty.

In *Walking Together*, Philippe Kayumba-wa-Yafolo draws the viewer into the personal world of a visitor or an immigrant trying to build new relationships in a strange place. The work is simple; a hopeful, discordant, yet profoundly touching conversation between a woman from ‘here’ and a man from ‘there’ who explore their different worlds through seemingly straightforward questions about family and life, such as “How many brothers and sisters do *you* have?” Walking down the passage of the City Hall, the audience is forced to encroach on their personal space in order to hear the soft, intimate conversation. Involving eavesdropping, this is perhaps the easiest moment of the exhibition to miss, but what we overhear is arguably the strongest message: there are new whispers in our corridors; rich whispers in a threshold moment that still needs to be translated into the concreteness of new beginnings.

Ruth Simbao is an associate professor of art history and visual culture at Rhodes University and the recent recipient of the Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Research Medal



Maurice Mbikayi

Why a horse?

The idea of the public performance was of someone coming from the past with wounds, which is why I used the bandages. It is like a journey, travelling. I wanted so much to use the horse, instead of walking or using a car. The horse is an image of strength... confidence. I always wanted to use a horse.

Where did the image of the bandaged figure come from – the movies, a book?

To tell you the truth, from nowhere: I was thinking of doing a performance, sitting on a chair with bandages... I got the idea from the xenophobia. After that I said, what kind of work can I come up with as an artist. I have to think of myself as a foreigner – vulnerability, fragility – and I thought of a bandage.