

Simon Gush and Bridget Kenny (University of the Witwatersrand)

Simon Gush is an artist and filmmaker. His artworks and films explore ideas of work and its rhythms that have shaped Johannesburg. His work has been exhibited at the MuAC, Mexico City; Göteborgs Konsthall; MAXXI, Rome; Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie; the Dakar Biennale and Bamako Biennale. His films have been screened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; ICA, London; Tate Modern; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, Berlin; Palais De Tokyo, Paris; as well as at numerous including International Film Festival Rotterdam, International Short Film Festival, Oberhausen and Visions du Réel. He completed his MA in sociology at Wits in 2019.

Bridget Kenny is an Associate Professor of sociology at Wits. She works on labour, service work, political subjectivity and affect in Johannesburg. Her books include Retail Worker Politics, Race and Consumption in South Africa: Shelved in the Service Economy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and Wal-Mart in the Global South, co-edited with Carolina Bank-Munoz and Antonio Stecher (University of Texas Press, 2018).

Lifts and the 'labour of repair': elevators and the landscape of Johannesburg

This paper is based on a collaboration, where the lift becomes both image and site of relationality, explaining the city of Johannesburg. We examine lifts in Johannesburg in old residential and office buildings. These lifts have their own histories. In part, they recall 'empire's ruins' by invoking pasts, through their aesthetic traces and in the ongoing break-down of their technology. And yet, this paper foregrounds the enduring 'labour of repair' circulating through lifts. Lifts are sites of the urban everyday through which multiple vectors track. Users circulate outward to other places in the city and upwards to specific spaces in buildings. Repairmen return (eternally) to McGyver parts together. The parts themselves travel the city between scrap yards and markets, like immortal transplant organs on their way to new bodies. The interiority of a lift, too, directs lines, receding through infinite mirroring and constitutes awkward intimacies.

We are interested in the continuous and enduring labour of repair required to keep lifts functioning. We mean this literally with the technical repair of elevators and figuratively with the re-use of them. While the sedimented materiality of the lift can be understood as 'imperial debris' (Stoler 2013, p. 2), we suggest that the labour of repair is an everyday practice which is neither simply an instance of 'ruination'/'rot' nor of redemption. The lift becomes both a landscape in itself, mapping an architecture of the city, and an object in the landscape that grounds particular relations at a given time and place. The vectors we trace through image and word point upwards with elevation and also outward again into the city. In this way, lifts offer an infrastructure linking fragmented places of home and work/non-work, interior and street, private and public, past and present in ways that raise questions about futures.

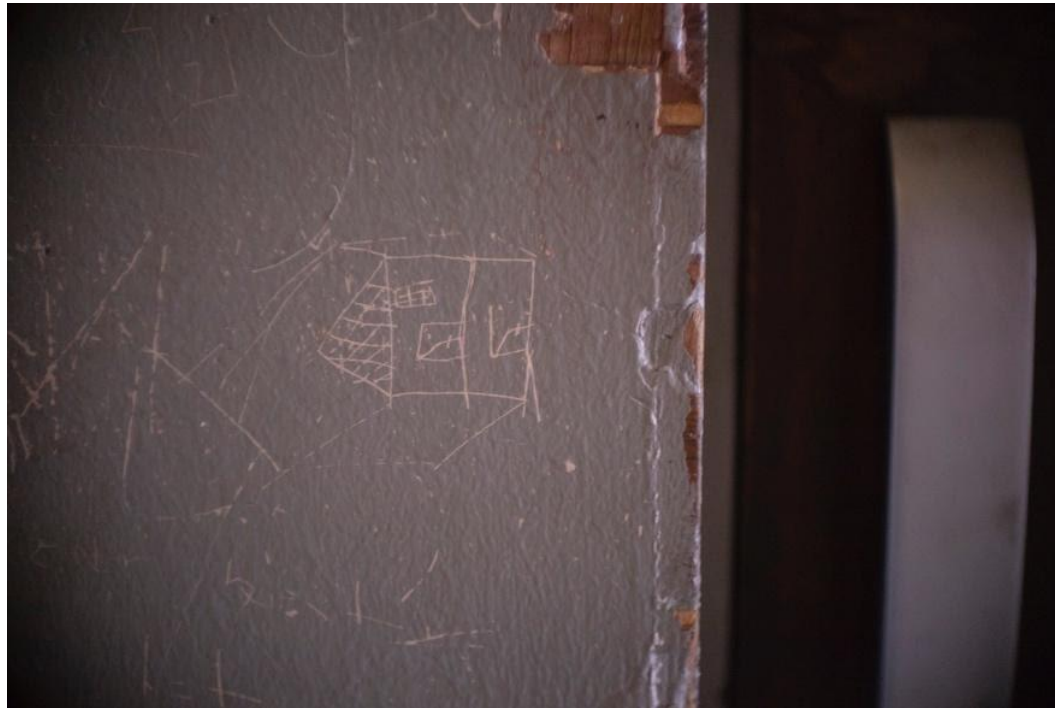


Photo: side panel of a lift.