

## MZANZI'S GOLDEN ECONOMY

By Kim Gurney

(University of Cape Town)

It is hard to compete with the sort of gold around the neck of Chad le Clos. The country came as close as seems likely to the “social cohesion” so desired of its political leaders when on August 1 the 20-year-old swimmer pipped American rival Michael Phelps to win the London Olympics 200m butterfly. The medal ceremony was almost as compelling. The athlete’s lip trembled and tears ran down his cheeks as the national anthem marked his moment and the country’s second top honours.

You could have been forgiven for missing another South African golden moment simultaneously rolled out in the British capital. The Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) was letting Londoners know of its new strategy, dubbed Mzanzi’s Golden Economy. It effectively values the arts, culture and heritage sector by its ability “to grow the economy, create jobs and build sustainable developments”, according to a DAC spokesperson.

This notion was first mooted at a July 2011 conference in Newtown, before being publicly declared at the United Nations COP17 conference in Durban the same year. It was proposed at Newtown that “the creative economy in South Africa has the potential to be a leading sector in generating economic growth, employment and trade as is the case in many advanced economies”.

This arts strategy is rather Olympian in spirit. The DAC told a Johannesburg conference in May this year that Mzanzi’s Golden Economy was nothing less than the key to an African renaissance. The

London Olympics cultural programme devised to reflect it was themed as a retrospective with the aim to showcase talent, reflect South Africa’s rich culture, history and identity and how it is inspiring new ways. The visual arts element comprised repatriated artworks created during apartheid, and a craft exhibition.

Back in the heart of Mzanzi’s golden economy, meanwhile, the most compelling contemporary art is largely performative, ephemeral or intangible. Its creators would be hard pressed to issue a price tag let alone satisfy job-creation measures. Perhaps this increasing incidence of the transient is linked to global shifting sociopolitical terrain, with artists reflecting a deeper matrix in flux. Whatever the reasons, this register defies in various ways an economic lens.

Some of these artists are speaking about apartheid but they are looking ahead, to “temporality, wounding and consequence” in the words of Farieda Nazier. Her project ‘After Math’ exhibits in August at the Apartheid Museum in abstract sculptural installations, collaborative animated video and live performance. Most however share a trickster approach to subvert the way we see the world.

Take for instance the Sunday synchronised run by Sober and Lonely Institute of Contemporary Art (SLICA), which organised a race in Johannesburg and Los Angeles with the same starting gun: 15h13 in Sandton and 06h13 in Echo Park on 12 August. This art-meets-life event was timed to coincide with the middle section of the London Olympics marathon runners completing their epic race, marking the end of that athletic jamboree. The confirmation email featured an animated image of two corgis on a treadmill with the following injunction: “Remember - Murakami says: “To keep on going, you have to

keep up the rhythm’.” Clearly, with a trophy for the middle runner, the podium was not the point. The run is a movable visual feast, an example of SLICA’s “quirky, interesting, funny projects that capture the imagination”, as one respondent put it on their website.

And Johannesburg is not short of those. Anthea Moys is a performance artist who has often poked fun at striving. She has ‘swum’ in snow, buried herself in a hole she dug at a Gautrain construction site while decked out in safety gear, participated in the 94.7 Cycle Challenge on a stationary gym bike positioned in the middle of the road and appeared in Sandton on horseback with a bright red hero cape. Moys described her practice in a 2008 interview we conducted: “The point of play is to have no point... It being useless in itself is useful – for the human spirit.”

More recently, Moys is in August co-ordinating a streetgame between Johannesburg and Berlin where players seek reciprocity in the urban fabric of both cities. *Flipside* forms part of a broader festival, ‘AMAZE Interact’, where play in urban space is a central theme. Thorsten Wiedeman, the director of AMAZE, similarly speaks about “a playful interaction with city and public space” using gaming technology and design and the idea of play to let something happen.

This kind of strategy was elucidated at a June 2011 seminar by the head of the Wits School of Arts, Georges Pfruender, entitled *Playing the City: Urban Games*. He cited examples of artistic interventions in urban contexts and how these can inform or inspire new readings of the cityscape and different notions of public art. Regarding play, he said: “It has no efficiency in economic terms... Although it looks

like it brings nothing, it involves a huge amount of elements. Investing effort is part of being a player. The other part is narrative.”

It’s an unconventional price tag but as the role of the viewer becomes less passive perhaps the idea of investing in an artwork is also changing along with the notion of what that investment represents.

Take the work of Sello Pesa, who stirs preconceived notions - of space, of inter-relations, of what is real and enacted. He often collaborates with Vaughn Sadie, whose latest art project uses street lighting as a lens on the cityscape and its dynamics. At a 2011 performance *Inhabitant*, Pesa rolled his body across one of the busiest roads that lead into the city and concluded with an apparent fit inside an empty oil drum on its verge. The audience, perched on plastic chairs next to blocked gutters, watched nervously as he edged himself perilously close to danger and wondered whether they were supposed to intervene. Streetlights switched on as dusk set in and pedestrians made their way home. The *teatro mundi* of the city became conflated with performance as passersby and urban texture formed part of the work.

Likewise, a citywalk led by Donna Kukama in May challenged preconceived notions of space, movement and interpersonal dynamics. It formed part of ‘Shoe Shop’, a month-long art project broadly themed around walking to explore public space. Interested parties meandered through Saturday morning shops that entice customers through performers - dancing, singing and ringing of bells. Along the way, Bettina Malcomess collaborated at random public sites for a ‘shoe shine’ performance, where she transformed into a white-coated polisher and buffed Kukama’s shoes on the pavement. The intervention disrupted the accepted everyday script

of public life and triggered much curiosity from passersby. It also made apparent the often invisible control mechanisms that underscore supposedly public space: security guards soon intervened and brought each performance to a close. Alongside Bree Street, a Johannesburg City Partnership guard filed a surreal incident report to the control room: “They are making art!”

The city streets are also the stage for Mohau Modisakeng. He is rehearsing in the month of August for a three-day public performance *Dikubu* that will take place in Johannesburg innercity comprising 12 men with sjamboks whipping a synchronised sonic choreography.

These artists are all exploring the shifting public sphere in everyday street negotiations by bringing latent dealmaking to light. They are also demonstrating that public art need not be monumental, tangible or large-scale to be effective or even commemorative.

For instance: graffiti artist Breeze Yoko in September last year sprayed the portrait of slain musician Gito Baloi onto a wall on the corner of Nuggett and Kerk Streets, the site where Baloi was gunned down in 2004. This was part of a broader public intervention *Na Ku Randza* (‘I Love You’) co-ordinated by the Centre for Historical Reenactments, based at nearby August House.

Above the graffiti site stands a large pink elephant, which used to demarcate the Jumbo Liquor Wholesalers and which was through this project reimagined as a bearer of memory. The whole intervention was described as “a space in which mutual recognition can be imagined alongside violent encounters, the slaying of Baloi being one of them”. A policeman who sidled up in his van alongside was



perplexed but placated by a participant whose task it seemed was to hand out roses to passersby.

While Yoko created his portrait, others laid out a trajectory of the bullet that killed the musician by writing in chalk the seconds left to the fatal moment from each street corner. During the same intervention, two artists were engaged at a trader’s stall bearing ritualistic objects in a performance piece by Kemang Wa Lehulere. Adjacent, the Keleketla! Library was silkscreening T-shirts bearing an anti-xenophobic statement: “Foreigners please stay. Don’t leave us with the tourists.” The T-shirts were later given away.

Indeed, a common thread is that such works are rarely for sale. Like the T-shirts, they often challenge accepted notions of value. In another recent work by Kukama, called *Cafe Exchange*, staged at the Parking Gallery in the eastern city premises of VANSAs, this challenge was more explicit. Visitors brought in an object to contribute to the growing archive and received a cup of coffee in exchange. The strength of the coffee was determined by the adjudicated “currency” of the object.

So how to fathom the value of art, if not through its contribution to economic growth?

It has long been argued that not everything that has value can be measured nor is measure necessarily an adequate way to reflect worth. Take the views of David Boyle as articulated in *The Tyranny of Numbers* (2001) or more recently Charles Kenny in *Getting Better* (2011), who proposes there is more to life than GDP. And indeed, the economic lens as a whole is itself being re-evaluated with attempts by politicians, economists and thinktanks to find a more holistic measure of wellbeing. These efforts add to established gains by developmental thinkers like Amartya Sen who, with Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, articulated GDP’s limitations with *Mismeasuring our Lives* (2010).

João Orecchia with his project *Invisible Cities* has taken this challenge to a new dimension. Every month, a transient space in the city plays host to a multimedia installation of art, music and live performance. This has included the transformation of defunct musical instruments - a piano, a trumpet, and a guitar. The piano was burnt on the top of a vacant innercity building, after handmade microphones were embedded inside it, and an arresting timelapsed musical video was made of it crackling

and burning to ashes.

Orecchia said in an interview we conducted in December last year: “What you’re left with at the end is another kind of object, which is a symbol of that transformation and life, if you can call it that, of this piano. And all of that is a symbol of the transformation of Johannesburg - not in some grand sense of gentrification and development but right here, right now. Things are happening all the time and changing all the time. There is all this space and so much of it is inaccessible. The whole impetus of *Invisible Cities* is just to make a contribution.”

These artists are manifesting affective, ephemeral, intangible and transient work, often in the public sphere, that Mzansi’s Golden Economy cannot fathom - and yet they speak of what is enduring about Mzansi’s gold. This paradox is perhaps sufficient to indicate the reductionist challenge of validating the arts in economic terms.

Let’s turn to James Webb, who makes the audience work a little for their delight. His solo exhibition ‘MMXII’ is currently showing at the Johannesburg Art Gallery until October 14. It includes 15 of his own projects, in a part survey of his work, and a reimagining of the gallery’s collection. Above the entrance is the signage “Know Thy Worth” - an indication that the viewer completes the work’s meaning - and indeed, no artwork is handed on a platter. On a guided July tour, he gave an inside track, pointing out a ‘secret’ artwork now part of JAG’s permanent collection. The ceiling light of an outside portico flashes a message in morse code, to be deciphered by curious onlookers. There is an invisible sculpture embedded somewhere in the gallery that creates a dead zone for cellphone reception unbeknown to visitors. And a light hidden in the bowels of one room

filters through. “It’s spooky, it’s weird, it’s me,” he said with a laugh. “A lot of my work is as much about concealing as revealing. I don’t want to give everything away. I’m not there to give statements but to propose, suggest and seduce.”

This is a long way from the language of the DAC’s latest arts strategy, where art is a tool of “social cohesion” and “nation building”. The ANC’s latest policy documents also emphasise these objectives, along with “national healing”, in its reference to the arts sector. It calls for a deepening of the Mzansi Golden Economy strategy to increase the sector’s “local content generation, job creation and export potential”.

Notably, a social cohesion conference was held very shortly after the debacle involving *The Spear*, the painting that depicted President Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed and ignited a national controversy for weeks. To reference the problematics, one only has to cite then Arts Minister Lulu Xingwana, who in May 2010 refused to open the Innovative Art Exhibition at Constitution Hill, deeming works on show to be offensive. She invoked “moral regeneration, social cohesion and nation building” as the reason to discuss where to draw the line between art and pornography.

As Andre Le Roux, the general manager of the Southern African Music Rights Organisation (SAMRO), said at a May creative economy conference in Johannesburg: “Art, works of the spirit, products which emanate from creativity, are not that easily packaged, commoditised and sold ... They are laden with value -- traditional, contemporary, ornamental and controversial. For some, they may glitter and be the highlight of cultural expression but for others they are not as simple as extracting or refining gold.”

Gina Kraft often challenges perceptions of the female body, from suntanning at Rosebank Mall in a burqa to a meander through Park Station in a misshapen bridal gown, leaking sand from her dress as she walks by bewildered. More recently, a collaboration with Kieron Jina at a goldmine dump in Ophirton in greater Johannesburg explored themes around marriage, “creating new ceremonies from established traditions, diverse cultures and stereotypical roles within a marriage partnership”, she writes. The work, *Stained*, showed birthing from the landscape, travelling through it, and the connection of the characters through a tea-drinking ceremony.

Now that sounds like something the English could have related to in London’s Olympic cultural programme. Mzanzi’s Golden Economy, indeed.