

Sketches

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Sam Hopkins describes his work as “contextual” as opposed to “conceptual”, as responding to a specific context, usually from his lived environment that at least for the present exhibition, “have come about as a result of speculating about things that exist in my everyday life: from frustration with the city council, to interest in the signage systems, to my ongoing investigation of memory and everyday sites of commemoration”.

As the title of his solo exhibition, Sketches, suggests, there is an open-ended nature to his ‘formed’ ideas, which allows for the possibility of future developments, even after the exhibition. This offers a glimpse into his way of thinking and working. The show gave an overview of his recent work relating to the city of Nairobi, the environment he lives in. It took as its material contemporary social and political issues that might not be immediately apparent but that, nonetheless, have a strong local currency. The exhibition at Goethe-Institut Nairobi consisted of eight separate works in varying media. Whilst these works each existed autonomously, they also functioned in concert: both spatially and thematically, they worked in relation to one another.

One of the strongest installations of the exhibition, which also signals one of Sam Hopkins’ current themes, was Logos of Non-Profit Organisations working within Kenya (some of which are imaginary) (2010). As the title suggests, it is a collection of logos from 100 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The work focusses on the logo as a vessel that communicates, both consciously and inadvertently, image, self-perception and ideology. This is contextualised within Kenya, a UN and NGO hub for the region and an intellectual space within which the discourse and rhetoric of ‘Development’ is very current. What is critical about this installation, however, is the introduction of a fictitious element. Of the 100 logos, 20 represent imaginary organisations that imitate the style and language of the authentic ones. As it is not indicated which are real and which are

imaginary, the viewer is quasi-forced to change their perspective to differentiate between authentic and imaginary logos. This destabilising process forces a reappraisal of this imagery and highlights a certain absurdity inherent in these logos. To lay emphasis on this examination, 4 large magnifying glasses hung in front of the collection of logos.

Pets of Kibera (2010) is an ongoing project, but for this exhibition the work presented was a series of photographs and a video. Similar to the logos, the work takes a fresh look at a familiar issue: pets and their owners. The context, however, is not so familiar. The project is located in Kibera, a large slum in Nairobi, and was a collaboration between Sam Hopkins and Mbuthia Maina, an artist from the Maasai Mbili collective.



Sketches_07_Pets of Kibera_2010_Documentation_(c)King-22

Together they explored the issue of why and how people who live in an economically precarious situation keep pets. In some ways, this seems counter-intuitive: pets need feeding and so could be seen as a luxury in a slum context. However, a pet is also, of course, both a companion and a dependent. Thus there seems to be a matrix of issues concerning power, economy and status that surrounds this phenomenon. Hopkins and Maina took a series of portraits of pet-owners with their pets, set against a painted backdrop, with the

title 'Mount Zion Petz n Pikchaz'. This style is reminiscent of many local studios, who use a background to simulate imaginary places. In this work, however, the background both affirms the place (Mount Zion is another name for Kibera) and at the same time negates it, by not offering the usual imagery of tin shacks. The environment is only hinted at by the mud foreground of the image, suggesting that this 'studio' is quite makeshift. As images, they seem to question our preconceptions about the dynamics of slum life: they both hint at a similarity between this world and middle-class, Western lifestyle, as symbolised by the pet, yet acknowledge, through the portraits themselves and the structural elements of the studio, the specific nature of this existence.

This idea of similarity and difference is very present in the work *The Car Park* (2010). Whilst car parks have a certain ubiquity, they function in a very specific way in Nairobi. Generally privately owned, they obey a certain market logic that dictates that, as each car pays a fixed fee, the maximum number of cars must be parked to generate the most revenue. As a result, the car parks use every inch of space available, with no established routes to take the car out again. Car owners leave their car keys, and the cars are constantly moved and reshuffled as cars move in and out of the space. Hopkins filmed a day at the car park from a vantage point high on a nearby roof, and presented the footage sped up into a ten minute loop. This compression of time serves to highlight and emphasise the amount of movement in the car park. Presented on a flat screen television lying on the floor, encased within a box, the effect is to miniaturise the cars. This sensation, combined with the high speed of the loop, gives the viewer a sense of privileged perspective, of seeing something that would not normally be possible to see. This position seems to tie in with Hopkins' comparison of these movements with the computer game Tetris, where the player has to manoeuvre falling shapes so they tessellate with one another.



Sketches_08_The Car Park_2010_Still_(c)Hopkins-37

One of the reasons people make such use of private car parks is because the Nairobi City Council, (NCC) who police the spaces on the street, is notoriously corrupt. The parking department of the city council wear knee-length yellow coats as their uniform, with the slogan 'Corruption is Evil' printed on the back. They make an impressive impact on the cityscape and seem to be everywhere: their disappearance on a Sunday is noticed by everybody, and the whole city feels notably more relaxed. It is a somewhat Orwellian situation, with what is widely felt to be the most corrupt public body in the country publicly proclaiming the evil of corruption. Hopkins addressed this serious issue playfully in his installation *Corruption is Evil* (2010) which consisted of 50 yellow knee-length coats, seemingly identical to the city council uniform. They hung on a coat rack facing the main entrance, and visitors were invited to wear them during the exhibition. The slogan was slightly changed to read 'Corruption is evil', implying that Corruption is a capitalised issue, something that other people do, not oneself. The work itself is also implicit in this logic, the front pocket reading 'Not the property of Nairobi City Council', yet it is obvious by the shape and colour of the coat what the

reference is. A large number of the coats disappeared over the course of the exhibition.

One of the most visually arresting works in the show was Nairobi's Diamonds (2009), a triptych dealing somewhat obliquely with Matatu culture in Kenya. Matatus are the privately owned minibuses that function as the public transport of the city. They play a powerful role, both in the public imagination and on the roads of Nairobi. Renowned for reckless driving, they are also venerated amongst the youth for their gangster attitude. Driving through the city at night, it is notable how much broken glass is on the streets, a result of the high number of accidents that very often involve Matatus. Hopkins sees these glass pieces as small jewels, "...a kind of urban diamond..." thrown up by the stress and pressures of the city. He collected a large number of these and fashioned them into a pendant that formed the number 23. This stands for a particular matatu route which, in Nairobi, are strong carriers of identity, standing for a whole neighbourhood, rather than a mere destination.

The work contains three photos: the broken glass sparkling in the night alongside the traffic; a close up of the yellow stripe seen on every Matatu, which indicates the destination, and a portrait, taken at night, of Richie Rich, a well-known Hip Hop artist in Nairobi, wearing the 23, the number of the Westlands route, and the 'hood he identifies with. To create a pendant made from broken glass in this form seems to offer a kind of provocative affirmation of urban identity in Nairobi.



Sketches_02_Nairobi's Diamonds_2010_Image_(c)Hopkins-32

This work curiously references one of Hopkins' other main concerns: memory and the culture of commemoration. Nairobi has a number of monuments, memorials and statues to commemorate an established canon of 'Independence Heroes'. The same is true for street names, although the effect seems to be to compress this person into a street name, rather than to trigger the memory of the person whenever the street is mentioned. With the project *Renaming the Streets* (2010), Hopkins seems to try to open this commemorative space to a contemporary context and a democratic process. The work consists of a series of photos of street signs with the name blanked out that were sent out as the invitation to the exhibition. The addressee was invited to insert the name of a person they considered as being memorable and to bring the invitation to the exhibition. These were collected at the opening of the exhibition and pinned on a column resembling an advertising pillar. Interestingly, there seemed to be a distinct lack of imagination in the renaming process: most people seemed to enter their own names, or even the name of the company they work for. It is difficult not to see this as a reflection of the absence of a shared and accessible history and a contemporary canon of folk heroes.

This investigation of formal signage was contrasted, and to some extent complimented, by the installation *Tags-Some of the services*

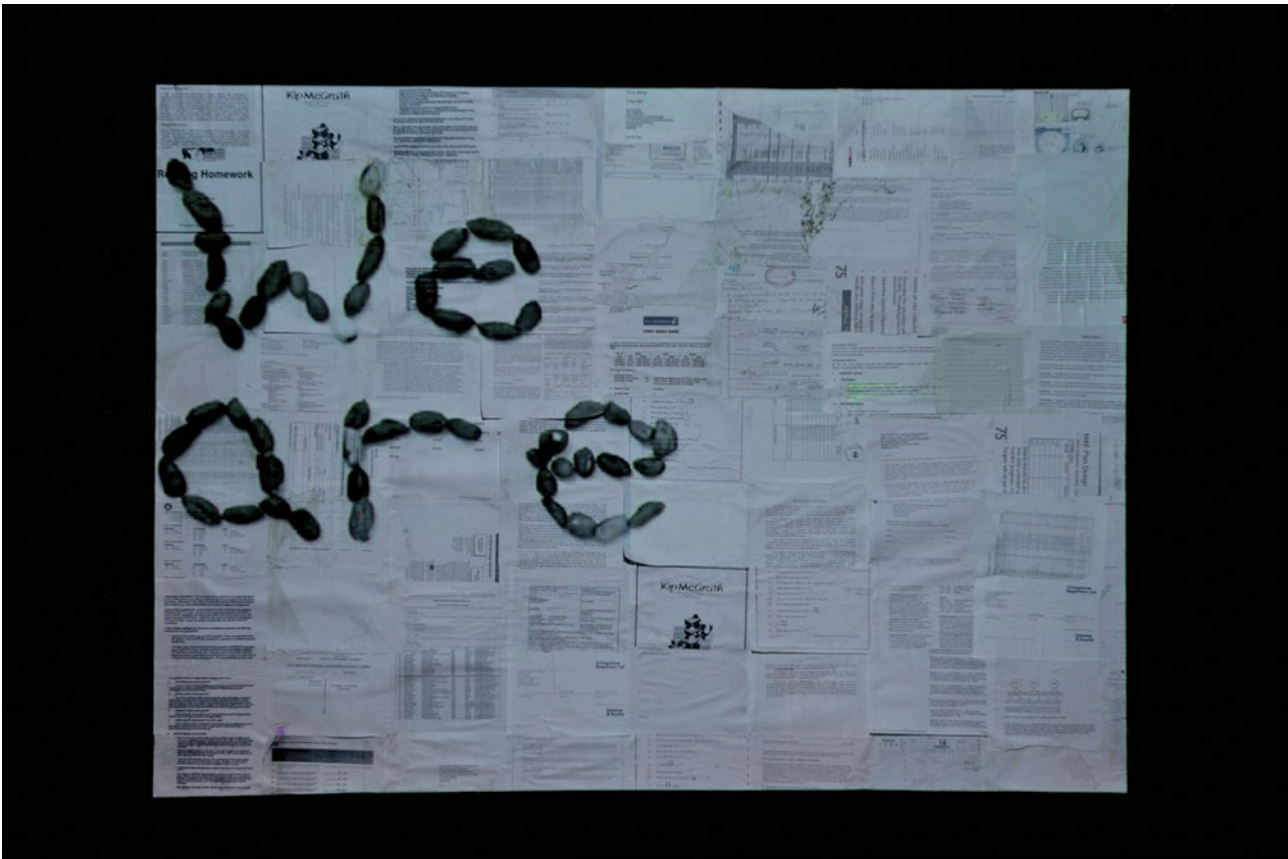
advertised in and around Nairobi (2010). This consisted of 90 photos pasted on a wall documenting the hand-painted signs that are common around Nairobi. These advertise anything from wooden floor sanding to traditional doctors to fridge repair and car washes. Generally nailed to trees or lamp posts, they are all over the city, to such an extent that they almost become invisible. Hopkins' described his own process of discovering them as a "treasure hunt", which itself is another way to experience the city. He intervened in this process by painting his own adverts with the words 'Public Art' and a telephone number. These were then installed on the same trees as the signs for witchdoctors and car washers. As an intervention, the object is cleverly performative: the sign saying 'Public Art' highlights itself and the host tree with its cluster of signs, as a kind of public art. As an action, it also seems to make a wry comment on the role of the public artist, which is presented as just another mundane job. Installing these images of the 'Public Art' signs, camouflaged within the other images of actual signs is a subtle reference of the experience of hunting for treasure that Hopkins went through. It does however seem to be a work that is based on the assumption that visitors are observant in the same way that Hopkins is, and will notice the odd sign out. Whether or not this work was successfully decoded by the audience remains to be seen.



Sketches_04_Tags_2010_Documentation_(c)Minishi-9.jpg

A capacity for acute observation of social and urban phenomena permeates Hopkins's work. This is particularly evident in the work *Peanut Wrappers / Detritus of Development* (2010). All over Nairobi, children sell peanuts on the side of the road, wrapped in scrap A4 paper. Hopkins opened up these wrappers and discovered that most of them used waste paper from offices of the many NGO and UN agencies based in Nairobi. Memoranda, email lists, even confidential correspondence, had all found their way to an alternative use on the street. It seems ironic that documentation from these offices, tackling issues such as poverty and children's rights, ends up being given a very practical usage by poor children working on the street. Hopkins takes this irony and layers it with a further ironic reference in his installation of these scrap peanut wrappers. Creating a screen from the wrappers, he then projected onto this the lyrics from the song *We are the world*, the celebrity charity song from 1985, produced by Quincy Jones. The words were formed from peanuts and seen in a slide show, Karaoke style. Decontextualised from the music, these lyrics sound naïve and patronising: projected on this loaded backdrop one has the sensation of a layered and textured work addressing issues of charity and help that hints, somewhat unsubtly, at the space between the intention and the act.

Many people worked on the production of *Sketches*, and during that period the extent to which Hopkins' involves other people in his practice became highly evident. He is far from the solitary artist who works alone in a studio, rather he is much more in the tradition of post-studio practice. There is a constant engagement with both his physical and discursive environment. As he says: "It's about being out there". This process lends both resilience and depth to his work, as it is given the chance to be seen and shaped by a number of people during its genesis, as opposed to when it is 'completed', a state that Hopkins seems to be deeply suspicious of anyway. It is a practice that also seems profoundly contemporary in the true sense of the word. It is drawn from today, from a lived environment that we all share, and as such has a broad resonance amongst constituencies that might not normally engage with contemporary art. Nevertheless, he does not achieve this accessibility by compromising his ideas: there is a sophistication to his simplicity. Sam Hopkins exhibits both a dynamism and a potential in his practice that I look forward to seeing evolve in the years to come.



Sketches_06_Peanut Wrappers_2010_Documentation_(c)Minishi-16