

Breathing life into the city

Red Eye



Suzy
Bell

HE IS fascinated by biocentricity and has worked with the delicacy of engraving a poem on to a leaf to reference cellular memory and engrams, he is interested in digital media and has created and directed experimental films and performed at poetry festivals.

Artist Kai Lossgott says he is in search of visual narratives, biophysical language patterns and the vulnerable instincts that drive him – sensitivity, silence and acts of sensing. “In a human-centred world, my aim is most often to work from a life-centred perspective,” he says.

He is also a curator who presents *City Breath*, a festival of video poetry and performance this weekend at Labia on Orange, where 20 short experimental films on four South African cities will be screened.

“When I did the selection, I was looking for special multi-skilled people who worked in the gaps between genres like a video and a poem. I find it is the inter-disciplinary work that is most interesting.”

The video-art Lossgott is



BIOCENTRIC: Curator, poet and artist Kai Lossgott presents *City Breath* at Labia on Orange until Sunday. Picture: Niklas Zimmer

inspired by has a lyrical element to it and deals with cultural, mythical and poetic structures and dimensions of life.

“In this festival, there is something for everyone,” he says. “Some of it is visually beautiful, some of it very clever and some of it is quite different. I think it is especially for

people who love poetry as there are films that expect you to listen, to be open, like a poem expects you to be open.”

He says the artists he chose for this festival are not all film-makers. “The idea was for film-makers to collaborate with poets, but a lot of the film-makers wanted to write

their own poems, and poets wanted to make their own films.”

With *City Breath*, Lossgott has set up new collaborations of video poems and screen dances, dances made specifically for screen – two experimental genres he feels are underexposed in South Africa.

A screen dance, *I walk the street with loose parts*, inspired by Deborah Steinmair's poem, *Dream Weaver*, reflects on spending time living past one another, so much so that we become caught up in our own small spaces.

“What is beautiful to see is the strict contrast between a space which normally carries a mass of human traffic, and then to see it empty and deserted.

“So many of the buildings we surround ourselves with function only from sunrise to sunset and yet there are endless stories to imagine in those spaces after hours.

“This, for me, is truly the city alive, with a breath and a heartbeat that slows down as the day draws to an end,” says Louise Coetzer, the choreographer.

In *Fragments*, two women can't quite meet and can't quite let go.

“One gay, one straight, one black, one coloured, the spaces they inhabit connect them, and yet become the thing that separates them from each other,” says poet and director Khanyisile Mbongwa.

Fragments is a dance poem about the physical and psychological identity of women in the city. They dance in urban spaces marked by masculine architecture that denies the organic curves of

their bodies. They venture into marginal areas in which they are subject to intimidation or violation, areas marked by gang graffiti where only men walk safely. Their silhouettes become windows into the cityscape, in a film that dreams of a place where, in a line from the hushed internal monologue of the poem, “I forget your sex and your skin colour.”

Lossgott's *Walking in plastic* has performance artist Mduzuzi Nyembe presenting a memory of a wounded woman, a dream for an absent father, and a dance in a street market for survival.

“They are ritual stories of the heartache of the slums – substance abuse, violence, gender inequalities and chronic unemployment. Each of Nyembe's characters, taken from his daily interactions in the township, is left, in the words of poet Bandile Gumbi, ‘a constant wanderer, always at the beginning of complete circles’, trapped in the existential cycle of poverty.”

Lossgott has been seeking funding for *City Breath* since 2008.

“But, as the National Arts Council does not fund films and the National Film and Video Foundation only fund commercial films... I am sponsoring it myself. And I love that it is taking place at the Labia Cinema on Orange. It is Cape Town's best-kept secret: an edgy venue for enjoying independent, local and international films.”

● *City Breath* runs from 6.15pm tonight to 8.15pm on Sunday. Tickets are R25. See www.citybreathproject.blogspot.com