



# Strange utopia

**John Pepper in conversation with Minnette Vári**

Filmed in black, white and the foggy grey of early morning, a female figure darts across the rooftops of a city. She crawls behind barbed wire, above thronging crowds, against the backdrop of a thousand electric globes like Christmas lights in every skyscraper's window. The screen splits into a Rorschach mirror of the city at night, and reforms, becoming stereo overlaid with collage. A radio tower appears on both sides. A bird flies across, joining the frames. The figure appears again, encumbered by gear, naked and exposed, and watches the city form above with fear, and desire. She is paranoid, and panoptical. Somewhere between fallen angel and scurrying devil, hers are the unsure eyes peering from the backs of alleys, from below the cement cracks, and from over the corners of roofs that together constitute the million lights that mark the city skyline at night, and that make up their own forms of surveillance. What are we to make of this estranged utopia, composed of hunters hunted and watchers watched?

In early November I spoke to Minnette Vári in Massachusetts about this new video of hers, titled *The Calling*. The following text is adapted from our conversation. What is striking about *The Calling* is the degree to which the artist has dramatically risked her self, her body and her idea of herself, in comparison with earlier video work like *Alien* (1998) or *Oracle* (1999). As Vári becomes more technologically adept in her studio production she has simultaneously tended to work more directly with her own body in the process of making art.

This is an exciting aspect of the newest work, where the artist has become an acute theorist of contingency, of the intersection of the technologies of postmodernity – in the media, the decaying city and the electronic revolution generally – and their pitfalls. These are inherently, if not overtly, the subjects of her work at the level of the manipulation of artistic media. Vári questions her materials in the classic modernist sense, but by working so closely with her own body and its historical surrounds she questions materials in a manner which also produces a critique of the emotionally full world lived by people. In the photo series *Sentinel*, and the two-channel video *The Calling* which evolved from it, Vári shows us the precipice of our comfortable world – whether that means New York, Johannesburg, or the traces of desire that cross the landscape as it approaches these metropolitan places.



'Out on a ledge, I had this vertiginous feeling that the more I try to get under the skin of the city, the more I am in fact outside of it'

**This and previous**

**page:**  
 Minnette Vári, *Sentinel*  
 series, 2002, video-  
 graphs, handprinted on  
 photographic paper

**John Pepper: "O Jerusalem, aurea civitas ..." O Jerusalem, golden city. That is the first line of a choral work for women's voices composed by medieval nun, poetess of sacred ecstasy, and musician Hildegard von Bingen. This song is sampled and mixed into the background of your recent two-channel video work, *The Calling*. Are those also the words that wave for a moment like smoke through the city sky in the piece? If so, it seems a fitting metaphor for Johannesburg.**

Minnette Vári: Of course. The City of Gold, a metropolis that pokes and thunders at the sky while its reason for being there is thoroughly subterranean. The link is obvious, and hopefully equally present is the irony of it.

**I think it is interesting that in recent statements about your work you seem to be resisting the description of this new project as being about "my home", or specifically about Johannesburg, even though that city is the source of most of your imagery. Is there a strategic reason why you have chosen this approach?**

*The Calling* grew out of the *Sentinel* series of large video-graphs [a term that I had to invent for these works that are produced as handprinted black and white photographs, but are derived from video source and as such retain the character of video stills] that I made in 2002, which was intended as digital sketches toward a video piece such as this. I live five minutes from some of the high buildings that you see me on in both works. Even though I would like to consider it my home, going into the city was like venturing into something very foreign, a place that perhaps has become foreign even to itself. The words "aurea civitas" don't just mean "golden city" but also impart a radiance, as with the Afrikaans word *stralend*, a tricky one to translate. It means something or someone that is illuminated, but almost from within, illuminating everything around it. Like the sun, a body of immense mass that draws to it other bodies through gravity. Gravity – grave – sepulchral crevice – mine shaft. Gold is a heavy metal, and its mining history in Johannesburg a weighty one. Out on a ledge, I had this vertigi-

nous notion that the more I try to get under the skin of the city, the more I am in fact outside of it; that my attempt to speak from within its walls is turning me inside out and making me vulnerable, as though I myself am being mined. Gleaming ore is taken from inside the earth and brought out, like a reverse interment, a ponderous and physical "shining".

**Is the idea that it is something that draws you in with its brightness, like the insect that is drawn to the hot glow of a lightbulb?**

I am interested in how we let ourselves be drawn into places, relationships, histories. It is one of the reasons why I chose the potentially nostalgic title *The Calling*, because it comes up in so many of the themes I was pursuing in this work: destinies that are lost and found, doubted, denied, invented, dissolved, forgotten. But a call can also repel. So I went into the inner city, trying to connect with whomever I could encounter and have short exchanges or longer conversations.

**What kind of conversations?**

Situations where I had to justify my presence there. Or just a simple "Good morning". I would find myself in derelict buildings at 4.30am, when the sun was just about to come up. People would be waking from the night's sleep, leaving wet footprints on staircases of polished concrete, their voices echoing down the corridors from the rudimentary facilities that old corporate restrooms provide. Somebody rushing by saying "Hello. Where are you going?" People spoke about evictions, difficulty with papers, finding work, having your baby born in this new country, food, risk, falling in love, where home is and who is left behind.

**People who were living there informally?**

In most cases, yes. Big business has generally moved out of the inner city. The dynamics have changed so much. I tried to create a dialogue between the present and some of the historical, or rather imperial film footage that I had found that



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presents Johannesburg as a boomtown, a place where the living was going to be easy.

**So you were just talking to them informally, asking them what they do, telling them what you are doing and so forth?**

The sharing of place and the intimacy of exchanged information brings understanding but it also electrifies the interstices between us in which difference resides. I was trying to navigate the inevitable swell of paranoia and suspicion, imagining that some people would find it odd that a stranger would simply want to talk and not care about their legal situation. I was often faced with my own morbid fears, walking around with a camera in areas considered dangerous.

**Why do that? Is there some connection you feel to them? Do you feel like you are in exile, or paranoid in the city in a different way?**

I think all South Africans have, at times, had reason to feel this breathless gap in which one flails around to find common ground. It is by no means a unique situation. Discourses about inclusion and exclusion have been with us persistently, and necessarily so. But exile: this always reminds me of the old folk tale of the good and evil sisters, where the good sister is rewarded by having jewels and flowers tumble from her lips whenever she speaks. In contrast, the evil sister is punished and has to live with the curse of snakes and lizards that slither from her mouth with every word she utters. On account of this, she is sent to live in the dark and tangled woods. Argentinian writer Luisa Valenzuela re-tells the story from the perspective of the so-called evil sister and equates this condition of being made an outsider to that of being an artist. That which one has to say as an artist is not always



easy to say, nor, for others, easy to hear. In order to speak one's own truth, one is sometimes called to produce something grotesque.

**So this work is not about Johannesburg.**

Not about Johannesburg. Maybe around it; trying to encircle via this fragile itinerary the length and width and depth of belonging, a spectral home, an elusive destination.

**Are you saying that what you are describing about what went down in South Africa, and the draw of the city, is actually more universal? Am I just putting words in your mouth?**

Yes you are! [laughs] The history of South Africa is one aspect of the kinds of social change that I have addressed in other works. It wasn't really the focus of this new work, but I cannot deny that that consciousness is always present. In this case, I was more interested in connecting different myths of the ideal city, some kind of utopia, and extending this even to an idea of self that always remains out of reach.

**The text of Hildegard von Bingen's *O Jerusalem*, which is scrambled into the background of *The Calling*, has me thinking about Hildegard herself and the meaning of "Jerusalem" for people in the Middle Ages. Umberto Eco has written of the symbolism of Jerusalem in medieval literature and art, as something not ever referring to a real geographic place that could be visited, but rather as a conceptual place, a utopia. Jerusalem was ultimately a metaphor, perhaps thinly disguised, for heaven. It was a stand-in for a place that we are perpetually in exile from, and which represents a happiness, good living and a shining existence. I find this to be a curious insight into what you are exploring.**

**Above:** Minnette Vari, *Servant* series, 2002, videograph, handprinted on photographic paper  
**Inset:** Minnette Vari, *Alien*, 1999, still from digital video

'I created this imaginary, broken metropolis, thinking about the goudstad, the promised land, Monomotapa, a golden kingdom'

Yes. In her time Hildegard, from the little town of Bingen, was something of a rarity, iconoclastic even, by speaking and writing in ways that women just didn't do in that time – not in recorded history, at least. To me, she became this sister in the woods, her words of praise and pleading like beautiful, glistening toads and snakes. One could also see the city as something like the woods and swamps in the folk tale I mentioned – a place where one treads with a sense of trepidation, but also a place where you could roam as you like. I was travelling a lot during my preparation for this work, hopping from one skyline to the other, always filming. From this I created this imaginary, broken metropolis, thinking about the *goudstad*, the promised land, Monomotapa, a golden kingdom. Not only in my work, but also as a person, I was scrutinising the little shifts, the choices that cause us to change position, to move around in big and small ways, where we sometimes find ourselves at the crossroads of being blessed or cursed. Having to choose what we are: good sister or evil? And which, of these two, is really the fortunate one?

**In *Sentinel* you used coats of arms morphed into a figure on a rooftop. It is disturbing, like Quasimodo.**

Symbols such as these present to the world that which you are or whence you come, but they also show the promise of what you could bring forth into the world. At the same time, for every individual person, this is also your burden. If you do not live up to this historic pledge it keeps

nagging, gnawing at you. It pokes out of you, from under your skin, like a deformity. The same with your fears, the same with your hopes. A coat of arms with all its heraldry is also very European. When I walk on the streets of Europe, I am not regarded as an outsider simply on account of being white. Yet that is where I feel the most alien because I do not share the heraldic familiarity of this embrace. This, and my odd relationship to the place I call home, causes me to mine the archives of the grotesque, producing hybrid creatures along the way, becoming them, walking around in strange shoes.

**Georg Simmel, the famous outsider-founder of the study of "sociology", was himself German-Jewish and a marginalised academic. He similarly claimed that the situation of the "stranger" is the product of a permanent dislocation but also *nearness* in a social setting. A group or a person is in a position of estrangement precisely because they are *near* to another. That strangeness is defined by familiarity across almost everything else: your appearance, your clothing, your walking upright, your buying the same panini at the same bakery.**

Exactly, "too close for comfort". I think that sort of proximity just highlights disparity, and I often feel compelled to try to

sew together two sides of the ravine. Strangely, I gravitate toward such moments. Isn't this what I do for a living? Creating these crowded encounters of perverse nearness where interpretation becomes a personal risk. This is where I find that my obsessions, fragilities and worst fears become most apparent to myself – hopefully this is also true for those who view my work. From the position of the "high and dry" emblem-encrusted figures in *Sentinel*, I arrived at something more liquid, more hazardous in *The Calling*, which brought me to strange places, not only at odd hours of the day. I put myself, my body, in physical peril by literally going on top of really high buildings and sitting on the ledge of the uppermost level, a bundle of paraphernalia on my back, shifting my centre of gravity.

**This was not shot with a blue screen in the studio like your earlier works *Alien* and *Oracle*? You are actually on site with archival material mixed into the background later?**

I have tried to keep things rather simple in this piece. The footage was shot on site and is, as it were, pretty real. Despite having a difficult relationship with performance art, I decided to approach these segments in a straight and simple way and just do it. Getting up onto those bare ledges between 20 and 40 floors up had me petrified, even though I don't suffer from a fear of heights. I was convinced *The Calling* would land me on a slab in the morgue. Then, at sunset, shivering in the July breeze, a call to prayer floated up from a city mosque. Quite a sublime moment for me.

**Tell me about the other figures that appear in the video. Are they from historical footage?**

What was interesting to me were the links I was able to make between historic and contemporary images. I included the silhouette of one of the people I interviewed, a man who was very open about his story. He came from Zimbabwe and had his newborn baby boy with him. Looking out from his balcony in Hillbrow, the lights were coming on and the back-

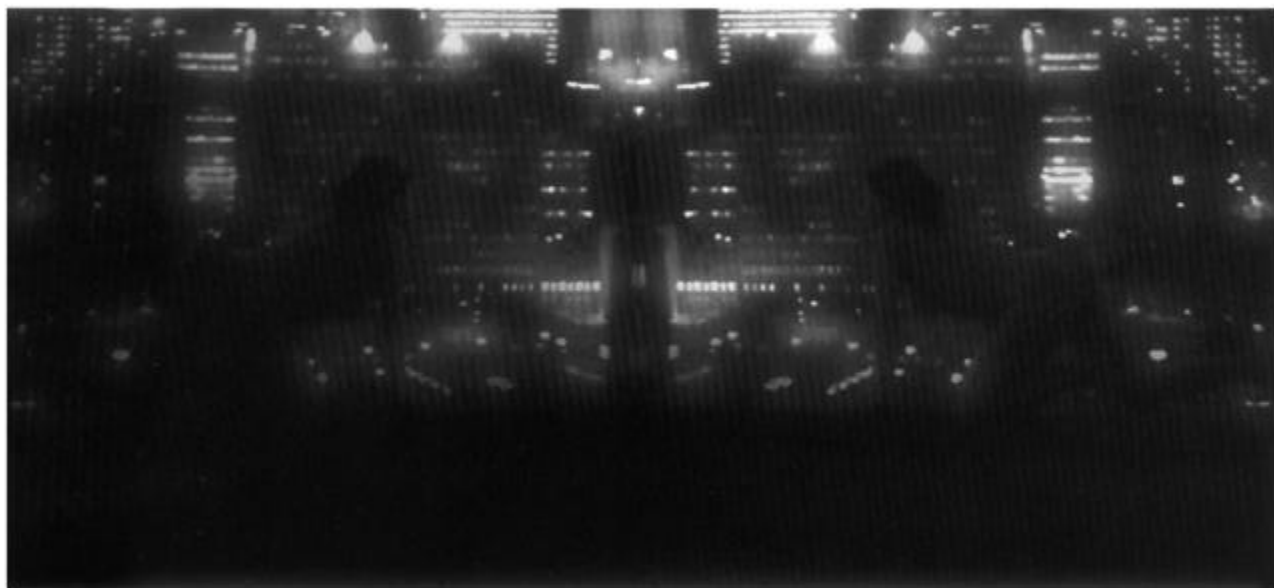
ground transformed into something quite jewel-like. In film material dating from the 1930s, I found the image of a man also overlooking an urban scene. Filming on top of the Lister building in town, I captured a view of the Auckland Park tower that exactly matched a much older one I happened upon a week later. There's also the Braamfontein monument to mine workers, captured at different moments in time. These instances of shared place or gesture intrigued me and I tried to forge temporary links between them, creating time echoes.

**In my favourite shot from *The Calling* you are more clearly and realistically shown, almost like the documentation of a performance event, and it looks like you have hiking gear, a scythe, film equipment, gears – all kinds of stuff attached to you. Is there a dialogue between this image and the bodily protrusion of coats of arms and tumescent lumps seen in *Sentinel*?**

There is a definite link. What appears to be film equipment is a butter churn that had come apart. I like the idea that it reminds people of film, of a device that records. Though I had intended to build up a sculptural mass that would be worn on the body, there is a roughness about how I eventually did it. I had the



**Inset:** Minnette Vári, *Oracle*, 1999, still from digital video  
**Facing page:** Minnette Vári, *The Calling*, 2003, stills from two-channel video



'The viewer is left to negotiate the problematic implications and dubious intent of this figure, a process which is unavoidably self-reflective'

Minnette Vari, *The Calling* 2003, still from two-channel video

mass of objects strapped to my body with fibre tape. The process was painful and uncomfortable, and I think it shows.

**In *The Calling* you appear personally discomforted in a way that you had already been exploring at a remove, in digitally modified images, in *Alien*. You seem in the newest work to be subjecting yourself to the *bodily* ritual that was already implied in the *visual* imagery of the work up to and including *Sentinel*. But I cannot tell from looking at this bundled junk on your body whether it is a burden, the "wreckage of history", or an armoring of the body, or if it is a cyborg body, or all of these.**

I agree it is a very ambiguous image. In both the *Sentinel* series and *The Calling*, I was setting up a "protagonist" of uncertain identity. She/it could be an intruder, an unwelcome observer, a gargoyle come to life, an itinerant witness, an exile, a refugee. The objects I chose would also read in different ways – take the scythe, for instance, and all of its different connotations. When one gazes out over a landscape, one owns that view in many respects. Looking almost always appropriates. The viewer is left to negotiate the problematic implications and dubious intent of this figure, a process which is unavoidably self-reflective.

**Who else is in the city besides those characters? Is it not outsiders who compose the city?**

Aren't we all, in a way, outside of something? I find it hard to find any situation in which one is fully belonging and fully rooted in one position. I think people are of necessity itinerant, in-between beings.

**That is strange, this idea of the beaming, radiant city, from a distance. It reminds me of that American classic *The Wizard of Oz*, where they are going to the Emerald City,**

**towards that thing in the distance. And of course when you arrive at the Emerald City you have to put green glasses on because it is actually not green at all. What is beautiful about the place is very controlled. There is fanfare and brightness from a distance, but once you get there it is not so great.**

People travel long, long roads to live in circumstances that are less than ideal, much less. For some, this is preferable to what they had before. It is a brutal avalanche of consequences, and those green glasses come in many different incarnations.

**What makes up the radiance of the city, then?**

I think it must be the hope and promise, the heat of our breath that we bring to it. Utopia itself isn't more radiant than an unconceived idea – it is the desire to participate, to bring our wares, to share our knowledge and our confidences that light it up and shape its skyline.

**Like *O Jerusalem*, people imagine, but then forget that it was actually a metaphor that they were reaching for?**

The same poem goes on to speak of stones that are alive. The city is built of glorious, living stones. The catch is that one has to keep breathing life into the stone that you are, cement it into a good spot, wring blood from it, transform it into bread to break. Is this religious imagery? See, we are always so busy creating new utopias. Maybe breaking them down is just as important.

**John Pepper teaches African Art at Northwestern University in Chicago**

Minnette Vari exhibits at Bell-Roberts Gallery in Cape Town from December 4-20, and at the Corbin/Shopland Gallery in Toronto until December 23. She is preparing for her first monographic museum show, opening in February 2004 at the Museum of Art, Luzern, Switzerland.