



**Reflection on Last One Standing:  
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The Official Snowball Fight Association (OSFA) staged the two editions of Last One Standing in the towns of Fully and Grimentz in Switzerland during the winters of 2006 and 2007. Over 800 local people participated in the tournament, including professional athletes, business people from various professions, students, educators, comedians, politicians, social workers, artists, cooks, winemakers and construction workers.

The creators of LOS understand their project as an art driven initiative with a situationist approach: the organizers create a basic condition for an art/sport action, which in each place takes a new shape and also contains elements of performative improvisation. Each action provides challenging new insights about the complex inter-relation between sports and arts and about the possibilities and limits of re-situating art practice in context of games and popular culture.

A major focus of reflection of this ongoing project concerns “wunderware schnee” – the miraculous product of snow - for all who love winters in the Alpine mountains, it is a deeply emotional topic. It is also a commodity produced at great financial and ecological costs to satisfy “users of landscapes” across the globe – by playing with snow the LOS creators wish to start open conversations about our ways of dealing with ‘manufactured’ nature.

At each stage, the initiators seek collaboration with peers at the place of production – installation artists, video artists, composers. They also seek active interaction with thinkers from the fields such sociology and ethnology and social work who bring in their perspectives of social context to the development of a game. A conference addressing these topics was organized in Sierre earlier in 2008 (for more details see [www.lastonestanding.ch](http://www.lastonestanding.ch))



The Joubert Park Project staged the third edition of Last One Standing at the base of operations at the Drill Hall, a multi-use heritage site located in the middle of the inner city of Johannesburg. It is run by a team of artists who engage time and energy to facilitate artists’ residencies and accompany art projects in dialogue with the public sphere. This project aimed to bring together a diversity of people of the inner city of Johannesburg in the staging of a spectacular ‘urban game’ revolving around a substance that has always held an intrinsic magical quality for people everywhere – but most especially for people in locations that do not normally see snowfall. The organizers felt that the project would provide a unique opportunity for creating a ‘space of wonder’ in which social actors who would not normally engage directly with one another would be able to interact in a dynamic, playful and generative manner.

In the Johannesburg context, they were drawn to the combination of play and violence involved in the project and the manner in which these elements would play themselves out in the inner city context. The intentions underpinning the project were predicated on a perception/intuition that there is a certain symmetry/echoing between the methods and procedures of games and sports on the one hand, and the

manner in which space and power in the inner city are presently being contested, a complicated match that is often presented in public discussion and the media as being a contest between the (usually compromised) forces of 'law and order' on the one side and rampant and chaotic 'criminality and violence' on the other. The organizers are interested in the development of more nuanced pictures of what is often felt to be a 'lose-lose' situation, a 'losing battle'. And we are interested in interventions that work with the methods of both games/criminality, alter the perceptions of all the players in this situation and provide cues and clues for playing nicely.

During the preparation for the project four teams of players were recruited from the across the inner city, including hairdressers, tv stars, taxi mechanics, boxers, trolley-pushers, artists, rugby players and officials involved in the management and development of this difficult part of the inner city. All of the recruits attended a training day where they were introduced to one another, allocated into teams, oriented into the rules, fitted with specially designed combat suits designed by German artist Birgit Neppl, and provided with opportunities to develop their skills. Each team established a distinct identity and name: Phoenix, Jozi Tigers, Rockers and Heroes. A composer/sound artist duo – Andy Sherman and Joao Orecchia – worked with a local choir to develop songs/war cries for each of the teams. Two well known local actors – Robert Whitehead and Louw Venter – were recruited to perform the roles of MC and referee respectively. A group of students from the WITS School of Arts were recruited as snowball-makers to service the teams.



The project was realised on the 16th of August in the public open space at the centre of the Drill Hall precinct, with the action taking place during the course of the evening. While a snow-machine was hired for the production of snow for the snowballs, the court area was laid out with about 70 tons of sand which had been donated to the project, with precise demarcations as per the Swiss rules and specifications. The sand created a striking 'wild west' effect once the action commenced, with clouds of dust being kicked up by the participants. This effect was enhanced by an elaborate lighting system which was deployed to distinguish between different tactical areas of the field, and a soundscape composed by Orecchia and Sherman ran through the event, which was also interspersed with readings from both real and imaginary texts concerned with snow. War cries from the beautifully dressed choirs inaugurated each of the four games that comprised the contest.

Though the Drill Hall directors were largely preoccupied with tasks such as organizing and coordinating all logistical elements of this event, they also brought in their artists' perspectives: weaving a background story "snow in Johannesburg", creating an image bank for projection, composing a theatrical space and building the scenario for the night.

The project drew an audience both from the immediate neighbourhood as well as a more conventional arts audience which was bussed in from a parking area at the nearby Johannesburg Art Gallery (the short

distance between the Drill Hall and the Gallery being generally regarded as unwalkable from a safety and security point of view). A large contingent of local children came to the event, the majority of them without accompanying adults. The presence of so many children was not expected and catalysed an unplanned snowball throwing free-for-all with the majority of the audience taking to the field during one of the intervals between the formal games, an alarming moment for the organisers from a safety point of view, but a remarkable moment from an audience perspective.

To what extent did the project 'work'? Perhaps the most striking area of success was one in the dynamic established within and between the teams of players. The strangeness of the basic proposition soon fell away, and participants became immersed in the formalities of the process and the desire for victory at all costs. The event elicited a great deal of emotion, with heartfelt appeals being made to the refereeing team in the face of what were seen to be unfair decisions.

However, while it is fair to say that while the process of convening and animating the teams was very tightly and effectively managed from a conceptual and practical point of view, the 'curating' of the audience was less successful. While the diverse audience was struck by the technical and organisational aspects of the event, the internal dynamics of the competition and the rules were grasped by few. The rather elaborate programme developed for the competition was also arguably too long, with some elements not addressing the audience in a sufficiently engaging fashion. We also realised too late that we had not adequately catered for the large number of particularly local children that came to the event, and their rather chaotic participation in the event (though very satisfying in many ways) ran along a separate track to the main action. Though there were some strong moments for the audience, this whole aspect could have been more thoughtfully planned and managed.

Overall, our sense is that the project – though flawed in certain ways, provided powerful raw material for the pursuit of similar endeavours in the future. The JPP is keen to develop the idea as an annual event, using different types of game/combat each year, each with its own distinct rules and materials.



## **A reflection from the audience**

Through the vision of the Joubert Park Project, the Drill Hall has been the literal stage for many events that have “made strange” the world of the Johannesburg inner-city – an inner-city that would often seem to exist far beyond mere metaphor as the writer and academic Njabulo Ndebele suggests of so many South African contexts. This strangeness grew in ambition with the hosting of the Official Snowball Fight Association (OFSA) Last One Standing tournament. And it is through this strangeness that the kinds of disruption necessary to interrogate the rules of daily life presently in existence in this inner-city are foregrounded. Even before the tournament began, the presence of a beach-like sand surface in uncertain tandem with a snowball machine, with blocks of flats around them, provoked a different series of destabilising frames through which to imagine this inner-city.

The bringing together of Johannesburg residents from different social contexts within the format of a game was, for me, one of the significant underpinnings of this tournament. Perhaps the rule-like, but not rule bound (Stewart Martin) nature of some contemporary art allows for the rupturing of that which is taken for granted in the course of the commonsense of the everyday – and also a suturing (Felix Guattari). Whether this was a conscious realisation on the part of the participants and audience is not the point – there was something in this intensely embodied activity in all its apparent strangeness that released capacities which allowed for a different set of possibilities. These are possibilities of further dialogue and both individual and joint action: on a simple level, patently modelled in the involvement of the players. It is perhaps these and other possibilities that deserve attention in a more expanded project.

While the format of the tournament might allow for a tighter programme (although there is something to be said for the elaborateness of the event), my interest relates more to how the snowball fight tournament as a fulcrum could engage audiences, both adults and children, in ways that make them more active in their participation. How does the audience engage in similar (or related) embodied activity pre- or post- the tournament? Is it possible that the ramification of the tournament is that more players begin playing - as in playful practices being fundamental to a learning process? Perhaps there is something more durational that might be explored here without instrumentalising the game itself.

There is no doubt in my mind that this tournament should become an annual event: both as antidote and provocation - and towards a more inflected engagement with a future tense for the inner-city.