



Katherine Bull and Fritha Langerman: Come to Pass

St George's Mall | Cape Town

Katherine Bull and Fritha Langerman, *Come to Pass*, 2004, installation, St George's Mall Cape Town

It's not often that Cape Town's small art circle rubs shoulders with Joe Soap. No matter how much we try to amend this insularity through discussions, committees and art fairs, the local art scene – as anywhere else – remains a notoriously elitist and exclusive affair. This is why it was so refreshing to attend the opening of Fritha Langerman and Katherine Bull's *Come to Pass* on a busy Friday afternoon at the intersection of Shortmarket and St George's. Standing there amid noon-shoppers and lunch-breakers, street children and security guards, I was struck by the powerful potential of public art in a young democracy like our own. No longer "a hero on a horse", as Arlene Raven has put it,¹ public art may commemorate and memorialise, but it may also negotiate ownership and encourage participation in the public sphere.

This seems to be what Langerman and Bull have set out to do with their sculpture, the winning entry in the third Cape Town Public Sculpture competition, sponsored by the JK Gross Trust. In contrast to the two predecessors in the competition, John Skotnes' *Mythological Landscape* in Thibault Square and Brett Murray's *Africa*, Langerman and Bull took the "public" in public art seriously by literally embedding it into the very fabric of their work. The sculpture grew out of interviews with 24 women conducted at the site in September 2003 whose names, occupations and portraits, as part of this sculpture, pay homage to the ordinary women who are mostly left out of the city's official history yet play a crucial role in its ongoing operation.

Appropriating the idea of a guide to the city, the sculpture is made to resemble a clock or compass on the ground, with two sets of six glass and bronze discs which intersect to form a cross. Each of the glass discs represents a composite portrait of four of the women who were interviewed, while the cast bronze discs name six occupations that were instrumental in the formation of the city. The names and occupations of the actual

women are recorded on 24 cats' eyes that circle this design, a visual metaphor for the understated yet essential role that many women have played in the city.

In contrast to a tradition of public sculptures that dominate their space and stand out, this sculpture is unobtrusively meant to be part of its surroundings. Incorporating tar and cast and engraved brass discs that look like drain covers, the work is not meant to dominate the streetscape. Rather, it is part of a pedestrian zone, little more than speed bumps or a hopscotch pattern perhaps. Of course this is a deliberate choice on the part of the artists, relating them to a generation of female artists who have chosen to make public sculptures that do not dominate the public sphere aggressively. One only has to think of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* that was removed in the early 1980s from its New York site due to public protest, or even of the controversy that surrounded Murray's huge Africanist sculpture. Rather, Langerman and Bull's sculpture seems to speak to such works as the Women's Monument at the Union Buildings which like-

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wise focused on an unobtrusive form, a grinding stone, or even Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington that chose horizontality over the more conventional vertical obelisk of remembrance.

Yet while *Come to Pass* seems like a rather understated addition to the streetscape, it is a complex sculpture that will demand some engagement from viewers wanting to fully comprehend it and this, one supposes, is exactly the point. The process of deciphering this work necessitates a certain way of being in the city and the act of engagement with the sculpture demands active participation in the city's history.

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¹ Arlene Raven (ed). *Art in the Public Interest*. Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1989, p1