

# COME TO PASS: A WORK OF INSCRIPTION AND ERASURE or Empathy with Alice: a work in six movements

Fritha Langerman

## DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Fritha Langerman and Katherine Bull's *Come to Pass* is among the three final works selected in the third Cape Town Public Sculpture Competition. Over the next three months the finalists will make detailed presentations to the judging panel before a winner is selected.

THE WORK DRAWS ATTENTION TO THE ABSENCE OF WOMEN IN THE COLONIAL RECORD AND IS IN THE FORM OF 6 GLASS, STEEL AND ALUMINIUM DISCS,

7 REWORKED SPEED BUMPS AND 24 CAT'S EYES. IT EMBRACES A SYSTEM OF TAXONOMY AND IDENTIFIES 6 DISTINCT OCCUPATIONS THAT HAVE BEEN

INSTRUMENTAL IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE CAPE CITYSCAPE. EACH OCCUPATION HAS A PARTICULAR SPATIAL RELATIONSHIP TO THE CROSSROAD OF

SHORTMARKET AND ST GEORGE'S STREET. THE SPEED BUMPS ARE ENGRAVED WITH 'ARCHIVAL' INFORMATION RELATING TO EACH OCCUPATION.

ENGRAVED TEXT PLATES ON THE CAT'S EYES ARE NUMBERED AS UNITS OF TIME AND NAMED WITH THE 24 INDIVIDUALS PARTICIPATING IN THE PROJECT.

THE GLASS DISCS ARE DATED, NAMED AND HAVE A CENTRAL COMPOSITE PORTRAIT CREATED FROM 4 WOMEN NAMED IN THE CAT'S EYES.



THE MERCHANT	OMET OP ASSC	0102 - 2324
THE PREACHER	METO PA SSCO	0304 - 2122
THE SETTLER	ETOP AS SCOM	0506 - 1920
THE EXPLORER	TOPA SS COME	0708 - 1718
THE SOLDIER	OPAS SC OMET	0910 - 1516
THE ARCHITECT	PASS CO METO	1112 - 1314



## THE POOL OF TEARS

... intended to perform a recovery of the role of women in the history of Cape Town. It all seems rather trite. There are a number of women artists working in Cape Town who have a sophisticated grasp of identity politics and the talent to make powerful work out of it. If the judges couldn't bear to award the commission to a white male, as some have suggested, perhaps they could have been brave enough to solicit entries along these lines.<sup>2</sup>

IN ORDER TO TEST PUBLIC RESPONSE TO THE PROJECT AND TO DETERMINE THE EFFICACY OF ITS FORM AND SITE, WE SET UP A

PERFORMANCE THAT INCLUDED A MOCK-UP OF THE WORK AND A SURVEY THAT INVITED THE PASSING PUBLIC TO BECOME PART OF THE

PROJECT — IDENTIFYING THEMSELVES AS ONE OF THE SIX CATEGORIES. THEY WERE INVITED TO COMPLETE A FORM THAT REFERENCED

A FICTITIOUS ARCHIVE — ASKING FOR ORIGIN, DESTINATION AND TIMEFRAME.<sup>3</sup>

## PUBLIC TEXT – PUBLIC VOICE

Controversy is synonymous with the notion of public sculpture and this is, in part, a corollary of the fallacious and idealised notion that 'public' is a conceptual space of democracy, equal ownership and equal access. These utopian ideas of 'public' have been expounded by Jürgen Habermas, and are recapitulated by Gooding, who writes "public possession of a public space and its objects is thus both political and imaginative: political in that democracy claims space as shared prosperity of people, entitled as a complex public site of interaction and imaginative in that buildings and objects create conditioning for consciousness" (Gooding 1998:19).

Regulation of space by external agencies (business, legislation and informal mediators) determines its usage and social enactment. City government recommends public art sites thought appropriate for both resident and tourist populations and, although most public art projects in South Africa are privately funded, the 'city' is unwilling to relinquish control over what can be seen as the active construction of visual history and public culture. The debacle that framed the installation of Brett Murray's *Africa*, also a Gross Trust commission, has become legendary. Municipal, council and business offered objections and opinion based on assumption and generalisation. In the presumed interests of the public and an attempt at inclusivity the public voice was, in effect absorbed.

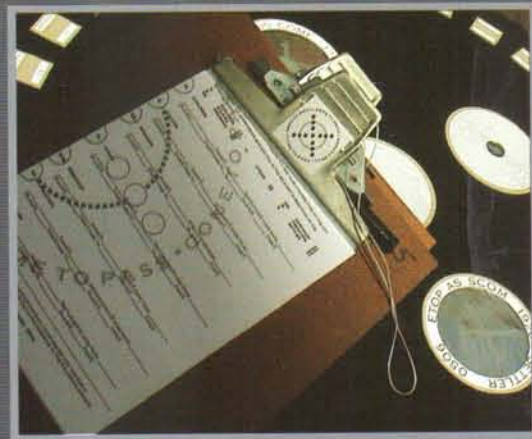
Public sculptures and monuments have, in many cases, been spatially offset against 'the plaza' or city square. This is a space where local identity is constructed and transacted – a forum or centre of public life – and the works play a defining role within the space. In the case of *CtP*, it is surrounded by street traders and in close proximity to a functioning market place, Greenmarket Square, where the only public edifice at this point is a set of toilets. The public are instrumental in construction and transformation of meaning and space over time, and this is evidenced in the site, which has a covert identity as a space of informal trade, a home, a site of drug dealing, an informal auditorium, etc.

In a virtual age, concepts of permanence seem outmoded and inappropriate to deal with a currency of flux. The erection of monuments and public edifices, despite their seemingly intrinsic durability, inevitably opens them to the risk of erasure and deletion. Permanence is only relative to popular ideology as is exemplified by the destruction of public monuments, most notably in the Soviet Union in the early part of the century, and again in the Soviet states in the 1990s. In America, the controversial removal of the public sculptures by Richard Serra and John Ahearn in the 1980s was governed by political sentiment. Presently, in South Africa there is a moratorium on the residency of the past in the present. Despite proposals to eradicate the various monumental testimonies to our colonial past,<sup>4</sup> (in particular the statues of Van Riebeeck and Dias (previously in the Gardens) in the "gateway to Africa", the Heereengracht Boulevard),<sup>5</sup> this has only been actualised by the accidental collapse of the J G Strijdom monument in 2001. Interestingly, while popular sentiment acknowledges the problematics of monuments of the Apartheid era, a number of visual testimonies to new national heroes, with the intention of countering previous ideological biases, have been recently unveiled. These are the numerous busts and monuments to Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo, particularly in the Eastern Cape, the Steve Biko monument in East London, the Hector Pietersen memorial in Johannesburg, and the Women's Memorial at the Union Buildings, to name but a few. There are currently proposals to replace the Blotha statue outside parliament (already transformed into a Xhosa initiate by Beezy Bailey in 1999) with a statue of Nelson Mandela.

The imposing monument makes the viewer its object and enacts authority through distance rather than inviting complicity. *CtP* is an act of text made public and a public text remade. Its intricate engraving requires an intimate reading and engages the public in a private dialogue that is not collectively experienced. It is in the act of reading, both the text and the objects, that meaning is revealed. Objects are endlessly connotative yet the reading of objects is bound by context and association. *CtP* materially references the architecture of the street, requiring the interpretation and recontextualisation of the familiar.

A CAUCUS-RACE AND A LONG TALE  
 After six weeks, we were told what we already knew, that the roads department were concerned about the height of the speed bumps. At this point we called a meeting between the city designer and members of the roads department. We proposed raising the work so that it becomes a traffic island (as well as reducing the height of the speed bumps from 6cm to 4cm). We felt that this would both eliminate pedestrian accident and conceptually extend the project. All parties seemed to be of agreement that this was an acceptable proposal.<sup>6</sup>

COME TO PASS TAKES THE FORM OF A COMPASS AND CLOCK, REFERRING TO TIME AND SPACE.<sup>7</sup>



**CITY AS TIME AND SPACE**  
 The city operates as a timepiece in that its history is legible in its form. Change and transformation leave evidence in urban design and extant architecture. It embraces themes of transience and transubstantiation – decay and regeneration. As the city at the Southern point of the continent, Cape Town is at once a navigational guide, marker and point of reference. Due South, it substitutes the compass and provides a binary reference to other global centres. Perhaps because of this, the Cape is imagined in terms of binaries – occupied and empty, possessed and dispossessed, Cape of Good Hope and Cape of Storms: place of heaven and hell; order and disorder. Similarly *CtP* positions time and place; contrasts protrusions and recessions; is of the street and below the street.  
 Time and space in the city have been gendered. Time is male and of history, progress, reason, science, culture; whereas space is female and of reproduction, emotion, nostalgia, aesthetics, body (Massey 1994:257). In terms of this reading, spaces are experiential and conceptual, allowing for the possibility of alternative pasts. *CtP* uses the fracturing of time to interrupt a narrative chronology.  
 The compass is the frontier between present and future, negotiating between a resident location and a projected peripheral space. This simultaneity makes the compass an appropriate device to speak of a history created in the present. The compass offers direction but at the same time implies the greater complexity – the map.



FIG AND PEPPER  
 In the following week we were informed that an official in the Department of Roads had decided that he would not permit the sculpture to be erected on the chosen site. An alternative site in the Heerengracht Boulevard was suggested by the council. In telephonic conversation and in meeting with the official it emerged that:  
 a) he was unaware that this work was site specific  
 b) his objections were that St George's Mall "was already too full of clutter". Money had been spent paving St George's Mall and the work would not complement the paving. Furthermore, he believed that bricks could not be cut in a circular form and the work would appear messy.  
 c) he was unaware of the sculpture competition and that any site had been made available. He believed, despite suggestion from other officials, that the traffic island would still be a pedestrian hazard. He now refused to permit the work even in the prescribed site.<sup>8</sup>

FOR THIS REASON, WE ARE CONCERNED WITH REFLECTING THE CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY THROUGH DIFFERENT MODELS: THE OFFICIAL RECORD – THE ARCHIVE; THE ORAL RECORD – THE ANECDOTAL; AND HISTORY AS AN INVENTION – A FICTION. THE SPEED BUMPS REFER TO THE 'OFFICIAL RECORD' AND ARE ENGRAVED WITH A SYSTEM OF ARCHIVAL RECORDING THAT IS INCOMPLETE. WE HAVE CHOSEN TO APPROPRIATE THE MONUMENT/MEMORIAL AND ARCHIVE AS IRONICAL REFERENCE. ARCHIVES ARE DOCUMENTS OF EXCLUSION AND MONUMENTS TO PARTICULAR CONFIGURATIONS OF POWER AND ARE AN ACT OF DISCRIMINATION AND SELECTION. PUBLIC SCULPTURE IS IN PART ARCHIVE – A RECORD OF CURRENT PREVAILING INTELLECTUAL, CREATIVE AND POLITICAL SENTIMENT. *COME TO PASS* IS SELF CONSCIOUS AND SELF-REFLEXIVE AS A MEMORIAL AND RECORD OF BOTH THE PAST AND PRESENT.<sup>9</sup>

**MAKING HISTORY**  
*CtP* is a remapping of power and place. Recent discourse acknowledges that history is a construction, and historians are increasingly referring to small and seemingly trivial narratives to interrogate grand narratives. André Brink (1998:32) writes that history is a narrative text in which memory and language intersect. Through the modes of chronology, place and narrative, history is constructed. He suggests that history cannot be redressed by replacing its protagonists, but rather by reinventing a method of approach. Imagination is a primary tool in this regard as are the collective values of multiple viewpoint and version, personal narrative and memory (ibid:42).

While its form and categories reference a 'structure of the past', *CtP* does not refer to any specific historical character or event. Through the use of a somewhat arbitrary selection of contemporary female protagonists it performs an inscription of the present, and through this, there is an implied erasure of the past.  
 "To make a work which plays with history is, of course, to acknowledge that such a work is a play on the postponement of meaning, it is a play of delay" (Kosuth 2001:308).

The reference to the archive is a symbolic act of retrieval. The illusion of the archive as accessible and truthful is inextricably connected with illusions of 'public'. The apparent fixing of time introduces a fallacy of collective ownership and inheritance. However, the archive, particularly the colonial archive, is a site of contested knowledge and seen as a reproduction of the power of the state. Mbembe writes that the archive is a montage of fragments that creates an illusion of totality and continuity (2002:21). Archiving is an act of selection and discrimination – it confers a status on information. Archives are documents of exclusion and monuments to particular configurations of power (Foucault 1989:34). The archive is an epistemological system, a means of classifying and ordering and through its system of access, it ensures a regulated admission to the past.

The subtext of death is inherent within the archive (Mbembe 2002:22) and is analogous to the monument and sepulchre in that it is symbolically concerned with the interring of remains and memorialising the dead.

The authority of the archive relies on an appeal to truth. Mbembe (2002:20) suggests that archives 'debilitate doubt' offering a material evidence that makes external or deferred meaning possible. This proved apposite in the reading of the original maquette for *CtP* that memorialised fictitious female characters. The materiality bestows an authority and official status on the work and this uncertain veracity was of concern to viewers and judges who felt deceived by the system. In the process of reconstructing and re-inscribing the past through the present, the authentic and original becomes of primacy. *CtP* operates not only by formally referencing the archive, but also as a system that in itself questions the nature of veracity and its relationship to material manifestations.

#### ADVICE FROM A CATERPILLAR

9.00 am Tuesday:

The work will be allowed in the centre of the intersection of St George's and Shortmarket. The speed bumps need to be flattened although the cat's eyes will be permitted.

2.30 Wednesday:

1. The sculpture should be installed on the original site, as indicated on the competition pamphlet.
2. The sculpture should be adjusted to ensure pedestrian safety. The sculpture must be as flush with the paving as possible i.e. the steel speed bumps must be flattened and engraved to make it slip free. The cat's eyes should be installed lower than the paving.<sup>10</sup>

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CITY AND ITS POPULAR HISTORY LARGELY REFLECTS AND VALORISES THE EXPLOITS OF MEN, WHEREAS WOMEN HAVE BEEN ELIDED

FROM THE CITY'S HISTORY AND THE EVOLUTION OF ITS DESIGN AND DEFINITIONS OF ACHIEVEMENT. THE PIECE IS PRODUCED IN RESPONSE TO THE NOTION THAT

PUBLIC SCULPTURE IS AN EXPRESSLY MALE DOMAIN WITHIN THE CITY — NOT ONLY IN ITS PRACTITIONERS, BUT ALSO IN THE NATURE OF CITY SCULPTURE ITSELF,

WHICH IS LARGELY IN THE LANGUAGE OF ERECTED PROTRUSIONS. IN CONTRAST, THIS PIECE IS RECESSED AND DISCREETLY SUBMERGED INTO THE STREET.<sup>11</sup>

42

#### RECOVERING PUBLIC SPACE

It is widely regarded that the structure of the city reflects the prevalent social order of the time. The term 'Mother city' implies a protective place and a place of origin, however, city theory has interpreted the city as having male authorship — a space of exteriority, in contrast to the feminine space of interiority and domesticity. Feminist theory also notes that the role of domestic space is not acknowledged within urban design and the public workplace (Sandercock, L & Forsyth, A 1992:452).

The genealogy of the word public, derived from *poplicus* (people), which over time became *publicus* (of the people) with reference to *pubes* (adult men) evidences its intrinsically exclusive nature. Mitchell (1992:37) notes that violence is encoded into the practise of public art — thematically and physically and that public art is based on the exclusion of certain groups — most notably women.<sup>12</sup> The masculine, heroic nature of public monument has been challenged over the past few decades, most notably in Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veteran's Memorial* in Washington. Although it commemorates a largely male event, its form, a v-shaped incision, is seen by many to evoke a symbolically female language. Furthermore, its recession into and 'scarring' of the land is read as an anti-monumental act, set in opposition to the conventional free-standing monument.

Another work that uses submergence to articulate a simultaneous act of remembrance and anti-heroism is the Gerze brothers' *Hamburg monument against fascism* (1985-1990). This work invited the public to add their names to a lead covered column. Over time, as names were added, the column was sunk, until only a commemorative plaque remained. In this work, the public were activated as subjects of the work in that it only gained form as an act of remembrance: the memorial itself became a memory (Mitchell 1992:62).

There is not a simple gendered binary between submerging and erecting a public sculpture. Although the submerged work suggests a possible open space or silent lacunae, the act of penetrating the street is ultimately one of violence.



#### WHO STOLE THE TARTS?

I can't remember where you guys are in the 'where the sculpture will be' debacle, but I thought I should say that I went by the original spot today. The photo shop has closed and a cafe is opening. They have stacks of outside tables that look like they are right in the wrong spot. Looks like another case of the right arm doesn't know what the left arm is doing.<sup>13</sup>

Thanks to my collaborator, Katherine Bull. This text reflects some of my thinking around the project, and is not necessarily opinion held by her.

#### REFERENCES:

- Brink, A. 1998. 'Stories of history: re-imagining the past in post-apartheid narrative' in Nuttall, S & Coetzee, C. *Negotiating the past: the making of memory in South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M. 1989. *The archaeology of knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Gooding, M. 1998. in *Public-art-space*. London: Merrell Holberton.
- Kosuth, J. 2001. 'Public text' in Matzner, F (ed). *Public Art*. Munich: Hatje Cantz.
- Sandercock, L & Forsyth, A 1992. A Gender Agenda: New Directions for planning theory in LeGates, R & Stout, F. (eds). 2000. *The city reader*. London: Routledge.
- Massey, D. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Mbembe, A. 2002. 'The power of the archive and its limits' in Hamilton, C, Harris, V, et.al. (eds). *Refiguring the archive*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Worden, N., van Heyningen, E., Bickford-Smith, V. 1998. *Cape Town: The making of a city*. Cape Town: David Philip.

#### ENDNOTES:

- 1 Bull, K. & Langerman, F. 2002. Come to Pass. Competition brochure.
- 2 Dawes, N. art southafrica vol1 issue02 summer2002 p7.
- 3 pers comm. Competition interview. October 22 2002.
- 4 The recent proposal to remove the Paul Kruger bust from the entrance to the Kruger National Park adds to this debate. The South African Heritage Resources Agency is currently formulating an official policy towards approaching these problematic symbols of the past.
- 5 Y350? *Old memorials in new times* debate. Castle, Cape Town, 28 September 2002.
- 6 Letter to Gross Trust. 10 December 2002.
- 7 Bull, K. & Langerman, F. 2002. Come to Pass. Competition brochure.
- 8 Letter to Gross Trust. 10 December 2002.
- 9 Bull, K. & Langerman, F. 2002. Come to Pass. Competition brochure.
- 10 Council correspondence.
- 11 Bull, K. & Langerman, F. 2002. Come to Pass. Competition brochure.
- 12 This is perhaps marginally contradicted in South Africa by the Van Wouw Vrouemonument in Bloemfontein, erected to commemorate the 26 000 women and children who died in British concentration camps during the South African war. However no women were contracted in the production and design of this monument and it has been interpreted as largely serving male agendas.
- 13 e-mail correspondence.

43