

What can one achieve with art in the South African history context?

I, the Artist-Hare, have taken on a slightly European-hare's trait and have hidden some ideas under stones. Is there one near you? Please read it aloud.

MAPS and STRUCTURES

Here I stand, a visual questioner and a visual messenger among the verbal, particularly those committed to the written word. As someone who didn't even do history at high school, swapping to art history so I wouldn't have to 'do' the Great Trek again, I am aware of my precarious position here among you.

Plato, the Bible, the Koran, Hegel...all warn of the pit-falls of the visual but I take one of yours as my defender. Annette Vowinckel who works at the History Institute in Potsdam has recently written a paper entitled "Terror and Images-Notes on the relationship between art and history, on the occasion of the Berlin RAF exhibition" Here she states

From the start of the 1990's the term, *visual turn* or *iconic turn* has been in use, which diagnoses a paradigm shift from text-based knowledge to image-based knowledge. This *turn*, which first developed as a reaction to the increasingly visual perception of the world through television, computer and internet, has since wandered into the humanities, causing considerable uneasiness.

The uneasiness results from a long tradition of mistrust of all things that are "only" in images in our culture. This mistrust articulates itself in the establishment of a hierarchy of text and image to the benefit of the text and a degrading of the image to illustration. Since Plato's cave analogy, philosophy has been dominated by the idea that truth can never be recognised through the senses, but only through reason, independent of the senses.

At the end of this paper she says

(...) it is imperative that we re-establish the trust in the images which was broken over 2000 years ago (...) We carry the responsibility for future generations of historians (...) to learn to analyse and interpret images without going to the other extreme of viewing the world only as a media spectacle, as virtual reality.

An art work can represent the spirit of its age, but an art work can also be read as a fragment, against the middle-class discourse. These two possibilities do not contradict one another, as we have for some time perceived history as "fragmented";(...), as an reference to a story, *which has not been digested, perhaps even, not even past*. After all, we live among people who experience time from varying perspectives and who have configured it differently. The question, which one should ask is not: What is allowed?, but: What can art achieve?

So, what do I want to achieve by my interventions in Kimberley?

Achebe's conviction is mine. "We each have a responsibility to our own peculiar place and its story."

This statement dropped into my lap in the early nineties, when I was tussling with how to contribute to the process of change in South Africa, individually and by interaction with others and gave me the base from which I have developed my work, the most recent aspect of which was "The Past is not Dead".

In my individual work, at that time, the series, „When People Run Like Buck“ dealt with recent history, The Ciskei massacre, while „San Ladders“ „San Shielanigigs“ etc. followed the line of linking ancient African and European concepts of life and survival.

In 1993 the first performance of AN OTHER celebrated the many cultures present in Berlin under the basic premise, „I am just an other among others.“ As Paul Richor put it. My impetus was to set a sign against the developing racism, a impetus fired by my childhood experiences in Apartheid South Africa.

„Once we were all black“ continued *the idea of the history of our unity*

In 1997 the installation show, „A Field for Nonquawuse“ at the Galerie in Scheunenviertel, showed for the first time my long term occupation with the history of the cattle killings, *from the point of view of the Xhosa people*, as well as the project, „Hungry but Happy“, which involves the passing around of a postcard showing children in front of a hut at Greenpoint, an area you will be hearing more about later, getting people’s responses to this image and it’s printed and handwritten text and exhibiting these responses, as a paper wall in the first exhibition and later at the department of the environment in Berlin, as an installation with excerpts from the responses on foils, on chunks of white bread. This project is open ended. (Copies available for responses.)

Interestingly the history of my place of birth and my present place of residence have some fascinating parallels that keep coming up in my work. I continue to live in two places which are experiencing dramatic change and I try to reflect and link experiences of the one with the other. This linkage of Africa and Europe is another constant theme in my work as I feel a responsibility to both places and both cultures.

In 1998 and 1999 in Kimberley, I moved from individual art work to an attempt to set in motion a group project, „Revisioning Our Past–Envisioning Our Future“ The aim was to inspire others to do what I had done with „A Field for Nonquawuse“, namely, to use the arts, not only the visual, as a medium for looking at history, ancient to recent, *from the point of view of the other protagonists involved in any event*. In a series of discussions and workshops I put this idea forward, but became aware that I had probably started this initiative too early, as the majority of people kept returning to *their own* hurt and pain, rather than being able or prepared to enter the skin of the others. As one can see from the title, and this is true of all my so-called history projects; for me, dealing with the past is a way of finding out how we got to be where we are now and trying to find ways of working towards more understanding and a more co-operative future. It is also about seeing history as a conglomeration of stories, of many millions of human beings, not just the history that is written from the point of view of the rulers. In this respect Walter Benjamin expresses magnificently what I and I think a lot of others feel, particularly in relation to South African history.

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A

historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. *He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.*
Walter Benjamin

The little success I have had has come from talking to people and convincing them that I am interested in their stories, by letting the older people know that their stories are valuable, but letting the youth know that their take on the past is important for the future they are creating.

In 2000 I produced an installation for the exhibition „Heimat“, „Home“, for the House of World Cultures, which consisted of a table with a map of the Kimberley area on it and four post cards. Visitors could sit opposite me, choose one of the cards and ask me to tell them the story. This naturally led to more discussion in most cases. This discursive element is one which I continue to build into my work. They took away with them, the card, as well as some details about the life and history of the area around my home town. I have these cards here too.

Also in 2000 I produced two parallel exhibitions in the east and west of Berlin and a resume catalogue with the title, „Land-Schaft-Geschichte“, which is much better in German than the English title „Land=hiSTORIES“, as it also indicates that *land creates* histories. Here most of the above themes are outlined and the main theme of land as an archive or a store of life, which was opened to me by David Morris' sensitive guiding round the archaeological and San engraving sites near Kimberley is developed.

2003 saw a new series related to the above theme exhibited at the Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin. Seven large canvases explore the landscape, as well as drawings, which relate to various ways of experiencing land, and the particular diamond history. This body of work also relates to the present and persistent question of how to deal with ownership of land.

Ingeborg Ruthe said of this show....“ Liz Crossley digs herself into and through the land of her childhood, with both brush and pencil.”

In 2004 the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in the person of Arndt Hopfmann made the show at the WHAG possible. In this exhibition I returned to Kimberley and wanted in a variety of ways to reflect what that place means to me. I showed the drawings of people bowed over the land, searching for food, for diamonds, the images which suggest fenced land, the feet of those walking the land, wheel-barrows of rocks with quotes on the land hidden among them, the installation „Hungry but Happy“, projected images within and a sound and light performance outside the gallery for the opening, which was developed especially for that site. Here too was the first co-operation with Abel Modise and his group, who will also be talking later.

The fact that the gallery is on the ground of the former Malay Camp, led me to expand my show beyond the perimeters of the gallery and use some of the funding to make it possible for Andries Mokghele, a young man who was at that time working as a tour guide and Loius Mallett, a former Malay Camp resident who will be talking to you later, to sit outside the gallery, using the professional Mc Gregor Museum recording equipment to record the stories of MC residents, as well as the questions and comments of passers-by and school classes. These have now entered the museum archive. We also put up signs in the vicinity, in Xhosa, Tswana, Afrikaans and English, with images from the museum archive, showing the multi-cultural Malay Camp residents and asking people to join us in looking at and re-memering *our* history. This *our* was important in signalling that people of all different cultures, origins and religions had lived in Malay Camp, as there is still a tendency which needs counteracting, for people to say “Oh, yes, the Malays!” and feel that it has nothing to do with them.

The outreach then went further, out to the perimeters of the city, where we placed two signs on the way out into the veldt. The first read „Miles and miles of bugger all“ and had a red bar

through it, the second, read „Miles and miles of histories“. A small intervention aimed at making people aware of the multi-layered stories of lives buried in the ostensibly barren land. Two of these are now installed on one pole outside the WHAG and two are more appropriately sited by David Morris so that they are seen as one leaves the WK Rock Art Centre, about which he will be speaking later.

In 2005 I returned with a project which built upon what we had started, and called it „The Past is Not Dead“, quoting from Christa Wolf, who quoted Faulkner by saying *„The past is not dead. It is not even past. We divide it from ourselves and pretend to be strangers.“*

This quote was serendipitously on the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's papers when I arrived to discuss the project with Dr Hopfmann. It seemed to me to be the ideal title, as it reflected the problems both Germany and South Africa are having in dealing with their pasts.

In Kimberley the call was put out and a small group of people of all ages gathered to see how, in a short time, one could make the first steps towards putting signals as to our past out into the public space. Of the many ideas put forward we selected a few, which were do-able. Abel will be showing you these elements later and telling you of his experiences. Probably the long contact and establishment of trust over the years made it possible to achieve what we did in such a short time and speaks against a short-term, bombing in, working and leaving model..

David Morris suggested we link all these by taking part in an already planned a day of events. Heritage day. I took up the idea which had developed in 1999, 2000, of having some sign or event in various parts of the city, decentralising and making it available to as many guests and passers-by as possible. I am sorry we did not manage to fit in a sign at Greenpoint, but we had Malay Camp, a wall site near the Big Hole, Wildebeeskuil outside the city and Galaschewe.

(Let Able deal with this....Shortly, there was a map of MC made and discussed with Malay Campers and others on site, a mural with the CW quote and the text handed out and discussed with passers by, a rap using the quote was also produced, recorded and sung in Galashewe and Kimberley centre, signs for the words wind and water were installed at WK and young girls from Galashewe joined Platfontein girls in entertaining the public at the SASI launching of two oral history stories, the group was then bussed to Galaschewe where a new sign with a quote from Robert Sobukwe had been installed on his office, the CW quote was also temporarily installed and the Real Pointers danced a crowd together. Radio interviews and a call-in as well as recording sessions.)

I would like in closing just to encapsulate the conceptual basis for this work.

Many artists work with history or use historical themes. It seems hardly possible not to deal with the past. In this group work, I hope to inspire others of all ages and backgrounds to pick up an historical thread and run with it, developing and learning more about it as one goes, so to speak, *in the process of* creating. It is my hope that we can continue this work in Kimberley, getting to know ourselves, each other and our history and our present better in the process of collecting more stories for the archives and setting up more signals in the public space to show others where we have been.

I am also not sure after all this that I have said precisely what it is that the way I handle art can do...because it is so varied in various situations and even within the one project...I think it is doing different things at different times...communicating, drawing our creativity, re-framing ideas, refocusing the past, making a mosaic of thoughts and feelings, setting markers, signs, surprising one into questioning, encouraging disagreement, as well as further thoughts and feelings.....

There are so many ways of perceiving the past. Here Walter Benjamin creates a terrifying image of the violence and the inevitability of the process of change which catapults us into the future.

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. (...)

His face is turned toward the past.

Where we perceive a chain of events,

he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.

The angel would like to stay,

awaken the dead,

and make whole what has been smashed.

But a storm is blowing in from Paradise;

it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them.

The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

This storm is what we call progress.

But while I was preparing this presentation I heard an interview with the director of the British Museum, in which he said that their exhibitions aim

„to explore from *more than one perspective.*” and that

“the museum has a role in *helping everyone else to talk about identity*

and to *reflect* on how that particular identity might be influenced *or be part of a greater identity*”

and added that they “attempt to present the cultures of the world

as *somehow interconnected* and *somehow one.*

...enormous continuities

of *survival,*

of having *endured* and

how people keep starting again.”

This interview moved me deeply and reminded me that *what really moves me is survival* and

also of what I owe to the Mc Gregor Museum, particularly Fiona Barbour, David Morris, the Focks and the Liversages. They *let me into this world,* which remains *an essential source for my work* and

my *understanding of life.* That is probably an answer as to how someone who never studied history has come to be so involved with it and *why I am interested in opening it to others.*

Thank you all for helping the project thus far.

By-the-way, to the Hare's question, „What happens to us when we die?” one could answer, „If you're lucky you land up as a story, or history or fragments of your life land up in an archive, or, if an artist gets their hands on your life story, you could land up as an installation that often has more to do with them than it has to do with you, as the psychoanalysts will tell you!

But let the others speak for themselves.

Abel Modise (The Past is not Dead – Events)

David Morris (Wildebeestkuil & Miles & Miles)

Louis Malett (Malay Camp. Oral History & Book)

Mr Maniza (Greenpoint)

Vida Allen (Malay Camp & Greenpoint – Museum Projects)