

Liz Crossley's work quoted in a paper by Sabine Marschall, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
This fruitful link-up came about through the work of David Morris,
who has placed one set of the original signs on the Wildebeestkuil site outside Kimberley.

Creating visual imaginaries of the past: Heritage tourism and commemorative monuments in South Africa

Introduction

'Miles and Miles of Bugger all – Miles and Miles of HiStory' is an art intervention by Kimberley-born, Berlin-based artist, Liz Crossley (born 1949)ⁱ. It was part of her exhibition or installation called *This was a city*, which was staged at the William Humphreys Art Gallery in Kimberley in 2004, but spilled out into the streets and historically significant spaces outside the gallery. Crossley's signs were placed along roads leading out of the city, challenging the popular conception of an empty, largely uninhabited half-desert (Karoo) and affirming a landscape rich in histories (Morris 2004). It provokes visitors to question stereotypical conceptions – induced by tourist imagery – of both natural and cultural heritage as unchanging and frozen in time. Visitors are encouraged to rather imagine the landscape as a multi-layered historical place of interaction and human interventions over a long period of time, some of which have left material traces, others not. It is precisely the frequent lack of such traces or visible remains, which poses one of the key predicaments for the emergent cultural and heritage tourism sector in South Africa. Because the tourist industry thrives on visibility and tangible experiences, the heritage sector is called upon to create visually attractive sites and objects that ultimately assist with self-sustainable heritage conservation through commodification.ⁱⁱ

By visually representing selected aspects of a previously invisible past, by visualizing historical narratives previously neglected or marginalized in officially endorsed discourses, the complex, chequered past of a cultural landscape – miles and miles of history – can be unfolded in the tourist imagination. But at the same time – as this paper will show – new hegemonies and historical monologues can emerge, as selected slices of the past are being 'fixed' and foregrounded over others. As opposed to the apartheid-era context, where state-initiated projects of public memory were largely staged for the benefit of local audiences, the heritage products of the post-apartheid heritage sector are also – and sometimes even primarily – addressed at international tourists.

(...)

In my previous research, I have investigated the construction of public monuments, memorials and statues – currently a thriving aspect of the heritage sector – as a socio-political tool to officially endorse specific interpretations of the past in pursuit of ideological agendas and national goals such as reconciliation. In this paper, I want to focus on another significant and often neglected purpose of monuments, namely their ability to 'bring history alive', to serve as photogenic visual markers that provide a sense of tangible experience where there is objectively nothing to see. I argue that by presenting solid renderings of oral histories, by visualizing contested historical narratives and literally casting them in bronze, one can authorize preferred interpretations of the past and lend legitimacy to potentially contested aspects of that past.

Conclusion

As the example of Crossley's public art installation *Miles and Miles of History* illustrates, visual artists both in South Africa and internationally, sometimes create thoughtful pieces of public art with a historical theme or commemorative purpose. Such works, produced in different media, often ephemeral in nature, can become great tourist attractions in their own right, although often for a more narrowly-defined audience. What distinguishes such works from public monument commissions is that they intend to remind or alert the viewer to a historical event without attempting to 'fix' its meaning. Works of (public) fine art are meant to raise awareness and stimulate debate; commemorative public monuments are meant to settle debate by officially endorsing a specific interpretation of the past.

I have tried to illustrate in this paper how the need to create tourist attractions and produce visual markers where there is often literally nothing to see, provides a strong motor for the monument project in post-apartheid South Africa. Its driver is the State, whose agents at various levels use the opportunity to appropriate the past for the reshaping of cultural landscapes in the present to satisfy societal needs and the perceived interests of their constituencies. The enthusiasm with which the government invests in monuments in South Africa today frequently draws criticism, but one must not forget that the strategy of complementing the overwhelming presence of 'white' monuments with 'black' monuments has probably saved the country from a radical wave of destruction or removal targeted at what many perceive as hated reminders of a painful past. Not only are older monuments still meaningful and symbolically significant for a minority, but their continued presence will undoubtedly enhance the tourist's experience of South Africa's diverse culture and heritage for years to come.

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ⁱ According to her personal website, Crossley was born on 14.10.1949 in Kimberley and studied Fine Art at the University of Cape Town in the late 1960s. She worked in The Hague, London and Paris before returning to South Africa to complete her M.A. in Fine Art at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. In the early 1980s, she accepted a lecturing position in London and from 1986 she has been working as a successful free-lance artist in Berlin.

ⁱⁱ This paper is part of a larger research project on Commemoration and Heritage in post-apartheid South Africa, funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF).