

## Translation of Michael Thoss' Speech

at the opening of Liz Crossley's exhibition, Land=hiSTORIES, Department of the Environment, Berlin 2000

To take on the task of talking about Liz Crossley, who herself has an art historical training, has worked as a custodian, critic and teacher, puts one's courage to the test.

Liz Crossley's works refer to each other: each new work takes on and transforms elements from another and gives impulses for the next. In this way Liz Crossley's different works form a Gesamtkunstwerk in a constant flow, which unites the most disparate elements.

The access to her work seems to me to be as many-sided as the media and materials she chooses: She uses oil painting, drawing, photography and projection, installation, text and sound collages. (I bet I have missed something!) The word is always of central importance, whether it is in her dealing with contemporary art theories or with the oral history of her land of origin, South Africa. Liz Crossley once described herself as "an ambivalent, white South African."

This double awareness, which she developed in the first half of her life, as a white person in a majority black society but formed by Puritanism, Race discrimination, made her aware of the local realities. By taking cultural practices from southern Africa and putting them in relation to the European ones, mixing them and re-layering them, she takes the exotic out of the foreign.

In her sound collage in which Celtic hymns and religious songs of the San people, descendants of the first people in southern Africa, she transports examples of ritual practice from different cultural spaces, puts them in an actual aesthetic relationship and thus establishes parity.

Liz Crossley, who has been living in Berlin for fifteen years, is a 'borderliner' and mediator of the world images of the south and the north, which she constantly questions and puts together in new ways. In this way she makes us aware that identity in our trans-national and global world is constantly being reconstructed. The artist always sees nature in its cultural-historical dimensions, a constant aspect of Liz Crossley's work, which fits well in the present exhibition space, the Department of the Environment.

Nature- like the dry landscapes of her home province, the Northern Cape-are not for her simply "natural" in the sense of untouched and pure. To idealise nature in this way, as we do in our ever-green and rain blessed central Europe, a glance out of the window suffices, would be foreign to her. Too well does she know the history of privation, the hard living and survival conditions of the first peoples to occupy this land, the San and later the Tswana, who were subjugated or driven out of her own forbearers, the British missionaries and settlers. This dry piece of land is no refuge for the romantic soul. There is no room for such sentimentality in the work of Liz Crossley.

In the work of Liz Crossley, nature is covered in layer after layer of cards of human conquest and colonisation, warlike annexation and systematic expulsion, cultivation and destruction of human living spaces, all of which, for her, are in a close dialectical relationship. Here the places and their histories can not be separated from their environment.

Again and again, Liz Crossley shows the landscape round her home town, Kimberley, which shows the scars of Diamond mining. She last did this in her postcard action at the House of World Cultures, where she collected the responses of the visitors to the exhibition, which can be read here today.

Liz Crossley used a colonial photograph, which shows a Khoisan type shelter made of grain sacks and packing cases, before which a group of children dressed in rags sits. (The British used the appellation, "location" for these poor quarters!) "A typical kaffir hut" is the disdainful description printed on the postcard, which, by-the-way was printed in Germany at that time and sent all over the world by the white inhabitants of the Cape Province as a sign of their superiority. "Hungry, but happy!" is hand written under this and we have no idea whether this was meant seriously or sarcastically. Because the Apartheid regime seriously proposed that the black community could

only maintain their culture in the round huts or in the poor townships. By focusing on the multi-layered readings of these images, Liz Crossley shows how landscape makes history, or writes history: She calls these works, some of which can be seen here, Land-schafft-Geschichten (Land makes histories) (Land = hiSTORIES).

She leads us back into the prehistory of her area, for example to the holy places of the San people, near her home, Kimberley, in her search for and securing of signs which she follows with the sure sense of an archaeologist: In this exhibition she has projected images a site of San engravings combined with her own paintings of this site in a sandwich technique. In this way, she places the iconography of the San, which has still not been entirely understood in a new context: she projects over the official white history, which saw itself as having a God-given task, the earth-bound history of the ancient people.

The blood red and earth-coloured text stele standing in front of this mark the stations of the fall of an ancient culture, which was destroyed by the European settlers in a relatively short space of time.

One could describe Liz Crossley's way of working as reciprocal Anthropology, one which describes the polyphonics of equal artistic practices and modes of expression, whether they come from Africa or Europe, the Centre or the so-called Periphery. In this way Liz Crossley develops new maps of indigenous and urban Landscapes, which communicate with each other permanently.

The cultural philosopher, Homi K. Bhabha, who lives in Chicago, writes, that today we find ourselves in a state of permanent cultural exchange. Quote: " We live more and more between the cultural differences, and we draw our aesthetic values from the border areas between languages, territories and communities, which no longer belong to *one* cultural or national tradition....Only when we grant the different cultures, which are living with us the right to tell their stories, can the dialogue of the cultures of the world begin."

Liz Crossley's work is itself a motor for this cultural transmission, which works against the hierarchialising of the cultures. Her works are the stories of others and thus about ourselves.