Zombie monument: Public art and performing the present

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Art in public space in South Africa is increasingly a more visible locus of sociopolitical resistance and recalibration of the public sphere. This article focuses upon an emblematic example: the sculpture of a former colonialist, removed from its public university site in Cape Town following sustained protests. Since April 2015, the empty plinth of Cecil John Rhodes has become a site of re-imagination – from graffiti interventions to performance and installation art. While the plinth continually morphs in symbolism and significance, its ousted artwork waits at an undisclosed location for its fate to be decided. This interregnum represents a liminal condition that theorists call 'third space', extended in this research towards a fourth dimension of performativity. The physical disappearance of the artwork has triggered a second life, its apogee a national protest movement with global resonance. *Rhodes Must Fall* and *Fees Must Fall* are student-led calls for university decolonisation and free education arguably best understood as provocation around systemic issues in society. As this deeper work ensues amid fractious contestations, the artwork's re-animation of the public sphere is clear. Its leftover plinth is political, making visible other kinds of structural voids. It is also poetic: a zombie monument demonstrating through its reinventions public space as common space – contested, negotiated and performed in the daily creation of city futures.

1. Introduction

A figure stands upon an assortment of empty plinths, which previously bore colonial-era statues in Angola's capital city of Luanda, and stages enactments that re-imagine these memorials for contemporary times. In one pose, the man adopts a confident stance, dressed in a grey outfit with flared trousers. In another, he is caught in the full flow of a book recital and is garishly dressed in green, blue and yellow, with red stockings. These enactments form part of a photographic series by artist Kiluanji Kia Henda, entitled *Redefining the Power*.

The power is also being redefined about 3500 km south of Luanda, in the South African city of Cape Town where an empty plinth previously bore a colonial-era figure. This plinth is centrally located at a public university campus, overlooking the city's southern suburbs. It is the former perch of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes, an imperialist and colonialist. The bronze Rhodes sculpture was created by Marion Walgate and unveiled in 1934. Over 80 years later, in April 2015, the artwork was removed to a temporary undisclosed location in the wake of protests. Its sizeable plinth was then covered by a wooden crate and, at time of writing, remains this way.

However, as with Henda's photographic work, the plinth has taken on an intriguing performative life of its own. This article narrates a series of public interventions before and after the statue's removal and considers their larger significance. The primary research method in this arts-based inquiry was repeat site visits using iterative observation techniques, borrowing from Anthropology to 'follow the thing' (the artwork). The aim is to demonstrate how visual art has the capacity to recalibrate the public sphere by acting as vector of both resistance and radical re-imagination. In so doing, it draws upon the author's recent research into a trilogy of art interventions in Johannesburg ('New Imaginaries') that during 2012 explored public space (Gurney, 2015). These employed walking or ambulatory thinking, subversive play and performance art.

Two key findings were posited in this earlier work, which inform and enable researcher observations in the Rhodes case study. Firstly, an accretive appreciation builds throughout the trilogy of public space understood as common space – contested, negotiated, and daily enacted by multiple parties. "The common is full of productive moments of resistance that create new vocabularies, solidarities, social and spatial practices and relations and repertoires of resistance" (Chatterton, 2010: 626). Public space is constituted through dynamic acts of 'commoning', as Chatterton terms it. The second key point relates to the ephemeral

and nomadic characteristics of the *New Imaginaries* trilogy, which meant it was beyond easy capture – financial or otherwise. The findings helped deliver a riposte to an instrumentalist rationality currently pervading arts policy discourse and articulated by South Africa's own arts strategy, *Mzansi's Golden Economy*. That pervasive approach broadly validates the art sector economically as an industry, privileging growth of Gross Domestic Product, jobs and foreign exchange earnings.[2] The Conclusion offered an alternative value script that positioned public art as part of an urban commons, privileging public interest.

This idea of common space, in turn, was built upon Homi Bhabha's notion of Third Space, where hybridity and ambiguity allow for other, often incommensurable, positions to emerge (Bhabha, 2004). His writings have been influential in cultural politics; they engage colonialism, race and identity and provide a theoretical framework for this article. As Bhabha writes, "terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively" (2004: 3). This article expands the notion of third space, exemplified by the empty plinth, towards a fourth dimension of performativity. Further, it corresponds to the potential of an undercommons, as articulated by Harney and Moten (2013) who also apply this concept to the university itself.

Third space has a number of variants. Edward Soja developed 'thirdspace' as a way to understand spatiality and act to change it, drawing in turn upon Henri Lefebvre's ideas around spatial knowledge and its social production. Soja writes: "*Everything* comes together: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history" (Soja, 1996: 56–7, original emphasis). Other interpretations include: "an alternative to dualistic epistemologies" (Pile, cited in Law, 1997: 109) that incorporates a new geometry of knowledge, or a 'third space'; a variety of 'third places' that comprise community hangouts (Oldenburg, 1989), 'non-places' (Augé, 1995) and creolised urban spaces (Nuttall & Michael, 2000). Third space is neither the material space we experience nor a representation of it but "a space of representation… bearing the possibility of new meanings, a space activated through social action and the social imagination [where] unexpected intersections possess liberatory potential" (Crawford, 1999: 29).

The understanding of performativity to apprehend the Rhodes case study is drawn from the field of contemporary art. Visual art practices since the 1960s have opened themselves up to a theatricality that suggests processes of art production and reception as performative, with meaning enacted through interpretive engagements rather than a static object with prescribed signification (Jones & Stephenson, 1999). "The notion of the performative highlights the open-endedness of interpretation, which must thus be understood as a process rather than an act with a final goal… in the complex web of relations among artists, patrons, collectors, and both specialized and non-specialized viewers" (1999: 12). Moreover, such visual art practices tap into the shifting nature of the city's multiple modalities and a broader 'performative turn', acknowledged in theory and by human geography specifically in the 1990s (Dirksmeier & Helbrecht, 2010). This ephemeral turn matters in a current moment of intensified financialisation that increasingly puts art, and the academy, to work.

This case study has renewed relevance in the light of ongoing contestations around Confederacy symbols in the United States (US). Most recently, violent clashes in August 2017 flared in Charlottesville, Virginia, around the mooted removal of a statue of a Confederate military leader, Robert Lee. While every situation concerning symbols from the past has its own singularities, some insights can be drawn from

Cape Town and perhaps some parallels. For one thing, the statues of Lee and Rhodes in effect venerate oppression through past ideologies which continue to shape present realities. This in a broader context of contemporary right-wing political gains in both the United States and parts of Europe. Regarding the statues as heritage symbols that only speak about history is a position most readily available to those for whom such realities are not a daily lived condition. The leftover plinth at the University of Cape Town (UCT) thus provokes a common abiding question of public interest: what do we do with the unfinished business of the past?

That question is a pointed consideration for postcolonial societies. In 1994, South Africa finally shed apartheid, which was declared by the United Nations General Assembly as a crime against humanity, and transitioned into democracy. Yet the material realities for the majority are still inflected by the inequities of the past. Such concerns evidently formed part of the agitation around the Rhodes statue. This article posits the wishful thinking that artworks may embody as offering a transformative hinge towards re-imagining those selfsame realities. This is set in contradistinction to magical thinking, which wishes such realities away. Through the disruption of the voided plinth, the case study stresses the potential of the transient, nomadic and local over the concrete, permanent and spectacular to perform social imaginaries anew – and hence city futures.

2. Context

Monuments are rigid both in their physiognomy and limited capacity to represent change and after a while such monuments "fail to represent the changing perception of the events they are supposed to commemorate and of the people responsible for such acts of commemoration" (Lambert & Ochsner, 2009: 11). This is particularly the case for societies that have witnessed political regime change. Post-apartheid South Africa has largely kept historical artworks in public spaces and commissioned new ones alongside, reflecting the reconciliatory approach of a politically negotiated transition. This is evident in other examples of public culture: the multilingual national anthem stitches together old and new. That said, for complex reasons, artworks in varying contexts have recently become sites of spectacle where differing views collide and these contestations play out in the public sphere. The most recent example is the public sculpture of Rhodes hoisted from its plinth.

This action may initially seem reactionary but a brief diversion into the sociology of spatial inequality helps contextualise expressions in South African public space. But first, what is understood by public space? "The geography of public space… can best be defined as the relationship between the physical materiality of specific kinds of (generally) publicly accessible spaces, the processes that structure inclusion and exclusion, and the struggles to change (or maintain) both the structures and form of public space. The interaction of these elements produces public space as (actually existing) public space" (Mitchell & Staeheli, 2009: 512–13). Public art is art outside of museums and galleries and must fit within at least one of the following categories, according to Cartiere & Willis (2008: 15, emphasis mine): in a place accessible or visible to the public: *in public*; concerned with or affecting the community or individuals: *public interest*; maintained for or used by the community of individuals: *public place*; or paid for by the public: *publicly funded*.

It is well understood the country remains a markedly unequal society despite democratic gains. One of the world's highest Gini co-efficients, a measure of income inequality, reflects this disparity, and recent government statistics show that more than half of South Africans (55%) in 2015 lived in poverty (Lehohla, 2017). However, it is generally less appreciated how these inequities are spatially replicated in the present tense (Bernstein, Altbeker, & Johnston, 2016; Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), 2016; Karuri-Sebina, 2016; Moreno et al., 2016). Speaking about South Africa's National

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[2] Policy is at time of writing under consideration through a review process of the White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage.