Troubling Histories: Public Art and Prejudice (Johannesburg, 15–18 Nov 17)

Johannesburg, Nov 15–18, 2017
Deadline: Feb 28, 2017

Brenda Schmahmann, University of Johannesburg

This is a call for papers, a selection of which will be identified for further development into 5000--word articles for a themed issue of De Arte, a Taylor & Francis journal published with the University of South Africa. The conference will take place at the offices of the Research Chair of South African Art and Visual Culture at the University of Johannesburg between the evening of 15 November and lunchtime on the 18 November 2017.

The keynote address will be by well-known scholar of public art, Prof Erika Doss from the Department of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame, whose publications include Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities (1995), The Emotional Life of Contemporary Public Memorials: Towards a Theory of Temporary Memorials (2008), and Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America (2010).

THE THEME

In March 2015, a small-scale protest against Marion Walgate's sculpture of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town developed into the "Rhodes Must Fall" movement and culminated in the work's removal from campus a month later. The protest had widespread impact. Raising questions about not only Rhodes' representation in the public domain but also those of other individuals associated with values and ideologies that have fallen from favour who are commemorated in South Africa, it had the additional impact of reigniting a long-standing international concern: whether focused on sculptures of Lost Cause heroes in the United States, European monuments commemorating individuals revealed to have been Nazi sympathisers or Australian monuments memorialising events associated with the suppression of aboriginal peoples, for example, art historians and other citizens concerned about visual discourse in the public domain have long-since debated what steps, if any, should be taken to negotiate 'problematical' public art inheritances.

The contention around the representation of Cecil Rhodes also highlighted longstanding concerns about how art in the public domain has tended to recognise some histories and experiences while marginalising others. Unsurprisingly, endeavours to negotiate prejudicial art from the past has been simultaneous with endeavours to create new monuments and memorials which recognise the victims of oppression and atrocities. Some of these new public works have been successful, and the reasons for their success are worth exploring. Others, however, have proved controversial. Raising debate about not only about who or what is commemorated but also sometimes the designs deployed for such commemorations, some have additionally involved contention about

the locales in which these works are placed, consultations that may or may not have taken place in the process of developing them, as well as a host of other issues.

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PROPOSALS

For this conference, we seek papers which consider individual case studies from anywhere across the globe, and from any disciplinary perspective. We ask for explorations of debates that have arisen about one of the following:
1. the removal, retention or mediated display of historical sculptures, memorials and other public commemorations that, from a current perspective, may be associated with oppression.
2. new monuments, whether built or still in the design and conceptualisation phase, which engage with histories of oppression and prejudice, and/or commemorate their victims.

We envisage papers that unpack the implications of concerns or contentions, situating them in terms of the social and political histories of the communities in which they emerged as well as debates about representation and the politics of public art.

Proposed papers must be previously unpublished, original and eligible for selection for potential publication. Please note that those selected will need to be fully developed by the end of February 2018 in order to undergo peer-review. Papers must be in English.

A prospective participant should submit a proposal with the words “Troubling Histories Conference” in the subject line, and send it to the convenors, Brenda Schmahmann (brendas@uj.ac.za) and Kim Miller (miller_kim@wheatonma.edu), and copied to the administrator at the offices of the Research Chair of South African Art and Visual Culture, Neelofir Nagdee (nnagdee@uj.ac.za), by 28 February 2017. Please submit a single WORD document with the following information:
1. a title for your paper
2. an abstract between 350 and 500 words in length for a 30-minute paper
3. a short biography, including your current institutional affiliation (about 200 words)
4. your contact details, i.e. e-mail address, postal address, telephone number/s

Applicants will be notified of decisions by the end of March.

FUNDING

Presenters will need to arrange and pay for their own travel costs to Johannesburg. They will not, however, be charged a conference fee. Additionally, international presenters and those from out of town will be provided with accommodation sponsored by the host on the evenings of 15, 16 and 17 November.

Reference:

CFP: Troubling Histories: Public Art and Prejudice (Johannesburg, 15-18 Nov 17). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 31, 2017 (accessed Nov 2, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/14651>.