

Contemporary Approaches to Commemorative Public Art (Johannesburg, 9–11 Nov 23)

University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, Nov 9–11, 2023

Deadline: Mar 15, 2023

Brenda Schmahmann, University of Johannesburg

Monumental Developments: Contemporary Approaches to Commemorative Public Art.

This is a call for papers for a conference hosted by the NRF Research Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture at the University of Johannesburg. It is envisaged that selected papers from the conference will be developed into either an edited scholarly volume or a special issue of a peer-reviewed journal.

THEME

#RhodesMustFall and #BlackLivesMatter has been of inestimable value in enabling critical attention to be focused on monuments that commemorate individuals associated with problematical values or events that were part of shameful histories. These movements have also been important in highlighting ways in which public art is intricately linked to the articulation of identities and, rather than being an innocuous backdrop to our lives, shape how we understand ourselves and our place in the world in important ways. And they have also made evident that how our explanations of the past through visual culture are deeply connected to how we understand the present. But the corrections to the public art landscape that #RhodesMustFall and #BlackLivesMatter have encouraged have usually been only to the people and events we would seek to have represented in the public domain. Those responding to their necessary calls for changes to the contemporary heritage landscape sometimes overlook some other important shifts that have arisen in the last years of the twentieth century and in the new millennium – namely, ones concerning the nature of monuments themselves and how they function.

For many designers and artists, an effective and progressive commemorative public art involves not simply rethinking who or what should be commemorated but also how such commemoration might happen – that is, the form monuments or memorials should assume. Traditionalist uses of bronze and marble to represent people or events mimetically seem, for many, curiously anachronistic in the contemporary world. This may be in part because statuary of this type draws on traditions rooted in authoritarianism. For example, in ancient Rome, mimetic public art formed part of an imperialist agenda: by transporting mimetic sculpted portraits of leaders to the far reaches of his realm, his absolute power and authority was conveyed. But there are additional concerns about the process in which monuments are interpreted and perceived. While their seeming legibility may give traditionalist statuary or other kinds of mimetic work populist appeal, such commemorative art often in fact discourages participative processes of engagement or interpretations in

the light of viewers' different experiences. And such art is frequently at odds with a performative approach to public art – that is, one where the artwork enables commemoration and remembrance to be conceived of as a process that is activated by viewers themselves. While figuration has not necessarily been abandoned by artists working in contemporary paradigms, it has been deployed in ways very different to how it was a century ago.

This conference invites an identification and discussion of examples of commemorative monuments from the late 20th century or early 21st century that have enabled new and progressive perspectives and understandings of histories and experiences through not simply their subject matter but, most crucially, their actual form and design. It encourages focus on the kinds of visual strategies that have proved apposite in the contemporary world, revealing how enhanced understandings and experiences on the part of visitors and spectators are the outcome of design choices and new approaches to the art of commemoration that makers have deployed.

PROPOSALS

A prospective presenter is invited to offer a 30-minute paper focusing on commemorative public art from any geography. Potential participants are encouraged to focus on one or two examples, exploring them in depth rather than offering broad surveys.

The term “commemorative monument” may be interpreted broadly to include both physical objects or structures installed in public spaces and works of a more temporal type. It may also include contemporary adaptations to older monuments. Also, for the purposes of this conference, prospective presenters may assume a liberal understanding of where “public art” might be found (on city streets, on campuses, in corporate environments, on heritage sites, on the World Wide Web, and so on). The only notable exclusion would be exhibitions in galleries and museums – that is, unless those shows are themselves focused critically on “public art” as a topic.

Papers must be on material that has not already been published. A prospective presenter must also be willing to develop the proposed paper into either a book chapter or journal article, should it be selected for inclusion in a publication. Papers must be in English.

Please submit your proposal with “Monumental Developments” in the subject line, and send it to the convener, Brenda Schmahmann (brendas@uj.ac.za), 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 15 March 2023. 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 (up to 200 words)
4. your contact details, i.e. e-mail address, postal address, mobile phone number
5. a statement confirming that your paper has not been previously published and that, should it be selected, you would be willing to develop it into an article or chapter for inclusion in a publication emanating from the conference

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

Presenters will not be charged a conference fee.

FUNDING

Presenters will need to organise and pay for their own travel costs to the University of 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 from the evenings of 8 November until 12 November (4 nights).

Reference:

CFP: Contemporary Approaches to Commemorative Public Art (Johannesburg, 9-11 Nov 23). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 15, 2023 (accessed Apr 9, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/38327>>.