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# A new monumentalism? From public art to Freedom Park

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## Abstract

The paper uses the Gautrain as a device to link several works of public art and the new memorial at Freedom Park, interrogating their authorship, kinship, functions and aesthetic impact. The gigantic size of these works, their attempts to make portentous statements and to hail a defined public, suggest that they might belong to a new 'monumentalism'. The paper advances an argument for why there may be a return to monumentalism, noting the several Herculean labours works of public art are required to perform in the context of urban regeneration and the summoning of a history that is free of conflict and troubling suggestions of heterogeneity. The principal artist whose works are examined in the paper, Marco Cianfanelli, is part of a network that has explicitly committed itself to emancipating 'public' places from their exclusive and coercive apartheid past. Cianfanelli himself has expressed the hope that his works in the public sphere will encourage spectators to think critically about their environments. But, since some of his works appear bogged down in a blatantly mercenary project for so-called urban regeneration and his Freedom Park work contributes to what is described in this paper as a highly romanticised version of African history, his optimism may be unwarranted.

Key words: *Urban being*; *Running Man*; Cianfanelli; Freedom Park; Pretoria/Tshwane; monuments

## Introduction

This is a hard paper for me to write.<sup>1</sup> There are artists in my family and I work in a school of arts. I certainly don't want to say things that could be construed as wanting to put artists out of an already precarious business or that sound unappreciative of the value that public art adds to urban landscapes. I think it is a pity that artists like those I discuss below seem sometimes to be forced into compromises to allow their work to sell the 'vibrancy' of retail centres or – perhaps and this is a riskier argument – to make work that sells what is a very beautiful 'chimera' of national and continental history, but a chimera nonetheless.

I begin with a chance sighting of a work that turned out to be by a well-known local artist, Marco Cianfanelli in The Fields Centre in Hatfield, Pretoria. Through my attempt to get to know his *Urban Being* (Figure 1) on one side of the centre and his sculpture of a man running entitled *Into the Fields* on the other, I was led to think about kindred public art, notably William Kentridge and Gerhard Marx's *Fire Walker* in downtown Johannesburg, similarly recruited to the cause of urban regeneration. These installations are all of 'colossal' proportions as if their superhuman scale could allow them to speak of the 'elemental' (Yampolsky 1995:94). My ruminations on whether or not, in terms of size and aspiration, they might be classified as monuments, as well as the fact that Cianfanelli is also



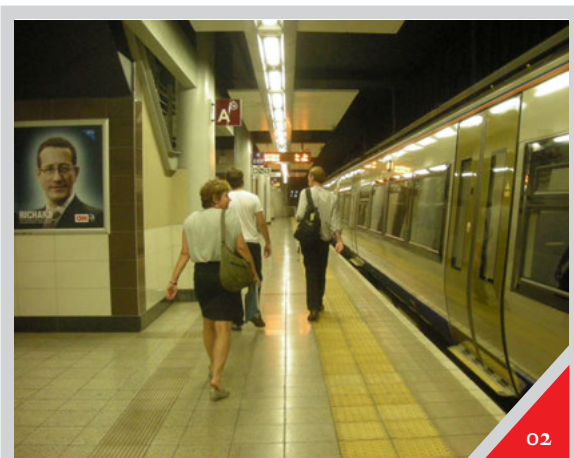
**Figure 1:** M Cianfanelli, *Urban Being* on traffic island. Photograph by William Mabin.

responsible for the new memorial structure at Freedom Park have caused me to interrogate what may well be a new monumentalism.

In the course of the paper, I move back and forth between discussions of various works of public art and the memorial at Freedom Park. Inspired by the observations of Paul Virilio (1984) on how our perceptions are altered, framed or conditioned by contemporary cinematography and by the views we glimpse from the windows of high-speed trains or jet planes, I record my impressions of objects thrown together by the time-space compression effected by the Gautrain on the route from Johannesburg to Hatfield, Pretoria. As *voyeur-voyageur* (Virilio 1984), I am afforded the opportunity of comparing structures from perspectives that are not available to the pedestrian spectator or to the motorist who must keep her eyes fixed on the highway (Figure 2). Habituated to the notion of 'replay' (Virilio 1984), I am in a position to consider the effects of varia-

ble lighting and backdrops even on the Voortrekker Monument, apparently so well entrenched in the iconography of the old monumentalism.

In the sections of the paper in which I discuss public art I ask, drawing on the work of de Certeau *et al*, what



**Figure 2:** Gautrain. Photograph by Linda Mabin.

is meant in this instance, by 'public' – how much of the 'public' are the works capable of, or desirous of embracing? Given that the works I discuss are part of urban regeneration schemes for the cities of Pretoria and Johannesburg respectively, I consider what the work is that the art is required to do and how it may vary or be constrained by different settings or, alternatively how it may seek to constrain the users of the so-called public spaces.

With regard to the Freedom Park memorial, I argue that it has been assigned the Herculean task of manufacturing a new history that is, perhaps by necessity, atemporal in order to enable it to transcend our current versions of South African history inextricably rooted, as they are, in particular moments of conflict. Lastly, I ask what the probable effects are of certain kinds of public art and of the memorial. In the case of the latter, my analysis is led by Foucault's (2000) reading of Nietzsche's call for 'effective' history in place of what I am imagining Nietzsche/Foucault would dismiss as 'chimera.'

## Return of the monument?

Not very long ago at the University of the Witwatersrand we were studying ways in which the artist Kevin Brand had reworked that most resilient icon of all – Sam Nzima's photograph of Mbuyisa Makhubu carrying the dying Hector Pieterse in his arms as he runs from the conflagration with Hector's sister Antoinette Pieterse (Sithole) wailing in anguish at his side. Brand has redone the picture in other kinds of media in settings that are remote from Soweto in order to encourage viewers to ask about what is not shown or known about the 1976 uprising. His picking at the threads of the minutiae prompted one of my students to ask me if I thought there would be a return to the

monumental. Brand, in one instance, by fitting a long shadow flung backwards from Mbuyisa's heels in a picture he made for the exterior wall of the museum in Dakar for the 1998 Biennale, seemed to be insisting on nuance and complexity at variance with the iconic familiarity of the Nzima image. The author of the essay we were studying argues that Brand's (1998) addition provided a form of relief to an image that she visualises as having been 'flattened' by years of often indiscriminate recycling (Simbao 2008:145). She describes it as resonating with Roland Barthes' preference for the text 'with a shadow' over cleaner, more straightforward texts. Citing Barthes, Simbao (2008:144) writes:

There are those who want a text without a shadow ... but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text ... the text needs its shadow ... subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro.

It was in the course of our discussion of this picture and the Barthes quotation in particular that the student remarked that he thought the pendulum might soon swing the other way so that we might see a return to the 'monument'. I took him to mean something massive made of durable material rather than Brand's duct tape, and which, if it casts a shadow does so only to magnify its own grandeur. Monuments are not, of course, as simple as this. The period after 1945 witnessed what is often described as a crisis in representation because the 'symbolic language' (Carrier 2005:20) available could not convey the horror of the Holocaust. Monuments thereafter sometimes attempted to cultivate a much smaller scale intimacy with their spectators or even to speak against monumentalism (Young 1992). In 1927 Robert Musil had already famously portrayed monuments as becoming invisible through familiarity (cited in Carrier 2005) and Pierre Nora (1986) was later to argue that paradoxically monuments allow for forgetting. In identifying monuments as a genre, despite

all these caveats, Carrier makes three points, among others, that I think are worth bearing in mind and are, in some measure, germane to all the works I discuss below. Monuments strive to provide 'focal points of collective identity'; are the bearers of putative 'historical tradition,' and mark a 'symbolic possession of urban spaces' (Carrier 2005:17).

However, despite the range of their scale nowadays, the automatic semantic association with 'monument' is still with the colossal and the student's remark put me in mind of two pieces of recent public art – Cianfanelli's *Urban Being* and Kentridge and Marx's *Fire Walker*, both of which are gigantic. It was their physical size that initially prompted me to wonder if the monumental is making its return via public art and that, if this is the case, what the implications are. Later I began to consider other aspects of monumentalism that resonate with Carrier's points alluded to above. Carrier (2005:20), giving an account of the impact of the 1945 crisis of representation through the eyes of some of the principal scholars who have written about it, also emphasises the shattering of orthodox aesthetic traditions and gestures towards the taxing work that had to be done in an attempt to 'reconstruct coherent memory cultures.' This is an extremely evocative phrase and one that is pertinent to the South African case where 'historical discontinuity' (Carrier 2005:20) is obviously one of the primary challenges for any representation of the past.

It struck me that it was no accident that I had used the word 'galvanise' in the abstract I submitted for the conference at which the present paper was aired in draft form. Not only did 'galvanise' have connotations of the kind of material favoured by this new breed of public art, but it also seemed to be suggestive of how artists and their patrons might view the magnitude of the effort that it takes to halt the erosion of parts of the city.

In a fanciful moment I saw *Urban Being* and *Fire Walker* exercising tremendous holding power over patches of soil exhausted by years of frenetic human activity that was on the point of shifting and breaking up.

I was reminded of David Bunn's (2008) imagery of the city's skin (in the case of Johannesburg) refusing or being unable to register its subterranean turmoil, most obviously a reference to the agonising labour in the mines that gave birth to the city. Bunn and some of his co-authors in the volume on the so-called 'Elusive Metropolis' create the impression of a city living dangerously close to the edge, if for no other reason than it is built on shifting ground, rendered unstable by the sinking of extraordinarily deep mine shafts. There is a suggestion that Johannesburg is callously – or defensively – disposed to amnesia and does not willingly remember its history and so, it seemed to me that the two sculptures might also be striving to contain the increasingly rapid disintegration of certain types of urban memory (see Dodd 2011a and Carrier on 'memory cultures' above). It occurred to me that, whereas *Urban Being* and *Fire Walker* are undoubtedly the progeny of particular artists with some common semiotic tactics, the form they take may be as compelled by the friable nature of the contemporary landscape – both urban and mnemonic - as it is by the genius of their creators. Under those circumstances, can there be any way of accommodating the visual equivalent of the kinds of subtle and therefore generative text that appealed to Barthes? Here I imagine some form of public sculpture that is genuinely open to several interpretations and is capable of prompting radical revisions of the city's past.

## *Urban Being – September 2011*

You glimpse him first as you make your way from the Hatfield Gautrain station beyond Walton's stationery



**Figure 3:** *Urban Being* and Walton's. Photograph by William Mabin.

shop along an avenue of desiccated jacaranda trees, looking like an overgrown traveller pausing before he goes to check in at the City Lodge to his right (Figure 3). But surely, you say to yourself, they don't have beds to accommodate his unyielding twelve-metre frame? *Urban Being*, he is called, by sculptor Marco Cianfanelli, a Wits Fine Arts graduate who has since made a name for himself, recently featuring as one of a handful of artists of Italian descent from South Africa at the most recent Venice Biennale. His exhibition for the Biennale had its premiere here in Pretoria at the nearby Art Museum in June 2011.

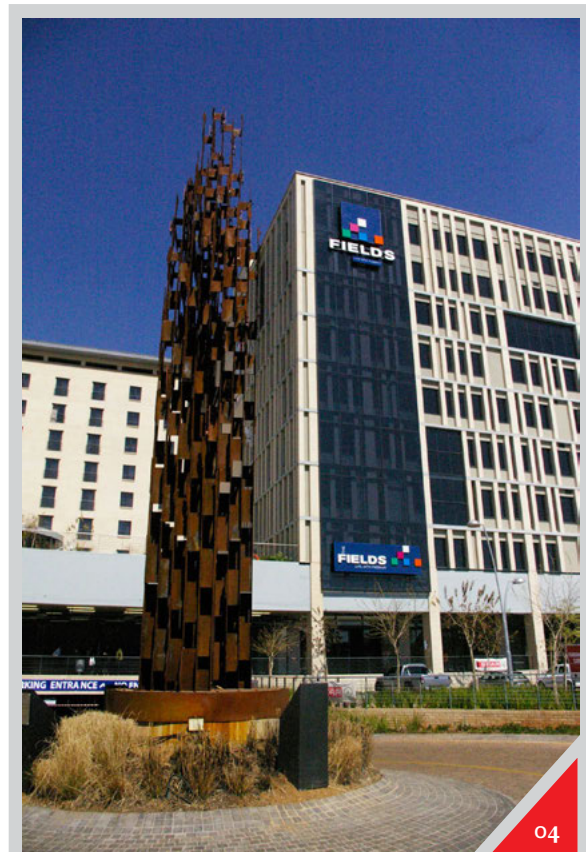
*Urban Being* has no lightness despite his name, which inevitably conjures an association with Milan Kundera's *Unbearable lightness of being*. It is strange that he

has none of the dynamism of the man running 'into the fields' on the south side of the shopping centre by the same artist or of the ethereal spirituality of the reed fence that reaches effortlessly into the sky reddening over Salvokop on the return Gautrain journey, making you catch your breath despite your cynicism, which was also created by Cianfanelli.

*Urban Being* seems to have to muster all his energy for being and for compacting the city over several centuries in the form of little people who roam over his body in a style that is reminiscent of, but not as graceful as Clive van den Berg's *Commuter* at the Chris Hani-Baragwanath taxi rank in Soweto. *Urban Being*, like some of Cianfanelli's other work – like the man running into – but it seems more as if he is

running out of – ‘the fields’ which, perhaps he has not noticed, have been transmuted into a shopping centre carrying only the whiff of an anglicised memory of the open veld – is made up of layers. In this work the metaphor is heavy and repetitive, whereas it works much better in Cianfanelli’s other sculptures (see for example, his work displayed in Turbine Hall discussed below). Here, presumably, it refers us to the epochs and the processes that are laid down like cast iron sediment to make this being that is not strictly a man but a vast composite of city life that we are only able to apprehend as a man. From certain vantage points his human likeness is broken up into complex abstraction (Figure 4). In this we recognise that he has kin in other places including William Kentridge and Gerhard Marx’s *Fire Walker* in Johannesburg. It is hardly surprising because Cianfanelli works with other well-known artists through the Goodman Gallery and the Trinity Session, the latter being an ‘art production team’ directed by Stephen Hobbs and Marcus Neustetter, which focuses on urban regeneration and public art – and there must be many mutual influences and what are popularly known as synergies (Vansa 2011; see Bunn 2008 on the Trinity Session).

*Fire Walker*, made of laser cut steel plates, almost rivalling *Urban Being* in height, can only be seen as a *gogo* carrying a brazier packed with lit coals for cooking on her head from one place that evidently favours the pedestrian’s perspective. For car drivers going over the Queen Elizabeth bridge she is quickly lost and dissolved into incoherent fragments, which to some critics has given her a disturbing, ghostly quality that suggests to them that certain kinds of black women are still not welcome in the city (Matsipa 2011) and for others confirms the genius of Kentridge and Marx in confounding the tradition of the staid, immovable urban monument (Dodd 2011a). Marx has explained the metaphor of the different planes that make up *Fire*



**Figure 4:** *Urban Being* fragmentation.  
Photograph by William Mabin.



**Figure 5:** *Urban Being* and City Lodge.  
Photograph by William Mabin.

*Walker* – or which cause her to disintegrate – as ‘comments on the nature of living in Johannesburg – ruptured, colliding, unstable, but also, once settled, open to the possibility of new and unexpected formations’

(Barstow 2011:30; Bunn 2008; and the work of Ivan Vladislavic, particularly 2004). Johannesburg has come to own what Alex Dodd (2011a:21), also writing about *Fire Walker*, refers to as its 'marginal and contingent nature,' which can be simultaneously exasperating, terrifying and exhilarating. But, what of Pretoria? Has *Urban Being* strayed into the wrong city? Did he fall asleep on Gautrain and miss the mellow, locally-inflected electronic voice asking him to 'please' leave the train and only wake up once it had turned around and come back to Hatfield, leaving him no option but to see if there was a place for him at the local City Lodge? (Figure 5).

Mabin (2011) points out that the capital city in general has to make certain decisions about how to represent the nation and its place in the world and that it generally does so through its public buildings and monuments. Mabin (2011) wonderfully evokes the history of Pretoria's struggles to convince even itself of its capital city worthiness. In his account we have a sense of Pretoria constantly looking over its shoulder at its troublesome neighbour who, especially at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fraternised with the wrong sorts and was always better at drawing attention to itself than was the much more modest and unassuming city to the north of it. Over the course of its history, Pretoria (where does Pretoria end and Tshwane begin, Mabin asks) has had, through various turns of events and the arrival of other contenders on the scene, to concede some of its prestige and power as capital city.

The Union Buildings (1910-1912) managed to endow Pretoria with some semblance of imperial capital citizenship with Herbert Baker's ingenious concessions to indigenous material nevertheless rooting it in Africa (Bunn 1998; Mabin 2011). But even by 1994, 'at the dawn of democracy,' Pretoria 'remained a rather ec-

lectic collection of private and public buildings and spaces, almost as though it had been waiting for a new direction to reorganise and re-present its capitalness' (Mabin 2011:19). Even now Mabin (2011:21 after Sonne) observes that its 'political iconography' is 'in flux.'

There is of course one notable exception. A few decades after Baker's Union Buildings had been finished the Voortrekker Monument embodying the triumph of resurgent Afrikaner nationalism settled itself down in a position to survey it was all shortly to command (Mabin 2011). Despite the fact that Albert Grundlingh (2009) has dismissed its significance for all but a handful of eccentric right-wingers, it still unfailingly makes its presence felt. Against the pale September evening sky the Monument looks neither monolithic nor anachronistic, as it is often portrayed (e.g., Noble 2011). The Gautrain drive-by makes it seem more likely that its architect Gerhard Moerdijk did derive his inspiration from an odd shaped hill at Mapungubwe near where he had a farm, as one version has it, than from a relatively new-fangled monument built in the early twentieth century in Leipzig as Elizabeth Delmont argued (1993) (Figure 6). Viewed fleetingly in the dying light of the day, the Voortrekker Monument looks almost organic with only a slight tracery of man-made embellishment falling across its façade in a gentle arc. If the 'basic language of public sculpture is the silhouette', as Gerhard Marx (Barstow 2011:29) maintains, speaking most forcefully when it is thrown up against the sky like George Harrison holding up his new found nugget of gold, exposing his bony ribcage to motorists on the R24 at Bruma and the angel atop the War Memorial in the grounds of the Museum of Military History in Saxonwold, then the Voortrekker Monument is executing a virtuoso performance. Cianfanelli has effectively set himself up to compete with its spectacular effect.



**Figure 6:** Drive by Voortrekker Monument.  
Photograph by Alan Mabin.

It is useful, at this point, to return to Carrier's typology of the monument genre (see above), which attempts to perform various symbolic functions in terms of summoning a community and of persuading it to unite around recognisable 'historical traditions'. Cianfanelli maintains that it is important to incorporate what a review of his work calls 'an emissary from the past' in making 'place' speak to the 'intellectual and emotional desires for location'. These are envisaged as the starting point for the 'construction of self' followed by the much more elaborate constructions of 'community' and 'nation' (Dodd 2011b). I would argue that Cianfanelli (and other authors of Freedom Park), as well as understanding the need to compete with the aesthetic impact of the Voortrekker Monument, recognises the need to match its historical credentials – the powerful narrative it encapsulates of a pioneering people who forged ahead against incredible adversity to achieve nationhood. The quandary is how to cater to desires that are so dis-located and dispersed that they need a literal re-embodiment of the past to persuade them that they belong together. His brief is not essentially different from that of the Voortrekker Monument's designers confronted with divided 'Afrikanerdom' in the early twentieth century, but it is probably a good deal more

demanding. Perhaps the very magnitude of the task necessarily limits both the aesthetic and the narrative repertoire.

Cianfanelli is clearly open to the desirability of a Barthes text with productive chiaroscuro. Ten years ago when he had just completed his first major public art project for SA Eagle, one of the big short-term insurance companies in South Africa, in Johannesburg's Hollard Street, Cianfanelli asserted that his sculpture was 'intended to affirm the urban context with all its contradictions' (cited in Ticknor 2002). Not all the critics were convinced. Michael Smith made some quite cutting observations about the SA Eagle work, dismissing it as 'urban romanticism' (Smith 2005), while allowing that Cianfanelli's work subsequently achieved a much greater degree of 'elegance' and 'complexity'. Judging by his use of antithesis, by 'urban romanticism' Smith means facile, disconnected from the gritty realities of the city and, in this case, dumbly extolling the virtues of finance capital rather than expressing subjectivity and a revolt against the aesthetics and values of industrialisation that characterised Romanticism proper.

I wonder if *Urban Being*, for all his colossal size and what I take to be belaboured metaphor, falls into the category of urban romanticism, either as Smith means it or in its more orthodox sense. From a little distance, some of the small figures dispersed over *Urban Being's* frame can be seen as miniature silhouettes offset against snippets of blue sky as if, after all, there is a place for individuality in the vast urban machine (see Dodd 2011b) (Figure 7). They are the most charming aspects of a piece that is otherwise strikingly immobile and are suggestive of Romanticism in its historical sense, denoting the subversive art and literary movement that developed in response to the pitiless, impersonal forces of the Industrial Revolution.





**Figure 7:** Small People and Sky, detail from *Urban Being*. Photograph by Alan Mabin.

But the little figures on *Urban Being* don't put up much of a fight. It takes a leisured spectator to notice them, quite unlike the human figures Cianfanelli has made dramatising their moments of anguish, joy and work-day life along the index of the gold price that stands in the foyer of Anglo-Gold Ashanti's Turbine Hall in Johannesburg (Figure 8). The overall impression of *Urban Being* is of overwhelming solidity, lack of flexibility and a ponderous dependence on the spectator to allow for his multi-dimensionality to become evident. It is as if *Urban Being* is immobilised by his setting. One is tempted to conclude, probably unjustly, that *Being* might be able to take the same kind of assertive stride forward as *Fire Walker* if he were standing somewhere in Johannesburg instead of in a suburban shopping centre in Pretoria which is, according to Mabin's (2011) portrayal, still waiting after all these years to



**Figure 8:** Cianfanelli's gold index.  
Photograph by Cynthia Kros.

assume its inheritance as 'a grand capital'. The truth is that *Urban Being* has been assigned a very difficult mission. Returning to Carrier's typology of monuments,

we might observe that *Urban Being* is supposed to be doing several jobs, including encouraging the development of new forms of collective identity through prompting a recognition in the passers-by of the commonality of their experiences of urbanisation. He is supposed to call attention to himself and to the potential of the commercial quarter in which he stands and to the incipient greatness of the city both as generic form and as this singular one – Pretoria/Tshwane.

## ***Into The Fields – September 2011***

The new monuments like *Fire Walker* and *Urban Being* are not named as monuments but they are, as we are seeing, allocated the same responsibilities. One of these includes repossessing urban spaces (see Carrier's 2005 typology above) thought to be on the edge of irreversible decay and vulnerable to the depredations of the undesirable public – not the urbane one that *Urban Being* is supposed to hail. It is worth thinking about the 'ghosts in the city' who figure in the title of a chapter written by colleagues collaborating with de Certeau (1998) on the second volume of *The practice of everyday life*. What form do these ghosts take in our cities? Perhaps we could include the card-players interviewed by Zen Marie and Jonathan Cane (Marie & Cane 2011) within reach of *Fire Walker* who don't even recognise her as having a human form but who are themselves (perhaps) 'everyday artists' whose art is made through their daily practices and ways of speaking. They are reduced to being as insubstantial as 'ghosts' tracing out 'unknown memories' because they are drowned out by the official recognition manifest in the contemporary art that has been erected in their neighbourhood (de Certeau *et al* 1998:141). De Certeau *et al* (1998:142) are not immune to the dangers of romanticising the everyday but they have



**Figure 9:** Pretoria Station.  
Photograph by Alan Mabin.

a lovely line about awakening 'the stories that sleep in the streets.' After walking the streets of Burger's Park close to the Pretoria (as opposed to the Hatfield) Gautrain station, a densely populated flatland in the south east of Downtown Pretoria where Tshwane's programme for urban regeneration does not yet seem to have penetrated, one suspects that it takes a great deal of regulatory power to keep stories that reference unorthodox histories quiet and the unruly 'ghosts' who tell them in check (Figure 9).

I turn now to a discussion of Cianfanelli's sculpture on the other side of The Fields, south of the Hatfield Gautrain station approach, which is patently more animated than *Urban Being* and has also been more explicitly linked to the objectives of urban regeneration in the publicity literature. My discussion aims to explore the admittedly rather limited ambitions for urban regeneration as they are expressed by some of the principal players here and to gesture towards some of the social and cultural consequences of an approach which expediently allies the City's spatial planning programme with poorly concealed commercial profit-making motives.



Figure 10: M Cianfanelli, *Running Man*. Photograph by William Mabin.

Cianfanelli's man 'running into the fields', according to Jeffrey Wapnick, 'captures the animation of the precinct's streets and spaces' (Premiumproperties 2011). Wapnick is managing director of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange listed, Premium Properties that owns assets in the region of R2 billion and holds a portfolio of properties in the Pretoria and Johannesburg CBDs, Hatfield and Silverton. 'The Fields,' Wapnick asserts, has as its 'key outcome, urban renewal.'<sup>2</sup> He avers (and one assumes it is true for the development to have gone ahead) that 'we worked to ensure that it would support the City of Tshwane's Metropolitan Spatial Development Framework' and runs on fluently: 'In addition to creating a vibrant space within the development, The Fields maximises the synergies to the surrounding areas, facilities and public transport routes, ensuring that the development is both connected and relevant.' Of the role of public art he intones: 'It's critical to have pride in our environment and culture

and art plays a pivotal role in a complete society ... the sculpture adds to the urban context by reflecting the youthful, bustling energy of the growing node. It is another way that The Fields can give to the community and create a sense of place' (Marketingconcepts 2011) (Figure 10).

It feels wasteful to use the beautiful prose of Certeau *et al* (1998) when they describe urban 'renovation' strategies as a kind of preemptory 'medicalisation' for commenting on what is really just a redevelopment scheme. Nevertheless, they did have property moguls in mind as one of the potential beneficiaries of urban renovation. They note how the 'nursing power' that is expressed through urban renovation 'takes responsibility for the health of the social body and thus for its mental, biological, or urban illnesses ... the affected urban parts are placed under supervision, taken away from inhabitants, and entrusted to preservation, real-

estate or highway department specialists.’ In terms of the ‘hospital system’ of their conceit (de Certeau *et al* 1998:139), Wapnick is evidently one of the ‘engineer-therapists’ (de Certeau *et al* 1998:140) in charge of – to continue with the imagery above – this particular sanatorium, which is perceived as being threatened by the proximity of the familiar contagions of the inner city in the twenty-first century. The Framework document (HatfieldUrbanDevelopmentFramework Document 2009) resonates with all the usual anxieties about the encroachment of urban decay and proceeds to prescribe a set of aesthetic prophylactics against the onset of dread diseases. Interestingly the publicity literature that hails its success and announces the ‘second phase’ of The Fields development that is to cost several million Rands, mimics the language of aesthetic plastic surgery: ‘The face of Pretoria’s Hatfield node, once at risk of urban degeneration, is changing forever ...’ (Saproertynews 2011).

Public art has been one of the rejuvenating ingredients that has invariably been injected into selected ‘nodes’ at least since the early 2000s when Richard Florida (2002) released his supposedly earth-shattering revelations about the economically beneficial impact of the presence of the so-called ‘creative class’ on the city. As Chiara Tornaghi concluded from a study of projects in Newcastle Upon Tyne and Gateshead in the UK, the extent of the ‘publicness’ of public art may vary enormously from being imposed on the ‘community’ to being the outcome of a genuinely consultative process (undated PDF). The Trinity Session (see above), in consciously setting itself against the coercive and exclusive ‘public’ spaces promulgated by the apartheid regime, expresses a broad and diverse notion of the public and tries to imagine the ‘public domain’ as one of ‘exchange’ (Vansa 2011). Cianfanelli himself has been described as desiring to ‘prompt a sense of complexity’ in the minds of the spectators of his art (Dodd 2011b).

Before pursuing Cianfanelli’s idea about the capacity of art to act on the world, I pause to think about the work that monuments did in the course of the last century and a bit in the ‘west’. To recapitulate somewhat crudely – before the middle of the twentieth century they were supposed to assuage grief through offering an immaterial kind of immortality and declaring that suffering was necessary for the survival of the nation-state. Then, after the Second World War, they tried to atone for unspeakable wickedness, to prevent its recurrence and to issue more subdued calls for improved versions of the nation to stand together. *Urban Being* and *Into the Fields* are supposed to be calling on the citizens of a city that is judged to be in need of restoration and reinvigoration and to cause them to be more deliberative about their role in it. The two pieces, as far as I can see, have caught the post-Second World War monumental agenda with its more critical and self-improving objectives but are they, in any way, able to realise it? It is clear that this is what Cianfanelli intends.

But the sterile environment of The Fields and its immediate vicinity appears to suffer from what some scholars have called ‘Starbuckisation’ with its string of chain eateries making one wonder if *Urban Being* and *Into the Fields* stand the remotest chance of attracting even a second look from the passers by, never mind about inducing them to think critically or creatively. It might be that this judgment is too harsh because it was made on an afternoon that the Blue Bulls were losing to the Sharks in a rugby match at nearby Loftus Versfeld (the proximity of which is also, according to sa propertynews an important predictor for The Fields’ likelihood of success). Most residents and patrons were probably more predisposed to have rugby than philosophical conundrums on their minds. But there is little evidence to suggest that the developers are interested in awakening anything other than the most basic consumer desires for cell phone technology, fast food

and alcohol. The Development Framework imagines an environment that is amenable to the transient and relatively affluent pedestrian delivered to the precinct by Gautrain and its associated public transport network, presumably with little time to stop and stare (HatfieldUrbanDevelopmentFramework 2009). A publicity brochure for The Fields, clearly addressed to the massive student influx through the gates of the nearby University of Pretoria, also anticipated by the Framework Document's authors, exhorts its readers to 'live with passion'. The 'passion' is visually and textually exemplified in at least five different ways, none of which contains the slightest reference to study or cultural pursuits (City Property) (Figure 11).

This discussion of *Into the Fields* has added to the earlier stock of metaphors about erosion (see above in relation to *Fire Walker*). The metaphors gesture towards major kinds of therapeutic intervention perceived as necessary to avoid wholesale disintegration. There certainly seems to be scope for artists within the broad brief created, but the constraints cannot be ignored. Returning briefly to *Urban Being*, one might ask how an artist could ever hope to make what is at once a large and portentous statement about urbanity and a more subtle series of comments on its innumerable subjective experiences – already a formidable task in itself – in a precinct that is really concerned to keep the public moving along attractively cultivated routes of material consumption. I have argued above that *Urban Being* has been assigned many of the tasks usually associated with monuments but that the odds against him being able to accomplish them are high.



**Figure 11:** Gear up Passion Poster.  
Photograph by Alan Mabin.

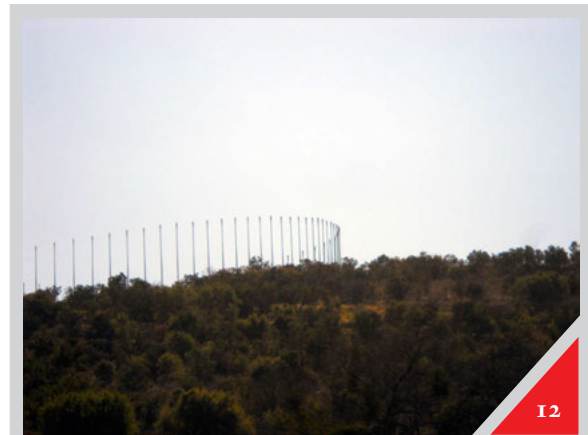
## Freedom Park – Timeless

Cianfanelli seems to have retained his optimism about what public art is capable of. For the last part of this paper I want to move away from retail and back into the field of formal monumental art, to Freedom Park, in fact, where Cianfanelli's reed fence on the crest of the hill – the *Sikhumbuto* (memorial) is perhaps the most spectacular piece in a setting that has decided against spectacle. In South Africa there has been a debate for some time about how monuments can develop an indigenous aesthetic that acknowledges African memorial practices and is not seen to be indebted to European traditions (Figure 12).

Jon Noble (2011) has given us a detailed account of what he conceives of as a struggle to find an appropriate architectural language in which to express the

ideas (perhaps we should say ideology) most closely associated with the person of Thabo Mbeki when he was President of South Africa. Under the loose rubric of the 'African Renaissance' these ideas stressed the importance of recognising that Africa is the common birthplace of all humankind and that Africa has given rise to philosophies, 'cosmologies' and systems of knowledge that owe nothing to the West – or at least which preceded western systems by many thousands of years. It is essential to recognise Africa and its wisdom as ancient so as to establish incontestably both their venerability and integrity. The connection was clearly articulated by Wally Serote when he became CEO of Freedom Park in 2004 and cited 'African history and heritage as bearers of our traditions and values' (Noble 2011:216).

Such a position relies on us subscribing to the postulate that what is old is good, presumably having stood the test of time, and that 'history and heritage' have borne their freight of traditions and values down to the present without mishap. Stated baldly like this exposes these statements immediately as fallacies. It is unlikely that 'traditions' and 'values' would remain intact over centuries. More on this follows below but let us observe here that seasoned architects GAPP, MMA and Mashabane Rose Associates acting as the Office of Collaborative Architects won the tender to design Freedom Park in 2004 (Noble 2011:220). These parties had already had a great deal of practice in finding a language to express the oppressive and debilitating impact of apartheid and for mourning its victims, commemorating the heroism of martyrs made by the Struggle and even telling stories of ancient Africa (see Bremner 2010 for detailed discussion).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it was not a very great leap, after all, for the architects to translate Mbeki's African Renaissance or Serote's injunction that 'the' African creation story (show) a 'sympathetic dialogue with the national environment'



**Figure 12:** Salvokop.  
Photograph by Alan Mabin.

into the 'fluid, organic, rounded forms' that Noble (2011:246-247) tells us became characteristic of Freedom Park.

What we may remark on here is that through its rhetorical iterations and an increasingly monopolistic architectural language, African knowledge has come to mean something that is not defined in temporal terms at all – except that its origins are supposedly located in the realm of long ago. One of the consequences is that there are no hard edges either architecturally speaking or in terms of the history represented. In the discussion papers for Freedom Park there was some concern with what were understood to be the distortions of South African historiography but the notion prevailed that they are susceptible to being rounded out rather than confronted and perhaps expunged (see Noble 2011:215). I take this to mean that interpretative dissonance was avoided, which, considering the combative nature of South African historiography, is quite a feat.

Ben Highmore (2006), in highlighting the 'resistance' to modernity that caught the attention of de Certeau and his colleagues (see above) has cautioned us against

thinking that their work is a 'nostalgia for something that has passed'. On the contrary, what de Certeau argues for is a 'willingness to listen to different temporalities that exist together in the present' (Highmore 2006:114). In fact, at one point in the chapter that I cited earlier, de Certeau *et al* talk about the city as a 'stage for a war of narratives'. This makes the absence of temporality in Freedom Park's dominant narrative – so close to a city that has surely had its fair share of narrative and real wars – even more striking. But, of course, Freedom Park was scripted to tell 'the story of the struggle of humanity to survive in his/her environment and to live harmoniously with fellow human-kind' (quoted from Conceptual Framework, Noble 2011:215), with the stress falling on the latter part of the objective.

The drive to go as far back as we can at Freedom Park – to the three and a half billion years ago or more when the geology at Barberton was formed – is intended to transport us back to something that was pure, essential, elemental and, as Foucault (2000:372) writing about Nietzsche's theories of history would observe it may very well cause us to feel 'solemn.' But what we are being shown, I would argue, is an illusion and our solemnity is wrung from us by sleight of hand. For, as Foucault (2000:372), bringing out aspects of Nietzsche's work, observes: 'what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin'. It is wrong to believe that 'things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth.' How can we overlook multiple forms of heterogeneity, conflict, struggle to the death and unpredictable evolutionary paths that have been accomplished mostly through mutation and accident? (Foucault 2000:373)

But the mythology surrounding our birth as a people creates such a lovely 'chimera' (Foucault 2000:373) that we might be expected to object to any attempt at its

destruction. Why would we want everything to be ripped away from the 'self' and to be left with no sense of security or stability? (Foucault 2000:380) Do we really want to trade the serenity of Freedom Park including Cianfanelli's soaring metal reeds that reach out to embrace the infinity of the sky for 'effective history'? The Nietzschean notion of 'effective history', I think, means to purge the discipline of history of some of its disingenuous practices, including the pretence of objectivity assumed by many historians and the attribution of transcendent meaning to historical events and of predestined and homogeneous identities to groups of people. We are warned in no uncertain terms that 'effective history' 'will uproot ... traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity'. And, in the face of such radical disruption, if we allow 'effective history' to do its work, we will consequently be deprived of a millennial ending (Foucault 2000:380).

Foucault (2000:380-382) interprets the 'task' of 'effective history' as becoming a 'curative science', revealing injustice and the inequities of power and knowledge through a radical, surgical 'cutting' away of the metaphysical pretensions of 'traditional' history. In our time, I take 'effective history' to mean one that allows us no illusions, no fantasies, no placebo alternatives to a world wracked by capitalist greed and recession. It is not easy to resolve the dilemma with which we are faced – do we cling to an illusory history that gives us false comfort and, which, in the end, may well cheat us of a happy ending or do we try to pursue the more honest 'effective history'? The sacrifices we are required to make if we choose the latter seem too hard. But perhaps we should turn to Mark Gevisser's (2007) analysis of Mbeki's African Renaissance, which, I argue, carries with it an implicit warning. Gevisser characterises Mbeki's 'Africanness' as the product of a lonely exile and his generalisation of his own longing to 'go home',

which Mbeki never entirely accomplished. Mbeki, in Gevisser's portrayal also never quite overcame the wounds to his self-esteem inflicted by his European exile. According to his critics, Mbeki never could face up to the real problems in South Africa either like 'grinding poverty', vast social inequalities and the HIV/AIDS scourge (Gevisser 2007:325). We are led to suspect that the 'dream deferred' of Langston Hughes' poem, which Gevisser takes as the title for his Mbeki biography, runs a real risk of turning into the festering sore that the poet dreads. Gevisser's account encourages us to think that Mbeki's African Renaissance acted as a balm for his own hurt, with which many Africans could identify. But how long will the 'chimera' of origin substitute for the resolution of deep longings, ongoing humiliations and a determined reckoning with the mechanisms of domination and appropriation? (Foucault 2000:378)

## Conclusion

The public art at The Fields is monumental in that it tries to interpellate a public that ought to recognise itself or some part of itself in the sculptures' metaphorical references. But its potential to do so is limited by its enforced complicity in an environment that is strikingly prosaic and governed by a notion of art as prophylactic. It is hard, even on the site of a development like The Fields to regret the presence of public art. But I have argued that it is almost inevitably immobilised by a setting that is heavily invested in passive consumerism. Not only that, the public art may conceivably, although probably unwittingly, be helping to regulate public spaces that are 'public' only in a restricted sense produced by an expedient alliance between the City of Tshwane and a private developer.

The artist-architectural network/s to which this paper alludes, also extends into the formal monumental realm at Freedom Park. The *voyeur-voyageur* is afforded a

series of juxtapositions and intercutting of images that make her conscious of the world as representation (Virilio 1984). Passing the Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park in quick succession on the Gautrain offers a surprisingly affecting view of the first and a stark view of an embodiment of the new(ish) architectural 'lexicon' of the second. There is something a little wistful about the slight beauty of the Freedom Park memorial – something that is at once hauntingly fragile and worryingly insubstantial. I have argued (following Noble's lead) that it represents a particular interpretation of African philosophy and ways of thinking about the world, distinguished by their apparent timelessness and immutability. The result is often aesthetically stunning – as it needs to be to compete with the Voortrekker Monument across the valley. But what are the long-term effects of allowing ourselves to be lulled by a mythologised history of origins and an extremely tenuous, teleological story about how we have gone about creating the conditions for harmonious social development? Should we be working instead on other kinds of text altogether – with shadowy profundity, teasing ambiguity and the inbuilt possibility for productive subversion?

## Notes

- 1 This paper was first presented to the Tshwane 'Vryheidspark' Walkshop, Unisa, September 2011. Thanks to the participants, to Linda and Alan Mabin for identifying *Urban Being* and for editing help and inspiration and to Georges Pfruender for the Virilio reference, sound advice and encouragement.
- 2 The Fields is bounded by Hilda Street to the east, Burnett Street to the south, Festival Street to the west and the railway line to the north. It comprises a few hundred residential units, 4,000 metres of retail space and 800 parking bays (Privateprojects 2011).



3 They have to their credit: the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, the Hector Pieterse Museum in Soweto, the Robben Island Museum, the Maropeng Cradle of Humankind Museum near Johannesburg, Mandela Square and, more recently, the Liliesleaf Museum in Johannesburg and the Nelson Mandela House Museum in Soweto.

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