participatory podia
JOHANN VAN DER SCHIJFF

1. John Maytham, a talk show host at Cape Talk radio station, gave the opening address at the unveiling of the *AWP*.

2. Run by the Association of Visual Arts (AVA) in conjunction with the JK Gross Trust and Spier.

3. Website of the United States Armwrestling Association. Available: http://www.usarmwrestling.com/index.htm (Accessed 1 February 2008)

Arm-Wrestling Podium (AWP)
2007
Bronze, stainless steel, weather resistant steel, mild steel, aluminium, brass, enamel paint
145 x 165 x 140 cm

The Arm-Wrestling Podium (AWP)

So arm-wrestling is fundamentally a silly thing to do. And here is a piece of public art which celebrate that silliness... But...it says to me, how dangerously silly are the dispute resolution methods that so many South Africans use. The gun, the knife, and all those other things. It is for me a piece that talks to the violence, that is part of the way we engage with each other in South Africa.
John Maytham[1]

The *Arm-Wrestling Podium (AWP)* was unveiled on the 1st November 2007 as the winning entry of the fourth Cape Town public sculpture competition.[2] It is a public sculpture acting as a communal platform where disputes can be settled in view of the public, by means of the physical act of arm-wrestling. Located on the patio of the Association for Visual Arts in Church Street, it is hoped that it will play an important role in resolving those nasty art world disputes that seem to be part and parcel of the 'scene'.

Its application, by the nature of being a public sculpture in South Africa, is obviously much wider than the art scene and it could be used simply as a platform to settle personal disputes of passers-by or as a way to find closure on political disputes where negotiation has reached a stalemate. The advantages of settling a dispute on the *AWP* are that: a) it leads to a definite outcome; b) it is in the public eye; c) although there is physical interaction and an undertone of violence, apart from possible stretched biceps, the result won't cause long-term injury to anybody if used according to the rules.

Attached to the sides of the podium are four plaques, in English, Xhosa, Afrikaans and Braille, with the rules as adapted from the USAA (United States Armwrestling Association).[3] They read as follows:

1. Contestants who use the arm-wrestling podium in an arm-wrestling match do so at their own risk. No third party will be liable for any injury, embarrassment or insult that might result from its use.

2. It is preferable that an impartial person should act as referee. If a suitable referee cannot be found, contestants may, by mutual agreement, proceed without a referee.

3. Either both contestants use their right hand in a match, or both use their left hand. Their free hand must hold onto the shaft throughout the match.

4. Contestants must look each other squarely in the eyes. The elbow of the competing arm must rest on the round cushion throughout the match.

5. To make a winning thrust, a contestant needs to force his or her opponent to touch the rectangular cushion with the forearm, wrist, hand or fingers.

6. It is permissible for a contestant to use a platform, or high-heeled shoes, for elevation if his or her belt-line is below the level of the table-top.

7. All starts will be a "Ready … Go". The cadence may vary.

8. Contestants must start with both feet on the tread-plate but can remove them after the start.

9. Any attempt to cause a slip — for instance by lifting the elbow from the round cushion, or by opening the hand — will constitute a foul. After a contestant has committed three fouls, he or she will forfeit the match.

10. If brute force is not enough, contestants are not using enough of it.

Formally the work makes reference to the forgotten monuments found in and around platteland dorpies to commemorate 'Boer War' battles or to honour South African servicemen who died during the First and Second World Wars. It was therefore important that the podium plaques used similar bronze sand casting techniques to those used on these commemorative monuments, and that the selected font was also appropriate to this period. Although bronze, as a medium, has uncomfortable associations with wildlife art and shopping mall art, my decision to use it was conceptually driven. After witnessing the visual deception offered by the level of realism and textural detail achieved by the cast bronze wheelbarrow wheels, I decided to cast the cushions in bronze rather than leather as originally planned. In addition to its excellent weather resistant and modelling properties it added a fun conceptual layer to the work; what you think you see and are about to touch is not necessarily what you get... The materials used to construct the rest of the work were a combination of stainless steel and weather resistant steel. With a high copper

4. *Power Play*, solo exhibition, Bell-Roberts Gallery, Cape Town, 25 April – 20 May 2006

5. Having attended the Designing Interactive Systems (DIS) Conferences hosted in Boston, Pennsylvania, I was the conference co-chair for the DIS2008 conference hosted in Cape Town, 25 – 27 February 2008. Available: http://www.sigchi.org/dis2008/home (Accessed 15 February 2008)

content, weather resistant steel forms a protective layer of rust on the outside over time, thereby prolonging the lifespan of the core material. The material has been utilised by, amongst others, Anthony Caro, David Brown and Richard Serra in their public sculptures.

Having just completed my first public sculpture, two specific points made by Serra in the catalogue of his forty-year retrospective exhibition (MoMA 2007) struck a cord.

> In the museum nobody questions the presence of artworks. The public space is a much bigger challenge. I am not naive about its potential and I'm not naive about its failure, but I've taken it on because I've always thought it offered a worthwhile alternative. (McShine 2007:36)

> In most of my work the site is part and parcel of the content. It takes the focus off the object and makes the viewer the subject. In terms of the evolution of sculpture, I see the object/subject reversal as — not that I'm responsible for it, or the only person who has done it — but I see that as a major shift. (Ibid:32)

AWP makes reference to the absurdity and political consciousness of the Dadaists; the happenings and participating work of the late sixties and seventies; and extends ideas developed in my *Power Play* exhibition of 2006.4 The sculptures on that exhibition actively encouraged participation by viewers, as was evident by the assault on the punch bag

works by a group of schoolboys on an art outing. Viewers did not simply reflect on the work; they took part in it with their whole body and in by doing that, 'made the viewer the subject.'

My interest in viewer participation also stems from my involvement in the field of new media. Having reviewed numerous papers dealing with Designing Interactive Systems,5 I realise that I have started applying some selective principles applicable to Human Computer Interaction (HCI) to sculpture. Admittedly, the application of these principles to my own work is done in such a loose, skewed, unscientific and bastardised form that it would probably make most Computer Scientists cringe. Because of the evolving ubiquitous nature of computing i.e. cell phones, iPods, and all kinds of intelligent devices invading our physical space, a lot of the emphasis in HCI has shifted from screen-based applications to physical interaction. Klemmer and Hartmann's paper *How Bodies Matter: Five Themes for Interaction Design* identifies some well-trodden HCI themes that had particular resonance with my art production, and in some way contributed to my ideas for the *AWP*:

> Choosing an action requires *commitment*; carrying it out is an expression of this commitment. In *social interactions*, risk may not necessarily entail physical harm, but can also come from the imperative to act in the presence of others. As Watzlawick *et al.* note, 'we cannot not communicate' — the absence of communicative effort is itself a message that is interpreted by one's peers. One cannot undo a social faux

pas in face to face interactions; technology mitigates against this risk: one can delete sentences before sending them to friends over IM or email. (Klemmer and Hartmann 2006:145)

Unlike theories of information processing and human cognition that focus primarily on thought as something that only happens in the head, theories and research of *embodied* cognition regard bodily activity as being essential to understanding human cognition. These theories have important implications for designing interactive systems. (Ibid:141)

Its application to the *AWP* is obvious. Making a comment on the violent society we live in is perhaps best understood and illustrated by viewer, and indeed public participation.

While working on the *Arm-Wrestling Podium (AWP)*, I continued to develop ideas for public sculptures. One of the outcomes of this process was an accompanying exhibition to the unveiling of the *AWP*, consisting of photolithographs of my working drawings and bronze maquettes.[6] I also developed three further proposals for sculptures functioning as participatory podia: the *MP*, *PFP* and *TCP*.

Visiting the Cape Town Society of Model and Experimental Engineer's yearly fundraising exhibition with my children, the delightful working steam trains and models on display awoke my own childhood memories of the miniature, coin operated steam trains at the old Pretoria Station of my youth as well as the mini, ride-along steam trains at the old Rand Showground in Johannesburg. Not having the funds to complete life-size versions and inspired by the workmanship and finishes characterising these miniatures, I have therefore started developing limited edition, quarter scale versions of these participatory podia. The advantage of designing and making sculptures using Computer Aided Design and Manufacturing Processes (CAD/CAM),[7] is that once a wire frame model[8] is completed within a 3D software programme, scaling it to be made bigger or smaller is a relatively simple procedure. These sculptures will differ from the bronze maquettes — which I view as sketches in 3D — in that they will be exact replicas of the life-size versions, down to the last nut and bolt. The attention to detail is what I anticipate will give these works their particular appeal and interest, which could potentially open up a new path in the development of my own work.

Monument Podium (MP)

The *Monument Podium (MP)* is the work that sparked the series and led directly to the creation of the *AWP*. The work is planned as an obelisk thrusting to the heavens, that, in the full-scale version, could rapidly be deployed wherever a monument of this nature is required. Since the significance of monuments and place names seems to change continuously in South Africa, all that is required is to replace the plastic memorial plaques on the sides of the full-scale sculpture with new versions relevant to the new setting. An added advantage is that the worry of the bronze being stolen and sold for scrap metal — a common occurrence befalling public sculptures in South Africa — is eliminated. In the quarter size version, I plan extending the needle beyond that in the maquette and including a red light on its apex, similar to the famed obelisk of the Washington Monument or the red lights on the Voortrekker Monument. Instead of signalling in Morse code, 'Ons — vir — jou — Suid

6. Worldart Gallery, opposite the AVA at 54 Church Street, 1 – 9 November 2007

7. I have written extensively on the use of Computer Aided Design and Manufacturing Processes in the previous edition of Artworks in Progress. Van der Schijff, J. 2006. Iron Triangle, Artworks in Progress, yearbook of the staff of the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, Cape Town. 70-73.

8. A wire frame model is a visual presentation of an electronic representation of a three-dimensional or physical object used in 3D computer graphics. Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wire_frame_model (Accessed 12 February 2008)

Monument Podium (MP)
2007
Bronze
26.5 x 10 x 14.5 cm

— Afrika' (We for you South Africa), its pulsation might say something equally inappropriate for its time such as, 'Aluweth' — Umshini — Wami' (Bring me my machine gun).

Public Foot-washing Podium (PFP)

The *Public Foot-washing Podium (PFP)* requires a participant to kneel on the bronze 'cushion' provided on the one side while on the other side, another participant puts her/his feet in the bowl located between them to be washed. In this way, the act of foot washing is transparent — everyone can see who is washing whose feet without rumours spreading as to whether such an event actually took place. This work could be relocated to a number of venues across the country for many years to come before finding a final resting place; ideally in the beautiful student town of Stellenbosch (according to many, the intellectual home of Hendrik Verwoerd and the apartheid ideology).

What inspired this sculpture was the bizarre incident of Adriaan Vlok, the infamous minister of police during the final years of apartheid, washing the feet of Rev. Frank Chikane, the general secretary of the South African Council of Churches from 1987 to 1994. Aside from the substantial media coverage of this incident, what drew my particular interest was my own brief encounter with Vlok as a student while studying at the University of Pretoria in the late 1980s. Vlok, who was on a

9. As heard on Cape Talk, some-time in 2006 after the incident.

Public Foot-washing Podium (PFP)
2007
Bronze and stainless steel
9.5 x 10 x 14.5 cm

road show to assert the State's authority, spoke in front of a packed auditorium of students, where he skirted and deflected questions with a smile while his security men and bodyguards quite openly made video recordings of the audience. He finally left the hall and got into his burgundy seven series BMW with a crowd of unruly, dreadlocked art, drama and landbou (agriculture) students milling about him, shouting pathetic insults. I recall vividly how the tinted back window slid down and Mr Vlok sneeringly laughed at us, while Tannie (auntie) Vlok crouched in the corner clutching her tiny handbag.

It was thus with a sense of astonished empathy that I heard of his atonement toward Mr. Chikane, the person his security police force agents tried to poison in late 1989. Amongst the protest of people on radio talk shows, probably the best explanation I heard was 'that Mr. Vlok is getting on in years. He knows he is bound to meet his maker at the gates of heaven soon, and he better get his house in order, or he might just not be let in...' 9

In his essay, 'On Forgiveness', Jacques Derrida wrote:

Favouring a confusion between the order of forgiveness and the order of justice, but also certainly in abusing their heterogeneity, as well as the fact that the time of forgiveness escapes the judicial process, it is moreover always possible to mimic the scene of 'immediate' and quasi-automatic forgiveness in order to escape justice. The possibility of this calculation always remains open, and one could give many examples of it.

All sorts of unacknowledgeable 'politics', all sorts of strategic ruses can hide themselves abusively behind a 'rhetoric' or a 'comedy' of forgiveness, in order to avoid the step of the law.
(Derrida 2001: 43, 50-51)

In the light of this perspective, it should be noted that Mr Vlok never applied, and therefore never appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). He has also never been officially charged for any wrongdoings.

Truth and Confession Podium (TCP)

Some time ago an opinion piece appeared in a daily newspaper celebrating the fact that, since democracy, South Africans have started talking to each other as well as to the outside world. Barred from doing so due to apartheid's physical, legislative and psychological barriers, we now can't seem to stop talking:

on radio and television talk shows, in business and politics, in classrooms, on sports fields and in the streets. The impact this phenomenon has had on service delivery or even listening to some decent music whilst sitting in the traffic, is admittedly not very encouraging. The *Truth and Confession Podium (TCP)* title makes reference to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as, somewhat absurdly, to one of the most well known brands of antiseptic sold in South Africa. As such it becomes a metaphor for the ritual of cleansing through talking and confessing.

The *Truth and Confession Podium (TCP)* concept was developed as a proposal for a public sculpture commission to be installed outside the main entrance of the new Convention Tower building next to the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC). Although the proposal was not successful, I have continued to work with the project. As in all of my recent major sculptures, the *TCP* will be ergonomically sound and the dimensions of the sculpture are important both conceptually and structurally. The platform is lifted from the ground, thereby creating a sense of occasion when stepping onto the 'public podium'. Raised by bronze wheelbarrow wheels, the tread plates will be positioned so that it is easy and natural to step onto the platforms. While sitting on the stools, the latch doors on either side of the dividing wall will be accessed by simply reaching out one's arm. Although the walls will be imposing while interacting with the sculpture, participants could do several things. They could approach from different orientations and leave without even seeing or talking to each other; they could open the latches and speak to each other through the confessional screen; shout at each other over the walls or they could simply get up, walk around and shake hands... At any given time, viewers on street level will be able to see only one of the two participants. This intended sculptural device should entice the viewers to see what or who is on the other side of the walls.

The confessional screen, in-between the two steel hatches, and only completely visible when both hatches are open, will be the focal point of the sculpture. Laser cut from stainless steel and polished to a mirror finish, it makes reference to the ornamental designs of confessional screens in the Catholic Church. The design references the seven deadly sins. Using images appropriated from South African iconography, I have assigned the following objects to represent each of the sins: panties (lust), cooking pot (gluttony), pickaxe (greed), TV (sloth), AK47 (wrath), BMW X5 (envy), Nguni cattle (pride).

While reflecting on these works, it becomes clear that biblical themes seemed to have emerged: an obelisk protruding towards the heavens, plaques with ten rules, foot washing

Truth and Confession Podium (TCP)
2007
Bronze and stainless steel
17 x 10 x 15.6 cm

and confession. Contemplating how this came about — biblical themes have never surfaced so obviously in my previous work — I came across the following passage by Derrida offering a possible explanation:

As enigmatic as the concept of forgiveness remains, it is the case that the scene, the figure, the language which one tries to adapt to it belong to a religious heritage (let's call it Abrahamic, in order to bring together Judaism, the Christianities, and the Islams). This tradition — complex and differentiated, even conflictual — is at once singular and on the way to universalisation through that which a certain theatre of forgiveness puts in place or brings to light.

This sort of transformation structured the theatrical space in which the grand forgiveness, the grand scene of repentance which we are concerned with, is played, sincerely or not. Often it has, in its very theatricality, the traits of grand convulsion — dare we say a frenetic compulsion? (Derrida 2001:28-29)

REFERENCES

Klemmer, S. & Hartmann, B. 2006. *How Bodies Matter: Five Themes for Interaction Design.* In Caroll, J. (ed.) 2006. Proceedings of the 6th conference on Designing Interactive systems. 26 – 28 June 2006, State College, Penn State University, PA, USA. ACM, New York.

McShine K. & Cooke L. (Eds.) 2007 *Richard Serra Sculpture Forty Years.* New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Derrida, Jacques. 2001. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness.* London & New York: Routledge.

Frank Chikane. Available: http://www.anc.org.za/people/chikane_f.html (Accessed 6 January 2008)

Frank Chikane. Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Chikane (Accessed 6 January 2008)

Umshini wami. Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umshini_wami (Accessed 14 January 2008)