

CHAPTER

2

Tracing Public Engagements in Visual Forms

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Normative understandings of public debate mostly associate it with the written texts or the back-and-forth of debating interlocutors making rational arguments. However, visual forms also occasion and animate public engagements. This chapter lays out a methodology for tracking the circulation of visual forms involved in public deliberative activity and the various kinds of ‘take-up’ they engender.

The chapter offers a conceptual vocabulary for the description of what is involved and the methodology can readily be applied to written texts. It is particularly useful in relation to visual forms because, without such a methodology, it is difficult to grasp the impact of visual forms on processes of public engagement beyond how they are received by audiences.

The visual forms we deal with here are forms that have entered circuits of public engagement. Whether individual creative works or a collection of items, such as an exhibition or a book of images, they are forms that have some kind of ‘charge’ linked to their aesthetic or affective dimensions and that gain further force in the course of their public lives. In other words, we are concerned with those forms that garner what Litheko Modisane terms ‘public critical potency’.² This refers to the capacity of visual forms to precipitate public critical engagements, through the interplay among their form, content, genre and the conditions of their circulation.