The White Bicycle: Performance, Installation Art, and Activism in Ghost Bike Memorials

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Abstract
In this project I examine the performative nature of the ghost bike memorial. Ghost bikes, flat-white painted immobile bicycles created by cycling communities and loved ones of victims, are installed roadside to mark the locations of cycling related deaths. Using critical performance ethnography and critical-cultural analysis as methods, I analyze how the ghost bike performs as an artifact of mourning and inspires co-incident performances of grief, activism, and community building and maintenance. As a memorial object used worldwide to represent cycling culture, the ghost bike acts as a social network link that connects a multitude of diverse cycling communities. I present five case studies of ghost bikes in New York City, Durham, North Carolina, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Lafayette, Louisiana in order to dissect what the polysemic ghost bike communicates to public audiences. My analysis led to the discovery that ghost bikes are not only used as memorials. They also perform as metonyms for the absent, ruined bodies of cyclists; as markers of racial identity for victims; and as tools to reframe the narratives told about cycling-related deaths. I describe how the differing interpretations of the memorial are adapted to create and alter performances of identity, and I argue for the potential for these performances to influence perceptions about cycling safety, cycling-based legislation, and road infrastructure.

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