



McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

Technologies, ontologies and agents

Edited by Chris Wingfield, John Giblin & Rachel King



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Acknowledgements

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We are also grateful for the financial support offered for the conference by the Centre of African Studies and the Smuts Memorial Fund at Cambridge, who each funded the participation of one South African scholar. We also extend our thanks to Peter Mitchell and Paul Lane for supporting our funding applications. We are especially grateful to the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, and to Cyprian Broodbank in particular, for considering our request for funding and then offering to double it, even if this offer came with the condition that at least some of the conference be held in Cambridge – which involved us attempting to lure assembled scholars onto a 7 a.m. coach for the British Museum with promises of fresh coffee and croissants, the morning after the conference dinner! Not everyone made it....

The combined funding enabled us to invite Same Mdluli, David Morris and Justine Wintjes, whose work is included in this volume, as well as Mbongiseni Buthelezi and Carolyn Hamilton to participate in the conference. We were especially honoured to hold the

very first launch of Carolyn and Nessa Leibhammer's edited volume, *Tribing and Untribing the Archive*, at the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology as part of the conference programme.

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As editors, we are especially grateful for the forbearance of the contributors to this volume over the period of four years that has elapsed between the conference and the publication of this volume. As a mitigating circumstance, we would just note that as well as a wedding, a baby and a family relocation to Cape Town and back between us, each of us has also moved to new jobs in new cities during that period – Rachel to the Institute of Archaeology at University College London where she is now Lecturer in Cultural Heritage Studies, John to National Museums Scotland, where he is now Keeper for the Department of World Cultures, and Chris to the Sainsbury Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, where he is now Associate Professor in the Arts of Africa. We can only hope that the extended period has enabled each of the papers in this volume to develop to a fuller maturity!

Chris Wingfield
John Giblin
Rachel King

Chapter 2

Reframing the Wonderwerk slabs and the origins of art in Africa

Michael Chazan

There is a broad consensus that the Middle Stone Age of southern Africa, beginning *c.* 120,000 years ago, provides evidence of a range of behaviours that are novel.¹ As expressed by Lyn Wadley, ‘Africa’s Middle Stone Age (MSA) is celebrated for its innovations’ (Wadley 2015, 156).

The evidence of innovation/invention include complex hunting tools and exploitation of marine resources, but the most spectacular developments are artefacts linked to symbolic behaviour, and more broadly to the origins of art, including the incised ochre from Blombos Cave and Klein Kliphuis, incised ostrich egg shell from Diepkloof and Klipdrift, and shell beads from Blombos Cave, and most recently a small painted piece of rock from Blombos – all of which are within the range of 60,000–80,000 years old (Henshilwood *et al.* 2002, 2004, 2018; Mackay & Welz 2008; Texier *et al.* 2010; Van Niekerk & Henshilwood 2016). These archaeological discoveries are linked to overwhelming evidence from a combination of genetics and fossil evidence that modern humans evolved in Africa (see Stringer 2016 for an overview).

It is thus somewhat surprising that less than forty years ago it was major scientific news when African art was shown to stretch back a mere 10,000 years. In 1981 an article presenting a series of engraved dolomite slabs from a Later Stone Age context at the site of Wonderwerk Cave in the Northern Cape Province, South Africa was published in *Science*. What made this discovery notable was the association of the slabs with dated radiocarbon samples (Thackeray *et al.* 1981; see also Beaumont & Vogel 2006; Bradfield, Thackeray & Morris 2014; Humphreys & Thackeray 1983; Thackeray 1983; Thackeray 2005).

In fact, the linkage between the slabs and an age of 10,000 years is somewhat overstated as only one slab dates back 10,000 years, the remainder are 5,000 years old or younger. The way in which the Wonderwerk

discovery was presented, particularly the emphasis on the single early exemplar, is revealing. The antiquity of the slabs is what made news, and ten thousand years was considered very old. Thus, only thirty-seven years ago an antiquity of ten thousand years for art in Africa was not self-evident. Such a perspective is unconceivable today.

Engaging with the intellectual context of the Wonderwerk discovery provides an opportunity to appreciate the extent of progress in paleoanthropological research in southern Africa over the past thirty years. In 1981, the scientific consensus was that art first appeared in Europe, most likely as the result of the local evolution of modern humans, possibly from Neanderthals. Paul Mellars (1989, 370) emphasized the novelty of cultural developments in Northeast Africa, Western Asia, and Europe during the period between 45,000 and 35,000 years ago, which ‘involved not only the well-documented shifts in stone-tool technology and associated bone / antler working but also the emergence of such features as personal ornaments, extensively traded objects, and (in at least certain contexts) complex representational art’. By the time Mellars wrote this article in 1989 views had begun to shift towards a recognition of an African origin for modern humans. A few years earlier, Fred Smith (1982, 685) was able to write that ‘the simplest and most logical hypothesis supportable on the basis of present knowledge is that the archaic-to-modern-*H.-sapiens* transition in South-Central Europe was indigenous’. Only one commenter responding to this article, Christopher Stringer, suggested that the transition to modern humans in Africa might be earlier than the transition in Europe. Another example of the scientific consensus in the early 1980s is the article published by Michael Hammond (1982) in which he analysed the historical factors that led to the ‘expulsion’ of Neanderthals from the modern human lineage, an error that he felt

Figure 2.1. Map showing Wonderwerk Cave and the other sites mentioned in this chapter: 1) Cradle of Humankind (Sterkfontein, Rising Star; 2) Sibudu Cave; 3) Pinnacle Point; 4) Blombos; 5) Klipdrift; 6) Klein Kliphuis; 7) Diepkloof.



analyses like the one published by Smith were in the process of correcting. Hammond's view drew heavily on an influential article by C. Loring Brace (1964) that argued that Neanderthals were ancestral to modern humans.

The strength of Hammond's article on Neanderthals is not his conclusion about the dynamics of hominin evolution, which we now see as fundamentally wrong, but rather that he urges us to look closely at the historical context in which knowledge claims about human evolution emerge. Hammond (1982, 4) writes that, 'like any other human activity, scientific research is to some extent inseparable from the historical context in which the activity occurs'. Hammond does not try to develop a generalizing theory of the sociology of science, but rather encourages us to consider multiple factors such as the effect of mentors or the influence of rivalries. Training this perspective on the emergence of the contemporary approach to modern human origins, including aspects of modern human behaviour such as art, that stresses the primacy of Africa, and particularly southern Africa, as the place of origins, we can begin to question whether this contemporary consensus emerged simply as the result of the accumulation of information (through new discoveries) or if other factors are at play. I will stress three potential

factors in this brief analysis: 1. The isolation of South Africa under Apartheid and the rapid reintegration of South Africa into the international scientific community following the change in government. 2. The dynamics of internationally funded research projects that stress discoveries of global impact. 3. The constraining of approaches to art to an emphasis on the potential of material culture to encode and signal information, and to serve as an index of cognitive modernity.

Scientific isolation and its aftermath

When the Wonderwerk slabs were discovered and published, South Africa was subject to an academic boycott that had only a marginal impact on the internationalism of South African science. We can point to the fact that both Frances and Anne Thackeray pursued their doctoral studies at Yale University and published in the journal *Science* as clear evidence that the archaeological impact of the academic boycott was at most limited. This situation changed somewhat in 1985 with the decision by the World Archaeological Congress not to include South Africans in their meetings in Southampton, a policy that led to significant debate within the international archaeological community (Ucko 1987). Even after 1985 there continued

to be regular publications in international journals on South African archaeology and fieldwork by a small number of international archaeologists. Yet it seems plausible that the shift in attention during this period within the field of human origins studies away from South Africa and towards East Africa was in part a reaction to political conditions, although the development of argon dating methods that provided an effective tool for absolute dating of East African fossil localities also played a role.

However, if we look only at patterns of international isolation we might miss a more significant aspect, both within Africa, and more subtly within South Africa. The warfare throughout much of southern Africa, including Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe constrained the movement of archaeologists and the ability to carry out research on a regional level. I have been struck during a number of conversations with archaeologists who worked in Africa during the 1950s and 1960s, that they frequently describe driving from South Africa up to the sites in East Africa. With the isolation of the Apartheid regime and the violence across the subcontinent, such travel within Africa became untenable leading to an isolation of South African archaeology as something distinct from African archaeology. Although it is difficult to document, there is also a sense that a degree of fragmentation existed within South Africa. Baumert & Botha (2016, 127) write that South African social scientists 'isolated themselves from international developments and also from other academics in South Africa because of the polarization between English, Afrikaans and African institutions, thus creating a level of self-centeredness...'. The location of Wonderwerk Cave in the Northern Cape, an enormous territory that lacked a university, appears to have become particularly isolated. The key publication for Wonderwerk Cave came to be a guidebook put together for the 1990 annual meeting of the Southern African Association of Archaeologists (Beaumont & Morris 1990).

With the end of Apartheid there has been a rapid influx of international research teams, including our own group working at Wonderwerk Cave (Horwitz & Chazan 2015). The reassertion of the role of South Africa in human origins must be seen in the context of the rapid expansion in the ranks of international researchers drawn to the opportunity to work in South Africa. It is important to emphasize that the new post-Apartheid international engagement has some distinctive traits. The first is that international teams often bring with them major financial resources, particularly in the context of a weakened Rand. The second point is that the research in South Africa has remained largely isolated within the subcontinent, with

little expansion to neighbouring countries. Indeed, much of the international activity has been focused in near proximity to the coast. Finally, South Africa is often conceptualized in opposition to East Africa rather than as part of the whole continent (see for example Brooks *et al.* 2018). Road trips from Sterkfontein outside of Johannesburg to Olduvai remain rare. Thus, in a sense there is an odd situation where the isolationist tendencies within Africa, southern Africa, and even to a limited extent within South Africa, remain largely intact while internationalism has boomed. This combination of fragmentation within Africa together with increasing global connectivity is the background for other factors that play a role in setting the historical context for the recognition of southern Africa as a place of modern human origins.

Discoveries of global impact

The publication of the Wonderwerk slabs in the journal *Science* was a notable event because it marked the recognition of South African archaeology by one of the leading scientific journals in the world. The emphasis on publication in such 'top tier' journals is the hallmark of the rapid influx of international teams, including collaborations with South Africans and collaborations led by South Africans, since the end of Apartheid. Sites including Sibudu, Pinnacle Point, Diepkloof, and Blombos have all been the subject of one or more publications in *Nature* or *Science* (Wadley *et al.* 2011; Marean *et al.* 2007; Brown *et al.* 2009; Henshilwood *et al.* 2002, 2011; Texier *et al.* 2010). Of course, one reason for the prominence of the publications is the excellence of the research involved. There is little question that the opportunity to work in post-Apartheid South Africa has attracted innovative and ambitious researchers. The structure of international funding also plays a major motivating role in spurring 'high impact' publication. Where international archaeological projects were once built around a colonial structure, the tendency today is for funding to be based on highly competitive applications to national scientific funding sources. To be funded a project must pass muster as science operating at the highest international level. This trend is exacerbated by the increasing expense of archaeological practice as it becomes highly dependent on digital technology and costly methods of analysis. This pressure to produce research results that, by external measures, is of the highest scientific merit extends to young archaeologists working to establish a career. Thus, to sustain a project at the cutting edge of archaeological practice requires in many cases publications that validate the scientific value, as opposed to the strictly archaeological value, of the venture.

This pressure pushes researchers towards the search for origins, and more specifically those that are relevant to all humanity rather than of local southern African relevance. Research on modern human origins fits this bill perfectly, and discoveries such as the Blombos ochre or the Diepkloof incised ostrich egg shell are truly of global scientific relevance. In discussing this trend Lynn Wadley writes that ‘in South African villages there is a saying that “when roads to the village are tarred, they take our children away from us”’ (Wadley 2014, 209). In some ways this has also been the case in archaeology; now that barriers are down, major finds tend to be announced initially in high-impact international journals.

The popular media attention to origins research in South Africa also seems to be fuelled by the romance of the struggle against Apartheid. A striking example comes from the site of Naledi which has produced an enigmatic collection of hominin fossils that have sparked global interest (Berger *et al.* 2015). A centrepiece of a recent meeting of the five largest emerging national economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, known by the acronym BRICS) was an unveiling of some of the Naledi fossils via video link. Following this virtual visit the leaders of the BRICS countries were asked to make handprints that would be displayed at the Cradle of Humankind visitor centre alongside a handprint made by the late Nelson Mandela.² The symmetry between the fossils of Naledi and the imprint of the hand of the hero of liberation is telling. There is something satisfying about learning the common African origins of all humanity in the same country where a recognition of our common humanity has triumphed over racial injustice.

Art as cognitive capacity

The archaeological study of art is often very focused on specific historical and cultural contexts. Thus, to take an example from a completely different context, excavations at a Roman/Byzantine site at the site of Huqoq in northern Israel has uncovered vivid mosaics that have generated spirited debate over the correlation between a scene with elephants and textual sources (Dunbabin 2018). Although the debate raises some issues of general theoretical interest, particularly regarding the origin of christianity, the issues involved are largely specific to the Roman/Byzantine world in general, and the Levant in particular. Given the importance discussed above for international archaeological teams working in southern Africa to prove the global scientific importance of their research, such a humanistic approach to art plays a minor role. In the discussion of early art from sites such as Blombos and Diepkloof, the emphasis

has been on identifying a capacity for symbolic behaviour, reducing the artefacts to an index of cognitive capacity (see for example d’Errico *et al.* 2003).³ What emerges is the powerful argument that early art is in a sense fossilized language, and testament to the first appearance of modern human cognition. The earliest evidence for language certainly fits the bill for a major transformative scientific discovery, and research on novel artefacts in Middle Stone Age southern Africa has been transformed into the basis for identifying the origins of human cognitive modernity.

Taking stock

It is notable that from the perspective of contemporary paleoanthropological research, artefacts like the Blombos pebble are fixed in the deep past, lacking the dynamic of an enfolded past and present. Moreover, these objects serve as markers of a boundary in the past, with the Middle Stone Age serving as a dividing line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the culturally modern and the archaic or primitive. I can see two problems with this perspective. The first is that any effort to draw dividing lines in the human lineage is treacherous and can unintentionally strengthen efforts to create biological distinctions within humanity. On the other hand, the grouping of Middle Stone Age humans as ‘modern’ restricts somewhat a recognition of the cultural distinctiveness of different societies, and that for us as ‘outsiders’ gaining understanding of this distinctiveness is a fundamental challenge.⁴

It is interesting that the discovery of the Blombos pebble, along with other Middle Stone Age incised objects, shifted the framing of the Wonderwerk incised slabs out of an origins narrative. Thus, the discoveries made at Blombos, Diepkloof, and other Middle Stone Age sites changes the way we look at the Wonderwerk slabs. In my own experience with the Wonderwerk slabs, I am drawn precisely to their ability to frustrate our efforts at simple ‘reading’, thus adding to a discomfort with the emphasis on art as communication, rather than a modality of material engagement. In our 2018 excavation season we have had the privilege to uncover what may be the most complex slab yet found at Wonderwerk (Figs. 2.2–2.3) As we began to examine this object, covered with a dense network of lines, we searched for animal forms but our search was constantly frustrated. We could find nets of lines, sinuous lines that seem to be elements of a representation, and lines that formed an axis of symmetry, but no image emerged.⁵ Looking at the Wonderwerk slabs reawakens an appreciation of the potential ambiguity of early art, and leaves a door open for multi-vocality in the interpretation of art. Moreover, when we shift

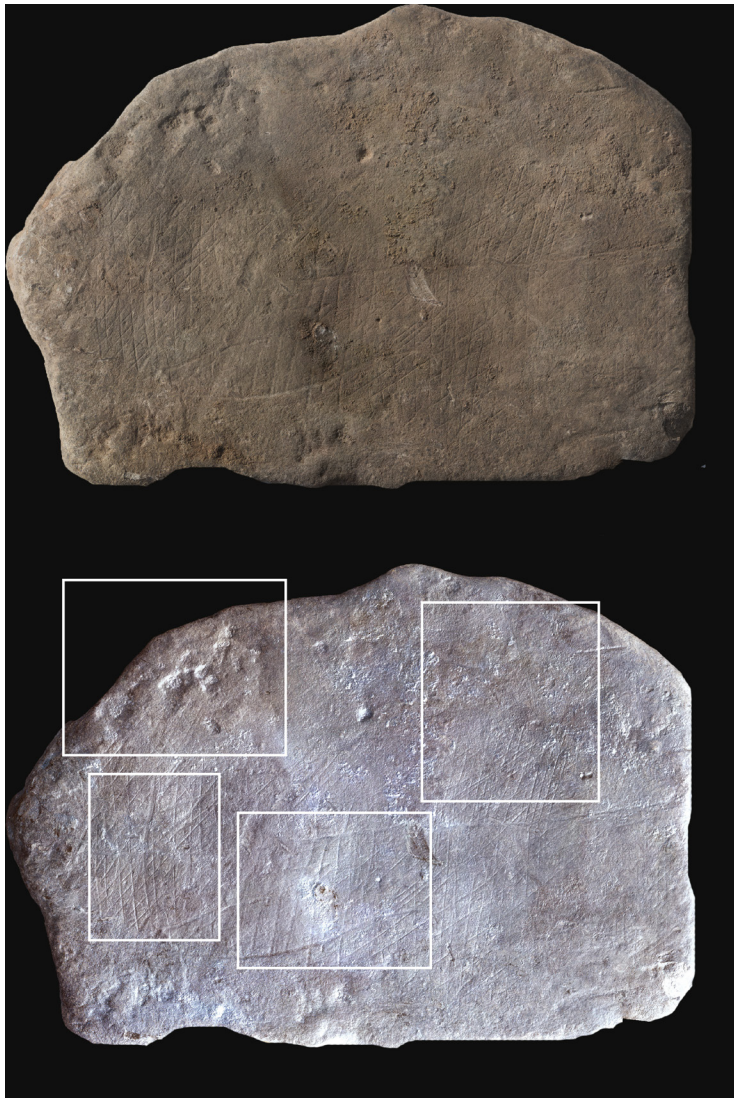


Figure 2.2. Two views of the Later Stone Age incised slabs found at Wonderwerk Cave in 2018. In the lower image the colours are inverted to increase the visibility of the lines. Photographs by Michael Chazan.

our focus away from looking for an encoded message, to take in the entire worked and altered surface, we lose a sense of certainty but at the same time we open the door to an open-ended inquiry. As the members of our research team examined the newly found slab from Wonderwerk we tilted the stone to different angles, hunting for patterns or images. We were actively engaged with the materiality of this complex object. In our excavation we are working to contextualize the object to gain insight into when it was made. These objects once stood as markers of the origin of art but as their framing has shifted, based on new discoveries that push the origins of art in southern Africa further back in time, they are in a sense set free to become subject to an open process of active examination.

There is potential to expand the scope of reframing by finding antecedents that reach further back in time, beyond the Blombos ochre and the Middle Stone

Age. At the back of Wonderwerk Cave, in the area designated as Excavation 6, Beaumont found a range of extraordinary materials- quartz crystals, specularite, and ironstone slabs transported to the back of the cave (140 m from the cave entrance) by hominins sometime around 300,000 to 500,000 years ago (Chazan & Horwitz 2009; Watts *et al.* 2016). The selection and transport of these materials suggests that a powerful appreciation of the sensory properties of material long preceded the impetus to create networks of lines, as found on the Blombos pebble, and much later in time on the Later Stone Age slabs found at Wonderwerk. A focus on the interaction between humans and materials leads to an understanding of continuities over time, rather than marking points that separate then from now. The incision of lines at Blombos and other Middle Stone Age sites become part of this process, rather than novelties without precedent. Incised objects are not semaphores,



Figure 2.3. Details of the incised Later Stone Age slab found at Wonderwerk Cave in 2018. Photographs Michael Chazan.

they are materials that remain material with novel properties and affordances, which may or may not include the capacity to record or transmit information. In writing about the emergence of art I have drawn from Gell's ideas about nets and traps (Chazan 2018; Gell 1996). From this perspective, incising a network of lines into a material is an act of transformation through entrapment. Adopting Gell's perspective allows us to

move away from searching for a singular origin of art in favour of exploring a long process of shifting relations between humans and materiality.

In the current scientific environment, there is a powerful imperative for archaeologists working on early art in Africa to channel their discoveries into a narrative of modern human origins that privileges the symbolic as opposed to the material. These imperatives

flow from the nature of the discoveries themselves, but, as discussed above, also result from the cultural structure of contemporary research in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. There is no question that the achievements of archaeologists working on the Middle Stone Age, what Wadley (2015) describes as 'those marvelous millennia', is a tremendous scientific accomplishment that has changed our understanding of the later stages of human evolution. Yet, there is also reason for concern about the lack of room left for uncertainty, materiality, continuity and for a sense of interplay between past and present.

Carolyn Hamilton (2017) writing on archives provides an alternative approach to objects from the past that may apply well to the study of artefacts. Hamilton writes that:

The past that is the object of interest is thus not firmly in a place distinct from the present time of enquiry. Rather, both are folded into each other and into what lies in between, and, indeed, into the way in which a hoped for future influences how we handle traces of the past and 'sources' in the present (Hamilton 2017, 350).

In her discussion of archives Hamilton (2017, 35) metaphorically refers to documents as travellers, 'travellers across time that have changed shape and accrued new meanings through time. Such travellers, I argue, were not merely affected by their contexts, but also affected them in turn'. The metaphor of documents as travellers provides a way of thinking about empirical evidence that forces us to recognize empirical reality (there is a traveller at the door) while also accepting the importance of the current context (my experience with the traveller is in large part a projection of my needs, feelings etc.).

Although there has been a trend among archaeologists working in Africa to loosen the disciplinary claim of authority, these developments have rarely reached the deep past (see review and references in Giblin 2013). Although there remain real barriers to the development of a truly decolonized palaeoanthropology, the move to decolonize the academy in Africa involves a call to increase the emphasis on pre-colonial history, which includes deep time (Hamilton 2017, Porr & Matthews 2017). Thus, we are left with the contradictory impulses to at once increase the emphasis on the deep past, but at the same time to abandon research approaches based on the colonial imposition of the enlightenment project out of which palaeoanthropology developed. There is a risk that this conundrum will lead to a tacit differentiation between the archaeology of the recent past, which will fold into heritage studies,

and palaeoanthropology that will be part of a scientific enterprise, largely buffered from social engagement. Such a solution would have the benefit of 'keeping the peace' but risks creating an arbitrary temporal division between past and deep past, and weakening the reach of both heritage and science.

In searching for the origins of art, a crucial task is to think about the way our research enterprise frames our objects of study. The case of the Wonderwerk slabs demonstrates how these frames are historically contingent. The Wonderwerk slabs were initially framed within the context of the origin of art in Africa in a way that no longer applies. Hamilton's metaphor of documents as travellers allows us to question how we relate to our objects of study as material entities, to recognize the value of multiple interpretations, but also to embrace the inevitable ambiguities of interpretation.

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Notes

1. The age of the beginning of the Middle Stone Age is subject to debate both on theoretical and empirical grounds. The bulk of the Middle Stone Age record relevant to the discussion presented here postdates 120,000 years so this age is used with acknowledgment that it is to a degree arbitrary.
2. This is described in an anonymous article entitled 'BRICS leaders get a taste of the Cradle of Humankind' in a newsletter published on 27 July 2018 about the 2018 BRICS summit in Johannesburg: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_documents/BRICS_Newsletter_Issue_10.pdf
3. There is a counternarrative in the study of the art of the Later Stone Age, which is equally global in its

implications, that stresses the role of shamanic visions in trance states as the causal mechanism generating artistic expression (Lewis-Williams 2004). It is striking that the search to correlate artistic motifs to entoptic phenomenon generated by human neurological processes, as opposed to culturally mediated expression, has not had a significant impact on the way that the earliest African art is seen.

4. In recent years Francis Thackeray (2005) has used one of the Wonderwerk slabs to advance an argument for a belief in the power of the wounded roan that he believes stands at the root of many African beliefs. Thackeray is taking on the challenge of understanding an ideational system that he finds to be distinctive and worthy of deep appreciation.
5. At this point the stratigraphic context from which the slab was recovered, and thus the age of the slab, remains unclear, adding an additional level of ambiguity. We remain unsure of whether this part of the site is an intact Later Stone Age deposit or if has been disturbed by later activities in the cave.

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The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

In 2015, #RhodesMustFall generated the largest student protests in South Africa since the end of apartheid, subsequently inspiring protests and acts of decolonial iconoclasm across the globe. The performances that emerged in, through and around #RhodesMustFall make it clear how analytically fruitful Alfred Gell's notion that art is 'a system of social action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' can be, even when attempting to account for South Africa's very recent history.

What light can this approach shed on the region's far longer history of artistic practices? Can we use any resulting insights to explore art's role in the very long history of human life in the land now called South Africa? Can we find a common way of talking about 'art' that makes sense across South Africa's long span of human history, whether considering engraved ochre, painted rock shelters or contemporary performance art?

This collection of essays has its origins in a conference with the same title, arranged to mark the opening of the British Museum's major temporary exhibition *South Africa: the art of a nation* in October 2016. The volume represents an important step in developing a framework for engaging with South Africa's artistic traditions that begins to transcend nineteenth-century frameworks associated with colonial power.

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