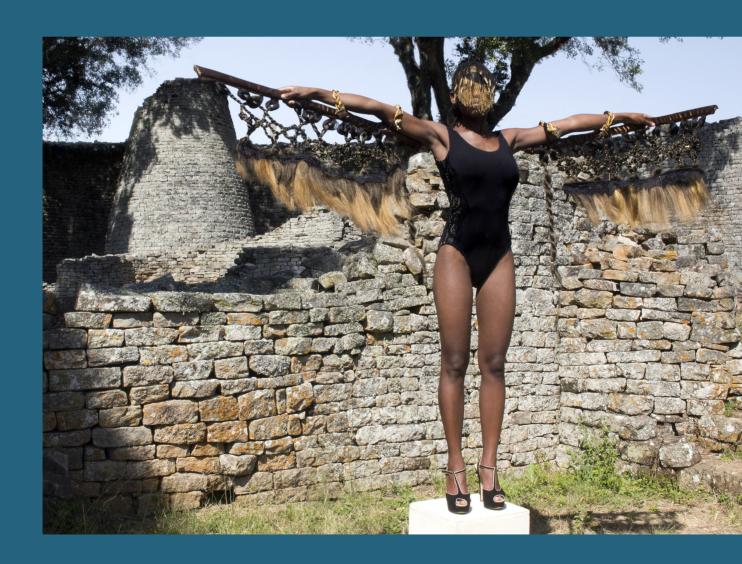# The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

Technologies, ontologies and agents

Edited by Chris Wingfield, John Giblin & Rachel King

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of art in South Africa

McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

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& Rachel King

with contributions from
Ceri Ashley, Alexander Antonites, Michael Chazan, Per Ditlef Fredriksen,
Laura de Harde, M. Hayden, Rachel King, Nessa Leibhammer, Mark McGranaghan,
Same Mdluli, David Morris, Catherine Namono, Martin Porr, Johan van Schalkwyk,
Larissa Snow, Catherine Elliott Weinberg, Chris Wingfield & Justine Wintjes

On the cover: Chapungu – the Return to Great Zimbabwe, *2015, by Sethembile Msezane,
Great Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe. Photograph courtesy and copyright the artist.*

Contents

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Figures

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.

The ongoing support of the McDonald Institute in making this publication possible is deeply appreciated – especially that of James Barrett, Emma Jarman and Ben Plumridge. We are also grateful to two anonymous reviewers of the volume for their comments and support, and to Mark McGranaghan for his assistance with standardizing the diacritics for languages that were never supposed to be written down!

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 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 15

The day Rhodes fell: a reflection on the state of the nation and art in South Africa

Same Mdluli

In March 2015 the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement began, a protest action where students were calling for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes on the campus grounds of the University of Cape Town. The movement subsequently evolved into the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement in 2015 and 2016 where thousands of students protested against increments to university tuition fees and calling for free quality decolonized education from both university managements and the ruling government. The protests led to an impasse between students and university managements at institutions of higher learning in South Africa, which eventually led to the government's intervention.[1] The two movements revealed different aspects indicative of the state of the nation in relation to education and other economic and political issues since democracy.

In *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*, Annie Coombes brings attention to the difficulties of dealing with contested histories in the public domain where different stakeholders must be considered in the context of a 'new nation' or becoming part thereof (Coombes 2004, 5–6). The period following the new democracy in South Africa she makes reference to, is not only characterized by a political shift but also one that is shaped by a moment of addressing the atrocities of the past, finding ways of healing through the agenda of reconciliation, social cohesion and nation building, and finally formulating a new national identity. The issues raised in Coombes' discussion of this moment, however, appear to explore the grey areas between public culture, citizenship and nationalism, and how visual art has played an intersectional role between art and politics, and an even more critical role in redressing notions of contested histories and memory. In visual art the sentiments of this moment are best articulated by art historian and writer Rory Bester, who, in his contribution to a publication highlighting a decade

of the South African National Gallery permanent art collection, notes the two critical moments in what he refers to as 'the art of a democratising age in South Africa' (Bester 2004, 24–5).

The first instance that could be considered part of 'democratizing' art is Albie Sachs' controversial essay of 1989 titled *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines* (Sachs 1991 [1989]) on the role of arts and culture at a point where change was imminent. The second is the moment after democracy, best encapsulated by Okwi Enwezor (1997) in his essay *Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African representation*. Both these essays did not only prompt public debate but also, as noted by Bester (2004, 25), 'represent important shifts in understandings of the "political" and their various relationships to visual arts practice'. While the issues Sachs' essay presented form part of a historical debate centred on the role of culture as weapon, it also highlighted a critical aspect of the debate which presented a dilemma for mainly white artists, who until then had centred their practice on anti-apartheid subject matter. At the centre of this dilemma is Enwezor's argument that for white South African artists the new political order presented a new struggle of having to relinquish control over the representation of Africans (Bester 2004, 25). The characteristics of the historical narrative highlighted by the #RMF and #FMF movements are thus placed against the backdrop of these two strands of understanding the intersection between art and politics, which this essay aims to illustrate as oppositional to Bester's views as attendant to 'the notion of public intellectual life and perceptions of its crisis in South African visual arts' (Bester 2004, 25).

The #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement offers a moment to reflect on what institutes and constitutes public participation in the politics of public art and public culture. This essay therefore focuses on two

Figure 15.1. *Map showing the sites mentioned in this chapter.*

works by Cape Town based artist Sethembile Msezane, namely *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* (2015) and *Chapungu – The Return to Great Zimbabwe* (2015), to illustrate how the notion of *fallism* or the *fallist* idea is employed to evoke an intellectual authority of understanding the epistemological structure of the institution – be it the university as an institution or art as an institution. The two works thus offer a useful departure point that does not only exemplify a significant moment marked by the literal *falling* of the Rhodes statue, but is also representative of the beginning of dismantling institutional structures and the image documenting this moment (in history) to reflect upon history.

Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell (2015) (Fig. 15.2) is of Msezane photographed at the moment when the statue is suspended by belts attached to cranes and about to be lowered. She is pictured possibly standing on a podium, elevated above the eye level of the rest of the spectators who have their cell phones out ready to snap the moment. Her arms are stretched out wide mimicking the furry wing contraption attached to them with rope. She is wearing a black swimsuit, her face is covered with a beaded Zulu bridal veil and there is something anticipatory about her posture and presence. It is an image that I argue represents a pivotal moment upon which the students anchored their

protest action to decontextualize the role of art as a critical component of political rhetoric. It is thus also employed in the overarching discussion of this essay to elaborate on one of the ways in which historian Cynthia Kros notes the protesters' actions 'was sustained by a substantial archive of iconoclasm' (Kros 2015, 150).

The second image *Chapungu – The Return to Great Zimbabwe* (2015) (Fig. 15.3) situates within history itself and by extension a memory of history. It is site specific and in the same manner as the image of the Rhodes *falling*, it captures the viewer to move dually back between the past, present and future. The past is referenced through the location of the shoot – the great Zimbabwe Ruins – that have over the years become an important cultural capital attraction for tourist, researchers and scholars. The medium of photography situates it within a contemporary setting that allows it to be contemplated by the audiences it seeks to captivate. It becomes a futuristic fantastical symbol of a Black woman superhero, one that has the ability to fly and transcend history and the patriarchal baggage it imposes on the Black female body. The uses of these images in this essay is therefore an extension of the question posed by political studies scholar Lwazi Lushaba, in which he asks whether or not our (South African) imagination is adequate enough for the task

of decolonizing the university. While Lushaba is refer-ring to 'imagination in its different forms; intellectual, cultural and political imagination' (Lushaba 2015, 2), my extension focuses on artistic imagination and whether or not it makes an adequate contribution to the process of decolonization. The task of accounting for the broader historical narrative of South African art is itself a contentious one, given that this history has mainly been based on the separatist spatial ideals of apartheid, that permeated even beyond perceived 'liberated' spaces such as the arts. This task also includes interrogating how art is valued, how it is categorized, by whom is it categorized and more importantly who is it meant to serve and within which institutional structures is it validated and considered part of a larger narrative within the cultural landscape. In the South African context this becomes a complex topic, in as far as measuring the extent to which art is able to drive debates around pressing issues, and its impact on the greater imagination of a new nation. The discussion on art and politics thus prompts a larger

philosophical proposition that situates art works and art exhibitions as platforms for showcasing artworks as pivotal to debates and insights on the possibility of new ways of seeing and looking at art, as well as new ways of being.

During the #RhodesMustFall protest actions there was a noticeable detachment of art schools from the institutional politics driving the ideological thinking of collective mobilization. As a result, they became these anomalies with a peculiar sensibility and approach to dealing with the protest actions. It was during the #FeesMustFall movement, however, that art students became more prominent participants in creating forums and spaces for challenging the managements of the universities. At the University of Cape Town, the *Umhlangano* collective shut down the Michaelis School of Fine Art Hidding campus in solidarity with the protest action and the call for *free decolonized education*. It became an intellectual thinking space to articulate the ways in which the art school is complicit in exclusionary policies and therefore a

Figure 15.2. Chapungu – the Day Rhodes Fell, *2015, by Sethembile Msezane, University of Cape Town, South Africa. Photograph courtesy and copyright the artist.*

Figure 15.3. Chapungu – the Return to Great Zimbabwe, *2015, by Sethembile Msezane, Great Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe. Photograph courtesy and copyright the artist.*

repository for its archival legacy. Parts of this historical legacy are, as previously noted by artist and curator David Koloane, based on the fact that 'visual art is a relatively specialized activity, which even amongst the white populace is to a large extent dependent on educational qualifications, class and ambience of environment…' (Koloane 2003, 119).

Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell (2015) becomes an important reference to how art is understood from the current institutional framework. While in South Africa art has always been exclusionary, in that it was essentially based on the separatist ideals of a classist system, it also immediately disqualified most Black practitioners from being considered as visionaries in the same light as their white counterparts. This disparity is furthermore emphasized by the exclusionary mechanisms of art history and art criticism, which

Koloane argues has maintained a consistent omission of Black artists from its historical narrative. *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* (2015) physically inserts itself into that history, but more importantly inserts a Black woman into a largely patriarchal narration of art history. This is expected given that the role of art during the struggle is implicated by the historical baggage pointed out by Koloane, who noted that even under apartheid '…the art fraternity never protested when their black colleagues were denied opportunities to share facilities such as libraries, art museums, through the Separate Amenities Act and other similar repressive legislation', (Koloane 1998, 71) – at least not until the MEDU Ensemble[2] initiated the *Culture and Resistance Symposium and Festival of the Arts* in 1982.

It can be argued that the views expressed in Albie Sachs' essay were in many ways directed at movements

such as MEDU, which since the early 1970s had clearly defined the role of culture as a weapon for resistance. And although MEDU was often criticized for being too narrowly political it became one of the leading cultural movements to mobilize art and culture as a tool against, and in resistance to, oppression. It did not only create a discursive space to articulate resistance through creativity but also offered a means for art and artists to refashion and redefine their role in a society through a communist, collectivist, and non-materialist approach. MEDU's historical significance thus presents an opportunity to explore how art lent itself to a critical engagement with the community through political rigour that highlights issues of inequality, social injustice, exclusion and redress, while remaining imaginative approaches through creativity. Through its activities centred on cultural activism it managed to create the possibility for a more inclusive space for the arts, but in so doing created a new role for the function of art more closely situated within the needs of the community. It also fostered a heightened consciousness of and commitment to 'giving birth to a new culture' (Serote, cited by Wylie 2008, 236), one that would prompt a new approach to art making and introduce a new crop of cultural revolutionaries.

One must recall that prior to this, South Africa's artistic cultural landscape was characterized by an exclusionary model based on ideas of separate development, that on the one hand led to a fragmented and somewhat displaced narrative of South African art history, but on the other raised questions regarding the role of art and culture in contemporary South African society. The moment of the symposium was as much about refiguring the meaning of art and culture, as it was about determining its role within a repressive system. The objectives of MEDU in convening this gathering were therefore based on the idea that 'if culture was democratic and non-racial, it can be used as a weapon of the struggle and become entrenched in democratic spaces that would foster change and become an integral part of a democratic South Africa' (Serote 2009, 194). While this may seem like an idealistic understanding of how art and politics merge, MEDU was nonetheless arguably an ideal South African art collective, precisely because of the manner in which it allowed for collective creative thinking and intellectual artistic thought centred primarily on its care for, and delivery to serve, the needs and desires of the majority of the people. The *1982 Culture and Resistance Symposium* was thus a critical moment in 'placing culture at the forefront of the resistance to apartheid', and in so doing 'allowed its participants to envisage the role for culture in a liberated South Africa' (Kellner & González 2009, 156). As part of the symposium MEDU also organized an exhibition of art works by South African artists titled *Art Toward Social Development: An Exhibition of South African Art* (10 June – 10 August 1982).

The founding of MEDU was according to one of its co-founders Thami Mnyele 'soaked in the conscious language of revolution' (Mnyele, cited by Wylie 2008, 236). However, this was later nullified by Sachs' paper, which in its delivery read as a kind of manifesto on the imagined role of art and culture in a liberated South Africa. Although it can be argued that his address was based on a particular political audience and ideological framework, one that was partisan and located within the ethos of the African National Congress (ANC), it is important to point out the moment of contestation it presented because it became emblematic of the kind of attitude, and broader understanding of the significance of art and culture, adopted by South Africa in the new democracy. On the one hand it presented an idea of how the arts could function in a 'liberated' and transforming society, but on the other it pointed to the dangers when art is imposed and over simplified, to determine how people (particularly Black people) should think of the world creatively and in their personal lives. Given the context Sachs maps out in his paper, perhaps the title should have been 'Preparing Ourselves for Change' as it assumes a collective consensus, one that appears to be condescendingly aimed at dictating a political mandate to artists of what ought to happen in the arts once freedom was achieved. It evades the fact that in as far as the arts goes, the majority of Black artists were already in a handicapped position, as a result of the discriminatory laws imposed by apartheid. How then was it possible to have a debate about culture when the relationship between the culturally dominant and culturally dominated was not even on the table? Furthermore, it ignored the possibility of questioning who determines the terms under which this debate should take place. This scepticism towards defining art alongside political ideological thinking, is thus dangerously premised upon what Diana Wylie notes is the 'modernist and socialist realist representation that art tends to presume a new world that – albeit more just, economically stable, and beautiful – could be imposed upon people, whether they wanted it or not' (Wylie 2008, 239). For this reason, the debates raised in Sachs' paper stand at a complex political and cultural nexus, ushered in by the rigorous ideological foundation established by collectives such as MEDU.

The politics of the student movements can be understood as the current struggle against this backdrop of artistic intervention, but this is not to suggest that the ideological frameworks of movements like

MEDU are necessarily the only approach to defining the role of art in society. Rather, in this instance, art is employed to demonstrate the intersectionality between art and politics; the fluidity the two seem to share in a conversation between past histories and present tensions. Within an institutional framework, MEDU thus enables a lens through which to probe and dismantle the epistemological roots of art and culture as instruments for formulating a sense of nationalism and identity – national identity. The perception that art making is an elitist activity has also played a major role in the wider narrative about how art is understood by the majority of the South African population. While there may be a widely shared perception about the conventions of art appreciation in general, it is worth pointing out the scholarly merit of considering cases like MEDU and the way this challenged the notion of art as a sophisticated leisure time activity, appreciated solely by members of the bourgeoisie and upper classes. It also enables an interrogation of what happens when art detaches itself from the political prism of being burdened with a social responsibility, in which case it is either rationalized in a socialist sense, or categorized through the individualistic idea of the 'authentic' African artist. In both instances, scholarship can become a critical means of critiquing the longstanding historical estrangement of art from the real cultural politics of the South African public, particularly those rooted in studies around representation and the redefinition of art from a western paradigm to an African perspective.[3]

Thami Mnyele was an artist and one of the founders of MEDU, who defined the ideal cultural worker as 'someone with clear political insight, a skilled hand and firm revolutionary morality' (Mnyele, cited by Wylie 2008, 236).[4] This may appear as somewhat restrictive of 'the artist' as an individual with agency, however it is also an intentional declaration on Mnyele's part that aims to steer away from the often romanticized and accented exceptionalism, afforded to the notion of the artist as universal genius, though usually western, white and male. The collective approach adapted by MEDU is not only a counter to an individualistic approach, but also one that students were able to employ to tackle a collective goal of sending a visual message in protest action, that aimed to achieve *free decolonial education*. Out of the #FeesMustFall movement emerged a number of other hash tags on social media platforms, including #Shackville. #Shackville was protest action led by students from the University of Cape Town who built a makeshift shack and placed it at the entrance of the main campus of University of Cape Town to highlight the plight of students, without proper housing or access to accommodation. When the demands of the students where not heard they resorted to burning paintings that had been displayed in one of the nearby buildings on the university premises. The reaction that followed from the university management, civil society and the 'art community'[5] not only revealed some of the underlying concerns in relation to the ways that value is ascribed to art in relation to economical, social and political issues, it also demonstrated the increased need to generate a conversation around the role of art in the public domain. This is not to suggest that the sole responsibility of art is to validate a sense of social or political consciousness by addressing public matters, but rather that art must be and can be imaginative and liberating in raising awareness around pertinent issues as well as pleasurable. In attempting to address the question of whether our imagination is adequate enough for the task of de-colonizing the university, and their art schools, a closer examination of the state of South African art and art history is required, to interrogate the trajectory of the socio-political conditions that have culminated in this moment of reflection.

Discussing the state of art in relation to the student protest movements is as conscious of the synthesis between art and politics, as it is of the means that art offers as an emancipatory expression and political act. The ideology and fantasy in South African representation that Enwezor (1997) referred to in his essay, is thus key to explaining the use of the Black (female) body in the student movements, and in Msezane's work. By using photographs, Msezane's work situates itself within a canon that problematizes photography and the role it has played in the colonial project. *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* (2015) in particular is part of a trope of photographic imagery that Henri Cartier-Bresson calls 'the decisive moment' (see O'Hagan 2014). In recalling the performance piece and the moment the photographic image was taken, Kros (2015, 158) notes how Msezane explains 'she had timed the raising of her arms (since she had her back to the action) by looking at "the reflection of the statue coming down" in the sunglasses and cell phones of people standing in front of her'. This is an important aspect to note in the process of making of this image, and the fact that the act of falling is not only suggested in title of the work, but also embodied as part of an anticipated action that literally and figuratively depicts the Black woman figure as a key component of weaving the connections between the past, present and future.

The second image *Chapungu – The Return to Great Zimbabwe* (2015) appears to be a lot more orchestrated, especially as it is not set against the backdrop of an event. Here the artist is pictured standing on a white podium in the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, which

not only represents a significant narrative of ancient African civilization, but also evolved into an important archaeological site (and tourist attraction) that has played a critical role in shaping the perception of Africa, as measured against a western epistemological framework of history. Although it also references history, it evokes this in a more political sense than the image of Rhodes falling, in its relation to power and knowledge as well as narrative and hegemony. The power relations the image invokes can be said to have informed an argument such as Enwenzor's (1997, 23), that 'although today these are thought of as things of the past, in reality they remain perversely lodged in popular culture texts, in films, novels and art. In films the fantasy is of the menacing [B]lack criminal and prostitute.' Enwenzor is here pointing out how 'historical scenes in which the [B]lack body has been tendered as display, reproduce the abject as a sign of [B]lack identification' (Enwenzor 1997, 23), while in contemporary art, he notes, 'we have Robert Mapplethorpe to thank for furthering the illusion of the [B]lack body as an object of enjoyment and spectacle, in short for helping restore it to aesthetic state of grace' (Enwenzor 1997, 23). Enwenzor's argument raises a critical question around appropriation, in particular, 'what images in a decolonizing South Africa should look like, and who has the right to use which images, and what the authorizing narrative ought to be' (Enwenzor 1997, 26).

Msezane's photographs thus stand as a reference to a history that is as much about the past as it is about the present, in their attempt to tease out the complex discourse of decolonization in a pro-longed post-colonial era. They are part of a lexicon of imagery that not only inserts itself into a historical narrative, but more importantly highlights the relationship between the medium and the narrative of the past. The specificity of the content in the imagery requires a level of criticality from the viewer, but it also prompts a consciousness around contested notions of history, and the ways mental geographies have influenced events both in the past, and in the present. The institutional structures both images make reference to include art institutions, such as galleries, museums and art schools, whose failures are made glaringly visible by the debates around #RhodesMustFall in particular. Not only have these institutions failed in generating a scholarship, or better yet a broader understanding of how art and culture can function to inform a more inclusive national (art) history, they have also in many instances inadvertently taken a position that overlooks topics that tackle this kind of subject matter.

For this reason, the role of art in a society such as South Africa has become an idea estranged from the urgency of prompt positive change. It is hoped that following the issues raised by students of the #RhodesMustFall movement, art institutions might in some way take up the challenge of becoming a means to reclaim what has gradually eroded, in providing structures for marginalized communities to become consciously empowered through access to creative and artistic expression. One might think that twenty years post 1994 these structures ought to exist. In many ways they don't, however, because the government in power is still dealing with problematic issues of transition two decades late – be they ideological, financial, and /or procedural. The importance of art in a society such as South Africa has not been prioritized. The lack of engagement in the arts thus points to a larger deficiency in public participation, in building a more critical conversation that is inclusive and an acute voice regarding matters of national concern.

Within both the #FeesMustFall and #Rhodes-MustFall movements various artistic interventions encouraged public engagement and advocacy in support of the students' cause. The student protests, particularly the #RhodesMustFall movement, signalled the deficiency in wider public engagement through the critique it received on various platforms. This criticism was later reiterated in other instances, such as the #Shackville movement, which sought to highlight the plight of lack of affordable accommodation for students. During this protest students built a makeshift shack on campus, a deliberate act that was aimed to disrupt the pristine visual appearance of architectural façade of the university's administration block. The protest action intensified and led to the burning of painting which students felt where offensive and a symbol of the institutional oppression. This led to the establishment of an Artworks Task Team, whose responsibility included facilitating a platform for dialogue between the university management and students on the removal of other art works students felt were offensive in terms of representation and their historical connotations. The task team also set up dialogues between students and some of the artists, whose works was found wanting by the students and the Artworks Task Team.

The presence of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town became an important signifier of a general state of the nation, generating a ripple effect of events which questioned the symbolism of other artwork and statues. The protest actions prompted a debate exploring the intersection between art and politics; two elements at the centre of the symbolism created around the ideology of nation and nationalism. #RhodesMustFall protest actions once again positioned the arts as a tool for inspiring change, while at the same

time illustrating the ways in which universities have become the final frontiers, a contested terrain of scholarship, knowledge production, and artistic imagination. The protest actions expressed how artistic imagination and the state of visual art in South Africa have long gone past a stage that needs to be formally addressed on account of transcending the current mental geography of what it means to be South African. In order to overcome the cultural recession we now face, the actions of the students must serve as a reminder, but also an inspiration, to move beyond the fallacies of a state regarded as diverse, in terms of cultural identity, to look more deeply at where we have come from, where we are and most importantly where we are going.

Notes

1. Not only did the government intervene by allowing the universities to use state force in the form of armed police, it eventually had to enter into discussions with student representative bodies and university managements to agree not to institute fee increases in that year.
2. The MEDU comes from the Sepedi word meaning 'roots' and was adopted as a name by a collective of cultural workers who lived in exile in Gaborone Botswana. The organization consisted of six units: Publications and Research, Graphic Art, Music, Theatre, Photography and Film (Kellner & Gonzàlez 2009, 76).
3. The phrase 'African perspective' is used loosely in this instance to describe the point of view from which a western paradigm is set against as a polarity.
4. Thami Mnyele was part of a collective of cultural workers who made up MEDU based in Gaborone Botswana. On 14 June 1985 Mnyele was amongst 11 other people killed after the South African Defence Force raided Gaborone Botswana.
5. The 'art community' is used here to refer to a small establishment of influential artists, art schools, art dealers, art writers and critics, art historians and art auction houses. Together they make up a chain of what constitutes the art market. In South Africa the majority of this art market is still predominately white.

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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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