



Behind UCT's Removed Art

The Writing on the Wall

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During the past two years, fine art has been under attack at the University of Cape Town (UCT), with artworks defaced, intentionally destroyed by fire and black-listed during various student protests. In response, some 74 works of art from the University's collection—by some of the country's most acclaimed artists—have been taken down or covered up “on the grounds of their vulnerability to potential damage” or because “some members of the campus community have identified certain works of art as offensive to them—for cultural, religious or political reasons.”

More than a year since UCT Vice Chancellor Max Price assured the public that the removal of these 74 artworks from public view was merely “provisional,” he once again addressed the issue as part of an opinion piece highlighting what he described as institutional racism on a structural level at UCT and feelings of marginalization on the part of black students. But, writes Ivor Powell, the longer that the artworks are kept out of the public eye, the greater the risk to the integrity of UCT and the more compromised the humanist values at its institutional heart.

As far as artist Willie Bester is concerned, his sculpture of the so-called Hottentot Venus, Sara Baartman—which is part of UCT's art collection and currently covered up by black cloth in the university library—provides a kind

of locus for issues of identity: firstly for the suffering and racism that occurred in the colonial and post-colonial context, and secondly, as he put it in a recent interview, “so that [we] can confront who we are.” We “fought for



everyone to be acceptable with whatever deficiency they have, or what is seen as a deficiency.”

For University of Cape Town Vice Chancellor, Max Price, however, Bester's concerns around inclusivity and social cohesion are of no great import, at least according to a recent column that he wrote for *City Press* on News24. Conjecturing the way in which Bester's artwork might be encountered by a black student born after 1994, Price writes of the “familiar naked sculpture of the Khoikhoi woman, Sarah Baartman, with her exaggerated buttocks that made her a freak show in Victorian England.” To be fair, Price does, in passing, allow that the student's reading of the work might alter if they knew that the sculptor, Willie Bester, was black and that he utilized the figure to project his personal pain. But then again it might not. “Or,” he continues, “this may be irrelevant, and your anger at the sexual objectification of this woman—this black woman—may continue to burn. It is not difficult to see why black students would say: ‘This is not simply art that provokes. This art makes me deeply uncomfortable . . . the University surely doesn't care about my feelings.’”

Well, as the Price administration is at pains to demonstrate, the University does apparently care. Responding to questions from the *SA Art Times*, UCT media manager Elijah Moholola said that the removal of the works was “part of the short-term recommendations made by the Artworks Task Team (ATT) earlier this year” and that the artworks that were removed from the walls are to remain in storage, pending, among other things, a broader consultative process. This consultation will take the form of displays of some of the contested artworks (in dedicated spaces such as the CAS (Centre for African Studies) gallery, debates and discussions around specific artworks and/or themes. Seminars involving the creators of some of the ‘contested’ works will also be hosted by the Works of Art Committee (WOAC) and other departments in the university, around different artworks and symbols.” According to Moholola, these short-term recommendations are to be implemented within one year, “so the process is still ongoing and on-track.”

In the meantime, Bester—a sculptor of some pre-eminence in the democratic South Africa and the son of a Xhosa father and a mother of mixed race—has been silenced in a debate about race and identity in the new South Africa. What Bester's artwork has to contribute to the institutional conversation is to count for nothing when weighed against the projected perception that the university doesn't care about the feelings of some of its students.

What right, one might ask, does the university have to devalue Bester's cultural and artistic expression? And

IT IS MIND-BOGGLING THAT THE VICE CHANCELLOR CAN SO THOROUGHLY MISREAD AND MISREPRESENT HIS OWN INSTITUTION'S ART COLLECTION AND THESE PHOTOGRAPHERS. IT SEEMS HE HAS DONE SO TO REPOSITION HIMSELF IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN, AND FOUND IT EXPEDIENT TO ESSENTIALIZE AND GROSSLY MISREPRESENT THEIR LIFE'S WORK IN THAT CAUSE.

—DAVID GOLDBLATT AND PAUL WEINBERG,
IN RESPONSE TO MAX PRICE'S COLUMN ON NEWS24

according to what measures of student perception and experience is Bester's work considered too hot to handle in the first place?

But Price's aesthetic prevarication does not stop there. He proceeds to discuss a body of photographs that he concedes might have been “intended to reveal the callousness of apartheid” but in which “black people are shown in the wastelands of the Bantustans, in desolate squatter camps, and in the dehumanizing grip of the migrant labor system.” He notes that photographs of white people, in the same collection, are portrayed as “powerful, privileged overlords.”

While Price does acknowledge that the photographers involved—“Peter Magubane, David Goldblatt, Paul Weinberg, Omar Badsha”—all acclaimed masters of their craft—intended their works to be “ammunition in the struggle against apartheid,” this is not sufficient to justify their display on the walls of academe. One might be excused for thinking that the observation is hardly more illuminating than saying that Nelson Mandela might have spent 27 years in prison as a criticism of the apartheid government—and indeed Weinberg's photograph of Mandela casting his first vote in 1994 hangs in the UCT library.

But so what? What matters for Price is this: “if you are a black student born well after 1994 what you see is a



parade of black people stripped of their dignity and whites exuding wealth and success. Even if you know the historical context of the photos, a powerful contemporary context may overwhelm this, leading you to conclude that the photos are just one more indication of how this university views black and white people.” And this is what counts.

For the record, the university does not own any works by Peter Magubane and Omar Badsha in its art collection. Although this fact is of little relevance to the broader issues under discussion, the fact that Price seems to think that they do is telling in itself.

Whatever the details, Price’s message is unambiguous: just in case artworks might be misunderstood by students, it behooves the administration to remove the works from view or to cover them up. To a neutral observer, this might seem a bit like saying medical students should be protected from autopsies in case they are offended by the sight of blood.

By the logic of the Price administration, the removals are justified as part of an ongoing process based on the short-term recommendations made by the Artworks Task Team (ATT) earlier this year. Both Price and Moholola have relied heavily on these recommendations in recent statements. What has never been highlighted, however, is the fact that the administration did all it could to keep the workings of the committee secret, finally releasing its report in response to a PAIA (Promotion of Access to Information Act) application launched by UCT staffer William Daniels, in the interests of public accountability. However, the university’s intentions remain vague and are mainly projected in terms of the one-year deadline from the ATT’s report in February. Moholola indicated further that medium-term curatorial strategies—including the possible construction of a special museum where works could be contextually exhibited—would be effected within two to four years. In the meantime, the longer that the artworks are kept in ‘safe keeping’ the more the stakes continue to rise. Price is the

head and occasional mouthpiece for an important institution of higher learning, one that is moreover founded on humanist principles and which has an extensive humanities department. This means that UCT, as an institution, is not merely geared to the inculcation of technical skills, nor to only what is measurable or subject to forensic analysis. Learning, as it is understood and practised at UCT, is not limited to calculus and empirical methodologies and procedures. Instead, in its institutional structures, UCT largely pursues disciplines that are traditionally designated as the Humanities—disciplines that include languages and their literatures, history, architecture, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, art and politics. As such, the humanities account for a very significant portion of all the study undertaken within the institution. Such disciplines are neither capable of proof nor usefully available for measurement. The knowledge to which they address themselves is of a different and more subtle kind, and accessed and developed by procedures different from those of the scientific method. In the humanist model, it is by engaging with and considering the claims of that with which you disagree—or that which

offends you, or that which you wish to supersede in some way—that you contribute to the sum of human knowledge, that you engage in the business of academic learning in the first place.

In this context, it is useful to think of a work of art as serving a similar function in the humanities to the hypothesis in empirical science. It is precisely through engagement with human consciousness that art works become part of the intellectual property of society. Such engagement and the art that it produces is, in a sense, the living memory of an institution.

In the normal context then, a society and its institutions simultaneously celebrate and critique themselves in and through the art and the imagery collected and displayed. Of course, what is collected and what is displayed changes over time—influenced by the fashions and politics of the



Paul Weinberg, Nelson Mandela voting for the first time in his life, Ohlange High School, Inanda (1994).



David Goldblatt, Exhaust pipe service, Esselen Street, Johannesburg (2002).

time and many other factors. It is not even unthinkable that it could, in some instances, be meaningfully argued that the destruction of works might be advisable. But such actions need to be broached within the frameworks of humanist engagement and transacted in public—not just by kowtowing to the demands of those who would hold art to ransom and make non-consultative decisions behind closed doors. In the case of the UCT militants, it is far from clear just who the so-called Fallists actually speak for, or that they are anything more than a disaffected minority, unrepresentative of either the majority or more persuasive opinion. In response, Price's administration has failed to establish meaningful platforms for the issues to be thrashed out openly and constructively. Meanwhile, his administration is left in the untenable position—anathema in a humanist institution—of siding with ignorance and misperception, and acting in order to suppress the very humanism it is tasked with furthering. The point here is that this is not really *about* art nor about learning. The narrative engaged by UCT's student militants is bluntly, brutally and convulsively political in ways that have more in common with the conventions of warfare than they do with parliamentary processes. This is about a struggle for the control and ownership of resources, a winner-takes-all model in which the old is obliterated and a tabula rasa is created on which to inscribe the new. Thus, in the Shackville protests, five paintings by Richard Baholo, the first black student at UCT to be awarded an MA in Fine Art, were set alight. The paintings in question addressed—in



David Goldblatt, Anna Boois, a goat farmer, one of 14 women given land by the government, with her birthday cake and vegetable garden on her farm Klein Karoo, Kamiesberge, Northern Cape (2003).



David Goldblatt, Copper bearing rocks at Simon van der Stel's exploratory mine, Carolusberg, Northern Cape (2004).

generically social realist and protest-friendly style—precisely the issue the students were ostensibly protesting: racist inequities in South African education.

Equally distressing for many democratically minded observers was the burning of two collages of images of



Paul Weinberg, Baptism, Nyaka Island (1999).

Black Sash activist Molly Blackburn—a woman closely associated with both the university and the city, and one of the key figures in the powerful non-racial opposition to apartheid that mushroomed in the broadly inclusive politics of the United Democratic Front in the 1980s and early 1990s. According to reports, the students responsible for the arson did not have the faintest idea who Molly Blackburn was.

Not that it would necessarily have mattered. Speaking in his personal capacity, Ramabina Mahapa, former UCT SRC president and Rhodes Must Fall leader, provides chilling insight into the militants' motivations in a student publication in March 2016:

The aim is to get the university to reach a stage where they will be unable to concede to any more significant demands and therefore resort to use the state policing apparatus and private security to repress student protests. The expectation is that this will detach the black masses from the hegemonic bloc of the ruling party and thereby awaken the “sleeping” masses that will then redirect their frustrations and rage towards not only the universities but the state.

This is populism in the raw. The idea is to drive the administration to violence and then—cynically and strategically—to cry foul. It has nothing to do with art, except insofar as destroying artworks raises the political temperature.

Burning the tokens and tracteries of the past—official portraits from the colonial era, statues, buildings, whatever—is essentially infantile. It is a denying through force

what gives displeasure, trying to unremember, as it were. Such actions seek a condition of radical discontinuity with the past. But the past cannot be wished away. Recontextualizing and reinterpreting history is one of the key jobs that a university in the international humanist mold is expected to undertake. And to do so on its own terms, as an institution of higher learning. That is, in the humanist tradition on which UCT was built, through robust debate and discussion, through processes of engagement which, incrementally and over time, lead to the writing of different histories and the enriching of our understanding of who we are and where we come from. But as long as the UCT administration continues to operate behind closed doors through its own management committees and without any public engagement, the institution loses credibility and will convince very few of its bona fides. The way that UCT has dealt with the crisis is, frankly, anathema to an institution of humanist learning whose *raison d'être* is informed debate and research, the systematic interrogation of what is believed and what is thought. In fact, it is precisely the presence of paintings by the university's first black Fine Art Masters graduate (Richard Baholo)—that marks out a moment of transformation already engaged by a gallery of elders, including Njabulo Ndebele and to Mamphela Ramphele. These are markers of a transformation that by rights should be built upon. Such images and such progressions are precisely what need to be seen and to be discussed. And, in the case of the destroyed Baholos, they now need to be shown in reproduction, with clear indications of exactly why the originals were not available for hanging. As long as such issues are not addressed, argued, and thrashed out in a context where opposing views are considered and debated, they will not be dealt with in any convincing way. It is somewhat chilling to note here that—even if we accept the Price administration's statements that the intention was not to hide or censor the work—the university's committees insist on inserting themselves in a kind of supervisory or nanny role within the process, as Moholola makes clear when he says that “It is untenable to think that works of art that were of relevance and importance in the past decades can simply continue to be. This does not mean that they lack value. . . . This is why it is important to develop curatorial strategies that investigate context and art works and respond accordingly as any collection or exhibition at this time in our history should and will do.”

Another medium-to-long-term recommendation was for the university to consider building an art museum with a curatorial team for exhibiting artworks. This will also act as a space for different discourses around all forms



of art—“problematic” and “non-problematic.” In other words, UCT appears to be building a platform from which it will be in a position to tell you what to think. Though the thought might be unkind, one can’t help remembering Adolf Hitler and Adolf Ziegler’s Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich 1937, where works identified as “problematic” were shown in ways that showed up “differences” in “discourse.” The rest, of course, is history. Not that one expects anything quite so dramatic in the case of works notionally tainted either in themselves or through their context with “institutional racism.” What is clear, though, is that until UCT as an institution takes sides in what is increasingly a constitutional issue, many will have empathy with the despairing expedient followed by David Goldblatt, arguably South Africa’s most distinguished photographer and one of its most respected cultural figures, in withdrawing his archive and collection from UCT, lodging it instead at Yale University in the USA, where at least its humanist syntax will be guaranteed.

The way that UCT is playing it, however, the removed artworks have come to be something like hostages, except that the expected negotiations and conversations are not taking place. Now, these hostages are demanding to be returned as symbols and tokens of good faith, presences in a future more broadly under construction. Until that process takes place—and includes referendums among the



Paul Weinberg, *On the Quickie* (1996).

entire student body, the University’s alumni and its staff to assess, among other things, just how widely felt are the sensitivities so glibly attributed by Price to the notional born-free student—UCT will almost certainly remain a battlefield in a war of attrition—or at the very least an academic basket case in the making.