

PUBLIC ART IN RELATION TO SOCIAL SYSTEMS: A CASE STUDY OF  
#RHODESMUSTFALL

by

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## DECLARATION

I declare that Public art in relation to social systems: a case study of #rhodesmustfall is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

Signature:

Date: 05 September 2022

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. DARRIES'. The signature is stylized with a large, looped initial 'M' and a trailing flourish.

## **SUMMARY**

Title:

Public art in relation to social systems: a case study of #rhodesmustfall

Summary:

The recent trend in removing statues of controversial figures from history prompts a need to consider a revisionist approach to studying publicly sited artworks, particularly when the social dynamic engages public art in a direct way. This dissertation studies public art as contributing to the complex structure of social systems through connections made between the histories of public art and social space. The aim is to understand how meaning is formed through these connections and that the resulting removal of public art is part of the self-organising quality of a complex social system within larger socio-political views. This is achieved by analysing the case study of #rhodesmustfall as it pertains to the social interaction with and eventual removal of the Rhodes statue sited on the University of Cape Town campus.

List of key terms:

#rhodesmustfall; #blacklivesmatter; University of Cape Town; Rhodes statue; public art; complexity; self-organisation; social systems; decolonisation

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
ATT	Artworks Task Team
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BC	Black Consciousness
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CAS	Centre for African Studies
CBD	Central Business District
EFF	Economic Freedom Fighters
HWC	Heritage Western Cape
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex
RMF	Rhodes Must Fall
RNSAMC	Rhodes National South African Memorial Committee
SANP	South African National Parks
TC	Trans Collective
TR	Truth and Reconciliation
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UCT	University of Cape Town
UFS	University of the Free State
US	United States
USA	United States of America
WOAC	Works of Art Committee



## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

### 1.1 RATIONALE

The protests that erupted in 2015 on the upper campus of the University of Cape Town<sup>1</sup> (UCT) – about the presence of Marion Walgate’s *Cecil John Rhodes* (1934)<sup>2</sup> statue (Rhodes statue) – mark an interesting event in post-Apartheid South African art discourse. This development partly relates to the manner in which the use of the social media tag #rhodesmustfall accelerated the momentum of these protests. In this instance, the tag #rhodesmustfall became a popular trope among the academic and broader social community in South Africa and gave rise to various meanings and interpretations of the publicly accessible art object referenced. The tag subsequently functioned as a mnemonic device representative of the oppression<sup>3</sup> of the Black community in South Africa. It is therefore unsurprising that the resulting upheaval of emotions that triggered the formation of the tag would become imbued in the now infamous statue, as Rhodes was implicitly associated with the oppression of this Black community (Mangcu 2015).

In his article *Rhodes anger has shattered the myth that race doesn’t matter*, Xolela Mangcu (2015) described, by way of quotes by Cecil John Rhodes, that the native population of South Africa were subject to a forced submission of not only basic privilege but also the dignity of identity. The harsh reality of the impact these statements have had in the formation of past political regimes is argued as not being lost in the socio-politic of the current political dispensation. Regarding #rhodesmustfall, Mangcu explains that there is evidence of latent oppressive ideologies still present in institutional structures such as the academic environment of UCT<sup>4</sup>. This is especially in consideration that the “Black middle-class students”

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<sup>1</sup> University of Cape Town. New buildings completed in 1928 under the supervision of architect Joseph Michael Solomon (Schmahmann 2013:55).

<sup>2</sup> Marion Walgate, *Cecil John Rhodes* (1934). Bronze, 160 x 122 x 142 cm (figure), about 200 cm high (base). University of Cape Town, Cape Town. (Schmahmann 2013:54, figure 25).

<sup>3</sup> In Cape Town, the issue of slavery is significant and denounced due to the offensive and oppressive association it harbours for a significant portion of the residential community.

<sup>4</sup> On the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2015 a university assembly was held at UCT’s Sarah Baartman Hall (formerly the Jameson Hall) where the UCT convocation as well as members of the public where offered the opportunity to express their views on issues regarding not only the presence of the Rhodes statue but also issues of transformation at UCT. Race was the highlighted issue and representation of both dominant race groups, Black and White,

of UCT are not complicit with the illusions of equality implied by the rainbow nation ideology, instead “[t]hey are comfortable in their skins - pun intended” and willing to express their disapproval of existing systems that inherently exclude the Black identity, especially academically (Mangcu 2015). Thus, the Rhodes statue became significant primarily because of the protests iconising the public artwork as symbolic of oppression, a fair assessment given the context but somewhat delayed considering that the Rhodes statue had been present on the university campus for decades.

The shift with regard to the Rhodes statue as a seemingly inconsequential public artwork to a strong symbol of oppression is remarkably slow, considering that a democratic dispensation has been in effect in South Africa for more than two decades. This is especially noteworthy since this overdue shift fast-tracked the removal of the statue after only one month of #rhodesmustfall protests (Schmahmann 2018:142). The resulting arbitrary status of the Rhodes statue relates to the influence that a dominant narrative could have on meaning production and its tangible associations within a social system such as that at UCT. Meaning may shift depending on a variety of factors but what aided the association of the Rhodes statue with oppression was the agenda of social interaction had by the academic community of UCT with the public artwork. This being a circumstance particular to art presented in a public space.

Public art has a different status within the art system to which it, as well as many other art practices, is affiliated. Art, such as public statues, that invites audience engagement would likely prompt a different relationship to the viewer, shifting meaning from what is established and official, to what is subject to change. That is

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offered sympathising and empathising statements in favour of recognising the disparities in equal opportunity based on outdated “White privilege” standards. However, a blur occurs between native Black and Black as a general term designating all racial sub-categories excluded from a Caucasian identity. Black pain is thus considered a general term inferring disadvantage and felt by all members who associate as not Caucasian. Furthermore, the assembly indicated that the issue of controversial symbolic presence was a cypher of larger, unresolved racially driven controversies in the collective consciousness of the South African community, represented acutely in the format of UCT as a microcosm. The issue of artworks was satiated with the overall agreement of a “complete review of the institutional symbolism on campus” (Rekgotsofetse Chikane in UCTSA 2015). However, the most impressionable takeaway from this recording was: the recounting of media articles, historical/personal accounts and statistics of racial representation in academia to the disadvantage of all dis-enfranchised and indigent members of mostly the student community at UCT (UCTSA 2015).

because the engagement of physically interacting with public art is where value can then be reached through consensus. In the example of the Rhodes statue, the statue straddles a distinct relationship in that its presence on the UCT campus is established as crediting the institute's patron. Alternatively, the statue is a public artwork and invites public engagement merely by being present on and available to the community forming the social system at UCT. The controversial protest action of Chumani Maxwele, "tossing a bucket of human excrement at it [Rhodes statue]" (Miller & Schmahmann 2017:vii), tends towards the latter description. This renders the statue open to what Paul Cilliers (1998:119) in his book titled: *Complexity and postmodernism: Understanding complex systems* termed the "agonistics" of the social system.

Agonistics, according to Cilliers (1998:119), and in the manner understood by the actions of Maxwele ultimately leading to the coining of #rhodesmustfall, refers to a dynamic interaction of historical and political issues within a social system. This interaction is described as being based on the duality of cooperation and competition of the aforementioned issues (Cilliers 1998:119). Thus, relationships develop with artworks as a product of the interaction between the corollaries of the historical value of the public artwork and issues that modify that public artwork into a controversial object. These relationships produce contrasting values as, historically speaking, value shifts based on the social circumstances conditioning that system. The issue thus far is that the value shift to an oppressive symbol that would have occurred over time occurred instead in conjunction with the association of Rhodes as patron of UCT. The resulting ambivalence is therefore expected. An iconic representation of Cecil John Rhodes and an oppressive symbol in terms of being a representation of violence against the disenfranchised Black community<sup>5</sup> means that eventually only one of the two valuations will take precedence and effect change.

A distinction exists between two sides – or meanings in this case – of any object, at least this is how Niklas Luhmann (2000:55) describes a bivalence in his book *Art as a social system*. Luhmann's bivalent description is valuable as it recognises

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<sup>5</sup> This perspective is motivated by the UCT Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement in their *Mission Statement* (Rhodes Must Fall 2015:6) offered as insight into the cause, and for gaining support for the various endeavours toward the movement's version of decolonisation on the UCT campus.

that one side would need to negate the other through the duality of competition and cooperation. In the case of the events of #rhodesmustfall, the protests initiated by Maxwele's actions ultimately resulted in the removal of the Rhodes statue. Thus, a dominant meaning was affirmed to the point that a change occurred within the former state of the social system and the environment it operates within. Such extreme change is desirable in a nation conflicted with historical social imbalances, especially regarding issues of race and racial injustice where the dominant means of exacting such change is by way of protest as signifying resistance.

The shift presented by the actions of #rhodesmustfall is related to the culture of resistance in South African history. The #rhodesmustfall protest was in favour, in part, of the need for change in the aesthetic landscape, a landscape still scattered with the remnants of past oppressive regimes. The American pseudo-equivalent tag #blacklivesmatter,<sup>6</sup> which equally highlights social injustices committed on the basis of race, is similar in the agenda of protesting oppression. The oppression emphasised in each of these two cases being related to: the violence of oppressively denying a national identity to the native Black community of South Africa, and in the violent victimisation of mostly the indigent Black community of America. Both tags foreground socio-political/historical injustices committed with regards to race and this centralises the dissonance felt regarding acknowledging the visual symbols saturating the public environment that function as a controversial view of national identity. Protests in the name of both tags have mobilised the initiative to remove monuments and statues symbolic of (confederate icons of America's) a colonial past. Both tags have also proven to be instrumental in effecting change and both have transferred to locations beyond the domain of their original contexts. Such actions require critiquing the motive for presuming an aesthetic standard for oppressive symbolism to remain in an environment where social interest is in contrast with oppression. Therefore, a revisionist approach to analysing public artworks would likely illuminate the rich network of references relevant in producing particular meaning regarding publicly sited artworks.

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting at this point that the American-sourced movement of #blacklivesmatter, started in 2013 (Black Lives Matter [Sa]b), preceded the South African #Rhodesmustfall, started 2015.

This need to reconsider the analysing and classifying of public art sited at historically contentious locations is especially necessary because of the UCT Rhodes statue incident. The events of #rhodesmustfall highlighted how the status of public artworks – entangled in the politics and social dynamic of the student and administrative community at UCT – can effect change. Due to the scope and variables involved in this complex case, an approach leaning towards systems analysis will simplify the complications arising from the interaction between society and art sited in a public environment. According to Cilliers (1998:viii), a simple description provided for any system equates to that system being complicated. This is where insular factors of a given system can be identified and directly related to each other. Complexity on the other hand refers to dynamic interaction as pivotal in understanding the intertwined nature of system and environment, where casting a finite description of and between any such factors is both impossible and reductive of the full scope of that system (Cilliers 1998:viii). In describing the events linked to #rhodesmustfall as complicated, the variable influences and results tied to the Rhodes statue and the space of UCT itself are overlooked. Instead, the arbitrary nature of meaning established thus far of the Rhodes statue needs to be expanded for a better grasp of the value that public art holds within the dynamic of a complex social system.

## 1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The focus of this study is on public art, with particular attention being placed on the Rhodes statue formerly sited on the UCT campus. This decision is based on the popularity and resilient lifespan of the #rhodesmustfall tag and its adaptation, as a trope. The explicit link between this trope and its subject is a significant factor when attempting to understand the relation between an art object and the social dynamic it formed part of. It is also in this relation that the importance of revising established impressions of public art's functional value within a social system is exemplified.

A significant motive for the development of #rhodesmustfall was the drive towards transformation on the UCT campus<sup>7</sup> and adopting an interpretation of

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<sup>7</sup> This point is clarified in both the mission statement of the RMF movement (Rhodes Must Fall 2015:6) as well as in a short article by Christina Pather (2015:2), an employee of the University of Cape Town at the time of these events. Each contribution foregrounds the racial and economic imbalance regarded as distinctive of the University of Cape Town's

decolonisation.<sup>8</sup> The draw of decolonisation as a core feature towards transformation took the form of eradicating as much morphology of colonial power and oppressive symbolism as was possible. This was achieved through emphasising the Rhodes statue as symbolic of colonial oppression and thereafter through the appropriation of this logic to apply this mindset in a critique of other public artworks in public areas on the UCT campus. Of particular attention is how the members of the student community engaged with the public statue. Although Maxwele's controversial act sparked widespread interest in the removal of the Rhodes statue from UCT, there had been earlier less-controversial interactions with, and in close proximity to, the public artwork, as well as later insightful ones on the university campus. These interactions are not all explicitly political, but they do still encourage reinterpreting public artwork from its seemingly monument-like status in a democratic South African landscape.

The Rhodes statue was not the only publicly sited artwork considered controversial, especially where other publicly sited artworks were subject to major vandalism, if not destruction. A number of protests occurred in connection with the UCT protests,<sup>9</sup> all referenced the #rhodesmustfall tag. This transitory fixing of the tag #rhodesmustfall to a public artwork is interesting as it presents an understanding of art identification having a fluid-like quality within social interaction. The aforementioned incidents present the reality that public art requires a revision, so as to adequately account for the dynamic quality of social systems, as this appears to be embodied in publicly sited artworks. The observed problem to be clarified in this study is the ambiguity resulting from publicly sited artworks embodying contrasting meaning in a dynamic and complex social system.

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administrative, support and academic community. The motivation therefore for transformation is towards prioritising the granting of equal opportunity to previously disadvantaged and disenfranchised individuals.

<sup>8</sup> This term appears in the title of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) book: *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. The premise of the book draws attention to the need for ethnic (African) language and knowledge systems to be reasserted as the focal point of African culture and identity, instead of the colonial language and ideologies imposed in the author's native country.

<sup>9</sup> A speech conducted by Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) political party leader Julius Malema made explicit reference to the protests at UCT whilst also inciting the attendant crowd to emulate the agenda of protesting controversial figurative public artworks (Gqirana 2015).

### 1.3 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this study is to indicate how public art – through careful consideration of its relation with the dynamic of resistant voices within a postcolonial social context – could be considered a constituent of a complex social system. In order to realise this aim, various factors that contributed to the removal of the Rhodes statue from the UCT campus must be considered. Such an approach would require analysing the public artwork in terms of its semantics and expanding this knowledge to understand the artwork's relational value with discourses within the specified social context.

This is particularly crucial in considering the functional value of public art within a social system. In the context of this study, the #rhodesmustfall tag references the recurrent theme for excluding controversial artworks from a system by highlighting the artwork's controversial status through protest and interaction with the public artwork. This is not to say that the tag homologises public art in every respect. Instead, the act of attributing public art to the tag functions firstly as contributing to a digital database on social media – to track relevant artworks – and secondly, as a residual trace identifying relevant discourses prevalent in related artworks. This includes those artworks sited at the same location or even extending to similar contexts that are geographically, ideologically, and historically distinct from each other.

The process of analysing public artworks, with a focus on the social dynamic of a system, engenders a distinction of public art within the art system itself. This distinction relies on the notion that publicly accessible art has a functionally different value to that of art presented in a privatised, albeit public, context. Public art has a draw toward tactile engagement in a more enticing manner than art presented in a non-public context. It is for this reason that engagement with art that is publicly accessible can range from touch, out of curiosity, to physically attacking the artwork as an expression of some deeply felt animosity. An example of this is Brett Murray's *The Spear* (2011),<sup>10</sup> as part of his exhibition: *Hail to the thief II* at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg in 2012 (Goodman Gallery 2019). The

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<sup>10</sup> Brett Murray, *The Spear* (2011). Acrylic on Canvas, 185 x 140 cm. Collection unknown. <https://www.goodman-gallery.com/exhibitions/265> (Accessed 25 November 2020).

artwork sparked controversy, as it depicted former South African president Jacob Zuma with his genitalia exposed. The public reaction to this took the form of the defamation of the artwork with black paint (Nicholson et al. 2012). Yet at the time the gallery refused to remove the artwork even at the threat of legal action (Burbidge 2012). The dismissive response of the gallery regarding the call for removal is in stark contrast with the removal of the Rhodes statue. This is presumed to be because the gallery exercised a more effective right to maintain the contents within the privatised yet public space of the gallery. The artwork was later removed<sup>11</sup> as a result of an agreement between the ruling South African political party, the African National Congress (ANC), and the Goodman Gallery (*Global Post*, 30 May 2012).

The similarity between public art in a gallery and public art in a public space is that both represent no stable overarching frame which absolutely conditions how the public is meant to regard the artwork. This extends to how far those responsible for the display of the artwork have the authority to be instrumental in its removal. In the case of the Goodman Gallery, the artwork was removed from the gallery walls but not the website. This lack of physical presence appeared to dispel the audience's disapproval of the artwork and the gallery retained a measure of authority over the painting's display. The resulting impression then is that authority regarding artworks in privatised public space versus open public space is disproportionate. It is therefore necessary to emphasise this distinction, as it clearly affects the functional status of public artworks' relations within the dynamics of a social system.

The aim of considering public art as a constituent of a social system thus requires analysing the artwork in terms of its semantics as a relatable object within the dynamic social system wherein it is sited and also in terms of its semantics within the art system itself.

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<sup>11</sup> There is also worth noting the issue of an ideologically imposed censorship, especially since the ruling political party was involved.



#### 1.4 LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent literature on the matter of public art sparking protests tends to reference the events of either #rhodesmustfall or #blacklivesmatter. In the case of current South-African-sourced literature, the tags focus attention on the need for transformation in many social and political spheres within the country. The rapid removal of the Rhodes statue from UCT is considered a delayed result (C Pather 2015:1) and generally the statue was an inappropriate symbol of colonial reference sited in an academic environment in the current democratic context (Mbembe 2015:3). It is crucial at this stage to emphasise that the three core factors that contributed to the removal were the interaction with the public artwork, the agonistics of the system resulting from dominant narratives, and that public art elicits emotional responses that have collective, not only individual, value. The literature included in this section accounts for each of these factors, with the allusion to the UCT Rhodes statue being another factor, as dominant themes integrated in this dissertation. There are four themes discussed in this review, with select literature cited in order to clarify each theme.

##### *UCT and Rhodes-specific literature*

As this study pertains to the topic of the events of #rhodesmustfall, criteria for consideration of most literature reviewed includes reference to the controversial statue in question. The authors are predominantly South African and texts describing the incidents of the protests in detail are often drawn from authors with direct academic affiliation with UCT. Although sources offer nuanced approaches to the content of their individual articles on the UCT Rhodes statue, that worth mentioning at this stage are Tamar Garb's (2019) *Falling and rising: In the wake of Cecil John Rhodes* and Nomusa Makhubu's (2020) *On Apartheid ruins: Art, protest and the South African social landscape*.

Tamar Garb's article focuses on the photographed event of the removal of the Rhodes statue from the university environment. Her analysis pays close attention to the details of the photograph content, providing access to the social politics evident on the university campus. These issues are highlighted in retrospect, especially when she discusses the documentation of Sethembile Msezane's performance *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* (2015). Memory is presented as a

crucial issue. Collective memory is especially significant when considering the history of struggle in social, political and economic terms of select communities in South Africa. Makhubu's article elaborates on this issue of struggle and memories in the form of analysing the socio-political value of the *Shackville* installation and the Rhodes Must Fall's (RMF) *Echoing Voices from Within* exhibition. Context is highlighted as affecting the interpretation and subsequent valuation of artworks presented in light of the events at UCT linked to #rhodesmustfall. The background and associated recursions of inequalities within the social system at UCT and South Africa at large provide an understanding of how spatial politics and not just social politics play a role in forming memories.

#### *Public art in controversial socio-political contexts*

Contentious meanings underpinning public artworks are not unusual. According to Kim Miller and Brenda Schmahmann (2018:1) in their editorial: *Troubling Histories: Public Art and Prejudice – an Introduction*, social systems, like South Africa at large, are burdened with art from former political regimes. This implies that a distinction is drawn between positive and negative meanings affiliated with public art. But the public art mentioned in the editorial is that which already exists, especially when the art in question references outdated ideologies in a post-Apartheid South Africa. Consequently, the public is finding a way around the existing narratives to insert alternative voices in an otherwise restrictive narrative context.<sup>12</sup> By maintaining the existence of such artworks, personal and historical reflection is dependent on what is being represented. Authors chosen under this category often recount the protest action of Maxwele, citing the incident in order to convey the depth which symbolism can bring in reading public artworks. Yet it is through engaging with the art that the public assert their agency on the visual elements in a public space.

#### *Directly engaging public art*

Cultural vandalism accounts for actions motivated by a collective memory; this is according to Erica Doss (2018:20) in *The Elephant in the Room: Prejudicial Public Art and Cultural Vandalism*. This is the case of #rhodesmustfall, where a feeling of oppression was derived through consensus and not just by Maxwele, even though

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<sup>12</sup> The majority of artworks considered in this study take the form of performance or installation art that engage the narratives of controversial public artworks.

his actions highlighted this feeling (Doss 2018:20). Duane Jethro (2017) echoes this sentiment in his essay: *Transgressive touch: ruination, public feeling, and the Sunday Times Heritage Project*, where he mentions that “Emotions are powerfully freighted through the language of touch” (2017:167). The tactility of an art object breaks the implied barrier that separates an audience from the object under observation. This rupture renders the artwork open to interpretation and it is the manner of engagement that provides insight into interpretation. Here the use of faeces in Maxwele’s performance is significant, since abjection<sup>13</sup> affects the status and value of the art. But engagement does not only have to be through an abject medium. Touch, physically marking and even adorning a public artwork with matter and media that reflect meaningful inclusions to the artwork are equally valuable as embodied engagements. Yet the more prominent displays, especially within a specific social system, often tend to be those that spark controversy.

The act of applying excrement to select public artworks transfers the association of abjection in the process. Nicole Maurantonio’s (2018) *Tarred by history: Materiality, memory and protest* article references “tar” as a medium harbouring the same status as bodily excrement with regards to abjection. In Maurantonio’s example, the tar medium’s references range from humiliation to a focus on the black contrast it has with the pale stone statues on which it was applied (Maurantonio 2018:55). Her intention was to present the medium of tar for its “potential in acts of protest” (Maurantonio 2018:52). In contrast to this, faeces require far less validation to assume the status of abjection. This matter’s expulsion from the body, its odour and various other qualities elicit a general sense of repulsion. This was certainly the case with Maxwele’s use of the faeces, especially as it is an assumed reflection of South Africa’s history of socio-economic and racial hierarchies. However, the issue of retaining the Rhodes statue for so long is more a matter for reconciliation and not just based on apparent campus authority.

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<sup>13</sup> *Abjection* and *abject* are employed throughout this study as technical terms. Their use hints at Julia Kristeva’s description of the trauma of separation as well as the body’s boundary being breached with the representation of excrement. (*Dictionary of Critical Theory* 2000. Sv “abjection”). With respect to public art, the memories of racial violence are embodied rather than separate from the artwork’s meaning. The use of excrement is a way of reactivating this memory.

### *Reconciling South Africa's tumultuous history*

Not all engagements with controversial public art need to be tactile. Furthermore, South Africa is rich with symbolism credited to past political regimes. Elizabeth Rankin's (2017) essay *A Janus-like juncture: Reconciling past and present at the Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park* analyses the construction of a new monument "Freedom Park" within close proximity to an Afrikaner nationalism monument dedicated to the Voortrekker community of the mid-1800s. The existence of the monument is implicated with a history of violence committed between the native Black population of South Africa and the Afrikaner settlers who moved inland to assert a nationalist identity. The Voortrekker Monument dominates the landscape, albeit being sited opposite the country's political seat of power, the Union Buildings (Rankin 2017:4-6). Such visual juxtaposing of contrasting ideological symbolism can be attributed to the democratic goal of reconciling South Africa's traumatic past.

This reconciliatory act of maintaining such monuments seems to comply with but challenge the initiative to commemorate a diverse range of histories within a homogenised South African landscape. In part, this is due to the depictions of the contrasting race groups that, irrespective of reinterpreting meaning, valorise acts that reference a reasonably unpleasant part of history. Jethro (2017:171) emphasised this point by noting that political agendas credited to the ideology link are embodied in the very design of the monumental public artwork. In the case of the Voortrekker Monument contrasted with Freedom Park, the design of the former has an imposing aesthetic, inferring the difficult relationship between the Afrikaaner settlers and the native population who felt displaced by the settling of foreign nationals. Such a contrast is worth challenging because of the decision to retain the symbolism. This is especially relevant when considering the city of Cape Town's historical association with slavery.

The reality of a history of slavery in Cape Town presented an empathic challenge for Gavin Younge and Wilma Cruise's task of designing a monument in dedication to this issue. Younge (2017:54) recounts in his essay *The mirror and the square – old ideological conflicts in motion* that personal trauma is a challenging subject to depict in art. The sensitivities of having to represent suffering in a manner that does not explicitly reference such trauma is one challenge, with the additional challenge being that both artists could not relate to such trauma for various reasons. Yet it is

a surprising observation that Younge mentions Cape Town residents – those whose ancestors were victims of slavery – as suffering from “symbol blindness” (Younge 2017:59). This is in consideration of markers such as Cape Dutch style housing and slave bells, which decorate the Cape vernacular without being removed or vandalised. Nevertheless, the issue of racialism would undoubtedly contribute to the public’s approval or disapproval of the monument. This same issue is present in revising the value of the Rhodes statue on Cape Town’s university campus.

The literature on the issue of artworks iconic of old regimes tends to highlight the impact of this situation on the public in a democratic landscape. Issues covered UCT protests (Garb 2019; Makhubu 2020), negotiating contrasting perspectives of histories (Miller & Schmahmann 2018), direct engagement with artworks (Jethro 2017; Maurantonio 2018), and attempting to offer alternative narratives (Rankin 2017; Younge 2017). Although the literature accounts for the effects such engagement have on perceptions of the public artworks, very few mentioned how the artworks are interpolated within the social dynamic of the system they are sited within. This is assumed to be partly due to the intention of articles and essays to focus on select issues rather than mentioning each as part of a larger complex system based on social engagement with public art. This obvious yet subtle assimilation is cause for further investigation but can only be realised when adopting public art as being part of a complex social system.

## 1.5 THEORETICAL STRUCTURE

The dynamic quality of a social system is such that complexity can be found therein and thus qualifies the need to incorporate a discussion on complexity<sup>14</sup> in this study. Cilliers (1998:2) credits complexity with how significant interactions is within a system. It is through these interactions that meaning is established and, as an adjunct of value, meaning is essential for regarding public art as a constituent of a

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that Edgar Morin is a recognised authority on complexity in terms of transdisciplinary dialogues across various academic fields (Montuori 2013:10). Although Morin is both referenced in Niklas Luhmann’s earlier philosophy work and that this study is conducted with a view to incorporating an interpretation of Luhmann’s systems theory, Morin’s literature has not been analysed. This was intentionally done to reduce the scope of theory literature to what could apply in the particular case study of #rhodesmustfall.

social system. Consequently, this fact is realised in Cilliers' (1998:3-5) offering of ten characteristics of a complex system.

The characteristics of a complex system are described in terms of the functional qualities of what Cilliers (1998:3) refers to as "elements". These elements collectively constitute a complex system and the degree and nature of the interactions which occur between them is how complexity is measured. This is evident in half of the characteristics being dedicated to interactions. Cilliers (1998:3-4) described these interactions as conforming to the measurable standards of meaningful, non-linear, short-ranged mediation, recurrence, and capable of extending these interactions to the environment within which this complex system operates. Functional qualities of the elements include mass quantity, dynamism, and a sense of isolated purposiveness, where each element is oblivious to the effect its activities have on the system itself. There is also a focus on the quality of history, presumably as a product of learning. A complex system should never reach a state of equilibrium; thus, learning within a complex system is valuable, not only for the current but also the future state of that systems functional existence (Cilliers 1998:3-5).

From the above discussion, it stands to reason that the crux of identifying a complex system rest predominantly with the quality of the interactions occurring within that system. Cilliers's (1998:2-3) emphasis on interactions also presents the acknowledgement that "complexity is manifested at the level of the system itself". Thus, complexity is a process of interpolating elements of a complex system within an environment. These interactions between elements and the environment conform to the degree of specificity Cilliers identifies in his characteristics of a complex system.

Cilliers' elements are considered to be the equivalent of what is referred to in this study as *constituents*. As the primary aim of this study is to indicate how public art is a constituent of a social system, it is beneficial to apply Cilliers' ten characteristics to an analysis of the #rhodesmustfall case study. Two key features to note for this adaptation are (1) that members of the social system at UCT constitute the constituents and (2) the driving force that powers the interactions between members is the information, or traces thereof, that saturates the collective

consciousness of that social community. That the constituents of this social system were many, actively involved in protest and participated in #rhodesmustfall for self-motivated reasons validates their correlation with Cilliers's elements. In consideration that the social and political history of South Africa was referenced in protest proceedings and there was a dire need for transformation on the UCT campus further links Cilliers' characteristics with #rhodesmustfall. Yet it is in the description of interactions that complexity is most convincingly adapted to the events of #rhodesmustfall. This is because the interactions adopt the form of protest action.

The protest actions of the UCT student community invariably involved direct engagement with the Rhodes statue and the potency of symbolic gesture – Maxwele's act of tossing faeces – adequately translates as a meaningful interaction. That the actions of the student community were unsuccessfully contained by the academic authorities, that the events took place almost entirely at UCT, and that the protests incorporated most publicly accessible art located on the campus covers the remainder of Cilliers's ten characteristics of a complex system. With this analysis, the conscious effort in incorporating the concept of complexity into this case study has been partly realised. However, adapting characteristics to the events of #rhodesmustfall still requires a more empirical approach, as the word *interactions* is vague when requiring specificity in this case study. Cilliers (1998:24) employed connectionism<sup>15</sup> as a working model of complexity, claiming that this model is already incorporated in the characteristics of a complex system. However, connectionism is merely the means, as the ends resulting from this approach is the consideration of a system as self-organising.

Self-organisation, according to Cilliers (1998:12), is a process occurring in complex systems accounting for the changes in that system. These changes are adaptive both to the environment, as well as the growing history of the system – like a complex living organism. Although equilibrium is not a desired result of a complex system,<sup>16</sup> the system would reach points of stability in order to maintain its

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<sup>15</sup> The decision to use connectionism is based on the need to consider the nature of the composition of constituents within a social system and the representation of public art. Although dynamicism, a model that links constituents with the environment, is another possible cognitive model for complexity, this latter option places less focus on representational value (Bem & Jong 2013:257).

<sup>16</sup> Refer to page 12 regarding the characteristics of a complex system.

existence so as not to fall into chaos or succumb to entropy. Cilliers (1998:12) describes this as a kind of “evolution”, a term corroborated by systems theorist Luhmann (2000:2). Luhmann (2000:2) differs slightly in his approach, describing evolution in terms of the linear trend of art’s history. This focus is to account for the changes occurring within art specifically, such as the contingency in meanings related to select forms and that this process of differentiation within the art system contributes to its complexity and communication (Luhmann 2000:2). This is where Luhmann’s analyses fall short regarding the content of this study. Luhmann’s focus is on art as an operatively closed system and avoids an analytical discussion of public art. This is assumed to be because public art offers the added challenge of interaction from an audience and not just the alterations of meaning attributed to select aesthetic standards in art.

Interactions have been established as being the most significant of the characteristics of complexity, where interactions occur at the level of the system itself. Thus, in order to understand how public art could be regarded as a constituent – in this case a dormant yet engaging element – in a social system, the interactions occurring within that system must be analysed. Furthermore, the state of the system changes as a result of these interactions and has been described as self-organisation. Self-organisation thus accounts for the possibility of evolution within the system while also aiding in maintaining the dynamic, keeping the system complex. In order, therefore, to appropriate this insight to this study regarding #rhodesmustfall, what needs to be investigated is how meaning contributed to ambiguity in the valuation of public art and how interaction with public art mobilised change within the system.

## 1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given that the crux of this study rests on the manner in which public art is assimilated into and subsequently removed from the landscape of a specific complex social system, the following constitutes the research questions to be answered:

How do the interactions with public art affect the meaning and therefore functional value of that art within the dynamics of a given complex social system?



Furthermore, how does this effect on public art contribute to the possibility of aesthetic change in the environment of that same complex social system?

The answering of these primary questions is resolved as three subsidiary enquiries constituting the content of the three main chapters of this dissertation. Included in this is the evolution of the tag from being affiliated with UCT to its application in the protest of public artworks related to Cecil John Rhodes as well as other controversial narratives within the South African context. Also included is the recognition of #blacklivesmatter, as this tag has also been affiliated with the removal of historically contentious public artworks.

## 1.7 METHODOLOGY

Art that is publicly accessible and not explicitly framed by privatised public control tends to rely quite heavily on conventional symbolism. What is meant by conventional symbolism is the implicit manner in which select narratives are communicated via the aesthetic quality of artworks. This is in consideration that most public artworks that had been directly engaged with in the events of #rhodesmustfall were all of a figurative nature and therefore harboured strong links to specific narratives circulating within the South African collective memory. Yet there is also the noted fact that the cause for protests about public art was due to ambiguity regarding the intended meaning of the art. Such data, being of a qualitative manner, is analysed by way of this case study. However, as the literature review has indicated, the scope of study is restricted to social systems and artistic concerns as the purpose of this study weighs heavily on the relationship between these two aspects. Thus, a content analysis has been undertaken as this case study is conducted in retrospect of the actual events forming the basis for this investigation. This is the reason for organising this dissertation into three chapters, each dealing with an aspect of the research problem identified in the research questions and thus lending to content analysis of this qualitative data as a research methodology.

The first aspect deals with variable meanings attributed to the artwork. The method of tracing representations contributing to meaning is similar to Cilliers's (1998:43) appropriation of deconstruction. Although his writing focuses primarily on complex

systems, Cilliers (1998:43) does acknowledge that a deconstructionist approach of identifying meaning as being produced through negotiating – differing and deferring – representation compares with the interactions he mentions in characteristics of a complex system. This apparent freedom in the production of meaning lends some sense to the problematic case of ambiguity, when interpreting the meaning of publicly accessible art. Additionally, the application of complexity in the interpretive analysis of #rhodesmustfall is made significantly more manageable due to this freedom.

The second aspect in this analysis prioritises connections regarding meaning and connections through interactions. The former relates to the traces of discourses previously described as being present in the collective consciousness of the social system being analysed, here affiliated with #rhodesmustfall. The latter relates to the tangible engagements had between constituents of that same social system, of which it is being motivated that public art is such a constituent. The need for this distinction is to clarify that information plays a significant role in maintaining the dynamic nature of a social system. Information therefore functions as the power source of that system and therefore the motivation for interactions to occur. Adopting a connectionist model is to understand how collective memories, within a complex social system, result in ambiguity regarding the meaning of public art. Cilliers (1998:11) described representations as distributed, not complete sources for meaning. Connecting chains of representations along this distributed network is how meaning is formed. Thus, patterns form and with them the possibility of some representations featuring multiple times for different patterns of meaning. This is especially evident in a similar purpose for tags as distributing digital metadata on the internet.

It had been discussed earlier how tagging mechanisms function to link digital data – which are publicly accessible on the internet – such as images, articles and personal rants regarding opinion and fact about the Rhodes statue. For this reason, it is within this study that an analysis of information indiscriminately linked to the #rhodesmustfall tag is embarked upon. Although not all the literature sourced to supplement this analysis pertains explicitly to #rhodesmustfall, it is the quality of the tag as a trace in a distributed network of representation that appeals to linking these similar literary contributions. This approach engenders the network-like

quality indicative of complexity and thus represents its process as interpolated with not only the constituents of the social system but the information inherent in that system as well. The third aspect adopts this approach in order to ascertain the functional value public art has within a broader understanding of a complex social system's ability to self-organise.

Having clarified how this study shall undertake the application of complexity and the approaches in analysing the public art and discourses associated with #rhodesmustfall, what follows is an overview of the plan adopted in answering the research questions. This plan is realised in the body of this study as it is expanded in the content of the subsequent chapters.

## 1.8 BREAKDOWN OF CHAPTERS

The research questions of this study focus on two issues, namely: how public art is assimilated into a complex social system and how that assimilation effects aesthetic change within that same complex social system. Realising an answer to both questions requires expanding the analysis to include three distinct but relatable processes. These are (1) an analysis of the figurative artworks being assimilated, (2) deconstruction of the discourses fuelling contrasting interpretations of these artworks, and finally (3) expressing the evolution of the system as a functional process inherent in that system. It stands to reason that this approach would require dividing the remainder of this study into three individual chapters with a fourth chapter recapitulating the main points discussed throughout. What follows is a brief breakdown of each chapter's content as each deal with each of the three aspects described earlier.

Chapter 2 introduces the prominent artworks involved and is linked to the events related to #rhodesmustfall. These include the UCT Rhodes statue, Maxwele's protest, and the various invasive engagements had with the UCT Rhodes statue prior to its removal. Additional to this is the acknowledgement of the Rhodes Memorial located outside the borders of the UCT campus. The need for this is to expand the application of protest against the eponymous UCT Rhodes statue to other artworks, especially when the choice thereof was based on the representation of an oppressive colonialist. Protest is cited as originating from a

shift in meaning, and thus multiple perspectives, of the artwork. However, most examples identified in this study related exclusively to the #rhodesmustfall tag.

The range of references included in this chapter may be inclusive of variations on the theme of controversial public art; however, the limiting quality implied by the connectionist use of #rhodesmustfall disadvantages the scope to which this theme can apply. Even with considerable references to the Americanism #blacklivesmatter, the use of a tag only contributes in a very specific way to a revisionist approach to public-art analysis. What could benefit from further investigation into this matter would be a consideration of artworks that explicitly promote interaction. The artworks mentioned in this chapter foreground the tactile<sup>17</sup> engagement between the public and an artwork, a quality that is almost exclusively associated with publicly sited artworks.

Chapter 3 extends the discussion on multiple perspectives by discussing the connecting of abstract historical and politically charged ideologies with the public artworks analysed in Chapter 2. Subjects include the formation of the RMF at UCT, two art performances sited at UCT linked to the original #rhodesmustfall tag protests: *Chapungu* and *Shackville*, and the modification of the tag to #rhodesmustfallinoxford when students at Oriel College in Oxford protested against a statue of Cecil John Rhodes sited on that campus. An additional consideration is the inclusion of public statues and monuments representative of old regimes located outside of the UCT domain. This is done to once again decentralise the Rhodes statue as the only icon for the tag but also to liberate the tag from the social enclosure of UCT. However, it is necessary to understand that the distinct use of the tag #rhodesmustfall pertains almost entirely to racial imbalances prevalent in a post-Apartheid South Africa. Thus, the issue of the continued existence of representations of colonial or Afrikaner Nationalist narratives in public spaces may exacerbate the necessity to overcome the traumas associated with such narratives. Such issues reflect median opinions on controversial public artworks while demonstrating how meaning is formed through traces of information in the network of a complex social system. The inclusion of

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted here that not all tactile engagements had with public art are of an invasive, vandalising nature. The Cape Town Slave Memorial in Church Square is occasionally used as a seating area during lunch breaks as well as for social interaction (Younge 2017:67).

the drive towards transformation is significant as decolonisation was cited as the motivation for alternative perspectives regarding public artworks at UCT. Discussing the subsequent formation of the RMF is to highlight how publicly accessible art and not just narratives of oppression, embedded in South Africa's political history, are still scattered throughout that country's aesthetic landscape.

In making a concerted effort to discuss issues of racialism and the need for transformation and decolonisation, this study once again becomes limited in the scope of analysis. Not all public artworks sited throughout South Africa, particularly in Cape Town, reflect colonial or Afrikaner nationalism. This case study emphasises the latter point; however, an interesting perspective to adopt would be to consider what and how narratives are established in more recent public works, especially when those works are of an abstract nature. Hierarchies are apparent in more forms than just racialism and investigating these alternatives would likely expand the value of connectionism and distributed representation within complexity, as it pertains to publicly sited artworks.

Chapter 4 adapts the insight gained from chapters 2 and 3 as a way to describe the process of aesthetic change occurring within the social system at UCT. Not only was the Rhodes statue removed from public view, but an Artworks Task Team (ATT), a curatorial adjunct of UCT, gauging the social value of campus artworks via a public survey, was formed to review the problematic artworks mentioned in Chapter 2. The very act of forming a sub-committee at UCT focusing on undoing a perceived injustice regarding public space is an interesting development in the evolution of the complexity of UCT's social system. By including the social community at UCT, the system as a whole and not only a singular authority was involved in the process of possible change. This is an example of the self-organising capabilities of a complex system and worth investigating as part of this study, especially as this approach manifested in various forms for similar reasons outside of UCT's social system. Included in this chapter are the public art interventions in Bristol, United Kingdom (Wall 2020), with regards to the #blacklivesmatter protests, the formation of the ATT, a stage performance and exhibition about the #rhodesmustfall protests organised by former participants (*The Fall* and *Echoing Voices from Within*), and a brief discussion on the fate of the now-removed UCT Rhodes statue. Furthermore, as self-organisation seems to

be a coping mechanism for the evolution of the system, an area worth exploring is the shift in focus from the narratives of the Global North to local or indigenous knowledge bases.

Chapter 5 concludes this study by recapitulating all tentative conclusions drawn from each individual chapter. A considered reintroduction of the #blacklivesmatter protest, discussed in Chapter 4, of the statue of colonial figure Edward Colston in Bristol, will be undertaken. A comparative approach is adopted in order to align the case study of this dissertation with the Bristol example. This is done to reify the reproducibility of the insight gained. Thus, the logic of chapters 2 through 4 shall be appropriated and applied to the events related to the protests, forced removal, illicit art installations, and evolution related to the figurative representation of a colonial figure. It is in this recounting that the full scope of investigation and analysis undertaken in this study shall be realised as confirming public art's assimilation as a constituent of a complex social system.

## CHAPTER 2: Symbolism of a Rhodesian landscape

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

When heritage scholar Nick Shepherd was quoted as describing the UCT campus as “the last Rhodesian Landscape” (Knudsen & Andersen 2019:241), the statement alluded to more than just the iconography of Marion Walgate’s *Cecil John Rhodes* (1934) statue. What was being referred to was a legacy embodied in the design and ambition rooted in the foundations of the academic institution and greater South Africa. These foundations hark back to the ideology of colonial conquest, with the “imperial gaze” (Shepherd 2020:571) still present at the academic institution. Forming the basis of the drive for transformation on the campus, the removal of the Rhodes statue affected the aesthetic landscape (select public artworks deemed offensive), as well as the institutional culture and proponents (transformation in terms of more Black representation in academia). Reaction to public art was thus considered a retaliation against all the constructs not admonishing (racially) oppressive ideologies.

The removal of the Rhodes statue was no minor accomplishment, especially in consideration of such memorialisation being rich with references to ownership and acquisition. Commemorative practices are committed in retrospect with regard to the persons or events being memorialised. The decisions are assumed to be associated with driving forward specific political ambitions, dealing with social unrest, and affirming a cultural status quo.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the decision by the current democratic dispensation to retain the controversial public artworks – as efforts of reconciliation – poses a challenge to the various narratives being continued and

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<sup>18</sup> This statement is made with reference to Britta Timm Knudsen and Casper Andersen’s (2019) article titled: *Affective politics and colonial heritage, Rhodes Must Fall at UCT and Oxford*. The article focussed on the physical engagement with public artworks as a potent and affective political tool. The content source of the comment on commemorative practices comes from the authors’ description of “statues as heritage” (Knudsen & Andersen 2019:253), wherein they delineate three features qualifying such public artworks. First, these statues are erected post-facto and are not emblematic of the eras which they represent. Second, due to the first point, the statues do not have a teleology and are therefore subject to possible removal for contemporary contexts. Thirdly, both former points account for the fact that statues erected under this premise are non-arbitrary and non-neutral (Knudsen & Andersen 2019:253-254). All three points are imperative to the further understanding of why the Rhodes statue was engaged with, as it had been, and later removed from public view.

obliquely questioned in a post-Apartheid context. At issue would be the query: whose voice and therefore narratives are being represented by these public artworks? This is inconsideration of South Africa's tumultuous and controversial history.

Considering this, as well as the hero narrative employed in the decision to erect monuments to Rhodes, a critical understanding of the symbolic value attributed to the historical figure of Rhodes forms the focus of this chapter. This value is interpreted through the formats employed in his, Rhodes's, memorialisation in the South African political and socio-historical landscape as public art. Additionally, the controversial nature of Rhode's public representation in a post-Apartheid context is equally considered, as it is this circumstance that contributes to the formation of the RMF movement and the eventual removal of the UCT statue. Consequently, what will be analysed is how memory is physically manifested in the form of and reactions to statues dedicated to this controversial figure.

## 2.2 RHODES MEMORIAL

The mere mention of Rhodes conjures up the UCT statue image implicit in the social media hashtag #rhodesmustfall. This tag is rooted in challenging narratives of Cape Town's colonial past, a past to which the figure of Rhodes at UCT appears to have been a potent symbol. Much emphasis has been placed on his figurative representation; yet, not only was this statue a later addition to the redesign of the UCT campus,<sup>19</sup> but the artistic value of this public artwork is reliant on the recurrence of select aesthetic forms.

Forms, according to Luhmann (2000:103-104), are an abstract construction of a system from which meaning can be derived. With respect to art, forms are thus abstract visual references to ideologies conditioning a system. An example of this would be the decision to install a visual marker designating ownership of a specified space. In turn, these forms tend to equate an aesthetic convention where

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<sup>19</sup> Reference is made to Brenda Schmahmann's (2013:55) book: *Picturing change: Curating visual culture at post-Apartheid universities*, wherein she discusses that the inclusion of the Rhodes statue was as a tribute to the departed patron and was unveiled some six years (1934) after the completion of the university on the campus's current premises (1928).



their recurrence in artworks affirms artistic value. Such descriptions of forms could be the chosen medium of an artwork such as the bronze material from which Marion Walgate's *Cecil John Rhodes* (1934) statue was cast. The choice of medium requires additional symbolic support to convey meaning. Thus, forms could also constitute subjects and the manner of their representation. It stands to reason that the medium must depict something for the artwork to have aesthetic value and subsequently information value. It is for this reason that the structure of Rhodes Memorial<sup>20</sup> is significant at this stage to this study.

Rhodes Memorial is a Cape Town heritage site that mimics the architecture of antiquity. The form of these archaic and classical aesthetics has become perceptible as a symbol of academia through its associations with philosophy, the empirical sciences, and classical art. These architectural and art aesthetic associations are relied upon in order to confer authenticity and prestige to not only the Rhodes Memorial but the Rhodes statue sited at UCT. The same reference to architecture of antiquity recurs in the aesthetic environment of UCT. However, realising the visually mimetic link with antiquity requires financial support, a financial support that conveniently links both the Rhodes Memorial and the UCT Rhodes statue.

Another reason for the discussion of the Rhodes Memorial is the economic link between it and the UCT Rhodes statue, this latter link being the quintessential reason for the existence of the now-removed artwork. According to Schmahmann (2013:55-56), the artist Marion Walgate was commissioned by the Rhodes National South African Memorial Committee (RNSAMC) for the creation of the UCT Rhodes statue. This same committee had, at the time, previously commissioned the construction of the Cape Town heritage site Rhodes Memorial.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the funding for the former was the result of the surplus left after the building of the latter (Properties and Services [Sa]). The commission for the

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<sup>20</sup> Rhodes Memorial. Built in 1912 under the supervision of the architect Sir Herbert Baker. It is an example of the mimicry of classical architecture (SAHO 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Rhodes Memorial was presented as a muted alternative to another possible artwork in honour of Rhodes. The alternative was a larger-than-life figurative sculpture in mimicry of the United States' *Statue of Liberty*, and was proposed to be sited on Cape Town's Signal Hill (Maylam 2002:143-144). The extent of the dedication is testament to the reverence of Rhodes in terms of his contribution to Imperialism.

memorial went to the architect Herbert Baker, whose familiarity<sup>22</sup> with Rhodes' imperialist ideologies is evident in the monolithic tribute to the former prime minister.

The aesthetic experience of Rhodes Memorial, especially when viewed from the base of the structure, is overwhelming. The grey-toned Cape granite structure of what is described as a neo-classical temple (Schmahmann 2018:149) is reminiscent of ancient Greek architecture, and with that goes the allure and prestige of progress. That the structure is positioned to overlook the Cape Flats and that two sculptural works dedicated to Rhodes symbolise a covetous gaze contributes to the structures' controversial (colonial) status. Such an assumption of the statue's point of view is in consideration of Luhmann's (2000:13) description of forms inherent to the art system.

The art system is dependent on perceptible forms, that is aesthetic features in artworks. Communication occurs when these perceptible forms are linked to a meaning derived through consensus. But consensus is a problematic condition since, according to Luhmann (2000:13), meaning is not unilaterally acquired from artist to viewer. Thus, observing art as perceptible forms is to linger on the possibilities of meaning in communication, which then renders perceptible forms reflexive (Luhmann 2000:14). Attributing to the design of the Rhodes Memorial the classical style of antiquity may strengthen the impression of progress and academia, a misguided view of Rhodes' imperialist ambitions in South Africa. Simultaneously, because of the reflexivity of the perceptible forms, that same aesthetic can conjure feelings in stark contrast to imperialist progress. Thus, ambiguity in terms of meaning is embodied in the artwork.

In her article titled *Identifying aesthetic experience*, Ariana van Heerden (2018:8-9) describes an aesthetic experience as when the object being observed is valued symbolically instead of pragmatically and a strong sense of emotional embodiment is established when relating to the object. Along with imperialism, colonialism is subsequently associated with the memorial and the design tends to represent the

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<sup>22</sup> According to Schmahmann (2018:149), Herbert Baker was Cecil John Rhodes' favourite architect; and an imperial architect of note, according to Paul Maylam (2002:144) in *Monuments, memorials and the mystique of empire: The immortalisation of Cecil John Rhodes in the twentieth century*.

privileged perspective of the coloniser.<sup>23</sup> However, such an experience is not apparent when first observing the Cape landscape. It is only after contemplating the artworks sited on the memorial and the work's formal symbolism that the link to colonialism can be made. The identifiers for such a reading are evident in the bronze cast dedications to Cecil John Rhodes installed in the memorial space.

At the base of the memorial steps is a bronze cast of artist George Frederick Watts' *Physical Energy* (1904),<sup>24</sup> an equestrian-themed sculpture. The figurative work depicts a nude rider with a horse together in a pose described as surveying the landscape (Schmahmann 2018:150). Regarding figurative work, Luhmann (2000:115) discussed how representational (figurative) art projects an imaginary space and time and those certain qualities inherent to the art system need to be in place to organise that space and time. Through such organising, the artwork is positioned to allow the lingering of perceptions held about the forms being represented. Watts' artwork is thus sculpted in a frozen position, organising time, and positioned on a plinth, which organises space and the statue as art. These features allow the audience to contemplate the imagined reality occupied by the depicted figure, while also allowing observation of the Cape Flats landscape. The equestrian figure is not explicitly described as being Rhodes but merely a "surrogate" (Schmahmann 2018:150). Furthermore, the depiction of a male nude is reminiscent of classical art. The alignment with the art of antiquity was likely the reason the memorial was not explicitly linked to the agenda behind #rhodesmustfall. This perception, however, is misled.

Knowledge about Rhodes's life and political standpoint contributed to a disapproval of his depictions in a post-Apartheid society. In a similar vein, a liberal reading of the figurative artworks on his memorial would taint any admiration of the memorial.

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<sup>23</sup> In Carolyn E. Holmes and Melanie Loehwing's (2016:1211) article: *Icons of the old regime: Challenging South African public memory strategies in #rhodesmustfall*, the authors draw attention to two distinct types of commemorative artistic and architectural dedications. These were monologic (affirming a meta-narrative that relies on a singular history of eternal applicability) and multiplicative (a hybridisation of views emblematic of the social environment within which the artwork/s is sited). All manifestations of commemorative public works dedicated to Rhodes accounts for the monologic model. This is because the established meaning attributed to the morphology of Rhodes decries engagements that aim to critique or destabilise a monological commemoration and value attached to the public works.

<sup>24</sup> George Frederick Watts *Physical Energy* (1904). Bronze, larger than life size. Rhodes Memorial, Cape Town. (Schmahmann 2013:91, Figure 48).

This is because the impression of the art of antiquity is that it imbues art with prestige. When that understanding is challenged, in this case, associating the memorial space with Rhodes's controversial memory, dissonance results. Form must offer non-arbitrary possibilities when linking representation to communicate meaning (Luhmann 2000:105). Stated differently, the symbolism must be consistent when linking a specific meaning. When lingering on perceptible forms is encouraged, more information is often incorporated and a miscommunication in meaning is likely to occur. Such information tends to involve knowledge of the subject matter and the background of the artist. Such excess of information is where contradictions arise in meaning. This is especially true when observing Watts' sculpture.

Watts claimed to be a keen admirer<sup>25</sup> of Rhodes, with apparent reference to Rhodes' colonial role. Such information could negatively impact the impression of any public figure but often tends to cascade onto the work of the artist and his merit in his field. Yet it seems that this British artist's personal views did not afflict his success and continued support from his native homeland, England (Pes 2017). The bronze cast sited at Rhodes Memorial is the first of four casts made of the original gesso plaster model (Watts Gallery Artists' Village [Sa]). Ambivalence regarding the valuation of the artwork is linked here to the contrast of two memory types embodying one artwork. In one instance, the artwork is admired for its quality of workmanship and is symbolic of the artist's skill and legacy. In another instance, that artwork is a placeholder for the support of the colonial representative to which the memorial is dedicated. Yet it appears that the imagined reality conjured by the artwork overrides any need to place the focus on a symbolic link to either of these impressions. Watts's sculpture had not been engaged with or vandalised, especially during the height of #rhodesmustfall and #blacklivesmatter protests. Thus, it is fair to assume that the association of that artwork with (Rhodes's) oppression rather than progress is unsupported.

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<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that there is a contrasting viewpoint in Schmahmann's (2013:89) account, implying that references support the idea that Watts was not in favour of imperialism. Additionally, Rhodes was a fan of Watts' work and had a particular admiration for the *Physical Energy* (1904) model when visiting the artist's studio during his lifetime (Schmahmann 2013:90).

The choice to vandalise public artworks, especially in the case of South Africa, is a volatile matter. The “symbol blindness” which Gavin Younge (2017:59) discusses in his writing, *The mirror and the square – old ideological conflicts in motion: Church Square Slavery Memorial*, refers to the Cape Town public’s apparent oversight of the otherwise controversial presence of symbolism attributed to the slave history of the Cape.<sup>26</sup> An example of this is the “slave bells” scattered in the Cape Town metropole, a space frequented by residents and tourists alike. Thus, the fact that the Rhodes Memorial is still standing, even though it is collectively as much a representation of colonial oppression as the UCT Rhodes statue, seems in contrast with a democratic political system that opposes oppression in any form. That the memorial at times serves as a neutral backdrop for creative pursuits does not assist in this matter either.<sup>27</sup> But efforts have been made to relocate the colonial associations with the structure, especially when considering its dedication to Rhodes.

An art intervention<sup>28</sup> undertaken by Capetonian Brendhan Dickerson, *One City Many Cultures - PTO* (1999) (Figure 1), a one-day exhibition coinciding with South Africa’s 1999 Heritage Day public holiday, referenced the colonial underpinnings of the Rhodes Memorial. The work comprised a temporary installation of steel poles surrounding the lower two of the eight lions flanking the stepped path leading to the memorial’s temple structure. Above one of the cage frames was a ribbon-like banner with “From Rape to Curio” (Schmahmann 2018:151) imprinted on it. The work was meant to highlight Rhodes’ ambition to build a railway between Cape

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<sup>26</sup> The content of Younge’s (2017) writing, forming part of the co-edited book: *Public art in South Africa: bronze warriors and plastic presidents* (Miller & Schmahmann 2017), reflected on the contentious task in conceiving and installing a new monument in the urban space of Church Square, Cape Town, a former hotspot in the Cape’s slave history. The work was co-produced with artist Wilma Cruise. Although the new artwork was intended to relate the physical and historical relevance of the space, the artwork is dwarfed by the elevated statue of Jan Hendrick Hofmeyr, a political figure associated in negative terms with the socially oppressed residents of the Cape.

<sup>27</sup> Wedding and celebratory photographic sessions have been undertaken at the location, as well as brief filming sessions which favoured the neoclassical design as a facsimile of ancient architecture.

<sup>28</sup> The art intervention mentioned here was initiated by a group called “Public Eye” and the event was titled: *P.T.O.* which is an abbreviation of *please turn over*. This intervention was part of the larger *One City, Many Cultures Festival* held in Cape Town and included interventions in both Durban and Johannesburg by artists located in those cities. Co-ordinated by Brett Murray and Kevin Brand, 20 artists were invited to construct additions to existing public artworks throughout the city with a view to reinterpreting the general meaning associated with those artworks (Borland [Sa]).

Town and Cairo, but with a cynical twist. The homophonous allusion between *rape* and *cape* is described as reflecting the infringement of colonial parties on native populations. Curio and Cairo aptly imply distance as it references the intended extraction of African diamonds – undertaken when excavating a railway between the two sites – to be appropriated as an imperial economic benefit. The art intervention was aptly conceived to reflect opinion on the outdated ambition of colonialism in South Africa and the forms employed in realising this concept worked well with the artworks present on the structure. But it is artist John Macallan Swan's untitled lion sculptures (1910),<sup>29</sup> originally sculpted to depict the powerful figures of Egyptian sphinxes – rendered as passive circus animals by the cages – that is of interest here (Schmahmann 2018:151).

Lions are a stereotypical iconography of Africa, representing the bold and untamed land that most tourists assume of the African landscape. Considering Rhodes intended to further his colonial reach in Africa, by extending a railway from the Southernmost to Northern most part of the continent, lions are an apt geographically distinct reflection of this. The organising of space/time is once again evident in the controlled seated stance the lion sculptures imitate. Their implied ferocity is subdued by being seated yet visible through the textural detail of the sculptural form itself, the cast bronze being an advantage in this instance. When Dickerson's intervention involved placing steel poles around a pair of the lions, the frozen moment of the uncaged animal was exaggerated. The addition of the ribbon banner is a form reminiscent of a carnival and the entire aesthetic is given a slight light-hearted feel, especially with the use of red. Red is a bold colour often associated with authority and thus functions in this sense as an accent of authenticity. Of further interest is the effect of caging only the first two of the eight lions. Undoubtedly the decision was ruled by logistical reasons, but it does impact reception of the entire scape when only part of the structure was altered, that is, the entrance to the memorial steps.

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<sup>29</sup> John Macallan Swan, untitled lion sculptures (1910). Bronze, larger than life size. Rhodes Memorial, Cape Town. (Schmahmann 2018:150, figure 2).



Figure 1. Brendhan Dickerson, *One City Many Cultures - PTO* (1999).

By having only some of the lions subject to restriction, an imbalance is created regarding the remaining six lions. Their unaltered form strengthens the impression of injustice implied by the caged lions and thus the symbol of oppression is both physically and metaphorically established. If the African reference is linked with the caged lion, then Dickerson's art intervention encourages relocating colonial justice by comparing the aesthetic experience of a partially and deliberately altered monument. Here there is ambivalence regarding meaning and thus memory attached to and interpreted in the aesthetic experience of the structure of Rhodes Memorial. Although the effect of observing Dickerson's intervention is not comparable to the dramatic stance against colonialism as the #rhodesmustfall protests, this intervention references a critique of colonialism without having to be invasive or destructive of the original artworks sited at that location. However, the memorial has been subject to acts of vandalism where, although temporary, the physical structure of one of its artworks was significantly altered.

Within the memorial's temple structure, another of Swan's artworks is housed. John Macallan Swan's untitled Rhodes bust (1910)<sup>30</sup> depicts Rhodes in earnest thought, which is reified by an accompanying poem by author Rudyard Kipling (Schmahmann 2018:149). The reflective atmosphere engendered in the artwork is, perhaps intentionally, mimicked by the contemplative pose adopted for the now-

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<sup>30</sup> John Macallan Swan, untitled Rhodes bust (1910). Bronze, larger than life size. Rhodes Memorial, Cape Town (*John Macallan Swan RA* 2011).

removed UCT statue, a short distance away from the memorial. This shadowed posture between the two Rhodes artworks is likely what contributed to the defacement, and a few years later decapitation, of Swan's, untitled Rhodes bust (1910) bronze sculpture months after the removal of the UCT statue.

Sometime in mid-September 2015, South African National Parks (SANP) representatives conveyed information that the nose of Swan's untitled Rhodes bust (1910) (Figure 2) was removed by what they assumed was an angle-grinder. The defacement was accompanied with spray-painted statements that included: "The master's nose betrays him" (spread across the plinth of the bust), "Your dreams of empire will die", and "Racist, thief, murderer, philanthropist" (on walls flanking the artwork). These acts of vandalism reflected the agenda that successfully initiated the removal of the UCT Rhodes statue only a few months earlier. Yet national interest in protecting the heritage site was a reflection on the memorial's value on a local and international level; efforts to repair the defacement were swiftly undertaken (Petersen 2015). The nature of the act of vandalism, however, offers an interesting insight.



Figure 2. Johannesburg, 21 September 2015 - The search continues for the missing nose of Cecil John Rhodes. It was cut off the bust at Rhodes Memorial in Cape Town last week (2015).

An interesting link is evident in the focus on what was removed and the slogan that accompanied the defacement. The expression *to cut off your nose to spite your*



face is the most immediate reaction when observing the vandalism in conjunction with the statement below it. Where the expression reflects an unnecessary act undertaken to achieve a specific goal, its relation to the figure of Rhodes must consider the colonial narrative linked to Rhodes in South Africa. This intention is qualified by the accompanying statements sprayed onto the surrounding wall of the temple structure and which emphasise the dissonance of Rhodes' imperialist and philanthropic ambitions. The explicit description of Rhodes as "Racist, thief, murderer" (Petersen 2015) reflects the consensus that established #rhodemustfall and the cascading effect of a desire to alter the aesthetic landscape of controversial historical figures. To the contemporary Cape Town community, Rhodes is undesirable and his presence on the memorial was what was attacked. Like the caging of only two of the eight lions in Dickerson's *One City Many Cultures - PTO* (1999) artistic intervention, only the bust and not the entire memorial was vandalised. Furthermore, the damage was undone through repairs after the most recent vandalism (Reuters, Shange & Makinana 2020). It becomes somewhat contradictory that the memorial, seen as a homogenous structure dedicated to a controversial figure, could be regarded as part objects, where the parts that encourage dissonance could be engaged with while ignoring the overall link they have with the design of the entire structure.



Figure 3. Mike Hutchings, *The damaged bust of colonialist Cecil John Rhodes after being vandalised in Cape Town on Tuesday (2020).*

In mid-July 2020, nearly five years after the first act of vandalism, the bust was attacked once more. This time a more aggressive defacement was successful<sup>31</sup> and Swan's untitled Rhodes bust (1910) (Figure 3) bronze was left without a head. Like the previous incident, the vandalism was shared online but this incident did not include any graffiti to mark or define the choice of damage (Reuters, Shange & Makinana 2020). The head was the intended target in the previous act of vandalism and this, along with the resurgence of #blacklivesmatter, are likely the causes for revisiting the controversial act. Both incidents were never claimed as the work of any specific party and the search to locate the culprits continues. However, in there being a lack of accountability, the implication is that the act was one of consensus and that all who likely share the view that colonialism is a policy based on oppression would support the agenda of invasive engagements with controversial artworks. This impression is not far-fetched in consideration of the support that #rhodesmustfall gathered, especially regarding the removal of the UCT Rhodes statue.

### 2.3 UCT RHODES STATUE

The UCT Rhodes statue held nearly an equally contentious status. According to a document drafted for the purposes of having the statue removed, the statue is claimed to have no real cultural significance<sup>32</sup> and that the removal thereof would not affect the heritage value of the UCT campus (Properties and Services [Sa]). Furthermore, the then continued visibility of the artwork would likely incite further vandalism due to such a contentious status. That interactions with the public artwork drew attention, but in contrast to the initial purpose the artwork was meant to serve for the UCT community, became problematic for the value of the Rhodes statue.

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<sup>31</sup> The 2015 defacement included evidence of an attempt to remove the entire head as opposed to just the nose. It was presumed that the task may have been considered overwhelming at the time and the abandoned attempt was masked by the inclusion of an allusion to the nose removal via the spray-painted slogan (Petersen 2015).

<sup>32</sup> The cultural value of the public artwork is attacked presumably because of what Sabine Marschall (2017:204) reflects on in her article *Targeting statues: Monument "vandalism" as an expression of sociopolitical protest in South Africa*. Marschall (2017:204) describes the installation of public commemorative artworks as based on the duality of remembering and forgetting. That the Rhodes statue holds no symbolic value for the social community occupying the space is reason enough that no loss could be felt regarding a loss of any valuable memory.

Originally erected in 1934 at the base of the campus rugby fields, the statue was moved from this location to the upper campus in 1962 for a logistical reason.<sup>33</sup> Marion Walgate's, *Cecil John Rhodes* (1934) bronze figurative representation stood in the path of the then excavation for De Waal Drive – a main motorway leading from the southern suburb area of Cape Town to the city centre. Described as being derivative of Auguste Rodin's French expressionist sculpture *The Thinker* (1904),<sup>34</sup> the later general impression of the Rhodes statue was not very encouraging.

In the motivation for the statue's removal, the artwork was described as "uninspired", "lacks originality", and having "very limited aesthetic merit" (Properties and Services [Sa]). These statements form the judgements motivated by the then urgency in having the statue removed and avoiding the possibility of dealing with the likelihood of its further defacement and vandalism. Realising this motivation involved engaging with information related to the National Heritage Resources Act (Act 25 of 1999), but also participation from the public as the issue was presented as a national concern and not just an institutional matter. At the core of the motivation was the reality that a community broader than just the student and staff populace of the university saw Rhodes statue as a "highly problematic" legacy and one that would best not be so publicly represented. Furthermore, the controversy related to the Rhodes statue was likened to the confederate statue controversies in the United States (US) ostensibly refiguring the public artwork as being symbolically more than just acknowledging the patron of the institution. That the application, as part of this motivation, requested the demolition of the plinth as well as the removal of the statue lends an understanding of how the public artwork's symbolic as well as artistic value was intended to be undone (Properties and Services [Sa]). However, what must be considered prior to the circumstances resulting in the decision for the removal of the statue is the motivation for its installation.

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<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting that Schmahmann (2016:96) identifies that roughly three years prior to this move, the South African government at the time passed the University Education Act. This act stood as a legal means to inhibit non-White access to public tertiary institutions of learning. Schmahmann's emphasis on this point places a poignant twist to the association of the Rhodes statue moving deeper into the university campus as a symbol of the exclusionary narrative the public artwork tends to elicit.

<sup>34</sup> Auguste Rodin, *The Thinker* (1904). Bronze, 180 cm height. Rodin Museum, Paris. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Thinker-sculpture-by-Rodin> (Accessed 16 September 2021).

The financing for Walgate's Rhodes statue was, as previously mentioned, due to the designation of surplus funds<sup>35</sup> in the building of the Rhodes Memorial.<sup>36</sup> According to Schmahmann (2013:55), Walgate was of the first female sculptors in South Africa to be given such a big commission, an achievement at the time. That Walgate's husband, Charles Walgate, was the replacement architect assigned the task of overseeing the redesign of the UCT campus was only part of securing the commission.<sup>37</sup> Marion Walgate's skill as an artist also played a role in the decision and the RNSAMC awarded her the opportunity on merit and not just convenience (Schmahmann 2013:55-56). Had the artwork not been a representation of a controversial figure, the artwork may have had a very different future. This is especially since the aesthetic of the statue is linked to tropes common to the Classical and Imperialism<sup>38</sup> art standards of the previously discussed Rhodes Memorial.

It was mentioned that there is an almost mimetic echo of the posture adopted in the design of the UCT Rhodes statue with Swan's Untitled Rhodes bust (1910) sited at the Rhodes Memorial. Both shadow the contemplative pose of Rodin's *The Thinker* (1904) but only Swan's work has that inference of inward thought reified through a textual reference. The poem accompanying the memorial bust describes pensive symbolism in romantic terms, alluding to the sublime landscape that lay before the artwork. In contrast to this, Walgate's artwork is described as having a

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting here that there were additional factors involved in the decision to install the seated Rhodes statue at UCT. According to Nicholas Coetzer (2020:73), Lord George Curzon had a measure of influence in the decision to have a seated figure of Rhodes sculpted at all. This is in consideration that the design of the Rhodes Memorial lacked any significant statuesque homage to the late Rhodes. At least this is according to Lord Curzon, a former British statesman (Schmahmann 2016:94). Lord Curzon's initial idea was to have the temple structure of the memorial extend deeper into an atrium space within which a larger-than-life statue of Rhodes would be seated. That this was not realised (and likely that the influence in having a statue made of Rhodes at all was still significant at the time) in the memorial, the RNSAMC had one made and presented as part of the redesign of the university campus (Coetzer 2020:72-73).

<sup>36</sup> Refer to page 25.

<sup>37</sup> Schmahmann (2016:101) also describes Marion Walgate as one of the first female sculptors in South Africa to have the opportunity to work in public art. This Schmahmann acknowledges as being a significant fact to the historical significance of the artwork, which, in having the work removed, defects the ambition of inclusivity with regards to transformation on the university campus. It is a credible issue considering that public art by female sculptors is not as common as could be presumed in the South African context.

<sup>38</sup> This comment is made in consideration of Coetzer's (2020:71) description in his comparison of Imperial Classicism with the architecture of the Roman Empire. The focus in each architectural aesthetic is to reinforce the idea of glory and purposive mission; qualities presumably fitting of academic success in as much as imperial conquest.

covetous gaze.<sup>39</sup> This is in consideration that the Rhodes statue is depicted as viewing the landscape – the props to the sculpture’s design of being seated on a bench and loosely gripping a scroll in the left hand – as a prospector<sup>40</sup> and not a dreamer (Schmahmann 2013:56). This strengthens the impression that the artwork was created for an advocate of and with ambitions of colonisation; ironically, this is the same intent when considering the design of Rhodes Memorial. Where the impression slants away from the harsh reality of colonial empowerment could partly be credited to the environment for the artwork’s siting.

The Rhodes Memorial is nestled in the green forest landscape of the base of Table Mountain, which tends to aid the imagined reality<sup>41</sup> of Watts’s *Physical Energy* (1904). Furthermore, Luhmann (2000:120) describes *ornaments* as an iteration that conditions meaning. Stone and bronze are the media echoed in the format of the memorial and of the UCT Rhodes statue. Authenticity and a link to heritage value are established in these forms, thus making these media (stone and bronze) an example of Luhmann’s ornament. However, a more pronounced ornament would be the plinth structure upon which all the artworks in question are placed.

Both the Rhodes bust and the Rhodes statue are larger than life, not just in scale but also in elevation off the ground, due to the plinth. Plinths have a specific purpose in especially public art. Demarcating a space for an artwork references Luhmann’s (2000:115) discussion of representational art projecting an imagined space and time. Time becomes a metaphysical issue especially since the status

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<sup>39</sup> The poem accompanying Walgate’s Rhodes is one of the key problematic issues with regards to interpreting the statue on UCT’s campus. At least this is according to Schmahmann (2016:98), who credibly notes that the poem is the only textual reference offering a framing device for the public artwork. No further information had been provided to enlighten viewers of the historical relevance of the artwork and thus possibly deflect focus from colonial ambitions.

<sup>40</sup> Nick Shepherd (2020:571) describes in his article *After the #fall: the shadow of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town* that there are two distinct architectural tropes in effect in the layout of the university campus. The first refers to the “temple-on-the-hill” (Shepherd 2020:570) design which reflects geometries of imperialism in the African landscape. The second trope: “the site of prospect” (Shepherd 2020:571) is relevant here as the statue enacts this reference to an “imperial gaze” which Shepherd (2020:571) describes as being: “filled with power and intention”. This validates the inference of exacting a covetous gaze over the Cape Flats landscape.

<sup>41</sup> Coetzer (2020:72) explains that the granite used in the construction of the memorial was sourced from Table Mountain and the decision to include indigenous plants in the surrounding space was to naturalise the presence of the architecture in the landscape. Presumably the intent was to legitimise the association of the western influence in Africa, marking Cape Town as a link between the global north and south.

the plinth affords the artwork equates the artwork with a timeless social significance. Elevated platforms tend to be employed when there is a need to demarcate something within a landscape. The significance of positive value is therefore imbued in the object because of this elevation, which can be both beneficial and problematic in the case of public art.

Artworks placed on a plinth have their objectivity disrupted since the viewer<sup>42</sup> is invited to ponder on their engagement with the artwork. Doing so allows the perceptible forms of the artwork to undergo scrutiny as variability in what is represented prompts variable possibilities in meaning. Within the confines of a gallery environment, this effect on the viewer allows the viewer to explore the imagined reality without being impeded by their own reality, the blank walled environment of the gallery space aiding this impression. The lack of external stimuli and the closed framing of the environment make contemplation a personally enriching experience. In this context, subjectivity matters; however, public art infers objectivity as an experiential standard. In the case of public art, that imagined reality extends to the environment within which the artwork is sited. The real world and a real-life experience are always already implicated in the aesthetic experience of art that is publicly sited.

This dilemma is reviewed by Luhmann (2000:46), who states that, the boundary posed by public art “does not draw the viewer’s attention inward but instead directs it outward”. Luhmann (2000:45-46) describes an artwork as having *boundaries* whereby the viewer can distinguish the imagined reality – conjured up by the artwork – from a lived experience. Art that invokes the environment, such as public art or architecture, does not encourage that same privilege. The environment is implicated in the artwork and the imagined reality is projected onto the environment, interpolating both artwork and environment in the production of meaning (Luhmann 2000:45-46). This is the case regarding the interactions had with the Rhodes statue.

In the case of public art at UCT, it is not only the physical environment that is implicated but the social element of that environment as well. The resulting flux of

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<sup>42</sup> The viewer of artworks on elevated platforms is also subjected to a submissive upward gaze. The elevated positioning of the artwork imposes a sense of subjugation.

these factors in the production of meaning is what Cilliers (1998:116) describes as the dynamic of a complex social network. This dynamic of a complex network is described as an intersection of discourses resulting in meaning never actually being fixed, even though it may undergo periods of stability. This stability is regarded as reaching consensus, but such a state is essentially the product of agonistics<sup>43</sup> within a complex system (Cilliers 1998:116-117). Thus, the factors of environment and the social element within a specific space must be taken into account when considering how meaning is formed, especially when additional contesting meaning exists.

Rhodes' statue was an extract of this former mining magnate's relation to the land on which the university is built. That the statue was moved deeper into the academic landscape, in a position with a privileged vista,<sup>44</sup> is likely where the contention surrounding its presence is sourced. References to imperial conquest, the value systems of the figure Rhodes himself, as well as his identification of being a racist, are thus implicated in the figurative artwork.<sup>45</sup> This is more potently effective than at the memorial,<sup>46</sup> for the main reason that the Rhodes statue is physically centred in an academic environment and not just an allusion to academia via the architecture.

UCT academia declared dissatisfaction with the statue. This is because the statue signified an institutional role model and the false impression that UCT reveres Rhodes. By interpolating the artwork into the agonistics of the social network at UCT, the statue's status as an art object is challenged. If an artwork's imagined reality is projected within the work, the work is safely conditioned by the art system from which it sources its value and meaning. Yet, when the imagined reality is

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<sup>43</sup> Agonistics refers to the state of debate that occurs in the process of negotiating consensus, that is: competition. Competition is considered necessary in paralogy – defined by Shawver (1996) as a constant process of producing meaning – and also leads to an overload of information within a system. Thus, complexity functions almost like a catch-all term to account for the production of multiple meanings.

<sup>44</sup> Coetzer describes (2020:68) the position of the Rhodes statue, in relation to the design of the campus, as the "Imperial axis". This axis, in his discussion, represents a focal point in the temple-like design of the university campus and thus proves to be a central position for bold statements and acts. Having additional ritualistic significance, the placement of any figurative artistic work, protest, or performance would likely reach a status beyond mere social disruption based almost entirely on location.

<sup>45</sup> Paraphrased from *03 Rhodes statue – Motivation by UCT* (Properties and Services [Sa]).

<sup>46</sup> Note that the Rhodes Memorial adopts a similar Imperial axis design trope (Coetzer 2020:72).

embroiled in the dynamic of the complex social network as well as the environment within which it is sited, then additional meanings result outside of the art-system closure. But this occurs almost exclusively in the case of public art as it relates directly with the environment in the production of meaning.

Luhmann (2000:46) describes this distinction as “work-specific space” and affirms that this does not offer the same projection of imagined reality such as artworks located in a gallery space. The artwork is regarded as art so long as it is in focus as art. It is in this instance that the plinth becomes a necessary feature. When this focus shifts from artwork, interest in the artwork’s imagined reality shifts as well (Luhmann 2000:46). Factors considered extraneous to the art system (the social system and the environment), but which conditions the aesthetic value and status of the artwork, is what maintains a link between the social system and the art system. This guarantees the art status of the work while also affecting the retention of the artwork in a public space. A dominant factor contributing to the removal of the Rhodes statue is that the statue represents oppression, and its continued existence on the university campus retards the potential for transformation at UCT. Where the Rhodes bust was damaged and slogans spray-painted on the plinth at the memorial to reflect disapproval, Chumani Maxwele’s controversial protest action had the same if not more potent effect on the Rhodes statue at UCT.

#### **2.4 MAXWELE’S PROTEST**

Described in the media as the “poo protest” (Bester [Sa]), Chumani Maxwele’s controversial protest action is frequently cited with regards to the eventual removal of the Rhodes statue previously sited at UCT. It is worth noting that the description offered by the media at once foregrounds controversy as the abject matter used in the protest compounds complex narratives. Although not as destructive as with the Rhodes Memorial bust, the representational value of the faecal matter employed in the protest does impact the meaning of the Rhodes statue. This is due to the acknowledgement that additional information, in the form of associations with faecal matter,<sup>47</sup> contributes to the complexity of the social network and the environment of UCT.

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<sup>47</sup> According to Tamar Garb (2019:29) the choice of human faeces was to highlight more than just disgust with the statue. The faeces were sourced from a portable sanitation unit



Along with the faeces, Maxwele wore a bright pink<sup>48</sup> construction hard hat and a pair of sandwich boards. The front-facing board had a white background with the black lettering: “EXHIBIT WHITE ARROGANCE U.C.T.” and the back facing board had a black background with the white lettering: “EXHIBIT BLACK ASSIMILATION U.C.T.” (Figure 4; Miller & Schmahmann 2017:vii). The choice of contrasting colours is sensible considering that the boards were not very large and the lettering in turn was not that legible from a distance. But it is the impact of having to imply the social injustices based on race, experienced at UCT, that the contrast is likely to reference. It is also worth noting that the reference of the words to the colour background as arrogance to white and assimilation to black conveys more information in the subtlety of its form than initially considered.



Figure 4. David Ritchie, Cape Town - 150309 - Chumani Maxwele, the man who allegedly gave President Jacob Zuma's motorcade the middle finger and was subsequently detained and hooded, launched a protest at UCT by throwing excrement at the Cecil John Rhodes Statue at the university's campus (2015).

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in Khayelitsha in the Cape Flats area, the very vista which the Rhodes statue overlooks. This reference to the socio-cultural environment in which most underprivileged South African communities are indentured to experience has been an issue raised on more than just this occasion. The injustice is therefore not isolated to imperialism, but also the current political dispensation and the lack of service delivery in fringe areas of the city.

<sup>48</sup> On two previous occasions the Rhodes statue was vandalised and the colour pink featured in both. The first was some time in the 1970s when the statue was painted a shade of pink. The second was when a swastika was painted onto the statue in 1997, apparently marking the first call for the statue to be removed (Coetzer 2020:68).

The experience of adopting imperialist ideologies is described by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986:3) as having a "cultural bomb" enforced upon the subaltern. The supposed intent of this bombardment is to alienate the native population from their indigenous knowledge systems and present the colonial knowledge base as a cure to the alienation (Thiong'o 1986:3). Maxwele expressed that same concept in a more emphatic manner. The "WHITE ARROGANCE" (Miller & Schmahmann 2017:vii) reference in Maxwele's performance is to enforce the ideology of the Rhodes statue as an imperialist figure represented at and by UCT. Furthermore, the continued presence of such a monument post-Apartheid is presumably what is termed as arrogant. The "BLACK ASSIMILATION" (Miller & Schmahmann 2017:vii) references a call for unity where spectators are encouraged to admonish the presence of the Rhodes statue. The contrast in Maxwele's sandwich boards reflects Thiong'o's disdain for an enforced culture appropriation. It stands to reason then that the consideration of these readings presents the dynamic at UCT with an information cluster affecting the meaning of the public artwork.

The former analysis of the Rhodes statue considered one historical perspective of the figure of Rhodes. The imagined reality conjured by the style<sup>49</sup> of the public artwork reflects an understanding of Rhodes as coloniser and academic. But that role is presented as an ambition for expansion rather than oppression, even though one implies the other. Maxwele's performance represented the oppression interpretation, a contrast to the desired interpretation of expansion crucial to the style of the Rhodes statue. This proves Cilliers' (1998:2) notion that an analytical method of uncovering the meaning of the artwork is unreliable in determining a direct relational understanding (of artworks). With meaning being consistently under-erasure,<sup>50</sup> isolating the meanings causes a strain in relating meaning formation in complex systems as a paradoxical relation (Cilliers 1998:2). A way to overcome this challenge is to regard representations as not implicit in the artwork

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<sup>49</sup> Luhmann (2000:130) discusses "style" as a concept coupling the elements constituting an artwork. Style is claimed to be what maintains interest in artworks as it is an aesthetic feature of artworks that link, through similarities or distinct differences, artworks aesthetically to the other (Luhmann 2000:131). In the case of the Rhodes statue, the depiction of Rhodes in contemplation, like Rodin's *The Thinker* (1904) is what is referred to here as a *style*.

<sup>50</sup> Originally worded in French as "sous rature", under erasure refers to a stratagem of philosopher Martin Heidegger where a textual word is eliminated but remains partially decipherable (*encyclo.co.uk* 2021. Sv "Sous rature"). The application of the word in this context refers to meaning being discounted but evidence thereof remains.

but distributed over an expansive network in relation to the artwork. Thus, meaning is not a linear process but a dialectical one.

Distributed representation, according to Cilliers (1998:11), forgoes the alignment of representations into set paradigmatic structures. Instead, a liberal distribution of representation develops meaning through dialectic engagements, thus promoting true variability. However, fixing linked representations when interpreting the meaning of artworks is still a necessity. When two meanings co-exist in competition for relevance, a blockage occurs. This blockage is what Luhmann (2000:119) described as a paradox, here pertaining to the communication of two distinct meanings of a figurative representation of Rhodes.

Maxwele's controversial protest action subverted the prospector symbolism of the Rhodes statue. This act caused a blockage in the communication of the symbolic artwork. Luhmann (2000:11) describes communication as comprising the components of "utterance", "information" and "understanding" as a unity. The communicative act reproduces the distinction between utterance (a firm statement conveying meaning that is established and recalled) and information (ambiguity serving as the possibility of alternative meanings), which leads to understanding (the consistency required to stabilise the repeatable use of the utterance). When "information" is "uttered", it is to declare one possible meaning in the act of communication. Yet by committing to utterance there is the simultaneous existence of all the information that is left unuttered in the communication act (Luhmann 2000:11). Maxwele's protest action referenced an utterance reified through the formation and use of the #rhodemustfall tag, resulting in the understanding that the Rhodes statue should be removed. However, the information of Rhodes as prospector remained, causing a paradox in meaning because the statue was not altered physically.

Luhmann's (2000:119) paradox is used to describe the simultaneous interplay of these two distinct meanings. Playing one meaning off on the other blocks the fixation for representation and the viewer is stuck in a representational limbo. The only escape from this limbo is to seek out additional information to assist deciding on a dominant meaning and escape this communication trap. Such a complex nature of communication is unique to the arts. This is because art permits possible

meanings to co-exist in the communication of a meaning paradox without the viewer being consciously aware of the surplus of information (Luhmann 2000:11). Thus, Maxwele's controversial protest action against the Rhodes statue could convey a dense network of representation. Even so, meaning is restricted to the perceptible forms in protest against which the viewer's attention is drawn, such as the hard hat.

Rhodes was considered a mining magnate and the relation between that status and Maxwele's use of a safety hard hat – iconic of the mining community – is explicit. What is intriguing about this aesthetic is Maxwele's distinct use of pink in place of the usual colour range of safety hard hats worn. This, along with his choice of leggings, has been described as “carnavalesque”<sup>51</sup> and as “viscerally connect[ing] issues of perpetual social deprivation and [B]lackness to perpetual [W]hite privilege” (Schutte 2015). The description of visceral, when referencing the colour of the hard hat, intensifies the association of abjection with the faeces that was flung at the statue. This bodily association is pivotal to Maxwele's stating that the choice of faeces was to represent the “shame of the [B]lack people” (Bester 2015, 10 March). This humiliation is linked to staining the publicly sited artwork with faeces.

The issue of employing the faeces as staining public art was, in light of Maurantonio's (2018:52) article, conferred to the distinct use of pine tar, as it was tossed on the base of a public artwork located in Richmond, Virginia in the US.<sup>52</sup> The engaged artwork depicts a prominent confederate hero, General JEB Stuart, and is one of several artworks of similar style that were and still are subject to vandalism. Maurantonio (2018:52) further describes the medium of tar as having multiple connotations based on historical references about race distinction in the US. She states these as “tarring and feathering (an act of physical humiliation), the tar heel (a historically ambiguous phrase), and the tar baby (a cross-cultural fable)”

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<sup>51</sup> Schmahmann's (2016:107) description of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival is “a space of social transgression through its disturbance of hierarchies and roles”. This reference was to an earlier intervention with the Rhodes statue where the figurative artwork was draped in soccer fan regalia typical of the South African sports scene (Schmahmann 2016:107). That the journalist Gillian Schutte (2015) mentions this with respect to Maxwele's protest may in turn reflect on the motive of the protest as socially transgressive; and disturbing the social hierarchies that exist within the context of the tertiary institution.

<sup>52</sup> United States (US) refers to the United States of America (USA).

(Maurantonio 2018:52). The use of matter loaded with symbolic value in the context of protest foregrounds the quality of the matter to fold space and time by making the symbolic histories of these materials present in the current use thereof. This metaphysics of presence assists Luhmann's (2000:119) paradox, thus exaggerating the ambivalence experienced by the viewer when observing the vandalised artwork in the US. That is, the humiliation and degenerate associations had with the US history of slavery and racialism affiliated with confederate politics. Like the stained Rhodes statue, the statue of Confederate General JEB Stuart had its socio-historical status augmented with a contrasting and deplorable association. That the pine tar is also loaded with alternative meanings, the three connotations for pine tar make the paradox a richer interplay of information and possible meanings. However, it is an asset when a protest draws attention to a specific meaning.

One way of foregoing this paradox is to mask some information off from the viewer. This act is another form of vandalism, although not as aesthetically altering as the faecal matter. Where tar served as an attempt at blotting the aesthetic of the confederate public monument, black bags were used at UCT to enshroud the Rhodes statue.

## 2.5 DRAPING THE RHODES STATUE

Before the removal of the Rhodes statue, the public artwork was covered with a patchwork of black plastic refuse bags<sup>53</sup> (Figure 5). The effect of this alteration impacted the interpretation of the statue in predominantly two instances. In the first instance, the deplorable status of Rhodes was reified using a refuse bag. The association with abjection is iterated by the associations with this medium. Thus, like Maxwele's use of faeces, the refuse bag connoted waste and the disposable association was realised in the use of a stereotypical black bag. The second instance accounts for a particular quality of public art: ambiguity. When the Rhodes statue was not engaged with for protest reasons, the meaning of the artwork was stabilised as a monological commemoration subsequently impacting the valuation

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<sup>53</sup> The intention to cover the statue was to subdue its symbolic link with UCT. This is according to Maxwele, who further claimed that the covering would remain in place until the statue was removed (Bester 2015, 16 March).

of the artwork. However, protest implies the possibility of more than one meaning being attributed to that artwork. As a result, the commemorative status is being challenged, emphasised by an extended period of covering the statue up and thus prohibiting alternative interpretations.



Figure 5. Adrian De Kock, *IT'S A WRAP: Cecil John Rhodes at UCT*, which is at the centre of controversy (2015).

Both Maxwele's controversial protest action as well as the masking with refuse bags contributed to the Rhodes statue's removal. The refuse bags masked the association of Rhodes as an imperial symbol and reduced the public artwork to a spectre on the university campus.<sup>54</sup> The protest was reiterated with the fervent use of the social media hashtag #rhodesmustfall but the artwork no longer featured as the true figurative representation of Rhodes. Instead, the masking refuse bags rendered the artwork moot in the environment. Being covered challenged the memory of Rhodes in that environment where removing the statue reinforced this notion. Here emphasis is dually placed on the significance of public artworks in the social environment and their significance in the art system.

The distinction drawn between the Rhodes statue as an artwork within the environment of UCT, as well as an artwork within the art system, is what Luhmann

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<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting at this stage that the shadow of the Rhodes statue was marked with paint on the steps extending from the base of the plinth and is still in place despite the removal of the Rhodes statue (Shepherd 2020:577). In this way, the statue is still present and, like a spectre, the memory of the controversy is still on the university campus.

(2000:29) describes as “double closure”. That the public artwork was visually obscured is in recognition of the object’s aesthetic status at UCT, the first closure *external* to the art system. Relating to the artwork in this way references its artistic value; yet, given the circumstances of its being covered up, suppresses any social necessity for it on the campus. At the same time the artwork is distinguished from most other artworks in that it is a full figurative representation of Rhodes, the second closure *internal* to the art system. Covering the artwork interrupts the internal (second) closure of the artwork by physically altering the artwork’s distinctiveness. The figurative representation is now replaced with an amorphous and aesthetically indistinct silhouette. The result of this is that the artwork’s meaning and value, even within the art system, now flows in sync with the agenda’s driving its removal from the social system, since it no longer symbolises its previous aesthetic value. Thus, interrupting its external (first) closure since the environment no longer needs to regard the statue as an artwork on the campus. Another such example can be identified in Schmahmann’s (2017:44) discussion of artist Cigdem Aydemir’s *Plastic Histories* (2014),<sup>55</sup> as a critique of gender politics by covering up specifically two figurative statues on the University of the Free State (UFS) campus.

The Australian artist Cigdem Aydemir chose to present two statues<sup>56</sup> on the UFS campus as covered in a pink plastic shrink wrapping. Her intention was driven by an interest in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century public statues that condition a particular association (Afrikaner Nationalism) for the communities impacted by the history of the represented figures. Also related was the desire for these monuments to represent individual memories while querying the public artworks’ relevance in the socio-political current of that environment. Her decision to title the engagement as “plastic” is to equate the modular material with memory. This is in consideration of variable information of the past filtering into contemporary narratives. Memory is thus rendered as open, not static, because of enlightenment. Thus, the decision to

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<sup>55</sup> Cigdem Aydemir, *Plastic Histories* (2014). Monuments shrink-wrapped in plastic with neon pink enamel, varying sizes. Vryfees experimental art commission. Bloemfontein, South Africa. [https://issuu.com/joh\\_designs/docs/plastic\\_histories\\_catalogue2014](https://issuu.com/joh_designs/docs/plastic_histories_catalogue2014) (Accessed 17 September 2021).

<sup>56</sup> According to Schmahmann (2017:44), Aydemir’s subject matter included three more monument statues to former Afrikaaner nationalist figures via digitally manipulated imagery. Furthermore, her project included a solo gallery exhibition of yet more pink shrink-wrapped sculptures and photographs of similar interventions on public art in situ.

use plastic shrink wrapping, as a technique in the intervention, acts as “preserving” the memory implied by the memorial statues (Schmahmann 2017:44-45). Similar to the refuse bags of Rhodes, the covering up emphasised the hidden meanings. Being able to identify multiple interpretations is what Luhmann (2000:29) calls identifying the “blind spot”.

The blind spot is described as existing within the flux of information offered in interpreting the meaning of an artwork. That is, if the statue of Rhodes is perceived as the embodiment of imperial ambition, then it simultaneously, although not obviously, embodies the perceptions of oppression and injustice. This holds especially when the figure of Rhodes is associated with racial prejudice. By covering the artwork, the communicated meaning becomes ambiguous, giving the blind spot an aesthetic form (Luhmann 2000:29). Schmahmann (2017:47) acknowledges this same point of a blind spot in Aydemir’s artistic intervention as “an intervention of silences and blind spots that underpin discourse ... an orientation that in this instance involves prompting viewers to think about not simply those whom these monuments celebrate but also those whom they marginalize or exclude” (Schmahmann 2017:47). Thus, the masking of the figurative aesthetic does not fully eliminate the artwork from the art system albeit its interruption of the systems’ internal closure. An alternative interpretation of the artwork is presented in line with the dominant discourses of the social system within which the public artwork is sited and this alternative is often presented in more than one way.



Figure 6. *South Africa: Cecil Rhodes Statue Vandalised (2020).*



Along with the black refuse bag patchwork, the Rhodes statue was additionally vandalised with spray paint (Figure 6). Colour was not presumed to be significant; however, the locations of the defacement appear to be significant. In the case of the Rhodes statue, the eyes were sprayed over in luminous orange. Much like the bust at Rhodes Memorial, there is an interesting link between the defacement of the artworks. The bust had its nose removed, reflecting on the trope<sup>57</sup> referencing Rhodes's inability to accomplish his ambitions in the Cape. In turn, the vandalised eyes infer being blinded<sup>58</sup> by ambition. The vandalised eyes may also hint at the vista which the statue was privileged to.<sup>59</sup> Yet it is not the Cape Flats landscape that is perhaps being challenged but rather Rhodes' ambition to acquire more land, stretching from the south to the north of Africa. According to Duane Jethro, "defacement is a powerful form of truth telling" (2017:171). The truth, as it was presented in the #rhodesmustfall protests, was the superfluous value the statue had on the UCT campus.

When Rhodes finally did fall (statue removed), all that remained was the plinth<sup>60</sup> upon which the artwork was presented. Here, the quality of ornament inherent to the art system is emphasised, as the plinth infers value. Suffice to say, once the public artwork was removed, Maxwele was of the first to mount the empty plinth signifying the overthrowing of the Rhodes statue.

## 2.6 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Several key points offered in this chapter contributed to the understanding of how public artwork is interpreted and valued within a specific social context. The primary focus here had been on the ambiguity of meaning attributed to the Rhodes statue, especially as the previously communicated meaning is rooted in ideologies that are no longer valued in the social system of a democratic post-Apartheid

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<sup>57</sup> The trope being *to cut off your nose to spite your face*.

<sup>58</sup> Vandalising eyes has crueller associations of which physical torture by inhibiting the victim's ability to navigate a space is one. Blinding Rhodes may additionally reference inhibiting his covetous gaze over the Cape Flats, denying his prospector association.

<sup>59</sup> Schmahmann (2016:94) mentioned that the decision to angle Rhodes in the direction of the Cape Flats was not specifically in reference to prospecting. Initially the object of the statue's focus was a rose garden on Rhodes' estate, a distance away from the university campus.

<sup>60</sup> Shepherd (2020:577) noted that, at the time of his writing his article, *After the fall: the shadow of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town*, the plinth was still located on the university campus, albeit being boxed in and the box itself painted grey.

society. As these points feature in a sublimated form in the remainder of this dissertation, it is beneficial to review them in terms of their relevance to the overall intention of advocating for public art as a constituent of a complex social system.

Public artworks, or art in general, comprise perceptible forms. These forms recur and have specific symbolic value within a given context that offers multiple, sometimes contrasting, interpretations. The communicated meaning is resolved through consensus of these recurrent and contrasting interpretations. Thus, vandalism, although altering the aesthetic of the artwork, conditions communicated meaning within the art system, especially when the art is sited in a social environment.

The extent of an art aesthetic to firmly establish communicated meaning contributes to the imagined reality of an artwork. However, such an imagined reality is often challenged in the case of public art. This is because public art is interpolated by the discourses of the environment within which it is being presented. This resulting paradox of variable meanings is crucial to the underlying value of artworks and is a quality unique to the art system, as it is reliant on the communication of perceptions. Thus, ambiguity of meaning results and the artwork is best described as being subject to double closure in a social environment.

Double closure occurs when the artwork engaged with in a social environment is formally altered. This alteration impacts the meaning and valuation of the artwork within the art system and social system. Where art is otherwise stable in its aesthetic classification within the art system, such formal and symbolic alteration could affect and be affected by discourses inherent to the social system. However, for this to affect any interpretation of the artwork would require consideration of what contributed to resolving the communicated meaning and establishing this as a memory within the referential network of the social system.

## CHAPTER 3: Mnemonics in a distributed network

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Memory serves as a potent force in the establishment of identity within any complex social system. Whether collective or individual, identity is sensitive to tampering and when challenges which alter an otherwise homologous state of identity is experienced the result is fracturing. This fracturing is not entirely a dissolution of the homologous state. Actually, according to Cilliers (1998:23-24), a connectionist model consisting of such fractured elements is implicit in complexity. This is due to connectionism valuing interconnections rather than emphasising nodal points as significant in accruing meaning. Thus, rather than seeing fracturing as resulting in dissolution, fracturing could instead be identifying the relations between constituent parts of a regulatable pattern. Interconnections are considered valuable in the construction of regulated patterns, and these regulated patterns constitute what we could commonly refer to as memories. Any identifiable social system thus comprises many possible memory patterns through which meaning can be communicated.

Memory patterns that can be fractured and reconstituted as different patterns could challenge communicated meaning. In this chapter, the focus is placed on how select memories, identified in the previous chapter, are reified within certain interactions in a complex social system. This strategy is aimed at answering the question: How is memory modulated through patterns of interactions with public art? That these interactions take on the form of performance art is subsidiary to this chapter. This is because we have already established, from Chapter 2, that forms inherent to the art system were found to be evident in that of the social system. This shared context places greater emphasis at this stage on the relevance of a distributed network of representation.

The shared context also draws attention to the establishment of former influential narratives (colonial narratives, White capitalist monopoly) that dominated the interpretation of art in the context of UCT. This decision is based on the now-prevalent reinterpretation of public artworks and subsequently how monological commemoration is ever-present. As mentioned previously, when variable memory

patterns exist simultaneously (ambiguity) in a complex social system, social disruption is likely a result. Hence, memories tied to differing interpretations of commemorative works would in turn challenge the homologous state of collective and individual identity within a complex social system, as they hinge on memory patterns. What follows are four examples of social interactions resulting as a challenge to memory patterns tied to the monological commemorative representations of Rhodes.

### 3.2 RHODES MUST FALL

The success of having removed the Rhodes statue from UCT urgently pushed the need for social and academic transformation. It appears that the link with the artwork was only part of the overall intent and the label, RMF, was established to represent a social movement and not just referencing an isolated incident. The absent presence of the Rhodes statue<sup>61</sup> persists in the social dynamic on the UCT campus as a cypher of inequality and oppression. The social impact of the RMF movement spuriously spread to local and international tertiary institutions, each promoting the same drive for transformation.<sup>62</sup> This movement presents the art system with an interesting shift to that of a sub-system functioning within the larger social system. Where the removal of the artwork should eliminate the causal associations for its removal, it seems that the link between art and a social movement was effectively strengthened because of a linguistic referent: Rhodes (historical figure). Art therefore has a potent socially significant function.

Luhmann (2000:146) discusses at some length that the function of art is to illuminate ambiguities of meaning in society, while also making art an “evolutionary attractor”. In Chapter 2, attempts were made to describe the value of artworks being instrumental in the creation of imagined realities.<sup>63</sup> It was indicated that, when these imaginings are projected onto the social environment, contingencies

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<sup>61</sup> Recall the painted shadow of the eponymous Rhodes statue mentioned in footnote 54 on page 46.

<sup>62</sup> Schmahmann (2013:49) mentions incidences at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, Makhandha where not only morphologies of Rhodes were openly protested, but the name of the institution itself. Although a name change has not been taken into serious consideration thus far, artworks were removed as a way to pacify the agonistics affecting the social system on that university campus (Schmahmann 2013:50).

<sup>63</sup> Refer to pages 37-38.

and disruption that affect that imagined reality are illuminated. In this description, the reality that conditions our social engagements is layered with the imagined reality conjured up by the presence of the public artwork. For the two realities to co-exist, there needs to be some semblance between them, so as not to create dissonance for the viewer or engager of the public artwork. The Rhodes statue functioned as art in both the art and social systems; however, dissonance occurred when contradictory meanings of the artwork were identified. A rupture occurred and the two realities, an aesthetic morphology of Rhodes as prospector and Rhodes being symbolic of oppression, could not co-exist in that same environment. This dissonance resulted in engaging with the artwork as vandalism and eventual removal. Imperialism as (architectural) form was already present in the social environment at UCT, irrespective of the Rhodes statue being an aesthetic feature on the campus.<sup>64</sup> It was assumed that the removal of the public statue, representing the art system's function as an "evolutionary attractor" (Luhmann 2000:146), would assuage the agonistics of the social system at UCT. On the contrary, the agonistics evolved and spread beyond the parameters of the campus environment. This persistence took on the form of the social media hashtag #rhodesmustfall.

The Rhodes statue was never fully eliminated from the social system; in place of the physical art object was the fervent use of the hashtag #rhodesmustfall and the mobilising of the RMF movement. The absent artwork had not been destroyed after removal. Yet even though it is secreted away from public view, the spectre of the statue remains within the complex network inherent to the UCT social system. This effect of information still circulating within the system of an environment, but not explicitly, is a kind of fracturing of memory into a distributed network of representation. Stated differently, the memory of Rhodes maintains as traces within the system – as painted shadow, hashtag and social movement. Discerning the value of that spectral artwork is what Cilliers' (1998:24) claims as occurring within a "connectionist" model of a complex system.

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<sup>64</sup> Coetzer's (2020:69) description of UCT's architecture is with reference to Imperial classicism exemplified by the temple front, flowing steps and the Rhodes statue occupying the axis of the symmetrical structure. Thus, the statue was a compliment to an already very specific architectural layout that emphasised the Imperial "intransigent presence" and a conscious embodiment of the Roman Empire's ambition for glory (Coetzer 2020:69-71).

By now, the value in having to describe the social system at UCT, as well as the autonomous status of the art system, as complex is readily apparent. Many factors are at play in a complex system and an attempt to condense these does a disservice to the relational quality of interlacing information. That the hashtag and the social movement could impact different contexts reflects the unremitting relativising of complexity. This in turn means that the interconnections of the resultant complex system are dense, rich, and likely to employ the iterable<sup>65</sup> quality of social and political issues implicitly linked to the artwork.<sup>66</sup> In the case of the RMF, issues were fixed on racial oppression.

The socio-political issues and valuation of the Rhodes statue reconfigure colonial discourse as subjugating the role of an indigenous African identity.<sup>67</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986:2) describes this subjugation as the result of two contrasting traditions: the traditions linked to imperialism and the other being the tradition of resistance against such imperialism. The imperialist tradition is claimed to be established in the form of standards and legislation that are transferred from the colonial homeland to that of the conquered landscape, here exemplified as Africa. The resistance tradition is any means or form undertaken to deconstruct such social and political territorialisation of the subjugates' homeland with a view to reasserting the independence once enjoyed by the native population. The addition of democracy is regarded as an advantage without eliminating the colonial settler from an enlightened politic. This, Thiong'o (1986:2) describes as culminating in a national heritage that inherently deflects the advances of the imperialist tradition and also best describes his decolonisation rhetoric. Such political revisionism is obliquely evident in the RMF's transformation approach labelled as decolonisation.

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<sup>65</sup> Cilliers (1998:55) discusses Derrida's description of the "*iterability* of the sign" as the repeatable use of a sign independent of both the sender and receiver of that sign. Iterable is used in the light of this but refers to the recurrence of social and political issues without explicit link to the issues' original context.

<sup>66</sup> Reference is made to Cilliers's (1998:24) comparative structural description of connectionism and complexity as well as the characteristics of a complex system.

<sup>67</sup> It is worth noting at this stage that, according to Marschall (2017:214), monuments are a marker of Eurocentric civilization. This symbolically locks the native African identity out of the narrative. The subsequent vandalism or lack of interest by the subaltern is to appropriate the public artwork into the social system for reasons related to their (subaltern) needs or discontent in their environment.

The agenda of RMF<sup>68</sup> had been to utilise the impact of protest action in realising the goal of affecting a long-lasting social change in the academic environment of UCT. The mission is ongoing, as the movement is still in effect today and, along with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign, still finds situations and events which contrast with the drive to decolonisation.<sup>69</sup> In consideration of this, the RMF concretised their agenda in the form of a mission statement (RhodesMustFall 2015) posted onto the social media platform Facebook, a mere 16 days after Maxwele's controversial protest action.<sup>70</sup> The statement opens with an affirmation regarding the united goal of ending "institutionalised racism and patriarchy at UCT" (RhodesMustFall 2015). In the statement, the progenitor of the movement is credited as being Chumani Maxwele, and the remainder of the text reflects statements admonishing the embodiment of Rhodes in the removed statue as central to the theme of transformation. The mission statement included extending the perimeter of influence to a national identity by citing the relevance of a post-Apartheid society (RhodesMustFall 2015). Thiong'o's (1986:2) resistance tradition is found echoed in these ambitions, with decolonisation adopted in the form of eliminating what is perceived as visual representations of colonialism. A practical means in re-visioning the aesthetic of UCT's campus. Public art then becomes the focus of agendas for transformation.

Much like Luhmann's (2000:146) opinion on the function of art as an "evolutionary attractor", the Rhodes statue is frequently cited as the "perfect embodiment"

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<sup>68</sup> In Abdul Kayum Ahmed's (2019:148) thesis, *The rise of Fallism: #RhodesMustFall and the movement to decolonize the university*, the three key pillars comprising the RMF's decolonial framework were Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, and Black Radical Feminism. It should be noted that there were various contradictions within this structured framework, contradictions that impacted the commitment of some noteworthy members of the movement (Ahmed 2019:214).

<sup>69</sup> France Nkokomane Ntloedibe (2019:65) highlights the issue that the choice to identify the RMF movement as an example of decolonisation is misleading. The collective goal of scholars and academics related to the event appeared to synchronise more with transformation. The western education system was not explicitly described as being removed. Instead, the goal was to centralise the significance of African epistemologies as an act of transformation. As a result, decolonisation and transformation are employed in many literatures related to the RMF and UCT as having almost the same meaning.

<sup>70</sup> Shortly after the Maxwele's controversial protest action, students affiliating themselves with the RMF movement occupied Azania House, formerly the Bremner Building, and held impromptu academic and creative jamming sessions. The space had a bohemian-like atmosphere with students, academics, and alerted members of the public joining in on holistic learning sessions, poetry readings, musical sessions, and inspired art performances. The academic participants were identified as *Fallists* and generally affiliated with the then newly established RMF movement (Ahmed 2019:153).

(RhodesMustFall 2015) of all the societal flaws this mission intends to thwart.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the mission statement mentions artworks twice as specific goals while the remainder of the statement focuses on academic, financial and hierarchical (historical and institutional) inequalities, with reference to social contexts outside of the campus (RhodesMustFall 2015). Although the extent of influence and references used in the RMF mission statement is worthy of investigation, the intent at this stage of the study is to explore only the explicit references made to artworks. This is especially with regard to how connections are drawn between the artworks and the goal of transformation.

Cilliers's (1998:25) description of a connectionist model of complexity equates the structuring of a complex system with that of a neural network in the human brain. The purpose of this is to indicate how a complex system like the brain can store vast quantities of information while being capable of recalling, processing, and interpreting that information on demand. Herein distributed representation best describes how a connectionist model meets the ends of producing a meaningful output. As distribution implies an almost web-like network of interconnections, the neural network design fits neatly within this visualisation. This is because the neural network, as per Cilliers's (1998:25-26) description of a connectionist model, is a collection of interconnected nodes where information is transferred through the synaptic links constituting this network in the brain.

When this connectionist model is super-imposed on the dynamics of a social system, the reference points (interconnected nodes) become a little obscure. Additionally, it is misplaced to assume that all information is *stored* in each individual unit, like the Rhodes statue. Cilliers (1998:25) pointed out that this misnomer occurs when interpreting a connectionist model as consisting of super-storage units where one unit can contain all the information of the entire system. However, these understanding defeats the very idea of complexity, which

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<sup>71</sup> Holmes and Loehwing (2016:1211) explain that Afrikaner and British colonial rule were minority establishments and their monological commemorations installed throughout South Africa were examples of non-reflexive representation. The Rhodes statue is considered an example of this, thus effectively correlating the association between colonial rule and reception to select public artworks sited in South Africa.



emphasises interactions rather than individual units as monads.<sup>72</sup> Subsequently the query in consideration of the RMF statement is: how does the statue of Rhodes fit into this network if the statue has already been removed? Answering this query requires considering the meanings associated with the Rhodes statue and the imagined reality it conjured up.

When the Rhodes statue was described, the recurring and notable features of the artwork and the discussion of the RMF agenda were the figurative representation of Rhodes as an embodiment of abstract concepts such as colonialism. Figurative art is assumed to be an iconic reference of an individual, since the facial features could not be mistaken for another<sup>73</sup> individual. Yet we have established that the figuration of Rhodes was not enough in interpreting the artwork and the need to understand his history and role within the South African context was just as valuable to determine the subsequent value of the artwork. But it was at this point that a dissonance occurred regarding the aesthetic and the imagined reality the public artwork affects the environment with. Positive and negative associations could be made with the figurative artwork and these valuations appear to be independent of the physical aesthetic of the work. Thus, representations, be they figurative or conceptual, are not implicitly tied to the external symbolism of the artwork. Instead, there is a need to explode the reliance of art analysis on the aesthetic features.

Fragmenting the Rhodes statue into conceptual fragments<sup>74</sup> seems beside the logical intent of producing a cohesive artwork. However, art offers communication

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<sup>72</sup> A monad is used to describe a unit that is essentially indivisible in terms of its structure and as a constituent encompassing all measure of metaphysical information (*Dictionary.com*. 2021. Sv "Monad").

<sup>73</sup> Marschall (2017:210) explains that, because select South African monument sculptures are cast in the mimetic medium of bronze, the repulsed attitude held of the real-life figure connotes the figurative representation, making the statue the enemy.

<sup>74</sup> Karin Murriss (2016:284) describes in her article *#Rhodes Must Fall: a posthumanist orientation to decolonise higher education institutions* such fragmentation in terms of quantum entanglements. Similar to a distributed network of representation, quantum entanglements are resolved through a process called *diffraction*. Diffraction traces the development of meaning through the intra-action between agents, the active human agent and the "thing power" of inanimate objects as agents (Murriss 2016:283-284). Where distributed representation bypasses agency and focusses on disengaged information, Murriss' (2016:283) interpretation of Jane Bennet's "thing power" alters the impression held of public art, especially when that art is no longer present. This absent influence contributes to understanding how imperceptible forms affect the production of meaning within a complex social system.

different to that which is rooted in language systems, according to Luhmann (2000:78). Communication in art occurs at the level of perception and, much like the connectionist model (neural network), is not atomistic in its representation. Representations in this model include perceptible as well as imperceptible forms inherent to the artwork. Not only does the figurative representation of Rhodes contribute to understanding the meaning of the public artwork, but also the need to acknowledge nearly the full scope of influence Rhodes had in the environment and social dynamic of Cape Town, South Africa. Meaning is thus generated through the links of this distributed network of representation. The art object is therefore perceived as embodying a matrix of signifying elements generated as artistic and conceptual forms, where meaning is communicated by coupling a selection of these forms. The meaning being communicated depends on the agenda affecting the connections of the network. Such necessary couplings are made in order to effectively communicate relevant information.

When the Rhodes statue was removed from the visual domain, this process of information resourcing did not get deposited along with the artwork. This is because the very network that encouraged the relevant links that resolved a specific meaning for the artwork was (and still is) prevalent within the social system which spawned its couplings, at least in a sublimated form. Thus, the imperceptible (conceptual fragments) forms are the resilient factors conditioning further associations with artworks and social resistance agendas of the RMF. The statue then shifted from having to be perceived visually to being perceived as a conceptual embodiment of influential factors affecting transformation agendas within the environment of UCT, as well as beyond.

### **3.3 ENGAGING CONTROVERSIAL MONUMENTS**

The RMF movement is not the first social movement to mobilise protest against Black subjugation within the contemporary context. Racial oppression is an ongoing strife and when the BLM movement expressed this discontent as the suppression of the: “Black imagination and innovation, centering [sic] on Black joy” (Black Lives Matter [Sa]a), both RMF and BLM were united in a drive towards transformation.

The BLM movement began in 2013 as a reaction to the acquittal of perpetrators in disputed racially motivated crimes (Black Lives Matter [Sa]b). The US judiciary system appears to be inherently at odds with social and legal justice. The victims and the accused's racial classifications were key issues in the disputes and fuelled the impassioned drive to highlight the imbalance witnessed in the social and political domains of the respective systems in the US. #rhodesmustfall protests drew inspiration from the BLM movement and the use of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter were visible on placards in the student protests. The affective<sup>75</sup> response to these incidences was the development of a collective imaginary sympathetic to the disenfranchised communities from both the US and South Africa, while also being a contributing factor to the advocacy for decolonisation.

In a public lecture given by Achille Mbembe (2015:3), the issue was raised regarding public artworks remaining on a campus claiming to distance itself of oppressive social and political associations. Mbembe's lecture advocated the need to consider an African identity rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and therefore symbolism. Decolonisation of African academia needed to be in effect promptly, considering that most tertiary institutions still maintain an allegiance with Euro-centric knowledge systems. Furthermore, his lecture queries the definition of "public" (Mbembe 2015:5) stating, in correlation with Thiong'o (1986:2) on the imperialist tradition, that a shared space does not need to equate conforming to standards set by the *owner* of the shared public space. Thus, the maintenance of public art that does not indicate inclusivity but rather perpetuates ideologies of past oppressive systems is not in alignment with decolonisation. As the perceptible forms (the figurative form of select public artworks) incite contesting ideologies, such artwork should therefore be removed from public view<sup>76</sup> (Mbembe 2015:3-5).

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<sup>75</sup> Britta Timm Knudsen and Casper Andersen (2019:244) mention in: *Affective politics and colonial heritage, Rhodes Must Fall at UCT and Oxford*, that the generation of support for movements like RMF is rooted partly in the common view of an untainted future. By rejecting the old, as a collective goal, space for potential is emphasised and then valued as affectively more significant than complying with the status quo being rejected (Knudsen & Andersen 2019:244). The collective imaginary is thus a unanimous agreement to reject colonial oppression and embrace the blank slate of a potential decolonial existence.

<sup>76</sup> It is worth considering at this stage that the removal of controversial art is perhaps not the only way to resolve the conflict. If remaining in place, what could be challenged is the naturalising of the symbolic value of the artwork. When the crux of its symbolic value has been eliminated from the collective memory, the discourses inspiring conflict may weaken, rendering the controversial status of the public artwork moot.

The Rhodes statue, being a figurative artwork, comprises perceptible forms. These forms contribute to communicating meaning; yet such meaning is produced relationally, as there is inherently an excess of information prevalent in the art and social system within which the artwork is sited. For this reason, even though the Rhodes statue was produced with a specific agenda, there is no discounting the possibility of the artwork affecting the production of alternative meanings and valuations. The decision of having the Rhodes statue removed qualifies that a relational understanding is credited to a particular way of viewing the artwork. A means of anchoring observation would thus aid the communication of this understanding.

Luhmann (2000:55-56) describes that two orders of observation are in effect in the viewing of an artwork, first-order and second-order observations.<sup>77</sup> Where first-order observation refers to accepting the communicated meaning of an artwork, second-order observation is rooted in the play of perceptible forms inherent to their relational nature in the production of meaning. Thus, employing second-order observation is an attempt to identify how meaning was reached through a consensus<sup>78</sup> (Luhmann 2000:57-58). This strategy in identifying observation orders aids in understanding how one artwork embodies multiple meanings. What is of further interest is how this same strategy could clarify the appropriation of a communicated meaning to multiple artworks.

Not long after Maxwele's controversial protest action against the Rhodes statue, Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) political party leader Julius Malema announced in a Human Rights Day public holiday gathering that action should be taken to eradicate oppressive symbols in South Africa. This initiative was directly inspired by the events taking place at UCT and Malema included in his speech that the EFF would gladly have undertaken the task of removing the controversial figurative artwork from that campus at no financial cost. Being no novice to the label of controversial, Malema incited the crowd with declarations dedicated to the Western Cape community, especially Cape Town, to retaliate against the shameful and

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<sup>77</sup> Luhmann (2000:55-56) also describes that second-order observation is also a first-order observation considering that an observation is had at all.

<sup>78</sup> The description Luhmann (2000:57-58) offers is that "eigenvalues" – considered to be the salient conceptual points in developing meaning – emerge through the recursive dynamism of information processed by recognising perceptions in the act of observing.

continued representation of deplorable social and political figures not in agreement with the principles upon which our democratic society in South Africa has been built (Gqirana 2015). The gathering spurred several acts of vandalism<sup>79</sup> towards select public statues and monuments, which were presumed to reference political regimes in contravention with democracy. This occurred across the country, particularly in areas with potent ideological symbolism.

Most vandalised works were in the Western Cape, seemingly in accordance with the EFF's recommendation<sup>80</sup> for action to be taken against these embodiments of colonial power. The UCT War Memorial,<sup>81</sup> located a short distance away from the Rhodes statue (on the steps), had been a target, possibly as a backlash of the events tied to Maxwele's controversial protest action some time before (R Pather 2015). Additionally, the Romano Romanelli, *Louis Botha, farmer, warrior, statesman* (1931)<sup>82</sup> statue of a former Prime Minister of South Africa, located outside the houses of parliament in Cape Town was a hotly contested public artwork even before the events of #rhodesmustfall.<sup>83</sup> Malema denounced the continued existence of the Botha statue outside a significant political centre of the

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<sup>79</sup> Marschall (2017:206) explains that the defacement and vandalism inflicted upon public artworks is conditionally regarded as legitimate, at least within fringe groups, contrary to the law. The act of defacement is noteworthy specifically in the context where peaceful transitions are deemed unsuccessful or unsatisfactory, according to the demographic still experiencing the oppression (Marschall 2017:206). That the EFF sought to exploit the actions of RMF for implementation in a national context is where the issue of legitimate actions is questioned. This is in consideration of the social influence this recognised political party has displayed in controversial incidents throughout the country since the party's inception.

<sup>80</sup> It should be noted that political parties and members inciting protest action may not always be undertaken with the national interest in mind. There is also the possibility that such action would draw attention to select political parties and members, boosting their respective political careers and profiles.

<sup>81</sup> Coetzer (2020:75) reflects on the war memorial sited at UCT as being symbolic of a monological narrative. The war memorial is meant to honour the lives of fallen soldiers lost during World War I and World War II. However, it is noted that this memorial marginalises the lives of Black South Africans forcibly conscripted to war. An additional counter-monument exists for such side-lined individuals, the Madi Phala, *Mendi Memorial* (2006) (Coetzer 2020:74, Fig 8) some distance off campus. According to Coetzer, the vandalism conducted on the UCT war memorial was in part a reference to Phala's *Mendi Memorial* (2006) and racial marginalising (2020:75).

<sup>82</sup> Romano Romanelli, *Louis Botha, farmer, warrior, statesman* (1931). Bronze, larger than life-size. Stable Square atop Plein Street, Cape Town. <https://ewn.co.za/2015/04/09/Louis-Botha-statue-outside-of-Parliament-is-defaced> (Accessed 17 September 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Two art-related engagements are Beezy Bailey's *Abakhwetu* (1999) (Minty 2006:432, Fig 3) and Sethembile Msezane's *Untitled (Heritage Day)* (2014) (Garb 2019:34). Both employed iconographies related to the African identity and both occurred with respect to Heritage Day. The choice was understood to be about the maintained presence of controversial public artworks.

city and the country. He (Malema) declared this opinion in a sitting of the State of the Nation Address, a year before the Maxwele's controversial protest action (Gqirana 2015). Consequently, the inscribed dedication to Botha (farmer, warrior, statesman), on the plinth of the monument, was blocked out with paint as part of protest action.

Outside of the Western Cape, a Pretoria statue dedicated to the former South African president Paul Kruger, Anton van Wouw, *Statue of Paul Kruger* (1896),<sup>84</sup> as well as a Port Elizabeth statue dedicated to former British imperial monarch Queen Victoria, E. Roscoe Mullins, *Queen Victoria Statue* (1903),<sup>85</sup> were tossed with Green Paint. Although located elsewhere to the EFF's recommended focal point, a significant few of the illicit engagements<sup>86</sup> were undertaken by isolated groupings within the EFF<sup>87</sup> (R Pather 2015). Yet, the more striking of these incidences occurred on a monument dedicated to lives lost in warfare, similar to the War Memorial located at UCT.

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<sup>84</sup> Anton van Wouw, *Statue of Paul Kruger* (1896). Bronze, larger than life-size. Church Square, Pretoria. Available: <https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/down-with-statues-down-five-monumental-vandalisms/> (Accessed 17 September 2021).

<sup>85</sup> E. Roscoe Mullins, *Queen Victoria Statue* (1903). Sicilian Marble, larger than life-size. Port Elizabeth. Available: <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/pes-queen-victoria-statue-painted-green> (Accessed 10 September 2021).

<sup>86</sup> Where the EFF did not claim credit for the vandalism, the anonymous actions were subsequently presumed to be the actions of the RMF (Marschall 2017:211).

<sup>87</sup> It is worth noting at this point that the retaliations undertaken against the presence of select public artworks had not all been done in the name of decolonisation. Marschall (2017:209) notes that White extremists undertook the task of vandalising monuments to Black African cultural and historical figures in paint coloured according to the former national flag of the Republic of South Africa (orange, white and blue) in protest against post-Apartheid reform. Part of the reason is that the transition of power from Apartheid to democracy was a peaceful one. This lack of revolution and war incited the vandalism of public art as a show of discontent (Marschall 2017:208).



Figure 7. Nomampondomise @YolzYako, *Fighters of Uitenhage!!! Taking on Town Hall!!! Down with colonialist statues down!!! #Siyagjima #Fearfokol!* (2015).

A monument dedicated to those lost in the Anglo-Boer War sited in Uitenhage, Eastern Cape, *Anglo-Boer War Memorial* (1904)<sup>88</sup> (Figure 7), was subject to significant vandalism. Not only was the monument struck with a 10-pound hammer, an unsuccessful attempt to dislodge the figurative artwork from its plinth, but great pains were undertaken to “necklace” the statue (R Pather 2015). *Necklacing* is essentially a torturous exercise where the victim is adorned with a burning rubber tyre. The act is meant to inhibit the victim’s ability to escape their torture and was reserved for extreme cases of violent action (Oliver 2020). That this act is reproduced on a figurative statue, commemorating a particular view of Afrikaner nationalism, reflects the extent of the racial tension incited by the EFF’s call for action while also being powerfully symbolic. Expressing socio-political discontent on an inanimate statue casts an unnerving impact that connections drawn between statues can illuminate. However, the memorial in Uitenhage – although figurative – is meant to infer a group and not just an individual. In the case of the Anton van Wouw, *Statue of Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr* (Sa)<sup>89</sup> in Church Square Cape Town, the

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<sup>88</sup> *Anglo-Boer War Memorial* (1904). Life-size figure. Uitenhage, Eastern Cape. <https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/down-with-statues-down-five-monumental-vandalisms/> (10 September 2021).

<sup>89</sup> Anton van Wouw, *Statue of Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr* (Sa). Bronze, larger than life-size. Church Square, Cape Town. <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/statue-draping-a-coincidence-1843771> (Accessed 10 September 2021).

motivation for this engagement rested not only on racialism but also historical injustice regarding an individual.

Irrespective of previous engagements had with the statue, the Hofmeyr statue sits undisturbed aloft a significantly high plinth. In the same year as both the RMF and EFF protests, a white cloth was found draped around the plinth of the Hofmeyr statue stating that he (Hofmeyr) was raised by a “Black woman” (R Pather 2015). The statement was made considering the role and race of a domestic helper in an economically privileged household. Highlighting this fact within the space of Church Square draws on the history of the environment itself.

Being the centre of the slave market in Cape Town, Church Square has ominous associations for the oppressed Black community and engaging with the space, let alone the statue, reflects this discontent. No doubt the decision to emphasise the role of a Black woman in the period of Hofmeyr’s youth is to directly link the figure with slavery, a concept prominently represented but obliquely acknowledged in the collective memory of the Cape Town social system. That Cape Town is associated with a history of slavery and that the community members of Cape Town are descendants of slaves is part of the city’s identity.<sup>90</sup> The psychological impact of this history is not always apparent when considering the general appreciation of the vernacular of especially the city centre. Church Square, for example, is flanked on three sides by buildings dedicated to the historical legitimisation of slavery and Hofmeyr’s statue is implicit in this legitimacy. In this way, the theme of slavery is both symbolically and discursively reified within the environment of Church Square.

Considering the dominant thread slavery infers on the meaning of both the art and environment, connections can be made with the symbolism and social history of the space. However, this insight does not clarify why such monological commemorations maintain an existence in an environment only a few roads away from one of the country’s political symbols: Parliament. This is especially in consideration that South Africa no longer subscribes to controversial oppressive political systems such as slavery. The seemingly peaceful transition from Apartheid

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<sup>90</sup> Younge (2017:58) describes several examples of locations in the Cape Town Metropole with references to slavery in terms of places occupied (or owned) by former slaves.



to democracy is especially evident in the addition of a counter-memorial<sup>91</sup> in Church Square.

In 2008, the City of Cape Town unveiled a commemorative artwork: *Church Square Memorial to Slavery* (2008) by Wilma Cruise and Gavin Younge.<sup>92</sup> The work comprised 11 granite blocks of varying coordinated heights, some of which had names and words engraved on them. The intention of the monument was to acknowledge a collective identity of those subjected to the dehumanising act of slavery, offering them a voice in death that they were not privileged with in life (Younge 2017: 63-67). The homage is poignant but starkly contrasted with the looming statue of Hofmeyr, significantly higher than the newer more inclusive commemoration. Furthermore, the issue of trauma, a dominant theme of the work, was difficult to communicate, at least according to the opinion of the artists (Younge 2017:59).

Observation by the artist in the creation of an artwork occurs only once. What this implies is that the artist, although trying to account for imperceptible forms in crafting the artwork, relies on the artwork to communicate what is “*temporally abstracted*” (original in italics; Luhmann 2000:43). This abstraction comprises information not explicitly apparent in the artwork’s aesthetic. Luhmann (2000:43) describes this circumstance as being different for the viewer of the artwork. Unlike the artist, observation by the viewer is repeatable and therefore subject to reflexivity. This is not to say that the artist could not also be provided with the same observational opportunity as the viewer. The only difference here is that the artist has prior knowledge and experience of the artwork in its creation albeit that their relation to the artwork may shift from creator to viewer.

Thus, more information, the blind spot, filters into the observation as the viewer is untainted by a conscious intent to communicate specific perceptions in the making of the artwork. The recurrence of aesthetic features inherent to the art system is necessary. This is to account for the credibility of the work being recognised as an

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<sup>91</sup> Coetzer (2020:70) describes counter-memorials in South Africa as a visual tactic meant to challenge the narratives of past oppressive political systems.

<sup>92</sup> Wilma Cruise and Gavin Younge, *Church Square Memorial to Slavery* (2008). Granite blocks, 2 x 80 cm high, 3 x 30 cm high, 3 x 60 cm high, 3 x 40 cm high. Church Square, Cape Town. (Younge 2017:64-66, figs 3.1-3.3).

artwork. It is assumed that this is the reason Cruise and Younge's counter-memorial adopted the aesthetic of monochrome monolithic structures scattered geometrically across the space surrounding (and echoing) the plinth of the Hofmeyr statue. The monolith shape links visually and practically with the plinth as the basis of a monument design. However, it seemed counter-intuitive for there to be a juxtaposition of this counter-memorial with a symbol of oppression, almost as if they are forcibly coexisting.

Holmes and Loehwing (2016:1215) describe a similar scenario as an example of multiplicative commemoration. This approach favours a "polyvocal representation" of communities coexisting within South African. They (Holmes and Loehwing) also note that such representations may: "appear alongside each other but do not necessarily interact with one another" (Holmes & Loehwing 2016:1215). The intent for such commemorative public artworks, like Cruise and Younge's *Church Square Memorial to Slavery* (2008), is in consideration of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings where reparations were being attempted over politically and racially motivated crimes. However, the coexistence of monological and multiplicative commemorative public artworks conjures dissonance in viewers irrespective of the counter-memorial intent. On the other hand, there is also the issue of "symbol blindness" (Younge 2017:59).

Symbol blindness could be interpreted as a way of reducing the complexity of the system within which symbols exist. Luhmann (2000:62) describes this reduction as occurring under first-order observation. First-order observation restricts what is communicated to a singular meaning attributed to an artwork. Second-order observation would be a process where this singularity is noticed and, in contrast, recognises the myriad of possible meanings inherent in the blind spot of the same artwork (Luhmann 2000:57-58). Thus, recognising and engaging with Church Square in the manner that the protest of the Hofmeyr statue exemplified is a result of second-order observation. Furthermore, the dissonance when attempting to relate the two memorial types sited in Church Square infers that the social dynamic is far more complex than what could initially be assumed. This can also be seen in a performance piece realised at the moment of the Rhodes statue removal.

### 3.4 *CHAPUNGU AND SHACKVILLE*

Although the Rhodes statue had been physically removed, there is still a residual presence of the artwork in the social dynamic on the university campus. This was established by a performance piece conducted the very day of the Rhodes statue's removal. At that moment, memories inherent in the social system at UCT were challenged by a flux of additional references to Rhodes not readily known but part of the same network of representation.

Sethembile Msezane, then a Fine Arts student at UCT, staged a performance titled *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* (2015) (Figure 8), some steps higher than the site where the Rhodes statue was being removed. The performance involved Msezane standing atop a plinth of almost equal height to the Rhodes statue, her back turned to the sensationalised event.<sup>93</sup> Msezane donned a black leotard, wings scratch-built from natural materials (where the feathered effect was produced from a fur-like material), and a beaded mask *shielding* her identity from onlookers and photographers. In addition to this, Msezane donned high-heeled shoes, a seemingly unusual decision considering that her performance lasted about four hours and once over, her feet and body were fatigued from the experience (Msezane 2015).



Figure 8. Sethembile Msezane, *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* (2015).

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<sup>93</sup> Murriss (2016:280) comments that, in having her back turned to the removal process of the Rhodes statue, Msezane challenged the gaze of the institution itself. This could be interpreted as defiance but also emancipation of the marginalised Black (female) body.

It should be noted that the specific choices made in the performance were symbolic of narratives and concepts which the artist felt were relevant for the social dynamic at UCT and the broader African context. Furthermore, the artist and the audience's observations are different.<sup>94</sup> This is especially relevant when considering a performance artwork, since the nature of this type of artwork has both artist and viewer engaged in observation at the same time. Retrospectively, as is apparent in Tamar Garb's (2019) recounting of the event, the viewer of the live performance is likely implicated in the artwork, in a manner similar to the artist initially being implicated in the artwork, due to the artist having been directly involved in the creation of the artwork. However, the audience may be unaware of its being implicated in the artwork.

Garb notes two features in the photograph, Sethembile Msezane, *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* (2015) (Figure 8), documenting the event. The first is that the photograph showed Msezane's arm near perfectly masking the arm of the crane lifting the Rhodes statue from the plinth. This striking image, Garb (2019:31) comments, appears as if Msezane's performed statue is itself removing<sup>95</sup> the Rhodes statue, vindicating the campus from the colonial symbolism. The second relates to the dominating presence of the masculine<sup>96</sup> in RMF protests, a situation that hotly contested the issue of intersectionality of the RMF in support for the drive towards realising decolonisation at UCT. The serendipitous capturing of the scene was credited to the late David Goldblatt and provides the recognisable surplus of information apparent in the blind spot of the artwork (Garb 2019:35). But it is the content of Msezane's performance piece that is of interest at this stage of the study. Interpreting the various form of symbolism, she employs in her work and how these features relate to discourses in the environment of UCT would assist in unpacking the relevance of information perceived in Luhmann's (2000:57-58) description of second-order observation.

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<sup>94</sup> Refer to page 65 regarding first-order and second-order observation with respect to artist and viewer of art.

<sup>95</sup> Murriss (2016:280) adds to this by mentioning a discursive and material entanglement of the Rhodes statue and Msezane's performance, emphasising the influence one artwork has on the other and vice versa. The production of meaning is thus a process in flux, which Murriss (2016:289) further describes as posthumanism, being in a constant state of becoming.

<sup>96</sup> Garb (2019:35) further notes that Msezane's feminine presence is what makes the sex-based contrast glaringly obvious. The male dominant presence being also in consideration of the scandals (sexual harassment) attributed to select membership of the RMF.

Regarding the subject matter of Msezane's performance, the Chapungu bird is symbolism visible on almost all national signifiers of Zimbabwe, formerly known as Southern Rhodesia. The decision to reference this particular symbol was due to Rhodes' cultural appropriation and literal annexation of cultural artefacts of Zimbabwe. On the Rhodes Groote Schuur estate,<sup>97</sup> not far from the university campus, resides a sculpture of the bird taken from Zimbabwe, when under occupation by the British imperial regime (Matroos 2018). The soapstone statue is the last remaining copy of a set belonging to the Zimbabwean cultural artefacts and has not yet been returned to its place of origin.<sup>98</sup> This narrative is represented not only by Msezane's attire, but also the performative act she exhibited as the Chapungu metaphor. When Msezane raised her winged arms in the process of the performance, this hinted at a reference to liberation especially as her gaze was directed at the imperialist symbolism of the campus architecture, including the Rhodes Memorial. The choice of props chosen in the performance leads into the agendas raised by the RMF, Black feminism.

Masking<sup>99</sup> her face during the performance is characteristic of Msezane's work. This act symbolically dissolves the artist's identity into the performed identity, but also emphasises the marginalisation of the Black (especially female) identity and body in social politics. Garb (2019:35) mentions that the protest events linked to the RMF were dominated by male RMF activists and: "relegated female participants to a secondary or supportive role". It is, however, only on reflection, in the visual recording of the event, that the dominant presence of male protestors is noted; the photograph of Msezane shows her surrounded by predominantly male onlookers capturing the event on their digital devices.<sup>100</sup> However, the impression

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<sup>97</sup> The soap stone bird is not the only reference to the Chapungu bird. Culturally appropriated as an imperialism symbol, stylised versions of the bird decorate the architecture of Rhodes House in Oxford (Knudsen & Andersen 2019:241).

<sup>98</sup> Maylam (2002:142) describes how the legacy of Rhodes has been immortalised in terms that both glorify imperialism and appropriate select aspects of the native Zimbabwean cultural history. By not returning the soapstone bird, these narratives are ostensibly being reified through continued appropriation of the Chapungu symbolism, here associated with the mythological phoenix bird symbol.

<sup>99</sup> Garb (2019:35) notes that the beaded veil symbolises the coming-of-age cultural practice credited to the Zulu community of South Africa. This symbol references the privacy accorded female figures of the Zulu culture, for whom anonymity is presumably critical. Garb (2019:35) also mentions that Msezane opts for a generic interpretation, the reference to dissolving into Black femineity in general, so as not to cast too personalised an approach to this performative practice.

<sup>100</sup> This act immortalises Msezane's performance as a digital medium in the infinity of the world wide web.

of marginalising the female Black body is not as obvious as is assumed through this image. Her elevated position, the spread wings, and the phoenix-like Chapungu symbolism challenge the marginalising of the female Black body as she (Msezane) is *seen* to lead the vindicating event. This is further emphasised by the angled shot where her (Msezane) arm morphs with the arm of the crane lifting the Rhodes statue.

The performance was described as “solidarity more than the destruction reported in the mainstream media at the time” (Matroos 2018). The performance therefore provided an alternative interpretation to the change occurring in the social dynamic of UCT. That is acquiescing and not protesting, a memory that affected the RMF movement’s impact on a global scale. However, this was not always the case, especially when interactions with artworks were of a destructive nature.

In the week of 15 February 2016, nearly a full year after the events of the advent of #rhodesmustfall, UCT was subject to yet another controversial matter. Members of the now equally controversial RMF group decided to erect an informal housing unit, dubbed *Shackville*, in a central space of the university campus (Furlong 2016). The objective of the installation was to protest a lack of adequate student accommodation for students from sub-economic households. Although the student-driven act was considered illicit and barely lasted two days, the issues raised highlight unsettling memories. This is with regard to the continuing social and economic marginalisation of oppressed communities even in the context of a democratic dispensation.

*Shackville*, according to Makhubu (2020:581), warranted being recognised as an art installation<sup>101</sup> rather than space invasion. This argument hinges on the understanding that this impromptu housing unit functioned predominantly as a symbol. The allegorical association of the unit was meant to represent the state of humiliation and “unhoming” (Makhubu 2020:579) experienced through the subaltern’s<sup>102</sup> alienation from their homeland during the Apartheid regime.

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<sup>101</sup> The *Shackville* installation could also be considered an example of a counter-memorial. This is especially as Makhubu (2020:580) describes the existence of controversial memorials as “the biggest monumentalisation of colonial and [A]partheid *heritage*”.

<sup>102</sup> *Subaltern* is considered to be a term that alludes to the socially, historically and politically subordinated fringe communities of a binary society (*Dictionary of Critical Theory* 2000. Sv

Appropriately sited on UCT's "Residence Road" (Makhubu 2020:574), the constructed unit blocked traffic and quickly evolved from an installation to what was later considered a hazard. The performance was sympathetic mainly to the Black undergraduate students whose demand for student accommodation on campus was not met.<sup>103</sup> The situation evolved the next day from spectacle to drama when, after being legally ordered to uninstall the unit, those involved abruptly began retaliating by engaging artworks (Makhubu 2020:577).

The *Shackville* effort hit a fever pitch when paintings donning the walls of select buildings on campus were lifted and burnt (Figure 9) in a bonfire a short distance away from where the Rhodes statue once stood.<sup>104</sup> Considered to be "conditionally 'public'" (Schmahmann 2013:15), artworks that are featured within the secluded spaces of university residences are not immediately the subject of national concern. This is because the collection of artworks affiliated with this description tend to be the ownership of the institution itself and therefore independent of government legislature concerning heritage. The vandalism of the artworks, being the property of UCT, invariably links this act with the RMF and their agenda to realise the transformation of the university campus.

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"Subaltern Studies"). The term *subaltern* is used here to denote the disenfranchised Black community whom the agenda of decolonisation and transformation is meant to benefit.

<sup>103</sup> Makhubu (2020:574) also mentions that *Shackville* was a response to address socio-economic issues inclusive in the demand for accommodation of the undergraduate students. Additionally, this effort highlighted "the incommensurable nature of spaces ... in South Africa forged through prolonged colonial tyranny" (Makhubu 2020:572). Thus, Rhodes features once again obliquely in the form of the recurrence of colonialism and the influential protests of the RMF in the collective social memory at UCT.

<sup>104</sup> Coetzer (2020:73) compares the imperial axis of UCT's campus with a faux Greek temple for the explicit reference to a sacrificial alter. In his discussion, Coetzer (2020:73) explains that the removal of the Rhodes statue and the vandalism of the World Wars soldier's memorial were undertaken in a space that accorded deified status to objects centralised in the axis. Burning the paintings in this central position, by implication, presented the artworks as a sacrifice, not in honour of Rhodes but in memoriam of the triumphant removal of the statue, and relationally a step towards the RMF's envisioning of transformation on the university campus.



Figure 9. Ashleigh Furlong, *Students burn art belonging to UCT* (2016).

Of the artworks burnt was a series of paintings completed by a postgraduate student of UCT's Michaelis School of Fine Art in the mid-1990s. What is significant here is that the student in question was the first Black individual to have achieved the postgraduate accolade among a predominantly White alumnus. Keresemose Richard Baholo was the proud artist of around five artworks previously located on the walls of the university's campus buildings. The works featured lively representations of protest action and were meant to reflect an ideology in stark contrast to the dictums of South Africa's Apartheid past. Rather than being emblematic of colonial reference or White privilege (and White dominance on the university campus), the works should have resonated strongly with the RMF as the art portrayed protest action in light of Black empowerment. Yet, the motive of decolonisation was used to naturalise the act of removing what was deemed to be artistic representations of what was interpreted as White colonial rule (Furlong 2016). Here the art symbol and not the symbolic content were connected to oppression.

The efficacy in linking dominant concepts within a distributed network relies on what are called "soft" and "hard" connections (Cilliers 1998:34). This description pertains to a system that does not operate on *a priori*<sup>105</sup> rules. Instead, the system operates on structures and patterns for concepts regulated within the system and

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<sup>105</sup> *A priori* is described as a form of deductive reasoning that has been established prior to the application of such reasoning (*merriam-webster.com* [Sa]. Sv "a priori").



influenced by certain internal and external conditions. This is to say, links could evolve within the system without having to adopt the extreme view of those conditions, affecting connections, as essential truths (Cilliers 1998:35). How this is effective in a practical example can be realised in the circumstances surrounding the events of *Shackville* and the burning of the artworks credited to the UCT collection.

Erecting *Shackville* was a product of protest against what students saw as UCT institutionalising spatial politics and racialism by obstructing access of select students to accommodation in campus residences. This connection might have at first appeared soft but by having the installation remain in place until it was forcibly removed quickly altered the nature of this relation. Furthermore, the retaliation by the protestors incorporated into the social agonistic dynamic more information. By employing the decisive agenda of decolonisation, the symbolic value of the now-burnt artworks relied on a narrow first-order observation of the art. This approach resulted in the hardening of connections, resulting in the artworks being indiscriminately removed. This is irrespective of additional factors regarding the background of select paintings, apparent under second-order observation. Had the latter been the case, the work of Baholo might not have been subject to the dramatic act of vandalism. Thus, the connections linking the motives and actions, as well as the art objects engaged with in the events of *Shackville*, demonstrate how patterns of activity can be differently structured based on the perception held of information within the system.

That artworks could be engaged with as a product of linking discursive concepts with material objects appears to be recurrent in the context of academia. Especially when in recent years the academic environment in question has links with the controversial figure Cecil John Rhodes.

### **3.5 RHODES MUST FALL AT ORIEL COLLEGE**

Rhodes was, and still is, symbolically associated with British imperialism. With this is a subdued reference to slavery and oppression, particularly regarding the African environment. That Rhodes was a revered individual and that memorials and celebrations were often organised by British authorities in his favour all contribute

to a particular memory type within the British nationalist context.<sup>106</sup> However, in the events that followed the expansion of the hashtag #rhodesmustfall from South Africa to Oxford in England (as #rhodesmustfallinxford), the memory of Rhodes that was previously revered was challenged by a select group of students at Oxford University in England.

Select students at the Oriel College linked with Oxford University readily adopted the now-iconic trope of #rhodesmustfall in their own agenda to decolonise the academic space of their tertiary institution. However, where South Africa was contextually located in a way that allowed a more liberal approach in interpreting the divisive impact of colonialism on the collective consciousness of the Black community, Oriel College students were differently affected.<sup>107</sup> This is due to the dichotomous relation between the national identities and national narratives of the two countries in question, South Africa and England. Where South Africa could marginalise British patriotism within the context of an African country, Britons – including in this case exchange students – are explicitly linked to such patriotism logistically. This does not mean that all Britons hold the same regard for Rhodes, but it does imply that challenging Rhodes’s memory is significantly complex when residing in the very nation that celebrates his memory.

The Oxford protests were linked to the presence of the Henry Alfred Pegram *Rhodes* (1911)<sup>108</sup> statue located on the Oriel College campus. The monument, positioned in an alcove on the facade of the campus’s main building, was to commemorate Rhodes and his financial donation made to the institution (Chigudu 2020:303). Although the link between UCT and Oriel College is that of Rhodes’s

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<sup>106</sup> Maylam (2002:142) elaborates on this perception of Rhodes, commenting that his (Rhodes) legacy conveyed a god-like status to him. From the dramatic nature of his funeral to the immortalising of his memory in the words inscribed on his gravestone, Rhodes became a metanarrative of pioneering success. This is especially noteworthy in Maylam’s (2002:142) description that “[e]very new settler arriving in Rhodesia was expected to travel to the [Rhodes] grave to pay homage to the ‘founder’”.

<sup>107</sup> It is worth noting at this stage that a Rhodes scholarship exists for students of South Africa. The benefit of this funding is for economically disadvantaged students to acquire the opportunity to study abroad, particularly at an institution like Oxford with ties to the legacy of Rhodes. Thus, it is presumed that most students protesting the visual presence of Rhodes memorabilia on the university campus are international students with little or perhaps no nationalist identity ties to England.

<sup>108</sup> Henry Alfred Pegram, *Rhodes* (1911). Portland stone, life size. Oriel College, Oxford. [http://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/streets/inscriptions/central/rhodes\\_oriel.html](http://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/streets/inscriptions/central/rhodes_oriel.html) (Accessed 20 September 2021).

financial contribution, the reference to legacy is perhaps less prominent in the gesture for UCT than what it is for the college. According to Knudsen and Andersen (2019:240), Rhodes's obsession with legacy and philanthropic donations, made after his death, left many reminders of the magnate's influence, socially and politically, in each of the two countries mentioned. But it is more the influence of Rhodes's "followers and admirers" that a "Cult of Rhodes" could be referenced as the cause to commemorate the figure as statues in the 1930s, especially with Oxford being Rhodes's alma mater (Knudsen & Andersen 2019:240). But this does not resonate with all graduates from Oxford, especially those with no link to British patriotism.

Simukai Chigudu (2020:302), a postgraduate student at Oxford around 2015, recounts the controversial status of the Oxford RMF movement. The complexities of England's history of racial injustice and colonialism, being represented aesthetically on the campus, challenges the affirmation of a Black identity on that same university campus. The imagined reality promoted by British politics is invariably tied to imperialism and still is considering the pervasive monarchy still part of British national identity. Questioning England's imperial past, visually represented on Oriel campus, is like questioning the national identity. It is of no surprise then that the demand for the removal of the Rhodes statue sited on Oriel College campus was not heeded, irrespective of the publicity the Oxford RMF generated.<sup>109</sup> The demand for change at Oriel college seemed more emphatic than at UCT, mostly because the latter already realised their goal of having the Rhodes statue removed (Chigudu 2020:302-305).

The hashtag #rhodesmustfall, once global, became appropriated as #rhodesmustfallinxford, an indication of the collapse of the public into the private. This collapse is typified by the globalised platform that the internet offers, especially when information can be found to saturate the digital space of social media.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Oxford RMF was shown to be statistically more active on the Facebook social media page dedicated to that social movement. This is in comparison to the South African RMF which had opportunity to exercise its views as action more than, and in addition to, debate (Knudsen & Andersen 2019:248).

<sup>110</sup> Cilliers (1998:113) comments on this collapse of public into private specifically when engaged on the internet. This is presumably due to access not being an obstacle on the internet platform, as the right key words can offer an overwhelming amount of information, an excess thereof.

Such a collapse is not merely a matter of convenience, as Chigudu (2020:311) considered in the selective appropriation of the RMF movement in Oxford from the context of South Africa, a former colony of the British Empire. The distributed network is once again visualised in the symbolic link between the two countries: a Rhodes statue. Identifying the public commemorative artwork as problematic in both contexts highlights the intersectional relation between the sub-systems of art and politics (nationalism) operating within the context of a larger borderless social system.

The relation between sub-systems affects the operative closure these systems maintain within the larger social system. Luhmann's (2000:134) discussion on this matter explores the idea that the distributed network of representation is accessible to all autonomous sub-systems within the larger social system. Thus, politics and art are not necessarily knowledge monads transferring novel knowledge from one sub-system to the other sub-system. The same access to surplus information possible in one sub-system is already possible in the other and their operative closure merely references how this information is transformed into meaningful knowledge particular to each sub-system. Where art employs communication through perceptible forms, politics does the same through linguistic structures (Luhmann 2000:134-135).

This is to say, the social challenge in the artistic representation of Rhodes at both UCT and Oriel College are not completely reliant on the socio-politics specific to the two distinct national environments. The internet permitted time and space to be condensed into a common point, a Rhodes statue, irrespective of the geographical locations of the artworks. Artworks are then, according to Luhmann (2000:182), reacted to when common contingencies are identified with a view to resolving the ambiguous nature of meaning in a complex social dynamic. The Oxford RMF decision to protest the Rhodes statue is also a form of hard connections, since a select group of students reached a firm consensus regarding the controversial status of the public artwork. But where Oxford RMF was unsuccessful, the British BLM was (albeit some years later) successful.

The actions of the RMF and BLM are described as saturated with images of violence, oppression, and trauma (Chigudu 2020:308). That the protests

foregrounded the social injustice of racialism is best exemplified in the retaliation of BLM protestors against monological commemorative artworks dedicated to slavers. This is noted in a reference to Bristol, a city in England. Bristol was the centre of newsworthy content during the height of the 2020 BLM campaign in England. The city was host to a public monument of renowned 17<sup>th</sup> century slaver and former resident of the city, Edward Colston. The controversial status of the John Cassidy, *Statue of Edward Colston* (1895)<sup>111</sup> statue was highlighted when BLM protestors chose to not only vandalise but physically remove the statue from its plinth. Protestors then proceeded to toss the cast bronze artwork into Bristol Harbour,<sup>112</sup> as a sign of their dissatisfaction with its presence in their city space. The elicited act was condemned by the authorities and only aggravated the situation more. This was evidenced when the authorities retrieved the discarded monument from the river (Farrer 2020).

The inclusion and exclusion of art in the public domain is a product of evolutionary processes underway in a complex social system. This results from how information is manipulated in the agonistics process of meaning-production within that complex system. Traces of information tend to be either adopted and rejected until that system reaches what Cilliers (1998:97) describes as a “critical point”. It is at this point that the system itself renegotiates the use-value of certain information has within the system. Considering the case of the UCT RMF movement, this is when a revision of otherwise overlooked concepts was adopted in order to significantly affect the presence of select artworks on the university campus.

### 3.6 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Incorporating the discursive element into a study of public art is a necessary step in understanding how viewers are affected by that art type. This is especially relevant when considering that memory is invariably present, as reflection and in the creation thereof, when observing artworks. Memory is a crucial feature to a complex system. This is because the patterns and structuring constituting the

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<sup>111</sup> John Cassidy, *Statue of Edward Colston* (1895). Bronze on Portland stone plinth, larger than life-size. Bristol, England. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1202137> (Accessed 20 September 2021).

<sup>112</sup> Interesting that the statue was tossed into a space symbolically associated with the transport of slaves, that is, shipping the subjugates from their homeland to an alien destination.

operations of the system and maintaining the complex nature require references that aid current and affect possible future meanings. Memory, being the plastic form of the history of a system, is essential for these operations to occur within the system. A key issue in this chapter was to identify how complexity is realised in the case of conflicted memory. The goal is that the features generating various memory types have not only a common referential base but require some regulation of select meanings.

In the case where meaningful connections are apparent, as in the comparative identification of Rhodes with other controversial public commemorations, symbolic and discursive links contribute to the development of collective (connected) memories and imagined realities. However, there is an explicit need to realise when, as the viewer, you are being interpolated into the production of the meaning of the artwork. Here the difference between first-order observation and second-order observation is significant. Being able to perceive the expansive (second-order observation) and not the reductive (first-order observation) scope of references in the relational production of meaning is pivotal. This ability would enable the viewer to identify aesthetic features, such as the slave symbolism in the Cape Town central business district (CBD), as contributing to a particular memorialisation. It then also provides insight on how to negotiate the knowledge gained from varying associated meanings attributed to the symbolism. Alternatively, the viewer may demonstrate a lack of knowledge about the multiplicity of meanings generated by a system for select aesthetic features (symbol blindness).

Such commemoration is not without further contingencies though. As in the case of monological and multiplicative commemoration, dissonance could occur as the result of an insoluble linking of these commemorative practices, most significantly in public spaces. Thus, soft and hard connections affect the pattern formation implicit in complex systems. Whether any one specific interpretation of a work holds depends on the strength of connections and meanings made with the artwork. However, for such connections to have any relation, whether complimentary or dissonant, would require a shared referential base from which to draw meaning and contribute to memory.

This and the previous chapter provided the basic tenets necessary to understand how public art could be valued as implicit in a referential network. The evidence thereof can be identified in the resurgence of the Rhodes statue, whether physically present, spectral, or alluded to discursively or symbolically when contemplating otherwise controversial public commemorative artworks. The following chapter coalesces these facts into a discussion on how the complex nature of the social system can absorb the enlightenment gained from this situation and restructure that system to become adaptable and thus remain complex.

## CHAPTER 4: **Self-organisation and public artworks**

### 4.1 **INTRODUCTION**

The complex state of the social system at UCT has been described through the considered analysis of both public arts sited at that location, and the various discursive matters that affect memory and opinion. Collating these matters into a unified system is not as simple as affirming all meanings generated. What this means is that, even though differing opinions can be valid and present in the system at the same time, there would be factors that condition which opinion has dominance and is perpetuated for most future valuations, especially regarding public art. This conditioning is referred to as the system itself formulating an organised state, temporary and subject to modifications, but stable. For both Cilliers and Luhmann, this process is referred to as self-organisation.

Both Cilliers (1998:12) and Luhmann (2000:157) mention that the self-organisation of complex systems has an autopoietic quality to it. Autopoiesis describes a self-organising system that generates, uses, and then breaks down – into smaller elements for reuse – constituents of its own system to maintain the operational processes keeping that system alive. Luhmann (2000:134) mentions operative closure when referring to sub-systems within larger social system. This is how he chooses to describe that the specific sub-systems never rupture the effectiveness and goals of individual sub-systems engaging clandestinely with each other. It was identified in the previous chapter that both art and politics as sub-systems with a shared referential base of a distributed network of representation meant that bridging connections between the sub-systems, for their independent autopoiesis, was entirely possible. There is, however, a significant issue regarding such an interpretation when considering public art.

Being an artform that thrives on social engagement for meaning to affirm its social value, public art exists in liberal relation to the autopoiesis of many interconnected sub-systems, apparent when considering the impact of the Rhodes statue at UCT. The issue with both Cilliers's and Luhmann's definition of self-organisation is exactly this quality about public art: it can exist as art and yet simultaneously differ symbolically by deferring its art status within a different sub-system. Public art



therefore has a use-value different to many other art forms, making it one of the most fluid objects to accrue symbolic value within the art sub-system.<sup>113</sup>

This fluid quality of public artworks can be identified in examples within social systems where public art transfers its use value from one sub-system context to the next. The goal of this chapter is to answer the question: what factors contribute to public art's appropriation into different social sub-systems? This goal is achieved in consideration of forms, production of meaning through relations, observation as identifying ambiguity, and the strength of connections which inevitably affirm, allude to, or differ the value of the public artwork within the environment in which it is sited. This demonstrates that not only how public art can be considered a constituent of a complex social system but how the system organises itself to maintain the memorial significance of that public artwork. What follows are four instances where the interaction and removal of public art has inspired artworks or art intervention. Included in this are the implications the inspired art and interventions had on the social consciousness of the community's audience.

## 4.2 THE BRISTOL STATUE

Roughly five weeks after the protest-driven removal<sup>114</sup> of the British Colston statue in Bristol, a new statue was erected. Made from lesser materials than the former bronze statue, the work was crafted by the London-based artist Marc Quinn who titled the artwork *A Surge of Power (Jen Reid)* (2020).<sup>115</sup> The statue was a depiction of one of the participants engaged in the much-publicised protest, Jen

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<sup>113</sup> This is especially relevant when considering Van Heerden's (2018:8-9) description of an aesthetic experience relying on observation prioritising symbolic not pragmatic concerns. Public art disqualifies this prioritising of the symbolic by having a pragmatic concern as well. That is with regards to its function within a specified social environment.

<sup>114</sup> It is worth noting at this point that none (not counting the burnt paintings from the *Shackville* protests) of the public commemorative statues protested against in South Africa, covered in this study, were ever removed by the protestors themselves. This observation is not meant to enoble the protest action of South Africa to that of England, rather it is curious that the tactics employed in the two nations – US included with England – differed in terms of the effect their engagement would have on the meaning of the public artwork. By choosing to vandalise the public artworks with various forms of symbolic matter, the artworks were subject to social denigration and humiliation rather than erasure. The symbolism was evidently more important to establish. Additionally, removal was meant to be regarded as official, and therefore consensual, by the South African political context.

<sup>115</sup> Marc Quinn, *A Surge of Power (Jen Reid)* (2020). Black resin, life size sculpture. Collection unknown. Bristol, England. <http://marcquinn.com/studio/news/a-joint-statement-from-marc-quinn-and-jen-reid> (Accessed 20 September 2021).

Reid. The figurative representation echoes Reid's act of standing atop the plinth, after the removal of the controversial artwork. Cast in jet black resin, the figure stands with one fist raised in the air, in a somewhat triumphant pose, the pose being representative of toppling a public symbol of colonialism,<sup>116</sup> an offensive symbolism collectively regarded as such by the community concerned (Bland 2020). Although geographically distinct, the link between England and South Africa extends beyond the slave trade references.

There are comparative links that can be made between the protestor removal of the Colston statue and the eventual removal of the Rhodes statue. Both protest events foregrounded the colonial link when condemning the presence of the statue in that specific area. Additionally, both public artworks were sited in locations which the represented figure had an explicit link to; both Colston and Rhodes were residents of the area where the statues were sited. But removing the public artwork from its original siting does not mean that the memory, or traces thereof, are removed from the system as well.

Retaining or *eliminating* constituents (the statues) from a complex system is part of a self-organisation process.<sup>117</sup> What is considered usable is retained a little longer, and what becomes superfluous or detrimental to the operations of the system has its relational pattern dissolved but never completely removed. What this means is that traces of the original constituent (the statue) dissolves back into the referential network as traces of meaning. However, the example of Rhodes offered another perspective of this process in dissolving the artwork. The economic element linking the once public statue with the hashtags #rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall, in favour of not only the socially oppressed but indigent communities vying for equal opportunity at UCT, meant that the pattern for the Rhodes statue never fully dissolved.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, the metaphorical spectre of the statue was anchored in that space after the removal of the artwork through the retention of the

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<sup>116</sup> Maxwele too stood atop the Rhodes statue plinth, after removal. Note also that Msezane's performance piece offered a similar interpretation; refer to page 67.

<sup>117</sup> Reference is made here to Cilliers's (1998:92) description of self-organisation. The description entails recognising that a self-organising system operates on memory, where remembering as well as forgetting are integral to the process of incorporating memory into the complex system (Cilliers 1998:92).

<sup>118</sup> Refer also to the mention of the painted shadow of the Rhodes statue at UCT in footnote 54 on page 46.

plinth, an object which conferred value to the once public statue. Similarly, artist Marc Quinn's Jen Reid statue relies on the value attributed by the plinth to all artworks previously ornamenting it. This is further enhanced by the style of Quinn's *A Surge of Power (Jen Reid)* (2020) echoing the monological commemorative narrative of the colonial artwork whilst also appealing to the demographic of the public of the protest that inspired the statue.

The significance of ornament in art affects the value conferred to an artwork by the plinth. Initially, the plinth could be seen merely as a platform, a substrate for the more significant artwork presented thereon. Yet the plinth also appears to have a value outside the description of a mere platform. On its own, the plinth has meaning and that meaning can anchor an artwork, especially public artworks. When combined, the artwork and plinth become a social necessity to interpret the meaning of the public artwork in context. Luhmann (2000:217) describes ornament as providing the opportunity to conduct observations of the artwork and thus train the viewer's senses for social communication. In other words, ornament (the plinth) anchors variable perceptions into a unified communication.<sup>119</sup> But this does not discount that variety cannot be observed. Luhmann also (2000:217) describes that, within the art system, ornament can also contribute to the value judgement of artworks as bad/good or un/acceptable. An example of this is the interim installation placed on the empty plinth after the removal of the Colston statue.

Prior to the "ambush sculpture" (Bland 2020) by Quinn of Reid, another installation was presented on the plinth, a mannequin meant to depict the controversial British celebrity, Jimmy Savile. The late Jimmy Savile was a British local celebrity whose controversial status was only unearthed after his passing. His contributions as a British media personality and philanthropist were marred when news about paedophilia surfaced. This, as is anticipated in a connected network of distributed representation, affected not only his image, but also the image of the media establishment linked to his entertainment career. That the allegations extended over a period of six decades and that the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) was accused of "turning a blind eye" (Grimshaw 2020) were cause for publicly condemning the memory of the once-beloved British celebrity. Although the

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<sup>119</sup> Additionally, the plinth offers the premise for a first-order observation, albeit also providing opportunity for second-order observation.

artwork's design was significantly lacklustre in comparison to Quinn's ambush sculpture, the tracksuit-adorned, platinum-blonde-wig-wearing mannequin mimetically referenced Savile. A T-shirt with the phrase: "If Carlsberg<sup>120</sup> did rapists" and a placard scripted with, "None of them stopped me and your licence paid for it", accompanied the public display atop the empty plinth. The impermanent nature of the intervention was evident when, sometime after the installation had been completed, the mannequin composition collapsed (Grimshaw 2020). The discredited status of the Colston statue transferred explicitly to the Savile installation due to the negative association being linked to the plinth, which then also anchors the meaning and credibility of the artwork.

Colston and Savile were representative of memories that viewers of both artistic representations felt did not belong in the format they were presented in. Colston's statue was toppled, mostly because it was of a permanent nature. The Savile intervention was left alone, the temporary nature sufficed for it eventually being removed by concerned authorities or nature. Yet, even though the Savile work had a more recent memory within the social system of Bristol (and England in general), both works equally conveyed a controversial status. Furthermore, what links the two figures is that both abused the positions they held in society; both committed atrocities that are generally condemnable; and both had their crimes white-washed by the organisations they were affiliated with, no doubt to avoid further scandal.

The statues of both Colston and Savile were more likely symbols of oppression (interpreted as such by select informed social groups) rather than the specific monological memorialisation conventionally motivated for in the installation of public art. It is likely that the reason for installing the Savile mannequin was with the intent of referencing the controversial historical status offered by Colston. This is in consideration that it is a British imaginary and national identity that was being challenged, something very personal while also publicly applicable. That it was the public art installations and not the plinths that were opposed is significant. This indicates that there is a meaning attached independently to the plinth, as ornament, and the supportive role that ornament takes is manifested through the interventions

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<sup>120</sup> A multinational brewery. The font chosen for the T-shirt was that of the actual brand label, done perhaps in reference to a bar that promoted Savile in a fancy-dress event (Kiely 2015).

had with the plinth. Here ornament highlights “what fits and what does not fit” (Luhmann 2000:227) and the imaginary space created by this ornament aids in resolving the external valuations attributed to it.<sup>121</sup>

An example of imaginary space conjured by ornament is best realised in Msezane’s performance while the Rhodes statue was being removed. Although not occupying the same plinth, the echoing of the raised figure sufficed to transfer the monument association from Rhodes’s statue to Msezane’s performance. This is enhanced by her having to remain in a static pose while the already static Rhodes was being hoisted up off its plinth. What this as well as the Bristol artistic interventions demonstrate is how public artworks equally impact the art sub-system and the social environment within which the event occurred. Quinn’s art installation, depicting emancipation by toppling a representation of imperialist ideology, functions as a counter-monument to both the Colston and Savile representations formerly sited on that same plinth. It is with Quinn’s art installation that the issue of Black Lives Matter (BLM) had a more permanent representation than when the plinth was merely empty.

In the South African context, Msezane’s performance cast a positive, even liberating, light on the co-presented removal of the Rhodes statue. That the removal and performance occurred simultaneously only enhances this effect, especially as Msezane’s plinth was dramatically high and not easily mountable. The result of the experience engendering an awareness of more than just knowledge of the Rhodes symbolism but also the tenuous dynamic of the RMF’s social status. Unlike the temporary performance nature of Sethembile Msezane’s *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* (2015), most passers-by of Quinn’s resin addition wondered if the authorities would remove the new sculpture.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> It is worth noting that, in December 2020, the same vacant Bristol plinth was occupied by a figurine of Darth Vader, a character from the fictional universe of the Star Wars film franchise. The act was done in memorial of the actor, who portrayed the character in the film, having passed away days before the elicit installation (*Sky News*, 2 December 2020).

<sup>122</sup> The resin installation was removed a day later (*Sky News*, 2 December 2020). Additionally, the Quinn sculpture was not the only possible option for an altered public artwork to that space. Although Quinn’s work was secreted into place, renowned art activist Banksy publicly proposed, on social media, an alternative artwork designed around the image of protestors removing the Colston statue, thus, commemorating the event in a more dynamic way. This proposal involved re-installing the original Colston figurative sculpture, albeit with a narrative twist. Apart from the fact that the Quinn work was surreptitiously

Irrespective of the outcome, the removal and addition of public art is a product of the processes of a complex social system.

Ambush sculpture, as well as the performance artwork of Msezane, is an example of autopoietic functioning within a system. While being *closed off* to other sub-systems, artworks negotiate information inherent to the environment within which the artwork is sited. Operating on relations of representations, new meanings could be manufactured for alternative artworks that deny and confer similar associations between past and present artworks located on the plinth (ornament). How such processes arise is what both Cilliers (1998:125), as well as Luhmann (2000:185), refer to as self-organisation. Furthermore, it should be noted that there exists no authority external to the system that declares what constitutes a public artwork (a constituent).

Both the Savile intervention as well as Quinn's sculpture held equal status, although not materially, in terms of being recognised as an artwork. The plinth on which both installations stood is what aided conferring this status, but neither the plinth (because this could be removed or boxed in as at UCT) nor the participants engaged in viewing or installing the artworks have control over the operations occurring within either system (art or social). This is to say the value of public art is a product of interaction and relating representations in the formation of meaning. It is not a quality implicit in constituents of a system. Origins of operations are through relating residual trace from previous meaningful patterns, patterns which were not retained but the trace thereof was never fully eliminated.

#### 4.3 UCT'S ARTWORKS TASK TEAM

Self-organisation is a means by which structure is spontaneously created for the purpose of consolidating information under conditions of increasing complexity. Cilliers (1998:125-126) explains this process in terms of language systems, elucidating that the internal structure of a complex system (like a living language) is subject to significant alteration through operations internal to the system (the use and re-appropriation of certain words or phrases). Furthermore, although the

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installed, Banksy offered his proposal for public opinion, thus most likely delaying if not omitting the possibility of ever being realised (Bland 2020).

environment can influence this restructuring of the system (the context within which the altered words are used), this influence is vicarious and indeterminate. There is no external entity overseeing the changes occurring within that system. Subsequently, this same effect can be realised in terms of the art system<sup>123</sup> regarding the events at UCT. There were factors internal to the social system at UCT *independent*<sup>124</sup> of the art system regarding the valuation of the Rhodes statue. That the statue was removed is not inherently credited to a specific party but it does credit the agonistics which spurred the process of change, a process that, although slow, was inevitable. The effect of removing the Rhodes statue and the demand for further removals, although connected, do not imply the same outcome. However, the development of the Artworks Task Team (ATT) at UCT presents a somewhat different impression.

A spurious form of a complex system's self-organisation, the ATT was initiated due to the events of *Shackville*. Separate to UCT's Works of Art Committee (WOAC), The ATT was formed under the UCT Council, a governing body charged with determining UCT's policies amongst other issues and involving participation from both the management and student bodies (CMD 2016:1). In this way, the ATT existed at the cusp<sup>125</sup> of transformation towards decolonisation in reaction to the actions of the RMF, especially with regard to several controversial artworks sited on the UCT campus. It should be noted that the artworks in question were not as publicly accessible as the Rhodes statue had been. This is because the ATT was formed as a UCT concern to audit the content of that institute's art collection. The purpose was to identify, through engaging with that academic community, those works which constituted a controversial description given the events of *#rhodesmustfall* (and *Shackville*), as well as the drive for transformation (CMD 2016:1). Thus, the artworks are what Schmahmann (2013:15) refers to as "conditionally public"<sup>126</sup> and what is at issue is institutional culture, not the public

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<sup>123</sup> Describing the art system as an independent system in this description does not discount the reference to art as a sub-system of the larger social system. It is merely less complicated to refer to the self-organisation of the art system prior to describing the effect such changes have in the larger social system, and vice-versa.

<sup>124</sup> Allusion is made to the comment on interacting sub-systems on page 76.

<sup>125</sup> The ATT also exists on the border of both the art sub-system as well as the larger social system at UCT.

<sup>126</sup> In a statement revealed by the Works of Art Committee (WOAC) of UCT, it was explained that the "access-controlled areas" of the institute displayed artworks that had no contextual information to support their existence within the space or the institution itself. For this reason, the WOAC opted to present the full collection for public access on the

culture, which is reflective of a national identity. It is the UCT academic community which would be able to access the artworks and it is the opinion of this community that matters most. That is where identity formation is concerned, as it would be visually structured within the institutional framework of the campus's artworks. Yet it should also be noted that the level of publicity that the #rhodesmustfall protests and *Shackville* received meant that the artworks, although assessed on strata set by an institution, would in turn be affected by discourses outside of the environment of the institution itself.

The foremost concern in identifying controversial works of art was the issue with racialism.<sup>127</sup> Black and White representation constituted the majority of the issues had with the controversial artworks, where the aesthetic of the artwork was condemned for either presenting the Black identity in a role of subjugation or fetishized. This inequity of racial representation creates an unconscious moral impact on the interpretation of identity and roles beyond the content of artistic works. Physical representation provides a structure for the distributed network of representation in a sense that permits interpretation, even where that interpretation does not coincide with the intended logic for the artwork. It became apparent that even the subtlest of inferences aesthetically could hamper the ATT's desire of "enhancing transformation and inclusivity" (CMD 2016:2). Thus, surveys were undertaken and statistics tables drafted in the final report of the ATT. Included in the report were recommendations to the WOAC on how to incorporate these findings in the curating<sup>128</sup> of artworks belonging to the UCT art collection (CMD 2016:4-8).

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WOAC updated website in order to correct the error committed that invariably caused the *Shackville*-affiliated burning of artworks incident (Mbulaheni 2020).

<sup>127</sup> In Murriss' (2016:277) article on the topic of #rhodesmustfall, she mentioned that, prior to the removal of the statue, notice boards were installed at the base of the statue providing the community at UCT a "pedagogical opportunity" to comment on the issues surrounding the hashtag-linked protests. Not all comments favoured the actions of the RMF and a particular image included in Murriss' article indicates as much. The student-written comment declared a lack of affiliation with the campaign stating that: "I am [B]lack and this "campaign" DOES NOT REPRESENT ME!!" (Murriss 2016:286). Race is therefore not absolute in its relevance to the need for transformation, although it is popularly projected as such.

<sup>128</sup> The primary concern for the acquisition of artworks by the WOAC relates to the representative excellence as noteworthy artworks produced by those with an affiliation with UCT. Thereafter, there is mention, although fairly significantly, of a consideration for work that "contributes to the congruence of or redress identified imbalances in the current collection" (WOAC 2021).



What is interesting here is that, even though the ATT was formed as a result of the events of #rhodesmustfall, its influence is minimal on the actual result of the restructuring of the art collection at UCT. What the ATT actually offered the WOAC was a list of recommendations. The ATT's role within the art system is thus minimal, albeit being comprised of individuals directly affiliated with art at UCT. Here, Cilliers's (1998:126) description of the environment having some influence on but not determining the changes conducted within the (art) system is apparent. The ATT became a vicarious collective to the art system; instead, they were a result of the social system and thus relegated to the generalised description of the environment when dealing explicitly with the art system. What the ATT report did provide were "quasi-rules" (Cilliers 1998:139), a subsidiary of the self-organising super-structure of the art system at UCT.

The WOAC shifted the discussion of UCT's art collection from the context of institutional culture (in this case UCT) to that of public culture (South Africa at large) on announcing their intention to include the public in matters concerning the reconsideration of the universities' collection of artworks.<sup>129</sup> These shifting aporias (internal contradictions) on UCT identity and national identity is part of the cross-referenced interpolation resulting from a distributed network of representation, incorporating art as a sub-system of the larger social system.<sup>130</sup>

UCT becomes a microcosm of the issues which have been prevalent and continually challenged at a national level. Just as Rhodes' statue was to UCT a symbol of oppression, there still exists the same such symbolism saturated in the national landscape and is significantly less conditionally public than the art collection credited to UCT. Furthermore, the RMF's influence stretching beyond the boundary of UCT to the not so insular context of public space with colonial and Afrikaner nationalist representations are also to be considered. The rejection of imperialist representation at UCT is warranted. That is in consideration of what

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<sup>129</sup> The WOAC released a statement as part of UCT's official communications regarding their revised panel on the committee, as well as a four-year plan of activity to incorporate the recommendations provided by the ATT. It is as part of this initiative that public talks were announced, conducted by members of the committee as well as noted artists within the South and greater African context, to weigh in on the decisions and concepts driving the changes undertaken by the committee (Moholola 2017).

<sup>130</sup> A discussion of this inter-relatable information source is presented on page 76 concerning sub-systems.

Thiong'o (1986:94) asserts is the blind acceptance of imperialism and that its relevance to the formation of an African identity should be questioned. Yet, imperialist symbolism is still saturated in the African, especially South African, landscape. This is in consideration of the democratic dispensation's intent to build bridges with our controversial and oppressive past and, through reconciliation,<sup>131</sup> to never forget but rework the national narrative of a South African identity. The result hereof is an increase in complexity tempered by self-organisation.

Both distributed representation and self-organisation reflect the need for a complex system to retain vast quantities of information and also to reconfigure the internal arrangements of this information, in order to accommodate the changes indeterminately resulting from external influences in the environment. These qualities tend to reflect an active system. Yet in the case of art, due to discussion thereof almost always being in retrospect, the implementation of self-organisation implies stability if not a rule-based<sup>132</sup> systemic approach. Yet, complying with this impression means that there must be some external source determining value and meaning of the art system *a priori*, a concept which Cilliers' (1998:10) vehemently denies as being remotely possible for a complex system. Thus, the art system (a complex system itself), in complying with the two qualities Cilliers does favour (distribution and self-organisation), would need to consolidate information in the form of memory. Subsequently, memory is open to reinterpretation, especially when external forces catalyse the internal processes causing evolutionary change within that complex system.

There are key signifying features that link artworks, across locations as well as across figurative representation, with colonialism and racialism, albeit not explicitly

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<sup>131</sup> Minty (2006:423) mentions that the retention of controversial symbols, with regard to the agenda of the TRC's restitution and reparation of South Africa's tumultuous past, was for the: "communal process of remembering and commemorating the pain and victories of the past". The Rhodes statue could likely be part of this concern as well as the public monuments mentioned in Chapter 3.3: Engaging controversial monuments on pages 61 to 64.

<sup>132</sup> Cilliers's (1998:15) description of a rule-based model to represent complexity involves direct logical representation. No contingency is accommodated and the very nature of complexity is therefore compromised. What is being referenced here, in terms of the art system, is the way art history is presented, especially modern art. Art movements are presented as having a teleology, a quality that is not conducive to the characteristics of a complex system.

referenced as such. This was evident in the retaliation<sup>133</sup> against conditionally public artworks sited on UCT's campus as well as the open public artworks dedicated to Afrikaner nationalist and British imperialist figures throughout the South African landscape.<sup>134</sup> It is partly because these works are still openly visible and accessible that the environment of South Africa produces a complex notion of national identity, as the presence of these works tends to increase the complexity of the social system. Thus, memory is imbued in the presence of these publicly sited artworks and their continued presence is a credit to the democratic intention of reconciliation of South Africa's tumultuous past.

The memory of the system is important then for forming meaning, but representation has no direct correlation between the environmental influence and the subsequent restructuring of the art system. That is to say, the didactic quality of Rhodes memorialisation on UCT's campus as explicitly colonial is complex because memory takes precedence in what is recalled and interpreted at any specific point in time. The memory pattern conditioning the meaningful representation of Rhodes at UCT was, at the time of its installation, of the patron of the tertiary institution albeit the latent knowledge of the colonial narrative. That a dissonance was present regarding the presence of the public art, with respect to colonial epistemology, likely influenced the shift in meaning of the public art from patron to colonial. The delay in this revaluation of the artwork, by reinterpreting memory, is a necessary feature to the process of self-organisation within a complex system.

Cilliers (1998:105) explains that the resulting delay is due to the system's resistance to change, a seemingly natural effect considering that the longevity of any system is based on its robustness. What is meant by robust is that memory, the feature noted thus far as maintaining a stable state in a complex system, is generally kept intact by the system for an indeterminate period of time. But change is inevitable, as the disruption of reinterpreting memory becomes interpolated in the processes of the system and in the formation of meaning. Maxwele's controversial protest action could be regarded as such an external disruption just as much as the burning of artworks during the *Shackville* installation. The delay in

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<sup>133</sup> The burning of artworks on pages 71 to 72.

<sup>134</sup> Chapter 3.3: Engaging controversial artworks pages 61 to 64.

removing the statue is credited to the agonistics of the system revising the accepted meaning of public artworks. Such change has a cascading effect and Cilliers (1998:105) claims this to be an ongoing occurrence, ceasing to end in the self-organisation process of a system. The activities of the ATT and WOAC, evaluating more artworks deemed controversial at UCT, is an example of this ongoing occurrence. That is in addition to the WOAC's publicising the art collection, opening the collection up to further commentary and debate.

Although the works highlighted by the ATT's report were marked as controversial, the decision to remove all the artworks was not as simple an option as was presumed. The negotiations to retain or even reinstall select artworks seemed counter-productive to the purpose of having formed the ATT in the first place. As a form of self-organisation by the UCT social system, the ATT was presumed to fulfil the catalysing function of change for the social system by affecting the art system. How the WOAC sought to alleviate this circumstance was through discussion panels, which encouraged public engagement and also the now more publicly accessible format of the UCT art collection via the WOAC website. Here there is a clear blurring of boundaries between what is considered the operational closure of the art system with the operations constituting the larger social system at UCT. The ATT could affect the art system vicariously and that the social system had been itself altered through this internal alteration of the art system, the public WOAC website shows that the status of public art cannot be reduced to the simplistic terms of a rule-based system.<sup>135</sup> There is significantly more cross-system engagement that affects change both internally and vicariously in the art and social systems. However, both system structures operate on the same distributed network of representation in the formation of meaning and valuations of artworks.

This description of the complexities of UCT's social dynamic is very similar to the circumstance, at a national level, of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) influenced decision to retain symbols of a controversial nature. Where decolonisation is aimed at questioning the relevance of including imperialism in any form (Thiong'o 1986:94), the resistance to alteration of the WOAC and TRC

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<sup>135</sup> This is in consideration of Cilliers's (1998:15) description of a rule-based model, footnote 132, page 90, when accounting for art history being a retrospective study and thus a closed narrative.

represents the system's resistance to change, if not a delay. Such delays result in dissonance, since old and new memories are presented in the system simultaneously. A situation that can be identified is the example of the Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park monument.

The duality of past and present is challenged due to the proximity of two monuments, the Voortrekker Monument<sup>136</sup> and Freedom Park<sup>137</sup> sited in the South African landscape. Rankin (2017:6) discusses the impact of retaining the historically ambiguous (Voortrekker) monument to the Afrikaner nationalist identity in contemporary South Africa. That the monument has decreased in significance in post-Apartheid South Africa is the crux of the article; as it is the context of a democratic South Africa that altered its value, especially in terms of memory. The relevance in retaining<sup>138</sup> this monological monument is questioned, as it perpetuates the narrative that the two communities of: Afrikaner and the native Zulu community are unwilling to cohabit the space (Rankin 2017:8).

Given that removing the monument would be an unwelcomed financial burden on the South African public, the decision to retain it was validated through the reconciliatory efforts of democracy. The revisioning of the monument was aimed at depoliticising the structure and secularising its value within the South African landscape. It is also, in that same breath, described as especially significant as a tourist attraction<sup>139</sup> (Rankin 2017:15). Thus, the decision was made to erect another monument, Freedom Park, as a mirror monument dedicated to the lives of the racially oppressed population of South Africa (Rankin 2017:17).

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<sup>136</sup> Voortrekker Monument. Completed in 1949 under the supervision of the architect: Gerard Moerdijk (Rankin 2017:7-8).

<sup>137</sup> Freedom Park. The site was officially opened in 2013 and hosts several art and architectural works in memorialising the history of South Africa from a Black perspective (Rankin 2017:17).

<sup>138</sup> Such retention is also perhaps due to what Schmahmann (2013:23-24) describes as the fear from most of the White, Afrikaner community of South Africa of alienation. The presence of the monument acts as an anchoring device serving to naturalise the Afrikaner attachment to the South African landscape.

<sup>139</sup> Maylam (2002:143) mentions a similar situation in Zimbabwe, where members of the tribe nearest the grave of Rhodes undertook the task of maintaining that memorial site. The decision was based almost primarily on the economic value Rhodes' grave served to the community, since tourists would frequent the site on visiting the country. Considering that most prominent symbolism of Rhodes' imperial influence were stripped from the country, this one very significant one was left as is, because of a purpose outside of its memorial value.

Although Freedom Park is described as a mirror to the Voortrekker Monument, its function was in diametrical contrast to the narratives offered by the latter monument. This counter-monument had been constructed as an inverted, reactionary response to Afrikaner nationalism and is reflective of the indeterminate external influence incurring change within the system of South African politics. Freedom Park was a product of self-organisation in that it was spawned from a vehemently contrasting response to the oppressive narrative represented in the monological Voortrekker Monument. Instead of depicting the African community as wild and aggressive, aiming to eradicate the Afrikaner community, the space of Freedom Park reflects the struggle of the African community (Rankin 2017:20). But the juxtaposition of these two monuments functions more as a contrast of ideologies than the relational kind described by the TRC's restitution and reparation of the past.

The result of trying to reconcile the narratives of past and present memories within the same context of an evolving social system presents dissidents of South African politics with a surplus of information. How to employ this information in the self-organisation of both the social and art systems inherent to South Africa can once again be represented in the microcosm of UCT. Here the grander scale of socio-political issues is negotiated in terms of the creative expressions of the student community. The events of #rhodesmustfall spurred not only protest but creative action; it is in this creative action that yet more controversies can be identified.

#### 4.4 ***ECHOING VOICES FROM WITHIN AND THE FALL***

A year after the events linked to the hashtag #rhodesmustfall, an exhibition titled *Echoing Voices from Within* was hosted by UCT's RMF at the institute's Centre for African Studies (CAS) Gallery. The purpose of the exhibition was to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the #rhodesmustfall protests. The exhibition included a toured walk through the prominent sites on the university campus, where the protests occurred, and present the audience with performance work that creatively engaged with memory and identity on the university campus and the greater South African context (CAS 2016).

Makhubu's (2020:583-584) description of the walk marks it as beginning at the Bremner administration building, renamed the Azania House during the student occupation of the space from the year before.<sup>140</sup> After a series of speeches, the procession moved through Japonica Walk (with performances by drama students), then the tunnel beneath the M3 freeway (a ritual cleansing of the colonial space was undertaken), and then the campus rugby fields (commemoration of the Marikana victims took place at that location). The audience was then led to the remnant plinth of the Rhodes statue (Figure 10) where poetry recitals took place, then to the location of the *Shackville* installation (musical performance), the former location of the Willie Bester, *Sarah Baartman*<sup>141</sup> (2000)<sup>142</sup> statue (the metal composition was covered with fabric in a symbolic attempt to clothe her), and ended at the entrance to the CAS Gallery (Makhubu 2020:583-584). It was at the CAS Gallery that the exhibition was to be held but the opening of the exhibition was marked by controversy rather than achievement.



Figure 10. Boxed-in UCT Rhodes statue plinth (2021).

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<sup>140</sup> Refer to footnote 70 on page 55 for further clarification.

<sup>141</sup> The WOAC involvement in this particular agenda took the form of talks held with artist Willie Bester, sculptor of the *Sarah Baartman* (2000) artwork. The goal was to address the student-driven censorship of the artwork but with the underlying intent of retaining the artwork in (conditionally) public view (Moholola 2017). However, the Bester artwork is now stored, along with the Rhodes statue, in an undisclosed location so as to avoid further vandalism and rather to preserve the artwork (Coetzer 2020:75).

<sup>142</sup> Willie Bester, *Sarah Baartman* (2000). Recycled metal sculpture, 197 cm height. Permanent collection of the University of Cape Town. (McKittrick 2010:124, Figure 1).

What was an unexpected occurrence was the interruption of the exhibition opening by members of UCT's Trans Collective (TC), a group generally identifying with the acronym LGBTQI.<sup>143</sup> The protest of the exhibition was to acknowledge the overlooked involvement of the TC community in the events of the #rhodesmustfall protests. Also included was the lesser-known contrasting of a patriarchal spin on the RMF movement's organisational structure and several incidents of inappropriate sexual misconduct perpetrated by male parties from that organisation.<sup>144</sup> This unanticipated protest occurring within the exhibition about a protest seems like a palimpsest of the events linked to #rhodesmustfall. The claim of the RMF being in favour of intersectionality was quickly countered by the TC,<sup>145</sup> as there was sufficient evidence in their (being the TC) favour to discount the ennobled façade that the RMF claimed.<sup>146</sup> The hypocrisy in misleadingly supporting intersectional issues presented a flaw in the RMF's goal for decolonisation, as the lack of support for marginalised communities was contrary to decolonial practice. The TC protest emphasised this reality.

The events described are of particular interest when discussing the process and function of self-organisation within a complex system. This is especially interesting when the very cause for recent self-organisation, the removal of the Rhodes statue, is interpolated within the art system in two ways: the protest to remove artworks because of oppressive symbolism and the protest to halt an oppressive exhibition of artwork commemorating the initial protest. To unpack these issues is to deal

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<sup>143</sup> The acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer. Later, less common inclusions are the initialisms: I for Intersex and A for Asexual resulting in the much longer acronym: LGBTQIA (Montz & Solomon 2019). The purpose of this identifier is as an affirmation of subversion from the heterosexual norm naturalised in most societies.

<sup>144</sup> An incident that occurred in November of 2015, months after the initial #rhodesmustfall protests, referenced reports of sexual harassment and abuse conducted by male participants in a protest conducted on the university campus. That the incident became subject to debate regarding the RMF's credibility and that the internal dynamic of the RMF group was not sympathetic to such ill-treatment of subjugated members of the movement were cause for the internal conflicts credited to the RMF (Knudsen & Andersen 2019:144-245).

<sup>145</sup> The disdain for intersectional support was represented as naked protest and speeches conducted by members of the TC (*The Journalist*, 29 March 2016).

<sup>146</sup> A distinction between collective and connective action was key in the Knudsen and Andersen (2019:245) discussion of the TC protests against the RMF (exhibition). Collective refers to the immediacy, aided by social media, of the intersection between people, technology and practice. Connective refers to an ongoing, reinforced and reproduced regime in a digital format. In other words, the creation of a unified sense of community on a digital platform over time. The authors mention that the RMF exhibit of protest represents collective rather than the preferred connective approach to action (Knudsen & Andersen 2019:245).



with the already complex nature of controversial public art sited at UCT and then describe how that experience could be reiterated as artworks.<sup>147</sup>

When Cilliers (1998:93) describes the negotiation of system information as altering: “the values of the weights in the network”, what is meant is that (with respect to the events at UCT) however frequently certain traces of information are apparent within the system (as clusters), this will affect how that system organises meaning and value. Maxwele’s protest, *Shackville*, the *Echoing Voices from Within* exhibition, and the TC protest each feature an understanding of abjection (in varying forms) but specifically against what is considered oppressive constructs (colonialism, socio-economic issues, and patriarchy, all of which are inter-relatable) symbolised in each case as an artwork. Decolonisation was purported as a resolution to these injustices and the demand for change (removal of the Rhodes statue, erecting an informal house, demand for closure of an exhibition) represented what Cilliers (1998:93) remarks as being the regulated and stabilised activity pattern radiating within the representational network of that complex system. It is therefore relevant to note that, when such a regulated pattern is encountered once again (the demand for change), then the reaction of that system is likely to adopt a similar, if not the same, approach of *eliminating* the source of the agonistics from the network.

It is puzzling then that the RMF chose to host an art exhibition<sup>148</sup> containing references of the protests that sparked the removal of the oppressive symbolism. The exhibition concretised and reinforced the pattern from the representational network that caused change. In this way, the issues had been iterated. However, rather than being the catalyst for change, protest was tokenised through visual and artistic representation. This integrated the event of #rhodesmustfall into the referential network, opening it up to critique, in retrospect, as a memory. This memory presented contrasting interpretations, as the TC protest proved. That the queer body was under-represented and instead tokenised in the exhibition seemed to warrant protesting as there was once again a need for change. The TC’s agenda

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<sup>147</sup> Makhubu (2020:572) describes the process of depicting the events of #rhodesmustfall as legitimising the socio-political disparities as art.

<sup>148</sup> An ironic twist considering that art was the primary target of the RMF in the initial phase of declaring UCT as a space in need of transformation. And decolonisation had begun with removing art that reflects narratives in contrast with such an agenda.

was to highlight the injustice committed to those who identify with the LGBTQI community. Instead, the interpretation of the memorialisation in the RMF *Echoing Voices from Within* (2016) exhibition is a reiteration of the very structures the RMF sought to oppose, resulting in dissonance.

Luhmann's (2000:209) interpretation of style, where style infers a need to copy existing art references in order to be qualified as an artwork, assists in understanding this dissonance. An example of this is Msezane's plinth performance echoing the statue of Rhodes, and that her performance was conducted simultaneously with the removal of the Rhodes statue. Msezane's performance could be classified as an artwork because there was a link between the aesthetic forms of her performance and the aesthetic forms of the Rhodes statue.<sup>149</sup> Interestingly, these forms need not have been exact copies, it need only have tapped into that same network of distributed representation which the Rhodes statue was equally reliant on for its meaning and value. Thus, by reacting to the exhibition organised by the RMF, the TC established the photographs on display, marking the #rhodesmustfall event as artworks. *Echoing* could therefore refer to the re-presentation of protesting art, as art eligible to be protested against. Here self-organisation is presented as an ongoing process rather than the system, especially the art system, merely being saturated with references that lead, according to Cilliers (1998:92), to the entropy of that system. However, the *Echoing Voices from Within* exhibition, by representing the protest as art, has entered itself and the art system into a kind of operative closure.

Operative closure here entails the evolution of the system through autopoiesis (Luhmann 2000:217-218). That is, the system continues its existence (and relevance) through the constant recycling of forms and patterns inherent to that system. The TC protest is reliant on the same patterns and forms already implicit in the art system (vandalising of artworks affecting the interpretation of the artwork, from the Rhodes statue to photographs on display) at the time of the #rhodesmustfall protest. The events occurring within the social system, while affecting and recurring in the art system, is an indication of a dissolving of the processes of the two systems. The presentation of protest as art is an example of

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<sup>149</sup> Additionally, both incidents were photographed and the photographs served as both record and artwork.

style being involved in a system's autopoiesis. Style configures these forms and the ornaments, which were once the stable element upon which new interpretations could be formed, as a necessary staple within the system that crafted them. This situation is apparent not only in the exhibition and protest already discussed, but also in the stage performance dramatizing the events of the removal of the Rhodes statue.

Performed initially at the Baxter Theatre, a short distance outside of UCT's campus, *The Fall* (Conrad 2016) was conceived, written and performed by former students and protestors affiliated with the #rhodesmustfall protest on UCT's campus<sup>150</sup>. That *The Fall* deals with the issues surrounding the removal of the statue of Rhodes is only part of the intersectional issues that impact the social community at UCT. Those same intersectional issues are also reflected in the context of the greater South African social system. The play had been received with critical acclaim and the playwright/performers had an opportunity to present this artistic work to institutes outside Africa (Smith 2018). The appeal of the performance was due to the issues being portrayed with a globally applicable, albeit personal, interpretation of oppression. Such positive reviews reflect how the nature of protest within the context of post-imperial/post-Apartheid UCT draws from the distributed network of information, valuing public art in geographically distinct countries. Here BLM protests are an example; however, BLM exhibitions have not manifested in the same way as it has for #rhodesmustfall.

The #rhodesmustfall protests related the environment of UCT with the social and art systems located within that environment. Had the protests not been memorialised linguistically (hashtags) and artistically (exhibition), the social disruption may have dissolved as latent memory in the complex system. Yet, the repeat of protests as the student burning of artworks and the TC interruption of the RMF exhibition a few months later, as well as the stage performance echoing the same event, permitted the pattern of protest to keep circulating within the complex system. Reinforcing patterns is what Cilliers (1998:94) describes as a means of stabilising the system. Such stability equates to the reapplication of the pattern

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<sup>150</sup> The foundations for the play were claimed to have been inspired by the impromptu jam sessions that took place at Azania House during that administration building's student occupation in 2015 (Ahmed 2019:151).

which drove the initial demand for change iconised in Maxwele's controversial protest action. Had it not been that the self-organisation of the system resulted in art forms depicting change itself being regarded as an art form, then the agenda to enact change would dissolve and could be forgotten. Iterability is required to maintain this structure of change, and, within the art system related to UCT, this iteration takes on the form of a dialectic.

Iteration as artistic works exemplifies that self-organisation is a dialectical process (Cilliers 1998:138). Self-organisation is a constant process of renegotiating between fragments or traces of frequently changing memory patterns as it is being stabilised in the system. The subsequent development of alternative interpretations of memory, reliant on the representational network, allows that meaning is formed, changed and reincorporated as a difference within that same system. It is also through this reasoning that select "quasi-rules"<sup>151</sup> (Cilliers 1998:139) develop as some form of standard by which further examples (patterns) internal to the system could be compared and addressed, in order to once again effect some sort of change. This is realised in the issues brought to the fore by the TC and then again in the content of the stage performance. Although the oppressive nature of colonialism was dealt with, there were the underpinning issues of patriarchy, sexual and gender distinctions, and sub-categorising of race groups that surfaced. Recognising these issues as already part of the complex system at the time of removing the Rhodes statue emphasises marginalisation occurring at UCT in general and this is what was being drawn attention to in the stage performance.

The cast of *The Fall* were active participants in the protests leading to the removal of the Rhodes statue. The decision to draft the play was inspired by the experience of the event itself, and this act of reflection and interpretation is significant to the creative act. Luhmann (2000:273) describes this occurrence as "*Bildung*", where the artist interpolates personal experience into the foundations of the artwork formulated for public view.<sup>152</sup> The effect of this is that the audience is then capable

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<sup>151</sup> An example of a quasi-rule would be the need to engage protest action when confronted with challenges to self-identification through oppressive structures. Like the TC protest of the lack of intersectional representation at the RMF exhibition.

<sup>152</sup> This also reflects on the artist and viewer observations. The artist has prior knowledge of the art but, with second order observation, the viewer has access to more information. Thus, interpreting personal experience in the creative product interpolates the audience

of making inferences to its own life, aligning its identity with the subject in the artwork (Luhmann 2000:273-276). This is in contrast with the reactions of the TC when they protested the opening of the RMF exhibition. Where marginalisation recurred as the performed subject in the stage performance, marginalisation recurred as the present motive for the TC protest. Both examples related to the RMF ostensibly presenting two distinct interpretations of the experience of the RMF, as a memory implicit in the complex system. Both creative examples also offered perspectives of life after the fall of the controversial public artwork. However, there is still interest in what happened to the now removed Rhodes's statue.

#### 4.5 HERITAGE AND PUBLIC ART

Once removed, questions arose as to what was to happen to the Rhodes statue once implicitly linked to the UCT campus. Although in safekeeping in an undisclosed location, there has yet to be any confirmation as to where the removed artwork would be finally located. What is known is that there had been some attempts to acquire the statue, although none of these offers has yet been confirmed as the final destination for the disused artwork.

According to the document set by UCT to Heritage Western Cape (HWC), a department of South Africa, there were four parties interested in acquiring the statue. The first mentioned is The Crow Foundation, an arts institute located in Texas, USA that intends to amend and preserve the condition of the statue, but with the added caveat that the public artwork becomes the sole property of that establishment. The other three<sup>153</sup> offers are from South African parties interested in maintaining the heritage value still imbued in the artwork, albeit its controversial status. With the document set by UCT declaring that the statue has no significant heritage and artistic value, the statue is neither prized nor encouraged to be considered worthy of display. This is in light of the artwork challenged by

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into the artwork, the way the artist is already implicitly linked to the art. Refer to page 65 for a full description of this relation.

<sup>153</sup> The three interested parties are Baker Square at Paardevlei, an establishment with ties to Rhodes' affiliated Imperial architect Herbert Baker; Nooitgedacht Farm, a holding formerly part of the Rhodes Estate; and The South African Institute for Heritage Science and Conservation, a private college whose interests in the statue involve education and research purposes (Properties and Services [Sa]).

references to the continuing legacy of oppression and efforts to suppress what little artistic merit the sculpture warrants.<sup>154</sup> Yet, even though The Crow Foundation had offered to retain and commit to the upkeep of this piece of history, there is a hesitance to accept the international offer (Properties and Services [Sa]).

Juxtaposing historically and socio-politically controversial artworks with democratically inclusive artworks is a way of negotiating a problematic past while also “satisfying traditionalists keen for the institution to include signs of its beginnings” (Schmahmann 2013:53). At least this is what is presumed when considering the delay in removing controversial ideologies and symbols of problematic histories. The South African context has many such examples, due to the TRC agenda. Added to this are the many artistic and destructive engagements with public art, a demonstration of the ongoing agonistics of the social system. Yet removing the artwork to the point that it is displaced from its narrative context only exaggerates the complexity of an already complex situation.

Local information is constantly highlighted by Cilliers (1998:91) as a key attribute of a self-organising system. This is due to engaged components of the system building patterns within that system based on changes that affect its internal dynamic within an environment. Presuming these changes are deterministic is the flaw that counters the logic of self-organisation. The quasi-rule (reconciliatory efforts) set by the political system of the South African context is the cause for controversial artworks to be maintained in the South African landscape. The only permissible alteration being the inclusion of artworks that offer a relational juxtaposition with the oppressive relics. This is how reconciliatory efforts are deemed to take effect and also an example of self-organisation. This casts another light on the function of self-organisation, that is, self-organisation is actually another description of reorganisation.

The description of reorganisation is in consideration of autopoiesis in the art system and the complexity of the system being credited to the use, breakdown and re-use of elements within that system. That a foreign source motivated for the permanent

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<sup>154</sup> Note the overlooked art historical value the Rhodes statue in the South African context discussed in footnote 37 on page 36. That is, Marion Walgate being the first female sculptor to have received such a significant public artwork commission.

acquisition of the controversial artwork, which, geographically and ideologically speaking, has no historical importance to the US, is significant here. The presumed intent behind the acquisition is to maintain that artwork's affiliation with (art) history as its commemorative value was foregrounded as the reason to acquire the work. By removing the statue from its origin context, the statue becomes merely an object of aesthetic relevance (symbolic), an approach which does not convincingly tie the statue to the complex self-organising structure of either the social or art systems specific to South Africa. In question then would be the public artwork's status in the art system only, or the inter-relation of the art and social system.

#### 4.6 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This chapter, on self-organisation, functions as a culmination of the varying concepts discussed throughout the previous two chapters. Ultimately, what is foregrounded is the issue of trace, the non-specific referential matter that filters through a complex system's distributed network. Identifying trace illuminates the process of meaning production, which in turn leads to an understanding of how memory is formed and reified within a system. It is primarily memory (the origins and contributions of trace) that is challenged in self-organisation because the interpretation of memory leads to the dissolution or reification of memory patterns in the complex system.

It should be noted that an attempt was made to classify the social and art systems as inter-related but simultaneously independent (operatively closed) systems. Classifying art as a sub-system of the larger social system and also operatively closed as a system in its own right is where the challenge can be located. Both statuses are valid for the art system, and this is due to the shared distributed network of representation. It is within this shared network that trace can be identified, meaning is formed and the communal use and individual appropriation of memory can be interrogated. Thus, the perceiving of representation in terms of difference and deferring is important. Included here is the anchoring of representation for meaning to evolve.

Ornament, when considering the value that the plinth has in the art system, helps anchor a pattern within a system. This has proven to be a necessary factor, since

art interventions incorporating ornament aids in qualifying that intervention as art. This can be seen in the use of the plinth and even the stage, upon which performances are had, even though such anchors are deficient in the recognition of art. Processes occurring within the dialectic structure of the complex system require some classification. Here the description of self-organisation, by way of autopoiesis, is valuable since an understanding of how a system is able to establish patterns of relevance without the need for external intervention is crucial to the operationally closed nature of the art system.

Self-organisation, like autopoiesis, is a spurious process and occurs with the repeated presence and use of components (constituents) within that system. Here trace is significant, since the patterns formed using traces of memory to notify the system of the need to reconsider the value those patterns have to the system and the system's functioning as a whole implicate the constituents involved. Because complexity is a system state that can reach neither entropy nor equilibrium (totally resolved state), self-organisation is surreptitiously engaged in maintaining the complexity of the system. Here the inter-relatable qualities of the art and social system are relevant.

Both the art and social system maintain their complexity in the process of inter-relation and self-organisation of internal processes. As a result, the value of the varying representations common and vicariously *specific* to each system can change. This is apparent in the case of the Rhodes statue where, in a social system context, the public artwork linked with contrasting memories resulted in its eventual removal from the physical environment. At the same time this alteration affected the status and interpretation of the artwork within the art system. Where self-organisation may aid structuring a system, it cannot reduce complexity. This is especially when a constituent spurs the agonistics, rendering a system complex. In being an object of value to the identification of complexity, the Rhodes statue as public art was both integral to and thus a constituent of the dynamic of a complex social system.



## CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Remembering the past is a process riddled with conflicting feelings of contentment, disappointment, and even fear. The events of the #rhodesmustfall protests ignited a mix of such feelings, since the act of protest and the process of remembering circulated around the aesthetic of a figurative public artwork. It is through these events that it became evident that public art held a position unlike most other art types, an issue which constitutes the crux of this dissertation. Memory has been shown to impact the presence as well as absence of the UCT Rhodes statue, the figurative artwork in question. But how that memory figures into the social dynamic and communication of meaning prevalent in the UCT environment is certainly the most important issue here. It is also the basis for the research questions offered in and answered through the course of this case study.

Two key questions were identified at the beginning of this study. The first specified a keen focus on the impact interactions with public artwork could have on the functional value of that artwork within a given complex social system. The choice to foreground interactions and complexity is primarily due to the intended use of Cilliers's (1998:3-5) emphasis on interactions in his description of the characteristics of a complex system.<sup>155</sup> That half of these characteristics were credited to interactions has been shown to be particularly relevant when considering how the Rhodes statue was engaged with when it was still present in the public space of UCT. Additionally, this resulting absent presence sparked some protests linking social discontent with the memory of the controversial public artwork. This circumstance is the reasoning for including a necessary second question in this study.

The second question pertained to how the impact of tactile engagement with the Rhodes statue could affect a system enough to cause aesthetic change to the environment, within which that system and artwork exist. Answering this question has proven to be the densest part of the study. The answer foregrounds a peculiarity specific to social systems theory, at least as far as what both Cilliers (1998:12) and systems theorist Luhmann (2000:157) have offered in their theoretical attributions in this study. The peculiarity is self-organisation, a process

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<sup>155</sup> Refer to theoretical structure on page 14 for a brief description of these characteristics.

that has been found in this study to be similar to a re-organisation of the functional value of public art within the given (art and social) system. However, the analysis exercised in this study of the UCT Rhodes statue and related works linked to controversial public art in South Africa was undertaken in order to assess how effective this logic has been. This same analytical approach should then also be extended to another example.

Towards the end of Chapter 3<sup>156</sup> and the beginning of Chapter 4, the discussion focuses on how the BLM-inspired protests at Bristol in 2020 could be described as an example of self-organisation within a social system. The choice to include this deviation from the figurative artwork of Cecil John Rhodes was based on the similarity in the connective memory of slavery which both Rhodes as well as Edward Colston had with British imperial rule in Africa. Connecting the memorialisation of two individuals associated with two distinct locations is not impossible. This is presented in this study by indicating how the public art symbol accrues meaning by linking distributed representations in a network. It is through dialectical engagements (Cilliers 1998:11) that meaning is developed in a network of distributed representation. Representation is therefore not an information monad, instead representations contribute to building meaning through connections. Such connections incorporate memories related to place in as much as it does to people and the histories to which they are linked.

When considering the meaning attributed to the Rhodes statue at UCT, the Rhodes memorial, sited some distance from the university campus, was analysed in order to understand the persistence of Rhodes's memory in the Cape Town area. The vandalism of the Rhodes memorial during the surge of #rhodesmustfall protests and #blacklivesmatter protests (of 2020) indicated that the memory of Rhodes in Cape Town was unfavourable. Instead, what this engagement offered was the understanding that the meaning of the Rhodes memorial was not unilaterally communicated (Luhmann 2000:14). That is to say there is no one implicit meaning tied to the aesthetic representation of Rhodes in a public memorial space. The duality of contrasting meanings means that a competition for information relevance occurs within the social dynamic of that complex system. This situation had been described in Chapter 2 as a kind of blockage, a meaning paradox with an interplay

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<sup>156</sup> Refer to Chapter 3.5: Rhodes Must Fall at Oriel College on page 77.

of distinct meanings (Luhmann 2000:119). But reverence for Rhodes is still in effect since the memorial was not destroyed nor officially removed. The resulting issue presented in Chapter 2 was the matter of whose voice is being represented by the figuration of Rhodes, a matter that has ignited the agonistics of a politically complex country. Similarly, in the Bristol example, whose perspective of a national identity was being represented by the Colston statue? This similar query, presented in Chapter 3.5, pertained to the Oriel College Rhodes statue but nevertheless applies to the Colston statue through the common link of the British nation for each artwork's location.

Colston's monological monument in Bristol, as discussed in Chapter 3, was not only protested against in the BLM-fuelled social agonistics but also dislodged from the plinth upon which it had been secured. By committing firmly to the decision for this act of elicit-public-art removal, the social system in Bristol reached what Cilliers (1998:97) describes as a "critical point". That is the moment where traces of information saturated the functional processes in meaning-production of the system to the point where the presumed use-value of the public artwork *had* to be negotiated.

Similar to the Colston-statue dislodging, the vandalism of the Rhodes bust sited in Rhodes Memorial<sup>157</sup> was due to residual traces of memories tied to oppressive symbolism being foregrounded in the 2020 BLM protests globally. Such linking may impact not only the removal of one element of representation in a public symbol, but the retaining of another to the recently altered context. The Rhodes bust was mended, returning the figurative artwork to its original state. In Bristol, the Colston statue's situation was different. That the Bristol-based plinth was left alone and even repurposed with later art installations is in stark contrast to what happened to the plinth upon which the UCT Rhodes statue was sited. Even though the statue and the platform on which the artwork is presented as a homogenous link, in terms of meaning and subsequently value within a system, the extent of the devaluation of one part of it could, and yet need not, impact the other part. This part object association is the best example of how distributed representation works in that it does not accrue meaning with a view of unilateral interpretation.

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<sup>157</sup> Refer to pages 32 to 34 for a description of the extent of the vandalism.

Representation was shown to be considered as fractured components, accruing meaning through association and not carrying meaning by itself within a system. Cilliers's (1998:82) description of these fractured elements being part of a distributed network emphasises the need to consider the nature of connections, or more specifically interactions within a social-system dynamic. Thus, to connect different works with the same valuation of art requires deferring the art status by way of presentation on a plinth. Such ornament, a term Luhmann (2000:120) employs, aids in conferring the art status to objects linked to it. In the case of Bristol, the plinth was repurposed to validate the installations placed upon it. At UCT, the plinth was boxed in so as to reference a complete elimination of the memory of the artwork and the trauma connected to it, and thus removes the relevance of a public artwork sited at that location entirely. However, the performance of Sethembile Msezane's *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* (2015) in Chapter 3.4<sup>158</sup> did rely on the "ornament" (Luhmann 2000:120) value of the Rhodes statue plinth, albeit the performance being a distance away from the statue removal and the plinth upon which Msezane stood was not structurally the same. Such an observation does link the Colston elicited-art interventions with the Rhodes statue, mostly through the reliance on the common framing of memory patterns related to protest of and vindication from oppressive symbolism.

When connecting the socio-historical memories of Rhodes and Colston, the issues of imperialism, colonialism and slavery recur often. The reality of these narratives is seen in the social dynamic and the expressed opinion of the communities who are visually subject to the morphologies of these controversial figures. The nature of the interactions with the public artworks dedicated to the figures is especially interesting as it presents the insight that information enters the agonistics of a social system as clusters, a term credited to Cilliers (1998:93), and which coaxes a system to negotiate relevant information in that system's self-organisation. Of particular interest in this instance is the controversial protest action of Maxwele.<sup>159</sup> The use of faecal matter is not without its own associations. Clustered in the visual form of faecal matter is associations of undesirability and waste matter specifically sourced in this case from latrines in informal settlements. Thus, Maxwele's use of

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<sup>158</sup> Refer to pages 67 to 70 for the discussion of Msezane's performance.

<sup>159</sup> A full description and analysis of Maxwele's protest is provided in Chapter 2.4 on pages 40 to 44.

faeces referenced issues beyond the simple defamation of the Rhodes statue. The faecal matter thus functions as a trace of associative memories linking Rhodes with oppression and the disenfranchised Black South African communities in the Cape Flats. Memories of oppression are robust enough within the system that protest appeared to be implicit in retaliation.

Protesting the Rhodes statue was presumed to equate to protesting the memory of slavery, a burning memory within the context of Cape Town. The collective memory of Cape Town's slave history, the visual association of South Africa's traumatic and contentious political history, and the new political dispensation's attempt to whitewash such complexity by retaining controversial symbolism as an act of reconciliation all flooded the system as cluster upon cluster of information. The resulting dissonance about not only the artwork but the whole notion of transformation on the Cape Town university campus ruptured the dormant state of some memories already circulating within the social system at that institution. This rupture also reflects the modular nature of memory within a system, especially as the patterns connecting the memories within the system are affected by public interaction. Also evident from this insight is that the interactions were enacted when the dissonance affected a sense of self, or rather a national identity tied to that social system. This is obvious in the context of not only Cape Town, but also of Bristol.

The removal of the Colston statue pacified the BLM protestors to some extent. Similar to Maxwele's performance of triumph over the Rhodes removal, the BLM protestor Jen Reid stood atop the plinth after the forced removal of the Colston statue. However, this social vindication in removing one controversial figure was short-lived, since the plinth had been replaced by yet another controversial figure. The analysis in Chapter 4 of the Jimmy Savile morphology disrupted national identity nearly as much as the retention of the Colston statue did. Both figures represented a part of British social history that is not collectively regarded as being worthy of praise. Yet what is interesting is that, unlike at UCT, the plinth in Bristol was not left empty for very long. UCT regarded the public display of art in the location of the former Rhodes statue as not being essential to the environment, a soft connection of memory within the system; the Bristol community maintained the display of art installations on the plinth, a hard connection of memory within the

system. This comparison of soft connections and hard connections, credited to Cilliers (1998:34), of a system's memory indicates how stable that memory may be. This is especially when taking into account that the memory, whether or not it was socially or politically driven, was anchored in a public artwork. This realisation affects the status of the art object and therefore the art system as a sub-system within the larger social system.

Art and politics are the two sub-systems in effect in this case study on #rhodesmustfall. The hashtag became a trope for the social community and references to both political, art and even academic-related agendas pervaded social media as a means to realise transformation or change within the complex situation. Prioritising certain agendas is a credit to both Cilliers's (1998:12) as well as Luhmann's (2000:157) description of self-organisation. Though it should be noted that the self-organisation implied by each of the two theory sources employed in this study reflected different perspectives of what system was being discussed. Even though each perspective has deferred the insight to either a larger (complex social) or smaller (art system) context respectively. What is common to both perspectives is the description of autopoiesis<sup>160</sup> as a means by which a system is able to negotiate the continued presence of information within the system.

The example of UCT's self-organisation was in the discussion in Chapter 4 of interactions with publicly accessible art. Even though the Rhodes statue was removed, the memory of it kept circulating in the socially linked system of UCT and globally. Memory remains in the system irrespective of being anchored in a physical aesthetic form, instead becoming an abstract form of representation. This transition is not the physical art object sublimating into an abstract concept, rather it is in recognition of the artwork being a tentative host to both perceptible as well as imperceptible forms (Luhmann 2000:43). The hashtag trope is a major factor here but it was the memory of protest itself that echoed in later performances and vandalism of art on the university campus. In the case of Bristol, the concept of public art constituted a necessary memory for that social system to retain. This is in consideration that not all morphologies of figurative artworks had an intrinsic link

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<sup>160</sup> Refer to page 80 for a brief description of autopoiesis as it is interpreted from both Cilliers's (1998:12) and Luhmann's (2000:157) use of the term.

to the BLM protests. Each of the two locations (UCT and Bristol) sourced the relevance of art in a public space to the social dynamic specific to the environment within which that social system existed. This is not serendipitous; instead, it highlights how art and politics are co-dependent on the same network of distributed representation for sourcing meaning within the system. This does not mean that the processes of forging meaning in one sub-system will inherently affect that same process in another; operative closure of each respective sub-/system ensures this independence (Luhmann 2000:134). Furthermore, it also indicates that the persistence of a particular view reifies and stabilises memory patterns within that system. This stability being a credit to how the dynamic of the system itself undergoes a self-organisation in negotiating the memory that takes precedence. This is also in consideration of self-organisation resolving contingencies with respect to ambiguity (Luhmann 2000:182). Irrespective of various sub-systems' co-dependence on distributed representation, it is very significant that all the analyses mentioned in this study focused explicitly on publicly accessible art.

What was resolved through this study was that public art is a distinct art type. Public art projects the viewer of the artwork's attention outward, to the environment. This is in the light of Luhmann's (2000:46) view that art conjures imagined realities for the viewer, resulting in an immersive, often introspective, experience. Public art, however, foregrounds the reality viewers are forced to deal with in a lived experience. Public art triggers collective memories more impressively, since these memories are relived daily, not fashioned by an artificial space or reality and constitutes a tangible component within a socio-historical/political dynamic. As a consequence, engaging with art sited publicly is not unusual, but what is interesting is the manner of that engaging.

In both the Rhodes as well as Colston examples, tangible interaction with the art resulted in an aesthetic change within the respective, certainly complex, social systems. This result is due to the ambiguous nature meaning has within the system, an ambiguity that affects the social value of public art. What such a judgement proves is that public art does not exist independently of the social system's dynamic operations. In fact, it contributes to this dynamism in the form of making tangible the imperceptible form of memories contributing to agonistics within the system. That these memories are variable and conflicting is apparent

primarily through the interactions that the public has with the art. That these interactions resulted in the removal of the public art credibly valorises public art as a meaningful constituent of a complex social system. This is in consideration that the system sustains the memories irrespective of the removed public artwork.



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