

Art-Rage and the Politics of Reconciliation

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Art in South Africa has become a site of intense and visceral race and class political antagonisms. It has catalysed debate, contestation and public discussion. In particular, public art and statues that echo the agonies of colonial and apartheid South Africa have sparked black public outrage and its proverbial opposite, white indignant anger. Art appears to have become a conduit for channelling frustrations with elusive reconciliation, the patronising expression of rainbowism and the impossible public dialogue about transforming post-apartheid South Africa. The discourse about art in public spaces, it would seem, becomes a proxy for other issues.

After students removed a prominent statue of colonialist Cecil John Rhodes from the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2015, Rhodes Must Fall activist and student Ntokozo Dladla noted that the visual environment (buildings, art and statues) of the campus had become the ‘focal point’ for the raising of wider political issues: ‘The systems and the processes in place here have worked in such a way to exclude us from feeling as though we are part of this university. We feel alienated ... The statue just dramatises those feelings.’¹ This feeling of profound alienation not only characterised many students’ experience of campus, but also the zeitgeist of an inequitable post-1994 South Africa, which still resembles racially partitioned apartheid South Africa.

On 15 February 2016, a protest based on student housing on the UCT campus took the form of the installation of a shack at the foot of the Jameson steps, on