



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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Interim Statement of the Council's Artworks Task Team

Precipitated by the removal of the Cecil John Rhodes's statue last year and broader transformation imperatives, the University of Cape Town's Council took a resolution to set up a number of Task Teams. The members of the Task Teams were originally nominated by the VC and the SRC with membership drawn from staff and students. The aim of these Task Teams, as expressed in the terms of reference, was to deal with transformation issues giving attention to questions of inclusivity and the **University's location in an African context as the basis of its work.**

The *Council Artworks Task Team* was set up in September 2015, and mandated, amongst others things, to conduct or commission an audit, an assessment and an analysis of statues, plaques and artworks on campus that may be seen to recognize or celebrate colonial oppressors and/or which may be offensive or controversial. From the outset the Team has been mindful of the urgency of its work in the face of ongoing student protest, as well as of the complexity of the issues involved.

The Chair of the Task Team with the assistance of a team of University of Cape Town students has completed a preliminary survey of existing statues and plaques on campus. The Works of Art Committee has a database of all of the accessioned artworks.

The Task Team noted that in 2015, and indeed earlier, some students at the University had indicated clearly that they find a number of artworks offensive for the way in which they depict black people. While a comprehensive list of works so identified, in multiple fora and on various occasions, requires close research of the kind that the Task Team has not yet been able to undertake, the Team identified a core cluster of works that were frequently cited.

Unlike in the case of works hung in galleries, members of the University community are not able to choose which works they wish to encounter. The works on display are unavoidable. In this respect, they function as a form of public art. Unlike most forms of public art however, their public appropriateness is not consciously assessed, nor is their acquisition subject to criteria relevant to their public display. Unlike works hung in galleries, those on display on campus are often without any context except their physical setting. The Task Team notes that efforts, by the Works of Art Committee and others, are currently underway to provide contextual information about at least some of the works. The Task Team notes that a number of commentators critical of

the campus display practice have pointed out that many of the artworks are displayed in settings in which colonial-era architecture has a predominant, even saturating, presence. This is one of the many environmental factors that affect how the works are apprehended by the public that views them on a daily basis.

Student members of the Task Team made strong representation to the Team concerning what they understood to be a widespread apprehension, on the part of **students objecting to the artworks, that the works' cumulative effect** in terms of the representation of black people was negative, even abject.

Effects of the kind identified by the concerned students, are not taken account of in terms of any current curatorial policies or guidelines.

To date, the Task Team has not been able to establish the existence of any University curatorial policies or activities governing the display of artworks on the Campus beyond the notion that the University community should be exposed to as much artwork as possible. The effective publicness of the art on display and the curatorial responsibilities and criteria that flow from that, the effects of its apprehension in distinctive physical settings, and the cumulative effects of all of this are not actively taken into account in the way works have been displayed.

The Task Team is of the view that it is incumbent on the University to acknowledge these problems. Under present circumstances, decisive and immediate actions are warranted. In the short term the Task Team proposes that the core cluster of works identified as controversial be temporarily removed while the University decides on the curatorial policy that it wishes to adopt. The Task Team is aware that individual faculties and other campus entities have begun to remove works on display, employing what appear to be a range of ad hoc criteria. These removals could also be reviewed at a later date once the University has decided on an active and considered curatorial policy. Safe custody is a further matter that warrants attention.

This is an opportunity also for the University to reassess its acquisitions policy. The Task Team understands that the Works of Art Committee has placed a moratorium on the acquisition and commissioning of artworks since April 2015. A moratorium would be in line with thinking in the Task Team and would have been an early recommendation from the Task Team. The Task Team recommends that a moratorium stays in place until such time that broader consultative processes have been conducted, from which recommendations can be formulated and presented to Council

The consultative process should be an open process involving all members of the University community. The Council Artworks Task Team proposes to elicit opinions and recommendations from the various constituencies, in a manner that will inform the final findings of the Task Team, and which could be fed into policy-making processes in the future. Furthermore, the Task Team aims to foster and promote activities that engage and consult with the broader university community (students, PASS staff, academics) through workshops, interviews, colloquia and assemblies. Included in these initiatives would be the facilitation of the first public forum welcoming all interested parties in the University community to express their views. These will include engagement on the matters of plaques and statues alongside the artworks. In whatever ways possible, these will take place in tandem with

developments in relation to the naming of buildings and other aspects currently being dealt with by the Task Team on the naming of buildings.

These processes will afford individual departments, faculties and the University as a whole an opportunity to assess the image conveyed by artworks, photographs, plaques, statues and other materials on display, each item in its own right, as well as in particular physical settings, and the cumulative effect of the whole, and to consider whether they convey the image of the institution that the institution actively desires to project.

The formulation of proposals for new plaques and the acquisition of new artworks, which forms part of the Task Team's mandate, will similarly be informed by the consultative processes mentioned above.

The *Council Artworks Task Team* acknowledges and takes seriously the concerns of students and staff as they pertain to the reception and placement of artworks, plaques and statues in their places of study and work, as well as the issues around representation that have been voiced. Through a process of critical engagement and participatory debate, artworks in the collection of the University, as well as plaques and statues, should have the ability to reflect, in their considered locations and **curatorial interventions, an inclusive strategy that takes into account UCT's position** as an African university, with diverse value systems, ideas and beliefs, as well as one that acknowledges the committed work of creative intellectuals.