

Letter

Heritage and Debt

By the time this letter is printed, *Quand le ciel bas et lourd* (*When the sky is low and heavy*), 1992, an installation by the artist David Lamelas, has most likely been dismantled. Consisting of a trapezoidal steel structure under which three rows of eight trees are planted, the work has occupied a spot on the gravel lawn on the east side of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) for nearly three decades. Yet, as the KMSKA is entering the final phases of its years-long renovation, Lamelas's work has been revealed to be in conflict with the planned design. Several attempts to relocate the work elsewhere on and off the site have been abandoned. Following the obstructive mandate of the Flanders Heritage Agency, Jan Jambon, the Flemish prime minister and minister of culture, has withdrawn his initial support, shifting all responsibility to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp (M HKA), which was gifted the work by the artist in 2011. Lamelas sent a letter to Jambon, stressing the importance of the work and the responsibility of the Flemish government to save it. The same letter carried the support of over 900 signatories from an international community of art professionals. Despite this weighty call, M HKA's director, Bart de Baere, has yet to present concrete plans to secure the work's preservation. Allegedly, the M HKA does not have any budget to cover the estimated cost of the work's relocation, condemning it to an uncertain future.

Quand le ciel bas et lourd, titled after Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, was installed in 1992 as part of the exhibition 'America: Bride of the Sun - 500 Years of Latin America and the Low Countries' at the KMSKA. The show examined the cultural, economic and political exploitation of indigenous Americans by European forces, and its long, often violent



David Lamelas, *Quand le ciel bas et lourd* (*When the sky is low and heavy*), 1992, Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp

project of colonisation and erasure, and made tangential references to Belgium's dark colonial past. Characteristically, Lamelas's installation does not literally express these histories, nor is it reducible to them. Instead, its semantic plurality is central to the work's poetics of repression and conveyance of hope; while some of the trees have grown over the structure, almost hiding it, others have died due to a lack of light and water.

The most pressing question is how does a situation arise in which an emblem of Antwerp's artistic and urban heritage is mismanaged and potentially destroyed and forgotten? As KMSKA's masterplan dates from 2006, why didn't M HKA foresee this problem? If heritage is widely touted as an asset of cities and nations, why is this work disregarded? Indeed, is it not the task of museums and their governments to conserve works, objects and buildings which have become public property? It is worth underlining that when

art is donated to a public museum it is also given to the community, effectively as a gift. But as the sociologist Marcel Mauss states, gifts come with a 'debt'. By accepting the donation, M HKA is legally and morally indebted to the artist, and has a responsibility to protect the work for future generations. In this case, forces - driven by architects and real-estate developers - have gone unmitigated, seemingly promoted by the museums involved or enabled by private consent.

The casual, almost noncommittal response given by the museums to date is truly perplexing. Recognition of these failings needs to be made, an action which would provoke a debate about the future of public artworks, and heritage in general.

Signatures of support can be added at <https://janmot.com/artists/quand-le-ciel-bas-et-lourd>.

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