

FORM Journal
Issue 1: "Time"



VILLA-LEGODI
Centre for Sculpture

Edited by Sven Christian

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FORM is an open-access journal dedicated to sculpture. Initiated by the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture, it aims to enrich critical debate about the medium, adopting an interdisciplinary approach that encourages contributions in all shapes and sizes, from academic texts, interviews, and artistic research to poetry and prose. Each issue grapples with a particular topic that is intentionally broad, allowing for a diversity of perspectives and avenues for engagement.

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TIME

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Willem Boshoff, detail of *Children of the Stars (Big B and Little B)*, 2009. NIROX Sculpture Park. Belfast Black-granite, 330 x 85 x 168 cm (Big B); 262 x 66.5 x 62 cm (Little B). Image courtesy of the artist.

Editorial

Sven Christian

As a journal dedicated to sculpture, it may seem odd that many of the artworks discussed in the first issue of *FORM* have roots in painting, photography, music, performance, and film. I find comfort in Olu Oguibe's expanded view of sculpture and the recognition that today, 'most contemporary art, be it sculpture in all its expanded dimensions or performance or new forms of painting or digital imaging, all the way down to NFTs,' are indebted to art forms and traditions from Africa that broke the rigid confines inhibiting European artists at the turn of the twentieth century from thinking beyond the limits of their respective traditions.

Oguibe's observation highlights the importance of not getting bogged down by reductive definitions, and to not limit our lens in such a way as to curtail a fruitful engagement with other modes of practice that occupy a more fluid ambit. As such, his contribution, "The Question of 'Africanness' and the Expanded Field of Sculpture," which introduces this issue, sets the tone. Rather than focussing on works that fit neatly within formal definitions of sculpture, this issue places emphasis on the *sculptural*. Underpinning all is a focus on time, and with it, memory and loss, boredom and desire, patience and impatience, accumulation and excess, the material and immaterial...

Penned in 2019, Stacy Hardy's "Theme for Exile" can be read as a poetic ode to Dumile Feni. Originally published by *Ellipses* as part of a triptych, the story is based on the author's experience of Feni's scroll at Wits Art Museum (WAM). At once corporeal and ghostly, it gives shape to the shapeless. Like the scroll, its rolling verse thickens and thins. Overflowing ashtrays and empty beer-bottles mark an absent-presence. Repetition fights against loss, excess, obscurity. Yet throughout one senses

the desire to hold on: 'To collect them up, the faces, the voices, pin them to the page. Always that tension, that balance, to cast history into the pit of erasure with one hand and with the other retrieve the shards that can be salvaged, to restore them, deranged by the passage of time.'

This aching futility, the question of how to remember, is echoed in Raqs Media Collective's "The Double Act of Flower-Time." Writing at the intersections between individual and collective memory, their focus is the 'figure of the unknown soldier,' ubiquitous the world-over since the advent of the First World War, and the attempt toward memorialisation. 'The war produced death on such an unprecedented, industrial scale,' write Raqs, 'that the actual dimensions of mortality, and attempts to account for it, could be apprehended in symbolic terms not so much through the figure of the named individual but through the deployment of the figure of the statistical average of casualties — the ghostly residual trace of the anonymous and fatally injured body of an unknown everyman-at-arms.' Here, the tone that marks also carries within it 'a fatigue of the count...' Memory 'straddles a paradox... a negotiation between having to remember, the obligation to mourn, the uncertainty of moments and conditions of its activation, the inability to recall, and the slow grinding requirement to forget and move on.'

We felt this same paradox play out during COVID-19, when fatigue coupled with a 'retreat to the safety of the digital world.' For the artist-duo Thukral and Tagra ("Arboretum"), this retreat exposed a 'glitch' in the 'mechanics of a system or, in this case, a society,' as well as 'a lifting of the veil, exposing who has the privilege of safety and who has no choice but to go on as they were.' Here, the glitch becomes

a constitutive means through which the duo question how to nurture a society that has lost touch with itself and the finite material base on which it depends.

In "Fences: Between Order and Paradox," Marc Ries reflects on Mathias Weinfurter's installation *Indices* (2020) at the HfG Oggenbach in Main, Germany. Produced during COVID-19, the work comprises a film and twin wire-mesh fence, from which 'posts have been removed, cut out; the resulting gaps... inconspicuous to the fleeting eye.' For Ries, these gaps 'signal a sensitive infringement of the disciplinary order. They interrupt the grid's regularity.' So doing, they create a 'foothold,' a means of transgression. Once again, it is the glitch that enables one to overcome a given limit or blindspot.

Importantly, however, Ries pinpoints a second intervention to counteract the first, a mirror, creating the illusion that the fence is whole. 'This restoration of the grid's order, thus of the boundary's power, is a visual effect,' notes Ries, 'a mirage that, on the one hand, reconciles, reassures those who desire the closure, the separation; on the other hand, it remains unsettling, since there is still the hope, the possibility of overcoming the limits set by the boundary.' That Weinfurter draws inspiration for this intervention from 'rehabilitation mirror therapy,' which enables amputees to overcome the 'trauma of the injury and [eliminate] the phantom pain,' should tell us something about the place of memory in the body and the ways in which we might reinscribe order where none exists.

The demarcation and appropriation of space — 'the possession and dispossession of land' — is also central to Sean O'Toole's reflection on the work of Jeremy Wafer, "This is no place for lovely pictures." Recognising the integral (yet overlooked) role of photography

in Wafer's oeuvre, O'Toole unpacks the artist's indexical engagement with and relationship to land, particularly that of his home country, South Africa. The difficulty inherent in O'Toole's paper is implicit in the opening passage, which juxtaposes the nine short days separating Steve Biko's arrest at a roadblock in the Eastern Cape to the shooting of Wafer's *Ashburton* (1977). In contrast to the enforcement of boundaries and the curtailing of Biko's freedom of movement, *Ashburton* depicts the artist 'standing in an unfenced clearing, surrounded by ankle-length grass and thorny scrub,' his arms hung 'limply' at his side. As writes O'Toole, Wafer 'resembles a surveyor's assistant, albeit without a rod or perch to render his action explicable. The wide frame of the composition reduces Wafer to a diminutive presence, a figure, a type, an adult white man standing in an undulating savannah.' O'Toole's observation mirrors Ries's, namely, that fences affirm 'a very old dualism: between an inert, unchanging, proprietary entity and a mobile, changing, non-proprietary entity. In other words, the dualism between property and elements that are free to move.' Later, O'Toole quotes Wafer on his choice of location:

The site chosen was somewhat arbitrary. It was accessible to the road, near enough to the town, not obviously fenced or demarcated: available and 'empty', an open space. There is of course no 'empty' land, all of it being owned and possessed in various forms: freehold, leasehold, traditional communal ownership or more informally claimed and occupied, and in a South African context the possession and dispossession of land has shaped a violent and tragic history.

Where O'Toole positions photography as an instrumental precursor to Wafer's ongoing engagement with land, sculptural or otherwise, my own text, "A Place to Daydream," unpacks the role of photography and social media in

the afterlives of Amine El Gotaibi's ephemeral installation *Sun(w)hole* (2019); the former for its capacity to orientate and the latter to disorientate.

As a rammed earth structure — 'a condensation of both natural and man-made elements: earth and concrete, but also stones, grass, glass' — *Sun(w)hole* epitomises the kinds of sedimentation discussed in Stefanie Koemeda's "Fast Twin." Based on a hypothetical expedition into space, she asks what we might find on our return: 'Human-made *plateaus*,' comprised of 'materials that, although familiar, would be geologically transformed...: cities, monuments, airports, railway networks, and ports' which, subject to weathering and decay, 'would create a sedimentary rock consisting mainly of materials that humans created or enriched — forms comprised of iron, aluminium, bricks, ceramics, and glass...'

Penned while in residence at NIROX, Sudeep Sen's "Quartet of Poems" intuits this plumb-line. A response, in part, to different artworks in the Park — Willem Boshoff's *Children of the Stars* (2009), Richard Long's *Standing Stone Circle* (2011), Richard Forbes's *Sacred I* (2023)... — Sen's poems marry earth and sky; our 'terrestrial histories' bound to 'this fossil-craddled terrain-DNA', this 'cosmic clockwork.'

If Koemeda and Sen cast doubt on the distinction between the "natural" and "artificial" world, Ashraf Jamal's "Dust: An Intimation" — a reflection on the work of Nina Barnett, Jeremy Bolen, and Alexander Oppen — tells us that no such parsing is possible. His essay begins by quoting Michael Marder: 'Humans are nothing but dust looking through dust at dust'; a reminder that the will to order and cleanliness is farcical; that 'life is an ever-forming formlessness, that any manifesto must remain incomplete, that what we espy and deem the truth is nothing other than a gradation in a blur.'

Jamal's words feel apposite within the context of Ramzi Mallat's "Ticking Today and Teetering Tomorrow," a reflection on his work, *We Are What We Know* (2018). Here, however, life's residue takes shape in the form of one-thousand coffee cups, one for each individual encountered by the artist during different tasseography sessions within his community in Lebanon. Described by the artist as 'time capsules,' each cup 'engages with, revives, and reanimates the past, whilst also distorting dormant anterior moments.' Grouped *en masse*, the work raises questions about the nature of personal and collective memory, especially as they relate to nationhood. 'While these cups are revered as a national emblem of Lebanon for having the colours of the flag on them,' explains Mallat, 'they were made in China and imported to serve as trinkets for tourists and nationals to remember the country.' A gap emerges between what one knows and understands of a place, a time, and the objects of memory.

This gap is ever-present in Gary Charles's "Archiving Futures: Digging in the Crates of Always," as well as Inga Somdyala's "The Beloved Country." In the former, we learn about the role of companies like Spotify in flattening our understanding of time and space; creating supposedly universal platforms that enable us to move freely between the local and global whilst collapsing the possibilities for understanding difference and contextual specificity. Similarly, Somdyala's reflection unpacks the use of an arbitrary signifier — the flag — and its capacity to unify. His paper highlights the fraught 'notion of a collective "national identity"' within the context of post-apartheid South Africa. He draws on personal experience of South Africa's education system, as well as the writings of Zakes Mda, Bessie Head, Sol Plaatjie, and Benedict Anderson, to make a case for how 'certain historical narratives are used to forge a national history as something that has existed for eternity, in order to create a

sense of collective identity where none existed before.’ So doing, Somdyala argues that the very ‘idea of nationhood... is haunted by its own inability to consider the full dimensions of history.’

Somdyala’s words resonate with those of Lawrence Lemaona (“I’m Tired of Marching”) whose installation — an automated protest machine — stems from a sense of fatigue, encapsulated by Martin Luther King Jr’s frequently quoted phrase: ‘I’m tired of marching for something that should have been mine at birth.’ As notes Lemaona, ‘That line has become ingrained in society’s psyche. With every generation it reactivates, but differently.’ The repetition of such iconic statements is a common thread in much of his work. While emphasising the importance of what is being said, their repetition across space and time also points towards a particular failure to listen. ‘It’s almost like I’m tired of being tired,’ explains Lemaona. ‘I need an outlet, somebody to do it on my behalf. I need to be able to go chill on the beach, and the machine can speak for me.’

Repetition is also central to the discussion that follows, between Usha Seejarim and Walter Oltmann (“An Antidote to Boredom”). Here, however, it becomes the basis for a sensory, embodied, and transformative engagement with matter, as well as the transformative potential of the accumulation (and by extension, defamiliarisation) of everyday objects. Speaking about her use of clothes’ pegs, Seejarim notes: ‘By itself the peg is quite rigid, but when you join them together they soften. They’re skin like. I can bend and curl them. A peg by itself can’t do that, but as a multiple it can. So it’s about exploring what they can be when they’re together. In the same way that a thread on its own is very different to cloth. Cloth is magic.’

Matter is also an important consideration in Nkgopoleng Moloji’s “Noria Mabasa’s Storied Sculptures.” Writing about *Bird Sculpture* (2020), for example, she observes a push and pull with the ‘structural possibilities of the medium.’ If such a consideration is important for Moloji, however, it is not because of any deconstructive logic, but because, in playing at ‘the edges of a clearly defined pictorial plane,’ the artist refutes the imposed demarcations between art and life, waking and dreaming, this world and the “next.” After Moloji, Mabasa’s art is seen, not as a ‘product of an indeterminable divine intervention but a combination of technical training, dreams, the spiritual, metaphysical and the somatic, all bound together...’ The join is important, if only for its ability to push back against the ‘misreadings and erasures’ that complicate our understanding of Mabasa’s drive, ‘her compulsion to create in the manner that she does.’

Such a merger is also present in Lukho Witbooi’s “Groundwater,” which concludes this issue. Set across two time-zones, 1985 and 2005, his story muddies distinctions between then / now, here / there, waking / dreaming life. In one of the more climatic moments, it even troubles the distinction between its two protagonists, Sibahle and Tsohle; the former attempting to use the latter as a conduit to commune with the world of the living.

It goes without saying that many of the papers gathered herein have lives elsewhere. Which is to say, not all are “new,” and some of those that are will eventually find new life in a different context. My thanks to each of the contributors for allowing us to republish their work. My only hope is that, when read together, the reader is left with some kind of impression, a sense of wonder, perhaps, about the mysteries that shape and give substance to our lives.



Olu Oguibe, detail of *Okwu Muo: Seat for Ala, Anyanwu the Three Virtuous Monks*, 2005. Anyang Public Art Project, Anyang, Korea. Courtesy of the artist.

The Question of 'Africanness' and the Expanded Field of Sculpture

Olu Oguibe

I'd like to thank all the folks who've joined us today. I'm an old fashioned believer that Saturdays are for families or, at least, doing yard work or visiting museums or the small farmers' market. So, thank you for taking the time out. A lot of thanks also go to the organisers of the event, most directly to Dr. Thom and his colleagues, who've been working on this series for a while, and to all the different institutions involved. I'd like to make some general remarks around the topic of our discussion, and then, time permitting, talk about a recent work or two that might demonstrate some of the points or issues pertinent to the subject matter.

At this point I should make a small confession. My confession is that our topic today, namely the "Question of 'Africanness' and the

Expanded Field of Sculpture," is a somewhat peculiar one for me. The peculiar aspect is not the bit about the expanded field of sculpture, but rather the question of Africanness. I have to confess that the question of Africanness is not one that I entertain too often or with much enthusiasm. I should call to mind that nearly thirty years ago, I published a quite contentious paper at the time called "In the 'Heart of Darkness,'" in which I contested the very notion of Africanness, or at least, the received notion of Africanness up to that moment.

Until then, the prevailing notion of Africa and Africanness — especially in the West, but also elsewhere outside the continent — had been exclusively sub-Saharan Black. This seemed incongruous to me for several

reasons, the first being that the ancient town or city from which the continent takes its name was not sub-Saharan. It was the Berber city or kingdom of Ifriqiya in present day Tunisia that the continent was subsequently named after, with the sub-Saharan part still mostly referred to wholly as Ethiopia until well into the eighteenth century AD. In broad historical time, that's quite recent.

While today this might seem one quibble too many, my second reservation was that the continent is still a vast terrain of almost innumerable groups, cultures, and languages of no less vastly disparate migratory histories and delineations. So, the then prevailing notion of an almost given homogeneous Africanness, literally marked with a line in the sand at the bottom of the Sahara, struck me as rather simplistic, by which I mean that term in its proper English form.

That was nearly thirty years ago, and I believe my questioning of that notion did occasion a significant revision in the way it would subsequently be applied to narratives and critiques of contemporary art from the continent.

About a decade or so after "In 'the Heart of Darkness'" was published, I had a rather interesting experience which brought up, once more, the question of Africanness. This time it was, in fact, in relation to what we refer to in this discussion as "the expanded field of sculpture." In 2005, I was invited along with several contemporary artists from different parts of the globe to make new public work for an urban regeneration project in Korea. The Korean project director was a friend and colleague with whom I had participated in other previous international projects. I travelled to Korea and, with the project director, visited several sites in Anyang Valley where the project was sited. The old

resort-town of Anyang is located between Mt. Anyak and Mt. Samsung, outside Seoul. This is the mountain from which the giant electronics company takes its name.

When I returned to Connecticut, I spent a great many long nights in the studio hashing out ideas for a public sculpture which I then sent to the director. He had already accepted my initial idea, which was to make a work that would acknowledge a small group of ancient Buddhist monks, known in Korean mythology as the Three Monks of Great Virtue, who once had a monastery not far from the site. My work would take the form of an altar comprised of a seat placed on a large boulder we found on site. This was pretty much in line with my practice of situating public work historically within its site, rather than shopping the same idea around or, to quote Trinh Tin Min-ha's seminal essay on the subject, "from one place to another." To reflect that this work was a gift from my culture to the site in honor of the monks, I gave it the Igbo name for an altar or shrine. So, now, it came down to what form this altar seat would take, and my idea was decidedly modernist and very minimalist. In architecture and furniture, those are my preferences.

However, when I sent the sketches to my friend, his response was quite brief. We would like something "African," he said. Now, that took me aback. What did he mean by something "African"? I'd innocently presumed, or rather taken for granted, that today, in the twenty-first century, anything I make as an African is inherently and invariably African, as well. But not so my colleague. He determinedly wished for a form or object which is easily and clearly visually distinguishable as "African" in reference and origin. Authorship alone, or even along with concept, was not enough. The form had to be identifiably African. But how?

In discussion, it soon became evident that this was not an argument I could win if I wanted the project to succeed. I had made other major public work in Asia where the question of Africanness did not arise, and was not an issue. This time, however, I felt like I could almost understand why, in a large field of artists that was, in fact, bound to increase over the years as the project expanded, my friend wished for a certain variety in approach and languages that might reflect different cultures from different geographies. So, a somewhat predictable or easily recognisable Africanness seemed in order to expect. Which in itself still did not address what this Africanness might entail or visually resemble.

In the end, given the importance of the concept in both of our views, I chose to drop the idea of modernist sculpture and instead interpret the seat for the altar in easily identifiable form by modelling it on an Igbo stool, which we then had cut in crystal and backed with a separate "back" of mirror-finish stainless steel, not visible in the image. It wasn't entirely clear to me that the new form would translate Africanness any more than my participation in itself should, but it did satisfy the desire or wish, and we made what, in my thinking, was a successful work.

What all this implies, to me, is that there inevitably has to be several different ways of interpreting or demonstrating "Africanness," one of which is to offer references to, or reinventions of, traditional or precolonial forms from the continent. But that's only one way of seeing. There is a more important understanding of the defining place of Africanness in the expanded field of sculpture, one which, it could be argued, may or may not have been apparent to my colleague, and that is the fact that almost all modern and contemporary sculpture bear an element of Africanness, irrespective of where they're made or who by.

I say almost all because there are extant traditions and tendencies in modern and contemporary sculpture that may have parallels in traditions of form in Africa, but do not owe to those traditions or influences directly or indirectly. It is a huge world. Most, however, owe directly, along quite brief lineages, to traditions of form that entered global modern art and creative practices round about the turn of the twentieth century.

In many respects, this is ground that's been plowed over one too many times, and not always for the right reasons. The more salient points can, in fact, be easily summarised.

The encounter between African art and European art, especially at the end of the nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth centuries, stripped the latter of its pretentious and often misinformed allusions to classical Greek and Roman art, especially in sculpture. And, while leading European artists directly modelled their new forms after objects and traditions from Africa, the most significant change was that those objects and traditions from Africa liberated European and eventually all modern and contemporary artists globally, and gave them license, as it were, to think of art and form and colour and concept in entirely new ways and without inhibition or limitations on the imagination. Looking at objects and art traditions from Africa and realising that a sculptor did not have to hew stone like Michelangelo did or like Phidias was mistakenly supposed to have done, or create formulaic bronze figures and groups narrating or approximating romanticist, neo-classical allegories along stiflingly narrow and often repetitive parameters, but instead, could break out and re-imagine form and discard singular perspective and use or incorporate hitherto decidedly non-sculptural materials going by European academic standards, and create assemblages and collages and animated

situations once consigned to puppetry or the circus, and recombine these with dance and theatre like West or Central Africans do, and bring it all under art with or without delineations.

This realisation also encouraged artists to then return to other traditions within their own cultures that they were otherwise wont to ignore in favour of the Western academic tradition, and rediscover and study and try to reclaim those other traditions and reinsert them in extant practices.

That is the ultimate element of Africanness in the expanded field of sculpture, that freedom and liberty to stretch the definitions of sculpture and the sculptural beyond traditional ideas of making or imaging, and produce integrated, multivalent new creations that draw on not just form and space but multiple realms of existence and experience and impact on all the senses. And that element of limitless possibility, that African element of infinite daring and jest and subterfuge and implausible inventiveness, is what most contemporary art still rides on, be it sculpture in all its expanded dimensions or performance or new forms of painting or digital imaging, all the way down to NFTs. The very idea that an electronically-resident algorithm could be art — that's African. And this Africanness defined modern art, as it still defines global contemporary art on and from every continent.

I would argue that this is the more important element of Africanness which is evident in my own practice, especially because I decided or chose quite early in my career, or perhaps, it was chosen for me by a natural rebellious temperament, to make work which is not predictable, particularly with regard to form. My work would in essence explore the full freedom that sculptors and artists in old African societies demonstrated in their eclectic and

uninhibited choices, letting theme and purpose and occasion determine my methods rather than stick to a formula or work within any restrictions. I think this aesthetic freedom may be seen in the recent and still ongoing projects that I've been working on, and I think we just saw that in Johan's presentation. We see it all around in contemporary art. You go back to the fourteenth century, the fifteenth century, right up until the nineteenth century, and hardly any of that would be accepted within the definitions of sculpture in the Western tradition, but today that's what we do. We keep pushing the envelope and we keep pushing the limits because African art gave modern and contemporary art the licence to do so.

At this point, I would like to try and bring up some images of a particular work and round out with a discussion of the work itself. It began its journey in South Africa in 2018, when Johan and Benji Liebmann, the founder of NIROX, invited me to do a residency there. I wanted to do something specific to South Africa. There was no shortage of ideas and subject matter, but the more important project which really brought me to NIROX and to South Africa, with Johan's help, was to address a very contentious issue in South Africa, one which eventually took controversial form in the figure of a young woman named Nokuphila Kumalo, who was murdered in 2013, and who happened to be a sex worker.

[Shows a digital rendering or sketch of Nokuphila Kumalo, published in an article by Ra'eesa Pather in the Mail & Guardian on 1 December 2016]

Some of you might be familiar with the story of this young woman, whose photograph, we are told, does not exist. Nokuphila Kumalo was a sex worker in Cape Town. As some of you might remember, she was murdered by someone who turned out to be a very



Olu Oguibe, installation view of *Pink and White Flowers*, 2018. Botanical Gardens of the North-West University, South Africa. Courtesy of the artist.

prominent South African artist, someone whom I knew quite well and someone whose career many of us had contributed to promote in some way, because he was a fantastic artist, but it did turn out that he was much more than the artist that we all used to love at some point and all supported. Now, Nokuphila was brutally kicked to death on the sidewalk on an early morning in April 2013, and I wanted to address that. I wanted to do something, to make something that centres around her, but also use that to address not just the question of sex work itself, but the subject of sexual violence in South Africa, in Africa, and wherever else it still occurs (and it does, at an astronomical level).

I took my lead from an interview that Nokuphila's mother gave after she died, when she explained that she had no photographs of her daughter. The one thing that her mother remembered was that she loved pink and white flowers. So, I wanted to make a public memorial of sorts using pink and white flowers. We explored several ideas and finally I settled on the idea of using live flowers.

The other side of the idea is that, because these were live plants which we couldn't just leave there (I didn't want to make them permanent because that then becomes a burden), I decided that we would encourage visitors to take these plants home, and take

care of them, and plant them in their gardens or keep them in their kitchens, and, insofar as they do that, to remember this young woman and remember her story, and remember how she came to such a violent and abrupt death at such a young age. And perhaps use these flowers in their home as a teaching tool; as something that someone can use to explain to their children why this plant is in their home and how they got it, and then to tell the story of this young woman.

I used 4,500 plants to create this installation at the University of North West in Potchefstroom. Eventually, people did take the plants. I thought it was a good way to realise what I had in mind. However, I did not want this to be the end of the project. I wanted it to be a living project that could be revisited again and again in different contexts.

The next opportunity came in 2020, in the form of an invitation to participate in Sonsbeek, which is a public art festival in the Netherlands. The project director this time was Dr. Bonaventure Ndikung. For Sonsbeek, I



thought I might recreate the monument in South Africa on a much larger scale, given the nature of the festival, but sticking to those pink and white flowers. That was my initial proposal.

As it happens — and you have to be flexible — we could not realise that initial proposal for an interesting reason, namely that I wanted to use live tulips, I wanted us to plant a whole field of them, pink and white varieties, but I was told after much consultation that, given the time we had and because of climate change, we could not predict how the flowers would turn out. They might not turn out pink, they might not even bloom, they might bloom at a different time, but we needed them to bloom for the show, so it was made clear to me that, to meet the deadline, we could not pursue that idea. That's how I decided to do the work differently, taking the path of more or less traditional public sculpture. The result was these neon sculptures; in a way using neon to reference sex work, to a certain degree.

To conclude, I should mention that this work is ongoing. It's returning to South Africa in November in a number of different forms, as a work on paper but also as a smaller sculpture. Myself, Johan, and a number of collaborators also hope to bring this back to South Africa next year, which would be the tenth anniversary of Nokuphila's death, and perhaps convene a symposium, conference, gathering, or seminar to address the issue of sexual violence, as well as the challenges of sex work in South Africa.

I'll probably round up there, and I think the whole point of this presentation — mine or Johan's — is really to point out that what African art or Africanness brought to our practices, and contemporary practice, is that licence to explore beyond stone or bronze sculpture or white alabaster, and explode the very idea of what sculpture is — to make



Olu Oguibe, *Sex Work is Honest Work*, 2020. Neon light. sonsbeek20–24 . Photo: Django van Ardenne. Courtesy of the artist.

it live; whatever needs to be used to convey a certain idea in sculptural form. That idea of the sculptural being completely blown apart, that's the Africanness in modern and contemporary practice. It's the Africanness in my own practice that I stick to, rather than the predictable ideas of what Africanness is.

This paper was first presented on 24 September 2022, as part of a webinar of the same title, hosted by The Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts in United States (IDSVA); The African Centre for the Study of the United States at the University of the Witwatersrand (ACSUS-Wits); The African Centre for the Study of the United States at the University of Pretoria (ACSUS-UP); and the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture at NIROX Sculpture Park.

Olu Oguibe is an artist, author and curator.

Oguibe a seminal figure in contemporary (African) artistic practice with artistic, curatorial and theoretic outputs that include exhibitions as part of the Venice, Johannesburg and Havana Biennales, Documenta in Kassel, Sonsbeek and numerous others; the curation of major national and international exhibitions and projects; and the authoring of key texts in relation to the study and dissemination of contemporary African art such as "The Culture Game" (2004) and "Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace" (2000) among others. Oguibe is a senior fellow at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at New School and the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC. Amongst his many major works are Monument for Strangers and Refugees (2017), Biafra Time Capsule (2017) and Sex work is honest work (2021).

Theme for Exile

Stacy Hardy

Waking late. The light falls through the curtain,
shards of light like blades: that image, fleeting.
And then again: the light, falling, slicing the room.

Outside the street is empty.

A cough. Spitting on the sidewalk. The buzz of
moonlight catching white teeth.

A bar. At a table hunkering down for the
afternoon. Ashtray overflowing, almost-empty
pack in nervous tatters, empty bottles of beer.
Waste accumulates in spaces.

Like memory.

Whole nights in the bar, smoking cigarettes,
watching, observing who is in love, who isn't,
who wanted to be, who lost it, irretrievable loss.
How the body transforms, footprints of past
loves, echoes that skewer the knees, curve the
back, sully the mouth. The shape of longing, of
hunger, of fullness, of boredom and waiting, and
waiting, and wanting, and of fear, of guilt, and
pain, intense pain, sadness, loss.

The shape of loss.

Later walking the streets. Actively seeking out darkness, the shadows where objects vanish, contours barely perceived, where creatures look alike.

Too afraid to go home.

The silence and cold of the apartment.

The canvases stretched against the wall. The unfinished work that taunts him.

So much unfinished.

Memories. The ghostly trails they leave.

Reciting by heart phone numbers of dead friends.

Sometimes, often without warning, their voices, partially forgotten, with the days, the months, long lost, dearly departed, faces, voices, dropped along the way, along the streets, within the history's mute erasure. And they talk, exchange stories.

Names written in blue ball-point pen, scrawled notes, to a friend, a brother, and with love, and yours forever, always, and write back soon, swear you'll never forget me.

The drift, the drink, the dark rooms.

White buildings, grey buildings; trails spinning
out between them.

Out front by the building's steps, a wreckage
of glass. Light trapped in it. Exploding lines
cutting the darkness.

Dark already, almost dark. Almost
November already.

Counting days, nothing adding up.

Always too much time. Too much of too little.

An excess that cannot be contained.

Inside, the mess in the sink. A dirty glass.
Rimmed red. A single bead of water from the
tap. A constant sound, ta, ta, ta, the beat of a
tongue across the roof of the mouth.

Things unspoken.

Separations. November rainstorms. Leaks.

A door you can't go back through.
Shutting himself in for days, weeks. Until
time vanishes. Working as if in a fever. Days
without stopping. Through the night and
again in the morning.

To collect them up, the faces, the voices, pin
them to the page. Always that tension, that
balance, to cast history into the pit of erasure
with one hand and with the other retrieve the
shards that can be salvaged, to restore them,
deranged by the passage of time.

How that derangement guides the hand,
traces the movements, transformations,
intertwinings, bends the line, slants it.

Bending then standing. The artist steps back
from the picture. Squints and then turns off the
light. Looks into the dark, because it's dark
outside, at this time of year it's dark, or almost
dark, always almost dark, all day long.
It's afternoon. A few minutes later, it's past
midnight.

He stares until his pupils adjust, shrink
towards the darkness, welcome it. It enters,
swallows details, gets inside and mutates
things. A trick, they say, of the light, but it is the
eyes that are tricked. The eyes that vanish.

His body is numb. His hands move as if by themselves — no it is the voices that guide them.

Conversations from smokemouth to smokemouth. The voices of old friends, shaking hands, clasped suddenly, or held too long. He tries to still them, bend fingers into a fist but it is too late, late afternoon or past midnight, already that dark, already drunk, still drunk, shaking badly, whole body shaking. Still drunk he thinks, or not drunk enough, and everything is, yes. An emptiness. A nothingness. The error that occurs in dissolving and recombining.

A distance? Yes, maybe yes, yes maybe it's a distance, he thinks. A loss.

Reaching to retrieve it. Already his hand is moving, reaching into the darkness. Pulling out a shape.

A woman.

An embrace, a quiet falling, slow leakage into unknown alphabets.

The same woman. Again and again.

He can't remember exactly what her face looked like, though sometimes he recalls her mouth, her hair, her nose, her eyes, how they widened and shrunk in strong light. Not a face, but features floating in the twilight. He

stirs them, and they recast, drift into darkness,
threaten to vanish.

A mother.

A lover.

Entanglement of lives, of limbs. Of faces. Of
voices, the faces, the stories they tell. They
enter, pass through him like ghosts.

Come, she says. Holds out her hand to him
and he goes to her and takes her hand and
they stand for a moment. And then she opens
her arms and puts them around him and
holds him close. Enfolds him.

Hair fist.

Mouths entangled.

Blood, bones. One voice carrying another.
The echo is insurgent.

Hands over and under. Hold. Bite neck.
The crook of an elbow. Arms outstretched,
becoming talons. Fingers twined into ribs.

An interplay of breaths, as the word,
exhausted, finds other forms, more from the
lungs than the vocal cords, more of a sound,
a rhythm.

A family album half-erased by time, wind,
pages filled with names for love, for loss.
Filling in the blanks. Too many blanks. Too
many absences.

Theme for a mother and a father. To embrace
it, hopelessly. To revel in loss and darkness.
In the middle of the night, with no other
witness, with nothing to predict the closeness
between the hand and the page.

The closeness of the woman, no just her
mouth. A mouth, moving. Murmurings,
rustlings. It fills the night, the darkness.

You must return, she was saying, you have to
return, even as you move away. Only then...

Only what?

He looks around, but everything is dark. Pitch
black. He cannot see. Physicality has begun
to dissipate.

An eyeless foot, an hourless hand.

Tongue wet with injury.

The bones of his tongue crack on the roof of
his mouth.

A body becoming snarled and tinted. A
broken body imagined in half-light.

Cold. He coughs. Reaches for a pen.

No, he thinks, it's all too much and I'm just too
tired.

Worn out, dirty.

The way that dirty is the feel of reenactment.

The same sweater worn for weeks. That black
scarf.

Days passing, out of the reach of the sun.

Time measured in cups of coffee, in ashtrails.

A pale dawn as thin as cigarette paper.

Rolling it.

Matches scraped, flared. The dancing point
of a cigarette's ember.

Bent over a photocopy of a photocopy.
An old letter, a stack of books and records,
trying to fill in the letters between.

The more times an image is copied, the
more its quality degrades. *The term for this is
generation loss.*

He works in the loss. In the darkness — into
it, already dark, pitch dark, black, a few
hours before morning, over and over, the
space where one story trails off and another
begins, oddly muddled, between what some
might have thought and what they dared to
utter, beyond what no one was sure of but
everybody recollected, or within what only
he imagined. Not an autobiography, the
story of a life, of a generation, of loss, exile,
death, of what happened. No, rather he
draws, is drawn, into the silences, over and
over again. What wasn't but could have
been, what is yet to come, until his hands
erode, disappear into the gap, what has
been left, left out, refuses to be seen.

Again and again, into furrow and
convolution he plants his image, which
outgrows, outgrows itself.

A story of twilight. Of being devoured. Of
devouring.

Of desire. Silence.

The gnawing drone home, home, home.

A book of time, for time and because of it. A book for recovery from sickness, homesickness, homelessness. An amen book that repeats an image until that image recuperates its power to attract, or touch, other images. To break them open.

A book as a time machine.

A way to travel.

Events unfolding both after and before.

This time soweto. This time, memory...
The way the streets shone, the glow of afternoons. The smell of sun, of smoke. Dry summer heat relentless.

That summer. The walls were hot, the sun beat. But there was lightness in the air; a sweet wind whipping their faces. Languages was loosened, fear dissipated, and the heavy rope of history slipped momentarily free.

Hunkered houses hemmed by bone and cartilage fences. Dogs trotting the peripheries, sniffing at the ash and junk. Rolling hills accumulate. Their shapes breathing. Smelling the grass quiver. Smiling in the streaks of every laugh. Living, dancing feet first. Snakes uncoil and two lion-headed dogs gleam in the sunlight. A row of eyes

flash, knees hurl bodies, sister gathers her
song, touches the claws. The swollen udders
of ghosted cows spurt incendiary milk.
Everybody clapping, the smell of sweat, of
clothes washed in sunlight, cigarettes, smoke,
bullets, burnt rubber.

The memory tears off a limb from his body.
Good-byes and absences, a great furious
tear. Eyes the colour of air, of the abyss.

Time seals, the firmament becomes overfull.
An image that exceeds the page. Hardly any
space left, not even for shadows. An image
that exceeds all drawing. Impossible to glide
the body into image, mutating form, from
blood to blood-line, and excavate organs
for what's left to salvage. He chews the word
in his jaws, lets meaning burrow into molars,
seep in crevasses between root and bone.

The pain of his mother's face.

A man in the foreground like the wind has
shoved him to the front of the paper. A poet,
limbs loose, his body bent by exile. A finished
man, a shadow, a song, a last song. His
words buried under grey stones.

At night the dogs dig them up, recite poems
to the street.

Standing again. Drawing away from the
street, from the dogs. From hunger. Drawing
away from memory's fire, from the wind.

The word family, Freedom. Brittle words
between his teeth.

In the evening, in the dark on white paper.
Even in the dark, he thinks, the only thing
now is to fill himself with beauty, stretch
himself out. Again and again, into furrows
and convolutions he plants his image, which
outgrows, outgrows itself. A scrolling canvas,
a communion.

At dusk a mother's final farewell.

All your journeys are a return.

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the author's experience with Dumile
Feni's scroll during a project titled "You
wouldn't know God if he Spat in your
Eye" (2020), curated by Sven Christian.

Stacy Hardy is a writer, an editor with pan African collective Chimurenga, and a lecturer in creative writing at UCKAR. Her writing has appeared in a wide range of publications and a collection of her short fiction, Because the Night, was published in 2015. She regularly collaborates with Angolan composer Victor Gama on multimedia works that have been performed around the world and her experimental performance piece, "Museum of Lungs," created together with Laila Soliman, Neo Muyanga, and Nancy Mounir, toured globally. She is a research fellow at Chicago University and is currently working on a research and performance-based collaborative endeavour exploring biographies and geographies of breath. She is also the librettist for a new opera which won the prestigious Fedora-Generali Prize for Opera 2020 and will premier at Festival D'aix-En-Provence, France in 2022.



Raqs Media Collective, still from *Film VII (Shadows), Not Yet at Ease*, 2018. Image courtesy of the artists.

The Double Act of Flower-Time

Raqs Media Collective

"Sipāhī aaj bhī koī nahīn aayā, (na?) kisī ne phool hī bheje."

"Soldier, once again, no one came today, but someone sent flowers. Or did no one send flowers?"

— Iftikhar Arif, *Gumnaam Sipahi ke Qabr Par*
(At the Grave of the Unknown Soldier)¹

Prologue

A flock of starlings takes flight. Starlings mimic, they click, wheeze, chatter, whistle, wolf-whistle, rattle and pipe. They have a flock call, a threat call, an attack call, a snarl call, and a call for copulation. Starlings fall silent when guns start to speak. But a flock of starlings is called a murmuration because even when completely silent, the flapping of hundreds and thousands of starling wings makes a whoosh, a loud murmur that can be

heard at a fair distance.

The First World War forced a rapid drop in starling sightings.²

War is not only about fighting.

War never is.

Someone has to clean the mess.

Someone has to touch the dead soldiers with their hands,

Someone has to cook the food,

Someone has to tend to the horses,

Someone has to grease the wheels of tanks,

Someone has to fetch water,

Someone has to carry the loads that need carrying,

Someone has to dig trenches,

Someone has to dig wells,

Someone has to clear mines,

Someone has to play the flute on a foggy morning.

War makes demands.

It's been heard there was a mule mutiny on the Bombay docks in the early years of the Great War. A pacifist mule, perhaps a conscientious objector or a rebel who did not want to fight the war of five kings, stood its ground and would not walk up the ramp on to the ship going to Iraq, though no mule after him dared break ranks. Some men then hoisted the beast on their shoulders and bore it triumphantly up the gangway and into the hold: that mule literally smiled over the trouble he was giving. Momentarily, the hostilities of the War are delayed because of one mule in Bombay.³

The sun is almost above.

Three women-shaped ghosts, three figures, extend their arms, turn away and towards.

A drum beats, a dozen hands clap in rhythm and the figures turn and turn again.

Who are these figures who haunt so?⁴

1. Excerpted from the Urdu poem, *Gumnaam Sipahi ke Qabr Par* (At the Grave of the Unknown Soldier) by Iftikhar Arif, taken from *Mahr-e-Do Neem* (Pg. 79) a collection of Arif's poems, published by Educational Publishing House, Delhi / Hussain's, London, 1983/84. Freely translated.

2. Food began to run out, and many of the Indian troops could or would not eat what meat there was. The defenders' draught animals, the oxen, were the first to go, followed by their horses, camels, and finally, starlings, cats, dogs and even hedgehogs. "The Tragedy of Kut," by Ross Davies, *The Guardian*, 20 November 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/20/iraq.features11>.

3. Taken from the Spoken Word script of "Not Yet At Ease". The reference to the mutiny of a solitary mule in Bombay is taken from *On Two Fronts: Being the Adventures of an Indian Mule Corps in France and Gallipoli*, by Major H.M. Alexander, Heinemann, London, 1917.

4. Taken from the Spoken Word Script of "Not Yet At Ease." The reference here is to a photograph that is treated and featured in one of the overall nine videos that are part of "Not Yet At Ease." The specific photograph being referred to here is identifiable as Indian Porter Corps open theatre at Kut, taken by Ariel Vargas in Kut, Mesopotamia/Iraq, in 1918. Collection of the Imperial War Museum (Item Number: Q24576. © Imperial War Museum).



Raqs Media Collective, still from *Film VII (Shadows)*, *Not Yet at Ease*, 2018. Image courtesy of the artists.

Scrawl-Lines to Thickets

Figuring out what is remembered of the experience of life on a daily basis, or over a lifetime, or across lifetimes, is a perplexing endeavour.

From a biological explanatory frame, forms of recollection (like other kinds of mental activity), are physical, bio-chemical-electrical processes occurring in the brain and the nervous system of human beings. Given the structure, composition, and finite capacity of the human brain, given that it is a jelly-like mass of entangled tissue encased in bone, it is almost impossible to visualise the accretion of individual bits of memory, of their infinite accumulation as physical units over time.

Were this accumulation to have its way, the brain would soon run out of space. Our heads would ache, and burst. No human head has room enough for all the moments of even a single day were they to be piled up as a cairn of memories. It is almost impossible to visualise

memory as a 'mere' accretion of seconds, over a day, over a decade, over a lifetime.

Humans fumble towards the future, keeping alive a thing, a process, an accumulation so transient, so incomplete, so ephemeral. Some remembrances strive to outdo time and oblivion through marks of permanence; it comes perhaps from a recognition and refusal of this fragility. And then, it is possible too, to think of acts and ways of living with both praise and anticipation, like repeated, anonymous offerings of flowers at the grave of the unknown soldier, as in our poet's poignant epigram.

Contemporary neuro-science has an account of long-term memory via the activity of the 'memory molecule' — calcium/calmodulin-dependent protein kinase II. It is alike in rats, raccoons, and humans. This substratum of biochemical-electrical process, a charged soup of enzymes and proteins, is the travel paths of sense data — vision, sound, smell, touch, even love or danger — from one neuron to another across synapses.

A re-awakened memory is the re-activation of a pathway. The more something is remembered, the more pathways become etched. When memories connect to memories, electro-chemical paths meet and fork. Eventually, what forms is a thicket of recollections within a thicket of charged pathways.

Memory, we could say, is the scrawling, hand-drawn map of this thicket. This is what a remembered life is. When memories from different lives intersect, we begin to grope at mingled webs of scrawls of lines. A small part of it is called history.

Neurobiology further goes on to explain that an activation of electrochemical signal paths necessary for memory to form requires particular enzymes. These enzymes are already present within the brain and nervous system at a cellular level, in a molecular

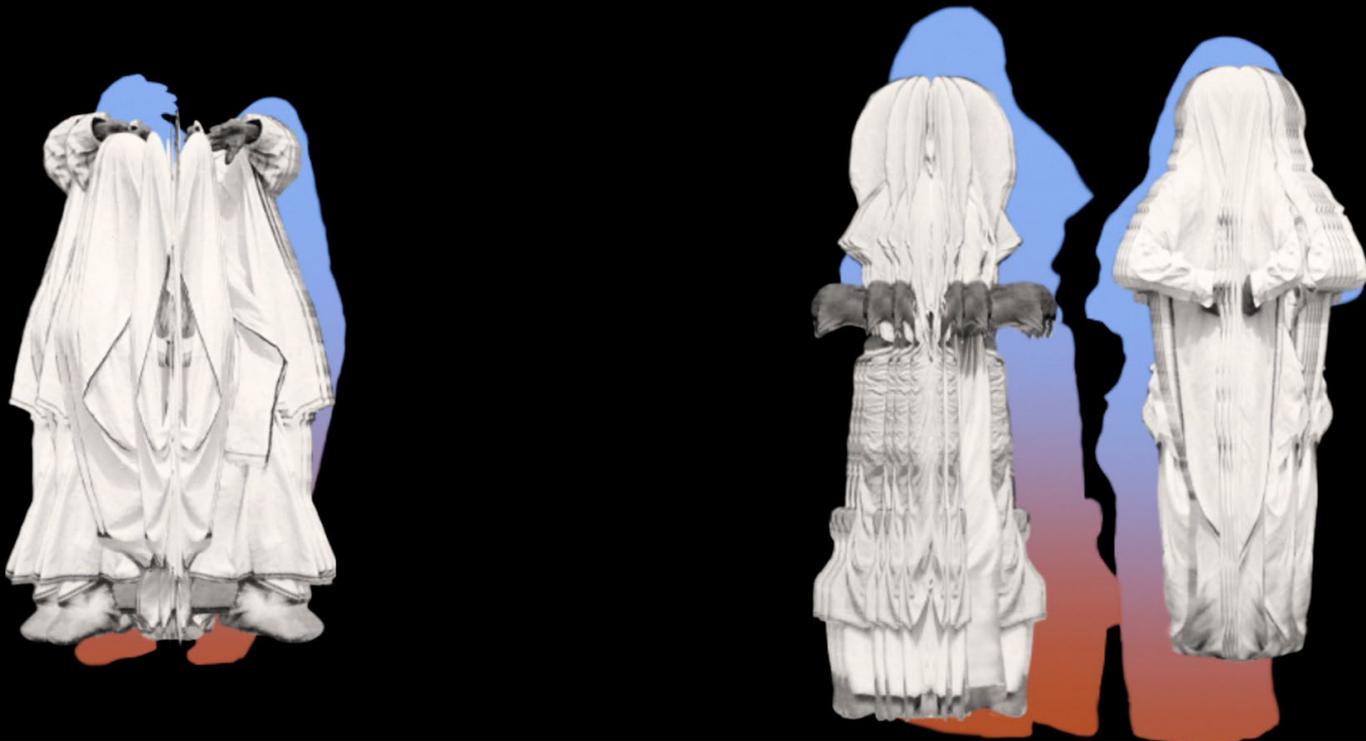
state. They rarely last longer than a few days, sometimes just a few hours. But, for a memory to be durable, these enzymes have to be functional in a sustained way across a larger span of time. It is here that the idea of memory-chain comes in. The enzymes operate in clusters, staging synaptic relays of 'off', to another 'on', and recruiting new points, keeping the process going. Though individual molecules turn off, clusters themselves continue, ensuring that the 'path' stays open, despite a host of other biochemical storms in the brain.⁵

And so, memories endure.

This 'endurance' is accompanied by a parallel process of 'forgetting' — a pruning of neuronal connections frees up memory.

“Many of the men show a tendency to break into poetry, which I am inclined to regard as a rather ominous sign of mental disquietude.”⁶

5. Memory Erasure Experiments Indicate a Critical Role of CaMKII in Memory Storage, Tom Rossetti, Somdeb Banerjee, Chris Kim, Bomsol Lee, Rachael Neve & John Lisman, NEURON, Vol. 96, Iss. 1, P207-216.E2, 27 September 2017.
6. Report of Evelyn Berkeley Howell, Chief Censor of Indian Military Correspondence in France, January 1915.



Raqs Media Collective, still from *Film VII (Shadows), Not Yet at Ease*, 2018. Image courtesy of the artists.

The Mnemes Dilemma

Herodotus defined what he was doing as an effort to ensure that the “deeds of men not be erased by time.”⁷ This ‘effort against erasure’ relied on the construction of structures and epitaphs that would or could act as concrete bearers of memory, an account of some humans and what had happened to them and by them, and how they would be remembered.

Herodotus’ list of fourteen of these mnemes — memory structures — in his account of the Persian wars, may be amongst the earliest objects to be recognised as ‘memorials.’ These are not concrete instance of private remembrance to the deceased by surviving intimates — family and friends. Instead, the mnemes at Thermopylae that Herodotus talks about are structures dedicated to the perpetuation of public memorialisation. It

is strangers made familiar, abridged and intelligible to strangers yet to come.

Mnemes become relics; relics turn into ruins and disappear in the undergrowth of time. But the pathways they activate stay open, as gesture leads to gesture, and then another, in a chain of markings through time, across generations. Like an enzyme cluster. An instance of an idea may disintegrate, but it is quickly replaced by other mnemes that etch further nervous paths through history.

Or not. Undergrowth can pull everything within it, rendering it unremarkable.

The proliferation after the First World War of memorials to the ‘unknown soldier’ — the quintessential stranger of the twentieth century — is an instance of this at work.⁸ The war produced death on such an unprecedented, industrial scale, that the actual dimensions of mortality, and attempts to account for it,

could be apprehended in symbolic terms not so much through the figure of the named individual but through the deployment of the figure of the statistical average of casualties — the ghostly residual trace of the anonymous and fatally injured body of an unknown everyman-at-arms.

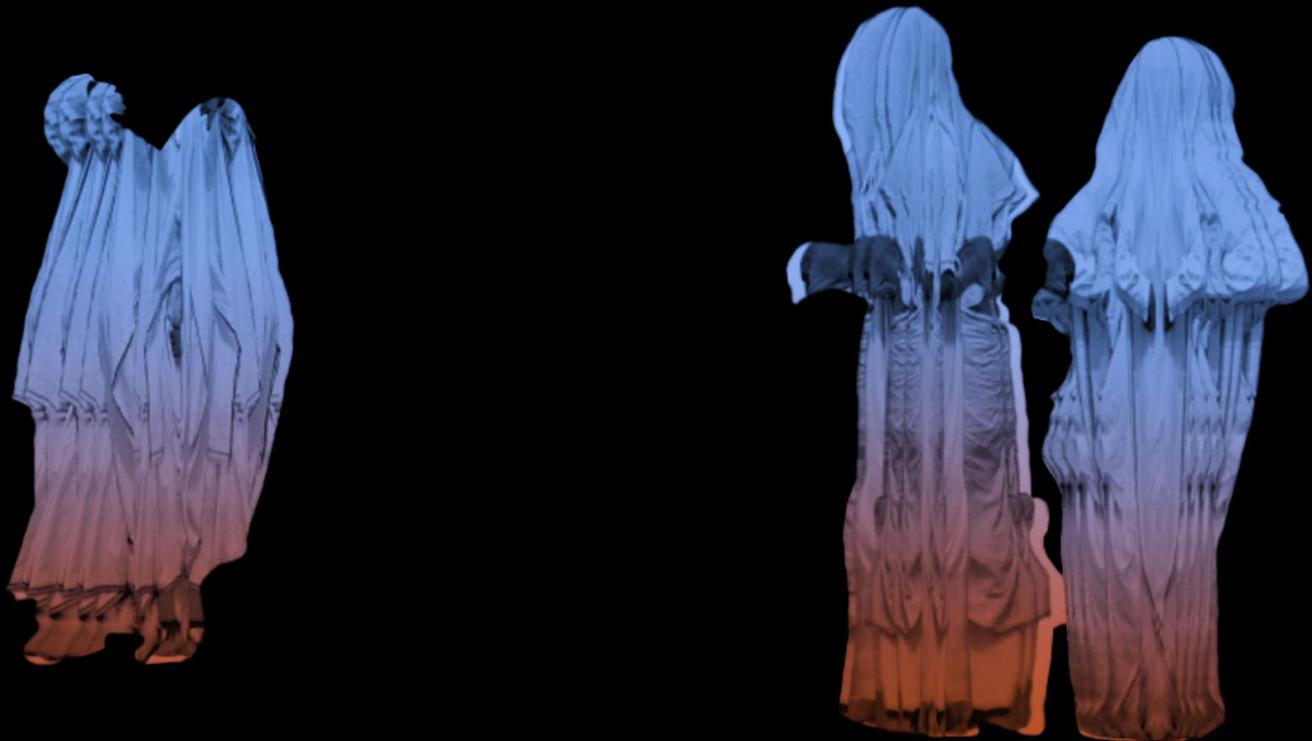
While detailed and meticulous keeping of the records of the dead and injured, with name, affiliation, and rank, did occur (and was sometimes faithfully engraved on stone, like in the inner walls of Delhi's India Gate), it was the unnamed, unnumbered, unknown figure of the dead or 'missing-in-action' soldier that came to embody the consequences of the new kind of war that had been unleashed.

His thoughts begotten at clear sources,
Apparently in air, fall from him
Like chantering from an abundant
Poet, as if he thought gladly, being
Compelled thereto by an innate music.

— Wallace Stevens,
'Examination of the Hero at a Time of War'

Typically, this spirit was kept animated by the burning of a gaslit 'eternal flame.'

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7. Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 1, Part 1, translated by Robin Waterfield, Oxford Classics, Oxford University Press, 2008.
 8. "The first 'Tomb of the Unknown Soldier' was unveiled on the second anniversary of the armistice, 11 November 1920... The unprecedented mobilisation of mass armies and the quasi-anonymous character of the war and of many of the fallen soldiers made his a universally understandable and seemingly pertinent solution." *Public Monuments : Art in Political Bondage - 1870-1997*, Sergiusz Michalski, Reaction Books, London, 1998. Pg. 78.



PAGES 45-51: Raqs Media Collective, Stills from *Film VII (Shadows)*, *Not Yet at Ease*, 2018. Courtesy of the artists.

Don't go don't go
Stay back my friend.
Crazy people are packing up,
Flowers are withering and friendships are breaking.
Stay back my friend.
O train, move slowly
You have a passenger bound for Basra
Hearing the news of the war
Leaves of trees got burnt.
War destroys towns and ports, it destroys huts
Graves devour our flesh and blood
Alas, I couldn't talk to him to my heart's content
The string flew with the kite.⁹

A Paradox

Every year following the First World War has seen armed hostilities between nation-states, or within a nation-state as it combats with proto-state clusters.¹⁰ The figure of the unknown soldier has multiplied exponentially. The invocation of this spectral body is occasioned by a new kind of war in a new century. It has left no country, no society, no culture untouched. Perhaps it is the single most pervasive figural move of the twentieth century.

The Unknown Soldier is everywhere. The entire world is his shallow grave.

The rash of commemoration from the First War onwards, apart from cloning statues of soldiers at attention with their weapons presented in a funereal salute position, has laid down a template for a tone — heroic and somber — of ‘public art’. It inflects murals, pavilion designs, statues of great men and some women, as well as different kinds of non-military ‘memorial sculpture’ commemorating atrocities and tragedies. The tone that marks also carries within it a fatigue of the count, a loss of the count.

Memory straddles a paradox.

Inscribing a mark on a difficult and unstable surface of historical violence is always going to be tough. As time passes, reasons to remember historical violence of a not-so-long ago war resurge if the rhetoric that had underwritten that episode resurrect in new

incarnations, with new pressure points. At the same time, the ability to recall the particularity of attendant events grows weak.

This paradox of memory is a negotiation between having to remember, the obligation to mourn, the uncertainty of moments and conditions of its activation, the inability to recall, and the slow grinding requirement to forget and move on.

This, then, is the force field within which public art stands when it says it commemorates.

This text first appeared in *Routledge Companion to Art in the Public Realm* (2021), edited by Cameron Cartiere and Leon Tan.

*Raqs Media Collective (*1992, by Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta). The word "raqs" in several languages denotes an intensification of awareness and presence attained by whirling, turning, being in a state of revolution. Raqs take this sense to mean 'kinetic contemplation' and a restless and energetic entanglement with the world, and with time. Raqs practices across several media; making installation, sculpture, video, performance, text, lexica, and curation. Their work finds them at the intersection of contemporary art, philosophical speculation, and historical enquiry.*

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8. This fragment (translation from Punjabi folk songs) is part of the Spoken Word Script of "Not Yet At Ease". Such songs were composed by women addressed to men leaving to be soldiers in the War. This is quoted in a lecture titled How They Suffered: World War One and its Impact on Punjabis by Amarjit Chandan. A transcript of this lecture can be retrieved from <http://apnaorg.com/articles/amarjit/wwi> (cached, accessed on March 23, 2018).
 9. For a list of twentieth century conflicts, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:20th-century_conflicts.



Arboretum

Thukral and Tagra

If a tree falls in the Metaverse, and no one is logged on, do we hear it? Does it echo and shake the earth? Do the birds cry in mourning?

And the trees falling around us here? Will we hear them if we are in the Metaverse? The fires that burn everything down can't touch us there.

When the pandemic struck the world, we took cover indoors and lived out our lives online. As we tried to circumvent the daily responsibilities of participating in a society, it became evident

who could retreat to the safety of the digital world, and who had to put themselves on the frontlines. The ones whose labour has been previously undervalued are the ones that now came to be recognised as "essential." The divide was never more visible. In technical terms, this is a glitch: a failure to function that exposes the mechanics of a system or, in this case, a society. Our new body of work contends with the increasingly porous boundary between the online and offline and the new norms that come with this terrain.



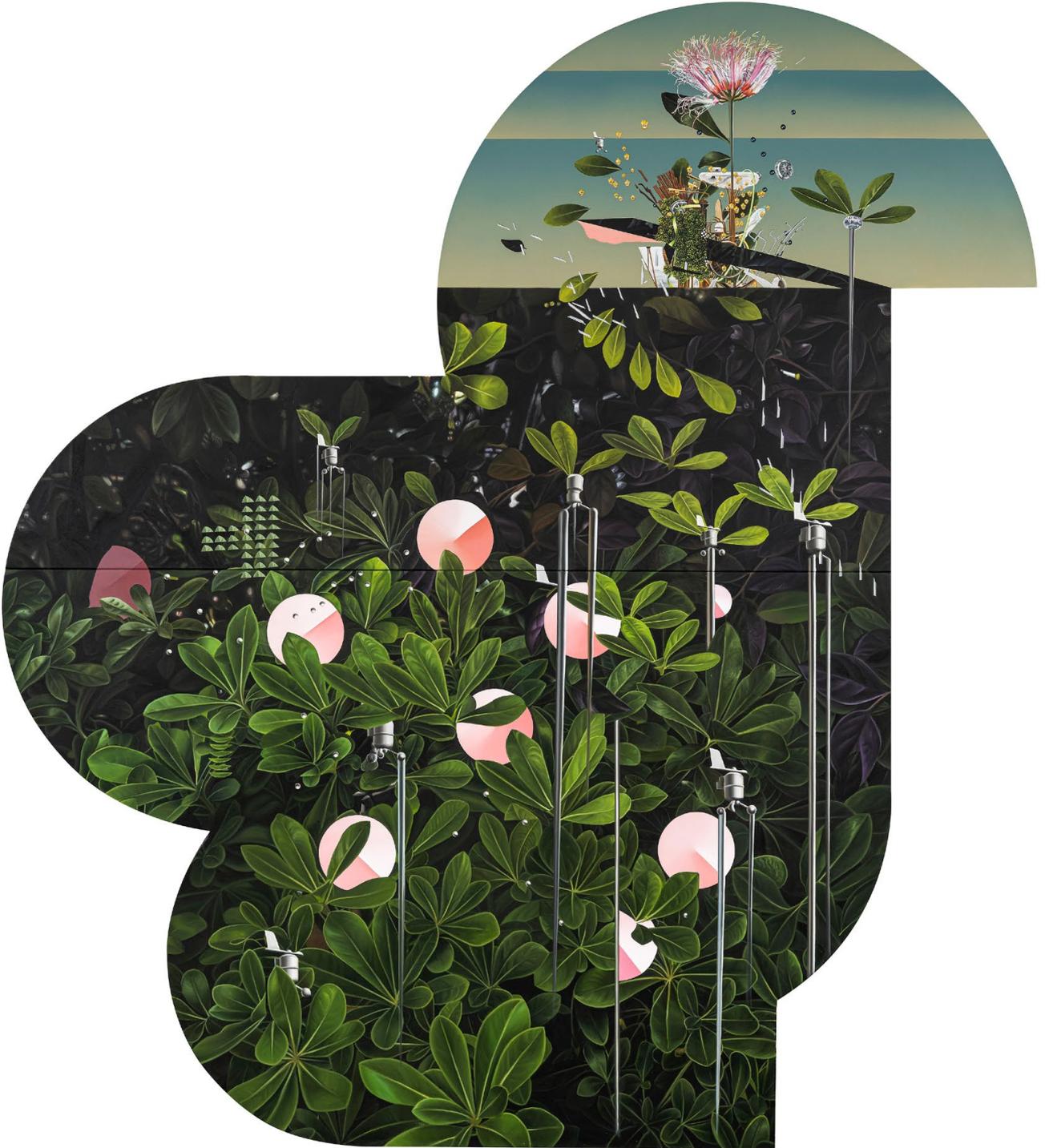
Thukral and Tagra, *Arboretum 8-Calendula officinalis*, 2022. Oil on canvas, artist-made wooden stretcher; 152.4 x 129.5 cm (irregular, two panels). Image courtesy of the artists.

Previous works have been described as foretelling of a dystopia when the world slowly starts to disintegrate. Forms lose structure and chaos reigns. However, when that becomes our reality, what is worth our attention? Where the objects of childlike wonder used to be surreal dreams of escape, the sense of awe shifts to what is now out of reach: the wilderness. What makes the wilderness so special is that reckless abandon, the giving away of quotidian worries to the moment at hand. It is humbling, reminding you that you are just another creature. Yet with the best cameras in our pockets, the way we relate to nature has changed as well. The graceful arc of a branch inspires the instinct to pull out a phone and capture it. No more pressing flowers into alchemical forever — it is so much easier to press a button. What Walter Benjamin wrote of film's effect on the aura of fine art remains relevant to the affect of art in the Metaverse to art in the so-called real world: 'The genuineness of a thing is the

quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears.'

Painted in photorealistic detail, *Arboretum* reverses this tendency to photograph and stretches time — painting flowers like meditative worship. A painting is not only its finished state, an object placed at a discrete moment in time. Rather, a painting is the outcome of time coalescing. The work has a zooming in effect due to its scale; looking is immersing, surrounding yourself with the foliage. Where, in earlier works, nature would be complementary to the central form, here it takes center stage. The details of art deco inspired architecture featured in works past mutate into the forms of the canvas, serving as a window to look out into the world beyond, as well as the armature of the frame. The composition speaks to a digital sensibility of seeing images as pliable. The trees glitch and fold onto themselves, repeating, while other details dissolve into pixels. Hidden behind the leaves, abstracted characters watch you watch them. Is there any escape from being seen?

When all interactions take place online, everything we do is measured, quantified, and stored. Your likes and dislikes, hobbies, and aspirations compressed into a series of 0s and 1s stored thousands of kilometers below the ocean. Even when we put our phones down they wait to be beckoned, keeping their "ears" pricked for everything we say. Our smartphones know our ailments before we do and suggest remedies. We stand at the dusk of the Humanist era, where our feelings and responses act as the guidelines for our actions. Instead we move into what writer and historian Yuval Noah Harari describes as an age of "Dataism," where the final say goes to the information the internet has been



Thukral and Tagra, *Arboretum 5- pittosporum tobira*, 2022. Oil on canvas, artist-made wooden stretcher; 226 x 202.7 cm (irregular, two panels). Image courtesy of the artists.

passively collecting. These paintings reflect this sense of logging data through the systematic organisation of details and the use of dots as visual interruptions. A section of the original image can be stretched to distortion, as if pulled through time, as if measuring something. The digital appears in the natural, the natural is digitised. If the interactions with the most material consequences — work, networking, play — happen online, then how can it be any less real than the world around us? No longer can the self be bifurcated so one half could inhabit the URL, the other the “IRL.” Within this liminal space, what do we gain and what do we lose?

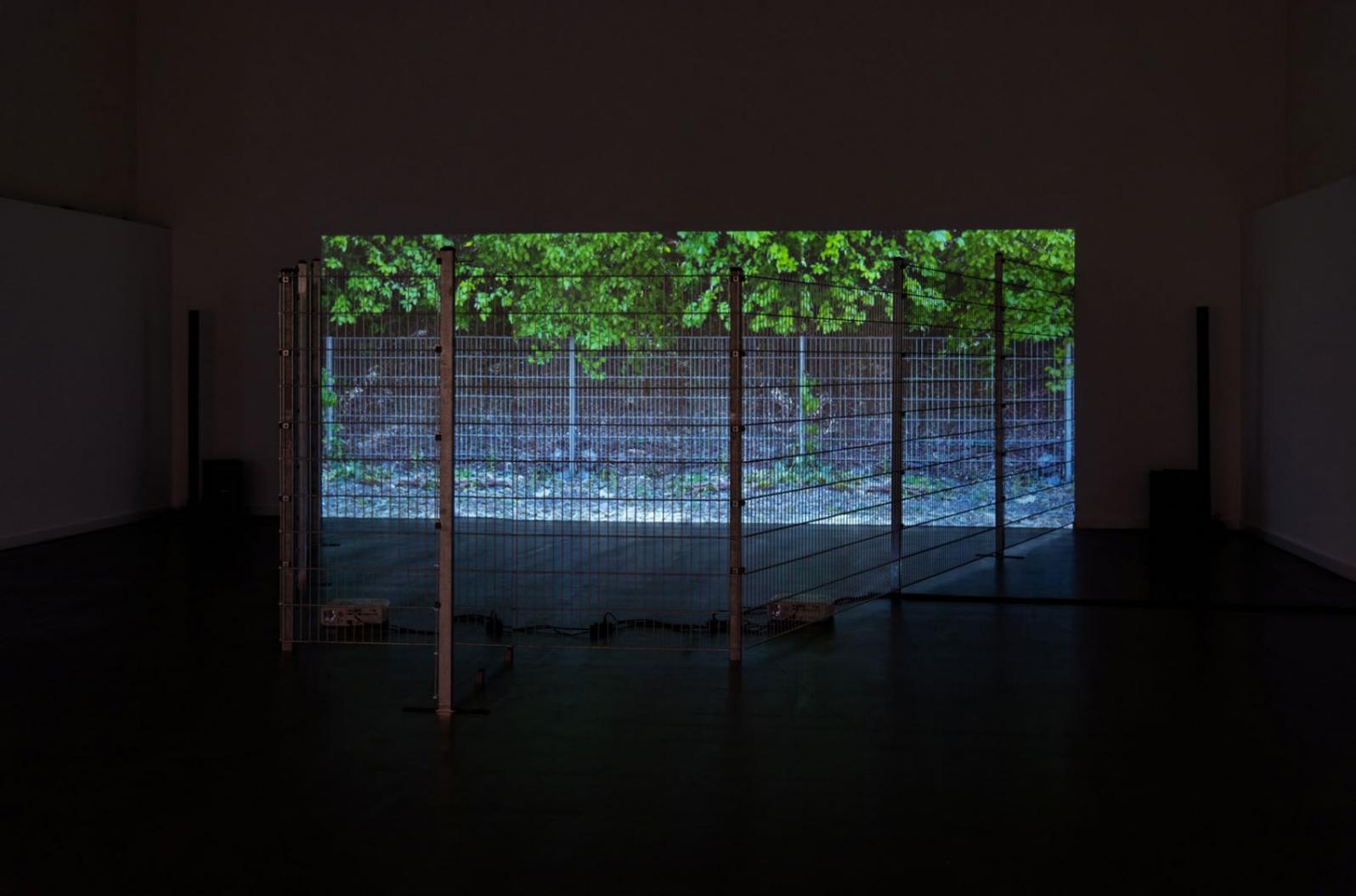
There is a sense of inevitability when considering the Metaverse — there is no longer any relevance to asking, ‘should we, or should we not?’ What then becomes pertinent is asking, ‘How should this world be?’ If we are creating a new public forum, how do we avoid recreating the same “glitches” we made in this world? More than anything, the pandemic exposed how lonely and atomised our society has become. In the face of a public health emergency that called for collective action, it was difficult to imagine such a thing. There was a lifting of the veil, exposing who has the privilege of safety and who has no choice but to go on as they were.

‘Creating communities’ has been touted as one of the ways forward; the Metaverse will allow us to ‘be in community with each other.’ Who is being spoken to here? And with what intention? What good is creating community if said community is an echochamber of bourgeois sentiment and ideas? What will be the purpose of this community? There has been a hollowing out of this term, making it devoid of any force or fire. A community is a symbiotic network of care, where everyone is looked after in material ways. How can that be possible in the Metaverse when

over half the ecosystem that makes our daily lives possible won’t even be able to get in? Speaking of the Metaverse in this way is only seeing the forest for the trees.

Every thing we make is supported through a rhizomatic system of labour; to imagine a fully digitised Metaverse is a fallacy, for there will always be the human behind the machine. Within the art world as well, it is romantic and grand to imagine the artist as singular genius, whose work is an immaculate conception of the mind. If everything becomes automated, then what is the role of the artist? It is the fostering of relationships between concepts and the world at large. The reality is that a work of art is produced through an ecosystem: before the painting, there is the canvas. Before the canvas, there is the frame, and before that is the wood. Between each of those states are the people that transform it. The studio is a greenhouse where, like gardeners, each person tends to the work. Picks the weeds, turns the soil, waters the plants. And the Arboretum blooms.

Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra work collaboratively with a wide range of media including painting, sculpture, installations, interactive games, video, performance, and design. Thukral & Tagra work on new formats of public engagement and attempt to expand the scope of what art can do, further emphasizing what the practice can do in a virtual context through their archives and publications. They break out of the mediated-disciplinary world, create multi-modal sensory, and storytelling in immersive environments. Their earlier work dealt with tropes of migration, mythological narratives, symbols of Indian identity, and motifs of a globally manifested consumer culture that enliven a largely pedantic and static area of cultural material. From a pop visual character to a predominantly abstract visual approach and compositional philosophy, Thukral & Tagra constantly shift in terms of their grammar and vocabulary. They have offered sociopolitical commentary that is implicit in their aesthetic for the past eighteen years. Recently, they seek to identify the practice as pedagogy through their collaborative Pollinator.io – Interdisciplinary lab, which cultivates an inclusive learning ecosystem that indexes to achieve knowledge sharing through cross-pollination.



PAGES 57–60: Mathias Weinfurter, installation view of *Indices*, 2020. Installation: double-bar fence, video projection, mirror; various sizes. HfG Offenbach, Offenbach/Main, Germany.

Fences: Between Order and Paradoxes

Marc Ries

On my usual route, I walk past a twin wire mesh fence. It separates a tennis court from the public green space that I use. I can see the players through it, but I cannot change sides. Certain activities presuppose their enclosure and demarcation. Their “being-other” requires a contraption that marks them as such and makes them inaccessible to those who are not part of them — part of this sport, for example — and part of the institution that enables their practice. Thus, according to a first interpretation, it is not private property that is separated from the public realm; rather, it is the division of activities themselves that determines

this separation. All activities that follow a contractual logic are separated from those that are performed by individuals on their own, contingently, as part of their everyday lives. If I wanted to enjoy playing tennis, I would have to master the technique by myself and become a member of a particular club by making a financial contribution. In other words, insofar as my playing activity is concerned, I would have to become institutionalized. The fence is the visible, institutionalizing power in this structure. It exercises power by separating two spaces. This is its social purpose.



Fences — if approached in another way — indicate that a piece of land has an owner. They describe the extension and route of a certain area by enclosing it. They are therefore the sensual-material marking of a property that both draws our attention and turns us away. In this way, they affirm a very old dualism: between an inert, unchanging, proprietary entity and a mobile, changing, non-proprietary entity. In other words, the dualism between property and elements that are free to move. As part of this manifestation, fences serve the function of halting movement in both directions — that is, preventing moving entities within the property from leaving the land in a disorderly fashion and hindering foreign entities from entering the property. When fulfilling this role, the twin wire mesh fence proves itself to be extremely reliable. It is used in a wide array of properties. This universal fence demonstrates the right of ownership, thus prohibition and physical defense. In contrast to a wall — which

also offers “visual protection” in addition to demarcation, given that it is opaque and so does not reveal what is on the other side — the fence operates with a form of visibility that is both displayed and inaccessible. The other side is visible, but forbidden. Here we can make a comparison to visual art. Every image shows us “something,” but we have to make do with this something as an image. We cannot change sides. There is a long-distance effect that persists, a way of seeing; we are kept at arm’s length. Even if the picture belongs to a different state of being, whereas the fence always dissociates the same reality, the prohibition that both enact can still be comparable.

The installation *Indices* (2020) operates — at first — within this logic. There are more than fifty fences; they were filmed. We can see, in specific projection areas, the visible, permeable fence, what is in front of it and what is behind it. And then there is also

an identical fence in the gallery space. It encloses the projection. Through it, we can see pictorial fences, through which, in turn, we can see a restricted territory. The real fence replicates the prohibition of the spaces depicted on film in their particular territorial authority, transposing this onto mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in art spaces. For the viewer, the impossibility of crossing boundaries becomes an immediate experience of both space's forms of exclusion and inclusion. As a viewer, I can neither reach the painting's site nor enter the gallery space enclosed by the fence. A peculiar tension in the order of things becomes manifest. The link between image and reality established via an identical object — "here" in the art space, "there" in the photographs' reality — forces the viewer to widely engage with the installation's semantics and arrangement.

A fence has agency, the power that is particular to a thing (Ding-Macht). It separates two spaces, without leaving any gaps. This makes it part of an institutional structure. Within this structure, the fence is a particular matter that effectively makes systems stable. It is reminiscent of a very old principle, the principle of dividing acts into those that belong to individuals as identifiable and privileged parts of an institutional order and those that belong to a dispersed collective without institutional connection. In its (omni-) presence, the fence outlines how this spatial hierarchy's hegemonic aspect can continue into the future.

That is the initial experience: the experience of a "total social fact" (Mauss), of a thing — a material, a fence — that acts and enacts subdivisions, inclusion, and exclusion. Still, the installation has a title, *Indices*. It first becomes elucidated through two interventions by Mathias Weinfurter that affect both fences, the real fence and the pictorial fence.

In a first intervention, the fence's agency is undermined. Both in the gallery space's "here-fence" and in the projection's "there-fence," posts have been removed, cut out; the resulting gaps are inconspicuous to the fleeting eye, but they signal a sensitive infringement of the disciplinary order. They interrupt the grid's regularity. In the resulting empty space, a foothold, a support becomes able to present itself invitingly as a way of overcoming the fence and thus the boundary. Its power is broken; the other side of the fence is made accessible. A change in position — a "trespass," a "damage to property" — has become conceivable.

A second intervention comes to counteract this first subversive act. At the same height as the fence, a mirror is integrated into the installation in such a way that its reflection suggests the grid to be perfect, normal, unscathed. Its image completes the broken grid in the imaginary of reflection, makes it look whole. The mirror provides the missing part to the original totality. This restoration of the grid's order, thus of the boundary's power, is a visual effect, a mirage that, on the one hand, reconciles, reassures those who desire the closure, the separation; on the other hand, it remains unsettling, since there is still the hope, the possibility of overcoming the limits set by the boundary.

Mathias Weinfurter got the idea for this second intervention from rehabilitation mirror therapy. After amputations, a mirror is used to make the missing limb reappear as an image, thereby provoking the vision of an intact body, of all body parts, which can help with overcoming the trauma of the injury and eliminating the phantom pain. In the mirror, the body is complete once more. The steel body of the twin wire mesh fence also becomes intact again in its mirror image, allowing the viewer to reiterate the assertion of its being



insurmountable. Even the projections of the fences are mirrored with an image processing software. They are digitally mirrored in such a way that we do not see the actual course of a particular fence. We only see one half, which is mirrored and continues flipped on the right side of the projection. This internal image mirroring becomes visible, discernible, in those moments when a car or a train moves past the fence. It enters the image on the left, for example, then disappears briefly, only to re-enter it on the right.

This unsettling visual experience — here of an “intact” real fence, there of equally “intact” pictorial fences, both the result of a paradoxical intervention with mirroring techniques — shifts the first total social fact, “fence,” into a play of traces, indices of appropriation, imagination, self-deception,

and self-assertion whose meaning oscillates. In other words, it is a play of heteroclitic spaces of possibility. Both spaces now start to vibrate. The collective bursts into the individual; the individual proliferates into the collective.

“Fences: Between Order and Paradoxes” was first published in Mathias Weinfurter’s catalogue “Indices” (2021), which forms part of a set of four within the boxset *Archive I*.

Marc Ries earned his doctorate at the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Vienna. Starting from questions of cultural theory, sociology, and aesthetics, he produces studies on mass media, society, and art. Since 2010, he has been Professor of Sociology and Theory of Media at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach/Main.

No place for lovely pictures

Sean O'Toole

In August 1977, nine days after activist Steve Biko was arrested at a police roadblock near Grahamstown, Jeremy Wafer travelled to Ashburton, a farming settlement neighbouring Pietermaritzburg, where he posed for a series of photographs taken by his partner, Colleen. Only one black-and-white photo from this outdoor action survives. It depicts the artist standing in an unfenced clearing, surrounded by ankle-length grass and thorny scrub. Wafer's arms limply hang by his side as he looks up towards the elevated vantage where the camera is positioned. He resembles a surveyor's assistant, albeit without a rod or perch to render his action explicable. The wide frame of the composition reduces Wafer to a diminutive presence, a figure, a type, an adult white man standing in an undulating savannah. The site he occupies is similarly vague and indeterminate. Photographer David Goldblatt called such monotonous tracts of land so typical of South Africa's sun-bleached hinterland "fuck-all" landscapes, in large part because they preclude romanticism. Herein lies a clue to Wafer's ambiguous presence in the veld outside Ashburton.

In its original form *Ashburton* (1977) constituted a grid of nine portraits depicting the artist in an equal number of non-descript outdoor locations within walking distance of one another. The work included nine punched index cards, each containing typed information on the time, location, and

sequence of Wafer's outdoor action, as well as an annotated contour map and a wooden cabinet to contain this constellation of fragments. The work was recovered from obscurity in 2012 when Wafer set about cataloguing his sculptures, installations, prints, drawings, photographs, and videos from the last four decades for his doctoral thesis at the University of the Witwatersrand. The process saw him reconnect with several hundred artworks, including a number of early works characterised by 'a wide range of experimentation, false starts, tentative beginnings and inexpert resolution.'¹

Ashburton bears out some of this criticism. And yet, when subjected to sympathetic and close scrutiny, this "lost" work offers a reliable fulcrum for accessing Wafer's fascinating corpus of photography, which has somehow avoided sustained scrutiny. This is a shame. Photography has been integral to Wafer's working method ever since he entered art school at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, in 1972. It has figured as the principal medium in a number of works from the four main periods of his career. In overview, Wafer's photography is about place, chiefly South Africa, although not singularly. It offers a rambler's sense of the specificity of place, the blanched particularities and arresting banalities that define his chosen rural and urban sites, some historically or biographically significant, others

1. All quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are from the artist's Doctor of Philosophy degree thesis, "Survey: exhibitions of sculpture, drawing and photography and a reflective catalogue of the art work of Jeremy Wafer 1975-2015." Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, June 2016.



SITE 3:

1 p.m. Saturday 27th August, 1977
430m South of Ashburton East Road
approximately 300m from Site 2 in
semi open area near bottom of hill

Jeremy Wafer, *Ashburton*, 1977. A selection from a set of 6 colour photographs and 6 text cards, each 14 x 10 cm, and an annotated contour map in a wooden cabinet 100 x 60 x 10 cm (not exhibited). Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

not. Roaming is, in a way, key to engaging Wafer's photography. It is the work of a wanderer interested in geology, ecology, social history, mapmaking and surveying, architecture and art — especially art and its capacity to respond to these various ways of knowing and being.

Notwithstanding his interest in figural subjects — trees, termite mounds, cairns, fences, coal dumps, grain silos — Wafer's photo work is noticeably discontinuous with South Africa's dominant paradigm of social realism. Precedents matter in historical scholarship. Wafer is unambiguous about the fact that his work swims in 'the wider sea' of art history.

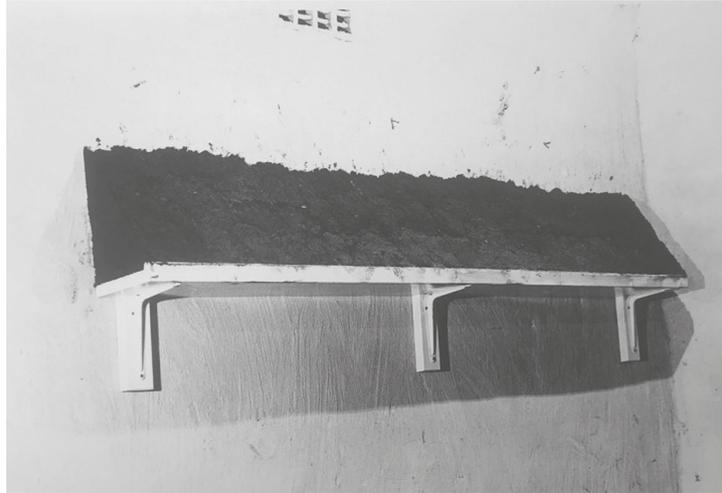
I can but recognise that my work is made possible by what has come before, by the language or set of possibilities established and in which I participate and interact with.

As a young artist interested in landscape, social activism, and 'radical countercultural critique' he drew sustenance and inspiration from ideas and practices emerging in northern metropolises during the later half of the twentieth century. It was Wafer's interest in land and landscape (a thoroughly corrupted aesthetic category in 1970s South Africa) that prompted him to look elsewhere for progressive models. He found sustenance in the work of Berndt and Hiller Becher, Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke, Eva Hesse, Richard Long, Walter de Maria, John McCracken, Ed Ruscha, and Robert Smithson. His earliest experiments with sculpture and photography are at once fervent and mimetic, committed yet beholden to the grip of a faraway authority.

In a synoptic essay appearing in the catalogue for the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale, artist David Koloane remarked how western avant-garde strategies are received and recycled 'in their passé state' as 'replica' or 'variant' in South Africa.² Wafer's practice is not this easily dismissed. While decisively influenced by methods and strategies of western conceptualism, minimalism and land art, his work, in particular his photography, is remarkably of its time and place. Frequently made in collaboration with his partner, Colleen, an artist with a background in scientific photography, Wafer's photo work is striking for its responsiveness to the particularities of South Africa's land, which the artist describes as 'dry, remote and resistant.' The austere, quasi-scientific objectivity of Wafer's photography, which frequently emphasises 'information over expression,' bears out this understanding. Wafer's interest in figuring the land necessarily invites consideration of South Africa's white landscape tradition, a praxis greatly influenced by European art history, in particular the aesthetic ideal of the picturesque. Wafer's early rejection of this calcified genre, liberating as it was, occurred during a period of strife and historical revisionism, notably around South Africa's settler history and contests over land ownership.

This essay's tight focus on land and landscape invariably means that I ignore various seams and strata of Wafer's rich photographic archive. Many interesting photos are either marginally acknowledged or simply ignored. I find consolation in the fact that Wafer is familiar with the necessity of winnowing. As

2. David Koloane. 1997. "Walking the Tightrope." In *Trade Routes: History and Geography*. Edited by Matthew DeBord. Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, p. 35.



TOP LEFT: Jeremy Wafer, *Shore 2*, 1979. Sticks, cloth; variable dimensions: each stick approx. 1.5m; temporary site specific installation Umzumbe, KwaZulu-Natal south coast); **TOP RIGHT:** Jeremy Wafer, *Earth Shelf*, 1983. Earth, motor car oil, timber; 200 cm (not exhibited); **BOTTOM:** Jeremy Wafer, *Black Chair (Richmond)*, 2010. Site-specific drawing: black oxide and binder; 120cm; Richmond, Northern Cape (destroyed). Images courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

part of his 'sifting' process for his doctoral research Wafer made a selection of 100 key examples of his work for analysis and commentary. This commentary begins with *Ashburton*, a decisive early work that heralded many of the methods and leitmotifs of his artistic practice, notably seriality and land as subject. Wafer's deep dive into his archive turned up photographic evidence of other lost works. They include *Shore* (1979), a temporary installation composed of sticks and cloth that he installed on a littoral near Umzumbe in southern KwaZulu-Natal; *Earth Shelf* (1983), a found wooden shelf packed with a sloping wedge of oil-saturated earth that he presented on his 1984 Master's exhibition at the Rembrandt van Rijn Art Gallery in Johannesburg; and *Black Chair (Richmond)* (2010), a site-specific drawing made in an abandoned building on the outskirts of Richmond in the Karoo. It is not these photographs, which, broadly speaking, affirm the camera's utility in archiving, that interest me in this essay.

I also ignore the great many photos in Wafer's archive that, in the pithy language of a sign displayed outside Eugène Atget's Paris studio, function as *Documents pour artistes* ('Documents for artists'). These include his many photos of South Africa's rich industrial archaeology, notably in Durban. His charcoal and wax drawing *Power Station Drawing* (1987) is, for instance, based on photos of the coalbunkers and chutes at Congella, a coal-driven power station commissioned in 1928 and decommissioned five decades later. The crayon and charcoal drawings *Air Conditioner* (1989) and *Rubber Mat* (1989)

are also based on photographs, the latter of a rolled-up rubber mat Wafer saw on a pickup truck and photographed because it was evocative of work by Jewish-Iranian artist Shohreh Feyzjou. These 'things seen and photographed in anticipation of future artworks' are an important part of Wafer's archive and merit their own discussion. My interest here, though, is in Wafer's consistent indexing of land, and the vital shift in consciousness this produces: from landscape to site, from aesthetic object to social fact.

Ashburton is emblematic of this shift. Although now reliant on text for completion, *Ashburton* is foundational, firstly, for its bold enunciation of land as a defining subject in Wafer's practice, and, secondly, for its confident use of photography as a critical tool for negotiating (not just figuring) this contested political and aesthetic category. Contest is a genteel word to summarise South African history. The opening to Sol Plaatje's book-length petition on land re-distribution, *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), is clear on this:

Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth.³

Plaatje, a journalist, linguist, and founding member of the South African Native National Congress, is well known, but at the time Wafer created *Ashburton* was still in the process of being rediscovered (at least by white South Africans). In 1973 Plaatje's diaries from the Siege of Mafeking (1899–1900) were published under the guidance of

3. Sol T. Plaatje. 1982. *Native Life in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, p. 21.

anthropologist and historian John L. Comaroff, and two years later *Mhudi* (1930), his allegorical novel set in the 1830s, appeared in reissue with woodcuts by Cecil Skotnes.

Plaatje's 'flaming power and energy'⁴ as a narrator, to quote Bessie Head, was matched in substance and vigour by Biko, whose writings also dwelled on the still-unresolved issue of land distribution. 'In a land rightfully ours we find people coming to tell us where to stay and what powers we shall have without even consulting us,' wrote Biko in 1972.⁵ Five years later, some two weeks after Wafer's action in Ashburton, Biko died in a prison cell in Pretoria. The tumultuous social politics of the early to mid-1970s — inaugurated by the Durban dockworkers strike of 1973, concretised by the nationwide student rebellion of 1976, and capped by the murder in police detention of Biko in September 1977 — form an unavoidable backdrop to Wafer's difficult coming of age as an artist. *Ashburton* was incubated during this arduous becoming.

The privileges of whiteness in apartheid South Africa — status, security, employment, domesticity, free movement — were not without obligation. In 1976 and 1977 Wafer served two mandatory stints as a military conscript on Namibia's northern border. During these three-month terms he worked as an intelligence clerk tasked with updating maps. The experience profoundly influenced his understanding of the world, ethically as much as spatially. Wafer's decision to venture into a veld outside Ashburton occurred shortly after his second tour of duty and his return to

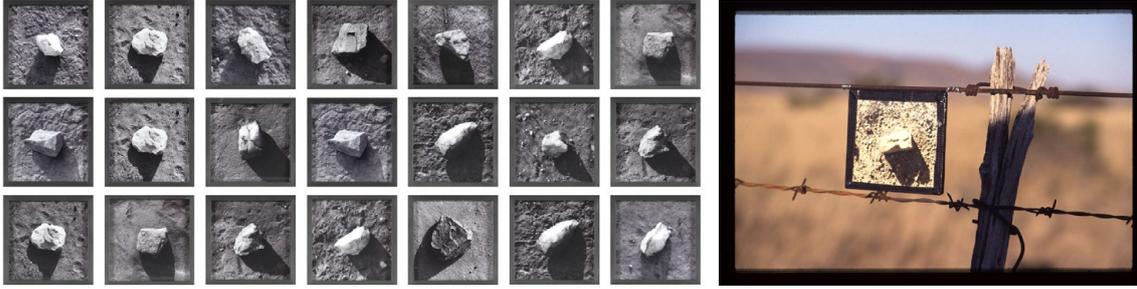
university to complete his studies following a three-year hiatus.

Ashburton is, in certain respects, a rehearsal of influence. The work is clearly cognisant of Walter de Maria's *Mile Long Drawing* (1968), an ephemeral drawing intervention in California's Mojave Desert in which the artist was photographed lying face down between two parallel chalk lines. But its most immediate relative is Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971). This series of 142 typological photographs of buildings owned by notorious slumlord Harry Shapolsky is accompanied by typewritten sheets containing the location and financial transactions related to each structure. *Ashburton* was similarly conceived as an elaborate evidence-gathering project. Drawing from an armoury of readily available media — photography, performance, and text — Wafer lodges an embodied critique of the formalist manners and implicit ideology of the white landscape tradition.

For all its indebtedness to existing work, *Ashburton* nonetheless asserts its own vitality. It is both visually and linguistically engaging. According to the index card accompanying the surviving photo, this third photo was made at a 'site' located 450 metres south of Ashburton East Road, in a 'semi open area' near the bottom of a hill. For all its attempts at precision and specification, the text — much like its companion photo — is equivocal. 'Site 3' is not so much a knowable (and today geo-locatable) place but 'a site of time,' to quote Robert Smithson. Wafer's awareness of

4. Sol T. Plaatje. 1982. *Native Life in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, p. xiii.

5. Steve Biko. 1987. *I Write what I Like: A Selection of His Writings*. Edited by Aelred Stubbs. Johannesburg: Heinemann, p. 82.



Jeremy Wafer, *Xoe*, 2000. A selection from 100 photographs mounted between glass, each 10 x 10 cm; a site specific installation on a fence in the Nieu Bethesda area, Eastern Cape, of one photograph every 10m for 1km; and a gallery version at the 2000 Grahamstown Festival comprising 100 photographs each 10 x 10 cm mounted as single line 10m long, exhibited: Rhodes University Fine Art Gallery, Grahamstown; collection: Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg. Images courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

Smithson is easy to discern in the language of *Ashburton*. 'The more compelling artists today are concerned with "place" or "site",' argued Smithson in a chewy and occasionally flippant 1968 *Artforum* essay.⁶ An interest in site necessarily implied an abandonment of the studio, which *Ashburton* evidences. 'Deliverance from the confines of the studio frees the artist to a degree from the snares of craft and the bondage of creativity. Such a condition exists without any appeal to "nature".'⁷

Wafer, who had grown up on the farm Longcrest in the Nkwalini Valley near Eshowe, was keenly aware of nature and deeply interested in land. Just not in the manner of English-born Robert Gwelo Goodman, whose impressionist landscapes articulated the colonial white dogma of beauty and ownership. In a 1919 letter to readers of *The Common Room*, a magazine of the Durban Technical College (later Natal Technikon, where Wafer was a lecturer from 1984–2002), Goodman advised journeyman artists

to pay attention to 'our landscape,' which he described as 'possessing the joy and delight of the unknown and unexplored in art.'⁸ The myth of vacancy and readiness that Goodman articulates was a defining hallmark of the white landscape tradition throughout the twentieth century, and is a key point of agitation in *Ashburton*.

Here is Wafer on his choice of location:

The site chosen was somewhat arbitrary. It was accessible to the road, near enough to the town, not obviously fenced or demarcated: available and 'empty', an open space. There is of course no 'empty' land, all of it being owned and possessed in various forms: freehold, leasehold, traditional communal ownership or more informally claimed and occupied, and in a South African context the possession and dispossession of land has shaped a violent and tragic history.

6. Robert Smithson. 1968. "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Proposals." *Artforum* (September), p. 85.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 87

8. Robert Gwelo Goodman. 1919. "Letter to the students." *The Common Room Magazine* (Summer), p. 6.

Ashburton, the place, registers aspects of this complicated history of possession.

Located between two rivers, Mkondeni and Mpushini, Ashburton derives its name from a colonial homestead, Ashburton House, established on the farm Wavertree outside Pietermaritzburg in the late 1800s. Norfolk-born William Frank Ellis (1824–97) acquired the title deeds to this farm in 1863. One version has it that he named the farmhouse for his wife’s family, another states that it was named for a place in New South Wales, where Ellis worked as a photographer in the goldfields northwest of Melbourne in the 1850s. Ellis eventually settled in Pietermaritzburg, where he advertised his services as a photographer in 1859 and became a member of the town council. In his later years he farmed and engaged in timber contracting. Ellis is not directly relevant to Wafer’s formulation of *Ashburton*, but his biography adds to an appreciation of the site, which was neither open nor available when Wafer visited, but rather fully domesticated.

This taming is not visible in *Ashburton*, which uses the strategies of conceptualism to explore entitlements (Wafer is a descendant of landowning settlers) and personal memories (he helped survey and mark out fields and orchards on the family farm). Fences and other signifiers of land ownership and possession do not figure in the only remaining photo from *Ashburton*. But they soon would. *Fence* (1979), an eccentric outdoor installation that integrated railway timber and cloth into a fence structure, was made during a workshop with sculptor Willem Strydom.

Figured in his recent work *Archive* (2014), a set of 20 archival photos printed on steel plate, this outdoor sculpture is an ancestor to *Xoe* (2000), an outdoor presentation of 100 close-up photographs of stones displayed on a kilometre-long fence in Nieu Bethesda. The bleached tonality of the photos in *Xoe* is typical of Wafer’s photographic grammar, and keys into a sustained debate among artists and critics about the blinding sharpness of South African light.

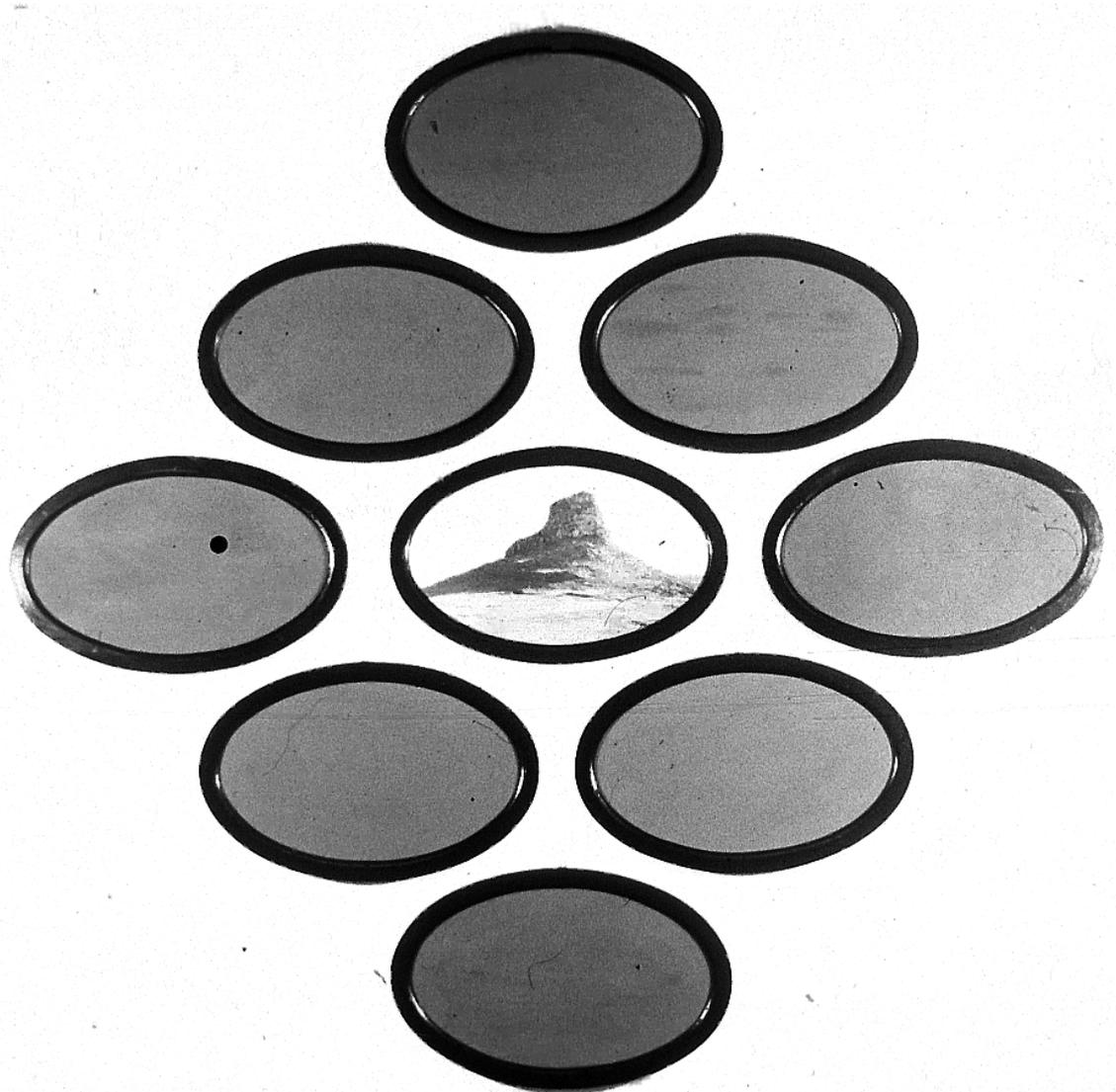
Gwelo Goodman identified ‘the fierce glory of our sunshine’ as a material element of the South African landscape. For Edward Roworth, a contemporary of Goodman, it constituted one of the three essential features of ‘our land’ — the others were monotony and size. Dimitri Nicolas-Fanourakis, a photographer and lecturer at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town in the 1970s, is far more articulate. In a 1976 review of David Goldblatt’s book *Some Afrikaners Photographed* (1975), he writes:

Most photographers in South Africa, taking their models from Europe and America make extravagant attempts to accommodate the inherent limits of photographic emulsion to the impossible contrasts produced by our light. African light crashes down, annihilating details, effacing features, never modelling, virtually always sculpting in harsh planes. It is not so much pitiless as indifferent. This is no place for lovey pictures.⁹

From the outset, Wafer’s photography accepted this superabundance of light as an

9. Dimitri Nicolas-Fanourakis. 1976. “A Radical Observation.” *Snarl*, No. 4 (February), p. 7.

10. They included Goodman and Roworth, also J.E.A Volschenk and W.H. Coetzer, whose oil paintings of Boer trekkers in the Drakensberg were catnip for white nationalists.



Jeremy Wafer, *Isandlwana*, 1995. Nine frames, each 40 cm. Photograph and pigment. Exhibition: *Passages*, Washington DC, USA. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

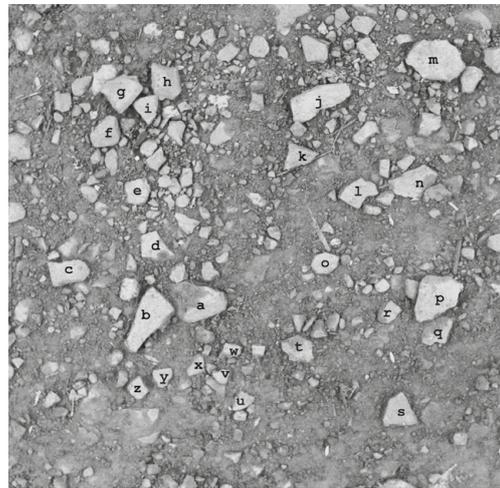
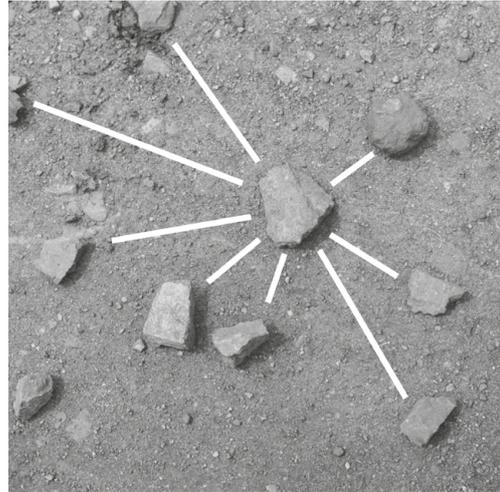
ally. South Africa's 'annihilating' light informs his tonally austere and blandly descriptive photography, which refuses beauty, or at least the false beauty of the Picturesque, an imported style that gripped the imagination of earlier painters.¹⁰

If *Ashburton* is a herald of this artless style, *Isandlwana* (1995) evidences its mature fluency. The work is named after an isolated hill in the corrugated interior of KwaZulu-Natal where, in 1879, Zulu soldiers famously vanquished an advancing column of the British imperial army. Mounds of painted-white stones identify this battle site today,

11. Edward Roworth. 1917. "Landscape Art in South Africa." *The Studio*, p. 115.

which is integral to the history of European conquest and indigenous resistance. For all its significance, Isandlwana resists easy photographic capture. Much like Ashburton, it is a place of undulating sameness. The Picturesque strategy would be to dynamically portray the undifferentiated grassy landscape, which Roworth thought possessed 'the moods of the sea.'¹¹ Wafer simply ignores it, instead offering a sun-bleached study of the partially shadowed mountain. His photo of the battle site tacitly acknowledges that a landscape cannot adequately narrate history.

As with *Ashburton*, Wafer's matter-of-fact photo of Isandlwana is a component of a larger work — a fact that might suggest why photo historians have ignored his work. *Isandlwana* was first exhibited on artist and curator Clive van den Berg's exhibition *Panoramas of Passage: Changing Landscapes of South Africa* (1995).¹² Presented in an oval frame, the photo was surrounded by seven similarly scaled frames filled with clay-coloured pigment and orchestrated into a rhombus shape. This presentation strategy shares kinship with other wall-mounted sculptures from the 1990s. In particular, Brett Murray's *Land* (1996), which presents a glass jar filled with soil enclosed by two profiles of male heads, and Malcolm Payne's seven vitrines from his installation *Face Value: Old Heads in Modern Masks* (1993).¹³ White artists in the 1990s, it would seem, were very much interested in land — or as Smithson puts it, in 'geologic time, and of the layers of



TOP AND MIDDLE: Jeremy Wafer, *Home Ground*, 1993. 2 of 4 digital photographic prints, each 1 x 1 m; exhibited: *Jeremy Wafer*, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, 1993; **BOTTOM:** Jeremy Wafer, *Border (Mozambique)*, 2007. Digital print on cotton paper, 140 x 70 cm. Images courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

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12. At the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown and Meridian International Center in Washington, D.C.
 13. Payne's Baldessari-like sculptural pieces formed part of his composite reading of seven terracotta figures known as the Lydenburg Heads (c. 500).
 14. Smithson, *op.cit.* p. 89.
 15. Hlonipha Mokoena. 2012. "Fuze, Magema." In *Dictionary of African Biography*. Edited by Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 403.



Jeremy Wafer, *Nhlube*, 2004. Version 2, comprised a 16m mural installation of three 2m circular digital prints: Nhlube, Nkwalini and Spitzkop, with three 2m circular painted shapes with vinyl lettering; exhibited: Kebble Art Awards: Cape Town Convention Centre, Cape Town, 2004; private collections: Johannesburg. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth's crust.¹⁴

Wafer, however, drew on a very different text to account for *Isandlwana*. In lieu of an artist's statement for his entry into the catalogue accompanying *Panoramas of Passage*, Wafer selected a passage by mission-trained author and printer Magema M. Fuze. An enigmatic figure in Zulu history, Fuze was the first Zulu speaker to publish a book in his home tongue.¹⁵ *Abantu Abamnyama Lapa Bavela Ngakona* (The Black People and Whence They Came, 1922), which only appeared in translation in 1979, includes a staccato account of events at Isandlwana. An excerpt of the quote chosen by Wafer reads:

When the warriors arose they entered the tents of the soldiers and there they stabbed the soldiers who were exhausted from firing the guns. There they killed and destroyed the European army that was there.

Wafer's decision to quote this idiomatic text by an associate of the progressive Bishop

of Natal, John William Colenso, was by no means a supplementary gesture. Rather than serving an accessory function, the text enjoys an equivalent status. Wafer is eloquent on this: 'the mountain is just a mountain; the history is how it is spoken.'

For all the many refusals — of beauty, sublimity, inarticulacy — contained in *Ashburton* and *Isandlwana*, both works nonetheless reiterate a dominant perspective: the horizontal view of land. Wafer's time as map-reader in the military introduced him to an opposing axis, verticality. His output includes a number of works utilising this destabilising axis. *Home Ground* (1993) is comprised of four vertically oriented photographs of stony landscapes on Longcrest. Each photo maps a square metre of ground on the Wafer family farm, and further includes a numbering system overlaid onto the photograph. This ascetic work reiterates some of the strategies of *Ashburton* — using the grid to explore and map a non-descript site — but also, importantly, is a harbinger of Wafer's use of aerial photography, as well as his later

vertical surveying and inventorying of stones in works like *Xoe*.

Aerial photos are a found rather than a made resource. But it was not Smithson's idea of 'deliverance from the snares of craft and the bondage of creativity' that drew Wafer to work with aerial photos; rather, it was their objectivity and anonymity, their divestiture of expressionism and individuality. 'The aerial view denies the openness or invitation to entry which is characteristic of a vista, the scanning or looking out and across space: it denies horizon, any hierarchy of foreground to background, direction or orientation, there and here,' notes Wafer on the photographic technique inaugurated with *Home Ground*. 'The affect of this looking down is somewhat oppressive and claustrophobic.' Paradoxically, this oppression and aridity is also freeing; it enables or allows for imaginative projection. *Border* (1996) is such a work.

Border is composed of twenty diazo prints of aerial photos depicting the boundary between South Africa and Mozambique. The work was first exhibited on the group exhibition *Hitchhiker* (1996) at the Generator Art Space, Johannesburg, as eleven prints displayed in a horizontal line. The physical border is a visible line running across the photos. The clarity of this line is evocative of the grand gestures of American land artists, of De Maria's *Mile Long Drawing* for instance, but in reality records something far more sinister. The clearing recorded in the aerial view forms part of an elaborate security infrastructure that, from the mid-1980s, included a network of electrified

barrier fences. These fences, which were set to administer a lethal shock, tracked the Zimbabwe and Mozambique borders, all the way from a farm known as Eendvogelpan, about 20km east of the Pontdrift border on the Botswana border, to Jeppe's Reef near Swaziland. They caused eighty-nine deaths between 1986 and 1989, and were only set to non-lethal mode in the early 1990s.

Wafer never visited the site mapped in *Border*. By contrast, his work *Nhlube, Nkwalini and Spitzkop* (2004), which also uses aerial maps ordered from the Surveyor General's office in Cape Town, depicts a known, intimate landscape. The work was originally a series of square prints of aerial photographs but Wafer later revised the presentation format into a sixteen-metre mural installation comprised of three large, circular digital prints featuring enlarged views of areas near Longcrest, accompanied by three circular discs of the same size painted an ochre colour. While expressive of his interest in systems of mapping, control, possession, and ownership, like *Home Ground* this ambitious and beautifully distilled work presents an overlapping account of place and history. The austerity of the aerial map is imbricated by autobiography and grand social history.

Maps are not neutral resources. The surveying and mapping that enabled white settlement and occupation of land in South Africa has a corollary in black dispossession, as both Plaatje and Biko recorded. In the 1850s, during British rule in KwaZulu-Natal, Theophilus Shepstone, the colonial secretary of native affairs, established a network of segregated 'native reserves' to limit claims

16. Thomas V. McClendon. 2010. "Makwerekwere: Separating Immigrants and Natives in Early Colonial Natal." In *The Demographics of Empire*. Edited by Karl Ittmann, Dennis D. Cordell, Gregory H. Maddox. Athens: Ohio University Press, p. 118.



Jeremy Wafer, *Measure*, 2004/2014.
Timber and paint, 2 m x 10 cm x 10 cm;
exhibited: *Topographies*, Stevenson,
Cape Town, 2004; *Strata*, Goodman
Gallery, Johannesburg, 2014; and *Edge
of Silence*, Goodman Cape, 2015. Im-
age courtesy of the artist and Goodman
Gallery, Johannesburg.

by black inhabitants to colonised land and its resources.¹⁶ These land allocations included Native Reserve No. 2, which Wafer knew by sight. This place of rounded hills, steep slopes, thin grassland, scattered homesteads, communal ownership, and poverty was visible from the veranda of his family farm.

This proximity to South African history, its knotty, fibrous character, is a central hallmark of Wafer's photographic practice. The country's historical past is neither remote nor abstract; it perpetually prods and pokes at the viewer. That it takes work to realise this closeness or contiguity is part of Wafer's stratagem. Early on, during the formative first phase of his career (1975–82), Wafer set about defining himself as an artist through rejection. Photographically, this involved refusing the social realism of documentarians like Goldblatt and engaged methods of activist photographers linked to the Afrapix collective. Established in 1982 by a loose affiliation of Durban photographers, including Omar Badsha, Lesley Lawson, and Paul Weinberg, the group's position was distilled in a feisty presentation by Afrapix member Peter McKenzie at a five-day 'culture and resistance' festival held in Gaborone, Botswana.

In McKenzie's opening presentation to a panel on photography that included Goldblatt, he argued that photographers must 'take sides' and 'serve the needs of the struggle.' Of necessity, photographers had to commit themselves to producing 'positive documentation.' Technically, this required 'the full and frank utilisation of the camera as the great instrument of symbolic actuality'

and — telling given the earlier discussion of South African light — the 'complete utilisation of natural un-contrived lighting.'¹⁷ Goldblatt disagreed, not about technique but the utility of photography. While fundamentally aligned to the idea of a non-racial democracy, Goldblatt, a liberal humanist, did not endorse the prevailing Marxist view that art could and should function as an instrument of revolution.¹⁸

Wafer did not attend the festival in Gaborone, but he keenly followed these and other debates. They contributed to his self-definition. Although clear of his stance (and choice of political side), Wafer's ambition as an artist using photography as a medium was neither to illustrate nor to demonstrate. He wanted, as he would later write, to avoid 'the kind of pictorialism or narrative which seemed to me to characterise most South African art.' In Haacke's art he saw how social activism and critique could be contained in a photograph, and in the larger-than-life aura of Beuys he recognised the productive marriage of a radical social vision with a 'poetic and affective' method. In summary, Wafer settled on difficulty.

Idiosyncrasy and opacity are epithets wielded by incurious viewers. Wafer's photography rewards, in large part because it registers his deeply felt engagement with what it means to be a white South African artist engaged by the land. This engagement endures. Recent sculptural pieces like *Plumb* (2014) and *Measure* (2004/2014) detail Wafer's abiding interest in surveying and mapping, its technologies as much as its ideologies. *Archive* (2014), a set of twenty photos printed on steel plate, casts a retrospective glance

17. Peter McKenzie. 1982. "Bringing the Struggle into Focus." *Staffrider*, Vol. 5.2, p. 17–18.

18. Sean O'Toole. 2015. "White's Folly, in David Goldblatt." In *Boksburg*. Göttingen: Steidl, pp. 93–94.

back and offers evidence of a different kind of mapping. The photographs in this set describe trees, woodpiles, railway tracks, coal dumps, and mine workings. They evidence journeys. There is a landscape from the Northern Cape, also a study of a stone cairn at Isandlwana. These works mine time. One photograph records Wafer's prototype fence installation made as a student in Pietermaritzburg. There is a vestigial quality to these photos, of things apprehended long ago, and now fading, but — importantly — there is also continuity.

The subdued tones of *Archive* recall the artist's *Harbour Diazos* (c. 1988), an ensemble of about fifty photos of warehouses and silos, stockpiles of sugar and coal, oil tank farms, and other harbour infrastructure produced using an ammonia-based printing process

once routinely used by architects and engineers. The series grew out of Wafer's 'deep affection' for the harbour and its workings — his first job after leaving school was at the harbour. Affection is a synonym for love as well as empathy, states of being Wafer's photographs allow and also offer an eloquent account of. It is a modulating force in his work, but not a palliative against what remains, difficult, true, and unavoidable about life in South Africa. The land is not free, not yet. The news brims with the commotion of people refusing to be told where to stay. A decade-old land dispute in the Lower Mpushini Valley Conservancy, very near Ashburton, continues to simmer. In Nkwalini Valley, conversations on the veranda at Longcrest acknowledge that things are changing, must change. There is still much work to be done.

This essay first appeared in the monograph *Jeremy Wafer* (2021), published by the Goodman Gallery, pp. 54–63.

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PAGES 76–78: Amine El Gotaibi, *Sun(w)hole - Piece of cradle 1*, 2019. Rammed earth, 1530 x 60 x 400 cm. FARMHOUSE58, Cradle of Humankind, South Africa. Image courtesy of the artist and NIROX Foundation.

A Place to Daydream

Sven Christian

Winding your way along Kromdraai Road, *Sun(w)hole* (2019) pops in and out of view. From a distance the artwork is recognisably man-made: the top corner juts out from the hillside like a sundial, its silhouette stark against a crisp, winter sky. In summer the rain clouds gather, reaching outward and upward before spilling their contents across its weather-beaten surface.

Amine El Gotaibi's intervention has become something of a talking point at FARMHOUSE58, visible as it is from different vistas. It shifts with you as you move, like a giant revolving door. People on hikes are

drawn to the work, uncertain about what it is or why it's there. Most linger on the hole at its centre, unable to see anything through it but sky.

The hole reminds me of a game I used to play as a kid, when I would close one eye and press a roll of toilet-paper to the other. Peering up through the cardboard on a bright sunny day, I could always find a full moon. Try to look at anything else and the illusion disappears; my sense of vertigo replaced with an imaginary line that connects me to a world of things.





Sun(w)hole alludes to this connection, but it also displaces it. Like the clouds, the wall reaches outwards and upwards; a condensation of both natural and man-made elements: earth and concrete, but also stones, grass, glass — all caught in the act of compression. Other forms of plant-life have taken root within the wall. Insects move in, out, and across its surface, building nests and carrying food.

Looking at the form-work used in its construction I picture an ant farm, yet the wall doesn't let up its secrets. The hole is a vanishing point without a horizon line. It provides nothing to hold onto, no telescopic lens through which to fix my gaze. Still, the thin film of sky it circumscribes is strangely expansive. And it's clear that I'm not the only one drawn in by the hole's gravitational pull. At its base lie two rocks, placed by inquisitive hikers. They're large enough to stand on, but not large enough to spot land. Even on

tip-toes, I'm left wanting. I step back and walk around the wall. Everything I could have wanted to see through it is in front of me. Still, I turn back and peer at the hole.

It's only later that I become conscious of its cone-like form. El Gotaibi has not just made a hole but a funnel, mirrored on either side. Watching the close-up footage of him chipping away at it with a pick-axe, hammer, and chisel, I can't help but think of those movies in which people tunnel their way out of a tight spot. At the same time, the hole reminds me of an hourglass or ant-lion trap. It catches the sun in its arc and places it squarely at your feet. Only, what you're looking at is not the sun. What you're looking at is the shape of the hole, defined by the shadow of the wall.

Sun(w)hole has a habit of doing this; of turning things inside-out, flipping things on their head. It is the earth, pulled up from below and anchored above; a straight line



Screenshot from Amine El Gotaibi's Instagram page (@ amine.elgotaibi). Photos posted on 18 June 2021.

atop a curved hill. It bends space and time, drawing attention to the strange yet affirming effect of the particulate — light, sound, smell, and touch — whilst muddying hard-and-fast distinctions between self and other, here and there, present and past.

It reminds me of the opening passage of Binyavanga Wainaina's *One Day I Will Write About This Place* (2011), described by one reviewer as a book of 'ellipses and half glimpses.'¹

The story begins in Nakuru, Kenya. Or more specifically, in the backyard of a middle-class home, between two makeshift poles. At their centre is a boy of seven. Standing in front of El Gotaibi's *Sun(w)hole* — the wall stretching

out on either side, the hole just above — I imagine myself alongside him. His younger sister Ciru and older brother Jimmy are there too. They are playing soccer. The middle-child is meant to be keeping tabs on the game, but can't help his daydreaming.

Warm breath pushes down my nostrils past my mouth and divides my chin. I can see the pink shining flesh of my eyelids. Random sounds fall into my ears: cars, birds, black mamba bicycle bells, distant children, dogs, crows, and afternoon national radio music. Congo rumba.²

He is the goalie, but he keeps finding himself outside of himself. In such moments, time stretches, and the immediacy of the game, its

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1. Helon Habila. 2011. "One Day I Will Write about this Place by Binyavanga Wainaina – review." *The Guardian* (4 November). Available [online](#).
 2. Binyavanga Wainaina. 2011. *One Day I Will Write About This Place: A Memoir*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press (Ebook), p. 3.

urgency, dissipates. He can feel his laugh 'far away inside, like the morning car not starting when the key turns.'³

There is an anticipatory logic here, and his sister, Ciru, has just got the upper-hand. She is coming his way. He is 'ready... sharp... springy.' He is 'waiting for the ball.' But then Jimmy intercepts Ciru, and our protagonist is outside of himself once more:

A few moments ago the sun was one single white beam. Now it has fallen into the trees. All over the garden there are a thousand tiny suns, poking through gaps, all of them spherical, all of them shooting thousands of beams. The beams fall onto branches and leaves and splinter into thousands of smaller perfect suns.⁴

The sun reads like a metaphor for his own subjecthood, and right now it is hard to tell where one beam starts and another ends, whether he is whole or fragmented, or whether each fragment is whole:

I laugh when Ciru laughs and I find myself inside her laugh, and we fall down holding each other. I can feel her laughter swelling, even before it comes out, and it swells in me too.⁵

Much like El Gotaibi's *Sun(w)hole*, the world described by Wainaina is osmotic. Things bleed into each other; are constitutive of each other. Both stretch the bandwidth of how we

understand ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. They play up the desire, on the one hand, for certitude, and on the other, to let go. It is this tension between stability/certitude/self and its inverse that I find inherent, not only in El Gotaibi's *Sun(w)hole*, but the various images taken of the work, and their afterlives on social media.

In contrast to the crumbling wall, which was built in 2021, *Sun(w)hole*'s location at a popular tourist destination has led to a growing archive of images, from selfies and marketing material to a mention on Google Maps. Although some were taken for the purpose of documentation — as evidence of its former life — most were not; they are records of life, a way of saying 'I was here.' They mark the passage of time, offering 'indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had.'⁶

Susan Sontag has suggested that the medium, especially where tourism is concerned, might placate one's anxieties about being outside of one's comfort zone. Wrenched from one habitual environment and the stability, routine, and purpose of one's nine-to-five, the camera becomes a mechanism for travellers to re-establish the co-ordinates of their everyday.⁷

In this way, the growing archive of images of *Sun(w)hole* attests as much to the lives of others as they do the work, which is often included without reference — more of a

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 4.

5. Ibid.

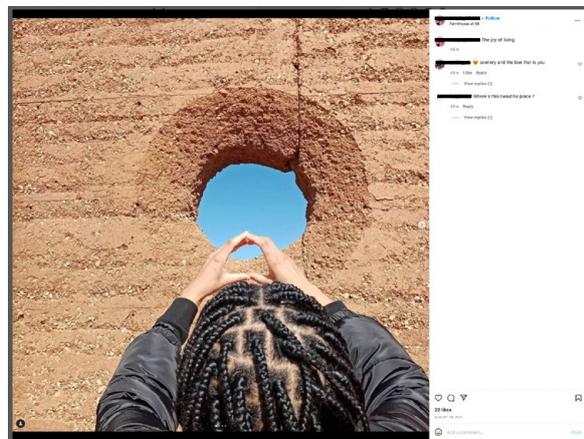
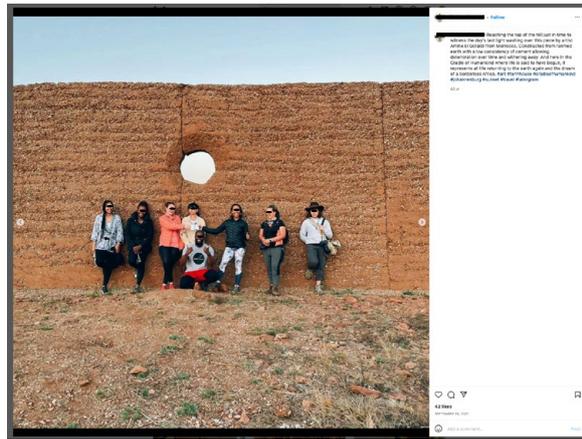
6. Susan Sontag. 2005. *On Photography*. London: Penguin, p. 6.

7. Ibid.

backdrop than anything else. 'Back at it... we hike and we snap,' notes one of the captions.

Importantly, Sontag writes that despite photography's ability to 'certify' experience, 'taking photographs is also a way of refusing it — by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir,' and thus 'assuaging general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel.'⁸

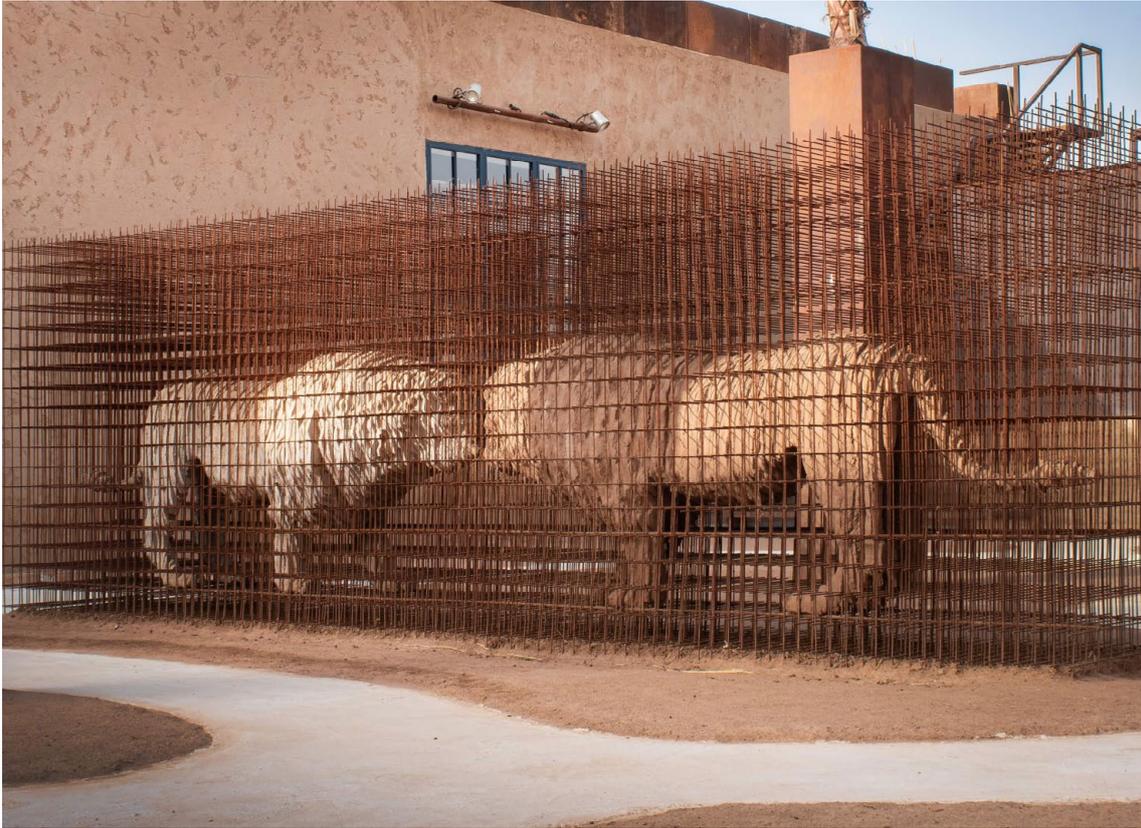
Without a compass, we turn to the camera to '[give] shape' to our experience,⁹ yet the lifeline that photographs proffer is by and large illusory; as elusive and ephemeral as the wall itself. My interest, then, is not with the wall but its effect on people: how they experience and respond to it, and how the camera may inadvertently capture and distill the artist's core concerns. If, as Sontag writes, 'to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed ... putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge — and, therefore, like power,'¹⁰ then the role of the camera may not be all that dissimilar from those early navigational instruments, such as the sextant and astrolabe, which create the illusion that one is central to the worldview established through the viewfinder.



8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., p. 2.



Amine El Gotaibi, *Atlas Lions*, 2021. Iron, concrete, and soil, 600 x 100 x 240 cm. Courtesy of the artist and MCC Gallery, Morocco.

As writes Hito Steyerl, many of the navigational instruments used by seafarers in the early stages of imperialism had a profound impact on how we view ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. Such instruments reduced time and space into a linear format, plucking the sun from the sky and bringing it down to the horizon so as to be able to pinpoint one's position.¹¹ Like photography, it requires that one 'fiddle with the scale of the world.'¹² In order for such tools to work, however, one has to disregard the 'curvature of the earth,' conceiving of the horizon 'as an abstract flat line upon which the points on any horizontal plane converge.'¹³ Like the camera,

this abstraction required a 'one-eyed and immobile spectator,' creating 'the illusion of a quasi-natural view to the "outside," as if the image plane was a window opening onto the "real" world.'¹⁴ Importantly, Steyerl writes that this transformation of space and time — which enabled the construction of things like longitudes, latitudes, and 'linear progress' — also had a profound effect on our sense of subjecthood:

As the whole paradigm converges in one of the viewer's eyes, the viewer becomes central to the worldview established by it. The viewer is mirrored in the vanishing

11. Hito Steyerl. 2012. *The Wretched of the Screen*. Sternberg Press, p. 15.

12. Sontag. *op.cit.*, p. 2.

13. Steyerl. *op.cit.*, p. 18.

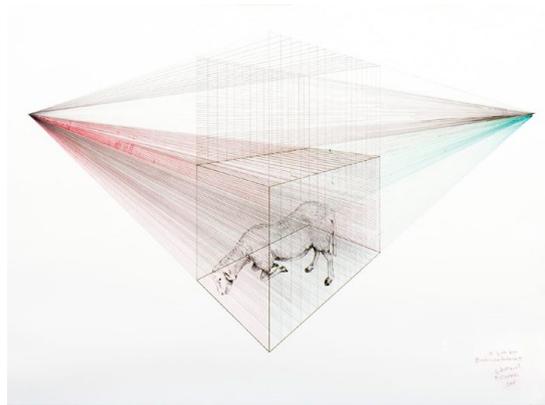
14. *Ibid.*

point, and thus constructed by it. The vanishing point gives the observer a body and a position. But on the other hand, the spectator's importance is also undermined by the assumption that vision follows scientific laws. While empowering the subject by placing it at the center of vision, linear perspective also undermines the viewer's individuality by subjecting it to supposedly objective laws of representation.¹⁵

Much the same could be said of photography, which translates all of our experiences into a search for the photogenic. El Gotaibi's concern for this singular vision is rooted in a concern for conquest, domination, alienation — in short, imperialism, and the scramble for Africa that had the continent divided up and subjected along similar lines.

In *Sun(w)hole*, as with other works like *Atlas Lions* (2021), it is the particulate that counts; the matrix of light and shadow that enables one to traverse the distance between one's self and one's other.

Similarly, in his drawings of sheep, the figure is frozen in place between one or two vanishing points. Significant here is that Gotaibi keeps this matrix in plain sight. He does not erase the lines, nor does he try to place his sheep on anything that might resemble stable ground. Instead they appear floating in space, convinced as he is that 'any pictorial medium cannot represent, in an exhaustive way, today's life in its crumbling, its complications, and the acceleration of its temporality.'



Amine El Gotaibi, *Brebis Séductrice (The seducing sheep II)*, 2018. Ink and pencil on paper, 70 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist and MCC Gallery, Morocco.

In *Phoenix* (2019), the artist suspends a sheep mid-air. On one side, its form is silhouetted by a thin metal frame, yet on the other it appears to dissolve; an atomic transformation that enables the trapped form in all of its solidity to mingle with the light and escape through the open window. After Steyerl, his is 'A fall toward objects without reservation, embracing a world of forces and matter, which lacks any original stability and sparks the sudden shock of the open: a freedom that is terrifying, utterly deterritorializing, and always already unknown.'¹⁶

Social media could be said to illicit such a shock. It is a space that is forever changing; where the process of documentation is at once sedimented, layered multifaceted. So that while the taking of a photograph might temporarily soothe one's anxieties, posting it on social media has the potential to renew them. Like the wall, the sheer scale of such platforms can have a disorientating effect. Just as soon as an image is added,

15. Steyerl. op.cit., p. 19.

16. Ibid., p. 28.



Amine El Gotaibi, *Phoenix*, 2019. Diptych, 74 x 110 cm (each). Courtesy of the artist and MCC Gallery, Morocco.

it gets buried beneath the weight of other images, all of which compete for attention. While its tags and hashtags may enable points of connection to be made, the sense of communion they convey — of a shared experience — is by and large illusory. As with *Sun(w)hole*, one's perspective, and therefore one's position, is forever mobile, unstable. His is a crumbling world, a collapsing world, a place to daydream. Its effect may be disorientating, but as writes Judith Butler, it is only through 'disorientation and loss' that 'the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.'¹⁷

A large crack emerges in *Sun(w)hole*, running from the top of the wall through to the hole's

circumference, then down to its base. It's hard to tell if the wall will come down in increments, or if I'm going to wake up one morning to find that the crack has metastasised; the top half split through and in heaps. I can't help but wonder what will happen when there is no more hole; will visitors still feel inclined to place rocks at its base? What will they look for, or through? Will they mount the broken pieces to get a better vantage, or walk along its length? What kind of creatures will make their home in the wreckage? When the posts replace the work, what kind of story will they tell?

17. Judith Butler in Gabrielle Goliath. 2019. "A Different Kind of Inhabitation": Invocation and the Politics of Mourning in Performance Work by Tracy Rose and Donna Kukama." In *Acts of Transgression: Contemporary Live Art in South Africa*, edited by Catherine Boule and Jay Pather. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, p. 130



Stefanie Koemeda, *Windkanter*, 2016–17. Clay, broken glass, aluminium, sand; dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

Fast Twin

Stefanie Koemeda

If we could travel through time and return to our planet after a long journey through space, the Earth's crust would have shifted further, spilling, eating, hardening, or dissolving the surface. When we finally landed back on Earth after the long journey through space, we would walk on a new kind of ground. Yet, in some places, we would find materials that, although familiar, would be geologically transformed. It would be the materiality of buildings and human artifacts: cities, monuments, airports, railway networks, and ports, but also the communication devices that encompass the planet, such as submarine cables or billions of computers. Weathering and erosion would create a sedimentary rock out of these buildings and objects, consisting mainly of materials

that humans created or enriched — forms comprised of iron, aluminium, bricks, ceramics, and glass which would, therefore, not exist without the action of humans.¹

Although such a sediment would appear sporadically on the Earth's surface, it would be completely independent of the rock below; a geological novelty resulting from the fact that mega-cities are being built on all possible latitudes and longitudes. The geological term for these rock formations is *plateau*.² Human-made *plateaus* would sneak into the stony image of planet Earth's timeline.

When looking at man-made buildings, infrastructures, and materials, a question arises as to the value of the distinction between two



Stefanie Koemeda, *I stent, you stent, we stent*, 2020. Steinzeug, approx. 20 cm (d). Images courtesy of the artist.

categories: artificial and natural. It can be said that the ability to distinguish between the natural and artificial is acquired. Children learn different rules of conduct for each of these realms. For example, children are expected to wash their hands when returning home from nature, but not before going into it.

Growing up, we learn to idealise nature. Often, it becomes congruent with the 'good wilderness' that originated from Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century. Nature becomes the area devoid of human traces.

When did artificiality begin, historically? Was it when computers were invented, or when plastics began to spread around the globe? Did it start with mass-production or the colonial era, when materials were shipped globally on a large scale for the first time? Or even earlier, when agriculture was invented,

and people began to channel energy for their benefit? Could we trace artificiality back even further to the invention of tools, such as the hand axe, which was not developed by *Homo sapiens* but by *Homo habilis*?

It almost seems contradictory that artificiality could have been produced by another species. Against this background, the concept of artificiality is just as arbitrary as that of the "natural." Would the sound of a highway still bother us so much in comparison to the sound of the ocean if we did not learn to make this distinction early on?

A possible answer to our questions could be found by gaining impressions from a geological future in which large human structures — today rising hundreds of metres into the sky — form a hard, compressed soil. Such a trip is possible, at least mathematically,

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1. Zaladiewicz, J. et al. 2013. "The mineral signature of the Anthropocene in its deep-time context." London, Geological Society: Special Publications.
 2. Waters, C.N. et al. 2014. "A stratigraphical basis for the Anthropocene?" London, Geological Society: Special Publications.

since Einstein described the twin paradox in 1911:

If we placed a living organism in a box ... one could arrange that the organism, after any arbitrary lengthy flight, could be returned to its original spot in a scarcely altered condition, while corresponding organisms which had remained in their original positions had already long since given way to new generations. For the moving organism, the lengthy time of the journey was a mere instant, provided the motion took place with approximately the speed of light.

On its return, this organism might report the following about the re-encounter with our future planet:

I am overwhelmed by my feelings and am very emotional to return. Over the entire duration of my trip, I had an intense longing for planet Earth. My body and mind are optimally adapted to this environment and the long time in space was a corresponding strain. When I re-entered our solar system, I felt great joy and relief. Crossing Pluto's orbit was like crossing the doorstep of a home. My arrival on Earth went very fast, and the last hours in space were filled with preparatory

work. Yet I noticed how the small glowing dot slowly became a white-blue bead. I began to recognise ice caps, oceans, land masses, and mountains. The Earth. I was frightened, because the face of the planet had changed more than I expected. The landing went smoothly, and I found a place to sit down for a while. All around were Eoliths, consisting of the city plateau rock. Detached from the parent rock, they were scattered on the plain. Their edgy shapes cast geometric shadows on the dusty ground. Despite their proximity to each other, they had very different colours and textures. Some softer parts of the Eoliths had already been gnawed off by wind and sand, to such an extent that more solid parts protruded like bones from carrion. Most seemed to be of homogeneous hardness. Their edges were so precise that they were reminiscent of small desert dunes; they seemed to float on the plain. Through the far and unimaginably long journey, I saw how a man-made and inhabited city acts as a sedimentary rock that will soon be overlaid by a new one. I have exposed my consciousness other dimensions and can answer our question; what is the difference between the artificial and natural? Looking at these beautiful stones, the question dissolves.

NEXT PAGE: Stefanie Koemeda, installation view of *REAL ESTATE* (2021) at VBKÖ Wien. Karlsplatz clay (subway excavation), 50 cm (diameter, each), height range: 10–180 cm. In collaboration with Veronika Dirrhofer, Cristina Fiorenza, Anna Khodorkovskaya, and Alexandra Zaitseva. Courtesy of the artist.

Stefanie Koemeda (CH and AT) studied Biology in Zurich and Arts in Lucerne, Porto, and Vienna. She artistically engages herself in the characterisation of human-made traces that are believed to endure geological periods and will by far outlast the existence of our contemporary civilisations. Her sculptural work creates new perspectives on sustainability, equality, and the constructed infrastructures of current societies. She lives and works in Vienna, regularly participates in shows, and runs an open ceramic studio in Vienna.



Quartet of Poems

Sudeep Sen

Children of the Stars

for Willem Boshoff

The asteroid that fell at Vredefort made it possible for human-like beings to emerge from the mists of time. My artwork 'Children of the Stars' brings homage to us as the children of the stars.

— W.B.

When evening's slanted sun caresses you —
you glow gold. Your skin-cracks show

blood — striated congealed crimson rock
shades, quartzite one can't replicate.

I trace my fingers along the smooth nape
of your curves. I calligraph my text on you

gently with my uneven nails, etching letters
permanently on your silk-polished skin —

jet-black granite, obsidian hue. I write
on you, in ink from meteorite minerals —

embedded in our earth's core, in your heart.
Syntax melds and multiplies, polyvocal.

My linguistic matrix, nobody understands
except you — you decipher every syllable.

You are the "children of the stars" —
chosen by god's "cradle of humankind."

Little B, Big B, Split B 1, ... Mar; Moo, Gro ... —
how many languages do you speak?

Is silence, your tongue? Every language,
your language. Cosmic silence, echoes.

Our ears cannot hear such cacophonies —
radio frequencies uncharted, unheard,

asteroids spinning, meteorites hurtling,
planets birthing and dying every second.

"If a tree falls in the middle of the desert,
can anyone hear the sound?" asks a monk.

In this highveld African savannah, guttural
echoes carried by coughing-dry winds,

whisper in my ear — secrets only my lover
can decode, ones our ancestors always knew.

NEXT PAGE: Willem Boshoff, detail of
Children of the Stars (Big B and Little B),
2009. NIROX Sculpture Park. Belfast
Black-granite, 330 x 85 x 168 cm (*Big B*);
262 x 66.5 x 62 cm (*Little B*). Image
courtesy of the artist.

คุณเอ็ด

... the people is one, and they have all one language; and I will say: Katso, se on yhtäläinen
... ueni, Tala, va na pu muyati umu ik... kaha vos...
...noi: katso, se on yhtäläinen
... le Господ: Это

เขาตั้งใจจะทำอะไรก็ได้ทั้งหมด

... have imagined. Go to, let us go down, and I will say: noua viahi, vi va likanuuela ku linga. Ta ti yenu, ...
...stettää mistään, kuin he ovat aikoneet tehdä
...кво да било нещо, що би

คุณเอ็ด

Ritual

for Richard Long

Early morning sunlight struggles
to pierce the heavy-grey clouds.

One ray, however, shines through
casting its light on a planted obelisk —

standing tall, amid the unkempt swathes
of wild grass-reeds on a knoll-top.

The light-hyphen shaft reveals on the stone —
an etching, uneven unformed letters,

a code unknown to us — known to
the winds carrying lapwing-lyrics.

All around, a few metres away,
a gathered circle of concretion, forms

a perfectly-stacked circumference —
these stones circumscribing

that singularly-tall tapering monolith,
guarding its primitive private sanctity.

In this cross-hatched wide open highveld,
everything seems weather-ravaged —

clothed in colour-clad lichen, and raw
"terrible beauty" of pompom purple.

Amid the winds streaming hush
I hear a slow-whispered song-ritual.

Trying to push the cloudbanks away —
allowing in the light's benediction.



Richard Long, *Standing
Stone Circle*, 2011. NIROX.

Toucan's Beak

for Richard Forbes

In Kalahari, red is quartzite —
sometimes, even dolomite.

A balloon, fossil, toucan's beak —
a clawed deranged head

on a decapitated pedestal —
a cleaved log, bleeding?

Red is also a carved skull —
hypothalamus hollowed out,

its spinal apex, a perfect hole —
tunnel sucking everything in.

A vulva's cocoon — where
passion and pain meet —

waiting for an elusive epiphany,
cosmic timelines away.

A slab of red meat, scored in
white fat-tissue streaks.

Or is it an ordinary tomato
in shopping isle's ordinary?

Defiant, statuesque — beak red.



Richard Forbes, installation view of *Sacred I*, 2023. Rose Quartz, 50 x 17 x 17 cm. Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture. Image courtesy of the artist.

My Intimate Skies

for Simi

Pin-hole sharp rays, exact as chiselled diamond tips,
glow in infinite lumens. In this sprawling crisp-dry

Savannah highveld — these luminous eyes, light up
my vast intimate skies, writing out terrestrial

histories on an ever-shifting skyscape. Within
its private metaphors, this fossil-craddled terrain-DNA

refracts. The cosmic clockwork measures exactly,
each light-ray's frequency, wave-length and laser-

strength. It is astronomy's language, a slow charting
of celestial memory on granite-black backdrop —

a plotted canvas, a maritime mapping of ocean's
unpredictable trade lanes. Memory is starlight.

Sudeep Sen is widely recognised as a major new generation voice in world literature and 'one of the finest English-language poets in the international literary scene' (BBC Radio). He received a Pleiades Honour (at the Struga Poetry Festival, Macedonia) for having made 'a significant contribution to contemporary world poetry.' His prize-winning books include: Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems (HarperCollins), Rain, Aria (A. K. Ramanujan Translation Award), Fractals: New & Selected Poems | Translations 1980-2015 (London Magazine Editions), EroText (Vintage: Penguin Random House), Kaifi Azmi: Poems | Nazms (Bloomsbury) and Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation (Pippa Rann, 2021-22 Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize winner). He has edited influential anthologies, including The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry (editor), World English Poetry, Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians (Sahitya Akademi), and Converse: Contemporary English Poetry by Indians (Pippa Rann). Sen's works have been translated into over twenty-five languages. He is the editorial director of AARK ARTS, editor of Atlas, and currently on a fellowship as a writer-in-residence at NIROX.



Photo: Sudeep Sen

Dust: An Intimation

Ashraf Jamal

'Humans are nothing but dust looking through dust at dust.'¹ This startling observation by the philosopher Michael Marder arrives without ceremony at the crux of this affair — the meaning and significance of dust, why we strive to eliminate it, yet why it remains both definitional and constitutive in any understanding of existence. If dust is allegorical, it is because it is the invisible cornerstone of life.

Dust is not merely an infinitesimal and nagging substance which must be wiped away; it is, rather, the poignant reminder of our neurotic desire for cleanliness — with its dubious adjunct "godliness" — and the fact that no matter how scrupulous the attempt to clean ourselves and the world about us — in which we dwell, which dwells in us — the attempt is always-already doomed.

As Marder reminds himself, 'I will not be guided by the question of how to dust within myself, to bring my mind to a spotless state of wonder about the world, while avoiding the sterilization of either the mind or the world.'² If absolutes and absolution are of no interest to Marder, it is because no 'spotless state of wonder' is actionable, no 'sterilisation' or final solution possible, least of all desirable.

Rather, it is this will to cleanliness that is the root of our failure to understand ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. Indeed, it is our psychic aversion to dust which

reveals 'our inability or our unwillingness to deal constructively with our lives, to accept their entanglements with finitude, death, [...] archived in the dust.'³

If Marder's declaration — 'Humans are nothing but dust looking through dust at dust' — seems hyperbolic, it is because of its stringency. Of course, once we reflect beyond our existential state, we are also more than dust. The philosopher's point is not to deny us the dreams and imaginations which inform lived experience, but to return us to its imperceptible yet gritty armature. Marder's core resolve is not to dash our hopes, but to reveal that our 'clash with external dust' is a means to 'displace' our anxieties, our 'mortal, rootless, restless selves,' which no attempt at self-possession can dispel.⁴ It is this restlessness, this rootlessness — concealed beneath the vaunted values of rootedness, emplacement, identity — which is exposed through dust, a substance which cannot be controlled or expunged.

For Marder, dust is 'allegorical' because it mirrors our inner and outer lives. Dust infiltrates both worlds, comes between them, and thereby refutes all the divisions we put in place — between inner and outer, this world and the next, etc. Dust reveals the illusory nature of binarity. 'Its Sanskrit roots,' notes Marder, 'dvans and dhvan, portend "vanishing," "covering over," "blackening," "becoming extinguished,"' which supposes

1. Marder, M. 2016. *Dust*. New York, London, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury, p. 23.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 15.



Nina Barnett and Jeremy Bolen, *On Breathing: Vapour*, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist, Adler Museum of Medicine, and POOL.

that 'dust only devours the shimmering of the objects it covers, eclipses their glow, blunts their edges, and causes their lineaments to vanish by encasing them.'⁵

This dread is rooted in our clinical need for clarity of mind, in-and-through things. The obsession is embodied in the modern love of linearity and the 'continuous surface,' unimpeded, unspoilt, declaratively perfect. Which is why, in "An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth" (1998), the design thinker Bruce Mau should kick against the pricks, stating: 'I'm sick of modern design. I'm fed up with corporate cool. I can't bear to see one more "continuous surface." I've had it with perfection. I hate clean lines.'⁶ The poet A.R. Ammons concurs. In his poem, "Corsons Inlet" (1988), we are 'released from forms, from the perpendiculars, straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds of thought.' Walking along the inlet, the poet notes that 'manifold events of sand change the dune's shape that will not be the same shape tomorrow,' that 'by transitions the land falls from grassy dunes to creek to undercreek: but there are no lines, though change in that transition is clear as any sharpness: but "sharpness" spread out.'⁷

Mau and Ammons tell us that life is an ever-forming formlessness, that any manifesto must remain incomplete, that what we espy and deem the truth is nothing other than a gradation in a blur. Which is why dust assumes its allegorical force. 'For all its unremarkable nature, dust cannot be tamed,

contained, made familiar or familial,' writes Marder.⁸ As particulate matter, both organic and inorganic, dust radically complicates the perceptible markers with which we separate the world of things and beings. No finite or absolutely differentiating calculus exists. In fact, once we grasp a graded blur as the best summation, distinctions founder — not because they must not persist, but because they explain our denialistic nature. The nihilistic echo one also hears cannot be ignored, precisely because it is our divisive nature that prompts the obscenity of separation and separatism — blazingly in evidence. in the rise of neo-fascism worldwide.

Dust flies in the face of an arrogant division of the world, making it ethically difficult to separate "self" from "other." There is no place of "pure" consciousness, abstract cogitation.' Rather:

In dust, as dust, we are thrown together, wasted together, with plant and animal matter, the cutaneous cells of others, minerals, cosmic debris, threads of clothing, and so on. Where does this desultory assemblage begin, and where does it end?⁹

Marder's rueful question must remain inconclusive, though the philosopher does make this compelling wager, that 'Dust is the medium, through which everything communes with the nothing it is about to become.'¹⁰

5. Ibid., p. 26.

6. Mau, B. "An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth." Available [online](#).

7. Ammons, A. R. 2006 [1965]. "Corsons Inlet" in *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*. Edited by David Lehman and John Brehm. New York: Oxford University Press.

8. Marder. op.cit. p. 51.

9. Ibid., p. 63.

10. Ibid., p. 72.



Nina Barnett and Jeremy Bolen, *On Breathing: Iron Lung with Blue Gum*, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist, Adler Museum of Medicine, and POOL.

Irrespective of 'the parade of forms,' everything is dust — it is our a priori condition, our present, our future. As a 'shared substance,' dust is 'a common and unstructured foundation' that invalidates differences, and the 'superficiality' upon which differences are founded. Why unstructured? Because 'dust cannot be abstracted from the things that fall into it. It is not the homogeneous residue of decay, but an intimate trace, a spatial testimony to

the singular journey of each being through time.'¹¹

If dust oppresses us, our awareness thereof can also liberate us — once we see ourselves, other people, and other things as unclassifiable singularities, we-they become 'resistant to conceptual appropriation.' If Marder's view is profound, it is because dust, as a 'shadow economy,' confounds 'the world's teleological workings' — the way

11. Marder. op.cit. p. 75.

12. Ibid., p. 28.

we understand economics, consumption, community, nationhood, every categorical imperative which has sought to overcome our fundamental ephemerality.¹²

Our 'immolation' — the very condition for being — can never be explained by 'the pyres of religion, economy, or metaphysical philosophy' which, in their respective ways, strive to pit the substantive before and above dissolution or ephemera. As Marder bracingly reminds us, 'The divine Word is a stopgap against the "corrupting" flux of matter.' Nevertheless, 'Dust is the destiny and destination for everybody, whether organic or inorganic.'¹³

Marder's book has touched me sorely, tenderly, because it has sensorially reassured me of life's gritty yet ephemeral complex, and done so without provoking dread. In seeing the world through dust, Marder assuages our fragility in the middle of every intuition, feeling, or opinion. At no point does he disavow the faith or principle we may uphold, but lightly dusts that faith or principle. By examining our proclivity towards cleanliness — acculturated, no less — he brings us 'face to face with ourselves.' Dust cannot be commandeered. It is ubiquitous. 'Elemental and pervasive . . . it disrespects the partitions between the regions of earth and air, air and water, water and earth, nature and culture.' It is, after Hamlet, the 'quintessence' of being.¹⁴

My further point, however, is that dust is also the definitive correlate of culture, economic, politics — history. Dust is historical, more profoundly so than any other sign thereof. It is with this bold presumption that I now conclude this rumination by turning to the visual arts, a culture and economy which, like the sterilised white cube which typically houses it, emphatically refuses dust. As Elena Filipovic notes in "The Global White Cube," whiteness, as the defining colour against which to exhibit art, first assumed dominance in 1929 in New York at MoMA: 'The walls became somewhat lighter upon arriving on American shores and even whiter over the years.' Its "essence" came to define the museological project:

Windows were banished so that the semblance of an outside world — daily life, the passage of time, in short, context — disappeared; overhead lights were recessed and emitted a uniform, any-given-moment-in-the-middle-of-the-day glow; noise and clutter were suppressed; a general sobriety reigned.¹⁵

This is precisely the vacuum-packed realm Bruce Mau abhors, and why Marder similarly challenges a 'spotless' world of wonder. A sterile universe, the white cube endorses rarefaction as a portal of truth and value. In such a world, dust is impermissible. It does not matter that all we can do is move it about the place as we strive to extinguish it from our lives. In his concluding chapter, "Dustart," Marder begins by flipping

13. Marder. op.cit. p. 81.

14. Shakespeare, W. *Hamlet*. Act II, scene ii (287–298).

15. Elena Filipovic. "The Global White Cube." In *OnCurating: Politics of Display*. Edited by Dorothee Richter and Nkule Mabaso. Zurich: *OnCurating*, pp. 45–63.



Nina Barnett and Jeremy Bolen, *On Breathing: Inflate*, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist, Adler Museum of Medicine, and POOL.

Filipovic's reflection on the sterility of the white cube. Marder quotes from Clarice Lispector's short story, "The Imitation of the Rose":

She missed the roses. They had left an empty space inside her. Remove an object from a clean table and by the cleaner patch that remains you see that there was dust all around it. The roses had left a patch without dust and without sleep inside her.¹⁶

Marder's adoration of this passage is intoxicating. What the white patch reveals is 'the absence of form, emptiness, an uncanny clearing' — a miniature version of the white cube — which, if not occupied, exacerbates a psychic ache, 'a place without dust and without sleep inside.'¹⁷ If Lispector equates dust and sleep, does this mean that consciousness is akin to spotlessness, and as such, dangerously mistaken?

16. Clarice Lispector in Marder. *op.cit.* p. 85.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Marder. *op.cit.* p. 89.

This is certainly Marder's view — and Mau and Ammons's too. Reflecting on a joint project by Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, Marder notes that this project — none other than a consecration of dust — foregrounds 'the fecundity and generativity of entropy,' a birthing of 'the dusty materiality of art.'¹⁸ This ground-breaking experiment, *Dust Breeding* (1920), is a forerunner of the South African, Johannesburg-based artworks with which I will conclude, namely *Accumulation #1* (2010) by Alexander Opper, a study which focuses on the cornices in the exhibition halls of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), and *The Weight in the Air* (2022) by Nina Barnett and Jeremy Bolen, installed in the Origin Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Opper challenges the directive, Figure and Ground, by drawing our attention to what is occluded in this perspectival arrangement — namely dust, which informs both the figure and ground. In a 2014 essay, "Spaces of Archival Slippage [...] Things [...] Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed as Art", Opper is sceptical of 'clear' archival 'systems' and troubled by 'stubborn isolation,' the desire for perfectible knowledge, and the 'continuous battle against redundancy.' In archival systems, memory is Platonic, and as such, idealised. However, history remains fallible, despite the desire for synoptic totalisation. No matter how absolute our need to produce a 'site-and-material-specific sanctum,' they remain subject to atmospheric interruption — dust.

Facades are always illusory. For Opper, JAG is especially vulnerable to an absolutist historical fantasy, not least because of its imminent collapse due to gross systemic neglect, but because its context — a decrepit inner-city, a bankrupt democracy, cultural disconnection, and disregard for the arts — has meant that, ironically, and tragically, JAG best illuminates the inescapability of interstitial corruption. Despite the largesse typically associated with JAG's impressive collection of modern European art, its role as a colonial outpost, now failed sanctuary, the inevitability of its superannuation — a mirror for the death of all things — has, for Opper, an especial pathos. In focussing on the accumulative dust, over decades, Opper addresses the broader matter of erosion, corrosion, the fudging of every figure and ground. The title of his meditation, which more broadly addresses the fallibility of museology worldwide, emphasises a bracketed ellipsis — none other than framed dust pixels — as material fact, as detritus, and as metaphor for the failed belief in similitude. Nothing holds, nothing binds — everything corrupts.

This sensibility is acutely experienced in Johannesburg, a city as a 'mined out conglomerate,' which is also the theme and concern of the installation by Nina Barnett and Jeremy Bolen. It too is wholly focused on dust as the quintessence of materiality, and not as its additive. As the installation's title also invokes, it is dust that makes matter of air, dust that manifests atmosphere, dust our airborne particulate.

19. Whitman, W. 1855. *Leaves of Grass*. New York, p. 13.

20. Bremner, L. 2010. *Writing the City into Being*. Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books.

21. In conversation with Nina Barnett.

22. Ibid.



Alexander Opper, *Accumulation #1*, 2010. Dust collected from the tops of cornices of three exhibition spaces in the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), fixed to paper with acid-free adhesive spray; 1960 x 600 mm (dust on paper); 2010 x 650 x 40 mm (full assemblage of work housed in steel frame behind tempered glass). *Accumulation #1* was made for the 2010 JAG exhibition *Time's Arrow: Live readings of the JAG collection* (2010), curated by Anthea Buys. Image courtesy of the artist.

As Walt Whitman ethically and romantically announced, 'every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.'¹⁹ We are each other's skins and their sheddings, biological and Anthropocene. It is not only oxygen we breathe, but man-made pollutants. This is our habitat, our gritty aerosol. It occupies us as intimately as it defines the Earth's putrescent rind. This awareness informs *The Weight in the Air*, a concept and installation which explores the precarity of our invisible lives. Part dust, part light, part observation, the artwork is as immersive as it is dissociative. Why? Because we cannot quite fathom the ruinous intimacy that is dust — and how bleakly yet beautifully it informs the psychogeography of the city which informs its location and theme — Johannesburg. As the urban philosopher Lindsay Bremner reminds us in *Writing the City into Being, Johannesburg* — the economic capital of South Africa — remains as it began, as a 'mined out conglomerate,' a place of dust. 'Johannesburg is an extremely difficult city to live in, but an addictive city to work on,' to write about, make art through. Like dust, the city:

never reveals itself all at once. In fact, it is reluctant to reveal itself at all. One suspects there must be more to it, more than this shimmering mirage and ceaseless activity ... this dross, floating on layers of mined-out conglomerate.²⁰

Bremner is not speaking directly of the governing atmosphere that defines the city, and yet she is, because she recognises that, like the dust that defines it, Johannesburg

operates enigmatically, caught as it is between shimmer and dross.

The Weight in the Air is thus both fact and metaphor. It speaks to a project that is more intricate than I have summarised. If my reflection on this installation, in the broader context of this essay, is brief, it remains aptly supplemental, and as such, after Jacques Derrida — integral. The material components which comprise the installation include sandpaper, bricks, fans, sensors, strip curtains, blue gum trees, and a dosimeter. The sandpaper, which decks the floors, is a granular echo 'of the sound and vibration of the moving body . . . creating more particulate through friction with the floor.'²¹ This, of course, is the inverse of the frictionless ideal of the white cube. 'The dust is airborne through the currents of the fans,' which would never quite settle anyway.²² Though, in this artificially aerated realm, it is quietly though dramatically foregrounded — perhaps because dust refuses theatre? That the installation is conceived as a 'prompt' reaffirms the need for dust's theatrical circulation.

Directives abound — Blue gum trees signify colonisation, their unnatural inclusion prompted by the need for mining shafts, and for 'anchoring toxic dust.'²³ That brickmaking segues from mining refuse reveals the co-dependence of the cultures of extraction and erection — the birth of the city. Construction sites and dumping grounds are coterminous. Yet no matter how one strives to anchor dust, it will not succumb. Dust passes beyond our control. It moves 'below the threshold of

23. In conversation with Nina Barnett.

24. Ibid.

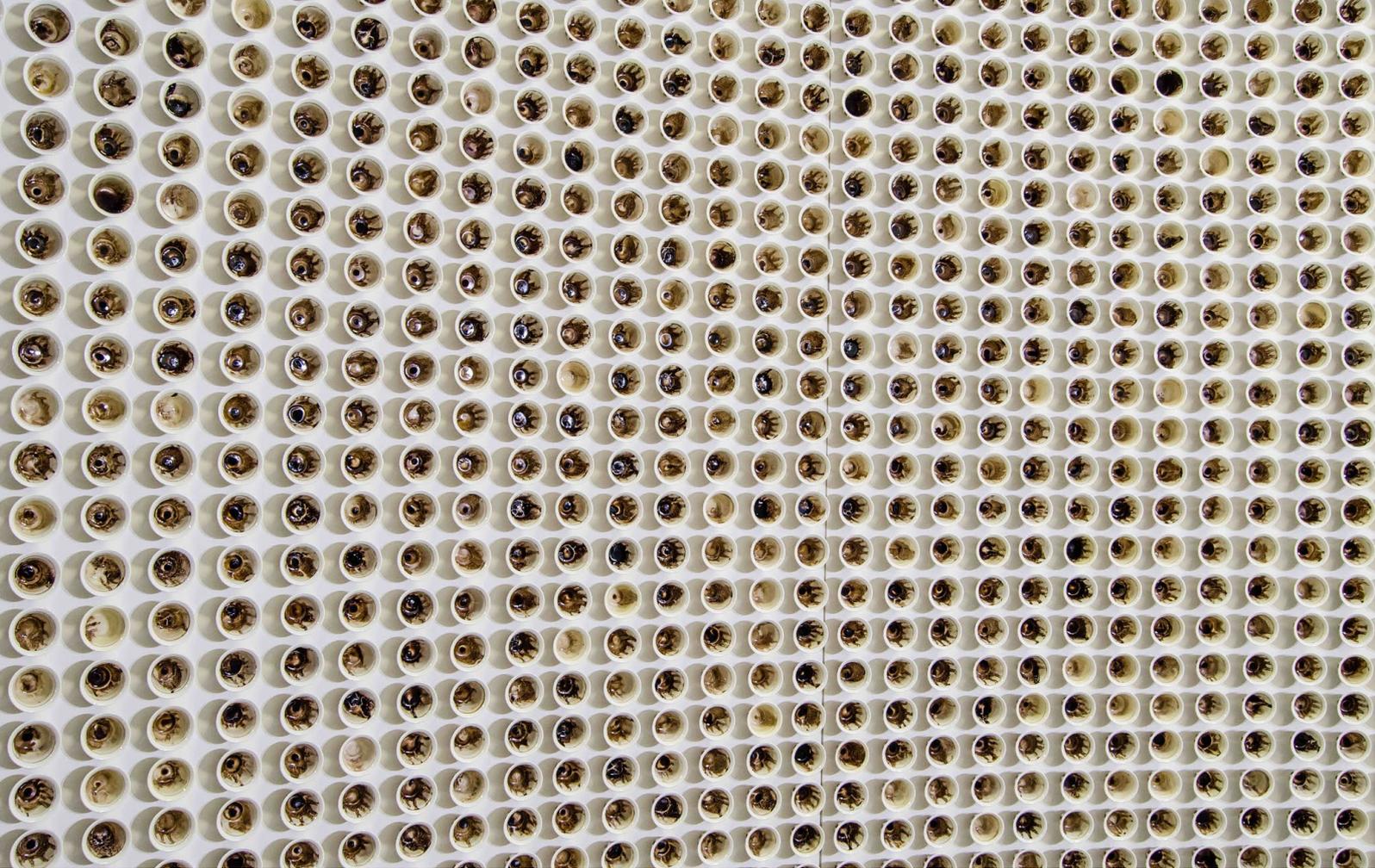
sense perception, microscopic life invades us from within and either infects our bodies or provokes a disproportionate immune response.²⁴ Barnett and Bolen do not address this matter, inescapable in a city whose foundations signal an abnormal earthly disturbance. Fracking is today's currency for centuries of invasive extraction. But what concerns us here is its fallout and invisible anthem — dust — which breaches every teleological record of the world — the histories of people, cities, the very earth itself. In this regard, *The Weight in the Air* is both an aside and a testimony. A rooted experiment in the rootlessness of dust, its structural elements tell us the story we cannot see or refuse to see. Deliberately understated, despite its prompts, the installation and story are designed to bond us to a place, in the way that water and earth, when combined, produce mud to build a wall, a home, a sense of place.

Throughout, this has been my concern — to make a home of dust, instead of seeing it as negligible, invasive, unsanitary. Before and after all, it is dust that defines us. Our mistake

has been to believe that we live solely between matter and the void, substance and absence; a polarity that fails to grasp the filter-conduit-foil through which we grasp the divide, which is dust, a substance as intangible as it is ubiquitous. In his remarkable study of dust, Michael Marder guides us through this ineluctable matter which we scrupulously strive to disavow, by perilously dividing the world between being and nothingness. Dust is our true filter. Silent and omnipresent, it tells us that we cannot varnish our lives into some projected clarity or dismiss what fails to adhere to the construct we present to ourselves and others. It is unsurprising that faith should have emerged as humankind's greatest wager — as fatal, as tragic, as beautiful and irrational though it may be. Faith is the wedge we have placed between the known and unknown. Yet what matters most is that which we remainder, neglect, deny — that gritty aerosol that occludes our need for clarity, substance, meaning, being. After all, it must be known that the void too is anything but nothing.

This essay first appeared in Jamal's *Looking into the mad eye of history without blinking* (2023), edited by Margot Muir and published by Mad Eye Books.

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Ramzi Mallat, *We Are What We Know*, 2018. Ceramic cups, ground coffee, and varnish on wood, 350 x 200 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Ticking Today and Teetering Tomorrow

Ramzi Mallat

Intangible, ineffable, always fleeting. Time is a bank account we are all born into and withdraw from endlessly as we go about our lives, unaware of its balance. A personal commodity which we trade-in for growth, companionship, labour, and rest, our time is a sacred resource that, once fully depleted, leaves us with a chronology of accumulated experiences. We are all bound by time through our mortality. As finite beings, we witness the passage of time through the transformation of our bodies and surroundings. Yet our temporal limitations do not stop us from measuring the various spans afforded by time.

For example, we estimate the age of trees through their girth, by counting the growth rings of a tree stump or sampling using an increment borer. Geological time is measured similarly, through sedimentation. This linear layering of deposits in Earth's crust allows us to date these formations and approximate how much time has passed. However, our self-referential modes of measuring and understanding time obstruct us from experiencing the infinitesimal relationships non-biological matter has with it. Time functions on many levels at once, orchestrating the rhythm at which all of creation moves.

But what of the instant, that 'flash in the pan' moment that arrives, passes by, and comes back again? The instant is the space we all inhabit, this urgent 'now' that defines our most present experience of reality. Built on a series of events past, it dictates any speculation into the future. It is the most graspable understanding we have of time. The instant sews such 'a close relationship between subjectivity and temporality — that, in some way, one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality.'¹

Accordingly, one's identity is dependent on circumnavigating the instant, negotiating with fact and fiction towards a resolved understanding of the self. As such, we are all the result of the times we live in, embedded in specificities that form and guide personal as well as collective values, aims, and objectives, which render time a founding pillar in all human quests. Memory itself is a consequence of time, a vault of somewhat cemented recollections of instances past that recounts events and lived experiences. It aids in piecing together a linear understanding of time as well as disassociates prolonged instances into manageably compartmentalised segments. But while memory is also a sieving of a superfluous past, remembering is an act of challenging time.

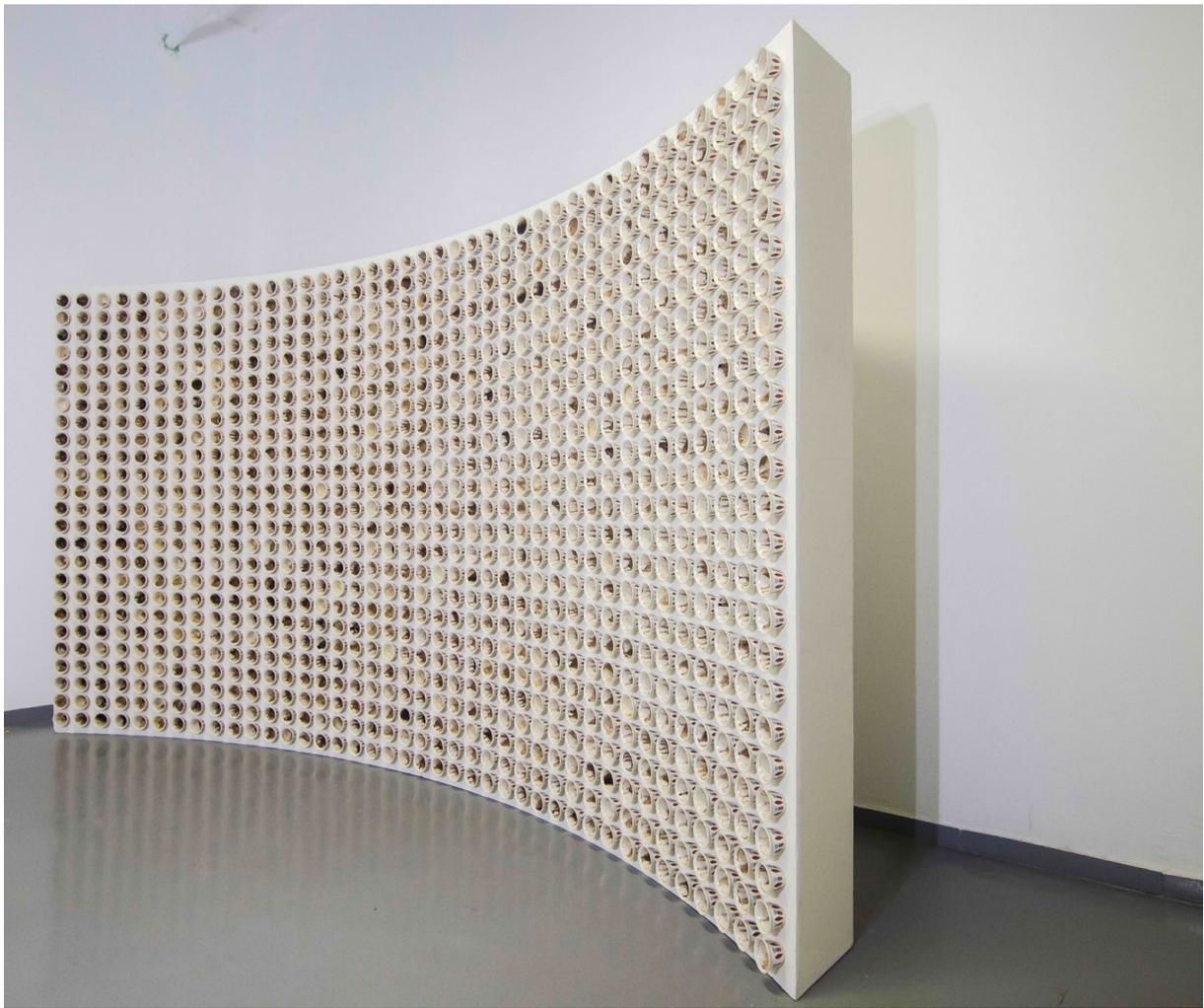
It is in that perspective that my work, *We Are What We Know* (2018), materialised. Part of an ongoing collaborative project with the community in Lebanon, from which I originate, this sculpture is a confrontation with the instant, examining its implications in collective memory building. Constituted of one-thousand coffee cups — one for each individual interaction I had with the public — the work portrays the encased remnants of past tasseography

sessions that unfolded through caffeination and conversation. With each cup having been painstakingly preserved in the same day as it was used, the sculpture stands as a time capsule of residues left from the highly intimate act of consumption. By retrieving these sedimented memories, one engages with, revives, and reanimates the past, whilst also distorting dormant anterior moments.

While these cups are revered as a national emblem of Lebanon for having the colours of the flag on them, they were made in China and imported to serve as trinkets for tourists and nationals to remember the country. This added layer highlights the permeable effects nation building may have on personal and collective memory, underlining how we can always remember things differently. Whether consciously or not, some details may be omitted, one's perspective of certain events may be tainted by their own biases towards specific subjects, some memories may even be suggestively implanted and remembered as real. While many factors may influence the act of remembering — from traumatic experiences that become buried in the unconscious to biological limitations of the brain's plasticity — it is not unlikely that deviations and derivations will arise. In that sense, the past is continuously mediated and reconciled to propound an extensive audit.

Archives are a physical manifestation of both memory and remembrance. Tools in turning back the hands of time, they aim to posit anyone engaging with these collections into the instant in which the works were produced. Therefore, archives are 'where temporal experience and the narrative operation are directly placed in contact, at the price of an

1. Achille Mbembe. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 15.



Ramzi Mallat, *We Are What We Know*, 2018. Ceramic cups, ground coffee, and varnish on wood, 350 x 200 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

impasse with respect to memory and, worse yet, of an impasse with respect to forgetting.²

One is granted a panoply of lenses through which to dissect and digest the past by delving into archival materials that regulate the median levels between time and narrative. What constitutes an archive's collection may vary depending on the institutions that house it, however it is primarily defined as any evidence that is categorised as tangible heritage. Ranging from ruins, artefacts, and relics to documents, photographs, and even film footage, they are what remains to form our understanding of history.

We Are What We Know challenges archiving as a practice, insisting on an expanded notion. Indeed, the anonymity harnessed by withholding any information specific to each cup's provenance allows for an openness of interpretation. Additionally, the scale and concave shape of the final installation creates an immersive experience for viewers, while rendering interactions with any specific cups an autonomous choice. This is also in part due to the overwhelming amount of information withheld in the piece, which holds the viewer's gaze, while asking to decode the wide range of available patterns. Time is not only imprinted on these cups, it is confronted and defied by their ability to capture the instant, leaving any observer to piece together a chronology of the past that includes two iterations of that same item, one of which is fictive. This work therefore showcases how archival collections become an apparatus which projects the mind simultaneously in the present and the past.

When beginning to unpick the future, it seems as though it is majoritarily left ambiguous and belonging in the far beyond, mostly due to the uncertainty that reigns in trying to ascertain the past. Plans and projections are propelled with conviction in order to tame such an erratic temporality. Archival systems are interesting in that regard: they function to safeguard reference points for future generations by preserving collections, both physically and digitally, in order to curtail the risk of incurring loss. However, *We Are What We Know* objects to preconceived notions of detaching the agency archives have in generating the future. Indeed, it stands as a testament to the speculative anachronisms of the future which have been structured in an attempt to dwell 'in the beyond,' using contemporaneity to predict and inscribe tomorrow. Homi K. Bhabha notes: 'to touch the future on its hither side [...] the interweaving space "beyond" becomes a space of intervention in the here and now.'³ (1994: 10). It is therefore in this instant where all conceptions of the future reside, whether 'present futures' or 'future presents,' the practice of futurisation is constructed by engaging with immediacy, which this sculpture attests to.

In her work *Poem Without A Hero*, Anna Akhmatova writes: 'as the future ripens in the past, so the past rots in the future — a terrible festival of dead leaves.'⁴ It is in that purview that a temporal feedback loop is highlighted in *We Are What We Know*. These coffee remains from past encounters, preserved and displayed, speak of the constant act of fortunetelling. They highlight the past's role as a turning point between the not-yet-conceived

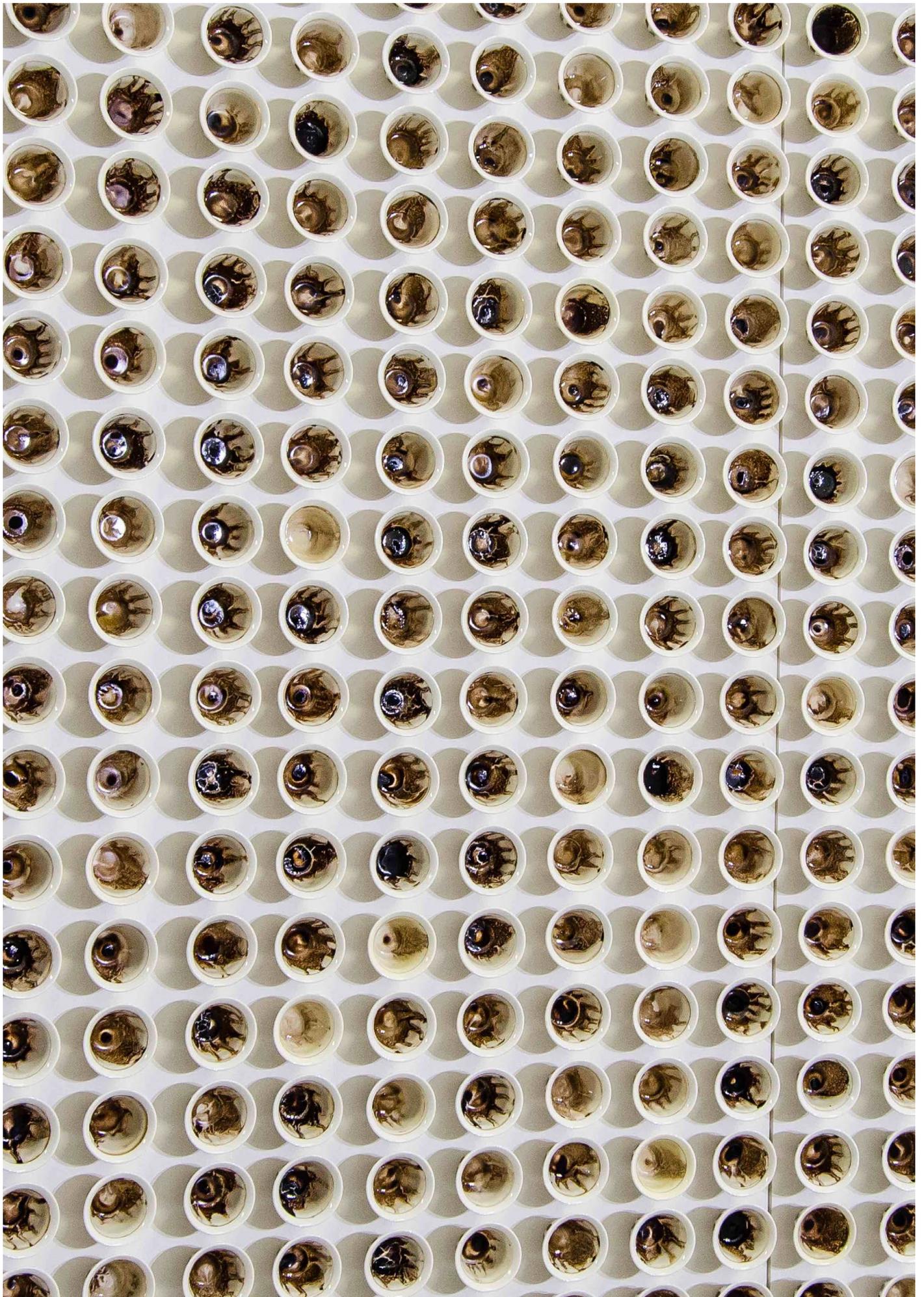
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2. Ricoeur, P., Blamey, K. and Pellauer, D. 2006. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. xv.
 3. Bhabha, H. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, p. 10.
 4. Akhmatova, A.A. 1989. *Poem without a hero and selected poems*. Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, p. 139.

future and the determining present. While this alignment is constantly being articulated in the 'now,' it is the past that holds weight in navigating the instant. As such, the communal archive built into the work not only plays a role in delineating the past but also in shaping the amorphous future, through the urgency of knowing. With an ability to bridge specification with speculation, such archives are accorded a malleability which teases the solid constraints we have of time's linearity.

While we are all conditioned by our specific temporality, time is a regenerative *tabula rasa* that disposes of any mode of reference

to refashion itself endlessly. It is solely in the engagement we have with the material world that we are permitted to understand the passing of time. We alter matter to create items and structures that can withstand the test of time, to challenge the finality of death. Consequently, each of us is an archivist, responsible for assembling the traces of existence that characterise one's life, if only to find comfort in the deceptive notion that we will not be forgotten. Yet we do not realise that we will not be remembered for who we are, either, but rather as fragments in a pool of unknowability.

Ramzi Mallat is a Lebanese multidisciplinary visual artist currently pursuing a Masters in Sculpture at the Royal College of Art. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Fine Art from Lancaster University and has recently been appointed a trustee for the IMOS Foundation in the UK. His practice revolves around the concept of origins through a continuous exploration of cultural identity in a globalised society and its effects on heritage and ubiquitous truths. By adopting theological and folkloric knowledge into his work, the artist aims to reveal tradition not as civilizational legacy but rather as invented by a society's cultural vanguard in the course of a struggle. Mallat has also participated in various solo and group exhibitions internationally, notably at the UNESCO Palace (2017) and the Cervantes Institute (2018) in Beirut, Lebanon. He has completed a short film/ documentary in relation to the socio-economic crisis which has hit Lebanon and has been awarded the official selection laurel from the Scarab Film Festival in Dubai and has been premiered in his first solo exhibition with Danuser & Ramirez gallery in October 2022. He has also been selected as one of this year's Forbes Middle East 30 Under 30 Listers.





Bohlale Ba Maka, 2022. Performance at NIROX Sculpture Park, South Africa, featuring Thulisile Binda, Carla Busuttill, Napo Masheane and Gary Charles.

Archived Futures: Digging in the Crates of Always

Gary Charles

It wasn't just about the stories themselves, though. It was about how memory was forced on the future. A better way to put it was this: history was also about the methods used to store it and the tools used to narrate it.

—Chude-Sokei¹

In a recent short story/essay, *Anarchic Artificial Intelligence*, Louis Chude-Sokei

considers the role of memory and history in formulating conceptions of futurity. Through the lens of emerging artificial intelligence (AI), Chude-Sokei illustrates how representations of potential futures remain tethered to our interactions with the past, retaining the power to reproduce and reinforce existing inequalities and power structures. In previous work, Chude-Sokei has drawn on depictions of robots and automata in cultural works

1. Chude-Sokei, L. *Anarchic Artificial Intelligence*. Available [online](#).

to illustrate the gendered and racialised understandings of artificial life within Western conceptions of modernity. Using Caribbean sound cultures as a central reference, he charts the complex inter-relationship between machinic innovation and human power relations, illuminating porous borders between the human and non/in-human. Cultural production, and more specifically the production of sound, is centred as a vital (but not exclusive) sign of both humanity and intelligence. 'They communicated in codes so powerful that their masters heard something like intelligence in the music they made.'²

Analysing the contours of perceived time through cultural production provides rich ground for thinkers and writers. Theorist Mark Fisher draws on the work of Franco 'Bifo' Berardi in conjuring a landscape of flattening cultural time; a seemingly permanent present, along with an associated inability to produce seismic cultural shifts. Fisher draws on examples from literature and film, but it is within music cultures that he finds the most compelling evidence. Even within the supposedly future facing world of electronic music, Fisher suggests we are locked in a loop of repetition, generating only minor incremental advancements over time, contending that 'the very sense of future shock has disappeared.'³

In this paper, I will consider how hyped technological advancements in AI serve to potentially intensify this repetition, reproducing not only cultural stasis but serving to entrench

power relations and biases, leading us into what Robin James calls the "Age of Statistical Reproduction."⁴ James equates repetition with Neoliberal hegemonic power, where probabilistic computation represents capital and its interests, eroding potentiality and devouring futurity.

Fisher's sense of flattened time and diminished novelty has resonated beyond academia and critical thought. Popular manifestations of this understanding can be seen in memetic social media commentary reflecting on our perception of time through the lens of popular culture. Favourite examples include a wistful Will Smith contemplating the shifting notion of thirty years in youth culture, and a recent tweet that alludes to non-linear paths of progress, implying curbed evolution during recent years: 'In the film "Back to the Future" Marty plays a song he considers an oldie: Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode." A similarly aged song today would be "Smack My Bitch Up" by The Prodigy.'⁵ These instinctive reactions to the experienced passage of time lend empirical credence to Fisher's contention that (in a cultural sense) time is stalling or thinning, that everything has been done before, with a 'feeling of belatedness, of living after the goldrush.'⁶ Music writer Simon Reynolds, whose book *Retromania* covers similar territory, charts the compulsive recycling of nostalgic material and textures by artists and musicians, and emerging retro fascinations of so-called hipster cultures. Reynolds quotes the novelist JG Ballard: 'Everything happened in the 60s, it was like a huge amusement park out of control. And I thought: well, there's

2. Chude-Sokei. op.cit.

3. Fisher, M. 2017. *Ghosts Of My Life*. Zero Books, p. 7.

4. James, R. 2014. "Neoliberal Noise: Attali, Foucault & the Biopolitics of Uncool." *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol 55(2), p. 140.

5. @tametick. 2021. "In the film "Back to the Future." Twitter (3 Apr, 8:52am). Available [online](#).

6. Fisher. op.cit. p. 8.

7. Reynolds, S. 2011. *Retromania: Pop Music's Addiction To It's Own Past*. Faber & Faber, p. 410.

no point writing about the future, the future's here.⁷

For both Reynolds and Fisher, the dawn of the new millennium heralded less newness, an encrusting of categories, along with autonomic re-collaging of past musical forms and aesthetics. The first decades of the millennium are seen as exemplifying music culture stuck in a loop, repeatedly regurgitating the past into a never changing present. During the same period, however, rapid and far-reaching changes have occurred in the infrastructures that support music cultures; in technologies associated with distribution and consumption, and in financial and capital structures that reward artists and populate the industry. A prominent development is the transition to digital streaming, along with the datafication of curation and recommendation.

Today it is possible to instantly access entire archives of recorded music through streaming platforms. For the present-day listener, all eras appear equidistant and all temporalities, always available, immediately. Whether this unbridled access opens up new potentials for creativity, or further traps artists in recursive loops, is open to debate. Certainly, the quasi-monopoly held by the streaming platforms creates an imprint on shifting tastes, definitions of style, categories, and even methods of creation.

Liz Pelly has worked extensively on uncovering biases and corporate interests embedded in both the recommendation and delivery mechanisms of *Spotify*. In her lecture "Music, Power and Platforms" at CTM 2019, Pelly highlights the way in which 'Spotify For Artists'

purports to use proprietary data to "assist" artists in making decisions about what to create and how to define themselves — in other words, how to modify artistic practice to best fit *Spotify's* matrix. She goes on to discuss production houses commissioning work with the sole purpose of deconstructing *Spotify's* curation algorithm to compose music with the highest probability of being "seen" by the algorithm's aural gaze. At this point she notes that 'this is not music culture, it's platform culture.'⁸

This concern is equally prescient when considering the much-hyped development of AI in music composition software. The protocols upon which the streaming platforms are based rely on categorisation and labelling; a hidden topology, mapped taxonomies of what music is, calcifying styles, genres, affects, and histories, treating music as settled and quantifiable. These logics driving curation are also embedded in models underpinning AI music creation. Neural Nets trawl archives, spewing infinite potential streams of music, probabilistically rendered against the vectors of an already established map. Data sets and protocols are presented as universal, apolitical, neutral representations of music, extending the idea of music as a Universal Language, with normative features and rules, applicable across cultures, localities, and timespans. However, this notion negates situated understandings and side-steps cultural memory, illustrating the entrenchment of hegemonic Western-centred scientific ideas of cultural understanding. In *Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies*, Marie Thompson looks at understandings of sound and music posited in new materialism and object-oriented

8. Pelly, L. 2019. "Music, Power and Platforms." CTM Festival (31:16). Available [online](#).



Bohlale Ba Maka, 2022. Performance at NIROX Sculpture Park, South Africa, featuring Thulisile Binda, Carla Busutil, Napo Masheane and Gary Charles.

ontologies. Thompson identifies and describes a modest ‘white aurality’ that underpins canonical works and pedagogy in Sound Studies and Western music academia – ‘a racialized perceptual standpoint that is both situated and universalizing.’⁹ However, the attraction to the idea of music’s universality is a powerful one, found in both public consciousness and works of art and literature. In *The Dispossessed*, Ursula Le Guin conjures two distinct worlds with divergent, unique sets

of social structures, new understandings of gender relations, and even novel conceptions of physics and time. Yet, within these vividly imagined worlds, one of the primary commonalities that remains is the law of musical harmony. The protagonist, a physicist named Shevek, encounters a church while visiting the unfamiliar ‘m/other’ planet:

Shevek listened. Somebody was practicing the Numerical Harmonies on the Chapel

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9. Thompson, M. 2017. “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies.” *Parallax*, vol. 23(3), p. 266.
 10. Le Guin, U. 1974. *The Dispossessed*. London: Orion Publishing, p. 71.
 11. Steyerl, H. 2019. “The Language Of Broken Glass.” HKW, Berlin. Available [online](#).
 12. Small, C. 1998. *Musicking: The meaning of Performing and Listening*. Wesleyan University Press.

harmonium. They were as familiar to Shevek as to any Urrasti. Odo had not tried to renew the basic relationship of music when she renewed the relationship of men. She had always respected the necessary. The settlers of Anarres had left the laws of man behind, but had brought the laws of harmony along.¹⁰

While music does not play a central role in the story, this example demonstrates a common perception that music is inherently mathematical and universal. This idea of music as mathematical, with fixed statistical relations (Western classical harmony) acts as the foundation for the belief that music represents the most likely frontier for machine creativity. Behind Le Guin's example lies the assumption that music is a solvable 'problem' with mathematical dimensions and calculable vectors. With a large enough corpus of example material, with sufficient data, these vectors can be simulated or re-aggregated, statistically reproduced. Problem solved. This approach ignores social and political realities, negating Thompson's situated cultures of reception. As Hito Steyerl points out in her discussion on algorithmic problem-solving, our historic deployment of technology tends to be highly effective when solving engineering challenges, yet less successful in complex social, cultural, and political areas. In centring the commodity (music as noun) and ignoring the multiplicity of social and political activities (music as verb), a zombie machine is created, reproducing decontextualised music as hyperinflationary currency. This computational approach understands music as combinations of formal

qualities that in aggregation can adequately explain the 'object,' static and cast, removed from intentions, locality, and temporality. Music is reduced to notated, coded data, archived in proscribed statistical relations. In this domain, a string quartet notated in the eighteenth century is coded into the same language as ancient Inuit Throat Singing or a throbbing Gqom beat penned last week in a KwaZulu bedroom. To be machine readable, the entire archive is flattened and compressed into a retrievable symbolic, mathematical map. In digital media terms, this is a deeply lossy format. This reductive logic absents social and cultural memory, the interconnections, and underpinnings, of music as both verb and noun. It ignores the creative process itself, the multitudinous acts of creating and improvising in commune (or isolation), the learning, the interaction, the seamless flow and accidental collisions of conjuring sound, what Christopher Small calls 'musicking' (1998).¹² Taken to its logical end, if a comprehensive training set can describe music, then progression, evolution, and novelty are curtailed. Interactions and movements negate models; multitudinous agents, acting both independently and socially, with ever-changing capabilities, desires, and intentions. These movements evade the algorithmic gaze, what Pasquinelli/Joler call "The Undetection Of The New" (2020).¹³ So, for a set of technologies so definitively hyped as futuristic, a primary function seems to involve reifying the complexity of the past — a data-driven hyperextension of a colonial instinct already present in Western Music Theory and Eurocentric music academia.

13. Pasquinelli, M. and Joler, V. NOOSCOPE. Available [online](#).

14. James, R. "Sound Is A Dimension Of Reality." Clark Art. Available [online](#).

15. Lewis, G.E. 2020. "New Music Decolonization in Eight Difficult Steps." *Outer National*. Available [online](#).

Robin James, when attempting the tricky definition of difference between sound and music, contends that there are no absolute objective differences, and that embedded notions of difference are 'institutional' in nature.¹⁴ She contends that the delineation and articulation of difference tells us more about institutions than the phenomena themselves. Western academic funding and pedagogic structures remain largely centered around a distinction between 'art music' and 'popular music.' This distinction is echoed when assessing state-backed cultural spending and programme curation.

This longstanding high versus low-culture debate resonates with racialised understandings of value within the arts. Western music academia (especially at the "prestigious" end) has been slow in shifting from these distinctions. In *New Music: Decolonization in Eight Difficult Steps*, George E Lewis demonstrates that contemporary art institutions and curators have been more forward looking than those in music, cultivating a 'network in which New York, Lagos, London, Cape Town, and Basel were more or less equally important to a contemporary canon.'¹⁵ He laments slower progression in music institutions, the academy, and curatorial endeavours however, and sets out a plan for the decolonisation of new music cultures. Revealingly, he calls for an abandonment of meritocracy (that there is such a thing as 'a good composer'), investment in diverse practices, and cultivation of new consciousness that re-arranges the entrenched institutional definitions of music and musicking.

Yet, these same institutional conceptions are still utilised to populate the ontological register of AI training sets. These taxonomies are explicit in Google's Audioset Ontology, a dataset of labelled/categorised audio events, including music divided up into genre, mood, concept, and instrument. Underlying categories reflect a Western institutional conception of musical identity. However, we are discussing one of the largest corporate monopolies known to humanity, with unbridled global reach, already endowed with the power to shape definitions, consciousness, and the archeology of knowledge.

Embedding classifications in the fundamental code from which future technologies may emanate represents a 'hyper-flattening,' encrusting already problematic categories and conceptions into our understanding of cultural production. This represents a crystalline example of Chude-Sokei's and James's warning that machinic, automated 'creativity' results in the reproduction of historic power structures and inequalities — a hypercapitalised Autofac. Google's high-profile removal of Timnit Gebru from its AI Ethics team is an example of how it has failed to challenge its approach to music. Gebru represented a critical voice within AI research, highlighting biases embedded in current practices and models. Gebru co-authored a paper looking at language models, "On The Dangers of Stochastic Parrots" (2021), demonstrating that greater volumes of data do not necessarily equate to diversity, and that finding patterns in static pools of data negates shifting social and political circumstance.¹⁶ These are similar concerns

16. Bender, E. and Gebru, T., et al. 2021. "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?" FAccT '21, pp. 610–23.

highlighted here within AI music processing and generation. And while music taxonomies may not contain the same potential for real world impacts as other algorithmic injustices, when considering the formulation of Audioset Ontology, and casting a glance at the authors and contributors to the project, it is hard not to agree with Gebru's point.

Therein lies the paradox: by attempting to compile an objective database, a neutral meritocracy, what is highlighted is the situated understanding of the subject, identity. However, perhaps this points to a futurity that is less flat, more plural, where the outcrops manifest Lewis's call for investment in multiple cultures and practices. In a recent article by Matt Bluemink following the tragic passing of SOPHIE, the artist's work is deemed Anti-Hauntological, a rich example that challenges Fisher's conception of lost futures. Bluemink posits that, 'regardless of our personal opinion of her music, it's hard to imagine that she would fail to induce "future shock" in listeners from 20 years ago.'¹⁷ SOPHIE's solo and collaborative work garners reception and occupation of multiple space: pop charts, the avant-garde, purveyor of noise, imploder of dancefloors. Fellow artist Lyra Pramuk captured SOPHIE's essence: 'Sophie's sounds are a musical embodiment of transness, evading the rigidity of the 12-tone system, to express a fluid in-betweenness, continually exploring the infinities between zero and one.'¹⁸ So, while Bluemink's assertion resonates, perhaps a more satisfactory classification would be Post-Retromania. SOPHIE sought to explore new possibilities in sound and thinking through sound. These were

never statically informed, always moving, perpetual transition, never returning. This sense is best captured in an *Arte* interview, with SOPHIE lounging on a bed while espousing the merits of utilising only the most high-fidelity synthesis. Returning to Chude-Sokei's *Anarchic AI*: 'But new life always announces itself through sound. That is where the artificial first becomes authentic.'¹⁹

This essay first appeared in
Alluvium Journal in 2021.

Gary Charles teaches Music Production at BIMM Institute Birmingham. He is an interdisciplinary artist and electronic music producer, exhibiting work including moving image, sound art and performance. His solo work as The Static Hand has been released on a number of independent labels including remix work for Berlin-based imprint flash Recordings. He has also composed sound and music for artists, film, theatre and contemporary dance productions. Gary is an associate practitioner of the Sonic Art Research Unit (SARU) at Oxford Brookes University, and is currently undertaking PhD research looking at the impact of Artificial Intelligence on creative practice and cultural production.

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17. Bluemink, M. 2021. "Anti-Hauntology: Mark Fisher, SOPHIE and the Music of the Future." *Blue Labyrinths*. Available [online](#).
18. @lyra-pramuk. 2012. "so much of Sophie's sound design." Twitter (5 Feb, 10.59am). Available [online](#).
19. Chude-Sokei, L. *Anarchic Artificial Intelligence*. Available [online](#).



Inga Somdyala, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 2018–19. Soil, compost, chalk, and ochre on canvas; 120 x 180 cm (each). Images courtesy of the artist.

The Beloved Country

Inga Somdyala

In grade 8 and 9, I was one of three flag bearers at my school. Each morning before first period, we were tasked with hoisting one of three flags and lowering them at the end of the day. This was a responsibility I took great pride in. Reflecting on the internalisation of this symbol and the ritual of hoisting it each morning, the flag becomes a focal object in critiquing the remnants of history within the 'rainbow nation.' My artwork *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (2019) grapples with these concerns.

In making this work, I painted a horizontal triband flag onto a piece of raw-edge unprimed canvas. The three colour bands are an ochre red, a dirty or off-white, and a brown soil colour. There is a visible difference in how I have applied these three pigments to the surface. The deep, earthy red pigment looks as though it has been applied by rubbing, repeatedly layered onto the surface so that there is a build-up of fine and rough chunks of soil and pigment — this is also evident in areas of small wrinkles and cracks that reveal the thickness of this layer on



LEFT TO RIGHT: the ANC flag; the apartheid-era South African flag, and the Transkei flag.

close inspection. The white pigment, which I applied by drawing or colouring in a constant horizontal motion, also shows patchy and “muddy” areas, revealing the under-layer of brown soil. This consistent horizontal application gives the chalky pigment the look of television static, stimulating the eye to make out indistinguishable or evasive shapes. I applied the bottom soil band by hand in a consistent circular motion, reminiscent of the application technique of cow-dung on the floor and walls of the round thatch huts of amaXhosa. The soil and compost are the only materials I have used to prime the canvas, as the thick cotton-duck weave is visible on the soiled canvas.

This flag, incorporating three central materials used conceptually throughout this body of work, brings together a set of thematic concerns into one symbolic and historically reminiscent object. The flag looks like that of South Africa’s ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), which has a green, yellow, and black triband colour flag. It resembles other flags as well, such as the apartheid-era South African flag (with its orange, white, and blue triband colours). It

also resembles the Transkei flag. The Transkei was an apartheid bantustan largely inhabited by amaXhosa.¹

Many nations in the world use this heraldic symbolism. For example, the horizontal tricolour was used for the old Dutch national flag (from which the South African flag was derived), as well as the French, German, and Sierra Leone flags. I reproduced this triband flag’s design three times with little variation, meaning they are all made of the same three pigments — imbola, chalk, and soil. This is symbolic of the passing of time, or the political “chronicle,” with little change regarding symbolic shifts in power.

My artwork *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is titled after a 1981 novel by Gabriel García Márquez, a Latin-American author credited as one of the pioneers of the literary genre known as magic realism. This style of writing is heavily employed in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* (2000). Literary works of magic realism are characterised by an interaction between reality and magic, or the real and the surreal, as well as non-linear narrative. The “chronicle” in the title of the flag work

1. The Republic of Transkei was the first of four territories to be declared independent of South Africa. Complete with its own Military Defense and Police Force, it operated as an independent parliamentary democracy from 1976 until 1994, when it was reintegrated into South Africa as part of the Eastern Cape Province.

further alludes to the passing of time: with the repetition of the same heraldic symbol, I suggest a similar non-linear or circular reading of time. Simply, I make reference to the adage that history repeats itself. I challenge the notion of a collective “national identity” from a cultural and historical point of view. The idea of a national culture in South Africa is fraught with contradiction, and laden with the idiosyncrasies of a colonial past. What was heralded by the 1994 democratic elections as a unified “rainbow nation” has largely proved equivocal.

Although my grandmother and grandfather did not receive a ‘formal’ education, I grew up in a family of educators. Half of my aunts were teachers. My grandparents sacrificed a great deal to ensure that their children received an education, and as such, placed significant value on education and the ‘acquisition’ of it. While they viewed an education as the only way to alleviate poverty, they faced a number of political, social, and cultural barriers restricting them from receiving an education. However, through their own experience as black people living in apartheid South Africa, they realised the capacity of education to empower and disempower. Aware of a changing political landscape, they did their best to ensure that theirs would not be a family of ill-equipped black South Africans.

For about ten years of my schooling career, I changed schools almost every year; never spending more than two years at the same school. This exposed me to vastly different levels and approaches of ‘formal’ education in South Africa. I went to public schools, for

the most part, all varying in size and quality. The schools to which my mother sent me were different to the schools in which she taught for almost fifteen years. In what used to be called Model C schools, the entire ethos: the codes of conduct, the ideas of what was right and wrong, the forms of discipline, and the mode of instruction were largely drawn from European culture and Christianity.²

In grade 3 my homeroom teacher, Mrs. Venter, had a worn pictorial Bible from which she would read us a scripture story and show us an image related to the story. These stories included Daniel in the lion’s den, Jonah and the whale, Jesus cleansing the temple, and Moses and the golden calf. We were then asked to draw an image related to, but not copied from, the illustration in the book. This relationship between school and religion persisted in weekly events, such as school assembly, during which a prayer was said followed by the national anthem and the school anthem, all of which had overlaps in meaning and all made reference to Christianity.

Such practices were rare in what are termed ‘mud schools’ (or rural schools), which are prominent in the Eastern Cape. This is the type of school my mother and most of my aunts taught at. Before I was old enough to attend school, if my mother could not find a child minder, I would accompany her to one of these schools. It was a long time before I started questioning the physical and experiential disparities between schools of this type and the Model C type. Thinking in the framework of this research and considering my personal experiences as a subject of

2. Model C schools generally refer to former whites-only, often suburban government or semi-private schools during apartheid South Africa. These received more funding, and had higher quality education, along with an inherited European ethos.

history, I realise that this shift between 'good' and 'bad' schools is also evident in my experience of moving between the rural and town or city landscape.

I have travelled long distances by bus most of my life. These are usually overnight trips. From a young age, it has always felt like the unfolding of a narrative to me, the landscape gradually shapeshifting before me at the window seat. From as early as eleven years of age, I travelled alone by bus between eKomani and Johannesburg. Leaving rural Eastern Cape and moving further into the Highveld, crossing the barren, farm-town lands of what Sol Plaatje invariably prosecutes as the 'so-called "Free" State,' to the electric Johannesburg centre was always a thrill. As a teenager, I dreaded this trip back from the city. I realise now that there was a difficulty in this shift. While I was perfectly content once settled back at home, the adjustment was part of something social, cultural and environmental that I was yet to grasp. I was aware that there was a disparity in these places, in terms of what was accessible, but I was only able to articulate big questions later.

It was during the fourteen-to-sixteen hour bus rides between eKomani and Cape Town that I first started asking the questions that motivate this research. The disparity that existed, even on a most basic domestic level, between these two places prompted some questions in me that my 'broken sense of history' could not adequately address.⁴ The cultural shifts

that I had to perform were not getting easier in Cape Town and within the University. This alienation of my cultural sense of identity was heightened by the experience of the initiation rite kwaXhosa during my first year of study.

'Where are you from?' was a question I felt I constantly had to over-explain. Since I grew up in a small town that most people have barely heard of, it was as if I had come from no place at all. This obscurity made it difficult to connect with others when I arrived. 'Which school did you go to?' asked those who insisted on grasping at some semblance of familiarity in the act of getting acquainted. Being from 'no place,' and a good school, but one with no historical or national repute alienated me further.

While experiencing the rite of passage deeply rooted my sense of self, my sense of identity became alienated as I moved further west by bus to return to the University of Cape Town. At the window seat, I was acutely aware of the changing landscape. It told the story of the generational exodus of migrant labour as a result of the 'destruction of the political and economic independence' of native people.³ Having been the most omniscient of historical witnesses, this landscape narrated the history of its own death through objectification, plunder, and eventual capture. It detailed the humanitarian injustice and structural violence it had sustained in the name of 'civilisation.' It was the history of heartbreak — to paraphrase Kemang wa Lehulere — that

3. Peires, J.B. 1989. *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-killing Movement of 1856-7*. Johannesburg: Raven Press, p. 313.

4. In her review of Sol T. Plaatje's record of the implementation of the Natives Land Act, titled *Native Life in South Africa*, Bessie Head (1982) remarks that 'most black South Africans suffer from a very broken sense of history. *Native Life in South Africa* provides an essential missing link. This book may have failed to appeal to human justice in its time, but there is in its tears, anguish and humility, an appeal to a day of retribution.'



LEFT: Inga Somdyala, *Ntyilo Ntyilo*, 2018. School desk and rusted mild steel, N/A; **RIGHT:** Inga Somdyala, *100 Chairs*, 2017–19. Digital print on Innova Fine Art, 91.5 x 60 cm. Images courtesy of the artist.

contextualised this journey as a journey of the landless in their country of birth, as part of their 'compulsory unsettlement.'⁵

My exposure to different schools and education systems and my experience of the rite of passage practiced by kwaXhosa, coupled with an increasing understanding of how the landscape is structured as a consequence of political history, have shaped my enquiries regarding the tensions between history and the present as well as my sense of self.

Bearing in mind that the postcolonial identity is wrought with the trauma of a violent past, its residue transferred subconsciously over time, residue is an implicit consideration in my studio practice. Working with soil, compost, and ochre means that there is often a lot of

residue when drawing, rubbing, smearing, or painting with these materials. The surfaces of most works are heavily textured. Due to their unpredictability, the works either retain or shed this texture when drying. This texture is important to me because it is the history of contact with the surface; it leaves a certain finish or memory of application. The application of chalk in a static and mechanical horizontal motion in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* also evokes the prescribed regimentation of the school or formal education space. There is the residue of chalk in the tableau *Zwelitsha*, the residue of use on the desk in *Ntyilo Ntyilo*, even the residue of bodies in *100 Chairs*. This contemplation of residue is directly related to attempts to locate it in the landscape and in my body, linking these as interacting sites of what Simon Njami (2011) terms 'permanent conflict' on which the

5. Plaatje, S.T. 2007. *Native Life in South Africa*. 3rd edition ed. Johannesburg: Picador Africa, p. 65.

6. In an article titled "Imagined Communities," Simon Njami discusses representation of the black body in contemporary art. Njami engages this idea that a black body is representative of all/other black bodies because 'the body becomes a metaphor. As an instrument of mediation through which the artist speaks to the other, the body is the first concrete element by which we are perceived. It is the seat of a permanent conflict, because through it, the contradictory question of perception is played.' See Njami, S. 2011. "Imagined Communities". *African Identities*, 9(2), pp. 197–203.



Inga Somdyala, *Zwelitsha*, 2019. Cement blocks, chalkboard paint, chalk, soil, bronze, axes, and maps, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

residue of history is embedded.⁶

Through artworks such as *Zwelitsha*, *100 Chairs*, and *Ntyilo Ntyilo*, I suggest how the classroom can be seen as indicative of a broader socio-economic class imbalance. I am critical of a singular homogenous sense of national culture that suppresses my cultural identity and knowledge systems.

Historically, the grouping of different socio-linguistic Nguni clans into a single "South African" nation/country emanates from a violent colonial past. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1991) contends that a nation is unable to articulate itself when it considers all of the competing or divergent histories. Therefore, certain historical narratives are used to forge a national history as something that has existed for eternity, in order to create a sense of collective identity where none existed before. This is why the idea of nationhood itself is haunted by its own inability to consider the full dimensions of history.

The very definition of a national group is marked by a violent drawing of borders on the landscape (creating an 'us and them'), a characterisation of "national identity" that ascribes certain sensibilities to people and institutions (a "South African-ness"), all of which emerge from a finite and linear representation of the past with a beginning, middle, and end. This is how the struggle between conflicting histories and divergent narratives or identities is concealed by the modern nation in an attempt to unite different people under a single flag.

Flags, like national anthems, the names we give roads, buildings, or institutions, the monuments we erect, and the images on the currency we exchange, all form part of the set of symbols that define this national identity. The muddy surfaces of *Chronicle*

of a Death Foretold represent the symbolic arena of cultural contestation and stratification in South Africa's past, as well as the murky or impermeable confinements of history's impositions.

The three flags that comprise *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* also make reference to the title of my body of work *ILIZWE LIFILE*. With this work, I make reference to a current state of conflict and war, a dead or dying nation, in three ways. The flag alludes to the colonial encounter with the Dutch flag, from which the violence of the apartheid era flag was derived. Secondly, the destruction of isiXhosa independence through the Hundred Years War, the forced labour following the 1856–67 cattle killings, and the dissolved independence under the Transkei flag. Lastly, the persistence of the same colonial heraldry and the perpetual struggle against the remnants of a colonial past under the ANC flag.

This text has been adapted from its original publication in Inga Somdyala's MA thesis, *ILIZWE LIFILE* (2019).

Inga Somdyala is a visual artist born in Queenstown, Eastern Cape, South Africa, living and working in Cape Town. He recently completed an MFA (2019) at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art. His work explores 'personal aspects of the cultural, political and social negotiations of the post-apartheid generation.' Based on lived-experience, Somdyala is 'interested in how the personal actively interacts with the collective, and history with the present. With a focus on materiality, tableaux and installation, my work is an evocative and tactile exploration of the interplay between cultural, geopolitical and psychosocial identity making in South Africa. The primary use of soil and ochre in my practice has led me from geological to ontological questions.'



Lawrence Lemaoana, *Democracy is Dialogue*, 2015. Beyers Naude Square, Johannesburg, South Africa. Courtesy of the artist.

I'm Tired of Marching

Lawrence Lemaoana

Sven Christian [SC]: Let's talk about the initial impulse for *I'm Tired of Marching* (2022), when you decided to produce something automotive?

Lawrence Lemaoana [LL]: My process is nomadic. Even though some elements are repeated, I rarely go with the first impulse. I'm often prompted by YouTube videos, music, literature... Something I read might spark an idea, which takes time to marinate. So, *I'm Tired of Marching* began with thinking about protest. I was at Wits during #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, and I got to observe how students organised and found forms of protest that didn't break the law but were still deeply subversive. I also witnessed a sit-in in front of Luthuli House, which was a powerful moment

for me — it was a contemporary form of protest that spoke directly to power, in the language of power. It's an example of how every generation has its own way of defining itself, yet I keep thinking of protest as a kind of reenactment.

Another plug was a speech by Martin Luther King Jr., in which he says, 'I'm tired of marching for something that should have been mine at birth.' That line has become ingrained in society's psyche. With every generation it reactivates, but differently. So it prompted a series of reflections on protest — things that I'd come across or works that I'd made. One was a public monument, organised by Lesley Perkes, the CEO of ArtatWork, that I created on Beyers Naude Square in Joburg. It dealt with past forms of protest, particularly the

Women's March of 1956. There was a famous photograph of a woman carrying a baby, with a placard that reads, 'With passes we are slaves.' It made me think about how the body is always present in protests, at least in Southern Africa. It's always physically involved.

For that work, I'd also been thinking about Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, and how in theatre you have a protagonist, which is not dissimilar from politics. So in South Africa, you have black people on one side and white people on the other, and some kind of mediator in between. I made this stilt, as a foundation for this woman to step on. It's thick at the bottom then tapers upward onto her feet. I liked that it was precarious, because public monuments don't last in the city. At the same time, I wanted to acknowledge the violence that comes with liberation monuments. In the Virgin Islands, for example, you had the Three Queens of the Caribbean who started a revolt called Fireburn. Their monument depicts three women holding a knife in one hand and a fire torch in the other. Then you have the Statue of Liberty with her torch — fire as necessity. It's like that scene in *The Jungle Book* about being given man's red fire. It felt like a request for power, because fire has that ability to create, destroy, and transform things.

My own version was more ambiguous — it could be read as a molotov cocktail or a candle in a bottle. When I grew up, that's how you lit the house. So she's holding a bottle with a candle in one hand and a placard that reads "Democracy is Dialogue" in the other. For me, the ambiguity straddles this precipice between liberation and violence. At the same time, I was questioning the nature of democracy as a form of communication; that in this country, we choose our politics like we choose our soccer teams — according to colour combinations.



Lawrence Lemaoana, detail of *Democracy is Dialogue*, 2015. Beyers Naude Square, Johannesburg, South Africa. Courtesy of the artist.

SC: Can you talk about the particular movement of *I'm Tired of Marching*, this mechanical rotation?

LL: I wanted to mimic toyi-toyi. When I began to research this form of protest I was told that it originated in Zimbabwe and was later appropriated by South Africans. When I looked it up, I found that it's linked to the struggle veterans who trained in places like Algeria and Egypt. So it has this military background, and travelled south to become the staple diet of protest language in South Africa.

This up-and-down motion also connects to a work that I made a few years ago, called *Newsmaker of the Year* (2008). It was an image constructed in textile, using the spiritual fabric of the Palu, which has white, blue, and red stripes. The stripes parallel each other, to the point where they almost read as being



THIS PAGE: Lawrence Lemaoana, *Newsmaker of the Year*, 2008. Embroidery on textile, 107 x 203 cm; NEXT PAGE: Lawrence Lemaoana, detail of *I'm Tired of Marching*, 2022. Automotive protest machine and greenscreen, dimensions variable. Images courtesy of the artist.

cinematic. I filled that section of the textile, the 'film strip,' with an image that I found on the front of the *Mail & Guardian* of Jacob Zuma marching. He had one leg up, the other down, and his one fist in the air. It was a celebratory image, with this figure stylised and flattened into letters, like a collage. I fixated on this image and chose to duplicate it to read like an animation, where each time the figure is reversed to mirror the one before, creating a sense of movement. For *I'm Tired of Marching* I commissioned an engineer to try replicate this motion. I had a simple idea of a disc, with two arms that would rotate. Eventually we decided on a central base, using a car-window motor to power the rotation.

I enjoy this process of placing disparate materials in conversation. It reminds me of this beautiful passage from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), where a motorcycle is being taken apart. The author describes the function of each element and its connection to others. I found that anatomy quite interesting in relation to the singular

and collective nature of protest, but also the bareness of protest.

SC: And the placard?

LL: The placard is a collage of traditional kanga fabrics that I cut out to read "I Am Tired of Marching." It's evolved, because I've decided to include lighting on the inside, to make the words pop, but it looks at the anatomy of the placard and this reoccurring idea that freedom of expression needs to be fought for. As Baldwin says, 'Freedom is not something that anybody can be given; freedom is something people take and people are as free as they want to be.'

I've also been interested in the process of conceptual artists like Marcel Duchamp, too, and how he appropriates and borrows from the world and recontextualises things within the gallery. My other obsession is Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), particularly the use of many vocabularies to speak about one thing. Dread Scott used the same method

**I AM
TIRED OF
MARCHING**



Lawrence Lemaoana, installation view of *I'm Tired of Marching*, 2022. Automotive protest machine and greenscreen, dimensions variable. UNISA Galleries. Courtesy of the artist.

in *What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag* (1988), but with the flag as the trigger. It's placed on the ground, with a visitors' logbook above it. On the wall above that is an image of the flag, draped over the coffins of soldiers who died in the war. It's a highly political work that went all the way to the Supreme Court. Some people thought it was blasphemous, anti-patriotic, and so on. Then free speech kicked in. But it's not a purely scientific form of representation, which for me is what conceptual art is intended to do. It's about clarity. In my work, that manifests through the inclusion of the protest machine, the structural engineer's blueprints on how to build it, and some kind of description of the machine.

SC: The one thing that stands out for me is circulation, be it through mass production or mass media, through the replication of an artwork, the appropriation of an object, or this idea of history repeating itself. Perhaps more important though is the question of what sticks, or why certain things land, and the role that different contexts perform in making things — phrases, images, symbols — stand out.

LL: It's something I think about a lot in terms of art, which is almost a world unto itself. How do those things perform outside of that structure? There's an element of performance and celebration when black people in South Africa protest — this sense of taking to the streets — but it's different in other parts of the world. To your point about circulation, in terms of spreading the word or going in circles — I always think of it like the ghost car in *Gran Turismo*, where you race around the track and on your second lap you create a ghost car and you chase yourself. There's a ghosting that happens, a *deja-vu*.

SC: The function of that ghost car is so that you don't repeat the same mistakes though, right? Like if you take a corner too wide in the previous lap, you can see it happening in the ghost car and correct in time.

LL: Exactly. But the very powers that we're protesting against come from us. The ANC understands the mechanics of protest, its anatomy, so they can squash it whenever. One of the factors during #FeesMustFall was that

one leader was working with ANC leadership. She had this celebrity status, which was compounded by a famous image of her with an ANC kanga on her head, with her fist in the air. There's an element of celebrity that joins itself to protest. And we look for these iconic moments, as if there must be an image to represent what is happening. But often these images betray what is being fought for. The ritual does itself in through selective leadership.

SC: How does that work when it comes to the isolation or selection of particular sentences in your work?

LL: It's intuition. If I land on a sentence it's either because I feel like it's been repeated ad nauseam, or because it serves as a recall to a particular time. The repetition says, 'You know you need to do this.' Sometimes the phrases are direct quotes. Sometimes they're tweaked by limiting the phrase to eight letters. It's about trying to say something with as few words as possible, to be impactful. You distill the phrase by writing it over and over again, thinking about it in different contexts.

SC: So you find a particular phrase that's in circulation, and isolate it, but then in the process of working them into the fabrics you tend to disguise them. They become difficult to discern. With this work, you spoke about wanting to use lights to make them pop, which is a bit different. Here you're entering into showbiz territory. It seems more like a sales pitch.

LL: Exactly. In thinking around these fabrics, I try to stick with the red, black, and white ones, because these are spiritual colours — there's a symbolic weight behind them. But they're also in-between colours. There's an ambiguity about them, in terms of what they mean, which echoes my interest in these phrases and words. When I read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for example, I looked for that phrase. I read it

a few times, thinking there must be a moment when he uses it, but he never does. It comes from W.B. Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming" (1919): 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.' For me it was this layering, distilling something and applying it to a different context to speak about a particular moment in Nigerian history. I then looked at how headlines operate. You have these catchphrases that either make you happy or sad, but draw you in to buy the newspaper. It's thinking about how these things become cultural items that don't necessarily have to have their moment to shine, because they're already in the system.

SC: Again, for me, it's about circulation: how toyi-toying is carried, translated, and interpreted to become iconic of protest culture here in South Africa, in the same way that *Things Fall Apart* is pulled from Yeats — neither point you back to the origin, at least not without prior knowledge, but they continue to have a life of their own.

LL: Exactly. We don't produce our own kangas either. They're imported from elsewhere. But the kanga, for me, is a means of communication. During Jacob Zuma's rape trial, for example, he said that Khwezi [Fezekile Kuzwayo] was wearing a kanga. For him that signified consent, but he appropriated how kangas are used in East Africa as a communicative device. So kangas in East Africa communicate differently to those here. In East Africa they're used to say what cannot be said in public. They're gift-giving objects, and the gift tells you how the person feels. If I don't like you I'll wear a kanga that has something insulting to you on it, and I'll make sure you see it. So there's this underlying communication that is visible to everyone. Textile companies also seek new idioms that they use as illustrations. One might be for interpersonal communication between a wife and a husband. It might be like 'The mangoes are ripe,' and it will have an illustration of a mango tree and a

ladder to say 'It's on tonight.' So Jacob Zuma took that and applied it to serve himself, which is a form of appropriation, but we do that all the time in art. We recontextualise stuff to give it new meaning. The kangas in South Africa are not used in the same way. They're more for sangomas and spiritual diviners, but they're also given to clients who will put water on them so that they're spiritually charged. There's a whole ritual to transform them from ordinary textiles into these spiritual things.

SC: Something that stuck out for me when I saw the work — its skeleton — was its IKEA-like quality. Not only the kind of wood used, but how you can see all the parts, the assemblage aspect and the fact that it came with instructions... You touched on this when speaking about Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, but there's also this DIY aspect that relates to the kind of fatigue expressed in the title.

LL: Yes, it's almost like I'm tired of being tired. I need an outlet, somebody to do it on my behalf. I need to be able to go chill on the beach, and the machine can speak for me. It's about handing responsibility over to someone else. That's been a reoccurring theme in the work. How do I allow the protest to carry on without me? How can I give others the ability to do the same?

SC: Withdrawal is something that I keep returning to in my own writing — the refusal to engage, and how silence often speaks louder than words. My thinking was inspired by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, who talks about a mode of withdrawal from the necessity to perform oneself in public. He's talking about Taqqiya, which is a piece of Islamic jurisprudence that effectively gives one the right to lie in contexts where they face potential persecution, in terms of your faith.

LL: So it's almost like taking the fifth in America?

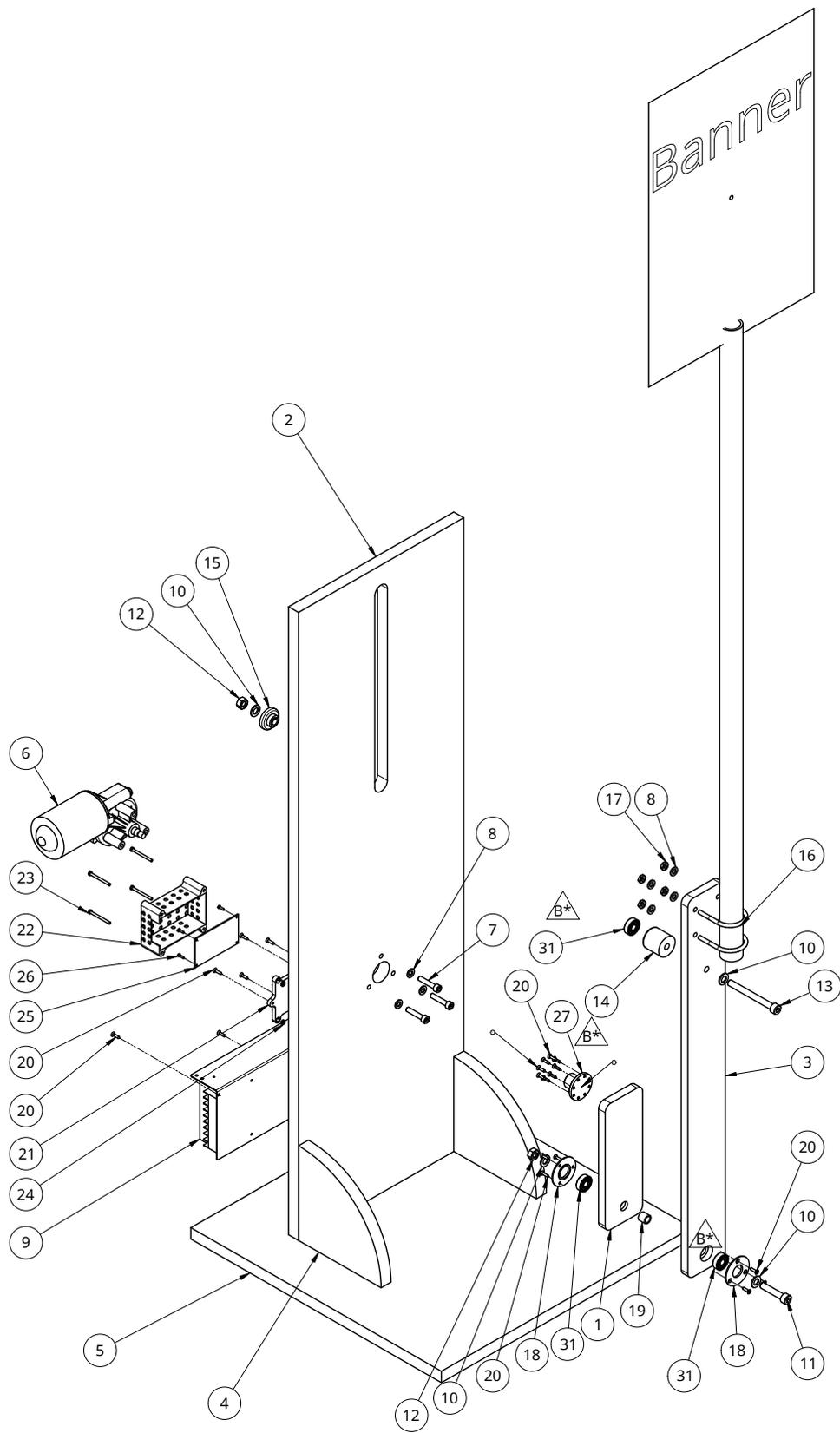
SC: He actually starts out by saying that in America you have the fundamental right to remain silent, but in doing so there's also this assumption of guilt. Similarly, you have freedom of speech but there's no legislation that protects the voice itself. It may protect the semantic content of your words, but these days, tech is used to mine the voice. So withdrawal, silence, becomes quite an important means of protest.

LL: That is so interesting. Words tend to have this second life. They can be raised and then suddenly lose their momentum. It's almost like the fragility of the word. It's a continuous obsession of mine: 'In the beginning was the word, and the word became flesh.' I think about the reverse. There's a point where the words that we express don't materialise, but defragment and become useless. They become inanimate, voiceless.

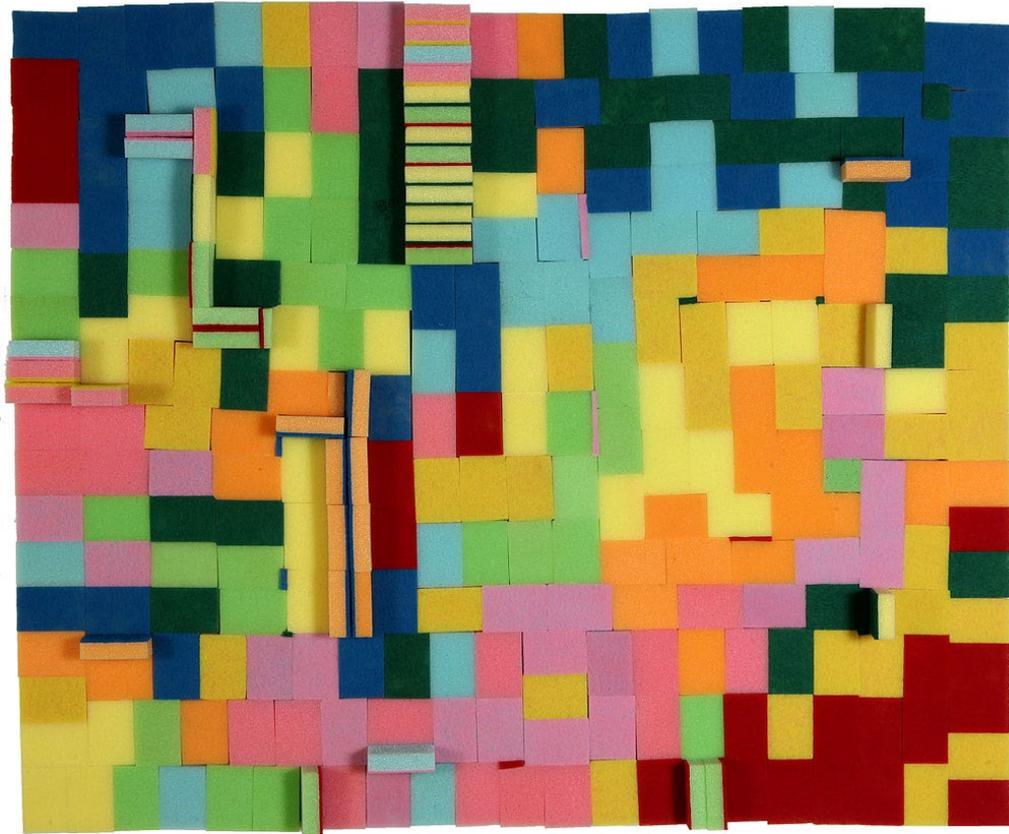
SC: Through over saturation?

LL: Through over saturation, through being ignored, even through their own structure. Like, why in 2022 am I still protesting for basic things, or for what should be available to everyone? I'm so exhausted of trying to articulate the fact that I need to relax. I need to live. I need to breathe.

Lawrence Lemaana was born in Johannesburg in 1982, where he lives and works. His art critically engages with mass media in present-day South Africa. Seeing the relationship between media and the 'people' as inherently problematic, he identifies and repurposes existing control apparatuses using his trademark cynicism. Lemaana's embroidered works are emblazoned with appropriated political dictums woven in kanga fabric — a material with its own complex ancestry. Here, Lemaana wages criticism on the agency of local media, and its ability to shape social consciousness: the result turns didactic and propagandistic tools on their head.



Gerhard Swanepoel's engineer's drawing for *I'm Tired of Marching*, 2022. Courtesy of Lawrence Lemaona.



Usha Seejarim, *Dish washing delight*, 2015. Scouring pads on board, 150 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.

An Antidote to Boredom

Usha Seejarim & Walter Oltmann

Walter Oltmann [WO]: I'm interested in the transformation of materials through time in your work, what motivates repetition, and the constraints and importance of materials in allowing (or not allowing) you to do certain things. So I'll jump right in and ask about the objects and materials that you use, which are very mundane household items — brooms, mops, clothes-pegs, irons. All refer to repetitive activities around the home, like cooking and cleaning and ironing and sweeping. Where did this start? Was it something that you worked with as a student?

Usha Seejarim [US]: It wasn't a conscious decision to focus on the domestic. As a student I was interested in routine, the things that we

do everyday. At the time I travelled daily by bus and taxi from Lenasia to Johannesburg. I made a number of works around that journey. I collected bus tickets to make a collage. I recorded the shadows on the side of the road. The rearview mirror on my old car didn't fit into its slot properly, so at night, when my husband was driving, the mirror used to rattle — I made a work that is now in the Iziko collection, where the car lights kind of dance. So there were various ways of documenting this journey. I also became aware that the first thing one does when one wakes up is brush one's teeth, so I made a video where I brushed my teeth for two hours. It was this routine that interested me.

Without realising it, I then shifted to the domestic. In retrospect, I realise that this happened after I had children. My life had become so domesticated and my routines changed. Suddenly I was doing a lot of ironing and laundry. But it wasn't a thing to say, 'Oh, now I need to make work about this.' The process of being pregnant, giving birth, becoming a mother — I think it was inevitable that I became aware of what it means to be a woman and the challenges involved. I suddenly had to pay attention to the domestic space. I couldn't ignore it. So it wasn't conscious, but my environment had shifted so much. Now it's much more conscious. I know more about, and am attracted to, the materials I use, so I've started to think about what it means and so on. I think I cheat a bit, too, because these materials are already so loaded. Half my work is already done.

WO: Your materials are really found objects, but I wonder how you collect these things, because you use them in such huge quantities. Where do you get so many clothes-pegs and irons?

US: Initially I relied on contributions. It was wonderful. I would put out a call to friends and family on social media, to say I need your broken irons or broom-handles, and it was great because people were excited to contribute. In 2012 I had a travelling show called *Venus at Home*. It showed at the National Arts Festival, and eventually at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG). A lot of people had contributed, particularly my mom's friends and neighbours from Lenasia. They came to the show and were like, 'That's my broom! That's my mop!' [Laughs] They were identifying all their stuff. It was great. But now I use these objects on such a mass level that I have to buy them. I purchase the ironing bases per ton from a metal recycling place.

WO: From the get go, it's clear that your work is located in social interaction, social ritual. Your objects or materials are things that we're used to handling, so they have haptic qualities that encapsulate us, but it's what you do with them that creates an interesting tension, by making something unexpected out of the very ordinary. It's as if you're calling attention to the value in the ordinary, but there's also this absurd disparity in spending so much time manipulating these things.

US: I love that. I love the absurdity of it. But for me, it's also very important to bridge the gap between my art and the world at large. The art world is often inaccessible to the ordinary person. I'm the first artist in our family. Until now, I don't think my mother really understood what I do. I was schooled during apartheid and still, public schools don't have proper arts education. A lot of family who come to my exhibitions aren't art literate. They don't understand the nuances of a reference to a particular art historical figure or work. So for me, these objects also provide an access point. And it doesn't matter if you don't know all of the references. This piece [*Dish washing delight*, 2015], for example, is made from scourers...

WO: Oh, yes. It's like a Mondrian.

US: Exactly. My aunt doesn't know what a Mondrian is, but she recognises the scourers and can appreciate the colours, so she can still access the work, which is important to me. Then there's the question of excess — the obsessive fixation with this object and the process and labour involved. The labour is important because the work is about labour. It's about the drudgery of life — a commitment to it.

WO: It's also this thing of remanufacturing manufactured material, dislodging it from its normal routine. In terms of process, I was



Usha Seejarim, *Cow's Head*, 2012. Mixed media installation with iron and hanger, 51 x 16 x 41 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.

wondering if altering the purpose of this ordinary object triggers something for you, which you then allow to develop?

US: Over the years I've focussed less on my mind and more on my gut. I don't know if it's because I have worked with these materials for so long, but I'm more and more dependent on my intuition, allowing it to guide what happens. Previously I would think a lot, and research a lot, and be clever about the work. Now it's about responding to these objects, spending time with them. I know it sounds silly, but to actually listen, like, 'Tell me what you want? I'm listening.'

WO: Yes, it's like the material leads you. The repeated gestures in your artworks involve various simple handcraft actions of stacking, bundling, tying, knotting — in other words, very hands-on methods of exploring directly and problem solving along the way. One

can see that it involves a very physical engagement, sometimes even a battle, with the material. I'm trying to imagine trying to undo a steam iron. It must be challenging.

US: All the materials go through a rigorous process of deconstruction, cleaning, bending, hammering, fixing. The irons I'm working with now need to get scrubbed clean with a wire brush and degreased. Then it gets all prettied up again. I made a series of works that I called 'Trophy Wives,' with the bases of irons that are cut with an angle grinder, then bent and beaten into shape. I became aware of the violence that the process involves. But on a superficial level, it's also about taking as much as I can from this. Like, there are several parts to the iron — the outer shell, the inside — and I use all of them. But maybe it's also about unpacking what's inside. To understand what it can be, I suppose. And where it goes. And to go deep.

WO: A lot of your work does involve this stripping down or undoing. There's this repurposing of things, but you also seem quite interested in the imperfect or messy or disorderly, as much as you are with the orderly making of things.

US: Yes, I embrace that. Sometimes I'm fixated on wanting to get something to do a particular thing. Often it just doesn't want to do that, and I have to accept that, even though it might take me a while to recognise that something else can happen, because I'm so fixated on getting it to do this one thing... Again, it's about listening, about being attentive, about seeing potential where you didn't expect to. And in working with the material, you also learn more about what it means, conceptually. The theory keeps developing as I work. It gets unpacked in the same way as the materials do.

WO: But there are also moments in your work where you reveal tears or ruptures, as in *Aperture of Concealed Desires* (2019). There's a little spot where the wires are untangling, like a moment of disruption or craft gone wrong.

US: I like that, it's going to be a good title for another work — "Craft Gone Wrong." [Laughs]

WO: I was wondering about that purposeful dislodging, though. What were you thinking there?

US: It's just embracing the mistakes, the imperfections. I've recently discovered that some of the work is very tight, aesthetically, and I want to allow for the unexpected. To free it up a bit.

WO: Your focus on the mundane or everyday, the repetitions and routines that take place within the home — regularity, monotony...

Would you say that repetition is a kind of purposeful engagement with boredom, and do you find something liberating in this?

US: I've never thought about it in terms of boredom, because I find the repetition quite fulfilling. Or insightful. Or meditative. It's not boring for me at all.

WO: The boredom is referenced in the objects, though, what we associate them with. Perhaps your work is like an antidote to that?

US: That's another title, "Antidote to Boredom." [Laughs] But also, Walter, like I love building puzzles. Three-thousand, five-thousand piece puzzles. My family finds it very boring. I'll spend hours trying to find the right piece, and there's a sense of complete exhilaration after three hours when one piece fits in. It's the same with my work. We use thousands of nuts and bolts to put these irons together, but there are moments of, 'Ja, this is it!' You know? 'It fits!' I know this is you asking me, but your work is equally repetitive. You work with the same material, and it's a repetitive act. It's equally hands on, but how do you deal with that notion of repetition and boredom?

WO: I also don't really see it as boring. It's like a drive. The repetition makes the work go forward, but not in a mechanical way. It's not like I'm not there, in my own mind. I'm always focused. So there's always the thing of making, looking back at what you've done, and then forward in an anticipatory way. But I suppose there is a kind of monotony involved, a rhythm.

US: In the making and in that rhythm is a strong sense of presence. You get into a zone. That's why it's the opposite of boredom, and why it's about allowing one's intuition to take over, because you are so present. In a way that monotony allows for that presence.



Usha Seejarim, photo taken during installation at Burning Man, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.

WO: And there's always this thinking process within it. As you were saying, you think, you theorise. It all goes into it. There's this famous quote by the musician John Cage, who said: 'If something is boring after two minutes, try doing it four times. If it's still boring, then try eight. Then sixteen, then thirty-two, and eventually you'll discover that it's not boring at all.' You have to go beyond a certain threshold in order for something to become special. Only then can repetition lead to variety.

US: I saw an interview with Samson Mnisi, who passed away recently. He was asked about his advice to younger artists, and I know from experience that when young artists would come to him and say, 'Can you give me advice?', he would respond, 'Let me see what your work looks like.' And he would look and say, 'Come back next week with ten works.' Eighty-percent of them didn't come back, but when twenty-percent of them did he'd say, 'Ok, in two weeks time come back with thirty, or fifty.' That was his process. He was so

prolific, but it's through that making and making and making that something happens.

WO: You've already pointed to your explorations in video, which is clearly a durational medium, so time and duration seem very important in your work. And I think an important aspect about repetitive crafting is that a viewer can see the endurance and commitment that goes into it. I'm often asked how long it took me to make something, and I'm sure you are too.

US: I haven't made too many videos. I made one about two years ago and it's something I want to explore more, but what I enjoy about video is that element of time. It's there in sculptural or installation work, but video allows you to play with it more. It's not like colour or sound. Time is an element that, for me, is much more elusive.

WO: The immersive scale of your work and its multi-sensory qualities are another point of

connection for viewers. Speaking about one of your broom installations, for example, you mention being able to smell the grass. So the smell becomes part of the experience. I was wondering about how you decide on scale. Is it determined by the process? Do you make decisions on scale whilst working?

US: I have a huge attraction to scale. I think it comes from being a student, when I used to do a lot of murals during the holidays. Again, it's about access. Making public art has a completely different dynamic to gallery work. The gallery is a very limited space, not because you have to pay to get in, but because lots of people don't feel comfortable. They don't feel like they understand the work, and it doesn't make them feel clever. Whereas artwork in public space is there to engage the public. Whether they like it or not, the work is there. As you know, I've done lots of teaching and grassroots work, so for me public engagement is important. Sometimes it's participatory, sometimes it's interactive, but in a public space the work has to be big, because there's so much that you're competing with. I just made a work at Burning Man which weighs forty tons. We needed cranes and forklifts and heavy equipment to move it, but there's something so exciting about that.

WO: Yes, large-scale public art is a different kettle of fish. Working on a huge scale is completely different to working quietly in one's studio.

US: Sometimes, if I want something at a certain angle and it's not possible, the engineer will make a suggestion that I haven't considered, which is not part of the aesthetic I want. And it's about this negotiation: how much do I hold onto, how much am I willing to negotiate, how willing am I to collaborate? I like those negotiations, because it's good to not be so comfortable.

WO: Absolutely. Things that push one out of one's comfort zone are important. Working in a different medium can make one think along different lines. It can push you out of your normal routine, your normal rhythm. But to return to these visceral qualities of touch and smell, what do you see them contributing in your work?

US: When I'm working I'm aware of these things — the smell of the grass — and I want the viewer to have that same multi-sensory experience. The work that you mentioned was at the Centre for the Less Good Idea. I had bought these broom heads on mass. The minute I opened the packet there was this smell of grass. It was so overpowering. Smell, in particular, is such a strong sense. I was four years old when my dad died. His brother, my uncle, is the closest connection that I have to him. And my dad used to smoke a pipe. He smoked a particular tobacco. I recently visited my uncle, who was sick, and got a whiff of this tobacco. At the time I couldn't make the connection. It was only after that I remembered that this was my father's tobacco. But I'm forty-eight next month. My father died forty-four years ago, and I can still recognise that scent. That's how powerful smell is.

WO: It also reminds me of the kinds of compression one finds in your work — it has this intensive quality, in terms of the form and the time that goes into it. And I think handcrafted work very often leads to this accumulated, condensed form, where the process shows itself condensed in the finished product. It's certainly true of your clothes-peg fields, for example, but also the broom works, which are often clustered into groups. There's an almost ritualistic aspect about the bundling.

US: Working with these objects in multiples, it's about how you put them together, and what becomes of them. The peg is recognisable,



Usha Seejarim, *Her Latent Power Lies Dormant*, 2019, Grass brooms and wire, 19.6 x 127 x 53 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.



Usha Seejarim, *Mistress of Obstacles*, 2019. Pegs and wire, 64.5 x 21.5 x 19 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.

but when you put lots of them together they become something else. By itself the peg is quite rigid, but when you join them together they soften. They're skin like. I can bend and curl them. A peg by itself can't do that, but as a multiple it can. So it's about exploring what they can be when they're together. In the same way that a thread on its own is very different to cloth. Cloth is magic.

WO: You were talking about puzzles earlier, and I know that at a certain point everything starts to fit into place and the process speeds up. Eventually there are only so many pieces left and you can pop them in quite easily. I was wondering about those larger condensed works — if you work from one side to the other, or if it's sporadic?

US: You have to plan how you do it with those works. I join them together into rows. They're

stuck with wood glue, then I layer them and put wires all the way through, so each line has a wire, and they're joined on the ends. If I'm making something specific I have to plan it by saying, 'Ok, we need so many rows like this. This is what our width is, this is our length.' But in the process of making another idea comes through, which sparks an idea to take it further in another piece.

WO: Anthropologist Alfred Gell wrote an essay titled "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology" (1992) in which he talks about repetitive making, and how it can have a confounding effect by momentarily disturbing habits and conventions. He tells a story about how his parents took him to go see the Salisbury Cathedral as a child. In one of the side chapels was this model that someone made of the cathedral, using only matchsticks and glue, and how he was completely enthralled by this little model; that someone had taken the time to use such ordinary materials to make something so spectacular. It was more impressive to him than the cathedral itself. What I took from that is how technical processes can cast a spell over us, so that we see the world in an enchanted way. This idea of the spell and of magic comes through quite strongly in your work. In some instances, such as your broom works, you evoke it quite directly.

US: The broom was a catalyst for that train of thinking, but I also read an article in *The Guardian*, referring to Michelle Obama as a powerful woman. It talks about how, when women transgress sexuality they're labelled whores, and when women transgress power they're labelled witches. I thought about this aspect of power, and what it means for my exhibition *Transgressing Power* (2019). It included a work called *Mistress of Obstacles* (2019), about Vinyaki, who is essentially the female version of Lord Ganesh. He's well



Usha Seejarim, *Aperture of concealed desires*, 2019. Pegs and wire, 172 x 86 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery.

represented. Ganesh is invoked to bless any ceremony, from the birth of a child, the death of a person or a wedding, to blessing your car or your house. You always do a Ganesh prayer first. Despite going to Gujarati school and studying the folk stories my grandmother used to tell us, I never knew about Vinyaki. And Ganesh is the remover of obstacles. That's why you invoke him before anything. But Vinyaki is the mistress of obstacles. Like, what the fuck? You know! Why is she not well documented, why hasn't she been given her light? It's a thing of power for me — this unacknowledged or untapped power. With that show, I made quite literal references in some of the works, but it's something that I'm wanting to get much deeper into.

WO: That idea of destructive power is also very interesting. When I look at your brooms, and they're all chopped up, I'm immediately reminded of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (based on a poem by Goethe); the scenario of the broom that gets chopped up and the situation just gets worse and worse and worse. Violence, threat, and destruction seem embedded in the work. But this underlying element of magic and power also suggests that your artworks are kind of fetishistic objects. There's something fetishistic about them; as objects of seduction and power, the animation of raw material.

US: I think there's an alchemy in the process of making.

WO: The transformation of ordinary objects from the domestic sphere into an aesthetic gallery context also seems to have a fetishising impulse, a la Marcel Duchamp. In *Strange Cargo*, Ashraf Jamal writes about the role of abstraction in your work — about what something is when it stops being what it is — and that this removal from the everyday is a kind of liberation. What are your thoughts

about abstraction and the idea of the liberation of ordinary objects?

US: The precursor to that is where you said the work is elevated, you know? Out of the ordinary. So ja, I think there is so much attention to this object. You can't ignore it. Whether they're multiple or monumentalised or just cleaned up and put on a pedestal... I'm drawn to stop and assess this role of women as domestic beings; that it is not something that should go unnoticed.

Usha Seejarim (b. 1974, South Africa) currently lives and works in Johannesburg. She is represented by SMAC Gallery. She received a B-Tech Degree in Fine Art from the University of Johannesburg in 1999 and a Master's Degree in Fine Art at the University of The Witwatersrand (Wits) in 2008. Most recently, Seejarim received the Chancellor's Dignitas Award as an Alumni from the University of Johannesburg (UJ).

Walter Oltmann (b. 1960, South Africa) is a practicing artist who lives and works in Johannesburg. He is represented by Goodman Gallery, and obtained a BA Fine Arts degree from the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg (1981), and an MA Fine Arts degree (1985) and PhD in Fine Arts degree (2017) from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He taught in the Fine arts department at the University from 1989 to 2016. Oltmann has an extensive record of creative work produced since the early 1980s, including a number of public commissions.



Noria Mabasa, *Nelson Mandela*, 2019–20. Clay, 20 x 16 x 32 cm. Photo: Lucky Lekalakala. Courtesy of the artist and NIROX Foundation.

Noria Mabasa's Storied Sculptures

Nkgopoleng Moloji

What interests me about Noria Mabasa's practice is her range — the way her work traverses numerous methods and techniques. From the hyperrealist depictions of people, animals, and objects found in daily life (as seen in *Mudambi*, 2022, or *Nelson Mandela*, 2019–20) to her surrealist shapes and forms (as seen in *Bird Sculpture*, 2022) and everything in between. Mabasa is an artist working deep within a source she has wrestled with for a long time — the dreams from which everything emerges. Both the terror and beauty of dreams illuminate modalities of feeling and being that form the foundation of her storied sculptures.

Mabasa's career as a sculptor spans six decades — long enough to see attempts at reforms and rewritings of history to recognise the contributions of Black women artists. To consider Mabasa's work, therefore, is to think of it in relation to misreadings and erasures within these histories. But, perhaps more subtly, it is to take seriously what it means to return to an image multiple times. And here, 'image' is a kind of proxy for a complex critical practice resulting in a distinct visual language. Returning to Mabasa's images over and over again produces a mode of insistence — an insistence to recognise her compulsion to create in the manner that she does. Said in



Noria Mabasa, *Bird sculpture*, 2020. Muvumela, 48 x 60 x 94 cm. Photo: Lucky Lekalakala. Courtesy of the artist and NIROX Foundation.



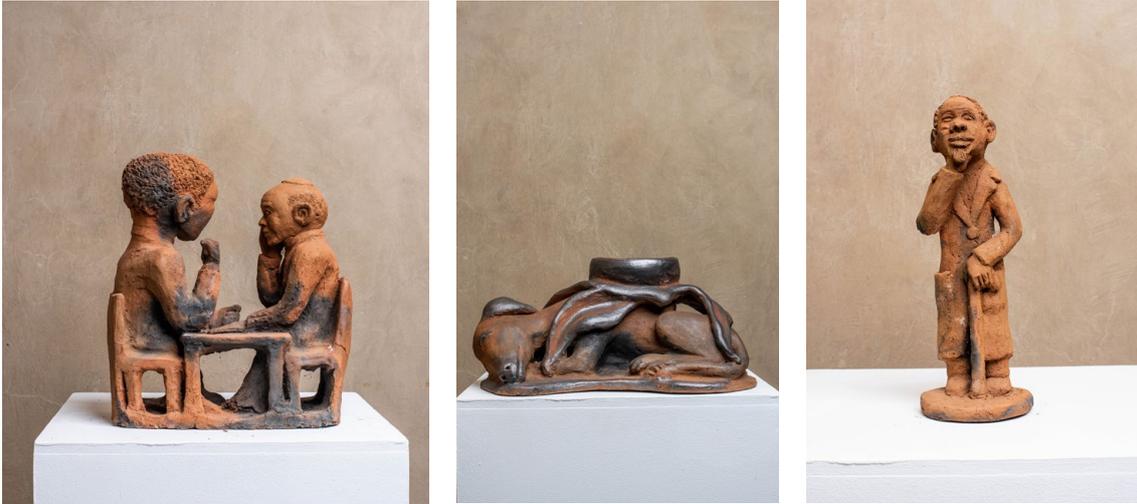
Noria Mabasa, 2022. Oak, 110 x 57 x 50 cm. Photo: Lucky Lekalakala. Courtesy of the artist and the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture.

another way, how do we speak of the essential qualities of Mabasa's work? How does one offer a formal analysis that does not seek to undermine or undermine her biography, but rather travel alongside it in crafting meaning?

In an attempt to respond to these questions — a failing but nonetheless continuous insistent attempt — I've settled on four things that capture my imagination in Mabasa's practice: her grasp on material, her refusal to separate art from life, the question of naming, and the place of dreams.

Materiality

Using wood, a material that is susceptible to insect damage, decay, and vulnerable to fire, Mabasa produces sensual and breathtaking works. *Bird Sculpture* is a small-scale work of intricate and fine detail, conjoined in a tangled composition of vertical presence. The strength of form seems to lie in the soft edges of the wings and rounded crowns. The work is a beautiful arrangement of concentric and curved outlines through which the artist pushes the structural possibilities of the medium — gesturing to what wood can do as well as what can be done to it.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Noria Mabasa, *Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu*, 2019–20. Clay, 28 x 17 x 34 cm.; Noria Mabasa, *Dog sleeping under the tree*, 2022. Clay, luvhundi, and phomo, 38 x 26 x 18 cm; Noria Mabasa, *Old man (thinking about his pension fund)*, 2019–20. Clay, 11 x 11 x 30 cm. Photos: Lucky Lekalakala. Courtesy of the artist and NIROX Foundation.

In her large-scale wooden sculptures forms morph and merge. An animal figure attaches itself to a human figure, only to become abstracted — a hybridisation of the language of volume, mass, and space. In another work (2022), intentionally untitled, human figures face right, standing alongside each other — hand on upper arm to form a chain, mouths slightly agape, perhaps in awe or in song. Once again, Mabasa plays with the edges of a clearly defined pictorial plane, embracing what the material naturally offers. We see this in the cavity of wood at its base, that she has seamlessly incorporated into the composition of the work.

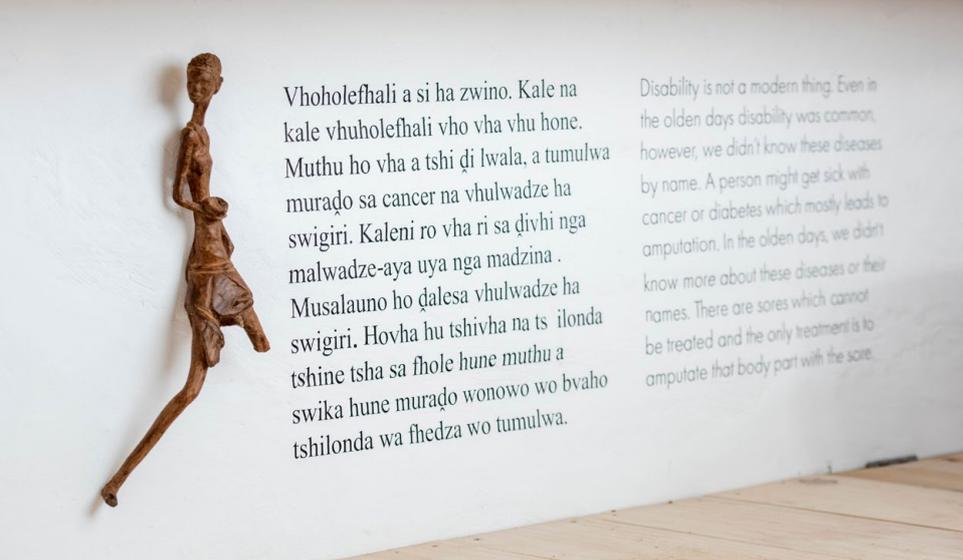
Mabasa’s mastery over the forces of the material extends beyond wood. Her practice also reveals an intimacy with clay, be it in compounded, fantastical works such as *Untitled (two birds and a rat)* (2021) and

Dog sleeping under the tree (2022), the more candid depictions such as that of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu conversing around a table, or *Old man (thinking about his pension fund)* (2019–20), Mabasa handles the material with alarming fluidity.

Art as life

A key feature in Mabasa’s work is how inextricably linked art and life are for her. This is evident in the manner in which Mabasa reflects on her artmaking process and the origin story of her journey. In the latest catalogue accompanying her exhibition *Shaping Dreams* — presented at the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture at NIROX Sculpture Park¹ — Mabasa notes: ‘I was having a quick nap and I saw a piece of wood in the river and immediately I woke up. I went to the river and found two women

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1. The exhibition was held in collaboration with IKAURU Contemporary Art from Africa and the Vhutsila Art and Craft Centre, and supported by the Department of Sports, Art and Culture.
 2. Noria Mabasa. 2022. Untitled entry in the catalogue for *Noria Mabasa: Shaping Dreams* (2022), edited by Sven Christian. Cradle of Humankind: NIROX Foundation and the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture, p. 8 (available [online](#)).



Vhoholefali a si ha zwino. Kale na kale vuhoholefali vho vha vhu hone. Muthu ho vha a tshi di lwala, a tumulwa murado sa cancer na vhulwadze ha swigiri. Kaleni ro vha ri sa divhi nga malwadze-aya uya nga madzina . Musalauno ho galesa vhulwadze ha swigiri. Hovha hu tshivha na ts ilonda tshine tsha sa fhole hune muthu a swika hune murado wonowo wo bvaho tshilonda wa fhedza wo tumulwa.

Disability is not a modern thing. Even in the olden days disability was common, however, we didn't know these diseases by name. A person might get sick with cancer or diabetes which mostly leads to amputation. In the olden days, we didn't know more about these diseases or their names. There are sores which cannot be treated and the only treatment is to amputate that body part with the sore.



Tshifanyiso itshi tsho vhadwa nga tshifhinga tsha Covid-19. Hoyu mulwadze u kho lwala Covid-19 ndi ngazwo o qela fhasi.

THIS PAGE: Installation views of *Noria Mabasa: Shaping Dreams* (2022) at the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture; NEXT PAGE: *Noria Mabasa: Mudambi*, 2022. Vicks, 15 x 18 x 74 cm. Photos: Lucky Lekalakala. Images courtesy of the artist, the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture, and NIROX.

bathing. I asked for the handsaw to cut the wood, since I didn't have anything with me. I didn't have a chisel. Then, I used an axe to craft my first sculpture. No one taught me how to do all this. I get my inspiration from my dreams.¹² Here we see an artist that is compelled by forces outside of her to make, but nonetheless hones skills and technical abilities that allow her to create her life's work. Mabasa's work is not to be understood as a product of an indeterminable divine intervention but a combination of technical training, dreams, the spiritual, metaphysical and the somatic, all bound together — a kind of refusal against a suture between these forces.

Naming

Through the titles of her artworks, Mabasa details real and imagined narratives. Whether standing, kneeling, resting, praying, or simply staring into the distance, Mabasa's figures are always armed with stories, some of which are translated in the catalogue and exhibition, others not. Accompanying a work in clay,

organically shaped to resemble one of her more fluid works in wood, we read:

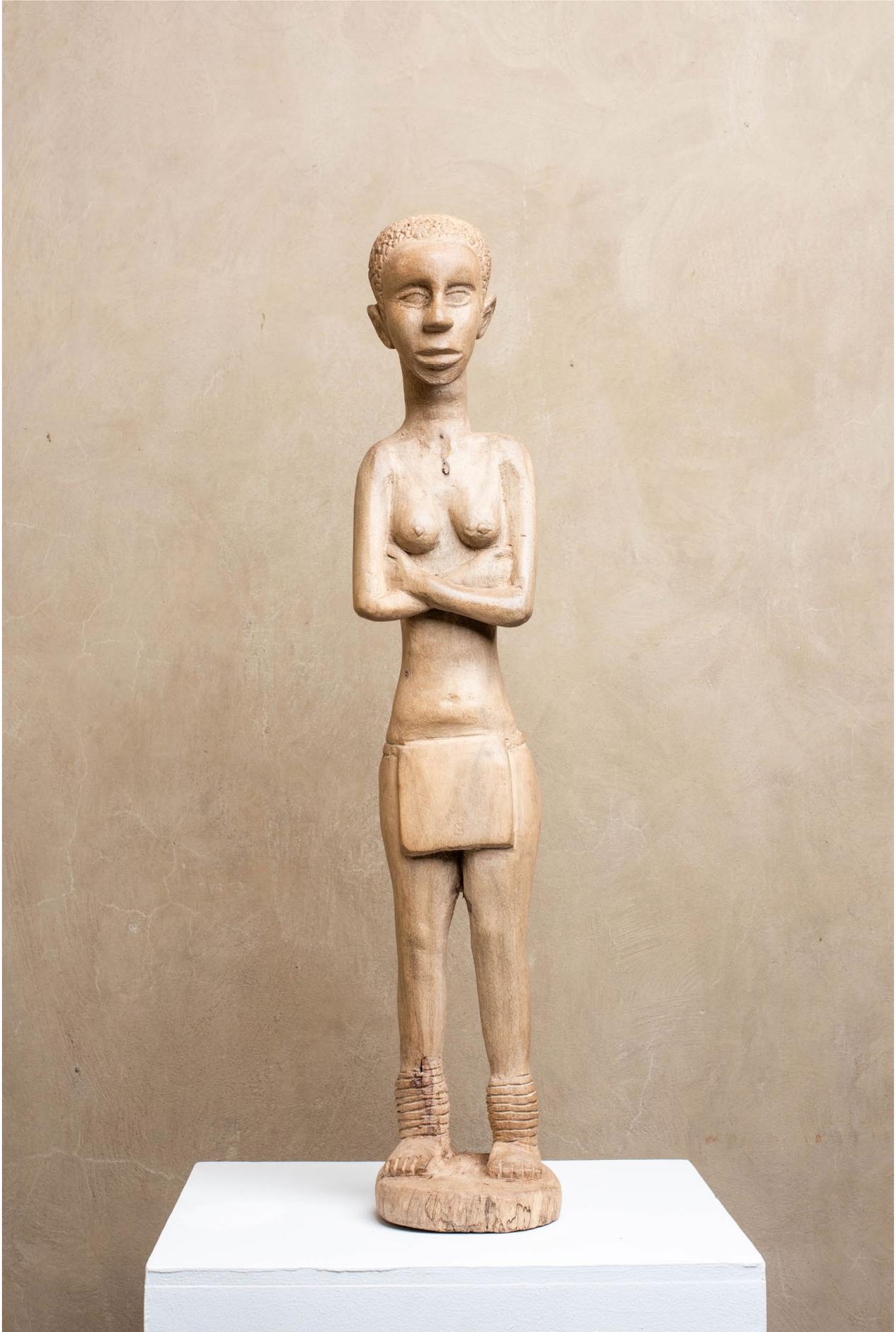
Hafha muthu u dakani u kho livha-livha u kho vhidzelela u khou tsa maqi.

Alongside another, we read:

This resembles a woman who is suffering. Children are afraid of their parents. This woman is washing the blanket and she is tired. The wife does all the house chores alone which is tiring while the husband fled to Gauteng.

The Centre's curator, Sven Christian, who worked closely with Mabasa in organising *Shaping Dreams*, reads this gesture against the 'various ways in which we narrate or tell the story of artworks through curatorial conventions and archival practices that are by-and-large taken for granted in the (Western) art world.'³ Each sculpture that Mabasa produces retains the agency of its narrative through the story that it carries, yet not all of the artworks are accompanied by descriptions, and even fewer

3. Sven Christian. 2022. "The Exploded View: A Brief Reflection on Curatorial Processes and Pitfalls." In *Noria Mabasa: Shaping Dreams*. Cradle of Humankind: Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture, p. 49 (available [online](#)).



have been translated for easy consumption. In such instances, it is the artist's private commune with her work, and the story it underpins, that is foregrounded.

Dreaming

'No one taught me how to do all this. I get my inspiration from my dreams.'

— Noria Mabasa

Mabasa's latest exhibition, *Shaping Dreams*, foregrounds the significance of dreams in her process. The sculptures she crafts and exhibits in *Shaping Dreams* articulate the vitality of the dreamscapes that influence their making. In her 1985 text, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," feminist author Audre Lorde reflects on dreams and freedom, noting that 'it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. They are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare.'

Mabasa's sculptures reveal the intelligence inherent in dreaming, where dreaming is a way of knowing and telling. This is often demonstrated in the bizarre and often illogical

assemblages of scenes and worlds that we find in her work. Here, the act of dreaming can be read through multiple entry points — dreams as fantasies, visions, poems, and messages from other worlds but also as subconscious ruminations of hopes and aspirations. For Mabasa, dreams are also instructions that give way to what can be moulded and are not separate from any other instinct or urge to make work. In one instance, Mabasa contemplates details that led to the creation of clay sculptures that she refers to as 'little people,' noting:

After the ritual at once, I sent the children to go to the river and dig some clay for me. I started the fire. On the other hand, I am shy to create little people using clay. The pictures I saw in a dream. However, I was also scared that I might fall sick again if I don't do this.

Through this telling, we see no rigid boundaries between "waking life" and "dreaming life." Similarly to Lorde, Mabasa's dreams give her the strength and courage to feel, to speak, and to dare.

Nkgopoleng Moloi is an arts writer based in Cape Town, South Africa. Her work has been featured in Artthrob, Elephant Magazine, The British Journal of Photography and post (The Museum of Modern Art's online resource), among others.

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4. Audre Lorde. 2007. "Poetry is not a Luxury." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, p. 31.
 5. Noria Mabasa. 2022. Untitled entry in the catalogue for *Noria Mabasa: Shaping Dreams (2022)*, edited by Sven Christian. Cradle of Humankind: NIROX Foundation and the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture, p. 7 (available [online](#)).



Noria Mabasa. 2010. Muzare, 300 x 170 x 70 cm. Photo: Lucky Lekalakala. Image courtesy of the artist and the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture.

Groundwater

Lukho Witbooi

Sibahle 1985

Mama says the water from ePikweni comes from eQandu, the great lake. It travels underneath the earth until torrents pour out in our village eWeza, and distant villages like eMboya and eMbozi, until this water reaches the sea. When Mama was a little girl, a white man named Mac owned the house and shop in the woods before it was sold to mamPhoswa. Mac saw this clean pool of water that never ran out and he used cement and rocks to build a circular structure so cows and sheep would not make the pool dirty when they came for a drink.

I am walking on the structure Mac built with my arms spread out for balance. Wezo is using my five-litre bucket to fill up two yellow twenty-litre bottles that he has placed in a green wheelbarrow. Asamahle is using a stick to fish for a crab inside the water. She beats the stick against the wall.

"I almost got him, but he lets go when I pull up my arm!"

"If you fill up the bottles, I can catch him for you," Wezo replies as he slowly pours water from my bucket into a bottle. Its emptiness bellows out as the water hits its insides.

"Ha ah."

Asemahle shakes her head and leans in, sinking her whole arm under the dark water. I jump off to kneel next to her.

"Don't scare it, Sibahle!"

"I won't."

I use my big toe to play with a pebble. From our reflection in the water, I note our differences. We are both wearing purple

dresses, but Asemahle has a bigger and rounder face. Wezo says she has rabbit teeth because of her two big front teeth. I have a small gap between my bottom teeth.

"I know Mr Crab very well," Wezo tells us. "He will just go to the bottom and you are going to wish you had asked me for help."

Wezo goes around to the other side of Epikweni, but he still makes sure to dip his bucket without stirring the water too much. Mr Crab is looking up at us with two pointed eyes and he grabs Asemahle's stick with his largest claw. She pulls the stick up and Mr Crab retreats to the darkness of the water.

"You scared him, Wezo!" Asemahle tells him, before throwing her her stick away.

"You are lying, Ase! He sunk before Wezo dipped the bucket."

I climb back to resume my walk around the waterhole. Asemahle pushes me and I fall into the water. I can barely process its cold embrace before something pulls me down. Something is holding me around my body and water pours into my open mouth.

Tsohle 2005

Makhulu is standing over me with a paraffin lamp. Her shadow looms behind on the blue wall and I can make out her doek on the white ceiling. She places the paraffin lamp next to the bible on a mirror cabinet and clasps the top of her nightgown shut with a fist and turns her shining brown irises to me.

"You were talking in your sleep again, Tsohle."

"I had another bad dream, Makhulu."

This is the third time she wakes me up at midnight for prayer. I regret telling her I dreamt about Sibahle in a purple dress calling out to me. She would not have insisted that I move my bed into her bedroom, and I would not be losing sleep.

"The devil does not sleep Tsohle. We must also be vigilant and ask God to destroy the evil spirits that want to harm us."

Makhulu picks up her black bible with the red mouth from the mirror cabinet. I feel the bottom of my bed for my socks, and I slip them on. I make sure to aim my feet for the fuzzy mat, but I still feel a cold sensation around my ankles. I kneel next to her with my thigh brushing against the belt of her nightgown.

Makhulu starts her prayer. "Lord of Abraham Isaac and Jacob! We call upon you!" She slaps her hand on the bible and her words are like stones being thrown at the devil. "Please protect us with your light against the darkness that seeks to destroy our home. We remember your promises, Lord. All the devil's tricks are revealed in your light!"

I also pray. "Heavenly Father, please watch over Mama, Mandy and Lethu. Please help my stepdad stop drinking so he can stop hitting them. Please also help all the children who are orphans. The old people and the homeless." Makhulu finishes first, so I also end. "Lord also protect us from the devil. I know the fight is won in Jesus's name. Amen."

"Go pee, Tsohle," Makhulu instructs. She takes the paraffin lamp and shuffles back to her bed. The blue chamber pot is next to the door and I pull down my panties from underneath my nightshirt. I enjoy listening to the sound of pee as it hits the side. I climb back to bed and my sheets are no longer warm. Makhulu lifts the glass from the lamp and blows it out.

"Makhulu, can you please leave the lamp on?" I ask her. I don't get a response. She might be asleep.

"Tsohle, the lamp uses paraffin. Paraffin must be bought at the store," she replies.

I also take my time to answer.

"Okay, Makhulu. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I look at the window where the light from a full moon is coming in. I plan to look at it until morning comes. I can make out a small cobweb on the corner of the windowsill. I sit up and lean close, but it's an old cobweb and there is no spider. I sink back and wrap my blankets tightly around me.

Sibahle 1985

I pull myself from the water as it flops to the edge and spills into the side of ePikweni. The bottom of a half-moon is shining through tall gum trees and the night is full of stars. There are frogs and crickets singing in the pond the overflow of water has created.

I take small steps around the water to where I left my flip flops, and I can hear the barking of the small dog from the teacher's house far across the main road. The dog stops barking and starts again. I spot a flip flop on top of the other in the grass. Instead of picking them up, I look around for my water bucket, but it's gone. I look at the trail leading home through the clearing in the woods and I see darkness.

Then I hear a man singing but his pleasant voice fades just as he is being accompanied by drums. I feel like there is a room I cannot see in the darkness. The smell of impepho hits me strongly. I look at the small trees just to make sure there is no fire, but there is nothing but the whisper of the small trees. The teacher's dog starts barking again before growing quiet.

People start appearing on the trail that leads home. Their clothes emit light and not all of them are clear to me. I can make out an old man wearing white pants, a white hat, and a brown jacket with only the top three buttons closed. His face has distinct cheekbones and a small white beard. His unsmiling jaw and intense stare make it appear as if he

shouts when he talks. He is holding a rifle and is standing next to a beautiful woman. The woman is barefoot, with something white smeared on her legs, arms and face. She has dreadlocks underneath a leopard-print doek, multi-coloured necklaces hang from her neck to her waist. She is wearing a voluminous red skirt with white beads stitched into it and a white top.

"This was a bad idea. Sibahle is just a child."

The old man speaks with a voice of hundreds of voices coming from inside me.

"We had no other choice. Her mother did not listen to us," the woman replies with a similar voice.

"We should have been a bit more patient before making our decision."

I turn and start running towards the teacher's house.

"You should not run from us, Sibahle. We are here to help," the woman's voice tells me.

"You are impatient, Zimkitha. This child needs our guidance. You scared her."

"If her mother did her part, she would know there is nothing to fear from abantu abadala."

Tsohle 2005

Makhulu's movement in the kitchen wakes me up. I hear the slamming of the cupboard and rustling plastic and I can smell burning oil and a dove is making noise outside. Makhulu's phone rings and I jump out of bed to go and listen at the door.

"Tsohle is a good girl. She can cook and clean. Why must a stranger watch your home when you can have a family member — No! I did not raise a liar, Wezo. You are telling me you hired a foreigner to clean your house? - Okay, but Tsohle told me that she saw Sibahle in her dreams. Yes, Yes. I just don't think it's

good for her to be here. — Okay, Let's talk later."

The door hits my head. Makhulu sees me rubbing it.

"This is what you get for listening in on your elders. Did you even make your bed, Tsohle? Take the chamber out. You know you can't go out before doing the dishes."

I take the chamber pot out and empty it on the hedge. Makhulu made amagwinya, which she puts in a large twenty-litre bucket. I make myself tea and sit on the chair and take a bite. There is too much oil, but I like them like this. I stir the tea and feel the thickness of the sugar at the bottom. Then I do the dishes and hear Makhulu calling me from the veranda.

"Tsohle, your friends are here!"

"I need to brush my teeth first," I answer.

"Why aren't your teeth brushed? Did you wash?"

"I washed last night before I slept, Makhulu," I answer, but her attention has already switched to the others.

"When does school open? I feel like your holiday does not end."

I brush my teeth at the back of the house using water from the JoJo tank. The corn from the garden is still green and Makhulu's towels and undergarments are on the fence. I spit and rush inside and bring out my towel from the burglar bars.

"Tsohle!" Makhulu calls for me.

I go out and I see my friends. Today Vuyolwethu is wearing a yellow hoodie with brown corduroy pants. She is the oldest, with short hair, and when she sees me, she smiles, exposing her gap teeth and her eyes become large before she looks away.

Inga is next to her in a white long-sleeved shirt and a pink skirt covering. Thulile is wearing a shirt and her hair looks like it has not been relaxed in months.

"You know where I will leave the key if you get hungry," Makhulu tells me. She has a bucket filled with amagwinya and a plastic

bag with chappies and amalopisi. We assist her to the road, where she boards a taxi going to town.

Sibahle 1985

I run quite a distance from ePikweni before something pulls me back and I am next to the water again. I look at the old man and the woman he called Zimkitha.

"You can't leave this place, Sibahle. Utata oMkhulu is right about us being here to guide you. Please take the time to listen."

"I want to go home."

"You can't go home, Sibahle. At least not in the way you imagine. Look at us carefully," Zimkitha tells me.

I look at them and their shining clothes. That is the most striking thing.

"Now look at yourself."

I look down and I see my purple dress has a similar glow. I look back at Zimkitha.

"What's going on?" I ask her, but it's the old man that answers.

"You were our last hope, Sibahle. Your mother has turned away from our ways and now we are fading away and if we disappear without making things right, we can never return."

"I don't see how I am useful dead. Why does it have to be me? Why not Asamahle -"

"Asamahle was our first choice," Utata oMkhulu says. "But you fell into the water. You were both on the edge watching the crab."

Thulile approaches me and holds out her hand and light shines from it. She touches me and I feel energy enter me.

"This is my gift. I was the best singer when I lived. I now have passed it on to you. You see, Sibahle, we are not bad people. It is us that bring blessings to our families from the spirit world. It is us that work to protect them here against evil forces. If we leave this plane, then misfortune will follow the family for generations until the line ends."

"You said so yourself that Mama does not believe in you. I don't understand how I am supposed to change things. I mean I can't even leave this place now."

"Your purpose is bigger than just her. Yes, it's true that you can't leave this place, but I will teach you how to communicate in dreams."

Tsohle 2005

"Don't you miss Butterworth?" Thulile asks me for the hundredth time. We are walking on the road that runs behind Makhulu's garden and the gum tree forest, which is on our left.

"I don't miss it."

"What about your Mother?" she asks.

"You always ask Tsohle this question," Vuyolwethu says, tapping a stick that she picked up on the road.

"I miss uMama mna," Thulile replies. We are quiet because her mother died.

"Are you still going to Cape Town?" Inga asks me.

"Yes, of course, she is," Thulile answers for me.

"Well, your Grandma said she can't wait until school opens so I got confused."

I think about the phone call and how it seemed uMalume Wezo was not happy to have me.

"Where are we going?" I ask. I notice we've gone past Vuyolwethu's house, where we usually play.

"It's hot so we are going to go for a swim. You know how right?" Vuyolwethu asks me.

"Lethu's father taught me at the beach in East London when he and Mama started dating."

We reach a turn that cuts through the field after the gum trees end. There is a government garden project on our right, and I see lines of cabbages and in the far distance the sound of hundreds of chickens in a yellow building with net-like bars on the window. I can smell their

poo from here.

The trail leads us down until we get to a place that leads down to the waterhole. It's a circular enclosure and the water is low, but it's clean. I've decided against swimming, and instead, I sit on a flat rock with Thuli. I watch Vuyolwethu undress. Then she and Inga jump into the water with a squeal. Thulile gets up and goes around the bushes behind us. She makes the trip twice, returning with red clay. She uses an old, crushed bottle she found to fetch water. Then we use the clay to make animals.

When Sibahle appears next to the water, I drop the cow. She is looking at me, wearing a purple dress. She has my mother's eyes.

"Tsohle, mtanesekhaya. You came," she says, but her voice is coming from inside me.

"I have been waiting for a long time here. Zimkitha told me to be patient. Now you've come after all these years."

"Yes, I have. Please come with us. I can speak to Makhulu and tell her I saw you and get her to come here."

"I can't leave this place. I have visited uMama lots of times. But she ignores me and

calls me an evil spirit. You are special, Tsohle. Even if she did come here, she would not be able to see me. I am just a spirit without a body."

"Then you can use mine."

I reach out my hand and Sibahle reaches out her own.

I wake up and I am on the trail leading home next to the Project.

Vuyolwethu is standing over me. "Tsohle, are you okay?"

"How did I get here?"

"You fell on the ground in a fit near the waterhole. We tried to help but then you just stood up and started running then fell again here."

"You are not wearing your clothes."

Vuyolwethu covers her chest and laughs. "I was just worried that's all. You know we are not allowed to swim here." Thulile and Inga come with her clothes.

"Let's just go home" Vuyolwethu suggests. "I think that's enough swimming for the day."

"Where is Sibahle?" I ask.

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