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Paradise Fallen Xenoepistemics: Stopgap Notes on Site-Specificity

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Paradise Fallen Xenoepistemics Stopgap Notes on Site-Specificity

Zen Marie

Paradise Fallen
Xenoepistemics
Stopgap Notes on Site-Specificity

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
Fine Art

WITS School of Art
University of The Witwatersrand
20 November 2023

For the comrades, confidants and conspirators
With love, solidarity and eternal gratitude

13 April 2023
00:16

What follows are a series of speculations.
These speculations circle a cluster of ideas
Concepts
That manifest in physical sites
This is their accumulation

The texts are from a variety of sources, over the period of 2011–2023
Notes, transcripts, journal articles, speculations around theory and method
...
situated alongside each other, not always seamlessly
the pace of reading, tone and register shift and move

some of the texts are seemingly better resolved
and others are unpolished and rough
they are important in the relationship they form
as part of the creative work
they are both produced from
and are the material for production

video and documentation of performances or exhibitions
can be found through hyperlinks

The text can be read from beginning to end,
But, as most things
it exists better as a loop.

ZM

Notes for using this document

~~**Mia Culpa**~~ **Sine Macula**

This PhD was not made in one sitting. It is the culmination and collecting of over a decade's worth of practice.

The basis for this practice lies in performative, lens-based, screen-based, and pedagogic processes. This practice also includes forms of writing, note taking and publishing of conference papers and journal articles.

These multiple practices were carried out over multiple sites, including multiple universities, residencies, project spaces and museums. The practices included numerous modes of dissemination.

The basis or the core of this PhD relies on a body of work. This work, accumulated over time, is, in a way, distilled into two films that exist as video installations. You can view the films through the links provided, but it is important to remember that their intended viewing was in their installation form. You will only appreciate a fraction of the work if you do not look at the documentation, the sonic interventions, and the paratextual framing material, and imagine the work in their site-specific manifestations.

The text that accompanies the films are an expanded series of paratextual propositions. They oscillate between forms of writing that are alternatively poetic, fragmented, opaque, and forms of writing that appear more lucid and conventionally essay based.

The reader is invited to approach this PhD as if approaching a cluster of artefacts or relics. The ordering and the selection are deliberate, or should I say deliberately and intentionally designed, to insist on retaining the complexity, mystery or even magic of both the text and the image. The work's only prescription is this attempt to deny prescription. To disallow a settling of meaning as it embraces and encourages a convoluted and ambulatory drive through the material.

The navigation of this text is one that perhaps demands too much of the reader. Perhaps it is a demand that is at times frustrating or even impossible. This is a risk that I take willingly and knowingly. It is a risk that I take in solidarity with fellow makers and writers who approach postgraduate study and demand so much more of the text. Who are interested in stretching the text to its limits.

This PhD, a dossier of fragments, is pointedly unapologetic for its insistence on the work not only being foregrounded, but that this text becomes a work in itself. This conception is not immaculate. The blemishes and scars are what makes it what it is. And these have been left for you to witness.

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i



Bas Jan Ader, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 1975. Photo: lithography on paper, 11 5/8 x 16 9/16 inches (unfolded). Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Sweat-Drenched Theory: Lean into It // A Return to the Porno-Tropics

Paradise Fallen

Landscape, space, site >

Affective orientations within / location / locatedness.
Embodied, visceral, libidinal, cyclical / Circadian time.

In distinction to
Machine time, synthesised, structured,
'homogenous empty time'

Sugar-free.

The circulation of desire, through product.
Entrapped. Complicity.

The thing / la chose

You want the thing, but the thing obliterates you.

Floating > liquid > fluid > sweat

Sweaty theory
Sweat-drenched theory
Drenched theory
Drenched meaning

notes from Sarah N:
22 July 2015

- Slow down
- What is the theoretical and contextual movement to 'island'
- Is it not another matter – that of offshoring – article by her and Achille.
- Take hustling seriously as a concept and as a form – methodology? – expand explore further – Niq Mhlongo dog eat dog – Teju Cole – Al Pacino's smile.

Think more fully about the category of the 'not city' – the zone beyond or outside of the city

Nigel Thrift and Ash Amin > city not as city – non-flâneur

The movement away from the city needs to be plotted much more carefully.
Why? from what I am moving away from. – this could be the moment to re-read the canon of urban textuality? and then show what new approach I will be taking.

South Africa – urban / non-urban
'suburbs in the veld' neither city nor non-city
urban but not city

example?

>>
Jump to island needs to be clarified or the area needs to be shifted, focus changed.

From city – to outside of city – to island
Is this the trajectory of the project?

The peninsula is potentially an exciting concept
What is the peninsula to the city?

The bridge is overused but could be interesting as a point of connection between Hong Kong and Jhb (stonecutters bridge and the Brixton tower)
Proxies > ?

Island is too obvious – does not seem to easily fit within the terms of the project, at least not immediately.

The structure needs to embody floating as an aesthetic form and theory but not illustrate it.

Floating as the movement between or to places

Queer ways of approaching theory and geography?

How to do floating? How can floating be performative?

The outside:
What is the outside of cities?
What is the outside of Durban?
Floating away from or floating toward?

Macau could be an analogy for Mauritius?
Outside of Hong Kong

Shoddy retro fantasy. – Maurice

Iterations of JHB
How does JHB look from the outside?

Lindsay Bremner - inland docks – container city south of JHB.

Dakar / Hong Kong / Maurice

Outer-urban/outer-natural

Revisiting form – a critique of aesthetic form

ocean as epistemological scrambling - floating signification

Paradise Fallen: *Ile Aux Serpents*



Zen Marie, *Ile Aux Serpents*, 2018. Video Still. Dakar, Senegal.

Ile Aux Serpents: Treatment and Script

> *There was a man who loved islands. He was born on one, but it didn't suit him, as there were too many other people on it, besides himself. He wanted an island all of his own: not necessarily to be alone on it, but to make it a world of his own. An island ... has to be really quite small, before it feels like an island; and this story will show how tiny it has to be, before you can presume to fill it with your own personality.*
>
> *(Lawrence [1927] 1982: 458)*

Ile Aux Serpents: a film about ambivalent feelings of longing for a place that is impossibly lost. It is about the desire for an island that was perhaps once home – once, that is, a very long time ago. We follow a character we know nothing about. This character has in some undefinable way been displaced from this island and now longs to go back. Despite the cost. The film is about the impossibility of the return to this island and the desperate futility of that desire. The image of the person moves through an endless, undulating sea and across a deserted and barren island.

ILE AUX SERPENTS

FADE IN: OF IMAGE OF WATER RUSHING PAST
CUT: SUNSET WITH PIROGU

1

when I was young
I dreamt of becoming a pirate
of running away
taking to the waters
and travelling
to distant lands
Of fighting foreign enemies
and claiming their lands for my own

It was this ocean
It has a name, I guess
But that is not important
What is important is that it whispers to me
in the dead of night
This ocean knows my name

2

There is absolutely no water source on the island.
It is utterly useless
A fucking death trap
Not even the pirate ships had any use for it

desire, longing, and thirst.
starving, craving, and yearning
Temptation
It begins with temptation

3

This is my destiny
no other claims are valid
This is mine
and mine alone
Blood, teeth, hair
Steel, powder or chemicals
Nothing
Nothing and no one
No one will stand in my way
I will conquer, I will defend

4

You could hide out here for a while
not get caught, and survive
I guess
But what will you do when your supplies run out?
And the thirst overcomes you?
You could try and forage
for roots

And desperately suck
What little moisture there is
But the relentless sun and salt spray would get you
You would have no choice but to flee
…
Escape
Or capture

5

The pain is incredible
It’s like nothing you’ve felt before
Beyond words
You …
You are not sure where it comes from
It totally envelops you
To succumb
so deep and primal
a yearning for more
even though you know it will obliterate you
A terrifying abandonment of all restraint
Beyond this, there is no me
There is no you
There just is

6

The island is deserted
…
empty
…
legends say that it has never been inhabited
At least not for any length of time
There is no water
There is no shade
It is inhospitable
Empty
Completely and utterly deserted
Nothing exists here
At least nothing that is holy
Nothing good
Nothing pure
There is no god
Only evil lives here

7

I first visited the island at the end of dry season
The rains had not yet come
It was hot
hot and dry
I could not sleep
It was too hot
I lay awake
Tossing and turning
Sweating
Hot

Hot and cold
Feverishly sweating
Cold and hot

8

I was drawn to the island in a way I couldn't explain.
I knew that it was forbidden
I knew the stories too well
There are spirits that live here
And these are not spirits of the good kind
They will tease and tempt you
Tease you until you go mad
until you cannot resist them
until the seduction is complete
and you are completely possessed

9

I thought that they were only stories meant to scare children
To make sure that they behaved
So that they did their chores
And said their prayers
And went to bed
I never believed in true evil
It never existed
It was only ever an abstraction
If only I knew then
what I know now
How fear would have paralysed me
How terror would have lacerated my belly
Until my eyes bled
Bled tears of silk and salt

10

The regret is intense
The act was repeated and repeated
Repeated even though I knew it was wrong
The regret is intense
More so because I got pleasure from it
It made me …
I still want more
The pain fills my entire body
My senses fade to white
I'm left with nothing but fear
Fear and desire
I desire the island
And the island still desires me

11

The current bubbles and swirls
eddies and flows
with incredible force
with horrific beauty
It's hard enough to steer a boat through the currents

A swimmer would be lost in seconds
Fight as they may
they would be carried out beyond sight of land in minutes
A strong swimmer may last a few hours
Until either the cold renders exertion useless
Or the sharks maul the meagre flesh
That remain on bones
The currents around the island are deadly
They will carry a body out to deep sea in minutes

12

The snakes?
Yes
there was a time before the snakes
The snakes are said to have come to the island 1001 years ago
No one cares to remember how
Or maybe the truth is too dangerous
Maybe they were brought by those we love
By those we respect
If we really knew who brought the snakes to the island
What would we do?
Would we take our revenge on them?
Would we call them out and shame them?
Would we be strong enough to kill them?
with the same venom by which they acted?

13

The ocean has a force
that still calls to me
The ocean is a force
that I still yearn for

It is not long before I am able to succumb
and let the ocean swallow me

One day
I will become a pirate
And sail to distant lands
And vanquish all those
who died before me
I will become
a pirate

END ON TILT TO SKY: FADE TO WHITE





Ishkar Richard, *Where Are My Fuckin' Flowers*, 2013. Performance. Johannesburg, South Africa.

An Attempt at an Opening

> *Doing a Fine Art degree is very much like trying to be a psychic medium. I've spent four years trying to convince myself and others that I can speak to the dead when the truth is I can't even see the dead much less hold down a conversation.*
>
> Ishkar Richard, 2013[1]

> *Accreditation. The "doctorate of fine art." I've never heard something so stupid in my entire life. It makes no sense whatsoever. I don't know what it's all about and I don't know what it's going to lead to, but I do know that the Academy is slowly losing ground as far as producing artists [...] Art is a conversation. And if there's no conversation, what the hell is it about?*
>
> Lawrence Weiner, 2012

This PhD aims to critically explore the concept/practice of site-specificity as a form of institutional critique. It starts with suspicion of the practice-based PhD, a suspicion that I carry, but one that is present across artists and academics. The suspicion from the side of academics is a question about the rigour or epistemological value of the practice-based PhD. Or conversely, from the side of the artist, there is a suspicion of what this 'rigour' of scholarly practice does to open or speculative creative practice. At this stage, I am prepared to make the claim for the practice-based PhD's need to be protected from the dangers of being instrumentalised by scholarly rigour or functionality. From the side of the artist, I am less confident as to what the value of the practice of doctoral work in a university lends to an artistic practice. And in many ways, this PhD has this question as its implicit through line.

The cost of not protecting open-ended speculation would be to give in to forms of scholarship that simply reproduce existing forms. It would be to erode a conception of the university as a space for critical, even radical, ideas to emerge. In this sense, the contribution that this PhD makes is contained in the form that the submission takes as a series of loosely connected files. This is to insist on the work as a form of site-specific or relational aesthetics in its mobilisation of paratextuality as integral to its work, and to insist on the work as an intervention that disavows that moment of exhibition or thesis as a finality, but rather asserts that these are but moments in a continuum. They are sites in a procession of sites.

Paradise Fallen is a video installation that was developed over the course of six years of study, with four iterations before it was shown at the Wits Art Museum (WAM). While WAM was supposed to be its final presentation, the work went on to have a further iteration as part of a group show, called *Occupation*, at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG)[2].

Using video installation, I argue that the critical energy of site-specificity is precisely its self-reflexivity or self-awareness. And following this, I propose a reversal

1. Ishkar Richard was a fine art student at Wits with whom I worked. He committed suicide on the 1st of August 2014, two years after graduating. He was 22. Ishkar left an indelible mark on all who met him, all who encountered his spirit and his work. He continues to leave a mark by virtue of the questions that his transcendence challenges for those who mourn him. See appendix i for an interview with Ishkar, and appendix ii for a text that I wrote that attempted to remember him as well.
2. See appendix vii.

of the conventional arrangement of site-specificity – which is to go outside of the gallery. Rather, I ironically revert to the more conventional arrangement of bringing the outside of the gallery inside. This is a gesture that has important and telling roots in knowledge quantification and qualification processes that instrumentalise images into either mercenary forms of information gathering or capitalist forms of manufacturing of desire in the commodification of people, land and objects.

The image, which is normally contained in a frame, now occupies an entire wall, enacting a trompe-l'œil effect to prompt a questioning of the relationship between the viewer, the image or screen, and the space or site where the image was filmed. The framed image is stretched to the size of a cinema screen, but embedded within the architecture of the space. The absence of any of the paratextual material that usually comes with the apparatus of cinema is reinforced by the undulating landscapes that sprawl in time as well as space. The scenes are allowed to play, much longer than we are used to.

Part of the work was an attempt to unburden the image of its baggage. Of course, this attempt is only partially possible, as the weight of the history of images and image-production economies means that, at the very least, traces of these histories are present. These traces are not without import – they bear witness to violence, and are those points within the image where they do their critical work. Even if they are present in the absence.

The work, filmed in 'empty' landscapes, and resituated in the space of the museum, is created as a speculation into how images of land, especially in terms of painting and photography, contain the potential to create affective responses, even when dislocated from overt or ostensible content.

The work seeks to offer the possibility for quiet contemplation of these projected landscapes. The location of the landscapes is not divulged, and they could be anywhere. Islands, deserts, mountains. Open sky. The landscapes are punctuated by text in the form of voice-over, or title cards on screen.

This installation, and the process of developing it, were in themselves interrogations of photography, and of installation as a methodology, and were intended to turn the gallery space into a device that could transport the viewer by means of the immersive projections.

This work explores and critiques the potential for an aesthetic proposition that operates in a mode of relative abstraction, to be submitted in partial fulfilment of a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Fine Art.

In this spirit of critical self-reflexivity, the practice-based PhD itself becomes an important site of contestation.

I argue that to take the practice-based PhD seriously as a site, demands interrogating the relationship between the theoretical and the practical, and insisting on the space for an open-ended speculative process.

When it comes to the question of meaning, the nature of aesthetic objects, being of the kind that often are illusive or multiple, makes how one speaks about – and perhaps even more importantly, how one does not speak about – a work of vital importance. This PhD does not attempt to go into an exegesis. It attempts to trust the work; a focused investment into a process and an idea over time. Even if, at times, this has seemed impossible and futile.

Rather than professing meaning and value, this text attempts to recount the overall process and execution of the work, in its multiple iterations. Included in this

are not only exhibitions, but moments of sharing, in discussions or seminars, as well as in writings that were published either before or during the process of the PhD.

This PhD consists of documentation of a series of video installations. This included the video work or films that were made as the anchor pieces for the installations, and importantly also includes the supplementary works of the sonic interventions that were collaborations with musicians.

The documentation is arranged in this pdf as a series of linked files and folders. But it is also assembled into a website for ease of viewing. It is left to the reader to decide on the sequence or how to navigate through these files.

Through the texts accumulated over the course of the PhD, I explore ideas and concepts that either relate to or emerge from the process of making the work. It is my assertion that the PhD is in fact seen as an accumulation of all of these facets of the work.

These contentions are developed from an assertion that site-specificity is fundamentally an appeal/provocation/invitation to be hyper-reflective, to look for the radical contingency of a site in order to demand a space for a creative practice that can pursue ideas without being bound to demands for functionality or productivity.

The contribution of this PhD is in its argument for an art school in a university that can protect useless ideas and failed attempts. In its own way, the PhD offers one example among a myriad of possible others for making work in the context of a practice-based PhD, and offers an argument for creative practice as a form of institutional critique. It is a contribution, in its own way, to the numerous voices that insist on a university as a space, independent from the constraints of the market, that can foster, generate and produce ideas that contest dominant paradigms.

This PhD is a lament

It is a eulogy, and at times
it is a celebration.

It is about an image of a sun
that has no heat
Of rain
that does not wet you
and a storm that cannot harm you.



Francis Alÿs, *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*, 1997. Mexico City, Mexico.

In Praise of the Uselessness of Work

> *The university I dream of is a space that contradicts reality, because it is the space where one is confronted with what I would call "uselessness." What I mean here is that students should be able to experience things and thoughts that are not displayed in the real world.*
>
> Simon Njami, 2013[3]

Paradise Fallen is the name given, as a placeholder, to include a number of speculations, gestures and actions that have accumulated over the last six or more years. These speculations have taken form around processes and concepts that have been catalysed by a kind of itinerancy, a kind of mobility and movement that is, in many ways, peculiar (but not exclusive) to the space of contemporary art. This itinerancy is, on the one hand, spatial (as in my physical movement across sites), but also, importantly, it is a movement or travelling across disciplines.

These itinerant speculations are grounded in what I call 'the work'[4]. In its simplest sense, 'the work' is this submission: a combination of words and images bound together in a way to make traversing its content possible. The work in this sense is an accumulation of sites. In the immediate sense, 'the work' is this PhD, which is practice-based. Fundamentally, this means that it is a combination of two components: a written one, and a practical body of work. However, my intention is to blur the borders between these two components and invite the reader to view this work as a complex and multimodal compilation of works.

The work is not singular, but rather it is an accumulation of sites, at once material, pragmatic, ephemeral and symbolic. The work is an accumulation of propositions, manifestations or restitutions that took shape and form in relation to the coordinates of the sites in which they were proposed.[5]

The work/this work includes and relies on numerous prior works. Each of these prior works are sites in themselves, as much as this work is a site in itself. The work assumes its specificity in relation to the site and moment of its sharing. The installation, publication or any other dissemination of the work, offer temporal and spatial coordinates that provide the work with a framework that makes it legible. This is importantly a process of mediation that relies on a series of decisions that need to be made in terms of approach and treatment of the medium. In the immediate sense, the medium is constituted by these pages, and the phrasing of words and images across them. However, the work in its expanded sense crucially relies on a working through of the medium of experimental video, or video installation.

3. From "Fictional Faculties" in Ambrožič, M. and Vettese, A. (eds), *Art as a Thinking Process: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*. London: Sternberg Press, 224.

4. I include here the numerous meanings of 'work', which includes a critique and perhaps destabilisation of both the idea of 'a work of art', and work as a form of activity towards earning an income. The way in which I use the idea of work corresponds to the ways in which the concept of occupation is used in multiple and perhaps contradictory ways. For an elaboration of this, see Hito Steyerl (2011) *Art as Occupation*.

5. Importantly, I am attempting to avoid using the term representation, and prefer restitution or manifestation. Restitution productively suggests a return or a recourse to something that was removed, and manifestation has an important meaning in French, that suggests a site or action of protest. These are, for me, much more productive that a *representation*, which I feel is denuded of its critical value by overuse.

The work, that is the submission of this PhD, includes the numerous sites for its production, contemplation and sharing. This work, or this accumulation of sites, is structured as a series of passages, fragments and even, at times, non sequiturs.[6] This is intended not only as a reflection on the process or mere representation/ reproduction of the products of the work that have been made, but more so, this assemblage of sites is intended to deepen and expand on the ideas that are constellated around the body of work, as it itself comes to constitute a work in its own right.

In this, the practice is not separated from the text; it is not severed from the theory. Rather the site of work is foregrounded as complex, multimodal and interconnected, seeking the potential, or more fundamentally the possibility, of working as an artist in a university.

6. This structure owes much to Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, which assembles as a series of convolutes (sections). Much is also owed to Bettina Malcomess and Dorothee Kreutzfeldt's *Not No Place* (2013), which in itself draws on Benjamin's structure of fragments. As Malcomess and Kreutzfeldt write in the first line of the book: "This book begins with a site, then a multiplicity of sites, and returns to them" (Malcomess & Kreutzfeldt 2013: 9). Additionally, I owe much to the PhD submission of George Mahashe, who submitted a box of dossiers and convolutes as part of his doctoral submission.



Ishkar Richard, *Mind Fuck*, 2013. Sculpture. Senate House (now Solomon Mahlangu House), Wits University, Johannesburg, South Africa.

brûler[7]

7. This 'list of things to burn' was written for a text piece and performance at Cité des Arts in St. Denis Reunion Island in 2015. It was prompted by the Fees Must Fall moment in South African universities. The text piece consisted of a large-scale charcoal work on paper, and the performance involved me reading the 'burn list' on a loop in what was a durational performance piece lasting 4 hours. *Paradis Tombe* was the origin of the title *Paradise Fallen*; tombe was an attempt to think through the idea of 'falling' or 'must fall' as in Fees Must Fall. *Paradis Tombe* was in effect the first work in this series. Tombe has an interesting meaning, as to encase in a tomb or entomb.

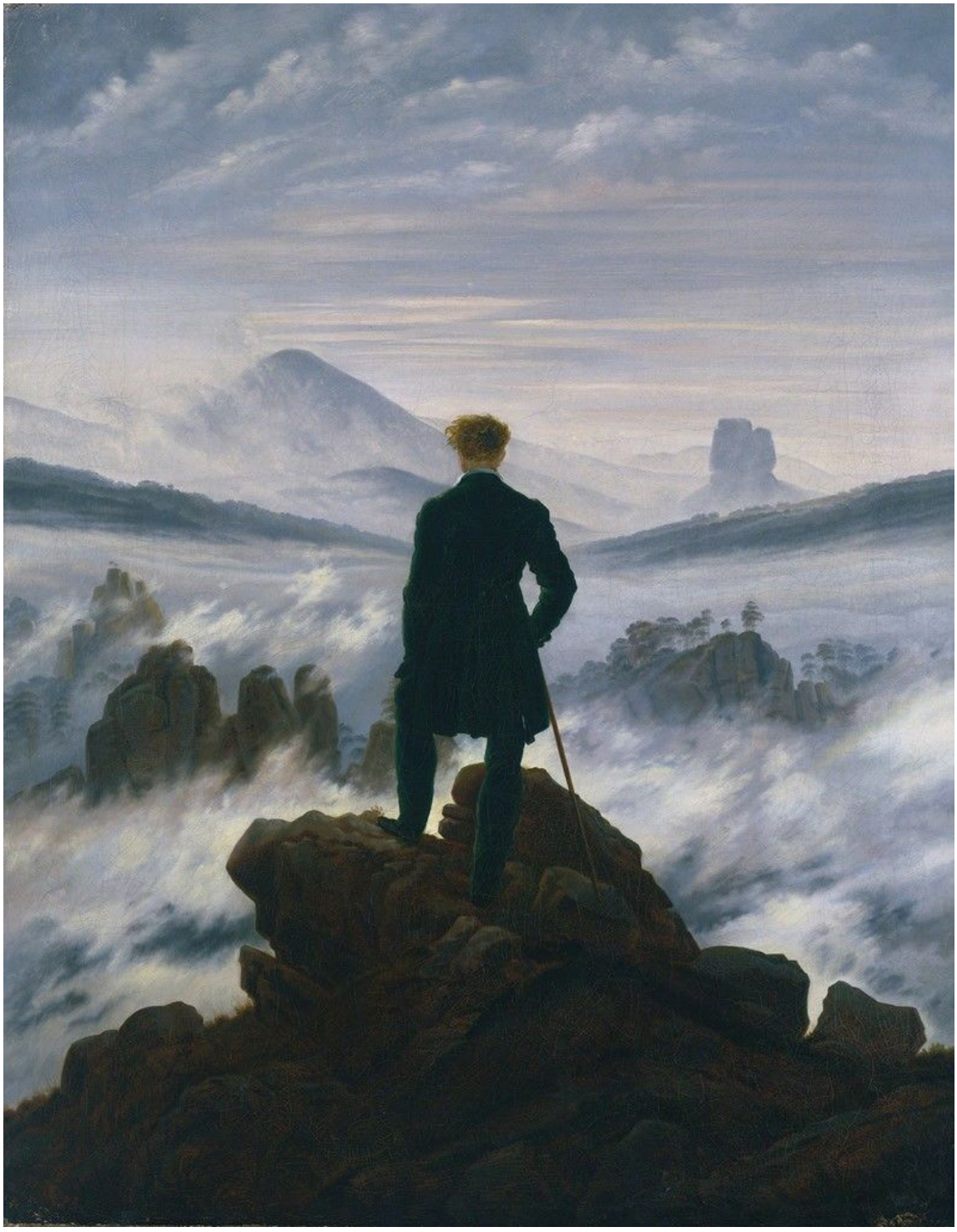
brûler l’apprentissage
brûler le corps brûler
la voix brûler la
connaissance brûler la
maison brûler la terre
brûler l’universitée
brûler l’Europe brûler
l’Ouest brûler la
subjectivité brûler
les certitudes brûler
l’apocalypse brûler
l’espace brûler le
temps brûler l’angoisse
brûler le fascisme
brûler le professeur
brûler l’étudiant
brûler les enfants
brûler les parents
brûler la destruction
brûler la négativité
brûler la cooptation
brûler les alternatives
brûler l’expropriation
brûler le capital brûler
l’oppression brûler le
colonialisme brûler
la commune brûler
la fugacité brûler
les morts brûler les
zombies brûler les
cerveaux brûler les
institutions brûler la
blancheur brûler le
sexe brûler les hommes
brûler les races brûler

l’identité brûler le
pouvoir brûler les vies
brûler l’épistémologie
brûler l’effacement
brûler les sorcières
brûler les nations
brûler les politiciens
brûler l’orientation
brûles la réification
brûler la révolution
brûler la libération
brûler l’économie
brûler l’enfance brûler
les enfants brûler
la différence brûler
la modernité brûler
les étrangers brûler
l’ignorance brûler les
culpabilités brûler les
problèmes brûler la
coordination brûler
les mains brûler la
citoyenneté brûler le
gouvernement brûler
les retrouvailles brûler
les mères brûler les
pères brûler la politique
brûler la démocratie
brûler la résistance
brûler le partage brûler
la logique brûler le
monde brûler les
néolibéraux brûler
les libéraux brûler
les travailleurs brûler

le bonheur brûler
les pratiques brûler
le contenu brûler
la théorie brûler
les graines brûler
l’oxygène brûler les
fondations brûler
le public brûler les
discours brûler les
barbares brûler les
noms brûler la pensée
brûler les gens brûler
l’occupation brûler
la pause brûler les
dissonances brûler le
centre brûler la marge
brûler le main Stream
brûler la majorité
brûler le goût brûler
le désir brûler la
périphérie brûler les
intérêts brûler la vision
brûler les consciences
brûler le double brûler
l’aliénation brûler
l’hégémonie brûler
la pauvreté brûler
les décisions brûler
l’acceptation brûler
la perfection brûler
les dictateurs brûler
la honte brûler les
hypothèses brûler
les champs brûler la
recherche brûler les

traductions brûler les transformations brûler l'imagination brûler l'objectivité brûler la subjectivité brûler les objets brûler le territoire brûler la capture brûler les produits brûler le salut brûler la rédemption brûler production brûler langue brûler la fragmentation brûler l'ego brûler l'importance brûler les conneries brûler la chaleur brûler la subsistance brûler la nourriture brûler l'amour brûler l'amitié brûler les ancêtres brûler l'esprit brûler le patrimoine brûler les traditions brûler l'attente brûler la compréhension brûler la complexité brûler les transitions brûler l'existence brûler la structure brûler la paysage brûler l'architecture brûler l'oppresseur brûler le maitre brûler la loi brûler la peur brûler la vue brûler les points de vues brûles les nuances brûles les perspectives brûler la contemplation brûler l'information brûler les images brûler la représentations brûler les médias brûler la propriété brûler l'individualité brûler la pauvreté brûler l'arrogance brûler les données brûler les faits brûler les sentiments brûler la sympathie brûler l'empathie brûler l'antipathie ou brûler les émotions brûler la bienveillance brûler le droit brûler les privilèges brûler les élites brûler les seigneurs brûler les dieux brûler les auditeurs brûler les téléspectateurs brûler le spectateur brûler l'auditoire brûler l'évasion brûler la biologie brûler les rebellions brûler les luttes brûler les confrontations brûler l'éthique brûler la compassion brûler l'amour brûler l'insécurité brûler les problèmes brûler les questions brûler la maladie brûler la mort brûler les messies brûler la religion brûler l'illumination brûler les sens brûler le non-sens brûler le silence brûler l'assurance brûler les diasporas brûler les indigènes brûler les choses brûler les rêves brûler les organisations brûler la subversion brûler l'animation brûler la généralisation brûler la compréhension brûler les crises brûler la grammaire brûler la vitesse brûler la dualité brûler la perception brûler les catégories brûler la rationalité brûler la reconnaissance brûler la gauche brûler les réponses brûler la loyauté brûler l'école brûler les livres brûler les bibliothèques brûler les enseignants brûler les salles de classe brûler les ardoises brûler le colonialisme brûler la servitude brûler l'imagination

brûler l’esclavage brûler les océans brûler les mers brûler les baleines brûler les requins brûler les volcans brûler les montagnes brûler les forêts brûler les desserts brûler les icones brûler les buissons brûler les barbes brûler la mauvaise herbe brûler les côtes brûler la politique brûler la société brûler les hiérarchies brûler le prisonnier brûler les capitaines brûler le confort brûler les contradictions brûler la violence brûler la constitution brûler l’être brûler les moeurs brûler les lieux brûler les parasites brûler les virus brûler la permanence brûler l’impermanence brûler la confusion brûler le contexte brûler la provocation brûler la stabilisation brûler l’instabilité brûler les processus brûler les rubans brûler les secrets brûler les instruction brûler les diplômes brûler les certificats brûler les assimilation brûler la précarité brûler les fondamentaux brûler la stupidité brûler les rencontres brûler l’ethnicité brûler l’urgence brûler les moments brûler le mouvement brûler l’altérite brûler les compromis brûler les stratégies brûler la technologie brûler le nihilisme brûler la constance brûler la production brûler les monuments brûler la connaissance brûler les pratiques brûler la littératures brûler la langue brûler les fétiches brûler les fondamentaux brûler l’arrogance brûler les génocides brûler effacement brûler souteneurs brûler le contrôle brûler le classicisme brûler la foi brûler la base brûler reconnaissance brûler le sens commun brûler l’exécution brûler les ponts brûler le développement brûler le trafic brûler les relations brûler les flux brûler l’hémisphère sud brûler l’Océan Indien brûler la méritocratie brûler les bibliographies brûler les archives brûler le matériel

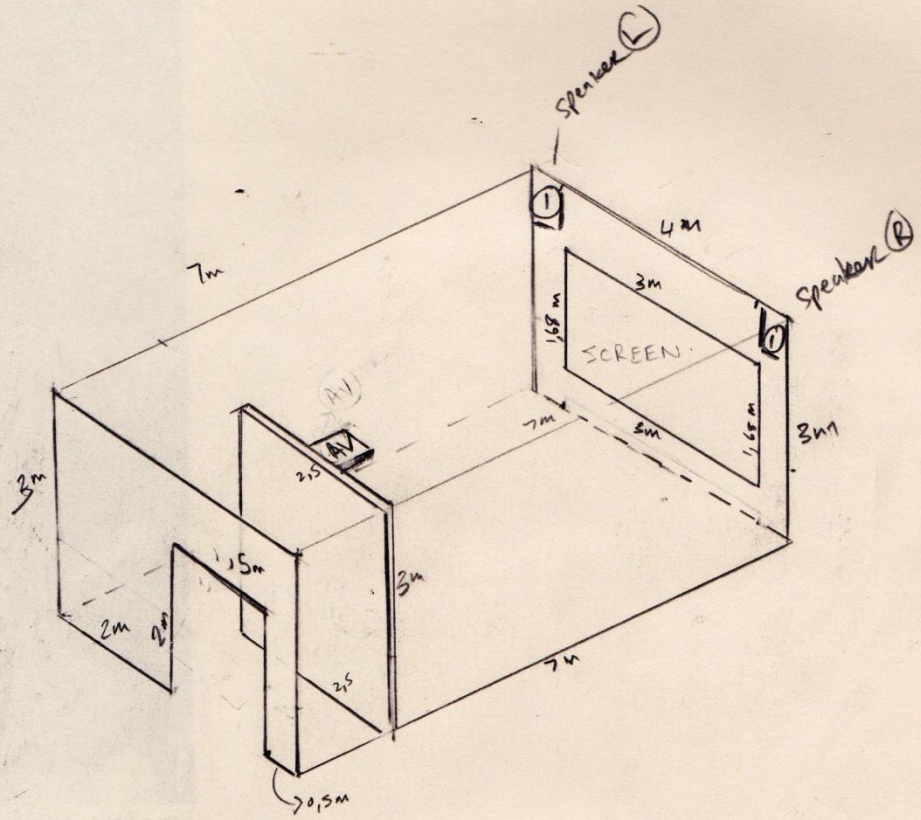


Casper David Friedrich, *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (Wanderer above the Sea of Fog), 1818. Oil on canvas, 94.8 cm × 74.8 cm.

God Help Me Pass: Love and Hate in Lesotho



Installation/
Projection Room sur ÎLE AUX SERPENTS.



AV: projector/media player/Amplifier (with electricity)
① speakers. wall mounted.
Room and Chicane Painted Black
Screen Painted white.

ZBN MAKER 2017.

The Work

> *Work is an instrumental relationship, meaning that one is not doing it for its own sake; either one is doing it to earn a wage or to produce something such that one has a product at the end of the day – but one is not doing it for its own sake.*
>
> Hito Steyerl, 2013[8]

The work of art promises the conceit of transcendence, while work as labour threatens a kind of capture or coercion. The relation of these designations is not a stable one, as a work of art – in conflicting, simultaneous and contradictory ways – both proposes a kind of capture in work, as labour, and in the work of art as a commodity, while still potentially offering forms of release, if not transcendence.

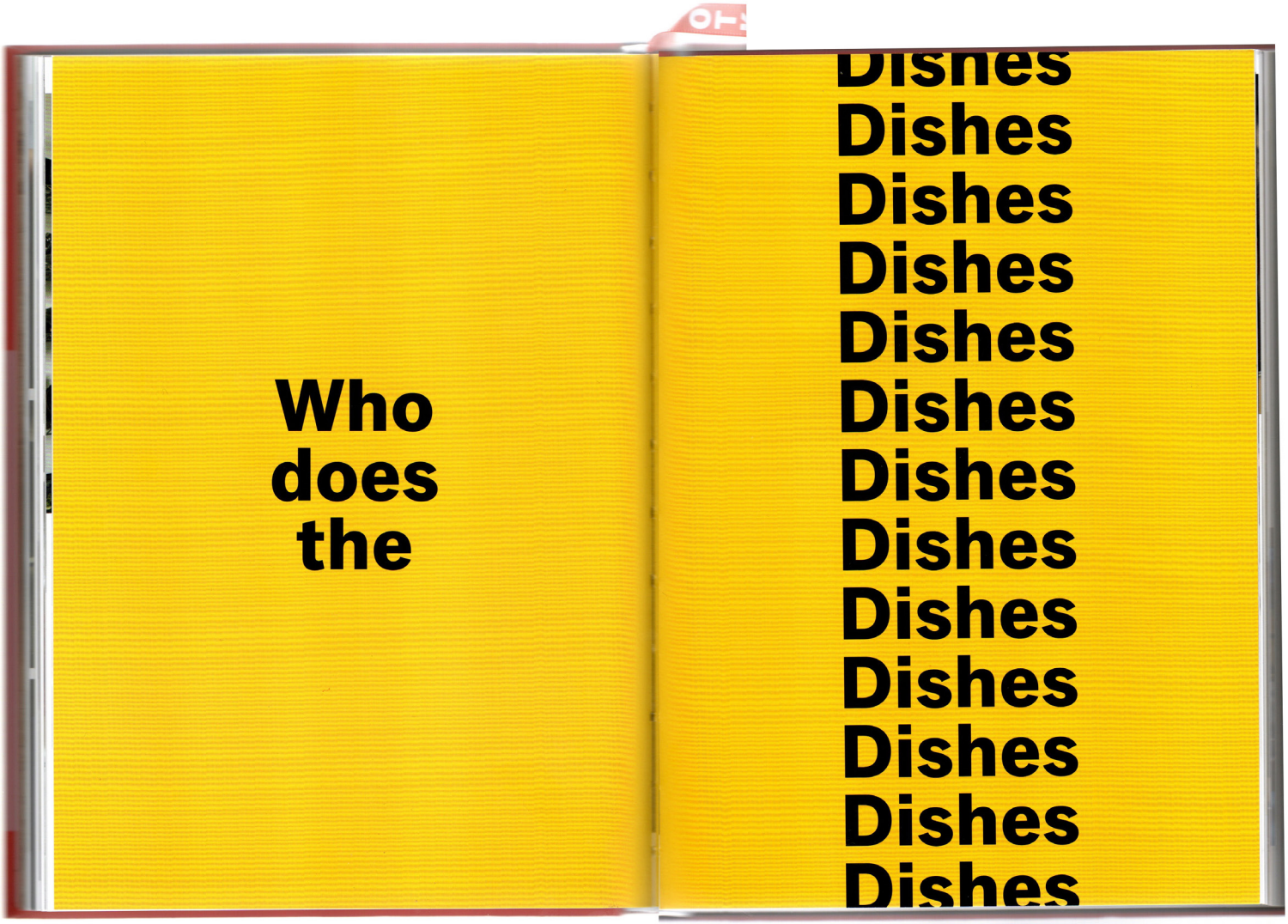
In other words, this is about linking the meta-/supracritical with a set of pragmatics: to link the symbolic with the banal; to ask the theory, the politics, even perhaps the *meaning* of the work, to engage not only with the method of production of the work but also with the logistics, the housekeeping or pragmatics that often come with these processes. As Yotam Ottolenghi and Noor Murad (2021: 100) ask, "Who does the dishes?"

Central to this is the process of *making work*. The process is never free from the economies that control the work of art as a commercial object, nor is it free from capture as quantifiable labour. But within the collection of these actions, over time and space, the central question revolves around the idea that the site of work becomes a point (among many) that can offer some way of approach in opening up questions around what has been called the relation between form and content. In this way, the sites of work are simultaneously real physical spaces but also abstract and ephemeral zones of speculation and play. And seeping through all of these are sites of process, practice and dissemination: some visible, some concealed.

There are physical spaces that form the coordinates of this work. These are spaces that I have visited, moved through, and repeatedly returned to.[9] Each time I return to Johannesburg, the place where I not only reside, but also the place where I work (as a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)) and, importantly, also the place where I *make* work, in my studio and edit suite, I am reminded of the extent to which Johannesburg, as a place, has significant bearing on this work. Johannesburg is not only a point of departure (practically and conceptually) but also a point of conceptual and political structuring or processing of the work. The initial idea for this PhD was squarely directed towards the city and sets of site-specific urban practices. While the trajectory of the work has changed course, I nonetheless keep this initial point of departure in play, by means of including extracts of the initial PhD proposal in this final submission.

8. From "Art as Occupation: What Happens to Knowledge?" in Ambrožič and Vettese (eds), *Art as a Thinking Process*, p. 224

9. See Appendix iii for a collected itinerary of my movements during the PhD. While not all moments of travel were directly related to this PhD work, the overall movement is important as it informs the accumulation of ideas and forms over the course of this period.



Scan from *Ottolenghi Test Kitchen: Shelf Love*, 2021. London: Ebury Publishing.

In this sense, the practice and politics of the city provide a theoretical frame or *dispositif* for the folio of work that is in front of you.[10] Each of my departures and returns to Johannesburg have given form to my interaction with the numerous spaces and sites that are traversed in this PhD.

These physical spaces open up as sites of speculation that include not only the see-able, hearable and feelable materiality of the space but also, significantly, carry an overwhelming array of ephemeral, spectral or residual provocations into it. It is this relationship that forms the core of the work, across the numerous sites that it operates in.

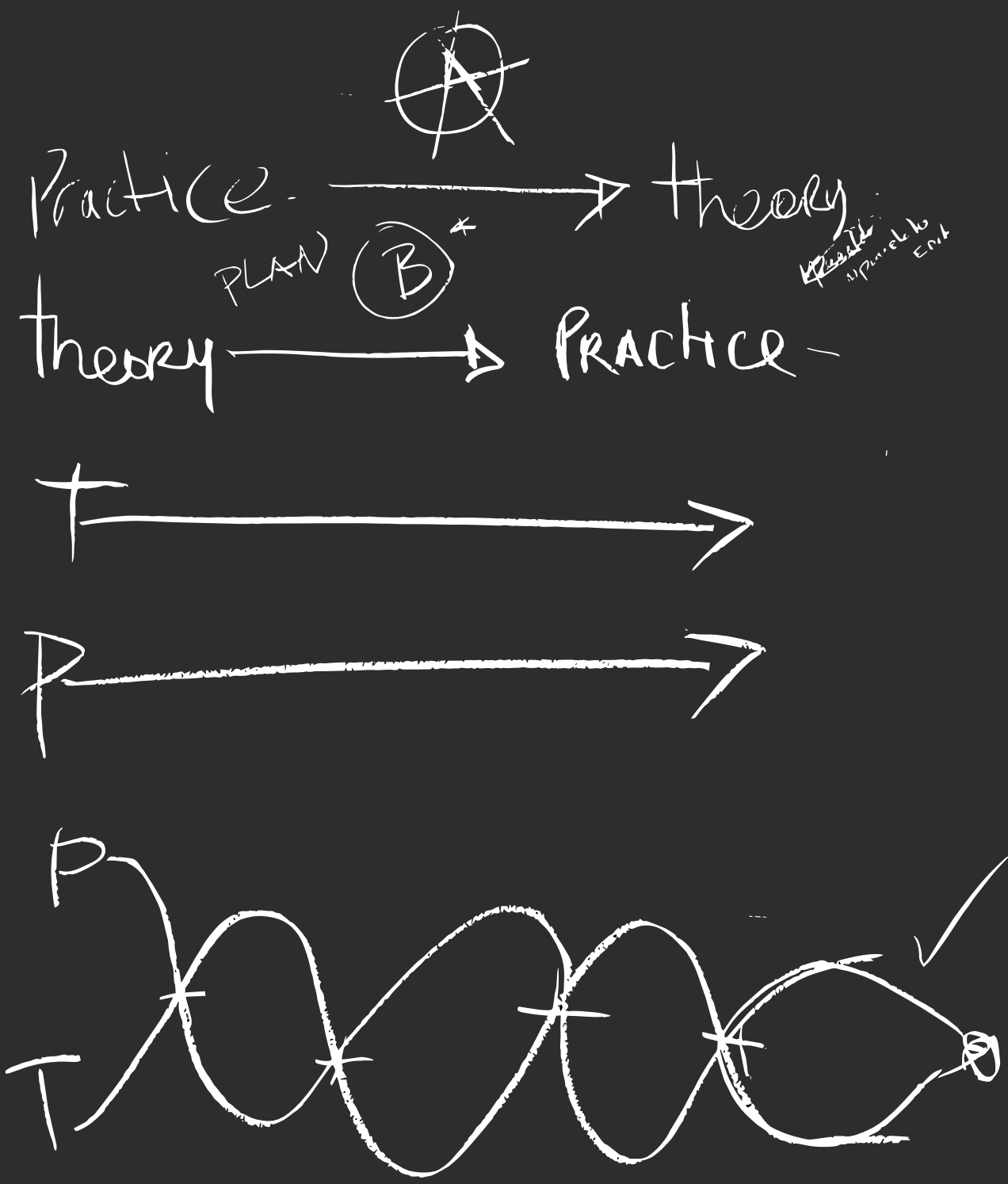
The spaces that have prompted, or even made the work necessary – the spaces in which I have worked – suggest a kind of itinerary or itinerancy (that draws on the physical itinerancy).

This idea of movement from one space or site to another, is intended as a form of wandering, derived through the ideas the work elicits. In a frustrating way, it provides a non-structuring structuring device to give shape or form to the flows of ideas and actions that are in fact fluid and ongoing – moving through various sites of practice, and tactics of holding these sites in a discernible frame, a frame that not only delineates and contains but that suggests linkages and points of contact, continuity and discontinuity to ideas that flow around it.

As such, the documentation, writing, and speculation around the work, as contained in the submission of this PhD, are a series of synchronous movements of speculation and gesture that explore relationships between image and text.

The method or device of the itinerary serves as a vehicle for collecting my ideas and giving form to what I am collecting in this accumulative fashion. As the ideas have intensified, got muddled, and become increasingly more opaque over the years, my reliance on this itinerary of how the work was made, is intended to allow points of access to the reader of this document. This is not an apologia. This is me locating and committing to a critique and destabilisation of *this site*. And *this site* should be recognised in the immediate instance – of these words now being read by you, the reader – as a site itself, formed by the material and abstract expectations and desires that come with the form of a PhD thesis.

10. I read *dispositif* through Giorgio Agamben (2009), Gilles Deleuze (1992), and Michel Foucault (1997) as a way to deepen the relationships between object, idea, form and content. This is a way to fully encounter the complexity and irreducibility of a work of art, or a work of activity. Important here is the relationship between the discursive registers and the pragmatic grounds for the articulation of a series of ideas embedded within a medium. It is instructive to assess how the term 'dispositif' relates to Agamben's concept of the apparatus, and Sarat Maharaj's (2009) dialectical relationship between 'Know-how and No-how'.



Zen Marie, *Diagram on Office Chalk Board*, 2018. Room 321, WSOA Building, WITS, Johannesburg South Africa.

Aim

On one level
I think I have lost "you"
only to discover
that "I"
have gone missing as well.

Judith Butler, 2004, p. 22

This document is a collection of work. The core of the work is hard to define and, perhaps, to even ask for a core to hold the work and give it coherence at its centre is an imposition on the work that reduces, limits and contorts the work to a limited set or series of meanings.

What would it look like if I did not insist on a centre to give form and meaning to this work? What if I approached the work from the edges, establishing the limits, the zones at which the work stops being the work? Would this be to encounter the *framework of the work*, or, a *framing* of the work[11]?

As mentioned, the numerous sites of exhibition where the work was articulated, become a frame or dispositif for approaching the work. In this way, the framework within which the work accumulates could be arranged around the concept of *site*. More specifically, this could be articulated around a concept of *site-specificity*. This is a concept and, critically, a mode of practice in contemporary art.[12] Alongside the working of the concept of *site*, exist multiple sites (physical, ephemeral and conceptual) that the work relies on, responds to and questions.

These Sites are Fundamental

However, as sites, they are by definition not self-contained. They fragment and are porous as they extend to interactions with related concepts and forms; as they suggest and allude to other sites, ideologies, politics and relations. And with these sites come an entanglement of dispositifs that emerge in their own histories, with specific lineages and accumulations of meaning, as well as processes, rituals and conventions that are idiosyncratic, and significant to these idiosyncrasies. These sites change over time.

The Medium as Site?

The forms of practice and theory that come from fine art or contemporary art, film, video installation, theoretical speculation, and forms of research expanded to include creative or practice-based modes of inquiry and exploration, are all at play in this mix. These forms are sites of practice. And these sites of practice reveal methodologies and processes that could be situated as the core of this work, of this document.

11. The concept/practice of framing is read through Mieke Bal's articulation of the concept as she writes it in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, University of Toronto Press, 2002, p. 133.

12. See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity*, MIT, 2002, for a compelling, cogent and almost comprehensive account of the concept's origins and usage.

Or, at least this is one way to approach restitution – through manifesting or accumulating a process and series of works that are, in themselves, opaque, and that withhold or resist a one-dimensional or restrictive anchoring to anything that resembles meaning.

The concept of meaning itself must be contested, as it is often arranged across form and content.[13] Meaning is sometimes reduced to what the work is *about*, or a listing of its content.[14] Roland Barthes (1981) stretches this *aboutness* of an image across the *studium* and the *punctum,* or the personal resonances which are layered over the generalised statements that one could make *about* a work, namely a list of its components and subject matters. The *studium* is easier to agree and to elaborate on. The *punctum*, however, is variable, subjective and never stable. In many ways, I am looking for a space that draws on the stability of the *studium* but that has the dynamism and affective *force to break through* the *punctum*.

While meaning is not stable, and offers little space for consensus, I'm not saying that we cannot say anything about a work. Nor am I resorting to the refrain of 'the work speaks for itself' to block further speculation or writing that explores a work.[15] Nor am I insisting on a facile subjectivity or relativism, as there are many things that not only *can* be said, but said with some certainty. It is this certainty that I insist on troubling, as it suggests an imprecision of translation between languages, and this imprecision is all the more operative between aesthetic propositions and written languages.

What a work means is different to the effects of a work – or what a work does *performatively*[16]. In this way, I would like to talk about the way an image is able not only to describe a reality but to initiate a new set of relationships in motion, following Austin and Butler – perhaps even inaugurate a new reality or, by its iterative force, re-establish and consolidate the power of existing forms.

There is indeed much at stake, then, in the articulation of doctoral work in the creative arts. In part, this is a question of the quantification and qualification of the extent to which an aesthetic object can be accepted as an epistemological object. This assessment is one that is deeply troubling, as it often includes assumptions and hierarchies that are not reliant on philosophical or intellectual premises, but rather are decided on concealment of institutional, symbolic or economic forms that have been settled and agreed upon. The articulation of the work is a *site* that necessarily includes these dimensions.

There is a lot that I am prepared to articulate alongside or in relation to the work. This is not to profess or decide on meaning, but to take the work seriously as a site, and to situate it alongside ideas that speak to or inform its making, and the possibilities of thought that the work provokes. This is the labour that I aim to occupy myself with.

13. Again, Mieke Bal's elaboration of the concept of meaning is pertinent as she writes it in the opening chapter of *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities, a Rough Guide*, University of Toronto Press, 2002.

14. See page 124 for an essay I wrote about the idea of *aboutness*, in relation to the film *Ile Aux Serpents*.

15. While the work most certainly does speak for itself, it speaks in a language completely other to the conventions of academic English or theoretical speculation. Its mode of enunciation is complex, sophisticated, yet supremely *imprecise*. And it is in this imprecision that caution should be taken in attempting to situate a work of aesthetic dimensions in relation to hard-nosed language or analytics. This is not simply a matter of translation, but rather of translation in the face of a radical alterity.

16. I use the concept of performativity here in the sense that John L. Austin and Judith Butler use it to refer to a statement or speech act that does not merely describe reality but *performatively* inaugurates or rearranges reality anew. J.L. Austin, *How Do Things With Words,* Clarendon Press, 1962 and Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, 1993.

But before I get ahead of myself, the work needs to be communicated to you, the reader of these words. And this communication is not a simple matter. The work, or the series of works, exist in advance of this text. As such, they need to be documented. The process of this documentation is an act of mediation, perhaps even *remediation*[17]. These words are part of this mediation. And these mediations, as I've been alluding to, create a new site. Even though this new site is devised, in the first instance, as referential to a prior series of sites, it is not *mere documentation*, but should be taken seriously, sensitively and cautiously as a form or process of articulating, producing or *manifesting* the prior sites.[18]

The mediation that I am speaking of here, is layered. It is multiple and includes numerous sites:

- There is the site of documenting or filming the scenes that I have filmed.
- Then there is the site in which the work was edited – my studio.
- Next was the site of showing or exhibiting the work.
- And here, now, back to you and me, there is the site in which these words are being read and interpreted by you, the reader.

This leaves us with an accumulation of sites that stretch across space and time. And as the ordering concept is precisely that of *site*, or *site-specificity*, it is important that these sites are given the necessary attention, focus and space to unravel, as they demand.

Delineating the Aim?

The aim is no doubt entangled within the sites themselves and, more so, the aim is a site *in itself*[19], in that the aim is entangled within sets of desires, forms, dictates, structures and politics.

Put another way, the aim is not neutral. It is filled with interest, enmeshed within economies and hierarchies. The aim misses its mark. It is tainted.

These problematics may seem to distract or confuse. And, in fact, they do, as these distractions and confusions are distortions, or mediations, of words that stand in between the reader and the 'thing in itself'. This is important, if we are to be sensitive – even empathetic – to the aesthetic artefact as more than a placeholder/container of knowledge production, but could perhaps be imagined as a mobiliser, catalyst or dynamic intervention into knowledge economies. By this, I am insisting on the work as being part of a project of critical value.

This dynamic is central to the work at hand, even more so as this work started, or was intended at the outset, as a critical exploration of the concept of site-specificity. I began my research of the concept with a literature review, tracing it back to the context in which it was first developed; which was the intense political climate of the Cold War.

17. See Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, MIT Press, 2002, who speak about how 'new' forms of media are not entirely new but carry traces or share traits with prior media. The example they use is that of a website, and its multiple windows being a remediation of the illuminated manuscript.

18. As mentioned before, the word 'manifestation', as used in French, denotes a protest or protest action. It is an echo of translation that I find useful in thinking about each site as a protest of sorts – a manifestation that is relational and responsive to the force of power and convention in a particular site.

19. I draw parallels with Agamben's thinking in "The thing itself is not a thing – it is the very sayability, the very opening which is in question in language, which is language, and which in language we constantly presuppose and forget, perhaps because the thing itself is, in its intimacy, nothing more than forgetfulness and self-abandonment" (Agamben 1987: 25).

Here I followed the critique of Miwon Kwon (2002), who asserts that the radical aspirations of the concept came to be lost as it was appropriated by the very institutions that it set out to critique. To quote Kwon at some length:

> This concern to reassess the relationship between the artwork and its site is largely provoked by the ways in which the term "site-specific" has been uncritically adopted as another genre category by mainstream art institutions and discourses. The term is indeed conspicuous in a diverse range of catalogue essays, press releases, grant applications, magazine reviews, and artist statements today; it is applied rather indiscriminately to art works, museum exhibitions, public art projects, city arts festivals, architectural installations; and it is embraced as an automatic signifier of "criticality" or "progressivity" by artists, architects, dealers, curators, critics, arts administrators, and funding organizations. For those who adhere to co-optation as the most viable explanation of the relationship between advanced art, the culture industry, and the political economy throughout the twentieth century, the unspecific (mis)uses of the term "site-specific" are yet another instance of how vanguardist, socially conscious, and politically committed art practices always become domesticated by their assimilation into the dominant culture. And this argument would insist that if the aesthetic and political efficacy of site-specific art has become insignificant or innocuous in recent years, it is because it has been weakened and redirected by institutional and market forces. (Kwon 2002: 1)

The site of site-specificity was often lost through the type of appropriation that Kwon describes, as it was (mistakenly) assumed that the critique could hold even as it was recuperated and commodified by the very institutions it purported to critique. It has not held fast.

One of the aims of this current work is to trouble this concept – in precisely the ways that this concept set out, initially, to trouble the supposed neutrality of the spaces involved in the economies of contemporary art.

I aim to critique the concept through my engagement with numerous sites. Yet the multiplicity of sites are not all of the same order. Some are physical spaces in which I filmed, wrote, and made work. Others are more abstract or conceptual sites of mediation/meditation or sites of communication.

And then, finally, there is this site – a site that exists for this moment, as you the reader form meaning from these words in your mind; a site that mediates between my thoughts and yours. This site, the site of these words, implicitly forms a mode of relation. It is demarcated or even governed by rules and procedures, syntax and grammar, that we assume we have an agreement or consensus on. A social contract between the writer and the reader, even if those terms are fluid and changing. This critically leads to a question regarding the institutional sites of the university via the form of the PhD, and of the museum via the form of the exhibition.

In the first instance, the reader is the supervisor who reads these words with the view to giving guidance and feedback. Then, there will be a range of readers – comrades and intimates – who will take time to read or listen to these words, and add to and shape the form of these words through comments, critiques and questions.

Then there will be three examiners tasked with assessing if these words, and the constellation of texts that accompany them, satisfy the requisites of a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Fine Art.

If you, the reader, is one that comes to this work now contained in the site of the Wits archive of PhD work, then the examination has gone well, and the necessary approvals and legitimising rituals have been completed. Yet, even having been completed, all those rituals and administrative processes are important as they are forces that have shaped, formed and constituted the site of this work as a form of knowledge production in the framework of doctoral research.

This last site is perhaps the most difficult one for me to engage with because, as I write now, I write in advance of all the readers and sites listed above. Those are future sites, yet to come. And, as I don't claim clairvoyance, I can only speculate as to their meaning and, even then, not with any certainty.

The focus of this work is on the sites that have already been, and so, in many ways, this is a work of reflection: of how the sites that form the coordinates of this work invoke an itinerary of ideas, shapes and forms. The exploration of these sites – their politics, their resonances and their entanglements – are the work I undertake now.

These prior sites include specific spaces where I filmed or worked: Dakar, Saint-Denis, the Karoo, and the Drakensberg. They extend to spaces of dissemination – where the work was shown: the fem of colour, The Point of Order, The Wits Art Museum and, finally, the Johannesburg Art Gallery. These sites form the framework for an elaboration of the ideas and elements that they suggest.

In this, the *land* or *landscape* as a site emerges as a central concept that requires elaboration. Landscapes are sites that carry the traces of histories – histories that are often marked by multiple and numerous violences. These violences are, in many ways, continued into the present.

It is my insistence that the contemporary art and academic spaces that allow and enable uncritical filmic meditations of such landscapes to exist, unchecked, perpetuate and become complicit extensions or manifestations of these violences

The aim then, of this work, insists on a critical meditation of site-specificity to effect the full complexity of the term in relation to the politics and aesthetics that the multiplicity or accumulation of sites elicit. This aim, that I develop, is carried out in the work that holds the centre of the submission. The videos (that you can access via the links provided), the images that site (and cite) the installations, the appendices that are collateral texts, notes, documents and ideas produced while making this work, and finally the text you have in front of you, which operates as a guide, reflection, critique, literature review, theoretical framing and, perhaps, even a reluctant exegesis on the overall submission, are offered as a contribution towards the ongoing debate of what the potential for practice-based or creative research is and can possibly be.

The urgency here is to begin to understand the ways in which knowledge is produced, and to ask after the effects of such production. This is carried out parallel to but always with moments of intersection with the theoretical interventions and analysis of practice.

In this way, the PhD submitted is one that employs a mix of tactics and methods from contemporary art and conventional academic research. The intertwined trajectories of theory and practice are all approached and problematised

as forms of writing, analysis, methods of articulation, and tactics of criticality. As such, this PhD is conceived as a complex text or 'thick description' that deploys all the forms of making, doing, seeing, thinking, reading and writing that already take place inside an arts school within a university, both in South Africa and abroad. I invoke the notion of 'thick description' developed by Clifford Geertz (1973) as a response to conventional anthropological research and ethnography, in relation to which Geertz develops this concept through the work of Ryle, Wittgenstein, Weber, Ricoeur and others. I mention this not because I wish to move into the space of equivalences between anthropology, ethnography and art (in the manner of Hal Foster or others), but rather to reinforce the point that artistic research is not alone in being dissatisfied with conventional research methods and modes of analysis. In fact, the injunction to critically rethink and rework epistemological procedures must be at the heart of any research that takes its critical potential seriously.

Rationale, Alibi and Motive

I came to this work through a convoluted process. In fact, I began this doctoral study with the view to writing a 'conventional' PhD. There were many false starts and dead ends. The form the work currently assumes, in many ways, found me, at a point where I had to *come clean* and recognise (confess?) that my daily practice and my process are fundamentally arranged around my creative practice. This is what I was actively doing all along, even while attempting to assume the posture of a person writing a PhD in the mode of comparative literature, cultural studies or, in my case, cultural analysis, as per the requirements of the school where I obtained my MA, which was the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, and I still owe much of my scholarly practice to the methods and injunctions that come through this school, and the important foundational work of Mieke Bal.

While I was pursuing what I imagined to be 'a real PhD', I became aware that I was caught between what I imagined 'legitimate' scholarship looked like, on the one hand, and my creative practice, including teaching in an art school within a university, on the other. This last element is important, as much of my teaching is in practice (not theory), and part of this work involves opening up space for practice to be prioritised rather than overdetermined by theory. It often happens that art students (in art schools in universities) insist on deploying theoretical phrasings as alibis and motives for the making of their work. My fear and warning of such framing is that this has every possibility of drowning the work – and denying the possibility of learning from the practice, the medium and potential that the work could perhaps offer. It took me some time to transfer this position into the writing of this PhD.

The challenge of a PhD in creative practice includes assuming a position in relation to the ways in which the aesthetic or poetic object exists, is silenced or is spoken over in terms of the conventions of scholarly academic practice. In this study, I address the relationships between practice and theory, doing and thinking, and between writing and making.

The shift in my approach was not only towards a practice-based PhD. More so, it was a shift that resisted being divided into two parts, into a separation of theory and practice. Instead, my intention is to engage the complex, entangled ways that theory and practice overlap, connect or disconnect. This insistence on simultaneity is a critical position that resists, and in a way deviates from, the examining guidelines that govern the formal assessment and conferring of this PhD.

No framework is neutral. No framework exists without impediment or the danger of restricting the work, its form, its mode of address, and ultimately, its meaning. As we learn from critiques around site-specificity, described above, the gallery and the museum are similarly not neutral spaces, but are filled with ideology and politics.

The call made under the banner of site-specificity is often to abandon the gallery and museum, and to look for spaces on the *outside.* And by moving away from these spaces, thereby enact a form of critique. However, the museum and gallery are still the sites to which many of these site-specific interventions have returned in order to be given legibility. A similar argument could be made of the university.

It is clear that these institutions have made themselves indispensable. They appear as monolithic nodes of power that are unshakeable or unsympathetic to forms that deviate or are illegible to their conventions. To imagine a space outside of these institutions is to risk being silenced. So artists and scholars continue to work within these boundaries, all the while attempting to challenge that power within. Or at least this is what I believe the responsibility of artists and scholars who enjoy the protection of these institutions should be: that they should be preoccupied with a critical project that begins but does not stop with forms of institutional critique.

The museum and the university are sites that are in urgent need of continued critique. It is perhaps one of the prerequisites of any work undertaken in the university to be self-reflexive and critical of the methods of carrying out research and understanding the margins for error that may exist. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is one example of this, as are the numerous forms of post-structural destabilisations of authorship or linearity of meaning.

The rationale for submitting this series of work for consideration as a PhD is, in a way, to ask the work to engage with a debate around what is regarded as 'legitimate' knowledge production. By this, I refer to a debate around creative or practice-based research, which at its core asks after the extent to which a *work (of art)* or any other aesthetic object/performative action contains or offers *value* as a source or act of knowledge production. Implicated in the idea of the evaluation/assessment of *value* are criteria of rigour, method, theoretical framing, literature review, and all the other requirements of traditionally accepted academic practice within a discipline. The practice-based PhD is a nascent form of knowledge production: we are very much at *the birth of a discipline*. Or so we should insist, since it is apparent that any perceived 'newness' in the university tends to be regarded with suspicion, and comes under threat from the regulations that govern the conservative and technocratic social sciences and humanities protocols. While it is perhaps obvious, it is still important to assert that the cut and paste of such criteria from text-based analytical disciplines does not easily extend to cover the specificity of creative arts-based practices. Even within the arts there are a vast range of perspectives, from music, film, theatre, to fine art, that resist categorical, generalised or homogenised rubrics.

In particular, conventions around the assessment, valuation and validation of creative research are imposed on practice-based research/artistic research/creative research, or whatever formulation you prefer.[20] The categorisation of the type of work that I am pursuing in this submission, by virtue of the prescription contained in the Wits University Senate's standing orders that govern this PhD, is termed 'practice-based research'.

In this submission, I offer this mixture of text and image, as a critical gesture that sets the university into relation with the museum. These are two crucial sites that this work engages with. In the committees, boards and juries that constitute the authority of the university, there is the task of having to guarantee the veracity, competence, rigour and legitimacy of work made for degree purposes.[21] More so, these criteria are consolidated into overarching frameworks, such as the Bologna protocols in Europe or the National Qualification Framework in South Africa.

A practice-based PhD that is demarcated into two separate portions, that is, of theory and of practice, has the burden of establishing the terms of the relationship between theory and practice.[22] In this, the mutability of the work (of art), or at least its coding into an(other) language whose legibility is unclear in terms of the quantification and qualification of its value as knowledge, is always in danger of being overdetermined, silenced or limited. The necessity of this imprecision is perhaps obvious, as it is absurd to stipulate how many paintings make an MA or a PhD.

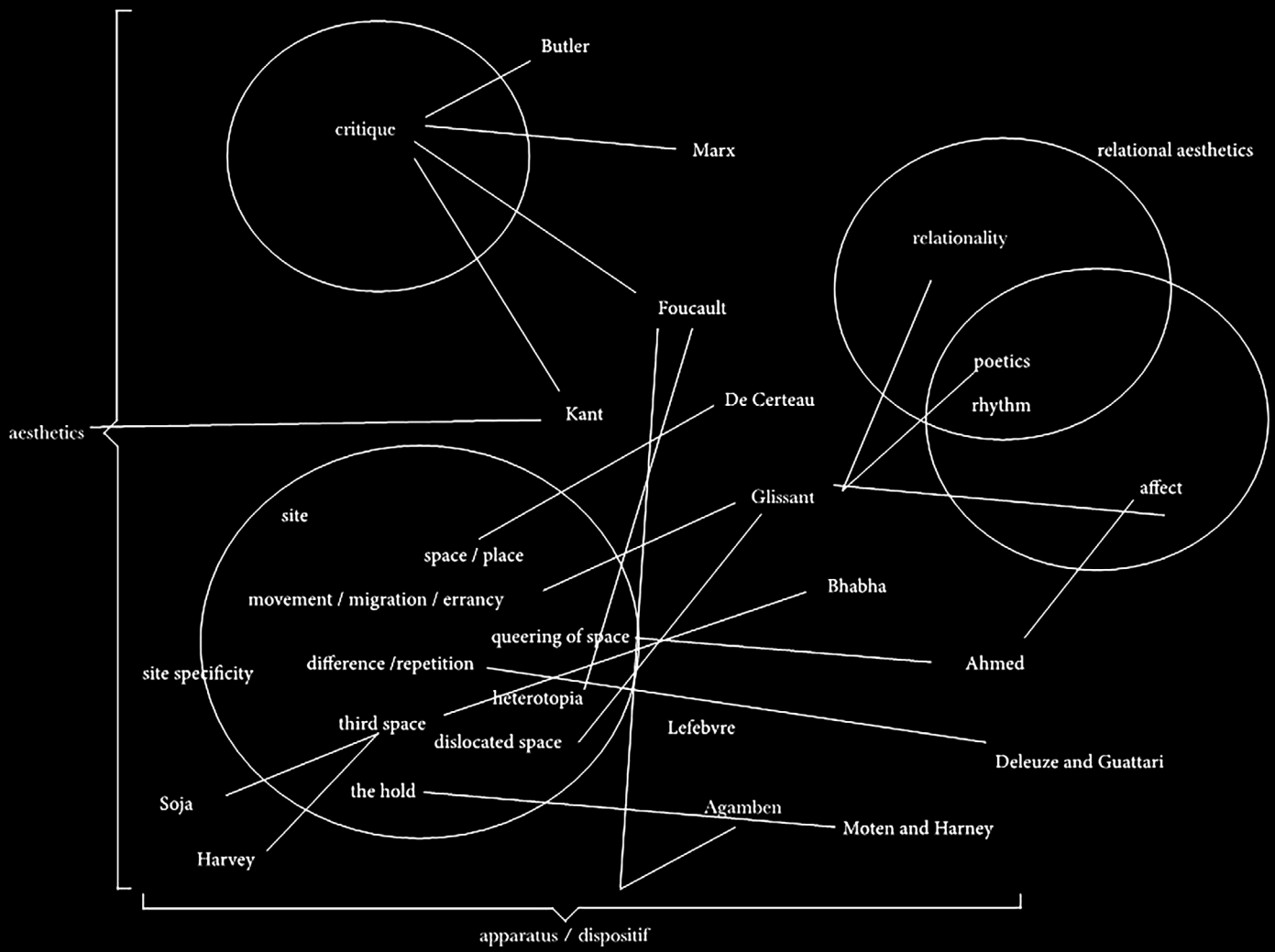
There is an inconsistency in accepting that it is possible to stipulate the word count of an essay as a means of calculating how much can be achieved in a particular number of words. Hence the expectation that an MAFA is 20 000 words, and a PhD in Creative Work is 40 000 words – the crude logic being that the quantity of words is an important marker for 'stepping up' a qualification from an MA to PhD.

It is clear from the standing orders that the quantity of practical work to be submitted is not specified, which suggests an acceptance that it is either not possible, or not advisable, to do so. Whichever the case, it is a telling admission on the part of the standing orders that one component is specified and the other is not. Similarly, in terms of the issue of quality, criteria are offered to assess the rigour of the writing, but not so for the practice. In either case, it is importantly left to the PhD itself to assert, clarify and articulate the terms in which the work can be seen to be successful or not, even while being subject to the generalised rules that govern examination. All of this is significantly, and crucially, reliant on the expertise of the three appointed examiners, all of whom are deemed appropriately qualified to assess the form and content of the PhD.

20. There is a vast array of formulations that attempt to provide a container or holder for how to quantify and qualify what goes on in an artist/musician/performer/filmmaker's studio or process. In fact, there emerge institutional border wars that seek to define and prescribe not only the names but ultimately to assert control and standardisation over these processes so that they are deemed examinable. The Wits Senate's standing orders around this are a case in point. See appendix v, containing the guidelines for examiners by which this PhD is subject to examination. If you are reading this, not as an examiner, then this submission has in fact passed the criteria contained in those documents. It is not my intention to engage in debates around naming, in this work, as any such naming needs to emerge from the process of doctoral studies at hand. This is an assertion of a form of fluidity that is crucially site-specific, which is to say that the naming of the process, and the process itself, its methods, parameters and form of dissemination – in fact all criteria for evaluation – must emerge from the *nature of the work*. This is to ask for the contingencies of the work to be regarded as sites to be read and understood in terms of their parameters. The kinds of relativism in anthropology, from Levi Strauss and beyond, are perhaps analogous ways to think of this.

21. That selection panels are in some academic lexicons named 'juries' suggests quite strongly a claim for bona fides rubber-stamped by a legal rhetoric. The university is fully conscious of the need to consistently perform and make visible its power through a range of practices that can be traced in many ways to pagan rituals. The sceptres, hats and gowns used in graduation are only one such example.

22. Which is in addition to pursuing the creative practice and writing the text.



Zen Marie, *Diagram for Paradise Fallen Online Presentation,* 2020.





Zen Marie, *Difference Repetition 2*, 2019. Charcoal on Fabriano paper, 140 x 140 cm. Johannesburg, South Africa.

Transcripts from public discussion at TPO: Part One[23]

Ready?

00;00;02;26 - 00;00;13;00
Speaker 1
Ok…. Welcome to *Paradise Fallen: difference repetition.*
For today's conversation, we'll be speaking about Zen Marie's work. Zen Marie, artist.

00;00;19;07 - 00;00;26;09
Speaker 1
Lecturer, PhD candidate. (laughter) See how he navigates these little psychologies.

00;00;26;09 - 00;00;29;03
Speaker 1
We have Dee Marco, who teaches in media studies at Wits.

00;00;30;04 - 00;00;36;17
Speaker 1
And we have Tracy Murinik, respondent, who is an independent art writer, commentator, educator and curator.

00;00;36;17 - 00;00;54;26
Speaker 1
Commentator: I am the chair for the evening. And I'd like to say I would wear the hat of representative islander to see how this analysis of islanding works. Without further ado.

00;00;54;26 - 00;00;56;14
Speaker 4
Thank you. And that's Natasha Himmelman.

00;00;57;01 - 00;01;04;20
Speaker 1
Oh yes. Representing VIAD at UJ.

00;01;04;20 - 00;01;23;27
Speaker 4

Well thank you everyone for coming. This is a strange kind of moment for me. We're sitting in an exhibition space amongst a body of work that has been going on ...

00;01;23;27 - 00;01;24;17
Speaker 1
For a while.

00;01;25;09 - 00;02;00;07
Speaker 4
And the experiment here is to think about how this work operates within a set of logics that are problematic in different ways. So the one is in terms of the logic of a text that I distributed way too late, and it's way too long and way too speculative, in that there's still a whole lot of typographical errors and a whole lot of inconsistencies in terms of the thinking, in terms of the research.

00;02;00;07 - 00;02;40;18
Speaker 4
It's very much a text in progress. I chose to circulate it with an email that I sent to my supervisors in order to … Well, look, this work has been going on for probably a decade, and it could and probably will go on for many more years. But at the end of next year, I've got to arrest that process, compile it all, and submit it for the operational logics of a doctoral degree.

So there's a kind of an artificial oddity about how this work, which is fluid and in process, gets arrested at that point. So in prefiguring for that point of … sort of sealing, stopping and submitting, the experiment was to see how that feels now. So the way that the work looks tied up and curated, in the sense of it being a kind of, I guess, conventional contemporary art exhibition, is an experiment with that form in as much as the text is an experiment with the form of the analytical essay.

So for me, those two things meet in this moment, which feels very strange. I'm going to read part of the text – the part of the text that is written, in the first instance, as a journal article. And there's going to have to be a concerted effort on my part from now on till the end of the year to turn that journal article into a chapter.

And what it feels like for me, at the moment, is that it's the first chapter, and the chapter that starts to establish the key lines of thinking in the work. So I'll do that, and then Dee and Tracy will respond … I think you all asked me, what do I want out of this moment?

And I'm not exactly sure. I do have an idea of the ritual of submitting a tranche of writing for the PhD, that comes with the kind of necessity to then present it to people – normally in the form of a public defence. So it's sort of … what you're all supposed to do is kick the hell out of that text and show how it's imprecise, it's impoverished; it's lacking in so many ways.

00;04;46;28 - 00;04;59;01
Speaker 4
And then, by that process, this is a pedagogy before and by that process to strengthen the argument and produce a very robust thesis at the end.

00;04;59;20 - 00;05;00;11
Speaker 2
Hopefully.

00;05;01;02 - 00;05;22;14
Speaker 4
There will be something like that robust critique. But I think that we've all, in different ways, been thinking through and talking about different things over the years – not necessarily specifically this, but I think that there's a way in which I see each of us as people thinking with me, as I think about everyone who's come here tonight.

00;05;23;15 - 00;06;08;29
Speaker 4
So that's just my way of framing, I guess. So the journal article is called '*Paradise Fallen*: Islands, Archipelagos and Xenoepistemics.

What is below is referred to as 'the work'. And what is around us is referred to as 'the work' – an installation which includes video projection, video monitors, drawings and lithographic prints. The images and text are proposed as more than a descriptive accounting of the work, even though the work is encountered through the text and photographic documentation.

00;06;08;29 - 00;06;39;05
Speaker 4
The aim here is to discursively engage with the ideas developed in the work, and to write alongside the work. Perhaps even through the work. In this sense, what you have before you, and what I'm reading now, is not a conventional journal article in the proper sense, but an attempt to engage with the complexities of submitting a body of creative practice as a contribution to the ideas, concepts and urgencies that are contained within the special edition of this journal.

Now, I mean, that obviously needs to be kind of modulated so that it starts to address the way in which the PhD works, and the aims of the PhD.

As with any artistic practice, the matter I believe cuts two ways. While the fault lines of the form and – sometimes people describe this as 'versus' – content is a debate that is well-worn and perhaps rather tired at this moment, the form/content question, I believe, is not as quaint or anachronistic as I first believed. Neither is it a niche debate that is specific only to art and aesthetics, but an important element of critically questioning how we, whoever we are, know what we know, and how what we experience allows us

23. The following text is a transcript from a public talk on the second installation of *Ile Aux Serpents,* at the exhibition space, The Point of Order, on Thursday 26th September 2019 at 18:00. The Respondents where Dee Marco and Tracy Murinik and the chair was Natasha Himmelman. These transcripts were generated into text via an AI transcriber from Adobe Premiere, and the text bears the scars of this translation.

possibilities of action, or even the refusal of action or non-action.

00;07;43;08 - 00;08;09;22
Speaker 4
The framing of these issues as such is not to add a topical lustre to the work engaged with below, but rather a frank and emphatic declaration that there is always at stake in the world around us crises of proportions and magnitudes that are impossible to ignore, and the form/content debate I am arguing, is important in understanding some of these political and economic questions.

00;08;15;15 - 00;09;07;23
Speaker 4
But this has always been and always will be true, and by truth, of course, I mean true of work that attempts to locate itself within the world of ideas and the world of atrocities that it is made in. And in this way, art theory, knowledge and practice, and even science and technology, must congeal. What emerges in a discussion of form and content, especially when attempting to configure art in particular, or creative practice more generally, within the framework provided by science and technology, or knowledge production, with all of the attendant investment in method, theory and rigour of output, is a temptation to make the distinction between what the work is about and how the work materially manifests, as if it is possible to separate the two; and even if such a separation were possible, that this separation would be productive at all. What should be asserted and declared upfront is that while it may seem possible to make this distinction, we should not fall into the trap of enacting the separation between concept, idea – thematic, perhaps – and the material or the materiality, which includes immaterial formal qualities of the work.

00;09;38;03 - 00;10;11;02
Speaker 4
What is important about creative practice is that formal questions, such as style, composition, rhythm and tone are fully implicated within and are the basis for any operational logics or flights of fancy, that include content-based questions, like subject matter, concept or idea. What is at stake in this debate – and this is why I entertain it at all – is that in order to understand the piece of work as a form of research or as a part of the process of knowledge production, viewers, audiences, analysts, readers must be able to receive the double shot of both form and content pretty much simultaneously and, if possible, without bias, as we work our way through or inside the work.

And I guess this is a kind of ambition, or where I'm starting to desire the work to operate, within the structure of a PhD.

In this way, we should not make the mistake of reducing or redefining autostatics or redefined art to incorporate aesthetics; meaning that something that is silent cannot speak, or that it should not be written about and spoken about – that it is a thing in itself, and will communicate its own logic by itself, not edifying or reducing science to formulas or even styleless knowledge production.

I mean, any form of writing or any form of mathematical equation has a stylistic or formal quality to it that that can be appreciated, even if the emphasis is not always placed on that. And sometimes, in some schools, particularly within the social sciences, I guess these are sort of looked down upon.

00;11;35;24 - 00;12;02;10
Speaker 4
But what I'm arguing is that these are sort of cultural conventions and traditions rather than hard-and-fast protocols within academia, and that they should be challenged.

So we need to resist the move to equating content with knowledge, and form or style with frivolity and excess. And while doing this, we need to accept that any piece of work will not behave according to accepted formula.

00;12;03;01 - 00;12;47;11
Speaker 4
It will appear to cohere to something, but will never satisfy the conventions all the time. And this line of thinking follows a number of theories ... And I'll just end with this point here: that what should be clear is that these questions are not pertinent to the automotive, but that the cantankerous, bizarre and weird nature of all research processes and all knowledge production should be appreciated and valued, as they indicate something of the people who are writing them, the people who are producing those theories, and the way in which they are read – as it is only in this way that newness, innovation and breakthroughs can be quoted. So I begin with this preamble on the one hand to relate the compilation of this work in terms of the mandates of the PhD, but also, on the other hand, to insist that while the conceptual or thematic concerns of the work be developed and explored around water, the oceans, climate change and the politics of these pressing planetary concerns, the work is also about islands, about reimagining history and, perhaps, is about a number of other things as well.

00;13;22;09 - 00;13;39;03
Speaker 4
But the work cannot or rather, let me say, should not, be reduced to any of these 'aboutnesses'. So what you have before you is all of these aboutnesses and more, but alongside and within the context of an immersive installation, which is what I'm calling 'the work'.

00;13;45;27 - 00;14;08;17
Speaker 4
So *Paradise Fallen* is a series of work that includes … See, here I'm just repeating myself! And that's the prelude to the journal article, which carries on to engage with the work in much more detail, and starts to write through what this work is doing.

00;15;38;08 - 00;15;43;29
Speaker 2
It's been kind of an exciting challenge to kind of sift through the work.

00;15;43;29 - 00;16;13;10
Speaker 2
And to think about what the provocations are, but also to think about what the possibilities are for this as a chapter. And so I've just made some notes, and some of it's just in point form, and I'm hoping that some of it's question-based. May I also just say, in my own experience of a public defence – which is actually really nice – I felt really happy when it happened. So I hope this makes you feel pretty nice inside, and not stressed and attacked. And yeah, cool.

Okay, so this review, currently, in general, I think it is an important and timely contribution to thinking through what constitutes theory work, and what are the intersections of this kind of theoretical 'work'. And I put the word 'work' in inverted commas because it kind of speaks back to what Zen said as we speak about the creative – the creative work as work – and to kind of problematise this idea.

00;16;51;21 - 00;17;27;13
Speaker 2
So the intersections of theoretical work in particular, and how they either or both intersect with one another, and how they produce knowledge, right? And so, as Zen's work points out, in his own processes, his own relationship to time and space became muddied by encounters from afar and near, with the year 2016's loaded and energetic responses from students in South Africa while he was elsewhere working on this video work.

00;17;27;13 - 00;18;06;02
Speaker 2
So it really is kind of interesting to me you inserting this moment that was very personal to you. You were far away – you were in Dakar at the time? Yeah – and how that kind of was where you were at. So, his encounters from 2016, [and with students'] noted and energetic responses, we were – are – forced to encounter institutions, right?

00;18;06;04 - 00;18;44;15
Speaker 2
And in many ways, ourselves. This was part of the provocation of the Fees Must Fall movement, to think about some of the things that we engage with in this country from outside of the exchanges of white European rhetorics of knowledge, and what is valuable knowledge, right? So I don't want to hover on this too much, but it is a very important thread of the work that you're trying to do … such an important theme that comes out, most notably addressed in the xenoepistemics, which you see now as you enter a critical engagement and

00;18;44;15 - 00;19;09;03
Speaker 2
thinking through artistic production and creative practice as scholarship, partly. So I'm basically saying that I don't want to overly engage with this, because I'm not sure what some of the discussions might be. But I think it comes out very strongly in the work. And also, I imagine, that in this space, it's one of the first questions I want to ask: What is a practice-based and theory-based work?

00;19;09;03 - 00;19;30;22
Speaker 2
What are the demands? Right? And how does the production of a creative body of work in this kind of foreword intersect with theory, and where you are actually compelled to make it intersect with you in this 50/50 way? I'm not sure that there is a 50/50 split, or if there ever could be such a thing.

00;19;31;03 - 00;19;58;04
Speaker 2
And how does it differ from the creative explorations of the completion of such a degree, perhaps in a more 'quote unquote' theoretical only fashion? What is the big difference? Right? So in other words, I just want to problematise that project because it pits these two things against each other within the framework of an institution.

00;19;58;04 - 00;20;23;14
Speaker 2
And so what is this thing, and what are the requirements of you, in your artistic capacity, and in your intellectual thinking capacity? Because those two things, surely they are also one and the same, which I think is part of the tension that you're picking up on. So I've chosen a few themes around which to kind of pivot my ideas.

00;20;23;14 - 00;20;49;25
Speaker 2
And the first is the notion of the ocean, and the ocean as technological right. So thinking the ocean as itself, doing its thing, holding its own affective registers and tonality. This work around the ocean and transatlantic routes, histories ... We know this work has been done and others have explored some of these themes in great detail.

00;20;50;11 - 00;21;00;02
Speaker 2
I'm most interested in how some of these considerations of the ocean have been dealt with in Afrofuturist texts, and I see that you point towards these as some kind of … almost like a tipping of the hat in, with

00;21;04;23 - 00;21;17;00
Speaker 2
this work, which is called [Sugar-Free: Video Manifesto] … I might be wrong, but I'm kind of putting it out there.

00;21;17;15 - 00;21;25;10
Speaker 1
So this was my first viewing of Ile aux Serpents, and when I watched it, there were two texts that came to mind, and I want to bring them to this conversation. The first is Djibril Diop Mambéty's Touki Bouki – and specifically a scene in which the protagonists, Mory and Anta – two young lovers who wish to travel to Dakar after having made love, they look out over the ocean.

00;21;51;28 - 00;22;19;03
Speaker 2
And so this this kind of rocky plain, looking out … This notion of looking out over the ocean, and the way that you write about a dream, just brought that image to mind for me there: the repetitive idea of watching the ocean, watching its rhythms in this 1973 film, is one of the many moments of when the ocean itself is a character in the culmination of the film.

00;22;19;04 - 00;22;46;28
Speaker 2
It is also this ocean as character that Anta chooses to take her away. She needs a boat, which Mory denies, and notably escapes the ocean with the type of flow and repetition is a space of everything and nothingness. And I want to kind of note these feelings, right, because the discussion around affect and the affective, obviously, also comes up quite strongly.

00;22;48;01 - 00;23;17;04
Speaker 2
And the second text [that came up] for me was the 1996 video essay by John Akomfrah, The Last Angel of History. And what I thought about, what struck me, was when you write about the use of light and the kind of playing around with lightness, and there's a kind of yellow image, how do you see that as part of the opening scene of that film?

00;23;18;04 - 00;23;58;12
Speaker 2
And so another classic text, this time not dubbed post-colonial, but rather after a futuristic, seminal piece of work, which has informed many scholarly and theoretical positions from which to consider and insert and dissect diaspora experiences and sensibilities. In both these films, the soundtracks feature music and their relationship to the sonic as part of the space and, at the same time, perpetually changing it, as well as the sea as sonic device, with the waves acting as makers, breakers, and all the while we remain very aware of what we don't know, what is underneath.

00;23;59;28 - 00;24;38;27
Speaker 2
Okay, so that's the ocean. The second series of themes is the palimpsest, or the palimpsestic, if that's a word. I've put it down as 'memory, space, and human histories'. So I'm very intrigued by this notion of the practice of something that occurs to me a lot in thinking with memory or past history, in its most simplest form, the notion of pastness in the present, and the visibility, the tangibility, even the affect of registers of pasts in present.

00;24;39;24 - 00;24;58;27
Speaker 2
Or quite simply, the messiness of the separation of past and present. So, I hear you. I acknowledge the complexity of rendering both mediums, if you want to – for lack of a better way of putting that –important, both the theoretical and the practical work, the showing
to us.

00;24;59;20 - 00;25;11;09
Speaker 2
And the reading of your thoughts. But I also read, in having read the work more than once – 'cause it's a dense text and beyond the fleeting references.

00;25;11;27 - 00;25;14;13
Speaker 3
This specific text, I think now, I had not read in relation to the other work.

00;25;34;25 - 00;26;06;07
Speaker 2
So beyond the references to an implied history or histories of colonial modalities of movement, I had not seen the considered engagement or even explicit mentioning of the fact that the spaces and the histories and, as you said earlier, the aboutnesses – I added an extra here – and that those things are actually about black bodies and mobility, and about water passages.

00;26;06;13 - 00;26;37;24
Speaker 2
And so for me that calls into questions stuff around intergenerational trauma and memory. And those things do come up though, when one engages the space differently. So I'm saying, for me it's quite interesting to sit here now and have conversations that you have picked up on stuff that I hadn't experienced yet. So while the focus interestingly follows the work of – I mean, Zen notes many scholars – but one of them being [Paul] Gilroy, right, and noting the Middle Passage.

00;26;38;12 - 00;26;43;14
Speaker 1
I found myself affected by the register of absence – that the absence of the human form in a more conventional way … the absence of the body, for lack of a better way of putting that, rather than being ... So, rather than being convinced by the implication in the fixation on the ocean and the space and the palm trees, objects or bodies of water that Zen speaks about specifically in the text, I found the absence of people eerie and almost haunting.

00;27;16;16 - 00;27;41;14
Speaker 2
Which then takes us into that whole realm of hauntology, which may or may not be where you want to go. So to read the ocean in this way, that is presented in this video work, is to also imply the technological in the soundscapes of colonial rhetorics, as well as the possibilities that the real-life possibilities on either side of that Middle Passage. And Gilroy, in small acts,

00;27;42;01 - 00;28;03;27
Speaker 2
writes about the creation of a burden … problematic to Black, stable, immigrant families. But he also writes about the reinvention of a sensibility, obviously speaking specifically about Black Britishness, that is complexly in coexistence with memories, and even rememories, to again employ a term that you do from Toni Morrison's Beloved.

00;28;09;22 - 00;28;39;08
Speaker 2
And so memories and rememories in relation to the ocean, and this kind of relationship … And so, for me, what is interesting here, is that the ocean, and the lack of sound, except for the narration of course, or people, there's

also a double kind of memorying that takes place – both what the people might have experienced, what you have experienced, and what we then experience.

00;28;39;08 - 00;29;08;07
Speaker 2
So I feel like there's a kind of methodological thing going on there, in the in the process of watching, and in your process of having made this work. [Walter] Benjamin's important ideas on memory also resonate in this absence. I note my quote: 'The first material on which the mimetic faculty is put to the proof is the human body.' Akomfrah's tipping of the proverbial hat to Benjamin in the title The Last Angel of History is also interesting.

00;29;08;07 - 00;29;27;17
Speaker 2
And that kind of link further fueled me in this realm of thinking. Benjamin writes about the angel of history as a dialectical image, and I really want us to think about that a little bit more when we go into conversation later.

00;29;37;04 - 00;30;00;27
Speaker 2
I don't know if this is the right place for this, but I want to also then think about notions of belonging, right? The accent and the voices – your presence and the narrator's presence as a voice, a suggestion even. I feel like the film suggests that we imagine with you; we locate ourselves in the landscape literally and metaphorically.

00;30;01;15 - 00;30;27;10
Speaker 2
And then I also wanted us to maybe think or talk a little bit about translatability and language, on the island and not. And as we experience the film in our context, and the sound of the French, the Frenchness may well be lost on some of us. So, what happens also when one reads, and doesn't understand necessarily, and the differences in the affective, in how one can read or engage the text.

00;30;31;26 - 00;30;54;27
Speaker 2
Then a really big theme for Zen in this work is the notion of site – site and time. So site and time at the same time as memory holders. And again I've returned to this notion of haunting, haunted space. My notes about the site, and I quote: 'Form is situated. It is implicated within the space that exists.

00;30;55;16 - 00;31;36;10
Speaker 2
'Site-specificity here cannot logically demarcate where art begins and ends. To grapple with this idea, Marie suggests that the space and his composition of a set of non-identifiable images – montage – is not art but also is art at the same time.' Not burdened by commodity, which I feel is something you kind of say very strongly in the piece … [The work is] not burdened by commodity, consumption or specific spaces or traditional art spaces, nor are the images laden with the burden of prettiness, necessarily.

00;31;36;10 - 00;32;02;17
Speaker 2
They take on other things. So the listlessness of the rhythm of the ocean, and the imperfection of the islands or archipelagos, makes none of it nameable and thus not viable. And so my question is, does this automatically then constitute the work as more than in line –specifically in line with these ideas around knowledge production or knowledge-production discourses?

00;32;07;18 - 00;32;17;22
Speaker 2
The fact that the work is set apart in this way, in its aboutnesses, does it become so abstracted that it is hard to access what it might be called at all? I don't know if that makes sense. That might just be weird thought from my own brain.

00;32;27;05 - 00;32;58;15
Speaker 2
So, to quote from the work: 'Time functions differently on the islands. Sometimes it feels like an island and sometimes not at all.' Later, in the same piece: 'Islands are seductive spaces to think about the disruptions of time.' So my question is, is it about disrupting time or about a kind of timbre? And I really like that word, because it's something that speaks to tonality rather than a fixedness.

00;32;58;15 - 00;33;45;20
Speaker 2
So when we speak about time or space, there's an association of fixed ideas; whereas timbre speaks about something a little bit untouchable, ephemeral.

And then, a last thing … Some of these things were not actually from this text, but some of the larger pieces that you sent us. I noted that it is interesting in the cinematic and aesthetic composition of the work, I wonder about whether there is enough done to tie together the ideological rhythms of the disrupted time/space, of or in or on the island. The people of the island with their various oceanic and other histories, as well as the notion of any space, in a purely aesthetic composition ...

00;34;11;03 - 00;34;37;29
Speaker 2
Tying those three things together. They are the ideological rhythms from distracted time in space, specifically in the context of the island; the people of the island who I'm saying I feel [are] absent, even though one can feel them, they are absent. And I'm not saying you must populate [it] with characters, but I mean, there's something [there] for me.

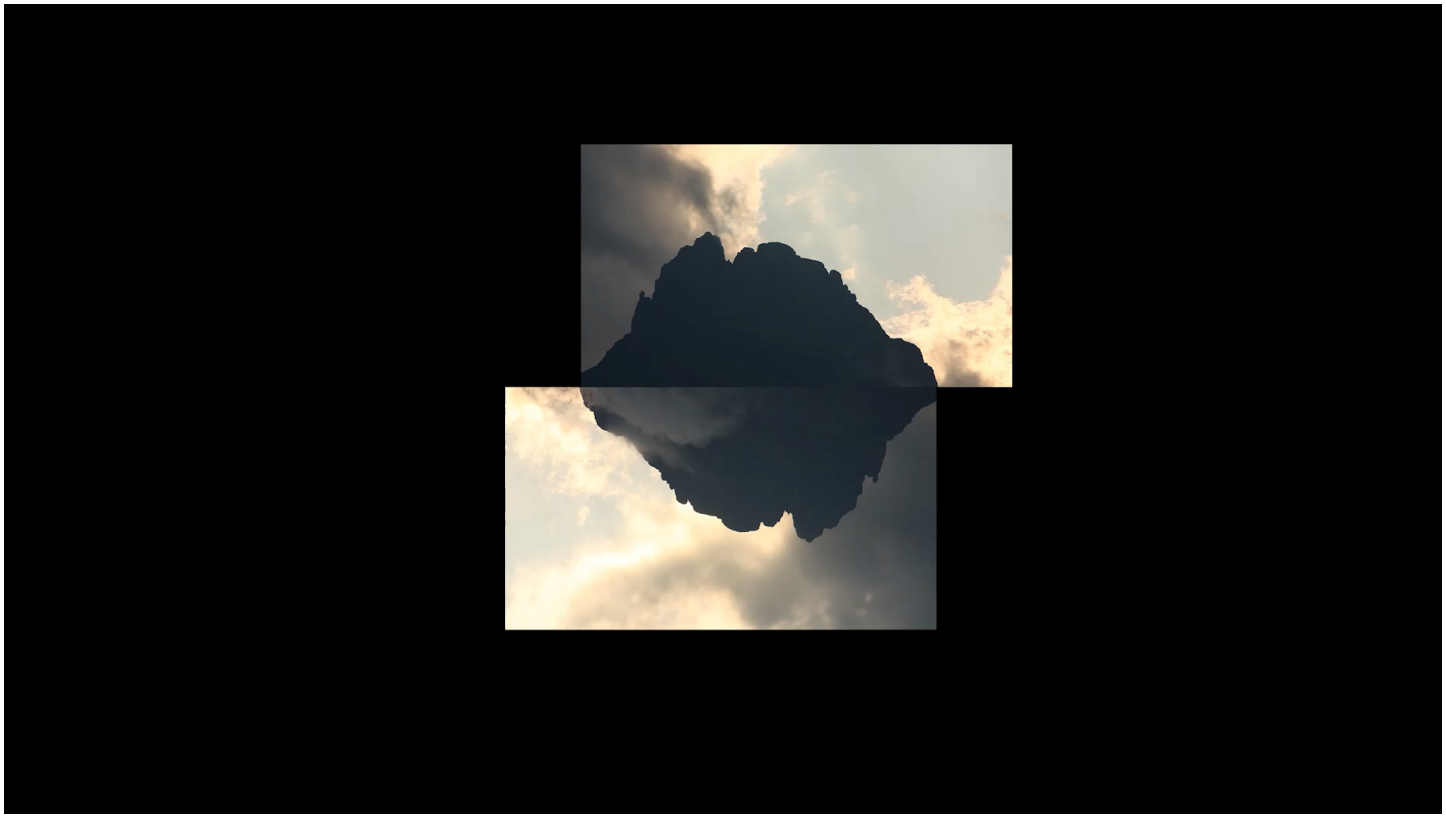
00;34;37;29 - 00;34;59;15
Speaker 2
Something eerie. And I think that's something interesting, but I think it is something that needs to come through as an interesting mechanism – as a choice in the work and study, [not] only in the PhD work.

00;35;00;19 - 00;35;24;01
Speaker 2
And then I had a few questions: How is affect rendered a valuable theoretical and methodological practice in this work? I think that's a very big question, because I think that you will have many answers for different chapters. And I also think that the creative work, that we are sitting in now, does [and] will yield different answers.

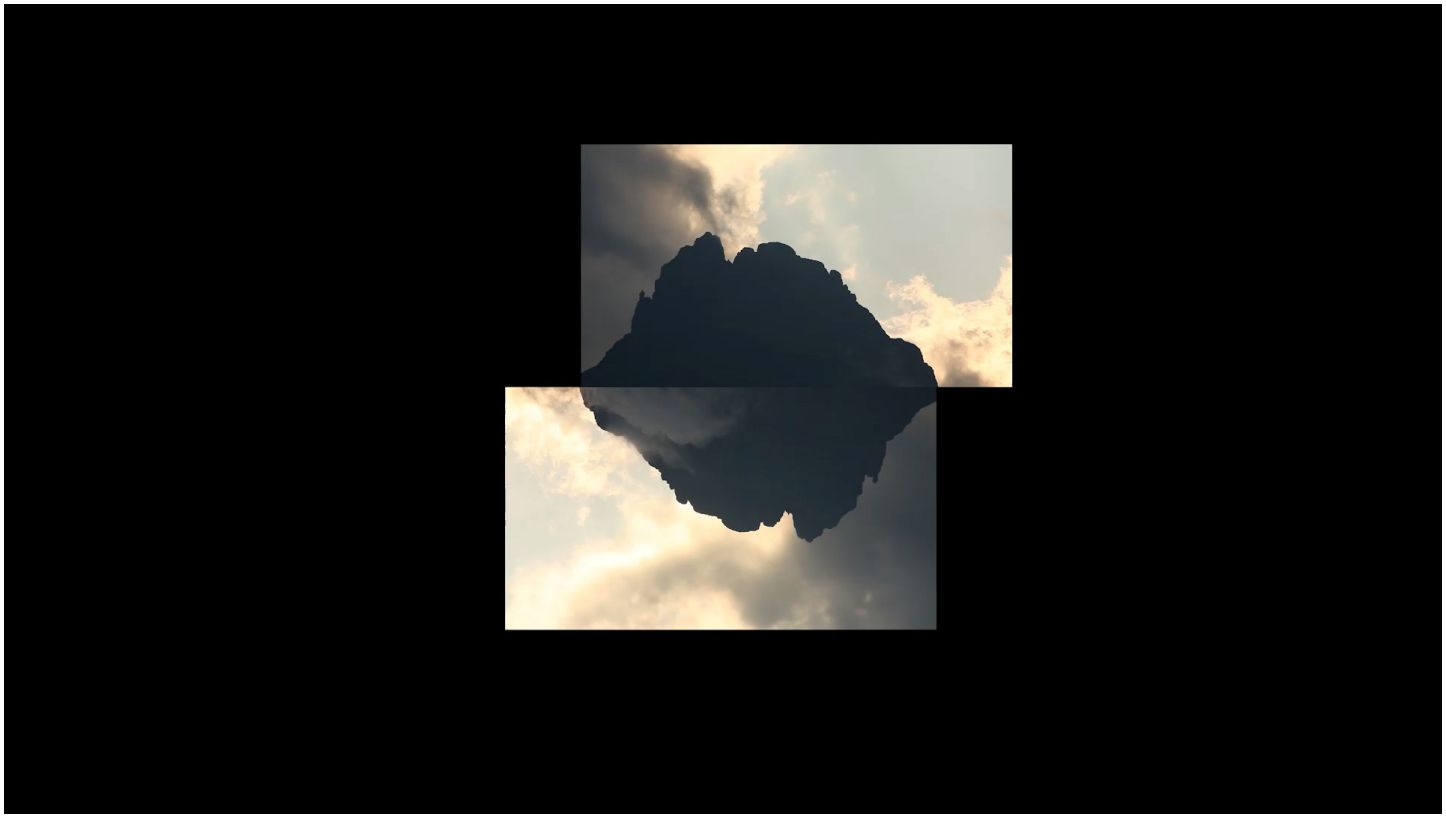
00;35;24;17 - 00;35;28;09
Speaker 2
And then I'd ask you, which I think is kind of a provocation, but I'll go with it: What if you just enjoy the discussion of the work in the PhD? And what if in doing the work, you were already making an intervention without having to say that you do, you know what I mean? I feel like at the moment there are two different things going on.

00;35;56;00 - 00;36;27;24
Speaker 2
There's stuff around. This is part of an interventionist practice, partly because it is part practical, part theoretical. There's are a number of theoretical interventions you clearly wish to make. And I think that if you enjoyed that second part, you would be making those interventions anyway. But maybe that is just for the journal article that it comes across that way, that could be spoken about.

00;36;27;25 - 00;36;35;13
Speaker 2
But is it possible to position the work more acutely, and to perhaps locate some of the aboutnesses or some of the aboutness? And to name some of it? I don't know if that makes any sense. So my question around that is, does this help to register a kind of legibility that is so loaded and complex, but clear to you and also to your reader or whoever. And I'm just thinking about the school examination. I'm speaking about this as a work that will develop into your monograph or whatever comes next. And so, I'm interested in the why – what is happening here and what it's about?



Zen Marie, *Of Our History*, 2021. Film stills. Drakensberg, South Africa.



Zen Marie, *Of Our History*, 2021. Film stills. Drakensberg, South Africa.

Method and Mode of Analysis

This PhD thesis deviates from traditional academic conventions in the humanities. It does not conventionally deploy historical surveys, textual analysis, discourse analysis and conceptual genealogies to do its work.

The research design includes both conventional and practice-based research methods. Besides the relevance that these questions raise for an ongoing inquiry into how aesthetic, creative or practice-based research functions, and contribute to a changing epistemological (and pedagogical) landscape, I see this 'mixed' theoretical framework and methodological structure to be one that does not relegate the practice to an object of analysis, but takes on and mobilises the forms of questioning and action located at the centre of practice in order to address the question of its critical potential.

This PhD moves between forms of writing and research conventionally regarded as academic postgraduate work, and forms of practice that are more often seen in contemporary art. It is the intention of this thesis that what appear to be two distinct or even diametrically opposed positions of knowledge production, are made to take stock of their perceived intractability as they are brought into proximity with each other. In this sense, the structure, design, methodology, theoretical framework and final form of publishing of the work take seriously its operation as a form of practice-based research in the context of a PhD.

There are many rich debates around practice and theory, research and epistemology that I have drawn upon in designing the research and practice-based process, as well as in analysing the theoretical and aesthetic material.

The space of the studio is a site that implies a methodological point of reference. The studio generates readings, actions, theory and practice. The studio has a crucial relation to the museum and the gallery – it is that space where work is enacted to produce material, ideas or objects for the museum and gallery. The studio exists in advance of or before the museum and gallery.

William Kentridge, in *Six Drawing Lessons* (2014), has contributed much to an examination of the studio as a space for doubt and not knowing, and for exploration and experimentation. Others, Like Brian O'Doherty (2007) and Jens Hoffman (2012) critically engage with the studio in less utopian ways, critiquing the economy of the studio and its relationship to the gallery.

The artist's studio has morphed, following Sarat Maharaj (thinking with Agamben and Deleuze), into a kind of 'any space wherever' that pops up in shapes or forms contingent to the artistic project at hand, in pursuit of what he calls 'xenoepistemics' (Maharaj 2009). The studio has increasingly become dislodged from a physical space, and the atelier now operates in the structure of analogy. It is increasingly common for artists to declare 'my laptop is my studio'.

While the studio is the appropriate place to begin an exploration for the appropriate name of the space that work proceeds from, I will by no means stop here. The analogies of the laboratory, incubator or observatory, like the studio, are also not neutral designations, as they come with conceptual residue that I further develop, think through and shed in this exploration.

While analogies from science, astronomy and medicine can be instructive at times, all carry residual conceptual and operational artefacts from their disciplines that need to be engaged with. For example, the laboratory, while deployed as a loose analogy of a space where experimental work is carried out, carries residual

implications of rationality, sequencing, and a specific kind of ordering. This would be very different to naming the space a factory, for example, which would call upon processes of production and manufacturing, or a workshop, which would allow for a range of hands-on or manual practices and organisations of space and ideas that a laboratory would not. A laboratory pre-empts or prefigures a specific kind of intellectual system or ordering in advance of any work taking place. Similarly, the spatial form of the studio, derived from fine art practice, also needs to be questioned, as it is conventionally figured as a space where work is always in process – incomplete and waiting to be finalised by its exiting into the discursive and economic field of the gallery. This final push of 'completion' triggers a range of art-critical and commercial mechanisms that operate in a way that is by now quite familiar.

This questioning of the appropriate site for the work to occupy is importantly one of method, as well as a concern for theoretical framing that is pivotal to the project. The function and naming of this space will be deliberately left open, and a key part of the work of the research is to question the analogous forms that are brought to bear in the construction and design of such interdisciplinary spaces.

There is substantial literature on this subject, as already mentioned. The studio is displaced and critiqued in this literature as a particular construction of high modernism, and includes critiques of the commercialisation or rarefication of the art object that run more or less parallel and in line with new politicised forms of art practice.

In developing the name, structure and aim of the site for working, it is necessary to amplify the aspects that are useful, and to dispel aspects that are not, from the series of related forms that we could possibly rely on. In fact, none of these terms in themselves are fully sufficient, as the analogy sometimes never goes far enough, or at other times goes too far.

In this way, the studio, in its normative form, gives way to a more fluid and productive focus on *Site*, which is foregrounded not only as the conceptual framing but also a cornerstone for the methodology of the practice. This methodology is deeply tied to the idea of the studio as a space for speculation and flux.

My methodology is a hybrid construction drawn from Cultural Analysis and Fine Art practice. But the arrangement is never balanced, and I go through passages of focusing more on one proficiency at times and having to push the other to the background – in the background but never silent – as I unavoidably draw on all of these proficiencies (implicitly), regardless of the emphasis at any given time.

These distinct forms of practice have very different outputs. Or, to put it another way, are articulated from the perspective of method: they have very different processes, and conventions of ordering process, such that there is a different set of possibilities that these processes prefigure, if not predetermine.

Flagging these forms of practice as undergirding frameworks for the methodology at work in this PhD, is important, as they are the forms of practice that I bring to this work. They are not simply methods but *sites* for constant and rigorous interrogation and critical reflection.

And as such, to take them seriously as sites, the critical way I aspire to organise my daily practice needs to be opened up to critical exploration. The space that this PhD offers is a challenge to that process. In many ways, this critical exploration is relegated or restricted to this section on method, but necessarily reappears in moments where I consider the underlying or overarching theoretical concerns.

No-How

I'm not a minister
I'm not a philosopher
I'm not a politician
I'm in another category

Sun Ra, date unknown

The search for an appropriate methodology, literature review, mode of analysis, and space for working as well as dissemination in the visual arts, is a process that has multiple contingencies. In this process, site, medium, mode of address, coordinates of time and space, bodies, eyes and ears, lighting, acoustics, etc. are all crucial and integral to the production of meaning in ways that exceed the debate around form versus content.

As Chus Martinez (2012) asserts in *How a Tadpole Becomes a Frog. Belated Aesthetics, Politics, and Animated Matter: Toward a Theory of Artistic Research*[24]

This exercise of accepting the riddle of ambiguity, the constant alteration of the relations between matter and words, time and meaning, defines a research manner that calls for a radical reconsideration of the role of language, of straightforward conceptions of how things interact, as well as the inventory of monologues produced by serious forms of meaning (Martinez 2012: 46).

Martinez expands on this provocation to carve out the 'maybe' as a non-concept that is intended to introduce difference into the relations that define knowledge (ibid). In this way, Martinez seeks to estrange art from the capture of rationality, coherence and institutionalisation. She seeks to rescue forms of action, reflection, objects and events from an entrapment and ossification within language. The correlation, relationship or mapping of pathways between objects, images, actions or performances and written text is a precarious and often biased one – biased on the side of the written text, overriding or dominating the relationship, dictating terms and setting agendas.

To take this complex relationship seriously, I will attempt not to overburden or overdetermine this aspect of the project with too many prescriptive or prefigurative words. Its meaning needs to emerge out of the context of the project as framed thus far, and in the spirit of Sarat Maharaj's xenoepistemics – a foreign, nameless non-knowledge of no-how (rather than know-how). A space that Maharaj (2009) describes, following Deleuze and Agamben, as 'any space whatever'. No-how, or xenoepistemic and practice-based research, in the way that Maharaj proposes it, is productively read alongside Édouard Glissant's call for opacity.

24. This text was one of the introductory essays to *The Book of Books*, part one of three published accompaniments to documenta 13.

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SUGAR-FREE>>>PUNGWE A MOVEMENT IN FIVE-PART DISHARMONY[25]

Your silence will not protect you.
Audre Lorde, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,* 1977

PART ONE: EXCITABLE SUBSTANCES

Nous nous battrons pour que
la liberté ne soit plus
un mot beurré à la sardine.

Together we shall fight
until freedom is no longer
a word buttered with sardines.

Sony Labou Tansi, *The Shameful State*, 1981

The quest for stimulation, for some form of ecstatic release is ingrained as a fundamental compulsion desire in the bipedal organism called homo sapien sapien. The drive to rapture, to transcendental or metaphysical soaring can be found at the base of all religions. The pushing of the body, spirit, psyche and soul to the extreme limits of its capabilities, is a feature of all forms of drug taking. While this search for the miraculous, for the divine or for ecstasy sometimes results in epiphany or nirvana, it also has the potential of an irrevocable launch beyond the physical conscious realm and precipitates a fall into the abyss of the void. The risks in such a cosmic game are real. The rewards of eternity, omniscience and omnipotence are alluring, seductive and compelling. And the thrill of this play with mind, body and soul is in many ways unavoidable.

Every society has had to approach the task of how to either inhibit or amplify these drives. Various systems of cultural or political orders have built their power on the ability to control and administer the fabric of this compulsion to transcendence. From Shaman to Imam, from Priest to Rabbi, the CEO now reigns supreme in the control of how the search for the metaphysical sublime is packaged into manageable neat and convenient bite-sized bits that mimic the obsession/compulsion for thrill.

That humans rely on external fixes to their inherent metaphysical compulsions is not new. We have long ago found in a range of potent roots, plants, minerals or other elements a range of externalised catalysts for tweaking our chakras, chi's or pranas. That the history of colonialism is tied to the control and administration of substances that excite our senses is not coincidental.

From benign substances like sugar, various spices or coffee, to the more flagrantly intoxicating poppy and cocoa with all their alluring derivatives, the establishment and commodification of trade routes was in order to administer these goods to supplicate insatiable populations in order to pacify, placate and neutralise but also to fix the point of transcendence and ecstatic rapture in a way that is predetermined and profitable.

Sugar-Free locates itself at this precise juncture. It plays at the interstices of corporeal desire, transcendental ecstasy, and outright commodification and subjectification in order to find the moment and the place in the eye of the storm, at the centre or the root of the fractal in the depths of depravity within the capitalist beast, in a posture that insists on radical thought, action and being.

PART TWO: HISTORY IS NOT A STRAIGHT LINE

History is written by the victors – the occident writes global history and writes out other histories. There is

25. This text was written as a manifesto for a series of collaborative actions with Memory Biwa, Robert Machiri and Dimitri Madimin.

no straight line of history. It is not teleological – genealogies are bullshit. In charting the history of the world, contemporary power is antagonistic to ancient history. We feel in real terms the might of empires that push and pull, that play and insult our lives in the present. Do we get angry enough to do something? We see and hear the atrocities that ensue. Constantly. Unrelentingly.

But do we understand? We witness fascism rise. But continue as if normal. If this is the disdain and cynicism with which we approach the present, how dare we engage with the past?

The British Empire has long fallen. But the allure of the ambition of its global conquest lingers on in vagaries of North American Imperialism alchemically modulated into late capitalism's free market. Willing buyers need willing sellers, yes. But we know the price to be paid for impetuous unwillingness.

> *I try to swim every damn day I can, and I've learned to scuba dive and snorkel.*
>
> Nina Simone, 1977[26]

Older empires like those of the Dutch, the Portuguese or the Spanish seemingly rendered impotent by the march of time and the burnishing effects of antiquity, negate the blood lust that sustained the profit and plunder that their specific forms of racial supremacy dictated. A return to the flesh of the corpse of the colonial empire is a practice of exhumation. It is to dig again and to sift through the remains of vile and decrepit arrogance's and vanities. Bring out our dead.

But please, let us be clear. This exhumation must be defended against retrogressive tendencies that wallow in defeatist self-annihilation. No. The function, operation and purpose of dismembering the cadaver of colonialism is only in order to exorcise the demons that haunt new orbits of power. It is to flush out and purge the toxic residue that history insinuates only in order to search in utterly and flagrantly utopian ways for that which lies outside of history. This is an attempt at immersion into the abyss that exists before, after, inside and around the certainty and security of the historical.

PART THREE: THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY

> *I never wanted to be a part of planet Earth, but I am compelled to be here, so anything I do for this planet is because the Master-Creator of the Universe is making me do it. I am of another dimension. I am on this planet because people need me.*
>
> Sun Ra

The difference between representation and performativity is an important one. To attempt to devise an image of something to construct an approximation by virtue of a series of proxies is at the heart of the project of mimesis. This is to find a way to show the thing, when the thing itself is impossible to stand in front of. When the thing itself is absent. Painting, at one point in its history, attempted to strive towards this function of mimesis. Photography emerged in order to stake a claim of such intense high fidelity of mimesis that painting (quite wisely) moved on to more abstracted concerns. These attempts to re-produce, to present the thing when the thing is absent, is a process of re-presentation. However, we know that this presentation (again) is fraught with the pitfalls of multiple discrepancies. Even digital high-definition photography cannot claim to present again with 100% fidelity.

There are always gaps, glitches, short sights, oversights, errors of parallax, falsities of interpolation,

26. From an interview with Allison Powell, '*You Al Capone, I'm Nina Simone*', online: http://boscarol.com/ninasimone/pages/nina/interviews/interview1997.html.

distortions and so on and so forth that mediate between the original and the imago – the image of representation. And this, even before we get to the role of ideology.

I approach the map through this issue of representation, because the map is supremely a representational schematic.

Through functions of scale and graphic codes, it establishes and orders specific relations to the thing, and that which allows us to view the thing in its absence.

In this way we can loosely talk of mapping as a conceptual schema that operates to allow access and knowledge about a thing via its proxy. But radical experimental cartographic practice is limited, even as it makes clear its reliance on subjective positioning, and it being a function of numerous distortions. A map, on the other hand – a real map as opposed to a conceptual schematic– a map of a place, of a territory or a route, does something quite different as it neutralises subjectivity and distortion to masquerade as a function of total vision and knowledge.

It will be clear to the reader here that the map can operate in the absence of the thing, but also importantly exists in the obliterating and overwhelming presence of the thing – when you are engulfed, swallowed or immersed in the thing, the map is the life raft that allows and makes possible an over-determination/domination of the thing. In this way the conventional map drives towards a god's eye view of the place you stand. Your physical body, freed of corporeal limits, your biological eye exploded by way of scalar projections. You are allowed to see yourself in some kind of carto-cartesian-Google-drone-omnipotent out-of-body experience/projection.

Except that we don't have to almost die each time we spin the sphere on Google Earth.

Is it a facile jump here, to assert the platitude that all maps are political? To once again be that guy who stands up and shouts: Maps are ideological! They are not neutral! they are blueprints of representation/oppression!!! We do not need to be down with conspiracy theories to know that the drone in the sky is watching you. Even though this drone's power is impotent, paltry and weak compared to the potency of your own ability to watch yourself. We truly are our own worst enemies.

PART FOUR: THERE IS NO POST IN THE COLONY

> *I'm gonna put a curse on you and all your kids will be born completely naked.*
>
> Jimi Hendrix

The prefix 'post', indicating after or beyond, is routinely slapped onto words/concepts that often command immense and totalising power. It is a wilful marker for a desire of termination, an invocation of the end.

A putting to bed of disastrous energy and ideology. Let's kill the beast by linguistically or grammatically signalling its closure. Modernism, structuralism, colonialism ... maintain their perverse hegemony precisely because we have posts to mark the remains of their rotting corpses. Tombstones sometimes serve as obstacles to access and interrogation.

They stand erect, making any exhumation impossible.
No, let us tear down these posts and dig up our dead. Let us take morose delight in the unhygienic operations that ensue in a desperate devouring of unrecognisable cadavers.

The thrill is not gone. It just needs to be lubricated, resuscitated and stroked into plain sight so that it can be seen, and when made visible we can challenge and contest from a ground more stable.
The "Global South" and the other euphemisms, fictions, desires, and cliches that come to infantilise Africa, Latin America, and Asia etc.

still remain. More so the ownership of minds and bodies in explicit and overt or implicit and closeted ways persists. Slavery and genocide exist. And I mean to say that they exist in a deadly serious and literal sense. But this is not all. Slavery and genocide exist also in insidious ways couched in politically correct phrases. What is postcolonialism when empires still rule, but by different means?

PART 5. MUSIC IS THE WEAPON

> *Time, time for some, time for some action ... just.*
> *Time, time for some, time for some action ... just.*
> *Time, time for some, time for some action ... just.*
> Erick Sermon & Redman, 1992

Fela Anikulapo Kuti's famous saying "music is the weapon of the future", taken up by our comrades at Chimurenga, simply as 'Music Is The Weapon" (2022), and soon to be fucked up by Major Lazer in their upcoming album, this phrase is where we would like to take your leave.

It is where we will leave you as we attempt to extricate ourselves from the potential of nihilism that lays in wait like the spectral shadow of reason and analytics.

The perceived futility of the current predicament of global fuckery is immense. We believe that Fela is correct as he attempts to show us the way towards the light.

Like the glittering Nigerian Jesus that this modern-day-messiah-meets-dancing-shiva creates and destroys the world over and over in endless repetitions and cycles of cosmic turbulence.

The beat will continue as the rhythm finally gets you.

We arrive here, at the very end, at the place that more accurately should (not) be described as the beginning. Ecstasy, desire, rapture transcendence. Metaphysical bliss as the body and mind become one with the universe.

What else is there left to say, except to remind you too to quietly
go fuck yourself and to make sure never to swallow your spit out of politeness.

Sugar free



Zen Marie, *Shadow Palm*, 2018. Charcoal on Fabriano paper, 1.5 x 6m, installation view at fem of colour. Johannesburg, South Africa.

Transcripts from public discussion at TPO: Part Two[27]

00;38;22;20 - 00;39;14;25
Speaker 3
It's so interesting that the things I'm wanting to focus on really pick up exactly where you left off, and maybe the place I'd like to start is to consider those last couple of questions that, Dee, you raised, in terms of how does it create theoretical interventions, and where does the work exist in relation to traditionally perceived text? And so maybe my starting point would be to interrogate the nature of text, and specifically in a creative PhD, or any creative endeavour, and it's something which you raise very strongly right at the beginning, Zen, in terms of the type of dialectic that supposedly exists between the content and theory and the creative practice. So, in challenging that, which I think for me is a fundamental act not just of how we think through the nature of ideas, where they exist, what realms do they exist in? Do they exist only in written form? Do they exist in a space that is dedicated to their referral to an audience who has to listen, take it in, and believe.

00;40;36;16 - 00;40;46;12
Speaker 3
Or is the nature of text, or the rethinking of the nature of text, something that starts to address a decolonised space, a decolonised pedagogy or disruption, and maybe an explosion of what we've understood to be the nature of where theory and where content lie – content being that which can be accounted for as something traditionally outside what you've defined as 'the work'. So my first provocation would probably be to insist that in thinking about what is written, the nature of writing – or let's rather call it something more broadly, the nature of the text – is considered in a far more fluid scope of its possibilities. And that, for me, apart from the written text that you distributed to us, this space, for me, is both an encompassing, immersive text that we're engaging with, as well as a compilation of specific texts that you brought together.

00;42;21;10 - 00;42;25;07
Speaker 3
And Dee, if you were talking about the palimpsestic notion of how this plays out, I think that there is so much, it's almost like a type of quantum engagement that we can start thinking through in terms of the nature of text, because just in terms of the film behind us, here we have something that is a construction and a curation, and a bringing together of visual images as a type of essay, which is, in my mind, text.

00;43;05;25 - 00;43;17;14
Speaker 3
It has a soundtrack that is spoken word, which is text. It has an English transcription of the spoken word, which is text. And then of course there are all the other things that you have made us aware of in your introduction to the written text that you distributed, which is the constructness of how we perceive and how we read, and that there is never a consistency in what we receive and understand of what it is that we both respond to and are acquiring as intended information.

00;44;02;19 - 00;44;04;06
Speaker 3
So maybe I should just go to some of my points and ground it a little. So what constitutes a text? And by extension, then, what constitutes a thesis or dissertation, and what is at stake? And is this partially also intertwined with the nature and the intentions around the work itself, as also a subject and an enactment, that is an act of performative research and content and reasoning, as it were. So a formulation and enactment of a poetics in and of research, which is maybe – and this is picking up also on the questioning of what you imagine the expectations to be of the product of the PhD. Is it in defiance or enhancement of, or decolonisation or explosion of what a PhD product can embody? And also in the face of that temptation, which you reference in the film, and which you reference in the *[Sugar-Free]* manifesto,

00;45;38;19 - 00;45;49;20
which for me is just such an incredibly powerful piece of text and image, and image as text, and one of the things you pick up in that is the longing and the temptation to go somewhere where maybe you shouldn't, and that Maybe it's almost at the precipice towards insurrection. And so I'm not necessarily suggesting that you go for insurrection in terms of how you respond to the imagined product at the end of the PhD, but I would certainly keep encouraging you to disrupt the expectations that I think you hold, as well as the institution as a whole will continue to hold, until it is disrupted with other possibilities brought to the fore.

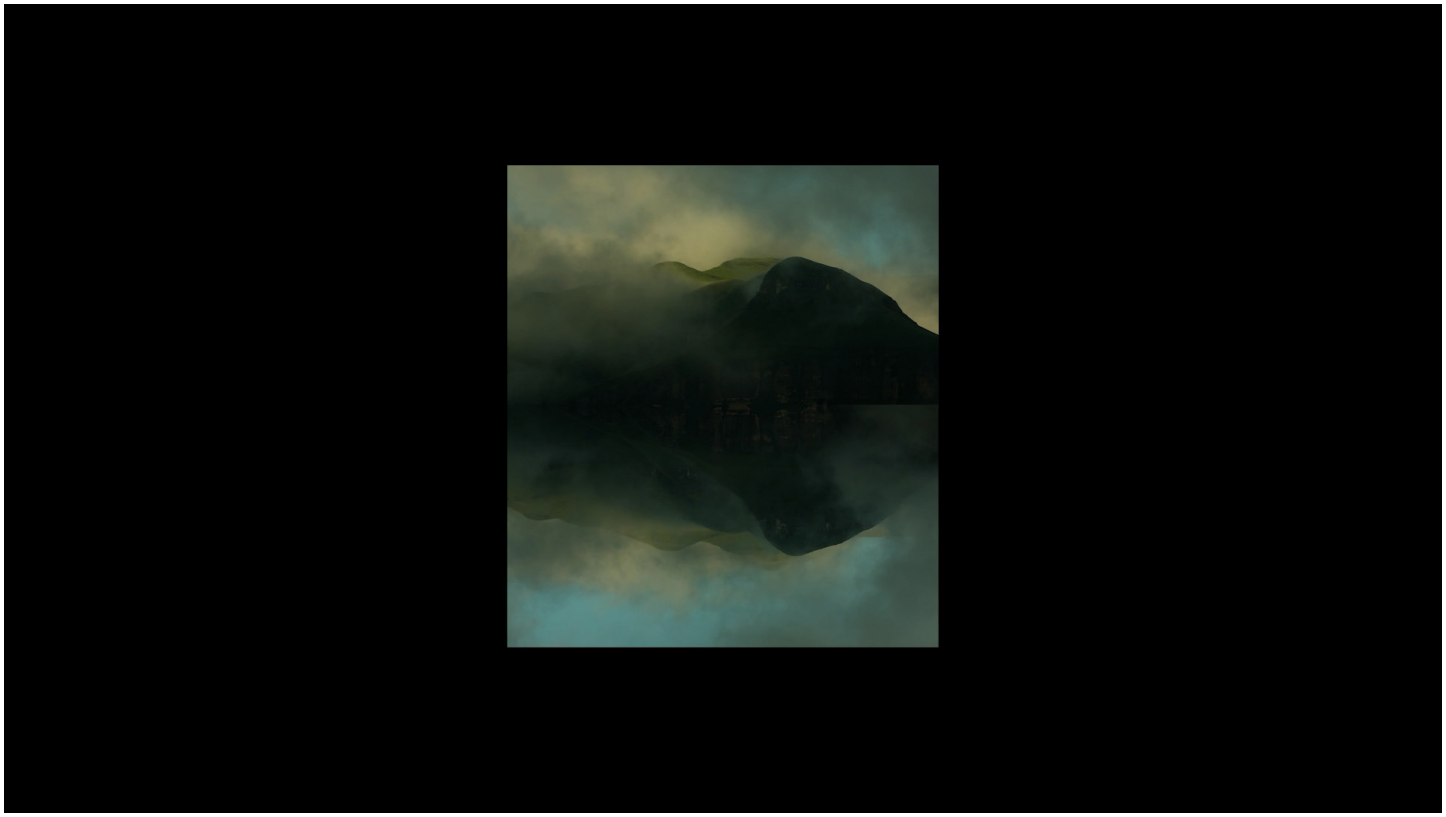
00;46;50;20 - 00;47;12;20
Speaker 3
So that's something about text. And in fact, in your notes surrounding the journal article, you've said that 'Textuality has been expanded in ways that allow for an understanding of multiple objects, or even events and persons as texts, least of all due to the fact that they can be *read*.'

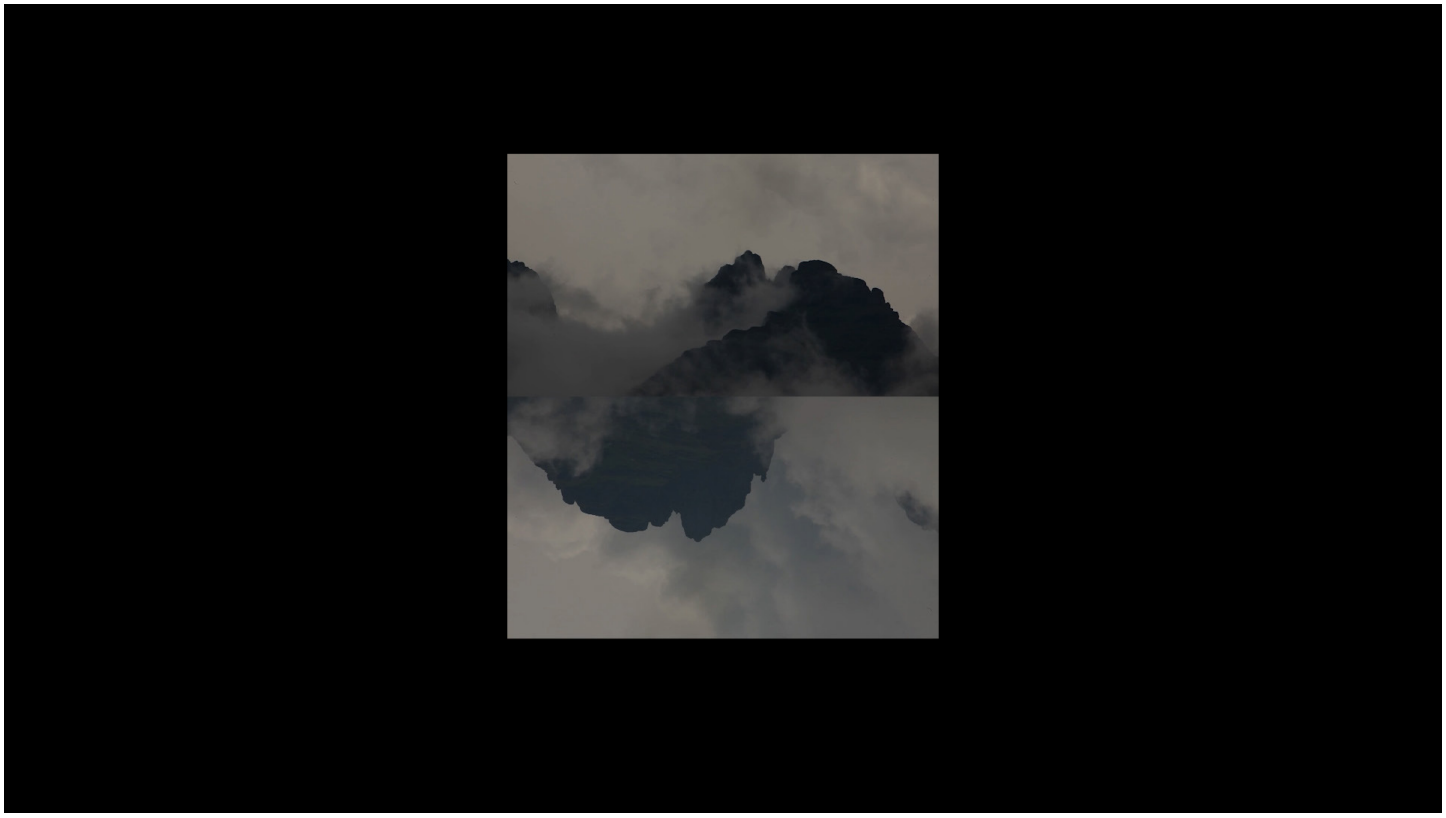
27. The following text is a transcript from a public talk on the second installation of *Ile Aux Serpents,* at the exhibition space, The Point of Order, on Thursday 26th September 2019 at 18:00. The Respondents were Dee Marco and Tracy Murinik and the chair was Natasha Himmelman. These transcripts were generated into text via an AI transcriber from Adobe Premiere, and the text bears the scars of this translation.

00;47;18;03 - 00;47;41;17
Speaker 3
And I think that's absolutely intrinsic to the notion and the expansion of what gets to be engaged with not as an act of generosity around trying to stretch oneself into accommodating other things as text, but as a very specific engagement and acceptance that these things *are* text. And that the theory of it or the description of it does not have to replicate itself outside of the creative act of research becoming evident as new knowledge.

00;47;58;22 - 00;48;41;03
Speaker 3
These things can work together and they can inform one another. But I'd be very sad if there was a separation that was delineated in the way it's ultimately presented. And I think one of the things that also strikes me, and I know that the journal article has kind of preempted the variations of what's come into this space as an installation, but most of these pieces were already here or in production a year ago. The *difference repetition* works, which I'm going to speak to, have come in, and also the four still images on the wall over here are new for me, but I think that what you've left out of your description, for now, is the nature of all of these pieces working together as a text that can be read. And certainly, I would want you, in each following chapter, to go into the specifics of what constitutes that text. So, the separate, individual works can become chapters or paragraphs within the text, but ultimately the space, for me, is enormously successful in terms of how it narrates many ideas, but also deepens many ideas. So there is, for me, a very strong relationship that can be described in relation to the three video works, together with the drawings, together with Danai's [Mupotsa] poem as a very specific text, together with the new works that have come into the space as well, together with the reflections onto the floor, which, in the Newtown space [at fem of colour], I remember just being so overwhelmed and seduced by, but not seduced only by the poetics of the aesthetics of these works, but with the pushing of spatial and theoretical boundaries that had us read even the floors we were sitting on or next to or looking down upon as part of a landscape that we were inserted into, even through imagining. And what is the nature of reading other than inserting ourselves through a process of imagining, anyway? So that's something that I'd also want to push at a bit.

00;51;05;27 - 00;51;28;00
Speaker 3
To get to some of the theoretical things that you've brought in ... And one of the things that you brought up, Dee, was the nature of translatability, which, for me, was absolutely central as well – as much about the more literal translation of idea into words, or language, but also of the translatability of image into words and meaning and vice versa; of metaphor or literal conversion; and then, of course, falling into the immediate trap, which you name, and which many other theorists, and which, of course is echoed by the new works of difference and repetition, for me...





Above and below: Zen Marie, *Of Our History*, 2021, film stills, Drakensberg, South Africa.

vi



Kirsty de Kock, *How do we queer academia, tho???*, 2017, Performance, Apolonia lecture theatre, Wits School of Art, South Africa. In context with student responses from "Ways of Being", third year History of Art course (2018). Image: Abri de Swardt

Theoretical Framework

The initial point of departure for this practice-based research PhD, was to critically engage a concept from contemporary art practice. This concept is not only an abstract theoretical one but denotes a mode of practice that has, since its development, organised work that is disparate and varied.

My thinking was to track this concept back to its first emergence in a contemporary art context, and to then build a critique of its current operation from that point of view. My first speculation was that the ways in which the term 'site-specificity' is used today, is a far cry from the radical operations of institutional critique that its first usage demanded. In doing this work, a few things emerged for me.

Site-specificity, similar to other concepts or modes of practice, such as relational aesthetics, become fashionable through widespread usage, which leads to a kind of instalment of these practices within the very institutions that they sought to critique. But more than this, site-specificity (and relational aesthetics) are concepts that predate the 'coining' of these terms. Substantial bodies of work by radical feminist, queer and non-European artists provide a pre-history of these concepts, as they prioritised, through critique, the import of site, and of relation. They insisted on the weight and loadedness of the site; on its non-neutrality. They further demanded a recognition of the 'soft infrastructure' of people, and the power of the ephemeral or non-material/non-object-based communications and connections.

In fact, like most else that we think of as 'western art', these concepts are seen to be powerful and intrinsic to pretty much anything that starts to resemble organised activity in cultures and societies across the planet and across time. At its core, to acknowledge the import of the space you are in and the relations between yourself and other people, as well as other objects, is imbued in ritual acts of all varieties. This is necessary to flag here, at the outset, as the danger of working within the western episteme is to imagine that these ideas and concepts are exclusive to this episteme. Knowledge production owes its origins in many ways to the Renaissance, and the amnesia of the Renaissance's deep reliance on widely appropriating ideas from non-European cultures – a fact that is little acknowledged, even though it is widely practised.

That function of restorative historiography is an important way to begin. And while my engagement with this aspect will be merely an opening, a gesture to flag the complex genealogy of this concept, I am interested to use this opening as a platform from which to build a critique of the term in its current usage and theorisation.

The mobility and transferability of site-specificity that I wish to follow enables rethinking site, and relationality, in terms of the urgencies for contemporary modes of critical practice in the arts. In this way, my argument is to prioritise fluid, self-reflexive and critically wired practice over and above the seemingly absolute hold that the economy of contemporary art has in its privileging of the sale of objects. The political stake I attach to this project is to ask after the critical potential of contemporary art.

In carrying out a theoretical close reading of the concepts of site-specificity and relational aesthetics, I insist on using those concepts, and the critiques thereof, to frame an engagement with the multiple sites that the work that this PhD

traverses. And in the spirit of self-reflexive meta-criticality, I turn to critique the site of the museum, and the site of the PhD in creative practice.

In this move towards a self-reflexive critique, I draw on the work of Sarat Maharaj and others who question the shape and form of doing creative or practice-based research. Notably, the subject of methodology becomes a crucial area of exploration, as I seek to destabilise the products of both theoretical work and contemporary art practices that aspire to forms of criticality.

Beyond Site and Space: From Site-Specificity to Situated Aesthetics

The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible [...]

Hannah Arendt, 1958

The entire thrust of site-specificity, as is conventionally written, is one that places an integral and fundamental emphasis on contingency and 'locatedness' within sets of spatial, temporal and conceptual coordinates. The practice bears traces of its emergence as a function and operation, perhaps even as a sub-genre, within contemporary art practice.

Even while site-specificity proposes a practical and theoretical framework that is responsive, relational, reflexive and immersed within the micro- and macro-politics that exist each time a site-specific project is proposed, it is important to question the extent to which the mode of practice delivers on its critical potential.

Site-specificity exists as a set of practices and conceptual structures that are malleable and responsive, perhaps even reclusive and soft, as they often work in the background. Certainly, most artists whose work fits into this category of aesthetic practice do not rally under its flag in overt ways. It exists as a kind of anti-genre or, at least, not a genre as we conventionally understand the term.

In the 21st century, site-specific practice begins to work across all forms of contemporary art as a commonly assumed and taken-for-granted position. Reflexivity, contingency and relationality are the norm for most contemporary art projects and are certainly part of any project that aspires to social, cultural or political engagement. In this scenario, it becomes important to re-read this form of practice in order to assess if the explicitly political ambitions within site-specificity are still at work, especially as it becomes generalised into something of a trend.

Miwon Kwon (2002: 1-2) flags some of the complexities at play in *One Place after Another*, a text that has become one of the seminal works on site-specificity:

> [...] the unspecific (miss)uses of the term "site-specific" are yet another instance of how vanguardist, socially conscious, and politically committed art practices always become domesticated by their assimilation into the dominant culture. And this argument would insist that if the aesthetic and political efficacy of site-specific art has become insignificant or innocuous in the recent years, it is because it has been weakened and redirected by institutional or market forces.

Miwon Kwon, Martha Rosler, and others have shown that the radical critical ambition that accompanies site-specificity is diluted once it becomes part of a commercially driven project of city rejuvenation, city branding, gentrification or

urban regeneration. I would go further, to include the forms of site-specific works that return to the gallery or the museum, and seek to do its critical work there. This return of site-specificity to the space of the museum and gallery is often called institutional critique, or has worked under the label of relational aesthetics.

Site-specific work, along with forms of public art and community-based cultural work, have become important and increasingly more common modes of working in contemporary art. This is evidenced in the work of Grant Kester (2004), Claire Bishop (2006, 2012), and Martha Rosler (2013), as well as in the edited volume, *Situation*, by Claire Doherty (2009).

The term site-specificity itself is only one among a range of terms that could be used to describe it. Grant Kester prefers to use the term 'dialogical' in describing such work. He arrives at this term following Mikhail Bakhtin, '[…] who argued that the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation – a locus of meanings, interpretations and points of view' (Kester 2004: 9-10). He continues to usefully outline the broad parameters of such practices in his book *Conversation Pieces*, and flags a cluster of similar practices, such as Littoral art, following the practice of Ian Hunter and Celia Larner, which places import on the 'hybrid or in between' nature of the work, and Relational Aesthetics, following Nicolas Bourriaud, which foregrounds 'communication and exchange'. The list goes on: Tom Finkel Pearle refers to 'dialogue-based art', and Homi Bhabha, through an essay from the *Conversations at the Castle* project in Atlanta in 1998, speaks of 'conversational art' (Kester 2004: 9-10).

Site-specificity as a term is not neutral, while its operational logics are predicated on a contingency. This contingency comes with a symbolic and economic residue that needs to be constantly questioned and negotiated. The site from/upon which site-specificity is carried out, is also an important moment and site, in itself, to be considered and critiqued.

The U.S. or U.K.-based accounts of participatory, socially engaged practice in contemporary art are ambivalent in relation to forms of development or activist thinking and work. It is unclear if such modes of creative activity have any real impact in terms of social, economic or cultural urgencies.

Furthermore, it is unclear how this kind of work is appraised from the perspective of conventional art criticism or the commercial art world. Projects that do not always place emphasis on the final object or product of the artwork, and rather focus on the process, sometimes find themselves at odds with forms of aesthetic critique, especially from the vantage of the commercial art world (Kester, 2004).

In all these cases, the political function of the aesthetic of 'art' is one that needs critical elaboration. Creative practices are often deployed as thinly veiled methods of gentrification or reductively instrumentalised as colourful background. Or, even worse, they are insinuated to add a veneer of critical or participatory practice into processes that are clearly driven by top-down interests in service of artists' egos, big capital, property developers or city-manager agendas.

This dissatisfaction with the term 'site-specificity' is in line with concerns shared by a number of other theorists who question the centrality of place within conceptions of site. For example, Ruth Simbao (2016) proposes 'site-situational' as a preference over 'site-specificity':

> While place falls prey to Western, modernist stereotypes of closed, territorial geographic systems, site-situational readings, radical forms of 'recognition' and ambulatory hermeneutics enable an understanding of place as a wandering signifier, a trickster figure, and an in-the-moment conversation between environments and living beings. (Simbao, 2016)

While Simbao discards 'specificity' in favour of 'situational', she still retains 'site' as integral to the equation. Simbao alludes to the use of situated practice as it emerges within debates around environmental management (EM), and in terms of thinking through systems or ecologies. Ingmar Lippert, Franz Krause and Niklas Hartmann state that:

> We identify the limits of understanding EM though the framework of ecological modernisation and show how political ecology and work-place studies provide important departures towards a more critical approach. Developing these further, into a cosmopolitical direction, we propose studying EM as sets of socially and materially situated practices. (Lippert et al. 2015)

This form of systems thinking that I will draw on from environmental management, presents tantalising figures of the 'cosomopolitical' for thinking through systems outside of a purely human-centric register. This line of thought, via an environmental systems approach, can be seen within 'dynamic systems theory' and 'situated cognition'. As Ingar Brinck (2007) expands:

> While human agents reconstruct the environment to enhance the ways in which it supports their activities, the environment in turn structures human behaviour by providing the necessary scaffolding for performing physically, socially, and culturally defined acts. Artistic creativity and aesthetic experience equally result from the dynamic interplay between agent and context. This fact allows for artist and viewer to relate to particular artworks in similar ways, given that those of their cognitive processes that concern art emerge from resources found in the shared environment. (Brinck, 2007)

In this way, not only is the site or location problematised and unsettled as being fixed, but again we are asked to rethink the roles of the artist and the audience. These forms of situational or situated considerations of aesthetics in relation to the environment or ecology in which it exists, present in relation to concepts of writing and authorship by Roland Barthes (1967, 1977), as well as in terms of the concept of the aura by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 2008). What is critically at stake here is a search for forms of site-specificity that are fluid, dynamic, and can respond to a multiplicity of contingencies, meanings, spaces and times. Importantly, for my purposes here, this is a site-specificity that can be extended as an institutional critique of the sites of power that invest site-specific work with their grounds of possibility.

I propose that site-specificity and its potential challenge or critical intervention into a field of social, economic and political contingencies, is a significant area of study in ways that are not only restricted to the field of contemporary art or the history of art. What is at stake are broader questions of the role of culture within

the realities of city making, urban planning, as well as cultural, social and economic activism more broadly.

Site-specificity, as a discrete concept in the episteme of western art, is usually tracked back to the 1960s, in minimalist art (Kaye 2000: 2):

> … here minimalism's site specificity can be said to begin in sculpture, yet reveal itself in performance, a move which calls into question its formal as well as spatial location. (Kaye, 2000: 3)

If site-specificity, following Nick Kaye and others, is ultimately about locating the viewer or audience – or even the 'self-conscious' location of the viewer or the audience, a few questions become pertinent to ask. The first would relate to the object: What kinds of objects are potentially efficacious in this process? Do they need to be objects in the physical sense? Or can they extend to conceptual, ephemeral, or even non-material objects? Who is the maker of these objects? How would the coordinates of authorship be mapped across this object's history? How does the process of making these objects come into play?

What about the viewer? Do we have to refine, redefine or extend the idea of a viewer here? Is the viewer some kind of participant or even, potentially, a co-author? What of the space? What happens when space gives way to site? How does the locatedness of location come to play within this range of concepts?

Speculations to answers of many of these questions can be found in the history of western art. Yet they clearly exist in radical ways in epistemes outside of the west. In societies not dominated by the radical division of labour, where demarcations between functions of law, medicine and aesthetics are not distributed across separated institutional and professional administrations, there are important moments of reading what has emerged as site-specificity. What is at stake here is to read site-specificity beyond the 1960s, beyond a narrowly defined and reproduced avant-garde, and to push it beyond the western episteme.

Even if one were to restrict oneself to the western episteme, certainly the deployment of image and objects (paintings and sculptures) in the liturgies of the Renaissance, indicate a set of time- and space- (site) specific gestures, actions or even performances. But this can be extended.

The shaman, the sangoma or priest invoke and insist on forms of ritual that are deeply embedded within logics of space, place, location and site. There is a lot that can be gained from opening up the neat delineations of how site-specificity is defined exclusively within the western episteme. The challenge here would be to ask after a new form of art history – an art history that can find a new aesthetic language that draws on what, until now, has been an uncritical and problematic reliance on the anthropological, but exceeds these discursive constraints as well. This will be to push an aesthetic concept to an interaction across and between disciplines, such that the full richness of the flavours of multiple times and multiple epistemes can be appreciated at once and in a complexity that embraces singularity and paradox.

Queering Site: Ahmed, Affect and Anchorage

Arrival
Proximity
Orientation

So even when tables appear, they only seem to do so as background features of a landscape, which is full of many other half-glimpsed objects.

Sara Ahmed, 2006, p. 4

In re-orientating phenomenology, as part of a project to more fully push critique into encounters with forms that are its other, Sara Ahmed begins with the table of the philosopher – the table at which the enlightened subject of philosophy sits, and the object within which this body is intertwined in the act of producing meaning about the world. The table exists here as a device from which to approach that which is beyond the table. It is more than the wood and joints that make its physical form. It is, in many ways, an apparatus or *dispositif* (following Agamben and Foucault) that is bound with the project of theory and critique, via the mediation of text. The hermeneutics of text – and the acts of writing and reading, are the forms that Edmund Husserl invokes when summoning up the table: the table of the philosopher.

Ahmed's invocation of the table begins with Husserl, but the emphasis is thrown beyond the table to the 'half-glimpsed' objects in a landscape where the table is only merely a background feature. The necessity of this 'relegation' of the table, or the invisibilisation or 'disappearing' of the table, which I am here proposing as a dispositif in an attempt to think about both theoretical analysis or critique, is one that Ahmed suggests is part of a 'return to the object'.

Theory is not made apparent or foregrounded as an important mixture in the complexities of how objects are constituted. This, in effect, naturalises theory, via its invisibility, as an unquestioned set of precepts, propositions and protocols that can simply be applied to an object. Ahmed uses this point of questioning, of pushing against a kind of phenomenology, as her point of departure.

Ahmed's strategy is twofold: on the one hand it is to find in phenomenology moments of disorientation that, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, involve not only 'the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of dizziness and nausea, which is the awareness of our contingency, and the horror with which it fills us' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 296, in Ahmed 2006: 4).

This work of reading disorientation, or of queering phenomenology at the centre, is important, and more so because it is enacted alongside the project of queering phenomenology in the second manner in which she proposes it, through a different set of orientations:

> […] I bring the table to "the front" of the writing in part to show how "what" we think "from" is an orientation device. By bringing what is "behind" to the front, we might queer phenomenology by creating a new angle, in part by reading for the angle of the writing, in the "what" that appears. To queer phenomenology is to offer a different "slant" to the concept of orientation itself. (Ahmed, 2006: 4)

In this way, at the core of Ahmed's intervention, is to think carefully and take seriously the points of departure, of first contact, not only with the objects of scholarly study, which I propose we can extend beyond phenomenology to include philosophy, critique and theory as well, but through underscoring of how precepts, a priori figures, forms or methods and modes of doing the work of producing meaning, *have a meaning*.

The bringing to the front of both the body of the writer and the technology/techne of writing, is the making visible of a dispositif or apparatus in the sense in which Agamben explores this idea through Foucault. And it is by way of elaborating through this figure of the dispositif/apparatus that I wish to push towards an engagement with and rethinking (or reorientation) of the role and function of critique as an occupation that has taken for granted text and writing as one-dimensional, a priori and unquestioned.

This is a reading of Ahmed, Agambem, Foucault and Butler, in order to ask more deliberately how forms of writing critique or theory – that are not exclusively or narrowly defined as, or assumed to begin from, the point of departure of reading and writing in conventional ways. This is, in a sense, to ask after forms of writing and reading that do not begin, in the first instance, with the apparatus of the table.

In these queer, other, or even deviant forms of theorisation, the point of departure can be considered through multiple other forms, that in themselves are important devices, dispositifs or apparatuses. The artist's studio, the canvas, the photographic lens, or the editing suite; these are assemblages of spaces and practices that, in similar ways to the philosopher's table, are put into the background in order to illuminate the ostensible focus or subject/object of representation or inquiry.

In the case of the filmic or photographic image, this can be thought through as a privileging of the capture of the person, object or event via the apparatus of the camera, and its naturalisation through invisibilisation of both the camera and the processes leading up to the capture of the image.

In many ways, this is a prioritisation of product (aesthetic) over process. The relational negotiations and encounters that come to determine the manufacture or production of images, along with the technical supports, and numerous spaces of both production and dissemination – the entire accumulation of these, in fact – constitutes assemblies or assemblages of apparatus/dispositif combinations that, I argue, are not dissimilar to the way in which theory, critique or philosophy are constituted.

In this sense, both theory and practice are rife with ideology and politics that are performatively (re)produced through assemblages of dispositifs that manifest or congeal in various supplementary or posterior objects. To call these objects that appear after the fact, as it were, *texts*, is not a stretch. Textuality has been expanded in ways that allow for an understanding of multiple objects, or even events and persons as texts, least of all due to the fact that they can be *read*. It perhaps asks a bit more of the reader if I were to insist that, if these multiple texts can in fact be *read*, then surely we have to accept that they must all be *written* in some fundamental fashion.

What I am asking for here, is that we accept that there exist as many ways of writing as there are texts. Each one, as in the case of the table, suggests a contingent and profound approach to producing meaning. The implications of this are vital. The insistence of this PhD course of research is that the practice, or the work

and the theory, does not exist as bifurcated halves. Neither should they operate according to case study/theory relationships as per the social sciences.

The modes of thinking text/theory in relation to art object, that comes from conventional forms of art history, is also treated with suspicion. The insistence here is that the *sites* of departure, the dispositifs that in fact produce the *spaces* that allow interactions between object, idea, concept and subject, are crucial to foreground in the manner that Ahmed proposes, such that our orientations towards the cinematic or the installation, the written and rational, are all engaged within a manner that asks for disorientation, and that does not attempt to assuage fears of overlap, messiness or confusion. For, in the moments of disorientation, there are perhaps the bits and pieces that can allow for a pushing beyond, into spaces that are not governed by hostile and oppressive ideologies.

> But if we stay with such moments then we might achieve a different orientation toward them; such moments may be the source of vitality as well as giddiness. We may even find joy and excitement in the horror. (Ahmed, 2006: 4)

What is more difficult to sustain as a series of continuities, is to think of the aesthetic, visual, sonic or live work, and the writerly set of postulations, as inhabiting a shared space or as operating with a shared series of objectives. The danger in doing this work, of thinking practice as theory (and vice versa), is of flattening the heterogenous and important differences that different approaches to writing proffer.

GSA Lecture Series
online
Architectural History and Theory
05.05.2020

Email to Supervisors:

From: Zen Marie <znmarie@gmail.com> **Date:** Thursday, 30 May 2019 at 16:57
To: Sarah Nuttall <Sarah.Nuttall@wits.ac.za>, "david.andrew@wits.ac.za" <david.andrew@wits.ac.za>
Subject: Some notes after our meeting

Dear Sarah and David
Thank you both for an intense and thought-provoking meeting.
I wanted to sketch some notes, thoughts, or responses in order to continue deepening and fine tuning the pertinent questions and concerns and by way of looking for a coherent way forward agreeable to us all.

Structure of a practice based PhD

This will need some active, concrete and substantive work on my part to more fully articulate this structure.
The key problematic here being the relationship between the practical (to which I will at times refer to as 'the work') and the written.

I agree with the idea put forward by Sarah for the necessity of the text to forcefully, powerfully and meaningfully develop
"an opening out of theory" that has more than a passing / tenuous / lackadaisical relationship to the practical.
While I concede the apparent incoherence of the work at this stage, I am really excited by the challenge of working with the full extent and range of my intellectual and creative potential. Aside from any of the contingent or institutional aspects, I believe that this approach is one that is kind of honest or true to the kind of energy that I inhabit.
I am committed to a rigorous theoretical engagement. I value theory, and have been committed to working through theory even before my MA in cultural analysis at the university of Amsterdam.
This two-year MA (working with Mieke Bal) was a period where I focussed exclusively on theory. I put my practice on hold at this time. And while I surely benefitted from this focussed attention to theory, I do feel that I missed an opportunity here by hiving off my practice.

To not challenge this MA with the inflection, immersion or inclusion of practice, was I believe in retrospect to have been short sighted, as it was radically underutilising my full potential.

I am not *just* a scholar (as if anyone is *just* a scholar) I am an artist as well. The full account and implications of what these two positionalities imply, and the ambition that comes with the challenge (and it is a huge challenge) to come good on a relationship of form and content (between practice and theory) that appears paradoxical and mutually exclusive is actually what I am understanding as the basis for what I can offer through my doctoral work.

I believe that the ambition of the project has not diminished. If anything, it has grown. I am in a more explicit manner, posing some of the questions at the core of the original PhD proposal:

Importantly for me, this directly relates to the ways in which performative, sonic or visual (what I am at the moment clumsily referring to as the *aesthetic*) cultural products operate as producers of knowledge. This is the culmination of all of the energies present in the moment in the 60's through minimalism and conceptual

art, through the Avant guard, through site, place, space, situated aesthetics, and radical contingencies – and queer phenomenology all lead up to.

This epistemological concern – a concern with objects of knowledge not neatly linear or rational - is crucially a question of the ontological status of the aesthetic. This ontology is more that one of a simplistic account of cultural objects that need interpretation, but rather one that goes beyond the object - beyond space and beyond site. It is a complexity that includes the performative as a mode of aesthetic contingency. As Sarah (Nuttall) importantly pointed out, this is an area that Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology will be incredibly useful and important to engage with in expanding on these concerns.

In this sense the writing, as a form *of theoretical opening out*, (I really like this turn of phrase) proceeds in a complex relationship to the work. I agree with the position that especially in a PhD, the work cannot simply be expected to "speak for itself" and remain inchoate without intervention. My ambition is that the nature of this intervention and the nature of the relation of the work to the writing must be so much more in excess of the numerous (and tired) formulations that we could usually expect. On the one hand, the writing must be in excess of the "reflective artists essay". On the other hand, the work must be much more than an illustration of the writing. The work cannot be reduced to case study, and the writing cannot be a mere explanation or even worse operate as an apologia or rationale for the work. The writing implicitly operated as a kind of 'framing' (following Mieke Bal's use of the term) but the ambition is that it exceeds this as well. The ambition is for a complex intertwining of multiple textualities, for numerous, rigorous and demanding crossings between writing, theory and practice or aesthetics.

What I am excited about, is to think about this relationship between text and image, theory and work that meaningfully pushes the nature of each, as the relevant critical, theoretical, formal and aesthetic questions are pursued. And pursued unapologetically taking both the work and writing seriously to a point at which they are set into a series of correspondences and critical questionings that are integral and meaningfully further the intellectual and creative inquiry found in both.

How this complex relationship will ultimately take shape is something that I can only go so far in the mode of a hypothetical projection. I agree with Sarah in that at the moment, there appears to be a disconnection and incoherence. The proposal operates to suggest a range of research trajectories, and the installation from last year appears to suggest others.
I do not believe that they are mutually exclusive. What I do believe, is that there are points of mutual and beneficial overlap that are not simply the collapsing of the one into the other.
I understand that it is incumbent on me to develop these lines of sight in more forceful and concrete ways. More so, to develop these correspondences in ways the push the theory into an intense and critically exacting relationship to the practice, and to demand that the practice becomes more articulate in how it iteratively manifests itself as much more that passive or "inchoate visuality" but as a complex and meaningful intervention into theory.

What is important is that this happens as two deeply connected processes.

The way forward

As Sarah (Nutall) indicated, we should meet again very soon, perhaps even next week, where we can continue this conversation.

With more input from both of you, I will draft a proposal for a clearer structure that satisfies the questions and concerns expressed today.
I can undertake to have this new outline a week or so after our next meeting?
I will take your guidance as to what this outline should take into account, but I suspect that it will certainly need to articulate the form and structure of what is more clearly a PhD by creative practice. More so, this outline should begin to articulate the complex relationship between writing and practice.

I have a teaching buy out for this coming quarter. I aim to get stuck into the writing, in a way that I haven't managed thus far as I feel this proposition of a complex submission of theory and practice to be a position that I can fully own. I aim to have a tranche of writing for you towards the end of this period. In addition to this writing period, I propose to install the work at *The Point of Order* beginning on the 8th of September until the 28th of September.

Part of this moment of installation should be to discuss with you both, in 'real time' or in situ, the overall project but especially the relationship between text and work. What will be important to this discussion, is that we three will be in the space, in situ with the work, and with a tranche of writing to concretely refer to. This will be a meaningful moment to test out some of the ideas and concerns expressed today. Further than this, this could be an opportune moment to host a public discussion about the work, the writing and overall doctoral project. I would be ready to host this public discussion around the 18 or 19th of September. Not sure what your thoughts on this are?

There was certainly much more said today that I am not capturing, it would be really helpful for me, if you guys could sketch some of that which I have omitted…
Thanks
And soon
Zen



Jo Ractliffe, *Woodland near Cassinga*, 2009. Diptych, 1500 x 589 mm. Cassinga, Angola.

Situated Aesthetics as Dispositif

Reading aesthetics from the vantage of Agamben's dispositive
Towards a Consideration of Anyspace Whatever

Between Foucault and Agamben, there is much to consider in relation to the concept of dispositif or, as Agamben translates it, 'apparatus'. The concept, and its (mis)translations, offer a moment to deepen a question of critique, especially in relation to the concept of site-specificity, or radical heterogeneity.

It is in fact the dispositif, or the range of dispositifs, that a site is governed by, that give a site its very ground for specificity. This is to say that the assemblage of dispositifs are what contribute to the specificity of a site. This is much more than a framework or context; the very idea of a dispositif or apparatus suggests to us multiple forms of mediation and remediation within or through a site.

This, I would argue productively, also includes not only the material, synthetic, technological or quantifiable, but also, crucially, has dimensions that are not discernible or sensible at all.

An important component to the radical heterogeneity of a site (its specificity) are all of those features that make it sensible to people who inhabit/occupy or move through the site. The idea of the immaterial, the psychic or the ephemeral are crucial components to any site, and the marking of its specificity.

Jo Ractliffe's *The Aftermath of Conflict* series shows this in the non-documentation of sites of battlefields.

> Through these apparatuses, man attempts to nullify the animalistic behaviours that are now separated from him, and to enjoy the Open as such, to enjoy being insofar as it is being. At the root of each apparatus lies an all-too-human desire for happiness. The capture and subjectification of this desire in a separate sphere constitutes the specific power of the apparatus. (Agamben, 2009: 17)

Important in this chapter is a critical elaboration of the concepts: representation, performativity, dispositif, apparatus, and critique, in order to explore the supposed bifurcation between 'theory' and 'practice'. The significance of the 'whatever' – a concept drawn from Giorgio Agamben to Sarat Maharaj – is developed as a critical point where authority is questioned and fluidity is ensured within the constantly shifting frameworks and strategies for *measurement, testing rigour or assessment of success.*

The work of this chapter articulates the potential and role of a visual arts practice in critically challenging or expanding conventional ideas of research and knowledge production. In many ways, this is a theoretical engagement with ideas that can be used to think through site, space, and location in relation to ontology and epistemology. The relevance of this area of research and writing lays the basis for making the connection to the practical component, through understanding the relationships between the two. In many ways, this is an exploration of how practice-based research operates at all.

Critique

Ahmed Veriava, in his PhD thesis from 2014, develops a genealogy of the concept of critique, from Kant to Marx to Foucault to Butler. In this account of the concept's development, we see the importance that critique has in relation to a force of power or rule of law.

The relationship is not one of fully dismantling or destroying this power, but rather is one of fine-tuning, refining or redirecting the force of this law. The example that Veriava gives, via Foucault, is of a critique of governmentality.

What does an extension of this concept to an engagement with a form of radical heterogeneity of a site offer? What can we say of critique, and of this radical heterogeneity when the site is an artwork? By way of a call and response, an artwork elicits a critique. This critique functions not only as a paratext but also, given time, becomes a text in itself.

The radical heterogeneity of a site creates a series of relations that produce other sites. How then are we to understand or to navigate a site? This is surely a relation (poetic?) between the multiple elements within a site, and the viewer and the viewed are but only two of these elements?

The Aesthetic

I refer to the aesthetic in terms of its expanded usage, in ways that are perhaps similar to Jacques Rancière's, who defines it, following Immanuel Kant (with interventions through Foucault), as:

> The system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. (Rancière, 2000: 8).

Aesthetics, or the aesthetic, is not then simply a form of judgement, appraisal or evaluation of beauty or form, but is, I contend, the necessary and appropriate form of enquiry, critical questioning and mode of operation present within the contemporary arts. This term requires more detailed elaboration, especially in relation to debates between the disciplines of art history and aesthetics, as well as in relation to its Kantian roots (Elkins et al. 2006).

The Wretched of the Screen

The function of the mirror stage thus turns out, in my view, to be a particular case of the function of imagos, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality – or, as they say, between the Innenwelt and the Umwelt.

Jacques Lacan, Écrits, 2006, p. 78

The screen, as a phenomenon and a concept, is expanded on in film theory as being much more than the location of the image. Rather, extrapolating from Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, the screen operates in the logic of the imago, which importantly is foundational for the forming of subjectivity.

In a world where the apparatus of image production (and the dispositif that holds this apparatus) is prolific and pervasive across all spheres of late-capitalist life, the mirror stage/imago/screen relationship is crucial to explore critically.

Landscape

> *First, let's take a step back and consider the crucial role of the horizon in all of this. Our traditional sense of orientation – and, with it, modern concepts of time and space – are based on a stable line: the horizon line. Its stability hinges on the stability of an observer, who is thought to be located on a ground of sorts, a shoreline, a boat – a ground that can be imagined as stable, even if in fact it is not.*
>
> Hito Steyerl, 2012, p. 14

Images of open landscapes form the core of the body of work produced for/over the span of this PhD. Our experience of landscapes, I assert, is tied to elemental questions of how humans have approached and try to order or contain the world around them.

Animistic spiritual practices narrativise the land and the elemental forces that act in concert with it. Earth, water, wind, fire, air – all essential elements that at once offer life and substance, but also present potential dangers and forces that need to be contained.

This containment can be seen in countless narratives from spiritual traditions across the world. They are abstractions that allow an understanding of these uncontrollable elements, naming them and redirecting their chaotic energy into forms located in human experience.

The image, and particularly the image of the land, the landscape, is no different in its attempt to hold the land in a frame, to extract it from its uncontrollable vastness and hold it within a narrative. This is more than a narrative: the techne that contains the landscape image is nothing less than entangled within a dispositif apparatus relationship and, as such, is subject to forms of power acquisition and extraction that ultimately seek to functionalise the landscape image into use value. The landscapes in the genre of colonial landscape painting are not mere impressions, even if they began as such. They became complicit with colonial military apparatuses of information gathering, that were contained within a dispositif that articulated a relationship of human to non-human, and human-to-human relationships.

The landscape is not a neutral phenomenon. It is not passive, but rather active, in the process of establishing these relationships. The assertion that the word is better written as a verb or action – landscaping – as opposed to a noun, object or subject – landscape – is an important contribution by W.J.T, Mitchell and others. To quote Mitchell who writes in the introduction to Landscape and Power (1994):

> The aim of this book is to change "landscape" from a noun to a verb. It asks that we think of landscape, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed. (Mitchell, 1994:1)

The land, as landscape, is entangled within the complex web of history, power and perception, As Denis Cosgrove asserts:

> […] landscape represent[s] a way of seeing – a way in which some Europeans have represented to themselves and to others the world about them and their relationships with it, and through which they have commented on social relations. Landscape is a way of seeing that has its own history, but a history that can be understood only as part of a wider history of economy and society; that has its own assumptions and consequences, but assumptions and consequences whose origins and implications extend well beyond the use and perception of land; that has its own techniques of expression, but techniques which it shares with other areas of cultural practice. (Cosgrove, in Elkins & DeLue, 2007: 20)

Jo Ractilffe's *The Aftermath of Conflict* is a series of still photographs that have assumed representational strategies not predicated on re-presenting or re-framing violence (explicitly), but are implicitly invested in a project of exploring and investigating how colonial violence may persist as deeply seated echoes or scars that have seemingly become naturalised in the landscapes in which they had been cut.

An important question to ask here – especially in relation to modes of representing landscapes, such as in colonial landscape painting – is about the people who were subject to the violence within these spaces. This includes considering the representational strategy deployed by the artists who image them. Ractliffe chooses to focus on the land. Her images in this series are absent of any human figuration. Rather, what we are confronted by in the images, are black and white photographs that present not merely as landscapes but as cyphers needing to be decoded. While at first they may appear to show empty spaces, a closer inspection reveals traces and relics of human activity. The viewer is guided by a range of paratextual prompts to reconsider these black and white photographs of southern African spaces, through the narrative proposed by the artist's movement through these spaces, and her search for a kind of reckoning, if not reconciliation, with the violence that had at some point played out on these sites.

These sites were, at one point, theatres of war, where the military machines of the apartheid South African government sought to dominate and control its neighbouring countries. These battles drew in and violated the people that lived within these spaces, as they became contested with global geopolitics, which saw the

mighty Soviet Union and Cuban military deploying combatants to contest the South African Defence Force's incursions.

It has been written that these barren, unpopulated landscapes require a forensic gaze to uncover or deduce, and make links between, the sparse signifiers that are fleetingly scattered across the images and the broader political or historical narratives. The forensic gaze does offer one way of approach.[28] But there is also another way of reading that can be deployed – a poetic reading, or reading these images as one would read a poem, is valuable to hold next to the science of forensics. Because to think about these landscapes as poems, rather than as crime scenes, is to insist on symbolisms and significations that are human-centred. Poiesis as opposed to forensis is more about interpretation, feeling, and even mood, than it is about a rigorous scientific enquiry that will reveal the 'truth' of a scene.[29] In fact, the 'truth' of a poetic reading situates a further set of bodies in relation to the image – the bodies, eyes and minds that move in front of the photographs – namely, the viewers of these photographs. Viewers who stand in galleries or museums, or hold the finely crafted and printed books where these barren landscapes exist, that offer prompts for speculation and reflection. Following my arguments earlier, the viewer's position in relation to the image operates as a further or subsequent site – perhaps a para-site or meta-site that is filled with traces of violence and erasure.

28. What I mean to refer to here, is an analysis in the register of the *studium*, that comes from an accounting of what is in the image, and a process of deduction and interpretation that follows. This is a form of analytical reasoning that has been troubled by some groups that engage with *forensis* in the expanded sense. See Eyal Weizman and the Forensic Architecture group, as an example.

29. The concept of poiesis is used here in the sense of producing or bringing something into being, and is again put at odds with a process of deducing meaning from that which is already there.

vii



Zen Marie, *Ile Aux Serpents: Palms*, 2018. Film still. Dakar, Senegal.

Truth and Lies in a Post-Medium Condition Medium, Mediation, Media: From Materiality to Formlessness and Back Again[30]

The title of this academy, its set up, at its core deals with a tragedy of epic proportions.

It is a tragedy that has a history. It is located within specific sets of politics. Within a clear range of knowledges and intuitional forms.

This tragedy is one that precipitates an impoverishment of imagination and a surrendering to bankrupt forms of separation, specialisation and division.

This tragedy is manifest daily in our lives and in our minds.

It is an enslavement to the form of thought and practice structured around binaries.

The left brain, and the right brain, right and wrong, good and bad, irrational and rational, black and white, us and them, presence and absence, etc, etc, etc.

It is not going too far to say that this separation can be thought of as the central evil of our time. It is in the guise of this 'logic' that civilised and uncivilised, human and non-human are produced. It is this structure of thinking that makes possible slavery, genocide, apartheid, environmental fall out and more.

This structure is embedded within the form of thinking rendered as dialectical, a cornerstone of western epistemology. Thesis separated from antithesis … but rarely does a synthesis appear that manages to turn polarised contradiction into productive paradox.

The binaries produced from dialectical forms of thought are a structuring that operate like a virus, and have infected human consciousness in ways that are far reaching, nuanced, and in most cases total.

The form of the dialectic, or the binary is not of course unique to western knowledge and it perhaps has its roots in forms of oppositions or contrasts which we see around us that are seemingly natural or have been naturalised. Young and old, male and female, day and night, right and wrong.

But while we may agree that day is day and night is dark, we will also agree in the proposition that the in-betweens or mixtures between these seemingly fixed oppositions are in fact much more alluring, exciting and productive.

Sunsets and sunrises provide much more than the intense brilliance of the midday sun, or the deep quiet of the depths of night.

The liminal places of in-betweens, transitions and progressions between one thing and another, one state and the next – or the prior – are actually more commonplace than the dialectic allows us to imagine and so much more fertile that the points of extremity within the binary.

Enter the corpus callosum. The bridge. The connector between what we are told is the left brain and the right brain.

The corpus callosum is offered to us here as a provocation.

An invitation to unsettle the apparent divisions between the rational and irrational, the creative and analytical:

30. This text was written for a public lecture at the RAW Material Company in Dakar Senegal. I was invited as 'faculty' of the RAW Academy, specifically the Academy Session 4 that was curated by Tracey Rose, titled Corpus Callosum. This text has not been published before.

the distinction between mind and the body.

Or as Alibeta Saar spoke about earlier this week, it is about unsettling the relations between an earthly material realm and that which is outside of or beyond our five basic sensory capacities.

My attempt to engage with this challenge proposed by Tracey Rose, was to think through the concept of the medium. And the idea of mediation.

This has been an attempt to make links between conceptions of the medium as operative in contemporary art and its history and to put these into relation with broader concepts and processes of mediation in more philosophical or spiritual forms.

This is to situate the medium and processes of mediation as fundamental and crucial to any communication process, be it in communicating to audiences in galleries, to the makers of the universe or to lovers and friends.

The ability of humans to have access to the 'actual nature of things' or to 'true reality' is in most accounts limited, if not impossible.

From Plato's cave to Vedic conceptions of Maya or to complex (and binary-blurring) African conceptions of multiple and parallel realms of time and space, there are accounts of worlds, concepts and experiences that exist outside of human abilities for comprehension or apprehension.

In these accounts, humans never have access to the complete or total nature of the universe.

In order to address this deficiency, philosophical or spiritual frameworks propose strategies that attempt to make these connections or crossings between worlds, spaces and timescapes possible.

Various personages emerge: the Marabout, the Sangoma, the Mystic, the Shaman, the Priest, the Rabbi and the Imam, all of whom, in one way or another, attempt to assist with the transcendence of our physically constrained sensory capacities.

I propose that all of these figures are engaged in processes of mediation that far exceeds the moral or ethical injunctions often associated with the divine.

These processes also importantly engage with abstract concepts and forms of insensibility or irrationality that are incomprehensible to and challenge our acculturated, socialised or linguistic conformities. As such these processes contain much revolutionary or radical potential.

In these processes of mediation, various strategies are deployed that include sonic, visual, olfactory and haptic forms of guiding a person or group.

There is always some form of prompt, some material, object or textural basis from which mediation ensues.

The medium is here both the person and the material by which links between abstraction and practical forms of thought and feeling are made.

I believe that we must problematise the concept of the medium and processes of mediation across philosophical, spiritual and aesthetic frameworks.

Crucial to this, will be to situate *the medium*, and processes of *mediation* as the cutting edge, or interface between abstract, ephemeral, conceptual, metaphysical energy and the grounded, material textures that make up the people, objects, institutions and politics that we negotiate on a day-to-day basis.

In many ways what I am asking for is to look for the radical potential of art-making practices.

Speed

On Monday, I had a very direct and honest conversation with Alibeta Saar about the speed with which things are done.

He challenged me to understand that the quickness of attempts to understand things is not only disrespectful, but futile. Some things take time.

Sometimes these things don't arrive at all. We are made to wait. And sometimes the waiting is the thing to appreciate, not the thing that we wait for.

Process over product. Intention over effect. The postponement of pleasure and the delay of gratification.

The compulsion, drive, desire for speed. Instant gratification. Direct and immediate access to complexity. Now. Without waiting, without working too much.

We can all agree that multiple forms present in society produce the ground for this attitude to proliferate. Quick-fix pill culture, fulfilment of desire at the press of a button or the click of switch, these seem to be the appropriate forms of how not only desire, but also meaning, knowledge and life itself circulate in late capitalism.

A return to the slow, a return to the small. The unhinging of time from modes of commodity-driven injunctions. These are not, or should not be throwbacks to a way of life now lost.

It should not be a nostalgic lament for the past. Rather we would do well to think in terms of a more radical and uncertain project of imagining potential futures that do not yet exist.

The Thing is Not the Thing

Abstraction and immanence. Distance and directness. The thing, or the perpetual impossibility of approaching the thing, because the thing always escapes one's grasp.

Like air, it slips through your hands when you try to clutch at it.

You are more effective doing nothing and letting it play on your skin.

Like air, it is all around you,
it is part of your everyday.
It is in your lungs,
it is your breath,
it is your voice,
but try to grab it and it escapes,
try to hold it in your lungs and you suffocate.

Conclusion

When the medium gives way to becoming embodied, located or locked within a discrete subjectivity.

When the medium becomes a product of specialised labour, it is a short step from the medium becoming re-captured now not as a commodity, but as a service – in a way analogous to how the prime functioning of capitalism moved from commodities to services, from production to speculation.

It is here that the shaman and the artist are prone to being hijacked. Those whose radical alterity is the ground for their recuperation into economies that thrive on critique and criticality to accrue value, produce meaning, and re-affirm forms of knowledge-power-agency triangulations.

What I have learnt in my interactions at the RAW Material Company, over the years that I have had occasion to visit it, is that the things that I desire, the forms of poiesis or aesthesis, even the forms of politics and taste that I have cultivated an appetite for, are in urgent need of questioning.

It is less about what I find to be good, right, politically progressive or aesthetically relevant.

No.

The challenge of RAW, and the Academy especially, is to put these inclinations on the back burner, not to switch them off, but to let them simmer.

And to foreground that which is other alien
or estranged.

In my short time at the Academy in the last week, I have found a space and community of people fundamentally heterogeneous, but radically connected.

The intimacy that this generates is one that is tough.

It is challenging, infuriating, frustrating and at times perhaps even overwhelming.

What I take with me from the encounters over the last few days is that this intimacy is perhaps the bridge
the thing
that connects one thing to the other
this to that
as it joins here to there
us to them
and I to you.

The paradox at work here, is that the radical interconnectedness of things is inseparable from the fundamental separation of forms. And it is along the lines of this paradox, among a litany of others, that the everyday must proceed as we travel through the universe.



Zen Marie, *Ile Aux Serpents: Sun*, 2018. Film still. Dakar, Senegal.

Paradise Fallen: Islands, Archipelagos and Xenoepistemics[31]

Paradise Fallen is an installation, which includes a central film, *Île Aux Serpents*[32], an array of small video monitors (with the repeated video of a palm tree blowing in the wind), drawings and lithographic prints. The images and text that follow are more than a descriptive account of the work, even though it is encountered here through the text and photographic documentation. My aim is rather to discursively engage with the ideas developed in the work, and to write alongside or through the work. In this sense, I engage with the complexities of a body of creative practice as a contribution to the ideas, concepts and urgencies reflected across the articles in this issue. *Paradise Fallen* offers up what Sarat Maharaj (2009) refers to as xenoepistemics, or what, extrapolating from Sarah Ahmed (2006) might be considered a 'queering' of phenomenology. Xenoepistemics is important for questions of creative research as it contains a challenge to embrace knowledge that is non-linear, estranged, foreign or other. Queer phenomenology, in similar ways, asks for approaches or orientations to the sensible world, in ways that value deviations or non-normative positions. In the spirit of xenoepistemics and queer phenomenology, I turn to the work.

Lost in Paradise

Paradise Fallen plays with narratives that float on the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, narratives that tease and provoke personal, emotive, historical and political registers. The work is interdisciplinary in nature, produced through theoretical and literary research[33], filmmaking, and large-scale drawings. The camera, the lens, and associated technical and ideological apparatuses, become not simply a point of departure, but theoretically and politically rich and meaningful contributions to the production of the external and inner worlds with which the work engages.

From 2014, I engaged in researching, filming, drawing and conceptualising the material that resulted in *Paradise Fallen*. Shown during the *Watershed: Art, Science and Elemental Politics* programme at Wits in 2018, the body of work included three videos. One was a large-scale projection, titled *Île Aux Serpents* (25 minutes, looped), presented in installation form in order to prompt an encounter with the physical and metaphysical terrors that lurk beneath and within any landscape. It also included one sculptural 8-channel work (60-second video fragment, looped), containing images of a palm tree – manipulated to be in the negative – bristling in the wind; and one single-channel monitor piece (14 minutes 39 seconds, looped) that scrolled the text of a manifesto I wrote in Dakar in 2017. The installation also included two large-scale drawings (140 x 140 cm and 140 x 500 cm), and a stack of photo-litho prints of a film still from *Île Aux Serpents*, together with a poem by Danai Mupotsa from her anthology of poetry, *Feeling and Ugly* (2018). The film *Île Aux Serpents* was initially screened in Dakar, Senegal, in 2017 and was installed more

31. This chapter was published in the journal *Leonardo*, MIT Press, volume 4, Issue 5, 2021. It is included here in extended form.

32. The film can be viewed at this link.

33. What is sometimes quaintly called 'desktop research,' but my 'disciplinary location' is more appropriately located within the strand of cultural analysis, proposed by Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

elaborately in 2018, in Johannesburg at fem of colour, a multidisciplinary platform for artistic engagement in the inner-city district of Newtown.

The ocean, in many ways, exists outside of technology, even though it was a catalyst for the intense development of technology. A crucial component of colonialism was mastering the ocean, as a medium that could be traversed. It was a phenomenon understood to be immense, yet conceivably conquerable. The ocean is a powerful force of historical and political significance. It can also be thought of as a device for contemplation, and can be linked to the aesthetic of the sublime, following Kant (*Critique of Judgement*, 1987) and Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful,* 1889). In *Paradise Fallen*, the concepts of the Middle Passage, the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 2002), especially in reference to the transatlantic slave trade, and references to the Indian Ocean[34], allude to debates that situate the ocean as integral to the symbolic and economic forces of colonialism, and displacement, as exemplified in Black radical thought and critical theory, especially from the Caribbean. The ocean becomes a crucially important yet epistemologically ambivalent space from which to viscerally and poetically leverage more analytically critical work.

The ocean also figures prominently in literary work. The ocean – its traversal, conquest, and power – suggests a figure, device, character and narrative that have captivated poets and novelists, from Homer's *Iliad* in 8 BC to Joseph Conrad's colonial maritime fiction, to work that is much more critical of colonialism, its history and aftermath, such as by Aimé Césaire (2000), Édouard Glissant (1997) and Kamau Brathwaite (1994), for instance.

The ocean provides the first material substance to link continents and people across the globe. But within this scholarship of the ocean, the island emerges as a crucial figure. Within the English literary tradition, including (but not limited to) the writings of Daniel Defoe (2010), Robert Louis Stevenson (1999), William Golding (1962) and Aldous Huxley (2018), the geographic form of the island is more than a mise en scène. The island, instead, functions as a character or narrative device that provokes fundamental disorder, breakdown, or even obliteration of western society. Following Pamila Gupta (2010), the island is marked more by its connections with the outside than by its insularity. It lays the ground for the exorcism of dreams, desires and fantasies.

While the film picks up on these literary and theoretical cues, it insists on an aesthetic and poetic register that is integral to its cinematic logic. To follow, I focus on these concepts, and on how the making of the film shaped both its content and structure. I then relate these to other aspects of the installation, and explore how each component might be read in relation to the rest.

34. See Isabel Hofmeyr, "Universalising the Indian Ocean". *Publication of the Modern Language Association of America* 125, No.3: 721–729. As well as K. Bystrom and Isabel Hofmeyr, "Oceanic routes: (Post-it) notes on hydro-colonialism," *Comparative Literature* 69: 1–6. (2017) and Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr and M. N. Pearson, eds., *Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean* (Pretoria, SA: UNISA Press, 2010).



Zen Marie. *Ile Aux Serpents: Ocean*, 2018. Film still. Dakar, Senegal.

Île Aux Serpents

The film *Île Aux Serpents* is the central work of the *Paradise Fallen* cycle. I began to film it in April 2017 while I was at the RAW Material Company, an independent artists' space in Dakar, Senegal. The work was provoked by the landscape of and around the Cape Verde Peninsula, and was catalysed by thinking through the islands of Ngor, Gorée and Île de la Madeleine, also called L'île au Sarpan, which was the inspiration for the title of the film. The ocean and the land meet on this coastline in ways that enact a dramatic and tantalising allusion to mythology, narratives, histories and forms that appear, emerge and recede. These mythologies, implicitly ingrained into the land, come from a range of sources, which includes colonial folklore, narrative and myth from the Islamic tradition and, importantly, ancient wisdoms from the fishing communities who still live and work around the peninsula, and still fish off the reefs and islands found there.

The tension in the work is stretched across elemental forms and transitions or overlaps between desire, yearning, pain, loss and regret. In the film, the voice-over – an undefined male character – narrates the desire and conflict of a series of events that ostensibly occurred on an island sometime in the *past*. The video alludes to a compulsion for *future* return, which is disturbed by the recognition that any return will precipitate the total obliteration of the narrator's self. The film is intended to be shown in a large space, as it was for *Watershed*, with the space empty but for one long bench. The projection and audio were designed to immerse the viewer in the landscape.

The ambition for the treatment of this landscape is to insist that the landscape is more than simply a mise en scène in which narrative unfolds. The island (landscape) should rather become a driver of the narrative, as it perhaps becomes either protagonist or antagonist. The rich and complex associations of islands are invoked, as Gupta (2010) observes, as they are mobilised within the writing, cinematography, editing and installation of the work.

Gupta articulates very clearly the complex relationships between conflicting and conflictual desires, expectations and exploitations of islands. These dynamics, produced historically, are evident within contemporary flows of people, currency, products and ideas to and from islands. Within this framework, I develop the basis for thinking about the island as being always in excess of its cinematic potential, and imagine it through an invocation of these complex histories and presents. In this way, I establish the island as *site*.

Island Time

Paradise Fallen is a work of intense engagement with particular sites in Réunion and Senegal. Both places, for me, are spaces informed by friendships and people. In Réunion, it was with the artist, Yohann Quëland de Saint-Pern, with whom I have worked on and off since 2009. While I was there in 2016, the active volcano, Piton de la Fournaise, erupted; concurrently, a political volcano was erupting in South Africa – Fees Must Fall. My stay in Réunion in 2016 was intense. I watched, via television and social media, as the contestations around conditions of scholarship, privilege and race in South Africa blew up. Witnessing these events from Réunion framed and shaped my experience on the island. Johannesburg was not *over there*, but *with me* throughout my stay. While, no doubt, this was amplified by near

instantaneous communication of streamed video and social media, the idea that we carry with us multiple spaces as we traverse new ones, is much older. My presence and my baggage added an additional narrative thread to the multiple, complex and conflicting narratives that exist already on the island. The first drawings for *Paradise Fallen* were done in Réunion, and it was here that the project was born. The work in Réunion gestated for about a year, but during my next residency in Dakar, these nascent ideas began to manifest.

The islands off Dakar are a fragmented archipelago or semi-archipelago[35]. On Îles aux Madeleine, you can see, and feel, that you're on an island. But at other times, you do not have an embodied sense of being on an island. Of course, you know you are on an island, because you arrived by boat, and your imagination continues to locate you there, but physically, from a given sightline, you could be on the mainland.

Sometimes you can't even see the ocean, as you are engulfed in grass on the high plateau. You could be in the middle of a savannah or on the slopes of a valley.

A similar dislocation of space operates in reverse on the mainland. Dakar is a peninsula, and yet there are moments and places on the peninsula that lead you to feel as if you are on an island. This has to do with how ocean and land meet there, and a series of proximal relationships between how you are able (or not) to view relationships between sea and land, related to elevation and layers of water-land combinations that may or may not be visually apprehended. There are times when an 'island feeling' is produced by a complex play of sensory cues and aesthetics. The peninsula narrows at the point at which the outcrop of land meets the mainland; in real ways, the bulk of the peninsula becomes an island. You feel this most when you are in the *centre ville* and on the *corniche*. The pace of the city modulates, shifts, moves, fluctuates – one minute in time, and then suddenly out of step with the cycadean rhythms of the body – meets with the cosmic time of sun, moon and tides. In Dakar, the rhythms of pre-capitalist, precolonial time permeate intensely, and jostle for space next to forms of postcolonial modernity. Ancient fishing villages, animistic spiritual practices, grand mosques, and state-of-the-art airports all fill the same frame. But rather than seek the thrill of these juxtapositions, at once anachronistic and idiosyncratic, I deliberately crafted a filmic non-time, so that the film resists specific temporal location. I sought an atemporal island time – one that traversed historical epochs, drawing on them all, but looking down on the island – looking down not from the hypersurveilled Google eye view, but from the sublime epiphany of the view from the crest of a wave or even, fancifully, from a mountain peak on the moon. This was, for me, incredibly disarming, as I am usually more at home in a position of critical thinking extended from strands of post-structuralist socioeconomic critique. Using the apparatus of the camera, I allowed something else to emerge, as I immersed myself in the temporal and spatial provocations and particularities of the site.

Time functions differently on the islands. It is outside of the regularised time of capitalism, structured around commuting to work, returning home and stopping at the shopping mall on the way. But on some islands, like Réunion, sometimes it doesn't feel as if you are on an island because of the built environment: there are shopping malls, high-rise buildings, mobile-phone towers and traffic lights. At other times, you feel as if you are on a remote and deserted island. Then, there are the

35. Glissant, in his provocation of "archipelagic thinking", proposes that the entire world might be thought of as an archipelago. See Glissant, 1997, p. 194.

dynamics of islands, leaving and arriving. There is constant movement. On some tourist islands, even around Dakar, the population quadruples with the arrival of huge floating hotel cruise ships. On Réunion and in Dakar, these forms and times operate next to each other, on top of each other at times, and always superimposed and dislocating of both space and place.

Islands are seductive spaces to think about the disruptions of time. Not all islands disrupt, but similarly, not all mainlands are continuous with time. Spaces inside continental bodies also disrupt time. So there are islands within mainlands, on continental bodies. As Gupta (2010) observes one could talk about islanding as a conceptual rather than a geographic process. Again, this follows Glissant, as he extends the archipelago to what he calls 'archipelagic thinking' (1997: 194).

To what extent does blocking out the light in a space create timelessness, such that this becomes separated from the larger flow of things, people and time? In the installation that I built to house the film, this is exactly the strategy I employed: a black box, bracketed off from the outside world; a space that one enters, to be dropped into the cinematography of the island world.

Writing Site

Water operates in multiple ways in the work. At one level, because there is literally an ocean, and Dakar is at sea level, water enters as an unavoidable phenomenon. From a cinematographic point of view, the atmosphere in Dakar is infused with this water. The ocean as a medium or material is incredibly important, of course, as the basis for colonial sea exploration – the ocean took one from place to place. But the idea of water is also a medium to reflect on how different substances or representational strategies come to stand between an individual or a people and the thing desired. I am also interested in water as a metaphor for cleansing and other psychic forms of thinking about the ocean. A lot of the film employs time-lapse photography. For most of the three months that I shot the film, I literally just stood in front of the ocean, with my camera, and immersed myself in thinking about light and the water.

In this way, the work explores the ambivalence of desire: of deeply wanting something but knowing that to indulge in that desire will lead to obliteration in the most extreme sense.

There is something about the light, the humidity in the air, and the sandy graininess of the Harmattan – the seasonal dry, dusty wind that blows from the Sahara – which creates a kind of intense colour, especially at sunrise or sunset. This is one way to engage with the site. But there is also something psychic or emotive, built on a range of things other than a description of this particular place. This is an emotional space, so the site is less about Dakar and more about the psychic or emotive site. I have tried to effect this through the dislocating strategy within the cinematography, to create an illusion of being in a non-specific place in a non-specific time.

Reflections on Making the Work Part One

Dakar, uKhahlamba Maluti, and the Karoo.

The spaces in which I filmed these works are sites for a complex interplay of forces. The land is the ostensible subject, framed compositionally as images that carry a kind of fidelity or definition, to allow them to become windows into distant spaces or worlds. The screen, as a secondary site, operates as a kind of portal – a transporter that takes the viewer from the place that they stand to other worlds, times and spaces.

The experience of shooting these works, and the experience of showing these works, has been a long-sustained experiment with time and space. To unpack this here is to shuttle between these spaces and times, in order not only to reflect on the process that forms the work and writing in this submission, but to invoke the deep and tacit knowledge that the landscape holds.

This land is written by the traces of the forces that have operated on it since its birth. There is a long durée of time here that does not operate in the same register as humans do. We are outside of this earthly time. We come into the picture much later, as countless forces of wind, fire, tectonic movement, asteroid collisions, etc. have marked and etched deep traces of themselves on scales that are hardly possible to grasp.

This earthly time is vast, especially when one charts the events and coordinates of human occupation and movement across the landscapes that we inhabit, or that remain uninhabited.

This work is a mediation and a meditation on the impossibility of reconciling human time with earthly time. It draws on both, as it sets time and space into motion, in order to offer points of view or points of reflection.

Dakar

My first visit to Dakar was to attend the first RAW Material Company *Condition Report*. This was a large gathering of artists, curators and cultural activists who were involved in 'building independent art spaces on the continent'. The symposium ran from 18–20 January 2012, and was a heady, vibrant mix of cultural workers from Africa. The spirit was of a kind of optimism that I had never seen before and, I'm sad to say, have never experienced since. Allowing myself to be consumed by romantic flights of fancy, I imagined that this was what the 'Premier *Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres* (First World Festival of Negro Arts)', that was also hosted in Dakar, in 1966, must have felt like.

The symposium was a whirlwind of energies, critical minds and creative spirits joined in what was a festival of ideas, and lots of dancing. This was my entry to Dakar – a formative experience that I believe lays the basis for the ideas collected here towards becoming a Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art.

Part of my first visit to Dakar included a residency that began immediately after the *Condition Report* symposium. So, after an intense period of about a week, the delegates from around the world departed, and I was left as the only guest of the RAW Material Company. Looking back on this experience now, the transition was seamless. My entry into Dakar was held and welcomed by some of the most active and prolific minds on the continent. And the RAW Material Company had already become a home with intense and sweet memories.

In the remaining month of my stay, I set out to pursue a series of works that were the initial prompts for beginning the PhD, and it was here that

the PhD can be thought to have begun. While the work that I made under the *Caught by Traffic* cycle of works is not the core of the submission here, the processes and explorations of space and site that it initiated, are important for the work at hand.

Caught by Traffic was an experiment in site-specificity. It proposed to work with taxi drivers in urban spaces to unlock dynamics of site and space that would ordinarily not be discernible. In this way, I set out to collaborate with taxi drivers in making the work.

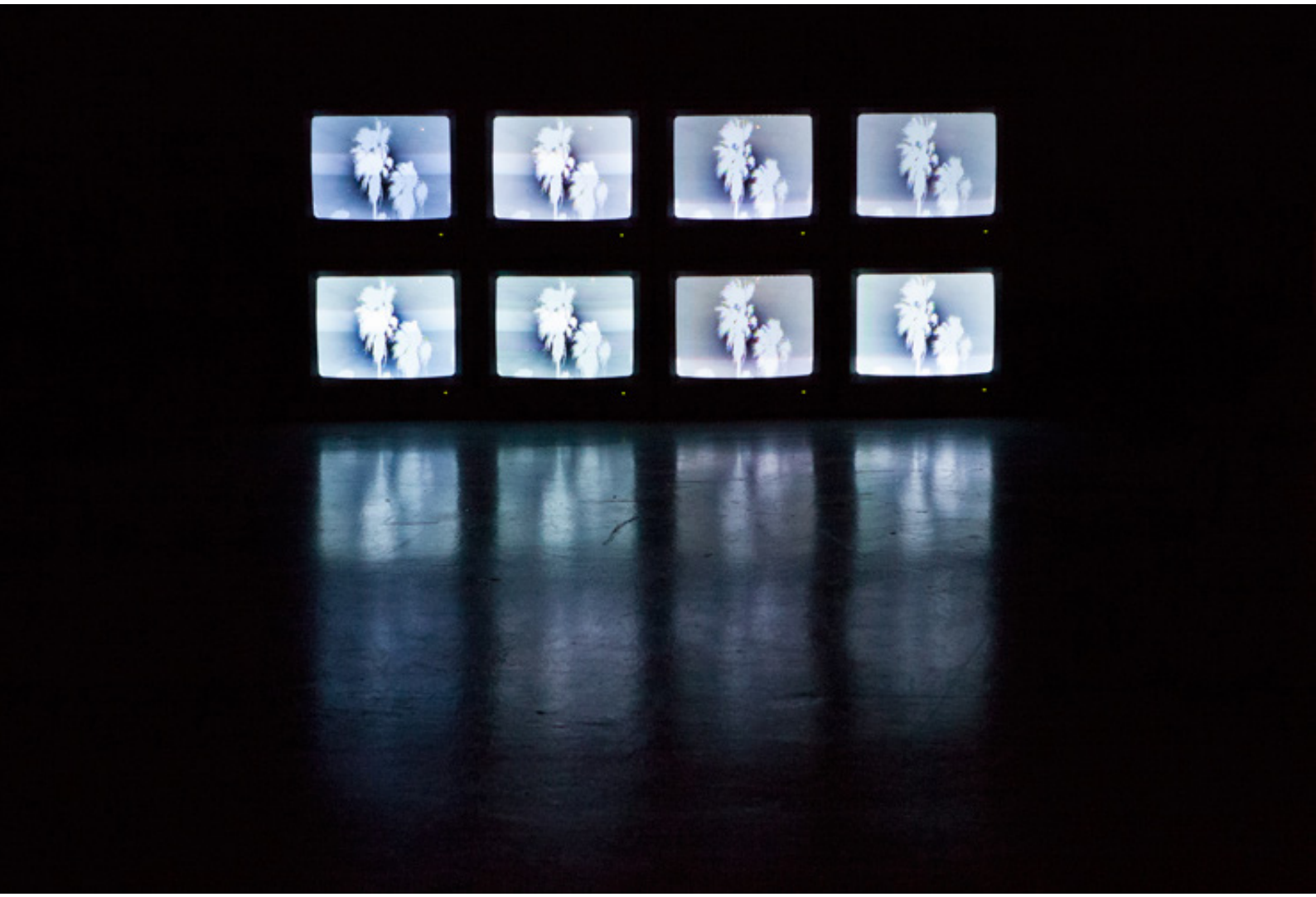
My approach was to look for people who owned taxis that were modified and embellished in ways that suggested a rigorous and serious investment into the visual capacity of the car as a form of symbolic or aesthetic project or space/place making.The *car rapide* was the form of transport that I focused on, and I spent the rest of my time switching between broken French, smatterings of English where I found it, and learning bits and pieces of Wolof.

The minutiae of this series of work are not the focus here, but I have added some writing and documentation of this work in appendix v. What is important about this project, and why I mention it, is because my intention, and my first assembled methodology that I pursued to unlock the notion of space and the dynamics of site, was through this framework. It was to situate the urban as central to the work, and it foregrounded the connections and disconnections, the continuities and discontinuities, between people, space and site.

Despite my best attempts at looking for a space of collaboration, and for overcoming what I felt to be pitfalls that come with documentary or anthropological methods of inquiry, I continually seemed to fold back into pre-demarcated roles, of me as specialist and the people I sought to collaborate with as subjects. This was not only a matter of distance, or a gap in intention and investment in the work – that was no doubt operative – but it was a process that was chaotic more so because it ignored the power of a fundamental feature of the site. Or at least the site was host to my presence. And, critically, the presence of my camera. In these early works, I tried hard to disrupt the intense and overdetermining presence of the camera.

Part of this disruption was to not make the camera central. In fact, in the three works that make up *Caught By Traffic*, I never travelled with a camera. I picked up whatever was at hand, whatever was available, and made the works in that way – my somewhat naive logic being that, if the camera was not an extension of physicality, not fetishised or over-invested in, then we could focus on the relations between me, the drivers, the painters, between all of us – including the car and what this all said about the city we were in – and I would be able to produce something that was not handicapped by the relationship of the external 'expert' capturing images and producing knowledge 'in the field'. Yes, I wanted to find a way outside of and beyond the colonial or documentary film or anthropological encounter. And no, I did not find the secret to going beyond these power relations. And, in fact, that was not the point. In many ways, the music videos that we made were collaborations of a sort. They exist as moments or nodes within complex and radically heterogenous sets of relations, desires – none of them reconciled – but playfully at work and teasingly at play. And, in ways, they contain traces of the power relations that were at work in those sites.

The camera as a site, and as a limit of possibility; as an instrument and a technology, an apparatus or dispositif



Zen Marie, *Inverted Palm*, 2018. 8 CRT monitors with looped video. Installation view at fem of colour. Johannesburg, South Africa.

that inevitably held sway – either in its physical presence or in the power of the relations it must organise and arrange, even in its absence – is something that became more clearly part of my thinking as I moved from *Caught by Traffic* to *Paradise Fallen*.

And while *Caught by Traffic* in Dakar was an important starting point, it was a later trip to Dakar, in 2017, where I spent three months, between March and May, as a 'witness' or interlocutor for the RAW Material Academy, led/curated by *Chimurenga* magazine, where the ideas towards *Paradise Fallen* began to incubate. In these months, I participated in the curriculum of the Academy, as an observer, with the view to writing a text for this project's publication. That text is also included, as appendix v.

Back in Dakar, I had that particular estranged and uncanny feeling of returning to a place that was so familiar, yet a place in which I was most certainly a foreigner. In the warm embrace of Chimurenga and the fellows of the academy, I wrote and finished the proposal for this PhD study. As I wrote the proposal, I also filmed the first draft of *Île Aux Serpents*.

Change and progressions are often difficult to track or to precisely pinpoint. But for me this was something of a fault line. In the writing of the proposal, which was marked by the practice, procedures and conventions of academic writing as I understood it then, I was satisfying an injunction from the university to fulfil a form of practice – or to make my practice sensible – and to motivate and argue for the epistemological dimensions of that practice. In my fashion, I did just that, producing just under 10 000 words of proposal that I submitted to two faculty-appointed readers, and further went through a public seminar at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WiSER). This was when my supervision was still shared between the Wits School of Arts and WiSER.

The passages of work – these sites of practice and the politics, strictures and conventions that they come with, including all the pitfalls and traps of institutionality – are foundational. And it is precisely because of this minefield, of the economies produced by academically institutionalised knowledge production, that the work became less anthropological, and less preoccupied with exorcising ghosts within the machine of western epistemes, and more about finding quieter, softer spaces for speculation.

In this, the RAW Material Company and Chimurenga were crucial. The people who work in these spaces, and the work that they do, in the way that they do it, were as far as you could go from the 'ivory tower' and its Machiavellian mischief and callous careerism. I started to realise that my investment in institutional critique was too occupied with mounting a reaction to the core of institutionality that the academy presupposes. More so, I realised that these gestures of institutional critique were reactionary in ways that only reaffirmed the centrality and power of the institution. I began to rethink a position of institutional critique in terms of a politics of institutional repair, in the sense that the progressive transformation of institutional spaces now necessitates a more complex mode of critique, that is different to Fallist or narrowly defined decolonial practice. But more than all of this, I began to realise that the true import of academic citizenship was precisely about leaving the academy, of leaving the museum, only to return with revitalised, critical energy.

As I wrote the proposal for this PhD, I realised that that form of writing was not the space or the site at which my practice existed. I am not a social



Zen Marie, *Ile Aux Serpents*, 2018. Installation view, RAW Material Company. Dakar, Senegal.

scientist. Neither am I on the edges of those disciplines conventionally figured in the humanities. However, I do still write, and the way that I write and the position that I write from is important.

How work is made, designed, and produced through its documentation and the writing that accompanies it, are crucial questions that must be left open as questions. If they are not, we allow the university industrial complex to flatten knowledge into homogenising templates and formats. These practices and forms of institutionality are forms of epistemic violence that prioritise legibility under the alibi of rigour. They demand coherence at the cost of difference. They are part of the massification of the university industrial complex that sees the university as a space to produce the legitimate subjects of late capitalism – subjects who are able to be punctual, carry out institutional procedures and write reports that account for these actions to the hierarchy and the source of funding.

If we remember that the university (in the western formulation we derive it from) was first initiated by scholars, philosophers, scientists and artists who refused to accept the hegemony of the Catholic Church, who refused to be silent or conform to overarching convention, ritual and institutionality – and who became pariahs or martyrs for insisting on science and creativity that was free from the strictures of the church – then we need to resist the organising administration of the university we find ourselves in now. It's just another church that protects another elite. The language has changed, but the project remains the same.

It was in this mix of ideas that *Paradise Fallen* was born. And it was while satisfying the requisites of the PhD proposal that I wrote the voice-over text for *Île Aux Serpents* (see beginning for this text).

The work I'd made prior to this point was important in enabling me to get to the point where I could allow myself the space to tap into an inner world of emotions, sensations and resonances. I had needed to move through a range of more material or analytical passages, that sought to explore visual culture as a way of critically unpacking *urban conflagrations*. The move from the material and analytical to the ephemeral and poetic was and still is not a comfortable one. It is a register that I am still working out and experimenting with. It is a mode that I believe has ambivalent relationships in reconciling with forms of politics that insist on solidarity, empathy and even selflessness. It pushes me to consider to what extent the poetic and the personal can be a moment for connection and solidarity, or to what extent it becomes self-serving and narcissistic. In this way, the poem of Danai Mupotsa that was included in the fem of colour installation, was instructive as an example where I believe this complexity is successful. The vitality of politics in the work is precisely enacted through the personal, through modes of empathy, and in its solidarity with others.

In Dakar, there are ancient forms of spiritual practice that are present, not in museums but in the everyday. Forms of animistic spiritual practice predate Islamic traditions, which in turn predate French coloniality. The first film in this submission, *Île Aux Serpents*, owes so much to an appreciation of the overlapping traces of these technologies, apparatuses and dispositifs. The writing and cinematography of *Île Aux Serpents* was in many ways prompted by, and in part is an homage, to these forces – forces that unsettle the machine time of the everyday, as the everyday invokes a durée that spans more than two thousand and twenty-three years, that

stretches beyond to the years 'before Christ'.

As mentioned, the first version of the film was written and filmed while I was in Dakar during the Chimurenga-led RAW Academy. In this space, I fed off a 'living library' of practitioners and thinkers. They included Jehan El-Tahri, Kodwo Eshun, Stacy Hardy, Lionel Manga, Graeme Arendse, Victor Gama, Ntone Edjabe, and Koyo Kouoh, among others. Their words, works, propositions and provocations are still fresh in my mind. And, in my own way, I aspire to build on their energies and labours.

I took the footage that I filmed in Dakar, and the text that I wrote, back home with me. And I edited. The process of editing the footage was relatively easy, in that the work already had a form and a structure, and my job was to render that emotional and political space and make it discernible in some way. The text was not as easy to work with. I had planned for it to be a voice-over, but with the image of a person walking through the landscapes. This figure in the landscape never materialised, as it was logistically not possible to produce this.

I tried a number of strategies, getting everyone from friends and family to read the voice-over, in multiple languages and in numerous tones. What kept on tripping me up was the painfully overbearing nature of the words. The words were overbearing, even though they sounded in a poetic register; they overdetermined and closed down the film, rather than opening it up. The images were always going to speak a language softer than even the softest or most abstract of words. And my awareness of this overbearing nature of words is part of what makes committing myself to these words on this surface, that you read now, so difficult.

How to write a PhD that must work in tandem with a body of work – that body of work being comprised of sensuous forms that ask light and sound to tease, provoke, seduce and challenge?

An image is what happens when light or sound become turned away from abstraction – away from direct unformed phenomena, and are quantified, differentiated and held captive in a syntactic and grammatical system. An image is a function of language.

What I learnt in my time in Dakar, is that there are spaces outside of or beyond the image, and there are ways in which images can do much more than satisfy the language functions of our brains. Perhaps a space where thinking can give way to feeling. It was this that I gleaned in Dakar, and it was this that I struggled through as I edited and wrote, back in my edit suite in Johannesburg.

As part of this struggle, I planned for another visit to Dakar, this time as part of the residency programme that RAW Material Company facilitates. This visit was significant as, for the first time, I did not go with an agenda that included an itinerary filled with people. My prior engagements there had been filled with the energies and conversations with the fellows and faculty of the academy, as well as the participants and presenters of the *Condition Report* symposium, and with the painters and drivers of the *car rapide*.

This time, in the context of this residency, I went solely to film. And over the course of two months, I immersed myself in filming the land- and seascapes, at sunrise and sunset. These two times of the day are moments where we are most alive to the movement of the earth around the sun. We see that which gives life. In ways not dissimilar to how animistic traditions embellish the movement of our solar system's energy source, I paid homage to the sun in my ritual of filming. The process was one of

being very still: the camera locked off on a tripod, quietly and closely observing the changing of the angles of light play across the land and sea.

The romanticism of these actions is not lost on me. And in many ways, this 'romantic' element is one that I have struggled with in the way that notions of the picturesque or the beautiful congeal as aesthetic forms that have dubious critical, political or similar charge and force. The type of images that I was making seemed to resonate with a kitsch, naïve, or even romantic set of images. Even though I was conscious of this at the time, I challenged myself to push beyond these self-criticisms and to get lost in the sunrises and sunsets. I also committed myself to following the process of filming, and it was in the pragmatics of timing the sunrise or sunset, scouting for locations that could be suitable, negotiating the presence of the camera in these locations, as well as all that goes into camera management – charging batteries, managing data files, and packing bags to be taken to the sites in which I filmed.

My presence at the sites themselves was much more static and stationary than what one normally identifies with a film or television shoot: the camera, locked off on a tripod, the camera person sitting next to it, not looking through the camera, but looking out into the sun. I must have cut a strange image to passers-by. People often came to talk, and asked what I was doing, as it was not even clear that I was filming. My pose was more of a person enjoying the view than it was of an active filmmaking process. My response was always something like, 'I am filming the landscape' or 'I am filming the light as it changes'. At which point, the person asking the question would turn from me to look at the rising or setting sun, and remark, 'Oh, it's really beautiful, isn't it?' And that said, we'd stand in silence looking at our sun.

Part of the residency included a public talk about the work I was doing. And an important part of this talk was the multilingual realities of Senegal, and my lack of either French or Wolof. Translation was a marked and essential feature of my experience in Senegal over the ten years that I moved between Senegal and my base in Johannesburg. Translations in and of space, traditions and cultural practices, and translations between languages.

I remember attending a public talk at RAW, where the English of the artist presenting their work and ideas was being translated into French. An elderly Senegalese man got up in the question and answer session afterward, took the mic and, speaking in Wolof, questioned why it was that this presentation was exclusively being translated into French? It should, according to him, more properly and appropriately have be translated into Wolof because, as he provocatively put it, 'French is the language that has raped my mouth and my mind.'

This provocation stuck with me. And I set about trying to find ways to engage with this reminder of how language is not neutral but carries with it an historicity that bears the traces of scars. Translating the text into Wolof was my first intuition, and I initially explored this possibility. As I tried to do this, I was confronted with a disturbing reality. That my presence in Dakar, even though carefully and patiently explored over a decade, led me to a position no more immersed in the workings of the city than an expat. My presence was that of a foreigner – more than a tourist, but still markedly estranged from my surroundings.

My presence was as an interlocutor in a contemporary art space, and my work or practice embedded within that. I realised that despite all my hard worked-for experience, I still felt as if I did not have the 'right' or the capacity

to work in Wolof, and to do so would be an appropriation that went counter to the ideas in the work I was developing. Working in Wolof, I felt, would be to claim a kind of authenticity that I did not have.

The text for the voice-over speaks alternatively and ambiguously from the perspective of the coloniser, on the one hand, and the colonised on the other. In both cases, it was me that was doing the writing, and it was me that was channelling forms of ambivalence in terms of my identifications. My through line in this text was of simultaneously inhabiting the space of the victim, and of the perpetrator of deep violences. And here the only act of translation I could stomach was that of a translation into French. Somehow, my experiences as a first-language English speaker, and of being a person historically produced through forms of migration, both forced and coerced, makes clear that there are limits to my ability to connect directly, or claim connection, to the land in Senegal. My ancestral path does not open directly onto this space. And my presence as a figure moving through that landscape, as a visitor/stranger, needs to respect these invisible limits, and not lay claim to that which is not offered to me.

A Movement from One Site to Another

The process of making *Île Aux Serpents* was one driven by encounters with a city, Dakar. It was a process that lasted over five years, and was a slow, patient accumulation of ideas, forms and intimacies. I could not have made that work 'on the fly', written a script, chosen a location, scouted it, and executed it. I had to pass through and go beyond that first work, *Caught by Traffic*, that I'd made in the city, which suggested a way of processing images that was much more immersed in forms of analytics and rationality than it was keyed into a concern for representationality. The point of that work, even at that stage of my thinking, was to initiate a kind of drive, or traversal, of space through a partially absurdist, surrealist or Dadaist play with form. It was to push the ethnographic encounter into top spin by mobilising forms of popular visual displays of masculinity. There is a lot that I think is useful and important in this work. But at the level of this research and this reflection, it operates as a scaffolding – a necessary process that was needed for me to pass through, and perhaps even to exorcise my first, instinctual, and in-built preconceived ideas of what artmaking in an academic context needs to be.

In this sense, the forms of creative practice that are allowed to flourish, find home, or to be floated at all in a university research economy, are forms of practice that can hold their ground and be justified against criteria borrowed from the sciences, applied to the social sciences, and then forced onto the humanities, or what they are called in the United States, the 'liberal arts'. The art school, with its multiplicity of chaotic forms of practice, which include tacit and embodied knowledge, skills, techniques and processes, exists in a fragile and precarious space in relation to the university's knowledge economy. The imposition of criteria and processes of administration, crudely cut and pasted from the sciences, helps us little to fully appreciate the radical difference of practices that do not get formed in the first instance as a research question.

The nature of practice-based research as a set of radically heterogeneous, speculative practices that demand a questioning of how knowledge is produced, is a challenge and a duty of such work in a research-based institution. If we allow ourselves to be folded back neatly into social-science methodologies, then we risk

the reification of neocolonial forms of hierarchies of knowledge, and in what form they are or can be made legible at all.

To insist on forms of practice that stretch towards the unknown, the illegible, and the inchoate, is the challenge that the process of making *Île Aux Serpents* offered to me. Left with the remains of this process in the form of a 17-minute video piece, the next challenge was to find spaces for sharing this work, that could extend and meaningfully contribute to the ideas contained within, but also respect and channel the energies, forms and poetics of the tenor and tone of the work's ineffability.

And here we move from the site of making – the studio – to the site of dissemination – the museum or gallery.

fem of colour

fem of colour is an itinerant, non-location-specific space that was imagined through or alongside the studio practice of Gabrielle Goliath and the curatorial practice of James McDonald. fem of colour, conceived as an open, collaborative and public-facing initiative, was the first site for the first installation of *Île Aux Serpents*.

The space, at that time, was located on the west side of Johannesburg, in the Newtown district. Newtown is a light industrial area that has gone through successive phases of gentrification. At the time of showing the work there, in September 2018, the neighbourhood was in somewhat of a slump, and the local government and city endorsed and privately backed developments that had experienced a string of failures in trying to mobilise arts and culture, and the numerous cultural spaces that are housed in the neighbourhood, such as the Market Theatre, Museum Africa, The Market Photo Workshop, being the largest among many others. Their investment seemed to be predicated on the foot traffic that the newly built shopping mall would generate.

In 2018, the mall was opened for business, and provided a safe and easy space for residents and passers-by (of which there were many, as the Newtown Mall is immediately adjacent to a major public transport hub, Bree Street Taxi Rank) to shop, eat and be entertained. The mall did not satisfy all the needs of everyone who moves through the area, however. Being a more affluent retail space, it was more expensive than the more cost-effective, bulk warehouse-styled markets that are dotted around Newtown, still serviced by the majority of people who visit there, especially those in Johannesburg from out of town, needing to buy in bulk to transport to homes as far away as the coastal areas of South Africa, or even further away to Zimbabwe, or even Rwanda and Zambia, as they are connected by overland bus routes.

fem of colour was housed in the attic of a former warehouse, which now was home to a club. The club, being open only at night and closing in the early hours of the morning, did not do much to create a sense of occupancy in the area. During the day, the alleyway that gave access to the building was very much in line with the traffic that a light industrial area would support. The other residents in this complex of warehouses and attics were made up of clothing manufacturers and designers, in what was hoped would be a kind of cultural hub. In fact, the support that fem of colour received from the owners was rationalised as a way to stimulate foot traffic and visibility in the area – a classic well-worn tactic of low or subsidised rent for artists, as a way to invigorate and elevate the economic potential of a neighbourhood.

My invitation to work in the space came through a series of conversations

with Gabrielle and James about the work. I had screened the film for them, and they were excited to host a screening of the work in the space – a casual invitation, which quickly snowballed into a full-blown installation of the work, a portfolio of drawings, and a series of public events.

The space was light-proofed and painted black, two interventions that Gabrielle and James had already effected, so that a minimal amount of ambient light entered the space, and so that there would be little to no reflection of light off the walls. This made the space perfect for the screening and installation of video work.

The only intervention that I introduced to the space was to design and build a screen for the film. Deciding on the size, scale and physicality of a screen in a space is a process that importantly relies on an understanding not only of how light emitted from a projector works, but the thinking must critically continue to anticipate how the overall architecture functions, especially in relation to how people will navigate and move through a space.

The decisions and process of thinking through the work in shooting, and in editing, is not merely extended, but in fact actioned or operationalised in the curatorial moment of installation. Video work for installation, as I've said earlier, takes nothing for granted, or assumes nothing as given when installing a work in a space.

The economic dimensions of curating art spaces are often opaque in the extreme, and at best papered over to foreground the work as distinct and separate to the production processes that go on behind the scenes. In the absence of institutional backing or commercial support, fem of colour is very much an artist-run space, in that it relies on the resources and ingenuity of the artists to function. The contribution by James and Gabrielle was to provide the space to me rent-free. More than that, they were able to support the project by way of AV equipment, where they provided the projector and the audio infrastructure for the main projection. This incredibly generous support enabled me to use the small amount of funds that I had available, both from my personal funds and from a small grant that was made available by my participation in a symposium series that was being hosted at Wits University. The *Watershed* symposium, in the end, partnered with the installation at fem of colour, and the work became part of the programme of the conference. In this regard, Lenore Manderson was instrumental in engaging and supporting the project, as well as its extension in the text that I wrote for and that was published in the MIT journal *Leonardo*.

Being the first time that I was installing the work in a space, and the first time that I had the opportunity to test, play and tease out what related forms were emerging through the work, I used the moment to experiment with a range of related ideas. There was a series of drawings that first started in another site and another time, which became relevant. These drawings, part of a series initiated in Réunion, suggested another island off the coast of the African continent, and another set of deep colonial relations, as well as deeper and longer durées of planetary time.

Other elements included two monitor-based video works, and a stack of photo-lithography prints that had a video still on the one side and a poem by Danai Mupotsa on the other. Inside all of this, curated as the central focal point of the installation, was the film, Île Aux Serpents.

Seeing the film like this – in a space specifically curated to think with, and seeking to understand the function

and form of the work – was incredibly revealing. It prompted engagements with all the ideas contained in my PhD proposal and, importantly, challenged and unsettled most of them. Quite a few things happened in this moment of installation. But what was clear was that there was no other way to get deeper into the work, and to understand what it was that I was doing or what the potential of what I was doing could be, other than by doing this work, and committing to showing and sharing the work, even though many unresolved questions still existed in terms of how it fitted within the research design of the PhD.

Methodologically speaking, then, this moment of dissemination, or of staging, was more consistent with ways of working or processing ideas in the studio, workshop or edit suite. It was clear that the nature of the space as 'artists' project space' meant, significantly, that it was a space of experiment and flux, and in such a way lent itself to my need to develop an idea, and negotiate the coordinates of the work.

However, my contention is that even in more formal spaces of exhibition, there can still be, or always is already, a kind of thinking and decision making going on, on the fly, and in deep relationality between the space, the work, and the people who see the work. This triangulation is at the foundation of what constitutes the space as a site.

What is the most important, most meaningful and remarkable part of showing work, is to have the privilege of people coming to view the work, and the conversations that emerge from that experience. As it was an artist-run space, there was no infrastructure for 'invigilation' of the space. In the absence of this resource, I took on the role of operationally managing the day-to-day curation of the space. Every morning during the run of the show, I would arrive at the space 30 minutes before the advertised opening hours, and first turn on all the video works, and the minimally curated lighting for the works on paper. Next, I would sweep and mop the space, and the toilets that serviced the space, refilling handwash or toilet paper as necessary. Then the waiting.

I had intended for these long hours of waiting to be filled by writing in the space – my idea being to use this as a moment to further the questions, concepts and themes of the work through writing and reflection. This, however, did not prove possible to do. My contact details were given as contact details for the show, so I had a lot to do in terms of fielding queries and questions. The space at that time was not pinpointed on Google Maps, so there was a fair amount of giving directions and assistance to help people find the space. And then there was creating and following up on a mailing list that I had cobbled together with the help of others, and managing communications on this mailing list. The thinking was that, as a space that is off the map, so to speak, there needed to be consideration given to inviting people to come and see the work. In effect, I was the infrastructure and personnel for curating, invigilating and managing the space.

And then, most essentially, people visited the space. And in this, I acutely observed the interactions and intuitive movement of bodies in the space.



Zen Marie, *Production Still*, 2018. Dakar, Senegal.

Site-Specific Curatorial Strategies

The timeline of an exhibition run usually begins with an opening. This could be one or a few events that signal and communicate to the public that something new has begun. This could be a *private view,* a press launch, and/or a public opening. For large-scale or high visibility shows at big commercial or public spaces, it's not uncommon for all three to be performed.

It has long been considered that the opening itself is a relational form, that is, not simply an extra additional practice separate to the work. While it has become widely understood that the opening becomes one of the many 'paratextual' statements, along with captions, wall texts, frame choices etc., and while they are not part of the 'the work' in the main, they are forms that contribute to the functioning, and even meaning, of the work *itself*.

Paratextuality, a concept conventionally attributed to literary theorist Gérard Genette, is argued to operate in a way that is fundamental to the text itself and, following Philippe Lejeune, is proposed as having the power to 'control' the 'whole reading' of the text.

> More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold. [...] a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that [...] is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it. (Genette 1997: 1-2)

What Genette and others are indicating here is a bit more than a contradiction of the cliché, 'you can't read a book by its cover'. The cover, most clearly in this analogy to the book, holds power as a 'threshold' that carries 'influence', that allows for an elevation of both 'reception' and 'readings' of the text in the main. Paratextuality, following Genette, is a strategic and pragmatic device that seeks to garner this influence, which I further suggest functions to generate meaning as well as, significantly, value. This is a structure that Jacques Derrida opens up in his concepts of the parergon and the supplement.

In this sense, paratexts operate as markers of value or markers of locating a work within pre-existing value chains. A preface, or a review at the back of the book; a prestigious publishing house's logo, etc. actively work to confer credibility to the writing in the book that is 'the work'.

No text operates without these legitimating conventions, and this extends to other texts beyond the literary.

A film that boasts its Palme d'Ors, inclusions in festivals, or its awards and nominations, strategically places these prominently, so that it is not uncommon for these paratextual devices to be signalled to a viewer before they view the film. And if you don't like or agree with the film, then you have to mount your case contra to the 'critics' choice at Cannes', or wherever else they may stem from.

The world of contemporary art is perhaps more coy or restrained in how it generates meaning and value to a work of art. The artist's signature can be seen to be such a paratextual device. The authorship of a work of art is highly significant here, and the signature and date denote a location within the author's prior work, as too their relation to the significance and profile of the author in an art economy. Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' is relevant here, that imbues a work of art with a myriad of meanings and values

that circulate around the work. And certainly the aura of the artist, especially if it is an artist consecrated within a canon of art, sets a tone and space for relation that shapes both the meaning and value of the work.

The space in which the work is shown is additionally a hugely significant paratextual device. Whether it is a museum, and which kind of museum, of what standard, history and pedigree, signals very loudly, in advance of the work, the value and meaning of the work. It can lend credibility or confer authority to a work or a body of work. Part of the valuation of an artist's practice is to analyse in which collections the artist's work is homed. And this is often a key marker (among many others) that allows a monetary valuation of the work.

The question of paratextuality can be seen to have parallels or analogous operations in what Mieke Bal explores as a process of *framing*, or what Derrida opens up under the concepts of the supplement and of the parergon. The core point being that that which sits beside or is in addition or extra to the work, is in fact of vital importance to creating systems of value and meaning that are, in the end, attributed to a functioning of the work itself.

Paratextuality, as it includes all that surrounds the work, is important here, as it helps us understand the work and its exhibition as a site.

It is this juncture, or travelling of concepts, that I wish to explore, not only as concepts but as forms of practice that emerged within political trajectories that set out to critically contest forces of globalisation, commercialisation, misogyny, homophobia, and white supremacy within the art world.

Paratextuality, like site specificity, owe their lineage to the forces that shaped critical or radical theoretical formations. And as the vantage point from which global contemporary art views these formations, are markedly from a series of discourses that centre and unfold from a western episteme – those key markers being the European industrial revolution, and the European world wars. That other industrial revolutions, and other epoch-defining conflicts are not conventionally seen to be catalysts of, or organising devices for, movements or moments in western art history, is telling. And I deliberately want to draw attention to the geocultural and temporal locatedness of these concepts, precisely because they allow us to understand not only how and why these radical traditions of contestation emerge, but also because they allow us to understand how these radical forms of theory and practice are recuperated or folded back into support to validate the very structures that they set out to critique in the first place.

In the specific case of an exhibition then, it is widely accepted that nothing is incidental, and that all of the paratextual devices, necessarily including those of relationality and of site, contribute towards questions of meaning and value.

The opening or *vernissage* and the closing *finnesage* are significant moments in an exhibition's life. They suggest modes of relationality, and draw attention to the site via the performance of collective and ritualistic tradition. Nicolas Bourriaud contributes to this argument, by way of pinpointing a theory of 'relational aesthetics', and gathers together a list of artists who he proposes foreground a contestation or critique of these traditions as part of their work. He cites several artists in this regard: Rirkrit Tiravanija, for example, absorbs the ritual of the opening into the work through his performances that incorporate what would ordinarily be the work of hired caterers. His food performances absorb that pragmatic, but ritualise the serving of cocktail snacks, canapés or hors d'oeuvres at an

opening, and in this absorption, they redirect and divert the moment into one of a hyperbolic if not absurd projection of cultural or race-based stereotypes. His work with food poses questions about community, place, gathering and intimacy. The catering is not in this case a paratext, but is, in fact, part of the main text.

There are many other examples of how paratextuality is played with or even contested in exhibition curatorial practice. But even when it is not overtly contested, it is common for curators to seek out a way to integrate all forms of paratextuality, such that these statements support the work – from the basic consideration of the typography of wall texts and invites, to the where, how and if to service a bar, and what catering. While all these aspects are considered and scrutinised in detail, they are not often mobilised or seen to be fundamental to the work *itself,* which still is perceived to lie elsewhere.

In the forms of installation practice that I pursued in all three iterations of *Paradise Fallen*, I was very conscious of the moment of installation as constituting a site, and that each iteration of the work was not only informed by the site but that the site became an important and constitutive component of the work itself. Here, the site, not only in line with the injunction of the concepts and practices of site-specificity and relational aesthetics, insists on incorporating these forms of paratextuality by asserting a form of institutional critique[36].

The space of an exhibition is never simply a neutral, empty shell, blank slate or tabula rasa. The exhibition space is a site of contestation – of demonstrations of power – and is, at its core, part of a series of legitimating practices that endorse or enable forms of institutional hegemony to be perpetuated.

In this way, I again insist on the site of this PhD – of this text, the textuality of the work, and all the paratextual statements included – to be received as part of the 'work' that is submitted and examined. The work does not lie exclusively in any one of the videos, nor in any of the textual configurations of the shows. What constitutes this PhD is not exclusively this text, nor is it even in the relationship of this text and the documentation of the work. Rather, the entirety of the submission is in the accumulation of all these iterative textual statements and combined performative energy that these combined iterations of text produce or articulate through their ability to frame, shape, suggest or assert their relationality.

This, then, is a kind of hypertext, that not only shoots out to other texts in a series of citational spasms, but this relational, nebulous and opaque text also importantly folds into itself and self-reflexively attempts to eat its own tail, like the mythical ouroboros, as opacity leads into forms of laying bare the processes and politics that both inhibit and inform this text.

Interventions by Long-Standing Collaborators

The forms of paratextuality that I have invested in, as forms that were not seen as separate and last-minute additions to the work, were in the form of an 'opening speech', and the 'jazz band' at the opening.

In this way, I invited long-standing collaborators to intervene in the work. This included conventional forms of intervention that followed from the structure of an artist's talk, with respondents. And in this way, the work included responses from

36. There is a large body of critical writing on institutional critique, including by Hito Steyerl and others.

Charne Lavery, Danai Mupotsa, Dee Marco, Tracy Murinik, and Khanyisile Mawhayi. (Mawhayi's text that was written in response to the installation can be found in appendix iv) Lavery and Mupotsa engaged with me in the style of a question-and-answer session at the fem of colour (one of these conversations is included in the main text on page 221) and Dee Marco and Tracy Murinik prepared more formal or structured responses to the work, in its 2019 iteration at The Point of Order (an AI transcription is included of this conversation on pages 65 and 90). This was a much less relational moment, as this text was not ever spoken in space, but exists as a critical meditation on making sense of the work.

These interventions were highly significant in a number of ways. In the first instance, they were pragmatic curatorial or paratextual gestures that aimed to open the work up to a discussion. The images, and the immersive quality of the films, existed in a sensuous and sensory mode that required of the audience a suspension of time and language, and being able to 'be present' in the texture of the work. These tacit and embodied forms of being in the moment, or being transported by the work into the landscapes that I filmed, is and was an important feature of the work.

However, the installations were also intended to be textual contributions to the site of this PhD and, as such, it was necessary to open up dimensions of the work that allowed or prompted speculation, reading, analysis and critique in the form of question and answers, or through framing a critical text.

These are then not simply paratextual statements, but are rather speculations and responses to the work by people who cared to intervene in the mode of what can be called 'critical friendship'. These are important interlocutors of the work. And in this moment of collecting the multiple strands in which the work exists and into which it splinters, they become documents that allow a viewer who was not present at the exhibitions to have a sense of what these moments were, beyond photographic documentation and beyond my ability to describe them.

In this sense, the texts of the transcriptions equally become important sites that allow for an exploration of the work in those iterative moments, and in this vein, I will consider and engage with them here, again, in a mode of call and response.



Zen Marie, *Paradise Fallen: Blaxis*, 2021. Installation view, WITS Art Museum. Johannesburg, South Africa.

A forgotten contents page and partial false start of a bibliography

The Ocean

The vastness of the view to the horizon. Oceans, archipelagos; from Kant's sublime to Glissant's archipelagic thinking.

Rhythmanalysis: The Production of an Ephemeral Hermeneutics of Space

Performativity and the Production of Space

Poetics and Deterritorialization: A Loop of Islands is an Archipelago

Islands, archipelagos, cinematic creolisation

Towards a bibliography

'Le Monde tremble, se créolise [...] La pensée archipélique tremble de ce tremblement.'
(Glissant 2005: 75-76)

Glissant's poetics of relation

Additional bibliography for this section:

Édouard Glissant / *The Poetics of Relation* (1990)

Kamau Brathwaite / *Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite's Prose/Poetry as Sound-Space* (2003)

Elizabeth DeLoughrey / *The Litany of Islands, the Rosary of the Archipelagoes: Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy* (2001)

Jonathan Pugh / *Relationality and Island Studies in the Anthropocene* (2018)

Richard Kearney / *Britain and Ireland: Towards a Post-Nationalist Archipelago* (2003)

Carol Farbotko / *Wishful Sinking: Disappearing Islands, Climate Refugees and Cosmopolitan Experimentation* (2010)

Christian Depraetere / 'The Challenge of Nissology: A Global Outlook on the World Archipelago. Part I: Scene Setting the World Archipelago' (2008)

Godfrey Baldacchino / 'Studying Islands: On Whose Terms? Some Epistemological and Methodological Challenges to the Pursuit of Island Studies' (2008)

Christian Depraetere / 'The Challenge of Nissology: A Global Outlook on the World Archipelago. Part II: Scene Setting the World Archipelago' (2008)

Owe Ronström / 'Island Words, Island Worlds: The Origins and Meanings of Words for 'Islands' in North-West Europe' (2009)



Zen Marie, *Ile Aux Serpents*, 2018. Installation view, fem of colour. Johannesburg, South Africa.

Paradise Fallen Framing Text[37] fem of colour, 2019

Paradise Fallen is a cycle of work that includes photographic, paper-based, performative and video components.

Initiated in 2016 on a residency at Cité des Arts on Île de la Réunion, *Paradise Fallen* continued while working through the residency and Academy programmes at the RAW Material Company on the peninsula city of Dakar, Senegal in 2017 and 2018.

Paradise Fallen explores conceptual and geographic ambiguities of islands, as they offer much imaginative potential for dreams, desires, fantasies, fears and anxieties to be rehearsed through them.

The work plays with narratives that float on the Indian and Atlantic Oceans as personal, emotive, historical and political registers that are courted, teased and provoked.

This work is a form of creative research that I have been researching, shooting, drawing and conceptualising for the last 5 years. The work, which is interdisciplinary in nature, includes conventional theoretical and literary research, filmmaking, and large-scale drawings. All of these elements came together in a solo exhibition or installation that was a part of the 2018 *Watershed Symposium*, hosted through Wits University.

The form, content, conceptual as well as political/ emotional registers and thematic areas that the work engages in, contributes to thinking around ideas of landscape, memory, trauma, and desire in ways that I believe are unique and original.

The cycle of work aims to take the viewer through a series of prompts and provocations, in order to allow or ask for an engagement with the ambivalence of desire and violence. This is intended to be stretched across fictional, emotional, political, personal and aesthetic registers.

The work started to take shape during two artists in residence programmes in 2017: first at Cité des Arts in Réunion, followed by a residency at RAW Material Company in Dakar. Furthermore, the core writing of the script for the film was made while I audited the Chimurenga-led RAW Material Academy, also in Dakar, later that year. As such, much of the engagement with the politics of landscape and the nature of islands, in colonial and postcolonial contexts, is owed to interactions with these spaces.

The body of work includes:

3 x videos – one large-scale projection, one sculptural 6-channel work, and one single-channel monitor piece
2 x large-scale drawings (140 x 140 cm and 140 x 500 cm)
1 x printed stack of photo-litho plates.

The work was initially screened in an abbreviated form in Dakar, Senegal, and thereafter it was installed much more elaborately in Johannesburg, at fem of colour, a multidiscipline platform for engagement in Newtown, and most recently at the Serendipity Arts festival in Goa, India.

The body of work is a serious and substantial solo show, the culmination of ideas, research, conversations and making over the past 5 years. It is indeed already proving to be generative of further work and research, importantly in its implications for my PhD research on site-specificity.

In this cycle of work, the land, the city, the landscape and the ocean become more than geographic features, they exceed the limits of location or even the specificity of site. In many ways the landscape – or oceanscape in this particular instance – become characters driving a narrative rather than simply the setting or mise en scene for narrative to occur.

The ocean in many ways exists outside of technology and could even be thought of as a device for metaphysical contemplation. The ocean can be linked not only to conceptions of the sublime following Kant and Burke but also as an incredibly powerful force of historical and political weight in the work of Paul Gilroy, Isabel Hofmeyr, Pamila Gupta and others.

Certainly the concepts of the Middle Passage and of the Indian Ocean spark important scholarship that situates the ocean as integral to negotiating symbolic and economic forces of colonialism. Certainly, Black radical thought and critical theory from especially the Caribbean cannot do without it. The ocean becomes a crucially important, because ambivalent, space from which to viscerally and poetically leverage more analytical critical work. And it is no wonder that it figures prominently in literary work as well.

The ocean suggests a figure, device, character and narrative that has fixated poets and novelists, from Homer to Conrad to Césaire. It is a figure

37. This text was written to frame the exhibition at the fem of colour.

vast, undefinable and provides the first material substance for linking continents and people across the globe.

In this scholarship of the ocean, the Island emerges as a figure crucial to consider. From Daniel Defoe, to Robert Louise Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and even Aldous Huxley's *The Island*, the geographic form of the Island has provided more than a mise en scène, it has instead functioned as a character or narrative device that provokes a fundamental disorder, breakdown or even obliteration of western society. Following Pamila Gupta, the Island is marked more by its connections with the outside than by an insularity.

The Island is important as it connects and lays the ground for the exorcism of dreams, desires and fantasies.

Paradise Fallen explores these ideas in a way that pushes the Island into a critical proximity with a kind of terrifying beauty, a horror and form that is present in the work of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. While the film picks up on these literary and theoretical cues, it insists on an aesthetic and poetic register that is integral to its cinematic logic. What follows are both images of the installation as well as a conversation hosted in the space, inside the installation, with a friend, colleague and collaborator, Danai Mupotsa.

***Île Aux Serpents*, the Film**

This film is the central work of the *Paradise Fallen* cycle. It was begun in April 2017 while I was present at the Chimurenga-led RAW Academy at the RAW Material Company in Dakar, Senegal.

The work is triggered by the landscape around the Dakar peninsula and catalysed by thinking through the Islands of Ngor, Gorée and especially Île de la Madeleine (or L'île au Sarpan as it is sometimes also called).

The ocean and the land meet on this coastline in ways that enact a dramatic and tantalising allusion to mythology, narratives, histories and forms that momentarily appear, emerge and recede. The tension in the work is between elemental forms and transitions, of desire, yearning, pain, loss and regret.

The voice-over, of an undefined character, narrates the desire and conflict of a series of events that occurred on an island sometime in the past.

The compulsion for return is disturbed by the recognition that a return will lead to the total obliteration of the narrator's self.

During a residency in January/February 2018, I revisited many of the places I had begun filming in 2017, and also revised and rewrote the script that was the basis for much of this photographic exploration.

The result of this is a kind of video essay, located within an installation form, that attempts to tease out and court an encounter with the terror that lurks beneath the landscape.

The film should be shown in a large space. The space would be empty, perhaps with one long bench.

The projection and audio would work to immerse the viewer in the landscape.

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Tracey Rose, *San Pedro V: The Hope, I Hope*, 2005. Jerusalem, Israel/Palestine.

Zen and Megan Go to the Beauty Salon[38]

Zen Marie: *(to voice recorder)*
I am here with Megan Mace at the Huan Juan beauty spa and hotel.
I'm getting a pedicure and Megan Mace is getting a foot massage.
(to Megan)
Have you ever had a foot massage before?

Megan Mace: No.

ZM: Have you ever had a pedicure before?

MM: Yes, for my matric dance, and it was really bad.

ZM: Why was it bad?

MM: I ended up with some gel stuff on my toenails and it became really weird. It was a mission to get it off. So I just gave up with those kinds of things … and I don't wear sandals.

ZM: Okay, so, Mika Conradie asked me to write an article about the form of the exhibition opening – relational aesthetics, or something like that. I thought about it, and instead I'm proposing an interview with you, as your work looks at these things in very interesting ways. Is that okay?

MM: Ja, I consent.

ZM: So, VANSA is paying me R3 000 for this. I'm just going to pay for your foot massage. Does that seem fair to you?

MM: Ja, it seems like a transaction.

ZM: Is it a transaction that you agree with?

MM: Ja, it's better than just sitting and talking. At least I get something out of it.

ZM: I was a bit worried that it was a bit disproportionate – I get R3 000 and you only get a foot massage.

MM: No, not really Zen, I think it's okay.

ZM: You think it's okay? If I was you, I would negotiate for lunch as well.

MM: Are you hungry, Zen?

ZM: *(laughing)* Ja, most of the time!

MM: I don't know, I suppose I'll see afterwards. Maybe my mind will change.

ZM: So, how do you feel about this situation here?
MM: Well, I mean, when you proposed having a pedicure, I thought about it, um, because I have like a foot phobia. I just think that feet are like cats' tails – they have a weird kind of like … *thing* to them.

But I suppose it's just like one of those things, Zen.

I suppose it's strange to have an interview in any case. And like I said, I don't go for pedicures, so .... I don't know what I am going to get out of it anyway …

ZM: *(to voice recorder)*
So at the moment, Megan is getting her back rubbed. She has her feet in a bucket of water, and I've got my feet up on a stool, and they are getting scraped.

(to Megan)
So … give me a bit of background to the work that you, Gabi and Dawood did at the art fair.

MM: It began with Gabi proposing to me and Dawood Petersen that we do something for the art fair. Gabi as a curator, Dawood as a collector, and myself as an artist. Initially we didn't know what the outcome would be. We developed a methodology in the beginning that involved sending tasks to each other that had to have specific outcomes and be completed by specific dates. So, for instance, I asked Dawood to buy three things from Herbert Evans, because I thought it would be interesting to see what a collector would buy from an art supply shop. I asked Gabi to get her academic transcripts from all the educational institutions that she'd attended.

38. This interview was initially part of a commissioned for The Visual Arts Network of South Africa. The series was in order to provide young artists tools/insights into the art industry. I chose to interview Megan Mace, an artist whose work was at the time focused on forms of relationality and site-specificity within the artworld. The interview was never published.

Another task was when Gabi asked Dawood to make a selection of images. It was interesting in the relation between the curator, the collector and the artist. The remnants of these exchanges was in some way present in the booth at the art fair. Oh, and there was also the work where I spelt Gabi's name wrong.

The other part of the work was where we had wine from a range of galleries, with information on the cost and the brand attached. Each person who visited the booth was offered a glass of wine in exchange for a donation. They also had to fill out a form that consisted of questions, like, What was your favourite booth? Do you know any of the artists showing at the art fair? Have you signed up for any memberships? So it was kind of this exchange that took place.

What was interesting was that people were not only selecting a wine, but a gallery at the same time. Some people would ask for the most expensive wine, regardless of the gallery that it came from.

ZM: Where was the most expensive wine from?

MM: It was Graham Beck from Art on Paper. No, no … Art on Paper was Arabella. Graham Beck was from … I can't remember now.

ZM: So where do you think the 'work' exists in this piece? Could you put your finger on a precise point, saying 'this is the work'?

MM: I think it was when people came into the booth and interacted, and were asked to make the decision of which wine to choose, and to fill out the form. People were asked to participate in that way, to interact with us – Gabi, Dawood and myself. That became the outcome of the project in itself, this participatory moment. You could also say that the work exists in the stack of surveys that we have, and maybe the catalogue, but I think that the work was most successful at that point [at the art fair] when people interacted with the booth. People walked around and kept on coming back to the booth, so we had a kind of community that came together.

ZM: Can you tell me more about this community? What kind of people kept on coming back?

MM: For instance, the collector's and curator's – Dawood's and Gabi's – friends and colleagues would fill out the form but then also took on our role in explaining the project to others who then came back to the booth (maybe to speak to Dawood and Gabi, but also because our wine was going for a cheaper price). I think people also found 'safety' in the booth, where this community maybe came back because of being able to find that common face amongst all the random unknown ones.

This community and also developed further, maybe, by word of mouth. But I also feel that people, even the 'random' visitor, came back because there was this weird sense of community in our booth versus just 'art', white walls and a desk and person (gallerist) who maybe wanted to answer their questions.

ZM: The acquisition of wine from galleries, speaks to … well, I call it ritual, you called it a situation, of the practice of galleries providing free drinks to visitors at openings. What do you think about this practice?

MM: Well, some are free, some ask for a donation.

ZM: What is the difference between a gallery that gives drinks for free and a gallery that asks for donations?

MM: I think it says something about the standing of the gallery. Umm … once you have been asked for money for wine, it changes how you view the space. They are asking …

ZM: But it's common practice, it's an established tradition, and people have come to expect free drinks at openings, right? So why do you think this practice exists?

MM: Well, it's part of the invitation to come and celebrate the opening, I would say. And in a way, maybe it's a way to make you stay longer. And then, of course, the alcohol component, which opens people up to conversation, conversation that you would not normally have if you were walking down the street with someone else. Umm … and also to loosen tongues and wallets.

ZM: How is your response to free drinks? Has it changed from when you first started art school to now?

MM: Obviously, as a student, I think … well it's a stereotype then, that you go to openings for the free drinks. I used to … well I actually still do it … and the work becomes secondary to some extent. It's like you wait for Thursday to come to have free drinks.

(sound of hands clapping vigorously on skin)

ZM: Is there an acceptable amount to drink at an opening?

MM: Well, I usually drink until the beer is done.

ZM: So you drink beer, not wine?

MM: Yes. Well, if there is good wine … But I don't know what good wine is. But generally I have a beer.

ZM: Is it because you are sceptical about the quality of the wine?

MM: No, not at all. Like I said, I don't know about the quality of wine, Zen.

ZM: Do you think that there is judgement placed on how people drink at openings? Or the approach to drinking? Do you think there is an unspoken etiquette?

MM: Well, it's interesting. From my experience of bartending, you see people either coming back again and again or others being a little more afraid of refilling … And there is also the thing of when the bar closes. Some galleries have a specific time, whilst some of the bars close once the alcohol is finished.

ZM: What do you think that fear is based on?

MM: I think it's about yourself … what's that word … where you are ... when you become self-conscious. You are afraid of being judged by other people. Some people just go for the drinks, but others are more interested in the work – the work is more interesting and they just have one glass of wine, or they don't even finish a glass of wine. In this sense the alcohol is not relevant.

ZM: Do you think that it is acceptable to get drunk at an opening?

MM: I think if you were drunk, you would probably have a better time.

ZM: What about in terms of how people perceive you?

MM: I think the opening is a moment when you become a different person, Zen. Like you aren't the same person as you are on a regular day. I think it is more acceptable to get drunk at an opening. But I suppose it depends on which gallery you are at. Some galleries don't mind if you get drunk.

ZM: One thing I've never understood about an opening, is how much to talk to people at openings. It seems like you never want to talk to one person for too long. You kind of want to maximise your visibility to talk to many people. Is there an ideal time limit or ideal way to approach people and have a conversation, and should you talk about the work on show?

MM: Maybe it's just me, but I tend to have a set conversation for a particular opening that you have again and again. But I suppose it's about how much you know the person. People usually talk about their own practice rather than the artwork most of the time. Maybe that's just my own experience …

ZM: So you use the work as a kind of alibi or excuse to talk about yourself?

MM: Ja, because someone will ask 'What are you up to?', and they don't mean 'What did you eat this morning?'. It's like, 'What are you up to in your studio' or 'What are you working on?', and becomes a more general art conversation.

ZM: So is that a way that as an artist you use the opening as a networking moment, where you can inform other people, artists, curators or gallerists about what you are doing?

MM: Ja, you are kind of advertising yourself at these events. And that's also the point. So your question before, if you get drunk at an opening all the time, then you are assuming the position of the drunken artist, and then you maybe need to be the drunken artist all the time, rather than being the drunken artist just at the opening.

ZM: So then you have to be drunk all the time?

MM: Uh huh.

ZM: But that might become quite difficult or tiring.

MM: On your liver?

ZM: Ja, and on your mind.

MM: Ja … but it's strange … it's like when you go to church and then meet people afterwards. Outside the gallery is different than inside. Outside, when you are having a smoke and a drink, that's when you have these conversations. When you are inside, you feel a kind of pressure to talk about the work. It could be seen as disrespectful if you don't acknowledge that someone's work is in front of you.

ZM: Should you compliment the work or not?

MM: It's always better to be critical. I think that it shows you have an opinion.

ZM: Should you dress up or dress down to an opening?

MM: It's cooler to dress down nowdays. People actually put more time into looking like they didn't dress up, as though you don't care. Because you look at people at the opening and it's like, 'Ah she really got dressed up and tried very hard for this opening – she's got her 'opening outfit' on.' I think that clothing is always selected.

ZM: Do you think everyone understands the politics of the opening? Who does the opening privilege?

MM: It privileges the artist and their entourage, the gallerist and the collectors. It's a night for those people. Everyone else is like the extras in this whole play.

ZM: Why does a gallery need these extras?

MM: The institution needs wider recognition. It's a point for them to get attention and sort of show off or boast about what they have done. It would be interesting if a show didn't have an opening. But it's important for advertising and ultimately to make sales. We just come there to kind of like watch TV to the institution's performance.

ZM: Who is 'we'?

MM: The audience. The public who is invited to see the work.

ZM: Is it really a *general* public?

ZM: No, it's not, Zen. It's a closed public. It's not like the invitation to the opening was broadcast on SABC. Some people don't feel privileged, welcomed and equipped to come to these spaces. Galleries do have this weird elitist thing that goes on. They are not the most inviting spaces to go to.

ZM: Going back to your work, what is the fascination with the form of the opening?

MM: It's become like such a ritual. It's like going to church and never really questioning the bible. So why do we perform in this way, and what does it mean?

It's like … this weird performative moment that every person feels like they need to become something at the opening or take on a certain identity.

It's interesting why we go along with this spectacle. Just for the night. Because if you go to the gallery on a different day, you interact with the space differently. You are not on show and don't have to perform. I think it's also interesting that many people are not aware of how staged it is. And it's just becomes this thing is kind of normalised, and we do it all the time.

ZM: So if people are performing themselves at an opening, who are they performing for? And what, and why?

MM: Well, it goes back to the question of advertising. You take on a role, be it student or artist, collector or curator. I think people always play to a certain kind of identity. I'm not sure how conscious it is for everyone, but it happens.

Irit Rogoff talks about this in her lecture 'How to Dress for an Exhibition'. She speaks about the constant range of performances that people stage that are appropriate to the kind of event that you go to.

ZM: It seems that you are quite cynical about the exhibition opening? Or is that a misreading?

MM: No, I just think that it is really pretentious, but I like watching it, so I'll carry on going to it. It's like a special performance that takes place for one night only. And it also has a function as a networking moment.

ZM: If we say that the opening is not for the general public but for people involved in art specifically, it can be seen as one of the very few moments where an art community gets together and meet. Don't you think that there is something positive in that?

MM: Ja, but you're like showing the rainbow …

(sound of clipping)

ZM: What do you mean 'showing the rainbow'?

MM: You are trying to focus on the positive points … it's like a funeral, Zen.
I mean, does someone have to produce work in order for us all to meet? Like I said earlier, maybe the artwork becomes secondary to these 'meetings'. Do you really want to see certain people at the opening? It does have this aspect, Zen, that kind of thing, but there is something that is really not real about these points of engagement at the opening. I don't think I've pinpointed it yet, but it's …

ZM: By saying it's not real, do you mean that it is contrived as a point of meeting, so by extension, do you mean that it is an artificial form of community?

MM: Uh huh, because you would interact with someone very differently at Kitchener's than you would at Stevenson. I think these spaces make this sense of community so like … pretentious.

ZM: What about the afterparty, where only the specific special few get invited? What do you think about this ritual or situation?

MM: There is always this networking thing that people seem to be constantly doing … it's like a really tiring thing, Zen. The afterparty is just a rehashing of that, but with a closer circuit of people. But … it kind of does the same thing, but without the general public.

ZM: So what does your focus on the opening and its forms do in terms of your work? What is the comment or position?

MM: It's kind of stupid, because I'm still preaching to the masses.

ZM: You mean preaching to the choir?

(sound of scraping)

MM: Ja, choir … but I'm not trying to create some kind of revolution or whatever where the opening is radically changed or destroyed. I'm asking people to rethink, or perhaps think for the first time, what the conventions of the opening are.

ZM: Well, for me, it's like not so much about the opening, but that the opening is focused on to make a comment on the work, in fact, and in a sense you do this by turning the opening into the work. So then the commentary becomes more about the way art presents itself or develops as a series of rituals or situations.

MM: Ja, and then to some extent I'm posing a question of like, is the art then secondary? Couldn't we all just be in a space and then … network together?
Why does it take someone …

ZM: But isn't that what you did with Gabi and Dawood?

MM: Ja, to some extent, because there wasn't a lot of what people would conventionally call 'art' … I guess what I'm also asking is, why produce 'traditional' work with all that this brings along, when it is important to question the institutions that uphold and protect what work is in the first place.

ZM: Why is it important for you to carry out this institutional critique?

(masseuse: 'I'm finished')

ZM: Thank you.

MM: Because it's something I think we are always going to be like invested in, regardless if you go into education or if I'm still going to be a practising artist, or … there is always the institution that governs what we do, like how we make money, or produce art,

and it's something that I think needs to be questioned. I mean, I might one day maybe start making paintings, but now I need to understand what this 'thing' is …

ZM: The art world can be seen as a series of inclusive or exclusive gestures, gestures that either include or exclude people. Does your focus on the opening speak to these kinds of questions?

(sound of camera)

MM: You know, Zen, sometimes half the people don't even understand what they were participating in. Even if you think about closing the bar at an opening, if there is a collector inside, there would be another glass of wine for sure. So the question is, who is relevant at the opening? Is the 'general public' relevant? Do they necessarily need to be there?

ZM: So, if they don't need to be there, why are they there? Why does the gallery need this public? Is it about relevance? About making the work more desirable?

MM: Like I say, Zen, maybe it's a point at which the institution shows itself off. Like, 'Look, we have this artist in our space,' versus like if you go down the street (to Maboneng or Braamfontein), then you will get another artist.

ZM: Isn't it a strange, paradoxical thing? Because the whole idea of the gallery is to sell work, so it is an exchange of private property – it is a sale. So why add a public event in which a whole lot of people are invited, whom the vast majority of will never be able to afford to participate in this commodity exchange?

MM: Because, like there is always this idea that 'art is for everyone' – its aspiration of inclusion – and it gives up this 'free' thing that we all get to see. But … What is your question again? My brain is blocking up …

ZM: No … it wasn't a very good question … ummm …

(voice getting tired)

The idea of showing these peripheral situations and gestures that comes with the art world, ummmm … there is obviously a tradition around this. Ummm … What do you think about this tradition of institutional critique or relational aesthetics … or whatever you want to call it? What do you think these critical ideas do to the functioning of the art world? Do you think that it is a critique that is important? Or do you think that it, itself, becomes a form that gets included within the art world?

MM: I mean, obviously it's contradictory, because you create work that critiques the institution and then put it back into the institution, so that's one of the issues. Unless you're like producing it in Pick 'n Pay … umm … but then you're not speaking towards the institution directly. That's why I set up situations that are not like … I think it's important that when I set up a situation, it's not like didactic or obvious. It's not like, here is a 'fuck you' sign or something … I try to make it so that you have to participate in the situation being critiqued. I make the audience kind of complicit with the situation, so maybe you are not too aware that you're participating.

ZM: You have obviously thought quite a lot about the opening and its forms. Do you think other people understand the implications of the set of rituals in the opening? Do you think people care?

MM: No, I don't think people care. Ummm … I was with a certain artist the other day, and she is like the most awkwardest person at an opening (and I thought that I was awkward!), and she doesn't know what to do with herself, after a glass of wine or two, and she kind of understands, I think, and maybe gets the point, or not. Maybe she is only there because her work is there. It's just a cool event. I mean, if you look at Braamfontein, gallery hopping is a cool thing. I mean, this is not new, but … I don't think people understand, and I don't think that they care, Zen.

I think in art we take things too seriously anyway.

(Sound of skin being rubbed)

ZM: I think there is enough here for 2 000 words … How was your foot massage?

MM: It was okay, Zen. I think the back massage was better.

ZM: Really?

MM: Ja …

ZM: How did you get a back massage thrown in at the same time?

After the interview, Megan Mace declined the offer of lunch, but got Zen Marie to buy her a Tsingtao instead.

Biographies

Zen Marie

Photographer/Artist/Writer/Lecturer/Durban/Jhb/Boston/Jhb/Amsterdam/Jhb/Sydenham Primary/Fordsburg Primary/Martin Luther King Junior School/Johannesburg Secondary school/ National School of the Arts/Michaelis School of Art/Stichting 63: de ateliers/ University of Amsterdam/Vega School of Brand Communications/Wits School of Arts.

Megan Mace

Megan Mace was born in 1991 (Johannesburg), completed her BA Fine Arts degree at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2013. She is currently (part-time) doing her MA in Fine Arts at Wits University. Some of her other past and recent experiences and highlights within the visual arts include participating in: Rencontres. Play>Urban/ Maillon: Le-Maillon Théâtre de Strasbourg (2013), Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts, ABSA L'Atelier (2014), FNB Joburg Art Fair within a special project under Gabi Ngcobo (2014), and having curated exhibitions such as *Somewhere Between Here* by Mack Magagane (ROOM Space & Projects, 2014) and *SKAFTIEN [the remains]*, a presentation and a survey of a project by the same name (*Skaftien*), developed and realised by Keleketla! Library (ROOM Space & Projects, 2014).

Madonna
La Isla Bonita[39]

[Intro]
Como puede ser verdad

[Verse 1]
Last night I dreamt of San Pedro
Just like I'd never gone, I knew the song
A young girl with eyes like the desert
It all seems like yesterday, not far away
[Chorus]
Tropical the island breeze
All of nature wild and free
This is where I long to be
La isla bonita
And when the samba played
The sun would set so high
Ring through my ears, and sting my eyes
Your Spanish lullaby

[Verse 2]
I fell in love with San Pedro
Warm wind carried on the sea, he called to me
Te dijo te amo
I prayed that the days would last, they went so fast

[Chorus]
Tropical the island breeze
All of nature wild and free
This is where I long to be
La isla bonita
And when the samba played
The sun would set so high
Ring through my ears, and sting my eyes
Your Spanish lullaby

[Bridge]
I want to be where the sun warms the sky
When it's time for siesta, you can watch them go by
Beautiful faces, no cares in this world
Where a girl loves a boy, and a boy loves a girl

[Pre-Chorus]
Last night I dreamt of San Pedro
It all seems like yesterday, not far away

[Chorus]
Tropical the island breeze
All of nature wild and free
This is where I long to be
La isla bonita
And when the samba played
The sun would set so high
Ring through my ears, and sting my eyes
Your Spanish lullaby
Tropical the island breeze

All of nature wild and free
This is where I long to be
La isla bonita
And when the samba played
The sun would set so high
Ring through my ears, and sting my eyes
Your Spanish lullaby

[Outro]
Te dijo te amo
El dijo que te ama

Songwriters: Bruce Gaitsch / Madonna Ciccone / Patrick Leonard

39. At the same time I was working on *Paradis Tombe* at the Cité des Arts Réunion, I was invited to record a song as part of a vinyl that artist Yohann Queland de Saint-Pern was making. In fact, it was due to this project that the funding for my trip to Réunion was possible at all. You can hear the track I contributed here.



Steve McQueen, *Exodus*, 1992–1997. London, UK.

The Ocean as Epistemological Scrambler: Floating, Falling, Disappearing[40]

> *This is to say that disappearance is not only a threat – it is also an opportunity. The moment of asignification when models of identity disappear is also the moment when a postcolonial subject is invented – although the dangers of such a game should not be underestimated. There is one essential condition, however, that must be there if the postcolonial subject is not to be reabsorbed and assimilated: it must not be another stable appearance, another stable identity.*
>
> Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 1997, pp. 14-15

In preparing for this presentation, I began to think about the Indian Ocean in terms of the city of my birth, Durban. I wanted to use this body of water to develop connections and ways out of dead ends that come with being a so-called 'Indian' South African. Part of this project has to do with naming, misnaming and renaming – operating under proxies, pseudonyms, alter egos – and allowing signification to flow, to move, to change and to float.

I wondered what other names this body of water had. In ancient Sanskrit it is called Ratnakara. In Swahili it is called Bahari ya Hindi. In South Africa, in Nguni languages, the ocean is Ulwandle LwaseNdiya, however this name does not make a distinction between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

Even though I know that Indian nationalists are not to blame for the naming of this ocean, I've always imagined their intense delight at having an entire ocean named after the country. Of course, the name is the residue of colonial nomenclature, a nomenclature that is also at work in the naming of some Indians as Red and the formation of others as African.

South African Indian identity has always existed in a kind of prickly sandwich: between Africa and India. Sometimes neither, sometimes both; opportunistically deciding one way, only to turn around and go the other way.

It is at times conservative and stultifying, at others radical and creative. 'Indian' as a significatory category and lived sets of experiences, in South Africa, is often grossly misunderstood and caricatured, as well as theoretically impoverished and congealed as a nuanced area of study.

In attempting to *liquify* the 'Indian' in South African, I want to shift focus and read the 'Indian' in terms of a set of floating signifiers just east of Durban. My instinct was to look at Mauritius – to look aside, but also to look back, as my shift to Maurice began about fifteen years ago when I created an alter ego that was from the island nation.

Ceci ne pas Maurice: The Disappearance of Maurice

Île Maurice can be seen as a kind of device or lens that could be used to look at a formation of desire, escapism and fantasy. Historically, especially at the height of the sugar-cane trade, there were important, albeit fragile and tenuous, connections between South African and Mauritius.

Growing up in Durban, it was not uncommon for people to boast about their 'Mauritian' cousins. And certainly, the connotations of this familial relation seemed to promise an escape from apartheid race relations and feudal indenture to a paradise of *creolite*, white sands, turquoise lagoons and palm trees.

This imagining of Mauritius as floating, unmoored and free of overdetermined structure, is of course flagrantly ignorant of the political, social and economic realities that this island state precariously negotiates. It is a paradox between the imaginary of the island paradise and the reality of historical slavery,

40. This text was presented at *Holding Water* (25 October–26 November 2019). It was a programme of workshops, reading groups, film screenings and artist presentations that think the oceanic from land-locked Johannesburg, commissioned by POOL and the Oceanic Humanities for the Global South, WiSER. It has not been previously published.

and contemporary climate change and tax exemption.

Mauritius can be seen, then, as a kind of proxy – an alternate locus not for creating or securing meaning, but for setting meaning adrift; to set the meanings sedimented in Durban adrift, floating and fluid. Part of this absurd theatre was an alter ego that I had created while I was a student at the University of Cape Town. While the Indian Ocean technically ends or begins at Cape Agulhas, it was not an Indian Ocean that I could relate to. It was different on every level: its temperature, its feel, the shoreline it coexisted with were all foreign and very unfamiliar.

So, in my final year of art school, I went in search of my hometown, which is embraced by the breath of the Indian Ocean that I recognised.

The Set-up > The Fall > The Fall Guy
Alter Ego as Proxy or Misguided Fantasy

The alter ego I created was loosely based on my maternal and paternal grandfathers, Ismail Meer and Francis Marie – both men. Not men in italics or hyphenated men, but real men. Men as Amitabh Bachan in *Mard* – the real man.
My alter ego's name – Dyah Khan – I imagined to be half Gujurathi, ¼ Tamil, and ¼ Telegu. He was from Mauritius. He was a bastard, a philanderer, a kind of itinerant hustler. Like many Mauritians, he moved to Durban to find work. If one can dignify what he does by calling it work.

I find him first in 2001, in Durban, hanging out at a bar on the seedy Point Road. Point Road was described in 1979 by Barend van Niekerk in *Durban at our Feet: An Alternative Guide to a City*, as 'the rotten finger on the hand of the golden mile – the Golden Mile being the strip of hotels, and prime stretch of reclaimed beachfront area in Durban. Point Road, now Mahatma Gandhi Road, is perhaps even more rotten today. It connects the pleasure resort Durban to the seedier dockyards and harbour – the working end of Durban. Dyah Khan is a character that easily moves between these areas – as at home in the Maharani Hotel as he is in the brothels and chop shops at the back end of the docks.

This strategy to shift focus, to look just left of centre, redirect, distract or deviate perspective, is not a new one. In some ways it is a strategy inspired by Roland Barthes, who shifted emphasis to the seemingly minor sign. In *Mythologies* (1957), his analysis of steak and chips was predicated on *la frite* as the revealing sign. His analysis of Hollywood period film was hinged on the curl of hair that stuck to the forehead of the actors. In *Mythologies*, Barthes enacts a strategy of looking to the side; of thinking not through the obvious or primary signifier, but focusing on the seemingly lesser signifiers that became revelatory.

The looking aside, or shifting of focus from the primary, was an important part of the process that led me to create the character Dyah Khan – at once an alter ego and a fall guy, as in the kind from movies. The one who takes the rap so the crime boss goes free. Khan, in advance of his creation, is framed, set up.

Khan is also a scapegoat or proxy for working through ideas of identity, location and meaning, but without the dangerous traps of reification of racial categories or entanglement with parochial politics. He exists as a device – narratively, conceptually, aesthetically and physically.

Whenever I put on the suit, I allowed myself a flight of fancy, and the ability to do dangerous, dodgy and reprehensible things. Dyah Khan could absorb all the guilt and remorse that I could not. He could hustle and posture smartly and without shame. The question of where I end and Dyah Khan begins, is a little more complex than simply the seams of the suit. It's a question that I have not answered before, and am not really prepared to answer now.

The first time I deployed the suit in Durban, I used it to make a work that began as biographical, but spiralled out of control to become an engagement with the city more broadly. The result was an installation of found objects collected in the salvage yards, and second-hand and charity shops in Durban. It was an installation informed by a gonzo logic and a method of deep hanging out. It was an installation that began on the Victoria Embankment, the esplanade, Point Road, and the docks. It was more than the city that came into focus here, but the city in terms of the flotsam that had settled on its edges via its deep-sea port.

Love and Hate in Lesotho

The next time I deployed the suit, and the alter ego, was in 2007, where I went to Lesotho, itself an island country marooned in a sea of South Africa. I went with a few friends who, in

making a documentary, were following Paul Wolfowitz, the then head of the World Bank, who was to speak at a meeting of the world's most underdeveloped countries – a kind of reverse G8 summit.

So I spent my time in the suit, alternatively getting my friend Eugene Arries to take pictures of myself in the landscape, and also acting as cameraman for the documentary my friends were making.

In Lesotho, Khan was photographed for the first time, but took a back seat as the suit came to represent a cardboard cut-out – the images were actually more about the background than the figure.

A kind of perverse play on the Caspar David Friedrich work, *The Wanderer* (1818) – an anti-sublime piss take on borders, at poverty, and towards wealth – it disdainfully dismissed the aesthetics of the sublime by flirting with the absurd. Considering the film we were making at the time, it is difficult not to see Khan as a placeholder for capitalism in some way. (We never did get the interview with Wolfowitz, by the way.)

Falling Historical

The project in Réunion is the one I want to spend a little time on, though. The context was a residency on the island, called *Urban Scenographies*. The project in Saint-Denis was to coincide with Réunion's Heritage Day. As part of the festivities, there were to be series of stages for live music, and performances along Rue de Paris, which is the main street of Saint-Denis.

My intention for the work that I wanted to make was to critically engage with the monuments and historical sculptures that were dotted along Rue de Paris. Of course, the local authorities and heritage council were worried about the possibility of damage to any of the historical landmarks. There were clear instructions that nothing was to be interfered with. I could not manipulate the statues or sculptures as I wished, and would have liked to have done – I was thinking along the lines of the 1998 Public Eye interventions in Cape Town. Nothing as radical as this would have been allowed.

The approach I took was much simpler and more efficient. I stood in front of the various monuments and sculptures – obscuring them from view – and then fell while holding two palm trees. The palm trees made sense as they not only referred to an image of the tropics, but were also a reference to a Steve McQueen work called *Exodus* (1992–1997), where two Afro-Caribbean men in trench coats carried palm trees through the streets of London.

The palm trees in this work, *Falling Historical* became sacrificial libations that were given to the spirits not only of the monuments but of those who the monuments displaced. While Réunion has an apocryphal narrative of being an uninhabited volcanic island, the work involved that, in Réunion being settled, it was part of the disruptive and violent narrative of European colonialism. Réunion is still today a protectorate of France and member of the European Union. *The Fall,* or my fall, literally, allowed the monuments to be revealed after first being concealed. But there was something more. In falling, I was playing with the limits of control, and with a surrender to the force of gravity. It was incredibly difficult to will myself to fall. There is something in the body that resists, that does not want to obey the mind that is instructing it to fall. The most difficult part was to prevent my body from instinctually jerking out of the fall, literally a last-minute knee-jerk response predicated on self-preservation.

The Fall, besides being an efficient solution to intervene into a series of monuments that were off limits, was also a reference to an earlier and iconic series of work by Bas Jan Ader. Bas Jan Ader is, in a way, the master of the fall. One critic went so far as to comment that Bas Jan Ader's medium was gravity itself. He played with the moment between having control and losing control, or surrendering your control wilfully to the elemental force of gravity.

Bas Jan Ader's final work, *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975), was probably the ultimate act or statement of surrender to forces greater than your control. He built a boat, 30 centimetres smaller than the smallest vessel to cross the Atlantic in a solo voyage. It was 12.5 feet long. He set sail from New York with the intended destination of Groningen in Holland. Besides his provisions, he carried a copy of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. He was never seen again, but his boat washed up on the shore of Ireland.

In Search of the Miraculous was to be his final play with a surrender to the elements – this time to the elemental force of the north Atlantic. The conscious will of Ader was obliterated or claimed by the force of the ocean; the dialectic between control and surrender, this time, finally resolved. The ocean being the winner.

I have already cited the quote by Roland Barthes, 'The sea is a non-signifying field which bears no message'. But Barthes is not alone in this contention. Gaston Bachelard has called the ocean *a substantive nothingness*; W.H. Auden called it a *primal undifferentiated flux*, and Sigmund Freud associated oceanic feeling with the eternal and limitless.

The ocean, here, is that sublime phenomenon that is untameable and uncontrollable, ultimately a force or energy so large, deep and powerful that it lies radically beyond the human imagination or capacity for comprehension. We cannot hold it in our mind all at once. Rather, we have to break it up into parts or narrativise it in order to begin to grasp it in some way.

The ocean as void presents a logic that is always shifting, always on the move, and fundamentally inhospitable. It exists as a phenomenon of sublime otherness.

The deep sea, or Kala Pani, has the force and capacity not only to obliterate and destroy physical entities. It also has the function of destroying meaning. As Rehana Vally points out in her (2001) book by the same name, the black waters, or Kala Pani, were said to eradicate caste status if traversed. Travelling the Kala Pani meant a loss, a fall from social hierarchy. Here the ocean acts as a kind of epistemological scrambler in a way very different to Barthes' meaning. It is not a space of non-meaning, but a place with the potency to alter meaning.

Naming is at once paradoxically and, in opposing ways, an operation and subversion of discursive power. Ideology demands the capacity to name, as in Louis Althusser's interpellation (Butler, 1993: 121). However, the space to performatively deviate from this also exists – and here I am thinking of the way in which Judith Butler thinks through the Austinian performative (Butler, 1993: 2).

In looking at this structure of power and its subversion, the ocean – in this case the Indian Ocean – becomes a scrambler of epistemes.

The ocean becomes the space where meaning is lost and remade. It exists as a performative moment of potentially new meaning production, precisely through its instability of grounding signifiers to signifieds. This floatingness, and fluidity of meaning, that forecloses a grounding of signification, ironically presents the moment for new meaning to emerge.

The Kala Pani does not cause a total loss of caste and identity, but rather a scrambling or a reorganisation of it in ways that are unrecognisable to normative naming procedure.

In the movement of indentured labourers, people were asked for their name on arrival in Durban, realising that now, far away from India, and on totally strange soil in this anonymity, there was the possibility to name oneself as one pleased. As a result, there are a surprising amount of Govenders, Goundens or Maharaj's in South Africa. Upward mobility into a higher caste was seemingly a simple operation of lying to the English administrators, performatively naming oneself anew. However, the force or power of this naming was clearly limited. The work of indenture controlled bodies, in spite of their signifiers or family names. The economic material conditions decided more than signification could change.

Ceci ne pas Maurice: The Disappearance of Maurice

> Disappearance here does not imply nonappearance, absence or lack of presence. It is not even nonrecognition – it is more a question of misrecognition, of recognizing a thing as something else.
> *Ackbar Abbas,* Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 1997, p. 7*

Mauritius has always fascinated me. Familiar yet exotic. Besides the tropical paradise setting, parts of it have the same kind of post-indentured squalor that you see in Durban. I always felt it was like if you took the working-class ghetto of Phoenix, in Durban, and dropped it in the middle of the ocean, you would get exactly what you see in some parts of Mauritius. However, these parts are hidden. They are not what the tourists see. They are not what is marketed to would-be investors.

I want to stop not with samoosas, but with another savoury snack.

The humble *bajia*, on its travels, also enjoyed a renaming. When it stopped over in Mauritius, it was marooned as *gâteau piment*, or chilli cake. As some of its kin moved on to Durban, it became the chilli bite.

Tracey Rose and the Paradox of the Enlightenment
Radical Intimacy as Subversive Institutional Critique[41]

Rage + love = intimacy / radical intimacy

Trace rose is you
She acts in your place
She takes the risk
So you can feel what it is like on the edges
While not having to endure the risk
She takes the risk for you.

She is the crazy person on the mountain in a storm checking to see if lightning is still dangerous.

This is perhaps in line with what Simon Njami calls the Christ-like use of her body, and the analogies to martyrdom and shamanism that both Gabi [Ngcobo] and Simon went into yesterday.

Spending time with Tracey's work over the last few days, I've come to realise that there is no safety in Tracey Rose's work; we are all made accomplices, as we are all drawn into her radical intimacy.

But why do I call it radical intimacy?

The tendency to prefix any number of concepts with the qualifier 'radical' may seem like an easy one … to indicate extent or intensity … and while I fully intend to say that Tracey performs an excess of intimacy, I mean radical in another way.

In the sense that radical – a revolutionary – or a seer, as Simon and Gabi were naming the 'prophetic' – denotes a form of unrecognisability or misrecognition.

The intimacy that Tracey offers the viewer and her collaborators is often misrecognised as disruptive or aggressive posturing.

I want to bring together this idea of a radical intimacy and that of institutional critique, as a way to ask what such subversive gestures are able to do in rearranging the forms of power at work in the ecology of contemporary visual art.

This is to ask if such subversive energy actually does anything, or works as a reinstalment of that which is critiqued in the first place and, in this way, the subversive agent is instead recuperated by the art world, showing that the art world itself is evolved, critical and ultimately progressive in its inclusion of the subversive work.

How then does Tracey's subversive power and critique work?

I've known Tracey since the late '90s, and had the privilege to witness her creative process in different phases of her life: As a raging young art star in the period just after democracy.

As a frustrated woman feeling the burn of how the art world appears to anoint you its queen and then spits you out when it can't handle your truth.

As a young mother who is coming to terms with herself as mother of Lala.

41. This text was presented in July 2022, at *Shouting Down Babylon: A Symposium Celebrating the Work of Tracey Rose*, held on the occasion of a mid-career retrospective of her work, held at the same museum. It was presented on top of the Zeitz MOCAA, in a double-volume glass room, with panoramic views of the Cape Town harbour. This text has not been previously published.

And more recently, as an elder, who has more consciously taken responsibility of care for a new generation of artists.

I say more consciously, because Tracey has always been an elder, and her influence can be seen across so many artists.

Tracey extends this love and care of responsibility to almost anyone and everyone she meets. Watching Tracey taking 30 minutes for each person at the book signing last night, where she actually modified and embellished each book with personalised drawings, is an example of this.

I see much of her father in this. Tracey also seems to flirt with everyone. I see her mother in her as well, and from both, she inherits a fierce commitment to not only protect but also challenge those that she loves.

Her love and care are importantly extended to the art world. Tracey's commitment to the world of art is intense and at times contradictory.

Her critique is unflinching, unfiltered and unmoderated. Yet it always comes from a place of intense and burning commitment to what she often refers to as *Kunst*.

So, what I have to say, attempts to link the forms of radical intimacy at play in her work. In the relational circuits that it emerges in, both the making and the viewing of her work, collaborators and viewers alike are brought into her inner circle; are brought into an intimate embrace with the unknown and the impossible to know.

In many ways, this form of radical intimacy is in itself the basis or the form in which Tracey is most disruptive in her institutional critique.

Khooning

Important to this is the tactic of khooning that Tracey roses mobilises. A long history in masquerade and minstrelling, a performance by slaves – not for their masters but for themselves – as a critical performative gesture, khooning is a form that Tracey has long deployed. It is a concept that has particular significance in this space we sit in right now.

This harbour of Cape Town was the catalyst for oceanic trade, a sea route to the east and an energising of global flows of commodities … and yes – of the global trade in people as commodities.

We sit here with the ever-present but always silent spectre of slavery and enslavement. The haunting is not only across time, but across space – we are haunted by the present absences of those who right now live in conditions of slavery; with the contemporary reality of labourers who have been passed down like family heirlooms from generation to generation on the wine farms of the Cape.

We sit here not far from the Cape Flats, which has the highest rates of violent crime and GBV in the entire country.

How does Tracey's radicalism reach beyond the rarefied god's eye view of this museum we sit on top of?

A question that I have for long been perplexed by, is how or why Tracey invests so much, and so totally, into the art world. I struggle with this, partly because I have a lot of ambivalence about the art world – I've seen it devastate artists young and old.

The art world seems to encourage vulnerable, sensitive, creative spirits to feel, and feel the most; to journey to dangerous and difficult spaces and to convert this passage into works of art.

But when the market or demand for these 'products' runs dry, these artists are unceremoniously spat out with very little regard. This is an art world economically and symbolically ordered by the 1 percent of the world that can afford to spend a million here or there on a picture or object. This is the art world that is the playground of rich white men – both in its history of collecting and commissioning, and in the contemporary of its making.

I have always wondered why Tracey is so intensely committed to this space, why it is so important for her to frame her critique within this space, when it clearly sees her as an object of fascination and thrill; that allows her in, only to continually reject her.

Tracey is painfully aware of this. She always has been. Her commitment to the art world is a real one, as it is not clouded by naivety or sentimentality. She – more than anyone – knows how high the stakes are. And she puts herself on the line – physically, emotionally, psychically and totally.

What can the khoonery of Tracey Rose do to the master's house? Does she propose a subversion that disrupts the master's house? Or does she simply dance so that the master can feel a sense of righteousness, so that he is able to drink his wine as he supports free thinking and criticality in his slaves – all the while still working, profiting, from continued slavery?

The work and words of Tracey Rose suggest a few answers here.

Firstly, I believe Tracey says to us that the master's house is not only the master's … 'We the slaves' not only have the right to claim to it, but in many ways have a responsibility to occupy this house, to luxuriate in its beds and to bathe ourselves in the white-tiled porcelain of its fragrant baths.

Tracey tells us that the master's house does not belong to him, because we the descendants of slaves are the ones who built the house in the first place … the blood and sweat of Black bodies is what made this house.

For Tracey, this house is called *Kunst*, and she is never content to selfishly enjoy this luxury on her own.

No, as soon as she has her fill of this house, she bleeds onto the white sheets and craps in the cooking pots – she debases this house, makes a mockery of it, showing us that we can enter this house, because this house is fragile and malleable. This house is our house too.

In this way, Tracey lays claim to a history of art – and owns it, claims it as her own. Tracey often speaks in reverence to *Kunst*, and is unapologetic for her self-professed 'art snobbery'.

Despite a reputation for being the disruptive anarchic enfant terrible of the art world, I don't think I know a person with more reverence and respect for art.

Art is a duty.

Creativity for Tracey is a basic human right that everyone needs to have access to.

In many ways, this paradoxically feels like a conservative and counter-progressive position, especially in the light of strands of decolonial politics that would see us relinquish and reject the canon of 'western art history'.

Tracey is paradoxically an advocate for critical revisitings of this canon, as male and as white as it may be. This is evidenced in how she reads the history of art, and can be seen in the numerous references to art history in her work – from Goya, to Caravaggio, to Rodin, Koons, and more.

But Tracey does not read the canon in isolation. Tracey mobilises this history alongside and often simultaneously with revisionist art histories of her

own writing, that ooze with both critical theory and conspiracy theory alike … lots of conspiracy theories.

What I see in Tracey's work is a spirit that reclaims what is often seen as the birth of 'western' art – the moment when art moved from the cathedral to the museum, or the museum became a secular incarnation of the cathedral. Tracey occupies the museum as a high priestess of old, invoking the power of its transcendental potential.

Tracey sees the Renaissance and the Enlightenment as her own. She is not alone here. People like Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Walter Mignolo, and others, also rightfully see the Renaissance and the Enlightenment as moments of intensely syncretic and complex merging of knowledge from across the globe. These were conversations that we had with Simon Njami in the making of the work *Hard Cotton on Black*.

This conception rightly sees the Enlightenment as produced with ideas, imagination, technology and spirituality that is accumulated from across the world and, as such, the Enlightenment is a product of a mixing between the Americas, of the east and, yes, of knowledge and science and spirituality from Africa.

The Enlightenment is not the problem. Art is not the problem. It is not something that I as a descendant of slaves needs to disavow in finding my true precolonial self. The problem is that the Enlightenment is hijacked by the 'the west' and whitewashed to appear as if a western construction.

Tracey sees past this.

At Wits University where she teaches, she often appears as a voice that advocates for a more 'traditional' approach to art history. Or at least that is what it sounds like. Tracey argues for the canon, as that which we need not only to reclaim, but to refine and rearticulate in ways that affirm and give life to all of those who built it in the first place.

For Tracey lives in the master's house, painfully aware but never fearful of the violence that lies within it, but always bravely confronting this violence and keeping the door open for others to enter.

The significance of Tracey Rose in making space for over a generation of artists to find their voices to flourish, cannot be underestimated.

In personal and professional ways, Tracey's influence can be seen in the work of artists like Athi-Patra Ruga, Robin Rhode, Moshekwa Langa, Lady Skollie, and many, many more. The torch lit by Tracey is carried on by new generations of artists, often despite acknowledgement. Or at least this acknowledgement is not public, as Tracey is often seen as dangerous, and in so many ways is made a pariah of the art world. This is the risk she knowingly takes on.

The carnival and the Khoon – the space of excess – where anything and everything goes. A space for debasement and decadence.

The antithesis of the cathedral – a space of rarefied reverent and sacred gestures, coded and complicit with power.

Tracey moves from the wilds of the streets and clubs of Joburg and enters the most modern of incarnations of the cathedral: the museum.

And in these museums/ mausoleums, she brings with her and expresses the litany of repressed and unexpressed voices, screams and howlings from outside.

The carnivalesque is an intensely multimodal space.

And like a Renaissance artist, Tracey has a commitment to explore all avenues and trajectories of practice … a million miles away from the hyper-specialisation of modernism, where you pick your lane, find your space in the art market or ecosystem of the gallery world, and spend a lifetime confined to that specialisation, servicing the demand from collectors that is engineered by your gallerist.

This is what Simon called Tracey's 'curiosity of reading'.

Tracey is the consummate renaissance woman, involving herself in art, science, healing, transcendence and play.

Conspirators or collaborators

Tracey's approach to making work is supremely inclusive of those who are in her life – her life being the catalyst and prompt for the work, always crossing the lines between reality and artifice. Often asking white people to subvert their privilege and become accomplices … Matthew Krouse (*Whore Moans*) and Sue Williamson (*Pickaminnie*) and the 'look mother, a nigger', for example.

Tracey Rose provides the props and the prompts for us to set ourselves up, for us to confront our own deep-seated fuckery … inside ourselves.

The problem is that we are often not brave enough to accept this challenge, and it is easier to make Tracey the problem and allow her to be the martyr on her own.

She makes this invitation for you to share her burden.

And as such, the work is filled with such moments of generosity. Even of softness and caressing whispers.

But we fear this softness or these spaces of invitation. We suspect that these openings are traps.

We correctly recognise that we are being invited to join the performance – a performance that recognises, disrupts and makes us confront our own privilege and complicity.

How to make art like Tracey Rose?
How to make art according to Tracey Rose?

Tracey does more than offer objects and images. She proposes a method: she's giving us the recipe, the instructions, for how to make work.

This is so clearly seen in many of the artists who came up in the '90s, or at least for those who were paying attention.

We talked a lot yesterday about ideas of rage and love in Tracey's work. In many ways, this dialectic between love and rage is the core of Tracey, and her work. Her rage bleeds empathy, generosity and compassion.

Love bristles with fierce criticality as it sees through pretentiousness and laziness.

Tracey's love is as tough as her rage is seductive.

Her love and rage are her radical intimacy.

What is radical about this is never rage in itself, but the love that emerges through rage.

And her love is never sentimental or nostalgic, but a challenge and a battle cry.

What is absolutely crucial, and what I think most people don't recognise, is that with Tracey, we never ever see Hate.

Tracey's practice is ashateless as it is selfless.



Zen Marie and Dimitri Madimin, *Embassy: Massaging Nationalism*, 2013. Installation view, Gallery West. Den Haag, Netherlands.

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Zen Marie, *Paradise Fallen, Blaxis*, 2021. Film still. Karoo, South Africa.

Reflections on Making the Work Part Two

The Karoo

The vast open fields of the Karoo. The Valley of Desolation. Graaff-Reinet – a town owned by the Ruperts, who keep it pristinely in period costume. This same town was the last stopping point before the exiled Voortrekkers journeyed to find the promised land.

The Karoo is a conflicting entanglement of nostalgia for an originary narrative for the search for Zion.

The Karoo, the prehistoric sea, was home to the earth's first hunter-gatherers.

The Drakensberg

The mountains that are home to some of the oldest cave paintings known. The mountains that gave shelter and protection to those who seek it. The mountains whose peaks command storms that mould rock and earth.

The Drakensberg and the Karoo, like all South African landscapes, are dotted with national parks-board infrastructure that allows for easy and relatively cheap accommodation. These spaces were earmarked for protection in the 1920s by the National Party government, around the same time that they were developing and implementing apartheid laws. It is more than a coincidence that this ecological drive was carried out by a white supremacist government, as the land was always more than the land; it was a signifier for the very construction and imagination of an Afrikaner nationalism. The land was nothing less than Zion.

The depiction of this land in painterly terms is often crafted in this narrative, and photographs and images made of landscapes far from Europe were used to these ends.

Paradise Fallen: Blaxis

In and through all of these texts, site, para-texts and para-sites, there exist a range of interlocutors that respond not in words but in sonic form. The fem of colour exhibition, and the exhibition at the Wits Art Museum, included sonic interventions or improvised sonic responses to the film.

The first sonic intervention was proposed in relation to the first film, *Île Aux Serpents*, at the fem of colour. This was performed by Mpumelelo Mcata on guitar, Tumi Mogorosi on drums and trumpet, and Robert Machiri on percussion, turntables and digitally mixed sampling and looping.

While this was speculative and almost an organic or spontaneous emergence at the fem of colour, we crafted and planned this intervention with much more consideration and time to formulate ideas for the exhibition at the Wits Art Museum (WAM). The WAM show included a three-month process of discussion, in the form of a series of conversations, between Mogorosi, Mcata and myself. In structuring this conversation, we were hosted by Raél Salley and the Space for Creative Black Imagination at Baltimore's Maryland Institute College of Art. These conversations were, for the most part, informal online sessions, but culminated in three seminars or sessions that saw Mogorosi, Mcata and myself taking the lead in a 45-minute online 'talk' or performance.

These sessions were designed to enable or deepen the ideas that surround our practice, in preparation for the moments when the bands that Mcata and Mogorosi are members of (the BLK JKS and The Wretched), came to the space to respond to the images of the film. This provided some ground to build on, in addition to the first

intervention at the fem of colour. My intention was to draw the musicians into the thinking around the work, at the outset. Importantly, the film that was to be exhibited at WAM was still being edited, and the overall curation of the show still being planned. For me, these sessions with the space for Black imagination were important in drawing the musicians in as integral to the work, rather than being the 'light entertainment' at an opening.

This grounding was in part a kind of conceptual framing or entry into the work. In simpler ways, it was about building lines of connection and developing a sense of a shared undertaking. Vitally, it was to invest intellectually, politically and aesthetically into the presence of live instruments in a space designed to house a video installation. This was not a glib or off-hand paratextual device designed to add value and meaning to the work. Rather, it was a deliberate gesture attempting to push the critical potential of the ideas of the film into a much more direct interaction with the politics of ontology and epistemology that emanate from the landscapes, as they are carried in the alternatingly rugged, disconsonant, syncopated or melodic and harmonious tones, riffs, movements, progressions and images made by the live sonic improvisations.

The recordings of both sonic interventions and the original film are available to view here.

It is difficult to know how to expand on these interventions, other than to offer thanks to the musicians that make up the BLK JKS and The Wretched.

The first invitation to Robert Machiri and Mpumelelo Mcata was to respond to the film that I had made, at its installation at the fem of colour. To call it an 'invitation' is perhaps a little over-formal. It was rather the development of a progression of a series of conversations and collaborations that were already flowing. In addition to Mcata and Machiri, we invited Tumi Mogorosi, a renowned drummer, with whom I had been working within the context of a series of MAFA seminars I was running at the time, just prior to this show. Again, this was the culmination of, and development through, conversations and relationships that were configured through multiple other spaces and forms.

These forms of relationality are an important part of what is an ongoing professional practice: to produce work through friendship and intimacy, understanding and connections that are slowly built, and respectful collaborations that are founded on more than self-interest. These are at the core of this work.

A Hole in the Floor

The Wits Art Museum is a university museum, built in the main to house, protect and display a significant collection of African 'artefacts'[42]. It also serves as a space for candidates in Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art degrees to stage their practice-based research. Initially, I was scheduled to show my growing body of work, that accumulated around the working title *Paradise Fallen*, in September 2020. The global pandemic that began in that year, forced a reschedule to 2021.

In September 2021, the pandemic was beginning to recede and, while not fully open, it was agreed that the show could go ahead, albeit with limited access and selective Covid-19 restrictions still in place. This included a policy of no opening or closing events, limited numbers of visitors, as well as the mask mandate.

42. One of the key areas of focus for the Wits Art Museum is for the protection and collecting of such artefacts.



Maurizio Cattelan, *Untitled*, 1997. Rectangular hole and pile of removed earth, dimensions variable.
UCCA Center for Contemporary Art

My initial proposal to the WAM curatorial team was to use the space as more of a project space than as a space for a finished and resolved body of work. My argument was twofold: the first reason was that, since the Covid restrictions already fundamentally altered the ways in which a museum show was staged and accessed, this was then a moment to rethink the overall curatorial strategy and use the space as a working period to develop ideas, as opposed to the 'finished' or 'resolved' work that was conventionally the provenance of museum exhibition practice. My second reason, following from this one, was that, in any case, a body of work in fulfilment of a practice-based PhD, was already more in line with a process of thinking and speculation, of theoretical and formal inquiry, that in many ways made it different to 'objects consecrated' through a system of vetting and accumulating credentials, that is the normal pathway or journey of a work into a museum. The negotiations were illuminating of the forms of institutionality and conservatism that large structures, such as museums and universities, seek to protect.

In the end, I conceded to relinquish the 'project space' model, because ultimately my priority was to act as a curator (in the sense of caring, protecting and guardianship) of the work, and in this way my thinking circled back to considerations of the specificities of the site of a black-box exhibition. While I conceded this point and dived into the logistics and production needed to put up such a large-scale video installation, I did have a final point to negotiate with the curators of WAM. And this was for the live performances of the BLK JKS and the Wretched.

The negotiations here rested on what I would call sonic overlap, or what was often referred to by the curators as 'noise'. WAM had a large exhibition on show at the same time in the gallery, directly above the space I was showing in. And there were concerns that the sound from the live performances would interfere with the experience of visitors to the above spaces.

We spent a lot of time in discussion as to how this could work and, in the end, we managed to find mutually agreeable arrangements. In addition to installing curtains and being sensitive to audio flows through and between spaces, we scheduled two days of performances, a week apart, towards the end of the run of the show. Further to this, we arranged for the sound check to take place on a Monday, when the museum was to be closed, thus doing all the testing that we required in a way that disturbed no one. The actual sonic interventions would be scheduled to last an hour, and signage would be in place to alert visitors to the nature and fact of the interventions. So, while two rock and roll bands playing in a museum may at first sound … well it might sound 'rock and roll', instead, this was a very mediated and sensitively crafted intervention (as most things rock and roll are). As is the case with most of such interventions. I am reminded of Maurizio Cattelan's *Untitled* (1997), where Cattelan cuts a hole in the room housing a gallery of Old Master paintings in the historic Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam. The permissions and negotiations to pull off this seemingly glib and spontaneous, slapstick or off-hand gesture, must have been considerable. And such is the nature of any gesture performed in such highly regulated spaces, such as museums.

A Space for Lovers to Court or *Lover's Rock*

Over the course of the run of the show at WAM, I visited the space almost every day. I spent most of my time viewing the work, thinking, watching and observing. Trying to get further into the underlying ideas that prompted the work. Trying to make sense of what this kind of aesthetic proposition could do in the world, and trying to work out and understand why it was necessary at all. The writing collected in these pages is, in part, a result of those days of quiet reflection and meditation.

As I sat and watched and wrote in the space, visitors would quietly enter the space and approach the work. In these moments, I would gently move away from the best points to view the work, and allow people to find a vantage that they felt most comfortable with. In the installation, there were two benches – one in front of a monitor that housed *Île Aux Serpents*, and another in front of the projection that housed *Paradise Fallen: Blaxis.* Naturally these benches became focal points that people gravitated to, not only because of the comfort of the bench in an otherwise empty, dark and undulating space. But also because the benches were at a central point to the screen that marked the visually most immersive frontal view, that was directly perpendicular to the screen.

On these benches, I watched people watch my work. I was surprised at how long people sat with the work. These were films in which not a lot happened. While *Île Aux Serpents* has a voice-over that is suggestive of a narrative, it nonetheless has a circular quality that disallows narrative progression, with the attendant forms of build-up and climax. The work very much attempts to put a viewer within a landscape. And when confronted by this landscape, to gently shape and shift thoughts to the underlying conceptual and political concerns. While these are most apparent in *Île Aux Serpents*, they are much more subtle in *Paradise Fallen: Blaxis.* I began to speculate on what could hold a viewer in this space. Was it the content? The work offered very little by way of conventional content or narrative. There certainly was no conventional 'story' at work here. My thinking led to a consideration of the formal properties of the making and curation of the work. Could it be that the space, and the intervention that the work imposed into the space, were what held the gaze of the visitors?

The quiet stillness of the work, wrapped inside the dark embrace of the space, forced a recalibration of sorts. On entering the space, you would walk off Jorissen Street, one of the busiest streets of Braamfontein – a thoroughfare with heavy foot traffic, which commuters, taxi minibuses and buses use to traverse points of the city. As soon as you left the city, you would be confronted by a security desk, where you would be asked to sanitise your hands, and go through the necessary Covid protocols. Next, you would enter through a glass sliding door, and enter the museum itself.

This entry space has glass windows that allow full visibility to the street and, while the sounds of the street may be dampened, the space is immersed in natural ambient light. And since the museum is open between 10 am and 4 pm, this is always daylight.

At this entrance space to the museum, one has the option to walk along the street-facing windows, passing a large glass vitrine that houses objects from the Standard Bank Collection, and descend a flight of stairs. Gallery 1, where *Paradise Fallen: Blaxis* was installed, lay at the bottom of this descent. And as you descended, your eyes would have to slowly adjust to diminishing light, until you ultimately entered the space, which



Zen Marie, *Paradise Fallen: Blaxis*, 2021. Installation view, WITS Art Museum. Johannesburg, South Africa.

was fully painted in black, and which had four light sources: one projection, one flat-screen monitor, and two spotlights – one on the vinyl text on the wall just to your left as you entered, and another on the ramp that connected the two parts of Gallery 1.

The experience of entering the space could perhaps be a little disorienting. While it was designed to be gradual and progressive, so as not to be a 'shock' to the system, the quietness and the absence of light, as well as the sonorous ambient sounds from the videos, were in marked contrast to the frenetic pace of the Johannesburg city streets above. In this space, I observed and tried to understand people's movements.

More than gleaning any meaningful or new information in terms of how people interacted or responded to the space, since this was more or less as anticipated, what struck me the most was how people used the space as a space of retreat from the world above. In many ways, this became a subterranean otherworld, not separate to or divorced from the world above, but instead a place for reflection, and reflections that were guided by links made to the worlds that may exist above. You were invited to leave the world only to encounter it through the films, that offered portals to transport you into landscapes and mindscapes that existed elsewhere and in other times.

In this space, people sat, listened and watched. I was struck by how many couples, both young and old, visited the space. These couples sat on the benches and watched the landscapes unfold. They sat in silence, alone in thoughts, but joined to each other. Thoughts that, I know from my own experience, shifted from questions prompted by the work, but also to those more banal and fleeting – reflections on the day behind or the day ahead, everyday thoughts that we all slip into at times when our attention is not demanded, co-opted into focused attention, or coerced into channels of desire.

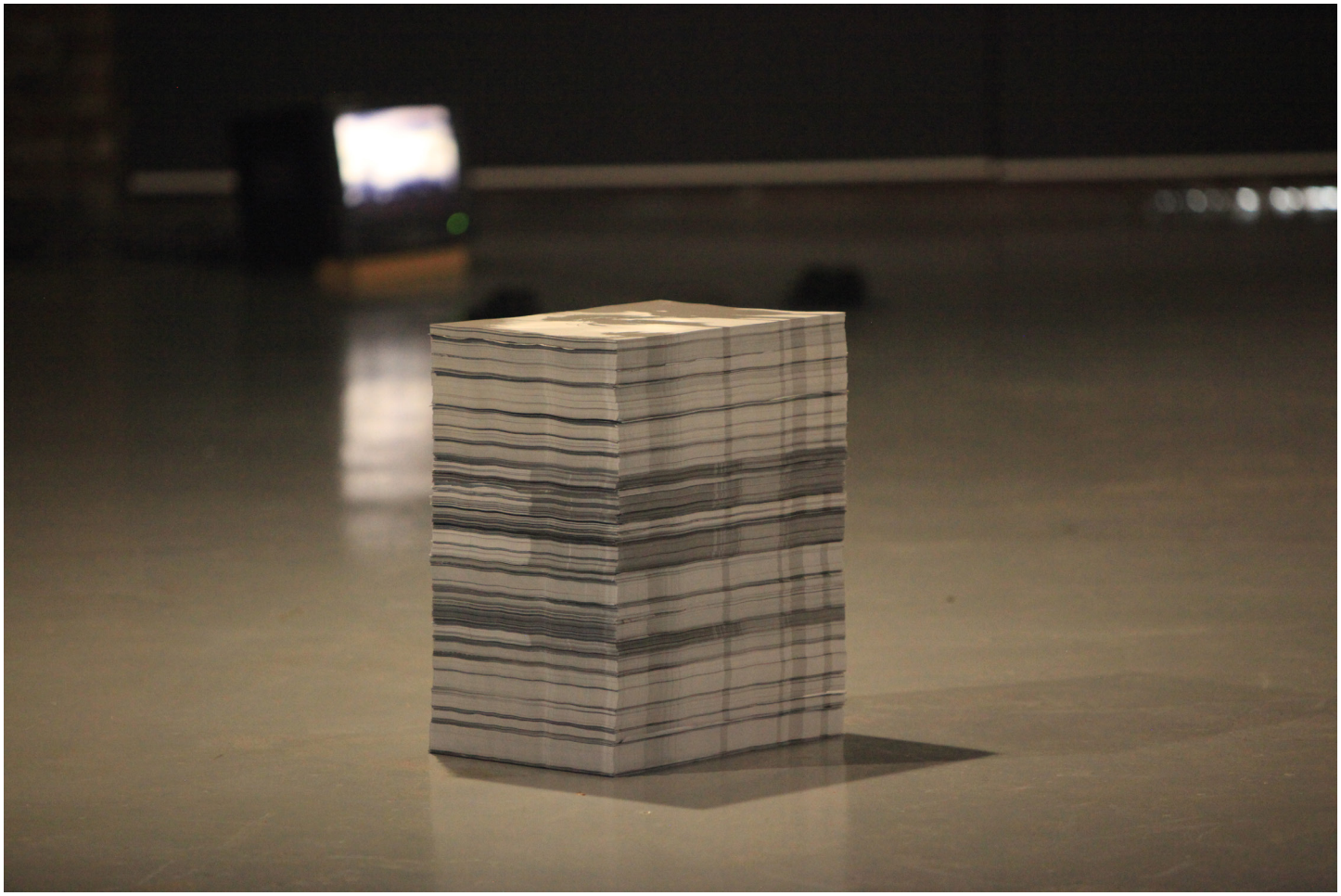
The couples softly whispered to each other, perhaps discussing the work, but I like to imagine that these were sweet nothings that lovers offer to each other in such moments of quiet reverie. This bench was then not unlike any bench or sitting place that allows a view out onto an expanse – a vista, a 'belle vue' – a lover's rock from which to be at one with oneself and to be at one with others. Such is the romanticism that opened to me as I held vigil in this space, as the forms of poetics that this work suggested, unsettled and challenged my inclinations to more secure coordinates of politics and theory. In this space, this lover's rock, it stopped being important what the work meant. Rather, the challenge was to accept what the work had become.

In this space, I also held four artist talks. These talks were held seated on the floor, on cushions, that were also in the space as an option for people to sit on, in addition to the benches. The talks were held in the dark, with the videos on. At the designated hour of the talk's commencement, I would allow the main film, *Paradise Fallen: Blaxis*, to complete the loop that it was on. After the cycle, which would not be discernible to anyone else, as the film was on a seamless loop but marked by the entrance of a bird into the image, I would lower the audio. And awkwardly begin to speak.

I always began these sessions with an attempt at a 'land acknowledgement', a form of paying homage to and making visible the contested nature of land in particular colonial settings. My land acknowledgement was awkward, more for the fact that this is not a conventional practice in South Africa. In fact, my appreciation of land acknowledgements is through the North

American or Australian practices of such. Part of my land acknowledgment was to acknowledge and speculate why it is that we don't do this in South Africa, especially since the land, and the ownership of the land, is still very much in active contestation. Perhaps, my speculation proceeded, this was precisely why we didn't do this; that to acknowledge that the land is scarred by violence, erasure and forced removal was too risky in a political climate where re-appropriation or restitution of land is not an abstract historical matter but a pressing, urgent political and contemporary issue. To 'give back' the land could not happen in an exclusively rhetorical or symbolic manner. To do this would be to agitate and support for actual land restitution claims that are ongoing.

I also acknowledge the unnamed artists whose work, exhibited in a massive exhibition of African objects in the spaces above – and labelled only by geography, time period, and ethnic group – I shared the Wits Art Museum with, the authors of these works lost to time, and unremembered. Much like the history of the land that Johannesburg occupies; a contested, occupied land that does not do well to remember the original inhabitants' pre-colonial settlement. This manner of opening the talks that I did, were sombre and mournful homages to that which we had lost. And this tone and tenor of approach to the work was important, as it allowed a point of access into the work that is deeply concerned with ideas around loss and impossibility.



Zen Marie, *The Subject of I: Stack*, 2018. A stack of A3 Lithographic prints of a poem by Danai Mupotsa, fem of colour. Johannesburg, South Africa.



The Subject of "I"

For the shrieking spirits who sing through my spirit and breathe through my stomach

I clutch desperately at bodies and smiling and kind eyes. For some sense coherence. Connection that means I have a place. I have no place. Words and tears pour hot, wet skin burns and feels like screaming. Face remains still mind retains control for a moment the cleverness suspends me in place where my voice speaks, does not break, and in the tone of silent scream speaks oneness of nonsense coherent incoherence.

I long for pleasure that comes with tongue and skin and eyes that touch and love on bottom and love on top softness and hardness and eyes. With self, and one and one and one; to feel your demand to possess every part of me as you try to clumsily collect me in those moments when I sit still and I just want to eat your face, your whole face and arms; consume you entirely for a moment suspended in the lies of affirmation. To only wake and remember my wounds, my incompleteness, my incoherence.

I want the spirits that course through my hot skin to refuse me, misrecognise me, hold me close and remind me of the control of love and the power of my wounds and that fire can never be still. I never want to accept or be still though I forgive my moments of stillness.

I want to live one and one and one
simultaneously
endlessly multiple
against all odds that I could ever escape one-in-three.

Danai Mupotsa

Feeling and Ugly
impepho press
2018

Image on reverse: film still from *Ile Aux Serpents*, Zen Marie, 2018

Paradise Fallen
Conversation at fem of colour (sic)

Saturday, 22 September 2018, 12h00
Zen Marie (ZM) and Danai Mupotsa (DM)
Intro by Gabrielle Goliath (GG) with audience responses

– conversation begins –

Gabrielle Goliath: So hi everyone, my name's Gabrielle, and Zen's just asked me to say a few words of welcome. So, welcome … and it's so wonderful to see so many people present here today. I'm so sorry to have missed Wednesday, but I'm so glad to be here today. Just a few words on this space, and then a few words on Zen and his exhibition. So, this space is called fem of colour, and really, it's meant to be a … it's derived from f-e-m, from feminine, but a form and a notion and concept of the feminine that extends beyond a definition of the feminine, that doesn't just rely on the gendered body. And so it's quite a political and social concept of the feminine. So, *fem of colour*, a space that seeks to host and facilitate very particular events.

And, why? Well … I started this space initially, I was always very anti the concept of having a studio of my own, which I think was perhaps quite arrogant at first, but then decided that, okay, I need a studio, I need a space, I don't want people in my home anymore. But then I thought, okay, so how do I consciously counter this notion of 'Studio Goliath'? So I thought, well, get a space, have a space, but then host events, host gatherings, host exhibitions, host like-minded happenings, and events and people. And so that's how this space came about. And so it's meant to really be that kind of space; it's meant to be a safe space. I feel also that there is a dearth of such spaces that are able to facilitate such gatherings.

And then, how Zen's show came to be … The first exhibition to happen here was, as he reminded me over a magnificent dinner at he and Naadi's home – they are both, as I'm sure many of you here know, excellent cooks, and it was delicious – and we were talking, and he was telling us about this work of his. And the whole point of going to the dinner was to have a meal together and then to have a screening after, which we did, and he spoke about this desire to show this work. At this point I hadn't even moved into the space yet – and I said to him, well, I'm going to have a space and, if you're keen, it would be wonderful to host it here. And so I'm very, very honoured to have this exhibition here. I hold Zen, as a person, in high regard, and his work. I think this is a very, very beautiful exhibition to encounter, in this space, and the poetic register within which it operates is so beautiful. The way in which it allows us to approach difficult and fraught subjects, but obliquely and by way of this poetic register, is quite interesting and quite provocative and quite thoughtful.

But I'm going to leave all of that to Danai and Zen to talk about. So, I'm so happy to have them both here, to have this conversation today. Thank you.

[*audience clapping*]

Zen Marie: Thank you so much Gabrielle … and really, thank you, for the opportunity to squat your space for a bit. The generosity with which you've welcomed me is amazing, and thank you also James, Naadi, Zak, and a bunch of other friends who've also just helped me to make this happen.

I'm going to hand over to Danai, who is also a friend, who I first encountered in a conference room in São Paulo a long time ago, and I was like, 'Who the hell is this person?!' And we've done a lot of things together over the years, some of which we'll speak about, some of which we can't …

My invitation to Danai to facilitate this conversation, is part of a larger importance of engaging and thinking through her work, both the academic work but, in a very important way, how her work as a poet and a person intersects and expands on and engages with that academic project. So, the collaboration with her in the stack of litho prints, of which you're welcome to take one, is a reproduction of a poem of hers from a recent, or recently published … is it anthology? or collection of poems, called *Feeling and Ugly*. And the reason for that, is that I really kind of … I always struggle with poetry, and I've struggled with the times when Danai and other comrades have done poetry recitals … I really struggled! … But there's something in making this body of work that

allowed me to engage with that, and I returned to her work in putting this exhibition together and found that some of her work was useful in allowing me to think through what this starts to mean, if one can talk about meaning at all.

So, Danai, welcome, and thank you for doing this.

[*audience clapping*]

Danai Mupotsa: Thank you. So, first of all, when Zen mentioned this collaboration, I said, you choose whichever poem you want, and then the ones he chose are all the one's I find like deeply painful … or difficult, or a lot of my poems are really short, so like then the really long ones I don't know what to do with them. So I was just like *meep* [*laughs nervously*]. But thank you, it's helping me work through that. So, I have some questions that I wrote down, on two sides of a paper.

ZM: They're terrifying questions by the way.

DM: So, to start large in terms of your work, and then get into some specifics. The first question I had, was for you to talk about your intellectual work, your intellectual project around site-specific work, and what that actually means – I mean to you – because that's part of what you're trying to define in this, in the work, as you're producing it.

ZM: The idea of site … of site-specificity, very quickly, has become a terribly impoverished term in contemporary visual art, which is made into a genre and a way of thinking about anything that exists outside of the gallery. Also, site-specificity comes with a range of other terms and related practices but, I feel, gets confused, in that it doesn't do what it sets out to do in the first instance. Which, for me, begins firstly as a project that includes a critique of the modes of normativity that site and space produce. This is a critique of power.

Historically, site-specificity emerges out of a radical moment in the '60s when there was a lot of optimism and hope for … well, there was an international left, and there was a whole lot of hope and optimism for forms of socialism on a truly international scale. Within the arts, there was the idea that the work that art included could be so much more than simply the decorative, and so much in excess of a highly coded commodity. This critical energy in art, especially in terms of the rejection of art as commodity, meant that forms of performance-based or ephemeral work proliferated. In this, space was not seen as neutral, but as highly loaded and even ideologically produced. The idea was that each space or site has a set of politics, ideologies. A set of relationships that are governed, generated and produced by a particular space. And that that is important to understand, to work with, and to develop site as a crucially important framework, but more as a set of filters. In fact, site or space become seen as core to the fabric, the texture of what the work could be. And here I think this would include any kind of work, whether visual, intellectual, or activist. I mean, a protest is deeply site-specific.

So the idea of site is something that's important, but for me it's important to think – and I think this relates to this work – to think about site as more than just a set of material conditions. There's the danger of rendering site just as the sort of bricks and mortar, the physical dimensions of it, when actually there's a lot of ephemera: there are psychic dimensions of site, there are emotional dimensions of site, and all of these have terribly important consequences in terms of who is allowed to operate in certain spaces and how.

So, for me, the work is an intense engagement with particular sites – Réunion and Dakar – and then this site, the space we are in now. I mean, I spent a lot of time thinking about not just the physical dimensions of the space, but really the conversation between Gabrielle [Goliath] and James [McDonald], and who they are. The tone and tenor of their engagement shapes how … shapes what is possible in this space. And for me that was also important to think about in terms of this. I mean, this show wouldn't be able to take place in this form in other places; it would be modulated according to different specifics.

DM: Okay. And Why Réunion? Why Dakar?

ZM: Well, both of these spaces [for me] are informed by friendships and people, right. So in Réunion, there's an artist, Yohann Quëland de Saint-Pern, who I've worked with for a long time, and he invited me to collaborate on a project with him there, where I was. He was doing a vinyl, and the vinyl was inviting friends to sing a song for him. So, I chose, obviously, Madonna's 'Lucky Star Bonita' ['La Isla Bonita'] … I call it 'Lucky Star' …

[*audience laughs*]

So, I sang that song for him, and we recorded it with a sort of Calypso band [*audience laughter*]. It's released, it's out there! But it's a limited-edition print of vinyl. But while I was there, I started thinking about Réunion. There was a volcano going off – a real one on the island. There was another volcano going off – it was 2016, and Fees Must Fall was happening at Wits. So I was watching, on social media and on the news, people I know getting shot and gassed, like on the university piazza, in front of the Great Hall. So it was a pretty hectic time of things going on. Réunion is intense anyway. It's French sovereign soil – not just soil, France owns the fishing rights around it and the airspace above it, and you spend euro – I mean it's bizarre. And all this while, it's on the Indian Ocean. It's pretty trippy.

Dakar is the product of a long-standing relationship with the RAW Material Company – Koyo Kouoh, Marie Hélène Pereira, and a couple of other people. I've been going back to Dakar regularly since 2010. But last year I was there at a project directed by *Chimurenga* magazine. You guys all know Chimurenga? And so it was a two-month period of the Chimurenga-directed RAW Academy, and a lot of the writing – well not a lot, ALL of the writing that went into the text here, the film and the manifesto – was done in the middle of this academy where Chimurenga, as Chimurenga does, was talking about difficult things; not just colonialism – colonialism is easy. They were talking about the violence of cartography, they were talking about how music is a way to engage with these kinds of things. They were talking about genocide. So the Chimurenga project was, for me, important in delineating the form and politics – in a sense the framework – for the site-specific context from which the text for the voice-over for the film emerges. And the film is shot in Dakar, on three islands around the peninsula.

The drawings were done in Réunion – well, the first drawings. These ones were done in this space. But the idea for these shadow drawings was from then. There are other reasons as to why they're important spaces, but those are the …

DM: Okay, so in terms of the relationship between the mainland and the island … A mainland has a kind of closer kinship to sort of progressive time, national time, hetero-normative time, whereas, perhaps, islands have a different kind of temporality, or different forms of combinations in relation to that kind of frame of time. So I'm wondering if you can say something about your choice of the island – islands … The island, figuratively; islands in real life, also.

ZM: Yeah, you see that's was one of the terrifying questions that Danai prepared! Look, I mean islands are strange things. There are some islands on which you could be on the island and it doesn't feel like an island because you don't have – as they used to call it – the 'god's eye view'; but now it's probably the Google Map or the 'drone eye view', of the compactness of it. So, for the islands in the film, some of the islands here – in the archipelago; it's a fragmented archipelago, or a semi-archipelago – that is, Îles aux Madeleine, you can see that you're on an island and you can feel that you're on an island. But at other times you don't have that impression – that physical impression and embodied sense of being on an island. Of course you know you are on an island, because you arrived on it by boat, and your imagination continues to locate you, but physically, from what you can see, you may as well be on the mainland. Sometimes you can't even see the ocean from the island, and you are engulfed in high plateaux with grass that could be in the middle of a savannah or the slopes of a valley. Geography has the habit of continually reminding you of how small your body is in relation to the planet.

A similar thing operates – but in reverse – on the mainland. Dakar is a peninsula, and there are moments on the peninsula that you feel as if you are on an island. This has to do with the meeting of the ocean and land, which is a series of proximal relationships between how you are able to (or not) view relationships between sea and land. It has to do with things like elevation and layerings of water – land combinations that you can either visually apprehend or not. There are times when you really have that island feeling, which is produced by a complex play of sensory cues and aesthetics. The peninsula of Dakar narrows at the point at which the outcrop of land meets the mainland, and in real ways, the bulk of the peninsula becomes an island in many respects. You feel this most when you are on the plateau, in the centre ville, and of course on the corniche. The pace of the city modulates rhythmically, and of course there are the palm trees. The imaginative or symbolic production of islands, in the European sense, is reproduced here through the kind of colonial planning and architecture of the city that preceded independence. And here, like in Réunion, the French wrote their desires across

this landscape in the plants they planted and the ways in which they built the city.

Then there are the kinds of dynamics of islands, being about leaving and arriving. There's a kind of constant movement. I mean, some tourist islands in the Caribbean, or even around Dakar, you know, the population quadruples as soon as one of those huge tourist boats, those floating hotel cruise ships, arrive and people come and do their thing.

So I think there is something to be said about how time functions there. You don't have the kind of regularised time of capitalism, right, which is about commuting to work, commuting home, maybe stopping at the shopping mall on the way. But some islands you do that, right? So Réunion Island at times doesn't feel like you're on an island; it feels like somebody took Stanger from KZN and dropped it into the Indian Ocean – and it's terrible! – and it has shopping malls and has everything else. But there are other times where you feel like you are actually on a remote and deserted island. On Réunion and in Dakar, these forms and times operate directly next to each other, on top of each other at times. It's really trippy.

So I think there's something seductive in thinking that islands disrupt time. But I would rather frame that as a question. And I would question that in terms of well, not all islands do that, but also not all mainlands are continuous with time. I mean, there are spaces inside of large continental bodies that also disrupt time. So you have islands within mainlands. So you could talk about 'islanding' as a sort of conceptual process rather than as a geographic one: To what extent does blocking out the light in this space create timelessness, that this becomes separated from a bigger flow of things, people, and time?

The link to nationalism … I don't know…

DM: Well, national time…

ZM: National time … I was going to quote Homi Bhabha there, but I won't …

[*audience laughs*]

DM: Okay, so I was talking to a colleague, who's a philosopher … and I was talking about someone who was talking about metaphysics, a student, and he's like, 'Everybody say's 'metaphysics' these days. They don't even know what it means!' So he was, like, shading us.

So, you're working with the idea of the metaphysics of place in some sense, so I'm wondering, in this corner over there [*gestures*], if you could say something about that …

ZM: So, the piece Danai's referring to is a manifesto I wrote for a collective I'm a part of. The collective is called Sugar-Free, and it deals with, it's centred around, thinking around this idea of *genoudsmiddele* – the collaborator I'm working with, Dimitri Madimin, is Dutch-Suriname – so it's a Dutch word that means, literally, 'excitable substances'. Our approximate word, or the proper translation would be stimulants, but 'excitable substances' is a much more viscous-y a word or phrasing. For us, it became a way to enter a thinking about colonialism in the way that colonialism was based primarily in a search for excitable substances, whether it's caffeine in your tea or coffee, spices to make things exciting in your food and to stimulate endorphins at times – I'm sure most people here are addicted to chillies in some way or other! And then to the other more dangerously excitable substances, like sugar, cocaine and heroine. Our relationship to the desire for these excitable substances is a complex one, one that is coded and split across the poles of excess and guilt, on the one hand, and restraint and ethics on the other. We are increasingly aware of the cost of these substances – to our health, to the environment, and to slave-like conditions often used to extract and refine these substances. I mean, on the one hand, it's filled with, you know … I mean coffee – you know we talk about blood diamonds, but 'fair-trade' coffee has a lot of blood on it, still. So we desire these things at great cost, and then there's the personal cost that, especially with hard drugs like heroine and cocaine, you know, you try doing that for a decade or two and it's obvious what the health cost is …

[*audience laughs nervously*]

And sugar … So you know the whole thing around the sugar tax. So the idea of Sugar-Free was to think about, well, we desire these things, we want the pleasure, but we want to take out the fundamental thing that's going to harm us. So we vape and we drink Coke Light, or Coke Zero, or Coke Green (nobody really knows what that green can is). So there's the strategies that we've developed to do that – to ameliorate our sense of guilt by packaging things in 'fair trade' and 'lite' forms that still give us a kick.

So the text in the video manifesto, which was also written while I was at the Chimurenga residency

in Dakar, is about how our desires are informed by a range of things that are very, very difficult and complicated. And there's an ambivalence there – we understand that there is a risk to the desire. How that enters in the thinking in that piece, is how we always have this desire or these layers between us, and these things, and anything in the world … so this is where it goes into this idea of representation. And I guess my engagement with metaphysics is purely around that representational moment of the thing or the object never just being an object or a thing. In fact, in any kind of philosophy or theory of art, there's an aesthetic process which comes to mediate between a viewer, a reader, a listener and something else – something else that happens somewhere else, at a time before or at a place removed, right? This is the medium, right?

And photography is exactly that. The only sure thing you can say about photography, as some theorists say, is that the thing being photographed is not here, right? It's sort of like an obvious thing – a picture of a person who was there doing that at that time. So the idea of that distancing, between people looking, reading, listening, and the things that they're looking, reading, listening about, I mean that's where the metaphysics of this comes into it, around a representational set of ideas.

I mean, it's not answering the question of what is metaphysics …

DM: I mean, I also wouldn't have answered it, but…

ZM: I would probably go back to the discussion on site-specificity, where site-specificity normally is predicated on a set of physical properties or physical material relationships, and I think it's incredibly important to think about the psychic, emotional, ephemeral nature of matter, of space, and of physics.

DM: Yeah. So in Sugar-Free, the manifesto responds to capitalism as this kind of structuring force that you're describing as metaphysics. And then we have water, which implies a different kind of – maybe not different, maybe there's a continuous opposition to this – I mean continuous, not just between here and here, but a different kind of way to frame the very relation you're describing. Water implying, for instance, cleansing, perhaps, in many frames of thinking and knowing the world, which may not be the same as what is implied in the piece I'm saying is continuous.

[*long pause … audience laughs*]

Can you comment on that?

ZM: I can. Look, the water … I mean last night – which is a plug for the next event that's going to happen – I was talking with the musicians that I'm working with for a live event next week Wednesday. So it's going to be me, Tumi Mogorosi, Mpumi Mcata and Rob Machiri who are, well they're going to be playing, making a sonic intervention in that space. We're going to move the screen into that space and I'm going to live mix the video to their engagement.

But they were asking, they were looking for – well Tumi especially, because this is how Tumi Mogorosi thinks – he's like, 'Well we need some motifs to lay down, because we're gonna totally improvise. What are the motifs?' And then Rob comes in with a hook on the piano, and I'm like, 'Well, on my timeline I've got, you know, it's cheesy, but I've got four elements – water, wind, air and fire [*audience laughs*], and that's, well, you know, when you edit you have to structure your shit somehow, and that was how I did it.' But for me that was an important way to think through the images that I have and to then think about how to put them next to each other. But those are important motifs – so, the fieryness of the sun, the wateriness of the water, the earthiness of the earth … the windiness of the wind …

[*audience laughs*]

I mean, editors are like drummers – you don't really want to ask them to speak too often! [*laughs*] But this was a conversation between an editor and a drummer, so what do you do? There are a whole lot of editor and drummer jokes which, if I was a stand-up comic, I would entertain you with, but …

So the idea of the water, for me, is multiple, because there's the literal ocean. But Dakar being at sea level – we're 1 700m above sea level here [in Johannesburg]. At the moment there's absolutely no moisture in the air now, and there hasn't been much moisture in the air for a while, and the light does different things. So from a cinematographic point of view, the atmosphere in Dakar is terribly important as it's infused with this water. So you're looking at water there, even though that would be in a different bin on my timeline [*laughs*] …

But the idea of water as some kind of a medium – and perhaps there's a riff to go back to the idea of mediation and how different forms of substances or representational strategies come to stand between you and the thing you desire … So the search for ecstasy, you always need something to get there, right? The ocean as a medium, as a material, is incredibly important.

Of course, that was the basis for a colonial sea exploration – the ocean took you from place to place. So when you think about the transatlantic slave trade, and you think about circumnavigating the Cape of Good Hope and going and finding the sea route to the east, the ocean becomes important to all of those.

The cleansing, and the other psychic forms of thinking about the ocean … I mean, look, I spent a lot of time just standing in front of the ocean – a lot of this is time-lapse photography, and for most of the three months that I shot this, I was literally just standing in front of a landscape and thinking about the light and the water.

Naadi falls asleep in front of this work, and that's an incredibly important point of engagement [*audience laughs*] – like there's something lulling and calming about what the ocean does, and it's not just the visual, the sight of the ocean; it's also the sound of it. I mean I think there's something incredibly deep there that I haven't explored and won't be able to talk to, but the ocean is an amazing thing. I mean, for me, I was born in Durban, and the ocean and humidity in the air, and the lush vegetation of KZN, is something I still miss in Johannesburg. The kind of barren, burnt-out landscape of the highveld is something that it's taken me about twenty years to understand its logic and to appreciate its beauty. But that's just a riff, I guess.

DM: I remember, as a child, Durban was like, you go into the water with a plastic bottle, carrying salt water, so that you can take it with you – I guess implying some of the things you're saying.

People are excited about you drawing. I've heard them talking about it. For me, the palm [*makes rustling leaf noise to mimic the sped-up part of the palm tree blowing in the wind*] – since we're talking about your timeline, and the air and the wind … In terms of place, what does the palm do? Because the palm also has a place, but also not a place – it's placeless. It can be placeless in some ways, but you repeat the motif.

ZM: The palm is a fascinating thing that I've worked with in different ways. I've gone back to and revisited it for the longest time. I mean, it takes on different resonances in different places where I work with it. The palms, at this point in the film especially, become like my main protagonists and antagonists in the film. So they're the malevolent spirits, the friends you want to console you, right? So, I'm really kind of playing with them narratively, or trying to play with them narratively like that. This is malevolence right here [*referring to image on screen*].

And in Réunion, for instance, well, palms have this relation to, like, tropical paradise – there's a kind of idea of how the palm signifies the beach island resort-type thing, which is kind of weird and ludicrous, because a lot of the palms that we associate with that image are actually desert palms – you know, the date-bearing palms which come from the Arab peninsula, which has nothing kind of tropical or subtropical or beachy or holiday-y about it.

Réunion Island doesn't have palms, or didn't have palms. Palms are not indigenous to Réunion, but I think it was the Portuguese or the French who came here and they said, 'Nice island, but where are the palms?', and proceeded to plant so many palms that now they've got over ten thousand varieties of palm, and it looks more like an island. Whereas the indigenous flora are totally different.

The palm drawings came from Réunion, thinking about these invasive aliens who are these signifiers of tropical paradise, and I guess the riff of the palm comes into it.

DM: Okay, so the snakes. For me, personally, in terms of thinking about ways of thinking about the world, cosmology, that's not monotheistic – so often in monotheism, water is morally good, this kind of binary good and bad – and snakes become equivalent to what it means to know, but to know is bad, apparently …

Whereas in non-monotheistic ways of thinking, snakes and water are continuous in their relationship in what it means to know the world – the capacity to know the world – and there is no binary moral frame of good and bad. Can you run us through your moral frame in terms of playing with water and snakes in this way – if you're playing with them?

ZM: Yeah, I really like that. First, because we're also bludgeoned by Christianity. I was thinking through the biblical association with snakes, but I really like what you're saying there, and in fact, yes, for me, the film especially is about – if anything is ever about something – an ambivalence of desire, right? So it's kind of like this deeply ambivalent sense of wanting something, but knowing that to indulge your desire for it will lead to your obliteration in the most extreme sense. So that the snakes also become this ambivalent thing. Of

what it does, joined with the water, I think is really interesting.

The morality of it, uh … I'm not even sure what you mean by that: 'What is my moral framework to engage with …'

DM: Well, as in, monotheistically, there's only good and bad, whereas otherwise it doesn't have to be either/or. So this question of evil, to repeat … So snakes aren't bad; some people think snakes are bad, some people don't [*laughs*], but it's not that they're not good or bad, it's just that it's not a frame to see the world …

ZM: Yeah, listen, I agree with that now, but I think in the way that the script, or the voice-over, is written, the snakes narratively are used in a much more reductive sense. And I think that's a fair point. I don't know … What more do you want to say?

DM: [*chuckles*] I'm like, okay … No, that's fine …

Okay, I have one last question in terms of continuing the relation to snakes and water, because for me they also become conduits for many frames of knowing the world, conduits for thinking about dreams as a particular way to know the world, so we have a way of thinking about our senses. And you've talked about the visual, the aural, the felt, the psychic, the ephemeral; but also the self that comes in the stomach [*laughs*] – the intuitive – but also other forms of knowing that we often un-privilege, for example, the dream. And often water and snakes are, in many ways of thinking about the world, one point of accessing or entering the dreamland and beginning to know the world in a particular kind of way that may not always correspond with the time of the present or the material in the way we think of the material or present. And it's all over the work, and so I'm wondering about your dreams … or a sense of what it means to be conscious or to become awake across the work …

ZM: Ja, I mean, my dreams, literally, I don't remember most of my dreams, unfortunately. I used to at a point, but not anymore. But I don't think that's what you're asking. I think it goes back to this thing about some kind of metaphysical concern, whatever that is. There's something in excess of a rational analytical approach to the geography, the climate, the history and the politics at work. So the Sugar-Free work deliberately provokes in a sort of teasing way, a spitting way, some of these ideas. And this provokes or teases out the kind of potencies within the landscape, in a way, which, I mean – if you want to use it as an adjective – is 'dreamlike'. So it courts a certain kind of … yeah, something that exists outside of rationality. And I think that's deliberate.

I'm looking for a way to engage with some of these very heavy political, historical and materialist concepts, but in a way that does something else. And I think, for me, what's important there is finding a point of empathy with all of these grand narratives or intense debates. And that's about locating myself within the landscape. Because I mean, literally, I was standing where Nik is for all of these things [*gestures distance between him and Nik in the crowd*], so I'm there each time, even though I'm using a tripod. But then to think about, in writing a text, how do I locate myself within the text? What is it? What are the personal resonances that can drive this narrative? And then to see how it works if I throw them onto the landscape, and throw them into this text.

DM: I'm done. I don't know if anyone is itching to ask a question or make a comment. I didn't ask if that was the thing to do, but …

ZM: Yeah, for sure … Just a quick [note]: the text was written in English. A friend of mine, Gilles Furtwängler, translated it, and an MC in Dakar, Youssoupha Sarr, did the voice-over.

Katelyn Chetty (KC): Why was it important for you to change the text from English to Afri … sorry, no, from English to French?

ZM: Freudian slip – wants an Afrikaans version! [*laughter*]

KC: So, why was that? I mean we spoke about it briefly, but for you, you said it was easier for you to edit. Why was that?

ZM: Yeah, I mean that was the result of that. Look all of the questions you can ask about any work, there's a fundamentally boring, pragmatic answer, right? Which is, I was showing it in Dakar, and people wouldn't have understood the English. So I say, okay, well, I could put subtitles. But I thought, oh, wait, I'm here for a while. Let's see what a translation would feel like, if that's more exciting? But then, when I did the translation, there was something about how … Youssoupha Sarr did an English voice-over as well, and I've got that file, and I've tried to edit that – in fact, for this

showing, I was like 'Oh, obviously now I must show people the English version.' But I struggled to edit with the English, and it was something about the immediacy of the meaning of each word, while I'm editing. It was tripping me up.

Whereas with the French, because I'm estranged from French – I mean, I can understand some French, but I have to think very hard, I have to work. So I was confronted with, or I had to engage with, the rhythm, the tone, the texture of the phrasing of the words, rather than the meaning of it. So I could speculate much more in a dreamlike way that was textural, rather than having to think about 'What scene is going to best illustrate or demonstrate this part of 'I will defend' [*referring to scene*]? And obviously it's not that kind of film, so it allowed me that kind of space to move …

We spoke about a lot more, but I can't remember.

KC: The other one was about why you've used the camera that you've used, and if you would potentially revert back to analogue photography with some of the palm trees?

ZM: Okay, well, I'm not going to answer that one … [*laughs*]

Nare?

Nare Mokgotho (NM): Okay, I'm a little interested in your sort of visual language, and your *lensing*. And the kind of tension that exists between the conversation that you guys are having around a site-specificity, and then a kind of distancing that happens with your long lenses. You kind of speak about locating yourself in the landscape, and then I see these extreme wides, which kind of give you that off-ness. And, I suppose it's also kind of that tension that exists with being an outsider to that space. So I'm just wondering if you could speak to that dynamic?

ZM: I'm not sure I understand the question …

NM: So when I look at the film, right, it feels like those images are taken from very far back. And I suppose site-specificity speaks to being implicated in the land which you're in – kind of intimacy – and in some ways I just don't feel that in the images.

ZM: Look, I mean the idea of not being familiar with the place is important. There's definitely a dynamic of me being a foreigner in Dakar, not speaking the language, etc. I mean it's not all long lenses. The birds, for example. I managed to get the birds because I saw them diving for a pile of small fish that came off a fisherman's net. So I literally lay down next to the pile of fish so they were just above me. But in terms of what site-specificity does, I think it's interesting that you ask for or propose a level of intimacy with site-specificity, because that's not conventionally part of it. But I think it's an important thing to demand, in fact. And then we'd have to think about what is it to be intimate with a site?

So, for me, the idea of a descriptiveness, of describing Dakar … I mean there's this horrible film by Rem Koolhaas on Lagos, which is also shot from a helicopter, so there's a kind of non-engagement from a drone eye view of what the city is, that lacks intimacy. And then how does that articulate space? For me, the cinematography doesn't tie this to Dakar in particular. There is something about the light, the content of humidity in the air; there's also the Harmattan, which is this wind that blows from the Sahara. There's a lot of sand in the air, which visually does something – similar to our mine dumps, it creates those kinds of intense colours, especially at sunrise or sunset.

So for me, that's the engagement with site, and the engagement there is as something psychic, something that's emotive, something that's built on a range of other things rather than a description of a particular place such that you can produce knowledge about it – which is what Rem Koolhaas's flying in the helicopter above Lagos is: now we know this thing because we've mapped it. Whereas this is an emotional space. So the site here is less Dakar than it is the psychic site, or an emotive site – which is what I've tried to do with the dislocating strategy within the cinematography.

And I think there's a bigger discussion there. But I hope that goes somewhere …

GG: I was just wondering what kind of dialogue did it generate in Dakar when you showed it there? What was the response in that space?

ZM: There were people – a few people – who slept …

[*audience laughs*] … which was the first time that I kind of got used to that as a legitimate response! There was a long discussion … I showed it at the RAW Material Company, and the audience there are young artists, university students, and

sort of the people in the Dakar art world. It's an incredibly politicised audience, generally. I mean, I think the idea of art in Dakar has a long history through Dak'Art, and a couple of other things that are state-supported, in part. So there was a long passage of discussion on how this responds to colonialism … Because look, Gorée Island is a difficult thing, it's a difficult space. It's a difficult narrative. I mean, there are people in Dakar who are saying 'Well, you know, we focus on the transatlantic slave trade, but the Muslims came and enslaved us long before the Europeans did.' And saying this in an Islamic country is like heavy shit. So, to talk about how there's a complexity of what kinds of colonial thought you're thinking about, Dakar is a deeply Islamic country, but to think about Islam as a form of colonial technology, what does that do?

So there was some of that, that came out. I don't know … I mean, I think there was an engagement with some of the footholds in the work for an analytical, rational discussion. Some of the darker, deeper, more metaphysical, dreamlike space, I think they're difficult things to talk about in a forum like this, and I think the best form of engaging this work is by yourself getting lost in the sounds and the sights of it. And then probably not having too much conversation afterwards … [*laughter*], which is a bit late to say that now.

Chanelle Adams (CA): I have a question about your subjects. In the discussion, it appears that the palm trees are charismatic, and I also see the birds as sort of personages in the visuals. And so I'm wondering what it is you find charismatic about palms … And perhaps why we're not seeing any fish or serpents or people, who are the main sort of players in this …

ZM: I like that … The palm trees are charismatic. That's your word, I didn't say charismatic.

CA: Yeah, yeah, I said that …

ZM: Can I throw it back to you? How do you find them charismatic?

CA: Well, you were talking about when there were two facing each other, and they kind of looked like they were arguing, and you were like 'That's malevolence'. In my mind, that registered as if they're in conversation or dialogue, or fighting …

ZM: Yeah, look, I mean, the birds are something … Dakar has no pigeons – at all – because you have thousands and thousands of those birds of prey. I can't remember what they're called – does anybody know, they're not kestrels – but they just chowed all the pigeons. So they're a feature of Dakar and, in fact, that sound is a sound that you wake up and go to sleep to in Dakar. The sound of these … what is it? It's like a whistling of these birds.

GG: They're kites, black-billed kites.

ZM: Black-billed kites, hmm. So, I mean, there was something kind of important about them that I saw there. Why are there no fish or serpents? I mean, for pragmatic reasons, but there could have been. The idea of how these things becomes characters? Look, I've not been wanting to code that or work with that too literally, so I'm being very loose here in terms of how I talk about them as protagonists and antagonists. And it's not that explicitly or concretely written.

The idea of the absence of people: well, people come in the form of three ships, right? There's the container ship, there's the tugboat – it's not a tugboat, it's a small trawler; and then the pirogue, which is a small dugout. For me the idea of this, the conceit of the film, was this deserted island. So it was this space where sometime in the past, some kind of transgression or trauma occurs, and the central character – through the voice-over – tries to think about their desire to return to that moment. But then the devastating impossibility of that – or if that return had to happen – what would be the implications of that, you know? They would be totally obliterated.

So the desire is them wanting to, but knowing that they can't. I guess, just in terms of that narrative, it didn't suggest a peopled landscape. So I purposefully shot – because I mean some of these islands, only the one island is deserted. Gorée Island has a huge memory industry where even Emmanuel Macron goes and opens a square there and tries to stand at the Door of No Return, to emulate Obama, who tried to emulate Mandela, by crying in front of it. So the choice of evacuating the landscape was deliberate.

DM: Can I ask you why that poem? [*referring to the poem, 'The Subject of 'I''*]

ZM: Of yours?

DM: Mhm.

ZM: Well, again, there's pragmatic reasons …

DM: Like so many choose water and salt as a motif, and then you chose that one …

ZM: Do you want the cheeky pragmatic response?

DM: Mhm.

ZM: It worked so nicely on the page.

[*audience laughs*]

It was a poem … I mean listen, when you told me afterwards the poems I chose were poems that you found very difficult, I mean I wasn't surprised. I could feel it in the texture of the words, but for me the …

DM: *I* don't even like them …

ZM: *You* don't even like them … It said something about, or it provided me a way to think about this project in a way that I found really interesting, so I resonated with what you're saying, and I thought, 'Wow, well how does that work in terms of what I'm trying to think about?' And for me, there was a link there, which, I mean… the way that I made that choice … I mean, I read your book the first time, and then I sat looking at it again when I wanted to choose something for this. I sort of knew which one it was that didn't …

DM: It didn't fit the page? [*laughs*]

ZM: It didn't fit the page! [*laughs*] … And, I don't know, it made … sense.

DM: It makes sense to me. I was just curious.

ZM: It's an incredibly beautiful, evocative set of speculations that then gets rooted into a very precise, political landscape, and I think to do that is something that I was aspiring to do as well. But your poem does it so much better. So thank you for letting me use it.

DM: Are we all done? Oh no, wait, there's one …

Ayesha Krige (AK): So, I'm interested, because, I feel like the palm is very hot right now – like we're seeing lots of textiles with palms on them – if you go to H&M, you can find like, I don't know, a couple of dresses with palms. Did you think about that, about how the image of palms are being sold, or not?

ZM: Look, my name is Zen, I've got spas, beauty treatments, exfoliating, incense carrying this name. So the idea of how things get consumed into a mass marketing culture is really interesting, but no. I mean, I had to continue with this work despite that, not *because* of that. In a similar way, I'm not changing my name because there's a spa opening – I mean if you Google, and obviously I Google myself all the time …

[*audience laughs*]

… there's a massage therapist called Zen, who I battle for Google space with [*laughter continues*] – Zen Marie-Holmes, or something …

Look, I mean the root of this is in its ambivalence between … So the palm at Sun City, the palm at Sandals, the palm at all of these resorts – that's where it comes from, right? But then also looking at the palm in the backyard of my grandmother's house in Merebank. I mean, these are very different palms, right?

So I think there's something about the extreme consumerist desire-filled promise of something; the promise of pleasure that the palm proposes.

Chris Soal (CS): I think we've spoken a lot about content, but I think the first thing that struck me when watching the film was the physical effect of it. So my question would maybe be, if you could comment on the form or the presentation of it, and the affect behind that? But then also, how you perhaps thought about the way you positioned us as viewers to receive it?

ZM: In terms of how this space is curated, or …?

CS: Sure. Even, I guess, in the way it's been edited. With the sound, in some ways it's immersive and also seductive, and distancing.

ZM: I think that you've hit it there. The strategy is to make it immersive, which is why sleep is a legitimate response. It should draw you in, to captivate you. Which is why the length of the cuts are as they are. And, in fact, you know, when you edit, you edit on a small screen. And then I put it up here, and then the first thing I did after watching it a couple of times was to make things longer, because the timing works differently.

Casey Golomski (CG): So I saw the connection with the drawings, the large drawings out there with the palms there. Like the negative space was really kind of selling to me this image of, like, an urban monolith … like these just giant buildings that you cannot fathom, that are absorbing you. So I was wondering how that kind of gargantuan urban form relates to the desolation that's kind of inherent throughout the other pieces?

ZM: So, it was difficult to make those links or to talk about them too much, for me. But what happened in that work was finding something within a form that's surprising, right? So the first time I did the shadow drawing, it was like, 'Oh, wow, this looks like some kind of medieval street plan,' or some kind of cobbled-together streets. I mean, it's definitely not your modernist grid city that Johannesburg has inspired or has taken inspiration from. I mean, how would I relate them back to this? Look, I think there's an engagement with a lot of speculative processes here, so those drawings are, they're relatively new as a way of working and as a way of thinking. So there is some space of being speculative in how the drawings work.

So besides the obvious – like there are palms, and here are palms, and there are more palms – I'm looking for something inside of these solid forms that starts to evoke something else. And I was like, wow, this looks like, reminded me of, Paris.

CG: And these bird sounds, is that outside, or are they a part of it?

ZM: No, that's outside.

[*audience laughs*]

okay, thank you.

Danai …

DM: Thank you, Zen.

[*audience clapping*]

ZM: Thank you all for coming.

– end of conversation



Zen Marie, *Paradise Fallen: Blaxis*, 2021. Installation view, WITS Art Museum. Johannesburg, South Africa.



Zen Marie, *Paradise Fallen: Blaxis*, 2021. Installation view, WITS Art Museum. Johannesburg, South Africa.

BLAXIS: In/Out of Site & Space – A Deaesthetic Paradise Fallen ⛔🛸✊🏾🥷🏾

***BLAXIS: PARADISE FALLEN* is the third part of an ongoing practice-based PhD research by Zen Marie. As such, the work is speculative in form, especially as form relates to the theoretical ground provided by the concepts *site-specificity* and *relational aesthetics*.**

It is born of conversations, experiments, and speculations between people working on the edges. On the edges of music, art, academia, film, poetry and more.

Blaxis is a coming together.

A coming together initiated by Zen Marie, in dialogue with Mpumelelo Mcata and Tumi Mogorosi.

These protagonists have, in one way or another, been in conversation for some time.

The basis for these conversations has revolved around a dissatisfaction with the way things are, specifically the way in which art, music, politics, even ideas, are shaped and constrained by industries that ultimately seem to serve the flows of capital and forms of power that prevail.

This critique is not one that is content to be restricted to commentary.

Importantly, the conversations and collaborations have taken form around proactively experimenting, improvising and making work. Not through waiting for the perfect context, but in insisting on action that performatively suggests ways forward.

Coming from distinct formative experiences, disciplines and practices, this coming together speculates with ideas, provocations and forms that seek to critique institutional power and explore the basis for collective collaborative actions.

The movements of *BLAXIS* will take the form of a kind of call and response, each session having the shots called by one of the three entities. In this way, three discrete, distinct moments will cumulatively develop around the ideas contained in *BLAXIS*.

What it is:

BLK JKS and The Wretched, two genre-defying bands, are somehow at the core of this series.

The bands, and the multiple people that have been involved in the thinking, planning and activation of their work, have steadily worked to make shit happen, not waiting for mainstream industries to bless or bestow resources. Labours of love, dedications of duty, The Wretched and BLK JKS have *been* doing it.

The two bands have been working along lines that are, for sure, distinct. They have invested in a deliberate disruptive aesthetic (or deaesthetic), practice and politics.

While importantly distinct and independent, there are overlaps in numerous ways. They *play* and disrupt and provoke and inspire as they play.

The concern with a Black radical politics or a Black radical critical energy is evident in both bands. The sonic is mobilised in its full range of potentiality: from exploratory to melodic lullaby, into full-frontal sonic assault.

These bands, musicians, and especially members Mpumelelo Mcata and Tumi Mogorosi, have been in continuing conversation and collaboration with visual artist Zen Marie, who has worked on collaborating on live visual programmes, music videos, documentary-style work, and more over the years with these artists.

The space of this music, and the space of the conversations that this music generates, is central to the *call and response* that *BLAXIS* will develop.

Programme **(order, form and content TBC)**

Movement 1: September 2021

Link to online talk at the Space for Black Imagination:
Tumi Mogorosi

Tumi Mogorosi is an artist, activist and theorist with a focus on the Black liberation through the prism of the Black Radical tradition as a framework, also as a way to engage the Black sonic in its diasporic articulation. Mogorosi has four jazz and improvised music albums, and features as a sideman on some leading groups in South Africa and globally. He holds an MAFA from the University of the Witwatersrand.

'As a Yeoville inhabitant, Yeoville has enabled my trans-national orientation to thought and being, which fosters the infidelity to the performative relay of national situated(ness). My practice straddles across performance theory, jazz studies, critical theory and Black studies in close relation with the question on Black liberation beyond the incompleteness of the South African rainbowism and global emancipation politics.'

Movement 2: October 2021

Link to online talk at the Space for Black Imagination:
Mpumelelo Mcata

Mpumelelo Mcata is one of South Africa's leading artists and cultural activists, an autodidact magician with two Berlinale world-premiered films achieved, whilst still having the gig of being guitarist and vocalist for internationally acclaimed award-winning post-rock band BLK JKS (amongst other tricks) hidden under his very many hats.

Movement 3: November 2021

Link to online talk at the Space for Black Imagination:
Zen Marie

Zen Marie is an artist and educator working at the intersection of lens-based media, social practice and installation. Zen holds an MA in Cultural Analysis from the University of Amsterdam and is a graduate of the two-year residency programme at De Ateliers in Amsterdam. Through a practice which spans film, photography, performance, drawing and writing, he investigates the relationships between power and place, and medium and meaning. His current and recent projects propose decolonial rereadings of the narratives that become entangled with nature via conquest and representation. The ocean recurs in his work as a site where the personal, the political and the social are refracted through the experience of the sublime. His current research extends this interest in the politics of the sublime to landscape. Zen's studio practice is complemented by his position as a lecturer in Fine Art at the Wits School of Arts in Johannesburg, where he is also engaged in research towards a practice-led PhD.



John Akomfrah, *Vertigo Sea*, 2015. Film still.

x



Zen Marie, *Dis-memberance of the Geneva Conventions and Inauguration of the Sugar-Free Accords*, 2016. Performance speech. Geneva, Switzerland. Photo Emmanuelle Bayart.

What is to be done? Unite or Perish!

The below extract is from a performance lecture delivered in Basel, Switzerland on the occasion of the Sugar-Free Movement. This was in collaboration with Robert Machiri, Memory Biwa and Dimitri Madimin. The collaboration was instigated with conspirator Madeleine Amsler. The lecture was delivered in advance of the symbolic release of white doves during the occasion of Art Basel. This lecture was the second iteration in this series of lectures, the first being the Dis-memberance of the Geneva Conventions and Inauguration of the Sugar-Free Accords, 2016.

Dear friends,

We gather here today
to perform a task
that is on the one hand extraordinarily simple
yet at the same time is singularly elusive.

We gather here today
in order to set in motion a process
at once radical in aim
yet pathetic in its surety of failure.

Our purpose here today
dear friends
is to mark the commencement of the joint venture
undertaken by the collectives
Sugar-Free and Pungwe.

These two collectives
join in the pursuit of shared ideals
and principals
in search for forms
of contestational politics
as well as
aesthetics that are critical.

The urgency within which
these lofty ideals are put forward
is framed by the grotesque
and abhorrent march
of technology and time
in the historical epoch of late capitalism
that we find ourselves in at present.

The question I pose to you
at this time my friends
is the question:
What is to be done?

I speak to you here,
in this park,
in this city,
on this continent.
And as such it is fitting that I begin
by addressing this context, directly.
I will in this way
preface the signalling
of the embarkation of this joint venture
by making a few statements
both preliminary and speculative.

This joint venture to which I allude
is an experimental collaboration between two collectives
Sugar-Free and Pungwe.

During this period of summer in the northern hemisphere
Which is winter in the southern
these collectives mobilise in order to plan and strategise
how to formulate questions urgent to our time
and how to deploy creative arts
to the task of these urgencies.

Let me briefly elaborate on the foundational basis for each project.

Sugar-Free
arises out of an urgency
to examine underlying histories of global commodities.

It specifically focuses
on commodities that act as stimulants
that create desire or heighten the senses
for example: coffee, spices, cocoa, gems, precious metals, etc., etc., etc.
And of course this list includes sugar.

These substances
are as desirable
as they are dangerous.
They rely on and create aggressive and abusive relationships
in their farming, mining, extraction, distribution and consumption.

They are marked by slavery,
coercion
and environmental fallout.
It is the aftermath that follows
the global markets for these commodities
that Sugar-Free explores
as a series of connected and disconnected moments
across the ‘global south’ and ‘global north’.

Pungwe is a collective endeavour
that works with African music
and related contemporary discourses.

Pungwe Nights is a participatory public platform
that hosts alternative music and sonic performances.
It is a project committed to struggle,
resistance and ‘Chimurenga’
as it engages with cultural forms as catalysts for change.

Together
Sugar-Free and Pungwe
pursue relationships of inequalities
and tactics of subversion
which will be mapped
as they are both historically produced
and located within contemporary realities
enacted as contestation, subversion or amelioration
of colonial, neo-colonial or globalised hegemonies.

It is these moments
of critical and creative push-back
that we searched for.

These are the urgencies
these are the terms of engagement.
This is the framework for action.

However
these words that I utter to you today
suffer dangerously from the trap
of the declarative statement.

They bear the burden of describing
and by describing
once again postponing action:
At what point do these declarative statements
which are couched in the impotence of representation
come to forge a mode and manner
of actions that are performative and vital?

The discerning and agile listener
will of course have fathomed
that the declarative
while being descriptive
can itself be performative as well
...
But this I leave for another time.

It will also be clear
that History is written by the victors
– the occident writes global history
At the very same time that it writes out other histories.

In charting the history of the world
contemporary power is antagonistic to ancient history.

We feel in real terms
the might of empires
that push and pull
that play and insult our lives in the present.

Do we ever get angry enough to do something?
We see and hear the atrocities that ensue
Constantly
Unrelentingly
But do we truly attempt to understand?

We witness fascism rise
But continue as if normal.

If this is the disdain and cynicism
with which we approach the present
how do we dare
engage with the past?
...

Let me return to the now
to the island state
where we presently find ourselves marooned
An island that is set adrift so far from its course
that it has lost contact with both sea and ocean.

It is an island of gluttonous, slothful and idle luxuriousness
Of wealth so vast that greed itself
has been rendered as a platitude as passé as it is trite.

In this island, once a refuge for Lenin, Nietzsche, and Borges
We find ourselves searching
through archives and riches
immaterial and distant
attempting to sketch the vaguest gleam
of a pathway through the murky quagmires
of global poverty
Genocide
intractable wars
and cataclysmic environmental crises.

European Empires have long fallen
But the allure of the ambition of global conquest
lingers on in vagaries of North American Imperialism
alchemically modulated
into late capitalism's free market.

Willing buyers need willing sellers
Yes
But we know the price to be paid
for impetuous unwillingness.

Older empires

like those of the Dutch, the Portuguese or the Spanish
seemingly rendered impotent by the march of time
and the burnishing effects of antiquity
negate the blood lust
that sustained the profit and plunder
that their specific forms of racial supremacy dictated

A return to the flesh of the corpse of the colonial empire
is a practice of exhumation
It is to dig
again
and to sift through the remains
of vile and decrepit arrogances and vanities.
Yes
Bring out your dead.

But please,
let us be clear

This exhumation
must be defended against retrogressive tendencies
that wallow in defeatist self-annihilation.

No.

The function
operation
and purpose
of dismembering the cadaver of colonialism
is only in order
to exorcise the demons
that haunt new orbits of power.

It is to flush out and purge
the toxic residue
that history insinuates
only in order to search anew
in utterly and flagrantly utopian ways
for that which lies outside of history.

This is an attempt at immersion into the abyss
that exists before, after, inside and around
the certainty and security of the historical.

But no, my friends
I do not stand here before you
as the crazy person screaming
'the end is nigh'
(even though it is).

Neither do I stand here pledging any course of action
or ingenious solution.

I have no clever 5-point plans
or easy platitudes of return or restoration.

No.
I am here
as I have said
to perform the very simple
yet infuriatingly elusive task
of joining Sugar-Free and Pungwe
so that they may go on to worthy performances in Geneva and in Lausanne.

There is no time to waste
We must unite now or perish.
I am confident that by our concerted effort and determination,
we shall lay here the foundations for a movement
that is at once vital, vibrant and dynamic
as it is self-reflexive and questioning.

At this point
I would call upon
Robert Machiri of Pungwe
and Dimitri Madimin of Sugar-Free
to perform the rites of the opening ceremony,
that joins the two projects as it commences the actions to follow.

Dis-memberance

Paradise Fallen: Blaxis

Wall text: Wits Art Museum

PARADISE FALLEN: BLAXIS
In conversation with The Wretched and BLK JKS

Wits Art Museum
7 September – 1 October 2021

This land beneath our feet
Carries traces of scars
Contains hidden memories
This earth holds secrets
Of violent acts
Always remembered
Never forgotten
But always too
This land holds traces of joy
As it offers sustenance and nourishment
Vitality
This land retains knowledge
That defies time
That ruptures space
This earth always remembers
Especially when we wish to forget

Paradise Fallen *is a video installation that begins with an exploration of landscape cinematography. Through the lens, the land is observed and recorded. Never static, ever changing and modulating.*

Human time, the time we exist in, is radically and fundamentally estranged from the expansiveness of earthly time, and more so from the boundlessness of cosmic time. What we have access to is often limited by the constraints of our senses, our physicality and our imagination.

What I witnessed and recorded through my camera, standing in front of oceans, vistas, valleys and mountains, forms the basis of this work. Its limitations are those of my senses and of my ability to manipulate the lens-based technology at my disposal.

This work is a meditation on the land. Land, whose beauty is haunted by the fragile traces of silenced histories and forgotten narratives.

These landscapes are bookmarks in the histories of time and space.

PARADISE FALLEN: BLAXIS *is the third iteration in a series of work that is part of ongoing practice-based research. Ultimately this work (along with writing that explores, critiques and searches around the edges of the work) will be submitted as part of a Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art.*

Reflections on Making the Work Part Three

A Rock and a Hard Place

Both the museum and the university owe their origins to forms of institutionality established in the Renaissance. The cathedral was the institutional form that previously held power over not only creative production but theology, pedagogy, and even law and medicine.

The deseating of power from the cathedral, through a de-secularisation, provided the basis on which the contemporary institutions of the hospital, court, university and museum could be produced.

I have benefitted from the privilege of both. The university and the museum have been important in my processes. They sometimes form spaces of support and at other times are frustrating and intractable forces that need to be wrestled with. While my practice has involved working in these spaces, I am wary of the often-dubious ways in which the increasing managerial control of academic spaces comes to close down the potential for anarchic, unstructured or non-written forms to emerge or have the space to be deepened and shared, as things in themselves. In the case of this PhD, the work is not permitted to be submitted on its own; it needs this accompanying text to offer some kind of surety for its functioning as a placeholder for knowledge.

This is an attempt to challenge and denaturalise these sites, through a critical deployment of site-specificity, which is to hold them to account according to their self-avowed enlightenment principles. This work is urgent not only for me, but as a way to add to the critical energies that demand space to be opened up, down or under the university, to add fuel to the undercommons and to denaturalise by making space within the university for immersive practice into visual, sonic, haptic, spatial, temporal actions, gestures, speculations to be invested in, to the extent that they are able to be regarded without the necessity of a written thesis. This is not to foreclose the value of writing, but rather to indicate that what is regarded as writing in academic institutions must not be homogeneous or predetermined, a priori, in advance of the research, but rather, following Sarat Maharaj, must emerge through or in terms of the specificity of the work itself.

Mick Wilson, writing in the edited volume *Art as Thinking Process,* (2013) asks,

> What can or what should an art education be if it is to be attuned to the intrinsic modalities of art as opposed to the extrinsic protocols of a disciplinary apparatus? In simpler terms, what should art education be like if it is to be determined by the requirements of art and not by the priorities of some other system or practice?

What Wilson means to contest here, is precisely what I am warning of, that the requirements and structures of criteria that owe their rationale to social-science

scholarship cannot be cut and pasted onto how we assess and imagine art education. However, it should be flagged that art education has never been fully autonomous, that the extrinsic forces of the art world, or more specifically those of the art market, have always existed as another system that assesses and values or legitimates creative practice along the lines of the tastes and vagaries of collectors. The art market has encapsulated artistic practice within the logic of a free-market capitalist system, and this in itself needs to be protected against. Karel Tiege's (2022) iconic text on the art market, explores this tension between the avant-garde and the market. In this sense, does the university, or the art school, not present a different set of markers/ contaminants that need to be watched carefully and protected against? Behind this all, from Wilson to Teige, the question emerges as to whether it is possible to see 'art for art's sake' or as a fully autonomous artistic practice? Is it not the reality that there is always some set of extrinsic protocols that exist, and that this is insisted on by the artist, as art always seems to exist within society?



Zen Marie, *Burial for Victory*, 2018. Performance. Geneva, Switzerland.

Burial for Victory[43]

1 x statuette victory female
1 x statuette victory male
1 x bottle of alcohol spirit (as appropriate to the region)
-cloth, enough to wrap the statuettes
-cement (roughly 30kg)
-water from appropriate water source
-spade
Prepare the site by digging a hole in the ground.
Wash the statuettes in water.
Wrap the statuettes in cloth.
Anoint with the alcohol spirit.
Place the statuettes in the hole.
Mix the cement.
Pour the cement into the hole.
Use the remainder of the spirits to further anoint the site.
Recite a eulogy, poem or speech that commemorates the form of victory that is being buried.

43. *Burial for Victory* was performed in Geneva in collaboration with Madeleine Amsler. It was part of WOAP.PERF Residency in 2016. These instructions allow the performance to be repeated/recreated by anyone.

The Paradox of the Art School in a University[44]

> *The art world is a paradox in that it requires its clearly defined and patriarchal methodologies and procedures but also needs to engage with the raw and unorthodox energy of new ideas and turn a process of undermining the status quo into something quantifiable or tangible within a range of existing frameworks.*
>
> Aiken, in *Art as Thinking Process*, 2013, p. 20

The debates about art and research, and the seemingly endless variations of art as research, research as art, practice-led research, practice-based research, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, all circulate around a fundamental paradox. It is a paradox similar to that in psychoanalysis of trying to access the subconscious through the conscious. Such an attempt in relation to art is filled with clever tricks, but those trying to access the subconscious are always aware of the difficulty, if not futility, of this ambition.

It is a paradox that moves across registers of the rational and intuitive, the linear and the non-linear. It is a paradox that I will explore here, in terms of the art school within the university. It seems as if we, in the art school, similarly deploy a myriad of tactics in order to fix, programme and rationalise processes that are in fact fluid, spontaneous, ephemeral and intuitive. I believe that it is a mistake to attempt to resolve this paradox.

We should rather hold onto the structure and challenge of this paradox in order to mobilise the fullness of the radical, critical potential that sensory, sensual and embodied forms of knowledge hold. We must value the paradox as we resist mechanised, technocratic methodologies of measurement and assessment that are part of increasingly neoliberal and commoditised forms of knowledge gatekeeping.

Forms of Knowledge and Decolonisation

The core of the matter relates to the kinds of artefacts or objects we deem to be legitimate carriers of knowledge. The university relies on forms of rational argument that draw on scientific method or variants of Hegelian or post-Hegelian dialectics as authoritative and universally accepted vehicles for knowledge production and transmission.

While rational argument in its various forms may be universally accepted as a carrier of knowledge, it is by no means uncontested. Even within the history of the university (and western knowledge), there are numerous contestations to the hegemony of what has more recently been enshrined within high modernism and structuralism. And certainly, the pushbacks that coalesce around postmodernism and poststructuralism, for example, are important to learn from. However, while we can thank the likes of Derrida for concepts that are un-writeable or unspeakable, we need to register these challenges and attempt to go further.

Practices and modes of working that are performative, sonic, embodied, haptic, visceral, visual, (perhaps even olfactory), must resist the compulsion to establish equivalences, or to find programmatic systems of measurement and

44. This text was presented as a keynote talk for the 2017 Artsearch Symposium, in 2017. The symposium was organised by Jyoti Mistry and David Andrew, and was hosted at Wits University and other sites. The text was published in the online journal *On Curating*, issue, 49, 2021.

assessment. It is in this resistance in the stubborn refusal of equivalence that we find the radical potential of the aesthetic as a form of knowledge production.

It is here that the aesthetic enacts the double movement of a refusal to conform but, at the same time, performatively asserting forms and contents that are not merely oppositional or reactionary but substantively iterative of epistemologies that are unprecedented, new, and emergent.

In this way, the ambition and radical potential of the paradox of the art school in the university should be for nothing less than moments of epistemological breakage or rupture, which have implications that resonate far beyond the university.

These moments, where old orders of doing, making and thinking are undone, reorganised and revised, are the kinds of radical moments that can contest positions of privilege that opportunistically feed on our daily lives for the enrichment of the academy, the state, and neo-liberal global orders more generally.

For us, especially for those of us situated on the continent of Africa, working in the increasingly contested space of the university, it is clear that the urgency of the project to dismantle the hegemony of these global orders is also a project to dismantle the intellectual, cultural and economic legacies of colonialism and apartheid.

The terms of contestation move between, and across, postcolonialism, decolonisation, Africanisation and pan-Africanisation, with such terms hotly debated as the ground for contestation is carved out and delineated.

If all of this sounds too revolutionary or even quasi-mystical, allow me to sketch a few practical examples where the paradox of the art school in the university comes to challenge convention and would seem to align itself to a broader project of radical politics.

If we take seriously the aesthetic as a challenge to epistemological form, structure, and administration, then we need to question a number of aspects of the university that we currently take for granted. While there are many issues to add to this preliminary list, I will look specifically at four: entrance criteria, assessment, the privileging of the written text, and the peer-reviewed journal.

Entrance Criteria

At the moment, for university acceptance in South Africa, we use the Admission Point Score (APS), which is calculated from high school leaving exams. This is a form of evaluation that is based on two assumptions:

1. That the structure of exams, which are predicated on rote learning and memory retention, is the kind of pedagogical model and assessment tool that is appropriate for evaluating and projectively assessing potential.

2. That all high-school education is delivered and received in a standard and consistent manner across sites (and across learners within sites), which in turn allows for a point-based system to be a meaningful index or metric that gauges a student's potential.

We know both these assumptions to be highly problematic. To blindly administer the APS system as if it constitutes an even playing field is to be complicit in the exclusion of students from schools that are under-resourced in the most extreme ways. In South Africa, this is effectively to exclude poor Black students from university. And this is even before we get to the question of fees.

The art school, by virtue of the kind of work we do, has the opportunity to contest this. We already augment the APS system with the audition, interview or evaluation of a portfolio. While it would not be a huge leap to propose a more fundamental overhaul of acceptance criteria, it would address the limits we place on access and thereby diversify knowledge production.

Assessment

We also need to radically and critically revise our processes of assessment: the examination structure as it currently stands is modelled entirely on the examination of written work. The application of exam policy from the social sciences to the creative arts is as clumsy as it is crude. Aesthetic or practice-led work urgently calls for a complete overhauling of the examination system, as studio or practical work is clearly at odds with many elements within current exam policy.

This begins with (but is not limited to) the awarding of a mathematically derived percentage to creative work. Again, the challenge posed by the aesthetic can be mobilised in service of broader questions of how we assess knowledge as successful, valid or legitimate.

Written Form

The insistence on the written form as the privileged and authoritative vehicle of knowledge production needs to be reconsidered. The challenge of postgraduate work in this regard is especially important, as we are increasingly asking why it is that we need a written component to support often rich, rigorous, critically and theoretically engaged practice.

To challenge the privileging of written form is to ask questions about the legitimacy of orality and other modes of knowledge production outside of western traditions. Connected to this issue is the primacy of the English language as the prioritised medium of instruction and examination. Again, the fact that the aesthetic explicitly proposes alternative modes of communication, means that it can potentially work in line with broader calls to reform the university in terms of its language policy.

The Peer-Reviewed Journal

We also need to question the peer-reviewed journal as the gold standard of research. Journals and their attendant economies have become profitable to a few select publishing houses that increasingly support insular and often mediocre networks of people and institutions. The peer review as a form has long been unquestioned as the accepted method of assessing and legitimating knowledge production.

Aesthetic and creative practice has struggled to fit into this economy and now poses serious questions about its continued legitimacy. This issue has recently been taken up in an online journal, *Ellipses*, a project based at the Wits School of Arts, which aims to challenge the peer-reviewed journal from the vantage point of the aesthetic.

End Comments

These are just some of the urgent tasks facing a university that is committed to change. In all these areas, the nature of aesthetic practice and creative research poses challenges that begin in the respective creative disciplines, but go beyond to affect the very core and nature of academic work across the board.

Often, the argument for not being able to do this work is that the problems seem too big, too deeply systemic, or that there is simply no time – student numbers are too high and academics and administrators are barely keeping up with processing the roll-out of what already exists.

What is clear from recent events in, especially, the student movement, is that these are excuses and that they are not enough. Mediocrity will not be tolerated. The pace and rate of such debates needs to quicken. It is not safe anymore for lacklustre, bellicose, slothful academics, technocrats and administrators to preside and profit over institutions that have in most senses failed.

What is needed are creative and brave leaders who possess the imagination, and are willing to take the risk, in challenging the very terms and conditions of knowledge production. These are leaders who will be able to think of knowledge as something other than an instrumentalised commodity to be sold according to increasingly neoliberal business plans. They are people who can embrace the revolutionary potential of the epistemological break that both the aesthetic and the project of decolonisation provoke.

I realise here that the manner and specifics of such a project – which sees the aesthetic as part of an epistemological break or rupture, which can work in line with the call for a more public, engaged and critically responsive university, and which treats the university as a space that challenges rather than creates privilege – is a complex and immense task. But it is a task that I believe is not only urgent but imperative.

The PhD in Practice-Based Research[45]
Draft text/working documents for discussion

at the Point of Order

26 September 2019
18:00

22-09-19

Dear readers

The following texts are presented as a way of suggesting a course of study.
A course of study that is perhaps 5 or more years on the go.
5 years of starts; false starts, hopeless starts, meanders and deviations.

What is presented here, is still in process. On the go.
Yet, even in what appears as spits and spurts of ideas and reflections,
I see semblances of what could be a more coherent and cogent body of work.

And by work, I mean both practical and scholarly, both aesthetic and theoretical.

The first passages are reflections meant for my supervisors. A text that is a stocktaking and the suggestion of a way forward, and an email correspondence to my supervisors. I share these with you, not only to allow an appreciation of the process, but importantly to suggest the ways in which the writing is finding shape and structure. These passages are speculative, and I share them tentatively and with hesitation.

The second text is a draft for a journal article that I am working on. This text suggests some of the style, form and theoretical energy that I begin to recognise myself in. It is imagined that with some work this will become the first chapter of the PhD.

The purpose of sharing this writing is to open up the research to discussion, to solicit feedback and critique. All with the view to further develop the work and the writing.

The public session that will be the scene for this relational moment will be located within an iteration of the installation of *Paradise Fallen* at the Point of Order, on Thursday 26th September 2019 at 18:00.

thanks

and soon

Zen

45. This text was prepared as a handout for circulation at the installation of *Paradise Fallen* at The Point of Order, Wits University, Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2019.

27-05-19

The text that follows is a kind of accounting of my research process in the PhD, post-proposal. It attempts to concisely track the progress of course of study that seemingly has meandered across divergent areas of focus. My intention now, at what is a mid-point in this doctoral work, is to respect these multiple strands as being grounded in a course of practice-based or creative research modes. The urgency now, being to follow the work and to come good on the ideas contained within.

Stocktaking and the Way Forward
Speculative Positions on Structure

The process in this PhD has taken a few unexpected turns and shifts in approach. These shifts can be seen in a number of the proposals that I developed to explore ideas that were important to me, and to pursue lines of thought that were present in my work – both in my creative practice and in what might be viewed as being more scholarly practice. These arrested departures included a proposal premised on the work I had been doing with informal public transport; another that pursued thinking through the figure and form of the island; and there was even a proposal that suggested a PhD exploring the idea of 'ghostwritten' or forged/plagiarised PhDs, by commissioning a forged/plagiarised PhD from the illegal online providers of this 'service', that itself wrote about forged/plagiarised PhD work in an effort to challenge the knowledge economy of postgraduate work.

In all of these false starts, I learnt more about myself and the work that I not only do, but also about the ways in which my personal and professional subjectivities are produced and potentially re-inscribed or re-articulated by this process of PhD research.

The proposal that I ultimately submitted, was incredibly over-ambitious in terms of scope and scale; it tried to do too much. This fact was evidenced in my proposal presentation, and in the feedback by the appointed readers of the proposal. What emerged for me in the proposal process were two central questions: one around the focus and scope of the research area, and the other that needed clarity and specificity around the nature of the practical component.

The proposal process was, in the first instance, a process that pursued theoretical and textual analysis of a wide range of sources. This literature review component of the proposal was, in itself, incredibly important for me to seriously read and write into an area of study. What emerged from this process was that, underlying all of many strands of thought and false starts, there was an engaged concern with 'site' as a core intellectual and aesthetic concept. As most concepts can be seen to be, it is necessarily interdisciplinary, and historically produced through numerous canons or conventions; and also, notably, suffers many erasures or silences that limit our horizon of understanding of what this concept proposes to include.

What is clear to me at this writing, is that the concept of site should be taken seriously to be the core premise of this research. Further to this, it is of utmost importance that the elaboration of this concept – its genealogy, its multiplicity in relevant disciplinary fields, and the constellation/mapping of

this concept in relation to the relevant connected concepts that inform it – is critically engaged with.

Crucial in the instance of this postgraduate thesis, is that these concepts and engagements mix and play to shape and form a complexity of relations to the practical work.

The year of study following the PhD proposal being written, publicly presented and formally submitted to the faculty, included my sustained reading and research on and around this concept of site, in a number of ways. I explored the 'site' of forms of structural, planned, bodily and psychic violence at the Drill Hall in Johannesburg, in a chapter I wrote for an edited volume on *Planned Violence* (2018), titled 'The Not-So-Quiet Violence of Bricks and Mortar'. This was an important elaboration on the concept of site in relation to this space in Johannesburg, that embodies both historical and contemporary forms of multiple violences. Included in this study was a critical engagement with the ways in which city planning around culture and memory has come to be driven by neoliberal forms and, in this instance, had not done the necessary work, requiring an engaged and sustainable effort of place making within this difficult inner-city urban context.

This writing was followed up by a conference in Lisbon, where I presented as part of a panel organised by the editors of that same volume. For this conference, *Colonial/Post-colonial Landscapes*, and in that context, I picked up on the idea of material/ephemeral culture as a form of colonial resistance. The moment that I chose to focus on was the use of food as both resistance and solidarity by indentured labourers on the east coast of South Africa. These accounts of food being used as resistance and solidarity, were explored through the theoretical framework of Sara Ahmed and Henri Lefebvre, in exploring ideas of space and place in terms of points of anchorage (Ahmed) and forms of rhythm analysis (Lefebvre). The text I wrote for this conference was presented at the Lisbon conference, but is presently (as of May 2019) still unpublished.

These two moments of writing are, significantly, moments in which the ideas contained in the initial PhD proposal were expanded on and developed. There are ways in which these ideas have neatly cohered to the original proposal, and there are other integral ways in which they have begun to propose novel strands of further, related thought or areas of focus.

Alongside these moments of 'conventional scholarship', I continued to explore my postgraduate research in ways that are sometimes described as 'creative practice' or 'creative research'. It is necessary for me to note that the final writing of my proposal, in April 2017, was completed while I was resident at the RAW Material Company in Dakar, Senegal. I was acting as an observer for the RAW Academy, then directed by Ntone Edjabe and the editorial team of the publication *Chimurenga*. In this moment of writing the proposal, I was intensely influenced by the work of Koyo Kouoh, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Jihan El-Tahri, Laila Souleiman, Kodwo Eshun, and many others. During this time, and in my engagement with the RAW Material Company, I produced two further texts – one that explored the platform that was the RAW Academy, and the other that was a meditation/reflection on the nature of the medium and processes of mediation involved in producing aesthetic cultural objects – in contemporary visual art, but more so in ways that precede or exceed these constraints.

While writing my proposal, I also, simultaneously, wrote the narrative, screenplay and voice-over text for an experimental film or video artwork. In fact, I went further than this, and shot

on location in Dakar, to produce what would be the first draft of the film *Île Aux Serpents*. I returned to Dakar in January 2018 to reshoot scenes and complete this film. This film became the anchor for a single-person show at an independent art space, fem of colour, in September 2018. The drawings, related video work and performance that were staged in this show, are all important elements that come to form the building blocks of a PhD course of research – a course of research that is complex, multiple and representative of a sustained intellectual and practical investment into the concept of site.

The emergent structure of this PhD, suggested by the research I have pursued over the past two years, set up a thesis that is a complex interplay between different modes of writing through the central concept of site. What is important, more so what is innovative or challenging in the form of this PhD, is the relationship between theoretical or conventional scholarship and the practical work. In this sense, I am now squarely thinking about this research, which takes the form of a 'Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art', as a submission that will take on two related and interconnected forms of manifestation. The first will be in the mode of writing and publishing consistent with academic scholarship. The second will be consistent with the form of creative practice that is organised around a video installation.

This video installation, proposed to be done at the Wits Art Museum in spring 2020, will itself be documented and included as textually important material in the overall submission. In this way, the submission falls more clearly in line with the requirements of a PhD that has a creative research component as one of its outcomes. What is important for me to recognise at this mid-point of my PhD research, is that it is crucial for me to take seriously the multiple strands of thought and practice that I have actually proceeded with. And to reconcile this with the initial prompts and trajectories suggested by the proposal.



Zen Marie, *Of Our History*, 2019. Installation view, CIRCUIT independent art space. Lausanne, Switzerland.

Signs Taken for Wonders: Paintings, Books, Spaces and Times of Contemporary Fire[46]

Art and politics have always had an uneasy relationship in South Africa. During the anti-apartheid movement, there was a clear injunction that art had to be mobilised in the service of struggle, or it was counter-revolutionary. As a result, there is a rich history of explicitly motivated political art in South Africa, from struggle posters or propaganda, to work that existed more appropriately within the forms and structures of the gallery or the museum, but still contained political *content*.

Such were the times, that abstract-expressionist painters were denigrated as cohering with bourgeoisie, western or white discourses of creative practice. The only legitimate form of creative activity was deemed to be one that took up arms against the apartheid state and, in this way, art was radically immersed in politics.

While the context has changed considerably, contemporary South African art still maintains a strong and engaged concern with the political. Certainly, the purchase that South Africa has in the international art scene is one that is produced through political/geographic contingency, both historically and in the contemporary; while the rise of the poetic or personal, through abstraction, play, or singular aesthetic narratives, are on the rise. The world (and South African artists) seems unable to move beyond the political in thinking about aesthetics exclusively for aesthetics' sake. This is perhaps not a bad thing, as the art/politics divide is not a very useful bifurcation. Aesthetics are political as much as politics are aesthetic.

What we see is a nuanced and engaged aesthetic/political matrix that is particularly South African.

Having said this, it needs to be recognised that so-called 'fine' or contemporary art contains aesthetic, political and economic practices that are in many ways separated from the mainstream. Its influence, and its capability to be influenced, is often limited, as academies, museums, and galleries seem content with ring-fencing circles of specialist knowledge, and cliques that are composed of strongly linked financial mechanisms, that produce exclusiveness and dominate the narratives of aesthetic possibility.

The overlap between institutions, groupings of powerful individuals, and broader cultural economies is irregular and needs to be questioned – not because these institutions are in and of themselves important to rescue, but rather because the museum, like the university, is a kind of archaic space that has managed to retain privilege in the form of aesthetics, rhetorics, hierarchies and positions that are a throwback to western European Christian discourses and conventions. We can see the university and the museum's origins in the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and beyond. The markers of this are clear to see and go beyond the injunction to reverent silence and contemplation, the rarefication of the object, or even the neoclassical columns that surround us. It even goes much deeper than the pageantry and costume at graduation.

An analysis of the rhetorical forms of the rituals, performances and aesthetics of academia and fine art is indeed urgent, not only in relation to how power and privilege are maintained and remain largely taken for granted and unquestioned,

46. This text was written in 2016 for (but not ultimately presented) as part of the *Johannesburg Workshop for Theory and Criticism's* (JWTC) last activation, which was called *Epistemic Risk,* and was held in Sao Paulo, Brazil. From 2011–2016, I was a co-convenor of the JWTC.

but also in an attempt to creatively imagine new forms of creative expression, institutional structures and knowledge systems.

The urgency is not to save the academy, or the museum; it is not to rationalise the wealth and power of these institutions through robust critique. Rather, the project should be an urgent undoing of forms of privilege and exclusion, in order to challenge which bodies and what knowledges are privileged in implicit or explicit ways in the institutions that control, dictate and produce meaning, both historically and in the contemporary. In the arts, these issues specifically refer to how and what art is taught, how curatorial practices are organised by which curators, as well as how and what kinds of contemporary artists are given funding, exhibition opportunities, or have their work absorbed into collections. If these are the questions, how then do we intervene in this minefield of symbolic and economic privilege?

The debate has often circulated around the question of 'to build' or 'to burn'? Do we engage with institutional forms of power, knowing full well that their ability to placate, promote or recuperate radical critique is a very real eventuality? Or does one take the more nihilistic route, that these structures will never change, so the project must be squarely to destroy, dismantle and bring them to the ground? Here, again, the bifurcation or polarisation is not very useful, as the ideas we seem to associate with each of these gestures or modalities in relation to power are not as simple as they may seem.

Burning can be a productive way of making room for building, and building can include forms that are radical, contestational or even violent. In this vein, I am interested to open up some of the concepts and, especially, traditions of avant-garde artistic practice in thinking through recent forms of protest.

What I intend to open up, are a range of practices that come from the other side of this art politics arrangement. Rather than looking for the political in art, or art that contains explicit political concerns, I want to rather locate moments of political activism alongside aesthetic, spatial or temporal concerns that include site-specificity, appropriation, as well as ephemeral or performative processes and practices that circulate within the fine or contemporary arts.

To do this is not to argue that forms of political actions *are* art, but that they intervene in productive and contestational ways – not only in cases of political exigency, but they can be critically engaging in sectors that are in need of radical decolonisation. In many ways, this is to situate recent political activism within established frameworks of what can be broadly called avant-garde or radical artistic practice.

The Representative and Aesthetic Regimes of Art

The burning of paintings at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in February 2016, or the attempted burning of books at Wits in October 2015 were, in many ways, turning points for some people who had previously sympathised with the student movement. From this perspective, these were simply not acceptable or strategic forms of revolutionary action. They were rather seen as acts of vandalism or gratuitous violence that raised a storm on social media, and through opinion pieces and official statements by the universities' senior management.

In unpacking these moments, we should move slowly. The comments and criticisms that these events elicited were, for the most part, staged as furious

Facebook or Twitter battles. In the furore of social media, important African philosophers, senior intellectuals, retired painting professors, self-proclaimed media pundits, as well as the rabble and riff-raff that populate social media, all seemed to have a collective fit in either castigating the acts or alternatively castigating the castigators of the acts, as racist diatribes were unleashed, calling the protestors everything from monkeys to Nazis.

This was especially true for the burning of paintings at UCT, where one particular professor emeritus, from UCT's art school, spent the better part of a day writing on Facebook with his caps lock firmly engaged. The pushback from the UCT community was especially vitriolic, racist and puerile.

While the overtly racist threads were difficult to stomach, and impossible to reconcile, it is not difficult to understand the potency of the pushback to the actions, precisely because there was much more at stake than simply books or paintings.

Of Books and Knowledge

Knowledge, and cultural or aesthetic production, are symbolically and economically grounded in the (symbols of the) book and the painting. The book as an object comes to stand symbolically not only for the word of God through monotheistic religions (the holy book) but also comes to represent the force of law – demonstrated in the phrase 'I'll throw the book at you'. The book comes to stand for everything that is holy, proper, and within the conventions of the law. The book is more than an object; it signifies knowledge, law and religion.

Of course, in our immediate context, it stands for everything that education represents – as books and the practice of reading are the proper and appropriate processes and objects of education. In Oxbridge universities, one does not say 'I am studying English literature', but 'I am reading English literature', or whatever else your discipline of choice is.

The book is the proper metonym for the epistemological power of the university. And the attempted burning of a bookshop at the end of 2015 is readable in terms of the matrix of productive and exclusionary power that the university holds.

It is perhaps important to note that the burning was not actually effective – emphasis on *attempted* here – as the fire was caught, 'thank god', just in time, before serious or considerable book-burning actually occurred. It is also relevant to note that the attempted burning was staged at the window of a commercial bookshop on campus and not at the general-access library, just one building down. Was this a strategic choice? Was the intent behind the act of burning a critique or an assault on the commercialisation of knowledge? It's hard not to see it as such.

However, if we are to think about this act as strategic, that is, as a carefully planned action whose objectives and outcomes were calculated and orchestrated in line with a broader political programme, then we come into some trouble. If is was a strategic act, we should take some care to think through for and by whom this act was strategised, and to what ends? Of course, the outcry implicitly and explicitly attributed the burning to the Fees Must Fall (FMF) movement.

Fees Must Fall at Wits has consistently organised through a sensitively thought-through process of mass democratic action. Lengthy, and at times burdensome plenaries are routinely held, where forms of action, political ideology

and pressing issues are discussed, and motions passed, on how best to act – thinking strategically and tactically. While this process is not immune to criticism, many of the forms of direct political action that transpired were not generated through this structure.

That the attempted burning did not come under discussion and did not get a mandate from this structure, can only mean that the act was carried out independently and outside of this democratic process. In fact, many of the Fees Must Fall students were either ambivalent to or critical of the fiery actions.

Was this a spontaneous act? Or was it representative of machinations of more radical elements in the student movement? Whatever the reality, the action was used through the VCO or SET communiqués and social media to castigate the student movement – generally and as a whole – as being inglorious, shameful, reckless, and of losing the moral higher ground. 'How can we support a movement that supports such action?' was the question that was asked.

The support that Fees Must Fall gave to the act can only fairly be located in the absence of any serious condemnation of the burning. But in this, the hands of activists were pushed. Even those who in private would be critical, could not actively condemn this act, precisely because the pushback against the act became generalised, categorically ascribed, and then grotesquely racist. The racism found on Facebook threads was perhaps most worrying in the case of UCT and the burning of paintings.

Of Paintings and Aesthetics

The burning of paintings from the dining hall at UCT was a spectacular visual outburst of the critical energies at play in South Africa today. As an event, it represented the frustration of student activists who had been violently engaged by private security and the South African police. The burnings took place just after the destruction of the 'Shackville' installation on the Jammie steps, and mark a moment of extreme division in the public thinking about the student movement.

The performative and aesthetic images of burning paintings that were created and then circulated in the media, worked to challenge in the strongest of terms the hegemony of not only a white, but an explicitly western, canon of knowledge production. The paintings were seen as iterative statements that were productive of an ideology of cultural bias. The attacks on the paintings were, as such, not an attack on painting per se, but a symbolic attack on forms of institutionality that implicitly and explicitly disavows the principal and process of decolonisation.

I am not proposing here that the attempted burning of books at Wits or of paintings at UCT were acts constitutive of 'art', as such. No. In fact they are more radical, as these acts did not seek to simply challenge the gallery, the museum or art school. The goal was more ambitious, and the anger more squarely directed – not towards a primarily aesthetic regime, but in opposition to the mechanisms and institutions of a residual coloniality that still privileges racialised cultural hegemonies 22 years after the dismantling of the legal structures of apartheid. Rather, my proposition is that these forms of protest can be read productively alongside the perspectives and methodologies that come from radical practices that have a long tradition and precedence within the avant-garde art canon.

Paintings have often been discussed in art criticism, history of art and in art practice as embodying the commodification of aesthetic practice. Painting's history of patronage, circulation, ideological control and promulgation has, since the late 1800s, been squarely debunked, critiqued and violated, from within the tradition of western art. From the Impressionists to the Dadaists, painting has been challenged, pushed to its brink and, at times, attempts at the obliteration of its function as an object of knowledge, power and economic capital have been staged. From Claude Monet's *Impression Sunrise* (1874) to Marcel Duchamp's urinal – *Fountain* (1917); from Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) to Lucio Fontana's famous cut canvases, there have consistently been attacks on what is considered to be art. More recently, we have periodically seen the more literal destruction of art and other objects in contemporary art practice – probably most famously in Michael Landy's *Break Down* (2002) and *Art Bin* (2010). In a different and less institutionally accepted way, Cape Town-based collective, *Tokolos Stencils* has used human faeces to disrupt their own exhibition opening, and intervened illegally into the sculpture of Mandela's Ray-Bans in Sea Point.

The attack on art was an impulse that many avant-garde and anarchist groups of artists engaged in, in the early twentieth century and beyond, as a way to counter the increasing commodification and instrumentalisation of art as a marker or maker of knowledge, and as a plaything of the rich and the elite. An important moment in this history of western art was the development of so-called 'conceptual' art practices in the 1960s and '70s.

Here the art object was questioned, challenged and displaced in favour of ephemeral, performative, appropriative, informational or site-specific processes. This period not only challenged art's reliance on a physical object, but also challenged the spaces inaugurated with legitimating power to produce what art is, or could be, i.e. there was a challenge to the gallery and the museum as authoritative structures. This energy is usefully collected in Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973).

I would venture to argue that the burning of paintings is much more productively read in terms of this tradition rather than in terms of the book burning in Nazi Germany – as many artists and scholars across the country scrambled to read the actions in terms of.

A crucial question that then emerges is, how the intellectual and art elite so quickly and publicly condemned this burning *now*, in full knowledge of the nature and structure of radical action in art, that has a precedence and tradition that is well known?

The immediate answer that this question is likely to receive is that, in this context, the situation is radically different. The burners are not artists, the action was not coordinated nor strategically conceptualised, and it was rather a gratuitous and illegal act of vandalism.

These responses show a kind of gatekeeping that either accepts or rejects acts (or objects) as having merit as art. This position imagines that there must be a kind of petition or attempt made by the actors or agents to solicit coverage from art institutions. This runs counter to the very idea of an avant-garde – as the entire impetus for avant-gardist acts of the past was to explicitly question, debunk and obliterate the distinction between artist and non-artist, or art and non-art, and the hierarchical elitist distinctions that come with those labels. Most avant-garde movements were not understood or legible within the conventions that

they attacked, at least at that time. Retrospectively, some of these movements have come to be venerated and revered, but in the time that they worked, they were alternatively called heretics, uncivilised beasts, or any number of other animalistic pejoratives.

My interest in thinking about the aesthetics of protest is to begin to shape the ground for questions that are important but will need further time and space to address later: What are the implications of temporal/spatial interventions in forms of protest? How do they form moments that force us to rethink some of the established theorisation around aesthetic and political time and space? What can be made of the misrecognition that occurs by the so-called enlightened, established and institutional artists, professors, administrators and intellectuals, that is marked by a disavowal of certain forms of protest from inclusion into already existing and richly populated areas of thought and practice? Why do those in positions of either aesthetic or political power seem to just 'not get it'? How can we rethink the category of the avant-garde in new politically and aesthetically contingent ways?



Marcel Duchamp, or Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, or Louise Norton, *Fountain*, 1917. New York.

Suffering is Optional[47]: A Conclusion (of sorts)

As I sit down to write this, the latest iteration of *Paradise Fallen: Blaxis* is being de-installed from the group show *Occupation*, that was staged at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG)[48]. This iteration, its curation and concept, owes much to the work that is included in this dossier. In fact, it would not be possible without the intense and sustained labour of the past 7 years (or more).

In many ways the *JAG Occupation* was a manifestation of the ideas, politics and forms that I have been struggling to articulate, collect and order in this dossier of fragments. From the vantage point of this moment, where the *work* exists in the past tense, where my choices as to what to include (and what to exclude) in this itinerant journey across sites, feels impossible to hold entirely in my head – at least in one instance. It is bewildering, discombobulating, and disorientating. And while this does not feel comfortable, does not feel safe, it most certainly feels *right!*

What is however clear to me, is that my insistence that *the otherness of knowledge* that creative work potentially elicits must not only be respected, but protected as well. In this way, while my circuitous dérive through the coordinates of the work may be unwieldly or even chaotic, they are such for good reason.

More than this insistence on a xenoepistemics, the preceding pages reflect a process, a course of study, a course of actions that I am willing to be held account to, as I feel as if they represent my position, my ambivalence and my critical location within Fine Art, within an Art School in a University, and reflect my ambitions for what I believe artistic practice should be. The chaos is perhaps in this way exceeded by the pretentiousness of these sentiments. And what, if anything, can be more pretentious than a Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art!

The weaknesses of this work are patently obvious to me. And given more time, I would go deeper into some of the emergent conceptual and theoretical terrain, especially in developing the relationships between concepts and forms. This is particularly the case with the concepts of dispositif, apparatus, critique, and opacity.

In terms of the practical/creative work that this dossier bears witness to, well, this is ongoing, and I have already begun to work in excess of this collection, in ways that have made me understand the function of this PhD for myself. And this function is in the first and most immediate sense a pedagogical one.

In December of 2022, I travelled to Finland to facilitate a workshop and present the ideas contained in the PhD. I travelled with a colleague from Wits who was also part of the PhD cohort in the department of Fine Art. Brigitta Stone-Johnson spoke immediately before I did. Normally, in these situations, my head is so intensely filled with the preparation and planning of my talk, that I zone out and don't listen to the talk before me. However, this time, I was captivated by Brigitta's talk. The content of her intervention was familiar to me. I had heard it before in numerous presentations she has done over the years. What struck me in this moment was not so much the content, but the manner in which she developed it and made connections to the context at hand. I was supremely impressed by what I can only call a 'quiet confidence' … it was clear to me that Brigitta had come to find a

47. Taken from the title of the foreword to Haruki Murakami's *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running,* a book given to me by Naadira Patel when I sat down to compile the fragments for this dossier. I owe so much to her strength and support in this process. The ideas and processes developed here were done with her acute and astute sense of deliberate and focused action. I learn from her every day. The book was in fact crucial in allowing me to attempt to find a style of writing that I could begin to see as my own.

48. See appendix viii for the curatorial statement of the *JAG Occupation*.

home in the work that she does, and that the process of her PhD was a hard-fought-for occupation of this intellectual and theoretical space.

This was clearly an insight that had everything to do with my own location in the final stages of finishing a PhD, and it led me to discard the text that I had written for this presentation, and allowed me to take the risky strategy of 'winging it' and speaking without a script.

Trust the Work

During the course of a PhD, you receive much friendly advice, geared to motivating you to finish and to minimise the weight of expectation and ambition that the project necessarily brings with it. Of all this advice, one phrase, a phrase of three words, recurred throughout and rings loudly in my ears as I write these final concluding remarks.

Trust.
The Work.

Seemingly simple yet infuriatingly elusive. I intuitively know or feel what is meant, but I also know that it raises so many questions and variables. What exactly is *the work*? How is it defined, how do you frame it, document it … and so on and so forth. My aim in compiling this dossier of fragments is, in some way, to open up space. To open up space not only for the work that I have attempted to do, but to also open up space for further work to exist within the art school within a university. Work that is not predetermined or prescribed by what we know, but is able to push beyond these boundaries. I return to the idea of xenoepistemics, of a knowledge that is not known; a future knowledge, an alien knowledge. A knowledge that is not entangled within the ideologies of the present, but a knowledge that is perhaps a transcendent one. This is the ambition, but the reality is a much grimmer making do within institutionality.

The administration of knowledge production has the risk of foreclosing the potential for that which is other to a form of civility that comes with an enlightenment institution, produced through colonialism and hardened by late capitalism. Add to this a kind of 'post-pandemic' rise of artificial intelligence and surveillance, we are left with a university that is at risk, precisely at the moment it is needed the most. Or at least I insist on redirecting the malaise towards a university that is able to do the world making it often aspires to in rhetoric.

The coal face of this is at the intersection of administrative and intellectual processes. And what I attempt to do in work is to insist that this interface is one that must be made *human,* and human more so for its flaws, its idiosyncrasies and its productive failures. The form by which we structure and process/proceduralise the work is crucial and perhaps there is a need for a *xenobureaucracy.* What the work suggests is that this xenobureaucracy is made not only through an engagement with the parameters of the institution, but can also operate in excess of or beyond these parameters. Perhaps this is also described as a kind of structured anarchy. An art school could aspire for less!

As it is, I am too immersed within the operational logics of the status quo to fully inhabit a xenoepistemics, which is perhaps always that which is to come and will never arrive, because to arrive is to be located within the contingencies of your

site. In this sense my role was to grapple with these coordinates, and to test their limits. What I have attempted to do here is a choreography with form and content, within the parameters of the structure of a degree. The manner in which I have attempted to do this is by drawing in a morass of sites accumulated over time and in conversation with numerous interlocutors. My hope is that this dossier of fragments provides a potential way of inhabiting or occupying the structure of a PhD in fine art, such that others can find their own pathways in a way that doesn't demand any suffering at all. But can include forms of joy and pleasure that come with the pull and push of image and text combinations. And this is important.

After all is said, I hope you have enjoyed moving through these combinations as much as I have had the pleasure and the privilege of making them.

With love and solidarity
Zen Marie
2023



Zen Marie, *Of Our History*, 2021. Photogrammetry print. CIRCUIT independent art space, Lausanne, Switzerland.

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appendix i

This interview with Ishkar Richard by Layla Leiman was published on the online magazine between 10 and 5, on November 25th 2013. It has since been taken offline, and is reprinted here with permission of the author, Layla Leiman.

Ishkar Richard has just completed his BA in Fine Art at Wits University. His work, which uses the human form as its starting point, playfully grapples with notions of the abstract, the abject, and much in between. Ishkar spoke to us to tell us a little more about his work, being a student, and what's next on his journey.

How and why did you become interested in art?
I would like to tell a nice story about how I've always been interested in art from childhood but I don't think that's the case. Growing up I was interested in everything really; art didn't take precedence over anything else in my mind. After finishing high school I made up my mind to study a degree in science but at the last minute I flipped a coin and decided I should be doing art. This is actually how I make most of my decisions, except of course when there are three or more options and the coin becomes useless. I would say that this is still true to this day, I am interested in everything but somehow I ended up making art, that's just how it worked out.

What has your experience as a student been like?
Doing a Fine Art degree is very much like trying to be a psychic medium. I've spent four years trying to convince myself and others that I can speak to the dead when the truth is I can't even see the dead much less hold down a conversation. I think this is true for anyone doing a degree in the arts, who work with things that I think are very difficult to quantify; I spent my first few years wishing for a textbook and some equations to solve but I eventually got used to not having these things. The most valuable part of being a student was having access to all of the expertise available in the Fine Art department. Walking into the staffroom you could almost smell the collective brainpower, it was a glorious thing.

What valuable lessons did you learn along the way?
I think that doing Fine Art has altered my general way of thinking in quite a broad sense. As a practitioner I've come a long way but I think even more valuable than that has been the development in my ability to analyse visual culture, I find it difficult now to remove my analytical glasses even when watching Dora the Explorer. Also some brief notes on safety:
-Avoid walking barefoot in artists' studios.
-A sculpture of a human in your cars passenger seat is difficult to explain when you get stopped by the police in the early hours of the morning.
-If you drink water saturated with plaster by mistake go to the doctor.

Tell us about the concept, process and result of your final project.
My work has always been figurative. The human body is the starting point regardless of what medium I'm using. The degree was very self-driven in the last two years, and students are essentially given free rein to do whatever it is they want. My final project manifested as two life-sized sculptures of human figures; one sitting on a table with wool coming out of his nose and the other sitting on the floor with a large globular cactus for a head.

These works are made using strips of plaster, which are applied in sections to my own body with the help of an assistant. The plaster hardens and is then removed and joined into a complete figure. In the case of the last two sculptures this cast was carefully wrapped in layers of black and green wool respectively. I am always trying to elicit some kind of emotional reaction in the viewer, or maybe it's more accurate to say that I'm trying to wrong-foot the viewer emotionally. To get them into a state of confusion about what it is that they are feeling.

How would you describe your personal style, and what influences it?
I think my style is quite eclectic it's quite difficult for me to describe. I think one proviso that I do have is for my work to be quite simple. The word 'simple' is a bit problematic but I always want my visual style to be quite clear and accessible in a formal sense. I also think my work tends toward themes that are quite dark; I think this comes from a love of both real and fictional horror.

My range of influence is also quite wide, if I were to name a few pertinent ones they would be the paintings of Francis Bacon and Phillip Guston. I am also quite influenced by the body horror of David Lynch, the writings of Julia Kristeva on abjection, films by the Coen brothers, and the short animated films by Tim Burton as well as Don Hertzfeldt. I should also mention Jacques Lacan's writing which I refer to and think of almost constantly. This last one might seem a bit strange but I am also influenced by Adrien Brody's face; it's very interesting, I look at it quite often.

Describe your dream job.
I think my dream job is to be involved in anything which produces an end product which I could be proud of, or which produces some kind of meaningful effect. I don't know, I don't have many dreams, dreams are strange things.

What are you busy with at the moment?
I am always making work in some shape or form, I try to work regularly. Recently I've been working on proposals for several exhibitions taking place next year in and around Johannesburg. I am also currently working on a short animated film about a boy looking for his mom, after becoming lost in a supermarket, it sounds sweet, but it's not. This is following a film I animated a few years ago about a dog looking for an owner.

What are your plans for the future? (short term and long term)
I am planning to continue my studies in art by doing a Masters programme at Wits next year; either an MA in Fine art or an MA in animation or perhaps both. As far as long term plans go, I'm not sure, like I said dreams are strange things and people who have specific dreams are also strange. I'm going to give a vague, romantic answer and say that in the long term I would like to be someone who others cite as an influence when completing interviews like this one. I think this is really what everyone really hopes for, to have a meaningful effect on others during their own lifetime and more importantly, to continue to have an effect after death.

Where can we keep up with what you do?

If you'd like to know what I'm currently doing, email me [ishkar.richard@gmail.com] and then I'll tell you.

appendix ii

This text was written for a session of the 2015 JWTC, which was presented as a 'seance' to call on the work of artists or writers who had committed suicide. Ishkar Richard was a talented young artist and former student at the Wits School of Arts. His passing was one of three suicides by artists in South Africa that year. The text grapples with his work and problematises the retrospective reading of it through his death.

Where Are My Fuckin' Flowers!
Life, Laughter and Death in the Work of Ishkar Richard

Holding Back the Tears

It is incredibly difficult to write about the work of an artist post-traumatic event. The difficulty is that readings of the work are usually dominated by the event. Traumatic, tragic, romantic or fatal events more that colour meanings ascribed to such work – they become foundational.

To listen to the music of Nirvana implicitly includes the suicide of Cobain, to think about the phrasing of Winehouse cannot but call up her excess, overdose and untimely death. However, music is perhaps a little more flexible here. The lyrics of Cobaine and Winehouse are never just read, they are heard. Heard and danced to, with phrasing, melody, a crushing riff or an ecstatic bridge that takes us beyond narrative and interpretation. Music moves temporally and viscerally in a way that images do not. Or at least images do not do this obviously.

I want to look at the work of Ishkar Richard in a way that goes beyond the context and narrative of his death, but also goes beyond the stasis of the image and interpretation. His work goes beyond obvious narrative implications as it seeks to commune with an elsewhere, an otherness or a beyond.

Double vision: How to be Playfully Angry at the World?

In order to move away from the context of his death, let me briefly sketch out the narrative we are departing from. Ishkar's older brother Bivash Richard committed suicide on the 19th of June 2012. He was 23. Ishkar Richard committed suicide two years later, on the 1st of August 2014. He was 22.

They were both incredibly young.

I met Ishkar at the Wits School of Arts when he was a second-year student. It was my first year teaching at the school. I watched him move from animation, to collage, to painting, and ultimately to large figurative sculpture and installation.

It was clear: this kid had chops!

The work that Ishkar made, especially in his third and fourth year of art school, are almost impossible to read outside of the death of Bivash, and then himself. But I think that in order to do justice to this work, we need to move beyond this narrative and ask more fundamental questions of it.

Mind Fuck

The sculptural installation *Mind Fuck* shows a human figure covered in torn-up notes from university textbooks. Perhaps a student consumed by the pressure of exams, the pursuit of knowledge, and the overwhelming need to accumulate information. While a haunting and dark work, Ishkar's humour is nontheless present here.

He showed this work twice, once on the Senate House concourse, the ground floor of the building that services, among other things, the senior management offices of the university. It was here that I saw the unease at which staff and students approached the work. This unease strangely turned into laughter as more than one person remarked, 'this is Wits pushing a student over the edge' – a not uncommon quip that riffs off the university's catch phrase 'WITS gives you the edge'. The work was not contextualised on the concourse. It was not flagged as art, there was no title, just a pile of shredded text books with two takkie-covered feet and jeans that covered legs sticking out.

This was a work that deftly engaged in both the site it was shown in (the university and its seat of power) as well as a personal narrative that was important, yet importantly not proclaimed, shouted or foregrounded. It floated in the mix, for those who knew, supporting but not dominating.

Ishkar's is a dark, macabre kind of humour, and one that is not shy of engaging with real and difficult material. It is through a head-on engagement with anguish and the impossibility of understanding that Ishkar plays, using all the material and emotional resources at his disposal.

Surely this is a meditation on the recent death of Bivash? An attempt to gain access and seek answers to ultimately unanswerable questions of his brother?

In a sense Ishkar gives us a view into the answer that he came up with – it is a mind fuck. The living do not get the luxury of a satisfying commune with the dead. Or at least of the kind of commune we are used to. There is perhaps a different commune that we do not understand or a commune that comes not from the dead, but is rather a projection by the living.

The reading of *Mind Fuck* in terms of the death of Bivash, satisfies me as little as it must have satisfied Ishkar.

The attempt to understand death is a futile occupation. Messages do not come back from the other side. At least not in his aesthetic practice nor in this so-called séance. It is the living, the practice of life and its attendant forms that speak here, not the dead.

To situate Ishkar's final project exclusively as an attempt to understand death and reconcile with the dead, is to miss out on the complexity and ambition of his work. He was not merely attempting to get answers from the beyond – he was also playing a sophisticated albeit macabre game with the living. There was implicit to this work a kind of institutional critique that was squarely lodged at the structure of higher education through the site in which he showed the work – he was blunting the edge of Wits.

Ishkar never attempted to *drown* this work or any of his others in the narrative of death, at least not explicitly. I do not know if he ever did this in private, but in public he pushed away from locating the work as homage or attempt at catharsis. He was much more astute and much more of a teaser. Shortly before his death, Ishkar was interviewed about his work. He described his work and time as an art student as follows:

Doing a Fine Art degree is very much like trying to be a psychic medium. I've spent four years trying to convince myself and others that I can speak to the dead when the truth is I can't even see the dead much less hold down a conversation. I think this is true for anyone doing a degree in the arts, who work with things that I think are very difficult to quantify; I spent my first few years wishing for a textbook and some equations to solve but I eventually got used to not having these things. (Interview with Layla Leiman: http://10and5.com/2013/11/25/fresh-meat-ishkar-richard/)

Here Ishkar shows a deft and efficient management of readings of his work that have the danger of reducing the work to the singularity[49] of death or the labour of mourning. He denies a reading of the work as a lament, as he enlarges his scope of engagement beyond *sight,* beyond the image, to an ambition for a *conversation.* For something more dialogical, even as he knows that this conversation is impossible.

The ineffable quality of making art, of going beyond rationality, coherence, sense or logic, is clearly at stake here. He is interrogating fundamental epistemological questions: how we know what we know through an examination of the aesthetic. Ishkar is immersed in the paradox of having to go into the void while still being asked to return now and then to report back, to 'paint a picture' so that everyone else can … get a moment of sublime excitement? Some kind of *frisson?* Experience a moment of voyeuristic titillation? Or to somehow get close to that which is tantalisingly dangerous as it promises to obliterate our very existence. In some ways – and not only in a romantic sense – this is seen as the function and role of the artist – to push beyond all boundaries and deliver sublime identification.

In this structure of the aesthetics of the sublime it is crucial that we the viewers (or we the not-dead) are guaranteed the safety of remaining alive, at least for the moment. In this the sublime is that point at which we identify not with the obliteration of self but with the safety of not being really at danger (Kant, Burke, Hal Foster etc.).

Where Are My Fuckin' Flowers?

The work *Where Are My Fuckin' Flowers (2013),* again shows Ishkar's dark sense of humour and provocation. Having dug a hole in his garden, he puts his head into it, in an absurd, futile, ostrich-like attempt to bury himself. The work, described as a performance, is in a way an absurd, Dadaist or Fluxus-inspired *happening* that explores burial and the act of giving flowers. *Where are my fucking flowers,* he asks*,* as he attempts to crawl into a hole that is just not big enough. In this sense it could be read as a profane and confrontational attack on both death and mourning. But again I insist that this is not all, or at least not the only thing, at work here.

Ishkar repeatedly used his own body in making his life-sized sculptures and performances. He assumed the position of the subject / object of this overwhelming and obliterating pressure. In this act of inserting himself as a placeholder for a contemplation of death he was enacting a dance much in the way the trickster gods have done – like Eshu or Loki he plays, dances and teases with a recklessness that challenges the order and hierarchy of both the living and the dead. The trickster gods are always much more playful than the masters of death more proper – think about a comparison to Hades, Kali or Santa Muerte.

49. Physics: a point at which a function takes an infinite value, especially in space-time when matter is infinitely dense, as at the centre of a black hole. Mathematics: a point at which a given mathematical object is not defined or not 'well-behaved', for example infinite or not differentiable.

It is perhaps all too tempting to interpret *Mind Fuck* as a meditation on the death of Bivash and *Where Are My Fuckin' Flowers* as a premonition of his own. Here we could extend the analysis to employ the temporal-based narratological terms of analepsis and prolepsis. Analepsis as a flash back to Bivash's death and prolepsis as an anticipation of his own.

However, both these time-based narratological concepts are limited when thinking through death. Death exists outside of time as it arrests and dismantles the flow of living temporalities. Death deals with time anachronistically as it plays with figures of eternity and infinity. It is a singularity. Cobain, Winehouse, Hendrix, Joplin, Morrison and Basquiat will forever be 27.

Do we ever mourn for the person? Or is it just ourselves? Mourning as a Metaphor for Critical Theory.

On one level, I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost "in" you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as the tie by which those terms are differentiated and related. (Judith Butler, Precarious Life, pg 22)

Whenever I go to a funeral, I am fascinated by the ritual of mourning. The shedding of tears in visible and dramatic ways. The intense signification of loss. Who are people crying for? I often look at people who do not have any close relationship with the dead person, they have not lost a lover a parent, child, sibling, or relative that was very close or a friend that was important. Their lives are not going to be turned upside down by this death. Yet tears flow. Besides the form of the professional mourner, as present in many cultures, and the political forms of mourning and solidarity in the anti-apartheid struggle, there is something else at stake here. The tears are not for the dead, but for the body that produces them. The mourner mourns for the projected or real loss of those closest to them, for real parents, children, siblings etc. More than this the mourner weeps for himself or herself. For the imagined and terrifying death of the self. The shedding of tears here becomes a sign of vitality of resistance to death as the dead cannot cry.

In this sense the act of mourning says much more about life and the living rather than of death and the dead. I find it difficult not to extend this, even if prematurely and speculatively, to an analogy with critical theory and the production of meaning.

Much like Spivak cautions us, the people, or things we write about are often silenced in the theoretical act. What meaning we produce says more about ourselves, our interests, agendas, egos, desires, and fears than it does about *the thing.* Mieke Bal also warns against this silencing of the 'object' in the writing of theory. As an antidote, she demands that objects are given the respect and the space to speak back to the concepts and theories that threaten to drown them in meaning.

The dead are a radical other that do not speak – at least not on their own. Others can speak for them or through them. This séance is predicated on speaking through the aesthetic production of the artists selected, through their work. But even here their work is silenced by interpretation – in this case, my interpretation. The interpretation of the mediums that speak and media that holds their message.

appendix iii: Travel log since 2012

DESTINATION	ARRIVAL	DEPARTURE
Senegal	03 Jan 2012	14 February 2012
Senegal	18 December 2012	14 January 2013
France	19 January 2013	3 February 2013
Hong Kong	20 March 2013	26 March 2013
Ecuador	10 April 2013	14 April 2013
France	10 October 2013	20 October 2013
Reunion	1 September 2013	8 September 2013
Netherlands	18 December 2013	1 February 2014
Swaziland	1 July 2014	3 July 2014
Brazil	22 January 2014	31 January 2014
Netherlands	03 March 2015	12 April 2015
Switzerland	20 July 2015	19 August 2015
Reunion	13 September 2015	24 September 2015
Brazil	27 August 2016	11 September 2016
Reunion	16 September 2016	16 October 2016
Senegal	2 April 2017	27 May 2017
Switzerland	3 June 2017	25 June 2017
India	8 October 2017	11 October 2017
Senegal	21 January 2018	19 February 2018
Senegal	13 April 2018	21 April 2018
Botswana	27 July 2018	30 July 2018
Zimbabwe	8 October 2018	16 October 2018
Botswana	17 October 2018	27 October 2018
India	10 December 2018	16 December 2018
Germany	10 February 2019	12 February 2019
Portugal	15 January 2019	22 January 2019
Switzerland	17 March 2019	29 March 2019
Italy	4 May 2019	10 May 2019
UK	July 2022	July 2022
Finland	December 2022	December 2022

appendix iv

***Paradise Fallen: BLAXIS* – A conversation with Zen Marie**

Khanyisile Mawhayi[50]

We have often heard people speak of the voice of God but not so much of the view of God, unless you are a film boffin who is familiar with the filmmaking shot "God's eye view" which places the camera directly above the subject. Zen Marie's latest instalment in his research-based series, Paradise Fallen, offers us an entry point as to what a sovereign entity sees in the territories and terrains unscathed by the human hand. I flew up from Cape Town to Johannesburg to witness the exhibition of the work in person at the Wits Art Museum prior to interviewing Marie as part of the programming for his exhibition. From the plane in the sky, I not only had a similar view of the landscapes that Marie probably shot in, but also of my own life and the links which led me to that exact moment. Such are the musings one would have while watching the film, reflections on the mundane and the extraordinary, the physical and the spiritual.

In our conversation I begin the questioning off with the usual, "who are you and what do you make work about" but Marie is not interested in a singular aboutness. Instead, he insists that the work holds space for many meanings in a concrete and intentional way. He states that there is a huge poverty to reducing work to an aboutness. "We are talking about images, we are talking about emotions, we are talking about sounds and a reductive aboutness is the pitfall of trying to put language to these complex notions." But this project is part of Marie's Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art and ultimately, he will be required to put words to this immersing body of work. In this attempt at putting language to the work, I focus on three parts: the land – the images and ideologies surrounding it, the people and their involvement in the making of the work and the curation of the work.

Tackling ideas surrounding land in a country with a riotous history and prickly present like South Africa's was never going to be easy. The image of landscapes, whether as painting, photography or even mapping, has for decades past, been used as a tool employed by colonialists to assert themselves as lords of these lands. Marie consciously draws on these images of colonial landscapes influenced by the time spent in his undergrad learning about American Landscape painting. From that point, he attempts the delinking project that, according to him, underpins the project of decolonization. "These mountains are bookmarks in our history," a phrase that Marie cites from a conversation he had with artist Donna Kukama is a delinking point. It moves away from the idea that the land lays dormant, ready to be conquered and towards the notion that it is a participant, however passive, in all that happens in, with, and around it. As the artist puts it, "the land around us bears witness to all of the fuckery of humanity." The phrase also suggests that the land not only listens but speaks and this work is an attempt at learning to listen to what the land has to say.

The thread and evolution of Marie's friendships and relationships runs across the making of this work. From the phrase offered by Kukama, to the collaborations with The Wretched and Blk Jks, there is a balance stroked between careful consideration of collaborators and allowing these relations and their effect on the work to form and flow organically. When asked about where he would show the work if he could show it anywhere, he answers, "It's not where I would show, its who I would show," again emphasizing the significance of the people in his life in making and sharing this work. Marie says this emphasis on relations, is a product of being locked down for so long but I'd like to think that the forced isolation only heightened an element that was already there in the making of the work.

The show was approached with as much artistic care as it was with curatorial care for how the work would be exhibited and received. Viewers had two possibilities in which to experience the film; a bench placed in the middle of the projection to mimic the commemorative benches found in national parks, as well as cushions placed on the floor. Each choice effective on different levels. The bench was picturesque (read Instagramable) against the frame of the film and Marie would document those moments, watching people view the film, wondering what they might be pondering on in those moments. The cushions, which was the option I chose to

50. Khanyisile Mawhayi (b. 1998) is an artist and art writer from Johannesburg, South Africa. She works mostly in photography, printmaking, and painting. She is passionate about institutional critique and uses her work to talk about her experiences in establishments such as art museums and universities and more recently the institution of culture, in an attempt to make these spaces more accessible and inclusive for people like her. She takes a comical, sometimes painful but always critical view of these institutions and society and what comes out is often a reflection of some of the most difficult parts of her life.

experience the video in, felt meditative not only because I was sitting cross-legged but because the floor to ceiling projection felt all consuming from that position.

The gallery space does not offer much in terms of escapism. It often lends itself to an idea of neutrality that can often alienate those who find themselves in it, including the artist, the art and the viewer. Marie challenges this and suggests that these white cubes and black blocks can be used as devices to travel through time and space. “It sounds ambitious and unachievable but part of that is the banalities of someone sitting in that space, going through this experience and thinking “Did I turn the stove off? I can’t remember if I turned the stove off” and then sitting there and thinking about whether they turned the stove off. There is something beautiful in that as well and I think that space to exit reality and travel to spaces and times that are unimaginable, I naively believe that is something that is still possible in cinema.”

The final shot in the 45-minute video is a close-up shot of a little bird perched on a branch preceded by the phrase “Where are my fucking flowers?” by the late Ishkar Richard, an art student who took his own life not long after graduating. Although the inclusion of the bird had a National Geographic documentary quality to it, for the artist, it was a moment of thinking about personal and collective losses from the last two years and even beyond that – in slavery, colonialism, recognised and unrecognised genocides. The inclusion of the bird and the thinking around mourning and loss emphasized a pattern that ran throughout the whole video: intimacy in the big expansive moments and expansion in the close-ups and enclosed moments. Marie wanted to create a space for the contemplation of the vastness of this thing that we live in called the earth and the complexities in that. Paradise Fallen: BLAXIS is an endeavour towards empathy; to look beyond ourselves and appreciate the spirits, feelings and ideals beyond ourselves while also acknowledging our mortality and humility.

appendix v

Senate standing orders

S2009/3048

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

FACULTY STANDING ORDERS FOR WITS SCHOOL OF ARTS: PHD IN CREATIVE WORK

This document must be read in conjunction with the Senate Standing orders on Higher Degrees and the Faculty of Humanities Standing Orders for PhD studies. Unless otherwise stipulated in this document, the provision of those two documents apply.

The University Rules currently stipulate the following requirements for the award of the PhD:

1. Fulfillment of requirements for conferment of the award of Doctor of Philosophy

   When the research is completed the candidate must –
   a) present for the approval of the Senate a thesis, the research for which is normally conducted under the guidance of a supervisor/s, which must constitute in the opinion of the Senate, a substantial contribution to the advancement of knowledge in the subject chosen, and which must be satisfactory as regards literary presentation;
   b) furnish an abstract with each copy of the thesis;
   c) if required by the Senate, present himself or herself for such examination or test, oral or written, or such requirements as the Senate may determine in respect of the subject of his/her thesis.

Following a proposal from the Wits School of Arts for the introduction of a PhD that could include creative work in the field of visual and performing arts, the Senate has approved for inclusion in the Wits Standing Orders for Higher Degrees the provision that the thesis may take the form of performance and/or a body of creative work plus a written text which contextualises the work critically and defends its originality.

2. Admission criteria

Applications from candidates for the PhD in creative work must be considered by a School committee of three people appointed by the head before the application is forwarded to the Faculty for approval. The applications must include a portfolio of creative work with supporting documentation and the committee will assess the candidate's ability to produce work on a PhD level. More particularly, the committee will assess whether the proposed creative work is likely to be accepted as accomplished work in its own right.

3. Admission on the basis of prior work

It is generally assumed that the creative work will be completed during the period of registration. In very exceptional cases a candidate may be admitted to the PhD in creative work on the basis of a substantial body of prior work. The work will be submitted to three independent peer reviewers appointed by the Faculty of Humanities in consultation with the Wits School of Arts to assess its suitability for acceptance on the PhD level. No work that has previously been examined for the purposes of a higher degree may be submitted. Such candidates will be expected to submit a proposal explaining how their thesis will relate to their creative work.

4. Supervision

The nature of the PhD in creative work implies that most candidates will need more than one supervisor. The School will only accept candidates for whom a suitable supervisor or suitable supervisors are available and will attempt to involve expertise from other schools in the University where necessary. In the case of co-supervision one of the supervisors will be appointed as primary supervisor.

5. Relationship between creative work and thesis

There must be a coherent relationship between the creative work and the thesis, in such a way that the two components can be assessed as an integrated whole. This does not necessarily mean that the thesis must be a direct commentary on the creative work. It must, however, serve to contextualise the creative work critically and enable the examiners to assess its originality. For example, in the field of Music Performance the candidate may choose to write a thesis that provides an analysis of the compositions that are performed as well as a critical commentary on previous performances. In the research proposal as well as the thesis the candidate must demonstrate how the scholarly work informs and elucidates the creative work.

6. Scope of the creative work

The appropriate scope of the creative work should be outlined for approval by the Faculty in the research proposal. The assessment criteria as approved by Senate stipulate that the creative work 'must be the equivalent of a year's full-time work'. This may take the form of one major project or of a number of smaller and related or diverse projects. The research proposal should explain the creative work and indicate why it is of appropriate scope. If the creative work has a smaller scope than the norm, the proposal must indicate why this is so and what proportion of the overall effort would be dedicated to it.

7. Scope of the thesis

The length of the dissertation should normally be between 30 000 and 40 000 words. If the time allocated to the creative work is less than a full year of full-time work, the proposal must indicate the adjustments that would be made to the length of the thesis.

8. Submission of creative work

All creative work forming part of the PhD must be submitted in the form of retainable documentation – slides, photographs, video recordings, dvd recordings and other appropriate visual and audio forms of documentation. In order to avoid any dispute around this matter, the research proposal must indicate for approval what documentation would be submitted.

9. Assessment criteria

The thesis must fulfill the central criterion for the award of the PhD, that it must be a 'substantial contribution to the advancement of knowledge in the subject chosen'. In addition, the following criteria have been approved by the University:

a) The creative work must be the equivalent of a year's full-time work.
b) The thesis (i.e. the creative work/performance plus written text) must make an original and intellectually articulate contribution to the understanding of contemporary performing and/or visual arts.
c) The creative work must be contextualised in relation to other forms of cultural production and contribute to the advancement of the discipline and critical debate in the field
d) The creative work must exemplify and locate the ideas in conjunction with the written text
e) The candidate's research would be expected to focus on one or more of the following: a critical exploration of the history, theory and practice of visual and/or performing arts; the development and creative application of new materials and technologies; the relationship between visual and/or performing arts and society; and the relationship between visual and/or performing arts and other disciplines.

appendix vi

Caught by Traffic

IN SEARCH OF AN AESTHETIC METHODOLOGY?[51]

The French saying*, bête comme un peintre* – as dumb as a painter – owes its biting wit to a reduction of the visual arts to mere imitation. The painter (as emblematic of the visual arts) copies reality and presents an audience with a view, a spectacle: an image. This image, produced by the naïve painter, is illustrative: it points to a scene as it depicts a reality. Of course this is the traditional, conservative perspective of the beaux-arts, which is often reduced to the ocular: the image is privileged as an essentially visual operation. Fast forward through the history of art to the mechanisation and commercialisation of the creative industries. Images are made and circulated at such profusion and pace that they become increasingly complex as cultural icons. This provokes questions on the status of the image. What is its link to an external reality? How does it play with ideas? How does it do its magic? And, crucially for my purpose, how does it operate in the game of knowledge production? In this questioning of the image or aesthetic object the artist is a conjurer of exquisite theories and sinister knowledges who often crosses the space between theory and practice, blurring the boundaries.
This essay asks after the specificity of this space between theory and practice. Does the artist bring a fresh perspective into theoretical reckoning? And does theory make art more rigorous?

Jou Alma Mater

The Academy is one of many places that mediate art in South Africa, the Fine Arts department serving as the first hurdle for would-be practitioners. That most practicing artists in South Africa hold BA Fine Arts degrees has bearing on the way young artists formulate their ideas, their formal and conceptual allegiances and, ultimately, their practices. In this context, the idea of theoretically engaged art practice is not strange at all but rather dangerously accepted as the norm.

Fine Arts majors are often given watered-down theoretical compilations in the form of a "greatest hits" of art theory. Added to this way of teaching theory is the reality that students are far more committed to "studio work" than to "class work". The result of this diluted theory as supplement to practice is like a seven-year-old with an AK47. The kid may be able to work the machine but God knows how many people will die.

The acceptance of practical work as research becomes more problematic the further up the academic food chain you go. Especially fraught is the relationship between theoretical (conceptual or written) work and practical aesthetic work. Musical compositions, theatre performances and exhibitions are often adorned with clumsy theoretical retrofitting. The danger of post-theorisation is that the artist misses the fertile potential contained in an engaged theory/object relationship.
Conventional academic research privileges the written word, which most artists see at best as a second home. Academia furthermore requires a research process with clear goals and a clearly defined and measurable methodology. While the arts necessarily resist universal or standardised systems of measurability, methodology is perhaps more open. Surely there is a methodology that the creative arts can offer academic research? In the spirit of probing the possibility of a methodological insight, I introduce The Big Boss.

The Big Boss

The Big Boss was my contribution to a one-week residency in Durban hosted by the Netherlands Institute voor Media Kunst (NIMK) and Dala, a Durban-based art/architecture and activism collective. The project challenged my intuitive, perhaps even formulaic, instincts towards making work.
Being a lover of the woofer and the MAG wheel, I decided to work with the aesthetic practice of taxis modification. Durban, more than any other city in South Africa, has a rich tradition of modifying cars, and this audio/visual form of expression is performed by a number of taxi drivers.
It took me a few days to find the man/car combination that was just right. Mark Chinsamy, owner/driver of The Big Boss, delivered the overall synaesthetic experience that I desired.
I travelled around Durban with Mark, engaging him in discussion on the "spatial dimensions of global spectacles on the occasion of the 2010 World Cup" – the theme of the residency. Mark had a lot to say. I generated almost ten hours of video, covering topics from class/race divisions of property, to the nature of urban spatial dynamics in Durban, the nuances of taxi driving, and the often illicit and nefarious taxi industry. At the end of filming I was at a complete loss about what to show

51. This Article was published in Art South Africa, Vol 9, Issue 4, as part of a special issue titled: *Space Ritual and Absence – Liminality in South African Visual Art, Caught by Traffic*, 2011

in the exhibition. There was enough footage for a documentary on Mark, who was keen on a "day in the life" type of film, starring himself. However, with no time to edit, this was near impossible. The other problem I faced was that his candid, no-holds-barred description of the taxi industry reinforced negative stereotypes of taxi drivers.
As my deadline approached the project took on an eloquence and efficiency that only a combination of fear and a lack of time could produce: a 3:24-minute music video shot to Waka Waka by Shakira with The Big Boss as the star, and a "live" discussion with Mark at the KZNSA Gallery. Inviting Mark to engage in discussion released me from the worry of being gunned down for misrepresenting him. But there were other issues at stake. The discussion was a frightening prospect. I was opening up the process that Mark and I had entered into some days before, to a real-time engagement with an audience best described as white, middle-aged, wealthy, art-loving Durbanites. What thrilled me about this was the presentation of Human as Rarefied Object – more Saartjie Baartman than Gilbert and George. The entire project smacked of a poorly conceived anthropological exercise. It was ethnography at its participatory worst. I was going to parade the "native" to the society for the arts, who would be shocked, entertained and titillated. I also assumed that I would be taken to task for such an impotent critical gesture, and my process shown up for the charlatanism that it represented. I was looking forward to being the fall guy for pseudo-anthropology in art. Unfortunately, it was not a total failure. The audience was shocked, entertained and titillated. But in spite of my hopes I was not crucified. Anthropological methodology and I went unscathed. The good art-going citizens of Durban got a chance to interact with an authentic taxi driver. They asked him why he played his music so loud and drove so badly. Mark and I discussed the finer points of car modification and the non-taxi-travelling audience got their first encounter with a real life, all-star taxi. They got a chance to take photos and to sit in The Big Boss with the music turned up loud, though not too loud as the sound system would have shattered the windows of the KZNSA Mark told us.

This project suggests that there could be a way to think, and rethink, events, people and places outside of conventional research. The Big Boss represents a kind of thick or sensuous form of data collection that speaks about – if not does – something that could be considered a form of visual thinking.1 It suggests a challenge to the words normally used to describe the group of people designated Taxi Drivers, that goes beyond the conventional production of both images and words. While The Big Boss contains many elements consistent with contemporary trends in visual anthropology, it resists categorisation as anthropological research project. The point, however, is not to try to locate The Big Boss as research, but to view it as a theoretical statement in itself. It is not a question of drawing out an analysis of the phallic signification system that the project no doubt lends itself to. It is rather a question of sitting with (or inside) The Big Boss and understanding the logic that it screams out in 1000W over six channels.

Practice-Led Research:
A Question of Liminality?

Contemporary developments in the tense relationship between theory and art, or art as theory, come largely from the academy. This is in part to find a proper institutional frame for textual objects that do not neatly fit within the conventions of a written thesis or recognised research outputs. But universities seem unable to push a radical agenda that challenges the neat epistemological structuring of the non-written object.
The challenge of rethinking epistemological structure from the point of view that the aesthetic object proposes is diminished by technocratic or bureaucratic rationalisation. As a result, artistic research is generalised by the academy in a way that neutralises its singularity: its ability to performatively do something different. This difference (or even newness) is in part to ask how sound or image might function as theoretical text. The conservatism of the academy is similar to the conventional and equally conservative articulation of the liminal as a non-space that is, by definition, uninhabitable. The emphasis is on transition or movement from one state to another between binaries. The possibility of dwelling on the threshold in a neither-nor, in-between or undecidable space seems a threat to the proper or the mainstream. The carnival must end and people must speak and act as hegemony demands. But what if the liminal were treated as a valid in itself. What if becoming was infinitely deferred and ontological security was sacrificed for a radicalisation of epistemological form? What if the binary opposition between here and there, this state and the other, were relinquished in favour of a dialectical relationship, but one in which any attempt at synthesis was deferred in a daring attempt to listen or to see something different?
To consider aesthetic configurations from these liminal positions, in a way that is not censored, politely revised or neatly translated, prompts a redefinition of the terms by which researchers, academics and policy makers approach such objects (or subjects). The Big Boss taxi can be seen as a liminal object as it resists classification or ordering, it is an affront to decent taste and correct politics. It sits between spaces as it pans through the cityscape. To what extent then is this point of resistance a potentially transformative one in attempting to organise the way conventional research is done? What research methodology does this kind of aesthetic object suggest?
The emergence of practice-based doctorates creates a frenzy of classification and structuring, the systemisation of creativity and the rationalisation of texts not primarily word-based. In this project a proper methodology to accommodate aesthetic practice is eagerly sought. This urgency for deriving methodology, for stabilising a set of practices that almost by definition are heterogeneous and contradictory is itself a threat to a radical perspective of aesthetic positions as research. The academy would seem to require a procedural approach, to establish a generalised methodology that can be applied to a range of research projects. We should perhaps follow Sarat Maharaj who proposes an academy that:

[…] is not seen as a fixed site, Know-All centre but as a straggle of self-organizing educative-creative events and conjunctures, each springing up afresh from scratch, as it were, for whatever art research project. The academy becomes less a monolith establishment, more a series of micro-labs or nano labs that take shape within a band of knowledge practices – within modalities of the haptic, retinal, computational, the frequencies of sonic grime, the somatic, performative, digital amongst others. Each time art research is floated, we might say, a microlab has to be knocked together." (Maharaj, 2009, p4)

Maharaj urges a shift from know-how to no-how, a form of post-structural provocation that sees methodology as an academic straitjacket that restricts rather than opens up the potential of the aesthetic object to new epistemological form. To embrace "no-how" is to ask the process itself to be accountable to knowledge production. The "no-how" keeps procedure at bay as reflexivity is prioritised. This challenge to postpone measurability is perhaps a utopian one. It is, however, one that is important to strive towards if research practices are to be invigorated by perspectives from the arts.

To view The Big Boss as a research project, as a theoretical statement, is to provoke a discussion on the nature of research; of art and the role that theory plays across these registers. While ideas of practice-led research have become fashionable in contemporary academia, they are still tainted by the disciplinary and technical ordering that academia requires. The debate is one of classification and structure. It becomes a question of how the medium we use suggests a logic or epistemological ground.

appendix vii

OCCUPATION: JAG



Context

The historic Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) is one of South Africa's most important public art institutions. Since 1994, the space has had numerous challenges, as it has precariously balanced the shifting prerogatives of city managers and the provincial government. The post-apartheid 'flight' of capital from the city of Johannesburg to the northern suburbs, and the increasing reluctance of art audiences to go into the city, have come, in many ways, to question the existence of JAG.

Needless to say, the pandemic and global recession have exacerbated this.

As a way to pose questions around these issues, an occupation of JAG is planned. Artists, writers, educators, musicians, curators and more, will propose a series of process-driven interventions that seek to open up space for reflection, mapping, invocation, libation, celebration, exploration, sharing, thinking, contemplating, play, and more.

This occupation will take place from the 31st October 2022, when the installation begins. This period will be a build-up to the opening, which is scheduled for the 13th of November. The occupation will run into 2023 (endpoint TBC), and there will be opportunities to continue engagements, collaborations and interventions until the occupation terminates.

The project is site-specific and relational, including three focused sites/rooms in JAG:

- **Blaxis Screen**
    - An audio-visual space that will include sonic and visual interventions, film screenings, and performances.
- **Speculation Room**
    - This room offers a space for writing, reading, talking, speculating, mapping and more.
- **Ghost Room**
    - In this room, the collection of JAG will be curated.
    - It will host performances and interventions relating to the haunting of JAG.

Occupation, conceived by us, Gilles Furtwängler, Thulile Gamedze and Zen Marie, began as a conversation with the staff of JAG. The first meeting took place in Khwezi Gule's office in 2019. Here, we began to gauge the possibilities of JAG as a site for continuing a collaborative project we had begun with Circuit Art Center in Lausanne, Switzerland. The project's first iterations, *Blank. with a bet on a long-distance relationship, with time, slow thinking and deep conversations*, *2*, and *The Ghost exhibition* took place between 2020 and 2021, against the backdrop of the pandemic and the slowing of time. As we continued to meet with Khwezi during this period, we started to become more and more interested in the space of JAG itself.

In many ways, this historic state institution has suffered in post-democratic time, as the art world, increasingly under the custodianship of private museums and foundations, looks on. Working with the JAG means grappling with a huge colonial collection, confronting ghosts, and asking questions about shameful histories of cultural imperialism.

But just as importantly, it means taking care of a tangible public good which is under duress, learning from the staff who remain committed to the space, and being curious about what possibilities *do* exist here, using the many resources that it has to offer.

Occupation, during its run, seeks to do some of this work, curating spaces for learning, workshopping, and the contemplation of difficult histories. The Ghost Room, the main site of curatorial intervention, juxtaposes empty landscapes and memento mori from the colonial collection, with works from contemporary artists that, in various ways, describe the ghosts we live with.

The occupation takes place against the desires of colonial emptiness, responding to this constructed void by getting people involved, and opening space for discussion and study. *Occupation*, a political strategy to accelerate a movement's demands of an institution, is simultaneously a process of accelerated social and intellectual life.

With the Blaxis Screen, we offer a surface and a backdrop for Black praxis, and for grappling with representations of land, while the Speculation Room is an active space for a living curriculum developed by participants. Both spaces, with the involvement of artists, writers, educators, musicians, and more, will be programmed throughout the intervention's duration.

Occupation is engaged in an open methodology rather than a foreclosed premise, producing space for as-yet-unknown discourse around the difficulties and possibilities of the post-democratic museum in Johannesburg.

This project is made possible through the support of the Circuit Art Center, the Leenaards Foundation, Arts Alive, the Wits School of Arts, and the support and generosity of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and its staff.

Artists: Abri de Swardt, Andrei Van Wyk, Bettina Malcomess, BLK JKS, Donna Kukama, Gabi Motuba, Gilles Furtwängler, Henri Michel Yéré, Invade, Memory Biwa, Mpumelelo Mcata, Naadira Patel, Nayansaku Mufwankolo, Nkgopoleng Moloi, Overnight Services, Pebofatso Mokoena, Robert Machiri, Shirin Yousefi, Stéphanie Rosianu, The Wretched, Thulile Gamedze, Tracey Rose, Tshepang Ramoba, Tumi Mogorosi, Vusumzi Nkomo and Zen Marie.



Zen Marie, *Paradise Fallen: Blaxis*, 2022. Installation view, Occupation: JAG. Johannesburg, South Africa.

appendix viii

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
School of Arts

SENATE PLAGIARISM POLICY

Declaration by Students

I _____Zen Marie_____ (Student number: ____518228__)
am a student registered for _____Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art_____ in the year ___2023___.

I hereby declare the following:

- **I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.**
- **I confirm that ALL the work submitted for assessment for the above course is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.**
- **I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.**
- **I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this in not my own unaided work or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.**

Signature:  **Date: 12/04/23**

