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2020
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‘You wouldn’t know God if he spat in your eye’: impressions from Dumile Feni’s scroll

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Practical component:

http://ellipses.org.za/IssueThree/IfGodSpat/

Research Report as a fulfilment of the Degree
Masters in Contemporary Curatorial Practices by
Coursework and Research Report
at the
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg

Supervisors:

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Tegan Bristow

2019

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously, in its entirety, or in part, submitted it as any university for a degree.



Date: 07 October 2020

Acknowledgements:

I would like to extend my greatest thanks to my two wonderful supervisors, Nontobeko Ntombela and Tegan Bristow, for their guidance, patience, and thoughtful engagement over the course of the year. They are, in many ways, the backbone of this report and the practical component that accompanies it. Here I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to Megan Ross, for her acute and sensitive copy-edits; to each of the writers—Atiyyah Khan, Stacy Hardy, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, Phumlani Pikoli, and Wairimū Muriithi—who breathed life into this project; as well as Andrea Hayes and Mareli Stolp of *Ellipses* journal, for supporting its online production.

I was first introduced to the scroll by Lois Anguria in February 2019, as part of the course, 'Writing Art Histories'. At the time, I had not found a focus for my research, and it was not until much later, following a Skype conversation with Kabelo Malatsie, that I realised the full impact of the scroll on my thinking. Thanks be to Kabelo for prodding me in the right direction, and to Lois, for guiding me through the rough passage of early research and for being so accommodating with her time. Here I would also like to thank the staff at WAM, in particular Julia Charlton, for allowing me access to the work, and Leigh Leyde, for taking the time to speak to me about *Activate/Captivate* (2016); my 'Exhibition Histories' lecturer, Nancy Dantas, for introducing me to the value of archival research; and Ziphezinhle Gwala (then at Johannesburg Art Gallery), for taking the time to help me compile research from JAG's archives on the life and work of Dumile Feni.

In addition to those mentioned, there were many who have in some way or another (be it formally or informally, extensively or briefly, encouragingly or critically) shaped my thinking. They include Conor Macklin, Khwezi Gule, Daniel Gray, Ashraf Jamal, Tammy Langtry, Jarrett Erasmus, Colin Groenewald, Chad Cordeiro, Phumzile Twala, Simangaliso Sibiya, Phokeng Setai, Renauld Proch, Kate Fowle, Athi Mongezeleli Joja, Rory Bester, Nkgopoleng Moloi, Gemma Hart, Tatiana Rais, and Nicola Cloete. I am also indirectly indebted to the writing of Chabani Manganyi, without whose research I would be at a loss, and to the wisdom of Carli Coetzee, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Prof. Njabulo S. Ndebele, Raqs Media Collective, and Our Literal Speed.

A massive thank you to my extended family, Karen and Malcolm Hickman, Murray and Colin Christian, Mari and Matthew Arnott, Gary, Greg, and Gina Nevin, Liam Brickhill, Anel Wessels, Lauren Edwards, Phumzile Manana, Martin Lund, Chris McMichael, Byron Eksteen, Nomusa Mtshali, Scott Eric Williams, Marie-Louise Rouget, and Jess Breakey for all of the love and support, and finally, to Ariane Nevin, who has been everything to me during this process.

Abstract:

This research report focuses on the curation of Dumile Feni's scroll, in particular the numerous challenges that the scroll poses to contemporary forms of curation, and what these tell us about the field. It concentrates on two exhibitions: the *Dumile Feni Retrospective* at Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG: 2005); and *Activate/Captivate* at Wits Art Museum (WAM: 2016). Both can be understood within the broader call for redress within South Africa's public museums, and the drive towards transformation and accessibility.

Although research to this effect exists, it usually focuses on the need for greater inclusivity and representation, rather than *how* institutions include and re-present artists. Drawing on theory, archival research, and interviews related to the exhibition of Feni's scroll, this report aims to complicate our understanding of transformation and accessibility. It highlights how South African institutions continue to privilege eurocentric modes of production, management, and display, albeit couched in what Julie McGee terms "the language of change" (2006: 184). Furthermore, it argues that within the context of South Africa's public museums, increased accessibility often means absorbing difference, containing conflict, and stripping an artwork of its idiosyncrasies in order to accommodate institutional inertias.

Using translation studies as a basis for expanding the parameters of curation, this report questions the mediatory role of curators, arguing "against translation in contexts where being understood is not to the advantage of the speaker" (Coetzee 2013: xi). Rather than trying to make artworks more accessible, this report considers how we might begin to treat loss productively; what we can learn from absence; but also what we can *unlearn* through it.

Keywords:

Dumile Feni / Curatorial studies / Translation studies / Intertextuality / Mistrust / Embodied methodologies / Aesthetic ecologies / Collections management / Collections engagement / Archives / Transformation ideology / Containment / Loss / Accessibility / Accented thinking / Unlearning / Fiction vs fact

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Introduction

Translation and curation have a lot in common. They both share a colonial history, are seen as agents of power, and are often celebrated for their mediatory role. Although many arguments have been made for the benefits of translation—amongst those its ability to bridge cultural barriers and expand the parameters of the 'target' language (Grossman 2010, Bassnett 2014: 2)—South African academic Carli Coetzee argues "against translation in contexts where being understood is not to the advantage of the speaker" (2013: xi), highlighting how verbal and literary translation is often a one-sided affair that allows for the dominant language to remain the norm, privileging and perpetuating its hegemonic status so that monolingual speakers do not need to learn a different language (2013: 3).

The application of Coetzee's perspective to the 'visual' arts—a field in which sight is privileged over other forms of sensory engagement—is helpful. In contexts where 'do not touch' labels remain the norm, artistic and cultural expressions that adopt a more wholistic sensory experience—which may include touch, taste, smell, or sound—are often reduced to a single element. In this report, such acts are understood as forms of containment which threaten to eclipse or subsume our understanding of art.

An important consideration is the question of representation. Over the last thirty years, there has been much research aimed towards curbing the lack of representation within South Africa's public museums. This research usually focuses on the need for greater inclusivity and representation, rather than *how* institutions include and 're-present' artists. Here, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak draws an important distinction between 'representation—defined as "'speaking for', as in politics"—and the idea of representation as it is often applied "in art or philosophy," namely to "re-present" (1999: 28). She highlights the dangers of conflating the two, pointing out that, in writing about the subaltern subject, the "theorist does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group" (1999: 28).

The importance of such a distinction is that curators and institutions often use the work of others to stake their own claims (Vidokle 2010; Eleey 2013). Consequently, people incorrectly assume the position of the curator as a conduit for understanding the concerns of the artist—a "vehicle for the artist's voice in the first person singular, unmediated by curatorial meta-text"' (Bowman cited in Ribas 2015: 5). Like translation, audiences may feel a sense of betrayal when they learn that their experience differs from the intent of the original author/artist. Similarly, Anton Vidokle writes of a deep-seated suspicion that artists often feel towards curators, likening the relationship of the two to that of a workforce and its management (2010).

Tejaswini Niranjana argues that the very idea of betrayal within translation "points to a notion of 'text' and 'interpretation' that comes out of the classical concept of the mimetic relationship between 'reality' and 'representation'" (1992: 50). This relationship is also maintained within the field of art. As described by Susan Sontag:

> All Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation. It is through this theory that art as such—above and beyond given works of art—becomes problematic, in need of defence. And it is the defence of art which gives birth to the odd vision by which something we have learned to call 'form' is separated off from something we have learned to call 'content', and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory (1964: 2).

In this report, I question the extent to which South Africa's public museums continue to perpetuate such forms of compartmentalisation, highlighting how Western perceptions of time, space, and orientation are often imposed on artworks under the guise of transformation and accessibility. I do so by focusing on the curation of Dumile Feni's scroll,[1] in particular its exhibition during the *Dumile Feni Retrospective* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG: 2005) and *Activate/Captivate* at Wits Art Museum (WAM: 2016).

Without having experienced the exhibitions in question, I have relied on theory, archival research, and interviews with those involved in the scroll's curation. In the first chapter, I provide a subjective description of the work's material, form, and subject matter, based on my own observations and the different interpretations that it has generated over the years. This chapter pays attention to elements of the work—in particular those that relate to time and space—that appear to have been stripped from it during its exhibition.

The second chapter introduces the concept of containment in relation to the scroll's initial exhibition at JAG. It foregrounds the ideological undercurrents of the scroll's exhibition, based on a close reading of the exhibition's catalogue. It also provides contextual information about the curatorial approach and the motivations that underpin it.

[1] WAM's official records title the work *You wouldn't know God if he spat in your eye*. I had initially assumed this title to have been given by the artist, however, in an interview conducted with the Grosvenor Gallery's Conor Macklin in September 2019, I learnt that the title of the work was given by Conor Macklin, and that it was drawn from one of the inscriptions found within the scroll. As such I have, throughout the course of the paper, chosen to refer to it as 'the scroll'. For reasons that will be explained in the second chapter, I have also refrained from making reference to the date that has been ascribed to the work (1975).

In the third chapter, I demonstrate how such ideologies—in particular the Western construction of time and space as linear—are built into the exhibition, from the ways in which research was conducted through to its chronological structure and the scroll's display in a vitrine.

In the fourth chapter, I examine what was gained and what was lost in the digitisation of the scroll during *Activate/Captivate* at WAM. This chapter draws on translation studies theory to arrive at some of the complexities inherent in the production of the digital scroll, questioning whether it helped to overcome issues of containment or if such issues persist, albeit opaquely. By examining the fine line between care and control, this chapter unpacks notions of embodiment, curatorial responsibility, and authorship. Seen as pivotal to the arguments of this report, this chapter is substantially longer than the rest.

In the fifth chapter, I deal with questions of address, intertextuality, and mistrust in Feni's scroll by examining the various inscriptions found therein in relation to Carli Coetzee's reading of mistrust within Thlalo Raditlhalo's writing. This chapter highlights an "awareness of the different contexts within and to which we speak" (2013: 49), demonstrating how mistrust is used within the scroll to resist containment.

In the sixth chapter, I discuss the approach that was adopted for the practical component of my research, exploring the use of fiction, audio, and the role of online curation as a way to think about the scroll in its absence, highlighting how such a space can be treated productively without attempting to gloss over conflict and difference in the name of increased 'accessibility'.

Chapter One: The Scroll

Feni's scroll was donated to WAM in June 2012 (Charlton 2020), a month after the museum opened at its current premises in Braamfontein, Johannesburg (De Becker & Nettleton 2015: 1). As part of WAM's collection, the scroll spends most of its time rolled up and neatly wrapped in protective acid-free paper. It is held in a padded wooden crate which is stored in a climate-controlled, access-only facility. On the occasions when it is taken out—for exhibition purposes or so that researchers may view it—the crate is carried into a secure room. The screws of the crate are loosened, the lid lifted. Two gloved hands retrieve the scroll, unwrapping it from the paper and carefully lowering it onto a large white sheet of protective padding that has been laid across a table. The museum are careful to monitor how often and for how long the scroll is brought out, aware that over exposure to light and many hands increases the risk of damage (Leyde 2019).

When I first viewed the scroll in early 2019, I was fortunate to handle it under the supervision of museum staff, however, this process is usually managed almost entirely by staff: researchers may view the work, but not touch it. The reasons for this are multi-fold. Museum staff are covered by insurance.[2] They are also trained to handle the work with sensitivity and are less likely to damage it, which is important, given how fragile it is. Although these regulations help to extend the work's shelf-life, they also blanket one's experience, so that any interaction with the scroll comes hand-in-hand with an air of Big Brotherly apprehension.

The exhibition of Feni's scroll is not exempt from such regulations. On the three occasions it has been shown, curators have sought to protect the work by placing it in a glass vitrine (Leyde 2019). This approach—as well as the more recent production of a digital translation at WAM—influences the way we experience and make sense of the scroll. In order to understand the effects of such display choices, this chapter will provide a descriptive account of the work—its material make-up, form, and subject matter—based on my own observations and the opinions of those who are familiar with his work.

It is worth stating upfront that the kind of analysis made here—one which breaks the work down into its constituent parts (in much the same way that a mechanic might dissect an engine in order to work out what is going on)—cannot adequately convey the experience of the work. This is important to note because, after Susan Sontag, "the idea that a work of art is primarily its content ... still exerts an extraordinary hegemony" (1964: 2). Although this chapter grapples with the scroll's material make-up and form, as well as its subject matter, the presentation of these elements is somewhat compartmentalised. As such, readers should be aware that the gaps between elements presented do not necessarily exist in one's experience of the scroll. Furthermore, all readings here are interpretative. They require "plucking a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and so forth) from the whole work" (Sontag 1964: 3) in order to reconcile them with their newfound context (this paper). In doing so, I run the risk of foreclosing a range of equally valid readings. Based on the assumption that most people will not have the same opportunity to handle the work, the descriptions provided are considered as necessary additions which complicate or expand on those that currently exist.[3]

[2] Although insurance was offered as a reason for why no person (other than museum staff) may handle the work, it is worth mentioning that insurance cannot return damaged goods. As described by Sara Heft, "Insurance is under no circumstances a tool for preventing the damage or loss of objects … but rather, a measure for ensuring suitable financial compensation in the case that unfortunate events do occur" (2012: 10).

[3] To date, the most substantive writing that I have found on the scroll is in Chabani Manganyi's *The beauty of the line: life and times of Dumile Feni* (2012).

1.1: Moving parts

Produced over several years (Manganyi 2012: 21), Feni's scroll is comprised of three core components: paper, a di-bond laminate backing, and two wooden dowels. According to WAM's archives, the scroll was completed in 1975. The accuracy of this date is debatable, suffice to say that it's unclear when Feni began working on it or when the paper was made. Based on this date, the paper is assumed to be at least forty-four years old. It has begun to yellow, and both the top and bottom edges show signs of deterioration, with some areas of the work that appear to have been exposed to moisture.

At first glance, the paper looks as though it is one long, single sheet. On closer inspection, it appears to be made with separate sheets that were glued together vertically and then horizontally—along the top and bottom edges—to a laminate backing, which runs the full length of the scroll.[4] This backing doubles as a protective layer and a support structure for the various sheets of paper. It also contributes to the thickness and weight of the work, which resembles a large ream (or two) of A4 paper. Owing to the scroll's fragility and the potential for further deterioration, the museum enforces a series of regulatory controls which are considered necessary to its preservation.[5]

The regulations enforced by WAM aim to curtail the work's deterioration (Leyde 2019), yet they also impact on our understanding and experience of the scroll. This is particularly apparent in relation to the second component, which consists of two wooden, cylindrical dowels that are attached to the paper (most probably with glue). These dowels are found at the left and right ends of the scroll when extended to its full length. They are approximately twenty-eight centimetres in length by two centimetres in diameter. The dowels include four identical handles (two per dowel), which have been shaped for easy handling. These handles protrude from the top and bottom edges of the scroll. They resemble small knobs, like those found on drawers. Although they do not appear to be varnished, they have been crafted to convey a certain measured antiquity.

The dowels allow you to handle the object and create a cylindrical support for the scrolling process, but they also contribute to the work's narrative structure. If, for example, the scroll was intended to be read from left to right (or right to left), a single dowel would suffice. In such a context, the scroll would need to be read in a single direction. This would require a large amount of space, because you would

[4] In an interview with Grosvenor Gallery's (London) Conor Macklin, he recalls seeing Feni working on it in parts, thus supporting this theory (Macklin 2019).

[5] At the same time, its gradual deterioration imbues the work with a loaded sense of time passed and, perhaps, distance travelled. The work's fragility may have also been a motive for its digitisation, thus extending the shelf-life of the work, albeit in digital form.

need to continue rolling the work out to view the rest of it. Two dowels means that the scroll can be rolled up from both ends and opened from the centre, or where the previous handler left it. If you want to read it from right to left, the scroll can be placed to the right-hand side of the table. The dowel on the left can then be rolled out. When finished viewing that section, the dowel on the right can be rolled up to meet the dowel on the left, or vice versa, in either direction. Once you're finished viewing the scroll, it can be rolled up and placed back into its protective crate. Should another person view it, they inevitably pick up from where the previous handler left off, with the option of reading outwards (left or right).

The capacity of the two dowels to enable a reading in both directions is important, not only to our understanding of the scroll, but Feni's work more generally.[6] As described by art historian Mario Pissara, "a lot of [Feni's] works have two contrasting elements in them. They may have two humans, or two bulls, or two totally different forms … There are also quite a number of drawings in which there are two figures pulling in different directions" (2012: 57). Although Pissara is speaking more specifically about things depicted—things 'in' the work—the same applies to one's physical experience of it. In other words, that which is depicted and our experience of handling the work are not mutually exclusive. Instead, the dual experience reinforces the tensions described by Pissara.

This 'tug-of-war', evident within the larger composition of the scroll as object, is visible in multiple individual figurations—a single figure or animal—where the subject is drawn symmetrically. In each instant, the subject is energised by a subtle tension which pulls the eye in opposite directions or draws it back in towards a centre. This tension is heightened by the scroll's form and the feeling that you need to choose between one direction or the other, resulting in a constant back and forth. You have to be careful when rolling the scroll out, aware that a sharp tug on one end might meet resistance from the weight of the other and damage the work. In physical form, this strain is very tangible, and (as argued in the following chapters) is complicated by the scroll's exhibition in a vitrine, as well as the digital translation produced for *Activate/Captivate* (2016). Central to this feature is the element of *tension*—a resistance created by the scroll's physical make-up and a feeling of being arrested by two opposing forces (in contrast to the sense of freedom that one might assume from the term 'dynamic').[7]

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[6] Speaking about Feni's bronze sculpture, *History* (2003), which today sits outside South Africa's Constitutional Court in Johannesburg, Dr. Cyril Khanyile said: "You could see that while it is a static image it is also dynamic in the story that it tells, because you could look at it this way, or you could look at it this way [sic]" (*Zwelidumile* 2009). Speaking about this sculpture, Feni described "A very powerful man pulling this cart. A man and a woman sitting at the back of a cart … The man and the woman sitting on the cart are sitting on a young woman. So it goes back and forth …" (Manganyi 2012: 40).

[7] There are many accounts to suggest that Feni produced much of his work while listening in on jazz rehearsals (Manganyi 2012). As such, the understanding of dynamism might be linked to the concept of jazz improvisation and 'free' play. As described by Hal Crook, "The word 'free' as it applies to jazz improvisation is decidedly misleading regarding the musical responsibilities incumbent upon the player. Playing free jazz does not mean that the player is free to play whatever and whenever he wants without considering the musical consequences … Nor does it imply that the music is created arbitrarily and that the playing is carefree and easy … playing free jazz

1.2: Deja-vu

Repetition is central to much of Feni's work.[8] In the scroll, numerous motifs are repeated, most notably the figures of a mother and child, as well as several animal forms and the image of a person playing a wind instrument. At times, these repetitions give the work an animated quality. In one instant, we see a series depicting a mother and child. By the fourth or fifth repetition, the child and the hands of the mother have shifted position, so that the child (now upside down) can be supplanted with the image of a wind instrument. Later, the instrument is replaced by the image of a snake. Sometimes it is the person playing the instrument that becomes the animal. Thus, the distinction between animal and human is blurred, with some depictions of people bearing anamorphic qualities and vice versa.

One might be tempted to think about such forms of repetition as being fluid—a smooth transformation form point A to point B—yet, unlike traditional animation, these transformations occur gradually.[9] They are punctuated by different images over a series of different 'pages' that are not always visible at the same time. In this way, they create a sense of continual return—the feeling of being caught in a loop, resembling something of a stuck record. Rather than the construction of a linear narrative, these repetitions invoke for me a sense of memory. Not the simple recall of past experiences—those "stored in a cabinet, the contents of which are generally accurate and accessible at will" (Trouillot 1995: 14)—but rather the understanding of memory as being in a state of flux, revisited on separate occasions yet with slight variations each time.[10] Looking at the various repetitions within Feni's scroll over an extended period produces a feeling quite similar to that of deja-vu. At the same time, there is no means for comparison because, more often than not, the initial drawing has disappeared into the rolls of the scroll. To go back and find it would not only be a laborious and time-consuming process, but would

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means that the player is "free" to play spontaneously improvised musical ideas that create balance, continuity, imitation, contrast, order and disorder in the music; but without a pre-determined tempo, meter, rhythmic feel, harmonic setting or song form to guide and limit the possibilities" (2006: 15).

[8] Not only did Feni repeat things within the same work, he also carried motifs and figurations from one work to the next across forms. We can see this in the repetition of one drawing found in the scroll—a Janus-like animal figure with its two heads playing similarly anthropomorphic wind instruments—which were later repeated in a poetry anthology entitled *Somehow We Survive: An Anthology of South African Writing* (Plumpp 1982). The figure is drawn slightly differently in the latter, yet it is almost identical.

[9] It is interesting to note here what South African artist William Kentridge (who often refers to Feni as a major influence), has to say about the role of animation in his own work:

"One of the things about traditional animation is the lack of consequence of violence … Things get transformed—a safe falls on your head and in the first frame you're squashed flat but then you leap up and you're walking again, and a steamroller goes over you and you get your tongue stuck in a door and twenty knives go into it. It's the opposite of that dream sensation—when you are trying to defend yourself against an attack but, no matter what you do to the other person, it makes no difference, you have no power … I think the slower transformations, which are fewer and further between in films, have to do both with the lack of that vivid animation that someone like Tex Avery has and with a sense of wanting things to bear the consequences of their transformation" (2017: 23-24).

[10] Michel-Rolph Trouillot complicates our understanding of memory when he writes that "it is as least possible that events otherwise significant to the life trajectory were not known to the individual at the time of occurrence and cannot be told as remembered experiences. The individual can only remember the revelation, not the event itself" (1995: 15). Here, Trouillot uses the example of a child that learns of their adoption, asking, "is it only the revelation that belongs to my life history? Can we confidently exclude from one's history all events not experienced or not yet revealed, including, for instance, an adoption at the time of birth? … The revelation itself may affect the narrator's future memory of events that happened *before*. If memories as individual history are reconstructed, even in this minimal sense, how can the past they retrieve be fixed?" (1995: 15)

mean no longer being able to view the current depiction, having now disappeared into the periphery of your vision (if the scroll could be rolled out far enough) or into the rolls of the scroll itself.

There is an interesting parallel here with the poetry of Feni's contemporary, Mongane Wally Serote, who is mentioned on more than one occasion in the scroll.[11] Like Feni, Serote often uses repetition in his poetry, returning to particular words or phrases. In the lengthy poem, *Freedom lament and song* (1997), Serote threads together various sections through repetition. One example is the use of the word 'here' which, on a micro-level, signals a point of return as well as a fork in direction:

> here
> where history keeps repeating itself
> the Tembu
> Baca and Pondo
> the men and women and lately the youth
> keep the fight
> here
> where the mountain frolics with the horizon
> and the horizon screams and buzzes
> with the memory and knowledge of time
> of history
> when battle after battle was fought here
> here
> where the love for life is the love for freedom
> from the huts
> the green huts
> the pink huts
> the white and green huts
> the thatched and cement and brick and huts of mud
> the men and women
> in their blood and courage ah
> the Eastern Cape, the land of Makana is born
> it rose and rises
> like a mushroom quick in growth

[11] Serote and Feni were close, close enough for Serote to have spoken at Feni's memorial service on 02 November 1991 at the Johannesburg Art Foundation in Saxonwold (Star 1991).

it rose and rises
like a tree slow in growth
it rose as if it would never ever rise
it is here
as if it has always been
the Eastern Cape

This repetition occurs in individual words, as well as in whole lines that string words together. These links are then repeated throughout the poem, sometimes in consecutive lines or punctuated by others. We see this in the above excerpt: "it rose and rises / like a mushroom quick in growth / it rose and rises / like a tree slow in growth / it rose as if it would never ever rise" (1997: 6). Interestingly, the poem also appears to be rooted in memory and, much like the gradual transformations that occur in Feni's scroll, Serote builds the metaphor, but each time with a slight twist. In this case, "it rose and rises" is a constant thread. The rhythm, however, is undulating, and like much of the tension in Feni's work, is built on the development of opposing forces: "It rose" is past tense, "it rises" present; the mushroom is "quick in growth", while the tree is "slow in growth." Finally, "it rose as if it would never ever rise" (1997: 6).[12]

The excerpt provided is one small sample of an approach that Serote adopts throughout the poem. It can be found in the minutiae (as described above), as well as in the larger composition, which begins and ends in much the same way. The first three lines of the opening stanza—"Here we go again / history is a life and it is a death / it reincarnates"—are much the same as the closing three: "here we go again / history is a life and it is a death / freedom grows in life and sings of human beings." In this way, repetition is not only built into the tempo of the work but brackets the poem, in much the same way as the dowels of Feni's scroll.

Comparing the scroll and Serote's poem is useful because it provides an additional avenue through which to consider the ways in which the scroll's constituent 'parts' might serve the whole.[13] Nevertheless, such a reading requires a zooming in and out, and is only possible if you've read all sixty-nine pages of the poem and then returned to analyse it.[14] Such an analysis threatens to simplify or dilute the

[12] Serote's writing also features a series of repeated motifs, such as the 'eye', which denotes a form of shared or mutual (yet unspoken) understanding: "… she's married again now / and she and I say nothing about Thule / except in the silence of the eyes / and the detail of the face / as we hope that the new man can't hear us / talk …" (Serote 1997: 10-12). This is interesting in relation to the inscription, "You wouldn't know God if he spat in your eye."

[13] The comparison is also useful in that it demonstrates that Feni was not working in a vacuum. He inspired, and was inspired, by many of his contemporaries. Thus the work of his contemporaries, whether in art, jazz or poetry, is illuminating.

[14] Although diverging, there is another interesting parallel here to jazz improvisation, which Crook terms the 'micro-view' and the 'macro-view'. He is specifically speaking about those people who are playing music, but defines these terms as follows:

impact of the poem. It could never do the work justice; it can only point to different fragments that enrich it. Much the same can be said of my analysis of the various repetitions and transformations that occur in Feni's scroll, which also occur on different levels. At times, they are disrupted, with large areas of the paper left blank, while others are dense with imagery. An extended period of time is required to appreciate how such transformations occur, in much the same way that a slow-motion video of a bird is able to capture/explode the mechanics of an otherwise effortless take-off.

1.3: Inside-out

There are numerous instances throughout the scroll in which the application of marks—light, circular scribbles—constitute movement. In contrast, sharp angular marks, often applied *en masse*—typically delineating the form of a figure, animal, or instrument—create a sense of weight or permanence. These marks contour the subject matter of the work, but they also create a mood, rhythm, and depth, which the eye follows from one part of the scroll to the next. At times, the eye is allowed to drift into open space. At others, it is led into a thick cluster of marks. The use of line is quite similar to the way Serote uses words like 'here', stitching the figures together as part of the same, interwoven body. In addition, the page of Feni's scroll is visible at any given moment, both inside and outside of the figures. As a result, Feni is able to layer his subjects so that all appear interconnected, if not through line then through their immediate relation to the paper. As described by Pissara:

> It seems … as if there is a kind of synthesis between, on the one hand, an internal struggle, a very personal kind of catharsis, and, on the other, representation of things that are happening out there in the world ... I do not think that one can delineate clearly between these two modalities because it appears as if they fuse; there is some kind of synthesis (2012: 57).

For me, this 'fusion' does not flatten the forms in his work; rather, it creates a constant give-and-take between what is inside and what is out. Despite certain forms being repeated, and despite their being contained by the scroll and their relation to the paper, they do not form one homogenous body. Much like particles fired into a compression chamber, it is the *struggle* between these figures—the moments of

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"Micro-viewing the performance while improvising means to observe the content and execution of the music as it happens in each moment for the purpose of controlling (or correcting) individual aspects of the performance—such as the melody notes, the interaction, the pacing etc. Micro-viewing enables players to trouble-shoot the music on a moment to moment basis … Macro-viewing the performance while improvising means to observe or reflect upon the content and execution of the music as it has happened over a longer period of time … for the purpose of deciding what, how, and when to play next. Macro-viewing the performances keeps players mindful of past and continuing events in the content and execution of the music, the knowledge of which enables them to more effectively manage the music in the present … realising that the music has been consistently loud and dense (or, consistently soft and sparse) for a certain period of time enables players to decide whether to maintain or change the volume and rhythmic activity of the music" (2006: 30).

collision, transformation, and separation—and the sense of being pulled in different directions, that energise the work.

Unlike a small, framed painting—which appears contained within one's field of vision—Feni's scroll is extensive. It cannot be absorbed (or even viewed) at a glance. Furthermore, its dowels bracket your experience, making you aware that what you're seeing is only ever partial. The awareness of "things happening out there in the world" is thus not only tangible *in the work* but through one's *experience of it,* which is partly why the context of exhibition and the choices made around how the object is displayed and experienced are so important.

Although not exhaustive, the examples outlined above—from the scroll's ability to be read in both directions; the various repetitions, transformations, and tensions that occur in subject; their material equivalents; as well as the experience of the work as an embodied subject—have all had a profound impact on my understanding of Feni's scroll: what it *is*, but also what it *does*. These facets will be returned to and developed upon throughout the course of this report, paying particular attention to how the different choices made in each instance of exhibition have served to either accentuate or circumnavigate some of the work's more challenging idiosyncrasies.

CHAPTER 2: The Question of Containment

2.1: The institutional umbrella

This chapter introduces the concept of containment in its broadest terms, speaking in direct reference to the exhibition of Feni's scroll during the *Dumile Feni Retrospective,* which opened at JAG on 31 January 2005 before travelling to Oliewenhuis Art Museum and the South African National Gallery (SANG) (Dube 2006).[15] Underlying the core argument of this chapter is the understanding that exhibitions—rather than being simple extensions of an artist's practice into public view (Filipovic 2013: 75)—are embedded in a network of historical, political, social, and economic forces which are packaged into one's experience, to the extent that it is often hard to deduce what is of the artist and what is not (Vidokle 2010).[16]

[15] Exhibition dates: Johannesburg Art Gallery (31 January - 10 April 2005); Oliewenhuis Art Museum (Bloemfontein: 17 May - 17 June 2005); South African National Gallery (Cape Town: 13 August - 04 November 2005) (Dube 2006).

[16] The blurred distinction can be attributed to the hand of the curator in framing one's experience (Vidokle 2010). At the same time, Jessica Morgan argues that "this critique in fact pertains to a small part of the curatorial world, as the vast majority of curators remain unseen and relatively unknown in the apparently-neutral and all-encompassing facade of the institution" (2013: 27).

To this end, Elena Filipovic writes of the white cube as "an indelibly inscribed container" which "circumscribes an attitude toward art, a mode of presentation, and an aura that confers a halo of inevitability, of fate, on whatever is displayed inside" (2014: 45).[17] The regulations that inhibit the handling of Feni's scroll—be it at JAG or at WAM—are an obvious example. We are told that to preserve the work, audiences may not touch it (Leyde 2019). Consequently, curators have sought ways to exhibit the work, whilst prioritising its safety. Within the context of the *Dumile Feni Retrospective*—which was curated by Prince Mbusi Dube and included a sum total of 267 artworks,[18] structured into three chronological and geographically-specific periods[19]—the vitrine provided one such solution.

The need to preserve the scroll is understandable, yet it is also important to consider the effects of such display choices and how they relate to the structure of the exhibition as a whole. For example, how the scroll's exhibition in a vitrine (in which the work is reduced to a single element—sight) may have impacted upon an audience's understanding of those attributes that allow for movement, the passage of time, or one's embodied encounter with the work. It is also necessary to consider how the obfuscation of these features may be connected to the overarching framework of the show—a 'retrospective'—in which the past is intentionally held at arms length, and through which, the passage of time is kept at bay. The examples provided here are discussed in greater length in the following chapter. They have been introduced now to highlight how curatorial decisions around display—which may appear isolated to issues of preservation—often reflect different branches of the same underlying principle. As described by Filipovic, a central characteristic of "the white cube is that it operates under the pretence that its seeming invisibility allows the artwork best to speak; it seems blank, innocent, unspecific, insignificant"; yet it is also a space in which "ideology and form meet, and all without our noticing it" (2014: 45). For the purposes of this report, such blanketing forces are understood as a form of packaging or containment, namely, the prescription of a "certain set of intertexts and contexts" (Coetzee 2012: 49) which threaten to eclipse or subsume those of the artist and influence our understanding of their life and work.

By analysing curatorial acts or institutional utterances related to the exhibition of Feni's scroll, this chapter attempts to foreground the broader context in which such display choices were made. It high-

[17] Of course, not every exhibition takes place within the context of the 'white cube'. This qualification is specific to my research. Here, the term is used to refer not only to the site of exhibition—to any space used for the display of art which manufactures neutrality—but also to its ideological framework (Filipovic 2014: 45).

[18] This figure is based on the following breakdown of works on exhibition by Gavin Younge: "119 [artworks] from local, private, and institutional collections, [forty] from the Dumile Feni Family Trust, six works from London, and a further 102 from unspecified private collectors" (2008).

[19] Discussed as greater length in the following chapter, these included 'Before exile: 1964-1968'; 'London period: 1968-1976'; and 'USA period: 1977-1991' (Dube 2006). Feni's scroll, which is dated 1975, fell under the 'London period'.

lights how these decisions might be understood to parallel—at least ideologically—the work's exhibition in a vitrine. Within the context of the *Dumile Feni Retrospective*, this is perhaps most evident in the exhibition's 'pretext'—its *raison d'etre*—defined by Philippe Lejeune as a "fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text" (cited in Williamson 2017: 94). If one understands the 'printed text' here to be Feni's work, then the pretext might refer to all aspects intrinsic to the production of the exhibition—from display choices through to curatorial statements, object labels, the catalogue, opening speeches, guided tours, and press releases[20]—as well as other exhibitions produced by JAG that may have informed its direction.

An important reference here is Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: History and the Power of Production* (1995), which "deals with the many ways in which the production of historical narrative involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means of such production" (1995: xxiii). This is apparent within the context of my own research. Without having experienced the exhibition, I have relied on the catalogue for information, as well an archive on Feni that was made available to me by JAG. This archive included information produced internally—such as press releases and email correspondence—as well as newspaper clippings, reviews, and academic papers which circulated (or predate) the exhibition.[21] Although the latter have been useful in providing contextual information, it is the materials produced by JAG that are considered as integral components of the exhibition's 'pretext', as they are part and parcel of its production.

2.2: Transformation ideology

The first of these components is the catalogue, in particular the foreword, which was written by JAG's then head, Clive Kellner.[22] Like many catalogue forewords, that of the *Dumile Feni Retrospective* is permeated with a 'self-congratulatory rhetoric' (McGee 2006: 178). It reflects a revisionist approach to exhibition making that was adopted by many of South Africa's public museums from the late-1980s/early-1990s onwards:

> The exhibition has taken several years to prepare due to the scarcity of written archival information on Dumile, few works by the artist having been acquired by South African Museums in the mid

[20] From email correspondence (drawn from JAG's archives), it is clear that there were at least three tours conducted during the *Dumile Feni Retrospective* by the exhibition's curator, Prince Mbusi Dube. They were scheduled to take place on 17 February, 24 March, and 07 April 2005 (Malefane 2005). It is also evident that the (then) Minister of Arts and Culture, Dr Pallo Jordan, and Johannesburg's (then) Mayor, Amos Masondo, gave a speech at the opening (Nettleton 2011: 9). Anitra Nettleton writes, however, that Masondo's speech was based on material provided by the exhibition's curators (2011: 1, 24).

[21] It also included a number of records which predate the exhibition. It is quite likely that many of these were amassed during the early stages of research for the exhibition, and are therefore quite useful in trying to understand what informed the curatorial direction of the show.

[22] Kellner was appointed head of JAG in 2004 (Kellner 2009: 10).

> 1960s, and few artworks by Dumile having been exhibited to date in South Africa. In its magnitude and diversity, this retrospective exhibition is unprecedented as a chronological survey of the artist's *oeuvre* … It is a celebration of Dumile's art and life, and a vital record of the imbalances in the history of modern South African art (2006: 15).

That it served as a 'record' of such imbalances is perhaps by virtue of the fact that such a large-scale exhibition had not yet happened,[23] but it is important to note that Kellner attributes these imbalances to 'South African museums' in general, before turning to the retrospective at JAG as a record of them. In doing so, he creates a scenario whereby the responsibility for historical or past imbalances is shared (everyone is culpable), but JAG comes out on top.[24] To this end, an entire section of the catalogue is dedicated to works of Feni's that were acquired by JAG (Dube 2006: 179-196). Kellner also concludes his foreword by writing of their "[significant] addition to the development of the gallery's collection of African modern masters" (2006: 15)—a way to showcase the important steps the institution has taken to right such imbalances.

To understand the effects of this positioning, it is necessary to provide some contextual information about the exhibition and the years that preceded it. According to Brenton Maart, it was Mongane Wally Serote who suggested the retrospective in 1991 (2005).[25] At the time, large-scale solo exhibitions for black artists within South Africa's public museums remained few and far between (Ntombela 2013: 17), with the exception of a posthumous exhibition of John Muafangejo's work in 1988; an exhibition of Helen Sebidi's work in 1989 (Danilowitz 1990: 94); and a (comparatively smaller) exhibition of Feni's pen drawings in 1991 (Standard Bank 1991).[26]

All three of these exhibitions were opened at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Makhanda (then Grahamstown), before travelling to other cities throughout the country (Danilowitz 1990: 94; Manganyi 2012: 46).[27] They can be understood as part of an intensifying call for redress within South African public institutions (Danilowitz 1990: 94), as well as the globe more generally (Wilson 2018: 99).

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[23] The closest thing to it would be the exhibition produced by Standard Bank in 1991, discussed a bit later on in this chapter.

[24] In Anna Tietze's book, *A History of the South African National Gallery: Reflections on art and national identity* (2017), she writes that the South African National Gallery's Bruce Arnott, who "supervised the Department of Prints and Drawings" during the 60s and early 70s, "… was instrumental in collecting the work of black South African artists, including three Dumile Feni drawings constituting a Resurrection triptych" (2017: 128). Although she does not specify exactly when the triptych was acquired, it would have been sometime between Arnott's joining the museum in 1962 (2017: 127) and 1972, the date which concludes the chapter in her book. From this we can ascertain that, in fact, some institutions may have been 'ahead' of JAG in their move toward transformation.

[25] In 1991 Serote was head of the recently unbanned ANC's Department of Arts and Culture (Accone 1991).

[26] The scroll did not form part of Feni's exhibition in 1991. It remained in his possession until after his passing, when it was sent to Grosvenor Gallery, London, before being acquired by a private collector (Macklin 2019).

[27] Feni's exhibition also travelled to Windhoek, Namibia. It included ninety-four pen and paper works, produced between 1964 and 1967, while living in South Africa (Standard Bank 1991). Following the iteration in Makhanda, the show travelled to the Gertrude Posel Galley (15 - 30 October) in Johannesburg (which later became Wits Art Galleries, and then WAM) (Manganyi 2012: 46).

In his opening address to Feni's 1991 exhibition in Makhanda, Serote is paraphrased as having said that "the Dumile Exhibition marked the beginning of a total cultural war against apartheid" (Accone 1991).[28] Such was the political climate in South Africa during this time. Similarly, Chabani Manganyi writes that, when the exhibition of Feni's pen drawings toured to the Gertrude Posel Gallery (today WAM) in Johannesburg (shortly after its exhibition in Makhanda), "the language of both the opening address and the promotional statements was that of reclaiming Dumile: exposing and interpreting his work for the people of South Africa" (2012: 46).[29]

Feni passed away unexpectedly in New York shortly after this opening, leaving behind a trail of art with different friends and gallerists, much of which remains unaccounted for (Blignaut 2019; Manganyi 2012: 136).[30] Consequently, the concept of reclamation was sustained in the rhetoric surrounding Feni's retrospective in 2005:

> [The] retrospective references the significant legacy that the Johannesburg Art Gallery has produced. It is landmark exhibitions such as *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930-1988)* that have brought to public attention the history and development of 'black' artists in South Africa. The exhibition is also important in its repatriation of Dumile's work—even if temporarily—to their country of origin (Kellner 2006: 15).

Aside from the insinuation that work produced by Feni in the United Kingdom or the United States was somehow *not* of the place in which it was made, or that South African institutions have some intrinsic right to it, Kellner's insistence on the positive aspects of JAG's more recent legacy obscure the institution's own exclusionary history. As described by Nessa Leibhammer, JAG "[began] its life as a colonial institution devoted to modern European art … [in particular] paintings, graphics, and sculpture by artists from the United Kingdom and Europe, working in what was then considered a 'modern' style" (2016: 53, 55). Their approach to acquisitions was foregrounded on the belief that South Africa had no artistic legacy of its own (Carman 2006: xvi-xvii), or at least—in the words of founding member

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[28] According to Chabani Manganyi, this kind of rhetoric about Feni's work was quite common during the 1980s in the United States: "The political expectation about Dumile and his work in the 1980s can be seen in some public announcements, such as one stating that he had 'contributed work over the years to the liberation movement as the people's unofficial war artist in the struggle for freedom' … Dumile knew the meaning and value of his art better than anyone else. Yet many commentators were unable to resist the temptation to use it as a banner for the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s in the United States. Similarly, some overseas commentators and publicists turned the harassment that Dumile had experienced at the hands of the apartheid government into a badge of honour, which, in their eyes, appeared to matter more than his art" (2012: 26).

[29] Discussed in more depth in chapter five, the concept of reclamation in relation to Feni is complicated by the fact that he did not see himself as 'belonging' to a particular political party or camp, and is known to have been quite critical of the direction that he saw South Africa heading (Masekela 2012).

[30] Manganyi writes that Feni passed away on 16 October 1991, which would be the day after the exhibition opened (2012: 46), however there is a newspaper clipping (sourced from the JAG archives and published in *The Star* on 01 November 1991), which outlines the details of his memorial. It states that Feni passed away on 17 October 1991 (Star 1991). Following his passing, there are many examples, provided by friends such as Mongane Wally Serote, of works disappearing "without trace" (Manganyi 2012: 136).

Lionel Phillips—none which might appeal to those "who favour the development of art and the cultivation of a spirit of enlightenment and refinement" (Carman 2006: 153).[31]

The eurocentric nature of the founding collection is also evident in a prefatory notice to the 1910 catalogue by Anglo-Irish art dealer Hugh Lane—another of JAG's initiates—who outlined their motivations by citing the need to "form a representative collection of Modern Art *for* South Africa" (Carman 2006: xvi).[32] Lane goes on to mention "several important gaps to be filled up before the collection may be considered *representative*" (Carman 2006: xvi-xvii). At the time, such 'gaps' were exclusive to artists like Courbet, Manet, Renoir, Degas, and Whistler, "to name but a few that must still be gathered" (Carman 2006: xvi-xvii).

Jillian Carman—once a curator at JAG—writes of the founding collection's eurocentrism as part of a "grand social-engineering plan [which] sought to encourage a particular type of settler to Johannesburg, to regulate their social lives and to assert the superiority of British culture" (2006: 55). This was in 1910, at a time when many of the gallery's benefactors—Randlords from Johannesburg's recently established mining industry—believed that the foundation of a gallery might "[enhance], both locally and 'back home', [their] philanthropic standing" (2006: 55); or in Lane's words, remove "forever the stigma that [Johannesburg's] citizens are concerned with naught else than the amassing of fortunes" (Carman 2006: xvi).

This might explain why JAG's attitude towards what was (or wasn't) considered important shifted in accordance with the country's social and political orientations (Leibhammer 2016: 56). It might also explain how, in less than 100 years, JAG went from boasting "as representative a collection of contemporary work as [one] is likely to find anywhere in Europe" (Carman 2006: xvii) to championing public interest in "the history and development of 'black' artists in South Africa" (Kellner 2006: 15).[33]

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[31] This is an excerpt from a letter addressed by Phillips to the mayor of Johannesburg, dated 24 January 1910 (Carman 2006: 153).

[32] Emphasis my own.

[33] These shifts were not unique to JAG. They reflected a general trend within public museums over the course of the century that occurred in response to public sentiment (Tietze 2017: 25, 158). Between the 1930s and 1980s, JAG's international holdings were populated with the work of white South African artists (Leibhammer 2016: 56), with a similar shift occurring from the mid-1980s onwards, after "growing political pressure" (Leibhammer 2016: 58). Writing in relation to the history of the South African National Gallery (SANG), Anna Tietze notes that the 1930s was "a period of rising Afrikaner nationalism. Deference to British taste and institutional support [were] beginning to be questioned" (2017: 25). Hence the increase in acquisitions of white South African artists, both at JAG and at SANG. She also writes of the 80s as a period in which "black art finally began to receive significantly more attention in public exhibitions" (2017: 158). This did not, however, mean that the gallery stopped purchasing works by European artists. As writes Leibhammer, "international works by modern and contemporary artists were also actively sought and purchased [by JAG] from the 1970s to 1990s. They include pieces by Pablo Picasso, Jules Olitski, Dan Flavin, Helen Frankenthaler, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, Francis Bacon, Salvador Dali, and Marcel Duchamp" (2016: 56). With the exception of a work by Gerard Sekoto, acquired in 1940, no other work by a black artist was purchased by JAG until 1971 (Leibhammer 2016: 56). Sekoto also appears to be the first black artist to have work acquired by the South African National Gallery, in 1964 (Tietze 2017: 127).

2.3: The language of change

In the years that preceded the *Dumile Feni Retrospective*, as well as those that followed, JAG hosted a number of exhibitions which focused on the history of black artists, all of which attempted to plug the holes created by their exclusionary past. They included *Art and Ambiguity* (1991); *Hand in Hand: A Retrospective Exhibition of Ernest Mancoba and Sonja Ferdlov Mancoba* (1994-95); *Nomfanekiso, Who Paints at Night: The Art of Gladys Mgudlandlu* (2002); and *Thami Mnyele + MEDU Art Ensemble Retrospective* (2008-09) (Kellner 2009: 10; Leibhammer 2016: 58). In much of the material produced for these, *The Neglected Tradition* is depicted as a turning point in South African art history—the moment when South Africa's public museums began to take seriously the 'contribution' of artists of colour (Leibhammer 2016: 58). The use of terms like 'contribution' and 'development' imply a one-directional process—the incorporation of such work into a separate tradition—yet such inclusivity does not necessarily reflect the desired transformation as it does affirm the institutional tradition as being in a state of 'progress', able to expand its own parameters by absorbing the work of artists who are thought to work outside of it.

A number of exhibitions produced by JAG following *The Neglected Tradition* continuously refer back to it, and were often foregrounded by a language of custodianship and discovery, as well as the repeated assertion of JAG's 'significant legacy'. This is evident in the introduction to the more recent *Thami Mnyele + MEDU Art Ensemble Retrospective* catalogue (Kellner 2008-09). It parallels many of the sentiments expressed in the foreword to Feni's catalogue, pinpointing what appear as central criteria for the string of revisionist exhibitions that took place:

> In 2004, when I was appointed head of JAG, I came across files containing various correspondences regarding the [Thami Mnyele] project, only to realise that the exhibition had never taken place. Several obstacles, including insufficient funding and leads that didn't bear fruit, meant that a significant moment in South Africa's cultural heritage had been abandoned. More recently, Steven Sack, the director of Arts, Culture and Heritage of the City of Johannesburg, mooted the idea of a Thami Mnyele exhibition.[34] It made complete sense for a major art museum to present the work of a significant albeit little-known artist, particularly given South Africa's transition to a democratic nation and its commitment to addressing historically disadvantaged artists. JAG has a particularly strong tradition of organising major exhibitions addressing the lack of inclusivity of the apartheid government, including *The Neglected Tradition*; *Art and Ambiguity;* the *Ernest Mancoba Retrospective*; the *Gladys Mgudlandlu Exhibition*, and, more recently, the *Dumile Feni Retrospective*, to name a few. My initial research into Thami Mnyele led me to uncover an extraordinary group of artists, musicians, intellectuals and

[34] Sack curated *The Neglected Tradition.*

> activists who collectively produced posters, a newsletter, music, theatre, workshops and photography while in exile in Gaborone, Botswana, in the height of apartheid (2009: 10).

Again, this 'lack of inclusivity' is wholly attributed to the apartheid government, while JAG is painted as having a 'particularly strong tradition' otherwise, beginning with *The Neglected Tradition*. Explaining why *The Neglected Tradition* received so much attention, Nontobeko Ntombela writes that it "was one of the first large-scale museum exhibitions to challenge the way museums included and represented works of black artists" (2013: 17). While this may be true, the engine behind this shift began much earlier, outside the walls of the academy, and often through the efforts of those that Kellner claims to have discovered.[35] One example is the 'Culture and Resistance Symposium and Festival of the Arts', which was organised by MEDU Art Ensemble in Gaborone in 1982. In a document titled 'Background information to the Exhibition, Symposium, and Festival of South African Arts', the organisers write:

> The theme of the exhibition is 'Art towards Social Development', and it reflects the constant battle among cultural workers to find a place for themselves in society which is not merely that of light entertainers but one of making an important contribution to the development of society (Kellner & Gonzáles 2009: 187).

MEDU members Sergio-Albio Gonzáles and Mongane Wally Serote both write of the event as an important precursor to the establishment of the ANC's Department of Arts and Culture, with a reach that extended far beyond the academy and energised a lot of grassroots mobilisation during the '80s (González 2009: 86; Serote 2009: 193).[36] It is important to note that a large part of the struggle for artists involved in MEDU (and beyond) was representation on their own terms—not to be viewed as "light entertainers" and to be able to produce art that "was not in the hands of a small elite" (González 2009: 86).[37] Thus, the idea that MEDU artists were somehow 'uncovered' during Kellner's research is misleading. Employing the language of discovery that was typical of colonialism, Kellner's positioning of JAG as central to the changes that occurred can be viewed as "an exercise in Eurocentric power that already frames future narratives of the event so described" (Trouillot 1995: 114), with all of history appearing to start from the moment of 'discovery' (in this case, *The Neglected Tradition*). As described by

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[35] It was also viewed as a progressive exhibition because of the context in which it took place. As pointed out by Leibhammer, JAG is a public museum, which, at the time, was monitored and financially supported by the nationalist party (2016: 59). It also took place shortly after "the 1987 landslide win by the National Party in the last white-only general election—an event that marked an escalation of the armed struggle against racial oppression in South Africa" (Leibhammer 2016: 59).

[36] Other events that predate *The Neglected Tradition* include 'Towards a People's Culture' (Cape Town: 1986), which was "banned before it begun"; 'Re-writing South African Art History' (1987); and 'Museums in a Changing and Divided Society' (Pietermaritzburg: 1987) (Tietze 2017: 152).

[37] Although Feni himself did not attend this event, many of his affiliates—including Bill Ainslie, David Koloane, Mongane Wally Serote, Hugh Masekela, and Abdullah Ibrahim—did. As a result, it could be argued that Feni would have sympathised with the objectives of the symposium, a point that will be returned to in the fourth chapter.

Trouillot, "contact with the West is seen as the foundation of historicity of different cultures. Once discovered by the Europeans, the Other finally enters the human world" (1995: 114).[38]

It is important to note that the above quotations by MEDU, Serote, and Gonzáles were drawn from the same catalogue in which Kellner speaks of his discovery (Kellner & Gonzáles 2009). Ironically, with Kellner's foreword as the pretext, and without direct access to MEDU's original archive, the official record solidifies the image of *The Neglected Tradition* as the moment at which everything changed. It is ironic because, as pointed out by Sack, *The Neglected Tradition* aimed to challenge the lack of representation for black South African artists within the country's "'official' histories and art museums" (1988: 7), yet the hyper-visibility of this single exhibition appears to silence (or at least circumscribe) the significant role of those whose efforts predate it.

This is not to diminish the role of *The Neglected Tradition* or Kellner's contribution to the shifting landscape of South Africa's museums, but to problematise the rhetoric that JAG supposedly led this transformation, which undermines the agency of those involved. Writing at about the same time as *The Neglected Tradition*, Njabulo Ndebele insightfully observed how, within the context of South African universities, "the white settlers of this country have insisted on being the human point of reference for all the people of this country" (1987: 15). He goes on to write that in such contexts, "change means drawing the oppressed into this culture"—one which he describes as 'sterile' and 'derivative'—and "making its benefits available to all," whilst not allowing people "to bring in 'the baggage' of their African experience" (1987: 15).

This sentiment is echoed by Julie McGee (2006) in a paper written shortly after the *Dumile Feni Retrospective*. In it, she stresses the importance of "recasting cultural heritage, rewriting, re-examining, and recontextualising social memory" (2006: 183-184) within the context of South Africa's public museums. At the same time, McGee is concerned with what she terms 'transformation ideology', understood as an act of window-dressing in which "certain belief systems sustain meaning, values, and thereby dominance … [by] creating, documenting, proclaiming, writing, publishing, and speaking—in this case, the language of change" (2006: 183-184). Speaking about such rhetoric within the context of SANG, she writes:

> In its continued attempt to control social memory, the SANG remains entrenched in the western value system that first disenfranchised the majority of South Africans … Modern South Africa's cultural heritage institutions … have followed Eurocentric models in the most fundamental aspects of

[38] To see how such rhetoric manifests within the context of white writing on black artists in South Africa, see Van Robbroeck 2003: 178.

> their work: collecting, preservation, research, education, and ideology … Rearranging or changing the furniture inside the museum walls as it were, is simply not enough (2006: 178-180, 187).

McGee's emphasis on the mechanics of knowledge production echoes Trouillot's assertion that "the production of historical narrative involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means of such production" (1995: xxiii). From this, it is possible to understand how stories like that of *The Neglected Tradition* survive—through a process of archival accumulation. Conversely, the canonisation of such exhibitions runs the risk of overshadowing the narratives they attempt to represent. "As sources fill the historical landscape with their facts, they reduce the room available to other facts" (Trouillot 1995: 49), in much the same way that this sentence takes the place of an infinite number of other sentences. To adopt a phrase by Arundhati Roy, "it's as if you shine a light very brightly in one place, the darkness deepens around it" (2011: 31).

Speaking to an audience of predominantly white graduates at the University of Cape Town in 1992, Ndebele pointed out that, contrary to the sensationalist atmosphere surrounding the unbanning of South African liberation movements, the release of political prisoners, and the repeal of apartheid legislation on 2 February 1990, what followed was a neutralisation of their political agency:

> That date was not meant to bring in a new world. The promise of the future came by default. That day was designed to induce normalcy in politics so that the politics of the liberation movement could have its inspirational and visionary quality reduced to the mundane, so that it could be contained in such a way that there would be no difference between it and countless other demands that needed to be articulated through a regulatory process. What was done forcibly in the past, that is, to break the back of opposition, was now achieved through an apparent concession. The point of this is that the government, in using the rhetoric of change, was doing no more than reinforce[ing] the past. When the white community thought it was moving forward, it was actually digging in (1992: 47).

From this, it is possible to deduce that forms of containment or erasure do not require conspiratorial undertones. While this chapter has focused primarily on materials produced by JAG that are public facing—because in my mind it is these materials which directly shape public perception—further research into the museum's stakeholders, funders, and donors during this period would be beneficial to a more complex understanding of *why* such material was framed in such a self-congratulatory manner. As pointed out by this report's internal examiner, JAG holds a particularly precarious position 'that is always at odds with both its surroundings in central Johannesburg and the often unsupportive city government and underfunding that it is subject to' (2020). As such, it 'navigates a strange contradiction in

that it has to function as a museum to international (read Western) standards to maintain its importance in the public and Mayor's office's imagination and yet has to do this with minimal infrastructure and funding and almost no donor support' (2020).

In order to fully understand the rhetoric that surrounded the *Dumile Feni Retrospecitve* and the string of exhibitions produced during this period, it would therefore also be worthwhile to understand the impact and expectations of the exhibition's stakeholders, namely the National Lottery Distribution Fund, Department of Arts and Culture, the MTN Foundation, the City of Johannesburg's Department of Arts, Culture and Heritage Services, as well as the Anglo American Johannesburg Centenary Trust, who provided funding for the acquisition of works (Kellner 2006: 15). Such research would be invaluable, needless to say that despite the best intentions, silencing can and often does occur on a very mechanical level. To demonstrate this, Trouillot draws on the example of a sports commentator whose play-by-play account is determined by moments that are considered central to the game. In such a context, "silences are necessary to the account, for if the sportscaster told us every 'thing' that happened at each and every moment, we would not understand anything" (1995: 51). Further, such commentary is premised on a mutual understanding about the rules of the game. For those familiar with it, there are certain criteria that the commentator must adhere to (1995: 51).[39]

2.4: Modernism

By drawing on the analogy of a sports commentator, Trouillot not only explains the mechanics of historical exclusion, but how the construction of history is governed by (and within) the parameters of a given tradition which, in turn, defines what is or is not considered important to itself. This is why, on entering the fold of the South African university (or museum), students are often expected to leave "'the baggage' of their African experience" at the door (Ndebele 1987: 15). This is also perhaps why Kellner refers to Feni's art as making a significant "*addition* to the development of the gallery's collection of African modern masters" (2006: 15).[40] Rather than reflecting institutional transformation, such statements suggest that revisions made to the collection were based on their incorporation into a pre-existing modernist tradition, one that is defined as distinctly 'African'.

Discussing such rhetoric within the context of white writing on black artists in South Africa, Lize van Robbroeck observed how "African cultural modernity" under apartheid was often perceived as a "dangerously grey 'undecidable' that defied secure classification, and that posited enormous hermeneutical

[39] In much the same way that this essay (as part of a university postgraduate degree) must follow a particular structure.
[40] Emphasis my own.

challenges" (2003: 171). She argues that "by transgressing the boundaries of cultural territory reserved for Africans in the colonial binary of barbarism and civilisation, the modern black artist brought to the inner circle of European cultural modernity an uncomfortable difference and an even less digestible sameness" (2003: 171). Attempts made to manage difference "led to the development of discursive strategies and the invention of numerous taxonomies to deny proximity and coevalness and to reestablish spatial and temporal distance" (2003: 171).

Much the same could be said for curatorial practices within this context. If not asked to wait outside, then whatever black artists brought to the party was either diluted by proxy (perceived as derivative)(2003: 178) or celebrated for its supposed authenticity (representative of a 'homogenous', 'timeless', 'pure' and 'authentically African' tradition)(2003: 178). As shown by Van Robbroeck, "In colonial discourse … white influence on black artists is regarded as either corruptive, or as the agent of salvation on 'black culture"' (2003: 177). Further, she observes how it was not uncommon to find both paradigms reflected in the same text (2003: 177).

This is one of the concerns I have had to face in writing this paper, for while emphasis has been placed on elements such as the scroll's tactility/materiality; its expressive use of symmetry, repetition, and line work; or what may be regarded as its 'illogical' spatial configuration (2003: 178), this emphasis exists as a *direct result of how such elements have been perceived* (their relation to a supposed African authenticity) *and as such, treated*. I am not, for example, saying that the realm of touch (perceived as inherently 'African') should be salvaged at the expense of sight (perceived as distinctly 'European'). This would not only diminish the power and impact of things drawn, but simplify the complex and inseparable array of influences on Feni's life and work, regardless of origin. Rather, my concern is the over-emphasis on certain aspects at the expense of others, and the way that these latter aspects—perceived as both timeless and distant—are kept at arm's length or similarly obscured through their accentuation. In other words, this paper marks an attempt to deconstruct the binaries that hold these elements in a compartmentalised framework.

An important feature of Western modernism is the separation of art from life, which came about during the first half of the twentieth century in order to establish a place for art (with a capital A) in a world that was becoming increasingly saturated by visual media. In other words, the entertainment industry had begun to set-up shop in the same neighbourhood, and in order for 'Art' to avoid 'contamination', it had to find a new home (hence the modernist call to arms—'art for art's sake') (Greenberg 1982: 5-6). At first glance, this position may appear similar to MEDU's insistence that cultural workers (not 'artists') find a home for themselves beyond that of "light entertainers" (Kellner & Gonzáles 2009: 187). There is, however, an important distinction here, in that MEDU sought to make "an important

contribution to the development of society" (Kellner & Gonzáles 2009: 187) whereas Western modernism sought to separate itself "from anything to do with the messiness of real life" (Fowle 2014). This self-imposed isolation was not viewed as a form of subversion, but as a way of establishing and entrenching itself in a tradition that it could call its own (or, after Ndebele, as a way of 'digging in'). As described by modernist spokesperson, Clement Greenberg, what lay at the heart of modernism was "the [Kantian] use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence" (1982: 5). In this sense, the modernist drive can be viewed as a form of self-preservation.

This is an important factor to consider in light of the string of revisionist exhibitions produced by JAG. How does one differentiate between the need to preserve forms of social, cultural, and material life, on the one hand, versus the impulse to arrest social forms that pose a potential threat? Contrary to popular belief, Chika Okeke-Agulu observes how, rather than establishing an armature for modernism within the continent through the construction of institutions, "colonialism resisted and ultimately derailed the … very idea of modern subjectivity in Africa" through processes of indirect rule (2015: 23). This is particularly pertinent in light of Hugh Lane's assertion that JAG might "form a representative collection of Modern Art *for* South Africa" (Carman 2006: xvi) through the acquisition of European artists, thus attempting to derail the possibility of a pre-existing modern subjectivity within the country. Cited in Okeke-Agulu's paper, such acts may best be described by Olufemi Taiwo as "the ignoble science of cryopreserving social forms, arresting them and denying them and those whose social forms they are the opportunity of deciding what, how, and when to keep any other social forms" (cited in Okeke-Agulu 2015: 23).[41] How does self-preservation work in contexts where there are competing 'selves' to preserve, and where the means of preservation are historically weighted? The question raised is whether, despite the finality of Kellner's claims—in particular the assertion of progress—such exhibitions continue to harbour elements of western modernist thought which keep cultural difference at arm's length or (by means of an apparent concession) assimilate it into a tradition that is then able to decide what to keep and what to discard?

[41] Okeke-Agulu uses the example of "Western-style art schools … established during the colonial period in many parts of Africa" in order to point out why some may not "appreciate [his] claim that colonialism resisted rather than chaperoned the emergence of modern art in Nigeria" (2015: 23). It is worth remembering here that *The Neglected Tradition* relied on the prevalence of these schools to frame its narrative.

CHAPTER 3: Isolating the Past as a Distinct Entity

3.1. Single and simple moments

João Ribas argues that solo exhibitions have not been afforded the same amount of critical attention as that of the "'paradigm-shifting' group exhibition" (2015: 5), and that "its practical and conceptual concerns, [as in, how] such exhibitions [are] put together, what assumptions underpin them and what criteria might be used to evaluate them—have also been largely glossed over" (2015: 5). Where such exhibitions are written about, they appear to be "entirely compressed into the biographical and chronological focus of art historical writing on the one hand and art criticism on the other" (2015: 5). This seems true of the *Dumile Feni Retrospective* and the catalogue produced for it.

An interesting point made by Rob Bowman (cited in Ribas' paper) is that "in relation to the group or biennial, the solo exhibition 'sounds straightforward and declamatory, a vehicle for the artist's voice in the first person singular, unmediated by curatorial meta-text'" (2015: 5), yet such exhibitions are also part of a complex network of social, political, economic, and historical factors that are invested in the production of meaning and value—what Ribas terms the exhibition's "reputational economy" (2015: 6). Similarly, Alison Kearney argues that, when read through the lens of the Western modernist tradition, artworks produced by cultures beyond the West are often re-contextualised, to the extent that "any meaning [they] may have had outside of the museum is secondary to [their] meaning as representative of a moment in art history," thus neutralising their political or subversive agency (2005: 13-14).

It could be argued that the term 'retrospect' enables such forms of historical (mis)representation, as it implies knowledge about the past that was not available at the time. Much like 'hindsight', the understanding is that you can consider past events with a sense of clarity that is not obscured by the messy reality of the event itself. To this end, words like 'survey' (Kellner 2006: 15) are often used to describe retrospective exhibitions, providing a broad 'overview' of an artist's work. To adhere to such criteria requires the presentation of a large body of work, produced over an extended period of time, as well as the amassing of empirical information about this work and the contexts in which it was produced.

Despite Serote's initial impetus for a retrospective of Feni's work in 1991, funding remained an obstacle (Maart 2005), as did the challenges of sourcing and transporting much of his work to Johannesburg following his death in New York (Kellner 2006: 15). Not only did his passing make it difficult to source work, but Feni was not known to talk about his art or keep detailed archival records (Kellner 2006: 15;

Macklin 2019).[42] At the time, very little was known about his life, especially his early childhood and his time in exile (Younge 2008; Dube 2006: 245).[43] The task of putting together a major 'retrospective' thus required extensive research and planning on the part of the exhibition's curator, Prince Mbusi Dube (Younge 2008; Kellner 2006: 15).[44]

In the catalogue acknowledgements, Dube credits a number of people—both in South Africa and abroad—for "providing [him] with new information"; helping "[clear] the myths" about Feni's biography; or imparting "groundbreaking information that helped [him] map out the entire programme" (2006: 245).[45] Dube's use of the verb 'map' is synonymous with much of the language—"situate", "link", "tie", "locate" (2006: 18)—used to describe his methodology. Much like 'survey', such terms indicate a modernist approach to exhibition making, exemplified by the mapping of various art 'movements' along chronological lines.

This approach was originally adopted by the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA: New York) founder, Alfred H. Barr Jr, who produced a string of exhibitions in the early-to-mid-twentieth century in order to solidify his conception of art into different movements (Cubism, Abstract Art, and so on). Maria Lind attributes the current levels of didacticism in exhibition making to Barr's legacy, writing that "what is typically considered the very nucleus of the craft of curating (for example, Barr's model of selecting, installing, and in other ways contextualising work) … is not commonly thought of as 'didactic' at all but rather as common practice, the normal thing to do," to the extent that "it is almost not-visible" (2013: 88). The perception created by Barr was that art movements emerged in a 'natural', linear progression (Fowle 2014). This led to the belief that "artistic developments in the modern era … [grow] out of each other in accordance with rhythms, patterns, laws or trends" (Popper 1982: 11). Similarly, Dube writes of Feni's retrospective as an attempt to "trace the life and work of this artist from his birth and travels in South Africa through his exile to London, to his death in New York" (2006: 18).

To this end, the exhibition was structured into three chronological and geographically-specific periods: 'Before exile: 1964–1968'; 'London period: 1968–1976'; and 'USA period: 1977–1991' (Dube 2006).

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[42] As such, much of the artwork on exhibition was listed as 'untitled' and 'undated' (Dube 2006).

[43] The lack of biographical information about artists of this period, in particular artists who went into exile, has also been noted by the likes of Steven Sack, who writes about the difficulties of obtaining their work and information about it in the face of state censorship (2009: 8-9).

[44] Dube began working at JAG in 1996 (Leibhammer 2016: 53). In the *Dumile Feni Retrospective* catalogue, he is listed as JAG's education curator (Dube 2006), although in Nessa Leibhammer's paper, *Negotiating South African Inheritance*, he is listed as 'Curator, Exhibitions' (2016: 53).

[45] Interviewing people must also have proven difficult, as evidenced by an advertisement that JAG placed in the classified section of the *Sunday Times* to try and locate Feni's family, seven months prior to exhibition (Sunday Times 2003). In the catalogue acknowledgements, Dube credits Joe Dolby for "cracking the mystery of [their] whereabouts", leading to a succession of interviews across the country (2006: 245). In addition, Dube travelled to London and New York, where he was able to source work and ascertain biographical information about Feni's life abroad (2006: 245).

This approach mirrors some of the curatorial strategies employed by Sacks for *The Neglected Tradition.*[46] An important observation made by Brenda Danilowitz was that, "by choosing an end date of 1988, [*The Neglected Tradition*] took itself out of history, defined as a reconstruction of past events, and in a beguilingly paradoxical way included itself in the scene it had set out to survey" (1990: 96). Here, the use of dates bracket one's historical understanding of power imbalances in South Africa, with '1988' being used as a kind of full-stop, marking an end to such neglect; implying that the problem of exclusion was solved; and ruling out the possibility of its continuation.[47]

Similarly, the compartmentalisation of Feni's life's work into three chronological and geographically-specific periods required the gathering of empirical information which could be used to construct a sequence of events, 'linking' or 'tying' the subject—Feni—to something as stable as a 'fact'. The distinction between periods rules out the many overlaps of content and form that appear throughout his life's work, painting a linear picture of an artist's 'progress' as he moved from one place to the next. It is a reading in which almost everything is cause and effect, and in which the past is placed 'over there' (in retrospect), rather than 'here'. As described by Trouillot, many:

> … assume the independent existence of a fixed past and posit memory as the retrieval of that content. But the past does not exist independently from the present. Indeed, the past is only the past because there is a present, just as I can point to something over there only because I am here. But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or more accurately, pastness—is a position (1995: 14-15).

Like Danilowitz, Trouillot speaks about the use of "single and simple moment[s]" (1995: 113)—such as dates to commemorate historical events—and the subsequent loss of understanding to what he terms the event's "processional character" (1995: 113). By this, he is referring not only to the multitude of ways in which the 'same' event may be experienced by different people, but also an event's relation to a complex network of inseparable undercurrents which are cast aside, overlooked, or simplified in the production of historical narrative, based on what is or isn't prioritised by those who produce it. In this way, the messiness of the event is transformed into a digestible narrative that is easy to manipulate:

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[46] *The Neglected Tradition* also included a large amount of art by different artists (some 220 works) (Danilowitz 1990: 94), and was structured chronologically. Where Feni's retrospective focused on the different places he'd lived, *The Neglected Tradition* focused on specific centres in South Africa, like Polly Street and Rorke's Drift (Danilowitz 1990: 96). It also included "references to significant primary and secondary source material … notably absent from previous accounts" (Danilowitz 1990: 94).

[47] McGee describes a similar thing when she writes that "a transformation ideology that is event-centred can easily mask or justify fundamental or underlying issues or policies sorely in need of change" (2006: 193).

> The creation of that historical moment facilitates the narrativization of history, the transformation of what happened into that which is said to have happened. First, chronology replaces process. All events are placed in a single line leading to the landfall … Second, as intermingled processes fade into a linear continuity, context also fades out … The isolation of a single moment thus creates a historical 'fact' … As a set event, void of context and marked by a fixed date, this chunk of history becomes much more manageable outside of the academic guild … It accommodates travel agents, airlines, politicians, the media, or the states who sell it in prepackaged forms by which the public has come to expect history to present itself for immediate consumption. It is a product of power whose label has been cleansed of traces of power. The naming of the 'fact' is itself a narrative of power disguised as innocence (1995: 113).

Much like Ndebele's call to revisit the effects of the unbanning of different liberation movements on 2 February 1990 (1992: 47), the isolation of single moments and the creation of historical facts also have repercussions when considering the exhibition of Feni's scroll. In the catalogue for the *Dumile Feni Retrospective*, it is dated as 1975. This date has become part of the official record.[48] The listing also refers to it as a "visual biography" and a "manuscript for publication" (Dube 2006: 233). Set within the context of his 'London period', the combined reading urges the viewer to think about the scroll in relation to his life in the UK. Contrary to this are a number of accounts in Chabani Manganyi's more recent book—*The beauty of the line: life and times of Dumile Feni* (2012)—which suggest that he may have worked on the scroll well into the '80s, while living in the United States.[49]

One account is by New York artist and gallerist, Joe Overstreet, who recalls seeing the scroll during a studio visit (2012: 22), as does Morley Nkosi, who recalls seeing it on a separate occasion in New York (2012: 119). Perhaps the most compelling evidence in the book to suggest that he continued working on it in New York (as opposed to just seeing it) are two stories by Moeletsi Mbeki and Barbara Masekela. Mbeki remembers Feni preparing for an exhibition at the United Nations (New York) in 1983. One of the works Mbeki saw on this occasion was the scroll, which Feni "had brought with him from London. Bulky as it was, he carried it around and was always adding to it" (2012: 108). Barbara Masekela tells a similar story:

[48] It is listed as such in both the exhibition catalogue (Dube 2006) and in WAM's archives.

[49] Manganyi's book was published seven years after the exhibition, which he attended, accompanied by Omar Badsha (Manganyi 2012). I imagine that a lot of the early impetus for this book was based on his experience of this exhibition, resulting in numerous interviews that have subsequently complicated and enriched our understanding of Feni's life and work, with various accounts by different people that often contradict one another. Manganyi's approach has been pivotal to the direction of this paper and the corresponding project.

> What I remember most clearly [about his life in New York during the mid-80s] is the day when Dumile showed me a scroll that he was obsessed with. I later came to the conclusion that *The Scroll* was Dumile's life. It was as if he thought that through *The Scroll* he could uncover the mysteries of creation, the heroism of African peoples, and the certainty of victory over evil. *The Scroll* meant everything to him. He worked on it in London before he went to the United States and was always adding to it. In a way, *The Scroll* was a medium of inspiration for different pieces that he worked on later. As he worked on *The Scroll* he would think ahead of a sculpture (2012: 101).

Such an account is not conclusive, yet there is further evidence—based on my own observations—to suggest that he worked on it after 1975. For example, Feni spent time in Los Angeles in 1977, prior to moving to New York (Manganyi 2012: 23). This might explain the references to Skid Row found along the base of the scroll.[50] There is also evidence within the scroll's inscriptions to suggest that he worked on it at the time of the Soweto Uprising (1976) or after.[51] Of course, it is possible that these refer to his own memories of Soweto during the '60s, but it does open the possibility for doubt, which the exhibition does not appear to have done.

My concern here is not so much the accuracy of the date but its treatment. In its attempts to plug archival absences, the retrospective provided this information as fact and as part of a compartmentalised framework, thus excluding a variety of potentially valid readings. One such reading is the view, expressed by Stacy Hardy, the Feni's scroll is a "time-machine" (2019), or the view expressed by artist and curator Thembinkosi Goniwe, that Feni's work be understood as being "in a process of becoming, never getting to the point where it says 'this is final' …" (2012: 54); or similarly that of Khwezi Gule (included in the exhibition's catalogue), when he wrote that "[Feni's] drawings are in a constant state of becoming" (2006: 181).[52]

Even if the date is accurate, how are we to make sense of Masekela's assertion that the scroll functioned as a sounding board for work that he produced in New York, if it was only viewed in relation to his time in London?[53] And what does it mean to describe the period of Feni's life (1964–68) as 'Before

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[50] Such as "Crusifixionz at skid row" or "In respect of the people out in places like skid row put there by governments".

[51] One of the inscriptions reads: "Monopolice this year time Soweto this time, memory of the anonymous children and my friend ::Mojalifa Ngatane::".

[52] Speaking about his own observations, Louis Maqhubela refers to the scroll as being made "at the time when his line changed completely. I would say that it is the in-between style. Not early, but not late either" (Manganyi 2012: 99), thus making it particularly hard to be able to categorise the work in relation to a specific 'period'.

[53] This point is also reiterated by David Koloane, who writes that "For [Feni], sculpture was drawing. It was a medium he could continue to explore. It was a language all on its own. Dumile loved drawing. I believe drawing sparked off ideas for his sculptures" (Manganyi 2012: 97).

exile', as if everything prior to 1968 was just biding its time for the inevitable? Why the designation 'Before exile', as opposed to 'Johannesburg period', like the other sections of the exhibition? What differentiates life 'before' or 'after' exile, if the conditions under apartheid—where he moved around a lot and was often dependant on the good will of others—do not appear to have been that dissimilar from his living conditions in London and New York (Manganyi 2012: 99)?[54]

Although this designation may have spoken to the political climate in South Africa and the events leading up to Feni's exile—such as his contravention of apartheid's Urban Areas Act and his harassment at the hands of the police (Manganyi 2012: 11)[55]—the rush to locate Feni's practice within the broader socio-political context of the time seems to obscure the complexities of his life in South Africa, reducing it to a single event and locating his experience within the realm of the collective. Although the impact of exile on Feni's life should not be understated, one of the issues here is how we differentiate between individual and collective experiences. As described by Trouillot, there is a common misconception that "history is to a collectivity as remembrance is to an individual: the more or less conscious retrieval of past experiences stored in memory" (1995: 14). Trouillot complicates this understanding by highlighting how one's view of the past is subject to change, even in an individual capacity. As such, "the problems of determining what belongs to the past multiply tenfold when that past is said to be collective … We may want to assume for purposes of description that the life history of an individual starts at birth. But when does the life of a collectivity start? … How do we decide—and how does the collectivity decide—which events to include and which to exclude?" (1995: 16). Much like the analogy of the sports commentator, such decisions seem to depend on the tradition in which the collective imagination is framed.

3.2 Vitrines and the costs of upward mobility

Taiwo's use of the prefix, 'cryo-' (meaning to 'put on ice', as in the science of 'cryogenics') to describe processes of indirect rule has further repercussions when considering the choice to display Feni's scroll in a vitrine. As described by Nadia Seremetakis, the historical use of vitrines in the West to display cultural material objects from beyond its own praxis creates a scenario in which difference is both 'petrified' and easy to 'consume', to the extent that:

[54] The designation 'London period' is also complicated by the fact that Feni also lived outside of London during this period (Manganyi 2012).

[55] In a letter (06 October 1967) from Bill Ainslie to Eric Estorick (owner of the Grosvenor Gallery in London), Ainslie writes that "A month ago [Feni] was told by the Local Native Commissioner that he might stay in Johannesburg for a further six months only, at the end of the six months he must return to his so-called 'Homelands' or Bantustan. This means the Eastern Cape, where Dumile has never lived before — he has been in the Western Cape" (Manganyi 2012: 11).

> … items of older periods and other cultures which had their particular aromatic, tactile, and auditory realities were desensualized and permitted a purely visual existence. In this process, vision itself was desensualized and subsequently metaphorized as and reduced to a transparent double of the mind unmediated by any material, spatial and temporal interference. That taming of difference through sensory neutralisation fabricated a false historical continuity between past and present through the cover of dust (cited in Young 2014: 178)

In this way, it is possible to see how a 'false historical continuity between past and present'—evident within the chronological structure of the show—is mirrored and enforced through the scroll's exhibition in a vitrine. Here, it is also possible to see how concepts of time and space inform one another. With this relationship in mind, it is worth examining the scroll's exhibition in a vitrine.

When it was shown at JAG, Feni's scroll was included in a vitrine that was built specifically for it. This vitrine measured approximately seven metres in length.[56] It is the largest vitrine that the work has been shown in to date, with about one-seventh of it visible at any given moment. To view the scroll in this vitrine, you would need to walk up and down its length. This approach might help provide a sense of its scale. Depending on which section was visible, it may have also been possible to observe some of the repetitions and transformations in subject. Here, however, movement is largely constituted through the act of walking back and forth. It is *you* that is moving (that is *in time*), while the object remains still.

In this context, the work is almost weightless. It is also timeless, in that you do not experience the start/stop that the physical act of scrolling necessitates, nor do you experience the tensions inherent in the object—the resistance of the paper or the risk of it tearing.[57] Instead, the casing creates a physical barrier. Looking at the scroll through glass, you might see finger prints, a layer of dust, or the reflection of the spotlights above.[58] This creates a sense of tactility, but it is the tactility of the glass (of the context), rather than the paper. As described by Katherine Young, objects that are displayed in vitrines are "withdrawn from use and barricaded under glass, [settling] out of the patterns of life they once inhabited" (2014: 179). Central here is the designation 'once'; the understanding that objects within vitrines no longer exist in the same way that they used to. Young uses the word 'congeal' to describe this process (2014: 179), a term which seems to echo Taiwo's description of the 'cryopreservation of social forms'. Young attributes this to the fact that,

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[56] I visited JAG on 26 March 2019, and was shown the vitrine in which the scroll was exhibited. The length provided here is an estimate.

[57] There is an important distinction to be made here between the amount of time it might take to walk up and down the length of the scroll to view it (on your own terms), and the object demanding this time of you *in order* to view it.

[58] This is evident in an installation photograph of the work at the Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein, which was the second stop of the travelling *Dumile Feni Retrospective* (Dube 2006: 8).

> Once things fall under the category of the aesthetic, they get raised axiologically in value space … This upward mobility is achieved at the cost of ruthlessly cutting away the functionality of the object in question. Its decontextualisation is precisely what privileges work as art and moves it into what we take to be the transcendent position of art (2014: 181).

I would argue that this 'upward mobility' and the raising of Feni's scroll in 'value space' underpins many of the issues outlined in this paper. Within this context, the scroll's associations to different forms of religion, knowledge, literacy, and power may still be apparent (I believe visitors would be able to draw these associations regardless), yet its invested utility is stripped away. No longer may the scroll be *used* as a form of public address—something that can be read to a crowd, now, in the present—nor can it act as a living repository of information (similar perhaps to the papyrus scrolls of ancient Egypt, hieroglyphics, rock art, and so on).[59] In this context, it is only possible to think about how it *may have been used in the past*.

This perspective is similar to that of Hito Steyerl, who writes of objects in such contexts as 'fossils': "a condensation of social forces … in whose dark prism social relations lay congealed and in fragments" (2012: 55). For Steyerl (after Walter Benjamin) objects can be "understood as nodes, in which the tensions of a historical moment materialize in a flash of awareness or twist grotesquely into the commodity fetish" (2012: 55). Yet, according to Young, the word 'aesthetic' did not always harbour the same limiting purview, writing how its original conception in Greek (*aisthētikē*) meant to convey "sense perception" (2014: 196):

> Aesthetics [in its original sense] has to do not only with an axiology of value, with the beautiful, with criteria of judgement but also with a phenomenology of pleasure, with the sensuous, with categories of experience and matters of taste, taste in the crude sense of tasting things, of devouring and incorporating, not in the prim bourgeois sense of discerning superiority (2014: 196).

Exhibited in vitrines, Young argues that objects are removed "from the flow of phenomena" (2014: 195). Consequently, she emphasises a need to "return [objects] to their sensuous immediacy, to animate them again" (2014: 194-195) by "uncover[ing] the habit pathways to the senses, the lures we follow from body to environment [and] back again" (2014: 196). She suggests that this is (theoretically) possible through a return to the word's original conception.[60] While such language may seem utopian and

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[59] There are numerous examples of such forms of literacy to be found in Roberts, M.N, Harney, E, Purpura, A and Kreamer, C.M (eds.) 2007. *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art.* Washington DC: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

[60] It is important to note that Young's paper focuses on folklore, in particular its ability to 'oscillate' between a conception of objects as both ordinary and as art—"suspended between animation and arrest" (2014: 194-195).

essentialist—reflecting the need to return to some 'pure' state, untainted by European influence (Van Robbroeck 2003: 177)—my understanding of Young's argument is simply that museums need to find ways to "engage all the senses: the visual and the auditory, of course, but also the tactile, the gustatory, and the olfactory" (2014: 195). It is a reading that has less to do with '[returning objects] to their sensuous immediacy' than it is about trying to accommodate this immediacy; to 'uncover the habit pathways to the senses' for *viewers* in a field where sensory engagement is stifled.

Today, such display choices and the debates surrounding them have even entered into popular culture (evidenced by the film, *Black Panther*). Contrary to Kellner's insistence on progress—on 'upward mobility' through revisionist strategies—the exhibition of Feni's scroll in a vitrine may in fact be the most tangible reminder that what you are looking at is framed by a very particular institutional history—that the gallery is not a politically neutral space (Filipovic 2013: 74; Kearney 2005: 3).[61] That being said, are we destined as a result to only read the work in relation to colonial and ethnographic histories? Such an outcome is only truly justifiable if that is the sole intention of the work, and is therefore limited in its appeal.

What becomes apparent here is that, contrary to popular belief, solo exhibitions do not function as "a vehicle for the artist's voice in the first person singular" (Bowman cited in Ribas 2015: 5). Although the scale of the work and its susceptibility to damage present something of a catch-twenty-two, the problems that arise are ultimately produced by a web of ideological, hermeneutical, and aesthetic constraints that inform the tradition. In the following chapter, I will focus on the scroll's exhibition at WAM, in particular its exhibition during *Activate/Captivate* (2016) and the steps taken by the exhibition's curators to try and circumnavigate some of the challenges posed. Although progressive in appearance, it questions whether this approach continues to perpetuate forms of containment, drawing on the field of translation studies as a basis for analysing the mediatory role of curators and their responsibilities to both stakeholders and publics alike.

CHAPTER 4: The Question of Translation

4.1: The fine line between care and control

The extent to which curators and institutions control or frame artworks is a sticky issue. It is synonymous with some of the earliest definitions of the term 'curator', namely to 'care'.[62] As described by

[61] And here I am thinking about the kind of interventions created by artists like Fred Wilson (*Mining the Museum*) or Meshac Gaba (*Museum of Contemporary African Art*).
[62] The root of the word 'curate' is the Latin *curare* ('take care of') (Fowle 2007: 10).

Kate Fowle, the term 'curator' developed over the centuries from the understanding of "someone who presides over something—suggesting an inherent relationship between care and control" (2007: 10). The exhibition of Feni's scroll in a vitrine is evidence of this, both at JAG and at WAM. Here, the scroll is cared for, but in a way that prioritises its existence as an object of value (be it historical, cultural or economic), thus enforcing a degree of control.

This is evident in the exhibition *Wits 90 Treasures*, which took place between September and October 2012, four months after WAM opened on its new premises (Wits Art Museum 2012). Aimed as a celebration of the university's ninetieth anniversary, *Wits 90 Treasures* was the first time that Feni's scroll was exhibited following its exhibition at JAG (2005) and its incorporation into WAM's collection that June (Charlton 2020). Then, it was shown alongside a wide range of cultural material, biological, and historical objects and documents. As per the press release, the exhibition included:

> … The Tuang Skull; the Sediba Fossils; the world's oldest dinosaur eggs; rare African art … one of the world's oldest Bibles; Mandela's handwritten notes from the Rivonia Trial; Robert Sobukwe's original letters; Herbert Baker watercolours; photographs from the Barnett collection; excerpts from the Sol Plaatje collection; the Devil's Claw; old blueprints of the Union Buildings and the Johannesburg Art Gallery; rock art; a slave register and clay tablets (ca 3000–2000 BC) (Wits Art Museum 2012).

From the press release, it seems apparent that the exhibition aimed to showcase the significance of the museum and university as the custodians of history and culture, with the (then) Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Loyiso Nongxa, offering the following: "Great universities are one of the key pillars of our society—they survive for centuries and generations, they outlive governments and societies, making them ideal safe houses and curators of priceless treasures on behalf of civilisations" (Wits Art Museum 2012). Chronologies aside, *Wits 90 Treasures* seems like a digression from the efforts made by Dube to contextualise Feni's practice. In this context, it is hard to imagine the scroll being presented as anything other than a timeless relic of the past. The perspective of the museum/university as a 'safe house' also points to the close relationship between care and control exacted upon works within the collection. Nevertheless, it serves as an important reminder of the shifting attribution of value that occurs when an artwork enters into a collection, as well as the kinds of abstraction that can occur as a result.

As described by Alison Kearney, processes of acquisition into museum collections often result in a re-contextualisation of artworks through their newfound "association with authoritative knowledge" (2005: 9). Here, "the context of the museum assigns a particular cultural meaning to the objects within

it" (2005: 9), a meaning which often lies outside the praxis of the work itself (2005: 9). Speaking in reference to Theodor Adorno, Kearney writes of the collection as a 'tomb' for art, highlighting how "the museum's link with death is evident in the very word museum which comes from the German word *museal*, that describes objects 'to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying'" (2005: 9). This seems applicable within the context of *Wits 90 Treasures,* yet WAM also appear to have been at pains to keep its collection alive.

Beginning in 2012, the museum initiated a three year endeavour known as the *Collections Re-engagement Project,* which culminated in a publication (2015) and exhibition (2016), both of which were titled *Activate/Captivate.*[63] The *Collections Re-engagement Project* was made possible by a three-year grant of $375,000, awarded on 01st December 2011 from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 'to support the strengthening of student and faculty engagement with the collections' (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 2011: 91).[64] A cursory read through the Mellon Foundation's website reveals that the grant—titled 'Art Museums and the Curriculum'—fell under the category of 'Arts and Culture' and the subcategory 'Art History, Conservation, and Museums', which aims "to help shape and sustain art history and conservation as dynamic and rigorous disciplines … with an emphasis on training, collaboration, and knowledge networks." (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 2020) A more detailed breakdown of criteria for the grant reveals an emphasis on:

> Curatorial innovation in museums … programs that increase diversity of the curatorial and conservation professions … curatorial challenges in areas such as new media … development of networks for curatorship and conservation in new media art … object-based and curatorial curricula in art history graduate programs … involvement of artists in the work of art museums … digital humanities capacity in art history graduate programmes and research initiatives … major challenges in the development of tools and methods for conservation science … [and] collection sharing that brings understudied material to light for scholars and the public" (2020).

This insight is useful in trying to understand the particular emphasis that WAM place in the *Activate/Captivate* publication on changing or improving how the museum 'use collections in teaching and

[63] Rather than attempting to document the work on exhibition, the publication aimed to contextualise the project itself. It focused on "the growth [and history] of [WAM's] collections" (De Becker & Nettleton 2015: 11); the various ways in which students, academics, artists, and publics could engage the collection (2015: 11-12); and the role of object biographies as a way of furthering knowledge about objects within the collection in the face of archival absences (2015: 12). An important observation here is that the project was not unique to WAM. It was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation, and happened at a number of university museums across the globe (Leyde 2019).

[64] In 2011, A similarly described grant was awarded to University of Virginia ($315,000); the University of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology ($1,100,000); the University of Michigan ($650,000); and Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey ($500,000). Of the forty-three institutions provided grants in 2011 under the subcategory of 'Art History, Conservation, and Museums'—which allocated a total of $25,740,756—only four (including WAM) were outside of the United States (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 2011: 85–91).

learning processes" (De Becker and Nettleton 2015a: xi), as well as their focus on projects that were "highly collaborative" and "interdisciplinary"—involving colleagues from "different departments across the university" as well "students and learners from all grades and ages" (2015a: xi)—and the dual role of digital technologies in the accompanying exhibition for conservation and engagement purposes (Leyde 2019). In addition to the broader imperatives of the grant, the primary objectives of this initiative were to make collections and museums more accessible; and to adopt a self-reflexive position about how best to achieve this, through "active engagement" with the museum's "diverse" and "compound" audiences (De Becker & Nettleton 2015: 1).

The *Collections Re-engagement Project* also initiated a course for postgraduate students at Wits University titled 'Writing Art Histories' (established in 2013) (Wintjes 2015: 135). This initiative sought to counter the "silence" of objects in WAM's storerooms, in particular, the lack of information about how they were "made, used, collected and displayed, and how [they] ended up" there (De Becker 2015: 153). Produced as an ongoing initiative, this course focuses on object biographies. In the words of Justine Wintjes, this focus attempts to work "towards singularisation and 'against abstraction'" (2015: 139), based on 'specific interactions' that students are permitted with the work (2015: 139):[65]

> Object centred studies are, at the outset, narrow and rooted in a real and singular 'thing'. Students' eyes occasionally widen at the prospect of studying one individual object for an entire semester, but they quickly realise that the amount of information contained in the smallest relic is infinite and the task is far from small or claustrophobic (2015: 137).

This course introduced me to the scroll.[66] Spending increasing amounts of time with it has complicated my understanding of the artwork. As described by Wintjes, one benefit of this initiative is the extended period of study dedicated to a single artwork, as well as prolonged access to it. While there is a need for research to be done on works in their collection, the drive for accessibility can also be attributed to the fact that, between 2002 (when Wits Art Galleries closed) and 2012 (when WAM opened), the museum had no permanent space to exhibit their collection. As described by Laura de Becker and Anitra Nettleton, WAM was "well aware of the underexposure that had been the fate of many of the holdings at the time … actively pursue[ing] the *Collections Re-engagement Project* upon reopening" (2015: 3).[67]

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[65] This course attempted to "make a case for the 'object biography' approach as a particular kind of art-historical inquiry that creates productive bridges between close readings of individual objects, and larger-scale understandings of the world in which we live" (Wintjes 2015: 137). It also attempted to create "a balance in the curriculum between theoretical and empirical approaches, with a view to encouraging students to become active creators of knowledge from the very beginning of their postgraduate experiences" (Wintjes 2015: 137).

[66] My lecturer at the time was Lois Anguria, who introduced me to the scroll.

[67] The context of exhibition (which took place in the middle of the Fees Must Fall movement) (Leyde 2019), might also help to explain the sense of urgency felt by the museum to make their collections more accessible.

Despite being unable to locate documentation of Feni's scroll in the publication, it was one of the artworks that the curators tried to 'activate'. According to Leigh Leyde, the scroll's inclusion in the exhibition was premised on the understanding that it was a little known artwork by a well known artist, and that its exhibition might be of interest to potential researchers (Leyde 2019). The production of the digital translation was intended as a way for audiences to interact with it, an attempt to mirror the experience of handling the work without putting it at risk (2019). "We wanted to give an example of how you could engage with this object for research," said Leyde, highlighting how "the objects [on exhibition] could be platforms for research for any subject, from any angle" (2019).[68] To this end, the installation was accompanied by a five-track jazz composition produced by Yonela Mnana.[69] As described by Leyde:

> The digitisation was so that you had access to the full fifty-three metres of the scroll. You could look at the actual scroll in the vitrine—so you could see the materiality of it—and then you could hear an interpretation of the scroll, musically as opposed to visually. And so there was a conversation about, 'Can you really see Dumile Feni without the music?' … It felt like you were composing while you were looking through it and this music was playing. It was all in the box, in our core gallery, and the idea is that you scroll through it and you're listening to the music and it's a very sort of experiential, visual, musical … all the senses involved. You're touching but not touching. So it broke this barrier of you [not being able to] physically go through it as a visitor, but you could. It was the most access we felt we could possibly give the object whilst preserving it (2019).

According to Jessica Morgan, this is one of the major benefits of a collection, considered as "the ideal space in which to pose questions of new histories and new modalities of display" (2013: 35). While celebrated as a platform for increased access to the work, the production of the digital translation raises a number of questions about the role and responsibility of curators, as well as the efficacy of digital technologies to adequately translate and preserve information embedded within material objects.[70]

4.2: Curatorial responsibility through the lens of translation studies

In the introduction to his paper, 'What About Responsibility?' (20130, Peter Eleey provides an anecdote about a dealer he was trying to acquire an artwork from. After posing a series of questions about

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[68] They also commissioned the production of a series of musical scores by Yonela Mnana (Leyde 2019).

[69] This composition was a commission (Leyde 2019).

[70] A helpful case study here is Peter Botticelli's 'Preserving Artworks Digitally: The Case of Andy Warhol's Polaroid Photographs' (2015) in *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* (PDT&C) | Volume 44: Issue 3: 123-134.

how the work should be shown—the parameters of what his institution "could do or not do with it"; and whether the artist had "any particular stipulations regarding its care or exhibition"—the dealer said that for all he cared, once bought, they "could throw the piece off a cliff" (2013: 113). For Eleey, this anecdote points to the fact that curators and institutions often assume absolute licence over what they do with artworks in their possession (2013: 113). The ethical implications of such power stem from the mediatory role that curators perform between stakeholders, artists, and publics. As described by Eleey, artists are held directly accountable for their work, yet this is not always the case with curators, who often work collectively or under the institutional umbrella and therefore share responsibility (2013: 114; Morgan 2013: 28). After Anton Vidokle, the complication arises when curators 'overreach' the parameters of their profession, assuming a "single totalizing figure that she [the artist] cannot bypass" (2010), whilst imposing their own subjectivities onto that of the artist by controlling the means by which audiences come to experience their work (2010):

> The necessity of going 'beyond the making of exhibitions' should not become a justification for the work of curators to supersede the work of artists, nor a reinforcement of authorial claims that render artists and artworks merely actors and props for illustrating curatorial concepts. Movement in such a direction runs a serious risk of diminishing the space of art by undermining the agency of its producers: artists (2010).

At the same time, Eleey argues that 'risk' and experimentation are fundamental to both artistic and curatorial practices. He maintains that "just as we would defend an artist's absolute freedom to express themselves, so I would argue on behalf of a curator's ability to use whatever they want, however they want to use it" (2013: 118). Eleey makes an important qualifier, however, by stating that curators (like artists) should be held accountable for their treatment of artworks (2013: 119). This view finds an echo in the writing of Jessica Morgan, who argues that "The critique of the author/curator risks hindering much-needed experimentation and exploration of new forms of display within the museum, new approaches that undoubtedly require authorship and a rethinking of the contextualisation of art" (2013: 28). Situated somewhere between the two is the perspective of Anthony Huberman, who writes:

> Curatorial responsibility … involves the invention of ways to appropriately pay tribute to the lives of artworks and artists—not the invention of curatorial methods for their own sake. By always putting the artist first, a good exhibition behaves like a guest who takes care to do whatever is true to the spirit of a work (cited in Eleey 2013: 113-114).

Such a position would not discount the scope for experimentation, provided it does not come at the cost of 'the spirit of a work'. The question, then, is whether the production of the digital translation

could be said to strike a similar balance. This concern is not new within the field of curatorial practices, and is usually accompanied by a deep sense of suspicion. To this end, Vidokle likens the relationship between artists and curators to that of a labour force and its management, with the latter (curators) being seen as 'obedient' pawns in the master's house, there to micro-manage the unruly masses (artists)(2010). In his paper, *Coda: The Curatorial* (2013), Charles Esche makes a similar argument when he writes of curatorial practice as a "parasitical activity" (2013: 241), yet he also highlights the fact that curators need to also contend with the interests of stakeholders. "A clever curator has constantly to trim and modify to try to ensure that something approximating a curatorial vision remains visible through the tangle of financial and other interests that shape the ground rules of a given project" (2013: 241). Thus, the position of the curator is quite precarious. The sense of mistrust felt by some artists towards curators finds a parallel within the field of translation studies. As described by Susan Bassnett:

> Italian has a famous saying: *traduttore, traditore* (translator, traitor) meaning that translators always betray whatever they are translating. The idea of translation as a betrayal is important in several respects. First of all, translation is necessarily about trust: if readers cannot understand what someone has written in another language, they are reliant on a translator. Readers need to know that what they are reading is the equivalent of what the original wrote, for if they doubt the translator, then they doubt the translation (2014: 10).

Bassnett goes on to describe how, at least within the field of translation, such mistrust can have serious consequences, drawing on the example of "translators in war zones [who] are often maligned and persecuted for fraternizing with the enemy" (2014: 10). While this may not be the case for curation, the ubiquity of translation in today's age of mass-migration and technological communication (Bassnett 2014: 1) has meant a burgeoning of the field and with it, a wealth of critical attention which is helpful to the study of curatorial practices.

Bassnett's insight, for example, parallels some of the language used to describe curators, who are often seen as 'intermediaries' and 'mediators'. The perspective is that curators—like translators—are able (in part) to 'bridge the gap' between the context of production and the context of exhibition (enter curatorial statements, object labels, and so on). To this end, Maria Lind writes that, within the context of curatorial practices, mediation "signifies a transfer from one party to another, the pragmatic transmission of a message" (2013: 85). Yet she also points out that this transfer is often based on the "assumption that there is a deficiency among the visitors—a gap to be bridged, a hole to be filled, or even a conflict to be resolved" (2013: 88). This last point is echoed by Søren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen, who highlight how the term 'mediator' has "rather heroic connotations, implying a neutral and resourceful

individual who intervenes in an existing conflict situation with high-level troubleshooting, in order to restore order" (2007: 28).

This perspective brings to mind the attempts made at WAM to overcome the challenges posed by the scroll's exhibition in a vitrine by drawing on new technological resources. It also seems to echo Kellner's positioning in the foreword to the MEDU catalogue. Having expressed his resourcefulness—his coming "across files containing" correspondence about an exhibition that had not yet happened—Kellner describes a process of intervention against the backdrop of South Africa's transition to democracy (2009: 10).

One of the key issues here is that of representation. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak draws an important distinction between 'representation'—defined as "'speaking for', as in politics"—and the idea of representation as it is often applied "in art or philosophy," namely to "re-present" (1999: 28). Spivak highlights the dangers of conflating the two when she asks: "Are those who act and *struggle* mute, as opposed to those who act and *speak*?" (1999: 28). From my understanding, her point is that, in writing about the subaltern subject, the "theorist does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group" (1999: 28). The importance of such a distinction is that theorists—like curators—often *use* the work of others to stake their own claims. Consequently, people incorrectly assume the position of the theorist/curator as a conduit for the claims of the author/artist (in much the same way that the solo exhibition might sound "straightforward and declamatory, a vehicle for the artist's voice in the first person singular, unmediated by curatorial meta-text"")(Bowman cited in Ribas 2015: 5).

Tejaswini Niranjana argues that the very idea of betrayal within translation—the dichotomy between "faithful and unfaithful … loyalty and betrayal" (1992: 50)—"points to a notion of 'text' and 'interpretation' that comes out of the classical concept of the mimetic relationship between 'reality' and 'representation'" (1992: 50). She also highlights how "the notion of fidelity to the 'original' holds back translation theory from thinking the *force* of a translation. The intimate links between, for example, translations from non-Western languages into English and the colonial hegemony they helped create" (1992: 58).[71] This is, I believe, why it is so important that the hand of the translator or curator is visible at all times.

[71] Ganesh Devy similarly writes of the Western fascination with 'originals' as a byproduct of Western metaphysics. He draws on the Biblical story of Babel to demonstrate how "translation is an exile, a fall from the origin; and the mythical exile a post-Babel crisis consequent upon the moment of the fragmentation of a pure, original, divinely authorised language … Given this metaphysical precondition of Western aesthetics, it is not surprising that literary translations are not accorded the same status as *original* works" (Devy 1998: 152 cited in Bassnett 2014: 39).

The point made by Niranjana is of utmost importance as it demonstrates some of the underlying tensions of this report, namely, that any concerns about the fidelity of the digital translation to the original exist as a substantiation of the *force* of the translation. I am not simply complaining that the digital translation has betrayed the original. I am saying that, in their claim to be providing increased access to the scroll—that it was "the most access we felt we could possibly give the object whilst preserving it" (Leyde 2019)—the museum are making a claim of "fidelity to the 'original'" which inhibits our understanding of the *force* of the translation and its links to a colonial, modernist hegemony.

In her book, 'Why Translation Matters' (2010), Edith Grossman argues that translation is not a simple transfer of a text from one language to another, but that it requires an act of 'rewriting' (2010: 7). Her argument is necessary due to the common misconception that the role of the translator is to provide as literal a translation as possible (2010: 12), in much the same way that a photograph that documents a painting is expected to replicate the original as accurately as possible. As described by Ralph Lieberman, "Photography appeared to offer exact, value-free images, and some claimed that it provided illustrations so accurate that with them one could write about or study a work of art as if in front of the piece itself" (2010: 120). To this end, he writes: "The problem with the camera is not that it tells lies but that it commits perjury, swearing to its big lies by means of small truths" (2010: 122).

Our misplaced faith in the camera's objectivity has its roots in its ability to capture a one-to-one likeness, forgetting that photographs are framed in a very particular way and that they inevitably exclude. An important point made by Grossman is that, rather than providing a one-to-one likeness, the role of the translator should be to convey *intent*:

> Intrinsic to the concept of a translator's fidelity to the effect and impact of the original is making the second version of the work as close to the first writer's intention as possible. A good translator's devotion to that goal is unwavering. But what never should be forgotten or overlooked is the obvious fact that what we read in a translation is the translator's writing … [and should thus] be judged and evaluated on its own terms (2010: 31-32).

Like translation, photographic reproductions of art are often said to extend the original's shelf-life, preserving it for future generations. Like translation, such reproductions are also said to make art more accessible because they are easy to distribute (Berger 1972). One of the inherent dangers is that people view the photograph or translated text as a surrogate, forgetting that what they are seeing has been removed from its original context to suit the needs of another. When this happens, the need to experience the original disappears, in much the same way that a monolingual reader may not feel the need to learn a different language if someone else is going to do the work of translation for them (Coetzee

2013: 3). Although *Activate/Captivate* was primarily concerned with making artworks in their collection more accessible (by finding alternative strategies of engagement), it is important to consider the costs of such accessibility.

4.3: A window onto the 'real' world

When the digital translation of Feni's scroll was made, a series of high-resolution photographs were taken of it, which were then stitched together digitally (Bristow 2020; Leyde 2019). By moving their hand across a sensor, visitors were able to 'scroll' backwards and forwards through the digital translation. The digitisation of the scroll made it possible to get a sense of the original's dynamism. You could move left or right through it, enabling a reading that would not have been possible when viewed in a vitrine. At the same time, the movement of your hand through the air is a very different experience from that of trying to navigate the weighty, fragile, and somewhat clumsy object. Here, the tension inherent in the paper and the weight of the dowels is replaced with an effortless scrolling that is more akin with 'scrolling' online.

Situated just beneath it, the digital translation was also accompanied by a navigation bar, which provided a zoomed-out view of the scroll and your location therein (similar to a 'you are here' map). The navigation bar provided a percentage to indicate how far into the scroll you were, thus belying an understanding that the work be read from one end to the other—left to right, from '0' to '100%'. This bar also showed you what to expect by providing a frame (in the form of a red box or window) which showed you which section you were looking at, as well as indicating what lay outside the frame—what you could expect to see if you moved left or right. In this way, it exposed more of the scroll at any given moment than one would typically be able to view when handling the object (albeit in 'thumbnail' form), with the other parts of the scroll appearing outside of the frame.

The sensor that you move your hand over—known as a Leap Motion Controller—was embedded in a plinth, which was placed a short distance from the projection, approximately two metres away (Bristow 2020). This sensor relies on two infrared cameras, which are only able to pick up one's movement within a 120 to 150° field of view (at approximately 60 cm) (Ultraleap 2019). To be able to interact with the digital translation, you therefore needed to remain in proximity to the sensor.[72] Interestingly, the production of the digital translation and one's experience of it seems quite similar to some of the earliest conceptions of linear perspective, which were based on the abstract construction of the horizon as

[72] The door to the cubicle in which the digital translation was shown was left open, meaning visitors did not necessarily have to come in to interact with the work, but could stand at a distance and view it while someone else interacted with it (Bristow 2020).

a governing principle for orientating oneself in the world (Steyerl 2012: 18). Standing at a remove in a blacked-out cubicle, the scroll is projected horizontally, as one might expect to find a framed work of art on the wall (Bristow 2020). This is quite a different experience to handling it, in which you are not only close to the scroll—touching it—but looking down on it (of course, you could lift it up, but your arms would get tired and it would be that much harder to scroll). With the digital translation held at a distance, the scroll is transformed into something of a horizon line.

In her paper, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective', Hito Steyerl observes that "our traditional sense of orientation—and with it, modern concepts of time and space—are based on a stable line: the horizon line" (2012: 14). Here, Steyerl talks about how one's orientation—one's ability to navigate—is dependant on the stability and position of the observer, who "is thought to be located on a ground of sorts, a shoreline, a boat …" (2012: 14). This seems to echo the position of the viewer by the sensor. In addition, Steyerl writes of the horizon as "an extremely important element in navigation," one which historically "defined the limits of communication and understanding … [But could] also be used for determining one's own location and relation to one's surroundings, destinations or ambitions" (2012: 14-15). Not only did "early navigation [consist] of gestures and bodily poses relating to the horizon," she continues, but it also made use of instruments—"the astrolabe, quadrant, and sextant" (2014: 15).

Steyerl's analogy is illuminating here for its ability to connect such display choices to some of the earliest conceptions of space, time, and orientation within the Western psyche, noting how the construction and implementation of linear perspective not only "declares the view of a one-eyed and immobile spectator as a norm," but "creates the illusion of a quasi-natural view to the 'outside,' as if the image plane was a window opening onto the 'real' world" (2015: 18). This, she writes, "allows the calculation of future risk, which can be anticipated, and, therefore, managed" (2015: 18). Importantly, it also creates a scenario which "not only transforms space, but also introduces the notion of a linear time, which allows mathematical prediction and, with it, linear progress" (2012: 18).

Speaking about the advent and application of new technologies for navigation (such as Google Maps), Steyerl writes of a "displacement of perspective," which "creates a disembodied and remote-controlled gaze, outsourced to machines and other objects" that has "enabled the detached observant gaze to become ever more inclusive and all-knowing to the point of becoming massively intrusive" (2012: 24). One wonders about the implication of such a perspective within the context of Feni's scroll during *Activate/Captivate*. For example, how the imposition of a linear perspective which enables quick and easy interaction might parallel contemporary forms of surveillance technology. Designed for "simple interaction" (Ultraleap 2019), one of the Leap Motion Controller's selling points is its "wide field of view"

and its ability to transform "motion-to-photon latency below the human perception threshold" (Ultraleap 2019). In other words, one of its strongest features is its ability to reduce the amount of drag—of time-lapsed—between one's physical movement and its digital equivalent, so that any interaction appears effortless.

Having not attended the exhibition, it is unclear how the production and inclusion of Mnana's jazz composition may have worked to off-set such a construction—the impact it may have had on how one choses to move their hands, for example, or to 'compose' their experience. Nevertheless, we can begin to see how the scroll's digitisation may echo some of the earlier choices of display at JAG, situating it within a linear understanding of time and space which enforces a degree of distance between the object (over there) and audience (over here), whilst claiming to provide visitors and researchers with greater access to the work.

Given the difficulties that surround the exhibition of Feni's scroll and the challenges of accessibility, it is easy to see how such enabling forms of engagement may be appealing. Yet, as described by Ho Rui An, the contemporary faith in digital media can also be considered as a form of "exceptionalism" (2015: 130) which fails to account for the fact that such mobility is itself bounded by material and climatological constraints:

> By virtue of a presumed all-inclusivity, this new digital interior institutes a forgetting of the outside and the finite material base insulating it from the outside and yet runs on its absurd generosity. Just as we consign to oblivion the global disposal site that is the atmosphere as we dart across the globe on barrels of carbon fuel, the basal material limit of the digital sphere recedes from consciousness as it goes from being a clunky, groaning beige box in a climate-controlled room to a touchscreen device of peculiar thinness (2015: 130).

In her paper, 'A Thing Like You and Me', Steyerl makes a similar observation when she writes that "not even the digital image is outside history. It bears the bruises of its crashes with politics and violence …The bruises of images are its glitches and artefacts, the traces of its rips and transfers" (2012: 53). The question then, is how one might make sense of such traces—the scroll's 'glitches', 'rips', and 'transfers'; it's 'history'—when any form of 'latency' occurs "below the human perception threshold" (Ultraleap 2019)? From the initial process of photographic reproduction through to the editing process, the removal of the digitally stitched trace, and its eventual projection, what we get is a "a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea … squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed …" (Steyerl 2012: 32).

This new conglomerate of material pathways carry their own associations. They are embedded within their own histories of use. This is one of the reasons I refer to the scroll's digitisation as an act of translation, rather than a simple form of reproduction. Feni's scroll holds memory, not just in terms of subject matter, but through the dents and marks caused by the pressure of pen on paper—a kind of motor memory; whereas the digital projection distills it. Here, the ageing of the paper evaporates into thin air, and with it, the sense of memory—of 'thick-time'—that the physical object necessitates. In this sense, the digitisation of Feni's scroll reflects a rewriting to meet the expectations of the contemporary moment.

Although the original was included in a vitrine in proximity to the cubicle which displayed the digital translation, and although the digital enabled some form of interaction, both continue to privilege sight over other forms of embodied knowledge. In this context, the paper and dowels are treated as a secondary surface on which the drawings sit, yet even within the scroll, there are inscriptions—such as "non-surface blessings"—which indicate that there is more to the work than meets the eye. With the digital translation, the paper and dowels are seen to enable a particular function, but that function is considered primarily as a support for the drawings—a way of moving backwards and forwards to view them—rather than being integral to the meaning of the work as a whole. As such, one can see how the drive for accessibility harboured its own assumptions about what accessibility means.

4.4: The embodied subject

There is an assumption that through the collection and exhibition of objects, we are able to learn more about the past, how we make sense of it, and what this means to us now, in the present (Brown 2001). Yet this experience is almost always constituted through the act of looking, and it is sight, rather than say touch, that sets up our relationship to objects within this context. The channeling of experience through this single prism creates the impression that works of art are primarily visual (hence the field 'visual art'). When Feni's scroll was digitised, it was the visual element that was retained. Although the digital translation required something of the audience (the movement of one's hand through the air), this movement was less about the materiality of the object (how it would feel to pick it up, to move it) than it was about being able to navigate to different parts of the *visual* work, implying that its meaning is by-and-large retinal. Yet, as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "Our experience contains numerous qualities that would be almost devoid of meaning if considered separately from the reactions they provoke in our bodies" (2002: 46). In order to demonstrate this, Merleau-Ponty uses the example of honey:

> Honey is a slow-moving liquid; while it undoubtedly has a certain consistency and allows itself to be grasped, it soon creeps slyly from the fingers and returns to where it started from. It comes apart as soon as it has been given a particular shape and, what is more, it reverses the roles by grasping the hands of whoever would take hold of it … So the quality of being honeyed … can only be understood in the light of the dialogue between me as an embodied subject and the external object which bears this quality (2002: 47-48).

The difficulty then, is in trying to understand what the entangled peculiarities of the scroll are. One might be the scroll's *pull* or *weight*. When held, it wants to open up, to *spill out,* but the extent of this 'spillage' is equally determined by the environment in which it is handled. Unless held together, the two rolls of paper will start to *unravel*. If held up by a single person, the length (and strength) of their arms might determine how much of the scroll can be opened without the use of a table or an appropriate surface on which to place it. The length of the table might, in turn, determine how much can be rolled out. On one level, the scroll seems to resist containment when left to its own devices. At the same time, it is always in conversation with its immediate environment, which offers a form of resistance.

As much as the work unravels, it also 'ravels'. It *exposes* and it *conceals*. In this process, the rolls of paper on either side oscillate from *thick* to *thin*. If you keep moving in the same direction, one might get thicker while the other gets thinner. Finally, it takes *time*—a time which can in turn be represented by the degrees of thickness in the paper roll, like the rings of a tree trunk. All of these descriptions are embedded in our understanding of the object as 'scroll', and relate to more than one sense. To return to Merleau-Ponty's definition of being 'honeyed':

> The only definition of this quality is a human definition. Viewed in this way, every quality is related to qualities associated with other senses. Honey is sugary. Yet sugariness in the realm of taste, 'an indelible softness that lingers in the mouth for an indefinite duration, that survives swallowing,' constitutes the same sticky presence as honey in the realm of touch. To say that honey is viscous is another way of saying that it is sugary: it is to describe a particular relationship between us and the object or to indicate that we are moved or compelled to treat it in a certain way, or that it has a particular way of seducing, attracting or fascinating the free subject who stands before us. Honey is a particular way the world has of acting on me and my body. And this is why its various attributes do not simply stand side by side but are identical insofar as they all reveal the same way of being or behaving on the part of the honey. The unity of the object does not lie behind its qualities, but is reaffirmed by each of them: each of its qualities is the whole (2002: 46-48).

In this way, the use of terms like 'scroll' do not rest purely in the realm of the material (which can be kept at arms length). As a concept, the term 'scroll' also relies on our embodied relationship with the object and its utility, hence its dual purpose as both noun and verb. Set against the backdrop of the digital translation and its easy navigation, such an understanding might help to provide a reading of Feni's scroll as something that is able to "hold out against the perceived rhythms of modernity … and the felt fluidity of the present" (Young 2014: 177). Young describes this fluidity as "the figuration of modernity against traditionality, held still precisely in order to make modernity show up as if it were on the move, getting somewhere, progressing" (2014: 177). Further, she writes, "All objects bear their histories in their fabric, but mass-produced objects are diminished by this wear whereas works of craft, like works of art, are enhanced by it" (2014: 189).

One feels this strongly in the processes of deterioration that have come to mark Feni's scroll. With each passing year the work gets older and more susceptible to damage, adding to the sense of tension that the physical object engenders. It is an object that becomes increasingly risky to handle. To borrow a phrase from Young, it is a "stubborn, crusty thing that set[s] [itself up] against the flow of everyday life" (Young 2014: 178), and through which "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history" (Mikhail Bakhtin cited in Young 2014: 178).

The dowels on the scroll, like the contours of a chair, are built for the shape of our bodies, but they also shape them. To sit on a chair, one moulds their body to its shape (Young 2014: 190). Similarly, to hold the scroll by its dowels (or around the two rolls of paper), one has to bend the palm of one's hand into shape. In this context, your experience is determined by the length of your arms, which may be different for someone else. The deterioration of the scroll, the damage to it, and its relationship to the body, all allude to the fact that, in the words of Young, "The environment is the composition" (2014: 179). As described by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, "it is impossible to separate the words on a page from the fact that they are on a page, and that the page is published in a certain way, in a certain context, by a certain journal" (Filipovic, van Hal, & Øvstebø 2010: 16-17). That being said, "a work of art—and herein lies its incredible power and complexity—*can construct the exhibition as much as it can be constructed by it*" (Filipovic, van Hal, & Øvstebø 2010: 16-17).

CHAPTER 5: The Question of Address

5.1: Mistrust and compassion

Feni's scroll is considered by many to be autobiographic, or else, in the words of Morley Nkosi, a form of "visual storytelling" (2012: 119).[73] While it includes a number of inscriptions, the 'primary' medium is drawing. Where words are found, they tend to function like footnotes or signposts, yet, like the exhibition's pretext, these inscriptions are integral to our understanding of the work. As such, it is worth considering why Feni chose the form of a scroll and what role the inscriptions play in the telling of the story.

Chabani Manganyi writes that Feni did not consider himself a wordsmith. Speaking about an interview with Feni for a programme called *South Africa Now* during the '80s (2012: 37), Manganyi notes how Feni was "at pains" to express his "mistrust" of language—"engendered by a profound conviction that in representing complex human experiences, visual images are superior to everyday language" (2012: 39). Most of this mistrust appears to be directed towards talking or writing about his work, and to how others have interpreted it.[74]

To this end, he is quoted as having said that "some of the things that I know or feel but have difficulty explaining will come up [if you just look] because they are there within the piece" (Manganyi 2012: 39). A little later on, he repeats a similar sentiment: "Do not ask what the work means! Look at it and it will reach out to you and you may recognise what I was feeling" (2012: 40). There appears a tendency to want to leave audiences with something to be desired. The idea that the work should do the talking is also apparent in his love for jazz, which he observes, could "[capture] the universal without words" (2012: 30). As such, I don't think Feni's mistrust in language was a blanket disbelief in the power of words—he was, after all, a lover of poetry (Manganyi 2012)—but rather a belief that drawing, like music, could capture something that he struggled to articulate in words. As described by Jochen Volz, "Art dwells on the incapacity of existing means to describe the system we are a part of. In other words, art is obsessed with inventing signs for phenomena for things we have not named yet" (2019: 18). Speaking

[73] These two perspectives are slightly different, the first suggesting the writing of one's own story, while the latter could be any story, told through the language of imagery. The idea that the work is autobiographic is one that has been expressed by the likes of Omar Badsha, Louis Maqhubela, Morley Nkosi (Manganyi 2012). It was also listed as such in the retrospective catalogue produced by JAG (Dube 2006).

[74] In a 1968 interview with the Market Theatre's Barney Simon, Feni is quoted as having said: "Art historians are like preachers. They say this happened then and that happened then and this is what these people say and that is what those people say. And when you go along after church and say "What do you yourself think?" and he says "Get out of here you ruffian!" and he would like to have you locked away" (Nettleton 2011: 8).

about the distance between what we see, what we experience, and the pitfalls of written or verbal descriptions to capture these experiences, John Berger writes:

> Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight (1972: 7).[75]

This perspective is echoed by Cormac McCarthy in his paper, *The Kekulé Problem: Where did language come from?* (2017). It begins with a story about the German chemist Auguste Kekulé, who, having struggled to reach a consensus about the form and structure of the benzene molecule, fell asleep. The answer, he claims, arrived in the form of a dream, in which he pictured an ouroboros (2017). "Well. The problem of course," writes McCarthy, "is that since the unconscious understands language perfectly well or it would not have understood the problem in the first place, why doesn't it simply answer Kekulé's question with something like: 'Kekulé, it's a bloody ring.' To which our scientist might respond: 'Okay. Got it. Thanks'" (2017).

At the heart of McCarthy's problem is an understanding, shared by Berger, that language is not always the most efficient means through which to receive or interpret information: "Problems in general are often posed in terms of language and language remains a handy tool for explaining them. But the actual process of thinking—in any discipline—is largely an unconscious affair" (McCarthy 2017). McCarthy attributes this to the relatively recent advent of spoken language within the history of human evolution. He is quick to point out that language is not a biological system, nor is it a necessity, arguing that what distinguishes language in humans from other species is the idea "that one thing can be another thing" (2017).[76] Despite language being a "handy tool," McCarthy observes how our unconscious is not yet accustomed to thinking in words, opting instead to communicate with us through visuals:

> Apart from its great antiquity the picture-story mode of presentation favoured by the unconscious has the appeal of its simple utility … [It] lends itself to parable. To the tale whose meaning gives one

[75] The same could be said for other forms of sensory experience.

[76] To this end, Susan Sontag writes that: "The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation … [It] presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers. It seeks to resolve that discrepancy … Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text. The interpreter, without erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it. But he can't admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning" (1964: 3). Sontag goes on to write that "The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs 'behind' the text to find a sub-text which is the true one" (1964: 4). This is particularly hard to overlook within the context of this research.

> pause. The unconscious is concerned with rules but these rules will require your cooperation. The unconscious wants to give guidance to your life in general but it doesn't care what toothpaste you use. And while the path which it suggests for you may be broad it doesn't include going over a cliff. We can see this in dreams. Those disturbing dreams which wake us from sleep are purely graphic. No one speaks. These are very old dreams and often troubling. Sometimes a friend can see their meaning where we cannot. The unconscious intends that they be difficult to unravel because it wants us to think about them. To remember them. It doesn't say that you can't ask for help. Parables of course often want to resolve themselves into the pictorial. When you first heard of Plato's cave you set about reconstructing it (2017).

An important point here is that the graphic nature of dreams is often difficult to interpret, and that "the unconscious intends that they be difficult to unravel because it wants us to think about them. To remember them" (2017). Remembering something is perceived as being more likely if what you are thinking about is 'difficult to unravel'. You have to spend time mulling it over. The implications for our understanding of the scroll—not just as a physical object that must be handled with care; its dual construction; or the subjects' shifting configurations (in a way not unlike that of dreams)—can also be extended to Feni's use of words. Speaking about a poster that Feni made for a jazz concert at Mofolo Hall in Soweto during the '60s, artist William Kentridge recalls how, as a child, he was fascinated by Feni's phrasing, which created a long-lasting impression:

> [The poster] had a really nice drawing of jazz musicians. But it was an ammonia dye transfer architect's poster. So, it faded away and disappeared, but it had a text, which intrigued me for years, and the text was: "With is no charge." It drove me crazy, you know. It was not just saying "no charge" or "with no charge," or "is free," … but "with is no charge." And if any of the others had been written, I certainly would not have remembered that phrase for forty years (Kentridge & Morris 2017: 172).

This is not to say that Feni set out to confuse viewers. On the contrary, he has been recorded as having said that "his purpose as an artist was something he wanted his interlocutors to understand" (Manganyi 2012: 40); and later, that he was "not trying to confuse viewers; to dazzle them … [but to] make someone understand something meaningful which has to do with all humanity" (2012: 40). But Kentridge's story demonstrates McCarthy's point about how things that are 'difficult to unravel' are more likely to sink in. This is important to our understanding of Feni's scroll—the laborious nature of it versus its static exhibition; the challenges that the work poses to traditional forms of curatorship; and the resistance—expressed through the various inscriptions—to simple or singular interpretations.

To demonstrate this, there are a number of inscriptions found throughout the scroll, such as "This composition is not meant to be a fucking poem" or "all the writing of intent on this scroll is not meant to be read as poetry for it is not." Interestingly, such lines are often included in proximity to larger chunks of writing which do read very much like poetry.[77] In this sense, Feni appears to be thinking about his imagined audience, wary of how such inscriptions might be interpreted. Yet he also seems to be playing a bit of a game, if not to confuse you, then perhaps to get you to sit a while longer, to run the words back and forth through your mind. Many of the inscriptions indicate that Feni was suspicious of how his work might be interpreted. At times, he is quite direct, writing, "Your education does not allow you to understand the statement. You wouldn't know" or "Victim, you wouldn't know non from nothing for your familiarity is the kingdom of fantasy but then again."[78] On one hand, this could be read as a form of refusal or an intentional obfuscation—a way of resisting containment.

Writing about the work of Nicholas Hlobo, Khwezi Gule notes how the artist has a tendency to title his work in isiXhosa, thus "operat[ing] both on visual and linguistic levels" (2013). "What is the intention," he asks, "given that some titles are explained, but others are not?" and "How do we deal with a deliberate attempt at obfuscation?" (2013). At the heart of this question is "who tells whose story and who has the licence to talk about whose culture? … It is here" (2013), continues Gule:

> … that clues may lie to his artistic intention: that, for desire to work, something has to be denied, that a desire fulfilled is also a desire lost. Perhaps it is at this very intersection, where things are revealed and things are concealed—whether these things are linguistic or personal biographical details—that the mystery begins. [Thembinkosi] Goniwe has also rightly argued that reading artworks necessarily involves pleasure. The pleasure of looking, of contemplating, of configuring meaning, and that to rush too quickly into burdening the process of appreciation with politics denies the artwork the very complexity that makes art potentially liberating. But hard questions need to be asked: At what point is the biographical handed over to the viewer as something simply to consume, and to what degree is the visual merely a seduction that prevents one from being critical (2013)?

In contrast to the various forms of refusal found within the scroll, there are a lot of other inscriptions which show a deep sense of compassion and tenderness. These include "Only you can change my

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[77] Respectively: "My understanding for the / Analyses / In familiarity conversation / At the university of life / And your monstrous precious love / And other intelligent themes / Of nature / For you dear child" or "Re-enactment of the Verwoed killing / Between gentle straddled loins of the soft wound or my child / Glitter from the ancient rainbow beckoning your freedom / Showing through the glow and touching of toes / As she magnified in maltitude glide by / With the severed head of a shouting man / Precarious ballanced on a silver tray / covered in a blister of coal"

[78] Such inscriptions are usually found along the base of the scroll, however words such as "Children", "Solitude", "Sacred Freedom", and "Body and Soul" are occasionally included in other areas, floating between different figurations.

child"; "Theme for you dear child"; or "Song for my ma." Throughout the scroll, Feni mentions people with whom he shares a sense of kinship, admiration, or respect. Occasionally, names such as "Tsidi" or "Jean" appear, alone and void of context. Many of these names are recognisable—friends, writers, singers, artists and so on; people that were close to Feni and people that he deeply admired, yet no explanation is given. Other examples include "Theme for kuli pepe zaki / Wally moss nzimeni Ndumi my two / mothers"; "Amen book for serote pefe mokae and the crusifixion statements"; "Freedom piece theme for you"; "Patricia / Badsha / Chameleon"; "Remember this friend of mine" or "Composition for someone I knew."[79]

5.2: Two different audiences

From the various inscriptions, what becomes apparent is that Feni appears to be addressing two different audiences. The one, with whom he shares a sense of kinship and affiliation; and the other, of which he seems suspicious.[80] The use of intertextuality feels like something of a public address, which is amplified by the work's form as a scroll. By pointing to something (or away from something else), Feni unlocks a set of references—names, places, or events—which direct our understanding of the work, while also limiting its capacity to be read in other directions. As described by Carli Coetzee, "a text has meaning and resonance through how it is read with, and alongside, other texts" (2013: 46). At the same time, she writes that she is more surprised by "the way in which mistrust and suspicion can be related to intertextuality" (2013: 46).

To demonstrate her point, Coetzee makes reference to a text by Tlhalo Raditlhalo.[81] In it, he recounts an experience following a lecture that he delivered on the work of Professor Es'kia Mphahlele in 2004. This lecture formed part of a seminar at the University of Cape Town—an "English department of an English language university" (Coetzee 2013: 47). Raditlhalo writes that, "During question time, a colleague of [his], having noted the respect [he, Raditlhalo] conferred in [his] talk on Ntate Mphahlele, asked who [he] thought had inherited his mettle as humanist public intellectual," to which he "unhesitatingly responded that Professor Njabulo S Ndebele was the godson and that no one approximated Mphahlele's incisive intellectual engagement with the same degree of reflexivity as Ndebele" (2013: 46). Raditlhalo writes that his response "was followed by an awkward silence during which the questioner smiled" (2013: 46). Unable to place the smile as either "sympathetic or condescending [and] since there was no follow-up question, [he] did not elaborate" (2013: 46).

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[79] Just below the latter word 'knew' are two directions arrows which point left or right, implying that the composition be read in either direction.

[80] What Njabulo Ndebele refers to as a 'tactical absence'

[81] This text was published as an afterword to Njabulo Ndebele's collection of essays, *Fine Lines from the Box* (2007)

For Carli Coetzee, this story points to how the dual roles of affiliation and mistrust in Raditlhalo's telling of events are central to our understanding and "awareness of the different contexts within and to which we speak" (2013: 49). In her analysis, Coetzee is at pains to describe the context of the seminar room, which is "shown to be home, and also not home, to his argument" (2013: 46). She also highlights how Raditlhalo's "affiliation in the seminar is not with his colleagues (a seminar as a way for a department to build cohesion, to knit together research and personal interests)," thus demonstrating "a connection with his subject in opposition to one with his colleagues" (2013: 46). To substantiate this, she uses the following example:

> [Raditlhalo] refers to Mphahlele as *ntate*, literally 'father', but *ntate* is a term that carries here more than the connotation of an older person worthy of respect. In this context, Raditlhalo is also stressing his untranslated relationship to Mphahlele ('ntate' not 'father' or the previously used 'professor'), a gesture towards a certain kind of human intertextual placement. The choice of term of respect places Mphahlele's worth outside English, and beyond the reaches of the room … Raditlhalo's choice of this term of respect is meant to evoke for a listener a context other than this seminar room; but it also betrays a suspicion that he will not be heard in the way he wants to be—or at least he wants to foreground this possibility (2013: 46).

To Coetzee, Raditlhalo's positioning is intended to stress the distance between himself and the subject of his speech from that of his audience. In so doing, he makes "a certain kind of argument (about affiliation, about context, about the challenges of reading in a certain way, about the inheritance of intellectual traditions)" (2013: 47). In particular, Raditlhalo makes an argument for "the ways in which the room (and these seminars are normally held in what is called the 'tea-room', a room that displays and performs particular histories of social interaction, the format of this seminar, the institutional setting and its implicit and explicit exclusions) cannot contain what he has had to say" (2013: 47).

There are a number of parallels that can be drawn between Coetzee's reading of Raditlhalo's address and that of Feni's scroll, as well as other instances in which Feni has expressed a dual sense of affiliation and mistrust. This is perhaps most apparent in the various inscriptions found within the scroll, which prevent it from being pigeonholed, if not by art historians then by its imagined context of exhibition (which, at WAM, is not unlike that of the university seminar room). This reading is corroborated by a number of accounts told by those close to Feni (Manganyi 2012), which paint him as being fiercely independent.

One example is Feni's relationship to the ANC. He is known to have produced artwork for the party, to have lived in their offices in London, to have been supported by their members, and to have sympathised with their cause (Manganyi 2012). He is recorded as having said, "I am ANC" (Manganyi 2012: 38). At the same time, the context of this statement is important—he was addressing a journalist. On other, more intimate occasions, Feni is remembered as someone who would often distance himself from the party. Neo Moikangoa recalled how, "on visits to the ANC offices [Feni] made it very clear that he was coming as an uprooted South African and not as a card-carrying member" (2012: 113). Similarly, Justice Albie Sachs writes that "[Feni] made it very clear that he was not aligned. He did not want anybody to feel that they owned him" (2012: 129). As such, it feels like his responses to questions of affiliation were, like Raditlhalo's, contextually specific. When questioned by an outsider, he is willing to say "I am ANC," yet within the inner-circles of the party or amongst friends his independence is maintained.

On another occasion, Sachs tells of an encounter that Feni had with a wealthy collector. On seeing his work, this collector had been disappointed to find large ink blots on top of it. "When I saw Dumile I asked him what had happened," recalled Sachs:

> He spoke very softly and I had to listen quite hard. He spoke in his own idiom and more or less indicated that he thought she was trying to swallow him up. He told me: 'I saw the drawings that she liked and I stood over the drawings and dropped some ink over them.' So he had deliberately destroyed an opportunity that other artists would have grabbed. He resented her eagerness, which came from passion and appreciation … If there was a trend in him of fleeing from success it had some very deep roots that I was unable to understand (2012: 130-131).

Feni's mistrust of the collector and the subsequent destruction of his work to avoid being 'swallow[ed] up', raises a number of questions that are significant to our understanding of the scroll and its exhibition. What was it about this collector that he mistrusted? What was it about their 'eagerness', 'passion', and 'appreciation' that he resented? Did he feel it misplaced—that they were buying into something else altogether? What made him feel like this person was trying to 'swallow him up'?

For me, the decision to destroy his work rather than sell it, reflects a concern for the future life of his work—an acknowledgement that "[objects] are microcosms of a wider social world, the world of their making as well as the world of their becoming" (Wintjes 2005: 138)—and an "awareness of the different contexts within and to which we speak" (Coetzee 2013: 49); a way of "[foregrounding the possibility that] he will not be heard in the way he wants to be" (2013: 46).

In his performance lecture, *Contra Diction: Speech Against Itself* (2016), contemporary artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan asks how the right to silence "can be preserved in today's All-Hearing and All-Speaking society" (2016). He explains how freedom of speech (and here he is speaking within the context of the United States) may protect the semantic content of our words, but does not protect speech itself (2016). He draws on recent technological developments to show how governments, insurance companies, and so on, have been enabled to "measure emotional response via the vocal chords … not for achieving an accurate vocal translation, but for use as a lie detector … through the non-verbal evidence of the voice" itself (2016):

> LVA 6.50 is a lie detector that situates the truth not in what you say, but in how you sound. In the object quality of your voice and not the words you speak. In this way, the voice becomes divided into the words we say, and the way we say them. This division of the voice produces two different testimonies from one person's speech. One testimony on behalf of language, and the other testimony speaks on behalf of the body. Often these two testimonies are corroborated by each other, but they can also betray one another, an internal betrayal between language and body, between subject and object, between fact and fiction, exists in a single human utterance (2016).

The danger in this, says Hamdan, is that it denies people political agency, describing how even the right to silence "may offer a mode of withdrawal from public speech, from the necessity to confess. Yet it is the very withholding of our voices that can mute our political agency" (2016). Presented as a counter-strategy, Hamdan draws on the concept of Taqiyya, "an old piece of Islamic jurisprudence practiced only by esoteric minorities that allows a believing individual to deny his faith or commit otherwise illegal acts while they are at risk of persecution or in a condition of statelessness" (2016). In practice, Taqiyya is a subtle form of mispronunciation. The result is that potential persecutors may recognise the semantics of your voice to be saying one thing, while your body says another. This, Hamdan says, was an approach that the Druze community in northern Syria adopted during a period of "alleged mass conversions" (2016):

> Taqiyya is often understood as the divine right to lie, though Taqiyya is not lying. But it is not *not* lying, either. Taqiyya is a contradictory condition of being simultaneously inside and outside of the law, like police informants who can legally commit illegal crimes whilst under the employment of the police … Taqiyya is an illusive strategy of survival that is both employed in day-to-day life and in the most perilous of situations, and for one little-known Islamic community known as the Druze, Taqiyya is fundamental to their theological and social practice. For the Druze, prayer is typically private, and there are no mosques found in Druze communities … Taqiyya then is the concept through which the non-coercive religious activity of the Druze is maintained … Taqiyya is not only

> a legal dispensation to lie, and an act of dissimulation, but a technology of withdrawal from the fundamental obligation to perform oneself in public, to speak on behalf of oneself, to confess one's heart of hearts … *Taqiyya means you speak to people on the level of the other's readiness to listen* (Hamdan 2016).[82]

Hamdan speaks about the use of Taqiyya as an 'illusive strategy' which enables the Druze to participate in the process of mass conversions without letting go of their own position, thereby retaining their independence, belief systems, and affiliations whilst avoiding potential persecution. This sounds remarkably like the kinds of affiliation and mistrust expressed by Feni when speaking to the journalist, versus his friends within the ANC; or the ways in which Radithlalo was able to participate in the English seminar, whilst still expressing his affiliation to Es'kia Mphahlele as distinct from that of his colleagues. Speaking to Stacy Hardy about this facet of the scroll, she highlighted how such strategies were quite common during apartheid: "One looks at the archive of liberation songs, and how these songs were able to be played on the radio is because they [the authorities] didn't understand the simple codes that made them liberation songs. They're just not in a language that the dictator can understand" (2019). Further:

> The way everything worked under apartheid was that you were able to speak in two languages, which the oppressor never was. Things that they could not recognise as being subversive were in fact incredibly subversive. So there is a whole language which deliberately excludes a white audience, as you know. [Feni] chooses to only address that when he wants to, but there are layers of complexity that I know—and it was one of the difficulties of coming into [this project] with a white gaze—that I know I can never understand. I can only ever be the audience who understands his anger at me. But there are elements that I have no access to read and will never be able to read … That's where someone like Édouard Glissant, who says we have a 'right to opacity', comes in. It's ok that there are things about each other that we don't understand. That doesn't mean you can't engage. But it's just the acknowledgement that you will never understand (2019).

In the context of the scroll and its subsequent digitisation, I can't help but draw parallels between such concerns and the scroll's exhibition—the various attempts that have been made to make the work more 'accessible'; the desire to 'know'. What strikes me is Feni's ability to "speak to people on the level of the other's readiness to listen" (Hamdan 2016). This might explain why Feni opted for the visual, for things that are difficult to unravel. It is a perspective that might also help to understand why his work has

[82] Emphasis my own.

been prone to such a wide variety of interpretations (Van Robbroeck 2012), most of which tell us more about the interpreter than they do about the work itself.

CHAPTER 6: Counter-Fictions

6.1: Periodic listening stations

If, as Barbara Masekela intoned, the scroll meant everything to Feni, and if that same scroll seems to resist translation and the 'flows' of modernity, then perhaps the best approach to its curation would be to dwell a little longer with its *in*-accessibility—those aspects that pull away, that unravel and ravel, that expose as much as they conceal, that thicken and thin. How the work 'takes on flesh' and time; how it 'becomes charged and responsive'. This would mean grappling with its innate qualities as well as the environment it is responding to. It would mean drawing an audience's attention to archival absences, without necessarily trying to plug them. It would mean trying to grapple with the impossibilities of translation—its perjuries and omissions—whilst recognising its value as a new text, distinct from that of the original, by drawing attention to the bridge that separates the context of production from the context of exhibition.

This chapter is intended as an entry into understanding the approach adopted in the production of the practical component of this research, which has more to do with inherent inhibitions than it does with attempts at exhibition. Based on the theoretical concerns outlined in the previous chapters, this project was conceived around Raqs Media Collective's understanding of the exhibition as a "periodic listening station" (2017). Here, the use of the word 'listen' is interpreted, not just as a way of receiving sensory information, but as a moment of pause and reflection; as a way of being attentive or receptive to the world, especially in contexts where it may not be easy to hear the voice of another, be it above the crowd or at a distance.

In this sense, the practical component attempts to grapple with the question of accessibility as it relates to Feni's scroll—an attempt to treat loss productively, by knowing what we can recuperate and what we can't; what we can learn from absence, but also what we can *unlearn* through it. To this end, five writers were invited to come into WAM to view the scroll for a period of up to two hours, with the idea that they would then write a short, fictitious story or poem based on their subjective experiences.[83] Some were familiar with Feni's work, while others were not. Their points of access were thus varied depending on their personal interests.

[83] They included Stacy Hardy; Kaushik Sunder Rajan, Atiyyah Khan, Phumlani Pikoli, and Wairimū Muriithi.

Although not allowed to handle the work personally, they were able to watch as a member of staff did. They could witness the difficulties inherent in this process; could glimpse the opacity of the paper as it was lifted off the table; and were able to choose when to move on to a different section of the work, or when to keep looking. In this process, they were also able to see the scroll up close, unmediated by the context of exhibition and without the glass vitrine to obstruct their experience. They could bend closer to read an inscription or step away to get a sense of the work's scale. They could watch as the various drawings and inscriptions disappeared into the thickening roll of paper on one end. They could also get a sense of the transformations that occur in subject—the way that forms bleed into one another, only to reappear at a later point.

Although conceived as an opportunity for writers to experience the work outside the context of exhibition, this experience was still very much determined by the context of the museum where the viewing took place, as well as the more informal discussions that I'd had with each beforehand. The primary motivation for this approach was, however, to provide an extended period of time to view the work 'in motion'—to listen to it and read its body language—with the aim that the aforementioned facets of the scroll, as well as the context, might be brought to the fore in each of their respective stories.

To this end, there were no restrictions on what they wrote, what form their stories took, or how many words they used, and each were afforded sufficient time to sit and reflect on their experience. It is important to note that I, nor the writers, were allowed to take photos of the work, meaning that any sense of recall they had when writing their stories was based on memory and their own observations at the time of viewing. As a result, each story stems from memory, and is thus intricately tied to the subjectivities of each of the writers, as well as the passages of time, place, and context that bled into each story between the moment of the viewing and the writers' experiences whilst writing.

Initially, the idea was that each would provide a story in written form (handwritten or typed), as well as a corresponding audio component, which would be published online, as part of *Ellipses* journal's third issue,[84] which focuses on embodied methodologies.[85] As the project developed, however, it became apparent that different stories required different treatments. In some instances where audio is included, writers chose to read their text, while others opted to include music. The various decisions involved a process of negotiation between myself and each of the writers, as well as those doing the programming

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84 See title page for the link.

85 This platform has enabled me exposure to audiences I may not have been able to reach had I attempted to create the platform myself. It has also meant working with a team of professionals who have the capacity to make the site interactive, in a way that I would not have been able to do.

for *Ellipses*. In this sense, the project is comprised of three core areas. The first was an experience of the work in a secure environment; the second its translation into a fictitious story or poem; and the third, its subsequent inclusion online, in the form of a written text and/or audio story.

This approach was partly motivated by a short biography of Wangechi Mutu that I came across in 2016. It was written by Binyavanga Wainaina, and was unlike any I had ever read. The artist biographies that I am used to—those found on gallery websites or published in exhibition leaflets—generally follow the same formula, including a short introduction of the artist, where they are from, the mediums that they use, the themes that they tackle, and an extensive list of exhibitions, biennales, awards, residencies, or collections that their work has been a part of. All very informative, but, as described by Our Literal Speed's Matthew Jesse Jackson, there seems to be an unspoken understanding within artistic circles that although "we are immediately sharing a language … in some way we know that the language is inadequate" (2017). Take, for example, the opening sentence from the first paragraph of Wangechi Mutu's biography on Victoria Miro's website:

> In collages, films, sculptures and installations Wangechi Mutu reflects on sexuality, femininity, ecology, politics, the rhythms and chaos of the world and our often damaging or futile efforts to control it (2019).

It is a language that I have had to subscribe to when writing this report. Partly because of a feeling of 'this is how it's done', but also because I am speaking to (and embedded in) a particular tradition, with its own frameworks, vocabularies, and intertextual fields. In the excerpt above I have, admittedly, taken out the most descriptive or poetic elements. Nevertheless, it highlights the point that I, like Jackson, am trying to make—that "so much of what surrounds art today doesn't feel very much like art—it feels like publicity, or fear-mongering … How can we get back to something that feels like art?" (2017).

Wainaina's biography of Wangechi Mutu (also published by Victoria Miro), seems to offer an appropriate antidote. It is broken down into 130 bullet-points (part fact, part fiction) which conjure up a world in which the various taxonomies described on the website—"sexuality, femininity, ecology, politics" and so on—are not named, but given substance:

> 2. 1971. Idi Amin takes over Uganda. Wangechi's father buys a Peugeot 504. He and her uncle love to smoke Rex Cigarettes. All Kenyan beer bottles are stumpy and green. Over beer they discuss where they were when Jim Reeves died in a plane crash.
>
> 3. You are Wangechi Mutu. Born in Kenya.

> 4. You are Wangechi. Born. 1972. Born with a strange, bewildering left eyebrow. In a hospital run by Catholic order called Saint Discipline of The Blood. They are nice to babies.
> 5. 1972. All Kenyan beer bottles were green. Franklin Boukaka's song, *Aye Afrika, (Le Boucheron)* will play every night late in shortwave all over East Africa, a sad, sweet feeling. Inside our bloodstream of feeling independent.
> 6. You are a supermodel Kenya nomad four-year-old cowherd Afro-girl with tulle claws and steel killing teeth.
> 7. And you know that you have not been cow-herding. You just dreamt you were.
> 8. That it is not day. It is night. That your eyes are sticky. That you are sick. You know that kiss, you mother's fever kiss? It comes to you every year. She sings softly and spits her chew into your mouth, herbs and hot mush, pastes of beans, blood and milk, in small bits. Then your mum croons and goes out to stick her beak in the belly of a motorcycle trapped in a fashion shoot. Even now you can smell burning meat. Your fingers dream-bling! (Wainaina 2014: 9)

Where the former can be understood as an attempt to 'situate', 'link' or 'tie' Mutu's practice to an array of concepts; Wainaina's (like the work itself) is invested with an emotive power that both grounds and gives life to the work's conceptual broad strokes. Not only that, but it does not attempt to 'represent' or speak on behalf of the artist. Wainaina's can incorporate fact but can also complicate it, pointing to emotive truths that are hard to articulate empirically. As described by Marcel Broodthaers, "fiction [like art] allows us to experience reality and simultaneously what reality hides" (cited in Volz 2011). Further:

> Pronouncements like "Well, I like it," or "I can't stand that sort of thing," which sound aesthetic, locate judgement in personal taste and can foreclose discussion. But aesthetic pronouncements like "That's beautiful" or "That's ugly" transfer judgement from the perceiver to the object and can invite attention to what it is about the act or object that opens it to aesthetic consideration … They are provocations to insight (Young 2014: 190).

6.2: Runaways

Given the ongoing rush to fix Feni's practice to one or other armature, the choice of fiction felt appropriate.[86] This approach can be seen as an attempt to disrupt what Bill Brown terms, "our habit of looking" (2001: 4), described as the tendency to try and "see what [objects] disclose about history, society,

[86] For example, Anitra Nettleton's attempt to "establish a more secure art historical framework on which to hang studies of individual modernist artists in South Africa in the middle of the twentieth century by examining the work of Dumile …" (2011: 8).

nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us" (2001: 4). Instead, Brown argues that it is the "suddenness" of our encounter with objects that forces a gap between our interpretation and our experience. Referencing Leo Stein, he writes: "You cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a falling nut. These are occasions outside the scene of phenomenological attention that nonetheless teach you that you're 'caught up in things' and that the 'body is a thing among things'" (2001: 3-4). Important here is the sudden connection described, one that involves an encounter with the object beyond simply looking: the sharp pain that a nut causes as it falls on your head; the loud crack; the momentary dizziness. In this sense, fiction provided a means through which to retell such encounters, but in a way that the reader might walk alongside the text, inhabiting the various characters.

Rather than treating the scroll's meaning as finite, the variety of stories included become a catalyst for imagining an array of different possibilities, all of which are embedded in some form of truth that is both connected to, yet distinct from the scroll. It is perhaps quite similar to what Stacy Hardy terms 'faction'—a "genre of working between [fact and [fiction]" that acknowledges the failures of language and historicity. As described by Hardy:

> The very term 'war' that we've used for what we call conflict is so radically different, the actual practice of it is so radically different, that it can't be contained in that old language anymore. It's evading it. And if we keep talking about things in the same language, and we keep presenting things in the same language, the extremeness of things gets lost … That goes back down to everything from indigenous beliefs to the political reality of today, to the mysteries of nature. The languages of history, of law, of theory seem to be continually failing us. I've always found that fiction is a tool whereby we crumble the matrix so to speak—this illusion of reality that we've come to expect, versus what the fuck is actually going on (2019).

My position here is also tied to an understanding of what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie termed "the danger of a single story" (2009); to Arundhati Roy's objective "to tell politics like a story, to communicate it, to make it real" (2001: 10-11);[87] and to Saidiya Hartman's assertion that "fact is simply … a fiction endorsed with state power" (2019). Speaking about her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments:*

[87] Speaking in response to a question posed to by David Barsamian in 2001, about what the transition from writing fiction to nonfiction was like, Arundhati Roy responded with the following:

> Fiction is the truest thing there ever was. Today's world of specialisation is bizarre. Specialists and experts end up severing the links between things, isolating them, actually creating barriers that prevent ordinary people from understanding what's happening to them. I try to do the opposite, to create links, to join the dots, to tell politics like a story, to communicate it, to make it real. To make

Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval (2019) and the need for a plurality of ideas, Hartman goes on to question our fidelity to the archive, "given the kind of violence and power that has engendered [it]" (2019). She speaks about her work as 'counter-fictions', born from a belief that "anybody can write fiction because there's a way that there's not the same kind of contestation around power and knowledge that takes place around that domain" (2019). For Hartman, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction not only enables one to "push against the limits of the archive" but also creates a space for other kinds of stories to exist beyond "a certain set of archival limits or productions," thus providing "access to [a] realm of experience that is without a certain fact or archival trace" (2019).
When I mentioned Hartman's critique to Hardy—the idea that "fact is simply a fiction endorsed with state power," she also pointed out how it goes beyond that:

> It's about the kind of world that is constructed and presented from a very specific Western view, and a very specific use of language; a very specific understanding of things that operates on questions of linear time, on boundaries where everything is self-contained, that operates on ideas of subject and object, all those kinds of things. There's a radical need to find other kinds of ways to talk about our realities because our realities don't fit within those. And you know, I've found, often what I call poetic research—which is also a research that allows for a lot more subjectivity (or knowledge of that subjectivity)—that you are coming in with a history and a memory that is coming into conversation with whatever epistemological object you are studying is carried, and that it's important to bring back and foreground that subjectiveness (2019).

This sentiment is also echoed by Simon Njami in his paper, 'Fictional Faculties' (2013). Here, Njami speaks about some of the challenges that he faced as a lecturer, in particular the institutional drive to shape students according to its own value standards. Retelling an encounter that he'd had with a student at the Academy of Beauz-Arts in Paris, Njami explains how said student had struggled to meet the expectations of his lecturers. Following a trip home to Senegal, this student realised that "the canon of beauty, or the canon of lines and forms that the Beaux-Arts wanted to teach [him], had nothing to do with what [he] knew" (2013). The student's subjectivity, his way of looking and what he considered to be beautiful, was completely different to that being taught in Paris. As a concluding statement, Njami writes:

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the connection between a man with his child telling you about life in the village he lived in before it was submerged by a reservoir, and the WTO, and the IMF, and the World Bank. *The God of Small Things* [1997] is a book which connects the very smallest things to the very biggest. Whether it's the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water in a pond or the quality of moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom, your bed, into the most intimate relationships between people — parents and children, siblings and so on. If you lose these connections, everything becomes noise, meaningless, a career plan to be on track for tenure (2001: 10-11).

> I think that when we want to transform subjectivity into an indisputable truth we become liars. The problem with universities is that students are coming to classes in order to get some truth when of course we know there is no such thing. Therefore we should assume that we are just building fictions, and that maybe the greatest form of reality is fiction, as far as human sciences are concerned (2013).

This story could also be applied to the gallery or museum context, especially in South Africa, where exclusionary collection practices have left giant holes in the archive. How do we acknowledge the messiness of history? How do we account for archival absences? What shape do they take? And how can we avoid forms of knowledge production that perpetuate a particular kind of archival violence? When I began work on this project, there was an internal pressure of sorts to produce an exhibition—something that occupies a particular temporal and spatial dimension. Fortunately, I was dissuaded from such an approach by Kabelo Malatsie, who proffered the following:

> The exhibition does not have to be thought of as a holy space. An exhibition can be a space where we illustrate ideas. An exhibition can be an expo. It's not the thing. It's where we show some of the thing. It doesn't always have to be *the* space, you know? If your idea reads better in a different format than put your energies there. Make that (2019).

The use of fiction online is not foregrounded for its ability to circumnavigate the complexities or issues inherent in the exhibition of Feni's scroll. That is, it does not attempt to make the scroll more accessible to contemporary audiences. Instead, the imagined audience is made aware of each story's connection to the scroll, whilst simultaneously being made aware—through the variety of stories produced, and the absence of the work in question—that what they are reading or listening to is a subjective interpretation or re-imagining that is distinctly its own. Here it is also important to note that, from an experiential and material perspective, the online sphere is just as bounded and constrained as any other, if not more so. In this context, the scroll itself is completely absent. In a context where one's attention is being continuously fought for, and where the surplus information of the online sphere generates its own sense illegibility (2018: 187-188), this approach is intended as a way for audiences to *think the distance.*

This approach also has its roots in my experience of Glenn Ligon's *Runaways* (1991), a series for which the artist commissioned ten of his friends to write descriptions about his physical appearance and mannerisms. Styled to look like handbills produced in the early half of the nineteenth-century, the various texts begin to read like wanted posters. If you just read one of them, you might develop some kind of

mental image of who this figure, 'Glenn', is. Presented together, however, the differences that occur from one text to the other make such a solidification impossible. Each shift in description creates a fissure through which the real Glenn disappears. He becomes 'invisible'. A runaway. Always one step ahead of potential persecution.

That some of the stories point towards the sanitised context of each writer's experience of the scroll at WAM indicates that what you are reading or listening to is not simply an interpretation of the work, but reflects an understanding of the work's context and 'becoming'—its current life as part of WAM's collection. As described by John Dewey, "Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of aesthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience" (cited in Young 2014: 180).

6.3: Audio, absence, and audience

The initial thinking behind the use of audio in these stories was to deal with the various issues of address outlined in chapter five. A wavering voice, a hesitation, or a deep breath gives audiences a sense of intimacy, of being spoken to. At the same time, where audio is combined with text, there is a tension between you as a reader (reading the text in your own voice) and that of the author's. The inclusion of audio alongside text also creates a tension by forcing audiences to read at the same tempo of the author, in much the same way that one's experience of the physical scroll is a relatively slow and laborious process. The slippages that occur between the audio and the text, in which the author might leave out a word or stop to breathe, also disrupt the kinds of easy reading we have become accustomed to online.

The inclusion of these stories online, as opposed to in a gallery, points to the physical work's absence and the issues that surround materiality and accessibility. A book may have done a similar thing, but this approach would not have allowed for the inclusion of audio, and within the context of my masters, would have cost too much. For me, their inclusion online elicits a sense of desire to see the work, which is heightened by the fact that you can't. As a result, no photographic reproductions of the work were included (both here and within the practical component) to avoid giving the impression of making the work itself more accessible (resulting in a kind of physical amnesia). The scroll's absence online and the various allusions to it remind us that it too is a bounded system, thus bringing us back from the window on our screen into the material world.

From a curatorial perspective, this project has also required thinking about an imagined audience. The value of producing these stories online is that said audience becomes much wider and therefore much

more complicated. Aside from those already familiar with *Ellipses* or with this project (such as friends of the writers, or my supervisors), I have a somewhat optimistic mental image of people accessing these stories by chance. Perhaps they are sitting at home in bed, with their laptop in front of them, or at a busy bar, with headphones plugged in. Perhaps they are on their way to work and are listening/reading on their cellphone.

Someone who is familiar with Feni's work may be able to generate some kind of mental image of the scroll, but unless they've seen it before or are sitting in the seminar room in which the viewings took place, with the scroll in front of them, they will be at a remove and forced to rely on their imagination. Even if someone takes the time between the many tabs open on their screen to read the introduction, they will just know that each story is based on the same scroll; that the scroll forms part of WAM's collection; and that they aren't allowed to touch it. Enforcing distance probably seems like a really bizarre thing to do, yet it is through this that I believe we may come to learn something of the complexities inherent in the life of the scroll, if only through a shared sense of distance and desire that Feni must have experienced at the time of its making.

Conclusion

Writing a conclusion at this point feels counter-productive. The research conducted up until now, as well as the accompanying practical component, feels like the tip of the iceberg. My only hope is that we can begin to think more critically about the 'mediatory' role of curators and institutions, and the stifling effect that these might have on our experience of art. To this end, I believe the field of translation studies to be a productive starting point. After Dambudzo Marechera, "Thoughts that think in straight lines cannot see round corners … We were taught to want to go to where a straight line goes and to look back over the shoulder to where straight lines come from" (Marechera 1990: 37). The futility of this endeavour is profoundly limiting. Thinking about questions of authorship, originality, and address through the prism of translation allows for a greater understanding of representation and its compound meanings within the context of South Africa's public museums. Similarly, by questioning the various ways in which history is produced and the traditions that inform its production, we might begin to acknowledge some of the less tangible undercurrents that effect the display and exhibition of art.

It is important, for example, to think about how the context of this paper is formed by my Masters at Wits. It's structure into chapters and its dependence on a linear narrative seem counter-productive. Similarly, there are many forms that the practical component of this project could have taken. To this end, it should not be considered an end in-and-of itself, but rather a starting point for further work. There are many ways to approach Feni's scroll that might deepen and enrich our understanding of it.

Perhaps the short stories produced for this project could be extended into the form of a book, or a record. Another option, proposed by Stacy Hardy, would be to explore the avenue of dance and performativity (2019). Only time will till.

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