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Bubblewrapped: (Queered) Exhibition Making as a Means of Creating Spaces in Johannesburg Which Balance Intimacy, Safety and Access

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bubblewrapped: (Queered) Exhibition Making as a Means of Creating Spaces in Johannesburg Which Balance Intimacy, Safety and Access

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Contemporary Curatorial Practice as offered by the University of the Witswatersrand

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

School of ……Arts**……..**

SENATE PLAGIARISM POLICY

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There are innumerable points of encounter in the greater constellation of my life which have brought me to this bright moment. I wish I could whisper a million thanks to the wind and have it carried to everyone from the people who talked with me on the 50+ minute bus commute to the one librarian who let me not pay that fine.

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FOREWORD

If there was ever an incident that sparked new hopes and fears for the trajectory of humankind, and the ways in which we relate to one another, it was the dawn of the internet age. This new entity - so formless, yet bearing so much weight - looked to some like the death of human(e) connection and the warmth it brought, to be replaced only by the cold wash of light that emits from a computer screen in the dark (Valentine 2006: 367). To others, this new entity, so formless, looked like an opportunity.

This lack of form was an opportunity to mould something which might, in some fashion or another, finally work as a new tool to be instrumentalised in the battle against capitalism that many theorists in the late 20th century were engaged in. Within the discipline of art history, they fondly embraced this amorphous tool and named it New Media. Andreas Broeckmann thought of this new tool as signalling the death of capitalist hierarchies of power, with digital art retorting against those hierarchies and forming for itself a new position in media (cited in Stakemeier 2015: 130). This re-locating was envisioned as fundamental to challenging the media's role in capitalism in the dissemination of knowledge.

As Stakemeier laments, these hopes for the then “New Media” did not come to pass. Capitalism did not come crashing down. The digital space as a medium did not allow for a successful realisation of *mimesis*, in which art would exist as art for arts sake. Instead, the digital space allowed for a *mimicry*, in which the “crushing conditions of [capitalism]” would experience an acceptance and integration - a ““camouflage of the inorganic”” (Adorno cited in Stakemeier 2015: 126).

I enter this discourse from a different position. I was not there with Felix Guattari in the late 80s, as he hoped for a post-medium era, and the possible anti-capitalist ramifications of such an era (Guattari 2009: 299). I did not stand in the same position as him, so as to see the internet as this close-but-distant formless entity, that might just be a tool, if not a friend to some movement. Nor did I stand in the position to glare at the internet with anxiety and horror, fearing the distance it would wedge between human connections, like the people to whom Gill Valentine refers (2006: 367). None of these views could accurately describe the position from which I enter, because my

relationship to the internet and the digital space is that of a deeply personal familiarity. It is a site (or, as it were, a web of them), to which my subjectivity is so deeply entrenched.

Because I, like many people of my generation, grew up on the internet.

I could hardly call my position, when it comes to the internet, a vantage point. Rather, it is more befitting in many ways to say that I emerge from within the once formless entity. I refer to its formlessness in past tense as it very certainly has come to be instrumentalised in various ways. And amongst those many ways, I cannot deny the way that Stakemeier is right about how the digital has been co-opted into financialisation (2015: 134). She rationalises this as capitalism having seen some potential to build valuable relations between humans through the internet; in seeing this, capitalism can and has manipulated that humane value towards its own ends.

However, it is my position that too damning a picture is being painted within Stakemeier's conception of the digital. It ignores the very premise of the stance it posits - in the internet, there is the building of valuable human relationships. For me, who never had the opportunity to foretell what the internet *could* be, I think autoethnographically of how my experience with the internet *has been* a space of intimate human connection. In describing the process of mimicry, and how this inorganic thing (capitalism) has come to live within this realm of human connection, Stakemeier ignores that living beside that is the presence of intimacy.

Reflecting on this intimacy, I turn again to an autoethnography. A large part of my development was spent on pop culture forums and blog spaces like Tumblr. In these little niches of the internet, I felt seen and understood in ways I didn't have access to in my life offline. These spaces I found myself in - more queer than I had ever seen - were carefully curated. Moderators on sites like GagaDaily.com and ATRL.net worked tirelessly to ensure there was no "flamebaiting". Suddenly, derogatory language towards women and queer people, which had gone so unchecked in my unmediated interactions, was now met with a no-tolerance attitude. This work of moderating can in many simple ways be thought of in the same line with curating, as the direct action of selection and exclusion of certain works (in this instance, posts or comments/artworks) and people (users/artists) around a central theme. In this, there was a sense of safety here, which allowed me to ask questions about myself. In these contemplations and questions posed in these online spaces, via forums and the private chats they would branch off

into, I was beginning to think around identity politics. I was able to understand myself in intricate detail. I would even reflect on what it is I wanted to feel and to be seen as online.

This aspect of what is seen online was something which also fascinated me. Were these bold, outgoing, radically femme and queer persons online the exact same as they were in the world outside? I would never know, but it didn't matter. It was these identities they curated, and the spaces they curated around them that were of importance to me. Their version of "the world outside", which was hundreds if not thousands of kilometres away, likely looked very different to mine. But the space we did share, online, bore an affective quality, that made me feel like I had been more than just welcomed into a world (in all senses of the word) queer to me - but with my part in it, it was becoming a world of my own to claim.

Outside of what feels like a world of my own, where Stakemeier and I can possibly agree is that with or without a choice in the matter, we are engrossed in a world of capitalism offline. As much as I might be able to use the internet as a space to navigate belonging, I must be cognisant of the spaces in which I work and operate offline. To be more specific to my context, offline, I must contend with the art scene as it specifically plays out in Johannesburg - which is largely a context defined by the overdetermination of the commercial sector. With the public museum sector suffering from a lack of state funding, and only a few privately funded institutions to support the arts, much is placed on a very capitalist conception of the arts.

It is in the face of these disappointments (as documented by Stakemeier) and these precarious conditions in which I must begin to formulate something of a response, or at least some questioning to these conditions which have made for congruency with hostile elements. My position utilises the academic and personal knowledge I have of the digital media space to begin formulating such a response. For some time, I have grappled with the seeming distance that these tools have to the traditional centre of curation. Yet, in a process of engaging with the extensive texts of artist, educator and curator Paul O'Niel, I came across a conception of the paracuratorial that felt like the spark to fuel a greater project concerned with belonging. Ironically, it was in fact this positioning of the activities and tools located outside of the traditional curating conception that was liberating and provocative (O'Niel 2012: 1). What might be accomplished in working from the outside, or, as O'Niel frames the common assumption of the paracuratorial, "operating

at a distance from the main act" (O'Neill 2021: 1)? I therefore undertake the journey to questioning the main act, as it were.

INTRODUCTION

It is my intention to highlight one crucial point, and make it explicitly clear, early on in this research: the work is not done. Of course, what it is that is submitted in partial fulfilment of this Masters is done, and a complete effort on my part. However, the work of making intimacy happen is not done. Indeed, it will never be done. For if intimacy is a feeling which is worked towards (as the chapters below will highlight) then it is something that too can be lost. For that reason, in the final chapter, I have made the intentional decision to not speak about the curatorial project's eventual public realisation in the past tense, for fear of positioning this as a review or, worse so, a demonstration, communicating "Here! This is how intimacy in exhibition making is definitively done!" Instead, it is my decision to write about the methods and attempts involved in the making of *bubblewrapped*. This delivery choice of reporting maintains the focus of this research as being a question of methodology, and intentionally moves away from the framing of exhibitions as being final presentations, or the full stops of the art world.

This research asks: if it is that we can so easily imagine finding moments of intimacy within a number of institutions (such as those tender moments within the institution of marriage, or those spiritually moving confessionals within the institution of the church), why can we not find it within those institutions of our work under global capitalism?

The work of making intimacy happen within professional work - especially within the arts - is something which is largely under researched. Intimacy - or, rather, the possibility of making it happen - is the glowing star which this research is at all times always reaching towards and orbiting around. I reach back, thinking of my past, and the alluring glow of intimacy is remembered like the bright blue light that a computer emits as it's starting up, readying a world of limitless connection. I reach forward, thinking of my professional curatorial practice and its future, and the luminescent possibility of intimacy is thought of as the single light positioned above a plinth in a low-lit gallery, drawing eyes away from the glaringly plain white walls, and drawing a soft gaze to this manifestation of creativity.

The research recognises intimacy as a phenomenon which needs to be worked towards; something rooted in the experiential (and thus here one moment, gone the next). In my own personal experience, it is that fleeting quality of intimacy that has long haunted and intrigued me.

Unbeknownst to my prepubescent self, those moments of experiencing the intimacy of confession and admission to strangers on the internet - as my means of dealing with my own queerness - would go on to have me searching for years to come for experiences of so deep an intimacy. An intimacy that was qualified by this feeling of safety and belonging. Unbeknownst to my prepubescent self, I would go on to search for years for the echo of such intimate moments in non-virtual, traditional exhibition spaces. Daunting as this fleeting, experiential quality of intimacy may be, the exhibition, as one of the main features of the curator's practice, is itself something which has the potential to be deeply experiential. Therefore, there is some basis upon which intimacy (the proposed solution) and the exhibition format (a currently recognised symptom of the larger problem in the relationship between art and work) can be married.

This research undertakes a series of interviews which have been very deliberately designed to evoke all of the cornerstones of intimate engagement, as observed by Harry Reis and Phillip Shaver (1988). The interviews seek to recenter much of the affective factors that can often fall to the peripheral - if not erased from the agenda entirely - in exhibition making. This includes invoking memories and desires from childhood - which have long since been pushed to the side - by directly questioning what it is that motivated these professionals to take their place in the art world.

The research participants interviewed were people I have known from my professional practice to be well established as practitioners in the Johannesburg exhibition making scene, but who all play vastly different roles in its function. They were chosen for either the unique position they hold in the industry - often made unique or alienated by aspects of their social identity such as race or gender in what is established in this research as a predominantly white, wealthy and male dominated industry. In addition, they were chosen because I happened to have prior knowledge (from professional relations) of aspects of their professional journey which offered insight into things which are often kept under wraps, in favour of an arts industry that values pristine, untainted presentation to its public. In a research enquiry that seeks to question these modes of exhibition making, these kept-under-wraps-insights being made (partially) accessible is valuable in identifying what might be wrong in current ways of working, and experimenting with other possibilities.

A textual analysis of these interviews takes place within this research report. This analysis utilises both a content-analysis method and thematic groupings. As such, the research intends to highlight both the pertinent moments of a rhetorical consensus and rhetorical discord from people who occupy very distinct positions from one another. In this, I think alongside the possibilities, use and place of intimacy within our shared art world. I use the access that acting as a curator gives me to consider the possibilities of future exhibition making practice, starting with my own curatorial gesture for this research.

Albeit much of the impetus for this research is garnered from personal experiences within and outside of the arts industry, it would be remiss to not acknowledge how this research's curatorial gesture exists within a very specific contemporaneity of curatorial practice. Terms like 'other', 'alternative' and 'queered' are terms littered throughout this research in an attempt to explain the realisation, methodology, aesthetics and epistemic positioning of *bubblewrapped*. Quite early on into the research of this inquiry, I came across Portia Malatjie's writing on the alternative and experimental art spaces of Johannesburg (2013). Malatjie's inquiry sets the scene within which much of my own efforts take place, and garner their precedent.

Already in 2013, Malatjie recognised that there was a growing number of alternative art spaces in Johannesburg CBD, a term which she uses to describe spaces that "aim to bring to the fore strategies and methodologies that are progressive and not necessarily mainstream or foregrounded" (2013: 368). These spaces, rooted in site-specificity, were born of a movement to rebuttal the gentrification of the inner city (Malatjie 2013: 369), and thus in some ways always speak back at the demands of the market (property and otherwise). Malatjie uses The Parking Gallery as an emblem of such a space in the Johannesburg context, which was a space started by artist Simon Gush, closed, re-opened and managed an extension of the Visual Arts Network of South Africa and has since closed again. This specific sporadic, and ephemeral quality of alternative exhibition space provides exciting precedent for the research. Much like The Parking Gallery, *bubblewrapped* was an initiative started by one person (myself), making attempts for a more experimental art space, while also still having to navigate the realities of existing in a commercially driven art society (both Gush and I organised our various spaces around the availability we could scrummage from full time jobs (Malatjie 2013: 369)). For a commercial arts initiative, an exhibition space that lasted only a weekend (like *bubblewrapped* did), would

only be considered successful and worthwhile in the event that it turned over a very high sales rate, like an art fair would. Malatjie points to how it is that alternative spaces do not hinge on the same criteria for success that their mainstream counterparts do, with them not hinging on finality and actually allowing room for failure (2013: 37). As such, I reiterate this research's emphasis on ideas and attempts, and an intentional move away from approaching the research entirely retrospectively.

This curatorial gesture uses the recorded interviews as exhibition material. Unlike a white cube presentation - or the traditional exhibition format - there are no material art objects to be looked at for this exhibition. I use the word 'material' here to speak both to the quality of the exhibitionary material as being intangible/immaterial, while also recognising that in terms of value, the sonic and video art forms are seen as far more immaterial (in value) to the commercial art scene. This is an intentional decision, so as to give audiences a new perspective to view and engage exhibitionary formats. This exhibition peels away at layers of the traditional exhibition format and curates an environment which offers a more behind-the-scenes view of exhibition making practices within the Johannesburg art scene. It does so by deploying the sonic - in the form of the interview process - and the visual - proposed through the form of moving image, which I directed and conceptualised. The video is my interpretation of much of the existing literature on the Johannesburg art context, as well as first hand information given to me by my respondents.

As such, the exhibition seeks to do two things. Firstly, it seeks to make accessible information which I believe is worthwhile for art buying, art viewing and arts working professionals alike, to make us reconsider intimacy (and ultimately our ways of working) by presenting these moments of self disclosure in a setting they might typically never be seen as an appropriate space for it. Secondly, it seeks to stage and mount an exhibition which does not grapple with the world of traditional world of objecthood, i.e. classic mediums like sculpture, paintings, drawings, etc.; the video and the sonic component of the exhibition cannot be held, and passed off to another in a sales transaction (with these also generally being tougher sells in exhibitions which do try to sell film and sound). It requires a listening, a viewing, and a feeling of what has been said. Even the digital archive of the exhibition, hosted on a tumblr site linked below, is only but an archive of the exhibition. The site does not act as a digital articulation of *bubblewrapped*, because that

affect and sensory experience was true to the exhibition and its ephemeral qualities, like many alternative spaces of its kind. Yet, unlike much of its alternative spaces kin, which are often poorly archived (like The Parking Gallery, which is hard to find a thorough exhibition history of), this exhibition's inspiration from the internet allowed it an opportunity to exist publicly, for longer, without ever offering something acquired into a private collection, like an object from a commercial exhibition. Much of the exhibition's actual objects (or apparatus) - a computer mouse, chair, keyboard - are bubble wrapped, like art objects before exhibition; this single use of materiality is the discursive tool to return us back to those moments in which art is handled with care. The bubblewrap therefore becomes a material manifestation of processes which value consideration, care and processes of exchange/engagement.

The curatorial gesture is indeed an exhibition. But it is queered and made distant from this thing which it looks to; it is a lens through which to view the exhibition, and is a proposed method with which to approach it. I emphasise here that the queered exhibition format is but one proposed approach to the kind of exhibition making that can create spaces that balance safety, access and intimacy, hence 'queered' being placed in the title in parenthesis. While it is argued that exhibition making at large is an opportune site for creating the kind of aforementioned spaces, queer studies is but one methodological avenue with which to make such attempts.

In recognising this, the research becomes a question essentially concerned with method. This question of method is concerned with finding out how I might reconcile my moments of intimate belonging within the internet and the arts space within which my work and professional life is situated. The influence of the internet as a launching pad for the exhibition is intentionally referenced several times in the curatorial gesture, and, quite subtly, in its titling. The specific stylisation of *bubblewrapped* as lowercase 'b' is a nod back to the internet culture my generation has established. In my research, I have yet to find scholarly material that theorises around *why* it is that such large pockets of Gen Z/Gen Alpha type everything in lower case, but the reality of that is exemplified by the amount of blog posts available on the subject. The New York Post was the most reputable voice I could possibly find that had written on this minor linguistic phenomenon. Language and culture expert, Noël Wolf, shared with the The New York Post that the stylistic choice is Gen Z's means of using language to determine a more casual space of interaction, free of the formalised codes of language adopted in scholarly and professional

institutions (cited in Kato 2024). To even be amongst the first to write a little bit on this language phenomenon feels somewhat like sacrilege, as though I am explaining a generation-wide inside joke. This awkward footing I find myself in would be the reason this research prefaces itself as attempts towards intimacy, in the space of institutionality. There's an acknowledgment of the awkward attempts at finding just the right footing in new terrain. I recognise in the internet the importance of such a space (of intimate belonging) for myself, and venture to undertake something akin to a translation in my other professional and scholarly world. I also note that it might not be possible to translate the affect of an online space into the physical space of an exhibition site, even with allowance made for certain nuances to be lost in the process of translation. But for the very role that such an intimate space has played in my own actualisation, professionally and personally, it is worth making the attempt for someone else.

1. The undying yearning for intimacy and how to make it come alive

I would not be the first to state that intimacy is personal. That is something which is widely understood and accepted, both in and outside of scholarship. However - and I would still not be the first to make note of this - it is worth recalling that intimacy is also historical. Practices and attempts towards intimacy have a history which continue to form how it is that we understand intimacy, or what is intimate, today.

This history has made intimacy closely related to privacy. Most easily observed, the world has physically shifted around the ideas of intimacy as being closely tied to privacy to thus make gendered bathrooms, and make smaller domestic spaces dedicated to communal meeting (living rooms) in favour of those most private spaces being larger (master bedrooms) (Mateus 2010: 58). This is in line with the practice of intimacy as being an exercise of boundary work, as Lynn Jamieson discusses (2005). Jamieson, in her research, speaks to how changes of society can possibly be tracked and understood through the work of establishing boundaries, towards ideals of living more intimately,

The example of the boundary drawn between genders and the bathrooms they ought to use comes back to the idea that intimacy is personal. In privately (intimately) occupying a bathroom, the idea was that this was an affirmation and communication of one's gender, distinguished from another. Indeed, the personal is intimate.

Scholarship has also had no problem identifying and correlating the personal nature of intimacy to romantic relationships. In fact, Sehlikoglu and Zengin lament the way in which intimacy is all too often understood too narrowly, with a focus on sex, coupling and romantic relationships (2015: 22). Marriage is an area that is constantly looked at in much of the literature that informed this research.

Sara Ahmed looks at how the mind is able to rationally understand that while the day of your birth happens to be the day of many other, unknown people's birthday: it still feels appropriate to take intimate possession of it as *your* birthday (1997: 19). Similarly, she goes on to write about how an international feminist event hosted on her birthday by the UN made her feel momentarily closer to the UN itself, because by some coincidence, they were hosting an event which aligned with her political values on her birthday. Rationally, of course, Ahmed recognises that this was not in her honour.

But what is exemplified here is the human capacity to find intimacy within something as universal as a birthday and something as impersonal, and strictly coded by policies like an institution. Even marriage, one of the most readily embraced institutions across cultures of the globe, still somehow manages to consistently move its partakers to emotional tears on a wedding day. A wedding day which, across many cultures, will often be coded to feature a bride walking down the isle, very likely in white. These are rules of the performance of matrimony and they are widely embraced. Yet still, its partakers will find little instances of self-disclosure, perhaps in the choice of where the isle might be, or the exact shade of white of a dress. In this, the institutional is made personal by boundary work - distinguishing one bride from another she sees in a magazine - and thus made intimate.

Therefore, with the focus on intimacy, this research troubles itself with the complexity of affect. One of those complexities of this field grapples with placement. How do we place this thing that necessarily exists in the liminal, hard to grasp spaces (Seigworth & Gregg 2010: 1)? Before attempting to understand the way we affectively relate, it is important to highlight the conditions that make such an investigation necessary at all.

The arts' relationship to the affective is undeniable. However, what becomes of the arts in a space where the issue of feeling, even on some superficial level, becomes second priority to the

commercial concerns of art professionals? These are the questions I sit with in evaluating the art scene of Johannesburg. While the matter of placing affect is no easy feat, there's something else to be learned in understanding how the art scene is geographically placed across Johannesburg. Research in geography undertaken by James Gregory and Christian Rogerson (2018) indicates that "the spatial distribution of visual arts shows that 50 percent of Johannesburg's total of 315 visual arts establishments either are located in Sandton or Randburg followed by the Northern suburbs" (2018: 42). One must rationally assume that such a centralisation of the arts is by no means a coincidence. They go on further to state that "The pattern of visual arts enterprises shows a close relationship with the wealthier residential areas of metropolitan Johannesburg" (Gregory and Rogerson 2018: 42). It's interesting to position this knowledge alongside the fact that the majority of formal artists' studios are found in central Johannesburg (Gregory and Rogerson 2018: 42). What we thus see is a separation of the art from its site of production in central Johannesburg to its presentation and consumption of that labour in the North, where majority of not just Johannesburg's but South Africa at large's wealth is placed. When the art becomes public facing - and thus its most obviously relational, as is an interest of affect theory - the primary concern is the economic exchange that might become possible from that.

This inference is echoed by Ann Roberts, doing research in the field of Cultural Policy Management. Making accessible research done by Mary Corigall, Roberts cites reports that show that when the Johannesburg Art Fair began to research a stagnation in its attendance figures, it was found that the exhibitors began to focus their attention on making more international sales (Corigall cited in Roberts 2019: 19). The implications of this were explicit suggestions from gallerists to the artists they represent to skew their art to appeal to the sensibilities of wealthier Western audiences (Roberts 2019: 19).

Both the products of visual arts and the affect this research is fascinated in share a similar quality of being in constant flux; the Johannesburg visual art scene constantly shifting its display and production to follow the contours of the sales market. The artists best able to adapt to the ever shifting terrains are the artists that subsequently receive the institutional support of the commercial sector that overdetermines relations in the Johannesburg art scene, in the wake of the social and governmental disinvestment in the public art sector (Fredricks 2015).

But in the speed of these constant shifts, I return back to the challenge of grappling with affect, and finding a place for it. In light of these conditions, it bears worth to come to an intermission and consider intimacy, and how it is we grapple with that.

As a starting point for these musings, I employ the theories of Lisa Register and Tracy Henley, writing in the field of psychology (1992). Within this discipline, intimacy has long been a point of contemplation. However, very little had been done to consider intimacy within the framework of a phenomenological method. To this day, very few have contributed to this particular line of thinking.

What is highlighted in this framework is the essential but easily forgotten fact that intimacy is something which is experienced, and like any other phenomenon and experience, it occurs as a result of very specific conditions. Writing on phenomenology, Henley and Register state that in phenomenological studies, "[the] experiences of the phenomenon as told by subjects are analyzed to uncover the underlying perceptual and conceptual themes that structure or characterize a given experience" (1992: 469). In line with thinking about intimacy in this way, the study offers an interesting insight into a number of themes that reoccur in separate moments in which intimacy is observed to have been experienced. Of course, as even the study itself acknowledges, there is no guarantee that all (or any) of these themes will *always* be present in intimate experience. But, what is exciting from the perspective of a curator engaged in exhibition making is that there is a general set of conditions in which intimacy is recalled, as noted by Register and Henley's research participants. These can be thought alongside as reference in my attempts to ultimately make intimacy possible. Thus, in making an exhibition, I do not take for granted that a sense of intimacy will simply actualise itself. There are things done and considerations to be made to actually foster that intimacy.

The question that faces these efforts might be: why bother? Why is intimacy so important? This is a question that was posed to me quite early on in this research, which I have meditated on for quite some time. To me, it might've seemed so obvious how intimacy is an important thing, but the question is worthy of further contemplation. Guiding me in this thought, I turn to the writings of Lauren Berlant. In her article, *Intimacy: A Special Issue*, she discusses how intimacy builds worlds (Berlant 1998: 281). This quality of being able to build worlds has the potential to elevate

the symbolic power of exhibitions - existing in some ways as worlds of their own - to higher heights. I think of this in relation to the already established capital driven ethos that underpins exhibition strategies in the Johannesburg art scene.

In my own professional practice as an arts writer, prior to embarking on this research, a story was shared with me by one of my interview subjects which made this modus operandi apparent to me. She spoke of how following her graduation from a Fine Arts School at University, she was immediately picked up as one of the next rising stars on the Johannesburg art scene. Under the darting eyes of established gallery owners, she found herself constantly working to meet the constant demand of these galleries. Per her own admission, she was selling well. By many metrics, success - so quickly - was hers. However, she found that her artistic practice was becoming almost entirely devoid of the creative energy that had previously motivated it, much less having an emotional connection to the work. On the verge of burnout, she left South Africa entirely to explore the cultures of production in other cities. In an especially souring turn of events, the pay out from her sales took very long following her departure from the gallery she had been working closely with. It is fascinating to see in what ways the systems of exhibition making and production work so quickly, and what works slowly, and under which conditions. It points to the kind of (selectively) fast paced work ethos in and around exhibitions in Johannesburg. I think of how that ethos has come to live so closely alongside the arts for so long that it has seemingly become as necessary to the exhibition format as art itself. What Berlant proposes is that to "rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living" (1998: 286).

In this light, to rethink intimacy has the potential to challenge the state of mimicry in the arts, which Stakemeier spoke of as a state in which the inorganic, crushing weight of capitalism integrates itself without setting off any alarms. I've come to think of this inorganic thing as The Machine in my research. The Machine is the capitalist state of production, reproduction and exhibition that overdetermines the art relations in Johannesburg. The Machine does not have the human ability to value creativity, but is created and maintained for outputs. The Machine necessitates that all of its best, shiniest parts be shown. The Machine - although referring to the visual arts in this research - is representative of a greater factory, as it were, comprised of many

machines, which determine our ways of consumption. The Machine is not very different to what is still largely unproblematised consumption patterns evident in (fast) fashion, as it exists even in South Africa (Whaley 2021). Under global capitalism, the aesthetically pleasing nature of these industries - and many others - makes this insidious culture of extreme production conditions so inconspicuous as to make for unchallenging consumption patterns. This inorganic both lives among us, as Stakemeier suggested, and we live within it, acting as cogs within to make its functioning possible. The Machine is opposed by (the consideration of) intimacy, in how intimacy allows us to take a step back and consider, as Berlant says, "lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living" (1998: 286).

The world intimacy builds inspires the reconsideration of the way in which we live our lives, while The Machine is dependent on not thinking too intricately about our state of affairs. But above and beyond this space for new considerations, the world of intimacy allows for a sense of group belonging (collective affiliation) (Shaver and Reis 1988: 386). We do not have to exist as isolated cogs, only working together to sustain The Machine. Through The Machine, we might be a part of something - involuntarily, unknowingly even - but it is a far cry from belonging. Nira Yuval-Davis notes that the issue of belonging is inherently political, and has much to do with feeling safe (2006: 197). Intimacy allows us to think of how we might all possibly belong, and to further reconsider intimacy allows us to think of what it is we might want to belong to. My research seeks to begin thinking about *what it is* we might want to belong to, as a greatly networked arts community. In rethinking the issue of intimacy - as intimacy in exhibitions has certainly been thought of before me - we must be willing to not only consider that which has not been working thus far, but be willing to think of what other pieces might fit in or be used towards de-stabilising the functions of The Machine. Therefore, in this research I must draw from places otherwise regarded as being beyond the traditional scope of curating.

The continuously progressive space of the internet has allowed for imagination beyond the traditional to flourish, in the field of curating and beyond. The very concept of intimacy has been destabilised by the internet's immense potential for connection. Writing on how the internet has played a role in making something affectively felt across the globe, Gill Valentine reaffirms a previously established notion: intimacy calls for a certain amount of work on the part of those

who want to experience it. Valentine writes that people are engaged in the mental work of freeing themselves from the social constructions which would have us believing that intimacy is confined to institutions of the familial and marital kind (Valentine 2006: 366). As opposed to resigning to the belief that intimacy must be held strictly within such forms of institutionality, she notes a change in processes of individualisation and identification which evidence that "traditional ideas and expectations about social relations are being reworked" (Valentine 2006: 366).

Valentine outlines how one of the ideas that were being interrogated is the notion of intimacy, as pertaining to the question of physical proximity. Valentine writes that "the word close is a synonym for intimate, and literal closeness is assumed to be essential for familiarity and commitment" (2006: 367). She argues how relationships that manifest themselves in the online sphere are in some ways more 'pure' than those offline. 'Pure' being used to indicate a relationship that is not based on any kind of performative engagement in a normatively constituted idea of intimacy; these relationships feature a high degree of choice. One is *choosing* to be intimate, and to engage in a relationship that is founded on trust. Trust that the other person will mutually engage in this non-synchronous engagement and actively negotiate the appropriate conduct in this digital space (Valentine 2006: 268).

She observes through her study how women in particular have taken investment in these forms of internet relationships, with the online space "allowing them more opportunity in relative safety to experiment and take sexual risks beyond their expected gender role" (2006: 372). We can think back here to Berlant's assertion that a reconsideration of intimacy allows us to reconfigure our lives, and the relationships that we exist in - or endure - within them. With a re-consideration of how intimacy can manifest itself online, these women have the choice in the sexual, intimate self they want to present as. Beyond that, Valentine's study reveals the ways in which queer people have also relished in the new possibilities of intimate relationality the internet has offered the community.

What Valentine finds and presents to us is the presence of intimacy online, and how it is that women and queer people use it to their advantage. Taking this further, Xaio et al (2020). investigate 'finstas' and how it is they are used intimately. In spite of this research and that of

Valentine's being published more than a decade apart, Xaio et al. still make the observation that finstas are mostly used by women (2020: 1). They observe how these 'fake instagrams' are ironically used to present a version of self which is less idealised than the account holder's main account. In addition to that - and a notable difference in context to that of Valentine's 2006 context - these finsta holders use their accounts as moments to experience intimacy intermittently. In their distance from the more polished main instagram, they become spaces of pause, a moment to connect genuinely and intimately, in the fast and continuous outpour of content available online (Xiao et al. 2020: 2).

Xiao et al. make the comparison of the finsta/'real' dichotomy to that of the back stage/front stage respectively. What's interesting is that in addition to paralleling this social media phenomenon to performance, they also refer to the finsta as an exhibition venue. In consideration of the very public facing nature of the exhibition format, how then do we configure the finsta as possibly being an exhibition of its own sort?

While many have approached social media sites from a dramaturgical lens, in recognising certain aspects of performativity, Bernie Hogan (2010) becomes a noteworthy reference for many digital media scholars fascinated in understanding the exhibitionary qualities of social media. Writing on the defining parallels, Hogan write that the two formats share the following qualities:

> *1. Information signifying an individual is delivered to the audience, on demand by a third party.*
>
> *2. Because of the reproducibility of content and the fact that it is sent to a third party for distribution, the submitter does not continually monitor these data as an audience is receiving it, and may possibly never fully know the audience.* (Hogan 2010: 381).

On the second point, Hogan makes an interesting point of distinction between an email and social media post (2010: 381). In the case of the former, the data produced is directed to a specific person/persons and is meant to be read in light of a very specific time frame (emails often being either conversational or containing actionable tasks). While as in the case of the latter, data - the content of this exhibition format - is posted to a data repository. One tweet joins

your long running timeline, or one Instagram post continues to grow one's own feed. Hogan argues that another commonality social media shares with the traditional art exhibition format is that the posts are undirected, and one can't be sure of who will look at it. This bears some truth in that Instagram posts aren't made for and directed to specific people - Direct Messages exist as a feature for that specific reason. However, what Hogan's theory does not account for is that private social media accounts also exist, in which the account owner can manage who has access to the account.

Hogan is aware of the fact that the exhibitionary model for social media analysis does not directly translate the experience of an exhibition to the experience of social media. I use this as an opportune moment to clarify something in the aims of this research itself: while it is my belief that there is something to be learned from and understood about digital curation, there is neither the guarantee of nor the desire to translate with exact accuracy the affect present online to an offline exhibitionary practice. With that being noted, I return to the stance that there are useful practices to be observed and adapted to our own curatorial practice, on- and offline. Practices such as the recognition of intimacy outside of familial and marital institutions; or, practices such as distance being used as a tool to make intimacy more possible, by allowing the distance to make the revealing party feel more safe (like how finstas pull away from the larger audience and demands of a 'main' account).

At this point in the research, considering that titular issue of safety, I desire to square in on the pertinent point of access (and, implicitly, safety). While a reconfiguration of intimacy has been made central to this research, a look towards digital modes of curating shows how controlled access leads to a greater sense of safety, which thus makes room for intimacy. Israel Márquez, Debora Lanzeni & Maria-José Masanet (2023) takes a fascination with this aspect of control in their research around digital curation of the self. For some, a very intentional manipulation of the image to best self represent is the way that control is exercised; for others, it is an intentional construction of an online self that is equally true to the user's sense of self, but by only displaying everything around them *besides* themselves (Márquez et al. 2023: 913-914). Fascinatingly enough, the teens observed in their study also take an understanding to how the exhibitionary nature of their online practices implicates their friends and peers. In their

consideration, “the teens are aware that it is a public image that will not only be part of the construction of their own identity but also that of the other people present in the photo, so they also curate the image of their friends in social media” (Márquez et al. 2023: 914). In the field of digital media studies, curation is understood in a way which is not only about the self, but considers too the network which one operates within. Jenny Davis states that “Self-presentation is a performance for both self and others,” and that “selves are performed and accomplished collaboratively and processually, forged through interaction” (2017: 772). In reconsidering the way in which The Machine operates, it is important that this research adopts this collaborative-discursive approach. Such a view allows us to take the focus off outputs, sales, audience attendance, acclaim. etc. and takes several steps back to recognise how each aspect (person) of The Machine is fundamental to its successful aforementioned outputs, and therefore deserving of being heard.

Importantly, that which is also not heard becomes pivotal to the curatorial in the digital space. Davis points out that what digital curators leave out of their exhibitions is equally relevant to the reading of that exhibition (2017: 773); what is curated out is done so specifically to make room for what is curated in. While this is usually understood to be and discussed in regards to the curation of the content itself, the precursor to the production and distribution of such content is the curation of a specific audience, as Davis points out. As opposed to Hogan’s lowest common denominator approach (2010), in which the creator/curator produces and exhibits content which might be most generally pleasing to a context-collapsed audience of siblings, besties, colleagues, employers, ex-lovers, some creators/curators do the work of specifically establishing more private networks (similar to that of a finsta) to facilitate conditions in which they can more freely share. In this space, by limiting the access (that people have to them), they feel more safe to share intimate details. On intimacy online, Davis writes: “Those who do wish to share intimate content but remain concerned about reputation management employ a host of curatorial strategies. These strategies function to reveal different parts of the self to different audiences, taking a granular approach to performance and privacy maintenance” (2017: 773).

2. The Curatorial, and Its Responsibilities

So what then does this mean for curating, in the visual arts sense? What a number of scholars in digital media studies focus on is the aspect of curating that has to do with selection and care. Admitting to speaking broadly, Davis writes that "curation refers to the discriminate selection of materials for display. The curator's art is to carve out that which is most provocative, beautiful, relevant, etc." (2017: 771). Is this all? Given the progressive trajectory that has gone into establishing curatorial practice as the professional and academic discipline it is known as today, this research cannot resign to reducing the curatorial to discriminatory selection or a selection of what is most beautiful. Given the context of Johannesburg (and South Africa at large), it would be in poor, short-sighted curatorial ethics to think the solution to the problems of The Machine could or should be solved by discriminatingly curating to very specific audiences, as a country marked by a violent Apartheid history, that made entry for its black-majority-audience into the arts a complex task (Chambers, 1997: 51).

The point of disjuncture here is in the glaringly obvious but pertinent difference of language. The digital media scholars aren't far off in the comparisons they draw when they speak of exhibitionary practice in relation to *curating*. However, the curatorial is an entirely different set of considerations and practices. Maria Lind writes of the curatorial as being a mode of its own within curating; it is one which "[owes] much to site-specific and context-sensitive practices and even more to various traditions of institutional critique" (2009). Beyond that, with parallels being drawn to Chantal Mouffe's notion of "the political"[1], Lind presents the curatorial as "a set of practices that disturbs existing power relations. At its best, the curatorial is a viral presence that strives to create friction and push new ideas, whether from curators or artists, educators or editors" (2009).

This research does indeed seek to disturb the existing power relations which dictate our established modes of working within the Johannesburg visual arts scene, by resisting an exhibition which is focused on the heralded outputs mentioned earlier, such as sales, attendance stats, audience enjoyment or even acclaim. However, and true to Lind's conception of the curatorial, the research also has its own set of tensions with even the avenue (of digital media studies) it looks towards in the hopes to cause disruption. In disturbing power relationships, the

[1] Chantal Mouffe's conception of "the political" is an extension of thought and life that is inherently resistant to existing power structures

curator cannot simply mirror digital curation by making curatorial projects which are of a discriminatory nature; in a Johannesburg context, this negates the necessarily "context-sensitive" nature of the curatorial which Lind speaks of.

What is highlighted here is that even in the nebulous position and uncertain form the curatorial takes, it must in fact use this state of ambiguity as an opportunity to be more responsible, rather than relinquishing itself to the opposite. Although responsibility is a foundational sensibility to the discipline, this does not equate to it thus being an easy one. The complication lies in the fact that the curatorial - and even curating - is a professionalisation of the professional's own personhood (Burkhanova-Khabadze 2020: 3). One's own sensibilities, taste and nature as a 'thinking-subject' become the means for their production. How then - for something which is as personal as curating - do we establish a professional ethic, which can be broadly applied? While the solution to this problem is not clear, the ramifications of it certainly are. Many a curator have been accused of being opportunistic, instrumentalising the artists that they work with and showing favouritism to certain collaborators - all of this resulting in a sentencing to unethical curating (Burkhanova-Khabadze 2020: 5).

Burkhanova-Khabadze resigns to the fact that a curatorial ethic, given the personalised-professional nature of the work, will always exist as a kind of map of the curator's various positions (2020: 6). In this instance, the curator's ethics is only an indication of what they themselves care about. Therefore, the museum curator and the independent commercial curator will very likely (and necessarily) be led by a different curatorial map, with a different north star altogether, because their cares are invested very differently.

However, Burkhanova-Khabadze distinguishes between this ethic and the curator's responsibility. The reason the ethical map of the museum curator and the independent commercial curator will be very different is because they are leading to very different places. Curator's use ethics as a means to flag what it is they care about, and in what direction, amongst these murky waters, they want to sail their ship. The language of responsibility, however, in this instance is used as a reminder of the curator's inherently relational position (as we often think of a responsibility *to*). In every project the curator takes on, the curator undergoes a process of either creating or concretising existing relationalities (Burkhanova-Khabadze 2020: 7). "For

curating is never a process that an individual can undergo autonomously; it is always affected by the presence of the others with which she curates" Burkhanova-Khabadze writes (2020: 7).

Burkhanova-Khabadze uses Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the wasp and the orchid as a means by which to explain the nature of the curator's relationship with the various parties they work with. Deleuze and Guattari reference the biological evolutionary phenomenon of orchids and their ability to mimic the scent of the female wasps. In so doing, male wasps, in the heat of their mating season, quickly fly from orchid to orchid in what they believe to be a successful mating routine. However, they are instead working to spread the pollen of one orchid to another, engaging in a strategic (on the part of the orchid) trans-species pollination process. Many have ironically described this very natural process as being against the laws of nature.

It is no surprise that a connection is made between this and contemporary curatorial practice, in its tension with (if not clear defiance of) many of the established "rules" of the arts industry. Expanding on this further, Burkhanova-Khabadze relates the curator to the wasp and the various other parties with whom the curator engages as being the orchid. This is where the issue of curatorial responsibility resurfaces. As opposed to an understanding of the curator as having a responsibility to the artist "in which she is obligated to another by virtue of an agreement made or a duty to be had" (Burkhanova-Khabadze: 2020), which can make for a practice in which parties are disposable upon the meeting of contractual obligations: we can rather think of the curator as having a responsibility to facilitate the becoming of their collaborators. The wasp (curator) has the potential to fly about, and connect the pollen (knowledges, skillsets, etc.) of one orchid (member of this art network) to the others (other members of the greater artwork.

This research would like to position itself in thinking beyond just connecting the knowledges and skillsets - pollen, so to speak - of the network from one point to another. This means of working still views people as a means to an end, which Burkhanova-Khabadze desires to move away from. In her conception of becoming, the wasp and the orchid's engagement of becoming is a becoming which is "*towards* and *with* the other" (Burkhanova-Khabadze 2020: 8). In the same breath, this research desires to move away from thinking about what it is that can always be taken from various members of the network. It is in favour of a move towards utilising the curator's necessarily relational and deeply intertwined role in the arts industry as an opportune

moment to connect intimately in some way with the network, and foster possibilities of more intimate connections. This is in the hopes of fostering, through these intimate moments, conditions of exhibition making which are at all times more considerate. What considerations, in this process of becoming which Deleuze and Guattari allude to, do we make room for?

In considering the etymology of the word 'curator', the curator's practice should always leave room for care. Writing on curatorial responsibility, the Raqs Media Collective (2010) also continues to meditate on the complexity of the curator's role. With the curatorial embracing more and more possibilities, so too have come many opportunities for the curatorial to become a big and flashy display of these possibilities. This too has come with its own ethical complications - in the international biennale sphere, how does one avoid the trap of putting on show their localities? What impacts of generatification do these new opportunities leave the communities of these countries, when the buzz of the biennale dies down for another 2 years? What of the carbon footprint that comes from the shipment and travel of these works across the globe? (Raqs Media Collective 2010: 281) In all of these instances, there is wrong to be assigned (I could raise the question of if this wrong is necessarily to be blamed on the curator's themselves, and not the numerous funders who make possible these spectacles). But, as the Raqs Media Collective reminds us, the curator can be blamed for any action that is made without care (2010: 284).

I consider too those actions which are *not* made at all, and how that too can be a gesture of the uncaring. While the curator (via the powerful international art institutions that make possible this flashy sphere of exhibition making) has access to broader publics than once imaginable, Lucy Hunter (2015) makes a critique of a curator who is consistently outwardly facing. In the catalogue for her 2015 exhibition, *Irregular Renditions*, Hunter makes a critique of those curators who source the voices of artists who make politically loaded critiques in their artworks for the purposes to merely present - from a safe distance - those rhetorics. This curator is referred to as the silent curator, who can safely demarcate themselves a space and say "her words, not mine" when a time for consequences to rhetoric arrive. It is this cunning silence and strategic abuse of authorship which I am most wary of; those inactions which not only undermine the curatorial's place as a practice of critique, but even the basics of care in curation. Worse so, the silent curator might use these exhibitions as a megaphone to speak to societal problems of

injustice on the society level, but not interrogate the presence of these same problems on the level of the arts industry. It is my view that the silent curator is either, on one hand, gravely arrogant to assume that the arts as an industry is above gender or race related wage difference; or, unwilling to give thought and exhibition space to highlight those problems glaring obvious to them, for fear of job insecurity.

It is those precisely larger societal problems subsequently inherited within the arts that this research seeks to speak back to, and cannot be silent in the face of. Specifically, speaking back with a certainty of challenging that "background of an exploitative art sector insisting that art workers consistently struggle under exhausting work schedules and poor financial remuneration" (Whittle 2019: 115). If curation in digital media once acted as a space to escape fearful conditions - if even temporarily - why can can these curating practices not once again be adopted and adapted for new purposes of intimate, safe interactions within the arts?

It is now me, in my small capacity, who will insist on the art sector, by attempting to foster such a space. The next section details the methodologies used in these attempts, in both the textual aspects and curatorial gesture of this research.

3. Means of Understanding Towards Means of Creating

When I give thought space to the aforementioned notion of speaking back, I draw inspiration for this particular attitude from Alberta Whittle's strategy of 'wayward curating' (2019). In her 2019 autoethnographic essay, Whittle reflects on much of the same conditions of labour which this research reflects on, albeit with a particular focus on the labour conditions of the United Kingdom. Her question is equally one of method, concerned with investigating how all of the behind the scenes practices of the arts industry could be better configured to be decolonial and challenging of a 'top-down' system (Whittle 2019: 111).

Aside from the commonality of subject matter concern, I am drawn towards her emphasis on intimate relationships as being tools towards undoing this top-down system (or The Machine) (Whittle 2019: 121). As such, parrhesia is a method of wayward curating. Whittle's suggestion of this shows that there is something both valuable and productive in our verbal exchanges and

admissions in the process of curating. This is pertinent for this research because while I may not experience relationships as intimate as friendship with a number of the people who contribute to thinking about this project, making room for them to speak freely, openly and unashamedly of their desires and anxieties is indeed generative. In a context where end products are so valuable, conversation amidst workers might otherwise be seen as counter-productive and a delay in what it is we are all ultimately here for (pristinely presented white cube exhibitions, which hopefully generate lots of sales and social media buzz). However, in a practice of wayward curating, what we're "all ultimately here for" has potential for realisations which are in fact dependent on that very parrhesia.

It has already been established that this paper treats intimate connection, as a phenomenon, as something which cannot be taken for granted, but must be actively worked towards fostering (Register and Huntley 1992). This inspires a phenomenological framework, which Register and Huntley recognise as "[illuminating] recurring themes of human experience" (1992: 472), while still making allowance for the complexity of human emotion to have moments of diversion.

Operating from this frame, I use Harry Reis and Phillip Shaver's conception and model of intimacy as an interpersonal process (1988). As established previously, the curator's position is one which is deeply relational. This relationality has been something I have embraced as an opportunity to connect personally, one-by-one, with various members of this arts sector - hence the use for scholarship which regards intimacy as both interpersonal and a process. It is important to disclaim that there are some issues I take with Reis and Shaver's conception of intimacy. The most glaring is that it regards intimacy exclusively in regards to something felt between two people. This negates the intimacy we have already previously looked at, in which a queer individual might feel an intimacy with the larger queer community online, because even this abstracted, faceless form of queerness is more real than what they might be experiencing offline (Valentine 2006: 379). We have all likely been witness to one crying when their national sports team wins a world cup, or tournament game. In that moment, this person is feeling an intimacy with their country at large, and not necessarily something as interpersonal as an intimacy with the team captain. And, as will become relevant at a later point in this paper: one

can experience an intimate encounter with an exhibition, which is non-person entirely (but can be very *personal*).

Where Shaver and Reis' conception of intimacy as a personal model does become useful is in presenting methodological guiding lines in fostering intimacy between two people. In an act of reverse-engineering, their observation of themes which are usually present in intimate exchanges have guided the questions asked to research participants. These themes present in intimate encounters are when the disclosing party is revealing of their motives, needs, goals and fears. Their ability to continue to speak about these things is determined by the receiver's reactions to what is shared (Shaver and Reis 1998: 369). This model uses the language of "discloser" and "responder" because it draws on therapeutic studies. Apprehensive to in any way position myself as anything like a clinical therapist, it was very important in the gathering of research that this interpersonal process was by no means therapeutic, but more so a semi structured interview. The semi structured nature of it allowed me to play my part as an interviewing researcher to be responsive and foster intimacy. In going "off script", we could have moments where the questions were flipped back on me, or moments in which a shared experience was all too resounding to not share.

In consideration of this research report, and its accompanying curatorial gesture (to be discussed more in the final chapter), interviewing therefore becomes the means of data extrapolation. Subjects are all granted full anonymity and were interviewed separately. The interviews were recorded in an audio format, and used again later in the form of a queered exhibition as the accompanying curatorial gesture. The presentation of this audio in the queered exhibition had the audio manipulated to make the voice incongruent with that of the actual voice of the speaker. Towards understanding this data and exhibitionary material, a content analytic approach is adopted. In this content analysis, observations will be made about similarities and differences of the various sentiments expressed in the interview.

Differences were an inevitable and valuable aspect of this research. All of the participants I am drawing from in this research have been occupying different and (as is often the case) numerous roles in the arts industry. As opposed to casting out my net as far and as wide as possible, I have adopted the use of purposive sampling in this research. Campbell et al. (2020) investigated the

use of purposive sampling. Looking at qualitative research, purposive sampling is justified in its selectivity for contributing to the "depth (as opposed to breadth) of understanding" (Campbell et al. 2020: 654) of the specific industry/scholarship it is contributing to. It is assumed that these participants have valuable insights on the topic (Campbell et al. 2020: 654). Thankfully, I didn't have to *assume* that these subjects would have interesting insight to offer the research, having had somewhat of a knowledge of their practice. All of these practices are unified in their contribution to the successful execution and realisation of an exhibition as a public gesture. This differs: some of the respondents are involved in the behind-the-scenes work of producing an exhibition; some have had their work exhibited; and some are involved in making the exhibition's materials accessible to the public in the form of writing. Each participant - although unified in collective investment in exhibitions - has had very different experiences. None of these participants have been working professionally for more than 20 years, so they all offer a very contemporary reading into what it is to work in the arts in Johannesburg today.

In maintaining their anonymity, I will refer to each participant by the role which primarily interested me in their work. I acknowledge here two things: the first is that the respondents are all likely to be playing not one but many roles to keep their part of the art ecosystem afloat. The second, on a more humane level, is that the respondents are, of course, more than their roles. This form of referring to them acknowledges the ways in which this art ecosystem is orientated towards a practice of usability, where people are only as valuable as they are useful towards the functioning of the ecosystem, as the research at large is making commentary on.

With these things now acknowledged, I will now go on to briefly explain how each respondent initially became of interest to this research. For the purposes of maintaining their anonymity, I will attempt to speak to specific interests of each respondent's position or practice, without giving away too many details.

The gallerist became of interest because his intersections of identity - blackness, queerness - is a rarity, in an art ecosystem where the overwhelming majority of arts organisations are white owned (AMERU 2010: 4). This gallerist also makes room for their own artistic practice in their gallery. In demographics, the difference between *the gallerist* and the rest of the industry

becomes a research interest, with a fascination in the ways in which our identities interact with our position in institutionality.

The curator became of interest to the relationship through a statement they had once made in a casual conversation (parrhesia once again coming in as a useful tool at the curator's disposal). After having curated a well received, large scale exhibition, *the curator* said they just wanted to move permanently to Europe. This curator - who is black - felt that in Europe, they were, in their own words, "a somebody", and in South Africa - they were just another black figurehead to be used for optics and disposed of once a project was complete. This element of their blackness, in the gig-economy-driven nature of curatorial practice, became a point of interest which I would be remiss to not otherwise investigate further.

The writer became of interest to the research via a specific interest they had shown in their practice in the mechanics and operations of various elements of the Johannesburg arts industry. Fascinatingly enough, these various studies were removed from what would be considered the epicentre of the arts industry. However, it was this fascination and view of systems that made a connection to the idea of The Machine that I wanted to investigate.

The artist-organiser I had engaged with in my own professional practice prior to even the formulation of this research question. Through my work in arts journalism, I had come to find out that she was an artist who was experiencing a high level of commercial success in the Johannesburg arts industry, before a sudden departure to the United Kingdom following tensions with South African gallerists. There, she began to consider alternative ways of imagining artistic practices, largely even departing from traditional art practices and moving more towards writing. In many ways, this research owes much to just this one conversation, as it would go on to spur thoughts about what it is that is dysfunctional, and how it could be reconfigured.

The sales specialist felt to me to be a necessary addition to this research for a number of reasons. Firstly, *the sales specialist* would provide a balance in my commentary which is largely anti-capitalist, through the recognition that someone needs to see to it that the various members of this network are able to continue their creative practices. This is only possible through the access provided by having money in circulation. Above and beyond that, in previous

professional relations with *the sales specialist*, it had come up that their departure from one of the leading art galleries in the country was due to an extremely unhealthy work environment. This provides an interesting perspective that reminds us that the only people suffering at the hands of a broken system are not only the artist, audience or curator, as many thinkers reductively condense curatorial relationality to.

Given these professional positions, and their various experiences, the research attempts to elicit intimate exchange and see what commonalities and differences are present in each of their responses. In that sense, the research performs a kind of thematic grouping. However, it is also important to highlight the individuality and subjectivity of each respondent - to fail to do so would be to neglect the intimacy that was worked towards.

4. Making Sense of Intimacy

Remembering (Motivations)

Before moving into the thematic guidelines which Shaver and Reis lay out for us: to begin with, the research participants were asked to think retrospectively and recall two memories. Starting our interviews by thinking in the realm of affect, the interview participants were asked to think about one exhibition experience which had a notable emotional impact on them, in some form or another. In addition to that, they are asked to think even further back to think about what it is that initially drew them into this field of work we find ourselves in.

In observing Register and Henley's phenomenological study of intimacy, I considered time as an often noted factor in intimate experiences. Register and Henley noted that their research participants often felt the need to think of their intimate experiences in relation to a keen awareness of time. They wrote that "[it] was as if being in the experience was not enough to make it intimate, but being able to perceive the 'wholeness' of the encounter, in the context of the events that took place in time, was necessary in order to give it the complete quality of intimacy" (Register and Henley 1992 :474). In attempts to not only think around intimacy, but attempting to create intimate moments, distant memories, and the implicit rumination on time, was an attempt towards setting the scene for intimate engagement. These were not just memories

I was asking my participants to recall, but an attempt to think through these experiences - good and bad - not just as experiences, but something that happened in time, contributing towards the wholeness of their own personhood.

With regards to the exhibition which they recall that had some kind of notable impact on them, the majority called upon positive experiences. The presiding theme in these memories is that each of these exhibitions shocked them. The shock of it was mostly positive, with the respondents being taken aback by the curatorial excavation and execution of certain themes which would not be expected in an exhibition setting. *The gallerist* was shocked by the successful execution of such an intimate display in Claud Monet's home, using the inherently public exhibition format to exhibit one of the most renowned painters in art history. *The curator* was positively surprised to see an exhibition in one of South Africa's leading commercial galleries which was both experimental in its dramaturgical liberties, and which moved away from the all-too-exploited realm of identity politics. *The curator* enjoyed that this exhibition instead looked at the anthropocene, which in their eyes, bears far more real implications on our lives than socially constructed identities. On a similar note, *the sales specialist* was also positively taken aback by the eloquent way in which technologies and artificial intelligence were addressed, with particularly unsellable works, in a leading, very sales-oriented gallery. An element of the wonder for *the sales specialist* was the timing of the exhibition, as this pensive exhibition thinking about our relationship to artificial intelligence made its debut a mere week before the world was tethered to screens amongst the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contrast to the above-mentioned responses of *the sales specialist* and *the curator*, who were positively surprised by the exhibition in that specific institution, the *artist-organiser* and *the writer* recalled negative exhibition experiences from public institutions they did not expect to curate such an experience. *The writer* shared that her experience of this specific exhibition was one in which they were brought on as a curator, and described it as an "insidious experience", as they were met with the shock of working with predatory people in a space where they had assumed they could let their guard down.

What is evident across the board is a general defensiveness towards/low expectation of commercial, private institutions. In the most positive recollections, the shock comes from these

commercial institutions defying expectations and actually making space for a more considered approach to exhibitions. This echoes Robyn Cook's research into the kind of exhibitions staged by commercial galleries in Johannesburg, in which she found that "an overwhelming lack of will on the part of the commercial sector for the support and development of experimental and/or non-commercial projects" (Cook 2016: 64). What this means, conversely, is that public art institutions are assumed to be more receptive to creative modes of thinking, and, as implied, safer conditions for working. *The writer* shared their experience that "[the public art institution] is a safety. It's like a landing. It does feel possible to think together, make knowledge, ask questions, even be kind of speculative, or silly and open ended. Whereas more private spaces often are more restrictive; more bound to funders and outcomes. In that sense, it is kind of that specific state of neglect, and also that it's public that made it feel safe [...] I think recognising that people are the most important part in an institution."

Thinking back to a point before their hyper-awareness and varying sensitivities to the different institutions which collectively form what is known as 'the art world', the participants were asked to think of how it is they initially even came to be in the arts to begin with. This question of genesis almost resoundingly was responded to with a feeling that there was not much choice in the matter, but that it was who they were meant to be from children. Almost all respondents discussed having an inclination to drawing or creative expression of some sort as a child, that made all those around them affirm what would become their path towards the arts industry. The only exception is *the sales specialist*. However, even in their case, they found their way into the professional arts industry by a self-disclosed nepotism connection (they did not explain the nature of that nepotism in any more detail). Thereafter, a then more senior sales specialist at the gallery they interned at noted a naturally good rapport suitable to dealing with esteemed collectors.

Although a natural talent recognised by others seems to be the common motif in the journey towards professionalisation, some respondents made a particular point of noting how a conscious decision was made to cement that position. In all such cases, that decision was made to respond to some alarming observations made by the practitioners, and often called for some change in the profession they started in. While *the writer* started their journey in the arts as a fine art student,

student protests for #RhodesMustFall led to their becoming a writer for the student movement. Their position of elevated responsibility as a writer for the movement meant “making visible a whole different kind of narrative”, and caused them to look back critically at the University of Cape Town as an institution. They look back and note their first year professor, who was a black man with a specialisation in post-colonial art theory, and who was ultimately made to teach an incongruent course on modernisms. Looking at how race becomes grounds for the dismissal of intellect, *the writer* recognised that “it wasn’t really a decision to be in the arts industry, but it was more like a really strong emotional desire to put voice to what I was realising.”

Equally concerned with the reality of disposability - and not just in the intellectual sense - *the gallerist* realised that while they were experiencing early praise for their artistic practice, there was an underlying communication that the spotlight was theirs to hold for an unforeseeable temporality. “There was a phrase which was being repeated, where it’s “Oh, you’re the man of the moment!”, “The artist of the hour!” When you listen to that deeply, you understand you have a window in that space. Today it’s you that’s doing well, and then it’s someone else, and then someone else,” they reflected. “How do I create a platform for myself where I can feel at home?” *the gallerist* said, sharing the reflections that caused them to open up what was started as a hybrid studio-and-gallery-space to what has become a full time gallery space, dedicated to curating a select group of artists who the gallery can pour into with more of a long term commitment to development.

The artist-organiser has similarly devoted to running an organising body, which acts as an equipment library to help realise exhibitions that can exist outside of the traditional arts industry which the aforementioned respondents have shown their apprehension to. Remaining disillusioned by the current state of affairs, *the artist-organiser*, also having started out in fine art practice, involved themself in numerous other practices - partially as a means of economic survival, but also in attempts to “escape the art world”. However, they always return back to the art world, because “it’s a space where I feel freest. You can do anything. Or, in theory, you can do anything.”

In addition to theory around the phenomenology of intimacy (and the relationship to time), the above mentioned question also hints at one of the four themes which Shaver and Reis point to as

being key to moments of the intimate interpersonal processes; namely, the above questions alluded to motivations. Before moving from the past to thinking in line with themes more in line with a futurity (namely desires and goals), the next section will evaluate in depth how it is that this set of practitioners feel their various practices relate to or contend with the contemporary Johannesburg exhibition scene.

"Old, white, fucked up money!"

The curator opens their response to the question of the Johannesburg exhibitionary context by saying that "There's a ceiling in Joburg. [...] very confined space, very insular space." This idea of thresholds and boundaries becomes an interesting motif that runs through all of the responses, but in very different ways.

The gallerist relates their practice as a gallerist less so to the exhibition scene of Johannesburg itself, but more so to those who inhabit it. For them, the gallery space becomes a space to bring to life rose tinted memories of Johannesburg from their younger days, when they would make visits with family from Pretoria to the city of Johannesburg's vibrant cultural and artistic space. They find that their gallery space has mutually attracted a number of other artists and audiences from outside of Johannesburg, who continue to involve themselves with the gallery for this ethos of realised-fantasy, which it has come to represent. This is the case for even those people from the greater diaspora. For the research, this response acts as a reminder of notions already inferred, in the ability of exhibition spaces to be sites of world building.

Unfortunately, the other responses do not share the same positive view of the potential for such exhibition spaces in Johannesburg. All other responses recognise the issue of money as being a divisive factor in the exhibition scene. Both *the writer* and *the artist-organiser* made it explicitly clear that the relation I sought to investigate could largely just be traced to an inevitable financial tie. Speaking of their artistic practice, *the artist-organiser* said:

> "I make work and I show it. That's the way I sort of interact with [the Johannesburg exhibition scene] - it's on a commercial level. I prefer to have as little interaction with the sort of selling side of it as possible. It's just to make money. I don't want to market my

> own work; and therefore money. [...] and that's not exhibition spaces in general. I guess in Johannesburg, that feels like only for me to… I'm not sure. I guess, I see the Johannesburg exhibition space as a commercial space - pretty much exclusively. I don't think there's much room for intellectual engagement, or a genuine engagement with the discourse of art [...] It's about money."

This decision to not have too close a relationship to the commercial side of the arts industry is an act of boundary work, as thought of in literature around intimacy (Jamieson 2005). This is the work of creating boundaries which mark the kind of relationships a person has, either in the "lowering of boundaries among intimates" or "the presence or heightening of boundaries between intimates and those outside of their intimate relationships" (Jamieson 2005: 189). A removal from this commercial element is *the artist-organiser*, in some way, practising the kind of relations that make intimacy possible or, in their case, less possible. In fostering a less intimate relation, they are managing the degree to which being hurt by The Machine becomes possible.

For similar reasons, *the writer* confessed to not "really [liking] the art space", noting that "[they] just find it not always a sincere space". By their view, an underlying pretence exists, which often necessitates bending to the whim of the private collectors who hold the power in much of these engagements with arts professionals. In their words, these people are usually "old, white, fucked up money." "Often art collectors have the most fucked up money, because people don't have art collecting money unless they have another kind of money," they said. In those spaces, *the writer* observes that one is often asked to swallow their own values and aspirations to be in line with almost prescribed aspirations. Another element of this obligatory performance is touched on by *the curator*, who also remarks on the difficulty of re-entering the art space upon the decision to leave one's job in that art space.

For *the curato*r, the threshold is not only in the financial limitations, but also in that the range of what it is they can do. On one hand, the Johannesburg exhibition scene by their professional view is very heavily object oriented. However, on the other hand, the simultaneously fractured and deeply cosmopolitan nature of Johannesburg makes it an exciting venue for a curatorial imagining of different elements. Similarly, *the artist-organiser* - who also occasionally curates - views it as a place with the exciting possibility for connection.

Contrasting the above views, *the sales specialist* takes issue with the evidently common view that the commercial aspect of the arts is the problem in our art ecosystem. They start off by re-highlighting the absence of state funds to support the arts. By their view, it therefore becomes the privilege and duty of the commercial aspect of exhibition making to work in a labour of care, as they see "sales as [the] foundation for the continuation of this ecosystem".

As indicated earlier, *the sales specialist* also maintains reservations of the Johannesburg exhibition scene within their own practice. It is not sales itself that is the problem, but *the sales specialist* makes a point to distinguish their practice by practising ethical selling. They shared: "I believe in ethical selling, which is something not broadly applied. A lot of people will overlook certain warning signs in collectors". For them, this is an ethos of selling which necessarily considers the reputation and the values of both the sales practitioner and the artist. *The sales specialist* went on to recall instances where they did not sell to a collector believed to be racist, especially if the desired works featured black people. Furthermore, they took issue with the insatiable thirst for "poverty porn" on the part of the Global North art market; "There's something about the way we're selling contemporary African art that doesn't sit right with me."

This perspective offers an interesting counter to the established views. Or, better yet, the view offers another dimension to the complex issue. Perhaps it is not so simple as to say that money is the root of all evil, but it is the specific ways in which sales are done which could be reevaluated.

It is exactly the point of the initiative *the artist-organiser* runs to consider alternatives - and, importantly, not replacements - for these modes of exhibition practice. "It's an attempt to see how else we can do [exhibitions] with the resources that you would otherwise get from an institution or a private gallery," the *artist-organiser* said, expanding on the idea of their initiative as being a response to the circumstances this section has given textual space to. They root this idea on the potential of community.

Fears of the (un)known

However, where there is potential for the good, there also remains potential for the unfortunate, and the fearful. Although all of these practitioners have come in their own rights to a point where

they know The Machine very well (as do its many components know them in turn), knowledge attained and that which still remains unknown make for a perfect combination to breed fears and concerns. When posed with these fears and concerns as the subject of thought, the intimacy of the moment became palpable. The respondents expressed an apprehension that trails them in every professional move, but which they ordinarily don't have the time or the luxury to humour, in the fast paced environment of arts-related production. What appears in these responses is an unknown possibility that looms in the back of their mind, haunting each movement.

The fear for *the writer* is embedded in the very reality of the consistently unknown. While *the artist-organiser* identifies one obvious fear as being not being able to make ends meet (which would presumably be the case for any question pointed towards a working class study group), *the writer* identifies a fear in always having to question where the money they are making comes from. They share an anecdote which has since steered the trajectory of all future business relations, stating:

> "I think right now Israel stuff is very loud out of necessity [...] a few years ago, in 2018, some of us were doing some work around an institution in Cape Town called A4 Arts Foundation, where we found out the funding was Israeli and Zionist. For me, that was my moment of understanding that. For me, Palestine and Israel were just something I hadn't thought about and understood properly. For the last five years or so I've been more conscious of what institutions are linked to, and what it means to offer a service to somebody."

This particular reflection takes further the concern of having enough money, but considers the context of that. For contemporary curatorial practice, which often sees curators proposing a budget for the usage of certain funds when appealing for funding, it becomes a relevant concern to think: is the source of this funding something which not only I, but the team I employ, can make peace with? Furthermore, contemporary curatorial practice - or at least a slow curating (Crawshay-Hall 2020) - must necessarily consider social, political and economic contexts. In addressing those contexts, the addressing must be not only in the subject matter, but in the ways in which exhibitions are brought about by considering multiple parties beyond an overdetermined authorial approach on the part of the curator (Crawshay-Hall 2020: 11). The

curator must be engaged in making exhibitions which address a lived context not only through their displayed objects, but also through their means of exhibition-making. The curator who opts to curate in such a fashion is not relegating themselves to the practices of the silent curator (Hunter 2015), who this research has problematised.

This echoes a similar sentiment to that of *the sales specialist* who expressed concerns about being complicit in problematic systems by virtue of silence. When I asked, as a matter of clarification, if this was a fear of being used, they clarified that there comes a degree of agency, and how the choice of silence is equally the use of that agency. The *sales specialist* considers the need to use one's voice because of the collectors they have experienced; in these experiences, *the sales specialist* notes that at a certain level of wealth, a dangerous level of entitlement is to be expected amongst collectors. This entitlement is also the basis of fear for *the curator*, who is apprehensive towards Johannesburg's tendency to compartmentalise certain artistic practices on the basis of race. Once again echoing sentiments which reflect a disdain to being expected to produce certain works on the basis of race, *the curator* said: "My biggest fear is not creating room for other modes of expression."

This re-emphasises the role of the curator in creating/forcing spaces into existence. As such, even with tight deadlines of programming, the curator in their exhibition making needs to consider the space for rest in our current art ecosystem. It is the absence of this space to rest that makes *the gallerist* live in the consistent fear that their rest will be the downfall of many. They noted that "[they] used to nap when [they were] just a creative… [they] remember one time napping and waking up to 24 calls", making the observation that as the runner of an institution, oftentimes many people are dependent on them. A curator's role is perhaps equally networked (with *the artist-organiser* enjoying the capacity of the curator to connect people and ideas), and therefore has many relying on them. I wonder: what might be possible if people could rely on the curator to be the facilitator of rest? For *the gallerist* they facilitate their own rest by living outside of Johannesburg, and only travelling in to Johannesburg. Evidently, strategies of alienating oneself - or boundary work - from The Machine are seen as reliable ways of sustaining rest.

Never quite arriving

For *the gallerist*, the literal act of creating space between themself and The Machine is in some way an act of self preservation. However, the research seeks to think beyond mere survival - what else might be on the other side of that space? In asking the respondents what it is that they might still want to do or feel - touching on the theme of desire Shaver and Reis mentioned as a point of intimate reveal - I believed I was creating thoughtspace for fantastic imaginaries. Here, speaking purely in the aspirational, I looked forward to hearing dreams of the spectacular.

However, across the board, the responses weren't far from the point of survival. *The gallerist* and *the writer* both had similar goals of simply being able to practise their practice in a less stressful space in their life. *The writer* told me about their desire to play more with the fashion line they're in the process of building up, fascinated with clothes as an art form which are uniquely rooted in functionality. *The gallerist* just wanted to stop stressing that everything would at some point go wrong.

In contrast to the above, *the curator* desired something more along the lines of the big dreams I had initially thought I might garner from these responses. Without a moment's doubt, *the curator* expressed that their dream would be to bring back and be the chief curator of a Johannesburg biennale. "That's the next frontier if we're gonna reinvigorate this space" they said. Implicit in this statement is a sentiment that something has died here, and is in need of a reinvigorating.

In contrast to a retrospective solutions orientation, *the sales specialist* and *the artist-organiser* looked towards a realm of that which is yet to be known. *The artist organiser* said:

> "I don't feel like I've arrived in any sense. Partially I think I also chase that feeling of not knowing, of not feeling satisfied or engaged. You know, it's like, by putting yourself in spaces where you feel uncomfortable or don't know what you're doing. That thing of wanting to still feel something or experience something. I think I always want more."

Similarly, *the sales specialist* is curious about all that we don't know, but presume to know in our very local conceptions of art history on the continent. *The sales specialist* said although content with all they've managed to achieve so far in their career, there is always room to desire and know more; in their case, that would be to explore more of the continent and understand the art

history of other African countries, and understand more intricately the unique nuances of their art ecosystem.

These sentiments underpin the very attempts which this research report and its accompanying queered exhibition align itself towards, in that this research at large is satisfied with intimacy as something we will always yearn for and that it will always need to be worked towards with no possibility of ever fully arriving at intimacy as something completed. *The artist-organiser*'s reponse speaks back to José Esteban Muñoz when he writes that "We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can still be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain" (2009: 1).

In the final chapter to come, I will return to queerness as a methodology which guides *bubblewrapped*. However, for now, before situating this curatorial practice in futurity, I asked my research participants to think of the conditions of now and offer some thought to what it is that they believe the Johannesburg exhibition scene to be in need of today.

What's fascinating at this point is how clear it is that in the most ideal of circumstances (even imaginary ones), people's individuality will shine through in how it is they desire to act. The way they see things, or the things they want to see, will be very different. However, in processing and being processed within The Machine, there is an almost unanimous view. To the question of needs, at almost all points, it is clear what is felt most necessary: more space, and more funds. These two things are inextricably related.

The curator is of the belief that Johannesburg is in need of spaces which exhibit more peripheral media - i.e. that which is harder to package and sell, like performance, sonic or even light art. It is their belief that these funds certainly do exist, but are being gatekept by a powerful few. In unplanned unison, *the sales specialist* echos this, noting that Johannesburg is need of a more diverse ownership, therefore allowing new narratives to be brought forward, beyond those approved by the wealthy, white majority of gallery owners. Also commenting on the need for ownership to be more critically investigated and used, *the gallerist* and *the writer* share the view that both big and small galleries alike need to do the work of providing for artists.

The writer goes further to mention that the current trend of funds distribution in the arts - usually going towards strictly supplying funds for the needs of production - is a means by which the arts industry strategically only makes room for the middle class and above. In not providing funds for rent or just living a life, only those who are able to in some way bear the cost of those things on their own are welcomed into the art space and its small pool of funding. This returns us to the fact that The Machine, as we know and inhabit it, is but one point of functioning in the greater scheme of competitive and exclusionary capitalism.

As such, *the artist-organiser* is hesitant to the recent wave of galleries in Johannesburg adopting care as a curatorial thematic concern. They feel discomforted by exhibitions which are underpinned by such an idea, insisting that "it feels like a ridiculous conversation to be having in a gallery space where care is so not a priority, where relationships are so transactional [...] if you wanna talk about care in a gallery space, maybe ask some of the staff how much they get paid."

Clearly, the inter related issues of space (and who and what they make room for) and funds can't be so easily rectified by throwing around terms like care; care cannot quickly be thrown in as a footnote to mend the damages of the systemic operations of capitalism, as they have played out for decades. The affect with which we attempt to deal must be held alongside the context in which it will play out. This becomes a useful point of consideration for this research, and makes necessary even more consideration.

Placing belonging

As a final, and perhaps most important point of consideration, I posed to my research participants a question which could essentially unravel the intellectual material which this research premises its motivations on. The question examined 'belonging', asking whether or not such a consideration is a valuable one in a place of work, even when such a place of work is as affective as the arts.

Some of the responses were passionately prescriptive. *The gallerist* and *the curator* shared an interesting sentiment; they were of the belief that one necessarily needs to build a space for *themself*. It is interesting to position this sentiment against the profession both of these people

play in the arts industry. Arguably, for both of them, it is amongst their primary roles to make spaces. As such, perhaps, it becomes a more easy inclination. Introspectively, it is this professional inclination(/obligation?) that drives this research question to begin with. However, both of these respondents do not suggest making space for oneself with any degree of cavalier. *The curator* only offers the suggestion to make a space of belonging for oneself as a solution to their otherwise pessimistic view; initially answering the question of whether or not belonging ought to be a consideration in the professional arts space with an instinctive "No!". "As a colonial subject, you'll never fully belong to these spaces," they warned. This consideration of one's own race as being an intangible but very real object in the exhibitionary space calls back to Alberta Whittle's own concerns. *The gallerist,* who is also black, also says:

> "I think to feel like I belong within [the art space], I had to build a space. And I don't say that now everyone has to build their own space - it's tough. But I think [of] whatever way you can immerse yourself in a space - sometimes it's within relations, making home of other people."

Similarly, on the feeling of struggling to find belonging, *the writer* and *the artist-oragniser* both confessed to wishing that they didn't feel the need to belong ("I wish I could say 'fuck that!" *the writer* shared). However, both find themselves in a relationship with arts and belonging that is more complex than that. This isn't hard to understand, with *the artist-organiser* recognising belonging in some way or another as being inevitable due to practising art and having been affirmed for so long in their life. The case for *the writer* isn't much different, who has maintained a sense of responsibility to the arts and their writing - especially given that their work is something which engages many people. "I definitely care, for better or worse." says *the writer*.

On the side of 'for better', and on the polarity of *the gallerist* and *the curator*, *the sales specialist* gives a resounding yes to the question of whether belonging is important and necessary in the arts space. They say:

> "When you're working in a job like the arts, it's important to be affected by the art; it's important to care about the work you're doing; it's important to care about the artists; it's

important to care about the stories. So for me, when people are not emotionally invested, I just don't understand. I struggle with that."

Results conclusion

As expected, and as welcomed, even this question of belonging - which I said had the potential to unravel the intellectual material this research enwraps itself in - is no less complex after these questions. The fascination for this research is not to condense to bite-sized-pieces these questions, but uncover and think in new lights of nuances revealed from their responses. One can see from these responses that the various positions which we operate from within The Machine complicate our view of and relationship to belonging, and subsequently every other variable.

The only things unanimously agreed upon were the things which held the various practitioners together in this present context. There was a consensus that some kind(s) of higher economically-superior powers dictated the ways in which the exhibition scene played itself out. These powers dictated who it was that exhibited, as *the gallerist* addressed; they dictated what kind of art it was that was exhibited, as *the curator* lamented; they gained this power - and implicated the working class art professionals - in the most dubious ways, *the writer* fears; they made art purely about the money, *the artist-organiser* admitted defeatedly; and they would not take 'no' for an answer, *the sales specialist* warned. Each professional, even amongst their differences, was engaged in a practice of refusal, in their own ways. It is evident from these responses that all of these professionals had become professionals for their very ability to navigate around, distance themselves from and refuse The Machine.

A problem comes in that their practice of navigation and refusal is so all-consuming, that it can make a connection to some kind of utopian futurity or warm memories of their past difficult to grapple with. This is exemplified in the difficulty my respondents showed in trying to think of what more it is they want from this space, on the most personal of professional levels. There is a clear separation of the moment we find ourselves in and the time each professional was much younger, and recognised for their talent in people relations, art production or writing. It is my reflection that a connection with that period is made more possible with time. In trying to establish an intimate space for connection in all of these interviews, I kept in mind that a

connection of a moment to its place in the greater spectrum of time is what can give that moment an intimate quality. With that in mind, if each practitioner could have more time to work slower, and actively engage with that slowness, they might be better able to imagine what it is they not only want from that present, but their future and their past as well. In so doing, an intimacy is (re)gained with self, and with their practice in general.

A slow curation, as Jayne Crawyshaw-Hill notes, is "curating that expands on the exhibition practice to become a socially engaged project, [that is] enhanced by collaborative curating" (2020: 25). Inherently, a process "in which multiple stakeholders (curators, facilitators, artists, directors" (Crayshaw-Hill 2020: 25) are considered and involved will be a slower one. Furthermore, and importantly, Crayshaw-Hill considers it a more democratic one.

In conducting these interviews, I have taken away from each respondent's time in which they might otherwise be taking very strategic rest from their work, or I have taken time away from the work itself. Yet, in these interviews, we have taken time to think about their work itself. No productivity is taking place which directly contributes to their work, or any commercial exhibition; but something exists in those moments of intimacy which is generative towards exhibition-making, as *bubblewrapped* highlighted. How a curator chooses to use these moments of unconventional productivity - which double as spaces for lamenting, dreaming, admission - is the next step which remains excitingly open-ended.

5. The Next Step

To contextualise this final chapter, I will begin with providing an overview of the surface level details that pertained to *bubblewrapped. bubblewrapped* was a queered exhibition I curated on the 27th and 28th of January 2024. The exhibition was open to the public, but necessitated the audience to RSVP beforehand. This was because the exhibition took place at The University of Witswatersrand's University Corner, on the 21st floor.

The venue doubles as Drama for Life's research centre, and it took place in the half of the venue lined with old, but functioning computers. All of the walls in the rounded venue were glass, therefore overlooking all of Johannesburg from its city centre. On three of the five available

computers, there were headphones which played the sonic component of the exhibition on loop. This was a curated selection of moments from the interview process, where the voices were manipulated to maintain anonymity. In addition, a soundscape was curated by use of eerie machine sounds, strategically placed to echo and amplify the emotional undertones embedded in the various sections of speech. An original piece of music was also created and looped for the audio.

On the other two of five computers, a video played, which acted as a kind of artistic processing of the general context of this research and common backdrop in all the interview responses. The video portrayed a kind of mechanical pandemonium, and was supposed to serve as an imagining of what it is like to exist and operate within The Machine, and to therefore set the tone for the exhibition for audience members. It was also projected onto a set of lockers that stood by the entrance.

Aside from the media playing from the computers, the same loud eerie machine sound played on loop from a professional speaker to fill the venue. The exhibition took place just as the sun was setting, and the large glass walls of the venue allowed for the audience to see this sunset, while looking at an increasingly luminescent Johannesburg from a high point of view. This made the space optimal for what was an ‘internet blue’ wash of light, provided by the University of Witswatersrand’s Theatre Department. In the depth of this blue, I wanted to immerse the work and the audience in an atmospheric space. This heightened the eerie ambiance, as it made it an exhibition almost in the dark. Lighting also became a way of building my own world with this exhibition, as a word that is literally seen in a new light to that outside of the space. This was done to develop the idea of the exhibition space as a space to build other worlds.

In addition to the stairs that led into the exhibition space, all of the chairs, mouses and keyboards were wrapped in bubble wrap. This served three purposes. For one, the audience members might become aware of their weight on the bubble wrap, as they inevitably sat, walked and shifted on the bubblewrap, to its continuous popping. This was intended to disrupt the passivity of viewership, and present a moment for audiences to consider the influence of their viewing, taste and acquisitions on how exhibitions are staged. The other purpose - in the case of the bubble wrapped mouse and keyboard - was an added element of difficulty in navigating the videos and

audio, if one wanted to take the video forward or back (because the mouse lost sensitivity). This difficulty was to challenge the audience to be more engaged in processes of listening and observing. Inherently, bubble wrapped objects cause people to act with more cautiousness and care for what it is that is underneath, for it is assumed that what is underneath is fragile and/or valuable. This leads to the final purpose of the bubble wrap; a subtle nod back to the research and personal experience detailed in the research report that shows how it is mostly marginalised members of society - i.e. those most aware of their risk to harm - who relish in the anonymity, controlled access and odd safety of the internet. Those people, like my adolescent self, can wrap themselves in the internet feed they have curated for themselves, existing in a digital bubble wrap, so to speak.

As Whittle mentioned, our current modes of display work towards an idea of making an exhibition space as sanitised as possible, to leave room only for the artist's work to shine (Whittle 2020: 120). And while I remain cautious to not adopt a curatorial strategy that moves beyond thinking of art, this research asks: for whom is it useful to facilitate display practices that only show the value of the end product? What does it do for all of the labourers - artists included - who suffered through a process of fighting for funding, for space and trudging through the exploitative, insidious underbelly that the respondents above have spoken to? Those practices do not serve the audience members either, who are often "time poor and culture hungry", and have been habitualised into "seeing and feeling in a hurry" (Ratcliffe 2016: 6). In the quick gear shifts of The Machine, these deliberately easy viewing conditions make audience members expectant of going into a space to just extract some rush of emotion from an artwork and quickly move forward.

To challenge these now automated modes of producing-and-looking, *bubblewrapped* strips the exhibition of even what is assumed to be necessary to its functioning, i.e. art and/or design objects. Without art-as-spectacle, the exhibition exhibits only intimacy itself; the intimacy of a conversation, between two people. In line with queerness as a method, *bubblewrapped* is as banal as it comes, as it is an entire exhibition exhibiting conversation, thinking about conversation, and interpreting conversation (Muñoz 2009: 9). Yet, also in line with queerness as a method, there is something to be said for the value of that which is banal. In his own theory

around the relationship between the banal and queerness, Muñoz makes reference to both Andy Warhol and Frank O'Hara's fascination with Coca-Cola and how in its all-American ubiquity it becomes a vehicle to transport their audiences to a future world in which queerness and queer people can exist safely in the most banal moments (2009: 9).

But, how can we think of queerness, in a way that is not all-American? To consider how queerness as a method can be applied outside of a Western context, it is a useful activity to consider what it is that characterises that context. In the case of America, both O'Hara and Warhol could have used a Diet Mountain Dew, or a Dr. Pepper. To move away from the world of soft drinks, Warhol might've made a silkscreen of a number of swooshes, the iconic logo of Nike. O'Hara, had he written his poetry a few decades later, might have written a poem about being on FaceTime together, instead of sharing a coke. It is not the coke that matters, but how that coke represents American consumerism, as a key part of everyday American culture, and is therefore an entry way for queer people to be just another American.

In a country like South Africa, a number of economic, political and historical factors drastically limit the potential for South Africa to be a country characterised by consumerism, if even for the sheer contrast in spending power. By that virtue, queerness cannot hope and imagine itself in the comfortable banal of something which is not commonplace for most of the country. To understand queerness as it articulates itself in our South African arts context, curator and writer Kopano Maroga suggested that "no conversation about queer myth making can be complete without the mention of maverick Athi-Patra Ruga" (2019: 51). Expanding beyond myth making, Ruga's work is an important point of reference for this research in how it is that it "is meant to confuse fixed orthodoxy" (Adendorff 2022: 187), while sharing the research's satisfaction with never arriving, as Anna Stielau will aid us in understanding. Before then, it must be acknowledged that it remains an unfortunate fact that an exploration of what queerness can mean in the context of curatorial practice specifically remains to be largely unexplored, especially as it might relate to a Johannesburg context. However, in consideration of this, I draw from Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir's suggestion of curatorial research as boundary work (the other kind of boundary work that this research considers). In that, "the curatorial intent is to bring together distinctly different research modalities" (2021: 430). As such, we can draw from a visual cultures

analysis of Athi Patra Ruga's conception of queerness to therefore expand into curatorial theorising.

Visual cultures theorist Anna Stielau (2015) begins in the same place as this research, in unpacking Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, and its specific argument of queerness as perpetually not-yet-here mode of desiring. As per Moroga's suggestion, Stielau does not consider queerness in the South African context without looking to Ruga's work. Specifically, Stielau uses Ruga's *Lands of Azania (2014-2094)* (2013) to relate Ruga's conception of Azania to the greater issue of queerness. The tapestry work imagines a new Eastern coast of Africa, and references Anti-Apartheid political parties' use of the ambiguous and implacable 'Azania' to inspire political hope. Looking beyond the eye catching rainbow-burst of colour, one must recognise that the banal which Ruga taps into with this act of queering is in cartography and land. Ruga's conception of queerness becomes synonymous with an alternative world building (Stielau 2015: 130).

For so long as the Republic of South Africa has existed, the construction of the map - and what belongs to whomst - has been a contentious matter for political rhetoric. Indeed, to this day in 2024, issues of land repatriation still bubble (if not erupt) in our parliamentary meetings. These issues of land, and its deeply political, spiritual and cultural implications, have become so ubiquitous so as to almost become what it is that characterises South Africa like consumerism characterises America. Like much of the other countries that occupy the African continent, South Africa is painstakingly aware of the fabricated nature of space and geography.

As such, in the seemingly unending conversation of land and how it is made up, Ruga throws in a Sodom and an ocean blue Zebra. For curatorial practice and exhibition making as a spatial practice, this idea of queerness (as an alternative world building) animates the discipline with so many more possibilities. Thereafter, considering Berlant's suggestion of how a reconsideration of intimacy builds worlds, the potential of this, intersected with a queer curatorial practice, is nothing short of endless. This intersection cannibalises itself in constantly asking "how else could this exist?" *bubblewrapped* sought to build an alternative world, in which the exhibition is presented to a public before the traditional end products of exhibitions (art) are shown (and with no intention to show them). Instead, what is presented reconsiders intimacy as something to be

exhibited itself, in the hopes of building more worlds of possibilities in the audience's mind. Indeed, the ideal exhibition is not-yet-here.

On my part, as the curator of *bubblewrapped*, I realised just how much work is being done in listening, as a curatorial method. In listening and grappling with each word exchanged, there is something to be actively done on the part of the audience member as well as myself. Sitting before me were the voices of five individuals, who had all walked very different paths within the same terrain. In listening, there were moments of echo; where one person's sentiment resounded in almost perfect harmony with that of another. Then there were moments of extreme difference, where the respondents could not be more divided. In the process of dealing with these multitudes, I thought of the group exhibition as a commonly adopted format of the contemporary curator. In Johannesburg, it would take one drive down Jan Smuts Avenue to come across a number of group exhibitions on any given day. The choice for a group exhibition, from my own professional perspective, often has the dual purpose of striking the interest of as many collectors as possible, while also acting as a measure to distinguish which artists are in what stage of their professional trajectory, as measured by either their ability to have a solo show or the status of artists they are exhibited amongst in a group show. Practically speaking, there is much reason to choose either the group or the solo exhibition format.

However, in this particular investigation, it becomes a point of concern how little literary thought is given to the symbolic impact of either choice, in relation to that particular exhibition's overall meaning, whatever that may be. In line with that same banality of queerness as a methodology, I was taken by the magnitude of what it meant to listen to these voices and place them on a track. Clips which were bordering an hour, were dissected and mere minutes would come from each. I parallel this to one experience where a young artist had invited me into her studio and storage space, as I was searching for works to include in a virtual group exhibition I was curating. Her studio was located in a room under the stairs of her loft apartment. Directly across from that room, was her storage unit, which she invited me into to find completed works. I recall the duality of feeling both nervous and honoured. This space, which she had carved out in her own home, was dedicated to an artistic practice which was evidently inseparable from who she is and how she lives her life. In that, there was an honour. Yet, I was made nervous by her own

nervousness; it would later come out that her own practice was under constant scrutiny from her own lecturers within the Fine Art Department of her university. Reflecting back on the exhibition format I had chosen, I can understand the unease of an emerging artist whose work has already come under scrutiny in isolation, and which now faces the additional pressure of a group exhibition inevitably bringing about comparison (exemplified by the point I made earlier of group exhibitions as being a marker of an artist's professional positioning).

Months later, here I sat again with a combination of feeling honoured and nervous - although entirely of my own impetus, in this instance. In doing the work of curating the sonic element of *bubblewrapped*, I considered the honour it was to have been able to curate an intimacy within the interview process, that led to these most vulnerable admissions of yearning, frustration and disillusionment. To curate these moments of intimacy, I had to establish a dynamic in the interviewee space that existed outside of the traditionally transactional dynamics of a professional art space. For some of the respondents who I had been actively forming a relationship with for months before and outside of this master's research, this was easier. For others, I asked them to tell me about themselves beyond what it is I would have found online in my research into them and their practice. In this, the interviewee has an opportunity to engage in a self-disclosure, which Shaver and Reis would argue is the base of an intimate moment. The first scripted question thereafter pertained to asking them about their childhood. Something so personal as one's childhood memories - much removed from who they are as professionals - also went on to foster the intimacy of these moments. There would be a distinct twinkle in the eye of those recalling fond childhood memories, or a scrunching of the brow for those who were trying to recall aspects of their childhood self for the first time in quite some time. That childhood self who was not a gear in the functioning of The Machine, but might've had some creative spark that brought us to a meeting decades later. This began to set the tone of intimate exchange, in thinking of ourselves as existing outside of the roles we occupy (in the hopes of inspiring thoughts about how it is our persons have been alienated from the constant demand of and supply of labour we experience). Furthermore, to maintain that feeling, I also had to step outside of my role as interviewer/researcher/curator. Even if my own sentiments would never make it to the final recording, it was generative for me to share my own stories as we spoke. It did the dual

work of making the interviewer more comfortable in just having a conversation, while also bringing to question what it is we define as usable/useful in professional spaces.

Beyond usability, I also considered how important it was that I did justice to their sentiments, and the intimacy of those moments, by being selective in a way which did not misrepresent the speakers. Sometimes, this meant making sure to include the frustration of the speaker. In other instances, it was about understanding that a sentiment offered to me in this moment was for me to keep, interpret and use how I must going forward - but is not necessarily in good faith to put in the exhibition's audio. This speaks to the dilemma which Mariam Fraser and Nirmal Puwar (2008) put forward in their paper, 'Intimacy in Research'. Their focus distinguishes itself from research *on* intimacy, and looks at intimacy *in* research itself. Pertinently, and exploring these ideas mainly through documentarian practices, the research contends with the issue of creating an intimate, private research setting between yourself and your research subject, and then re-presenting that as data to the public, "in the name of a scholarly 'good'" (Fraser and Puwar 2008: 10). More than these audio clips being academic or exhibitionary material: at the most raw, these files contained real people's stories and experiences. As I listened, I was reminded of the "pure" intimacy which Valentine spoke about on the internet, and how that was made pure by people's decision to engage in this non-synchronous form of connection in a way which was appropriate and, most importantly: considerate (Valentine 2006: 268).

I thought of this, and related it to the group exhibition format, and the process of a curator engaged in making such an exhibition. How might the individuality of artistic and humane insight undergo a flattening or erasure in processes of production? In disrupting the traditionally visually inclined nature of exhibitions in Johannesburg, and having less to see, as it were, I was able to "see" in an entirely different light in my own exhibition making process, . As Fraser and Puwar's research looks into, I found myself engaging in a "looking that is not reducible to seeing, a 'looking emotionally' that is part method, part ethics" (2008: 11).

So I arranged the sonic components of this exhibition in a way that 'looked emotionally' at each subject, navigating carefully to not tread over the line of intimacy into an uncomfortable vulnerability, and exposing that which is not for the general public's consumption (thus another layer in grappling with the role access plays in fostering intimacy, as my interviewees would

know certain moments would remain just between myself and them). And while it is a position of mine to focus this research away from an audience's enjoyment of the show (as that focuses on finality), that element of the show was, undeniably, a concern of mine. As I set up the exhibition the night before, I couldn't help but feel the anxiety of confronting the queerness of my own exhibition through the lens of an audience who had become accustomed to certain exhibition engagement practices. I walked up to the 21st floor of University Corner with not much more than a USB, a projector and 50 metres of bubble wrap. Audiences who had RSVP'd, as per University Corner regulations, were coming to see an exhibition. For some, this was an investment in the ideas they had understood to underpin *bubblewrapped* through longer investment in the research via a personal relation with me. For others, this was just a moment of blind support or a fun weekend activity, with no more knowledge or interest than any other member of the general public who does not engage in artistic production and saw the exhibition marketed as not much more than just "a queered exhibition" taking place on a weekend in January. I thought of how this exhibition would rob them of their opportunity to pose before a painting, and stare at it pensively for a photo on Instagram. What would it offer them in return?

The danger of this line of inquiry is it once again puts a focus on outputs, which I have cautioned can lead to the disposable treatment of people. Seth Cluett made an argument for the symbolic offerings of sound art, by stating:

> "As sound is folded into the overall experience of artworks, the clarity with which its subjects, concerns, and expressions can be addressed in contemporary curatorial practices hinges on the ability of our theoretical models to account for information beyond the optical and haptic modes." (Cluett 2013: 110)

While this validates the place of sound as the primary driver of an exhibition, this rhetoric also unfortunately places an emphasis on the final product of sound art. While it is that I agree we need models within curatorial practice that seek to learn through listening, it is the point of this exhibition to amplify the whispers that fill the gallery, project space or museum before the boom of an opening night. If those walls could talk, what might we hear? Better yet, if we could just take a particular focus to listening, how might that affect future exhibitions? This stood out to me in my processes of research as a scholarly gap, especially in literature in contemporary curatorial

practice as it plays out in Johannesburg. Theories addressing listening as a curatorial method or queered curatorial methods in general are hard to come by. Of course, there exists literature about sonic exhibitions themselves, or exhibitions about queerness, but herein lies the problem of an output-focused arts scholarship. In my instance, the process of listening itself became the primary influence for the exhibition design. When I speak of this exhibition design, I refer here to the ordering of the clips, and their subsequent blaring alarms and moments of machine groaning. Even the moments of silence that would drag in between was a decision inspired by listening to every clip that made it into the final audio, and deciding what statements needed an opportunity to just sit with the listener, in the way the curator of an exhibition with physical art objects might decide one work deserves a wall of its own for the best engagement with that piece. *Bubblewrapped*'s video was similarly inspired by listening intently to the stories of the respondents working within The Machine; in listening to the underlying emotional tones of the voices as they spoke about the difficulties and fears of working in the art world, I was able to imagine a visual output that would not act as artwork, but the curatorial and affective context of the exhibition.

It is not my suggestion that all exhibitions become this kind of behind-the-scenes exhibition or queered exhibition. Where this exhibition relied heavily on those blaring alarms, how might a listening during the *process* of exhibition-making manifest itself visually? Would an exhibition marked by much conflict, funding battles, and unpaid overtime best be represented by the curator staging a white cube presentation? Perhaps. Perhaps not all of the moments of vulnerability ought to become a feast for the eyes of mildly curious guests; that decision for a white cube presentation might also be an act of preservation of intimacy *in* research, like omission was a tool I used. The avenues to a successfully intimate exhibition are endless. Amidst the groans of The Machine, it is a worthwhile attempt to shut one's eyes, and focus an attempt to listen and find out what would do justice to the various workers that make exhibitions possible - taking it case by case.

As was said in opening this research: the work of intimacy is not done. Hence my decision to not pose this final chapter as a consolidation of reports, with me surveying the audiences or the participants to determine if this was an exhibition which certainly balanced safety, intimacy and

access. It would be too reductive, and delegitimise the crucial fact of intimacy constantly needing attempts. The work of intimacy requires a re-evaluation and negotiations with specific contexts all the time. This exhibition was not the final marking point of this line of investigation; not for me and certainly not for the discipline of contemporary curatorial practice. Like the sounds that influenced the bulk of this exhibition, things can be lost if not paid particular attention to. The requirement here is to continuously be attentive to the shifting demands of the phenomenon of intimacy, and be particularly imaginative in methods made towards this intimacy, in a world where there has been little attention given to the phenomenon. But as I consider what such a methodology and questioning could do for future researchers and curators interested in curating intimate, safe spaces, I am brought back to the sentiment that introduced these efforts: it is worth making the attempt for someone else.

APPENDIX

To not have brought the research back to the digital sphere would have been remiss. For that reason, using one of the platforms cited early as a site of my own personal becoming, *bubblewrapped* is digitally archived on https://bubblewrappedexhibition.tumblr.com/. For optimal viewing experience of the intended (digital) exhibition design, please engage the exhibition on a desktop/laptop computer.

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