
PLUMBING THE DEPTHS: Recycling Conceived as Life Raft in a Mediation from Trash to Worth

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I declare that this thesis has been composed by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signed:



Date: 28 April 2021

Place: Cape Town

This is a creative PhD in Fine Art. It comprises a body of artwork entitled *Filthy Rich / Dirt Poor* (Wits Art Museum April – June 2021). And the scholarly essay that follows, entitled *PLUMBING THE DEPTHS: Recycling Conceived as Life Raft in a Mediation from Trash to Worth*.

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Abstract

The aim of this creative study is to interrogate, by means of a scholarly essay and a body of artwork, the travails of Johannesburg's informal recyclers so as to reflect on the city's exploitative and inequitable history – this while acknowledging that the pattern of inequality is profoundly racially skewed. Matters of labour, race and human value, discussed in conjunction with consumption and discard, are harnessed to sketch a trajectory from Johannesburg's historical gold-mining origins through to its contemporary status as the country's commercial centre.

The study seeks to demonstrate that the recyclers play a pivotal role in linking recyclable waste to commodification and hence labour to human worth. My research can be conceptualised in terms of waste, want and wealth, while also showing that 'waste' can refer, ambiguously, to both human discard and to the wasting of the land and those people who work it. Simultaneously, I advocate the potential of art to address the aforementioned matters by probing the creative labour expended in its making, the potential monetary value of art and, indeed, the cultural impact of art itself.

In an effort to articulate these disparate themes, I propose that just as human discard, since the formation of ancient middens, has provided invaluable evidence of the complex cultural, economic, political and environmental systems that governed our existence then, so, contemporaneously, can Critical Discard Theory posit the potential of waste (garbage, trash, rubbish, dirt) to build relevant interdisciplinary bridges that link the core concepts of this creative PhD.

Keywords: Johannesburg, gold, trash, Discard Theory, mine dump, inequality, recycling, waste pickers, informal economy, consumerism, capitalism, environmentalism, life raft, The Raft of the Medusa, Théodore Géricault, mixed media art.

**We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
Or of an ocean not littered with wastage**

TS Eliot (1941)

Introduction

Contemporary South African society is deeply inequitable, thrusting the consumerist waste of those who have the means into the sphere of those whose most basic needs for survival are not adequately met. Much of this waste is recyclable, however, and in the last fifteen years or so, has been recognised to have substantial monetary value. The collecting and selling of the discards of the wealthy thus offer a viable source of income for our country's poor.

It is my aim in this study, which comprises a body of artwork supported by a written thesis, to appraise Johannesburg in terms of its complex socio-economic systems and problems, particularly as these pertain to waste and its handlers. The core questions of my research are the following: How is the ever-increasing burden of trash to be managed in the City of Johannesburg? By whom, driven by what motives, and for whose gain?

Johannesburg's informal recyclers, by virtue of the invaluable intersection they represent between humans and their discard, play a leading role. Their work is undoubtedly for the betterment of society and yet they are subject to extreme levels of stigmatisation and marginalisation. With this in mind, my creative research centres on 'value judgements': in the first instance, as these relate to trash but more especially as these judgements extend to the recyclers themselves. The idea of 'value' is conceptually surveyed through analyses of various bodies of my recent art production. Discussions pertaining to the art-making component of this study are dispersed throughout this dissertation so as to speak to a number of different but convergent themes.

It will be observed that I engage a 'nautical' theme in both essay and artwork. I use this strategy to thematically conflate the task of recycling with the notion of an economic life raft extended to the city's poor. Furthermore, I employ a circular style of writing to reiterate my predominant theme of recycling, while also employing words, concepts and metaphors that allude to the prospecting mindset of Johannesburg's recyclers.

The essay begins with an enquiry into a 2009-10 series comprising hand-beaten lead ‘trash-objects’, entitled “House 38: Hazardous Objects”. Thereafter, the use of lead as a conceptual device is discussed at length throughout my writing, encapsulating themes such as the artwork as actant; labour, skill and materiality; and, by extension, permanence versus disposability. Later in the essay, and in a complete departure from hand-beaten lead, I examine the conceptual potential inherent in my art made from decommissioned, shredded South African bank notes sourced from the SA Reserve Bank. In the making of symbols – noughts, crosses and the highly recognisable ‘recyclable’ motif – out of this uniquely self-referencing material, I seek to set up a metaphorical ‘trajectory of value’. I play the monetary value of the previously intact notes off against their worthless, shredded remainder, and then – in circular fashion – ascribe cultural and monetary value to the new artworks that emerge.

Much later in the essay I describe a 2016 installation whereby I sought, via the symbolism of shipwreck, to ‘re-purpose’ Théodore Géricault’s 1819 painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*. Just as Géricault illustrated the inherent danger of governing bodies putting their own interests above national interests, giving power to political favourites, and abandoning the poor, I caution that society cannot expect to escape unscathed when governmental and societal structures turn a blind eye to burgeoning consumption, its fallout, and the circumstances of the poor who attend to the predicament. But I also point out that since shipwreck can be survived, it can also symbolise innovation, endurance, spiritual and ethical resilience, and rebellion against authoritarian structures. Circling back to the informal recyclers, I stage them as shipwrecked castaways, marooned by the disintegration of their previous communal and economic structures. But simultaneously, their trolleys can be likened to sea-going vessels and their drivers to seafarers. As the city’s waste is piled into bulk bags and hauled to the numerous cash-for-scrap depots, so, too, is the pallet/raft offered as a potent allegory for the self-reliant mariner who must use what little is available to survive in open waters.

Early chapters in this essay analyse definitions of human discard and how these definitions have altered over time and place. However, I state at the outset my conscious decision to avoid strict definitions, preferring to capitalise on the rich nuances embedded in the general concept of detritus for my allegorical references. My take on trash is always subjective, especially in view of the fact that a considerable percentage of that which was formerly discarded as worthless waste is now recognised as valuable commodity. Likewise, I assess trash in terms of

the potent signifier that it is – able to denote abundance amongst the wealthy while simultaneously indicating its commodity value to the poor.

In Chapter II. and again in Chapter V., Mary Douglas's pivotal definition of dirt as 'matter out of place', is extrapolated to the human population. Those in society who are considered to be 'abject' or 'disposable' have come to be thought of as 'people out of place', and, of course, the notion of 'disposable people' has a long history in South Africa. Georg Lukács, whose writing predates Douglas's by many decades, had already observed this phenomenon when he wrote that as the commodification, commercialisation and monetarisation of human livelihoods continued to accelerate, so too would the ontological conflation of the human and of disposable waste.

Chapter V. introduces new themes. I assess the societal validation of labour in contemporary South Africa – paradoxically, a country beset by an insufficiency of work. Joblessness is perceived as shameful and yet there is not enough work to go around, resulting in the need for entrepreneurial initiatives. Since the barriers of entry are low and the skills required minimal, informal recycling offers a form of work that can provide an income while also restoring a sense of self-worth.

Returning to the idea of the recyclers as prospectors (much like the gold miners of old) Chapter VII. considers the metaphors of surface versus those of the underground and a 'mountain/hole' duality is set up. Furthermore, AbdouMalik Simone's collaborative concept of 'people as infrastructure' is invoked to describe the informal recyclers' prospecting work and its benefits to the City of Johannesburg and its citizens. Chapter VIII. continues in a similar vein, while offering the intricate and entangled nature of Johannesburg's historical and perpetually evolving goldmining ecosystem as a symbolic device with which to interrogate the socio-political, economic and environmental impacts inflicted on the region in the past one hundred and thirty years.

Recent paintings by artist Clive van den Berg are closely analysed in Chapters VIII. and XII. In the first instance they are invoked to articulate the physical and psychological trauma inflicted on the mining landscape and on those who worked it. In the second, his work is cited in support of Jane Bennett's theories pertaining to the ability of inanimate objects – in this case art – to influence humans: to have 'affect'.

In my final chapter I revisit the community of recyclers living at House 38 and summarise the three distinct iterations of my creative practice over the past decade. In the first, I propose that lead replicas of items of refuse could stand as proxies in a conceptual analysis of the value of the life and work of the recyclers. In the second, I cast these same recyclers as the casualties of shipwreck. And finally, I evoke their presence by means of painterly depictions of a damaged mining landscape. In so doing I endeavour to conceptually address the fundamentals of this study: How is the ever-increasing burden of trash to be managed in the City of Johannesburg? By whom, driven by what motives, and for whose gain?



Figure 1. House 38, Sivewright Street, Doornfontein (June 2009). Photograph: John Hodgkiss.

His specific situation is defined by the fact that his labour-power is his only possession.

Georg Lukács (1923)

I.

Johannesburg duo, Tanya Zack and Mark Lewis recently produced a series of photo-books entitled “Wake Up, This is Joburg” (2014-2018). The title of one of the books – *Good Riddance* (2015) – deliberately plays with the contradictory perception of Johannesburg’s informal recyclers: while the title acknowledges their good work, it also points to the tendency to associate the recyclers with the trash they collect. The entangled nature of trash, humans and the city is further revealed in vivid descriptions of the recyclers’ co-joined movement as they haul their cargos of waste on customised grocery pallets, on foot, through the streets (Jones 2017:1001-1002).

One of the protagonists of *Good Riddance*, Naleli Kgomo, challenges this homogenised view, exhorting the reader to “[l]ook at our work, ... We work hard. We are feeding ourselves” (Zack & Lewis 2015:1). The word ‘look’ serves to highlight the visibility of their work but also alludes to the unique value they offer the city and its citizens. Johannesburg’s flotilla of recyclers appropriates the hard shoulders, often swelling into the roads themselves and forcing vehicles to navigate around them. “They mark the city with their labour, creating paths and routes that criss-cross its spaces” (Jones 2017:1002). Yet at the same time one is struck by their bodily vulnerability.

Some years before Zack and Lewis, I, too, had begun to engage in ‘on-the-ground’ research with Johannesburg’s recyclers and as I now proceed to introduce the various themes that will play out within this essay, I believe it is important that I revisit this research.

Working collaboratively with the late photographer John Hodgkiss in 2009, I began engaging with a community of informal recyclers living in an abandoned building at 38 Sivewright Street in Johannesburg’s inner-city precinct of Doornfontein. Our “House 38: Hazardous Objects” project (2009-2010) sought to probe the experiences and rationales of a community of around 200 recyclers by off-setting Hodgkiss’s anecdotal photographs against my hand-crafted miscellany of ‘trash-objects’ such as aluminium cans, polystyrene punnets and plastic soft-drink bottles. I duplicated these items (routinely collected by the recyclers) in near-virtual detail by beating sheet-lead directly onto the trash-objects themselves (or onto the solid plaster casts

of those that were too fragile). Thereafter, each beaten-lead panel was removed and soldered to its adjacent panel in order to rebuild the trash-object entirely out of lead sheet.

Key to this creative work was my conscious attempt to force a confrontation with the concept of trash – and, importantly, with those who handle it – in an effort to initiate a more meaningful contemplation of the things and people that we tend to disregard as that which we instinctively do not wish to see or acknowledge.



Figure 2. Examples of the trash objects crafted in lead. Photograph: Jacki McInnes.

As a relatively wealthy, educated, white South African, I am aware that the very notion of ‘dark buildings’ (abandoned and written-off by their former owners and which have subsequently been ‘hijacked’ by squatters) taps into white suburban fears of a crime-ridden inner city. And furthermore, that the term evokes colonial associations of darkest Africa, a place without agency or history, awaiting discovery. Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon writes about these buildings and their inhabitants, dwelling on the many complexities associated with white suburbanites entering the living spaces of the dispossessed in order to convey (verbally or otherwise) their

stories on their behalf (2017:176). He also points out that characterisations of the city's 'dark places' is not exclusive to white suburbanites. The residents themselves often use the grammatically informal isiZulu and isiNdebele term *Umnyama'ndawo* to emphasise developmental failures such as the lack of electricity and water that impact negatively on them. Simultaneously, the term can also express the notion of personal adversity (2017:176).

Wilhelm-Solomon goes on to describe his initial fear on entering these dank, reeking buildings overcrowded with human occupants and overflowing with their cargoes of recyclable garbage. In my work with Hodgkiss at House 38, I too felt the trepidation that Wilhelm-Solomon describes. And yet, once inside, I noticed to my surprise, and in stark contrast to the seeming dysfunctionality of these buildings, the individually demarcated living spaces of the recyclers. Many of these were fitted out and elaborately decorated with the spoils of the recyclers' forages: "Hodgkiss's photographs reveal[ing], without condescension, the minimum it takes to be house-proud. At night, the men, wrapped in Basotho blankets, some still wearing balaclavas, gathered around braziers, eating meals of pap and greens prepared for the community by a designated cook" (Titlestad 2012:51).

At face value, House 38 was a gut-wrenching example of the toxic fallout of failed inner-city policies. However, assessed from the perspective of the recyclers, there were other more complex stories to tell. Although in a perilous state, the building was their safe haven, essentially their 'life raft'. And in a city that cuts certain individuals loose, or leaves them to slip through the cracks, the image of the life raft is a potent signifier. In the face of desperation, these 'castaways' were forced to find alternative strategies for survival. By recycling society's detritus, the recyclers commodified items of trash and created new semblances of economic order out of the wreckage of society.

The vagaries of the city and of existence within it came into play early in the project: the community at House 38 was evicted by the 'Red Ants'¹ on 16th October 2009. Two days later

¹ Red Ant Security Relocation and Eviction Services, known simply as the Red Ants, is a private, Johannesburg-based company hired by private landlords and the Gauteng Local Government to enforce the law on behalf of the courts and Offices of the Sheriff. Although they presumably have the law on their side, their work is frequently muddled by accusations from civil rights groups, the media and the evictees themselves, who cite poor prior communication, intimidation and excessive violence in the handling of the evictees and their possessions.

a private developer bricked up the entrance and first-floor windows, and the building was eventually renovated to provide low-cost student accommodation. In the following year, five of Hodgkiss's photographs were paired with five of my lead objects on a group exhibition, "Ecotopian States" (2010), which I curated at the University of Johannesburg Gallery. Hodgkiss died unexpectedly on 15 March 2012.

Since a Memorandum of Agreement was signed with the Gauteng Human Settlements Department in July 2015, conditions around evictions have apparently improved – illegal residents are now required to receive written notification at least a month prior, at which point the Settlements Department is expected to intervene with alternative accommodation solutions. A second warning is delivered 48 hours prior to the imminent eviction. The Red Ants have also agreed to act in a decent and orderly fashion that does not "violate the dignity and human rights of those affected by the eviction".

Notwithstanding these undertakings, evictions unavoidably play out in extremely fraught circumstances. The Settlement Department is frequently accused of tardiness in its communication with evictees and the provision of alternative accommodation. Fear plays out in the form of angry retaliation among the evictees, which is, in turn, viciously suppressed by the Red Ants, who "do the work that nobody else wants to do" in the words of Red Ants CEO, Johan Bosch (<http://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/red-ants-human-settlements-sign-pact-evictions>).

Grossly material, garbage is society's id; it steams and smells below the threshold of ideological rationalization and sublimation.

Ella Shohat & Robert Stam (1998)

II.

Middens, comprising the preserved remains of ancient human habitation, have provided a vital resource for archaeologists wishing to study past societies. Now, as then, the study of human consumption and the management of its fallout confirm that waste and pollution continue to provide important material evidence of complex cultural, economic, political and environmental systems. Critical Discard Theory² therefore provides the framework within which our cast-off refuse can build relevant interdisciplinary bridges linking local and global politics and economics, thereby aiding one to interpret the multifaceted questions that have come to characterise contemporary human existence (Whiteley 2011:12). The study of waste also points to the importance of assessing the bigger picture and understanding the origins of the problem, instead of simply resorting to technological or moral solutions that may only address the symptoms (Liboiron, Acuto & Nagle 2012:np).

In her seminal book *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas describes 'dirt' (both bodily and inanimate) as a cultural construct and as 'matter out of place'. Douglas argues that in our efforts to maintain order and avert contamination, humans establish taboos around that which is expelled and, in similar fashion, assign specific spaces for that which we discard. The correct disposal of dirt – together with cultural rituals intended to purify (separate filth from cleanliness) – is presumed to nullify dirt's ability to pollute and therefore renders dirt benign. Douglas is particularly concerned with boundaries and edges, especially of the body and, by extension, those relating to the household and the city (1966:97-98).

Basing their work on Douglas's writing, some theorists have been inclined to conflate the term 'waste' with 'dirt' and suggest that both, equally, should imply matter out of place. But others, such as Martin O'Brian, are of the opinion that "[i]f dirt is matter out of place, wasting is its reversal, the in-placing of dirt" (Strasser 1999:271). Strasser posits 'waste' as that which

² 'Critical Discard Theory' is the interdisciplinary field of study encompassing the anthropological, historical, socio-economic, political, geographic and environmental systems underlying our concepts of waste and associated habits of wasting (Liboiron, Acuto & Nagle 2012:np).

retains a usefulness – leftovers and scraps of organic matter that could be used as animal feed, or be converted to compost, or could provide the base material for soap. On the other hand, she regards ‘trash’ as something completely redundant, having no use-value whatsoever (Bhattacharyya 2018:46).

Strasser also proposes that since theorists tend to take ‘process’ as their departure point, trash could be understood as contiguous to the day-to-day functioning of household and economy.

The economic proposition is straightforward: once large numbers of people have attained a certain standard of living, the growth of markets in new products depends on the continuous disposal of old things. Disposal, in other words, may be understood as part of the larger process that encompasses production, distribution, purchase, and use, and trash as a product of that process, not merely a by-product (Strasser 1992:7-8).

That the disposal of waste operates at the interface between private and public confers a symbolism on our discards. That which is brought into the home to be consumed or used will eventually (or perhaps much sooner than that) leave the home as unwanted. Once outside, refuse becomes ‘public matter’ which, in theory at least, renders it available to any person who may have a re-use or new use for it. Simultaneously, it becomes ‘a public matter’ in that the problem of humanity’s excess requires humanity to come together to solve. For these reasons, the meaning of garbage has undergone a radical shift in the twentieth century. Originally associated with poverty, excess and waste are now recognised as problems of affluence. At the same time, one must be cognisant of how the relationships of different sectors of the population to garbage “both underscore and create social differences; class is an essential factor in the dynamic processes of reuse” (Strasser 1992:8-9). What is discarded as worthless by one class of people is coveted and commodified by another.

Shreedeep Bhattacharyya is inclined to view dirt/waste not so much as a dichotomy but as a trajectory. In the interchange of discarded objects – from original (intended) use to secondary (unintended but possible) use/s to a final destination of inert uselessness – these objects occupy liminal space and time. “What we need to acknowledge, here, is the fact that waste is not just about matter that is out of place ... it is also ‘matter on the move’, constantly changing its place, as the matter finds it very difficult to disappear” (2018:48). Bhattacharyya therefore argues for a distinction between ‘waste’ and ‘dirt’ that is quite different to Douglas’s but similar to

Strasser's. For him, the former term implies the possibility of reuse, while the latter is inert matter, devoid of use-value and hence also of monetary value.

Notwithstanding the above, I prefer to circumvent the varying definitions ascribed to our discarded matter and will use the terms waste, garbage, trash, rubbish, dirt and filth interchangeably. Although Discard Theory is central to my body of work, I am less concerned with the technical or philosophical aspects of this field than with the allegorical potential offered by trash to speak to matters of 'value' and 'worthlessness'. These will be assessed, in the first instance, in the literal sense as they pertain to trash as a commodity; secondly, in terms of the value to society and environment of the work performed by Johannesburg's informal recyclers; and thirdly, with regards to 'human value', or what it means to be valued as a present and contributing member of our species.

By linking creative practice and environmental sustainability to Discard Studies, Stuart Walker argues that creative practice "is capable of tackling complex issues in situations where the question cannot be clearly or narrowly defined, where information is incomplete, and where a variety of outcomes is possible" (2014:17). Creative research has the potential to bring together a diverse range of factors, integrating them into specific outcomes or design solutions by way of processes and practices that combine intellectual knowledge with human imagination and creativity. Managing human discard in an environmentally sustainable manner, he continues, requires exactly this kind of analysis to unravel the intricacies of social, economic and environmental considerations as they intersect with "individual purpose and profound notions of personal meaning that go to the heart of what it is to be a human being" (2014:17).

Furthermore, and keeping the metaphoricity of my creative research in mind, it is worth remarking on how two key constructs at the centre of my work – garbage and consumer culture – can be played off one another by means of the ambiguous meanings of the words 'waste' and 'want'. Waste connotes useless consumption, extravagance, squandering and indulgence but can also imply decline, dissipation, destruction and death. Want can suggest craving, desire and yearning, while simultaneously implying lack, need and poverty (Strasser 1992:5).

**Art is a form of knowledge, which allows us to inhabit the terrain in between,
the space between what we see on the wall, and what we conjure up behind our
retinas.**

William Kentridge (2014)

III.

Maarit Mäkelä (2007:159-160) links artmaking and the production of knowledge, believing art to be a dialogue concerning the ideas, histories and ethical philosophies that the artist (and viewer) has a stake in and an opinion about. The art-object should not be the aim of the project but should function as the conduit to that which is intangible – that which can only be conceived, perceived, recognised or understood – to offer the answer to the research question posed. Mäkelä thereby implies that the art-object can become the embodiment of the research question, while simultaneously asserting that the art-object alone cannot embody knowledge. This, she believes, must be achieved through the process of interpretation, which should be staged within the context of the written thesis.

With this in mind, it has been my aim to engage metaphorical concepts of trash – especially as they pertain to informal recycling in the City of Johannesburg – to explore notions of value with respect to both the work performed by the recyclers, and to trash as commodity. Michael Titlestad (2012:51), referring to the “House 38” body of work described above, suggested that my beaten-lead ‘trash objects’ could be cyphers serving to warn that in the current late-capitalist era, unchecked consumerism and waste would likely overwhelm us. But he also spoke of my transformation and translation of that which is residual or of little consequence, writing that I seek to reinterpret society’s cast-offs in terms of the narrative of the intertwined nature of commodification, value and man.

My artistic practice has evolved significantly since 2012 and yet Titlestad’s observations at that time are still relevant. In addition to the symbolic use of lead to express my disquiet about our profligate behaviour, I have subsequently begun to include real discarded matter in my creative practice. Various artworks make use of mine dump dust, while others comprise decommissioned South African bank notes shredded for disposal by the South African Reserve

Bank. My intention in the use of these materials is to blur the lines between commodification, value and waste: in the first instance, by making art from the worthless by-product of the gold-extraction process and, in the second, by making art from what is, quite literally, ‘trashed’ money.

It is of interest that I am not the only Southern African artist incorporating decommissioned currency into the artmaking process. Gerald Machona and Dan Halter, both of Zimbabwean birth and who now both reside in South Africa, have drawn on the hyperinflation and subsequent collapse of the Zimbabwean Dollar to speak to matters of governmental ineptitude, the economic collapse of their country of birth and the concomitant mass migration of Zimbabweans to South Africa. Machona uses intact but worthless Zimbabwean Dollars to create ultra-delicate sculptural renditions of local plants, these contained within glass vitrines. In so doing, he seems to reference nineteenth-century English physician, Dr Nathaniel Ward’s, use of similar glass casings, which came to be known as ‘Wardian cases’ and which were used to improve the chances of survival of the plants he imported from the colonies back to Europe. In keeping with this reference, Machona concerns himself with issues of migration, transnationalism, social interaction and xenophobia in Africa.³



Figure 3. Gerald Machona, *The Iris* (2016). Decommissioned currency, copper wire, silicone sand, vitrine, 75cm.

³ <https://www.goodman-gallery.com/artists/gerald-machona>

Halter, in a similar vein, focuses on “his sense of a dislocated national identity, human migration and the dark humour of present realities in Southern Africa”. His linocut series, “Domboremari” (2016-2017), depicts the highly recognisable balancing rocks of the same name that feature on Zimbabwean banknotes. The series also alludes to Zimbabwe’s cycle of hyperinflation – which saw the highest denomination peaking at an inconceivable Z\$100 trillion in 2008 – and which “[left] every citizen a poor billionaire”.⁴ Absurdly, especially in the context of an essay that seeks to explore notions of individual and monetary value, these defunct Zimbabwean banknotes can still be purchased as collector’s items at tourist hubs such as Green Market Square in Cape Town.

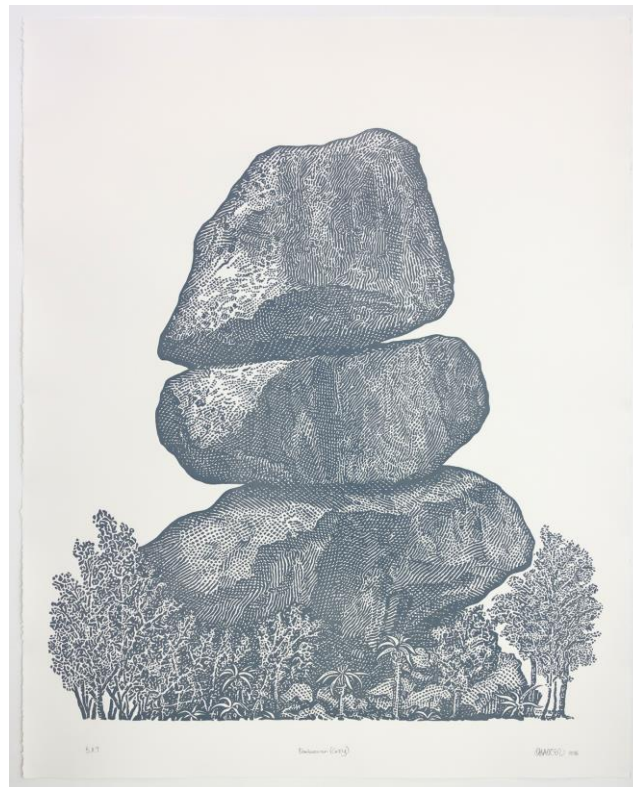


Figure 4. Dan Halter, *Domboremari (Grey)* (2017). Linocut, 100 x 81cm.

Gillian Whiteley writes that the fragility of human existence can be linked to the processes that materials, especially garbage, are subject to. “Decomposition and entropy connote the transition from unity to disunity, disintegration and chaos” and can therefore provide potent metaphors for “political states, signifying social upheaval, anarchy and revolution” (2011:1).

⁴ <https://www.whatiftheworld.com/artist/dan-halter/>

Focusing on the disparity of wealth in the City of Johannesburg and the attendant and necessary work performed by the city's recyclers, I make a case for informal recycling as a vital function in the service of the city. Although their activities may seem haphazard and unsanitary to the uninitiated eye and at times may be vilified as bordering on the criminal, I propose that the recyclers' work has its own unique order, purpose and outcome. Not only does it provide monetary subsistence to the recycler and an environmental service to the city, but it simultaneously encourages social morality and cohesion, while conferring a sense of self-worth and dignity on the recycler (Loschiavo dos Santos 2011:10).

So the commodity and trash are as closely linked as production and consumption. ... It may even be that we can think of commodities as deferred trash.

Julian Stallabras (2009)

IV.

‘Trash’ is a relatively new phenomenon linked to the rise and expansion of capitalist economies, beginning with the Industrial Revolution in the Western world and expanding ever since to every corner of the globe. As manufacturing has increased, so has the production of waste – and of wealth, but not for all. The growth of industry induced the movement of the rural poor into the cities in search of work but for many, it was not industry that would sustain them but industry’s fallout. Many have exchanged, and will continue to exchange, rural subsistence for the equally marginal activities of collecting, processing and living off industry’s by-products (Sinclair 1906:vi). Trash therefore is a complex signifier in that it denotes abundance amongst the wealthy while simultaneously providing the building blocks and the sustaining industries of the poor:

The trash of the haves becomes the treasure of the have-nots: the dark and unsanitary is transmogrified into the sublime and the beautiful ... as a diasporized, heterotropic site, the point of promiscuous mingling of rich and poor, center and periphery, the industrial and the artisanal, the organic and the inorganic, the national and the international, the local and the global: as a mixed syncretic, radically decentred social text, garbage provides an ideal postmodern and postcolonial metaphor (Shoat & Stam 1998:42-43).

At the same time, as suggested here by Shoat and Stam, trash can act as a potent signifier of beauty. Charles Baudelaire’s city poems, written in the latter half of the nineteenth century, revered those who lived on the edges of society – prostitutes, street cleaners and scavengers of various sorts – viewing them as symbolic figures engaged in worthy occupations. As Walter Benjamin later noted, Baudelaire adopted the ‘rag pickers’ or ‘chiffoniers’ of nineteenth-century Paris as an extended metaphor for poetry itself, in that both activities dwell in the partially concealed residues of human activity and desire. In somewhat contradictory fashion, then, Benjamin also criticised a certain genre of photography that, he felt, made “enjoyment

out of abject poverty and transfigure[d] even a ‘refuse heap’” (Whiteley 2011:17). This stance is refuted by art historian, Julian Stallabras, however. He is of the opinion that the line between trash and ephemeral beauty is vague. Beauty, he writes, can survive in spite of the onslaught of trash, even if only by contrast. And even a blighted landscape can allude to what was there before and what could be recovered in the future. Taking the theme further, Stallabras makes a case for the image of trash in the production of allegory, while simultaneously considering the trash-object itself to be liminal – neither complete nor incomplete, neither perfect nor imperfect. “By separating image and meaning, allegory rejects the false appearance of artistic unity and presents itself as ruin. In this it has an honesty which utopian symbolism can no longer claim” (2009:418).

These impressions, better suited to a rapidly fading Romantic era, lost traction around the mid-twentieth century as a severely distressed world economy, combined with post-Second World War technologies, saw America and later Western Europe, aggressively developing the automation of every type of production, while simultaneously and necessarily adopting an ethos of mass production and ‘single use’ mentality that remains in place today.

Baudelaire’s symbolic city views had evoked a pre-industrial interpretation of detritus: in the ‘system’ of waste, items that were considered worthless to one sector of the population were claimed as a resource by another. Industrialisation and, more recently, capitalist ideologies, have broken this ‘duality’, replacing it with the idea of a unidirectional flow in the system: “Materials and energy are extracted from the earth and converted by labor and capital into industrial products and by-products, which are sold, and into waste, which is returned to the eco-system but does not nourish it” (Strasser 1999:14-15).

Now, in the service of contemporary capitalism, it has become imperative that the nostalgic tendencies invoked by Baudelaire and his contemporaries be suppressed, while fast-talking advertising campaigns encourage ‘out with the old, in with the new’. Objects do not even need to become dysfunctional or tatty; simply becoming ‘old-fashioned’ is sufficient to justify their dispatch. Accordingly, the fundamental objective of technological processes has adjusted away from durability towards novelty. Further compounding the situation, foodstuffs and other household supplies, which had previously been measured out in portions into a customer’s own container, are now sold in pre-packaged form. When this practice began in post-Second World War America, it was touted as hygienic and of convenient benefit to the customer, but the real

winner was the manufacturer, who acquired an invaluable vehicle for free branding and advertising on the disposable packaging (Strasser 1992:17).

As for the relationship between advertising, allegory and decay, there can be little doubt that they make uneasy bedfellows. Allegory can and often does look to decay for its referents, while advertising often uses allegory to beguile consumers. Yet, advertising avoids the concept of decay at all costs – desire is, after all, predicated on the wholesome and pristine:

More than anything else, trash reveals the broken utopian promise of the commodity. The lesson of the obsolete gives the lie to the promise of ultimate satisfaction. It is all the more powerful at a time when there is rising disaffection with materialism and the price that must be paid for mass-produced idiocy, when green issues are rightly seen to be ever more urgent (Stallabras 2009:418).

American journalist Vance Packard analysed post-war economics in which consumption had to rise, and keep on rising, to sustain an ailing American economy. Consequently, the usefulness of items decreased even as their number burgeoned, causing deft marketing and advertising strategies to become the order of the day. Mass production in mid-century America was glamourised by a particular philosophy of consumption and waste. But Packard was quick to point out the link between waste and want:

There is this general evidence of profusion of material wealth even though there is a substantial residue, numbering millions of families, that remains unquestionably ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed. And the television set may be substituting for adequate food in the family budget (1960:4).

Now, in the age of the Anthropocene,⁵ new technologies facilitate the imagining and manufacturing of new products – and their subsequent consumption and discarding – with shorter and shorter turnaround times. Garbage has become ubiquitous. It straddles geopolitical, social and economic settings with impunity and is therefore both a compelling yardstick and

⁵ The term Anthropocene comes from the Greek word *anthropos*, meaning ‘human’. Its widespread use has been attributed to the Nobel prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer, who began popularising it around 2000 in recognition that it is humans themselves who have wrought the current devastating transformation of the earth (en.m.wikipedia.org).

powerful leveller. It is a signifier of wealth and the measure of our ‘conspicuous consumption’, as coined by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Such is the imperative to constantly discard and replace that to re-use certain items is deemed peculiar or even antisocial behaviour (Bauman 2004:110). And as we rapaciously embrace the new and discard the old, the trajectory of our fleeting desires is driven from factory to home and relentlessly towards the landfills on the urban peripheries, where our trash is conveniently deemed to ‘disappear’.

It would not be preposterous to suggest that planned obsolescence has become a contemporaneous key to economic stability and that the omnipresent ‘use-by date’ is a particularly effective weapon in this initiative. The market justifies a throw-out mentality premised on convenience (disposable coffee cups, plastic shopping bags) and on the containment of dirt, which is routinely couched in perceptions of contagion (disposable vacuum bags). The fallacious notion that the re-use of various items (disposable razor blades) presents a threat to our hygiene or health is also a useful strategy. And thus is ‘tossing’ made culturally permissible (Bhattacharya 2018:47). Even more garbage is created in the excessive packaging of items, while constant ‘upgrades’ are marketed as imperative to our experience of the object but are really aimed at reducing usable objects to junk as quickly as possible.

Critical Discard Theory offers a provocative view of the twentieth century via the interpretation of both wanting and wasting and posits the voracious consumption of commodities and the consequent accumulation of trash as the most potent signifiers of our reckless attitude towards environment and society. The groaning and toppling rubbish dumps that pockmark our world can be seen as the symbols of the vast resources of the earth – and the labour of its people – wasted away in seemingly no time at all (Stallabras 2009:419). And yet, the very omnipresence of our trash seems to render it somehow ‘invisible’. It is as if we are so overwhelmed that we subconsciously blot it out.

Contemporary capitalist society has aided our myopia by evolving a highly efficient system of garbage collection from our homes to some distant place on the outskirts of our urban imagining where it is buried in landfills. Disposal in this fashion is a “crucial part of the planned obsolescence that facilitates continual demand for new commodities and is central to the production of capitalist value” (Samson 2015:817). Stallabras concurs, while also reiterating Douglas’s distinction between garbage in the streets or landscape versus that which is disposed

of in rubbish dumps. When tossed into our surrounds, discarded matter is “not merely redundant, but out of place, reacting against the unitary phantasmagoria of capital” (2009:417). By comparison, the dump, for all its rankness, is considered the rightful repository for our cast-offs and can therefore be conveniently disregarded.

If one were to attempt to ascribe meaning to trash, this might lie in the utter absurdity of its production in the first place: masses of packaging and objects are produced, often offering only a fraction of their advertised usefulness, only to be rapidly cast off as soon as the flimsily constructed object breaks, or the consumer grows tired of it, or an upgraded version is made available. Or perhaps meaning can be extracted by conceptually stripping away the crisp packaging that so recently held the promise of novelty, utility and distinction in order to recognise that what remains is nothing more than the sum of its component parts. From its persuasive presentation of unique worth to us on purchase, the object regresses to something inert and seemingly useless. Yet, in its unravelling, the trash-object can reveal a different truth: one that pertains to society’s misplaced arrogance, its claims to exceptionality, its irrational desires and ultimately its deceptiveness.

During the post-Second World War era, the rubbish dump came to be perceived as a ‘graveyard’ – the repository and ‘last resting place’ of unwanted things. But South African academic, Melanie Samson, argues that a more contemporaneous (and responsible) interpretation of the rubbish dump must surely be that of a “resource mine”. And further, that in view of the extreme socio-economic disparity in our country, nowhere can this reinterpretation be more apposite. Samson also makes the crucial observation that, over the past decade, it was Johannesburg’s informal recyclers themselves who effected this change of regard towards garbage through their intellect, labour and struggle. She is quick to point out, however, that now that this information seems obvious, formal labour seeks to appropriate the recyclers’ knowledge, while simultaneously evicting them from their source of revenue and worker-worth (2015:814).

Packard’s apocalyptic tome *The Waste Makers* (1960) predicted that hedonistic consumption, which was actively encouraged in post-Second World War America to offset a moribund economy, and which continues today, would doom the planet to an “age of waste” (1960:9). But possibly even more alarming is the way a deeply inequitable perspective from the Global North has shaped the geopolitics of consumerist production and the management of the

resultant waste. This can be demonstrated in a leaked World Bank memo from 1991 where, without a hint of irony, the president at the time, Lawrence Summers, advocated a scheme whereby toxic, rich-nation waste should be ‘allocated’ to African countries. His reasoning being that these countries, still relatively unscathed by pollution at that time, had a greater capacity to ‘absorb’ waste than the already over-burdened West (Nixon 2013:1). Conveniently, growing pressure from rich-nation environmentalists fearing for their health and objecting to aesthetically offensive waste dumps could be appeased. But Summers’ cynical solution was especially revealing in its assumption of “a direct link between aesthetically unsightly waste and Africa as an out-of-sight continent, a place remote from green activists’ terrain of concern” (Nixon 2013:2).

The uneven production of commodities and the attendant fallout offers a sombre metaphor for the developmental and environmental inequalities between Global North and South – a notion that Nixon (2013:1) describes as ‘slow violence’. His descriptor is particularly apt for a process that, while insidious, is relentlessly intensifying over space and time. The world’s poor, already desperately short of the basic resources for decent life, wage a constant battle against the degradation of their environment at the hands of wealthier nations. Pieter Hugo’s photo-essay *Permanent Error* (2009-10) is an apt example, revealing the devastation of Ghana’s landscape by the wholesale dumping of millions of tonnes of obsolete technological devices from developed nations at Agbogbloshie Market outside Accra. Here the cast-off ‘e-waste’ is burned by the city’s poor to extract valuable metals for meagre resale, resulting in the pollution of air, soil and groundwater for miles around (Hugo & Angelucci 2011:np).



Figure 5. Pieter Hugo, *Untitled: Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana* (2010). C-print, 82 x 82cm.

This ... is apartheid's dirty secret: not total separation or apartness, but the capture of indispensable 'hands' of black labour. ... Somewhat paradoxically, what was most 'inconvenient' about the population of black labourers was its indispensability to the 'white' South African economy.

Jennifer Wenzel (2018)

V.

A brief observation on the manner in which littering is regarded in the City of Johannesburg is apposite here. Generally speaking, and not without justification, littering is associated with antisocial behaviour because it prioritises private interest over public welfare. This, while also acknowledging that South Africa's mining history, as well as its contemporary industrial practices, could, and should, be accused of the same kind of disregard. Masses of solid waste, acid mine drainage and air pollution have laid the landscape to waste in an era that persists in favouring profits, investment and private gain over public good.

Littering incurs cost, it can negatively impact public health and it mars public enjoyment of the environment. Litter can also act as a marker of class, income and status in that those with political and financial clout have more influence over regulatory processes and greater resources to keep their spaces clean. Paradoxically, wealthy, industrialised countries are inclined to encourage excessive consumerism while simultaneously shirking their duty to the environment and public.

But littering can also be employed as a powerful act of defiance. It has become quite common to see Johannesburg's municipal workers literally 'trashing the city' in their demands for higher wages and greater respect. "Their message is clear: we may be at the bottom of the social heap, and you may think we are human trash, but by God, society needs us, and if you don't listen to us and give us a living wage, we'll make you pay for it" (Southall 2018:np).

For his part, Jeffrey A. Lockwood hypothesises litter in terms of its 'thin', as opposed to its 'thick', qualities. 'Thin' pertaining to formal or sensory judgements such as colour, composition and its balance within the environment, while 'thick' refers to moral implications: litter as emblematic of disregard, selfishness and arrogance (2015:102,106). Lockwood acknowledges the importance of a moral imperative to remove litter, whether this be common

garbage, or invasive alien species, both flora and fauna. However, he is quick to assert that litter can imply inherent and unexpected value and beauty too. The impulse to judge something as an eyesore, out-of-place, or alien is socially conditioned and hence implies a subjective decision (2015:110,116-117). Equally, since the concept of value is a human construct predicated on matters of time, place and socio-economic circumstance, litter does not easily lend itself to verifiable, scientific research but rather to a process of creative enquiry.

What, then, becomes the ontological implication for ‘trash’ – since a considerable percentage of that which was formerly discarded is now considered to be a commodity? And by extension, how does the trash/value judgement now apply to the informal recycler within this recently established informal economy? Problematically, it has been my anecdotal experience that recyclers ‘become their work’ in the eyes of mainstream society. Although their entrepreneurial and environmental value is gaining recognition – in theory at least – in practice they have not escaped the stigma. Their presence, like the trash they collect, is inconvenient.



Figure 6. Pikitup strike in Johannesburg, April 2011. Photograph: Jacki McInnes.

It is useful to recall that Douglas’s definitive concept of dirt as ‘matter out of place’ is equally relevant for sectors of the human population considered to be ‘surplus’ or ‘disposable’, or ‘people out of place’ – and to recognise that the notion of surplus people has a long history in South Africa. A colonial trope that perceived colonised people in terms of their bodies (fit for labour) rather than in terms of their social and intellectual autonomy and viewed the colonised

South as a bounty of raw material ripe for the taking, set the original scene for both racial and geopolitical exploitation (Shohat & Stam 1998:28). The independence of black Africans in terms of their land and work was troublesome in the expansion of colonialism (and later apartheid). Simultaneously, the predominant capitalist project of early twentieth-century South Africa – Johannesburg’s gold mining industry – required a surfeit of cheap labour to generate surplus value for the mining magnates and the politically connected. Furthermore, the mining industry was instrumental in driving dispossession and reducing black Africans to the status of labour commodities.

Around the same time, in the early years of the twentieth century, Georg Lukács had begun to warn against the conflation of man and commodity (and ultimately, of man and trash) writing that the labourer’s “specific situation is defined by the fact that his labour-power is his only possession. His fate is typical of society as a whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanised and dehumanising function of the commodity relation” (1923:38). Workers were increasingly being perceived as cogs in the overall process and, as a result, were becoming estranged from the skills they brought to the workplace. Furthermore, as rising levels of automation replaced their specialised skills, so the emphasis in the factory switched from qualitative to quantitative, thereby decreasing their worker-status and usefulness. Consequently, the concept of ‘commodity’ came to be understood not only as the product of the labourer, but as labour itself – and, by extension, the labourer him/herself (Lukács 1923:34).⁶ So even as capitalism generated surplus labour, so it simultaneously discarded the labourer.

Johannesburg’s gold rush, commencing in 1886 and proceeding at full throttle well into the third quarter of the twentieth century, could well be considered as both the prototype and the epitome of the dispossession, displacement and exploitation of the labourer in the service of South African capitalism. The migrant labour system, and later, apartheid’s grand projects of black townships and separate Bantustans, saw black South Africans relegated to the wasted

⁶ The post-Industrial trope of human as resource has remained virtually unchanged in the twenty-first century. However, at the time of writing this dissertation, which happened to coincide with the Covid-19 ‘lockdown’ (26 March – 1 May 2020), there has been some speculation that the need for vast swathes of the population to work from home in the near-to-distant future may begin to blur the human-at-home/human-at-work dichotomy, potentially undermining the conventional notion of the ‘human resource’.

outskirts of the country's major cities. These areas could not adequately sustain their inhabitants, thus propelling the able-bodied into the labour forces on which South Africa's pre-democracy wealth relied. But such was the need for ultra-cheap labour on Johannesburg's mines that the number of local black South Africans was simply not sufficient – nor, as it transpired, were they the cheapest labour available. In desperation, the Chamber of Mines supplemented their numbers by importing indentured labour from China. When the contracts of these Chinese nationals expired (around the turn of the twentieth century), a new and equally urgent deal was brokered with the Portuguese colony to the east. A major rail link between Lourenço Marques and Johannesburg, which came to be known as the Eastern Main Line, was completed in 1895 and the Portuguese, anxious to generate enough export volume to guarantee the success of the port at Lourenço Marques, were perfectly amenable to 'bartering' the freedom and futures of black Mozambicans – via the Eastern Main Line – with Johannesburg's mine bosses. In exchange, they anticipated a steady supply of goods to be freighted east for export from their port (van Onselen 2019:4-5).

In his foreword to Charles van Onselen's book, *The Night Trains* (2019), Wilmot James writes these pertinent words: "The place of technology in social affairs is never neutral" (2019:np). And so it was with the Eastern Main Line. The Witwatersrand Native Labour Association – an offshoot of the Chamber of Mines – had permission to run their private trains on public tracks, resulting in a legal no-man's land. The trains were seldom inspected or policed, and migrant workers could be in transit for up to thirty-six hours, during which time they were not given adequate food or water, nor even the most basic ablution facilities. It was also not unusual for migrants to be locked into their carriages for fear of their desertion. Worse still, South African Railways were prone to 'conflate' real cargo (coal, heavy machinery) with the migrants, resulting in ontological misnomers such as 'human freight'. Refusing to acknowledge that the migrant trains were, undisputedly, passenger trains slowed them through the system. But worse, the migrant's lives were placed in unnecessary danger since goods trains were frequently manned by the lesser experienced or competent locomotive drivers (van Onselen 2019:7).

It has been speculated that approximately five million black migrants were ferried between the Komatipoort/Ressano Garcia station complex and Booyens station in Johannesburg between 1910 and 1960. It was these labourers who "formed the umbilical cord and lifeblood that gave birth to the mining revolution that took place on the Witwatersrand" and who "contributed

centrally to the profitability of the gold mining industry that, in turn, drove South African economic prosperity and allowed its white ruling classes to indulge in moral and political electoral self-indulgence for more than a century” (van Onselen 2019:5).

Work as a moral imperative originated in industrial Protestant Europe. Up until that time labour had been founded on a needs-based premise – sufficiency, not surplus. But as production became increasingly capitalistic, work had to be incentivised, which was achieved through dispossession and new cultural (Calvinistic/Protestant) norms. These notions of the redemptive possibilities of work were exported wholesale to colonised Africa. Here, supported by the lure of financial security, work was touted as the conduit to “spiritual maturity and political citizenship” (Lawhon, Milligan & Stokes 2018:1119). By way of comparison, however, these writers also refer to research conducted by anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff, which offers an intriguing explanation of an alternative African work ethic that paralleled and probably predated colonialism. Analysing two terms found in the seTswana language – *itirela* and *bereka* – the authors quote Comaroff & Comaroff:

“[T]he vernacular term for work (or, more precisely here, ‘work for myself’) was nicely distinguished from that used for labor done for whites. The first, *itirela*, implies ‘making oneself’. It is the reflexive form of the Setswana *go dira*, ‘to do’ or ‘to make’. *Bereka*, on the other hand, comes from the Afrikaans *werk*, and connotes wage labor” (2018:1119).

Lawhon et al’s interpretation proposes that *bereka* alienates the black labourer, while *itirela* posits work as both self-sustaining and as an honourable pursuit. They go on to suggest that this ontological conflict may elucidate the historical reluctance of black labour to embrace and participate in the colonial economy of wage labour, especially with respect to farm work and work on the mines (2018:1119).

There can be little doubt that the coercive nature of colonial wage labour was deeply problematic. However, it could also be argued, as Lawhon et al do, that black workers ultimately benefitted from the dislocation from their traditional rural areas. Economic pressure in burgeoning colonial African economies forced a tacit acceptance of black labour in traditionally white, urban, industrialised areas and these workers, in turn, altered colonial notions of civilisation and modernity in order to promote their own political liberation. By rejecting the narrative that insisted on African identity as traditional and rural, black workers

could make legitimate demands for equal wages, the right to unionise and, ultimately, to seek national liberation. Concomitantly, work and an organised and represented working class came to be commended, while resistance to economic participation was disparaged (Lawhon et al 2018:1118).

This inherited colonial work ethic has persisted even after the demise of apartheid. The ruling African National Congress espouses working for wages as a means towards personal respectability and morality within a modern, productive, multiracial economy. By comparison, the unemployed are stigmatised as lacking decency and dignity. Entrepreneurship is also advocated and together they contribute to a “contemporary understanding of work as a socially and politically significant cultural construct” (Lawhon et al 2018:1120). But economic growth in the twenty-first century no longer guarantees intensive labour practices and we see phrases such as ‘jobless growth’ and ‘job-shedding growth’ slipping into the business lexicon. Available work is also frequently unreliable and earnings marginal. The South African government has therefore been obliged to introduce an extensive programme of social welfare, although the benefits are confined to children, the disabled and the elderly.⁷ Those who could reasonably be expected to work are excluded thus placing them in a tenuous position, but worse, reinforcing the logic that to be jobless is shameful (Lawhon et al 2018:1121-1122).

Spiralling unemployment has also had the paradoxical effect of obliging the jobless to create their own work, effectively transferring the morality of ‘working for a wage’ to ‘working for oneself’ (and preferably creating employment for others at the same time). Simultaneously, individuals who do not generate their own work are dismissed as too lazy or unimaginative to utilise the opportunities to hand. So, while the economic forces governing work have changed considerably, “the valorisation of work has not” (Lawhon, et al 2018:1130).

⁷ Much of this PhD was written during the COVID-19 ‘hard lockdown’ (26 March – 01 May 2020), during which the government extended social security to able-bodied adults. This marks a politically significant moment in that government finally acknowledged the structural failings of South Africa’s economy. “Contrary to the conservative tropes that people must stop depending on ‘welfare’, ... what this crisis exposes is the reality that our economy ... currently excludes livelihood opportunities for a vast portion of the population. Social protection in the form of cash transfers is not merely a ‘safety net’ for a minority of people, but a central distributive task of the state in a brutally unequal capitalist economy. The campaign for universal basic income just got a shot in the arm” (Hall 2020:np).

Labour has remained a contested topic in South Africa for centuries and now, in its latest evolution, it brings yet another dilemma. A previous abundance of work required that black labourers be coerced to sites of production, but recent economic conditions pose the predicament of job scarcity. The twenty-first century has seen vast sectors of the world's population becoming 'redundant' in that there is simply not enough wage labour to sustain the livelihoods of all. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman contends that this is a direct result of modernisation, which he assesses in terms of extensive mechanisation combined with the colonisation of all aspects of human life by market forces bent on capital accumulation. Drawing on Lukács's analysis of the commodification of labour and hence the labourer, Bauman predicted more than a decade ago that many of the world's poor would become the "collateral casualties of economic progress" and furthermore, that as the commodification, commercialisation and monetarisation of human livelihoods continues to accelerate, the ontological conflation of the human and of disposable waste will become more prevalent (2004:39-40).

Bauman (2004:39-40) goes on to note that while one might imagine that, together with modern technologies and agrarian advances, the aggregate of land deemed hospitable to human life would have expanded, in fact it has contracted. He ascribes this to our seeming inability to develop some of the land without simultaneously laying other parts of it to waste, to such an extent that the land is no longer able to sustain its previous inhabitants. In addition, economic progress has deemed previously viable vocations as no longer feasible or worthwhile, further exacerbating the waste of the land and its citizens. Bauman argues, therefore, that when we resort to the common lament 'the planet is full', we are mistakenly assessing the problem from a sociological or political angle. We would better serve society if we shifted the power for change away from an implacable earth and directed it towards its inhabitants instead.

This is a place to pass through, to run to and to run from, not a place to collaboratively contest or co-invest in for the longer term.

Simone & Gotz (2002)

VI.

The Surplus People Project,⁸ established in South Africa in the 1980s (and which continues to work for a transformed and just society in keeping with the country's constitution) documented how apartheid-era 'forced removals' were rationalised by casting black people as superfluous in areas favoured for white habitation. Simultaneously, areas to which blacks were dispatched were often barren wastelands: "unprepared sites on marginal lands without reliable access to water, household fuel and electricity, sanitation, health services, or transport" (Wenzel 2018:184). The metaphor is extended by the descriptor of such places as "dumping grounds" (Wenzel 2018:185) and thus have the concepts of human and dirt come to be further entangled. In keeping with Douglas's conception of waste as dirt that has been disposed of – or "put into its proper place" as Samson (2015:817) phrases it – the "spatial relation between dirt and waste underwrites the spatial logic of apartheid forced removals, so that clearing 'black spots' can be understood as waste management in this dual sense" (Wenzel 2018:186).

In these circumstances and where the possibilities for subsistence farming and other traditional ways of making a living have largely disappeared, the displaced poor are obliged to sustain themselves by whatever means accessible. At the same time, inordinate levels of socio-economic disparity have seen the burgeoning waste of the wealthy making its way into the spaces of the poor on Johannesburg's peripheries. As previously noted, since much of this waste is recyclable, the collection and selling of it provides an income, albeit meagre, for these people.

⁸The Surplus People Project's website at <https://spp.org.za/about/about-us/> states as their vision "a transformed and just society [that can] stand in solidarity with radical social movements in struggles for pro-poor agrarian transformation for food sovereignty. Their mission is articulated as a commitment to "challenge neoliberal capitalism, power and patriarchy and to promote and advocate for agrarian reform for food sovereignty with strategic alliances. Our support amplifies the agrarian struggles of social movements, and community formations in the Northern and Western Cape."

In interviews conducted with Johannesburg's informal recyclers, Lawhon et al (2018:1124) noted that low barriers of entry and the minimal skills required presents recycling as a viable option to a broad range of unemployed individuals. The interviewees, while acknowledging that the work is both gruelling and unsanitary, nevertheless preferred to overlook the degrading aspects and focus on the benefits of financial sustainability instead. Furthermore, suggestions that automation might lessen the load while increasing the gain were met with scepticism and the concern that automation was far more likely to usurp their position in the value chain. From an anecdotal point of view, these views were largely confirmed in my own interviews with the residents of House 38 in 2009.



Figure 7. Recyclers on their way to a recycling depot, June 2009. Photograph: Jacki McInnes

Now, more than a decade later, collectives such as the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) in Johannesburg are beginning to embrace more collaborative and mechanised approaches to their recycling work. A pilot programme introducing itself as ‘Building an Inclusive Circular Economy: Recycling with Reclaimers in Johannesburg’ was initiated in the western suburbs of Auckland Park and Brixton in mid-2019 and, owing to the initiative’s early success, is likely to be expanded to other areas in the near future. A simple but significant aspect of the project was the provision of clear plastic bags to the households involved. These could be used to single out the recyclable objects before they became contaminated with general waste. Moreover, since the bags were intended to be placed outside the homeowner’s ‘wheelie bin’,

visibility and cleanliness were greatly improved, thus saving the recyclers a considerable amount of time and contributing to the dignity of their work. According to a report on the initiative, the majority of the residents of the pilot region embraced the project, often entering into conversations with the recyclers, or offering them refreshments.⁹

State-owned and private entities, realising that there is significant worth in recycling, to say nothing of the imperative for formal job creation in a country with stubbornly high unemployment levels, have – predictably – muscled in with proposals to formalise the sector. This – equally predictably – has been strongly resisted by the informal recyclers. This may seem contradictory in view of the labour ethics discussed above. However, in those instances where formalisation has already taken place in the sector, it has been characterised by appropriation, regulation and the concomitant exclusion of its progenitors. This is not to say that government support for informal work is non-existent but where support does exist, it is not driven by lofty aspirations of developing “budding capitalists”. Rather, it pursues the urgent imperative to contain the inevitable socio-political fallout of total dispossession, by ensuring that poor people are at least able to support themselves (Samson 2015:815).

It is important to recognise that, in the local context at least, it was informal recyclers who originally ascribed monetary value to trash, demonstrating that a living could be derived from the collection and selling of household and industrial refuse that could be reused or recycled. In addition, recyclers contribute environmental value to the communities in which they work and commercial value to the municipal structures that govern the city. “The role of reclaimers in South Africa is like the last line of defence, if it misses us, it’s already gone, it’s already going to contaminate the environment.” These words, spoken by Johannesburg recycler and prominent member of ARO, Luyanda Hlatshwayo, underscore the estimation that recyclers remove 70-80% of our country’s refuse before it reaches the landfill and in so doing, save municipalities approximately R740 000 000 per year. Yet they are rarely acknowledged and are not remunerated by formal labour or the State (Samson 2019:np).

Samson (2015:818) draws on the work of John R. Searle to explain how a landfill is a socially constructed entity for which three elements are necessary: collective intentionality, shared beliefs and shared desires. When applied to the landfill, the collective intentionality is to

⁹ <https://petco.co.za/unique-recycling-programme-a-boost-for-informal-sector/>

obliterate that which has been discarded, based on the assumption that it has lost its use-value. Secondly, there must be agreement with regards to function, which in the case of a landfill is to dispose of waste by burying it out of sight (make it go away). And in the third instance the rules and procedures, which are collectively or constitutively determined, must be consistently applied and adhered to (whether rational or not).

In the case of Johannesburg's landfills, municipal employees are required "to render unwanted commodities permanently valueless by burying them" (Samson 2015:817). Consequently, access is generally controlled and is restricted to the delivery of rubbish, while the collection of same off the landfill for reuse or recycling is prohibited. Samson is of the opinion that these rules extend beyond reasons of practicality, however, and serve the purpose of abstractly presenting the (sanitary) landfill as a clean and environmentally sensitive space. Disposal is thus couched as a benign function, while the reclamation of recyclable items is symbolically demonised. Such a notion can be seen to be reinforced in the use of the word 'scavenging' to describe the recyclers' work.

We should be aware, however, that the three social elements – collective intentionality, shared beliefs and shared desires – are not exclusive to those in power and informal recyclers have fought back with determination. They have convincingly argued that it is financially and environmentally illogical (and irresponsible) to contemplate landfills as "commodity cemeteries" rather than as "resource mines" (Samson 2015:819-820). This, together with the admission that neither the police nor private security companies can effectively guard the physical space of the landfill, has subsequently led to municipal structures and private waste companies working collaboratively with the recyclers.

Karl Marx's original notion of accumulation, which came to be known as 'primitive accumulation', sought to separate rural peasants from their means of production in order to force them into wage-labour in the factories of the industrialists. Processes of accumulation have continued to manifest within the advancement of capitalism, leading Marxist geographer David Harvey to observe that in order to assist capital in our contemporary crisis of overaccumulation, neoliberal governments have sought novel procedures such as the privatisation of public goods and services and the attachment of common resources and spaces by national governments (Samson 2015:815). In order to differentiate his notion of accumulation from Marx's, Harvey favours the alternative concept of "accumulation by

dispossession” (2010:17). So, while the purpose of primitive accumulation was to supply labour to the capitalist project, accumulation by dispossession in the current era achieves the opposite by “rendering increasing numbers of people permanently surplus to the needs of capital” (Samson 2015:815).

Samson observes that by blocking recyclers’ access to landfills, the authorities inflict two types of injustice. In the first instance, the recyclers’ livelihoods are severely hampered, while in the second, their experiential knowledge is usurped. She argues that this type of authoritarian appropriation can also be viewed as an instance of accumulation by dispossession (2015:813). It is deeply ironical, and not a little cynical then, that the knowledge and skills of even those perceived to be on the lowest socio-economic rung – the wasted people – should be coveted by formal capital.

In further writing, Harvey concerns himself with the interrelatedness of labour, wages and the city. In a scenario of a scarcity of labour, wages will necessarily increase. In return, capitalist forces will seek to replace labour with technology or, alternatively, will pressurise unions in an attempt to force wages down. Failing this, cheaper labour (often from immigrants) will be sought. Simultaneously, increased pressure is exerted on natural environments to force a greater yield – and to absorb the extra waste produced. If local markets cannot absorb the products, foreign markets will be pursued. Sustaining capital accumulation in this fashion requires urban expansion which, Harvey believes, will have an inevitable and profound effect on the character of the cities being built (2010:19).

Harvey quotes urban sociologist, Robert Park’s, notion of ‘the city’ as “man’s most consistent and ... most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart’s desire. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself” (2010:17). But Harvey also contradicts Park’s words, observing that in contemporary times the city is no longer an entity to which every-man can offer input, nor is every-man’s right to the city guaranteed. Instead, the city has become a site of increasing capital accumulation by the wealthy against the large-scale displacement and dispossession of the poor. “From their very inception, cities have arisen through the geographical and social concentrations of a surplus product. Urbanisation has always been, therefore, a class phenomenon of some sort, since surpluses have been extracted from

somewhere and from somebody while the control over the disbursement of the surplus typically lies in a few hands” (2010:18).

Moreover, Harvey believes that questions pertaining to one’s right to the city encompass much more than individualistic access to resources. The city dweller is also obliged to consider what kind of person he or she is, what social relations are sought, and what sort of relationship one wishes to have with the resources the city provides. Cities form as a result of powerful socio-economic forces and are necessarily a collective endeavour, since shaping a city cannot be achieved by an individual. And this, he believes, inevitably results in urban discontent (2010:18).

Harvey’s analysis can be extrapolated to the development of the City of Johannesburg, but it is complicated in that neither the geographical location of the surplus product, nor the labour required to monetise it occurred above ground and in plain sight. Traditionally, or at least after Baudelairean fashion, modern cities have relied on the distinguishing features of their surfaces and the reflections thereof – real and conceptual – for their aesthetic appeal (Bunn 2008:137). In the case of Johannesburg, however, the machinations of the accumulation of wealth – and the associated wasting of the hands of labour – manifested deep under the ground.

What distinguishes Johannesburg from the metropolitan norm, however, is that this rhetoric of the surface has been implicated in an act of historical repression: in an inability to come to terms with the real origins of surplus value, in apartheid labor practices, and especially in the buried life of the black body, instrumentalized and bent into contact with the coal face, or ore seam, in the stopes far below (Bunn 2008:137).

There having come, I know not by what way,
Did with him speak and solemnly announce
A country rich in emeralds and gold.

The Quest for El Dorado
Juan de Castellanos (mid-sixteenth century)

VII.

Without doubt, the City of Johannesburg, in its mass of contradictions, can be assessed in Harvey's terms outlined above. It is simultaneously prosperous, even as its infrastructure decays; it is being re-built, even as it is torn down. It is still prospecting for gold, even as the toxic residue of its iconic mine dumps is washed southwards by high-powered water jets. It is a city of lofty post-apartheid aspirations but still deeply ensnared in its colonial and apartheid history. It is a city into which many foreign Africans are assimilated and yet, for many, it is not accepted as their final destination, but merely as a waypoint en route to someplace better (Simone 2004:422).

Johannesburg's historical mining activity deliberately and artificially divided what was then largely virgin landscape into two very distinct but co-dependent halves, an action that subsequently laid the groundwork for "the socio-spatial structure by which the city [has grown] and expanded" (Trangoš 2018:37). It is a city existing on the cusp of opportunity but is perennially thwarted by an uneasy discontent, bordering on revolt. From the extraction of gold from beneath the earth to the dumping of its mine waste¹⁰ on the surface, it is a city built on successive strata of literal matter and figurative implications, suggesting that the city can only be fully conceptualised in three dimensions.

Edward Said devotes a section of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) to a critique of the colonial fixation on "the physical transformation of the imperial realm" – the intention of which was to endorse and entrench the colonial project. This, he contends, was achieved in two distinct ways.

¹⁰ Johannesburg's 'mining waste' is comprised of the huge, iconic mine dumps themselves, which can also be referred to as 'tailings dams'; dumps of waste rock; open-cast excavations or quarries; large bodies of water impregnated with toxic sediments and particles; and the 'footprints' left in the landscape after a mine dump has been re-processed (Bobbins & Trangoš 2018:8).

One being ‘ecological imperialism’, as Alfred Crosby referred to it at the time, which involved the aggressive manipulation of rock, soil and vegetation in the service of the imperial master plan. The other was through “administrative, architectural and institutional feats such as the building of colonial cities ...” (1993:109).

Filip De Boeck, writing about Kinshasa, also focuses on destructive imperial transformation while simultaneously offering a useful trope with which to imagine the post-colonial/post-apartheid City of Johannesburg – and thus the reorganisation of space – to reflect colonial relationships of power. By placing the exalted ideal of the ‘mountain’ in opposition to the negative space of the ‘hole’, De Boeck contrasts Belgium’s colonial aspirations of old with the lived realities of Kinshasa’s present-day population. Kinshasa developed in the vicinity of the imposing Mount Mangenge, which had been imbued with ancestral notions of sovereignty and authority in pre-colonial times. The colonial project appropriated the mountain, however, staking its claim by means of Belgian flag and Christian cross and “inscrib[ing] new meanings on [its] surface – new notions of sovereignty and governance, new power and knowledge regimes” (2017:5). The mountain fed the urban aspirations of the Belgian colonisers, who built majestic Western buildings to seal European dominion. Even after Congo’s independence in 1960, and more especially once Mobutu Sese Seko seized power in a military coup in 1965, imposing high-rises continued to epitomise power and modernity. In 1969, Mobutu presided over the construction of the Sozacom Tower (1969-1977) on the Boulevard du 30 Juin, which was to become the city’s new landmark (2017:6).

Ruth Sacks points to the irony of independent Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), constructing their monumental buildings after European design. Even while wishing to sever ties with oppressive European rule, Mobutu continued to promote cultural visions from the West with the intention of boosting his popularity, both with his own people, who had grown up under colonial teaching and were familiar with its style and implications, as well as on the international stage. Regrettably, however, in following the European language of architecture and city building, the Mobutu regime inadvertently bought into “a Eurocentric ideology of teleological progress that suggested the ultimate form of advancement for a city was to become like the former metropole [thus] reproduc[ing] the toxic hierarchical notion of modern culture coming from Europe alone” (Sacks 2019:7).

The Mobutu regime, which was blatantly totalitarian, excessively self-serving, and essentially bankrupt by 1975, presided over a deeply unequal populace. This can be demonstrated by the modernist skyscrapers that dominate the city's skyline, while simultaneously demonstrating a complete lack of consideration for the informal urban sprawl that surrounds them (Sacks 2019:7). The development of the City of Johannesburg has followed its own particular trajectory but nevertheless exhibits strong resemblances to that of Kinshasa. One important difference, however, is that when the city's black population began reintegrating itself in the late 1970s, the white business community, fearing some contrary notion of 'disintegration', essentially upped and abandoned the city in favour of the newly developing business district of Sandton to the north.

But returning to the mountain/hole duality: Johannesburg cannot boast of much in the way of mountains, but it is surely a strange coincidence that its closest pretence to such, the Witwatersrand Ridge, presided over the original gold-bearing reef that caused the city to come into existence in the first place. Discovered in 1886 and stretching some 56 kilometres from Randfontein and Carletonville in the west to Springs in the east and abutting Soweto to the south, the reef was found to contain some of the largest reserves of gold ever discovered. Johannesburg's growth was fuelled by this gold rush and, as was the case for other colonial African cities, it was not too long before its buildings soared upwards to symbolically reflect this city's prosperity too. Furthermore, in its use of modernist architecture, Johannesburg sought to emulate contemporary Western cities such as New York.

As for the topos of the hole: this could be conceptualised as a mine, a cemetery, or even just the ubiquitous street pothole which, one might argue, suggests the metaphors of the hole as the more apposite descriptor for contemporary Johannesburg. Simultaneously, 'hole' can also relate to "space, temporality, body and the general human conditions" (De Boeck 2017:2) and as such might be harnessed to convey the unmet aspirations of many of Johannesburg's present citizens.

One of South Africa's most prominent artists, William Kentridge, has grappled with the exploitation of labour in the service of capitalist accumulation for the better part of his career and in his 1991 animated film *Mine* is seen to use the symbolism of the hole to dramatic effect. The film's main protagonist, mining magnate Soho Eckstein, sits propped up in his bed with a tray bearing a coffee plunger and coffee cup before him. As he forces the plunger down, so it

spirals onwards through his bed to an imagined mine below, within which toil the shadowy figures of numerous anonymous mine labourers. In a later scene, Eckstein can be seen tallying his profits on an old-fashioned calculator placed on the same coffee tray. The extended hole metaphor in this film links the coerced labourers below to the capitalist tycoon above, suggesting that while the hole buries some, it is also the repository of wealth for others.

In an argument worthy of Poulantzas, the film [*Mine* (1991)] offers an articulation of fractions and levels: racial capitalism forms an alliance between finance houses and a super exploitative mode of deep-shaft mining, dependent, in turn, on a system of compound-based migrant black labor. There is a hideous visible inequality between nonchalant wealth above ground and the bodies crushed in the stopes below (Bunn 2008:141).

In a similar vein, Joshua Walker exploits the duality of the metaphorical hole to point out that mountains and holes mirror one another: a hole becomes a negative space even as its displaced matter accumulates to become a substantial heap. Walker then anthropomorphises the metaphor and suggests that to consider the experiences of a group of people from the point of view of deficit only is problematic. Where there is a lack (of resources or infrastructure) there is, he argues, also an opportunity for new tactics (2014:31). Regarding Johannesburg, the measure of its inner-city inhabitants' resilience – and success – is their ability to stare down the obstacles while contriving alternative strategies in the face of an implacable city and unsympathetic political administration. Wilhelm-Solomon concurs, using the term 'ruinous vitalism' to describe the strategies employed by Johannesburg's most marginal inhabitants. He concerns himself with the occupants of unlawfully appropriated dark buildings, who frequently find themselves having to navigate traumatic and debilitating events such as fires, flooding, building collapses and evictions. He contends that ruinous vitalism is about the capacity of the victims of such calamities to regroup and retaliate against the unpredictability of their surroundings and futures (2017:174).

In an artwork entitled *Mountains of the Moon* (2017) presented in completion of this PhD, I have used my own ink, made from linseed oil and the soot of burnt tyres, to create a painting of a land massif. But, in self-referential fashion, my painting is based on a photograph of the pile of tyre dust I crushed in the making of the original ink, which, due to its extreme fineness formed a concave meniscus when the holding tray was lightly tapped. And thus has my mountain simultaneously and ambiguously also become a crater. Walker and Wilhelm-

Solomon's contemplations are mirrored in this artwork that could be suggesting the coexistence of hope and defeat. Ironically, the circularity of a tyre is also emulated in the image.



Figure 8: Jacki McInnes, *Mountains of the Moon*, 2017, Burnt tyre soot and oil on paper, 57,5 x 84cm

Moreover, and with regards to the dichotomy of mountain and hole, it is disturbing that administrative bodies of the City of Johannesburg have referred to dark buildings as 'sinkholes'. In their unfortunate choice of words, they effectively erase the existence of the indigent inhabitants of these buildings and reduce their homes to "economic blight, sites of criminality and waste, and sinkholes of economic value" (Wilhelm-Solomon 2015:143).

Promotional material relating to the City of Johannesburg also exploits the mountain/hole metaphor and regularly interweaves the perception of the city as a ruined space of crime and grime together with glowing reports of the potential for development and renewal. The two perspectives are not diametrically opposed, however, and share the common notion that "[w]aste, violence and decay are a kind of ground zero for reconstruction" (Wilhelm-Solomon 2015:143). Such a view serves city administrators and developers well in that the brutality of the forced evictions, displacements and homelessness of the city's poor can be concealed in congratulatory narratives of orderliness, cleanliness and rising property prices.

Other casualties of development include the histories, memories and the alternative forms of order and security developed by those used to operating outside the confines of the law and in conditions of adversity. Wilhelm-Solomon does, however, admit that he is not entirely opposed to urban regeneration. He recognises that “the desire for order, security and hygiene are not simply fantasies of the paranoid and propertied middle class, but widely shared, particularly among the poorest in the city” (2015:143-144). He goes on to stress that city regeneration cannot be the sole preserve of administrators and developers and must include the views and needs of all the city’s stakeholders, even “those seen as its blight – squatters, informal traders, undocumented migrants – [all] seek their own regeneration, their own ways to revitalise hope, in the face of dispossession, loss and death” (2015:143-144).

Mamadou Diouf and Roselind Fredericks believe that traditional (Western) definitions of ‘city-ness’ and citizenship are no longer apposite when applied to contemporary African cities. Developmentalist and comparative methods that were until recently considered adequate to assess African cities are now seen to run the risk of pathologizing them. Writing about Africa has historically tended to think of African life as rural and has, therefore, pre-judged the perceived informality and migrancy of African urbanism as dysfunctional. This tendency has extended into the post-colonial era, even as the majority of Africans now build their lives in cities. In addition, African cities continue to be characterised by narratives of crumbling infrastructure, crime, grime and flagging economies that require to be propped up – presumably from the outside, which further reduces the agency of the city dwellers themselves (2014:4).

Countering this prevalent view, Diouf and Fredericks write that nuanced analyses that consider the innovative social and structural initiatives, such as those practiced by the informal recyclers of House 38, should be privileged. When informality and migrancy occur, citizenship (of the city) becomes a function of negotiations with various structures within the city. The writers argue that by developing their own version of the recyclable garbage collection services that the municipality ought to provide, informal recyclers embody AbdouMaliq Simone’s collaborative concept of “people as infrastructure” (2014:7). The African city can then be assessed in its ability to make its own rules, while its marginalised inhabitants are able to carve their niche and effectively negotiate their right to citizenship.

Although it is true that Johannesburg’s inner city displays a fair degree of physical ruin and that it might, therefore, epitomise the collapse of the urban ideal, it is by virtue of its ‘ruined’

status that the city has become accessible to those who are unable to secure a foothold elsewhere. One might also expect the city to lack cohesive character and any sense of infrastructural order. Yet the economic collaboration of its inhabitants has been seen to offer a nascent but enduring form of city re-engineering. Particularly since South Africa's democratic election in 1994, residents of the city have had to work collaboratively in order to "engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure – a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city" (Simone 2004:407-408).

Simone argues that Western cities have long tried, and failed, to achieve the fluid mutability – borne of the need to maximise the chance of economic success – that characterises so many contemporary African cities. He cites the example of 'taxi-touts' who facilitate operations at taxi ranks in order to augment profits while simultaneously assisting commuters. Their knowledge is empirical; it does not require rules or abstract theories. Experience has taught them to recognise various signs – the distress of a commuter unfamiliar with the city; the need to help another with shopping bags; which route leaves from which area of the rank and so forth. A wide variety of tasks can be achieved in a seemingly effortless fashion based on their capacity to improvise (2004:410). Johannesburg's informal recyclers have adopted the same kind of survival tactics and have learned to read the city's waste, navigate its rules and, consequently, extract its value. This, in spite of the fact that the administrators of the city's landfills routinely forbid reclaiming on their properties.

The prohibitive position adopted by landfill personnel is premised on a contemporised vision of the African city extrapolated from the Global North, in which no niche for the informal economy is permitted. Informal recyclers are cast as the "'detritus' of capitalism and modernity [and] "are particularly reviled as a visceral, visual denunciation of the purported unidirectional progressive development of the 'world class city'" (Samson 2015:818). But Diouf and Fredericks refute this view, arguing that the recyclers' methods of managing adverse conditions should not be considered solely as the desperate survival strategies of an abject underclass. Instead, their work can be considered as providing a framework from whence cohesive and mutually beneficial relationships between diverse groups of urban residents can be built (2014:9). Or as House 38 resident, Portia Gcobisa Zungula, put it to Hodgkiss and me in 2009: "We bring the rich people's dustbins back here and we do their dirty work."

**‘Over the Mountains
 Of the Moon,
 Down the Valley of the Shadow,
 Ride, boldly ride,’
 The shade replied, —
 ‘If you seek for Eldorado!’**

Edgar Allan Poe (1946)

VIII.

Since its inception, Johannesburg has projected a certain brashness. But its superficial self-assurance conceals an exploitative history of the wasting of both land and man that goes very deep. The region’s historical and perpetually evolving goldmining ecosystem is both complex and entwined and thus offers itself as a valuable symbolic device with which to interrogate the socio-political, economic and environmental impacts inflicted on Johannesburg in the past one hundred and thirty odd years. Resource extraction has literally and figuratively shaped the region and its people and the evidence, both blatant and subliminal, is everywhere to be seen. It can be seen in the grandiose aspirations and wealth that went into the building of the city itself. But, paradoxically, also in the proximity of the dumped waste – there are few major cities in the world situated as close to mining waste as Johannesburg (Trangoš 2018:28). It can also be seen in the abandoned towns along the reef when the mines that supported them ceased to be profitable. It is in the acid mine drainage or decant¹¹ rising up from neglected underground tunnels to permanently damage the landscape. Less obvious but just as devastating are the mining-related illnesses such as silicosis, tuberculosis and asbestosis suffered by many former miners. Or the current danger to the health of the many people who live too close to previous mining operations and inhale the fine, heavy-metal-laden mine dump dust.

¹¹ As the water levels in abandoned mines have risen due to inadequate or absent management, these combine with certain minerals present in mine waste, and with oxygen, to create acid water that is high in sulphates and is known as acid mine drainage. “The surfacing of acid mine drainage decant in the West Rand (in 2002) demonstrates the limited capabilities of the Witwatersrand’s hydrological and ecological systems to buffer the effects of mine contamination” (Bobbins & Trangoš 2018:8).

For many years South African artist, Clive van den Berg, has articulated this physical and psychological trauma in his work, presenting the violation of the mining landscape as a proxy for “the violence of nationalism ... [and] of a fractured and violently distorted national memory” (Morris 2011:20). He persistently conflates body and land, while simultaneously removing their respective skins, so that that which was concealed beneath and within is divulged and made to speak to vulnerability and damage. The skin becomes permeable, while the ground crumbles. “What occurs above, leaks below; what originates below seeps up. ... [T]here is a sense of disorientation, in which the elements by which we have learned to see and reproduce the world – depth and perspective, figure and ground – have begun to disintegrate” (Morris 2011:20).

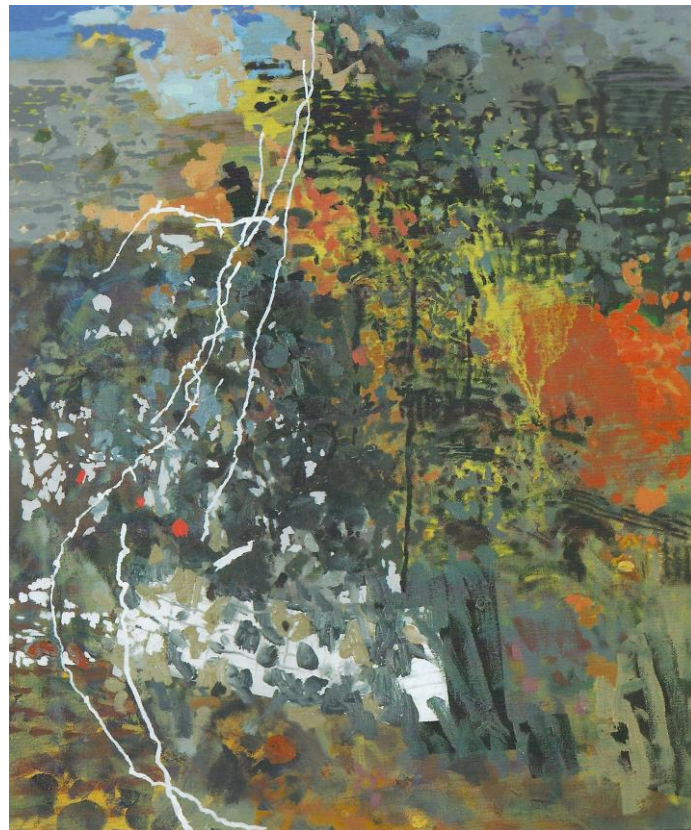


Figure 9. Clive van den Berg, *Johannesburg Scene II* (2010). Oil on canvas, 60 x 47cm.

The east-to-west vector of the gold-bearing reef, and the mining thereof, has acted to bifurcate the Witwatersrand both physically and conceptually. Trangoš (2018:36) delineates the two zones as ‘landscapes of production’ to the south versus ‘landscapes of pleasure’ to the north and points out that the spatial divide embodies the racial divide instituted by the colonial occupation of South Africa. Mining activity was confined to the south, as were the labourers

needed to do the work. The ‘captains of industry’ preferred to separate themselves from the sites of production upon which their wealth depended and took up residence on the elevated and unsullied Parktown and Westcliff ridges to the north. The spatial divide was later capitalised upon by the apartheid regime, which used the buffer zone offered by mining activity (and mining waste dumps) to delineate white capital to the north from poor and working-class communities in the south.

The concentration of wealth and capital to the north of the mines ... [offered] a landscape of pleasure, high society, wealth, sun and air. To the south, due to the spatialization of geological wealth, components of the same natural landscape were sacrificed to gold mining and characterised by dust, disease, exploitative labour practices, profit and environmental degradation (Trangoš 2018:36).

In the late twentieth century, inner-city Johannesburg underwent a seismic shift. Whereas up until the early 1980s it had been the epicentre of white business and capital, this shifted north to the newly developed financial district of Sandton, while working-class blacks began to move into inner-city residential zones such as Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville and further-flung suburbs such as Bez Valley and Newlands. But in spite of this, the original patterns of racial inequality have persisted, complicating efforts to build an inclusive city. Wealth generated in the region is routinely shifted northwards, whereas the majority of the city’s inhabitants are condemned to suboptimal lives on the urban periphery where the land has been ravaged, services are inadequate and opportunities scarce. Mining capital built the city even as it entrenched socio-economic and racial/class divisions. And yet the physical divisiveness of the Witwatersrand is not immutable, and overlaps are gradually being achieved through shared visions and initiatives.

Although mining activity on the reef has largely ceased, Johannesburg’s mining landscape itself is not static and continues to project its effects – literally, figuratively, positively and negatively – into the future. New technology has made the re-mining or ‘recycling’ of the city’s iconic mine dumps financially viable. High pressure water hoses dissolve the three-dimensional physicality of the dumps to a liquid slurry, which is filtered to extract infinitesimal amounts of gold before being washed away to affect areas even further south of the city.

The consequences of this second, major manipulation of the landscape by man in less than a hundred and fifty years is bound to have substantial and negative environmental effects. But it could also be argued that the flattening of the mine dumps physically and conceptually breaks down the historical barriers between north and south. Simultaneously, the newly levelled ground between the city and its southern satellite townships has allowed for the expansion of viable and profitable industry, bringing previously marginalised populations closer to opportunities for financial reward and growth. Somewhat ironically, the flat expanses freed up by the re-processing of mine dumps are frequently utilised as shipping container depots: as the mountainous dump comes down, so a steel-container tower rises up in its place. As the landscape is endlessly rewritten, the mine dumps – having attained something akin to local legend over the years – become just another waypoint in the cycle of the commodification, wealth and waste of the land and its people.



Figure 10. A stack of shipping containers situated on a former mine dump south of the city. Photograph: Jacki McInnes

Controversially, abandoned mines and their surface waste dumps have also presented opportunities to informal recyclers, who glean anything of value off the dumps' surfaces: old steel rigging and disconnected, heavy-duty copper cabling being amongst the most valued prizes. Artisanal miners or 'Zama Zamas' operate below the surface. Many are skilled miners, caught up as the collateral damage of a rapidly fading industry. It is therefore poignant that they have, of necessity, readopted the artisanal mining practices that date back to the original gold rush (Trangoš 2018:15).



Figure 11. Informal Recyclers digging up valuable copper cabling on a former mine dump south-west of the city. Photograph: Jacki McInnes

**Johannesburg my city
Paved with Judas gold
Deceptions and lies
Dreams come here to die**

Lesego Rampolokeng (2004)

IX.

In an endeavour to situate the informal recycler within a trajectory of want and waste, the complex nature of the economic development of Johannesburg – and the workers involved – must be scrutinised. Shoat & Stam could quite easily have been making a case for Johannesburg when they wrote that the “coexistence of pre-modern, modern and postmodern economies produces a series of interlinked, coeval worlds living in the same historical moment but under diverse modalities of subordination and domination” (1998:42-43). Achille Mbembe, preferring to focus on the labourer, notes that although we generally define waste as that which is produced “bodily or socially by humans”, we simultaneously acknowledge that “workers are wasted under capitalism” in a manner akin to the exploitation of natural resources (2011:8). Therefore, since the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, there has been an earnest quest to “re-humanise society and culture” – a task that has not been easy in view of the unique course race and capitalism has followed in this country (2011:8).

It is particularly ironical that this logic of human waste is exacerbated in an environment characterised by an alarming scarcity of wage-labour. “[A] rising superfluous population is becoming a permanent fixture of the South African social landscape with little possibility of ever being exploited by capital” (2011:8). These conditions aptly describe the lived experience of Johannesburg’s recyclers and Mbembe’s writing therefore provides an important context in which to interrogate the value judgements habitually applied to them.

I was recently introduced, by fellow artist Diane Victor, to the conceptual possibilities of making art from South African bank notes (ZAR) which, when terminally soiled or damaged, are shredded for disposal by the South African Reserve Bank (SARB). Victor’s concerns, like mine, focus on the exploitation of labour, the unremitting disparity of wealth – and the

persistently racial nature of both – that bedevil the country. Victor, one of South Africa’s leading draughtswomen, opted to burn the shredded banknotes for both aesthetic and conceptual effect:

I am working on a drawing made from the ashes of our currency – I have managed to source shredded banknotes ... and am burning and grinding them to produce the ashes for the drawing. There have been delays in my finding a place that can accurately weigh the individual notes so that I can measure the exact ‘amount’ of currency I am burning. I am keen that the value of cash being burned should be exact. Perhaps the minimum wage amount? But only a minuscule amount of ash would be generated from that (Victor 2016:31).

With Victor’s consent, and after a lengthy negotiation with the SARB, I was given permission to access and use this uniquely self-referencing material in my own art-making process to create a metaphorical ‘trajectory of value’. By playing the monetary value of the previously intact notes off against their worthless, shredded remainder, and then – in circular fashion – ascribing cultural and monetary value to the ensuing artworks, I hoped that my conceptual value trajectory might speak to Mbembe’s views articulated above.



Figure 12. A sack of shredded R10 notes collected from the South African Reserve Bank. Photograph: Jacki McInnes.

Using what could best be described as a collaging technique, I compiled simple, recognisable symbols such as crosses, noughts, ticks and stars from the shredded notes. These symbols are ubiquitous but are also rich in implied but ambiguous meaning. An X is a negation and a mark of failure, but it is also precise, it marks the spot. A ‘tick’ is quite the opposite and is generally a sign of affirmation. Noughts, on the other hand, equate to zero, nothing, an absence. However, in contemporary, social media-dominated times ‘XOXO’ has come to denote the altogether more positive message of ‘hugs and kisses’.

Marc Auslander (2020:np), in response to my ZAR artworks, wrote that they are made poignant by the fact that, whether during previous eras of great wealth in South Africa, or in our contemporary period of economic downturn, “the ultimate source of the valuation of the currency has in fact always been the shredding of the bodies, health, and dignity of black South African workers, who for generations were ground up and sp[a]t out by the world of the mines.” He further implies that, in my juxta-positioning of five-pointed star shapes with the X symbol, perhaps I sought to make visible the vicissitudes of the global financial system and the largely impenetrable dynamics of international currency exchanges. He considers these two shapes to denote the “high-water and low-water marks of South Africa's currency valuations” and continues:

One associates the shape of the star with the famed diamond the *Star of South Africa*, the enormous gem which inspired the South African diamond rush, and heralded the staggering fortunes generated by the Kimberly diamond fields and later the gold mines around the Rand. The diamond inspired the *Order of the Star of South Africa*, a set of military and civilian decorations, now discontinued, that were associated with the Apartheid regime. During the period that the *Order of the Star* was in operation, the rand, backed by substantial mineral exports, was relatively robust (2020:np).

Many of the ZAR works were made around the time of the Covid-19 lockdown (late March to June 2020) and accordingly, I intended the works to be topical and to be assessed in terms of our current dire economic circumstances but also our resilience as a country. What formerly existed as ‘legal tender’ had subsequently been discarded as shredded paper. Therefore, and by means of this metaphor-rich material, I endeavoured to reflect the tenacity versus the fragility

of the lives and livelihoods of our country's citizens, our battling economy¹² and the tenuous state of our social cohesion.

The exchange of commodities (goods and services) has come to be considered a defining characteristic of humanity and yet, ubiquitous as it is, the concept of commodification can be difficult to pin down. Marx's definitive appraisal in *Das Kapital* (1867) saw commodities assessed in terms of their 'use-value' versus their 'exchange value'. Use value, according to him, was a relatively simple matter: steel could be transformed by means of human labour to become an eating utensil, which would be useful to another person, who might agree to barter or pay for it in kind. Marx tied use-value inextricably to the object's physical properties and material uses and was at great pains to distinguish the object's 'use-value' from its 'exchange-value'. This he assessed in terms of labour: the greater the duration and the technicality of the labour going into the making of the object, the greater its perceived exchange-value. However, this value did not accrue to the labourer, rather it was presumed to reside in the commodity itself (Nguyen 2015:342).

In the capitalist market, exchange-value dominates, and the transaction of commodities is enabled by gauging their respective values against a third entity – money, which functions as their 'universal equivalent'. So, what ought to be a social relation between labourer and consumer has become a relation between things. And as money came to dominate in the exchange of objects, so the hand of labour continued to be excluded from the transaction, having the inevitable and persistent effect of the exploitation of the labourer (Nguyen 2015:342).

In anthropological terms, fetishism refers to the belief that godly powers can inhere in inanimate objects, which generally manifest as man-made totems. Marx borrowed this idea to rationalise his notion of 'commodity fetishism'. He warned that as the labourer becomes increasingly invisible, so the consumer will come to access products solely by means of the exchange of money – but not with the labourer, rather via those institutions that glean profit

¹² South Africa's economy has, for some time, seen a steady decline in mineral commodity exports and a concomitant reduction in international economic confidence. In 2020 the ZAR was considered to be one of the weakest currencies against the US dollar: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/01/15/what-can-burgers-tell-us-about-foreign-exchange-markets>.

from the labourer's output (Marx 1990:168-169). In Marx's analysis, commodity fetishism is the "mystical foundation that underlies the law of economic equivalence as well as the law of human equality" (Nguyen 2015:342). Furthermore, not only does the exclusion of the labourer lead to exploitation but "it is precisely because labour is fetishized as the source of all value that those whose labour has been rendered unnecessary by capital's immense productivity are marginalised in society" (Nguyen 2015:343).

Marx's 'catastrophe', therefore, was – and still is – "the marginalisation of 'superfluous' populations resulting from the irrelevance of productive employment" (Nguyen 2015:343). Further complicating matters, as the steady increase in technology in the service of capitalism reduces human labour, so is the value of the resultant goods reduced. In effect, technology has also disrupted the correlation between labour and value.

The vigour with which the system of monetary exchange was able to inveigle itself into the system of barter the world over is surprising. "One perceives in this a drive inherent in every exchange system towards optimum commoditization ... Hence the universal acceptance of money whenever it has been introduced into non-monetised societies and its inexorable conquest of the internal economy of these societies, regardless of initial rejection..." (Kopytoff 1986:72). And thus, first coinage and, much later, a system of 'paper money', came to substitute for human labour, just as man-made totems came to be conflated with godly powers. Marx, who had historically viewed 'value' as a direct correlate of human labour, was obliged to concede that, subsequent to money becoming the universal equivalent between things, the labourer would have had scant, if any, control over the seemingly independent market forces of capitalism.

On the contrary, commodities such as gold and diamonds can stake their claim for a value intrinsic unto themselves, even while their exchange value is objectively assessed on the open market and effected by means of paper money. Hence, one might deem 'currency' to have intrinsic value. But Marx disputed this as illusory, considering value to be vested only in the labour expended in the object's creation. Auslander (2020:np) extends this sentiment to describe the South African scenario:

For over a century and a half, the staggering wealth generated by South African mineral industries was not so much extracted from underground per se as from the backbreaking labor

by millions of Southern African workers, overwhelmingly black, whose bodies, health and communities of origin were violently compromised by the mines and allied systems of social engineering. The story of the fabled *Star of South Africa* diamond, for which the Griqua shepherd boy who discovered it was paid only a pittance, is in that sense anticipatory of the generations of exploited black South Africans, whose under-valued labor built the national patrimony (2020:np).

Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff concurs with Marx's explanation of use- and exchange-values but is more concerned with the 'status' of objects. These he ascertains in terms of their cultural, economic, technical, social and material 'biography'. An object's biography, he believes, can be determined by asking various questions. "Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognised 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life', and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?" (1986:67-69). In addition, he observes that our human responses to these questions will necessarily result in an entanglement of "aesthetic, historical, and even political judgements, and of convictions and values that shape our attitudes to objects." Ultimately, Kopytoff suggests that the 'exchangeability' of things implies their 'commonality'. "To use an appropriately loaded even if archaic term, to be saleable or widely exchangeable is to be 'common' – the opposite of being uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular, and therefore not exchangeable for anything else" (1986:67-69).

Kopytoff thus presents a most relevant conundrum with respect to the evolving biography of an artwork and how this might intersect with – or perhaps fly in the face of – the notion of the artwork as a commodity and, therefore, representative of value. Further complicating what is already an intricate line of thought, I find myself obliged to ponder the 'value implications' for my own artworks – and perhaps even more so with regard to those made from decommissioned, shredded banknotes. In our country, the ZAR is the universal equivalent that facilitates the exchange of goods and services. When ZAR notes are shredded for disposal by the SARB, however, their value is presumed to be destroyed. So total is their 'end-of-life' status in fact, that the shredded paper cannot even be recycled (due to the various additives intended to make ZAR notes waterproof and more durable). Instead, the shredded remainder is dumped – with ever-increasing irony – in municipal landfills (Beresford 1998:np). But, in keeping with Kopytoff's views on the biography of things, could the fact that the shredded ZAR notes, by

virtue of being the building material of my artworks, be interpreted as imputing renewed value upon the shredded notes? And ought this new value necessarily be confined to the conceptual realm? Or could it be thought of as being ‘monetary’ by virtue of the commodity value traditionally – and, even more so, contemporaneously – ascribed to artworks?

Kopytoff asserts that the counter-drive to the ever-burgeoning commoditisation drive in the world is culture itself – the tendency of the individual to “discriminate, classify, compare, and sacralise” (1986:87). Commoditisation tends to standardise value, therefore positing excessive commoditisation as anticultural. On the contrary, humans are inclined to predicate culture on discrimination and thus strive to separate aspects of their environment as ‘sacred’ (public lands, state monuments, chiefly insignia, ritual objects). Singularisation can be a powerful tool in this exercise.

In addition, Kopytoff introduces the notion of ‘terminal commodities’ as those things that are bought ostensibly for personal use and are, therefore, generally not resold. Their commercial exchange is precluded by an edict which, while not explicitly stated, is nevertheless culturally understood. Yet, in this contemporary era of hyper-commodification, the notion of the terminal commodity has largely fallen away. And thus is the marketing of such things as Persian carpets, vintage cars – and artworks – couched in narratives of ‘a good investment’ and ‘high resale value’ (1986:75).

They went to sea in a Sieve, they did,
 In a Sieve they went to sea:
 In spite of all their friends could say, on a winter's morn, on a stormy day,
 In a Sieve they went to sea!

Edward Lear (1871)

X.

In the early development of my creative research for this PhD in 2016, I began to explore the possibilities of re-contextualising or ‘re-purposing’ Théodore Géricault’s painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19). Key to the shock French society expressed at the painting at the time – and especially to its harrowing back-story – was the sheer scale of the class disparity it exposed. In June 1816, the French naval frigate, the *Méduse*, set sail to repossess a colony in Senegal from the British. She did not reach her destination. Instead, her captain, appointed for reasons of political expediency rather than competence and who had not put to sea in more than twenty-five years, ploughed the ship into the treacherous Arguin Bank off the coast of modern-day Mauritania. In the ensuing melee, the captain, his higher-ranking officers and the better-off passengers commandeered the lifeboats while the rest – 146 men and one woman – were herded aboard a makeshift raft hastily constructed from the timbers of the sinking ship. The raft was towed behind the lifeboats for a time but, with the better part of her floorboards submerged, she was exerting a tremendous drag. Barely hours later the towrope was slashed, casting her adrift. With scant water and supplies, no compass and subject to the alternating violent storms and sweltering heat off the West-African coast, the ragged group soon fell upon one another in acts of desperate barbarism and cannibalism. All but fifteen died in the thirteen days before their rescue (Savigny & Corréard 1818:xiv).

The fiasco, recounted in the 1818 best-selling manuscript by two of the survivors, Alexander Corréard and Henri Savigny, rocked France’s political foundations and provided the content for Géricault’s world-famous painting. Géricault sought to use ‘shipwreck imagery’ to illustrate the danger to which the French populace was exposed by a regime that put dynastic over national interests, gave the command of ships to political favourites and allowed aristocratic officers to abandon their men in times of crisis. *The Raft of the Medusa* bore

testimony to the fate of a class of people considered disposable by the elite order of that epoch in France. And, just as it has served the agendas of other contemporary artists, I believed it might serve as a springboard for my own creative endeavour to interrogate the socio-economic inequality that has resulted in an ever-increasing number of unemployed poor people – or ‘human waste’ as Zigmunt Bauman has referred to them – in South Africa.

The eradication of all forms of inequality was, arguably, the greatest aspiration of the majority of pre-democratic South Africans. But, contrary to expectations, inequality has not reduced and has in fact worsened in the past twenty-seven years (Harmse 2013:3). South Africa is currently reputed to have the highest Gini coefficient in the world and nowhere is this more in evidence than in the country’s major metropolises. First-world opulence is fiercely guarded within the impossibly high walls of security complexes and locked down behind the shatterproof windows of sleek sedans. And while the rich get richer, the poor must become increasingly resourceful in the business of everyday survival. This is particularly pertinent in our local scenario in which, in view of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid legacy, inequality is deeply racialised. As such, South Africa’s complex structure of inequality is even more prone to instability – we are, quite simply, not all in the same boat.

Géricault’s iconic painting has been recontextualised innumerable times in contemporary art. Significant examples include Frank Stella’s brutish assemblage of sheets of molten aluminium, *Raft of the Medusa (Part 1)* (1990); Martin Kippenberger’s 1996 “The Raft of Medusa”, a series of self-portraits in the varying poses of the painting’s original protagonists; Jeff Koons’s 2014-2015 series, “Gazing Ball Paintings”, in which the artist copied thirty-five paintings, including Géricault’s *Raft*, and to each attached a hand-blown, blue, reflective-glass ‘gazing ball’; and Adad Hannah’s tableau vivant *The Raft of the Medusa (100 Mile House)* from 2009.

Each artist alludes to Géricault’s original from a different angle. Kippenberger ‘appropriated’ Géricault’s doomed raftsmen by replacing them with self-portraits that mirrored the recognisable poses of the original painting. In so doing, he offered a personal reflection on his imminent, self-destructive death – he was a hard-living and unapologetic alcoholic who died of liver cancer, aged forty-four, shortly after completing the series (Cotter: 2009:np). Stella’s eruption of jagged aluminium sheets evokes the pounding waves and shattering raft, alluding to the destructive powers of nature and man (Mendelsohn: 2015:np). Koons’s ‘gazing ball’

captures and inserts the reflection of the viewer into the painting. And, likewise, Hannah's tableau populates, animates and contemporises the original.

Koons's and Hannah's conceptual interventions seemed the most relevant for the purposes of my research, Koons in that his gazing ball literally forces the reflection of the viewer right into the drama. This not only personalises each viewer's experience but also "makes evident the contemporary environment of [the] masterpiece and [its] relationship to the viewer of yesterday and today" (Ramírez-Montagut 2010:3). Hannah's intervention, on the other hand, mimics Géricault's original intention to use 'spectacle' as a potent political tool.

The importance of Géricault's *Raft*, then and now, can be attributed to his prescient melding of the more formal tradition of History Painting with the then nascent style of Romanticism. He had been influenced in this style by his predecessor, Antoine-Jean Gros and went on, in his own turn, to influence Eugene Delacroix, who was later to become one of the most esteemed Romantic painters of the era. Portrait painting was also at the centre of Géricault's practice, as can be seen in his melancholic and deeply moving life-studies of Paris's asylum inmates, which were later incorporated in his epic *Raft*. Although depicting a specific, current and utterly shocking event, Géricault eschewed History Painting's reliance on Classicism in favour of high emotive drama. Apprehension, horror and awe are evoked by using the Romantic painterly devices of heroism of the human form, emphasising the power of nature in the violently stormy seas and heightening dramatic tension by means of chiaroscuro. Géricault can therefore be regarded as one of the first artists of his day to understand and fully exploit Romanticism as a tool for political persuasion (Mendelsohn 2015:np).

In preparation for my re-contextualisation exercise, I set about finding an appropriate setting, props and protagonists. By a series of lucky coincidences, I happened to meet a scrap steel collector (with the serendipitously apt name of Buccaneer) while visiting possible sites for the photograph. He sourced a band of fellow recyclers and I arranged to work with photographer Leon Krige in January 2016. Ultimately, the photograph comprised fifteen scrap steel recyclers crammed into a tiny dinghy, placed atop a mine dump just off Wemmer Pan Road, south of the City of Johannesburg. The resultant, large-scale photographic print formed a component part of an installation entitled *Sleeps with the fishes* (2016).



Figure 13. Jacki McInnes, *Sleeps with the fishes* (2016). Fine art print on cotton rag (Diassec framed), 87 x 190,5cm. (Photographic image produced in association with Leon Krige.)

Sleeps with the fishes presents the mine dump tableau in a cinematic format for the contemplation of an ‘absent man’, this man being implied in a sculpture depicting a pair of men’s shoes fashioned from beaten lead, resting on a wooden footstool. The title of the installation obviously references the euphemism for death made popular in the 1972 film *The Godfather: The Game* in which Mafia boss Vito Corleone is told “Luca Brasi sleeps with the fishes. We just fitted him for concrete shoes.” This method of ‘disposal’, allegedly developed by the Sicilian Mafia in America, involved encasing the victim’s feet in poured concrete and dumping him, dead or alive, into deep water.

By alluding to the concrete-shoes narrative, I intended to suggest that ‘mainstream society’ (represented by the shoe-clad viewer) cannot expect to escape unscathed when governmental and societal structures turn a blind eye to burgeoning consumption, its fallout and to the circumstances of the people on the margins who attend to the predicament. In an instance of socio-economic and racial disparity as extreme as that in South Africa, all members of the formal establishment are complicit to a greater or lesser degree. And without doubt, all, whether mainstream or marginal, will be vulnerable. The empty shoes stand in for an absent viewer: mute, apathetic, and seemingly absurdly attached to the false notion that the crisis is neither of his making, nor that it will, inevitably, have the power to sink him too.

My creative research has shifted substantially from the approach taken in the making of *Sleeps with the fishes*. Although the recyclers are still pivotal, they are not explicitly embodied in the creative work for this PhD. Instead, I imagine them as the allegorical protagonists within three

symbolic stages of ocean journey: initial progress, which is scuppered by ‘shipwreck’, but is ultimately redeemed through the metaphoricity of the life raft. Their ocean journey is mediated in terms of a paradox of privation and survival and, keeping in mind the incongruity that Johannesburg is one of the biggest cities in the world developed in a place with no major body of water, I symbolically displace ‘the ocean’ in my artwork with the dusty mine dumps that form the backdrop to the city.

South Africa’s gold-mining industry was the foundation on which the country’s economy was built during the twentieth century. Now, one hundred and thirty years later, the skyline to the east, south and west of Johannesburg is dotted with the mine dumps that remain as iconic reminders of the exploitative and inequitable origins of the city. By and large, cities attract people in search of improved job prospects and hopes for a better life and it is therefore not surprising that the city’s periphery has become the repository of human flotsam and jetsam. Groupings of people, many displaced from traditional agrarian lives in rural areas, or from other African countries, have populated this space in the hope of being incorporated into a modern industrial life capable of sustaining them economically. But the aspirations of the urban poor have been scuppered by a lack of jobs, poor infrastructure and overcrowding. Their experience has not equated to ‘a better life for all’ as espoused by the various iterations of the *National Development Plan*, in progress in South Africa since the 1990s. The challenge of rapid urban growth is further complicated by ever-greater accumulations of waste, which is invariably removed from centres of wealth and directed towards the margins, where it clashes with the peri-urban poor.

Rob Nixon (2011:85) speaks of the focus of the geologist as necessarily ignoring surface life in pursuit of the unseen riches below ground. But subterranean riches are finite and mining, therefore, a terminal industry. The underground site will eventually be abandoned, leaving only its dumped waste above ground – matter out of place – where it will further displace human habitation and natural ecological order, while simultaneously standing as the solitary monument to the labour of so many, for the prosperity of so few.

Brownell dwells on the nature of these places, writing that post-independence scholarship has tended to “characterise the periphery of cities as black holes, swallowing up African livelihoods. They [are] seen as places not only composed of waste, but full of wasted potential” (2014:210). Now, as if to continue the divisive history of the city – as if the present cannot

elude the poisoned past – the pollution emanating from the dumps inflicts an imperceptible but deadly threat to the approximately 1.6 million people living in their vicinity. The fine dust from the dumps contains arsenic, lead and radioactive uranium, all of which pose severe health hazards – from eczema and asthma to birth defects and cancer – when the dust is inadvertently inhaled or ingested (Reichart 2013:9).



Figure 14. A mining landscape south-west of the city. Photograph: Jacki McInnes.

In Latin they have a word for the surface of the sea. Aequor. It is not far from the word Aequus, which means equal, fair, just, kindly disposed.

Malcomess & Kreutzfeldt (2013)

Humans live their lives and build their institutions on dry land. Nevertheless, they seek to grasp the movement of their existence above all through a metaphors of the perilous sea voyage.

Hans Blumenberg (1996)

XI.

That I chose one of the many mine dumps that frame the city as the site for my Géricault re-enactment and that, since then, I have chosen to conflate mine dump and ocean in ongoing creative research is significant for several reasons. In current artworks I incorporate layers of mine dump dirt into the making of the image itself. This lends a palpable grittiness to the works while also serving to merge the physical surface with the metaphorical underground. At the same time, this device serves as a reminder that the City of Johannesburg would not have existed at all had it not been built by the sweat of the black mineworkers toiling below. David Bunn writes that much of the output of Johannesburg's creatives in the past forty years has been influenced by the hulking presence of the city's peripheral mine dumps. "[T]he landscape presence of huge gold-mine tailings were a constant reminder of the force needed to keep intact the cheap migrant labour system, and this notion of the surface heaving with pressure from below, as though from the mass of buried life, is the Real that inhabits much art..." (2008:140).

Johannesburg's mining terrain, comprising myriad tunnels below, mine dump waste above and acid mine drainage decanting from below to the surface, could be interpreted as a 'palimpsest landscape'. This, in the general order of geomorphology, is defined as a landscape comprising strata and geomorphic features of vastly differing age. The original landmass, shaped millions of years ago by the climatic and geological conditions then in existence, is termed a 'relict' in that the conditions that formed it no longer exist. But relict is nevertheless subject to continuous reshaping. This might be gradual, such as that from the grinding and crushing force of glaciers.

It could be perennial and caused by successive freezes and thaws, or it could be very rapid, as is the case in the aftermath of earthquakes (Vâlceanu, Kosa & Tămîrjan 2014:2). Extending the notion of the palimpsest landscape to the mine could be a useful conceptual strategy, but one must, of course, be cognisant of the timeframe involved. Conflating the reshaping of the normal landscape, painstakingly whittled away over eons, with that of mining terrain would seem to be somewhat incongruous. Rather, one should acknowledge that the mining activity of the Witwatersrand violently, and with brutal efficiency and haste, upended the surrounding grasslands, revealing modern man as the most powerful geomorphic agent on earth.

As such, the mine dump is steeped in layers of meaning, offering a compelling conceptual location for my creative research. But, in spite of a tendency to characterise the city's peripheral mine dumps in terms of waste and wasted potential, they could also be assessed as sites of human endeavour, resourcefulness and income-generating potential. Just as society's cast-off trash has residual value in the hands of the recyclers, so too can mine dumps be evaluated in terms of their inherent value. Titlestad (2012:53) has described my work in general – but especially with lead – as “dwell[ing] on the boundary of damage and possibility” and this seems an apt idiom with which to approach the themes of ambiguity and contradiction inherent in my creative output.

Sleeps with the fishes staged Johannesburg's informal recyclers as shipwrecked castaways, marooned by the disintegration of their previous communal and economic structures. But ‘shipwreck’ as a trope also offers the opportunity to explore existential themes such as innovation, endurance, spiritual and ethical resilience, and rebellion against authoritarian structures. Akira Yoshimura's novel *Shipwrecks* (1982) seems to confirm this notion. Essentially, it is a parable that places human need in opposition to authority and the law and suggests that, in circumstances of extreme deprivation, it is to be expected that ‘morality’ will be redefined and that this redefinition can gain legitimacy within the affected community in the form of a ‘purifying ritual’.

Regarding Johannesburg's recyclers, I contend that codifying practices such as their attire, their patterns and modes of movement, and especially the trolleys on which they transport their recyclable materials comprise a self-authored ‘purifying ritual’. Their attire is robust (albeit scruffy), good walking shoes (often gumboots) are worn and, more often than not, a woollen balaclava is pulled over nose and mouth regardless of the season. The construction of their

trolleys is not random, nor is it dependent on opportunistically sourced materials. Instead, it follows a distinctive design comprising a plastic, wheeled pallet sourced from supermarkets where they are used to move boxes of foodstuffs. There is a jarring irony in this, in that the abundance of food in the supermarket is profoundly at odds with the scarcity of the same for the recycler. In addition, the pallet which was originally used to proffer goods to the consumer is, in its new incarnation, used to hasten the cast-off garbage out of sight. A one-tonne, plastic-weave bulk-bag rests on top of the pallet and the trolley is directed by means of the collapsible folded legs of an ironing board used as both handle and steering device.



Figure 15. A recycler's trolley at the end of the day. Photograph: John Hodgkiss.

South African cities were, and continue to be, formed by their history of segregation, which facilitated the movement of the white minority by curtailing that of the black majority. And yet, cities are dynamic, evolving organisms comprising the totality of their historical and contemporaneous existences, the myriad cultures of their inhabitants, and the moulding effects of their unique structures, spaces and flows. Johannesburg – the country's economic hub – is furthermore characterised by its ever-evolving aspirational pursuit of wealth, its self-perception of status, and its expectation of the freedom of choice attendant on these. And such evolutions require constant re-navigation.

Motor cars have always been perceived as potent symbols of wealth and status, but they no longer dominate the roads to the extent that they used to. In contemporary Johannesburg, the daily jostle for the tarmac now includes many alternative modes of mobility and while this irrefutably speaks to the city's endemic inequality, it also "impinge[s] upon car-space in ways

that test the boundaries between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ or ... car drivers and non-car drivers” (Jones 2011:381). Johannesburg’s motor cars seemingly indicate the (relatively) ordered passage through a disordered space, while the recyclers trolleys, commandeering the hard shoulder and encroaching into the road, as they often do, are perceived to embody disorder. Vehicular movement now frequently finds itself challenged.

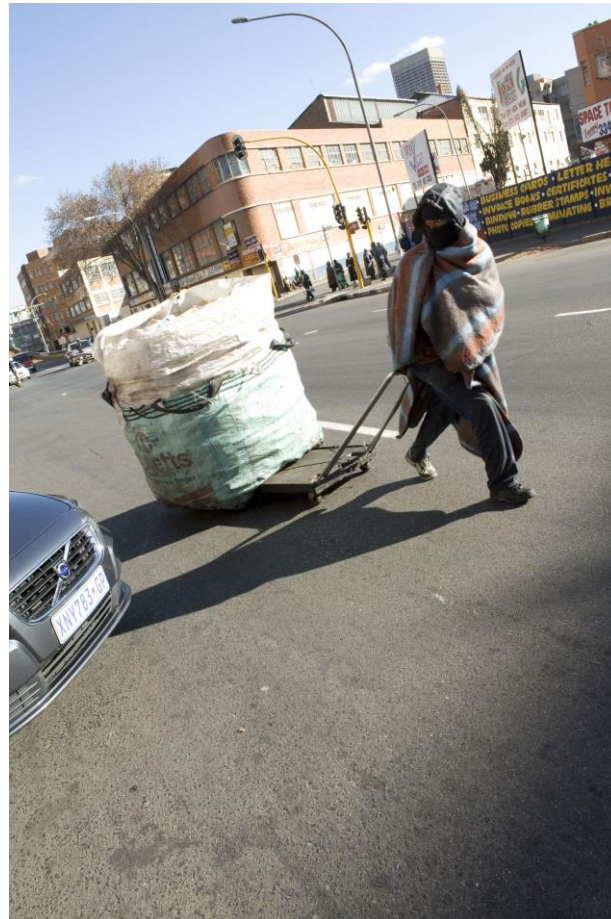


Figure 16. An informal recycler navigates Sivewright Road on his way to a recycling depot in the city.
Photograph: John Hodgkiss.

As they move through the city’s hazardous streets in practiced and fluid motion, the recyclers’ trolleys can be likened to sea-going vessels and their drivers to seafarers. The city’s waste is piled into the bulk bags and hauled to the numerous cash-for-scrap depots, thus offering the pallet/raft as a potent allegory for the self-reliant mariner who must use what little is available to survive in open waters.

It is important to note that the recyclers’ homogeneity is unique to Johannesburg. Although informal recycling is widespread in South Africa, as it is in many other developing cities the

world over, I have not observed the same degree of unifying detail in any other metropole. In conversations I had with recyclers it was speculated that informal recycling originated within Johannesburg's community of illegal Basotho immigrants about fifteen to twenty years ago, so this may provide a clue. But since then, the ethnicities of the recyclers have become widely integrated. I consider it significant that their attire and work methodology suggests a desire for self-identification. They seem intent on harnessing the power of a set of signifiers in order to clearly distinguish themselves from the rest of the population, as occurs in the formation of sub-cultures. Perhaps they do this – consciously or unconsciously – to lend credence to their work, which is generally maligned, or to their personhood, which is frequently disregarded.

In *Shipwreck with Spectator* (1996) Hans Blumenberg symbolically equates human existence with seafaring and writes that, since the time of early Greek philosophy, or even before, the sea was conceptualised as a natural boundary – earth understood to be under the dominion of Zeus, while “out on the high seas, earthshaker Poseidon acts in accord with his own decisions” (1996:9). Blumenberg deems, with good and rational reason, that it is unwise to venture forth with impunity and yet he also acknowledges that humans always have, and always will, set out on sea voyages – or a contemporaneous equivalent. It is for this reason that humans place an inordinate importance on the perilous sea voyage for our metaphors of existence. Furthermore, Blumenberg speculates that the allure and status of seafaring is contingent on its promise of adventure and riches and that it is not surprising, therefore, that in the ocean and in seafaring we “encounter the culture-critical connection between two elements characterised by liquidity: water and money” (1996:9).

But seafaring must necessarily be associated with shipwreck, a catastrophic event which Blumenberg symbolically equates with the disastrous consequences visited upon those who over-reach their day-to-day needs, whether this be simply for survival, or in pursuit of prosperity, hubris or greed. However, he is also quick to concede that “pure reason”, would likely result in risk aversion, causing human progress to stall. Consequently, the ever-present hazard of shipwreck is the price that must be paid in exchange for advancement and the discovery of both real and metaphorical new worlds (1996:29).

Gisle Selnes adds that shipwreck and exile have inexorably been linked in human culture and writing, at least since Homer's *Ulysses*. “However, exile is only one among a large number of possible metaphorical avatars of shipwreck. Shipwreck, ... as soon as it becomes the subject

of linguistic or figurative representation, appears as so profoundly metaphorical that it might be taken as the vehicle of virtually any human experience which involves radical change or loss” (Selnes 2003:np).

**And so this thing we call art exists in order to restore the sensation of life,
in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony.**

Victor Shklovsky (1917)

XII.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* concerns itself with the 'thingness of things' – their shape, colour, texture, possible use and form – and how their attributes can cause an inanimate object to influence humans; to have 'affect'. Bennett's 'vital materialism' offers an alternative assessment of the inanimate, suggesting that the undeniable power of objects lies in their ability to enhance our understanding of the human subject by inviting us to ponder our own materiality. She also admits to her opposition to anthropocentrism, believing that when we ask of an object 'how can I use this thing?', we foreground our conventional (Western) perception of the passivity of things. If instead we were to ask 'what can it do?', we could learn to better understand our political, social and economic drives and decisions. As long as we are unable, or we refuse, to dislodge our preconceived notion of matter as thoroughly inert and non-affective, we "feed [our] human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (2010:2%). Bennett refers to Bruno Latour's idea of an 'actant' – a source of action, either human or non-human, that has efficacy in that it can make a difference, produce an effect, and change or alter the course of events. If we were more inclined to accept the affect of objects, we might embrace ecologically superior and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption, allowing a more eco-ethical culture to emerge (2010:3%).

Transforming cast-off, unwanted or unusable items into art has a long history (collage, bricolage, assemblage and the readymade) and 'trash-as-art-material' has been handled in myriad ways. Two main themes emerge, however: where the trash is so substantially transformed in the artwork that it no longer signifies as trash (other than conceptually – that is, as the 're-commodification of trash' by virtue of the monetary value of the resultant artwork). Against this, trash can be portrayed as precisely what it is. As such, 'trash-as-art-material' can be used in a deliberately transgressive or political manner.

Slavoj Žižek contests the idea of recycling as a panacea to the excesses of late capitalism: “[t]he idea of ‘recycling’ involves the utopia of a self-enclosed circle in which all waste, all useless remainder is sublated: nothing gets lost, all trash is reused. [It would be more useful] to accept waste as such ... the inertia of rotten material that serves no purpose” (2010:35). Scottish curator, Stacy Boldrick, extends these ideas into the arena of art, rejecting the popular celebration of art practices that incorporate or recycle waste to create something of value and pointing out that such practices are merely the reconfiguration and relocation of unwanted waste. Rather, she suggests that the acknowledgment of trash as itself – ephemeral, expendable and worthless – presents a more compelling alternative for the work of art (2015:np).

Some artists have taken this process even further, incorporating destructive acts into their work – whether by natural processes of decay, or deliberate acts of destruction – to interrogate the obsolescence of the trash-as-art-material, the cultural and monetary value of the resultant artwork and, metaphorically, the ephemerality of the material world. Boldrick goes on to assert that the destructive process, by reducing the art object to fragments, abstracts it, thereby prefacing its materiality and inner workings over its objecthood. At this point, both the trash-as-art-material and resultant art object are relegated to the status of ‘matter’, lacking both useful and symbolic value (2015:np).

Offering a different perspective, Rosalind Morris, in an analysis of Clive van den Berg’s oeuvre, is of the opinion that the ‘medium’ of an artwork is a distinctly different entity to the physical materials used in the artwork’s construction. The medium, she believes, should be understood as “that which the work discloses as its essential element” (2011:10). She equates ‘element’ with that which the artwork signifies and, consequently, postulates that a found object cannot be interpreted as a medium. And yet, she continues: “waste or detritus, or the abandoned, these are media. The medium is, thus, not the physical element but the element in its transformed state, in its conceptually appropriated state, in its aesthetically actualised state” (2011:10).

Moreover, Morris echoes Bennett’s ideas articulated above, suggesting that, just as it is for everyday objects, so it is for artworks: it does not serve one to ask ‘what does an artwork mean?’ but rather to ask ‘what does it do?’ (2011:66). By way of example, she refers to van den Berg’s “Broken Syntax” series (2011), describing the way the artist flattens perspective and conflates spatial relations in order to disrupt our traditional expectations of landscape

painting. Although there is a distinct horizon line, demarcated with mine dumps and fronted with a line of trees in *Broken Syntax, Land XI*, the planes of the painting then become perplexing – as does the painting’s meaning. A middle-ground merges imperceptibly with a foreground, which at times appears to be a surface, while at other times appears to be an underground scene viewed in cross-section. These spatial dis-orientations are vaguely suggested by means of lighter versus darker colour and by vertical lines at the bottom of the painting, but all cause the work to appear to be in a state of “disassemblage” or “decomposition” (2011:66).



Figure 17. Clive van den Berg, *Broken Syntax, Land XI* (2011). Oil on canvas, 60 x 45,5cm.

Describing the perspective in these paintings as that “which one sees from elsewhere”, Morris effectively shifts the gaze away from that of the artist. A viewer expects their experience and understanding of an artwork to be orchestrated and directed by the artist, however, “[in these paintings], the artist is as caught in the scene of the visible as are the figures that appear As a result, what has previously been imagined as invisible starts to erupt into the possibility of figuration. Not only the dead, but ghosts can arise in this newly conceived terrain” (2011:20). Van den Berg has deliberately eschewed the conventions of landscape painting, seemingly in order to probe the geopolitical history of Johannesburg. “The spectre of cross-sectional and

cartographic forms suggests itself, as does that of modern landscape painting, but their force arises from something like a memory encrypted in dreams” (2011:66).

The “House 38: Hazardous Objects” series from 2009-10 comprised Hodgkiss’s photographs, counterpoised by my large collection of waste objects – aluminium cans, polystyrene punnets and plastic soft-drink bottles – all fashioned from beaten sheet-lead. And at this point, it seems apposite to apply Morris’s formula: do not be overly concerned with what the work might mean, rather enquire what the artwork might do. Beating sheet-lead into the shape of the trash-objects was a technically intricate process and this, together with lead’s seductive, velveteen appearance, lent the objects a certain aura of monetary worth, despite them being representative of trash with all its negative connotations of unchecked excess, filth and ecological degradation. Initially I conceived of the lead pieces as ‘tokens’ that might have the potential of symbolically expressing my appreciation of the tenacity and resourcefulness of the recyclers but as this body of work developed, it became obvious that creating lead replicas of items of trash could signify on many more levels.

What might my intention have been, then, in reproducing trash objects from beaten sheet-lead and presenting these as art? After all, I could simply have exhibited the trash as ‘found objects’, arguing, as Bennett does, that all inert matter has the potential to affect. New York-based artist, Justin Gignac, has developed a successful online practice packaging and selling items of trash collected from the streets of New York enclosed in slick Perspex boxes. Gignac’s practice exemplifies the *objet trouvé*: found objects exhibited as art with no, or minimal, alteration by the hand of the artist. His boxes are visually appealing and “in a Baudelairean sense, convey the beauty of the ruin and have intimations of mortality; they are ‘exotic’ souvenirs which reference collective memory and a vicarious glimpse of ‘other’ lives” (Whiteley 2011:6). But, as Whiteley cautions, ever since recycling has re-entered our consciousness as a “fashionable rhetoric of sustainability”, the contemporising of Baudelaire’s original ‘rag-pickers’ has increasingly become a global trope for redemptive purposes, while also articulating the disquiet of the wealthy West. “The cultural re-appropriation of rag-pickers and their rubbish persists” (2011:18).

Whiteley’s warning is pertinent for my research and yet I believe that my artistic intentions pertaining to the *Hazardous Objects* series have little to do with Gignac’s approach to trash as subject matter. My aim leans more towards a metaphorical analysis of the labour, skill and

materiality involved in replicating these waste objects in the allegory-rich material of lead. I believe that if I had exhibited the items of trash themselves, I would simply have exposed trash for what it is – noxious, repugnant, disposable. But in re-presenting the trash objects as hand-crafted lead replicas, perhaps what I have achieved has been to emphasise, even exaggerate, Bennett’s musings with respect to the affective power of objects. By capitalising on the notion of the cultural/commercial value inherent in the ‘unique art piece’ and using this together with the intrinsic indestructibility of lead, I would argue that what I sought was to confer human value on the recyclers themselves, societal value on the work they perform and commercial value on the discarded items they collect.

Re-animating and re-valuing trash in art, whether for monetary, cultural or ‘activist’ purposes, may offer the artist a way to take back some control, possibly reducing a sense of helplessness and guilt in the face of an overwhelming global calamity. But, as Žižek does, one must question what chance there is for the success of such a project. As materialist culture, exacerbated by ‘built-in obsolescence’, gains momentum, the stakes are raised and the notion of an artistic solution (could this perhaps be viewed as the artist’s own metaphorical life raft?) becomes increasingly remote. And yet, art can most definitely raise awareness.

The true alchemists do not change lead into gold; they change the world into words.

William H. Gass (2010)

XIII.

My lead replicas, approximately fifty pieces in all, were created over a period of time from 2008 to 2010. Apart from twelve of them – reworked into a visually beguiling series of works titled “Neontological Speciation” (2012), of which nine sold – no commercial interest in them has been shown despite various gallery outings. This does rather contradict or undermine the notion of the ‘value’ of the artwork as mentioned earlier. In mitigation, however, Stallabras is of the opinion that art that finds itself to be non-commercial can stand in effective opposition to commodification. Quoting Lukács, he argues that art offers qualities such as “a form irreducible from content, an enriching objectification of the subjective, and a deconstruction of the opposition between freedom and necessity, since each element of the work of art seems both autonomous and subordinated to the whole” (2009:420).

In its physical properties and history, lead has ambivalent and contradictory potentialities, hence offering metaphors for both destructive and redemptive purposes. In its ability to transform under tensile stress or heat, the metal tends towards a state of flux, while still retaining the traces of its transformation. Its sombre, entirely unreflective surface is grey, but never black or white. It is toxic but also has protective properties. And it is virtually indestructible.

Lead, gold, silver, copper, tin, iron and mercury were the first elemental metals identified and used by the prehistoric people of western Asia. Except for iron, these metals all had a relatively low melting point (lead at 327.5°C) and were easily extracted from their ores. Lead had the further advantages of being extremely dense yet malleable and of being largely unreactive and therefore not prone to oxidative degradation.¹³

Lead came to be used for any number of purposes, from ancient Asian beads and Egyptian fishing-net sinkers, to writing material, stimulant and contraceptive. It was even traded as an

¹³ <http://www.rsc.org/periodic-table/element/82/lead>

Ancient Chinese currency. Lead reached the height of its usefulness in the construction of the piping systems in Ancient Rome, where it came to be known as *plumbum*. With the fall of Rome, the use of lead declined dramatically and did not gain comparable levels of use until the Industrial Revolution. Since then, it has been invaluable in naval applications, especially as ballast; in the military, most obviously in the production of bullets; in construction; and more recently as shielding against gamma and x-rays (McAlister 2013:3).

But for all its useful properties, lead has an equally sinister history. It was not officially recognised as toxic until it had wreaked a swathe of damage across the centuries. Theories exist that the fall of Rome could be attributed to lead-poisoned drinking water, although no irrefutable proof of this exists (Nriagu 1983:660-663). It was an integral component of the printing press (circa 1440), where lethal lead dust visited havoc upon the health of the printers. In the sixteenth century, it was the well-to-do who were afflicted: it was fashionable to use white lead oxide as a skin and hair whitener, but its effects were equally disastrous. It damaged the skin, led to hair loss and, if used over an extended period, caused death. In the eighteenth century, lead was used as a bulking agent in cheap wine, resulting in the mass poisoning of the poorer populace. By the turn of the twentieth century lead was found to be a neurotoxin that accumulates in soft tissues and bones. In sufficient quantities, it has serious adverse effects on the central nervous system, the cardio-vascular and immune systems and the kidneys.¹⁴

Once the toxicity of lead was conclusively established, its use in processes or products that could cause harm was rapidly curtailed, or at the very least stringently monitored. It is surely ironical then that the single most lethal, and arguably, most widespread use of lead is in the manufacture of bullets.

Physically and philosophically, lead was also central to the various alchemical traditions practiced throughout Europe, Egypt and Asia. Alchemy can be separated into its exoteric (practical, proto-scientific) applications and its esoteric (philosophical, spiritual) aspects. It aimed to purify, mature and perfect certain objects, especially with regards to the transmutation of ‘base metals’ such as lead into ‘noble metals’, especially gold, in a process referred to as *chrysopoeia*. Alchemy also concerned itself with the creation of an elixir of immortality, the production of panaceas able to cure any disease, and the development of an alkahest or

¹⁴ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/lead-poisoning-and-health>

universal solvent.¹⁵ Later, Hermetic practitioners viewed alchemy as fundamentally spiritual and the physical transmutation of lead to gold lost precedence to their aspirations for personal transformation, purification and perfection, ultimately with the hope of achieving immortality.

The alchemical symbolism behind the transformation of base-metal lead (the materialistic) to noble-metal gold (the spiritual) is not difficult to comprehend. Lead was abundant, it was easy to extract, and its matt-grey, somber appearance rendered it unattractively dull. Although useful, it was considered commonplace and, consequently, was cheap. Gold was rare and difficult to extract and with its soft, otherworldly gleam was highly desirable, esteemed, and expensive. Lead was a rudimentary and utilitarian metal, its function tangible. Gold had no real practical use at all but emblematically conferred wealth and worth on the possessor.

These metaphorical and alchemical references feed into my research on the recyclers and their position and role within the shifting fortunes of Johannesburg. The city was literally built on gold and on the backs of those who mined it. From its earliest gold-rush, shantytown beginnings to its glory days at the height of apartheid, to its fall from grace in the 1980s, to its current-day wobbly rejuvenation, Johannesburg's underlying infrastructure, both physical and societal, has always been exploitative and deeply inequitable. And yet, Johannesburg offers opportunities to every stratum of society and consequently enjoys a mythical 'El Dorado-like' status for many, whether they be from poorly resourced rural communities, are economic refugees from other African countries, or belong to the increasing number of neo-fortune-seeking property developers looking to buy up their piece of the action.

A number of prominent mid-twentieth century artists have exploited the wide-ranging allegorical possibilities inherent in lead, using this conceptually in their work. Richard Serra's "Prop" series (1968) comprised heavy sheets of lead variously propped against walls with lead rods or perched precariously atop other sheets of lead. He was drawn to the inherent instability of his constructions, which when combined with the toxicity of the metal, gave these works a powerful aura of risk. His minimalist lead structures are also deeply paradoxical, employing the obdurate forces of gravity, friction and weight to "highlight the abstract tensions between stillness and potential chaos, power and fragility, idealism and raw materialism," as described by art critic Ken Johnson (2002:np).

¹⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alchemy>

Contemporary English artist Cornelia Parker grapples with universal world problems in unexpected ways that, although captivating to the eye, are buttressed by dark undercurrents that question humanity's increasingly perilous relationship with itself and the planet. In her "Bullet Drawing" series (2007-), she melted down individual lead bullets and drew them out into a "bullet's worth of lead wire, so they somehow became a trajectory of themselves" (Parker, 2009:np). The work contains many layers of meaning, extending from the base-metal properties and associated innuendos of lead to the cultural history of lead bullets (wreaking the havoc of European imperialism, industrialisation and ultimately capitalism upon hitherto 'undiscovered' native peoples from the fifteenth century onwards) and their personal associations for both artist and viewer: were the bullets used to wound, or to protect? To empower, or to subjugate?



Figure 18. Cornelia Parker, "Bullet Drawing" series, (2007-). Lead on paper, size variable.

However, it is Anselm Kiefer who, arguably, has taken lead to its greatest symbolic heights in the visual arts. Kiefer was born on the 8th March in 1945, exactly two months before the victory of the Allied forces in Europe on the 8th of May that year. Consequently, his meditations as poet-philosopher-artist are deeply informed by the catastrophic aftermath of the Second World War. His formative years revealed a shattered people unable or unwilling to speak of their past since it held too many shameful secrets. He found in lead's 'memory' (the fold marks, warps and natural oxidisation which, once imposed upon lead, cannot be undone) the possibility of exposing and confronting these histories, believing that only in the recognition of Nazism's heinous acts would it be possible for Germans to reclaim the past and start the process of

rebuilding their country and collective psyche. “I was born in ruins. So as a child I played in ruins, it was the only place. A child accepts everything; he doesn’t ask if it’s good or bad. But I also like ruins because they are a starting point for something new” (Kiefer quoted by Gayford 2014:np).

Kiefer’s paintings frequently contain materials and processes prone to mutation. Plant matter such as straw and sunflowers are intended to decay over time and his various oxidised and patinaed surfaces are highly unstable. Fire, too, is used in both destructive and transformative ways and it comes as no surprise that his work borrows heavily from alchemical traditions, both in exoteric application and esoteric consequence.

In an interview with art critic Martin Gayford, Kiefer proposed that all art can be considered in terms of alchemy in that a base material, whether paint, found object or bronze, is transformed into an artwork with real and conceptual presence. But Kiefer’s key interest in alchemy lies in its analogous implications for personal transfiguration, purification and perfection. He adheres to the alchemical principle of ‘macrocosm-microcosm’: the idea that processes that affect minerals can potentially also affect the human body. Therefore, if one were to find the physical secret of purifying gold from base-metal lead, one might conceivably find an associated philosophy to purify the human soul. Ultimately, Kiefer states that he is drawn to the enormous weight of lead, believing it to be the “only material heavy enough to carry the weight of human history” (Gayford 2014:np).

In the wealthier global North, abandoned items are quite efficiently made to vanish but in other parts of our inequitable world, the discarded object enters a liminal phase from whence repair, resale and reuse will transform it from its previously touted utility to new material and economic possibilities. This transformative task is rarely performed by those who can afford to replace the old. Instead, it is an operation that takes place in the peripheral, wasted spaces of the poor, where homeless things and people tend to terminate (Bhattacharya 2018:46).

The “House 38: Hazardous Objects” series probed questions of value and disposability with respect to the recyclers themselves, the trash they collect and the art objects I painstakingly created in beaten lead sheet. As with Kiefer’s reliance on the exoteric and esoteric traditions of alchemy, my waste objects became a kind of proxy, attempting to make visible the individual lives and work of this community of recyclers. I wished to articulate the way in which they

sought to transform their lives in the only way available to them – living off the waste of the city into which they had inserted themselves. At the same time, I also wished to acknowledge their considerable environmental contribution to the city’s inhabitants and its future.

More recently, I have extended my repertoire of lead objects – and reinvented their conceptual meaning – by exploiting the considerable weightiness of lead. Incongruous objects, which one would least expect to be made of lead, are beaten into shape: aeroplanes too heavy to fly, balloons that would fall to the ground, and life rafts and rings that would immediately sink. In other works, lead ladders and staircases direct the viewer’s eye out of the picture frame, presumably to salvation in a better place. But far from the solution these ‘great escapes’ seem to imply I propose a conundrum. What at first may appear to be a rescue – for the recyclers, for the city, for society buckling under the burden of consumerism and its fallout – may in fact be a false hope, or a temporary one at best.



Figure 19. Jacki McInnes, *It's going down!* (2012). Beaten sheet lead, 40 x 25 x 25cm.

Many creative practices require a specific mode of thinking – ‘thinking in images’ – in order to access the creator’s intended meaning. This, since imagery has the power to link heterogeneous objects or actions so that the unknown may be deciphered via the known. But at the same time, humans are inclined to overlook that which is commonplace, we do not really

see the thing, we merely recognise it by its general impression. As the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky observes:

A thing passes us as if packaged; we know of its existence by the space it takes up, but we only see its surface. Perceived in this way, the thing dries up, first in experience, and then its very making suffers. ... This is how life becomes nothing and disappears. Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife, and the fear of war (Shklovsky 1917:162).

Shklovsky is of the opinion, however, that art has the capacity to counter this ‘automatisation’ by prompting a more complete way of seeing things, rather than just recognising them. The unique ‘device’ of the artwork in this task is its ability to increase “the duration and complexity of perception” by the complication of the artwork’s form, which de-familiarises or ‘enstranges’ it from the everyday objects of the world (1917:162). *Ostranenie*, as Shklovsky referred to this concept of estrangement, is to interfere with an object’s automatised (preconceived or presumed) meaning by taking it out of its usual context and making it seem ‘foreign’ or ‘surprising’. A deeper analysis of the object is forced on the viewer, thereby encouraging a new encounter with reality.

We always encounter the same characteristic of art: it is created with the explicit purpose of deautomatizing perception. Vision is the artist’s goal; the artistic [object] is ‘artificially’ created in such a way that perception lingers and reaches its greatest strength and length, so that the thing is experienced not spatially but, as it were, continually (Shklovsky 1917:162).

I would argue that my waste-objects could be understood in terms of Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*. Refuse in the City of Johannesburg is ubiquitous and rank but by recreating rubbish in lead, that which is quickly discarded without consideration now demands to be re-examined and re-evaluated. In this context my lead waste-objects perform the work of the surrogate.

**To be a non-commodity is to be ‘priceless’ in the full possible sense of the term,
ranging from the uniquely valuable to the uniquely worthless.**

Igor Kopytoff (1986)

XIV.

American performance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s piece *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80) focuses on the work of refuse and sanitation workers to show how their work has historically been stigmatised and devalued. This work saw her criss-crossing all fifty-nine of New York City’s districts to shake the hands of the roughly 8500 refuse and sanitation workers (or as many as would accept her gesture) to say: “Thank you for keeping New York City alive”. Laderman Ukeles meticulously documented her interactions with each worker, recording their location on a map, together with her conversations with each one of them. Her intention was to champion those who do vital but uncelebrated work and to challenge the stigma these workers are routinely subjected to (Heddaya 2016:np).

Laderman Ukeles’s work gives me pause to return to the key elements of my own research regarding Johannesburg’s informal recyclers. How is the ever-increasing burden of trash to be managed? By whom, driven by what motives, and for whose gain? I believe that my creative practice of the past few years has offered me the opportunity to examine the undercurrents governing these questions and has also allowed me to grapple with the contradictory concepts of coexistence and alienation. Other areas of research refer to the lines of communication that come into play within my topic and the power dynamics attendant on these. Ultimately, the manner in which these considerations feed into the value hierarchies differentiating Johannesburg’s vastly disparate population lies at the core. My research seems to articulate this conundrum: what does it take and what does it mean to ‘belong’ in a certain place at a certain time?

Achille Mbembe writes that in the past one hundred and fifty years or so, in an era characterised by wars and other man-made disasters, extreme levels of violence, fear and vulnerability, the perception of what it is to be human has changed. He believes that we require new modes of ethical thinking and that Africa is an especially apposite territory in which to situate these

thoughts. “Here, under conditions of slavery, colonisation and apartheid, brutal forms of dehumanisation have raised, in the starkest terms possible, the political and moral dilemmas of human difference.” Hence, our definitions of “law and life, sovereignty and the political” have changed profoundly, situating “life itself [as] the prime medium for exerting power, [where] power in turn is fundamentally the capacity to control and redistribute the means of human survival and ecological sustainability” (2011:5).

‘Humanism’ was a Eurocentric concept that had its origins in the attachment of supreme importance to the human rather than in matters divine or spiritual. But this definition was corrupted by colonial apologists seeking to create a social hierarchy predicated on race in order to legitimise their conquest, occupation and exploitation of non-European lands and their people. As Mbembe observes, humanism, in its new iteration, therefore became “[a] racially exclusive ideological discourse ... predicated on the belief that a difference in colour was a difference of species.” And thus, race became the cornerstone of regulations and prohibitions and, later, of the apartheid laws used to transform “black life into waste – a race doomed to wretchedness, degradation, abjection and servitude” (Mbembe 2011:5).

Even in post-apartheid South Africa, one has to concede that although democratic principles called for equality in life and law for all, hopes for a genuine and encompassing democracy have been thwarted by persistent variants of racial dispossession and inequality. Worse still, when one analyses the socio-political hierarchy of what it takes to be perceived to be a ‘present and participating’ human in contemporary South Africa, wealth and property have become pivotal. So pivotal, in fact, that the deficit of these can be perceived to diminish bodily life. And thus, South African society is still kept apart, no longer by race alone, but now also on the premise of ownership. “The end of apartheid has not resolved the old question of difference. It has simply shifted the terms of the difference and the dispute” from racial to economic grounds (Mbembe 2011:12).

Compounding these challenges, one must also consider ‘foreignness’ – specifically in terms of the ‘undocumented’ or ‘illegal’ migrant. In South Africa, a country conditioned by centuries of separatist policies, it is predictable that migrants will be subjected to severe discrimination, but this is not confined to our country and can be seen the world over. ‘Walling’, or the erection of conceptual (and real) barriers, has produced categories of people – illegal migrants, undocumented workers and, in troubling recent events, even refugees and asylum seekers –

whose movement and opportunities are severely circumscribed. And often the justification for walling is embedded in the nebulous notion of ‘national security’ (Mbembe 2011:12).

Since its inception, Johannesburg has been a destination for foreign Africans, whether they were coerced into abysmally remunerated labour on the mines in the past century or, more recently, have fled their own despotic or economically shattered regimes further north. Unlike the naïve mine recruits of yesteryear, however, most contemporary Zimbabwean, Malawian, Burundian, Congolese and other migrants, having already relocated to the cities of their home countries, have been fairly adept at survival in Johannesburg. For the most part, they form ethnic collectives in order to secure some sort of remuneration and housing in what is often an antagonistic environment. And while their rootedness in the city may seem shallow and their informal work ephemeral, their lives are lived strategically and with purpose. So much so, in fact, that they frequently disrupt the plans of formal capital (Bunn 2008:155).

Bunn describes how, in pursuit of self-preservation, Johannesburg’s black migrant (and usually informal) population navigates governmental structures. Each time city ordinances seek to map out and delineate new developmental zones, or erect barriers to defend newly refurbished spaces, these are transgressed and, where possible, are reoccupied or repurposed. In the case of the *muti* market at Faraday Street – an area in which medicinal plants and animal parts, believed to be imbued with healing powers, are sold – efforts to barricade and sanitise this space have been met with predictable resistance:

From the first hours of them being moved, displaced *muti* sellers started to prop their own advertising onto the new signifiers associated with the hygienic space. Herbs and skins were arranged around the fire equipment brackets; and on the fringing, spiked palisade fencing ... the pathetic corpses of monkeys are crucified to dry in the sun (Bunn 2008:162).

In the recent past, the movement of black South Africans and foreign black Africans into Johannesburg has been driven, not by the needs of industry, but rather by a ‘penetrative’ or ‘insertive’ movement caused by the lack of life-sustaining resources elsewhere. What is more, this movement occurred in an incredibly short space of time and has involved many people from far-flung locales coalescing in a relatively small area. Residents of different ethnicities are inclined to stick together and can be quite obsessive about ‘their’ spaces and connections. Furthermore, they will be quick to defend their perceived territories in the face of suspected

encroachment. Consequently, collaboration between different groupings is uncommon. Not surprisingly, this has resulted in a fractured and frequently fractious populace in which a significant measure of xenophobia prevails (Simone & Gotz 2002:5).

These newcomers are generally confined to informal work, which not only impacts on their personal lives but also on the well-being and livelihood of the city. Informality necessarily relies on the blurring of the structures and boundaries of the law – in the misuse of cityscapes and buildings, for example, or dangerous encroachment into the streets, and in the poor hygiene often associated with the preparation of street food. In retaliation, the city passed strict by-laws pertaining to informal trading in the early years of South Africa's democracy. Certain areas were designated as 'restricted', or even 'prohibited' zones, licences were required in other areas and a by-law enforcement unit was set up. All with little or no impact, however. Or, as the Inner-City Office manager at the time, Graeme Reid put it: "Against a 10 000 strong street trading population with no other means of livelihood, and with limited manpower and resources, a governmentality based on the principles of isolate, designate, assign, and individually permit or prohibit is simply not viable, or appropriate" (Simone & Gotz 2002:8).

Reid, recognising the unique complexity of Johannesburg and its disparate population, was aware that responses to challenges could not be imported from elsewhere, nor could they be pre-determined 'tried-and-tested' solutions. Projects would have to be developed in collaboration with all stakeholders and on the understanding that they would offer tangible opportunities. It also quickly became clear that if pre-existing arrangements were simply supplanted by new modes or structures, buy-in would be unlikely. Instead, by leaving existing structures in place but enhancing them, locales and the people operating in them could retain their identity while simultaneously taking advantage of the city's innovations. Reid also conceded that the only way to change the behaviour of the city's inhabitants was if they, themselves, recognised that to operate in different, novel ways would boost their own wellbeing. This, as opposed to "directly proscribing how they must not act for the sake of the cleanliness and order of inner city spaces" (Simone & Gotz 2002:7).

These are lives, not at the End of Days, but produced by an eddy in the flows of late-capitalism. ... The informal recyclers, excluded from the flow of the formal economy, capitalize on an eddy, an evanescent reverse flow. Watching the current of the formal economy from which they are excluded, the recyclers know it wouldn't pay anyone else to do the work.

Michael Titlestad (2012)

XV.

It was always with a feeling of awkwardness and trepidation that I approached my photographic and interview sessions with the recyclers. Driving to their building and photographing them at work with a top-of-the-range professional camera posed a circumstance of gross imbalance from the outset. And yet, being one of the few members of the 'formal economy' to actively engage them evoked, I would argue, a palpable sense of validation and pride, thereby setting up the possibility for a more equitable cooperation. I was struck, while conducting the interviews, by the absurdity of my questions regarding matters as intimate as their sleeping quarters and how much they earned each day. Had our roles been reversed, how would I have reacted to the same questions, I wonder? South African artist and academic, Raimi Gbadamosi articulates some of the pitfalls of polarised communications such as these:

[T]he negotiating parties have to accept the possibility of not getting what they want when they proceed with talks, and not knowing what the other party wants. It is this lack of awareness of what the other party truly wants or needs out of the negotiation, apart from what they state openly, which brings about contention inherent in negotiations.

The powerful prefer negotiations. They have time on their hands, have more to give, less to lose, and what they do give, will come from an excess of whatever capital is being discussed. Dispassion born of plenty is a benefit when negotiating... (2017:np).

I would like to suggest, however, that when the empowered enter into conversations and/or negotiations with the disempowered, much can in fact be achieved. Despite the best efforts of

both parties, lines of communication are dictated (frustratingly but usually innocuously) by a basic inability to understand one another's culture, experiences or language. And yet, as was the case with the residents of House 38, when the subjects of the enquiry have grown so used to being stigmatised, the mere fact that an enquirer takes the time to listen to their stories engenders a positive space for collaborative interaction. Simultaneously, by inserting myself into the uncomfortable (and, arguably, dangerous) world of the recyclers, I better positioned myself to tackle questions pertaining to the value chain that lies at the heart of my research.

“House 38” and *Sleeps with the fishes* also fed into the other key area of my research: my conscious effort to force a confrontation with trash – and more importantly, with those who handle it – in order to make visible that which we instinctively do not wish to see or acknowledge. German-American philosopher, Herbert Marcuse wrote that “[t]he truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality to define what is real” (Felshin 2016:np). And perhaps this is what I hoped to achieve. I believe that my initial engagement with the recyclers themselves, subsequently mediated within my written and creative research might go some way towards grappling with their lived experience and the new ontological meanings and value they have conferred on themselves and on trash by means of their recycling work.

The body of work created specifically for this PhD (2017-2021) has continued along similar conceptual lines as those of “House 38” and *Sleeps with the fishes* and yet it has departed markedly in terms of praxis. The bodily presence of the informal recyclers in my work concluded in 2016. Since then, seemingly inert art-making materials, used in the making of semi-abstracted landscapes, have come into play. These new materials and abstractions are not mute, however, and have been selected precisely for their metaphoricity. Mine dump dirt and shredded South African bank notes are used to trace the stark outlines of an abandoned mining landscape, speaking to the lives of the mine labourers who came before and to the informal recyclers who continue to work this landscape for meagre wage.

The lyrical pastoralism of Paul Nash's landscapes earned him many accolades – “an exceedingly English artist” and “a man with ‘Wordsworthian intuition’” (Grant 2006:np) but his paintings were never as benign as they seemed. His genuine love for the European landscape provided his subject matter but within his practice lay a barely concealed threat of disruption and the pervasive spectre of death. It was these qualities that were to set him apart as one of

the most important war artists of the twentieth century. Nash was dispatched to the Belgian front to serve as an infantry officer in March 1917. When he arrived, it was into the full bloom of spring, but when, after a period of absence due to injury, he returned to the front – this time as an official war artist – the landscape had been reduced to a “barren, blasted quagmire, littered with the dead” (Grant 2006:np). Only shattered tree trunks remained, their gaunt brokenness inferring the ghastly damage inflicted on so many young men’s lives. Although my topic does not intersect with the disasters of war, or not explicitly in any case, I am nevertheless drawn to aspects of Nash’s landscapes, especially his ability to express the calamitous destruction of societal order and life by means of the “death of nature” (Grant 2006:np).



Figure 20. Paul Nash, *We Are Making a New World*, (1918). Oil on canvas, 71 x 91,5cm.

Mine dump dirt, in its inherently fine dustiness, lends itself to a pallid pallet. Pigments, regardless of their initial radiance, are reduced to sallow hues once they are added to the paste I create out of mine dust, water and glue. Ochre reds, mustard yellows, gun-metal greys and olive greens predominate, each suggestive of the pervasive colours of the mining landscape: reds and yellows reflecting the crushed soils of the dumps themselves, greys and greens suggesting the sparse vegetation and scrubby eucalyptus trees. Simultaneously, translucent, watery blues reference the spreading industrial skies. I build the paintings up in layers with

dark, unreflective bases overlaid with strata and patches intended to echo the wan colours of Johannesburg's southern periphery – once the source of such great underground wealth but now just the repository of surface waste.

In the past decade, three distinct iterations of my creative practice regarding the recyclers have been produced. In the first, I proposed that lead replicas of items of refuse could stand as proxy in a conceptual analysis of the value of the life and work of the recyclers. Subsequently, I cast these same recyclers as the casualties of shipwreck. And finally, I evoke their presence by means of painterly depictions of a damaged mining landscape. In hindsight, it seems that this project has progressed fitfully. It has been scuppered at various stages by a range of ethical, political, practical and financial considerations, only to re-emerge in a different form each time. And now, at this juncture, I find myself wondering whether my original intention – to interrogate Johannesburg's exploitative and disparate history – does not, perhaps, reside precisely in this erratic trajectory.

The historical and contemporary character of Johannesburg is an elusive thing. Since its inception, it has looked to other great cities of the world for its form but, for all its aspirations, the mould that has in fact given it its shape has been unique to its own time, place and people. Johannesburg can be considered 'global' by virtue of its "cultural and ethnic heterogeneity, [its] transnational flows of labour and capital, and [its] uneven spatial and social development" (Mbembe 2008:3). And yet, as Arjun Appadurai, quoted by Mbembe points out, the global must be assessed within a "complex, overlapping, disjunctive order of multiple centers, peripheries and scapes of various scales, moving at various speeds" (2008:3). The city has always operated above and below ground. At times it conducts its business in plain sight, while at others, it is disturbingly opaque. Sometimes the city comes together to achieve goals for the betterment of all its citizens but at other times it completely unravels. So, how to pin the city down, then? Mbembe's words here are probably as close as one can hope to come:

Moreover, identifying many such sites at times implies drawing on particular critical pedagogies – pedagogies of writing, talking, seeing, walking, telling, hearing, drawing, making – each of which pairs the subject and the object in novel ways to enliven the relationship between them and better express life in motion (2008:9).

In conclusion, and since it has been my stated undertaking from the outset to recognise the work and social standing of Johannesburg's informal recyclers, it is worth considering the historico-cultural links between the concepts of 'filth and idleness' and 'licentiousness and immorality' and then to assess these links with regard to societal agency. Western cities are regulated by imposing an ethos of self-discipline and order on urban inhabitants, a tendency that has spilled over into the post-colonial African city. Consequently, grime and urban decay are demonised and are routinely used to validate "governmental regulation of specific populations and geographies of the city" (Brownell 2014:209).

Brownell's musings then explore sanctioned eviction in terms of the perceived disposability of certain groups or classes of people. Drawing on Douglas's seminal work on 'the abject' defined as 'dirt', or as 'matter out of place', she writes that the fact that certain matter is considered abject has less to do with its biological composition than with the idea that dirt, as a societal construct, can be perceived to be where it (presumably) ought not to be. Having the authority to designate what is dirty from what is clean can be a powerful political tool – and one which becomes devastating when the judgement is extended to the human body. "Considering both the biological and metaphorical role of dirt in a society then becomes an apt way to look at 'place' and 'displacement'. Writ large, Douglas's definition invites us to think about where not just things but also people 'ought' to be or not be" (Brownell 2014:211).

In view of the above, it did not come as a surprise that the intense programme of gentrification towards the east of Johannesburg's city centre saw the community at House 38 evicted on 16 October in 2009. Livingston Sikhumba, who often acted as our interpreter, told us that the Red Ants arrived at the building during the morning when most of the recyclers were out on the road. They chased those people who were inside out with whatever they could carry, then turned the place upside down, stealing money and anything of worth from those who were not there at the time. By the time Hodgkiss and I arrived in the afternoon, the former residents were sitting indecisively amongst beds and bundles of clothing on the pavement. The Red Ants, many of them stoned, hung out of the building's windows or lolled in chairs near the entrance. Residents who asked to enter the building to collect personal items and official papers were forced to pay a bribe of R20 each.



Figure 21. The residents of House 38 on the day of the eviction. Photograph: John Hodgkiss.

The circumstances of the eviction of the residents of House 38 were undeniably flawed. Communication was poor, although Livingston later admitted to Hodgkiss and me that the community had received an eviction letter some weeks before. The Settlement Department made no effort to source alternative accommodation, as is required by law in the case of evictions, this possibly because most of the residents were illegal immigrants. In the ensuing melee, fear mingled with rage as the residents lost their safe haven, and their vulnerability was further reinforced by having to pay bribes to retrieve their belongings.

As for the Red Ants, I had the impression that the job in hand required a psyching ritual comprising either truculent behaviour or mind-numbing drugs, or perhaps both. I perceived neither pride nor shame in their work. Perhaps it can be argued, therefore, that being employed to do dehumanising work has the capacity to dehumanise the employee too.

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Filthy Rich / Dirt Poor

Curatorial and Formal decisions

The exhibition “Filthy Rich / Dirt Poor” (Wits Art Museum: 30/04/21 – 20/06/21) is produced together with the scholarly essay entitled *Plumbing the Depths: Recycling Conceived as Life Raft in a Mediation from Trash to Worth*. In both, the manoeuvrings of the accumulation of wealth and the associated patterns of consumerism and discard are teased out against the wasting of the land and of those who work it. In a trajectory that begins with Johannesburg’s 1886 gold-rush, gold miners of old are conflated with the contemporary city’s flotilla of informal recyclers.

In paintings and mixed-media compositions, mine dump dirt, oxides, lead sheet and decommissioned, shredded South African bank notes are used to trace the stark outlines and map out the bold geographical shapes of Johannesburg’s iconic mine dumps. Conceptually, the scarring of the landscape speaks to the harm wrought on the mine labourers who came before and on the recyclers who continue to work the cityscape for meagre wage. The artworks have an intense material connection to the themes explored and as surfaces are repeatedly built up and worn down by violent means such as gouging, scratching and grinding, the appearance of palimpsest landscapes emerge, speaking to a history of exploitation of land and labourer. Furthermore, the materials incorporated in this body of work are often toxic or damaging to environment and man and therefore compound the overriding theme of violation.

My landscapes are frequently presented in cross-section so that surfaces seem to merge with that which lies below. What is above collapses underground and mountains slide into craters. This visual opposition may suggest a passage in time, a change in circumstances, or some diametrical position between opportunity and failure.

Mine dump dirt, having long ago been ground to an incredibly fine dust in the ore-extraction process, confers a sallowness upon many of the artworks. And this seems to reflect the diffuse Witwatersrand light and the washed-out colours of the city and its scruffy peripheries. While pondering curatorial decisions, I noticed that the pallet of our South African currency – bottle-green, ochre-brown, cadmium-orange, periwinkle-blue and russet – mimic the colours of the Highveld landscape. I wonder if this was, in fact, the intent of the designers of our legal tender? Nevertheless, it is an observation that significantly influenced my curatorial decision to pair and group works such that they reference the ebb and flow of the land, its people – and of money.

Another of my major curatorial decisions was borne out of my need to unify the diversity of materials and methods deployed in this body of work. I opted to avoid a ‘traditional’ hanging height in favour of placing works at randomly selected and notably differing heights. This infers a certain dynamism, while simultaneously unsettling the exhibition as a whole. In deviating from a uniform – and familiar – hanging convention, individual artworks become awkward, they teeter on edge and seem about to collapse in disarray. In so doing they further reinforce the surface/underground analogy. These strategies make for somewhat uncomfortable viewing, which is well in keeping with my overall themes. Not only does my hanging strategy corroborate the haphazard appearance of Johannesburg’s man-made landscape, but it also reiterates the notion of waves and troughs. This is a significant intervention in that much of the work presented makes visual connections to the sea and to shipwreck – themes that are extensively considered in the written component of this creative PhD.

Ultimately, it is my hope that the creative interventions deployed throughout this PhD should suggest an endless drift of time, people and circumstances. Matters of labour, gain, profit and loss are equated to the constant ebb and flow of flotsam and jetsam, possibly alluding to the perpetual striving of Johannesburg’s informal recyclers for a stronger foothold in a harsh and capricious city. Essentially, this creative body of work seeks to trace a mediation between damage and possibility.



Title: *School/Shoal*

Date: 2021

Medium: Lead thread, lead sheet & surf -sinkers, fishing line

Dimensions: 89,5(h) x 131 x 8cm

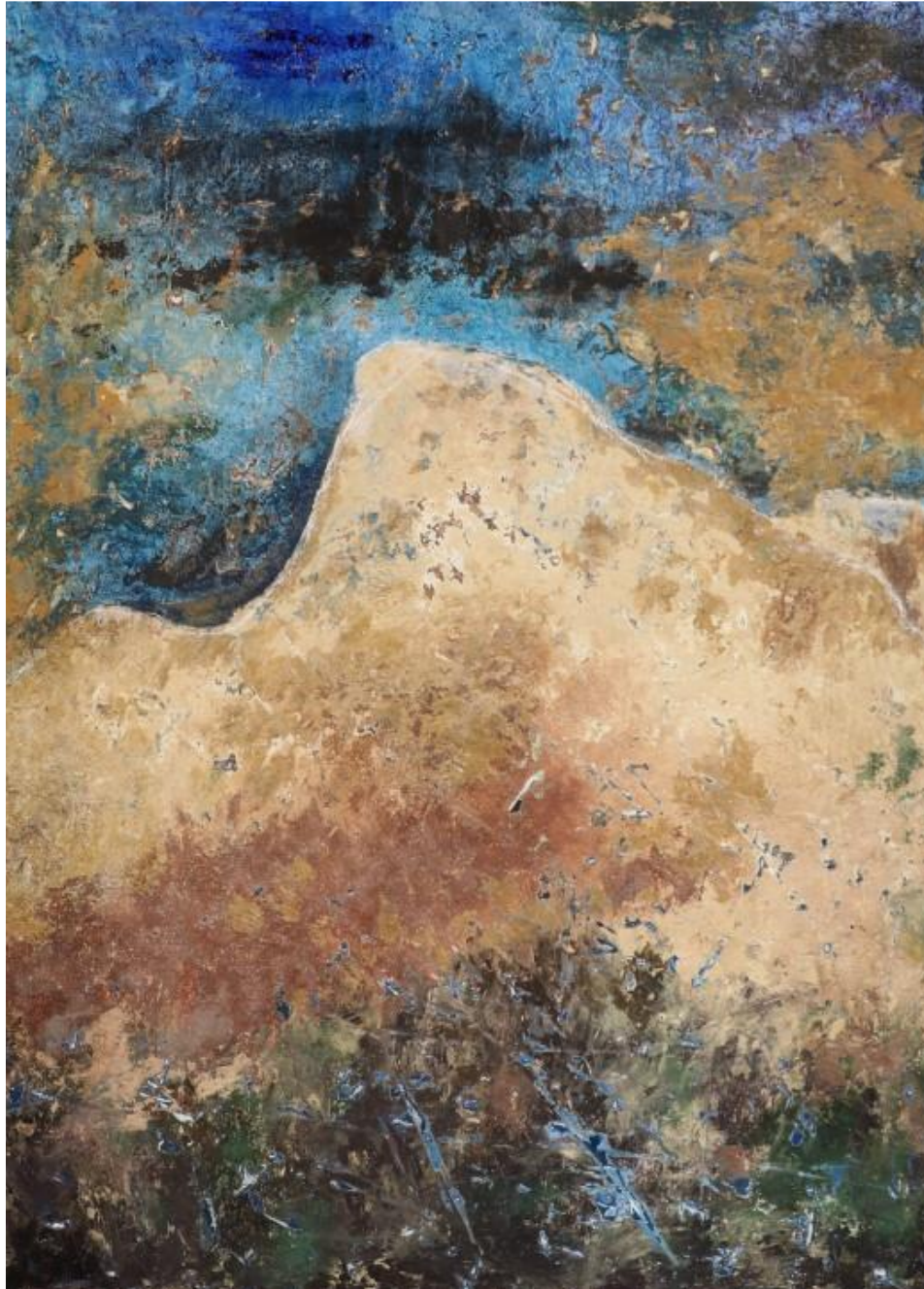


Title: *Between Damage and PossibilityI-V*

Date: 2019

Medium: lead ribbon, hand-made paper

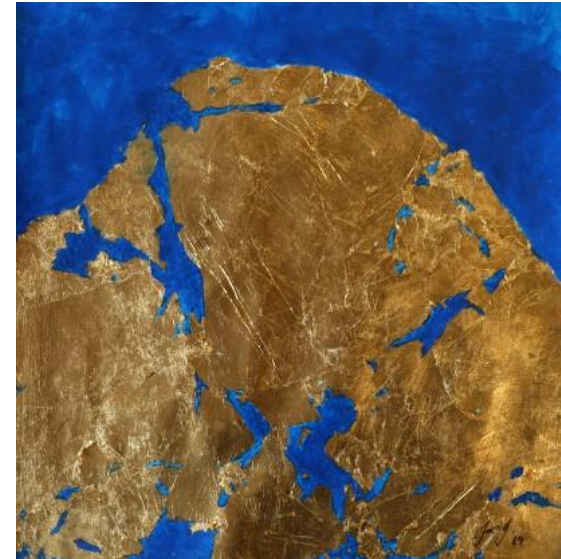
Dimensions: 29,7 x 24 cm each



Title: *Dumped I*
Date: 2018
Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides, wood glue on ply
Dimensions: 118,5(h) x 84cm



Title: *Raft*
Date: 2018
Medium: Mine dump dust, collage, reverse painted on glass
Dimensions: 42(h) x 29,7cm



Title: *Gold Mountain (Water)*
Date: 2018
Medium: Acrylic and gold leaf on paper
Dimensions: 28(h) x 28cm



Title: *Gold Mountain (Sky)*
Date: 2018
Medium: Acrylic and gold leaf on paper
Dimensions: 28(h) x 28cm



Title: *Ascend the Rungs I*
 Date: 2017
 Medium: Lead, mine dump dust & iron oxide on paper
 Dimensions: 38(h) x 28cm



Title: *Ascend the Rungs II*
 Date: 2017
 Medium: Lead, mine dump dust & iron oxide on paper
 Dimensions: 37(h) x 27cm



Title: *Pioneer Plant (Khakibos Weed)*
 Date: 2018
 Medium: Spray paint on glass
 Dimensions: 30(h) x 24cm



Title: *Dumped II*

Date: 2018

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 90(h) x 100cm

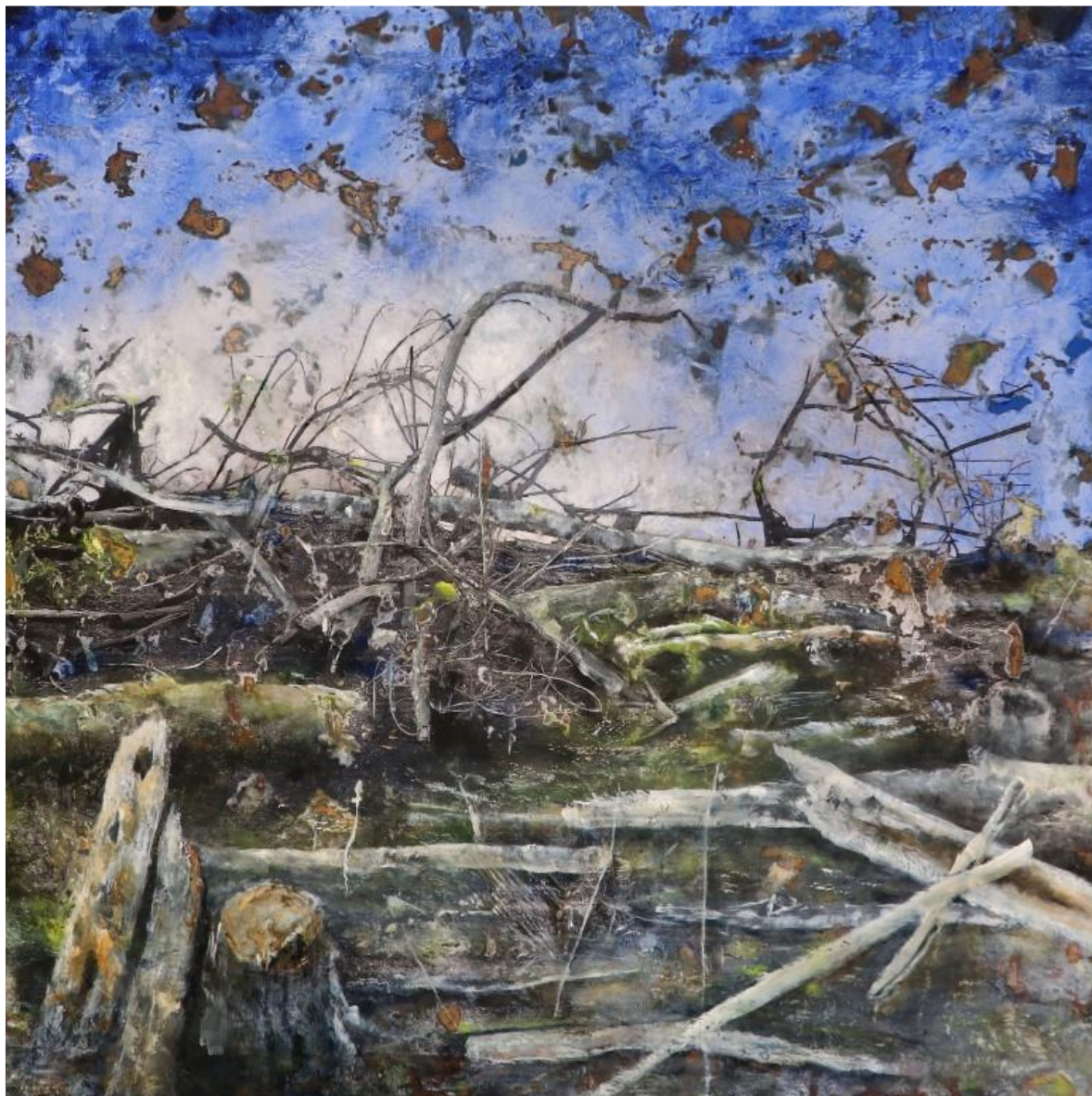


Title: *Abandoned Land I*

Date: 2021

Medium: Mine dump dust, photostat, oils, oxides, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 90(h) x 90cm



Title: *Abandoned Land II*

Date: 2021

Medium: Mine dump dust, photostat, oils, oxides, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 90(h) x 90cm



Title: *Shaft*

Date: 2020

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 118,5(h) x 84cm



Title: *Blue Gum: 5-Star Drive-In Dump*

Date: 2020

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 118,5(h) x 84cm



Title: *Junk Status R10s*

Date: 2019

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB, cold glue, glass

Dimensions: 20(h) x 20cm

Edition: 5 (E.V.)

Title: *Five Star R20s*

Date: 2019

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB, cold glue, glass

Dimensions: 20(h) x 20cm

Edition: 5 (E.V.)



Title: *Five Star R50s*

Date: 2019

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB, cold glue, glass

Dimensions: 20(h) x 20cm

Edition: 5 (E.V.)

Title: *Junk Status R100s*

Date: 2019

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB, cold glue, glass

Dimensions: 20(h) x 20cm

Edition: 5 (E.V.)



Title: *Junk Status R200s*

Date: 2019

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB, cold glue, glass

Dimensions: 20(h) x 20cm

Edition: 5 (E.V.)

Title: *Five Star R10s*

Date: 2019

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB, cold glue, glass

Dimensions: 20(h) x 20cm

Edition: 5 (E.V.)



Title: *XO* (diptych) (left panel)

Date: 2019

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB, cold glue, glass

Dimensions: 100(h) x 100cm

Edition: 3 (E.V.)



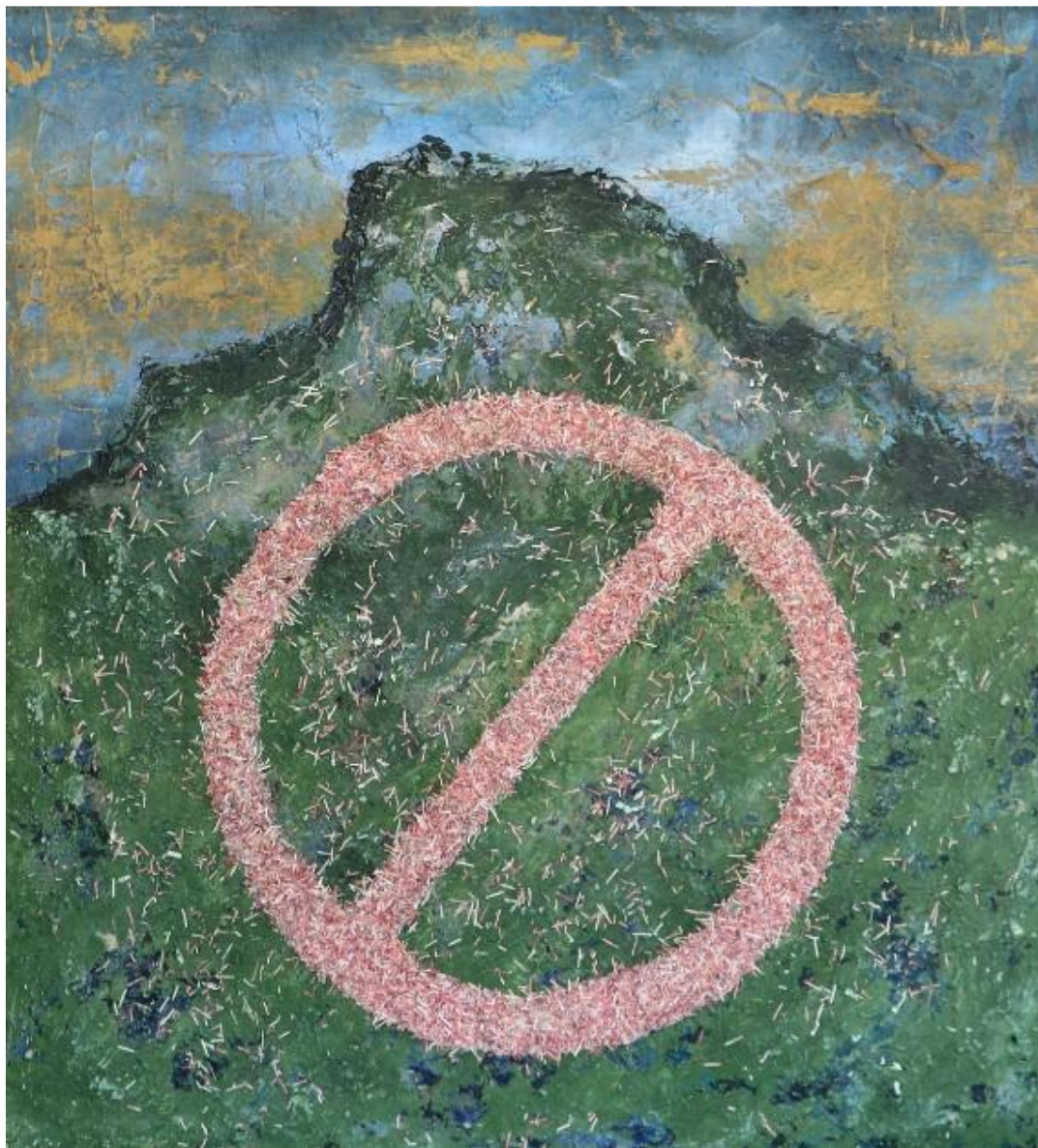
Title: *XO* (diptych) (right panel)

Date: 2019

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB, cold glue, glass

Dimensions: 100(h) x 100cm

Edition: 3 (E.V.)



Title: *Access Forbidden*

Date: 2019

Medium: : Mine dump dust, oils, oxides & decommissioned
SA bank notes shredded by SARB, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 90(h) x 82cm



Title: *Takealot*

Date: 2019

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB,
cold glue, Plexi glass

Dimensions: 90(h) x 82cm

Edition: 3 (E.V.)



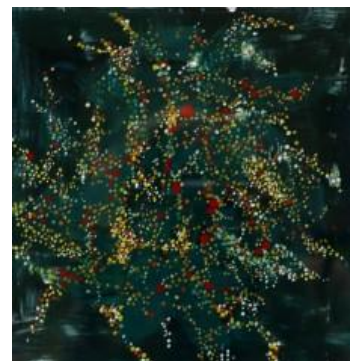
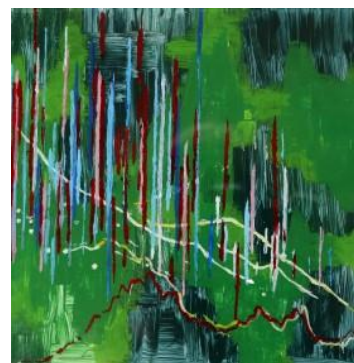
Title: *Waste & Want*

Date: 2019

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB,
cold glue, Plexi glass

Dimensions: 90(h) x 90cm

Edition: 3 (E.V.)



Title (lt): *The Streets are Paved with Gold*
Date: 2019
Medium: Burnt tyre soot, gold dust, plant matter and oils on paper
Dimensions: 96(h) x 51cm

Title (rt): *Zoom I, II & III*
Date: 2019
Medium: Reverse acrylic painting on glass
Dimensions: 20(h) x 20cm (each)



Title: *The Streets are Paved with Gold (Burning Man: Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave)*
Date: 2019
Medium: Burnt tyre soot, plant matter and oils on paper
Dimensions: 109(h) x 37cm



Title: *Dumped (Working drawing)*
Date: 2018
Medium: Mine dump dust and iron oxide on paper
Dimensions: 41,5(h) x 29,7cm



Title: *Burning Man: Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave*
Date: 2017
Medium: Burnt tyre soot and oils on paper
Dimensions: 21(h) x 29,7cm

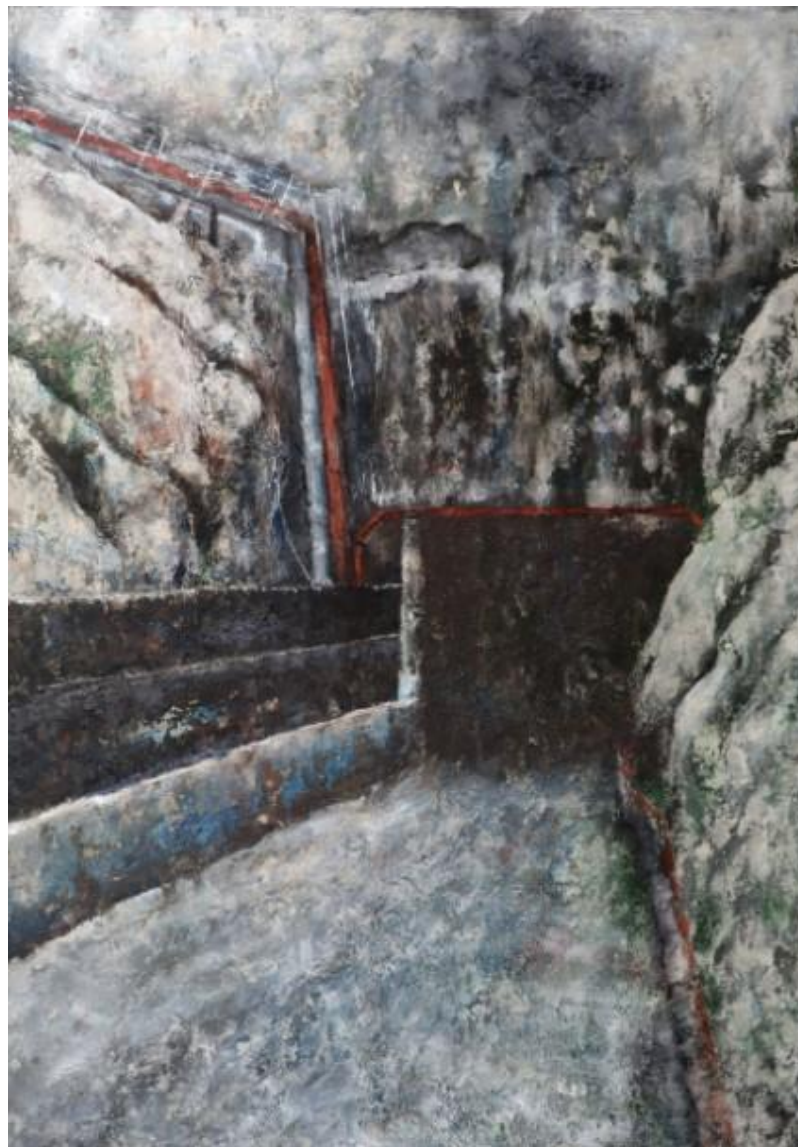


Title: *Shaft Works I*

Date: 2019

Medium: Lead tape, mine dump dust, oils, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 118,5(h) x 58cm



Title: *Shaft Works II*

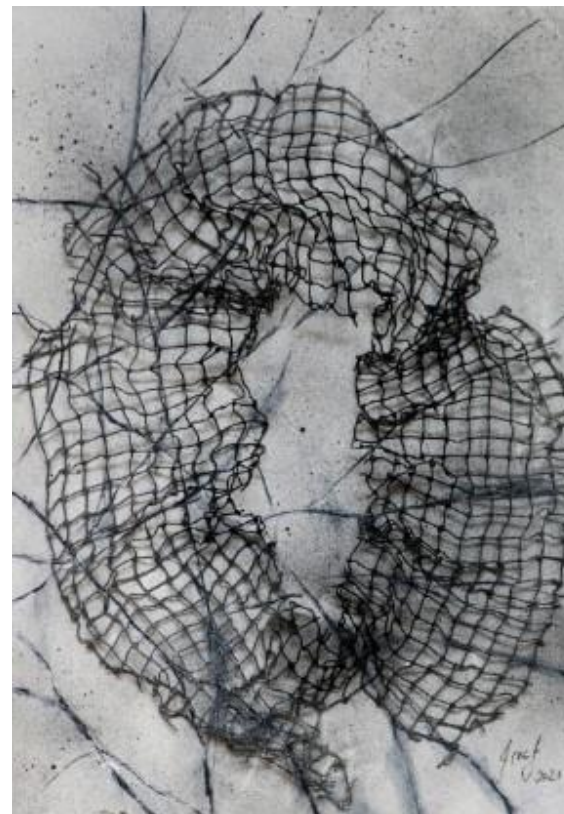
Date: 2019

Medium: Lead tape, mine dump dust, oxides, wood glue on ply

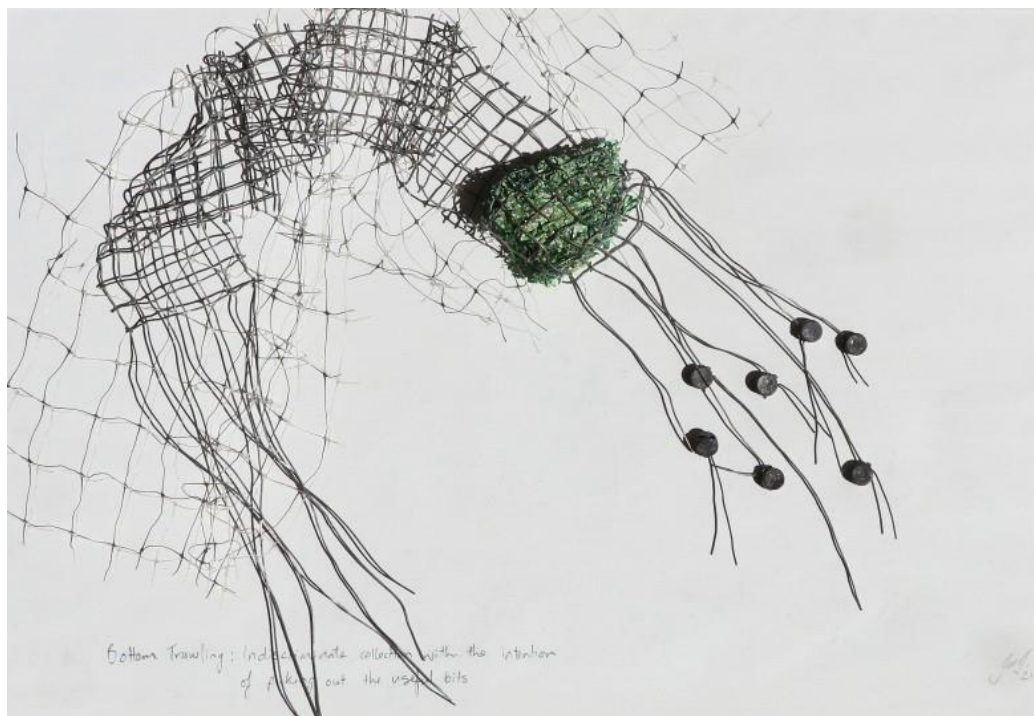
Dimensions: 118,5(h) x 84cm



Title: *Ships of Fools*
Date: 2021
Medium: Sheet lead on paper
Dimensions: 29,7 x 21 cm



Title: *Fishers of Men*
Date: 2021
Medium: Lead thread on mounting board
Dimensions: 29,7 x 21 cm



Title: *Bottom Trawling*

Date: 2021

Medium: Lead thread, decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB on paper

Dimensions: 29,7(h) x 42cm

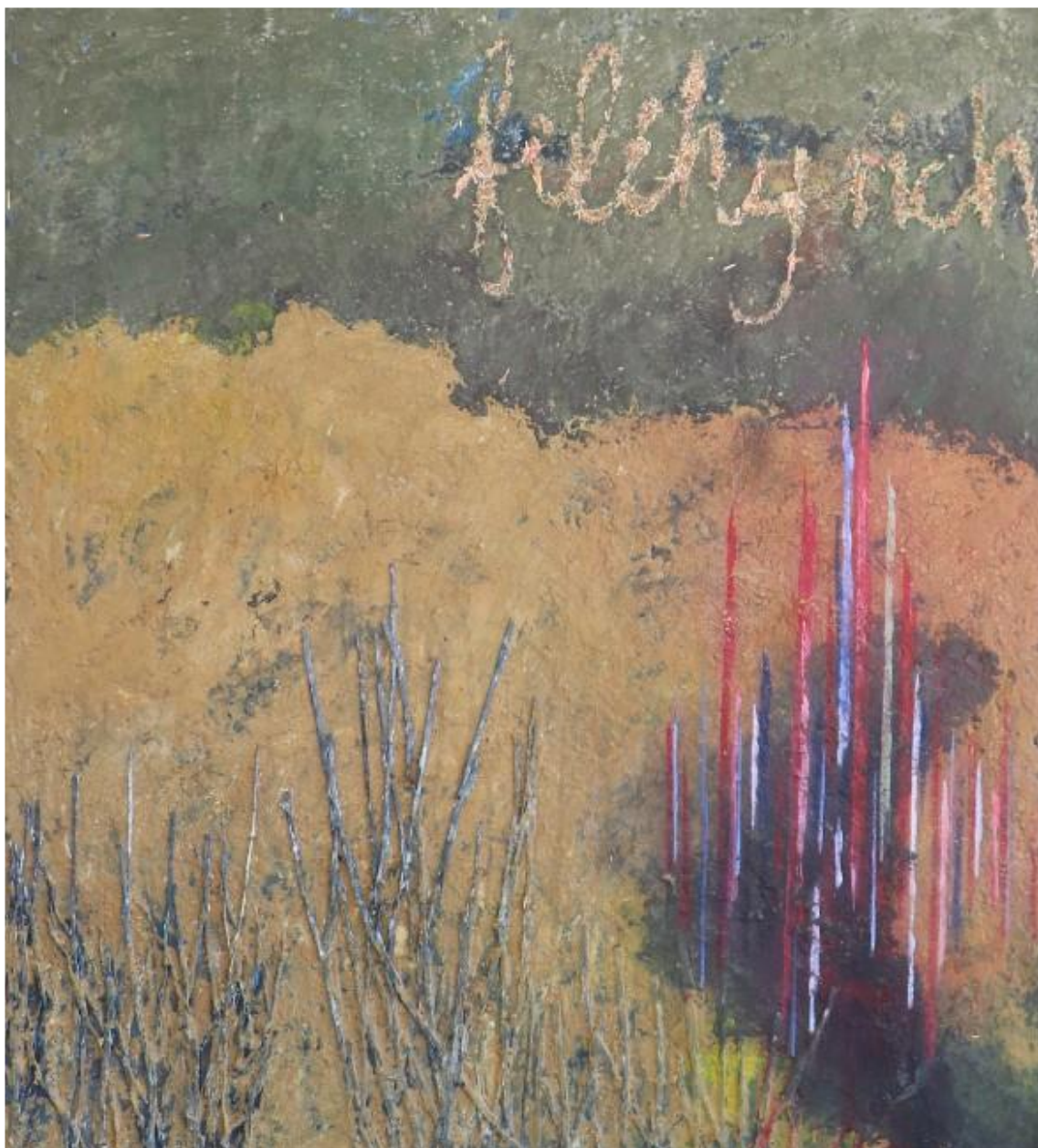


Title: *Skiff*

Date: 2021

Medium: Steel wire on mounting board

Dimensions: 29,7(h) x 21cm

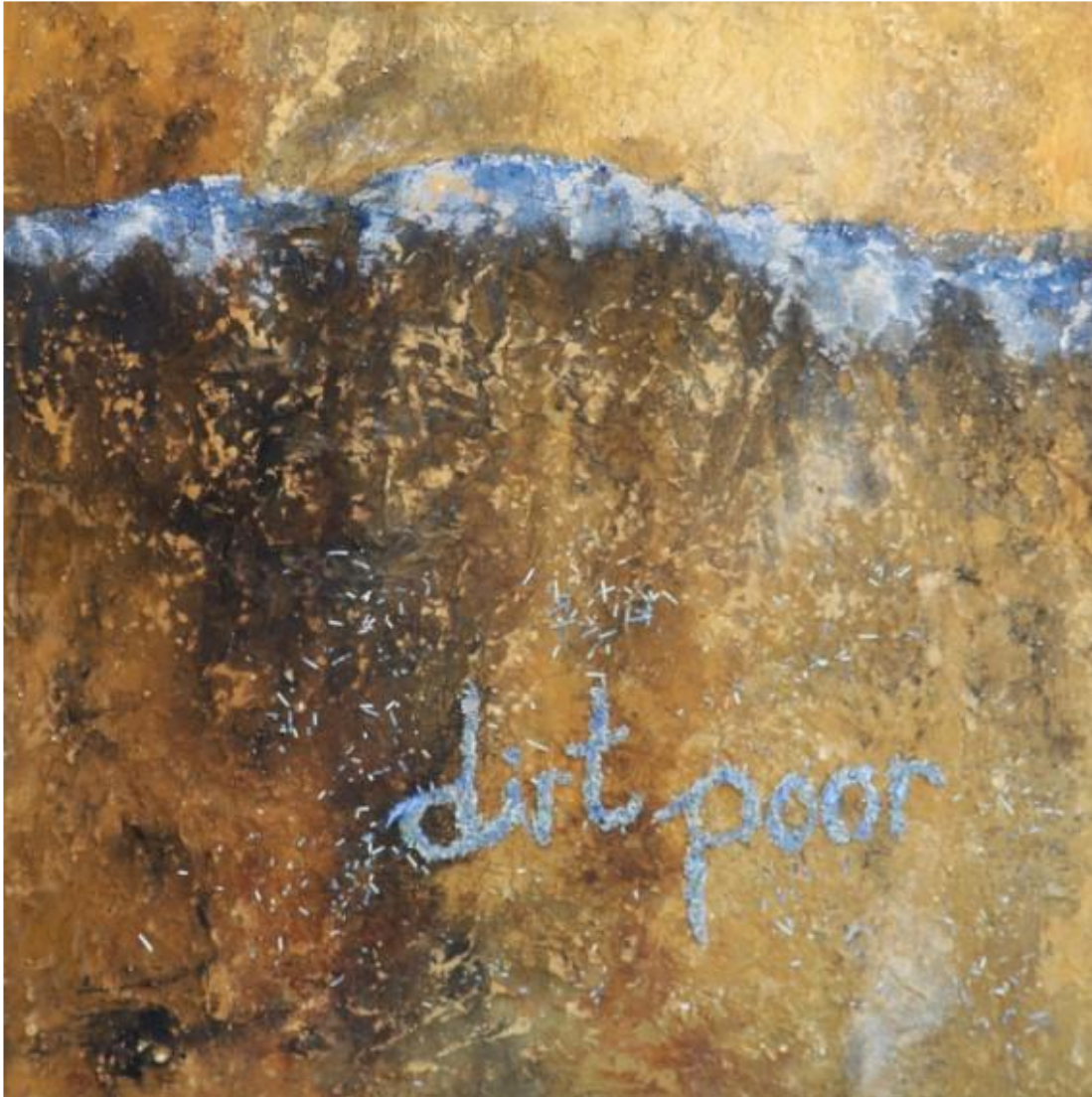


Title: *Filthy Rich*

Date: 2020

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides & decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 94(h) x 86cm



Title: *Dirt Poor*

Date: 2018

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides & decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 60(h) x 60cm



Title: *Liquidity*

Date: 2020

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB,
cold glue, glass

Dimensions: 30(h) x 30cm



Title: *Target Market*

Date: 2020

Medium: Decommissioned SA bank notes shredded by SARB,
cold glue, glass

Dimensions: 30(h) x 30cm



Title: *Graft*

Date: 2018

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 105(h) x 71cm



Title: *Aerial View*

Date: 2019

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides , found objects, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 60(h) x 60cm



Title: *Dark Buildings*

Date: 2020

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides , lead tape, wood glue on ply,

Dimensions: 60(h) x 60cm



Title: *Someplace better*

Date: 2018

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides , lead tape, wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 60(h) x 60cm

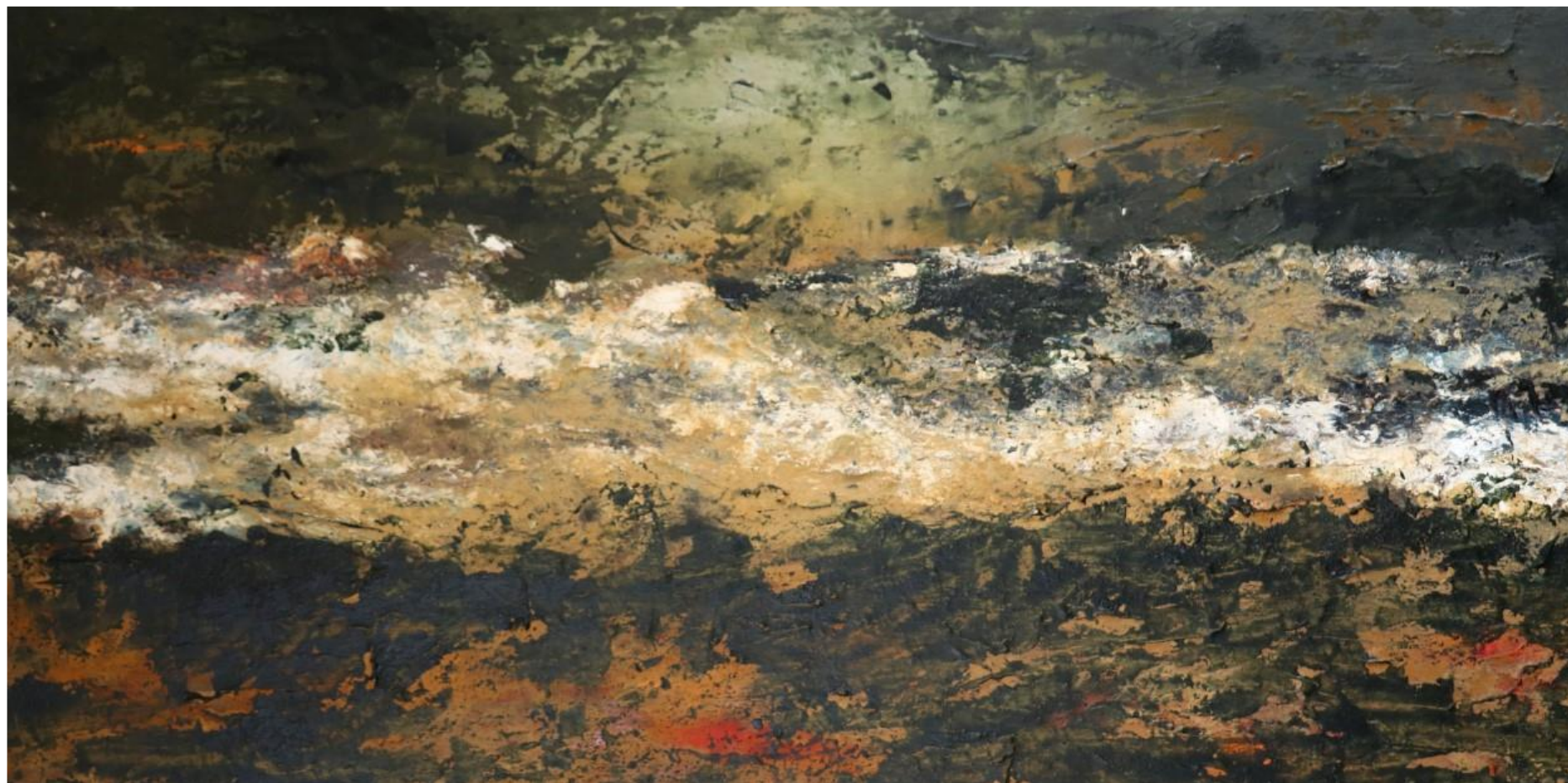


Title: *Veldt Fire*

Date: 2018

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides , wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 60(h) x 60cm



Title: *The Remains I*

Date: 2019

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides , wood glue on ply

Dimensions: 54,5(h) x 110cm



Title: *The Remains II*

Date: 2019

Medium: Mine dump dust, oils, oxides , lead tape, wood glue on ply,

Dimensions: 54,5(h) x 110cm



Title: *Mountains of the Moon*

Date: 2017

Medium: Burnt tyre soot and oil on paper

Dimensions: 57,5(h) x 84cm