

*embodied-enTANglements/enTANgled-embodiments*

performaTIVE encounters with materials, creative proceSS and the *artist-woman's* body

beverley ann butkow



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embodiments*

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## declaration

I, beverley ann butkow, hereby declare that this dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Art, University of the Witwatersrand. Apart from where recognised, this research is my own unaided work and has not been previously submitted for any degree to any other university.



beverley ann butkow

15 march 2022

## ethics clearance number

protocol number: H19/10/05

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there are shining lights who act as my North Star, guiding my path, walking alongside me, holding me and nurTURING me. I tell each of them regularly how important they are to me. I am suffused in appreciation of what they teach me and the categorical support they give me.

I single out Dr Jessica Webster for her particular assertive method of challenging me, which exPAnDed my thinking, making and writing on every level.

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## abstract

My creative research is actiVaTed by the enTANGled intersection of weaving and painting practices, corporeal feminisms and new materialisms. My research and making process seek to unseTTle, destabilise and disown existing knowledge – by LEArning to unLEArn, de-disciplining genres and destabilising gendered expectations.

I de-discipline the Western genre of painting through introducing weaving as a form of painting – REclaiming painting as a feminist material practice that uses objects and colours to make paint-like marks in three-dimensional space. Long stigmatised and belittled as ‘women’s work’, I instead celeBRate weaving as a **proudly** feminine mode of creative making in which iterative creative practices are regenerative and “re-member” space through the body, creating belonging and identification.

The gestures of my sedimeNTed body and enTANGled life experiences are imprinted as autographic traces into the inteNSE-encrusted-enTANGled forms I make, which I call **eXe**, or *enTANGled-embodiments/embodied enTANGlements*. My selfhood gets made-unmade-remade in their making. Through my actiVities that make-unmake-LEArn-unLEArn-disrupT-arrange-rearrange, I challenge expectations and gendered impositions placed on me from the multiPLE life roles I take on, as well as flattened representations and identity markers. My research process is a return to forms of knowledge produced from and by the body. The viewer experiences (rather than simply sees) **eXe** as an emotive or auratic visceral bodily encounter, and through them, becomes *immeRSed* in a perforMance of intenSE creative labour and sedimeNTed life experiences.

## keywords

	performative encounters
	artist-woman body
	creative process
	artist-woman
weaving	embodiment
painting	enTANGling
materials	materials
enTANGling	painting
embodiment	weaving
artist-woman	
creative process	
artist-woman body	
performative encounters	

## contents

the unfolding <b>proceSS</b>	15
enTANglement 1	23
<b>de-disciplining</b> painting through weaving	
enTANglement 2	51
make-unmake-LEArn-unLEArn- <b>disrupt</b> -arrange-rearrange	
enTANglement 3	85
<b>exPAnDed</b> forms take flight	
<b>words in FLOW</b> through my proceSS	133
weaving/knotting/ <b>enTANgling</b> the threads	134
reference list	138
bibliography	143



embodied-enTANGlements/enTANGled-embodiments  
immersive installation  
2021  
Origins Centre Museum, Wits University, Johannesburg





val forms  
at they are  
they read  
the work

Unkeda  
AT Tech Components

Could I develop  
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interesting story  
making digital  
- funding. Speaks to  
- different inter  
funding

Deconstruct

the

Component

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reach out

Don't be  
scared

prod'n Co. the story

digital extension

AMU

at the core  
 is an  
 uncomfortable tension  
 a pulling-straining-stressing-agitation  
 an unseTTledness

a teeTering instability  
 between chaos and organisation  
 grounded yet exPAnding  
 cOexisting

multiplE meanings almost get captured  
 but flit away  
 Escaping  
 always the Fugitive

a humblinG – a celeBRating  
 a claiming – a REclaiming  
 an uncontaininG

make-unmakE-creatE-disrupT-LEArn-unLEArn-arrangE-rearrangE

shadows and light create paTTerns through my forms  
 illumiNaTing, yet escaping vision  
 seeing yet not  
 beads  
 visceral, fleshy and bodily

catching the light  
 holding the light  
 mOving into the light  
 mOving into the limelight

light bouncing off faceted surfaces  
 with a deeply mesmeric layered luminoSity  
 ShiMMerInG glitter, SPArKle Tinsel and flecks of Gold leaf  
 an

exubeRAnt, ebullient over-the-topness  
 like playing dress-up, grabbing sequins to go dancing, costume parties  
 beads, like how my mother-in-law wore trinket jewellery and artificial pearls  
 how does an outsider become an *insider*? how to gain belonging?  
 I had to find a way to sParKLE, I had to shine  
 whose approval did I see? and why?

UnseTTling surfaces  
 actiVaTing the forms with  
 a liveLiNess

Penny Siopis  
 (1997:55)  
 foregrounds  
 “the idea of  
 the fugitive  
 – that which  
 cannot be  
 fixed, which  
 cannot be  
 located”.



the unfolding process



I have spent three years deeply engrossed in an immerSive creative proceSS, which takes a fluid, material and philosophical approach to actiVaTing the small rHYTHmic weaving gestures of my body with the FLOW of everyday materials. **Varied threads are enTANGled:** dressmaking scraps and mundane everyday consumer materials that I work with; movements of my *artist-woman* body; the physical location of my studio at the Bag Factory Artist Studios in Newtown, Johannesburg with the sounds, smells and textures of creativity immerSing me; my life experiences and those of the people who weave with me; as well as my context as a *mature* student at Wits University within creative practice in South Africa in 2021.

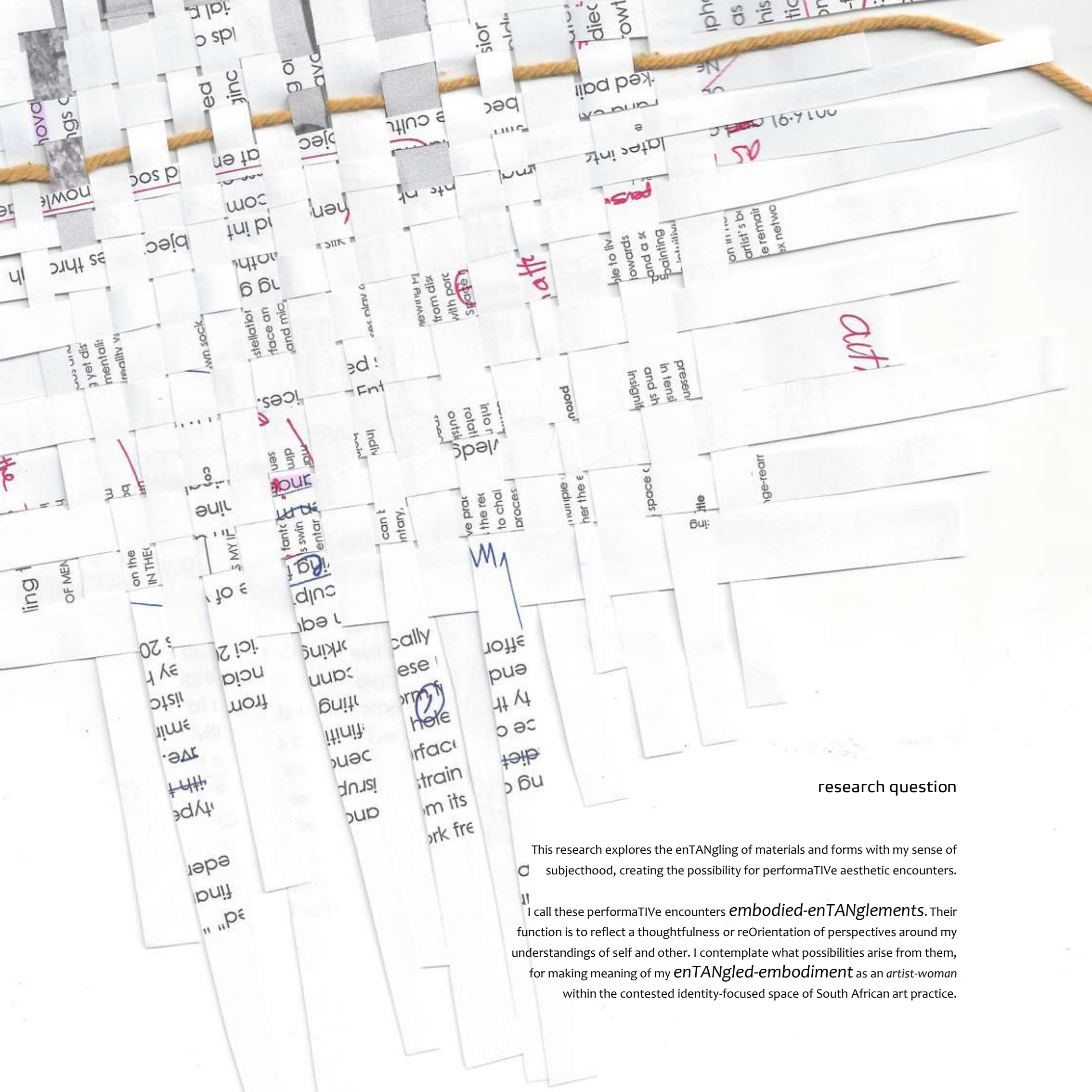
The act of enTANGling is a surprisingly apt way to describe my life. My roles as a mother+wife+artist+Jew+student+daughter+South African+white+professional middle-class+global citizen+mature+woman+ can be characterised by a compleX knotting of enTANGlements and tensions. The expectations of me – externally imposed from my family and my broader social, cultural and political context – and my internal desires, ambitions and dreams enfold a combination of forces into the structure of my being. This experience of womanhood, motherhood and artisthood is beset with tensions and contradictory pulls. I hold this knot of tensions in my sedimeNTed body where it functions as a central lever of my life experience and of this research. **Every personal tale shares social experiences** and my individual experience hints at paTTerns of social relationships.

*embodied-enTANGlements/enTANGled-embodiments*, or **eXe**, are heavily laden, heavily laboured, amorphous sedimeNTed painted-woven constellations. They are **layered moments of intercoNNECTION between the material, personal, and social.** They are nurTUREd in wandering, questioning, embattling, loving and motherly acts. Through the labour and time invested in them, they transform into **multilayered sculptural masses** that celeBRate the small, ordinary, and even mundane. My nurTURing of enTANGled forms manifests **an aliveNess** that exPANDs into the world-FLOWS with an anthropomorphic defiance. **Space is unseTTled** as constellations dissolve and then solidify again. The cipher **eXe** refers to various components of my studio-based making proceSS, my philosophy of thinking, making and knowing, and ways of being in my body, as well as the physical woven/painted-enTANGled-dimensional free-forms I make.

My deeply immerSive proceSS, and the forms I make, insist on slow looking to allow a bodily and emotional coNNECTION to grow. My research looks for small nuanced reOrientations, and subtle changes in perspectives.

I choose to refer to my artist-self through Griselda Pollock (2020:xxiv) and her co-author Rozsika Parker's term "artist-woman". The term recognises artists who are women as co-creators of art history while avoiding flattening them to their identity markers and "sentimental biographic accounts" (ibid.xxv). "Once you qualify the word artist ... with any adjectival noun such as woman or black, the artist in question is immediately disqualified. They become different, *other*, supplementary, defined by ethnicity or gender" (ibid. xxiv). Applying the term *artist-woman* rather embeds my singularity and difference into how my social factors like gender, geography and generation (ibid.) impact my artmaking. It considers my practice equally through my belonging within my cultural moment and its artistic trends, and my difference through the "calculated, competitive and inventive interventions" I make that bring "subtle shifts, reOrientations of perspectives, discovery of new dimension in a narrative" (ibid. xxv).

The term sedimeNTed describes how the build-up of life experiences within my body directs my way of being in the world, and my responses to it. First used by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), Jonathan Webber (2018) explains that the term "sedimentation" describes how human behaviour is unconsciously guided by the accumulation of internal knowledge that builds up through daily life. In *The Second Sex* (1949), De Simone de Beauvoir adds a gendered perspective, arguing that gendered behaviour and stereotypes are shaped and become sedimeNTed through the different expectations taught repeatedly to girls – to be pleasing and helpful – in contrast to boys being taught to explore and dominate their worlds (Webber 2018). Judith Butler details how gender becomes a material product of the gendered body over time: the sedimeNTing effect of regulated, reiterative, and ritual practices (1988:526).



## research question

This research explores the enTANGling of materials and forms with my sense of subjecthood, creating the possibility for performaTIVE aesthetic encounters.

I call these performaTIVE encounters *embodied-enTANGlements*. Their function is to reflect a thoughtfulness or reOrientation of perspectives around my understandings of self and other. I contemplate what possibilities arise from them, for making meaning of my *enTANGled-embodiment* as an artist-woman within the contested identity-focused space of South African art practice.

## conceptual orientation


My research traverses space between the pull of things that are static and grounded, and those that orientate towards fluidity and flow. Grounded in physical materialities – my body, materials, the stability of my life structure and home – I propose a shift towards the non-solid and fluid (Deleuze 1987:162). **fluidity, hybridity and un-formedness** inform my making, working and thinking, through which I focus on the activity of *Doing*, rather than the solidity of being (Barad 2003:802).

In looking at the shifting relationship of phenomenal experiences with the world, this text hinges on theories that consider the logic of societal structures and patterns, searching for fundamental shifts or reorientations in how we inhabit our lives, society and Mother-Earth, our planet.

Theorists of vital new materialisms, like Donna Haraway (1988), Rosi Braidotti (1994, 2006, 2011) and Karen Barad (1998, 2003), reconceive the human body as entangled matter that is impacted by all aspects of the world it overlaps with. Provocative opportunities to reorient perspectives and bring new dimensions to making practices come from Jane Bennett's conception of "vital" or "vibrant" matter (Bennett 2010:vii). I further consider the *thing-ness* of things through the framing of anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2015). Isabelle Graw (2012, 2016), David Joselit (2009), Paul Crowther (2017), James Elkins (2000) and Rosalind Krauss (2011) inform my understanding of contemporary painting, and making practices more generally. When considered together with decolonial thinkers Walter D Mignolo (2013) and Rolando Vázquez (2013, 2020), this understanding **reORients towards ethical and reciprocal conduct within entangled/intermeshed relationships**, requiring a shift away from hierarchical and binaried thinking towards ethical and responsible modes of mutual interconnectedness. Looking at what influences women's embodiment, Judith Butler's notion of gender undergirds my understanding of performativity within systems of societal control, while corporeal feminists like Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Hélène Cixous (2004) resuscitate the perceptive material body that Merleau-Ponty's (1945) phenomenology exposed. Amelia Jones (2015) and Marsha Meskimmon (1999, 2019) guide me on the "co-constituting" possibilities (Haraway 2004:84) that exist at the intersection of making practices, vital new materialisms and corporeal feminisms. Claire Bishop's 2005 writing on installation art and Dorothea von Hantelmann on experiential encounters (2014) are instrumental for me in framing the potential for performative encounters.

I entangle these multiple frames of reference and thinking around embodiment, gender performativity, corporeal feminist theory, vital new materialisms and aesthetic theory as a way to fragment binary and fixed perspectives.

This opens possibilities for new formulations of subjecthood and objecthood that move beyond representation, towards experiential encounters in which *things*, like my *eXe*, are able to reveal their performative power.

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a string of pearls. The hand is positioned on the left side of the frame, with fingers gently gripping a white cord. The pearls are small, round, and have a warm, yellowish-cream hue. The background is filled with more strings of similar pearls, which are out of focus, creating a bokeh effect. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the pearls and the skin of the hand.

The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project.

- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949

## framing my body


What's written in **my artist-woman body is the starting point for the research**. The proceSS unfolds through my body, which serves multiple functions in my research, acting as protagonist, actiVaTor and receptor, in tune with the external environment. My research is situated in the specificities and uniqueness of my accumulation of experiences and embodied sense of things in the world (Haraway 1988:583): the social, material and political conditions within which I live, as well as geographic and historical perspectives that inform them. I am both the subject of the research, as well as its object.

I use the term *my body* in the way I live in it: as an integrated and compleX multidimensional *entity*, which frames my experience of life. This multidimensional and multivalent body extends way beyond its physical form, incorporating various fields of energy, intelligence and information that are in constant interchange. While the limits of the body's functioning remain undiscovered, we know that it accumulates many different intelligences, like emotions, affects and intenSities, perceptual knowledge, intuitive and sensory experiences, **sedimeNTation** of life experiences and analytical proceSSes. **I define my body by actiVity – what it Does, rather than as inert matter** – in the mode of a Deleuzian “coming into being” (Braidotti 2006:8) that is constantly morphing and is incapable of being contAIned.

Traces and residues of my life experience are **sedimeNTed** in my body's organic material form, which functions as a repository of daily events and knowledges accumulated through the routines of life from the multiple sources that influence me. As a **sedimeNTary site**, my body is a holding place of forgotten things: discarded, fragmented memories, traces of day-to-day lived experiences. Every thought, memory, emotion, action, experience gets stored there. Long-forgotten childhood experiences stay alive in it, things heard that have a lasting impact on shaping my perspectives. Gestures made and actions taken. Movements. Every compliment, every put-down, every time I was obliged to do something against my will. Every time I felt like the queen bee, but also when I felt small, misunderstood, neglected. These feelings may be forgotten, but their traces remain within my body; along with suggestions of bodily functions I generally don't think about, like how my cortisol spikes when my body goes into a state of stress, the visceral knot in my stomach when I sense something is wrong or the vibrational high of a stomach-aching laugh. Laughter, the imaginative play of childhood, regimentation of school days, feelings of shyness, a reluctance to be in the limelight, pain inflicted on my selfhood, discriminations shouldered.

My social experiences get enTANGled with my innate attributes, building up layers over time that direct my functioning in the world and my responses to the world around me. They become my outlook on the world. My **body-as-repository** holds the key to accessing the knowledges embedded within it. This **sedimeNTary site** is foundational to my embodied creative practice.





**T**ime wasted on essay writing invites the comparison to housekeeping – a necessary distraction from the real work for many women creators. Though she was never a housewife, in some ways Sontag used essay writing to keep house – to kick out the cobwebs, take inventory, make itemized lists of recent passions, discard outworn ideas. I read that while at the University of Chicago she expressed disgust to another female student because the girl was jotting grocery lists in the margins of her Hegel lecture notes.

- Extract from Notes on Susan Sontag  
by Molly Zuckerman-Hartung (2009:52)

this text

This text is divided into three sites of enTANGlement:

**enTANGlement 1** sets weaving and painting in relationship.

**enTANGlement 2** deals with tensions around the multiple roles I take on, challenging my socialised-disciplined embodiment through my innate creative self.

In **enTANGlement 3**, **eXe** exPAnd dimensionally, taking flight into space in performatiVe embodied encounters through creative actiVities that actiVaTe their material InteNSities and FLOW.

A structuring device holds each enTANGlement, akin to the warp in weaving. These three warp-strings are:

### **unseTTle**

I use unseTTledness in two senses – firstly, it refers to things that remain in an ongoing proceSS of forming and avoid coming to particular fruition; secondly, as a verb that agitates or disORientates what we know, opening space for new options and possibilities that challenge us to rethink.

### **POrous boundaries**

My proceSS encounters multiple boundaries – skin, the canvas of a painting and its frame, the loom, my socialised disciplining as a woman. Boundaries give form, but they also contain, acting as a barrier that isolates from external engagement. They put things in opposition, setting up binaries. My interest is in making boundaries more POrous so that, through their fluid mutaBility, they allow the FLOW of information both into and out of the form or category.

### **cOexisting**

Differences keep arising in the proceSS. **eXe** are a physical representation of opposing ideas and values. JuxtapOsing things that are contradictory creates deliberATE tension. Rather than viewing differences as opposition, though, I am interested in the place of their tense-compleX-ambiguous-unseTTled cOexistence. This is the point of *teeTering* balance between chaos and organisation.

The infinite, endless looping rotations of the Möbius strip run through this text as an analogy and framing device that enables these different levels of compleXity to cOexist. The Möbius swivels through its different yet interchangeable surfaces, retaining differences, all the while producing an effect of unity in three-dimensional space (Grosz 1994:210). It enables compleX views of relationships that hold multiple configurations, even dialectic opposites, in ways that avoid flattening them.

Artist Sarah Sze uses the word “teetering” to describe how her dispersed sculptures hold at the exact point between construction and destruction (Louisiana Channel, 2014).

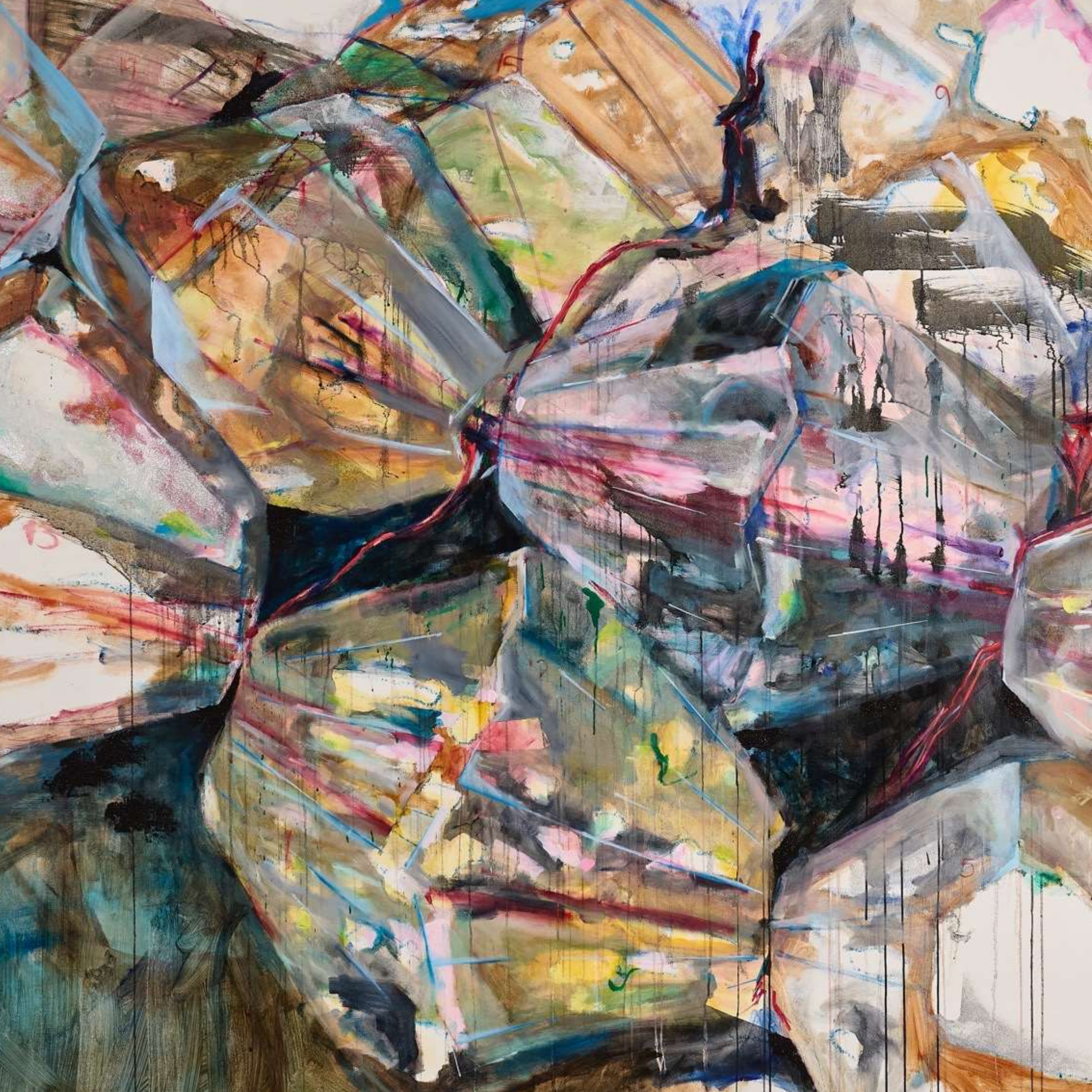
enTANglement 1

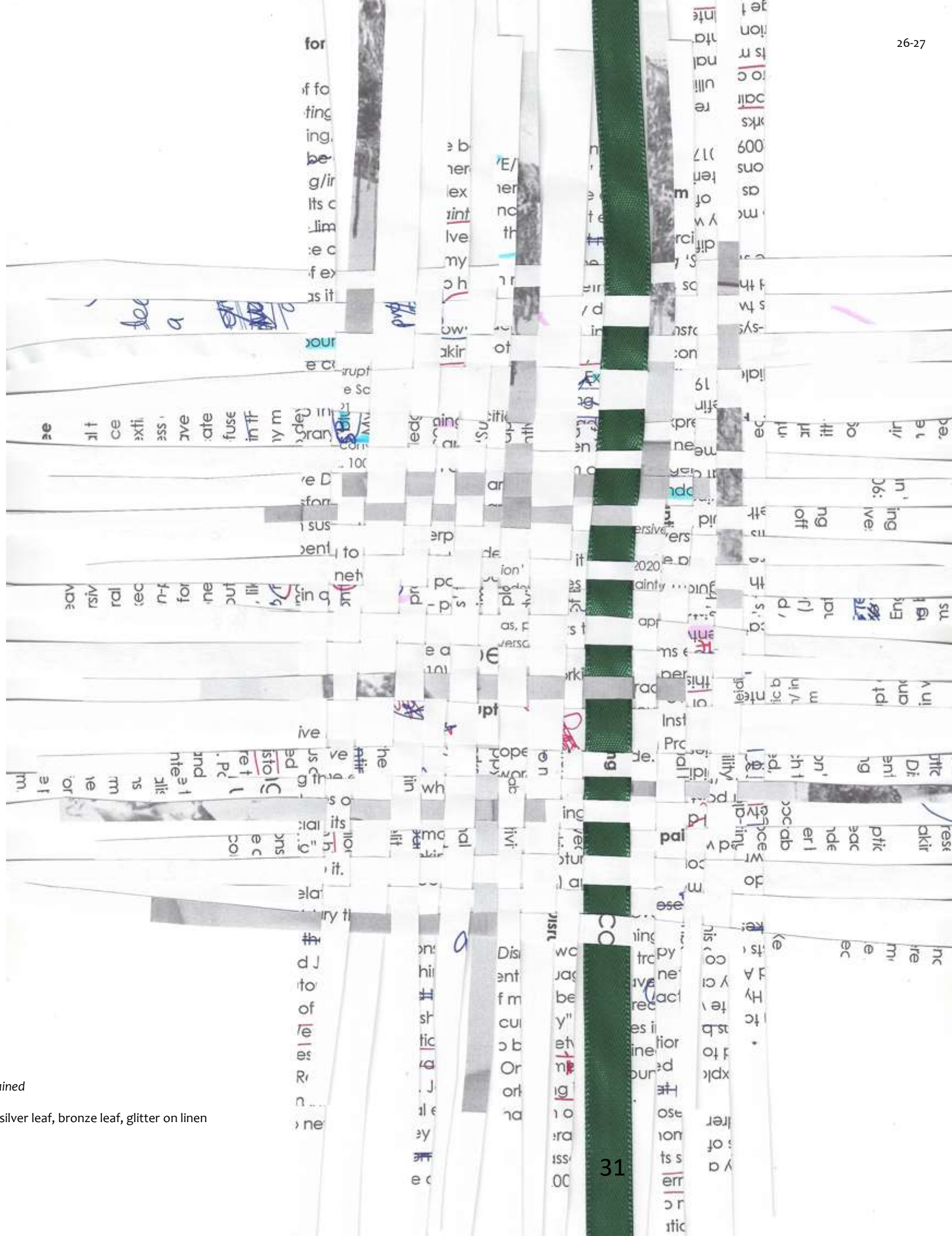
de-disciplining painting through weaving





detail - untitled  
2021  
oil paint on linen  
140 x 100 cm





detail - constrained-unconstrained  
 2021  
 oil paint, encaustic wax, ink, silver leaf, bronze leaf, glitter on linen  
 220 x 300 cm

For Isabelle Graw (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth 2016), painting's perseverance arises from how it's "active residual omnipresence" folds into all other art forms as a "non-specific index that "continue its work" there (ibid.:89, 91). My woven surfaces hold visible residual links to the activity of painting through my use of painting debris, namely the strips of cut-up painted canvas and the makeshift looms from wooden painting stretchers. Even while weaving, my body echoes the act of painting: vertical in orientation to the loom, which itself stands parallel to the wall, easel-like (Judd 1964:1). Typical of a painter, I pace ... circle ... step back ... stride forward to view my developing work from a distance and close-up.

My messy hands-on approach to making feels painterly, so that the marks on my woven surfaces made from non-painterly materials still embody a notion of gesture that emulates painted brushstrokes. My innate sense of composition, colour, stroke, texture, line, mark-making and build-up of layers all reference painterly making and thinking processes.

In distancing myself from Western expectations of painting, I am not challenging the material and bodily practice of painting itself for which **I have a deep and sustained love**, exhilarating in the material act – the sticky, smelly, wet, messy, simultaneously frustrating and invigorating material gesture of smooshing wet gooey stuff over a surface to make a variety of marks. I rather apply a decolonial strategy of reframing how Western painting has been educated into us through "the dominant project of civilisation" (Vázquez 2020:82).

## **I look for other possibilities for painting.**

I am a painter.

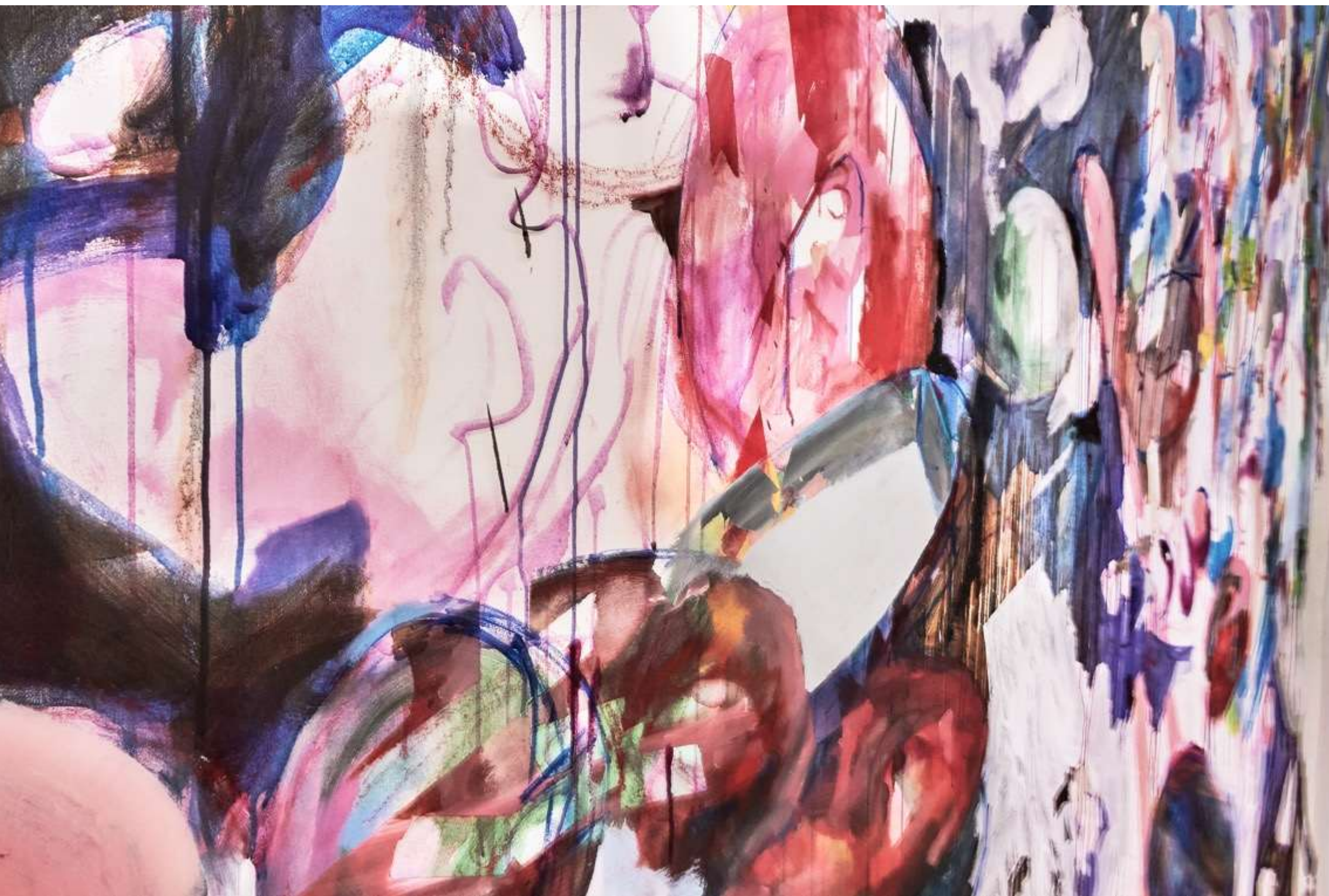
I choose to paint through weaving.

I do this to REclaim weaving.

But... every artist, and research process, needs the rigour of a structural support or "set of rules" to work with (Krauss 2011:78): this need is intensified in a process like mine, whose nature is fluid, unstructured and entangled. Since the dematerialisation of the art object in the "post-medium condition", Rosalind Krauss (1999:20) advocates for both a return to materiality and the necessity of medium specificity (Krauss 2011:89). The medium or "technical support" used by an artist need not be material; it can be anything that the artist invents, even a conceptual "recursive structure" (ibid.:76). The artist secures her medium by working it repetitively, so that it comes to delimit her practice (Krauss 2011:78). The artist's "scaffolding" starts off by referencing historical conventions of the medium through the memory it retains, or how it facilitates a recovery of memory when used iteratively (ibid.:127, 128). Once secured, the medium accumulates new associations through its ongoing use and context.

My "technical support" or "scaffolding" (Krauss 2011:78) is the tension between the activities of painting and weaving in space. Their juxtaposition ignites my process. The call and response between **how painting and weaving engage with space** creates the friction, energy and momentum that spur my process forward visually, conceptually and theoretically.

William Kentridge (2012) performs this movement around the studio – walking away with his back turned on his creation, then mobilising the element of surprise to view it with "clean eyes" as he turns around – as a purposeful differentiation between the reciprocal roles of "artist as maker" and "artist as viewer". This separation shows the different modes of processing/being of the artist – "maker" as uncertain self-critical problem-solver, and "viewer" as the rational analytical thinking space.



*detail - And in the dying moments of her academic constraint, she rioted*  
2021  
oil paint, encaustic wax, ink, silver leaf, bronze leaf, glitter on linen  
220 x 300 cm





He advocate for a reappraisal of both painting and weaving. I sidestep categorisations. This goes far beyond “expanding” the category (Krauss 1979) or “differencing the canon” as a way to write women into the Western art canon (Pollock 1999). It rather explodes colonial categorisations, such as between painting and weaving, rendering their boxing into genres and disciplinary boundaries as meaningless (Mignolo & Vasquez 2013:4). Refusing to recognise genre, I unsettle the fine art genre of oil painting.

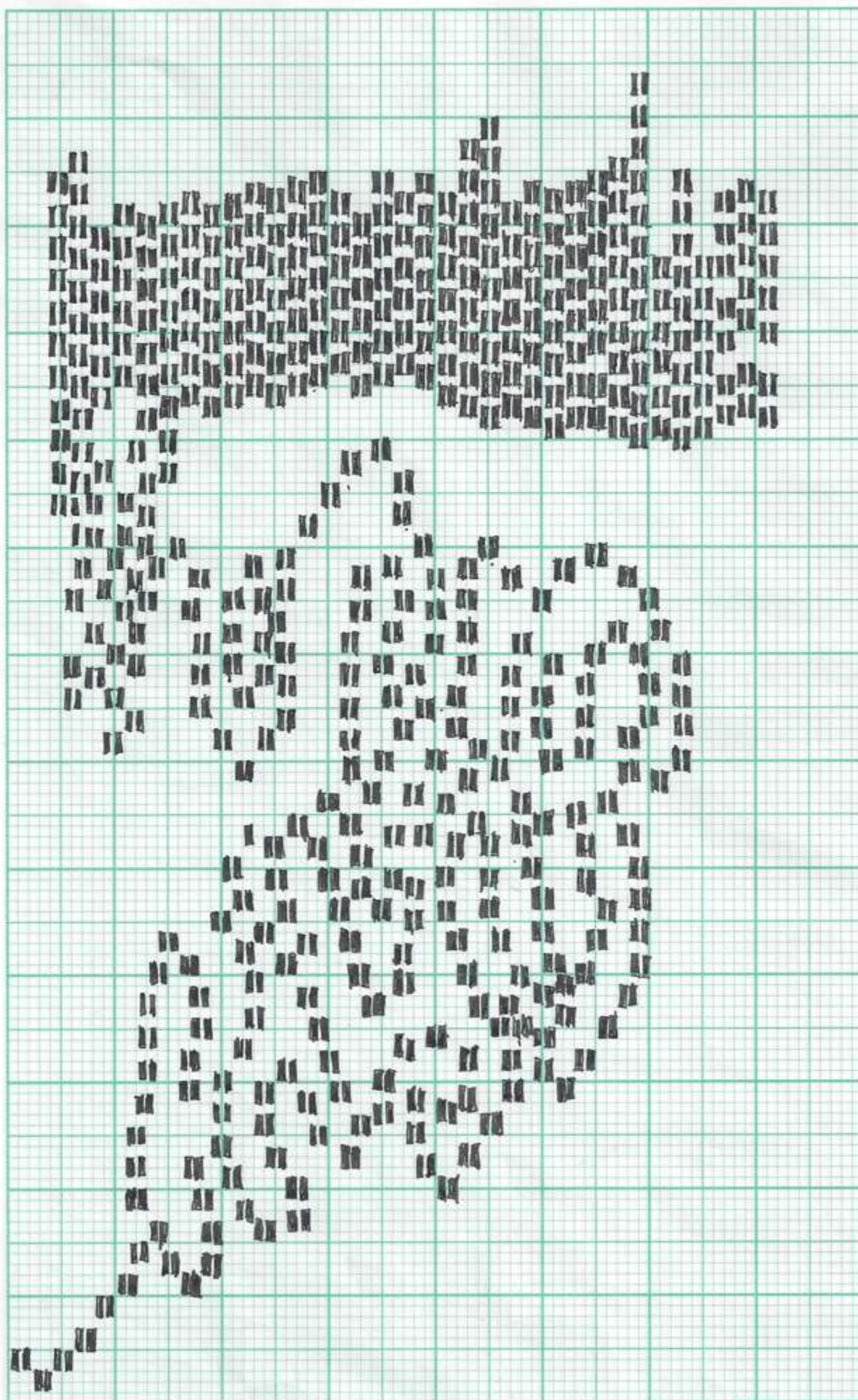
### I de-discipline painting

Appearances are misleading. *held residues* is a seemingly serene artwork. But it holds an underlying violence.

The work was formed using improvised Spanish lacing woven from different thicknesses of natural string. The intricate lacing emulates a drawn mark, suggesting the presence of the artist through the dexterity and intensity of work. The loom is fashioned from a discarded oil painting stretcher: it is held taut and warps under extreme tension.

With its repurposed loom, *held residues* holds links to the Western history of oil painting. Just as rigidly-claimed identity markers risk a one-dimensional flattening of a subject, visual representation can similarly be a fixing in space and time that influences the partial perspectives through which we come to understand our everyday experiences and views of the world. Visual representation through mimetic forms, such as painting, emerged as part of the modern-colonial order to control and order what we think, and has a firmly entrenched “vice-like grip” in contemporary thought (Bolt 2004:13). Man asserts his dominance by “conquering” the world as pictures (ibid.:25). He “secures” the world by reducing it to an organisational system of fixed thought patterns as “a projection, modeling or framing” (Heidegger cited in Bolt 2004:19) that “represents” the world (Bolt 2004:19). This model places man at the centre of all relations (Heidegger cited in Bolt 2004:19) and thereby creates both “fixity ... and [...] mastery over that world” (Bolt 2004:9). Joan Copjec (1996:24) traces linear perspective to the “geometrization of vision”, which develops in the Renaissance.

Spanish lacing is a specific style of lace associated with Spain, although not indigenous (Cole. 1875: np). I use it because it has a high proportion of negative spaces, which render my woven surfaces porous, and thereby able to develop a visual relationship with their context. I taught myself to Spanish lace by copying a found image, making my own improvised version that disrupts the established traditional method of Spanish lacing.





*held residues*  
Made with Marguerite Sanders  
2020  
130 x 130 cm  
weave with string on repurposed  
painting stretcher





Splitting the world into **linear perspective means splitting the subject**

between mind and body  
and  
between socialised and material bodies.  
It results in flattened representations of the body.  
I problematise Western painting for these reasons.

**Breaking representation** means looking beyond the binary, requiring man's superiority to be  
overturned.

Unsettling forms opens space for alternate views and perspectives that **transcend figuration  
and representation.**

I use weaving to challenge painting, breaking the painted surface out of its geometric frame. Emptied of its original contents, the frame delineates an absence. Being a self-taught weaver is an advantage here: beyond fumbling around feeling lost and uncertain in my making, it spurs unexpected and non-traditional disruptive moves. Removing the painted surface where meaning is historically placed evacuates knowledges embedded in the colonial genre of painting (Siopis 1997:66). Breaking the frame is a metaphorical reappraisal of Western conventions of art practice that unfixes and unsettles classification and genre, refusing its firmly bound categorisation and the aesthetic hierarchy that establishes painting as superior to weaving, and fine art as superior to craft.

I cut the removed canvas into strips to weave a new surface into the emptied frame. Painting becomes the support/loom that I weave into. I contest conventions by leaving my paintings unframed, yet frame my woven textiles. My scaffolds and technique further break with tradition: my looms are often completely spontaneous, made from the remains of old stretchers with distressed slanted warps, so that weaving gets completely twisted out of shape.

Large unwoven gaps in the surface externalise the process of making, leaving the strips of painting with nothing to hold onto. I conceptually unravel the dominant history of Western painting by literally stripping the disrupted canvas of its loaded history, establishing it as unframed and unfixable, and simultaneously reassert a new conception of painting that is linked to weaving.

### how I started weaving

I consciously side-stepped painting for many years, avoiding its loaded history as a site of tension and internal struggle for me. In frustration at the excessive control expressed by my painted mark-making, which for me evidences my constrained body, and to create distance from the complexities of figurative representation, I cut up a painting. Left with a messy pile of painted canvas strips, I intuitively wove them together in a supremely domestic act of making tidy: from inception, my weaving has been tied to painting, to domesticating, and to the act of breaking with figurative representation. This research represents my personal attempt to confront my demon: my struggle to find my place as a female, as an artist and as a painter within the identity-politics of much South African art practice.

Creative, imaginative and theoretical practices have disruptive power. Haraway's *Cyborg* creates a space of *otherness*, fantasy and science fiction from which to contest or escape social impositions and "identities, categories, relationships" (Haraway 1991:181). Butler (1990:175) envisages using the surreal fantasy world of *performance* to un-perform societal impositions. If gender is an illusion that "is only real to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 1988:527), it can be dismantled by **performing a new "subversive"**

**script** (Butler 1990:187), with a different set of acts that create space for alternative representations and self-defined identities. Creativity offers a space of rebellion for women artists: in contrast to the concrete use-value of the domestic, the very act of creative making that works towards something and nothing in particular can be confrontational.

Painting is fundamentally linked to weaving and, for me, the boundaries between them are POrous. Aesthetically, textile is the primeval art form “from which all of the arts borrow” (Cirauqui 2017:218). Vertical painting conceivably developed through tapestry’s vertical orientation, and thereby visually “invokes the tradition of painting to the archetype of the tapestry” (ibid.).

Contrasting this historical perspective, colonisation imposed a separation of painting and weaving. Our understanding of, and the way we place value on, creative actiVity has been shaped by the modern-colonial order since the 1700s (Gaztambide-Fernández 2014:205). For Walter Mignolo, “coloniality describes the hidden process of erasure, devaluation, and disavowing of certain human beings, ways of thinking, ways of living, and of doing in the world” (ibid.:198). Colonisation unfolded in a threefold proceSS that started with “effacing” and “erasing” forms of making that pre-existed it (Mignolo & Vásquez 2013). The next step asserted a new definition of painting to establish it as a genre with elevated status. The final step disseminated a system of “acceptable” tastes and Kantian aesthetic values that moulded the senses and perception (ibid.:4, 6). Mignolo & Vásquez assert that art forms were used to “shape the senses” of subjects and regulate their tastes (ibid.:13) as a way to legitimize “the ‘superiority’ of European arts and aesthetics” (ibid.:14) by rejecting other forms of aesthetic practice.

I structure my proceSS with Mignolo’s plea to creatives in mind: to play a central role in dealing with and healing from the “colonial wound” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2014:206, 207). Cultural producers can assist in dislocating colonial “aesthetics” by “delinking” or liberATing the senses from “the sensibility of the colonised subject” (ibid.:201). “Decolonial aestheSis” recognises an innate creativity in all humans that can be mobilised to revalue what “has been made invisible or devalued by the modern-colonial order” (ibid.:201, 205). This means asserting personal tastes and preferences, rather than having these circumscribed and regulated (ibid.). My proceSS is informed by these acts of liberATion:

of the senses

of personal taste

of the aesthesis of my made forms

an ever-exPAnding interpretation of what it means to ‘paint’

The development of oil-based pigment in the 15th century led to the claiming and colonising of painting within the Western fine art canon as the exclusionary elitist domain of white male artists. As noted above, cementing the aesthetic hierarchy required diminishing the status and value of other art forms, which was enabled by the recognition of two alternate models of making: the *technical* or *hylomorphic* model employed by the artist was contrasted to the *textilic* of the crafter (Ingold 2010:93). The “genius” artist (read as white Western male) gained aesthetic artist-value through his ability to exert “rational and rule-governed” control over materials by imposing “preconceived form” on them (ibid.:93). In a world that could now be “engineered in the light of reason” (ibid.:93), the incredible skill involved in craft making was debased as manual labour and relegated to a lower status for its mere functional use-value. A distancing occurred in the reciprocal relationship between artist and “active” materials. Western making practices lost “the tactile and sensuous knowledge of line and surface” known by artisans as they came to consider materials as “inert substance”. Viewed as inert and homogenous, the aliveNess of materials was deadened. Materials became *other*, subsumed as mere objects available for man’s use and intellectual prowess. They became *Object* to man, who took the foreground as *Subject* (ibid.).

But more recently, many (female) painters have REclaimed the *Subject* for its material value and, especially since Abstract Expressionism, upheld the capacity of horizontal painting proceSS to challenge the phallic verticality of the Western canon. Many artists and theorists have attempted to redefine painting, to move painting “outside itself” (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth 2016:9) through interrogating its intersection with other art forms, such as incorporating readymades, or merging with perforMance and bodily practices (ibid.). Painting is now successfully assimilated, hybriDised and repurposed into other genres of contemporary artistic practices (ibid.:9), rendering its boundaries POrous. LiberATed from fixed definition, painting’s scope is now a medium exPAnded. Similarly, my conception of painting extends beyond the cerebral, vertical, flat, one-dimensional representation of Western painting.

Contemporary painting is broad, fluid and “gratuitous” enough (Schwabsky 2002) to facilitate practically anything being considered painting, including weaving in my case.









I weave in an ever-exPAnding and fluid interpretation of what it means to 'paint'. Painting is rather a **material, bodily, hybrid conceptual practice** with fluid or POrous boundaries that enables a reconsiDERatioN of space, dimensionality, medium and materials (Ring Petersen 2010:126). Its relevance to my project is rooted in four specific characteristics it holds:

as a **haptic, tactile touchy-feely sensorial bodily activity** with inherent links to my subjective body as maker

through its use of a broad array of **materials, objects and colour** to create forms and paint-like marks on the surfaces

its open **engagement with its surrounding** environment, including how it engages with space

its **ability to hold contradictory positions** simultaneously; such as how it navigates the specificity of its history while trying to escape itself (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth 2016:89); or its links to the subjective particularity of an individual artist while still holding an open dialogical relationality to world events

I use painting as a conceptual interrogative tool to rethink bodies, making practices, gendered codings, and to destabilise intellectual, material and theoretical frontiers. **malleable, complex, contextual and uncontainable**, painting is an apt site for broad experimentation and investigation that presents exPAnSive possibilities to my research.

## REclaiming painting through weaving

My practice is informed by notions of the decolonial feminist material object. Rather than linking painting to viscous oil paint, I seek to **REinsert, RE-assert and REclaim** weaving within a longer tradition of painting with materials, objects and colours that has specific links to women and their embodied practices. Painting is an innately human expression of creativity that has existed probably as long as humankind. Women particularly have been painting with objects and colour through deep human time and across the ages, using a wide range of deep ancestral technologies, like weaving, embroidery, tapestry, carpet-making and lacemaking. Women's work is repetitive, easily interruptible, and not dangerous because it must accommodate childminding in a division of labour where "women spent most of their time raising young children and preparing the daily food and household cloth" (Barber 2005:294). ImmeRSive practices have always been an important part of women's lives – anthropologists believe that women dominated the textile industry in prehistoric times, with the majority of cloth made by women for home use and sale, according to Elizabeth Wayland Barber (2005), who researches at the intersection of archaeology, textiles and the feminisation of labour. I conceive of **painting as an immeRSive, bodily and material practice of mark-making with objects and materials.**

These forms of painting that pre-existed colonisation were **effaced as "worthless"** domestic work or housekeeping in a division of labour that viewed work done by women as "non-work" (Federici 2004:92), or racially prejudiced as the art of servants and labourers. Despite being stigmatised and belittled as domestic non-work, weaving is fundamental to human development and not just "incidental to culture" (Kruger 2001:22,23). Dating back as far as humanity itself, its history intermeshes in primal ways with the development of human communities. Textiles and woven tapestries formed a primary means of communication prior to the development of written language. So critical is weaving to human development that writing itself developed out of weaving (Ingold 2007:70). Weaving is a critical driving force in "establishing, homogenizing and perpetuating" many societies and in the creation of collective memory and culture (Kruger 2001:22,23). Culture describes how a social grouping live, and incorporates objects and media that support this life, together with their beliefs, social customs and "other modes of human experience, circuits of economic exchange, and expressions of power" (Jones 2012:13). Sparse archaeological evidence exists to stake women's place in this important history (Barber 2005:200), which is poorly researched and documented because fibre rots and decays away (Kruger 2001:22).

Women's immerSive creative practices were "excluded" and "erased" from the canon of serious or "high" art (Mignolo & Vázquez 2013:17), often violently because "the other of contemporaneity is classified as ... outside history" (Vázquez 2020:58). Linda Nochlin (1971) shows how women were, and in many ways are still, structurally denied access to the training, skills and resources through discriminatory institutional and structural practices which preclude them from achieving greatness as artists (1971:28, 32).

The work of reframing weaving from craft to a Western art form began around the 1920s. Denied the opportunity to study fine arts at the Bauhaus because of her gender, Anni Albers was pushed into working with textiles. Albers, together with her colleagues and subsequent generations, established weaving as a site of disruption and struggle, pushing its boundaries by experimenting with innovative uses of materials, processes, scale and abstraction, and weaving into dimensional or sculptural forms. Albers, recognised today as a pioneer of fibre art and exhibited in the world's top art museums, asserts that her "pictorial weaving" be viewed for the same formal qualities as other media, like watercolours or oil painting (Weber 2017:210).

Yet, her 'innovation' within the Western aesthetic field is more complex and contradictory: rather than being pioneering, she drew from the ancestral art of different cultures, whose aesthetic practices, methods and deep ancient knowledges Albers and her contemporaries studied. Albers, for example, spent extensive time in Mexico and Peru studying innovative and sophisticated Andean weaving techniques. Peru has an intricate tradition of expressive weaving (Albers 2017:3) and pre-Columbian Andean weavers made "structural" designs that created elaborate and hardy cloths (Harrod 2018). Vázquez ascribes an "aesthetic violence" (Vázquez 2020:96) to how "non-western aesthetics were appropriated and incorporated as resources for many of the great innovations of the avant-garde of modern art" (Vázquez 2020:59). Colonisation destroyed much evidence of how the flow of localised indigenous knowledge spurred the development of Western society. Chinese silk weaving demonstrates how Chinese knowledge, technical advancements and efficiencies like the shaft or treadle loom spread to Western society initially through trade routes (Albers 2017:13), and later through crusader expansion and colonisation. The Chinese loom remains the prototype for "the loom of our time" (Albers 2017:13), and, in fact, weaving has continued "essentially unchanged" from ancient times (Albers cited in Smith 2017:240). Albers openly and respectfully attributes the influence of Andean weavers. Yet her assertive feminist stance could be viewed as inadvertently recolonising deep ancestral knowledges.

Following Albers, I seek to disrupt the colonisation, gendering and domestication of weaving and its stereotyping in Western terms as a domestic activity of women's work. Yet, I wonder whether I am prone to committing the same acts of appropriation that are levelled at her, and whether there is anything I can do to prevent it.

In defiance of gendered impositions and stereotypes of weaving, I celebrate weaving as a proudly feminine mode of painting that points to women's immersion in everyday creativities as a critical, historical and enduring part of feminine life. I assert it instead as a **recovery of memory** of ancestral iterative painting practices of women (Mignolo cited in Gaztambide-Fernández 2014:205). **eXe** are located and contextualised by how they hold "the efforts of the forebears" of weaving "in reserve for the present" (Krauss 2011:127).

**eXe** are undisciplined paintings.

**eXe** are de-disciplined weaves.

This **de-disciplining of painting** is an **"un-disciplining" of knowledge** (Rogoff 2010:40). It unbounds knowledge (Rogoff 2006:1).





*Subversive Disruption*

Made with Marguerite Sanders

2019

repurposed oil-painted canvas, plastic beads, plastic mesh, cable ties, fabric, silk ribbon, washers, embodied traces of time/labour/exertion/conversation/ instruction

100 x 100 cm



*DisrupTing 'Subversive Disruption'*  
Made with Marguerite Sanders, Heidi Stroh  
2019, reworked 2020, 2021  
repurposed oil-painted canvas, plastic beads, plastic mesh, cable ties, fabric, silk ribbon, washers, embodied traces of time/labour/exertion/conversation/ instruction  
free-form

### *DisrupTing 'Subversive Disruption'*

Starting with tradition to disrupt convention. Starting from closed stand-alone monolithic planes and moving to open and interactive forms, becoming enTANGled and enmeshed in social and cultural networks in which materials, context, making and location within art practice collide.

This is weaving gone wild  
This is an uprising

*DisrupTing 'Subversive Disruption'* is the first time that I physically integrate weaving and painting, pushing the enTANGlement and equalisation of these materials and art forms. It holds layered traces of multiple transformations within its form, from a stretched painting and a separate weave, to its current intermeshed form. I needed holes to weave into the canvas, and this required me to be destructive with the painted surface, cutting, ripping, slashing, punching holes into it. Once enTANGled, the form felt constrained and inflexible in its frame; still too contained to work with. I removed the painting from its frame, unstretching it. Having broken the boundary that contained the form, I could work freely into its now unfixed and mutable form.



### an in-between hybrid form

The physical tension of forcing weaving and painting to coexist challenges the boundaries of both practices. *DisrupTing 'Subversive Disruption'* is a hybrid that exists somewhere between weaving/textile, painting, sculptural appendage and assemblage. The complex form's in-betweenness defies fixed definition; it exists as an ambivalent intersection of *painterly-object/weave-painting/installation-painting*, where it dissolves traditional aesthetic categories. Its complex form **cannot be delineated**, just as my making practice refuses to be limited to one working methodology. There's a fluidity to how I locate myself within the space of paint, but am equally drawn to other modalities of material making that broaden my modes of expression, like sculpture, installation and drawing. I move fluidly between modes of making, allowing my creative practice to develop as it needs to, unhindered by historical genres and definitions. **Blurring boundaries** unsettles dichotomous formations and disrupts siloed views. *DisrupTing 'Subversive Disruption'*'s woven surfaces brings deep history and reclaimed past knowledges into the present, balancing tradition with innovation as it entwines past and present, making them contemporary and singular in a way that questions contemporary making practices.

*DisrupTing 'Subversive Disruption'*'s flexible, complicated form invites fluid interpretation. Since its shape transforms each time it is hung, it can be viewed as a *living work*. Its free form rotates gently when suspended, playing games with my imagination: at one point, it evokes the silhouette of a bent-over body; another time I see a body in movement – possibly running, or dancing. Its instability of form points to its morphing or changing nature – **it is a "becoming-form"** – in a process of becoming something that avoids definitive answers, suggesting rather the continual process of working things out (Deleuze 1987:10).



## “transitive” netWorked painting and “autographic” painting

DisrupTing ‘Subversive Disruption’ holds another dialectic tension, between what I consider to be ‘socialised’ and material painting. Its surface holds two different kinds of mark-making, contrasting the weave’s tight-structured-systematic-regularity with more freely gestural marks of gloopy drippy paint. It captures two alternate ways of conceiving painting: within social netWorks (Joselit 2009) and the embodied, material, bodily, physical, messy “autographic” actiVity that happens in the studio (Crowther 2017:4).

**Weaving is Relational** – the weft and warp maintain an intrinsic relationship of tension – and is even embedded in the English language as a metaphor for pulling things together, yet painting has only more recently begun to be considered as relational and netWorked, through what David Joselit terms “transitivity” (2009:128). This reOrientation shifts painting from monolithic autonomous object into netWorks of relations and Interactions with worldly conditions outside of its siloed field. Joselit contends that painting alludes to more than the sum of its materials, reframing it from the closed inward-folding closed system of Western history by opening it to outward-facing social engagement. Painting’s interactions are transitive in how they **overFlow the boundary between inside and outside**, conveying and translating these painted objects into new contexts (Joselit 2009:130, 131). Painting is “outside of itself” (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth 2016:9) as it assimilates into external stimuli, events, phenomena and intersubjectivities through netWorks of interrelationships it is contingent upon and through the affective impact they have on each other (Joselit 2009:130, 131). NetWorked paintings become **cultural objects that embed social knowledge** and meaning-making within them.

In contrast to this socialised reading of painting, painting and weaving are also bodily and visceral embodied material practices located in the haptic-tactile-sticky-tacky-fluiD-spilt-smelly-wet stuff of materials in relation to the actiVities of my body tying-threading-knotting-pulling-working-experimenting-playing-sweating-shifting-moving-stretching-exerting. *DisrupTing ‘Subversive Disruption’* captures and embodies my bodily movements within its material make-up through my creative choices and actiVities, like my choice of materials, gestures of mark-making, imagination, and compositional strategies employed (Crowther 2017:12). Paul Crowther (2017) is interested in these material aspects of making: the basic act of “putting marks on a surface using viscous or liquid pigment” (ibid.:1). He locates painting’s significance within the link between its intrinsic material features and the bodily experiences of the artist: painting’s meaning comes from how **the artist’s relation to her world and space becomes embodied within painting’s** signs of mark-making (ibid.2017:4). While Crowther refers specifically to painting and drawing, weaving easily falls within his framing of autographic material practices.

Crowther expresses concern that the extensive focus given to painting within netWorks may suppress its material and autographic status (ibid.:2). Pure transitivity may narrow and prescribe its potential range of reading to established netWorks. My positioning of eXe within this research illustrates this: locating them within netWorks of theory and practice around corporeal feminist theory, aesthetic theory and vital materialities could restrict their meaning to this pre-selected choice. Yet eXe need not be delineated such; they could as easily be considered from other axes falling beyond the scope of this research, like how they speak to the denuding of Mother Earth consequent to excessive human consumption of materials. Alternatively, to the nature of my relationship with the women who work with me. Crowther argues that netWorking may limit alternative possible readings for material practices, reducing meaning to “one selected range of capabilities or identity” and rendering it “incapable of thinking outside the social conditions of its own subjectivity” (ibid.). For him, leading from the material body through a focus on embodied actiVities and **autographic facets “recovers a level of intuitive intrinsic meaning”** creating **embodied coNNEctions** that circumvent and resist any possible narrowing into, and enclosure within, netWorks (ibid.:3).

This tension between autographic and netWorked painting is an important analogy to the two notions of embodiment that follow – the innate material body, which contrasts the gendered socialised body.

enTANGlement 2

make-unmake-LEArn-unLEArn-disruptT-arrange-rearrange

In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, flesh that dances  
on bare feet in grass

- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 1987

To spin the web and not be caught in it, to create the world, to create your life, to rule your fate, to name the grandmothers as well as the fathers, to draw nets and not just straight lines, to be a maker as well as a cleaner, to be able to sing and not be silenced, to take down the veil and appear: all these are the banners on the laundry line I hang out.

- Rebecca Solnit, Grandmother Spider, 2014



## embodied research

Feminist theorists argue that individual women are intimately and inextricably enTANGled with a greater narrative of the collective. Our social, cultural, political and material interactions indivisibly impact other people, relationships and social formations. Every personal tale shares social experiences: our bodies carry the “traces of others” (Roslyn Diprose cited in Meskimmon 2019:359). The value of creative practices is how they “fuse what is general and unique about human experience” (Crowther 2017), so that individual experiences resonate with shared social experiences (and even those that are not shared).

My research process is a return to forms of knowledge produced from and by the body.

My *artist-woman* body is an active force in my work and in this research. My autographic making is hands-on, tactile, haptic, physical. Neither represented nor physically present, my physical body is merely implied. My *artist-woman* body imprints its mark on the woven and painted surfaces as it paints, weaves, knots and ties: I “bind” my “pathways or lines of becoming into the texture of material Flows comprising the lifeworld” (Ingold 2010:96). These “lines of becoming” (ibid.) become embodied in the material forms I make. My body is literally enTANGled into every thread.

Creative practices are inherently subjective; I’m particularly drawn to painting’s scope for individualistic manifestation and self-expression which, as an embodied practice, links to the subjectivity of the maker, possibly more overtly than in other mediums (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth 2016:90, 91). For Graw, painting is saturated with the life of the artist through the fabricated effect of an imaginary “ghostlike” presence of its maker. Painting brings “strong residues of contact with the artist’s subjective labour and the painter’s life experiences” (ibid.), yet cannot be reduced to this (ibid.), making it a rich site of tension for female artists to interrogate selfhood. When creative practices are considered through their direct access to the embodied experience of the artist, they play a unique role in navigating new ways to consider selfhood.

A significant part of how people relate to each other is through our bodies and embodied experiences. Theorising from a South African perspective, Sarah Nuttall (2009:152) argues that embodied experience is a relevant form of theoretical research that can access worldly experiences through a range of creative registers and contexts. She looks in new places for **new methods to access embodied subjectivity** by employing different “experimental, exploratory” sensorial techniques, language and creative registers. Using examples from Penny Siopis’s *Pinky Pinky* series of paintings, William Kentridge’s animated movies and Nadine Gordimer’s novels, Nuttall frames Johannesburg-in-transition as an intertwining between surface and depth (ibid.:83-86). This facilitates accessing and REclaiming “forgotten” or “neglected” spheres of innate knowledge previously erased and effaced in colonial and apartheid South Africa (ibid.:152-153). Layering creative methods gives access to something complex and nuanced that evades direct words, analysis and theoretical methods. These embodied and sensorial techniques have critical and theoretical methodological validity, providing a valuable alternative to the prescriptive fixed registers of traditional academia.

Nuttall (2009:157) writes of a multiplicity of identities making up a “transitioning Johannesburg”. I add my own story to this space.

I turn an analytical gaze onto my enTANGled life as the maker. eXe are sedimented, embedded and enTANGled with my confluence of unsettledness, worldliness, personal perspectives, perceptions and memory associations – all components of Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) phenomenological body – and embody my unique life experiences. I access my sedimented embodied experiences through weaving and painting, which is my mode of self-theorising or “Autotheory”. “Autotheory” as described by Lauren Fournier (2021) translates established bodies of theory and philosophy through an encounter with first-person narrative and embodied experiences. Writers like Audre Lorde (2007) and Saidiya Hartman (2008) show how subjective storytelling and subjective experiences challenge established processes of knowledge production, **deepening our human and theoretical understandings** of the world. eXe hold and reveal insights and possible meanings around my experiences as a contemporary woman within the interconnected networks of my social environment and space, place and context in a South African artmaking practice.

## *Superpower-Curse*

I carve out a space of personal significance that is specific and unique to my life in the tense-tangled-textured-knotted-material-encrusted-sedimented-intensely overloaded-fragmented-broken surfaces and complexly layered depths of *eXe*. The enTANGled messy form of *It's My Superpower and My Curse* (shortened to *Superpower-Curse*) is one such form. It is a rather unusual object that creates a complicated viewing space. The eyes get lost trying to follow the messy maze of looping wire armature through which woven planes and rounded shapes of dishevelled tangles are woven knotted tied intertwined in an eclectic cacophony of fabrics, threads, colours and materials. Its large girth is grounded by an exPanding foam 'rock' upon which it balances sculpturally. Proud, yet precarious. The chaotic disarray of eclectic threads and fabric offcuts sit alongside coloured nylon ropes that criss-cross the form, together with two feather dusters. The title gives recognition to my 'Superwoman complex', through which my abundant energy and abilities to give and cope are boundless and through which I can do ANYTHING, and thereby regularly have me take on too many household tasks and labours of love. *Superpower-Curse* can be read as a metaphor for my multiPLExperienced physical material body that embodies my vulnerabilities and strengths as a woman.

UnseTTled and ephemeral, *Superpower-Curse* is fluid, hybrid and Unformed: I make, work and think within that state. Yet *Superpower-Curse* is equally Grounded in the physical materialities of weaving and of my artist-woman body. It gives me something real to work with, becoming the "thinking space" from which to consider my embodiment (Aby Warburg cited in Vesters 2016:1). Weaving activates the transitive coNNECTIONS between its form and my life experiences, which gain conceptual significance as I integrate them into netWORKS of gender, performaTIVITY and embodiment.

As one moves closer towards *Superpower-Curse*, the coherence of its woven surface starts to disintegrate. What from a distance may appear unified is revealed in the close-up images to be a multitude of tensions – each intersection holds an individual tension as warp-weft pull against each other. The knots that bind its form, the pulls and unresolvedness, its overworked irregular surface and overcrowded jumbled masses capture the texturedness of my daily experiences, and those of many contemporary women. *Superpower-Curse* reflects the tension of the social experiences that shape me. It maps the enTANGled force and intensity of contradictory pulls and demands of roles, work, Actions and Doings; the pressures, anguishes, expectations and disciplining that I experience daily as a woman, mother and artist. My contradictory experiences celebrate the ordinary and everyday, simultaneously a tense, torn, taut juggle of dividing my time, attention and resources amongst my multiPLEx conflicting and tangled life-roles – artistic career, motherhood, relationships, family, economic, social and communal commitments.



*It's My Superpower and My Curse*

Made with Heidi Stroh, Cynthia Maxinyane, Sharon Maxinyane, Menard Hunga

2021

galvanised roofing wire, fabric offcuts, ribbon, fabric rope, imitation pearls, cable ties, insulation tape, feather dusters, wool, repurposed oil painting, plastic beads, plastic cord, glass beads, plastic shopping bags, plastic mesh, exPanding foam, cardboard box, embodied traces of time/labour/exertion/conversation/instruction  
approx. 200 x 120 x 120 cm



A knotted, tangled, ensnarled binding of tasks ...

to-do lists//cooking//driving//beading//looming//grocery shopping//mixing  
 paint colours//designing//theorising//stacking the dishwasher//stringing  
 beads//pulling string//logistics, lots of logistics//selecting fabric//cutting  
 strips//making school lunches//making sense of theoretical positions//making  
 chicken soup//pulling//tying knots together//laying the  
 table//mentoring//checking in with my parents//listening to school  
 speeches//coddling//nursing sick children//mending broken  
 hearts//protecting//folding  
 laundry//entertaining//mediating//caressing//extending//dropping forgotten  
 books at school//growing weaves//growing confidence levels in my  
 children//threading needles// melting wax//defrosting food from the  
 freezer//drafting proposals//planning lifts//drawing up more to-do lists

Motherhood is a **constant negotiation** between giving and taking, of setting and shifting boundaries, in which the selflessness of calm-mothering-loving is seen as a virtue. Beyond the strictures of 'good parenting' are anxieties and expectations attached to 'good housekeeping', which inform a sense of self that extends into my professional life, as they do for many women who juggle these different roles. Home is a swivelling between the busy-ness of domesticity and personal ambitions, a daily juggle and ongoing negotiation with my husband and kids on how to share responsibilities, time, energy and financial resources. My drive to be a good wife and mother sits at odds with the wrench towards personal development. I am needed in too many places, expected to perform well on multiple levels simultaneously: constant compromises; an underlying drive to be everything to everyone; being pulled apart. bell hooks addresses the complex that women face in achieving balance, showing how, "despite feminist thinking and practice, women continue to feel conflicted about the allocation of time, energy, engagement and passion" (1995b:127). This conflict of what, and how, to prioritise hasn't changed for women over the past few decades, leaving me to juggle between wearing sequins and an apron. When do I put myself first, or when do I submerge my needs for my family? The price I pay for the consistent support of my family is taking on excess domestic responsibilities: it has taken years to turn resentment around this into deep, joyous acceptance. These complex and real issues confront women as they **walk the tightrope between self-actualisation and managing a family life** (Friedan 1963:12; hooks 1984:10; Ruddick 1989; Rich 1986; Grimshaw 1986:73).

I hold **this knot of tensions and complexities in my sedimented body**, and through it, a complexity of emotional, physical and creative wants/needs/desires have found embodied form in my making practice.







## different experiences of being in the world

Following a thin red thread as it gets lost inside and then re-emerges out and through *Superpower-Curse's* woven planes reveals how the texture, tightness and woven control differ through its form. Two distinct autographic gestural marks jostle together uncomfortably, muscling for space. Woven marks start out as an ordered grid of traditional 'well-behaved' weaving, then get challenged, becoming a misshapen fragmenting messy tangle that gets wilder and more out of control – **behaving**, maintaining the structures of weaving, yet challenging it; **defiant**. Fine/delicate/structured/controlled/rhYTHmic woven strokes are offset by roughly knotted densely tousled tangled out-of-place marks, errors, pulls and missed warp threads. A straining between structured control and gestural freedom.

These marks reflect my two different experiences of being in the world – the socialised and innate. Even the beads that sit nestled and protected within the inner folds of the form hold this tension: hardened into mesmeric layered luminosity, sParKling, exuberant, over-the-topness, like little girls playing dress-up or grabbing stilettos and red lipstick to go dancing. In contrast, the reflective, shiny glint conjures something visceral with the sticky, slimy fleshiness of the bodily. *Superpower-Curse* holds the contrast of the body as a material reality against a socialised representation of the much-theorised gendered body.

I draw an analogy between tensions held in *Superpower-Curse's* form to states of my sedimeNTed body – my socially-disciplined, constrained, gendered subjecthood in contrast to my innate, intuitive material body with its compleXity of organs, blood, emotions, intellect and creative wants, drives and needs; a parallel to the inherent tension between Joselit's socialised or transitive netWorks to Crowther's autographic material mode. Through the tensions held in its form, *Superpower-Curse* is a mapping of the contradictory ways I inhabit the world, twisting into each other, jostling for space as they expose my embodiment and how I assume subjecthood within my social, cultural, political and material worlds. I live between these different states, rotating between imposed, socialised, constrained, disciplined work ethic and my creative freedom, disruptiNg, making, falling into labour and routine, and pulling out again.



To describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair; but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and non-human bodies.

- Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*, 1999

### Möbial rotations unseTTle – I am unseTTled

Embodiment is both a social construct and a theoretical position. It concerns how humans experience life through our bodies and has been the subject of intense debate, including in feminist fields since Simone de Beauvoir said that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir 1973:301). Joan Copjec distinguishes two ways that mainstream cultural analysts tend to frame embodiment: where the material self is distinct from the embodiment of social identity, where a social identity can be viewed as a signifier that imposes social order (Copjec 1996:25). Elizabeth Grosz (1994) describes an intertwined relationship between these opposing concepts, seeing the subject as “becoming” in the fluid interconnected interaction between them (Grosz 1994:210).

The experience of **being a woman is impacted beyond socialised constraints** through skin that is permeable to lived experiences of space, social structures and discourses. Grosz frames a way for me to express the many internal and external forces that influence my embodiment, revealing how my body at once holds my personal experiences in the world, and my intra-embodied interactions with others.

It is in constant Möbial exchange and inextricable enTANGlement between external real-life experiences within my social, cultural, political and material worlds (ibid.) and my unique material makeup and personal interiority of psychological make-up of hopes, fears and drives (ibid.). These “co-constitute” (Haraway 2004:84) as they **rotate in mutual interaction as a “folding-in of lived experiences” and “folding-out of personal interiority”** (Grosz 1994:209, 210).

Because it can hold disparate things, the material body is multiple and “infinitely pliable, malleable”, thus able to hold identities that are unfixed (Grosz 1994:190).

**Subjecthood is Unbounded. Ungraspable**

The density of *Superpower-Curse's* woven planes moves from tightly packed and condensed in its centre, becoming looser and ridden with gaps and negative spaces towards the extremities. The form becomes permeable and thus able to integrate into the surrounding space. This porosity causes the eyes to shift, flitting between the form and the space it's in. Its surface breaks down and solidifies again, dissolving and recreating, becoming openly responsive and receptive to forces of the external world, absorbing them and being marked by them. Like skin (Ahmed & Stacey 2001:2, 4). The boundary between the viewer, the studio, the object, the gallery space, is interrupted and blurs, so that the viewer sees form, context and surrounding space in one moment as an integrated visual element and then disjointed in the next. The form exists in a fluid state of absorbing and reflecting, rotating between solidity and fluidity, oscillating between taking the foreground and then retreating back. It unseTTles space.

This back-and-forth is also a fundamental tension of much two-dimensional art: painting has long been interested in the struggle to create an illusion of depth against the literal flatness of the canvas (Krauss 1993). Figure-ground switching between surface and depth is a macro-micro view which considers what takes the foreground and what becomes the backdrop, holding the specificity of the individual within the context of the social.

### Figure-ground is an evocative analogy

of my enTANGling in the transitive netWorks of my world, providing a useful framing to explore my body as a receptive personal-communal interface within my social context. Engaging in place and context is critical to formulating a composite view of selfhood (Siopis 1997; Nuttall 2009). Multiple Möbiel rotations are analogised here: between my internal desires/wants/ambitions and my multiple responsibilities; my interactions within the various social spaces I inhabit; my belonging-not-belonging as I grapple with complexities around my identity and positionality, my place as a well-educated privileged professional middle-class white *mature* woman-artist-student-contemporary South African; and between a theoretical framing of subjecthood and my real-life material bodily experiences.

Like the oscillations in *Superpower-Curse*, I shift between multiple contradictory states as I rotate in and out of various spaces I occupy, like my studio at the *Bag Factory*, University of the Witwatersrand, my home, boardrooms, community organisations, the suburbs, the inner city. Many times, I end up feeling like I'm walking around in a top hat, set apart in many ways by my whiteness and age. Articulating this space of confusion feels flimsy. My worldly space feels like a rotation and juggling of pressure, conflict, confusion and uncertainty mixed with the substantial joys of the intensity of life, the stimulating challenges and fascinating places my life takes me as a wife, mother and artist. I am in the limelight, yet invisibly in the shadows, simultaneously empowered and disempowered, and uncertainty mixed with the substantial joys of the intensity of life, the stimulating challenges and fascinating places my life takes me as a wife, mother and artist. Inside-outside, majority-minority.



Living within contradictory states – belonging-not belonging, simultaneously powerful and vulnerable – feels familiar to me: Jewishness embodies the coexistence of trauma and threat with joyous life-affirming ritual practices and shared observances. I hold within my body the constant strength that comes from overcoming historical national adversity coupled with the dark, gnawing pit of existential threat. My Jewish upbringing couples transmitted family trauma with delightful family traditions of delicious food shared with family, friends and giggling children. Resurging external anti-Semitic threat is married with a religious obligation to make a positive impact in the world (*derech erez*) through community engagement and conduct that treats people with kindness and respect. Inherited memories of decimation marry the need to create *shalom bayit* (peace in the home) with a deep imperative to instil education as a means of liberation.

Becoming an artist is an inspiring, radical reshaping of my views, which also comes with a conflicted insider-outsider position. I am able to swap formal business attire to paint-splattered overall through the enormous privileges I've received: an excellent education, business experience and hours of life-skills training, access to a network of relationships built up through my corporate employment, and having a husband willing to support me, rent a studio and fund my art materials. Yet my demographic markers place me outside of the mainstream – female, a mother over the 35-year-old age limit set for many opportunities, limitations on attending openings, events and other opportunities, such as residencies, because mothering responsibilities reduce my mobility. While I speak from the centre, there are moments when I find myself inching into the margins, slipping into the background.

A layered feeling of being *not quite*. *Not quite* belonging. *Not quite* good enough. As a married mother in a heterosexual relationship, I hold a gendered position as an 'insider', yet, simultaneously, as a *mature* female 'African artist', I'm definitely an 'outsider'. I am privileged yet *other*. This is in direct contrast to my experience within my family where, through my daily acts of doing – cooking, school lifts, loading dirty dishes, homework, grocery shopping – I am the armature, the central supporting support. I hold, contain, energise and empower. I am the strength, the ignitor, the mobiliser of (others') potential, often through prioritising everyone else's needs ahead of my own. I am the warp.



*detail - Intertwined Reflections*

2020

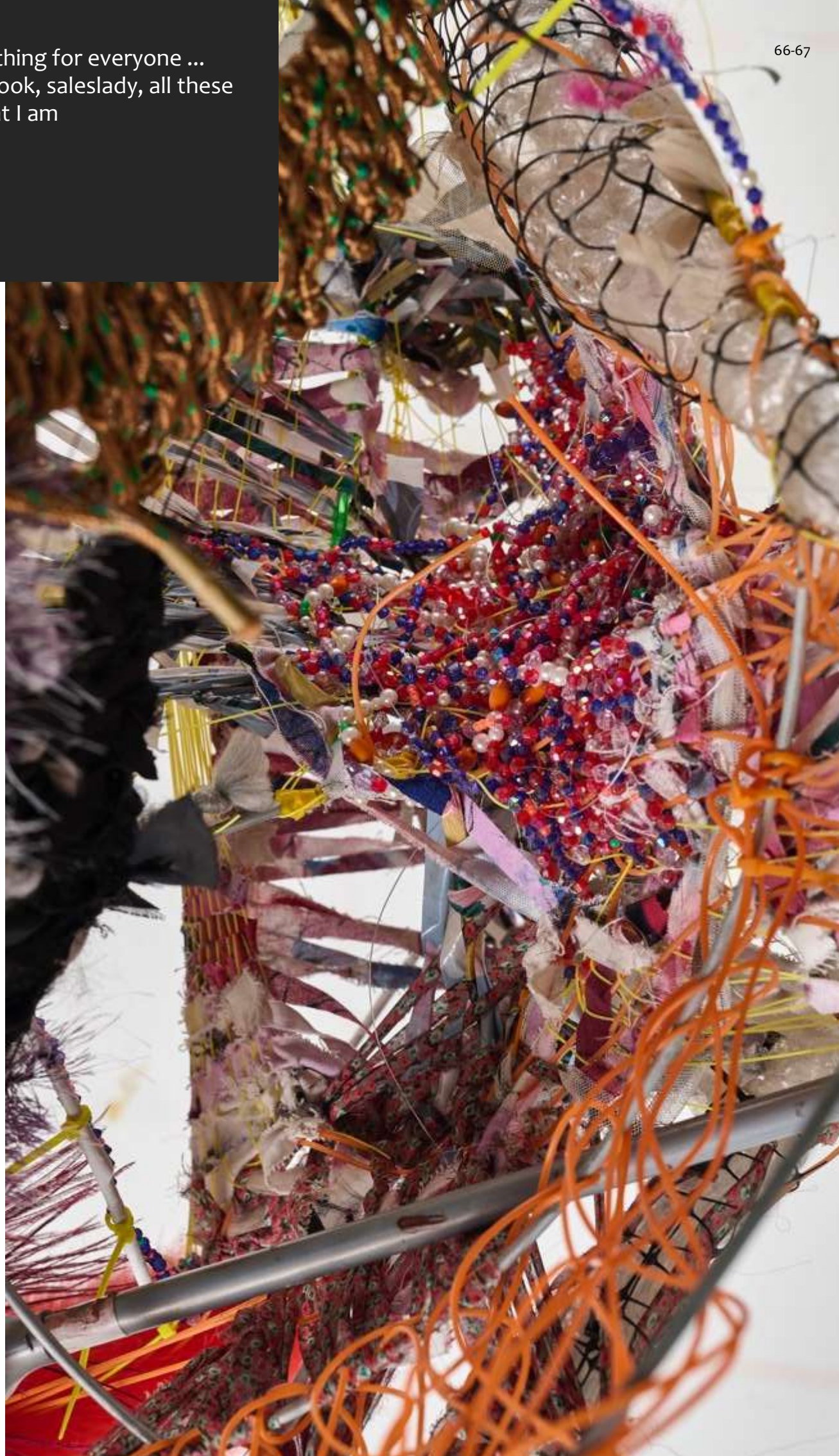
galvanized roofing wire, ribbon, fabric rope, imitation pearls, fabric offcuts, cable ties, insulation tape, feather duster, wool, repurposed oil-painting, feather boa, plastic beads, plastic cord, glass beads, plastic shopping bags, plastic mesh, embodied traces of time/ labour/exertion/conversation/ instruction  
approx. 96 x 62 x 55 cm

I cannot be so many things. I cannot be something for everyone ...  
 Woman, beautiful, artist, wife, housekeeper, cook, saleslady, all these  
 things. I cannot even be myself, nor know what I am

- Eva Hesse, diary entry, 4 January, 1964  
 Tate museum guide to Eva Hesse

Against the seemingly beckoning invisibility that being over fifty brings, I need to claim my space as a woman, to assert myself and feel relevant as an early-career artist yet *mature* person with something to say. I question my place and relevance as a white *artist-woman*. The tangled, unseTTled, intenSe form of *Superpower-Curse* reflects my quest to take up space as a woman, while equally recognising that being white implies I already have the privilege of space. I'm often shut down when asserting myself. Slinking into dark corners denies the meaningful contribution I can make by putting my skills to service, yet I recognise that my claiming space might be perceived as denying it to those who have historically been denied space in South Africa.

I broke new ground in my pre-artist career – asserting my need to be a hands-on mother, I was the first person to work part-time at a major South African financial institution. The assertiveness of this stance would not have been available to a person of colour in pre-democracy South Africa, and rare even today. I fought my way up the proverbial corporate ladder, working part-time and making sacrifices I shouldn't have been asked to, like breastfeeding at the boardroom table while negotiating a complex corporate deal. Yet I beat my male colleagues at their own game: working fewer hours, I managed to prioritise mothering and be equally successful and productive at work. I did this assertively, yet, as a white woman, I'm seen to uphold white male patriarchal levers of power: white women are “emblematic of patriarchy itself”, having sold out their sisters (Patricia Williams cited in Jennifer Nash and Pinto 2021:887). At the same time, Jennifer Nash & Samantha Pinto (2021:888) suggest that framing white feminism and white women in this way is negative for everyone: it has formed into “the diseased arm of feminist theory and politics that threatens the entire body of feminism”.





*taking space-vacating space*

this is my battle to feel relevant  
 my strangeness, yet belonging  
 what are my obligations towards the time and place I find myself in?  
 how can I contribute?  
 what is my place in my country?  
 why do I feel strange in the country that's my home?

what blindness accompanies my privilege?  
 what are the boundaries of my privilege?  
 how much personal accountability do I take?

does my voice r  
   e  
     a  
       c  
         h other people? can they relate? can I relate?  
           do I keep silent, or do I speak?  
           when do I keep silent and when do I speak?  
 what space can I take up? when do I step back and when do I claim MY space?  
 in claiming space, do I deny space to someone who's had less than me?  
 how do I make space for others without denigrating myself?

battling to fit into multiple worlds and roles

at the moment of discomfort, we have a choice

## my unseTTled space

Taut with Tensions, unseTTled, I drift into another conflictual contradictory Möbial Rotation.

*Superpower-Curse's* messiness and lack of fixity exacerbate a visual uncertainty/confusion. The close-up images show how large POrous gaps within its surface are as critical as the positive forms filled with materials – they allow the background to be seen through the form. From one angle, the painting behind is perceived to be part of *Superpower-Curse*; from another, the replication of woven marks and threads on the vinyl window become part of the form. The vinyl window itself causes vision to switch between the window's surface and what we can see from the streets of Johannesburg outside the window. This adds further visual layers and sedimreNTs into *Superpower-Curse's* already multilayered form. As vision shifts between the form itself and its background or context, *Superpower-Curse* is viewed as an ongoing rotation between surface and multi-layered depth. It holds multiPE perspectives and formulations of space within it: on one hand, depth is flattened by its solid material muchness; on the other, gaps permit surface and depth to exist in unseTTled motion as they rotate into, through and alongside each other.

Both my sense of selfhood and *Superpower-Curse's* layered form bear traces of my context in the ever-rapidly morphing pulse of Joburg's "cauldron of energy" (Manga 2017:xviii). Sarah Nuttall's assertion that we are always enTANGled in community (2009:157) is visualised in the fluiD rotation between surface and depth in *Superpower-Curse* that echoes how individuals emerge through, and as part of, their enTANGled intra-relationships (Barad cited in Hird 2009:340). My selfhood gets made-unmade-remade in the unseTTled space of Joburg, just as my individual impact on Joburg's surface gets woven-rewoven-reformed through my shifting subjecthood as a citizen – a reciprocal relationship with context and form. Penny Siopis describes how the framing of surface/depth is generative for reading creative production through the political and social climate in which they are made (Siopis 1997:58). Post-democracy, visual representations of South African female artists hold a compleXity and "multivalent imagery" (ibid.:61) that require a layered depth of analysis and "complexity of introspection" (ibid). This, Siopis argues, contrasts more binary presentations from "when we lived on the surface of our skins" (ibid.).

I link *Superpower-Curse's* messy, multivalent compleXity to the uncertainty and vulnerability I feel navigating certain of the spaces I inhabit and my sense of being unsure of the rules for playing within those spaces. Walking into the studio one day, a fellow artist (a colleague? a friend?) described a meeting of black artists – "even David Koloane and Pat Mautloa were there", he said – where the heightened anger and resentment towards white artists grew so intense that they "could have put a knife in the back of a white person". Eyes blazing in anger, he countered, "but you're not that white". Questions of surface and space are deeply sedimeNTed in South Africa's history, and any discussion of the white South African space I inhabit has a deep regard for this historical context. As Siopis observes, "In this country any investigations into gendered subjectivities ... will inevitably become enTANGled with questions of race" (1997:58). This holds similarly with issues of class.

My South African-whiteness adds layers of complexity to my selfhood. I have been the recipient of black feminist rage mobilised against my whiteness and heterosexual life choices. Nash and Pinto (2021:884) explain that black feminist rage is used as a theoretical and practical tool against “the problematic object of white woman” who:

are both the object of rage and the very bodies that must witness ‘eloquent rage’ – and be disciplined by it – in order to transform themselves into good feminist political subjects.

Explaining how the expression of individual emotion has been a major trajectory of Black feminist theorising, they suggest that rage be mobilised “intelligently” towards a self-reflectivity of “feminist vulnerability” (ibid.:889) and a way to reimagine feminist futures (ibid.:884, 885). But while Nash and Pinto confirm the collapse and flattening of all white women into one blanket category as “white women” (ibid.:888), they equally call us out for wielding “strategic tears” (ibid.:890) as a powerful weapon that transforms us into victims in the face of Black feminist aggressors (ibid.:892). There are times when spaces I inhabit feel threatening as I struggle with being marked, labelled and stigmatised based on my demographic markers, as a single-dimensional flattened version of myself.

**The critical value of the Möbius is how it holds differences without flattening them.** In the idealism of the rainbow nation, South Africans hoped for a move away from the “fixity and exteriority” of identity politics of the past, towards an “introspective complexity” as a way to begin unravelling binaries of “self and other” (Siopis 1997:58). Sadly, this hopefulness has not materialised: South Africans seem to be stuck in an ever-continuous struggle between surface and depth, between flattened representation and layered complexity, between binary identity markers and entangled relating.

I believe we want to move forward, but **we get stuck in known patterns of relating.** We try to connect as feeling human beings, yet as differences emerge, we retreat quickly back into known binary structures, labels, racial categories and stereotypes. These are the perplexities, the heartbreaks, heartaches and confusions I feel about living in South Africa. I feel discomfort in the vulnerable complexities of these entanglements, questioning how to make sense of my activity of sitting at a loom or dipping my paintbrush. **Superpower-Curse** agitates to look beyond surface-depth binaries to greater complexity, and the endless cycle of entangled traces that build up ever-more complex layers within its fragmented montaged depth.

No body, no act, is inherently resistant to containment.

And, correlatively, no body, no act, is inherently and fully containable.

- Amelia Jones, *The Now and the Has Been: Paradoxes of Live Art in History, Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art, in History*, 2012



Our bodies get written upon by our life experiences.

Just as *Superpower-Curse*'s surface gets marked by paint and woven mark, so too does my skin get marked as "a text to be marked, traced, written upon" (Grosz 1994:116).

The skin is the inscriptive surface that constitutes the boundary of the body, functioning as the interface between internal and external worlds. Skin is permeable and absorptive to external forces, inscribed when "events outside the body become incorporated into our very flesh" (Anne Fausto-Sterling 2000:238). Inscription happens in a constant Möbius exchange between external and internal, between surface and the depth of real-life experiences (Grosz 1994:116). More than a combination of psychological depth and surface superficiality, embodiment is rather a flowing process of "becoming in conjunction and through linkages with other surfaces and planes" (ibid.:190). Skin and made surface are sites of meaning receptive to their environments. Just as vision rotates between *Superpower-Curse*'s surface and depth, so do a rotation and interchange happen between my skin and the layering of my sedimented body.

*I tidy before sit down to write*

*I tidy when I can't think of what to write*

*I tidy when I'm lost*

*I make neat as a way to escape / avoid / gain control / suppress / process*

*Unfurling in flight*  
Made with Heidi Stroh

2021

*dressmaking scraps, ribbon, thread, plastic sheeting, lawnmower cord, glass and plastic beads, cable ties, insulation tape, fishing gut, string, wire, embodied traces of time/labour/exertion/conversation/instruction, clothes hanger*

64 x 41 x 50 cm

## socialised coding of *hard work*

Weaving takes me into my body, relying on mundane bodily gestures to create woven surfaces. **Woven gestures materialise and embody the movements and rHYTHms of my body.** The repeated ritual of weaving is evident in the systematic woven marks in certain areas of the surface of *Superpower-Curse*. Weaving is a useful investigative tool because the woven marks are visible, and, through them, my bodily gestures become illuminated. They become visible as paTTerns of the body, the mind, of behaviour, of embodiment.

*three little kids, on the back seat of the car, succumbing to moments of sleep. Late at night. my baby sister asleep on my lap; my forehead burrowed into big brother's shoulder ...*

*this is my earliest memory*

*a half-consciousness*

*Mommy was working at her third job ... selling ...*

*no babysitter, no choices*

*work was key. a hard lesson to LEArn ... key to feeding our little family, decimated by an ugly divorce, no support, no father, no income*

*my grandparents had worked hard. role-modelled. but Mommy rebelled, quit varsity at 20 to marry the (supposed) love of her life*

*Superpower-Curse* serves as a practical example of how my personal life experiences and responses to social forces and socialised constraints get coded into me, and how these bodily constraints can be seen visually. *Superpower-Curse* is infused in my intense, excessive relationship to my work: ever-present labour underpins my entire making process – excessive hard work having been programmed and disciplined into my body during childhood. My family directed me away from taking art as a school subject: for them, pursuing a creative direction was not an option as it didn't constitute productive work. I was taught the importance of education and how success comes through *hard work*. *Hard work* is work first, play later. *Hard work* is completing every task 100 per cent. *Hard work* is waking at five am because the early bird catches the worm. *Hard work* has no rest day. The centrality of *hard work* to my being was reinforced, while creativity was designated unimportant and without value. Separated between mind and body, I focused on my academic abilities, developing an intensely excessive relationship to work.

**Repetitive paTTerns of behaviour turn action into habit** that becomes encoded into our human bodies. Small bodily acts, repeated, are powerful: I create my daily reality through everyday actions that become habitual. Embodied, they make me who I am – echoing Judith Butler's (1988) observations of Foucault's studies (1965, 1982) into the habituation of daily routine enforced on prisoners. The imperative to work is now internalised as habit for me. I *work too hard* at everything I do, overloading myself by taking on too much and seldom saying no; I go into unnecessary depth, both within the studio – evidenced by the number of weaves made, academically – by the excessive number of words I've written in this text, and at home – by the almost obsessive cleanliness of my home. The mind-body separation, effacing of innate creativity and economic attachment to quantity over quality are all hallmarks of the patriarchal-capitalist/colonialist mindset I explore above. **I am part of a larger paTTern of socialised behaviour.**

Gender is a social construct – an illusion or “object of belief” (Butler 1988:520) – which fixes bodies into defined gendered roles through behavioural norms that are externally imposed on them based on a socially written script. Becoming a woman means embodying the historical and cultural expectations of womanhood and defined roles for women. Social controls are imposed on us invisibly through social laws, vested interests and power relations, which remain implicit and hidden (Foucault 1972), yet exert the pressure of social censure (Butler 1988:522). These invisible controls set up the female gendered body in binary opposition to the male body, creating sexual hierarchies, which Federici (2004, preface) claims “... are always at the service of a project of domination that can sustain itself only by dividing, on a continuously renewed basis, those it intends to rule” (Federici 2004: preface).

Butler's highly theoretical, psychoanalytic and overtly political approach is seen by some to undermine – possibly even negate – the agency and real-life experiences of women by assuming gender as socially autonomous from material reality (Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Lennon & Alsop 2019). Butler argues that performativity gets imprinted into the material of the body, but her argument ignores the material day-to-day realities of how we experience life through our bodies, and has been critiqued for creating an essentialised representation of women (Jaggar and Bordo 1989).



## weaving as regenerative paTtErning

Weaving is a repetitive re-enactment of labour. It is a build-up of layers of labour. The surface builds slowly. Methodically. Thousands of tiny repetitive bodily gestures accumulate into woven forms. These traces embody the hands, time, work, hours, energy and effort that go into it. A weaver is forced to slow down and allow the proceSS to unfold at its own pace. **Weaving is obsessive. It consumes time. Beyond technique, beyond discipline, beyond materials, weaving consumes labour.**

*in-out-in-out-in-out-in-out-  
out-in-out-in-out-in-out-in-  
in-out-in-out-in-out-in-out-  
out-in-out-in-out-in-out-in-  
out-in-out-in-out-in-out-in-*

The woven mark marks time.

They are made from the iterative habitual gestures of my body as it weaves, imparting a sense of paTtErn, repetition and human touch. The regular repeated ritual of **weaving turns gesture into paTtErn**. Patterns are representations of complex relationships that are essential to how we make sense of the world. Patterning is “deep, structural and formal” (Pollock 2017:7, 8) and forming paTtErn requires the imagination to turn repetition into something that “becomes intelligible” (ibid.). It is thus a high-order proceSSing actiVity. Concepts of *repetition*, *decorative* and *paTtErn-making* acquired pejorative associations in early colonisation, concurrently with the imposition of gendered hierarchies on artmaking (ibid.). These terms become “the negative of what is valued as original and singular as well as of whatever Western art has decided it wants to be when it is being tough, rigorous and white-manly” (ibid.). Yet, all artmaking practices require repetition, and it is a male-dominated fallacy to believe in the uniqueness of an artwork. The unique artwork is always made off the back of history, memory, personal experiences of making and other people’s LEArnings. It is **within the regularity, routine and sameness of iteration that the unique emerges**. RhYTHm implies “differences within repetition” (Lefebvre cited in Ingold 2010:98). Variation arises from the proceSS of iteration, which is an integral part of material making. No two woven strokes are the same: repeated strokes, while similar, reflect miniscule differentiation, rendering each as subtly unique in relation to the rest. **The uniqueness of every woven stroke can be viewed as a tiny act of disruption to socialised constraints.**

Individual threads weave together into a collective paTtErn of social formation. Weaving makes visible the inextricable form of relating that makes a fabric both cohesive, and that ruptures how things fit together. Through my woven movements, the repetitive labour of weaving tracks paTtErns of social coding that programme and discipline my female body into daily domestic routines, structures and rituals of homemaking. **Ritual and the everyday are closely linked and seem to relate to a woman’s way of being in the world and the paTtErns of her life.** Barber (2005:294) describes how immerSive practices must accommodate childminding in a division of labour where “women spent most of their time raising young children and preparing the daily food and household cloth”. For this reason, women’s work is repetitive, easily interruptible, and not dangerous. Woven cloth-making fits this description as an immerSive space of women’s everyday creativities.



Many of the arts that develop in the space of women's everyday creativities, like sewing or embroidery, hold iterative ritualistic aspects. The rHYTHmic gestures and bodily paTTerns that hold these socialised structures can constrain, control and confine, reverberating the order and repetitive sameness of domestic chores through the body. Yet, these same rHYTHmic gestures can equally be meditative, soothing, and offer regenerative possibilities, even joyously freeing and healing. The deep focus required by weaving facilitates a whole-body integration, freeing the mind to join the body lost in rHYTHmic FLOW. There is something deeply renewing about weaving that defies negative connotations and stigmatisation as women's work. It is rather **a celeBRation of the everyday by women.**

Our sense of belonging and identification with the world is created through an accumulation of repetitive actions that get recorded in our bodies. Henri Lefebvre (cited in Leach 2006:182) conceives of the body as a "recording surface" that registers the spatial experiences and memories of reiterative bodily routines. We create belonging through paTTerns of bodily actions whose iterative aspect "re-members" space (ibid.). Bodily rHYTHms and paTTerns impact our relationship to space: **women create their own spaces of safety and belonging through iterative bodily practices.** The analogy of the "recording surface" suggests that 'new recordings' are also possible.

### unstable mutaBle boundaries

The boundaries of the body give an impression of fixity. bell hooks (1995a:133) explains how we are socialised into believing that we need fixed boundaries: And we are taught over and over again that the only way to remain safe is to stay within fixed boundaries. Most often it's a boundary of family, community, nation. Before we face even these boundaries, it is the body that is the first sight of limitation.

Boundaries may keep us safe, but they can also restrain us within confined, inward-facing perspectives. Gendered identity is a political or ideological representation that ties a person down to a boxed-in, defined or finite identity representation – **it flattens into a fixity that is incompatible with the depth of multiple life experiences.** When we exist within the socialised or gendered aspects of womanhood alone, we become fixed/stuck, needing the counterbalance of the material/innate/creative.

Like the porosity of *Superpower-Curse's* woven-painted form, the boundaries of the body and its gendered identity are mutaBle (Butler 1988:519). Skin is inherently POrous and, as a boundary, gives a mere appearance of fixity, since "the forms of things are continually generated and dissolved within the fluxes of materials across the interface between substances and the medium that surrounds them" (Ingold 2007b:1). Inherently unstable, the body cannot be considered as a coherent thing: it produces a mere effect of unity and depth in three-dimensional space (Grosz 1994:210).

Grosz's argument views the female body as "infinitely pliable, malleable" (ibid.:190). As such, it is capable of assuming fluid definitions of gender and holding identities that are unfixed and unbounded (ibid.). The Möbius strip "hovers between two and three dimensions, gently turning surfaces upon themselves so that they demonstrate their multiplicity and mutability" (Meskimmon 2019:356). **Being a woman is a fluid state of changing and mutaBle subjectivity that does not settle into one reified form: "embodied entanglements enfold and unfold, they drift from inside to out and back again"** (ibid.).

**This instability and unseTTledness are critical to contesting identity markers that are held on the surface.**





### I resist being contained.

My body refuses to be confined.

I look for ways to unseTTle the fixity being imposed on it.

I disrupt *Superpower-Curse's* heavily-laboured-laden-sedimeNTed autographic surfaces, challenging weaving's comfortable, serene rhYTHm through the contradictory actiVities of make-unmake-leARn-unleARn-disrupt-arrange-rearrange. The creative rebellion happens "at the level of eyes and hands" through bodily actions (Bolt 2004:48). I mobilise small gestures that generally go unnoticed, putting them to powerful, active and productive effect.

### I disrupt a surface view to break fixity, flattened identity markers and unseTTle binaries

(male/female, human/object, mind/body (Cixous 2004:349, 350) and siloed versions of the world that fix a person into defined positions. I challenge societal paTTerns and expectations, controlling disciplines, flattened forms of representation, gendered impositions, the containedness of social construction and the hierarchical structures implicit in Western knowledge systems.

I unseTTle my excessive work ethic and socialised constraints, challenging both what has been imposed on me and what I have self-imposed, as well as preconceived ideas of what I am. I challenge being marginalised as an artist. I challenge what I have allowed into my space and how I have allowed myself to be diminished, contained or curtailed. I challenge my limited thinking, disrupting and destabilising representations and what I have been taught.

### I look to transcend boundaries.

Irit Rogoff (2003) says that visual culture is not about adding new knowledge but about leARning to unleARn; unmaking rather than making.

"Undisciplining" (Rogoff 2010:40) or "disowning knowledge" (Martinez 2012:48). My proceSSes of rearranging and juxtaposing, relooking and reproceSSing are used to destabilise meaning, perspective and relationships.

Throughout this text, I propose a shift from the solidity of clearly defined forms, definitions and boundaries, **looking for that which is unfixed, momentary and temporal.** This is a move towards proceSSual actiVities of fluidity and FLoW, of things in movement. There is a shift in focus from physical markers of belonging and identity to the actions that bodies take in the world – onto movement and transformation, rather than solidity.



make-unmake-LEARN-unLEARN-disrupt-arrange-rearrange  
make-unmake-LEARN-unLEARN-disrupt-arrange-rearrange



## dynamic field of enTANGlement

Breaking with  
representation requires  
a new conception of the  
world focused on  
actiViTy and proceSS.

*Becoming, not being.* Creative practice relies on the performaTIVE faculties of knowledge – “knowledge does rather than is” (Rogoff 2010:41). Rather than coming to completion, the openness and fluidity of my studio-based proceSS is about exPAnSion and growth. A deep investment in proceSS – a proceSS Ontology (Braidotti 2006:8) – means existing in an active proceSS of transforming ... LEArning ... adapting ... morphing ... developing. Embodiment itself is a proceSS, rather than a fixed form. Braidotti (1994:111-123) cites Deleuze’s assertion that “subjects, understood as mergers of mind, emotion and body, are always in the midst of proceSSes of change and emergence, or as he articulates it: ‘becoming’”. The body is a Deleuzian ‘coming into being’, **defined by actiViTy and what it can Do**, rather than as inert matter (Braidotti 2006:8). My fluid selfhood is a tactile and sensory FLOW of affects and intenSities – LEArning and unLEArning, developing, growing and progressing by constantly challenging myself.

## unconstrained body

Humans are more than sociopolitical identities; we are sensorial material bodies that interact with our environments. The body encapsulates a multitude of intersecting forces and affects (Braidotti 2011:247), bringing together material physical fleshiness with an emotional depth, sensory intenSity and the affects and perceptive aspects of the unique experience of being human. Rosi Braidotti (cited in Dolphijn & Van der Tuin 2012:1) describes an “enfleshed” materialism of the female body as a surface of intenSities and an affective field in interaction with others (ibid.:9).

Social constraints coded into the body must be disrupted through the body. Lefebvre’s analogy of the “recording surface” suggests that ‘new recordings’ are possible. The rHYTHmic, repetitive, performaTIVE acts of weaving help me reawaken my body.

Weaving helps me “re-member” instinctual bodily spaces and genetic codings (Lefebvre cited in Leach 2006:182); like the awareness awakened through my experience of giving birth unaided by pain medication to mask physical feelings in the body. I discovered there is something deeply instinctive – and incredibly powerful – within the female body that knows those actions instinctively. There is something about the past that lives on in this kind of instinctual coding.

In a similar way, the iterative, repetitive labour of weaving is a remembered action. The **bodily rHYTHMs are instinctive; they facilitate a rediscovery of innate rHYTHM** (Rogoff 2019). Weaving is un-LEArning and re-LEArning an instinctual rHYTHM. It accesses intuitive knowledge, REclaiming it; it channels the ancestral predecessors of those actions.

**Reperforming the motions of weaving re-members those spaces of women’s creative making from all times.**

Weaving has deep memory. It is instinctual and transformational. Innately powerful. **This instinctive rHYTHM seems to coNNect me to all women of all times** past. Instinct has the effect of flattening time, in the same way that repetitive religious ritual does.

Moving beyond a simple Möbial rotation, multiple concentric rings twist in on each other concurrently in **a never-ending circular enTANGlement** – of forces, layers, energies, complexities, depths. Rotations iterate on many scales on multiple planes: my internal and external environments, my body and mind, my physical body in relation to a theoretical body, the past and present, tradition and innovation. **I exist in a constant state of absorbing and reflecting; an intercoNNectedness and reciprocity from multiple tangled netWORKs of material intenSities.**

The extent to which the 'end of the object' was necessary for the beginning of an expanded potential for art to be a space of enunciation and inscription of other affects, traces, and subjectivities, including those of varied minorities and differences is still to be fully, or even crudely, asserted

- Griselda Pollock, *Maternal Object: Matrixial Subject*, 2009, p483

enTANGlement 3

exPAnDed forms take flight





*A suggestiveness*  
Made with Pinky Moyo  
2020  
Glass, plastic, wood and metal beads, artificial pearls, fishing gut, string, embodied traces of time/labour/exertion/conversation/ instruction  
approx. 110 x 83 cm

**an invitation to touch - the wall text to my exhibition:**

*"I invite you to experience this space with a childlike curiosity.*

*ImmeRSe yourself in the tactile sensory dimensions of my uprising of textures, colours and materials.*

*Perceive a bodily coNNection that occurs beneath the radar of language and rational thought.*

*I enTANgLe material, personal and social metaphors. In this place of alchemy, things and ideas are a perforMance that brings to life my creative labours. My nurTURing of enTANGled form manifests an aliveNess that exPANds into the world-FLows with an anthropomorphic defiance. Space is unseTTled as constellations dissolve and then solidify again.*

*I want to challenge the logic of how we make sense of the world. I elevate the intuitive perceptive body as the primary source of human intelligence. Human coNNection, full of raw emotion and dazzling compleXity, becomes possible. Creative practice is mobilised to un-discipline, de-discipline and destabilise.*

*Please share your immeRSive sensory experience with me."*



I invite you to experience this space with a childlike curiosity.  
Immerse yourself in the tactile sensory dimensions of my uprising  
textures, colours and materials.

Perceive a bodily connection that occurs beneath the radar of  
language and rational thought.

I entangle material, personal and social metaphors. In this place  
of alchemy, things and ideas are a performance that brings to life  
my creative labours. My nurturing of entangled form manifests an  
aliveness that expands into the world-flows with an  
anthropomorphic defiance. Space is unsettled as constellations  
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mobilised to un-discipline, de-discipline and destabilize

Please share your immersive sensory experi

## a constellated mass

Weaving on a monumental scale, I transformed the space of the Origins Centre Museum at Wits University into a giant, dynamic (and messy) loom. I created an intricate web of coNNectedness titled *embodied-enTANGlements/enTANGled-embodiments*, knotting together a multi-layered sculptural mass of forms and paintings into physical space. This immerSive and experiential multimedia environment functioned beyond the white cube's conventional state of quietude, actiVaTing the exhibition space with the movement of people, sound and light, encouraging experiencers to touch, engage, and experience.

Swaying above the entrance staircase with its intricate shadow reflected on the wall behind, the heavily beaded *A suggestiveness* set the scene for the exhibition as it fought gravity. Ascending the stairs, the experiencer's eyes (Jones 2015:22) were drawn to the right, to an almost monochromatic curation of forms, spotlighted in the darkened room and in conversation with the architectural space they occupied. A precariously balanced steel sculpture was grounded by a plaster 'foot' in contrast to its more fluid and weightless fragments of string and imitation pearl weaving. A weave was strewn messily on an exPanding foam 'rock', which stood in front of a loosely suspended 2 x 3 metre painted canvas, functioning as a room divider to contain the cavernous space and the relative chaos that it held. From the drippy paint, expressive brushstrokes, textures and angular markings of the painting, a blown-up detail of beads emerged, drawing attention to the basic building blocks of material 'stuff' that made up the forms in the room.

From this more ordered state of things, the experiencer turned to the left and was confronted with a literal explosion of chaotic, haphazardly layered forms that were montaged in the space as embodied fragments of materials and colour. The mess of forms disseminated from a tower towards the far end of the room, which appeared to spew out fragments randomly onto the floor and into suspended space. POrous, free-form autographic configurations hovered in a teeTeringly fragile equilibrium between holding together and unravelling, holding upright and collapsing. A netWork of flimsy sParKly threads held this explosion in gravity-defying formation, so that it took up space as the fragments integrated into the lines of coNNection, FLoWs and actiViTies of the world (Ingold 2010:94).

ExPanding into space.  
Taking over space.

Amelia Jones  
(2015)  
suggests  
replacing the  
commonly  
used term *the  
viewer* with  
“the  
experiencer”  
as a way to  
differentiate  
aesthetic  
experiences  
that involve  
whole-body  
actiVaTions  
from those  
that merely  
involve the  
visual act of  
looking  
(ibid.:22).





As the experiencer navigated through this explosion, she was immerSed in my Excessive Obsessive accumulation: densely overworked, intenSely laboured, a deeply encrusted overload of carefully chosen material and objects, textures, colours, creative labour, intenSe hand-woven gestural marks. It felt insistent. Multiple out-of-control heavily worked, heavily layered and sedimeNTed material forms, threads criss-crossing haphazardly with endings left dangling, enveloped experiencers in an Unruly profusion of material presence. My deliberATE efforts actiVaTed the physical intenSity and vibrational aliveNess of the forms through their excessive, weighty physical presence and unseTTled-tactile-textured-overladen-object-encrusted surface. The sheer number of beads. An accumulation of consumption. The tiny beads magnified in the introductory painting built up into this monumental corpus. The labour and time invested in them and other materials transformed them into multilayered sculptural masses celeBRating the small, ordinary, and even mundane. Disparate materials of various weights, soft, FLOWing textiles, broken pieces of wooden frames with spilling-out forms and thick silver air-conditioning ducting weaving-in-and-out of the mass like exaggerated thread. A large, colourful painting hung on the wall behind the explosion accentuated the layering and depth in painted moments, emulating the shapes and forms surrounding it. ExPANses of canvas were left raw and incomplete, evacuating meaning from its painted surface, and the underpainting and construction lines were exposed: like the wooden frames, they signalled the coming-into-being of a process. Reflective materials, like beads, glitter, plastic and sequins enlivened it, catching the surface with shimmering speckled light, pixellated marks dancing with an aliveNess that evoked visceral flesh.

This overloaded massing was juxtapOsed by a sense of ritualistic repetition and paTterning that pervaded the space.





The mass of assemblages had a sense of the otherworldly, caught frozen in time, yet actiVaTed to liveLiness through my creative acts. Liberated. Light and the tiniest movements animated their material intenSities, as they begged to be touched, inviting engagement. My eXe forms never settle into solid reified form: they are ephemeral, unable to be captured or tied down, yet they are grounded in physical materialities – the slow and progressive rhYTHms of weaving and the materiality of my artist body. They hold both a material physical presence and an unseTTled actiVaTion, simultaneously materialised and ephemeral. This contradiction of energetic tension – “an anxiety” – generated an animation within the constellatioN that made the assembled forms dynamic in space (Jones 2015:25). Rather than merely a massing of material structures, the constellatioN seemed to possess agential possibilities: actiVaTed as “quasi-persons” (Rottman in Graw, Birnbaum & Hirsch 2012:13); they exPAAnded dimensionally into space and dispersed into the FLOW of the world with an anthropomorphic defiance. These *embodied-enTANGlements* invaded space; unhinged, completely free and unbounded. Animated like this, these eXe had weird resonances and ‘spoke’ to me on multiple associative levels.

As the experiencer navigated around the forms and through the space, viewing perspectives changed. Rather than a single viewpoint, the complex layering of fragmented forms, materials and space provided multiple perspectives and perceptions. The constellatioN dissolved and reconstituted, unseTTling space. Forms broke down and solidified again as the experiencer’s eyes moved backwards and forwards, seeing an interplay between surface and depth, experiencing things individually and together, both revealing and hiding, pushing and pulling, FLOWing and oscillating between two- and three-dimensions. Multifaceted. Multidimensional.

A multisensory play of shadow and light enveloped the installation space with areas of light and darkness holding the composition, grounding it and accentuating its textures and dimensionality. Focused and dappled light, shadow, the movement of film projection through a ‘laundry line’ screen assembled from textured white weaves and the deep resonant reverberations of singing bowls precipitated experiential moments – immeRSing the experiencer in an encounter which engaged and actiVaTed her senses. As she navigated through and around the forms – an active participant rather than passive viewer – gliMMerIng light and shadows brought movement and a sense of otherness to the space. Flickers of light glinted viscerally and bodily as they caught the light, held the light, moved into the limelight.

caught the light; held the light; moved into the limelight

caught the light; held the light; moved into the limelight





Leaving the sensory overload of the explosion, the experiencer moved to a space of tranquillity, what I considered a Sanctuary. This final space was serene, the atmosphere of the room – suffused in a glow of the room in atmospheric pinks and purples – emanating from a printed vinyl, which covered the entire five-metre-long window with a magnified reproduction of *held-residue's* improvised Spanish weaving. The vinyl drew attention to the surface of the window, but equally to the world behind, which flickered with external movements whose shadows played within the room. The mood shifted as the vinyl's cerise hue changed in response to the shifting outside light. My *Superpower-Curse* presided in the middle of the room – rooted, weighted, grounded in the everyday glory of its material mass. *held residues* was attached to the wall, its twisted frame jutting ajar of the wall, with light projected through its POrous surface creating an elongated shadow. The play of shadows that resonated across the room was captured in three screen – prints, which held ephemeral woven traces.





Film projection through a "laundry-line" of weaves

The exhibition space became a meeting of forces between bodies, materials, artists and creativity when I invited fellow creatives to share and engage with my process. A series of events **actiVaTed** and stimulated the circulation of ideas, experiences, relationships and tensions (these events consisted of a durational performance, vibrational sound **immeRSion**, a ‘mind-decluttering’ experience, and deep-breathing meditation).

My constellatioN removed the experienter from daily realities and consciousness by **immeRSing** her in a world of fantasy and otherness, enveloping her in a live landscape of weaves that hinted at magic play and fantastical dreamscapes. The installation moved-shifted-rearranged-reformed as people engaged with and navigated through it, offering infinite possible dimensions and opportunities to experience things from new perspectives. This change in viewing perspective might be considered “emancipatory” from a feminist standpoint, as it provides incomplete or partial views, contrasting to a single-point perspective whose one fixed point of view “centres the viewer in a position of mastery before the painting, and by extension, the world” (Mary Kelly cited in Bishop 2005:36). Meaning and information seemed to lie in the in-between spaces. The constellatioN did not solidify into a fixed shape: it was not a finished artwork in the conventional sense, rather retaining an incompleteness or unresolvedness. It was **actiVaTed** by the experienter’s presence; and her involvement was essential to ‘complete’ it (Bishop 2005:11).



**activations**

My process is a **meeting of forces** between artist, body, materials and creativity. I invited three creatives, whose processes hold deep resonance with mine, to share my exhibition space. I'm curious to experience how their energies and creativity will entangle with my mine to activate the space.

Upua Sibeko is an award-winning performance artist who foregrounds his **physical body** by performing his experiences with brutal honesty, authenticity and humour. His durational performance revolves around what education in arts means to creative practice.  
Opening night performance – 4-7pm on Monday October 18

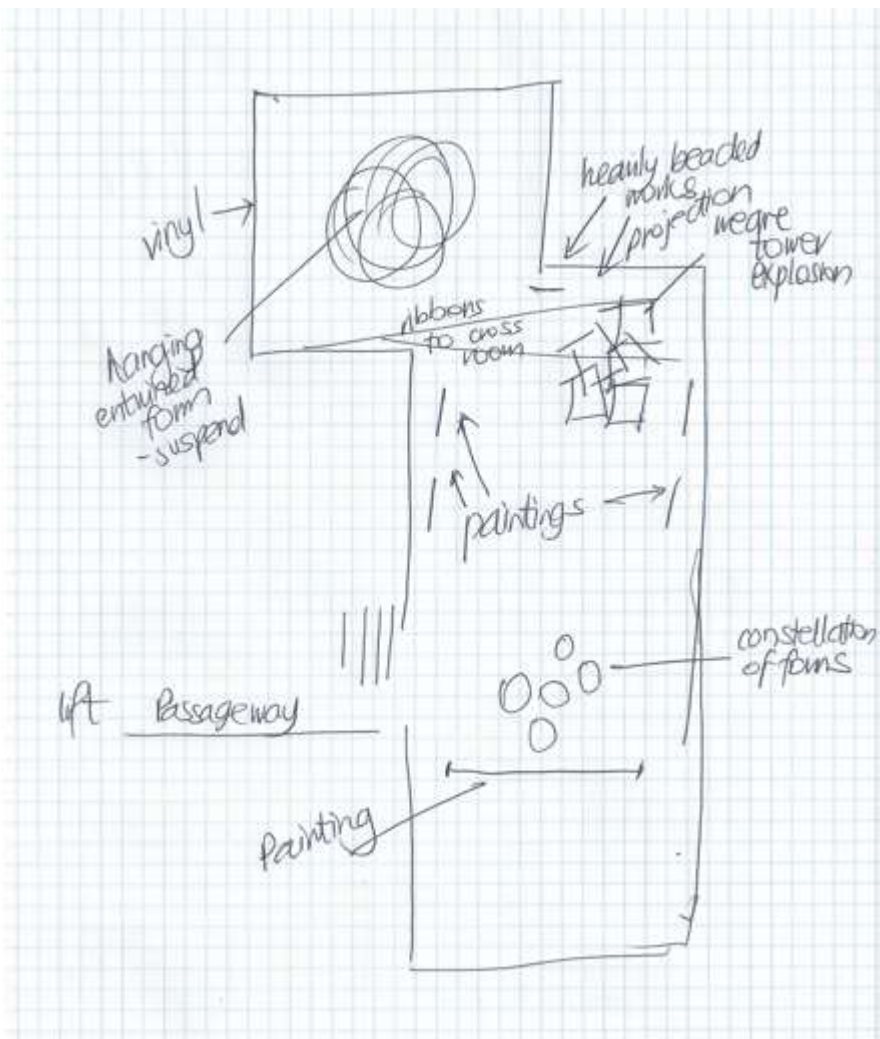
Wendy Leppard's Crystal Alchemy Singing Bowls generate deeply resonant sound vibrations. The indescribable **experience of sensations** is felt deeply within the body, activating playfulness and laughter as modes of healing, liberation and renewal.  
10am on Wednesday October 20 (limit 20)

Niki Seberini, the **mind freedom fighter**, considers the way we knot and entangle ourselves into stories that create their own life. And how these shape our lives. By reframing our assumptions, we untangle and unknot, and are able to weave together new stories and new realities.  
10am on Thursday October 21

embodied-entanglements/entangled-embodiments | bev butkow | 18-23 october 2021 | origins centre museum, wits university  
RSVP bevbutkow@gmail.com | COVID protocols will be applied

unsettle—intensity—feel—activate—resonate—liberate





Installation images

## technical specifications

Material list includes:

wood/plastic/glass beads, imitation pearls, string, dishcloths, scrap dressmaking fabric, wool, baking twine, glitter, hangers, plastic mesh, copper wire, repurposed painting stretchers, wooden frames, repurposed oil paintings, fabric, ribbon, fabric cord, fishing gut, rope, feather duster, lawnmower cord, air-conditioning duct, plastic sheeting, metal stoppers, plaster of Paris, exPanding foam, galvanised wire, aluminium bars, resin, hessian, acrylic, silver/copper/gold/bronze leaf, insulation tape, cable ties, metal washers, plastic cord, oil paint, ink, encaustic wax, graphite, embodied traces of time/labour/exertion/conversation/instruction

The constellationN comprised approximately 40 artworks, including:

- 1 'explosion', comprising weaves, wooden frames, wooden bars, string, ribbon, air-conditioning duct
- 6 unstretched paintings, ranging in size, with the biggest 2 x 3.2 m
- 10-12 free-form suspended woven eXe
- 10 framed weaves
- 1 metal/woven sculpture with a plaster plinth
- a multitude of wooden bars from broken painting frames
- 3 exPanding foam 'rocks'
- 1 film piece accompanied by a sonic piece
- a screen of woven textiles
- a vinyl window covering, measuring 5.4 x 2.14 m
- 3 screen prints



My forms were **actiVaTed** through their installation, **unseTTling** how we understand aesthetic experiences.

something strange  
 unexpected  
 happened in the exhibition space ...  
 catching me off guard  
 yet,  
 it felt totally natural and intuitive

I **immeRSed** within my installation for the first time before the exhibition opened. I sat in a gap in the middle, submerged amongst forms and spiralling weaves and swirling beads in countless shapes, colours, sizes, textures, fragments, reflections, particles. A calmness took hold of me, the release of having worked so hard to finish the installation. It was a Sanctuary. A Refuge. I sat there again during the Alchemy Bowl sound bath.

There was a moment  
 when time collapsed in on itself, so I was in all time, past, present and future  
 powerful multidimensional energies  
 waves of **exPAnDed** and **exPAnsive** informational fields  
 an energy helix  
 space, time and place were experienced simultaneously  
 I was in some kind of **an Energy Chamber**

This is not something I can explain, nor do I understand it. Perhaps it was the energy of the Wits University Origins Centre Museum itself, or the spirits of the ancestors that permeate its drawers of historical bones and rock engravings. I don't know whether spaces have their own energies. It possibly emanated from **immeRSing** in my created forms themselves. But **engrossed** in these **sedimeNTed** forms, gazing up, watching the lights glint on the wooden frames, particles **winking gliMMerIng gliSteNIing sParKLIing**, the gentle undulations of movement transported me into another world. My Sanctuary morphed into a Clearing. A place to claim personal space. To **recoNNect** with deep layers of myself. To release.

Others called this clearing **a Womb**.

Meditating within the Womb, I was overcome with tears, feeling a deep **coNNection** to the soul of a baby who had just been miscarried by hearts closely **coNNected** to mine. In that moment, a friend nestled into the Womb alongside me and told me of her two lost souls – her miscarried babies – whom she had never discussed before, releasing a 28-year old wounding. A videographer I had hired, instead used the opportunity as catharsis, speaking publicly for the first time of her experiences with depression and multiple suicide attempts. Similarly, the durational performMance artist used my 'healing space' to release and rebuild after a deeply traumatic academic experience.

Other such experiences emerged within this space. Someone referenced "the spirituality of the experience", another the sacredness of being in my space. For some inexplicable reason, the space of my exhibition held a spirituality, or a **coNNection**, to something ethereal or mystical. Something *other*. And to something healing. I write (possibly glibly) about **actiVaTing** forms and giving them life, but there was something *more* in the space, something that transcended anything that I was capable of creating through hard work; some kind of genuine alchemy.

**There was an energy** – a presence – in the gaps and negative spaces. There was an **aliveNess** that worked with the people I invited to be part of my process.

Possibly it was a synchronicity.

A confluence of elements – my works accompanied by the moving flickering shimmering lights and sonic piece, the activations that were part of the exhibition, my ME-ness (my personhood and life experiences), the space of the Origins Centre Museum with its own sedimented history and resident ancestors – came together in that moment to create a perfectly entangled experiential encounter, a space of magic.

I'm left with a deep feeling of incredulity, coupled with incredible exhilaration and gratitude. I'm already anticipating rearranging this gathering of forms in a different space.

I want to know ...

Is this family of forms able to speak? What will it reveal of itself the next time?

What is its power?

Will it present itself again?

understanding comes after making

Martinez (2012:53) suggests that “understanding comes after making”. My activities of making and display materialise the intense material forms I make so that they solidify complex ideas and bodily gestures as they assert their place in the world. The constellation is at once solid material space, giving a physical site from which to interrogate and contemplate, yet simultaneously unsettled and ephemeral, evocative of a journey or search that never reaches an end point. My constellation, and the space I make in, is a complex intersection – a hybrid entanglement.

**D**on't ask what the work is. **R**ather, see what  
the work does.

- Eva Hesse (cited in Alastair Sooke 2009)

**F**orm is the end, death.

**F**orm-giving is life.

- Paul Klee (cited in Tim Ingold 2010:96)

### a hybrID enTANgling

The immeRSive experience of the constellation, together with the phenomenological encounters it precipitated, **exceeds its forms and the ontology of its making**. It is a complicated enTANgling which exhibits some level of independent performaTIVe ability to influence an action (Jones 2015:28).

It is a moment of coNNection that knots together various forms of messy material stickiness. It intersects bodies, action and materials through the enTANgled traces that it holds of:

tensions between different modes of thinking and making that are forced to coExist  
 actiVaTed bodies, including my artist body and those of the experiencers  
 a deep investment in physical and bodily making proceSSes  
 the history and associations of the materials I use  
 lingering traces of past creative actiVities  
 residues of the perforMance of making  
 the intenSity of my creative labour  
 my liveLy actiVaTed physical forms  
 my subjective life experiences

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 my liveLy actiVaTed physical forms  
 my subjective life experiences

## a new mode of analysis for experiential encounters

This experiential moment, and bodily coNNection, **occurs beneath the radar of language and rational thought**, and goes beyond the accepted logic of how we understand material forms, aesthetic relationships, and a typical viewing of an artwork/object/form. Embodied bodily encounters or experiences that go beyond the visual cannot be explained by an interpretive system based on representation, which merely replicates or translates what a viewer sees (like traditional art historical analysis).

There is *more* to it.

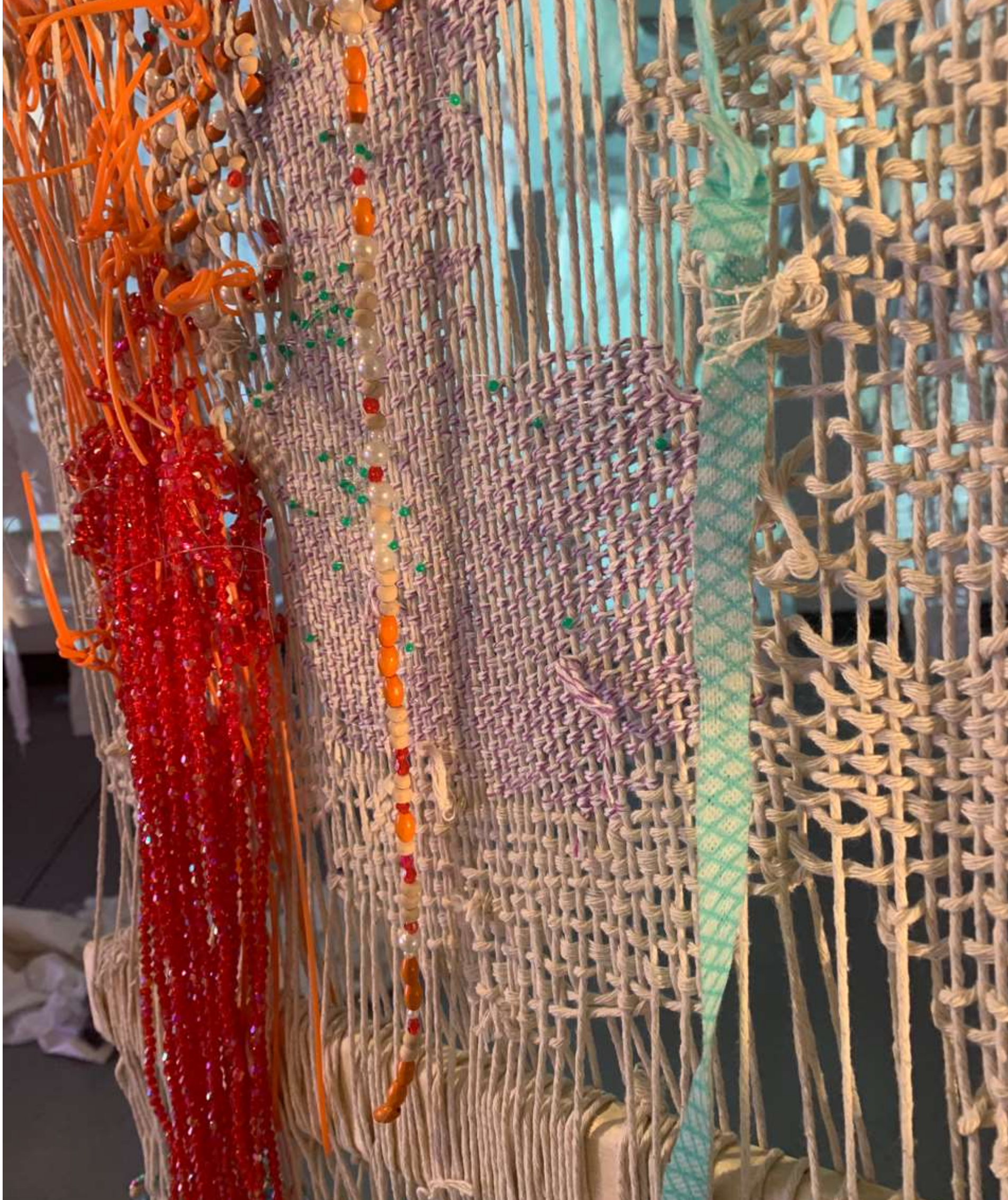
**New methods of analysis are needed** to consider objects beyond their objecthood and physical form, towards explaining multiple facets of the sensory, experiential, phenomenological impacts of aesthetic encounters that precipitate some kind of emotive or auratic visceral bodily experience. Objects need to be rethought as something more ethereal and amorphous – as the power of forces, intensities and auras at play.

Barbara Bolt explains that the so-called “performative turn” has transformed the engagement with experiential artworks into **an event (rather than a viewing)** in which the audience is now part of the artwork, and where no distinction remains between “subject and object, observer and observed and artist and audience” (Fischer-Lichte cited in Bolt 2008:23). Core to my conceptual questioning is asking “how action intersects with materials to produce new spaces of meaning” (Jones 2015:21). Amelia Jones (2015) frames a way to engage with “new complex art experiences that are performative yet exist in various material forms (including, arguably, that of the artist’s labouring body)” (ibid.:20). The performative in relation to art encounters is a reformulation of Butler’s gender performativity, which works through body actions, and Deleuze’s, which works through creativity. The performative artwork shifts focus from what an artwork represents, to the effects, affects and experiences that it produces: from what an artwork “does” to what it “says” (von Hantelmann 2014).

This performative power of artworks becomes possible only under a reOrientation of certain logics through which we have historically framed the world. Occasioned by theoretical developments in, inter alia, feminisms, vital new materialisms and decolonial studies, these reformulations include moves towards understandings that are non-binary; with materials as alive, vital and enTANGled; involving reciprocal and non-hierarchical subject-object relations and reciprocal relationships of equals between human and non-human that are premised on human non-exceptionalism. Jones (ibid.:22) pulls together varied interpretive sources **in a hybrid approach** that interweaves different “levels of interpretive engagement” around these experiential phenomenological encounters through a combination of:

- art history (attention to form and materiality)
- performance theory’s focus on ephemeral processes and the “authenticity” of the performing body
- the liveliness and material agency offered by new materialisms
- aspects of Marxist labour theories

These experiential aesthetic encounters and how we make meaning of them have a bearing on three moments in the creative process. These are the production and reception of forms/objects/artworks and the vitality of its materials, each of which I consider below.



## embodied impact on the experiencer

Inhabiting the space of my constellation ignites the experiencer's body with a sensory overload, drawing attention to her unique body in space. **It elicits a multisensory affective bodily response** (Jones:2015:20), enticing her hands to touch the surface, to feel, to experience its materials, textured surfaces and encrusted forms. Inhabiting the space of the artwork precipitates a visceral, sensory encounter in which she "experiences" the vibrational aliveNess of actiVaTed colour, movement, rHYTHm, texture, space and light, rather than sees them "represented" (ibid.). Experiential embodied encounters open the body to profound experiences. This "experiential dimension of image encounters" (Lauwrens 2019:300) draws the experiencer in at an intuitive perceptive level through the phenomenological effects created within her body (Jones 2015:33). It differs from the more conventional visual experience of contemplating a single artwork via the eyes alone: it **overturns the primacy of vision by engaging the other senses** on multiplE levels.

Eye movement slows moving over the surface to discern texture, so that viewing becomes "more inclined to graze than to gaze" (Laura Marks cited in Richards 2005:15). It develops a sensory perceptive relationship with the forms it grazes upon. Through Francis Bacon's paintings, Deleuze (1981:34-43) argues how oil paint itself is capable of expressing a unique materiality that can convey sensation and affect, which evokes haptic vision in a way that detaches from the image represented (Deleuze 1981:34-43). The **haptic is associated with embodiment**, in contrast to the optic, which concerns representation and disembodied vision (Richards 2005:15). The haptic shifts from figurative representation and linear perspectives towards more experiential materiality (ibid.). This formulation of bodily viewing experiences resonates with Mignolo's plea for decolonial aesthetics to liberATE the senses through creative experiences (Gaztambide-Fernández 2014:201).

Beyond being seen, eXe are felt.



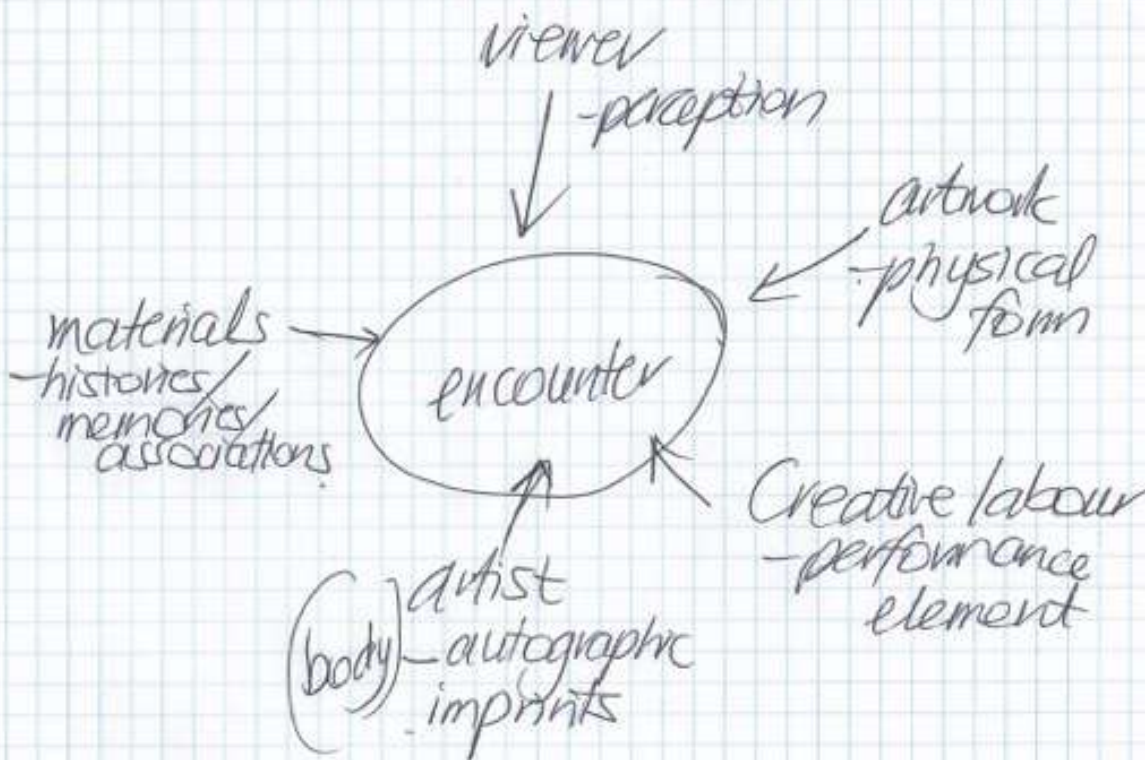


# Porous boundaries



My constellation evoked a **haptic perceptive response** within its experiencers' bodies. It generated a **whole-body experience/encounter** for the experiencer, akin to an immersive multidimensional and multisensory experiential theatrical encounter, which activated a "sensory immediacy" reliant on multiple intelligences, like senses of sight, hearing, smell, movement and proprioception (Bishop 2005:11). The constellation was alive with possibilities for the receptive experiencer, seductively drawing her into experiential moments that were intimate, personal and bodily, inviting her to interpret the experience in her own way. It required her to slow down: the more time she spent with it, the closer she looked, the more it revealed. **This experience puts perception and intuition ahead of intellect** as she decoded it through her body (Jones 2015:29).

Each person experienced the encounter in her own way, based on her perceptions and life experiences, and depending on the level of engagement she brought to it, including her state of mind and receptiveness. One experiencer fed back that my work adapted to his emotions, enabling him to more easily recognise and comprehend his feelings. Writer Ashraf Jamal (2022) interprets it differently – he suggests that my work "seeks to return us to a greater purpose – art as a healing act of love". The experiencer sees from her own perspectives, making meaning of the encounter through her "situated and embodied experience" (von Hantelmann 2014), emphasising how subjective and partial the embodied engagement with artforms is.



### a transsubjective meeting point

Critical to the experiencer's engagement with the artforms is how aesthetic encounters establish a bodily or phenomenological connection between maker and experiencer. This relationship happens within the exhibition space through the experience of the works, which sets their bodies in relation to each other.

Pollock (2009) describes the aesthetic encounter as an "event-encounter" in which the artist gives a "gift-package" to the experiencer (Ettinger cited in Pollock 2011). This gift-package or "matrixial objet" positions the bodies of maker and experiencer in relation to each other. The encounter longs "for a moment of transsubjective connectivity and sharing" (Pollock 2009:484). It aims to forge a connection. Each body brings her own unique fleshy materialities, partial perspectives and histories into this moment of encounter:

... the artist carries her own traces of histories through family and culture, channelling consciously as well as unconsciously many remnants and shared histories. The same is true for the viewer. Many strings are woven across time and space in the event-encounter with which all parties are resonating as well as working to bend affective vibration towards communicable understanding. (ibid.)

The possibilities for connection and sharing within this moment of transsubjective connectivity exists on multiple levels, many of which are below the radar of rational thought, happening within **the subconscious and receptive body of the experiencer** as she submerges herself within the artworks; becomes part of the artworks. Because the moment of transsubjective connectivity and sharing relishes, and thrives on, the uniqueness of each party's embodied experiences in the world, it has potential to **generate real human connection, as well as a genuine recognition of differences** that can "tolerate ... a sense of separateness and difference" (ibid.:484).

In conversation:

Otobong Nkanga:

**Y**ou realize how materials can relate to what our memory has registered.

**W**hat happens if we play with that memory — try to break that perception and rediscover the material?

**T**his is an exciting aspect where the work can play with performativity; the eye in relation to the brain creates another strain of understanding and of the material itself. If you touch it or smell it, it breaks our preconceived ideas of what it is.

Emanuele Guidi:

**I**t liberates other forms of knowledge within the material, other ways of knowing.“

on first impression, one sees a tangle  
 an unruly knotting together

I build the surface  
 to an Intensity  
 insistent. Overworked  
 an additive proceSS, Layer upon Layer  
 a sedimeNTation of materials  
 consumption accumulating

semi-completed weaves, sculptural masses, canvases unstretched rusted  
 tomato tins filled with paintbrushes and pencils shelves hold solvents ... glues  
 ... oil paints transparent storage containers in-proceSS beads and threads  
 fabric offcuts, strewn bags and bags stuffed a cluttered mix of eclectic  
 cosmetic  
 tubs of glitters ... holding a sensorial overload the stuffed-full studio

disappearing momentarily entwine tautly; Knot together fingers prising taut  
 layers apart reappearing enlived; actiVaTed shreds of offcuts ... weave and  
 Knot into the fray, order prevails, calm, serene; yet ...  
 also...  
 threads fashioned from dishwashing cloths  
 a wild overgrown Misshapen Mass of Materials

one could read defiance in this conglomeration of materials,  
 this is weaving being corrupted. Weaving becoming a rebel  
 disordered, Mismatching, Unruly  
 Weaving gone wild  
 Unwieldy, fluid  
 A Gathering  
 Fragile

becoming embodied  
 in constant transformation  
 constellateD relationshipS teeTer  
 spring-loaded Taut, they sit in tension  
 in equilibrium

different threads  
 webs of complex intercoNNection  
 get enTANGled and knotted

In the gift-package between maker and experienter, the enTANGling of materials and creative labours into made forms generates the moment of coNNection. It opens a conversation.

### the intenSity of vital materialities

The experiencer's presence in the exhibition space actiVaTed and animated the constellatioN through other forces, energies and powers at play. I have described how the constellatioN possessed some kind of innate "vitality" or liveLiNESS and complex intercoNNectedness (Bennett 2010:117). This liveLiNESS exerted performaTIVE power on the experiencer.

My role as the artist is merely to actiVaTe the materials' vibrational intenSity.

Performative encounters are enabled when matter is understood to be vital and in a state of constant enTANGled fusion and intercoNNectivity. Materials are no longer conceived of as passive, inert substances available for humans to impose actions, thoughts and interpretations upon (Barad 2003:821). Human agency is deprivileged "as the source of all meaningful expression or action in the world" (Jones 2015:25) within this view of human exceptionalism, which places humans on the same level as other *things* and all "Earth-beings" (Marisol de la Cadena cited in Vázquez 2020:42). In revitalising the vibrancy of materials, Jane Bennett (2010:viii) links humans to the vitality of matter, which she frames as a vibrancy "that runs alongside and inside humans". All materialities have some manner of "agential" force through which they assert themselves, giving them animating potential (Barad 2003:810).

The agency or liveLiNESS of material forms can be a contentious issue: to pass my 17-year old son's rationality test here and avoid dinnertime arguments, I do not attribute life to my constellatioN of materials: it is inanimate. Nor do I want to imply human-like agency, or impose human emotions or qualities onto it. Materials "are active not because they are imbued with agency but because of ways in which they are caught up in these currents of the lifeworld" (Ingold 2007:15). Once liberATed into the world-FLows, they function as more than mere accessories or tools that support human use: they develop a performaTIVE power in their relationship with the experiencer.

Made forms give rise to their own associations and coNNections through the unique combination of their making and materials, which act as "spur(s) to 'perceptions, feelings and thoughts'" for the experiencer (Ettinger cited in Pollock 2011).



## actiVaTe materials

My proceSS requires deep ‘listening’ to my materials, and guiding them. I immerSe myself in their material intenSities, working by hand in **an openly receptive and symbiotic relationship** with my chosen mass-produced homogenous consumer items and fabric scraps, giving them focused attention. Resisting the desire to impose dominance over them, I work to abandon control by letting their intrinsic material properties guide the creative proceSS. Rather than in binary opposition – as an *other* – to myself, this mode of creating requires me to be in synchronicity with their innate physical properties through respectful and sensitive exploration. They function within my proceSS as co-creators: matter “kicks back” (Barad 1998:116) as an active rather than passive participant.

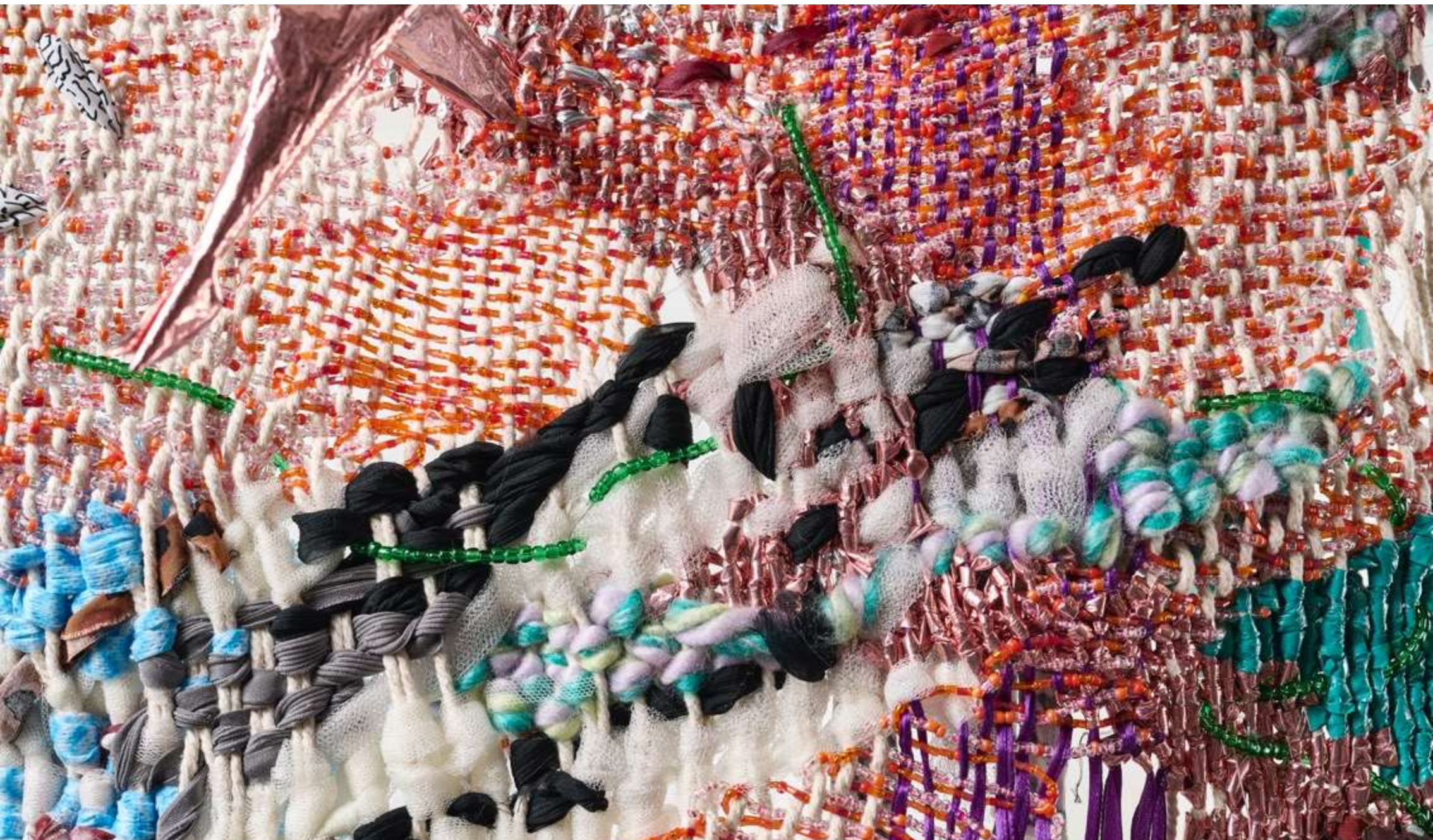
Anni Albers (1982) similarly speaks of a *suggestiveness* with which her materials lead her making proceSS. She proposes that “the more subtly we are tuned to our medium, the more inventive our actions will become” (Albers 1982:7). For Albers (ibid.:11), “...material is a means of communication. That listening to it, not dominating it, makes us truly active, that is: to be active, be passive. The finer tuned we are to it, the closer we come to art.”

Applying a similar philosophical approach to Ingold’s description of the craftsperson working in reciprocal relationship with “active materials” (2010:93), Albers (1944) describes her open receptivity and non-hierarchical relationship with materials: We LEArn to listen to voices: to the yes or no of our material, our tools, our time. We come to know that only when we feel guided by them our work takes on form and meaning, that we are misled when we follow only our will. All great deeds have been achieved **under a sense of guidance**.



## small immaterial materials

Painting opened to radical new performative readings when object materiality was incorporated in conjunction with vital new materialisms (Donna Haraway (1988), Rosi Braidotti (1994, 2006, 2011) and Karen Barad (1998, 2003), Jane Bennett (2010)). Contemporary painting's focus on materiality over form expands its material physicality and boundaries as it now absorbs materials, incorporating readymades and other consumer items into its surface. Framed as "a network that circulates materials in its social sphere" (Nasher Sculpture Centre), painting extends into the social and cultural world with a networked openness, engaging porously with its surrounding environment. **Materials function metaphorically for the social and cultural world**, coming laden with human relationships. Petra Lange-Berndt (2015:15,16) proposes a sensitive immersion in materials to understand the entanglement of people and material culture. As indicators of the social world, materials play an active role in how reality acquires meaning and form (Barad 2003:817). Contemporary painting foregrounds the multiple uses and associations, and societal power relations, implicit in the consumer objects it incorporates. I immerse deeply in the specifics of my choice of materials by "following the material" (Ingold 2010:93), which is a process of individuation that gives one-on-one attention and deep focus to each material. It requires investigating the specifics of the material, because describing the "physical properties and expressiveness of materials means telling their stories" (Ingold 2007:1).



Thousands of tiny beads and mundane everyday materials are woven together in the constellatioN, its surfaces marked by an eclectic cacophony of carefully chosen objects, which function as sites of exploration. My unique selection of textile-linked materials – offcuts of dressmaking fabric, a jumble of yarns and threads, wool and brightly coloured ribbon – are intimately tied to the body and its environment, both in their production and use. They could be read as gendered. They work from the outside in, to protect, clothe and keep the body warm; and from the inside out, to project identity and cultural belonging. Alongside this sit cord, string, metal washers, cable ties, shredded plastic shopping bags. These familiar mundane everyday factory-made homogenous consumer products are purchased in bulk, relatively cheaply, and have little individual value. They support our daily lives, providing utility value, yet are consumed without particular regard. However mundane, we couldn't exist without the manufactured materials which give shape to our lives. "To act with material and to be complicit means to investigate societal power relations" (ibid.:15, 16). Following the material highlights the appalling working conditions of factory workers worldwide, and the collapse of the once-thriving South African textile industry on the heels of a glut of cheap imports through globalisation. Some – like tablecloths – I buy on the side of the road to support the hawkers that sell them. **These different histories attached to these materials intersect within my surfaces.**

Juxtaposed alongside are elements that evoke a reading of domestic space, like hangers and dishevelled, dirty dishwashing cloths. Familiar domestic objects foreground the often-dismissed domestic space, where my family dynamics are bound together by materiality. Some materials hold deep personal resonance ... fragments of memories ... like my Bobba re-sewing hand-me-down dresses; ribbon hoarded (in carefully unwrapped, carefully refolded, carefully preserved wrapping paper); a young me rummaging through her treasure-trove drawers: buttons, threads, safety pins.





*Austerity, and the lingering remains of its deeply entrenched habit, forced her to guard and treasure the most mundane things. Nothing was wasted.*

*Every nail, piece of wool, food-packaging container was a prize. During the memory-filled task of clearing my late Bobba's worldly possessions, we found an unopened bottle of jam made by her late mother that was guarded, preserved, hoarded for over twenty years.*

*Her couch was wrapped in plastic sheeting, which was only removed for special guests. Definitely not grandchildren.*

*Nothing was discarded.*

*Everything had a use, and a reuse.*

*I LEArnt to value immaterial and mundane things and to give them a sense of worth.*

*Everyday materials were made precious.*



In contrast to my own complicity with today's culture of excess consumption and disposability, in my studio I emulate Bobba, turning unimportant ordinary materials into something special, giving them worth. Each of my materials brings a new facet to the Gathering, becoming a site that holds affect, memory (Krauss 2011:128) and relays of time (Pollock 2009:483). Objects elicit a collective reproduction past and historical significance, retaining traces of their palimpsest pasts and lending their uses, associative readings and interpretations to the surface. Some bring a rich history of their use, some lend a gendered or domestic reading, others bring their social enTANGlements. I leave my choice of materials recognisable on the surface, drawing them to meaning in the fluidity with which I use them. Some are used very specifically, like maroon-coloured feather dusters, for texture; others more generally. Some keep their innate associations, like the embroidery thread I weave with; others are subverted and disrupted, like oil paintings which are cut into strips to weave with. The modes of expression available to eXe are broadened through how I experiment with unexpected combinations of everyday materials; giving them the opportunity to combine in any way, to be anything: to self-actualise in this way.

Using materials as my 'paint' brings a broader social context into my painting, charging it with "social living labour" and bringing both "immaterial labor and the labor of others" (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth 2016:85) into my aesthetic sphere. The "material and technical register" of painting becomes "the very site" of, rather than a support for, how painting makes meaning (ibid.:8). My use of the everyday here is defiant. I nuTURE these materials in wandering, questioning, embattling, loving and motherly acts to **actiVaTe and liberATE their innate potential into the world-Flows**. I immerSe myself in their material intenSities, working by hand in an openly receptive and symbiotic relationship with my chosen mass-produced homogenous consumer items and fabric scraps, giving them focused attention. I unseTTle the ordinary and mundane, bringing the specialness of art to ordinary objects: **the extraordinary is woven from the mundane, dismissed and unnoticed.**



## deep immerSion in an intuitive creative proceSS

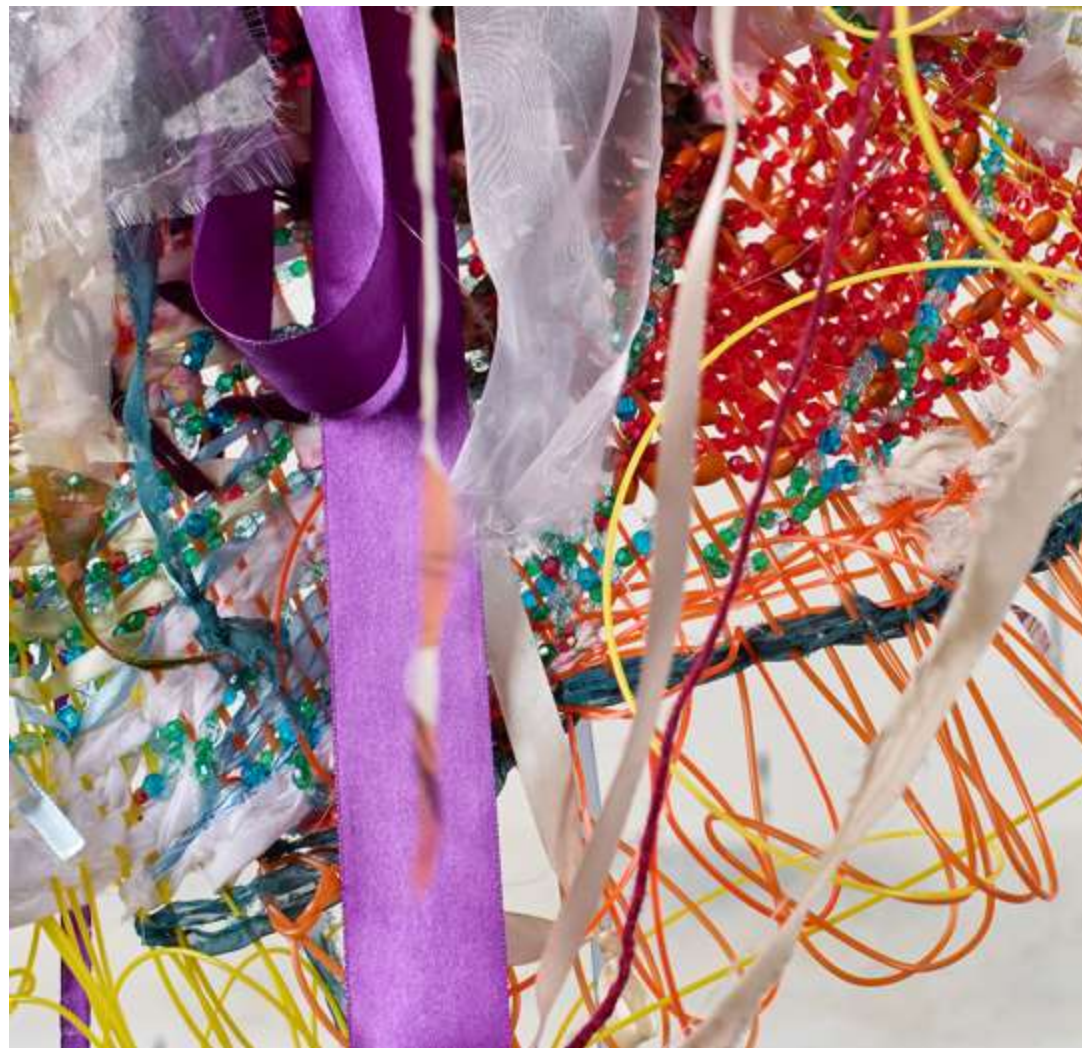
My creative actiVities actiVaTe the materials, working with them not as subject-object, but as an enTANgling. I do this by engaging deeply in creative proceSS.

My making unfolds in the experimental and explorative playground of the studio, with my tactile materials, messy bodily enactments and compleXity of creative decision-making and problem-solving. The studio's tactile haptic touchy-feely bodily space is a blessed relief: in it, I surrender rational control from the insistent overactiVe structured logical intellectualisation of my thought proceSSes. As my body and hands immerSe in material play and experimentation, my proceSS is led by a **productive lostness** that indulges deeply in creative exploration without aiming at formation.

There is a poetic fluidity to being in the studio as my proceSS drifts between the messy tactility of different making techniques, led by **an organic curiosity and spontaneity in open receptivity to my environment**. Unbounded by rules, each proceSS leads to the next in an **intuitive FLOW** that develops its own distinctive pulse. The "itinerant" proceSS unfolds gradually and is non-linear (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:369-72). Itinerant making refers to the sort of "nomadic activity" undertaken by an artisan who follows the FLOW of materials, relying on their intuition to find the singularity of their materials (Ingold, 2010:97-98). Itinerant making is a progressive actiViTy guided by responsiveness and regular feedback loops with "continual correction in response to an ongoing perceptual monitoring of the task as it unfolds" (ibid.).

As my creative proceSS evolves, it leaves temporal traces and clues, sedimented surfaces and depths, traces of mark making, incremental bits of knowledge and sParKs of insight that all get absorbed back, to deepen thinking and build up a sedimentation of visual, conceptual and theoretical layers.

eXe embody a build up of layers, traces of their proceSS and production, and hold the intenSity of my creative labours.





## intense effort absorbed in imprints

My woven surfaces monumentalise the creative activities, mundane everyday mass-produced consumer items and thinking processes that make them up. I build enTANGled netWorks through the ritualistic and rhythmic gestures of weaving, which imparts an indelible and **visible sense of pattern, repetition and human touch.**

While my body is not physically present in my forms, the evidence of its labours is held in direct bodily imprints of me as the artist, referencing my body's movements, as I had to be present to make the forms (Jones 2015:29). Together with the people who weave with me, we imprint a sequence of gestures and performances of our bodies and hands within the woven surface. The **immersion in the in-out-in-out meditation of weaving enables access to the accumulated knowledges sedimented within our bodies** through the micro-events of our daily lives. These rhythms and woven gestures are imprinted as autographic traces within the surface, which expand to capture each person's fingerprint-like contribution (Graw & Lajer-Burchard 2016:96) and our collective movements, gestures and creative decisions, along with the intimacy and reciprocity of our relationships. These decisions reflect in unexpected marks, colour schemes and material choices, which bring chance and spontaneity to the surfaces. Woven surfaces become netWorks that enmesh our bodies and lives, mapping and tracking our layered traces of making by materialising the intensity of our embodied gestures.

The woven surface holds a build-up of marks that map and track our ...

time  
 labour  
 gestural marks  
 itinerant decisions  
 bodily gestures and movements  
 sedimented accumulation of layered life experiences  
 relationship between our minds and hands  
 intimate working interactions in the studio  
 movements of our hands  
 embodied knowledges  
 dexterity of our fingers  
 autographic traces  
 creative acts  
 effort

**We leave our mark.**

I have grappled with the presence within the works of the people who assisted me. The nature of our relationships are deeply knotted, complex and multi-layered, involving roles that shift and mutate between the personal and professional. Despite having ethics clearance and presenting a conference paper around their involvement, I decided not to address this enTANGlement in this text, because it's complexity and vastness would exceed the scope of this current research process.



## possibilities for other worlds of knowing

Within this performative space, our formulation of objecthood shifts from passive object to an embodied form that functions as an active participant in the experiential encounter. “The object, traditionally the protagonist of meaning production, becomes a device for engaging in an experimental relation with oneself and others” (von Hantelmann 2014). Experiential embodied encounters open the body to profound experiences.

Engaging in the space of my exhibition, submerging in its mass of forms, became a way to deepen connections with oneself and opened possibilities for establishing interhuman embodied connection. Foregrounding sensing, deep listening and receptivity, non-verbal, non-intellectual modes of engaging happen through bodies. Embodied connection is essential to creating inter-human connection and relationships of care (Vázquez 2020.:108). Vázquez envisions spaces where humanity embraces its embodiment as an experiential sensorial liberation (ibid.), so we connect through new models of relating. Decoloniality presents an opportunity to go beyond existing world structures, like gender (ibid.:108), towards “pluriversal experiences of life” (ibid.:127) that recognise the “net of relations that is sustaining us” (ibid.:155-56). He suggests we reformulate space as “a womb” (ibid.:157) – a feminised space of mutual caring, nurturing and protection – to provide the opportunity to **resuscitate “other world(s) of sensing and meaning”** that were obliterated by the modern/colonial order (ibid.:86). Through the embodied connection generated by the constellation, our intuitive perceptive body can be understood to be a primary source of human intelligence. Human connection, full of raw emotion and dazzling complexity, becomes possible. Belonging becomes a human attribute rather than an identity marker.

Similar to reformulated objecthood, established concepts of subjectivity can be reformulated through entangling that move away from representation, to rethink agency beyond a human-centrism. Marsha Meskimmon (2019:354) frames an expanded formulation of subjecthood as a vital feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetic, which harnesses the unique characteristics of creative process. “Aesthetics and art-making” are especially significant ... because they “mobilize materiality, the senses and response-ability” (ibid.:358). Her formulation of subjectivity has three elements: 1. unravelling mind-body subject-object binaries; 2. performative materialisation of a dynamic subject; and 3. a move away from figurative representation towards diffractive figuration. Diffractive figuration brings inventive provocations to frame difference and complexity within entangled interrelationships, and represents a shift beyond representation and being, to “becoming” (ibid.:358).

## *embodied-entanglements X entangled-embodiment*

Creative practice plays a special role: it brings real possibility to realign the ways we understand forms and objecthood, as well as subjecthood. Understanding moves towards more complex, mutable and layered depths, which are necessary for expanded formulations of subjecthood, forms, and how people engage in space. Experiential aesthetic encounters bring new possibilities for framing my embodied-entanglements and my entangled-embodiment or subjecthood.

By entangling lingering traces of creative activities with vitalistic objects, **eXe** stand outside of representation. They are rather embodied assemblages, or entanglements between “human-nonhuman” (Bennett 2010:xvii) and intra-human relationships. These embodied-entanglements are available to “illuminate their human and social context” (Appadurai cited in Jones 2015:28).

## constrained and grounded in responsibility

Standing in sharp contrast to the fantasy and escapism of the constellatioN, my exhibition space equally held the **messiness, detritus and disorder of an alienated space**, or the derelict. It refused cleanliness. Unsettled, the constellatioN teetered between structure and chaos. It was both beautiful and shocking, calming yet disturbing, bright and dark, harmonious patterning and unravelling. This tension of contradictory elements is ever-present in my constellatioN, and in my process more broadly. I fluctuate between attributing its unseTTled unravelling “anxiety” to the genealogy of painting that no longer serves us, or just the decay implicit in my ageing process. It would also be easy to put the dishevelled, unresolved messiness of the process down to ‘Woman Gone Wild’ or:

... accountant mother of four quits her job to disrupt life’s confinement and becomes an artist ...

It could be a sign of South African society in slow decay, or the destruction of something sitting the conditions for a rebirth, renewal and regrowth. My constellatioN purposefully fragments both space and the body’s experience thereof, drawing attention to the way space is unseTTled – between figure and ground, inside and outside, surface and depth – mirroring the permeability of skin as surface. This is central to my experience as a white South African artist in the public spaces that I inhabit. **The grittiness of living in Johannesburg is a virtue; it forces me to account.**

The evident detritus and chaos in Johannesburg resonates somewhat with the destruction of the social and political order that previously served only a small minority in South African, and finds allegiance with other broad challenges to established paTTerns, structures, norms and boundaries of social systems and formations that extend way beyond South Africa, as part of a world trend. There is a **groundswell challenge to the exercise of power, authority, discrimination, and generations of prejudice**. Challenges are being posed regarding access to universities, gender inequality, treatment of women, treatment of the other within Global South communities, the form and content of inherited knowledges, and their basis of production. Past socialisations that squeezed people into existing structures no longer hold. Little in the world remains sacred and unchallenged. This creates contested spaces, including the spaces I occupy – family, religious and knowledge-creation systems, and within gender, identity and sexual orientation structures. Universities are contested spaces worldwide, within and beyond South Africa. Experiencing the constellatioN, a friend commented that, “lingering on the detail reminds me to focus on the exquisite magic of the present moment and less on the chaos of what is further afield”.



## my fundamental tension

Individual experiences play out because we are all enTANGled within the very structures that are being challenged and dismantled. We will never again be able to retreat into our narrow silos, as Bernice Johnson Reagon (cited in

Nash & Pinto 2021:903) warns that,

“we’ve pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a space that is ‘yours only’ – just for the people you want to be there [...]

There is no hiding place. There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you”.

Times of precarity and dereliction are filled with opportunities for real and meaningful realignment. Vázquez (2020) has been helpful to me in finding ways to process the tensions, compleXities, confusions and pulls I feel, suggesting a starting point of **acknowledging**

“**who is talking**” (ibid.:83). Vulnerability may accompany this; it confronts our tendency towards denialism – a desire to evade

responsibility, to search for:

“a safe position, a position of innocence, a position of certainty, a position where one cannot see oneself as implicated in the colonial

difference, a position where one cannot take responsibility”. (ibid.:144)

Decolonial work is “a movement of humbling” (ibid.:159) that recognises that we are all implicated (ibid.:165) and that certainty and innocence are not available options. The only available opportunity is to remove our “privileged vantage point” and open up relationally to the world around us (Lugones cited in Vázquez 2020:142). “**Being in relation**” is the key to decoloniality’s way of knowing (Vázquez 2020:86). My subjecthood and space, place, context and positionality are located within enTANGled webs of interactions, coNNections and social histories with others. I recognise that I have a moral responsibility to consider carefully the impact of my actions on other lives and to inhabit space ethically.

Inhabiting contested public spaces makes me acutely aware that my white, heterogeneous, middle-class professional body has similarly contested surface and depths. To many, my white skin and body are written upon and inscribed with an inequality of power and authority from both past and current social injustices.

They hold lingering sedimeNTs and painful memories of past and remaining structures into which I was both born and socialised. While hurtful, attacks directed at what I externally appear to represent go beyond the personal: I am merely a small part in a system undergoing a global shift. The surface of my skin retains incredible power: equally a painful remembrance to others, and a POrous and toughened-into-resilience self-protective boundary.

The shifting of surface to depth will remain an ever-present part of my existence as I rotate between those tensions. I remain perpetually **grounded by responsibility** as I juggle my life’s obligations, yet I nevertheless seek to liberATE and unbound (Rogoff 2010:40).

As I take my de-disciplined paintings and fling them into space, and as my constellation of forms exPANDs dimensionally into the FLOws of the world, I **assertively claim space** as a woman, as an African, and as a painter, whilst rooted in my responsibilities to the collective. Simultaneously exPAnded and grounded, I must accommodate a coExistence – any assertion of self must be coupled with a “humbling” (Vázquez 2020:157) and sensitivity towards the compleXities of my sedimeNTed body and space as a contested site.

I get to weave my own space, I claim the right to space for myself as a woman, to self-define with flexibility, but this is coupled with humble receptivity and sensitive listening to the specificities and uniqueness of others (Pollock 2009:484). Sensitive and assertive.

Within a contemporary world that intrudes a lot, where the pulls on me can weigh heavily, I need to establish firm boundaries of space as a means of self-preservation and self-protection, self-determining my parameters and the paTTerns of my behaviour.

**This coExistence – grounded and unbound – informs my inhabitation of eXe, and eXe in turn hold the coExistence of the tensions that I carry.**

## a personal reflection

Coming to the end of this process, I've been increasingly conscious of **an obvious fault-line** in my research and reading, which speaks directly to these tensions. I am compelled to interrogate this, and act upon it, for myself going forward: namely, an awareness that I should have immersed myself in a greater knowledge of South African and African theorists exploring this terrain.

I started out with a curiosity around a particular grouping of Jewish women theorists and artists – the offspring of immigrants whose intellect and character were formed in the shadow of the Holocaust. Brilliant women like Judith Butler, Rosalind Krauss, Anni Albers and Eva Hesse were nurtured to exercise their thinking and creative brilliance independently, to important effect.

But I easily fell into a broader pattern of reverting to handed-down Western academic sources and theorists that are easier to access and better-known entities. Mignolo (cited in Gaztambide-Fernández) explains that it is necessary to “de-link” off a base of existing knowledge (2014:201). I am only just starting to ‘unLEarn’ as a postcolonial post-apartheid subject. ‘UnLEarning’ is never easy – existing structures and established knowledge bases rest heavily on me, despite their innocuous invisibility.

While this dismantling has started, I am reminded that it is easier to fall back into patterns of behaviour that are familiar, and difficult to actually change them.









weaving/knotting/enTANGling the threads

## words in FLOW through my proceSS

acT - acTioN - mOve - mOvemenT  
 teeTer - teeTerinG  
 assemBLe - accumulATe - collect - constellATe  
 bodiLy  
 celeBRAtE  
 shiMMer - shiMMering  
 imprint  
 conTEXTual  
 comPLex  
 destabilise  
 de-discipline  
 enTANGled - enTANGling - enTANGlement - enmeSH - enmeSHed  
 UncontAIN - uncontAINable  
 exhubeRAnt  
 exPAnd - exPAnsive - exPAnDed - exPAnDing  
 fLuiD - fLuiDity - FLOW  
 humbliNG  
 hybrID  
 illuminate - luminoSity  
 sParKLe - sParKLing - sParKLy - gliMMering - flickERing  
 immerSe - immerSive  
 reLate - reLationship - reLational  
 IntenSE  
 actiVE - actiVaTe - actiVaTion  
 encrustED  
 juxtaPOse - juxtaPOsing  
 LaYer - LaYering  
 liberATe - liberATED  
 liveLy - aliveNess - liveLiNess  
 make-unmake-remake-leARn-unleARn-enTANGle-unravel-arrange-rearrange-disrupT-exPAnd  
 malleaBle  
 multiple - mutaBle  
 nurTURE  
 coNNect - coNNection - intercoNNect - coNNectedness  
 POrous  
 cOeXist  
 proceSS - becOMing - transfORMing  
 reconsiDEr - reconsiDEration - reORient - reORientation - reTHink - disORient  
 aGiTate - aGiTation - unseTTLe - unFiX  
 REinsert - RE-assert - REclaim  
 rhYTHmic - repetiTiVe  
 sedimeNT - sedimeNTed

## weaving/knotting/enTANGling the threads

I weave together the enchanted fabric of my research. Three warp strands – *unsettle*, *POrous boundaries* and *cOexisting* – stand as armatures through which a series of individual warp-weft coNNections get woven. These threads, which are inextricably enTANGled, comprise: the tensions between painting and weaving (enTANGlement 1); my body with its sedimeNTed life experiences (enTANGlement 2); and how materials and making practices become performaTIVE when actiVaTed (enTANGlement 3).

I weave as a form of painting, celeBRating weaving as a proudly feminine mode of creative making. I REclaim painting as an immeRSive feminist material practice that uses objects and colours to make paint-like marks. De-disciplining the Western genre of painting unsettles the linear perspectives that have long resulted in flattened binary representations of the body, and *subject-object* hierarchies which assert (specifically) man's mastery over the world and 'deadens' materials. Through the bodily acTiVities of weaving, my autographic traces (and those of the people who work with me) get imprinted into the painted/woven surface, which hold a strong indexical link to our creative labours and sedimeNTed life experiences. These residues of past labours and life experiences become actiVaTed within the painted surface, and are felt viscerally and bodily.

eXe capture autographic traces of my gestures and my enTANGled life as a contemporary mother+wife+artist+Jew+student+daughter+South African+white+professional middle-class+global citizen+mature+woman+. They hold the imprints of enforced social constraint and the intenSity of gendered work. Outside my home environment, my subjectivity gets made-unmade-remade in the unsetTled spaces I inhabit, like Wits University and my studio at the Bag Factory Joburg. My body resists containment. I use creative acTiVities of make-unmake-LEArn-unLEArn-disrupT-arrange-rearrange to challenge expectations and gendered impositions placed on me from the multiple life roles I take on, as well as flattened representations and identity markers. Stigmatised as 'women's work', iterative creative practices are actually regenerative and able to "re-member" space through the body in a way that creates belonging and identification. I discover that weaving is a remembered action: it *re-LEArns* innate rHYTHm by accessing and REclaiming instinctive knowledges.

My exhibition was immeRSed in an energy of auras, intenSities and energies at play that removed the experiencer from daily realities and consciousness. It challenged the boundaries of space, creating multiple viewing perspectives for the viewer, whose presence was essential to 'complete' the work of which she become an enTANGled part. The experiencer *experienced* (rather than saw) the forms as an emotive or auratic visceral bodily encounter, becoming immeRSed in a perforMance of intenSe creative labour and sedimeNTed life experiences. This aesthetic encounter changes how we have historically understood aesthetic experiences, shifting from *viewing* to *experiencing* bodily. My research process is a return to forms of knowledge produced from and by the body. Objects are asserted beyond their *thingness*: as enTANGled vital matter that form "human-nonhuman assemblages".

My creative proceSS provides an act of disowning knowledge, whereby rather than generating 'new' knowledge, my practice seeks to unsettle and destabilise knowledge, and to disown existing knowledge. I do this by LEArning to unLEArn, de-disciplining genres and destabiliSing gendered expectations.

The Möbius model, which swivels through its different yet interchangeable surfaces, retaining their differences, proves to be a valuable framing for my complex process, supporting me as I deconstruct and reconstruct new forms of relating. *eXe* teeTer. They hold the presence of continual destabilisation, juxtaposing contradictory elements that are forced to coexist: the tiny and insignificant are monumentalised; chaos and structure teeTer in anxious tension. They possess magical possibilities as they concurrently hold the weightiness of life, tinging reality with fantasy, and fantasy with reality. Intense, sedimented and holding a complexity of tensions, *eXe* can be considered to be *living works* that refuse to settle into stable form. Constellations dissolve and then solidify again in an ever-present rotation between surface and depth. Multiple Möbius rotations swing between solidity and fluidity, flattening and freeing, grounding and unbounding, belonging and non-belonging, sensitivity and assertion, as they entangle new forms and social relations. These entangled structures are multiple, mutable and expanded, and not readily understandable. Neither can they be reduced to words or fixed meaning, and attempts to understand them are – at best – fragmentary.

My deeply immersive process is messy, layered and entangled. The space within which I make is fluid and its boundaries are flexible. Perspectives and relationships within my constellation changed constantly, depending where you looked from. Through this, a “montage” of multifaceted meanings emerges (Aby Warburg cited in Vesters 2016:1). Chuz Martinez (2012:51) suggests that creative making “is complex because it does not facilitate any conclusions”. The ambiguities one feels within the constellation’s surfaces and depths leave it hard to grasp – it sits within the slippages, the non-absolute, refusing to be named and contained.

*eXe* embody that moment of connection when we think we’ve grasped something, yet it elusively slips beyond our grasp. In their searching-almost-grasping-but-not engagement they offer, meaning cannot be fixed or located.

Clarity evades us.

Meaning is Fugitive.

Lines are open-ended, and it is this open-endedness – of lives, relationships, histories and process of thought – that I have wanted to celebrate. I hope that, in doing so, I have left plentiful loose ends for others to follow and to take in any ways they wish. Far from seeking closure, my aim has been to prise an opening.

- Tim Ingold

How the line became straight

Lines: A brief history, 2007, pp169-170



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