ENTER THE FRAME: ***REFLECTIONS ON CINEMATIC PRACTICE***

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work. It is submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and has neither been submitted before to any other degree or examination at any other University, nor prepared under the aegis or with the assistance of any other body or organisation or person outside the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Shelley Barry

14 March 2022



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Dedication

For my ancestors. I listened.

For my parents, Pam Barry and Clive Barry. Thank you for instilling in me the value of education.

I will never forget the sadness in your eyes when you sat beside my hospital bed in 1996. Look how far we have come..

Thank you most of all for bringing me to this moment through your unwavering love and support.

Abstract

This research examines the practice of filmmaking from the site of a wheelchair and reflects on the methodology of making films with a recurring set of limitations. The limitations have to do with various aspects of filmmaking from the spatial to the temporal. In this research I undertake an investigation of my own practice spanning a period of 19 years, while situating it in a lineage of film practitioners who have used the genre of experimental film as a vehicle for their own creative expression. Investigating film practices, including the production of virtual reality and experimental film, is central to the articulation of method and is connected to poetic strategies of writing to reflect the cinematic aesthetics and politics of my practice as a wheelchair user.

The creative practice for the research includes a series of visual experiments in the aesthetics of cinematography and storytelling from the perspective of a wheelchair user, while the written thesis undertakes to document the process of creative practice and the theoretical inquiry that shapes the development of the work.

Keywords: access; autoethnography; creative practice; disability; experimental film; self-reflexive; virtual reality; practice-led research

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Dear Reader

I invite you to enter a world of my making.

This thesis is a reflection and function of my creative practice itself. It therefore combines a variety of elements that I am utilising to understand and reflect upon a body of work spanning nineteen years, a body of work still-in-the-making.

To this end, my writing is a combination of poetry, storytelling, journal writing, reflection and academic enquiry, as I delve into a practice that has been inspired by making work from the site of a wheelchair.

I inhabit a body that tells the tale of its wounds and with this comes a certain level of urgency to create, simultaneously fragile and powerful.

None of us know how much time we have but if we honour our breath and use it to align with our purpose, I believe that this is a life well lived.

Yours in Presence,
Shelley

In the Beginning, there was Mountain

ICU (Intensive Care Unit)

Another day.
Nurses wash me at 5am
tired as night duty
reaches end.
they talk. Avoid my dull eyes.
some say I'm pretty,
say it's a pity.

Clean now.
shapeless blue gown
2 more hours before breakfast
light shines on bedsheets
CPA,CPA,CPA,CPA
Cape Provincial Administration-
sheets, pillows, smells

They turn me.
over to face mountain.
Animals have arrived.
all day they will graze
or just stand staring.
I have learned to stare,
just like them.

Visitor.
My Mother is here -
running out of ways to make me smile
can't I crawl back inside her womb, I ask?
never know this life?

TV. Afternoon.
I watch, see nothing.
the day is clear.
Birds flap by.
it is summer.
life screeches outside.

Dream.
I leave the boxed room -
I am Spirit, grazing with Herd.
Mountain welcomes. Protects.

More visitors.
how am I feeling?
am I in pain?
so and so sends their regards…
And Jesus loves me.

Lights fade.
Mountain pulls on her blanket of night.
Animals move off the slope,
out of sight.

I'll be here.
waiting for them, tomorrowandthedayafter
wishing I had a secret place to go,
wrapped in mountain

But where can I go?
what can I do?

Long night haunting.
No view.

(Shelley Barry, *The Travelling Poet,* 2011)

ESTABLISHING SHOT: Creating the Frame

In my address to an audience at a disability film festival in Moscow, I stated:

> Film, being such a powerful medium, has limited itself in its current choices of who is fit to be seen, whose lives are worthy enough to be depicted and whose histories should be told (2002).

Twenty years later, this sentiment is still the consistent driver of my creative practice.

The aim of this exegesis is to consider the ways in which my practice of filmmaking has developed from a set of recurring limitations. The sustained limitations have invited new ways of working from the location of a wheelchair as a site of being seated, but liberating, in exposing the contradiction of the wheelchair as a restriction.

Through a process of reflection, I engage with theoretical and conceptual frameworks as a means of enquiry for engaging with my work. I consider this exegesis as being an interrogation of a new body of work while reflecting on my previous work, noting the shifts and developments in creative practice in a way that is reflexive of my development. My references also draw from the practices of other artists as theoretical propositions that further shape the understanding of my practice.

Similarly, the way in which one writes about artistic research can go beyond conventional academic writing. According to Hannula, Suoranta and Varden (2014:24), “The trick is to find a way of writing that suits not only the topic but also the researcher doing the writing.” This, however, does not discount the need for the creative practice researcher to pose questions and arguments but instead offers a creative approach to the writing itself. Goddard (2010:119-120) explains:

> Both the practice and its exegesis are narratives that resist complete explanation. The role of an exegesis is not to attempt an analysis or critical interpretation of the work, but to present a sense of the creative decision-making process(es) within the context of the research practice. The possibility of imaginatively integrating a creative practice with a creative exegesis may well be considered as one of the strategies that characterises and differentiates creative arts-based research. As a distinctive methodological approach, it also recognizes that the development of the practice-exegesis relationship generates a mutual inter-dependence and a correspondence between practices.

The resistance of narratives that defy complete explanation, as outlined by Goddard, is key to understanding creative practice research. Sarat Maharaj (2004:39) further supports this concept of resistance by outlining that owing to the unpredictable nature of this type of research, caution needs to be exercised "to regulate artistic research, to knock it into shape of the academic disciplines, to make it a lookalike of their logic and architecture. What matters today is its 'difference'-the distinctive modalities of its knowledge production."

It is precisely because creative practice research cannot be quantified in the same way as more traditional approaches to research, that it is constantly evolving. This process of defining, redefining and reshaping, allows for ways of interrogation that in themselves can become avenues of exploration for the creative practice researcher.

The writing of this exegesis became an integral part of my creative practice and therefore I explore different ways of approaching written expression, ranging from more formal academic writing to employing storytelling.

Adrian Miles(2008:2) suggests that,

> Writing is no longer the retrospective and teleological reporting of the discovered, realised, or already understood 'had–been–thought', but is the very event of a material thinking in itself. A sketch book, if you like, for a sort of scholarly activity that is primarily situated within the milieu of writing as the site of its practice.

My writing therefore functions as a form of sketch book, that encompasses the experimentation of exposing shifts in processes of thinking about creative practice, while laying bare the mechanisms I employ in finding my way through contemplation and creation. Sullivan explains that, "The aim of research in the visual arts, as in other similar forms of exploratory inquiry, is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and consolidate. Making informed choices about creative ends and means involves selecting, adapting, and constructing ways of working and ways of seeing." (2005:174)

Sullivan's assertion renders the reader as an active participant in the process of creative practice research. In which way does this form of research challenge the reader or allow for any form of illumination? These are open-ended questions, that encourage a more active form of reading and engagement in the writing and content of this exegesis.
My opening letter invites the viewer into my world but simultaneously, through writing and film, asks the reader to contemplate their worldview, particularly as it relates to disability.

The exegesis also examines the interplay between the written and creative work, concluding on the outcomes of these processes in tandem. As Maharaj (2004:40) posits with regard to creative practice research, "It is, in Samuel Beckett's word, more of an 'unnameable' because it has to invent its own methods each time rather than parrot pre-given ones."

I hereby invite you on a journey with this beginning of a sketch and a map without complete markers.

PANORAMA SHOT

The site of invention: Embodied experience

The theoretical and conceptual framework of my thesis is based on the notion of embodied experience as a source of knowledge production, as articulated by Sara Ahmed (2017:38).

> But think of this: those of us who arrive in an academy that was not shaped by or for us bring knowledges, as well as worlds, that otherwise would not be here. Think of this: how we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us. Think of the kinds of experiences you have when you are not expected to be here. These experiences are a resource to generate knowledge.

Ahmed reminds us as black women that we bring our worlds with us and that this worldmaking has immense value. While black women struggle to create access in the academy in its broadest sense, we actually also provide access to lived experience that would otherwise remain unknown. Our embodied experience and the way in which we write about that experience, in our own words, is a fist raised in the air, claiming space and agency.

Ahmed (2017:39) further adds that “the personal is theoretical”. She questions the dominance of canonical theoretical propositions and citation, reflecting on how the power relations can be shifted. Her early experience of the writings of black women in particular, became a foundational base that fundamentally shaped her thinking.

While Ahmed (2017:62) references the importance of living a feminist life, I write from her broader references to all bodies, usually excluded from a world, entering and transforming that world: “It is the practical experience of coming up against a world that allows us to come up with new ideas, ideas that are not dependent on a mind that has withdrawn (because a world has enabled that withdrawal) but a body that has to wiggle about just to create room”.

The creation of room Ahmed refers to is what I consider to be the site of invention. The wiggling corporeality is the way in which we blow on dust and call on new life.

Practice as Citation

Drawing on the concept of the personal as theoretical, I also locate this chapter within a community of artists whose work functions as a source of theoretical propositions. Knudsen (2018:125) states that,

> What is important for practitioner-researchers is that they can situate their practice within the existing practices of others—a community of practice—and can demonstrate how their research contributes new knowledge or understanding to practice and practice contexts, for the benefit of others, not just the self.

Jyoti Mistry[1] (2017:9) reiterates this sentiment, noting that artistic research does not revolve around an 'indulgent I', but reveals the process of construction of art, making the artist accountable for artistic practice as research.

I will therefore review specific art practitioners, referencing their practice as citation and as theoretical propositions that shape the development and reflexivity of my own artistic praxis. This approach is also based on Ahmed's proposition of the "animation of the everyday", where theory and citation is brought closer to home and in so doing becomes a political gesture. Ahmed (2017:39) suggests that "Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert. We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life".

In order to bring theory back to life, in the way in which Ahmed suggests, I employ an autoethnographic approach as one of the means of inquiry in my writing. Reed-Danahay (1997) defines autoethnography "as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts. Autoethnography is both a method and a text of diverse interdisciplinary praxes".

By writing about our lived experiences, we place worth on embodied knowledge production. Makhosazana Xaba (2019:16) notes that writing by black women is a

[1] Jyoti Mistry is Professor in film at the University of Gothenburg and works in film both as a research form and as a mode of artistic practice.) https://www.gu.se/en/about/find-staff/jyotimistry accessed Aug 24th)

form of visibility politics. By making our lives visible, through the process of writing, we affirm our place in the world[2].

The theoretical framework is also rooted in notions of the cinematic gaze. Tina Campt (2021:59) describes the gaze as follows:

> The gaze ”is a weighty term that has emerged most forcefully and been appropriated most widely in the field of cinema studies, and in feminist film theory in particular. It is a term most frequently cited to articulate the structure of visual spectatorship and pleasurable looking; specifically, who gets looked at, how, and at whose expense. Commonly understood as a gendered dynamic of spectatorship centered on voyeuristic or narcissistic pleasure in looking, the classic definition of “the gaze” (articulated most notably by film theorist Laura Mulvey) defined the white male viewer as the ‘bearer of the look’ and the white woman as an object “to-be-looked-at”.

The work of bell hooks builds on the concept of the gaze by writing extensively about the oppositional gaze. While her writing specifically references the gaze of the black spectator of cinema, opposing the dominance of the white gaze, I find it a significant aperture of looking at the oppositional gaze that is possible from a maker/spectator with a disability. The opposing gaze is one that can look back at able-bodied cinema and reflect on it as a call to action. As hooks (1992:116-117) explains,

> … all attempts to repress our/black people’s right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By defiantly looking, we defiantly declared: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality’.

hooks further states that it is in the desire to change reality that independent black cinema was birthed. The creation of independent black cinema is the work of looking back, of opposing ways of seeing and being seen.

[2] Xaba (2019) explains that this term was first used for feminist organizing but she repurposes the term for the tangible products of women’s creativity.

Tina Campt (2021:38) expands on the work of hooks by widening the reach of the black gaze outside the purview of the cinematic frame:

> A Black Gaze departs in significant ways from the notion of the gaze popularized within the field of cinema studies, most notably because it is not limited to film or filmmaking. It broadens this concept by exploring a Black gaze not only in lens-based art forms like film and photography but in a range of artistic practices that include movement and performance, sculpture, sound installations, and music video. A Black gaze is a structure of visual engagement that implicitly and explicitly understands blackness as neither singular nor a singularity; it embraces instead the multiplicity of blacknesses these artists simultaneously grapple with and personify.

My work is grounded in what hooks refers to as “looking relations”. By defying the standard able-bodied frame and gaze, I offer a different point of view that grants visibility to the ‘’other’ as articulated by Hartman & Wilderson (2003:189):

> It's as though in order to come to any recognition of common humanity, the other must be assimilated, meaning in this case, utterly displaced and effaced: "Only if I can see myself in that position can I understand the crisis of that position." That is the logic of the moral and political discourses we see every day - the need for the innocent black subject to be victimized by a racist state in order to see the racism of the racist state.

Although the quote above specifically references black subjects, Hartman’s declaration is at the heart of the erasure faced by persons with disabilities as the ‘other’, facing displacement and positioned to take the place of the subject to be pitied and simultaneously victimised in overt and covert ways by a society whose violence is largely couched in dismissal, ignorance and disinterest. Campt’s multiplicity of blacknesses offers a broader reading of the gaze and the way in which that gaze can function in creative practice. This builds on the theories of hooks and the notion of the oppositional gaze, which is not only an act of resistance, but a call to artistic creation.

As hooks (1992:128) claims, “We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions”. These alternative texts to the dominant norm are the labours of black bodies that bring stories and experiences to life that have been repressed by the dominant grand narratives of whiteness/able-bodied-as-norm.

Spry (2001:724) asserts that the body is the site from which the story is generated and if one erases the body "in the process(ing) of scholarship, knowledge situated in the body is unavailable"

Our experience, especially as practitioners of art, is always shaped by other artists. We make sense of our art through the work and influence of other artists, who co-form and co-create the ways in which we view the process of thinking-through-making.

I also draw on the theoretical framework of Welbon's doctoral thesis, "Sisters in Cinema", where she explores the work of three prominent African-American filmmakers, with the following question: *How did she do it?* Although this question may seem to be a simple one, it ultimately has to take into account all the forces that shape artistic production. In the gaping absence of knowledge about our creative production, we have to generate our own and continue to answer Welbon by keeping records and writing about our own work, that can be passed on to future generations, boldly sharing: *"Well.. this is how I did it"*

In the context of this notion and by placing value on the seemingly quotidian, I will reference and cite the work of artists who have had a specific influence on my practice. I draw on the work of experimental filmmakers, with the exception of Frida Kahlo, whose paintings led me out of despair and into the site of invention.

Kahlo's work found me in a hospital bed while in the intensive care unit of Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, where I lay quietly for months, waiting for bones to fuse and holes to stitch bridges of skin to wholeness.

I had been shot and paralysed in the Cape taxi turf wars[3] of 1996.



Image 1: Without Hope (Kahlo, 1945)

[3] The 2021 Cape Town taxi conflict is an ongoing violent turf war between the minibus taxi operators Cape Amalgamated Taxi Association (CATA) and Congress of Democratic Taxi Association (CODETA) over lucrative taxi routs in Cape Town, South Africa. For more background on the continuing conflict, see https://www.csvr.org.za/taxi-violence-roots-vs-routes-what-is-the-solution/

Doctors told me I would never walk again and would have to live with a permanent tube in my throat, as an aid for breathing and speaking. I was appropriately devastated and tried to strangle myself several nights by repurposing the rubber bands meant for exercise, which were attached to my bed. I wanted to return to the heaven I had briefly glimpsed while dying.

However, I always released the bands. And breathed again.

This was my entry point.

I had two windows to the outside world. One was a large window overlooking the slopes of Devil's Peak where animals grazed all day. The other was a tiny television set that served to entrench my assumptions: it was a window where my altered body was invisible.

Where were my examples of queer, black, women with disabilities who were on screen or making films? At the time, I did not have any references. This was yet another entry point – a simple question that I could ponder on those many sleepless nights until another small question posed itself to me. The question was simply 'Why not?' Why couldn't I be a filmmaker, who happened to be seated in a wheelchair, who happened to have a voice generated by a metal flap in my throat? Why not?

This simple question blew apart the confines of the little ICU room that had become my entire world. From this moment my universe expanded and expanded as I grappled to find my way to the lens.

I had entered a parallel Universe where everything was the same but I had fundamentally changed. This change was the harbinger of a new era.

By the time I left the ICU ward, I knew that I could not enter the world in a chair without being willing to live a life in cinema. Countless people had crowded around my bed fervently praying for a miracle. The miracle, my father later realised, was answered. The answered prayer was not my ability to walk again, it was the ability to make films and in that pursuit, I found my living water. After all, there was a screen to fill.

The consistent, unwavering love from family and friends kept hope dwelling within. And these two quotes:

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself, you will still make your greatest work”. Pam Barry (Mother)

“Feet, what do I need them for, when I have wings to fly” (Kahlo, 1995:274).

In the discovery of Kahlo’s life, I felt as if a sister and fellow artist had made a quantum leap and reached across time to firmly assert “It can be done. Just make work…”

Unlike her husband, Diego Riviera, who painted large murals, Frida’s art was on a much smaller scale. One of Frida Kahlo’s most famous quotes in response to why she painted several self-portraits is *“Porque estoy muy sola”/* “Because I am so often alone” (Zamora, 1990:102).

Kahlo often painted during her long periods of recovery in bed and painted several self-portraits this way. With the stroke of her brush, Kahlo could expand her world beyond her bed, her room, her home. This is how I felt about a film camera. I wanted to design my world, interpret it and explore a visual imagination where I was in charge of constructing images of my life as opposed to accepting the images of persons with disabilities as largely being asexual, in need of care or to be pitied. I also rejected the notion of the ‘Superhero’ with a disability, those who live their lives against all odds.

I wanted to create space for the intersections between being a queer, black, woman with a disability and a narrative that did not veer between tragedy and triumph but that found more of a sense of the everyday. I wanted to tell a story that may be told in a way that reflects a particular lived existence and experience and that validates a prising open of space in a cinematic screen that is predominantly heteronormative, patriarchal, ableist and white. With a camera on my lap, I could make room and like Kahlo, I could paint and create small portraits.

Bound?

What's this talk of wheelchair-bound?
these wheels are not my prison
I am a Queen! This is my chariot!
I'm not stuck in this chair
watch me dance,whistle,stomp
watch me spin, flip backwards
Toss out.
I'm not sleeping in this chair
not bathing in this chair
not making love in this chair (well…sometimes)

What's this talk of wheelchair-bound
I sit on the peak of a mountain I carry inside
I store music in the click of my fingers
see it spill out?
so from where I sit
perhaps it's you
Bound to a language I just don't fit!

(*Shelley Barry, The Travelling Poet, 2011)*

Kahlo's approach to making art was experimental in many ways, both in form and content. She created throughout various states of health. Her bed, where she spent much of her time, became a studio.

> While confined to her bed, Frida began to paint, using a small lap easel her mother had ordered for her. Overhead, in the canopy of her bed, she positioned a mirror so she could use her reflection as a subject. As she recovered and became more mobile, Frida also intermittently painted larger pictures, posing friends, relatives and children as well as herself. (Zamora, 1990:27).

Zamora (1990:46) also refers to Frida's techniques of experimentation. Around 1932, Frida was "creating many works … experimenting with techniques, painting on tin, making lithographs, even trying her hand at fresco" .

Her working method was always one of solitude, even when she was able to be out of bed. It is evident from her paintings that she documented her environment, bringing her life experiences, politics, people and surroundings into her work. Ultimately, her home, the Blue House in Coyoacan, Mexico, was her sanctuary and the house itself was a work of art.



Image 2: Kahlo's Blue House, Coyoacan, Mexico (Anon, n.d.)

In the early 2000s, I had the opportunity to visit Frida's Blue House in Mexico with my mother, Pam Barry. She was so inspired by it that she returned home to Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha and painted our home blue. A huge cactus is the centrepiece of our garden. It was my mother's loving way of giving thanks to Frida for the positive influence she had on me, through the tunnel of time. My uncle, Michael Barry, a fellow painter, transformed the den into a Mexican room. This was the room in our home where my grandmother took her last breath. By transforming the room, space was altered, to mark a new chapter in our lives.

The Blue House in Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha is my haven, where I am most inspired to write and create. Here, the memory of Kahlo is tangible. Her Blue House was where she was born, died and created her world. Frida's worldmaking extended across time and space, reaching many people all over the world. Kahlo's life was filled with painting, artists, politics, family and her love for Diego. And pain. It is life in its full spectrum of experience that found itself on canvas, almost as if the paint became her blood that would live on without her.



Image 3: Self-portrait with Portrait of Dr Farill, (Kahlo, 1951)

The influence of Frida Kahlo on my work is evident in two of my earlier films, namely *Whole − A Trinity of Being* (2004) and *Umbilical Cord* (2006). Two of Kahlo's paintings inspired these films: *The Broken Column* (1944) and *What the water gave me* (1938).



Laura Marks (2002:3) uses the term haptic visuality, which emphasizes the viewer's inclination to perceive haptically, but a work itself may offer haptic images. Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image. Thus, it is less appropriate to speak of the object of a haptic look than to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image.

Image 4: What the water gave me (Kahlo, 1938)

Kahlo's *The Broken Column* (1944) evoked memories of the pain of having a broken spine, where your body is crucified with the stabbing of invisible nails and a profound sense of loss. The visceral response elicited by my body in relation to this painting, is only possible, I believe, because of the understanding of having a broken spine. A different subjectivity is engaged with viewers who have not experienced this particular physical trauma. A body without a disability, for example, may have a contrary experience of the haptic as outlined by Marks (2002:3).



Image 5: The broken column (Kahlo, 1944)

There could be compassion or imagination in relation to the experience the painting references, but not necessarily the sensation of a "broken column". The memory held within the body of someone who has had a broken spine, combines with the viewing of this painting, to co-create new meaning, by drawing on personal experience. My haptic response in particular, was one of the inner knowing of pain as both physical sensation and as the emotional wasteland that accompanied that feeling, depicted in this painting as desolation.

Another example of a haptic experience is in my film *Umbilical Cord* (2006), where I acknowledge *What the water gave me* by Kahlo (1938), by immersing my body in bathwater, with red-painted toenails, revealed. The film is scored with the sound of water and a voiceover poem about longing and displacement between New York and home (Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa), as Kahlo clearly depicts the divides between her two homes at the time, namely New York and Coyoacan in Mexico. Here, a viewer may relate to the tactility and sense perception of feet in water in response to viewing the film, while possibly not being aware that as the subject of the film, I have no such physical sense at all. My body remembers what my feet felt like

in water, whereas my feet no longer physically feel it. This creates an interesting tension in the way in which Laura Marks (2000:187) describes haptic visuality:

> Haptic visuality implies a familiarity with the world that the viewer knows through more senses than vision alone. Changes of focus and distance, switches between haptic and optical visual styles, describe the movement between a tactile relationship and a visual one.

The question remains, who is watching and how are their senses affected by the materiality of their bodies, and in the way they perceive a visual work that does not explicitly expose a lack of physical sensation? There could therefore be an assumed sense of the haptic. However, Marks (2000:180)., in her writing on Cho's work, *Identical Time* (1997), does note that although his work explores tactile ways of seeing, at the same time, it questions the ability of vision to yield knowledge.

The scholarship of Tina Campt goes beyond what Marks proposes regarding the haptic. Campt (2021:149-150) regards the haptic experience as having the potential of changing social inequality. Empathy, while important, can be limited as an emotion. What change can arise from empathy, is the more significant question to ask.

> It is recognizing the disparity between your position and theirs, and working to address it. It is the work of feeling done both in spite of and because of these differences, and choosing to feel across that difference, rather than feeling with or for someone living in very different circumstances. It's about recognizing your implication in the circumstances of others and choosing not to be complicit. Far from the satisfaction of feeling identification with someone less fortunate, less secure, or utterly precarious, hapticity is a commitment to feeling the discomfort and the disparities of being better off and doing the work of making them generate a different outcome.

The work of Kahlo as an artist with a disability, for example, may create a haptic response that could be based on empathy and sympathy, yet how often has the work galvanised viewers to change the power dynamics of a world that privileges the able-bodied? The body with a disability is diminished in a world that insists on relegating these bodies to the margins of society. Yet it is within these margins that creative practice can flourish, not despite of circumstances but because of circumstances.

hooks (1992:116) regards the oppositional gaze as a tool of power that changes the potential outcome. "Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to

manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency."

Claiming agency is key to how Kahlo engaged in creative practice.

My film, *Ink/Visible* (2018), is influenced by Kahlo and is an ode to the creative who uses the bed as a site of invention.

Hayden Herrera, in her ground-breaking biography of Kahlo's life, uncovers the following quote:

> I never thought of painting until 1926, when I was in bed on account of an automobile accident. I was bored as hell in bed with a plaster cast (I had a fracture in the spine and several in other places), so I decided to do something. I stoled [sic] from my father some oil paints, and my mother ordered for me a special easel because I couldn't sit down [she means 'sit up'], and I started to paint. (Kahlo, cited in Herrera, 1983:134)

Like Kahlo, I also spend a considerable amount of time in bed, mostly due to back pain and partly due to fear of pressure sores, one of the leading causes of death for paraplegics. For me, the bed is a place where the body is most at ease; although pain is constant, being off the chair eases the strain of being seated. While Kahlo used the bed as a painting studio, I use the bed as a writing retreat. By countering the stereotype of the notion of a person with a disability, in bed and incapable, the bed becomes a site of creation, allows for the possibility of the realm of imagination and eventually transmits the micro domestic location to the larger world.

The weakening of the body through the passing of time, the fragility one feels with aging, the all too familiar pain keeps the reminder of impermanence hovering alongside daily life. For me, this creates a sense of urgency to make as much work as I can, while my body feels strong enough. A recent scan of my bones indicates a diagnosis of osteoporosis throughout my skeleton, with a high fracture risk in all bones. This sobering reality has hastened the urge to make my films and to write about my work. I am acutely aware of the limitations of time in which to do so and if anything fuels my creative practice at this point in my life, it is the sense of time passing. My work needs to mark this time.

Laura Marks (2002:4) proposes that the visual medium of video *"*enables an embodied perception, the viewer responding to the video as to another body and to the screen as another skin*"*

The skin of the viewer can never quite touch the physicality of the body making the work, but it can invite a viewer into a world unseen. And in the viewing of that world, the viewer may become aware of their own body, in relation to a body they may never inhabit or know in any significant way, beyond theory and sense perception.

All bodies are temporarily able-bodied, after all.

Audre Lorde (1980:89) grappled with this transient state of living:

> 'How do I act to announce or preserve my new status as temporary upon this earth?' And then I'd remember that we have always been temporary, and that I had just never really underlined it before or acted out of it so completely before. And then I would feel a little foolish and needlessly melodramatic, but only a little.

Kahlo literally lived with the daily reminder of death. In her diary, she notes that:

"There is nothing absolute/Everything changes, everything moves, everything revolves − everything flies and goes away" (1995:235).

Kahlo's worldmaking countered the exclusion she otherwise faced. By using her bed as a site of invention for painting and by unapologetically living life on her own terms, she "dismantle(d) the world that is built to accommodate only some bodies" (Ahmed, 2017:51).

Although the image of Kahlo has become commercialized and commodified, Borsa (1990:38) reminds us that ultimately her work is a form of disruption, a form of reconstructing her own history, while negotiating critical subjectivity.

While Kahlo used painting as a form of creative practice, by subverting the norms of the frame and the means to engage in creative practice, experimental filmmakers also wiggled out of the mainstream norms of cinema, using the camera as a site of invention.

Dixon and Foster (2002:1-2) explain that mainstream filmmaking allows little room for experimentation, as the production process is expensive, with pressure on the filmmaker to recoup money for investors. Without the driver of market forces, the filmmaker is liberated to create and this opens avenues for playfulness. This in turn creates breathing space for a "deeply personal cinema that is as varied as it is playful and imaginative"

Experimental cinema, is therefore a radical counterpoint, resulting in films that are unlikely to yield much financial returns and is led by the viewpoint of an individual's artistic expression.

The work of Maya Deren led me to experimental cinema and a body of work made by women who often worked alone or in small crews with minimal equipment, outside of the gatekeepers and dictators of the economic framework of capitalist cinema. This act of revolution appealed to me and confirmed a place for the work I was making.

I have always found sets strewn with equipment, lights, cords and crowds, claustrophobic. The main reason for this is that the amount of equipment and people in a space restricts my ability to move freely. I have to be able to breathe when I make films and I cannot breathe in crowds or when I have to jump over cables in my chair. Deren, known as one of the most prominent figures in experimental film, created a space to breathe for women.

Her apartment in Greenwich Village was often the site of informal salons, where women artists gathered, forming an essential place to engage and challenge the status quo. Fellow filmmaker, Joyce Wieland, referred to these gatherings as a "mutual support group" (Rabonivitz, 2002:72).

By working with small crews and fellow artists, with the least possible equipment, Deren was not dependent on the dictators of mainstream cinema, but could use film as a means of self-expression and the creation of art that mattered to her. She often collaborated with other artists in the making of work and in this way, created a sense of community. Her first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) was made with her partner and documentary filmmaker, Alexander Hammid. Deren struggled to finance her films and this led her to promote a more sympathetic climate for independent filmmaking. Deren's initial cinematic interest was in an individual woman's psychological experiences and in presenting a female subjective voice. But she expanded her interest from the individual woman's psychological experiences to presenting a female subjective voice (Rabinovitz, 2002:75).

Many generations later, Sadie Benning used a toy camera intended for children, to make films in her bedroom "incorporating found footage, newspaper and magazine fragments, and written notes that pass in front of the camera like secret messages to

the viewer." Russell describes this form of filmmaking as the "*technologies of representation"*, where personas can be constructed (1999:291, italics in original). The lessons I have gained from Deren and Benning include having the freedom to make the work you want to make, with the means you have with which to make it. Their ability to play, experiment, collaborate, while carving out a space for truly independent cinema production and distribution, paved the way for generations to come.

Deren encapsulates her aims as follows:

> My purpose is neither to instruct nor entertain, but to be that experience which is poetry. That experience may be incidentally educational. Experience is really the only education. When a person comes in, experiences something, and goes away a little bit different, he has been educated (Deren & McPherson, 2005:9).

Kahlo also emphasised the necessity of experience. She sometimes taught art at the Blue House. One of her students, Monroy, recalled that she encouraged them to:

> …get acquainted with life so we could understand it better and be able to paint it. We all went to the markets, the factories, the countryside, we mixed with the people… Frida told us that direct contact with life and participation in it, not as mere spectators but as socially active citizens, would open new horizons and greatly enrich our aesthetic and human sensitivity (Zamora, 1990:99).

The way in which Deren and Kahlo reference experience as a form of education, echoes Ahmed's declaration of citation as a form of feminist memory. Ahmed (2017:60) asserts that, "Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow"

Both Deren and Kahlo died while still quite young. While they worked intensively on the pursuit of art and vehicles in which to make it, the most important vehicle of all: the body, was often neglected.

I believe that any method of creative practice has to take into account the value of self-care, an often overlooked aspect in the process of filmmaking.

Ahmed (2017:491) references the importance of self-care by stating that,

> This kind of caring for oneself is not about caring for one's own happiness. It is about finding ways to exist in a world that makes it difficult to exist. This is why, this is how: those who do not have to struggle for their own survival can very easily and rather quickly dismiss those who attend to their own survival as being self-indulgent. They do not need to attend to themselves; the world does it for them.

Taking care of our bodies allows us to craft worlds where we all belong, where the necessity to constantly insist on our right to be here is not a constant burden, leaving us empty and exhausted. We have to return to the site of invention, where we can create a world that reflects us, instead of being crushed by a system that is designed to exclude us. We have to hold our work to the light, to make it visible. We have to conjure up communities of practice, recalling the past, moulding the present and passing on a future.

Bearing in mind the concept of citation as feminist memory and acknowledgement to those who came before, leads me to pay tribute to the work of prominent filmmakers Cheryl Dunye[4] and Michelle Parkerson[5]. These iconic black women were my lecturers at Temple University in Philadelphia, USA, during my MFA degree (2003-2006).

Being taught by fellow black, queer, women had an immense impact on my experience of graduate studies. They nurtured my developing creative practice and clearly influenced the direction of my work. Cheryl Dunye commenced one of her first classes in cinematography by drawing a rectangle on the white board and posing the question, "*Here is a frame. What will you put in it?"* I have never forgotten this question.

[4] Cheryl Dunye emerged as part of the New Queer Cinema movement of young film and video makers in the 1990s. Dunye's work is defined by her distinctive narrative voice. Often set within a personal or domestic context, her stories foreground issues of race, sexuality, and identity. Dunye's narratives are peppered with deconstructive elements with characters directly addressing the camera and making ironic references to the production itself. The effect of these devices, and of Dunye's appearance in her films and tapes as herself, is to blur the distinctions between fiction and real life,
(https://cinema.indiana.edu/about/visiting-guests/visitor/cheryl-dunye).

[5] Michelle Parkerson is an American filmmaker and academic. She is an assistant professor in Film and Media Arts at Temple University and has been an independent film/video maker since the 1980s, focusing particularly on feminist, LGBT and political activism and issues.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelle_Parkerson)

In my home, I always paint a white rectangle on a wall, to remind me of this quote and to continue inserting images into a frame, which has largely excluded images of black, queer, women with disabilities.

Dunye's early work explores the intersections between queerness and blackness. She explains the essence of her artmaking during this period as a responsibility. "In making my early work, it was because I had to.. Nobody else was making it. I just had to do it, and it was received for the people who needed to see it, who also needed to be recognized and acknowledged and live their lives" (1988:1).

Welbon (2001:140) explains that Dunye's decision to include herself in her work was a political act of self-affirmation. "Black lesbian artists are able to make themselves subject in a world which has always considered them object, an other, rendering their once invisible selves, visible". The frame in this sense therefore becomes a holding space for our images, as we discover our way through entering the frame, with our lived experience, knowledge and wild imagination. This process of finding our way through, is a process of research through artistic practice.

Welbon (2001:135-136) recalls Dunye's experience of attending a screening of Spike Lee's *She's gotta have it* (1986), followed by a Q&A session, where one of the black lesbians in the audience noted that the character of Opal Gilstrap, the stereotypical Black lesbian in the film, "did not reflect the Black lesbian worlds they lived in". Lee countered this by suggesting that she construct her own images, thereby creating different representations. This was a turning point for Dunye: an open challenge to fill the frame through her own practice.

By switching on the camera, we switch power relations.

In an interview for *Black Camera,* Michelle Parkerson (1988:5) states,

> I think we tend to make productions about other black women first, which is thematic. We tend to turn the camera on ourselves first because our story hasn't been told. It's only been recently that black women have been making films; thus our story has only recently been told cinematically and realistically. I think that there's an intuitive way we approach the subject, which is usually ourselves. But I think that women film and video makers, black film and video makers, tend to approach our experiences, concerns and history with more complexity than Hollywood industry. There's a lot more humanity in the way we approach black and female subjects in films and that is because we are that race and that gender.

Cheryl Dunye's practice also insists on turning the camera on herself. Her early work is characterised by this, leading to an experimental way of working and culminating in the first phase of her filmmaking with the canonical *The Watermelon Woman* (1996).

Dunye (2018:1) reminds us that, "I do think that the personal is political. Everybody's personal is political. Everybody's story is important —not just my own". Upon reflecting on her practice, Dunye (1996) explains that she initially intended to make a documentary about African-American woman artists "And then it hit me. Why did I keep searching for stories outside myself? I finally turned the camera on myself and started talking".

I clearly recall Dunye sharing with me that the reason why she was able to make her early work, was because she was the only person practicing film while at Rutgers University. She used this opportunity to foster a site of invention: finding her own way of navigating genre and making work through experimenting with ideas, within a community of artists.

It is important to note that although these filmmakers often worked alone and with small crews, they were ultimately always part of a larger community of creatives, leading to collaboration. The making of Dunye's *The Watermelon woman* (1996) was done on a small budget and with a crew of friends and willing collaborators[6]. Parkerson (1993:3) also notes the importance of working within a community. She says, "I certainly see my primary reason for making films and being involved in filmmaking as being a part of the African American community, in terms of being a woman and expanding the body of work that women direct around women…".

Dunye (2020) coined the term 'dunyemantaries' for her early works, which she explains as films that blend the personal and the political, documentary and fiction, comedy and drama, to challenge cultural and social norms through her unique autobiographical lens.

[6] Producer of the *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), Alexandra Juhasz, called on her community of activist graduate students and filmmaker friends and asked them to pitch in (Welbon, 2001:144)

When asked if black film aesthetics exist, Parkerson (1988:6) posited that it is ultimately the approach to the subject matter that creates a black aesthetic, posing vital questions such as who are the subjects, who speaks in the film, who determines the action of the film and which issues of concern are raised and for who? Perhaps Parkerson (1987:2) is less concerned by the packaging of what a black aesthetic means, by claiming that "film isn't something nebulous that happens on the West Coast with a couple of white guys. You can do this. You can make your own version of a history that has been manipulated and mutilated and stereotyped since films began. You can begin to retell history"

Dunye's methods of experimentation and Parkerson's interest in character documentaries were certainly my earliest influence in filmmaking, which has had a traceable impact on my creative practice from the early days of Temple, until now.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been taught by these remarkable women as they shaped my filmmaking and introduced me to a community of artists.

During a class with Michelle Parkerson, we were introduced to the work of experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, which ultimately contributed to the style of my film *Whole - A Trinity of Being* (2004).

Experimental work opens itself to such a range of interpretation that the viewer is able to collaborate with the maker in order to create meaning. After seeing the films of Stan Brakhage, I could hardly wait to get home to my desk to write down thoughts that were beginning to spin in my head. My first film *Whole − A Trinity of Being* (2004) was also influenced by the work of Maya Deren. I had been working on a screenplay called "Conversations with Frida Kahlo" and reached a point where the work felt stagnant. It had been a difficult screenplay to write, as I tried to capture my journey of healing after being paralysed at the age of 24 and eventually turning to the spirit of Frida Kahlo for strength and courage to continue. I found that there was too much in my journey to be able to capture in a narrative screenplay and that most of it could be said without words. This was a leap for me to take, after being so attached to words all my life.

I began my process by jotting down images of myself that I did not see reflected in the media and from there, ideas developed. If I had not been exposed to this form, I

would have stayed with the familiar territory of narrative structure and would not have opened myself to experimenting with my ideas in this specific way. This reaffirmed something I believe in and that is that as filmmakers, we always need to keep our spirits open to new experiences and possibilities. The way will always be open to explore. It is when we are stuck in certain ways of thinking that we begin to close down the way for ourselves and the work we do.

Diary Entry: September 10, 2003, Philadelphia

Shelley Barry, Diary (2002-2007)
Just returned from MFA Colloquium class and was introduced to the concept of experimental film which has got me quite excited! And inspired! Images are coming into my head at such a rapid pace that I want to write them down before I lose them and while this moment has me in its grip.

Damn, I just realised that my project, the one I have spent so long writing, i.e. Conversations with Frida Kahlo, is not necessarily going to happen the way I had planned – now I'm thinking, to hell with the whole long story etc. I can say this ***without words****, which for a writer, is quite a thought! I'm going to do lots of cuts of various images: feet on footplate moving over different textures of ground, shots of sleeping, laughing, crying, cooking, bathing, writing, just ordinary things but quick shots, shots of the angle of things, people at eye level and what they appear to be. Distorted angles, an empty chair in a road or various places, signs and symbols related to wheelchairs, flying down a ramp, touching myself, being touched, dancing, feet, holding the camera, looking through the lens, looking straight at the audience, returning the gaze.*

The first time I watched a Stan Brakhage film, I clearly remember sitting in the dark, feeling confused by all the images flashing in front of me. I realised that I was waiting for a neat narrative structure to make the aim of the work clear. Instead, I decided to surrender to experiencing the images and became drawn into a space that intrigued me. The earlier work of Brakhage, spanning a thirty year period, was made in his home in the Colorado Rockies, where he filmed his family and domestic environment. In an interview with Ganguly (2002:139), Brakhage explains that this period of his filmmaking "celebrated the glories of the undramatic present".

These films gave glimpses into an intimate world, where, for example, Brakhage filmed his wife, Jane, giving birth. Later in his career and after the end of his marriage, he shifted his focus to working with the material of film itself. It is clear to me that his work is influenced by French filmmaker, Man Ray's *Le Retour a la raison* (1923), for example. Dixon and Foster (2002:3) explain that Man Ray experimented with various materials on the film strip itself, such as sprinkling black pepper and salt on the celluloid, or even using thumbtacks.

This period of Brakhage's creative practice was also inspired by hypnagogic feedback:

> I started painting on film primarily to create a corollary of what I could see with my closed-eye vision or hypnagogic vision because there was no way I could get the camera inside my head or create a photographic equivalent of those shapes streaming across my closed eyes...I tried all kinds of things – scratching on film, even baking it.. (Brakhage, cited in Ganguly, 2002:147)

The quick succession of shots described in this journal entry above was also inspired by the work of Dziga Vertov. Vertov rallied against the dominant style of Soviet cinema and bore a strong impression on experimental filmmaking. Here, his Kino-eye manifesto functioned, not only as a clear guide for working, but was the engine of a particular politics of filmmaking.

> I am kino-eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. I move apace with the guzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane. I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies… My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you. (Michelson, 1984:79-80).

The images created by Vertov created a new way of seeing and in particular the way in which his images were combined through the editing process, resulted in "the fresh perception of the world" he wished to deliver to the screen.

Sergei Eisenstein, an influential figure in cinematic history and proponent of collision montage, aptly describes the power of the juxtaposition of diverse images in edited sequences:

> Everybody who has had in his hands a piece of film to be edited knows by experience how neutral it remains, even though as part of a planned sequence, until it is joined with another piece, when it actually acquires and conveys a sharper and quite different meaning than that planned at the time of filming (Eisenstein, 1949:10).

I entered the MFA film programme at Temple University with no prior knowledge of editing. This was a severe disadvantage because most of my classmates knew how to edit. A fellow classmate offered to teach me editing in one afternoon in "6 simple steps". I have been editing ever since, although several other steps were discovered along the way and I prefer working with an editor now. Those early days of editing were truly engrossing and I often lost track of time while captivated by the possibility of linking shots and deriving different meanings from the combinations that were generated.

In the final segment of *Whole − A Trinity of Being* (2004), I composed a series of shots in quick succession, with the rhythm of a drumbeat. These shots were snapshots of my life and also functioned as visual metaphors. Several shots were juxtaposed in order to create meaning, for example, an image of myself trapped on stairs with wheelchair wheels unhinged from the body of the chair, signifying inaccessible architecture, was followed by a POV shot of moving down a ramp, indicating ease of movement.



Image 6: Video Sequence: Entry (2003)

In *Re:Incarnation* (2018), two static shots, combined, create a moving shot by using a long cross-dissolve.



Image 7: Video Still: Re:incarnation (2018)

The following words of Vertov underline what I consider to be essential to my practice: “Everyone who cares for his art seeks the essence of his own technique” (Vertov, cited in Michelson, 1984:70).

Experimental cinema became an accessible form of filmmaking for me, leading to the exploration of new ways of seeing, resulting in a discovery of my own technique.

While exploring the aesthetics of cinematography from the perspective of a wheelchair user, the work of Japanese filmmaker, Ozu, informed a radical break in cinematic conventions seemingly embraced a pedagogy of access for me.

Taylor (2018) articulates the notion of a pedagogy of access as being,

> …an evolution of Freire’s Pedogogy of the Oppressed (1970). It is the next evolution of the most effective means by which to empower the voices of the Oppressed across the broadest spectrum of the global human population. Inclusion occurs at the cost of exclusion. Inclusion equals representation. Representation equals access. A Pedagogy of Access therefore exercises inclusion over exclusion for maximum results.

Although Ozu was possibly not aware of the implications of creating a pedagogy of access, the fact that his films were often shot from the perspective of someone seated on a tatami mat, providing a different angle from which to capture the moving image.

Donald Richie (1974:105) explains that “Ozu’s films are shot from an almost invariable angle… The camera rarely pans... Fades in and out are seldom found in his later films and dissolves are very rare; usually the sole punctuation Ozu allows himself, particularly in his post-war pictures, is the straight cut”.

The first line of my film, *Re:incarnation* (2018), states, “Perhaps all I have come here to do, is to simply sit still”. Being seated taught me to be centred and to literally be in the near-constant position of a meditator. Sitting evolved from a place of discomfort to the seat of power. It taught me the gifts of silence. This translated to the frame, as I often do not feel it is necessary to move the camera too much. I prefer to meditate on the image and the landscape of the human face.

Ozu’s work affirmed the significance of the face in cinema. He regarded the face as essential to character and often preferred his actors to only move their eyes in order to express emotion (Ozu, 1974:152).

The stationary camera creates a frame that can be meditative. One is forced to contemplate the image, which can open up another encounter for the viewer. The succession of the quick cut from image to image has become familiar film grammar. A frame that is more meditative, such as the work of Ozu, requires the viewer to contemplate the frame for a longer period. In the experience of that contemplation, a viewer may notice something within a frame that may otherwise have escaped their attention. Similarly restricted movement from the site of a wheelchair can result in a frame that is still and meditative. This may therefore not always be a limitation for both maker and viewer, but an invitation to linger and discover something more.

Filmmakers have been using the wheelchair as a dolly throughout the history of cinema. However, when the wheelchair is not a tool for an inexpensive dolly, but the means in which the filmmaker explores the world and captures images, the ‘dolly’ is no longer just a tool but an embodied vehicle of creation.

The ‘restriction’ of being in a wheelchair became a starting point from which to make work. By making work from a seated position, I am able to counter exclusion, with inclusion, by being both the maker of a frame and facilitating entry into a frame.

As an actual dolly, a wheelchair is not particularly effective unless the ground is smooth. This is rare. Ground vibration ultimately creates a shaky dolly shot.

I have used this shaky dolly shot in *Whole − A Trinity of Being* (2004) purposefully, to indicate that the ground is in fact not a dolly track but an uneven terrain to cross over.

Ahmed (2017:281) aptly claims:

> Access is pedagogy. Adjustments have to be made to spaces and buildings because they assumed certain bodies; the pavement might have to be adjusted to support the passing through of those in wheelchairs; a podium might have to be adjusted to support those who are not the right height; a timetable might have to be adjusted to support those with child care responsibilities, and so on.

Ahmed (2017:371) also recalls a time when she had fractured her pelvis and used a wheelchair and crutches for two months. She describes the attitudinal and physical barriers she encountered during this time, explaining that:

> I learned how disability is worldly because I came up against the world; the different ways you are treated, the opening of doors, concerned faces, the closing of doors, rigid indifference. But most of all, I came to feel the little bumps on the street, little bumps I had not even noticed before. Those little bumps became walls that took a huge amount of energy just to get over or to get around. Slow; heavy; down. The little bumps I had not noticed before.

The way in which Ahmed describes coming up against a world, is the daily encounter one experiences as a person with a disability. The world is a bump, a wall, designed to exclude. By making films from the site of a wheelchair, I counter the exclusion by creating frames that includes the bumps and lays bare the walls.

With regard to the mechanism of the dolly, it is possible to sometimes create a smooth shot when the ground allows and this belies the fact that it is shot from a wheelchair. In *Re:incarnation* (2018), it is not evident that the movement towards the temple is shot from a wheelchair. In *Entry* (2003), however, the journey to the ramp accompanies the sound of wheels scraping, thus making the association clearer.

Japanese filmmaker, Ozu, used the dolly shot sparingly in his work. The reason for this was twofold:

- He did not want to use conventional grammatical elements of cinema.
- The low camera angle was not conducive to using a dolly because of being unable to find a dolly that could accommodate the opened tripod legs (Richie, 1974:113).

After several attempts of trying to create a tripod fitted to my chair, I decided that I had no real use for the tripod and instead used a cinesaddle[7], which was a far more comfortable way of balancing the camera on my lap. Relinquishing this essential tool of filmmaking freed my movement and felt less cumbersome.

One of the ways in which we find our way through making our own worlds, is through inventing adaptations that make our work possible. Kahlo not only used an adapted easel while working in bed but also worked with another invention during periods where she was able to stand and sit. This consisted of an aluminium pipe stand from floor to ceiling, that allowed her to slide her easel up or down, adjusting it to the necessary height needed for painting (Herrera,1983:300).



Image 8: The cinesaddle

[7] Cinesaddles are filled with high tech foam balls that push the sides of the bag tight up against the camera to hold it rock steady. The interior foam balls also absorb vibration and provide a stable surface for the camera. https://www.cinekinetic.com/

Experimenting with the unknown

The community of artists discussed thus far all have one practice in common: they found ways in which to reinvent the image by using an artistic practice that relied on invention.

The ways in which these artists engaged with their work and created are acts of refusal as articulated by Tina Campt (2019:83) who defines refusal as:

> …a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise.

From Kahlo's suspended mirror above her bed that was used for her to paint, to Dunye's revisioning of history and Ozu's insistence on reframing dominant composition, there is a clear thread of disruption, reframing and the refusal to accept the status quo. The seemingly diminished subjecthood becomes generative as Campt proposes and this presents the possibilities of alternative realities. The act of refusal is therefore an act of power and an ability to see beyond the frame of the system, to seeing things with a new perspective.

In the teachings of Zen Buddhism, there is the concept of approaching life with "beginners mind"[8]. The wind on your face or the taste of tea should be approached as if you have never experienced it before. Everything should thus be appreciated and interpreted anew. The community of artists who have held and inspired my own work seem to advocate a 'beginners mind'.

Engaging in artistic practice as a filmmaker is not about rehashing the rhetoric of what can be studied at film school, but to work towards finding your own language, which becomes the expression that provides structure for your ideas. Mistry (2017:15) offers the following essential theoretical proposition, namely, that "... the act of questioning the stability of knowledge paradigms lies at the heart of artistic

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoshin

research". This proposition echoes Maharaj (2004), who refers to artistic research as experimenting with the unknown, as mentioned in my introduction.

The nature of artistic research is at essence, a process of discovery, of experimentation and of working outside the value chain of canonised knowledge. Artistic research invites instability, values process over product and questions the singularity of theoretical and methodological approaches.

The artist should be able to communicate their own interpretation of the world and in so doing, create a world that will be easier to thrive in for many. The domain of the personal has the potential of becoming the domain of the community. In a letter to her friend Lucienne Bloch, Kahlo writes, "Since I came back from New York [in 1935] I have painted about twelve paintings, all small and unimportant, with the same personal subjects that only appeal to myself and nobody else" (Kahlo, cited in Herrera:1983:443).

When writing this, Kahlo was clearly unaware of the immense impact her "small and unimportant paintings" would have on the history of art, how she would inspire millions and become an icon. The key thrust of her creative practice was disobeying the conventions of what art should be and daringly imprinting her own distinctive mark. The making of her art was an act of healing and a way of reinventing herself, with a focus on the process of making, as opposed to an end product or destination. Similarly Dunye explains that she only began to consider her own experience as a valid subject for her practice once she had seen the work of Michelle Parkerson and Marlon Riggs: "I realized I could exist on the screen and began using my life, my sexuality and my family and friends as subjects in my work" (Dunye, cited in Welbon, 2001:136).

These practitioners embody Ahmed's (2017) articulation of experience as a resource to generate knowledge. In a similar vein, Spry (2001:725) writes this complementary observation:

> Coaxing the body from the shadows of academe and consciously integrating it into the process and production of knowledge requires that we view knowledge in the context of the body from which it is generated. I must be ready to walk the talk of my scholarship by putting my politically marked body on the lines of the printed text.

By generating knowledge, we can find our way through unaccommodating worlds by constructing our own realities and placing value on our existence. We were not expected to be here. And in Lorde's words, "we were not expected to survive" (Lorde, 1978).

In this next chapter, I present a case study on the making of a virtual reality piece, which demonstrates how, through the process of creative practice research, we can expose an unaccommodating world by investigating the alternative reality that can be made possible beyond a virtual world.

360 DEGREE SHOT: *HERE*: A case study in creating Virtual Reality



***HERE* (2019)**
https://youtu.be/4KwJsgdsTm4 (view in 360 degrees)

Entering the Frame

As explained in the introductory chapter, the aim of this exegesis is to consider the ways in which my practice of filmmaking has developed from a set of recurring limitations. The sustained limitations have invited new ways of working from the location of a wheelchair as a site of being seated, but liberating, in exposing the contradiction of the wheelchair as a restriction. I situate this study within the context of experimental cinema practitioners and the practice of art as a form of citation. The following case study in creative practice blends the genres of experimental cinema and virtual reality, using the wheelchair as a site of production.

In this chapter, I will employ the tool of analytical autoethnographic research, which, as defined by Anderson (2006:373), refers to research whereby the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. This approach will be coupled with storytelling. By interweaving text from the script and through a process of reflection, reflexivity[9] and analysis, I intend to shape and reveal the core ideas derived from the making of *HERE* (2019). Literature on virtual reality has been reviewed for the purpose of situating it within a human rights framework as it pertains to disability.

[9]Reflexivity refers to an act of self-reference where examination or research bends back on, refers to, and affects the object/unit/person initiating the study. Researchers not only reflect upon their feelings and subjectivity but are also mindful of their connection to the research situation and their effects upon it and must follow up with documenting this.(Dyll,2018:144)

My first encounter with VR was at a pop-up shop at 27BOXES, Melville, Johannesburg, in 2017.[10] A man, whose name I cannot recall, hosted the pop-up shop with his wife (who later informed me that VR made her dizzy and nauseous and she wished he was not as obsessed with it.)

They were selling VR experiences and Cardboard viewers[11]. The moment I put on the headset and the tiny pop-up shop transformed into a virtual world, where I did not have a body, was metamorphic. I recall slowly moving my wheelchair around to view the orb in which I had voluntarily inserted myself, slightly fearful that I would fall off the edge of an undiscovered earth.

After an initial VR experience, the VR enthusiast, looking upon my face filled with weightless wonder, announced “You may as well blow your mind”. With these words, he introduced me to Google Tilt Brush and within seconds, I was painting poetry in 3D and physically entering rushed, experimental haikus. By the time I left that store, with a cardboard camera on my lap, I knew I wanted to make VR.



Image 9: Cardboard Viewer[12]

[10] 27BOXES is a cutting-edge lifestyle centre based in the heart of Melville, Johannesburg. https://27boxes.co.za

[11] Google Cardboard is the company's affordable answer to a virtual reality(VR) experience: It's a free app that works alongside other VR apps to let users effectively turn their phones into a VR device. Accessed on 28 February 2022. https://www.businessinsider.com/google-cardboard?IR=T

[12] Image from: https://www.amazon.com/Google-87002823-01-Official-Cardboard-Brown/dp/B01MQ5J5J4

The tiny print that wrote the book

The context of *HERE* (2019) is rooted in disability politics. My entry into disability politics began at a kitchen table at a house in Lansdowne, Cape Town, in 1996. I had been discharged from hospital for just a few months and worked as a secretary to Professor Martin Hall at the University of Cape Town. I was so grateful to have a job but could not believe that after all my years of study I was typing letters about archaeology and wetting the office floor with an uncontrollable bladder.

It was difficult to hold on to hope during those heavyhearted days. At 25, my glaringly bright future had diminished into a pinhole I could barely see through. Yet somewhere within always lurked my bouncebackability, which has thankfully not yet failed me.

On that particular day at the table in Lansdowne, I settled to read the *Mail and Guardian* newspaper, scanning the classifieds section for employment. Everything seemed far out of reach, until a tiny advert, typed in the minutest font, caught my roving eye. An organisation, *Disabled People South Africa*, was looking for a parliamentary policy officer to manage media and communications. In my mind the sighting of this rare clue to the future, is accompanied by angelic choral music. I made proclamations along the lines of 'Eureka!' and a few weeks later I was interviewed for the job. I was barely audible at this point, still trying to become accustomed to my new speaking valve. I was thin, pale and did not know the slightest thing about disability except that I was clearly included under that huge umbrella of marginality. Also, I should note here, that the position required a driver's license, which I did not have. I had travelled in minibus taxi's like millions of South African commuters, where I was hurt, as many have been.

A week later, while typing another letter in my secretarial mode, I received the call that propelled my life into an alterable direction. The job was mine. I would be receiving a computer, mobile phone and oh yes, a car, which I will have to waste no time in learning how to drive. And one last thing, I need to start immediately as there is a meeting I have to fly to in Johannesburg the next day.

Professor Martin Hall welcomed news of my resignation, knowing that a) I was not a particularly good secretary and b) that more was destined for me. (He was most likely also slightly relieved to return to a puddle-free office.)

I sat in the hotel room the next day, after my flight from Cape Town, staring out at the transcendent sunset of Johannesburg, grateful for a new beginning that destiny (and some tiny print) had suddenly thrust upon me.

The story of the South African disability rights movement has been in every notebook of ideas I have ever had. I've written several funding proposals over the years for an epic documentary series but this has subsequently not yet materialized. *HERE* (2019), however, draws upon the need for highlighting an invisible history and struggle. Through the medium of VR this history could not only be made visible but displayed on 360-degree screens that hover in the sky over a country whose streets silently bear witness to the history of people in wheelchairs, crutches, canes, toyi-toyi'ing.

Prominent disability scholar, Mohamed (2018:31), explains that:

> While most theorists of disability attend to the effects of living with disability in societies where disabled people are denigrated, it is important to also think about how disability is maintained and produced by inequality. In South Africa, the production of disability is racialised as most black people are impoverished... Disability is frequently a materialisation of social inequality.



Image10: Marching for Freedom
Photo Credit: Elvis Ntombela

This largely obscured history should still be told on an epic scale. For the purpose of my foray into VR, it was a starting point to telling the story of the hidden figures of the liberation movement in South Africa.

> For every person that died in the struggle, three others became disabled, and it was largely from this pool of injury and anger that the leadership emerged of Disabled People South Africa (DPSA), the organization that has spearheaded the disability rights movement in the country. These were also the conditions that gave rise to a mass movement of disabled people, which at its peak must have numbered 10 000 to 12 000 activists, working in unison and speaking with one unsilenceable voice. (Rowland, 2018:31)

Tieche reminds us that although VR may utilise new technology, that ultimately the age-old concept of a good story is still as relevant as ever. “It gives us another storytelling tool in the filmmaking repertoire...As a writer, you want to stay relevant. In virtual reality, you still need to have a good story to tell. Virtual reality is just another way to explore that story” (Tieche, cited in Luthy, 2017).

The medium of virtual reality provided me with storytelling methods I would not have been able to articulate in a more traditional medium. The experiant shares a world and communal space with persons with disabilities, with some level of engagement, which is sadly often not a reality in a non-virtual world.

Through virtual reality I could alter, even in the smallest way, the window of the tiny television set, in the Intensive Care Unit, that had reminded me of the largely invisible body with a disability, in the media we consume.

Bringing HERE into Being

Electric South, a non-governmental organization (NGO), promoting VR in Africa, put out a call for VR proposals in 2017. Applicants were required to submit story ideas for an opportunity to be selected for the prestigious VR lab. At the time, I was living on the 28th floor in the Johannesburg central business district (CBD) and during the countless days of observing the city from the summit of a skyscraper, I considered

what a transformed city would look like and imagined painting over a city in Google tilt brush, creating ramps and lifts and curb cuts. [13]

The impetus of this idea led me to thinking about artists with disabilities and wondering how they would transform a city through art. This premise set in motion the small beginnings of my VR experience, eventually titled *HERE* (2019).

The short film experiment, *Out of Reach* (2018), is the precursor to *HERE* (2019), as I slowly evolved the concept, the seed of the story. The Electric South VR lab was aimed at introducing six African artists to develop their ideas further, with a group of professionals working in VR both locally and internationally. Jessica Brillhart, somewhat of a VR Superstar and working with Google at the time, was a source of immense inspiration and knowledge about this nascent visual form.



Image 11: "Why am I here?"
(Brillhart, 2015)

The core of virtual reality is experience and presence. That's it. It's fundamentally about being somewhere, which makes it significantly more about "*Why am I here?*" (Brillhart, 2015). Tricart (2018:2) defines virtual reality (VR) as "an ensemble of visuals, sounds, and other sensations that replicate a real environment or create(s) an imaginary one. A person using virtual reality equipment like a VR headset is able to 'look around' the virtual world and sometimes interact with it". The notion of experience and presence provided by the vehicle of VR, seemed to be a suitable

[13] Google Tilt Brush is an application developed by Google that allows the user to paint in 3D space. https://www.tiltbrush.com

match for the content I was exploring in *HERE* (2019). By placing the viewer in a world where they are surrounded by persons with disabilities, they are nudged from the gaze of ableism, which essentially negates the existence of the 'imperfect' body and instead, invites the viewer to witness and be part of a Universe where they do not have to avert their gaze.

Peter Rubin (2018:15) observes that, "Presence is the absolute foundation of virtual reality, and in VR, it's the absolute foundation of connection—connection with yourself, with an idea, with another human, even connection with artificial intelligence". *Presence*, innate in VR, seemed to be a perfect counterfoil to the *absence* of the bodies of persons with disabilities in the world of human interaction.

Prominent disability activist, Judith Heumann (2019:7) makes this pertinent statement:
"It is no longer acceptable to not have women at the table. It is no longer acceptable to not have people of color at the table. But no one thinks to see if the table is accessible".
Brillhart (2015) explains that in VR, a director can assume "probable field of view" where the viewer will place their attention (denoted by the red dot in a triangle in the image). In *HERE* (2019*),* I wanted to populate this field of view with artists who had various disabilities, in order to represent a wide range of lived experience.

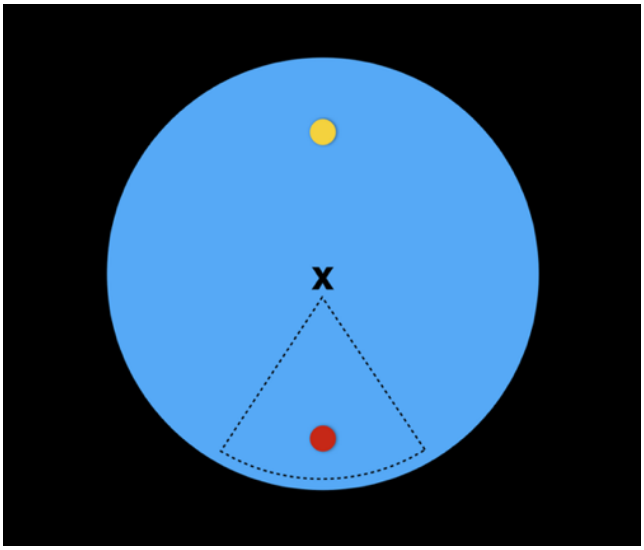


Image 12: "Probable field of view"
(Brillhart, 2015)

The process of casting commenced with a call through the Disability Rights Network[14] in South Africa, calling for artists with disabilities to email me and tell me about themselves and their art. The final cast consisted of singers, rappers, dancers, an activist and CEO of Artscape theatre, a television content producer, a deaf actor and an entertainment sign language interpreter.

These were actual artists with disabilities, not actors pretending to be artists. Too often, able-bodied actors are used to perform disability, interpreting their assumptions of a body with a disability. In a report for the Ford Foundation on the state of media as it relates to disability, Judith Heumann, notes that,

> Disabled people in film, on television, and in other forms of media should reflect the reality of our lives—our joys, sorrows, struggles, victories, and the everyday issues we all face. Only then will we be able to effectively counteract the themes of our being invisible or seen only as incapable, a drain, a tragedy (2019:6).

A character with a disability is repeatedly used as a narrative device, according to Mitchell and Snyder (2014:xi), who claim that disability itself becomes a narrative prosthesis. These prominent disability scholars cite Robert Murphy in the preface of their book, referencing his formation of the term 'disability creep' which is the phenomenon of the identity of disability cancelling out any other aspects of an individual's identity. This problematic but pervasive perception and representation is but one of many ways in which the effective on-screen representation of persons with disabilities is obstructed.

Are we really HERE

In *HERE* (2019), the viewer is placed in my body, seated in a wheelchair. It is not completely immersive in that the viewer is able to look down upon this body and therefore not necessarily feel that they are within that body. This distancing technique was not intentional but rather as a result of a high camera rig attached to my

[14] The South African Government in White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015) states that "Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (DPOs) are membership-based organisations that are managed and controlled by persons with disabilities. They constitute the representative voice of persons with disabilities based on their membership demographics. DPOs support the development of persons with disabilities' capacities by providing them with a common platform to exchange and share their experiences and build a common voice." The Disability Rights Network was an ensemble of DPO's and activists.

wheelchair. It does however obliterate any sense of the viewer's own body in that world and is an invitation to what being in a wheelchair may feel like, as the angle of view is a seated one.

The viewer finds themselves in a wheelchair wearing pants made of celluloid. The CBD skyline of JHB is in the distance. It is a day in summer, 2019[15].

Bakk (2019:171) notes,

> VR technology has so far been mainly considered as a kind of new form of film which goes one step further: you are no longer a disappearing invisible witness like in mainstream film, who is allowed to be everywhere in the world in order to understand what the film is about, but you are actually in the centre of it.

Heeter uses the psychological term interoception, to describe the awareness of bodily sensations (Heeter, cited in Rubin, 2018). From observing viewers engaging with the experience of *HERE* (2019), many of them displayed discomfort or unease while seated in a wheelchair. Some participants were interested in the VR experience but not in the act of sitting in a wheelchair. Many, who ventured forth with the experience, expressed relief when they stood up from the wheelchair, an act of leaving behind an experience that they were not confined to.



Image 13: Viewers experiencing HERE at the National Arts Festival, Creativate exhibition, 2019

[15] I intersperse the script of *HERE*, throughout the chapter, to illustrate and analyse the process of creative practice with the theory about virtual reality. For ease of reference for the reader, extracts from the script of *HERE* (2019) are italicised and in green font.

Heeter further argues that "The combination of VR and interoception leads to…. 'embodied presence': not only do you feel like you're in a VR environment, but because you've consciously worked to integrate your bodily sensations into VR, it's a fuller, more vivid version of presence" (Heeter, cited in Rubin, 2018:102). For able-bodied persons, this presence may be an uncomfortable experience, to briefly inhabit a body that is unfamiliar and 'bound' as per the general lexicon. For others, the experience was unique and elicited compassion and empathy for those who use wheelchairs within barriered terrain. I have to note here that I am basing this on random observation and conversations with those who experienced *HERE* (2019) and not on a formal study of the reflections of experiants. The two reactions mentioned above, reflects the key responses I observed.

The Empathy Machine

VR has been lauded as a technological tool that can be used to evoke empathy. La Valle (2019:15) explains that,

> the first-person perspective provided by VR is a powerful tool for causing people to feel empathy for someone else's situation. The world continues to struggle with acceptance and equality for others of different race, religion, age, gender, sexuality, social status, and education, while the greatest barrier to progress is that most people cannot fathom what it is like to have a different identity.

In a Ted Talk in 2015, Chris Milk described VR as the ultimate empathy machine, allowing users to enter a world and empathise with characters within that world. He refers to this 'real life' experience as 'truth', where experiants are not simply watching through the proverbial cinematic window but have in fact entered the room. Suzann Keen counters Milk's reference to truth, noting that empathy in a VR world requires a shared perspective by the reader/experiant[16] and the VR designer/author (Keen, cited in Fisher, 2017:3).

While experiant-empathy certainly is complex and not a singular experience for viewers, there is mixed empirical evidence of VR enabling empathy significantly more than two dimensional viewing. Researchers at Stanford University used both

[16] The experiant is someone who is experiencing Virtual Reality.

traditional and VR media content, in order to evoke empathy for people who were homeless. The conclusion of the study indicated that although VR seemed to provide experiants with slightly more empathy than traditional viewing, after eight weeks, there was not much difference in attitudes between the two groups of participants, although VR users signed a petition to improve the lives of those who were homeless. The study therefore concludes that VR seemed more "effective at improving attitudes towards specific social targets and motivates prosocial behaviours" (Herrera, Bailenson, Weisz, Ogle & Zaki, 2018:33). The researchers, however, are clear to point out that the evidence of VR eliciting empathy is limited.

A different study with 24 university students in Australia produced results which revealed greater indicators of empathy than two-dimensional environments (Schutte & Stilinovic, 2017:710). Empathy, as it relates to VR, is on the whole a new field of study and research but results are certainly not conclusive to support Milk's argument of the 'empathy machine'.

HERE (2019*)* does not aim to evoke empathy. The problem with empathy as it relates to disability is that it circumvents a human rights framework of situating disability. This deters society from the need to advocate for equality as opposed to having an intimate experience in someone else's reality. In VR one can easily fall into the trap of wheelchair simulation, where experiants can try a wheelchair on for size and realise some of the physical and attitudinal barriers faced by persons with disabilities. This is often used in classrooms or in the corporate world where it is lauded as an experiential educational practice, providing learners with newly found empathy for persons with disabilities (Williams & Dattilo, 2005:144). The following remark was made by a student, after the experience of a few hours in a wheelchair during a study at Pennsylvania and East Carolina University:

> I was a little nervous when I first got into the chair, but I am glad I did. It taught me to treat people with disabilities like normal people. You shouldn't stare at them or act in any different towards them because they are normal people just like you. I believe that if more people could be forced to participate in this experience, people with disabilities would be more accepted in our society (Williams & Dattilo, 2005:144).

Researchers at Stanford University refer to a different study which uses methods of blindfolding to simulate blindness. Their results indicated that although there was some empathetic concern, unlike the response above, it ultimately led to reinforcing stereotypes about blindness (Herrera, et. al, 2018:3). I do not see any particular value with this kind of simulation and believe that it patronises the lives of persons with disabilities. After all, human rights is not a simulation. *HERE* (2019) is not beckoning for Milk's 'empathy machine'. *HERE* (2019) is an act of witnessing the past by acknowledging the role played by activists fundamental to the liberation movement in South Africa, while unveiling a future that exists in animation as it is still so far from our current reality. Schmerah Passchier acutely observes, "*Here* takes you deeper into a journey of consciousness, where the struggle for freedom is also a struggle for bodies who do not conform to the so-called norm." (Passchier, 2021)

*A woman, **ACTIVIST-ARTIST**, wearing a calliper and holding a loudspeaker in her hand walks across the grass, surveying the land, while signs appear in the air. She goes to the edge of the city, her back turned to the viewer and sings a few operatic notes to the city as if to wake it up. She then starts reciting the poem below, at first facing the city and then turning around to face the viewer.*



Image 14: Marlene Le Roux/ ACTIVIST-ARTIST
HERE (2019) Photo credit Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel

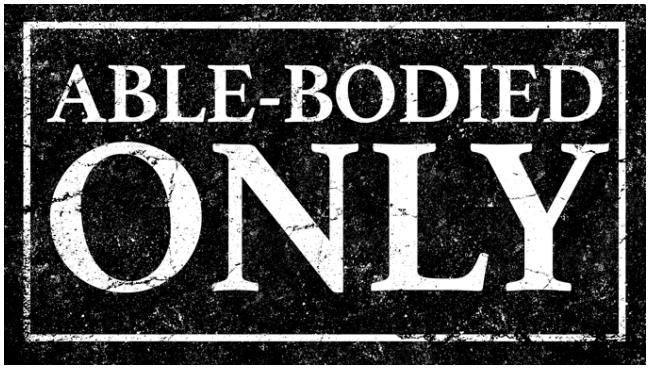


Image 15: Able-Bodied sign
HERE (2019) Animation credit: Kombo Chapfika

One of the signs appearing in the sky overhead claims “Able-bodied only”. I reference apartheid semiotics by indicating that much of our country holds invisible signage indicating no-entry signs for persons with disabilities. As much as signage during the apartheid era, indicated where bodies were allowed to enter, persons with disabilities are barred from entry on the basis of structural inequality.

In 2011, I wrote the following poem, to illustrate this sentiment.

untitled

dedicated to persons with disabilities

our world is strewn
with invisible signs
“no entry”
“keep out”
“able-bodied only”

there are no museums
holding our history of force removals

there are no land courts
no land claims/no title deeds
no reclamation

there
was
no
historic
date
when
the
bulldozer
came

The city is a result of architectural design that confronts different bodies in different ways. For persons with disabilities, these designs discount bodies that differ from the so-called norm. This disregard is evident in the structures of society from design to economic and social exclusion. In her article on *Body and disability in architectural research*, Catharina Nord references Dahlin, as follows: “Encounters with architectural objects penetrate our lives, they enrich and disturb our actions. Whether we want to or not, we confront them with our bodies and our senses, as well as with thought and feeling” (2008:3).

Another key VR tenet is POI (Points of Interest). Brillhart (2016) explains that, “by identifying points of interest (POIs) in a world, and by making bets on where a visitor’s attention will most likely begin and end, a creator can craft a path — or multiple paths — through the overall experience.”

In *HERE* (2019), persons with disabilities **become** the points of interest. This is in itself a radical departure from how persons with disabilities encounter their daily lives, where they face marginalisation and are by no means the point of interest or attention in society, except, more often than not, when they are either being pitied or patronized. Pointon and Davies note that characters with disabilities abound in the arts but that their portrayal tends to be negative (Mitchell & Snyder, 2014:19). The counterpoint, argued by social realism, calls for positive portrayals of persons with disabilities (Mitchell & Snyder, 2014:24).

The notion of positive versus negative portrayal of persons with disabilities in film and the arts in general, still holds the danger of stereotyping. I believe that it is the lack of our diversity as persons with disabilities on screen and an authentic portrayal of our lives in its varying complexities, that needs to be addressed.
The movement from periphery to centre is central to the content of *HERE* (2019). The title itself claims presence and articulates a need for acknowledgement and witnessing of bodies that differ from the norm. This witnessing is not limited to the recognition of bodies with disabilities but also functions as a visual vehicle of observing the claiming of space and the acknowledgement of our bodies and history.

In choreographing the blocking, I placed the performers in a semi-circle within a 180 degree view. Initially the performers are frozen in a haze of colour, except for when they are called upon by the lead poet, who urges them to join the activation of changing the city through art. The poem *"Call to Art"* is the summoning call.
As she speaks, some phrases of her poem float into the air and move over the city. The poem is a call for artists with disabilities to appear.



Image 16: Be part of this story. HERE (2019)
Animation credit: Kombo Chapfika

Call to Art

if we want
to be part of this story
we have to write our own chapters
we have to paint
our revolution across blank spaces
we have to dance
and stomp upon our space on the land
and make it sacred
we have to cross a stage
and speak from the centre
not the side, not the back
we have to capture
our images
And rid ourselves from the tinshaking-streetsitting-pity-me-pictures we have to embroider our history

on coloured cloth
and wave flags of freedom
we have to name this apartheid
crush it with our art
prise open a new way
with our pens/brushes/feet/voice/cameras embracing the space we carve
the place we sculpt

The Travelling Poet, 2011

The woman completes the poem, the words over the city fades and she turns to face the viewer. She looks at the viewer and surveys the landscape expectantly. A sign language interpreter performs the poem above the city.

The recognition of sign language in our constitution, was a crucial provision for the disability rights movement in South Africa.

> The constitution contains a second provision of which we can be proud. Having recognized eleven official languages, it goes on to name sign language as a further language to be developed. Even though we would have preferred to have sign language recognized as an official language, the existing wording does have important policy and funding implications. In actual fact, sign language is today often referred to as 'the twelfth language' of the country, even in official circles.
> (Rowland:2018:13)

As a filmmaker, it was essential for me to make the VR experience inclusive, by incorporating sign language into the narrative itself and by including actors who are deaf. However, I am aware that in its current version, the VR experience is not accessible to viewers who are blind. As an activist, I recognize that this is something that needs to be addressed with urgency regarding all my work. I am working with fellow activist, Shakila Maharaj, on ensuring that all my films have audio-description, therefore making the viewing of my films accessible to those who are blind.

As the ARTIST-ACTIVIST completes reciting the poem with passion and gusto, there is complete silence.

We hear someone singing a tune with no particular words and then A SINGER in a wheelchair fades in on the right of the ARTIST-ACTIVIST.

The ARTIST-ACTIVIST jams with the SINGER's wordless song in a moment of collaboration.

SINGER: The notes come to visit me because I help them travel.

As she says this, animated musical notes travel off her pages and dance around in the air. They both stare at all the musical notes floating around while she sings various notes that do not follow any order or specific song. As she sings, the notes move upward. They both watch the notes floating in the air.



Image 17: Marlene Le Roux (ARTIST-ACTIVIST) and Charne Hugo (SINGER). HERE (2019)
Photo credit: Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel

Although this action is occurring in the probable field of view, the viewer may of course look elsewhere. In *HERE* (2019), the viewer, within a 180 degree field of view, will see all performers with disabilities. Upon looking up, they see the perfect blue sky of Johannesburg on a sweltry summer's day. If they happen to look behind them, there is an empty field, which will later turn into a grassy catwalk for the Model/Herald [17] character. The Model/Herald character symbolises the person who is able to capture the attention of others bringing news of an oncoming event, as per Campbell's archetypal attributes for such a character.[11] If the viewer looks down, they will look upon my body seated in a wheelchair. The camera acts as the head and our eyes as the lens, as you look upon the body wearing silver pants, representing the silver screen.

[17] https://knowyourarchetypes.com/herald-archetype/
Accessed on 22 February 2022



Image 18: A camera on my head: 360 Insta-Pro VR camera
Photo credit: Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel

Tracing the shifts in attention a viewer may follow is part of the projection a VR filmmaker has to anticipate. Brillhart (2016) suggests that,

> It's also important to note how a visitor's attention shifts during an experience. By identifying this shift, we can essentially get our in and out points. In traditional editing, an in-point is where a shot begins and the out-point is where it ends. In VR, the in-point is where a visitor's experience is most likely to begin and the out-point is where it's most likely to end.

HERE does not use traditional in and out points, as Brillhart references. It is all done in one take. The shift of a viewer's attention needs to, therefore, rely not only on visual cues but on aural cues that may encourage them to follow the sound and in doing so, allow the story to unfold.

Unlike the geometrical dimension of a frame, VR operates in a circle. The 360-degree view captures everything simultaneously, therefore altering how a director prepares and shoots a scene. We completed 12 takes on the day of production. Any error made during a run, required the entire ten-minute piece to begin again. Crew were hidden behind hills and under grassy patches.

Microphones were placed on the bodies of the actors and sewn into their costumes. The shift from rectangle to circle, was a significant adjustment to make as a filmmaker, accustomed to working with a two- dimensional frame. As Brillhart (2015) explains, "...the frame is a hard thing for creators to let go of mentally and we find ourselves asking a lot of the wrong questions as a result, like *How can we force the visitor to look where we want her to look?* or *How can we discourage a visitor from looking somewhere else.*"

Writing for VR requires the awareness that one is writing for six dimensions. "A virtual reality film consists of six different planes (as opposed to the traditional two-dimensional film): front, back, right, left, up and down." (Luthy, 2017). In retrospect, I would fill the VR world with more elements, especially in the area behind the main field of view. Even though this was a space that the Model/Herald character uses as her stage, the area becomes somewhat empty when she crosses over into the area in front of the main field of view. In future, I would like to create a pop-up gallery of images of several persons with disabilities, particularly honouring all the activists, in Africa and beyond, who have fought relentlessly for freedom.

There are three other dimensions active in VR as posited by Carrie Heeter, namely "personal presence, environmental presence, and social presence", (Heeter, cited in Rubin, 2018:127). VR thus operates in all directions in a 360 degree view but also calls upon the experiant to be aware of their own body, the virtual space which they find themselves in and the social presence of being noticed by others.
The experiant thus registers the existence of persons with disabilities and will be confronted with images that may not fit into their stereotyped perceptions.

Beats from a human beatbox is heard. Two BLIND RAPPERS have arrived on the other side of the ARTIST-ACTIVIST. They wear t-shirts with the slogan "NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US", the slogan of the disability rights movement.

RAPPER 1 opens his hands and some notes travel off his fingers.

RAPPER 1 We found some notes
RAPPER 2 The beats send the notes further. Watch...



Image 19: Rappers Diketso Letlatsa and Sbonelo Nthembu
HERE (2019)
Photo credit: Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel

HERE (2019) relies significantly on the use of aural cues to shift the attention of the viewer to various characters, owing to the fact that there are no edits from one scene to another. The viewer thus has the choice of looking anywhere within the 360 degree view and as a creative, I relied mostly on aural cues[13] in order to shift attention.

[13] Brillhart (2015) explains that "cues can be pieces of music, a sound effect, a haptic response, a color shift, an animation, etc. How intensely noticeable these cues are is entirely up to you."



Image 20: Dancers Jamming
HERE (2019)
Photo credit: Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel

As they create beats, the notes change shape and form and start attempting to make patterns. The ARTIST-ACTIVIST notes that a new artist has arrived. TVWOMAN has appeared and wears a celluloid outfit, reflecting that of the viewer. She busies herself with setting up a tripod and camera. Everyone stops and stares at her.

TVWOMAN:

Keep going. This is for our archive.



Image 21: TVWOMAN: Zizipho Soldati HERE(2019)
(Photo credit Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel)

A red light on her camera begins to flicker. Throughout the rest of the piece she will be moving her camera to various points, capturing the action from different angles. At this stage a semi-circle of artists has formed.

The ARTIST-ACTIVIST repeats fragments of her poem. The SINGER sings. RAPPER 1 raps. RAPPER 2 hums and conducts.
The group of artists have actually created a funky, wordless tune. As they sing, the visual notes combine in various configurations.

As the motley crew starts jamming, a HERALD, who has been walking from a distance appears. She is wearing Afrocentric fashion. She is majestic.

HERALD:

There are many other people on the way.



Image 22: HERALD/MODEL: Anneline Mathiba
HERE (2019) *photo credit: Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel*

The viewer essentially becomes a central figure in this gathering, as the circle forms around this character. The character which the viewer inhabits is a foil to the TVWOMAN character. This is indicated by the matching material of their silver costumes, denoting the silver screen.[13] They both carry lenses that capture the presence of persons with disabilities.

In *HERE* (2019), the viewer is immersed in a world only populated by persons with disabilities who have gathered to affect change through art and the proposition of a redesigned accessible, equitable Universe, freed from the apartheid of confinement and ableist spatial planning. Tricart (2018:89) notes that virtual reality offers three unique elements to the narrative, no matter if cinematic or interactive VR is used:

[13] When English speakers first started attending "the pictures" in the 1910s, movie screens were coated with reflective metallic paint, resulting in a silver surface to better display the projected images. Available at https://www.dictionary.com/e/silver-screen-terms/
Accessed on 28 February 2022

immersion, presence, and embodiment. These special attributes are the reason one would choose virtual reality over any other art form to tell a story.

By being in a wheelchair, the viewer embodies a body that is seated and feels the vulnerability of being carried over uneven terrain to the edge of the city. “Embodiment can be separated into three subcomponents: the sense of self- location, the sense of agency, and the sense of body ownership. Embodiment is the most powerful contribution of virtual reality as it tricks our senses into thinking we are physically present in the virtual environment, not just a mental projection” (Tricart, 2018:89).

Immersion allows the experiant to look in any direction and to see the ground and the sky. They have been teleported into a new dimension through a VR headset. Storytelling therefore relies on a different set of dynamics. “In film, storytellers can use close-ups, tracking shots, or they can rack focus to the POI. In VR, a relatively accurate positioning of the sound in the 360° sphere and in depth can achieve that, and will bolster the realism and the immersiveness of the scene” Tricart (2018:113).

This sense of immersion enables the experiant to feel present in that environment. They become part of the landscape. The experiant is also aware of being present in the environment, thereby being a witness to action and being part of an event.

The group is pleased that more will be joining them.
The ARTIST-ACTIVIST spots a group coming in and they all look in the direction of a DANCETROUPE approaching.

Their arrival is quite noisy as they excitedly approach. The troupe consists of people with various disabilities.

The LEADER of the dance troupe carries a music speaker which he puts down on the ground. He presses play and an upbeat dance-song plays. The troupe dances to this song in choregraphed fashion, while everyone watches them excitedly. The dance comes to a euphoric halt and everyone cheers.

ARTIST- ACTIVIST asks the DANCE TROUPE LEADER: How was your journey?
DANCE TROUPE LEADER
Bumpy...



Image 23: Dancer: Musa Motha
HERE: 2019
Photo credit: Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel

LEADER We heard the call. Where do we start?
ARTIST-ACTIVIST
Well we start by remembering. And change what hasn't changed. THE ARTIST-ACTIVIST turns to the TVWOMAN and says:
Show them. THE TVWOMAN whips out a remote control from her pocket and points it at the sky. Everyone looks up.

Big screens appear in every direction of the 360 degree space showing images of the disability rights struggle in SA, a struggle that ran parallel to the broader fight for freedom.



Image 24: Screens in the Sky Mock-Up
HERE (2019)
Credit: Stephen Abbott

The film screens change to white noise and the screens fade to black.

ARTIST-ACTIVIST
Let's start. We're heading that way.

CUT TO:

The viewer is now at the edge of the city along with the other artists. The buildings begin to be outlined and reconfigure as animation. The characters transform into animated versions of themselves as does the viewer's own body.





Image 25/26: City and Characters become animated
HERE (2019)
Animation credit Kombo Chapfika)

Stars, comets and meteors populate the sky. A flock of one-winged birds fly by. The city continues to morph and change as they travel on this imagined super-highway.

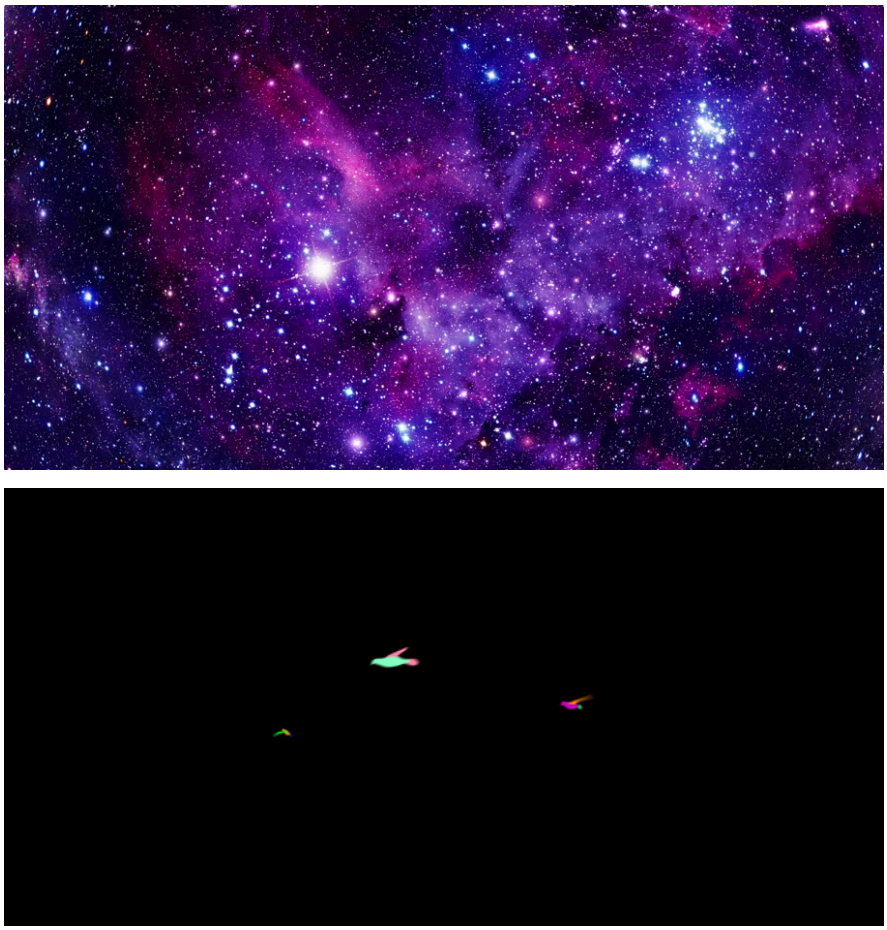


Image 27: Galaxy and One-winged birds
HERE (2019)
Amination credit: Kombo Chapfika

The alternate galaxy presents a utopian world where all bodies move freely and are treated equally. Anti-utopia has been aptly referred to as the “the architecture of discomfort” or the architecture designed not to be realized at all as reflecting the mission and ethics of architecture” (Riot-Sarcey, Bouchet & Picon, 2003, cited in Saltoğlu & Aydın Öksüz, 2016). In this respect, establishing an architecture that separates the community from its unique varieties and creating a single type of individual, is more of an anti-utopia rather than utopia. The designs created today are in fact the reflection of a discomforting architecture within an unjust world.

Everyone witnesses the possibility of *change as the city becomes accessible. The animation fades out and they all are at the same point where they were at the edge of the city.*

THE ARTIST-ACTVIST holds out her loudspeaker again and shouts to the city! WE ARE HERE!

Everyone cheers.

HERE!





Image 28: Rehearsals: We are Here!
HERE (2019)
Photo credit Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel)

This is when the characters all form a circle around the viewer, looking the viewer in the eyes, with encouragement, returning the gaze.

All fades to black and the title of the film appears. HERE.

In *HERE* (2019), the characters directly stare at the viewer. As Rubin points out in reference to the type of VR that *HERE* (2019) is part of: the viewer may be part of the story, existing in the frame, acknowledged by other characters but ultimately has no agency. “The story can interact with you—not the other way around. So the question becomes: Is there a way to bring you into a virtual experience to increase that social presence, so that you feel even more a part of the fictional world?” (Rubin, 2018:140). As the creator of *HERE* (2019*),* I am inviting experiants into the possibility of a new world, which they have the power to co-create and change. The agency of the experiant is therefore less about being able to interact with the VR environment but to question the status quo and ask themselves why the animated world is just a projection of a Universe, as yet undiscovered.

Experiants shared with me that the moment they felt most vulnerable was when their wheelchair was picked up and carried over bumpy terrain. For me, this was a significant discovery I wished them to have, simply because at its root, disability, in the context of the world we live in, is ultimately the experience of vulnerability.

By making *HERE* (2019), I am asking viewers to witness the bodies that are excluded and to acknowledge their presence. The way in which persons with disabilities are represented in *HERE* (2019) is joyous and celebratory, which is rare to see. As suggested by Bakk (2019:175), “in making worlds, art works primarily relate to the modality of the possible rather than the actual, they are presentations rather than representations”.

By placing the viewer in the centre of a circle of persons with disabilities, I am trying to create a space where persons with disabilities are looking at the viewer and celebrating their power *with* the viewer, while returning the cinematic gaze. In *HERE* (2019), both the viewer and the subjects have the power to transform the modality of the possible to the actual. Once society is able to view disability as a human rights issue, we are able to depart from the architecture of erasure.

Saltoğlu & Aydın Öksüz (2016:58) problematise architectural design titles such as “disabled friendly architecture” as being seen as the fulfilment of social responsibilities. I concur that the term ‘disability friendly’ is borne out of a patronising attitude that would never be tolerated by any other marginalised community.

Imagine a society that referred to their environment being ‘Women friendly’ or ‘Black friendly’? It infantalises persons with disabilities in the same realm of reference as Child-friendly, which goes to the heart of the attitudinal barrier, placing disability outside the purview of human rights. In her journal article, “Disability Matters!” Mohamed (2018:31) reminds us that, “The onus is on all of us to find better ways to unthink how we learn to be fully human to each other“.

By using the tools of analytical autoethnography, I have demonstrated that as a researcher, I have acknowledged that I am a visible social actor within the text, indicating that “feelings and experiences are incorporated into the story and considered as vital data for understanding the social world being observed.” (Anderson, 2006:384)

A society that allows us to be more fully human to one another as it relates to disability, will surely be more intolerant of the injustices that persons with disabilities face on a daily basis, will surely comprehend that disability is not about parking spaces and ramps but an entitlement to the full spectrum of human experience. In the soundscape of the utopian galaxy in *HERE* (2019), there is the distinct sound of children playing and laughing, freely moving. This is often not the experience of either a child or an adult with a disability. This is not something to be pitied, it is something we have the power to question and to change.

VR and Disability

HERE (2019) draws a parallel between apartheid and disability, drawing attention to the many comrades who also fought for liberation from an oppressive regime. It also calls for a transformation of a world that still consciously excludes people who are *HERE*!

As Heumann (2019:6) posits, “Much attention has been given of late to the need to increase diversity and representation in the media, but rarely is disability referenced as part of that diversity”. This is not a unique phenomenon to South Africa, but is a global one. Some countries make a more conscious effort to be inclusive of the bodies that are represented in media, but most countries still exclude persons with disabilities. Mitchell and Snyder (2014:xii) argue that persons with disabilities in

media, film specifically, are not invisible but are in fact hyper visible owing to their disabilities, who "overencumber the visual scene" embedded in a narrative where "we show how we conquer our disabilities or how they eventually conquer us".

With the advent of VR as a new form of technology, an opportunity arises to shift the narrative. VR has far-ranging potential for persons with disabilities and is largely being used in a medical context and also for educational purposes. However, fictional narratives that are emerging in storylines are still perpetuating stereotypes, where disability is being portrayed within hospital environments.

The VR film *Defrost* (2015),[15] directed by Randal Kleiser, takes place in the year 2045, when liquid nitrogen is commonly used to freeze patients until remedies for their illnesses are developed. The film follows the experience of Joan Garrison as she wakes up from her frozen state after thirty years. She reunites with her family but the reunion is bittersweet, as the passage of time has caused her loved ones to become strangers (Giardina, 2019).

Another VR film, *Catatonic* (2015)[16] , produced by Dark Corner studios, describes the VR experience as follows in their publicity:
"Strap yourself in and take a ride that's unlike anything you've ever experienced before. In this pioneering VR horror film, you step into the shoes of a mental health patient in a wheelchair who is being welcomed into a sinister psychiatric hospital".

Both VR experiences frame the person with a disability as a victim of circumstance, doomed to a life of misery in a hospital. *Defrost* (2015) uses a mannequin without a head as their rig, allowing the VR viewer to look down upon a lifeless body in a wheelchair who is stared at by her able-bodied family who 'lost' her to a stroke 30 years ago. The able-bodied peering at the emergent defrosted body in a wheelchair is essentially the main driver of the narrative. Media has often been used to reinforce prejudice against persons with disabilities (Mitchell & Snyder:2014:18).

[15] Trailer available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J76IoaMTKkc
Accessed on 22 February 2022
[16] Trailer available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkwiQjLMsQA
Accessed on 28 February 2022

While viewing *Catatonic* (2015), directed by Guy Shelmerdine, the experiant is strapped to a wheelchair and led through a horrific 'mental health asylum' where people with mental health conditions appear as deranged phantoms, designed to scare and cause potential harm, which is often the stereotype of those with mental health disabilities in the filmic landscape.

In contrast the VR film, *The Other Dakar* (2017)[17], directed by Sely Raby Kane, integrates persons with disabilities into the narrative, as part of Senegalese society, and places a short statured man as one of the leads who delivers a speech about art, which is inspiring. Other characters in the narrative include people with albinism.

It is ultimately the supremacy of one body over another, on a screen where we all belong, that *HERE* (2019) intervenes in. From the examples above, it appears that Africa may just be veering into narrative shifts in fictional VR representation of persons with disabilities. These narrative shifts indicate inclusion in society, which is a radical departure of the ways in which persons with disabilities are generally presented. As Mitchell and Snyder (2014:60) note:

> There is a politics at stake in the fact that disability inaugurates an explanatory need that the unmarked body eludes by virtue of its physical anonymity. To participate in an ideological system of bodily norms that promotes some kinds of bodies while devaluing others is to ignore the malleability of bodies and their definitively mutant natures.

The Other Dakar (2017) and *HERE* (2019) provide a significant counterfoil to films such as *Catatonic* and *Defrost*, whose narratives continue to 'other' persons with disabilities as aberrations of the 'norm' in society.

[17] Trailer available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OhCMhYMazA
Accessed on 28 February 2022

Exiting the Frame

There are millions of people with disabilities in this world. We exist. What are the implications of not showing bodies that are actually here on this planet outside of a context of being pitied or needing to be taken care of or shown as tragic victims of circumstances and/or sites of ridicule?

The exclusion of the participation of so many people affect the kinds of stories that are being told and the way they are being told and about whom they're being told. This severely limits cinema because ultimately viewers will experience a white, heterosexual man's story from a white heterosexual man's point of view and we have ingested that kind of cinema all our lives, not only in this country but across the world with the pervasive influence of Hollywood, which is largely white, male, heteronormative and able-bodied.

HERE (2019) is a call to action, a call to art and therefore a call to cinema to create an inclusive visuality and imaginary. In the words of Jessica Brillhart (2015), "we are the builders of worlds, the makers of storytellers. What an amazing concept."

If we open up the screen to other bodies and other stories, we will have a much richer, diverse, complex, interesting cinema that is more representative and that reflects the world we actually live in.



Image 29: Dolly Grip: 360 degree Insta-Pro camera rig
HERE (2019)
Photo credit: Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel

CLOSE UP SHOT: Small, invisible moments

The creative practice of Jonas Mekas



Image 30: Jonas Mekas [18]
Photo credit: Craig McDean

Celluloid Ancestor

In 2019, Professor Jyoti Mistry asked me if I was familiar with the films of Jonas Mekas, adding that, “I think this old Lithuanian man may really interest you”. Mekas had just passed on in January of that year. When I met him, through his work, I experienced the same feeling I had had in the discovery of Frida Kahlo… a fellow artist had reached across time and reverberated through my Universe. My reaction to witnessing his visual experiments led to a physical sensation I can only describe as *fluttering*. I felt as if my entire body fluttered with the thrill of his images finding their way to my screen in South Africa.

This is the power of Art.

[18] https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/jonas-mekas

Mekas, originally from Lithuania, purchased his first Bolex camera, upon arrival in the United States in 1949[19]. This signalled the beginning of a long and illustrious career in filmmaking, writing and distribution. Smulewicz-Zucker (Mekas & Smulewicz-Zucker , 2016:ix) describes Mekas as "the defender and promoter of the American avant-garde cinema movement, which gradually came into existence from the 1950's to the 1970's". This movement essentially transcended the narrative confines of mainstream cinema, with a focus on exploring the possibilities of the medium.

Elder (1993) explains that Mekas became the spokesperson for a radical, individual, personal, avant-garde cinema.

MacDonald (1997:346) notes that Mekas' style of filmmaking countered the dominant aesthetic of Hollywood films. Instead, the work of Mekas is not known for carefully composed shots and often presents the viewer with a flurry of images. His body of work, often characterised in the genre of the diary film, is the hallmark of his style.

Russell (1999:xv) notes that the form of diary filmmaking, working with autobiographical material, is a means of politicizing the personal and micropolitics of everyday life which becomes "the terrain across which subjectivity is inscribed."
The work of Mekas is a subjective engagement with the camera and environment, not dictated to by the formal grammar of cinema but instead proposing an individual response to a way of seeing and creating.

However, it is important to note that Mekas was not unanimously regarded as the avenging Angel of independent, experimental cinema. George Kuchar (1992:49), for instance, was of the view that Mekas's position as one of the few writers on underground films gave him more power than what might have been merited, and therefore attracted criticism from some quarters of mainstream Hollywood cinema: "He was one of the very few people writing about underground films in that period and so he had a lot of power and was feared, respected, and hated."

[19] Jonas Mekas was born in 1922 in the farming village of Semeniškiai, Lithuania. In 1944, he and his brother Adolfas were taken by the Nazis to a forced labor camp in Elmshorn, Germany. After the War he studied philosophy at the University of Mainz. At the end of 1949 the UN Refugee Organization brought both brothers to New York City, where they settled down in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.) http://jonasmekas.com/bio.php accessed Aug 24, 2021

The practice of Mekas also emphasised building community, writing about and archiving the films of others. His life's work leaves behind the founding of the Anthology Film Archives[20], which still exists, preserving the history of the most prolific experimental filmmakers from around the world. The majority of these filmmakers worked with lightweight cameras, using any equipment available to them, in order to pursue artistic expression and to preserve fragments of their lives.

On Method: Finding places to play

Hannula, Suoranta and Varden (2014:22) refer to the term methodological abundance, whereby there is the acknowledgement that traditional approaches of data collection have become far more pluralistic and more innovative methods are encouraged.

They articulate the following:

Here and there we hear voices indicating that "the" way of doing artistic research has been found and that the age of insecurity and methodological vacillation is—or at least should be—over. While we certainly appreciate the desire and even the need for some stability in a field that is under considerable internal and external pressure, we see methodological abundance not only as a general fact but as something positive for artistic research itself.

This proposition of methodological abundance therefore suggests that artistic or creative practice research offers a multiplicity of possibilities which resists methodological approaches that are one dimensional, fixed or firmly established.

[20] Anthology Film Archives is an international center for the preservation, study and exhibition of the essential works of film and video/landmarks in the history and aesthetic development of media as personal expression. In addition to its preservation and exhibition programs, Anthology gathers and maintains film and video collections, publishes books and catalogs and assembles traveling film and video exhibitions that are presented at museums and art centers around the world. See .http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/

In 2016 and 2017, Jyoti Mistry was an artist in residence at the Netherlands Film Academy, where she created new work, taught graduate students and consulted on a PhD in the arts. (2017:5).

This period led to a publication, which raises some interesting perspectives on creative practice research, that I employ in the writing of this chapter.

In a conversation between Mieke Bernink and Jyoti Mistry in 2017, Bernink suggests that “Artistic research is not just a tool but a mentality, or better, an attitude or ethos. It means context and pedagogical approaches are then geared towards creating a setting, a playground, in which a process can unfold”. (2017:7).

Although Bernink is making reference to a specific project that students were involved in with Mistry, the notions expressed above regarding artistic research is something I find resonance with. By considering artistic research as being a playground, where processes can unfold, is a liberating concept. There is no one-dimensional approach to artistic research. It is ultimately the journey of individuals, who can draw on the collective, while creating processes leading to an often unpredictable outcome. This is a different experience for every artist. Art is a place to play, to collaborate, a place to get your hands marked with clay or paint or to find new ways of moving, layering the air with music, capturing an image or shaping a piece of writing.

Artistic research does not have a particular set of methods that will lead to the necessary outcome but as Bernink (Mistry, Bernink & Hoogenboom, 2017:6) reminds us, “artistic research is always, fundamentally, a work in progress.”

Mistry (Mistry, Bernink & Hoogenboom, 2017:8) suggests that artistic research “invites epistemic disobedience and challenges the hierarchical transfer of knowledge through an open dialogue and questioning. It’s a process that encourages epistemic instability, which by definition implies that the outcomes are unpredictable”.

In one of the first books about artistic research, Hannula and Suoranta (2005:5) explain that artists carry out research about their surroundings, themselves, the instruments of their work and the linkages between these elements. They also claim that methodological diversity is a starting point for this kind of research (2005:24).

Using these notions as leverage for the writing and methodological exploration that follows in this chapter, I hope to take the reader through my process of creation.

In order to achieve this, I am uncovering my register of writing, couched within the concept of finding a place to play, where I approach the writing about the work with the same playfulness as making the work itself. Here, I define playfulness as being curious about the material processes of writing/making/thinking. Playfulness also allows me to write or work with my own voice and artistic expression, without trying to mould it to any set standards of academic expectation. I therefore use storytelling, poetry, imagined dialogue and an epistolary approach to set the stage for a conversation between Mekas and myself.

Tina Campt (2021:45/46) often uses an epistolary approach when engaging with art:

> Rather than writing about artworks, I spend most of my time at exhibitions and galleries sitting with and writing to them. I write to them about the feelings they solicit, the forms of discomfort they evoke, the emotional work they require and often demand, and the potentially transformative effects they have when we allow ourselves to inhabit those feelings and responses.

The epistolary method allows for reflexivity and reflection. Writing to, is also a form of writing back or looking back, for allowing the gaze to linger and to engage with the gaze in a way that it intimate, personal and honouring.

With this in mind, I draw on the films and philosophies of Jonas Mekas, as a springboard for creative practice, leading to an outcome which is more process orientated, as a final product is not pre-determined.

storytime

we will write
gather stories unto ourselves
and breathe them out

we will write
for our ancestors
for unborn children
for I and I

we will write
when all we have are words

words will hold us
words will sing to our tears
words will spell out our laughter

we pound unbeaten drums
we carve our words on the walls of time

we write ourselves into history

our mouths are open
our hands seek the labour
of our thought

listen.

hold your ears to the sky

for here begins
our once upon a time…

Shelley Barry *The Travelling Poet*, 2011

Dear Jonas[21]

Some days I find myself longing for time with you. Can we sit around the table at the Anthology Archives, share in a feast and talk for hours? Will you nod when I ask you for a tour of the Archives? May I hold your cans of film reels with absolute reverence, while you point to several other rows and rows of Super 8mm?
Shall we sneak out in the rain, find a hole- in- the- wall café and listen to poets?
Or how about a slow stroll around Central Park?
As I am about to continue with my musings, I hear your voice clearly. You stop me right there. "Yes, you say, let's do that."

It is very clear to me that you have arrived. And so, we head out.

We make quite a pair: you hunched over my wheelchair, pushing me through the streets of New York, while I carefully observe the ground for bumps and cracks we may trip over. Our conversation is interrupted with greetings from people who know you.



You introduce me as your new friend, visiting from South Africa.
We are invited to lunch, tea, dinner, and even a show later in the evening but you wave off all the offers, with a noncommittal gesture and we meander to Central Park. There is so much to say and you are not quite sure where to start except that you know how eager I am to listen. I hear you mumbling: "Where to begin?"
Laughing loudly, you exclaim, "There is so much! I am in the Spirit world now!"

I suggest that you tell me about being a filmmaker. My question has barely landed in the crisp air before you denounce the term entirely, reminding me that, "I am a filmer and not a film-maker. And I am not a film 'director' because I direct nothing. I just keep filming" (Mekas, cited by Elder:1993).

[21] All sketches in this chapter were created by Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel.

You offer to show me all your Bolex cameras when we get back but for now, there are streams of stories to tell. There is not enough time. There rarely is...

You start off by telling me how New York became your home after the UN Refugee Organisation brought you and your brother, Adolfas, to the city. You share the horrors of forced Nazi labour camps and how you still long for home in Lithuania. But you made a life for yourself here in New York and you prefer to focus on the present. Further questioning about that part of your life is met with a far-off stare.

You tell me to be silent a while as you need to concentrate on traversing the busy roads of New York City. Once we are safely over a crowded pedestrian crossing, you stop, ask me to make sure I clip on the brakes of my wheelchair, hurriedly flip off the lens cap of the camera around your neck and capture a child sitting next to his Mother, barely 4 years old, engrossed in filming a pigeon with his mobile phone. You chuckle and tell me that you are in fact a visionary as you saw this coming.
"Saw what coming?" I ask?
*You lean over and whisper in my ear, as if a dangerous conspiracy theory is being shared. And you tell me that you wrote an article in 1960 claiming that "films will soon be made as easily as written poems, and almost as cheaply. They will be made everywhere and by everybody. The empires of professionalism and big budgets are crumbling" (*Smulewicz- Zucker, 2016).

You follow up quickly with a disclaimer that you did not quite see the mobile phone as becoming such an expansive tool of production but you were always aware that technology is ever-changing.
I tell you that In Africa particularly, the advanced camera technology of the mobile phone has made filmmaking more accessible to people on our continent than ever before. The tool for us to make films is literally in our pockets and although economic access to purchasing a quality mobile phone is still not possible for many, it is ultimately Africa's most potent weapon of content creation. While you are absolutely fascinated by this, it is clear that having a camera constantly by your side, is not exactly something new to you. "I always carry a camera with me in order to capture or record a couple of images and sometimes conversations. Evenings, parties, dinners, meetings, friends…" (Mekas, cited in Cole, 2017*).*

I reply by asking if being spontaneous with your camera is a working method. "Yes of course!" you exclaim. "How can you capture the moment, if you have nothing to capture it with?"

We arrive at the park.

You seem rather pleased with yourself when you tell me that in your backpack you have some freshly baked bread from the deli near your house, a small jar of olive oil and the best ham I will ever taste. And a small carafe of fine wine. I burst your culinary-bubble, by letting you know that I am vegetarian. For a moment, your eyes widen,



"I have cheese too. Do you eat cheese?" As I nod, your face unfolds into joy.

"Then it's a cheese and wine party" you quip.

We st/roll to the bench in the park. I park my chair at the edge of the bench and you sit down with a sigh that betrays the fatigue of manoeuvring a wheelchair through the relentless crowds.



Soon you start unpacking your backpack, laying down an old cloth that looks like it may have been your mother's.

You busy yourself with unpacking the contents you had promised were encased in your bag. I feel hungry and happy, all at once.

After breaking off a huge chunk of bread, filling it with cheese and pouring a discreet splash of wine in an old Lithuanian silver chalice, you hand it over to me and ask,

" Now tell me why you came to find me. There are so many filmmakers and artists in New York you could hang out with on the other side. Why not Warhol? Basquiat? Langston Hughes? Why me?" I must add that you do not ask this with too much humility. (There is a sneaky smile that belies your question.)



I pause midway to my mouthful and say quite honestly, "I was really curious about your 365 day project."

You take a slug of wine, slap your knee with glee, and proclaim that it was a little bit of madness, if truth be told, but quite an adventure! One more slug of wine and a quick bite of your newly assembled sandwich and off you went with information!

"In 2007, I embarked on my largest video project…. the 365-Day Project, making one new video piece every day and placing it on my website. I did not miss a single day. It was a challenge because I was still doing many other things every day. I had to decide what I would videotape, tape it, go through all the technical processes until I placed it on the website the same day" (Mekas, cited in Kurchanova, 2015).

I agree that that must have been daunting and ask you what you enjoyed filming most. You waste no time in explaining:

"It's about my life and the life of my friends. It's very rarely that I go outside of my close circle. It does not matter what important event would take place, let's say, in New York. I have no wish, no personal need to film it. But I have a need to film small, almost invisible daily moments" (Mekas, cited in Kurchanova, 2015.)"

I tell you that this is why I am attracted to your work, especially once the COVID -19 pandemic struck the world. The recording of small, almost invisible moments is all that's available. You shake your head and tell me that you are so grateful that you left the earth-plane just a year before COVID-19 descended. We both agree that it was best that way. You tell me that the isolation would have been hardest for you. The joy of life is to be with others, to encounter others. You ask me to write this down, as Supreme Life Advice. I do. From here you launch into telling me about how artists in New York would gather at your home, watch movies, discuss art, spend time. Heaven is different but MUCH more pleasant, you say matter-of-factly.

You are quite clear that COVID-19 would have been a devastating experience for you and that there is not much you could have filmed in your apartment anyway: your cat, a fruit bowl, rain from your window. Not much. And you declare that you would probably not have survived COVID-19 because of your age. "I still can't believe I made it to 96!," you jest. At this point you have a revelation that displays the sentiment of relief on your face, as if it answered the question of why you had not been given more time here.

You gesture with half a ham sandwich, asking what my experience of it was.

I explain to you that with the advent of COVOD-19 and the lockdown measures implemented in South Africa and the globe, your work provided a vehicle with which to create cinema. Your oeuvre is an ode to the ordinary moments of daily life, without any predetermined structure.

You seem quite pleased with these accolades, tap your ear to indicate that you are listening and I feel emboldened to continue, although slightly nervous that I have your full attention.

I tell you that I have had to predominantly remain in my home environment since the first lockdown in March 2020 because of my comorbidities. Confronted with the minutiae of everyday life and the inability to engage in a broader world, the home environment became the space I encountered and the challenge was to document the same surroundings and create within a mostly unchanging frame of reference. I share with you that your 365 day project served as an inspiring option for filmmaking, when the world had somewhat fallen away.

You seem intrigued and I go on to say that I have always believed in working with manifestos and that you had a penchant for manifestos too. You smile, as if to infer that I have done my homework. But at this point you remain silent and allow me to continue. You look a bit sleepy but you lean back and enjoy a little shaft of light resting lazily on your face. At this point I realise that your face has changed. You no longer look as if you're in your 90's but have somehow transformed into a younger self, complete with a tweed jacket and hat. The video camera around your neck has become a Bolex.



Image 31: Jonas Mekas in action[22]

"So tell me about these manifestos of yours", you ask. I wish I had been more prepared to answer all your questions but I immediately launch into an epic tale of the manifestos I have worked with, especially in relation to my earlier films. As I am just about to start, you ask me: "Are you a teacher?"

" Yes," I reply. "I am a teacher."

You nod, "Well we have a bit of time. How about we go back to the Anthology Archives. There is a screen and a white board there. How about you tell me about this and teach me?"

"I'm not sure I have anything I could teach the great Jonas Mekas!" I counter.

You don't reply but within a quantum leap, we are at the Anthology Film Archives and I have a screen, projector and white board, while you are happily reclined in a newly-covered red faux leather chair, eagerly waiting for me to begin.

[22] Image 1: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Jonas_Mekas
Image 2: https://dmtalkies.com/jonas-mekas/
Image 3: https://mubi.com/films/diaries-notes-and-sketches

These are my lecture notes to you:

My work considers the relationship between physical space and creative practice from the perspective of a filmmaker with a disability. Here, I explore the possibilities of experimentation in storytelling with a camera that is accessible to me – from using a mobile phone to a 360 degree virtual camera, mounted above my head.

The films made over this four year period, (2018-2022), consist of a series of visual experiments, a virtual reality film and an experimental documentary. These films are embedded within the written text, inviting the reader to move between the modes of reading and watching.

Maharaj notes that it is essential to "keeping art practice-research open to dimensions of the unknown." (2004:45) The dimensions of the unknown is what has drawn me to creative practice research, as it is a different form of navigating knowledge production, leading to processes of unexpected discovery. The reader bears witness to these discoveries as I continue making work within a set of recurring limitations, while concurrently questioning the extent of these limitations.

As my creative practice included two years of a global pandemic, a core question of my filmmaking, namely "What can I make here?", was especially challenging. The key differences in creative practice are evident in the work made during the course of writing, most particularly in the making of my virtual reality film, *HERE* (2019) and an experimental documentary, *A camera on my Lap* (2022). The production of *HERE* (2019) took place in a pre-pandemic world, allowing me to create freely and in open public spaces, with several cast and crew. *A camera on my Lap* (2022) in contrast, produced during the pandemic, relies on the micro-location of the domestic space.

Other key questions that guided my creative practice during this time, have been:

- What is the experience and result of experimenting with storytelling with a camera that is accessible to me?
- What is the relationship between physical space and creative practice from the perspective of a filmmaker with a disability?

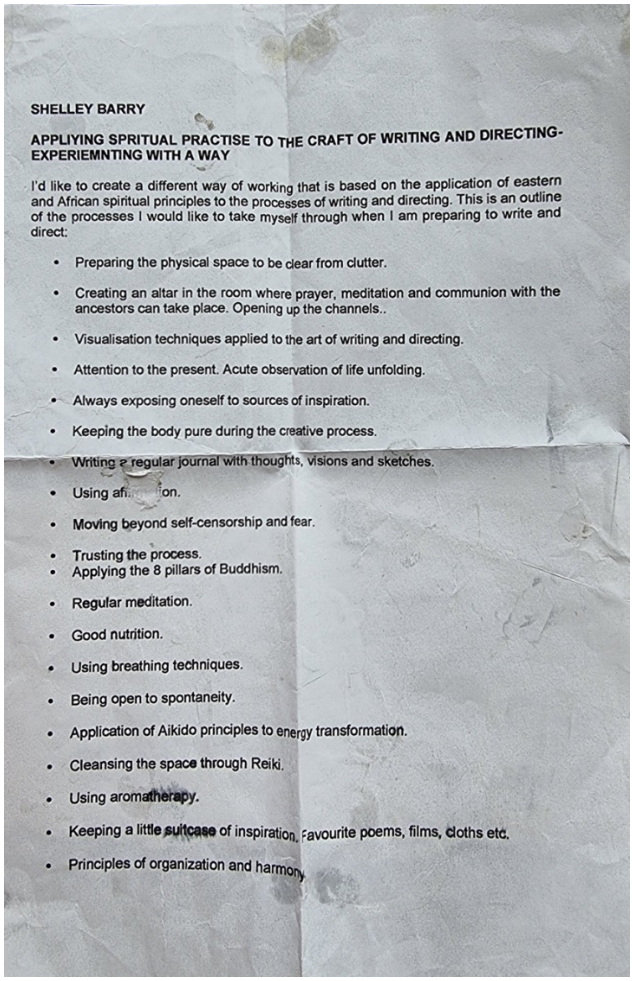
On Manifestos as a working method

Dogme 95[23] came to my attention during my first year at film school in 2003 and the conviction of purposefully creating parameters, sparked a working method for me. As Lumholdt (2003:140) notes: ”Dogme for Von Trier is less about picking a fight with Goliath over film etiquette than about a self-imposed self-referential vehicle for spurring his own development as an artist”.

The notion of a manifesto, impacted my work far more than the actual films by Von Trier. In an interview with Jorn Rossing Jensen in 1998, Von Trier reveals, “The manifesto was in itself without any value, but it states a couple of limitations which can be useful to work from” (Lumholdt, 2003:144).
Although I did not actually use the manifesto of *Dogme 95*, I created my own manifestos over time, which were used to create films.

The first documentation of working with a manifesto was written in response to a writing exercise we were requested to do at Temple University in Philadelphia, where I completed my MFA. We were asked to write a one page bullet point list outlining how we would prepare to make films.

[23] **Dogme 95** was a filmmaking movement started in 1995 by the Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, who created the "Dogme 95 Manifesto" and the "Vows of Chastity" (Danish: *kyskhedsløfter*). These were rules to create films based on the traditional values of story, acting, and theme, and excluding the use of elaborate special effects or technology. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogme_95



SHELLEY BARRY

APPLIYING SPRITUAL PRACTISE TO THE CRAFT OF WRITING AND DIRECTING-EXPERIEMNTING WITH A WAY

I'd like to create a different way of working that is based on the application of eastern and African spiritual principles to the processes of writing and directing. This is an outline of the processes I would like to take myself through when I am preparing to write and direct:

- Preparing the physical space to be clear from clutter.
- Creating an altar in the room where prayer, meditation and communion with the ancestors can take place. Opening up the channels..
- Visualisation techniques applied to the art of writing and directing.
- Attention to the present. Acute observation of life unfolding.
- Always exposing oneself to sources of inspiration.
- Keeping the body pure during the creative process.
- Writing a regular journal with thoughts, visions and sketches.
- Using affi[illegible]ion.
- Moving beyond self-censorship and fear.
- Trusting the process.
- Applying the 8 pillars of Buddhism.
- Regular meditation.
- Good nutrition.
- Using breathing techniques.
- Being open to spontaneity.
- Application of Aikido principles to energy transformation.
- Cleansing the space through Reiki.
- Using aromatherapy.
- Keeping a little suitcase of inspiration, favourite poems, films, cloths etc.
- Principles of organization and harmony.

Image 32: My first manifesto circa 2003

These initial musings about manifesto-led practice, led to a more formal manifesto, derived from the list above:

Manifesto Statement 1: Keep a camera in your bag

Before the advent of mobile phones as a production tool, small, consumer camcorders were ideal for keeping in a handbag. This provided me with the opportunity to be spontaneous and create work when I felt the need to. Life events and the subsequent making of art has been integral to my creative practice. Personal experiences such as navigating crowds on the streets of Manhattan, observing a two-year old at a Christmas party in Puerto Rico and the ordeal of a car accident in Maine, were based on footage recorded that was restructured into short films. *Str/oll* (2005) alludes to the negotiation of space in a city that predominantly caters for those who are able-bodied.

Experimental filmmaker, Rudy Burckhardt, who also made films on the streets of New York, aptly describes the witnessing of people moving as “inventing their own choreography in front of my camera” (Burckhardt, 1992:97).

This act of witnessing, possible with a camera, became an empowering tool for me, to craft a worldview I was rarely witnessing elsewhere. My camera became a means of being insistent on documenting a life that could have so effortlessly been erased and therefore it became a radical claim of entering the frame.

As Catherine Russell (1999:6) explains, “Autobiography levels the distinction between art and life, precisely because it turns the practice of shooting into an event within life and integrates the practice of making art into the fabric of everyday life.”

By making films that blurred the edges between life and art, I created a position of power for myself at a time when filmmaking often relied on significant budgets and working in crews. Experimental cinema provided a means within which to make work that reflected particular life experiences, with universal themes.



Str/oll **(2005)**
https://vimeo.com/418023641/774c781a9e



***Where are my Heels* (2005)**
https://vimeo.com/432803814/2c67334ded



***Cry like the Loons* (2006)**
https://vimeo.com/418015614/b56c67ae7b

Manifesto Statement 2: Take care of yourself and your craft

The body is a vehicle through which art is made. It is imperative to take care of yourself as an artist and to be completely committed to your craft. Experimental filmmaker, Maya Deren, for example, died when young and was notoriously malnourished. While she worked intensively on the pursuit of art and vehicles through which to make it, she sacrificed the most important vehicle of all: the body.

I believe that any method of creative practice has to take into account the value of self-care, an often neglected aspect of the process of filmmaking, particularly during a pandemic, when the prospect of death looms over us, with daily ticker-tape of the grim reaper's statistics.

In Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, she writes:
Living a self-conscious life, under the pressure of time, I work with the consciousness of death at my shoulder, not constantly, but often enough to leave a mark upon all of

my life's decisions and actions. And it does not matter whether this death comes next week or thirty years from now; this consciousness gives my life another breadth. It helps shape the words I speak, the ways I love, my politic of action, the strength of my vision and purpose, the depth of my appreciation of living. (1980:19)

In the context of my latest medical report and while living with comorbidities during a pandemic, I am thinking much more consciously of the legacy I want to leave behind. If I do not make the body of work coming through me right now, I may not always have the chance to make it. This induces a sense of urgency, which is coupled with increased awareness of nutrition, exercise, and the importance of a meditation regime to function as essential scaffolding of creative practice.

Manifesto Statement 3: What can I make here?

A guiding manifesto for all my work has been the question, "What can I make here?" This led to a series of one location films – an experiment with wheelchair cinematography, playing with various genres and exploring making short films that could ultimately screen on mobile phones or the internet as a potential distribution platform. My early work was characterised by this methodology.

Finding the right locations for your film is difficult enough. Finding the right location that is also accessible is a struggle. My films tend to be informed by this struggle, in that I have literally made many of my films in my bedroom or in accessible places I may find myself in. I was also often excluded from being invited to work as crew with fellow students on their films, leaving me alone, for the most part, to create and find a path of my own. This was restrictive. However, it propelled me to be creative, with simple tools. In retrospect, this was an affirming experience, allowing for what Mekas proposed, namely, to abandon, "the idea of reforming commercial practice, and instead espoused the radical decentralization of production, the reclamation of the apparatus by previously dispossessed social groups, and a whole register of formal vocabularies that facilitated unprecedented expressive functions" (James,1992:8).

In 2004, I lived in an apartment on Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia, overlooking an old Cathedral with a beautiful dome, bedecked by a golden cross.



Image 33: Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul

This visual became my staring-landscape for the time I lived there and features in my film *Retrato/Portrait* (2005), a film about a transwoman and her fractured and fragmented relationship with her Catholic mother.

The film began with the simple question: “What can I make here?” This was followed with questions such as:

- What does the light look like throughout the day?
- Which characters can live here?
- Is there a story that can be told here?
- How can I move here?
- Which camera angles can I use?



***Retrato/Portrait* (2005)**
https://vimeo.com/374148670/275973d604

These questions also informed my first two films of *Whole- A Trinity of Being*, namely *Pin Pricks (2004)* and *Voice/over* (2004), both shot in that apartment, which essentially was just a bedroom area.



***Whole- A trinity of Being* (2004)**
https://vimeo.com/373557047/09fb670e6b

Inclinations (2005) was another one-location film but we used a different location for this film, although I wrote it in the apartment with the cathedral view.



Inclinations
https://vimeo.com/425496497/bacc09fb2b

Catholic influences are prevalent in *Inclinations* (2005) and *Retrato/Portrait* (2005) and also references my own Catholic background – a site of conflict for me owing to the so-called Biblical condemnation of same-sex love. Like Mekas, I was trying to salvage an identity from the practice of filmmaking. As a queer, black, woman with disabilities, the act of creating images, is ultimately an act of defiance, a call for intervention, a reclaiming of cinematic space, where our bodies have been edged out for too long.

Manifesto Statement 4: What is the story that needs to come through me at this time?

For me, the practice of filmmaking, is an act of deep listening. I believe that I am led by my ancestors and guides. Often, a story comes through me and I will feel as if I have been instructed to make it. My film, *Where we planted trees* (2007), felt like a calling from the ancestors to tell the story of the house that was taken from them during the Group Areas Act[24] in apartheid South Africa.

You interject and tell me how important home is as a place of belonging. I agree, expecting a longer conversation but you want to listen. I tell you that although I love your working method of not relying on scripts, I crafted a script for the film Where we planted Trees (2007), including returning to the home where my grandparents were evicted.
You explain that you prefer immediacy.

To keep a film (camera) diary is to react (with your camera) immediately, now, this instant: either you get it now, or you don't get it at all. To go back and shoot it later would mean restaging, be it events or feelings. To get it now, as it happens demands the total mastery of one's tools (in this case, Bolex): it has to register the reality to which I react and also it has to register my state of feeling (and all the memories) as I react.. (Mekas in Elder,1993:6)

I disagree, suggesting that it does not necessarily mean that returning to record an event is a process of restaging but rather revisiting. The memory of the home acts as a catalyst for an emotional experience that is not restaged but rendered with immediacy, allowing the camera to react, even though it is reacting to a past long gone. Ultimately we are always in the present moment, even when we recall the past.

[24] The GAA was one of many pieces of legislation used to control the lives of Indians, Coloureds, and Africans, in this instance by limiting property rights. See also https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/group-areas-act-1950



***Where we planted Trees* (2007)**
https://vimeo.com/442308794/dbd0de9ffa

You consider my point of view but this is something you wish to mull over a bit. So, I continue.

Manifesto Statement 5: Bring in the Dream state

My dreams are very vivid and I am capable of lucid dreaming, which also informs my work. I believe that I receive messages from the ancestors through my dreams and that I have memorable, impactful interactions with other Beings. This is how I met Yemaya, whom I had not known of before. In my dream Yemaya visited me across the waters. She was a large black woman with whale-like barnacles all over her skin, wearing a blue and white dress. She carried a baby in her arms and called to me.

When I reached her she touched my head and simply uttered the word “Shine”.



Image 34: Yemaya

I was living in New York City with my partner at the time, Mili Bonilla. When informing her of the dream, she told me I had been dreaming about Yemaya[25]. I started doing some research on Yemaya and the images I saw corresponded with my dream. This sparked the film *New York/New Brighton* (2007), where I imagined two young girls with disabilities living across the Atlantic Ocean, who revered someone in a God-like way: Yemaya in New York and Mandela in SA. Although this was the only film I drew from my dream-state, I suspect that new work will be birthed this way in future.

Sylvia Vollenhoven explains that,

There seems to be an understanding inherent in mainstream storytelling, that is, that we choose the stories we tell and that we shape them intellectually. I have found that this is not the case with stories that matter. My mundane everyday life does not dictate the artistic work I produce. I am chosen by the stories that I tell. My artistry dictates the life that I live, and I am guided by the stories that I tell (2021:24).

I realise that I only enter deep states of dreaming when I feel completely safe. Living in South Africa does not often allow for this state of being as there is a lurking hyper-vigilance that hovers over you even in your dream state, owing to the pervasive violence encountered here.



***New York/ New Brighton* (2007)**
https://vimeo.com/440255535/2ae79e7f4e

[25] Yemaya is the Yorùbá Orisha or Goddess of the living Ocean, considered the mother of all.
https://esotericyemaya.com/D/post/yemaya/

Manifesto Statement 6: The mobile phone as a tool of creation

In 2007, I started working with mobile phones and created the following mini manifesto. It was my intention to make 100 cell phone films, based on written scripts. I made three and life took me elsewhere. The project may have changed but I am still working with a mobile phone, except that it has now become my camera.

The mobile phone manifesto:

- Must be shot in one location
- A mobile phone is central to the plot
- Distribution of the film is on the internet or on other mobile phones
- No more than 3 characters
- Must be shot, edited and viewed in one day

You shake your head and mutter: "Too many rules." I laugh and tell you that this is why I abandoned the project after only 3 films.
"Too much structure" you mutter again.
I agree.

Manifesto Statement 7: Create an archive

For a few years in my film practice, I abandoned manifestos, preferring to focus on documentaries that did not require working within manifesto-led parameters. At that stage of my practice, I was interested in the work of South African artists and made three documentaries on Charlene Maslamoney, Mr Shakes and Dr James Matthews. These documentaries were based on written treatments but the final edit was created through a meticulous process of sifting through footage and creating structure for the film. My core interest and motivation for making this work was to create an archive of the work of particular black artists, who had not yet been acknowledged through personal documentary storytelling. It was an act of creating archive, in the absence of one.



***Diaries of a Dissident Poet* (2018)**
https://vimeo.com/420601713/c02de783ef

Manifesto Statement 8: A camera on my head. Virtual Reality

My final manifesto was to explore the medium of Virtual Reality.

I pause my lecture here, self-conscious that I have spoken for too long and you reassure me that you find all this quite interesting but that you are hungry again. Could you please cook us dinner and then invite some of the old gang over to view the VR film? I ask you who you are referring to from the "old gang".
"Surely Maya Deren may be at least a little curious about Virtual Reality!" you exclaim.

I gulp.

You direct me into the kitchen, simultaneously chop an onion to a beat you have in your mind and begin to regale a fascinating tale recalling your interaction with Deren:

> I would act stupid sometimes when people used to see me with my Bolex recording some random moment. They'd say, "What is this?" I'd say, "Oh nothing, it's not serious." I would hide from Maya Deren. I never wanted her to see me filming because she would say, "But this is not serious. You need a script!" Then I'd say, "Oh, I'm just fooling. I'm just starting to learn," but it was just an excuse that I was giving, that I'm *trying* to learn. I always knew that this was more or less the materials I'd always be using. I was actually filming" (Mekas, cited in Taylor, 2017).

I share with you that I actually like the notion of "trying to learn". It is a liberatory concept for creative practice. Without the self-censorship requiring the perfection of your craft, there is room to play, which creates a framework to work in, not dictated to by the formal grammar of film composition or structure. Practice therefore becomes less pre-determined and self-conscious and more of an attempt to experience something with the tools available. The exploratory possibilities of working this way creates space to propose a unique point of view.

"It's all about a unique point of view, isn't it?", you say.
I nod.

You cook us dinner and after all our talking, we sit for a while in silence.
This does not last too long because you turn to me and say,
"Well, I should tell you about my manifesto then"

On the 11th of February 1996, at the American Centre in Paris, I made an impassioned speech titled the Anti-100 Years of Cinema Manifesto, claiming that avant-garde filmmakers were dispatched by God and instructed as follows:
"Here is the camera. Take it and go into the world and sing the beauty of all creation, and have fun with it. But you will have a difficult time doing it, and you will never make any money with this instrument"(Mekas, 1996).

Regaled as an allegorical tale of the dangers of filmmaking in pursuit of financial gain, you praise the filmmaker who loves the medium and craft of cinema, without wishing for anything in return, except to capture the "complex adventures of the human spirit" (Mekas, 1996).

I tell you that I love that manifesto and that it inspired me to create a manifesto based on your work, as a method to work with during the COVID-19 era.

Dinner is miraculously ready. The table is set. "See, I have my own version of virtual reality," you say. We giggle like children being tickled.

"Tell me about the new manifesto based on the work of Jonas Mekas (that's me!) This will be interesting to hear!"

Another lecture? I ask.

“Yes. But right here, while we eat,” you say, with a mouthful of mash and peas.

I inhale. Exhale. Start. This is much more than I anticipated. And I am nervous.

My lecture continues at the dinner table.

A Jonas Mekas manifesto for the COVID-19 era

On August 1, 2020, I decided to follow in the path of Mekas by using his 365 day project as a basis for creative practice, working with a mobile phone. Aspects of the methods used by Mekas were gleaned from a literature review of writing by and about Mekas. His working methods inform the construction of a manifesto to work with over the next 365 days, which encompasses my filmmaking during a time of restricted movement.

A brother has reached across time.

You smile, so sweetly, so radiantly, as if to say, yes, I am a brother.

A new manifesto

The use of a manifesto as a guided working method is in keeping with my practice of working with a set of recurring limitations, in order to elicit creative responses. Von Trier inspired the first manifesto in my list, Mekas inspires the last:
Shoot every day for 365 days.

The film practice of Jonas Mekas seems prescient for working in a COVID-19 landscape, where being present to daily life is crucial to our being.

> Such everyday home scenes as making pancakes, children playing with a cat, or ice-skating in Central Park, enable the audience to experience what Stanley Cavell (1986) has labelled, in other contexts, the “uncanniness of the ordinary” (p. 84). This is not to say that the audience uncovers something significant, but rather that they “unconceal the obvious” (p. 99), which has been forgotten as a result of overlooking such scenes as mundane, undramatic, and lacking motivation or purpose. (Mekas cited in Jasinkaite, 2020:178)

1. Shoot every day for 365 days.

Tom Smith (2008) describes the 365 day project by Mekas as follows:

> Simply entitled 365 Films by Jonas Mekas, the resultant work is fascinating in its diversity…in the 365 Films we are confronted with day-to-day dramatic shifts in year, location, and subject…In some of the films Mekas is simply alone exploring the environment with his camera or in others delivering monologues into it on subjects ranging from poetry to Paris Hilton.

I will depart from his project as follows: While I will shoot something, (for at least a few seconds), every single day for 365 days, I do not intend to upload a video on the Internet every day. Instead, I will review the footage at the end of the 365 day period and craft a film from it, which will form part of the creative component of my thesis, entitled " *A camera on my Lap*".

2. Use a lightweight camera

Mekas expressed that the evolution of technology had a significant impact on his work, "New technology allows me to go into different areas of content that I couldn't go into with my traditional camera." (Mekas, cited in Hattenstone, 2019)

A Bolex camera and camcorder used by Mekas will be replaced by a mobile phone and the point of view will be from the site of a wheelchair, using adaptive devices. Point 2 of this manifesto is similar to one of my older manifestos, namely "Keep a camera in your bag". While my aim was not to document the world around me for the purpose of recording daily life, I believe that it is important to have a camera at hand in order to document what one *may* experience. Mekas carried a camera with him constantly. Jasinskaite (2020:175) notes that "Carrying a camera everywhere, shooting the world around him every day is the basis for Mekas's practice – what could appear to be inessential and uninteresting plays a major role in his films."

In an interview with Natasha Kurchanova, Mekas speaks about the shift from the heavier cameras he used in the 40s and 50s to the lighter cameras and the use of video tape in the more modern era. He refers to 'casual filming' resulting from having a camera in his pocket. Video enabled him to write visual letters as opposed to postcards, which film restricted him to. (2015.)

Mekas pursued a cinema of intimacy. Compact, lightweight equipment provided him with the capacity to be privy to a communion of experience with others. He revealed to Peter Bogdanovich “you can use less-complicated digital technology, just little cameras that you can carry in your pocket, to find more personal subjects and personal approaches” (Mekas, cited in Bogdanovich, 2015).

Tom Smith notes that the use of sound changed radically with the shift to video from film. In his earlier work, he added narration after shooting but with synchronous sound, Mekas was able to “narrate his feelings within the moment of his encounters, thus collapsing any reflective distance from what he has filmed.” (2008)

In my practice I will use both diegetic and non-diegetic sound. A microphone attached to my mobile phone will record diegetic sound but I also intend to work with original score in the final film. Utilising the former working method of Mekas, I intend to write the narrative retrospectively, using the images as visual cues for the story.

Russell (1999:227) notes that,

> A common feature of auto ethnography is the first-person voice-over that is intently and unambiguously subjective. This is, however, only one of three levels on which a film- or videomaker can inscribe themselves, the other two being at the origin of the gaze, and as body image. The multiple possible permutations of these three ‘voices’ - speaker, seer, and seen - are what generate the richness and diversity of autobiographical filmmaking.

Moving between these permutations Russell refers to as speaker, seer and seen, I can create independently during the time of a pandemic, revisiting earlier working methods and yet exploring a new form of practice, inspired by Mekas.

3. Document the world around you

Simon Hattenstone notes that Mekas clearly departs from Hollywood conventions in his work, tending to lean more toward the genre of home movies and the capturing of “magical moments that make up a life, moments at once prosaic and transcendent” (Hattenstone, 2019.)

COVID-19 has forced us into the interiorities of our domestic spaces, where we encounter daily life with minimal physical connection to the outside world. Our homes

have become our canvas. Without access to working in crews, renting cameras and shooting in various locations, the mobile phone is the most accessible video camera, where we too, like Mekas, can film “magical moments that make up a life”, relying on the staple of experimental film practice: lightweight equipment, small crews and the surrounding environment. David E James (1982) refers to this as the use of “domesticated technology that responds to personal needs and the spontaneous framing of commonplace, ‘inconsequential’ activities”.

Michael Renov (2004:112) describes diary films as an “act of documentation, if only through the preservation of fragments of everyday life that envelop the self”. For the purpose of the work I am creating through this process, the diary film is a muse for what will ultimately be a crafted film. While I do not have a script as such, the footage gathered will be used to craft a film that may have somewhat of a narrative structure.

Mekas was not intentional with the outcome of his work and his creative practice had no specific goal except to document his life and to discover it again through film. In an interview with Bogdanovich (2015), Mekas describes his creative practice as a compulsion, obsession and passion that he is drawn into and cannot resist. He also notes that he has to share it with friends.

4. Be present

Mekas shared the following with Kurchanova (2015):

> So, here I am, filming this small daily moment of life … And I am trying to get to its essence, to the essence of that moment. And this essence, during the moment of filming, incorporates all of the past: the way I see what I am filming, the way my eye moves, the way my body moves, camera, on what detail I’m focusing – all my past is concentrated, involved in that moment. The present itself becomes inconsequential, only a pretext, a two-dimensional surface from which light reflects into the lens.

In an interview with Bruce Elder (1993), Mekas clarifies his filmmaking philosophy in his own words: “The camera now picks up glimpses, fragments of objects and people, and creates fleeting impressions, of both objects and actions, in the manner of the action painters. A new spiritualized reality of motion and light is created on the screen”.

Mekas was painstakingly aware of the fleeting nature of time and this consciousness led him to the celebration of the present moment. He describes his films as being

> …the celebration of reality, of life, of my friends, of actual daily life that passes and is gone tomorrow. We don't pay attention to it when it happens. Later, or course, we look back, we remember. But, for me, to catch, to celebrate the reality and life and friends and everything around me the very moment it happens—that's what is, that's what I'm possessed by" (Mekas, cited by Bogdanovich, 2015).

During a pandemic, being in the present moment and the practice of mindfulness is a way of countering the anxiety of projecting into an unknown future. Small, simple, acts of living, is perhaps all we have for now, in an indeterminate context.

5. String it together in post-production

For my *365 Day project*, I intend to look at the images after filming and to spontaneously create narration. Unlike Mekas, where a film was edited soon after shooting and uploaded to the Internet, I will only edit the footage at the end of the shooting period, which may be a year or more. In the words of Catherine Russell (1999) I would like to become a tourist in my own archive and the time between shooting and editing will provide me with the necessary distance from the images, which will in turn, be the gift of a new perspective.

> I have never, never been able to figure it all out. So when I began now to put all these rolls of film together, to string them together, the first idea was to keep them chronological. But then I gave up and I just began splicing them together by chance, the way I found them on the shelf. Because I really don't know where any piece of my life really belongs (Mekas, cited in Jasinskaite, 2020:170).

Bogdanovich (2015) notes that Mekas used both his diary entries and his poems to include as a narrative in his films, therefore Mekas's cinema became interwoven with the artistic pursuits he developed prior to his arrival in the United States.

In the footsteps of Mekas, I have often used poetry as narration in my films, as I came to the creation of cinema long after I had started scribbling poems on scraps of paper. I also intend to work with natural sound and composed music. I may also explore a method Mekas used, whereby, his voice interjects into an existing soundtrack as a form of reflection on the image. For now, I am most inspired by the practice of

discovery, of flowing with a camera in free verse, reinterpreting the micro-location of the domestic environment and inscribing a process of creation, which for now, has no clear end result, shape or form.

Guidelines for creative practice research

In addition to Mekas's 365 day project plan, I intend to use the following guidelines as outlined by Estelle Barrett (2007:192-193) in the appendix of *Developing and Writing Creative Arts Practice Research:*

The researcher will need to explain the following:

- What will be done.
- How it will be done.
- Time frame and relation to researcher's previous work.
- Recording of observations and documentation of the studio process.
- Approach and methodological frameworks: In science this might involve measurements, tables, graphs and so on. In artistic research, data collection might involve the keeping of visual and other journals, sketches, photographs, filmed documentation, recordings, interviews and other inventive methodologies. The approach used will reveal 'data' to be discovered and discussed.
- Observations:
    - What happened?
    - What changed?
    - What was revealed?
    - What is significant − (what was revealed that could not have been revealed through any other method of enquiry)?
- How does this compare with the work/ideas of others?
- What were the problems encountered?

You raise your hand and stop me from continuing:

"This list you just read sounds as if you're in a science lab! What is that about? I don't like that at all! You're not experimenting on mice. This is cinema!"

I agree that the approach does seem quite scientific but that experimenting is experimenting after all. Why not measure it in some way? Is that not part of discovering or playing with material?

"But this could suggest that unless art is quantified in this way, that this kind of research is not valid. That's a dangerous approach! As if we have to show all this serious data or what we've made does not matter at all!"

You strut up and down, shaking your head.

"So did you answer those questions after?" you ask.

"Yes I did," I say. "I can show them to you, if you would like".[26]

"No, no. no. Rather show me the film. The thing is that there is no single approach to making Art, to working with a method or a practice. You just have to find your way. You make your own sense of it. And then yes, hope that people care about it and even if they don't.. Why are you making it? For whom? There will always be people who think your work is fantastic. And then others who think it's ok or ordinary. Others will think it's mediocre. Or bullshit. And some will not even care! But you must make it any way!!!!"

I tell you that I agree with everything.

"And then what happened," you ask.

"I didn't survive your manifesto", I say.

[26] See Appendix B for my response to the *Creative Guidelines referenced earlier.*

Revisiting manifestos

The initial enthusiasm for following the method of shooting every day, did not last longer than the pilot period of 31 days in August 2020. Confined to my home environment, I became less and less inspired and soon found this method to be restrictive.

Diary entry: July 2, 2021

I have long abandoned the 365 day project. Over the past year, I have only captured images that I have been drawn to or called to capture. At the time of writing, South Africa is experiencing a devastating third wave of COVID-19. I have been living in isolation in my apartment in Johannesburg for almost two months and have rarely felt the urge to film. I will be going home next week to the Blue House, which inevitably always inspires me to create. The next stage of my creative process is to review what I have and create a first cut of images. I intend to use the images to evoke poetry and storytelling.

I therefore revisited the devotion to the manifesto of shooting every day for 365 days, using the following quote from Mekas as a guiding principle for a new manifesto, which has worked for me since, namely,
“Why do you want to make films? Only make films if you feel that you have a necessity to make them. Then you will find a way of doing so – nobody will be able to stop you. Just get a camera and do it, and as you do it you will discover what you really want to make. Don’t listen to anybody who tells you how, or what.” (Mekas, J. 2019)

The approach Mekas outlines here resonates with my philosophy about filmmaking, which requires the spirit of insistence on making work, despite restrictions. Experimental cinema has always signalled a form of freedom. Bogdanovich (2015) references this by claiming that this form of cinema allowed filmmakers to be independent, allowing for control over their own work, leading to an emancipation for both the filmmaker and the viewer.

By making small, intimate portraits, within locations that are accessible and safe, ironically provides me with freedom and the flexibility to make films on my own terms, which are not dictated to by any gatekeepers but can be a true reflection of artistic expression. The new manifesto therefore is: *Discover what you want to make.*

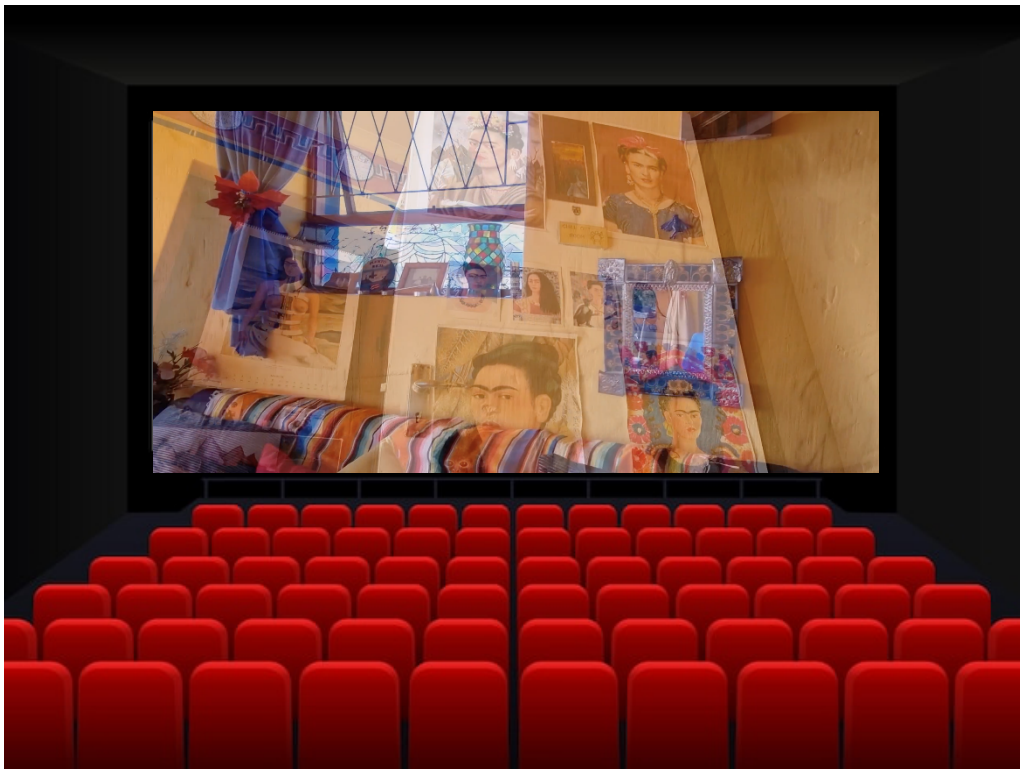


You slam your fist on the table: "Yes! Discover what you want to make! So, did you discover what you want to make?"
"Yes," I tell you. "I did."
"Let's see it then," you say.

You hand me a cup of tea while we watch the film made through the process of engaging with (and also somewhat abandoning) your working methods.[27]



Image 35: Poster for A Camera on my Lap (2022)



***A camera on my Lap* (2022)**
https://vimeo.com/687161333/ae6d698dfd

The end credits of the film roll. You grab the accordion and start singing:

I live therefore I make films.
I make films and therefore I live.
Light. Movement.
I make home movies and therefore I live.
I live and therefore I make home movies.

(Mekas, cited in MacDonald, 1997:346)

I sing along, as. I recognise the lyrics from your film Walden (1968).

"Thank you, Jonas, thank you for inspiring me," I say

You bow, "You are most welcome."

Then, suddenly in the distance, there is a Tibetan gong, with voices of Angels.

"It is time to go," you say. "Pity that Maya Deren couldn't make it this time. But please, write me a letter."

"A letter about what?" I ask.

“Tell me more about how you made A camera on my Lap. And how you made films from this wheelchair of yours”.
And with a hasty disclaimer, “Not a lecture. Just a letter.”
“Before I go, just one more thing I want to leave you with my new friend”.

A podium appears and you launch into a monologue:
*“*You may be wondering, sometimes, why we keep making little movies, underground movies why we are talking of Home Movies, and you hope, sometimes, that all this will change soon. Wait, you say, until they begin making real movies. But we say, No there is a misunderstanding here. We are making real movies. What we are doing comes from the deeper needs of man’s soul. Man has wasted himself outside himself; man has disappeared in his projections. We want to bring him down, into his small room, to bring him home, where he can be, once in a while, alone and with himself and his soul– that’s the meaning of the home movie, the private vision of our movies. We want to surround this earth with our home movies. Our moves come from our hearts–our little movies, not the Hollywood moves. Our movies are like extensions of our own pulse, of our heartbeat, of our eyes, our fingertips, they are so personal, so unambitious in their movement, in their use of light, their imagery. We want to surround this earth with our film frames and warm it up, until it begins to move. . . There is pain in the arts of the last few decades.
The whole period of so-called modern art is nothing but the pain of our ending civilization . . . Now we are looking, we are being pulled by a desire for something joyful deep within us, deep in the stars, and we want to bring it down to earth so that it will change our cities, our faces, our movements, our voices, our souls–we want an art of light” (Mekas, 1975).

You clap your hands and I say, “Yes! I used part of that in my 31 day experiment edit!”

The Tibetan gong sounds louder but you want to hear a little bit more.

“What did you discover from the 31 day experiment?”

"Well to be honest Jonas.. reflecting on the footage I recorded during the 31 days in August 2020, I found the emotional thread of anxiety in the images. Anxiety, isolation, consciously seeking beauty and joy, were key elements of the experience. I only used a few of the clips I had recorded, finding resonance with your words and engaging in techniques of repetition of images and the juxtaposition of the beauty of sunset in the garden, as the earth kept its rhythms while we faltered and grappled with a new way of life/lingering death. The process of editing was an intuitive response to the reminder of the anxiety of that period. The result of the 31 days experiment is this short piece"



***31 Days in August* (2021)**
https://vimeo.com/628025596/b9401efc33

The sound of the gong is loud and urgent. Your face morphs into your 96 year old self and with those twinkling eyes, you smile once more and I am teleported back to Johannesburg, where I sit at my desk and write you a letter I have no idea where to post.

Wheels and Reels: Some thoughts to share with Jonas.

Dear Jonas, thank you for our special visit. I wonder what you are doing now? Or who you may be visiting? You asked me about the making of my new film. I am not sure that there is much else to say after my long lectures and our chat. But I can tell you this: After I abandoned your 365 day method, after just 31 days, I captured images when I felt the need to, using your guideline of only making films you want to make. As I was predominantly at home, there really was not much to capture but I recorded moments of daily life. Since I was largely confined

to home, it made the most sense to me to make a film about, well, about the home. Like every home, our home has a story. I won't tell you that story here. You've seen the film.

Jonas, during the lockdown many filmmakers, had to find different ways of making films! Filmmaker, Mira Nair, was one of them. Mira always told me, "If we don't tell our stories, who will?" I was fortunate to meet Mira during the time she lived in Cape Town in the late 90s. Professor Jane Taylor introduced me to Mira, who at the time was looking for South African stories to tell. She expressed interest in a narrative of a lesbian couple who were involved in taxi violence. Although this idea did not develop further for various reasons, Mira and I have remained friends throughout. I regard her as my film mentor. At the time of our meeting, I was still dreaming of becoming a filmmaker. She invited me to film workshops she was running in Cape Town and constantly encouraged me to pursue my passion for film. She often said that I should not worry too much about how it would happen, that film is such a relentless passion that if you love the craft enough, you will somehow find your way there. She was right.

Anyway, Jonas, I know how you love stories but I am digressing from what you asked me to write about.
Please watch Mira's film, made during lockdown, here https://youtu.be/Pybw19iwrsU

You see, Jonas, it is all about finding a way to create, of using any kind of limitation as a propeller that can take you somewhere else!

Filmmakers who were largely marginalised by mainstream cinema created room for me, carving out a frame where the lives of black, queer people with disabilities existed on their own terms and disclosed their hidden lives to audiences.

The small portraiture of Frida Kahlo led me to think of how I could expand the world of my apartment and to discover a key question that opened up new dimensions in my living and moving space. The question was simply *"What can I make here?"* This led to a series of one-location films – an experiment with wheelchair cinematography, playing with various genres and exploring making short films that could ultimately screen on mobile phones or the internet as a potential distribution platform. My early work was characterised by this methodology. Finding the right locations for your film is difficult enough. Finding the right location that is also accessible is a struggle. My films tend to be informed by this struggle, in that I have literally made many of my films in my bedroom or in accessible places I may find myself in. This has been restrictive. At the same time it encouraged me to be creative. An accessible environment is crucial to a filmmaker with a disability. First and foremost, an accessible bathroom close to the location is vital. If not, you tend to be in trouble. People of course do not realise this. Wearing a catheter often solves the problem but you still have to empty it.
The location for *Inclinations* (2005), directed with Jen Simmons, was in a building with a rickety elevator and a bathroom on the level below. I often would not make it to the bathroom in time and would sometimes have to direct scenes with my pants soaking wet, with no place to shower and change and certainly without the luxury of time to move to an accessible venue in which to do this. It was degrading.

I will never forget that in the first week of film school, two of my classmates asked me the question "Did you mention in your application to Temple that you have a disability?"
I said, "Yes," biting my tongue. The next question was worse, "Do you think that's why you got in?" I was so humiliated that I could not respond. Attitudinal barriers are huge. People make assumptions that they don't make of able-bodied people.

I found my way to making films that were not dependent on others. All I needed was a camera in my hand.

In those long days and nights and months in the intensive care unit of Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, I pondered how I could make films from a wheelchair, wondering if my dream of becoming a filmmaker would still be possible. I knew that I had two choices: either I could crawl into a corner, feel sorry for myself and put my dreams aside OR I could make films because if I did not make films, my spirit would wither. And I could not allow my spirit to wither Jonas! How much I would have missed out on! It's that life force that keeps us going Jonas. Frida had that passion to create a life supported by her craft. It is not always easy, as you know too well Jonas.

According to Martha Zamora (1990:62), it was Frida's wish to fully support herself through her painting. Kahlo gave me hope in a time when pain was unbearable and a life in a different body stretched before me, a life I needed to reclaim.

In my search to find people who had started treading the unfamiliar ground of making films from a wheelchair, I discovered Liz Crow, David Mitchell and Jason da Silva.

Here and there I discovered others. There are far too few of us.

We have to have a cinema that is able to tell all kinds of stories, not just the stories of the privileged few who have access to the necessary resources.

As early as 2005, I started thinking about the need for a book on our experiences, that is in a similar vein to Ukadike's book of conversations with African filmmakers (Ukadike,2002), or the conversation series with directors.
I found these particular books very inspiring. Reading them is almost as if you are sitting at a table with Mambety, Kieslowski or Ackerman.

I envisaged the final product to be a collection of interviews of those currently working in cinema, with information on training, technology, diagrams/photographs on adaptations and a host of other features such as a DVD with films made by wheelchair users across the world. Although this idea did not come to fruition, perhaps it is still something I can explore in the future as there clearly is a need for it.

For now, I ask you to consider how many filmmakers you know of, making films from the site of a wheelchair? Therein lies your answer. The next question to ask is why?
This can lead you to another answer. I leave that to you to ponder.

I think it is worth revisiting some of the conversations I had with key filmmakers, who, in 2022, continue to be some of the leading filmmakers using wheelchairs in the world.

Liz Crow[28], a filmmaker based in the UK, also uses her wheelchair as a site of production. She notes the following core elements of what constitutes an accessible cinema (Crow, 2005):

> Cinema that represents our lives – in all their variety. Cinema that works very hard to make films that are inclusive of all audiences – audio description, etc., as standard provision and in a way that reflects the specific project (rather than a one-size-fits-all template the film is levered into). A sector which makes good use of us and working environments that include us – not because they have to, but because they recognize what we bring to it (not just as individuals, but the way our presence impacts on process – even where this means slowing it down, that's great, it can make for more considered creative judgments and more collaborative working methods.

This led her to create the innovative Access Tripod, a tripod that could fit her wheelchair. She explains the need for creating an accessible tripod for film production:

Basically (the Access Tripod project) came through my own desire (more than need) to use a camera at same time as wheelchair and then wanting to develop a design that would work much more widely than me. It works very well for static shots but is problematic for moving shots because of motion vibration.

Trying to wheel on the same path as Liz Crow, I asked Frank Sauerwald at Temple University to design a tripod for my wheelchair. I explained the concept I had in mind and in no

[28] Liz Crow is an artist-activist who specialises in film, sound, word and live performance art. Liz believes in the power of creative work to trigger change. She is perhaps best known for 'Resistance', a moving image installation and durational performance which raised issues of disability discrimination in contemporary society through an exploration of Aktion-T4 – the Nazis' first official programme of murder which targeted disabled people. See also https://the-ndaca.org/the-people/liz-crow/ (for footnote)

time he had whipped something together that fitted onto the metal front leg of my chair. It didn't work out that well though. The camera was heavy and constantly moved the tripod, so for the most part I shot without it and worked handheld. I had to use every ounce of strength and balance to hold that camera.

The problem with a tripod that is fitted to a chair, Jonas, is that it is fine to use for fairly static shots. With the movement of my chair though, the vibration of the ground creates a shaky shot. A new design would have to improve upon shock absorption. It also tends to be quite fixed and also does not pan and tilt that easily. Once the tripod was locked down, it had to be readjusted for a new shot, which reduced the element of spontaneity, a vital aspect of my methodology.

I think that shooting from a chair is the most challenging aspect. There do not seem to be many role models out there and so, even in 2022, it still feels as if it is still fairly new territory to explore.

Liz Crow (2005) also notes some of the other ways in which she engages in production.

> On larger productions, I always work with a Director of Photography and am not handling a camera directly. On this last production, I have video assist, which was incredibly useful. The camera also worked with a semi-remote control, so the DOP and I were next to each other for much of the shoot, rather than distanced (which a video assist could have led to), so we were able to communicate very closely.
>
> For me adaptations are about the people around me. My voice is not strong, so on this production I communicated through other people; they relayed directions from 'Action/Cut' to the specifics of what I needed actors, set designers or whoever to do. I would want to make some changes to this another time

> - a lot of it made sense because we were working over long-ish distances; we tried using walkie talkies, but they were more frustrating than useful.

David Mitchell (2005), an American film director and scholar, incorporates the notion of access in its full scope:

> I think it's imperative that disability filmmakers use all of the technologies available for making films as accessible to the greatest number of people possible. It should be a scandal for any film to be released without open captioning, audio transcription, etc.

Liz Crow and David Mitchell are not only filmmakers, but activists for accessible film rights.

Jonas, my entry point in becoming an activist was through the disability rights movement. I met the most interesting and amazing people who defied the stereotypes of 'disabled'. Raising awareness about disability issues was key to the struggle for equality. It seemed depressing that we had to convince the public that we were people too (yes...) and that we faced immense discrimination from both physical and attitudinal barriers.

My greatest barrier to making films came before my disability though. I did not have the economic access to film training until I was in my late twenties. I would have loved to be making work from the age of 8 (at least).

My first camera was given to me in 1999 by Brenda Goldblatt who was head of documentary at e-tv, where I worked. She handed me an old VHS camera and said, "If you want to be a filmmaker, you need a camera".

I shot everything in sight.

The VHS camera was a bit heavy and I had to hold it with both hands. I needed a lighter camera. When my mother retired from teaching, she bought me my first digital video camera, a lightweight Sony that fit into the palm of my hand. It was the best gift anyone had ever given me. I captured everything I could.
In the next few years, I was pulled back into policy work at the Presidency of South Africa. Back in an office, I became frustrated with the little time I had to be creative.
During that time, I organised the first Disability Film Festival in South Africa. I was dismayed that I could not find a single person in a wheelchair who was making films in my country, Jonas! Can you imagine?

The Ford Foundation advertised for scholarships to study at any university in the world. I sent in my application, prayed day and night. In December 2003, I made my first film, *Whole – a Trinity of Being* (2004) at Temple University in Philadelphia.

I enjoy shooting handheld, however, with heavier cameras, I literally have to lift weights and increase my upper body strength. Daily exercise has become an important aspect of filmmaking, although I am not always disciplined.

Owing to the fact that I am sitting down, I need to find a way to gain height with the camera, allowing me to shoot from varying angles. It would be possible to elevate the camera height and to tilt the side screen down in order to see the shot. I was overjoyed when I discovered Liz Crow[29] and read about her project to create the 'access tripod'. I felt that I could finally speak to another filmmaker about the issues I was facing!

The wheelchair has functioned as a dolly for years on film shoots, so it only makes sense that there can be wheelchair users who are DPs and camerapersons.

I am not opposed to working with video assist or to direct someone operating the camera, but I want to have the option of doing the shot myself when I want to. I directed via video assist for the most part, with Stephanie Garoian and Matt Concannon, shooting most of the film, when making *Whole – A Trinity of Being* (2004).

Entry (2002) was the beginning of the trilogy. I also shot certain scenes with the wheelchair tripod, which tended to be shaky, but became part of the aesthetic of an experience in a wheelchair.
The following two films, *Voice/over* (2004) and *Pin Pricks* (2004), were shot on video with Mili Bonilla, my partner at the time.

I loved working this way most of all. I would describe to Mili what I wanted. We had no crew, no lights, no external mics, nothing. Just us, in a room, shooting. Our process was simple: I would describe the shot I wanted, Mili would shoot and then I would rewind the tape, look at the footage and see if the framing fitted with my vision. If the shot did not include me, I could shoot it myself. It was a great collaborative process. I realised that I was happiest working with video. There were two other films made on film simply because I felt that it was probably my last opportunity to shoot film while being at film school.

For my last film shot on 16mm, I directed via video assist. There was something so restrictive about sitting behind a

monitor and not being able to move around easily because of all the lights and equipment. My experience has been that shooting on video gives me more freedom. I can pick up the camera and see exactly what I want.

I often worked with my little Pal camera, because it was small and I could literally carry it in my handbag. Now I enjoy the convenience of using my mobile phone, although I really want to work with interchangeable lenses, but this is already evolving, and soon phones will be able to do it all, Jonas!

Being a writer in a chair requires few technological adaptations, except when you require voice-activated software or need voice activation from typing. Generally, it is possible to be a writer. Directing is also very possible from a chair. You need to have a clear vision that you are able to communicate to your actors and crew. Video-assist or monitors make it possible for the director to be sure of the framing of each shot. Software is available to create easy storyboards. Producing is a lot of paperwork, planning and phone calls and is certainly possible from a chair.

Technology has also made editing so much more portable and user-friendly. At film school, I had a little G4 Mac that I could travel with and edit anywhere. Editors do not do their job standing up, so editing is perfect for wheelchair users! Cheaper and more effective digital software allows for professional editing to be done in the comfort of your accessible home.

But I am very privileged. I have an expensive wheelchair, a home, education, skills. Most wheelchair users globally are living below the poverty line and many do not even have wheelchairs to move around in, let alone to make films from.

Here, film has to function as a witness to this reality, as an awareness raising tool. There is also an obvious need to share resources and to impart skills.

We have to be so careful about ghettoising ourselves. Our work cannot remain in disability film festivals. These festivals tend to be poorly attended by the very audiences we want our work to influence. It is necessary to get our work 'out there', especially on television and the internet, with its massive reach. This is of course not so easy. People are so accustomed to seeing tragic stories about people with disabilities that any work that moves beyond "feel very sorry for me" is at odds with their perception.

The question then as it relates to disability, is how do we begin to change this perception? I believe that cinema is part of that answer Jonas!

Cinema is still in the dark ages with regard to inclusion of people with disabilities. It is just not accessible Jonas! There are 'trimmings' of accessibility in some theatres, yes. I refer to them as trimmings because there is such limited accessible seating (as in space for about two wheelchairs!), hardly any audio description or subtitles. Cinema that is inclusive has to be the cinema of the people. We should all have our voices heard, those with and without disabilities. Anyone should be able to have access to a cinema-going experience and to have the necessary adaptations needed. When they have that, they should be able to sit in the dark and watch images that realistically reflect their lives or acknowledge their existence in some way, lighting up the screen.

Jason da Silva, an American filmmaker, is one of the most prominent activists, working to change access to making cinema for persons with disabilities. His journey started when he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He won an Emmy award for his film, *When I walk* (2013).

In an artist statement on his website, he describes the process of making the film as follows:

> I wanted to capture the transformative experience- becoming disabled- in WHEN I WALK because I hadn't seen it done before, and people need to see how a degenerative disease impacts the lives of those living with it. The first scene of the film is of me on the beach with my family. I brought my camera along to film the get-together, but the footage captured meant more than I could have imagined: I fell down and couldn't get back up. Soon after, and encouraged by my family, I chose not to ignore my MS but to turn the camera on it instead. I had made films all my life, so making a film about the progression of the disease seemed a natural way for me to process the journal (Da Silva, 2016).

Da Silva went on to capture his journey, using attachments to his wheelchair and working with a cinematographer as his disease progressed. His activism has expanded its reach beyond creative practice, with the establishment of the AXS Film Fund (https://www.axsfilmfund.org), a fund established in order to give filmmakers with disabilities, specifically people of colour, from all over the world, the opportunity to make films. This fund is the first of its kind and I believe that it is a necessary intervention to the change we need Jonas.

Unless able-bodied people realise that they have a role to play in making this happen, it is going to be a very slow process. I find it so odd Jonas, that people will generally speak up for the rights of women, black people, LGBTQIA rights, etc., but when it comes to disability issues, people tend to think it is our responsibility alone to make the change.

"You should write a letter and complain", they say. I do not have the time to spend my life writing letters of complaint. I have films to make. Sara Ahmed (2021, italics in original) explains that:

> To be heard as making a tiresome complaint is to be heard as being tiresome, as distracting somebody from doing "*important* work elsewhere." In that moment, it is history we hear, a history of how Black women are heard as just complaining, history as going on, history as going on about it.

Although Ahmed specifically references the experiences of black women in the above quote, it also aptly encapsulates the experience of persons with disabilities. We are often seen to be complaining, angry and bitter. We are always seen to be complaining, although we are fighting for basic human rights. Our complaints are sometimes seen as distractions, problems to fix, an issue to be addressed. Our history as persons with disabilities is rooted in a history of complaint, of trying to be heard.

Well, that is a bit of whirlwind history of making films from my wheelchair Jonas. But let's get back to the making of *A camera on my Lap*:

After filming on my phone, I selected images that were evocative in some way and started putting these images together randomly on a timeline to see how the images worked together and how they related to one another. The story began to unfold slowly. I realised that I did not want to physically edit it myself, as I also find that working with an editor creates another layer of distance, over and above the distance of time. The scholar, Catherine Russell (1999:282)says it so eloquently, noting that the temporal gap between shooting and editing, "renders every image a memory, a trace or fragment of a time in a trajectory"

Working with these memories in the edit and allowing the images to connect with me and tell a story, was my preferred way of working. I used a yellow legal pad (which always reminds me of Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, who wrote on yellow legal pads) and wrote whatever came through me when looking at the image.

I worked with free writing, with the theme of home and cinema as central themes. Once I wrote something, I recorded it on my mobile phone and played back the voiceover while watching the images. And adjusted. And so on and so on. Quite simple really but time consuming and exhausting at times. Sometimes whole paragraphs were crumbled and recycled. Sometimes, the voiceover did not work at all when working with a sequence of images. Back and forth, Aimee Viljoen-Stroebel and I worked on the edit, as I pieced bits together, bit by bit. As you know, editing is the creation of building blocks that form a whole, a process that can move around many different parts, several different ways. In the end, Jonas, I think I relied on intuition the most. Here, I have to mention the scholar Russell again, at the risk of this sounding like a lecture, which you asked me not to do. But. Listen to this.
She says, "The avantgarde filmmaker today does his 'editing' the same way a poet or a painter does intuitively, automatically, during the process of shooting creating.(Russell, 1999:307)

Isn't that beautiful Jonas?

One thing I've come back to so much in the process of making this work, is how important silence is for the creation of my work. Nothing happens without silence. This is when the ideas slip in. I also find that working from sunrise to sunset is a rhythm that holds the creative process. I need structure. Time.

The same day, day after day – just to free the mind to create within routine (which can be so dull Jonas. Achingly dull and painfully lonely). But within that, there is the spark, the thing that comes from discovering what I want to make.

Since our time was so limited, there were a series of other experiments I did not have time to share with you. These experiments were made in 2018 and 2019. I was exploring my body, personal and public space I had access to and the movement of the camera within that context.

You express this so brilliantly in your Movie Journal column, making the connection between the camera and the body. You say that:

> The camera movements are reflections of the body movements; the body movements are reflections of the emotional and thought movements — which, in their turn, are caused by what came in through the eye. A circle between the artist's eye and the camera eye is established (Mekas,1966,cited in James, 2016:295).

I think that my experiments and films form part of that circle: the stillness of my work, the movements that are sometimes only slight, mostly meditative, reflects the body that holds the camera – a body that does not have much balance, that has to hold a camera very, very still. Filming is a form of meditation for me Jonas. I want to hold the image and let it breathe.

The following series of experiments involve making films from my chair, exploring ways in which the technical choices, location, space, body/being and mobility affect my creative practice and once again exploring what is possible within any given space.

Visual Experiments

Re:incarnation (2018)
https://vimeo.com/372871814/1a1351526c



Longing for a lost love, I visited a Buddhist temple to find some solace and in the journey to the main temple, there was an accessible pathway, lined with pillars. I found it visually compelling. The path was long and there was no way I was able to wheel it on my own. I tend to run out of breath and stamina to push myself. At the time, I did not have a rig attached to my chair to hold the camera and therefore require someone to push me, leaving my hands free to film. Luckily, I was with friends and it took a few takes before we found the rhythm of how I wanted the pacing of movement to be. I used my knees to stabilise the phone camera and give me some balance. We tried it a few times until I was happy with the shot, which I could easily replay on my phone, ensuring that I had captured what I wanted to.
The film is essentially made up of one long dolly shot and a static shot of my Buddhist altar at home. The slow cross fade between the two shots creates the notion of the seated Buddha moving towards the temple in space. The static Buddha thus moves with the dolly shot, as if suspended in air and free of gravity.

The shot of my Buddhist altar was easy enough to set up. I lit incense, framed my shot and stabilised my camera with books. The iconography of the Buddha is something I connect to deeply. Buddhas are often seated and engaged in meditation or finding a still point and in many ways I feel that this is an integral part of my journey in this lifetime – to simply learn how to sit still and to be able to tap into a well of silence inside. Making this film was cathartic, in that it was essentially a visual farewell poem to someone I loved.

Outofreach
https://vimeo.com/372871683/7788dd90e6



I lived on the 28th floor of a skyscraper bordering Braamfontein and the city. There was a tiny wrap-around balcony around my apartment. I was only able to access the balcony with assistance or with a specialised ramp, specifically designed for that space. The ramp was made for me but it was sadly too wide and although the builders promised to narrow it and return it to me, they never did. As a result of this, I could not go on to my little balcony unless someone helped me up the tiny step there. My chair fit snugly once I was on the balcony and it was difficult to turn. I missed the freedom of going out on to my balcony, as my view is quite limited from my seated position and the balcony gave me the advantage of leaning over the railing and seeing more of the spectacular view of the city.

I made this film from my living room by locking the brakes on my chair, raising my right hand as far as I could reach and then diagonally sliding my phone against the glass in a way that showed the city upside down. I thought of it of as a form of mandala, where I could navigate my way through to the sky. This shot was not at all easy to execute and the end result is a bit shaky, as I have limited upper body balance because of my high level of paralysis. Initially I thought of reshooting this experiment because of the shaky camera, but I decided to leave it as it is, as the less-than-perfect movement connects to the less-than-stable body executing the shot.
However, I imagined all types of fantastical rigs that could be invented that could have made the execution of the shot so much easier.

Ink/Visible
https://vimeo.com/372871336/c18ca12bf6



I made this film while writing in my room in the Eastern Cape. I had not specifically planned to make it, but one afternoon I 'saw' the film, while staring at my wardrobe. As the sun sets, there are beautiful shadows that form on my otherwise bland, white wardrobe and I started to film it, framing my empty chair in the shot, while working on my bed. I spend so much time on my bed, writing, and this sparked the idea for this piece. I positioned the phone on my chest and my breathing moved the phone up and down, clearly showing the movement of my chest in the shot. I am simply writing and breathing, while enjoying the shadows of flowers at sunset. I am not bound to my chair. It is simply how I move through the world.

Ocean
https://vimeo.com/373556133/fb737b000d



In this experiment, I was at the beach with my family in the Eastern Cape during the summer holidays. We had set up our tents on the upper platform at a place called Sappershoek, historically a beach where people of colour were allowed to go during apartheid. Much of my childhood was spent there. The upper platform overlooks the sea but was not accessible to me. Any movement I desired to make would have to be done with assistance, as the terrain was difficult to move on.

Some of my family had decided to go for a swim and I could not join them, so I watched them from a distance. Before they departed, I asked my cousin to bring me some seaweed and seawater on his return. I offered up the seaweed to the sea, returning it to its source and acknowledging how much I missed

the ocean. I asked my Aunt to pour the seawater over my feet while I filmed and simply merged these two shots with a crossfade in the edit. This film was made without any movement. All I could move was my hands, one holding the seaweed and one filming.

Thematically, I was thinking of how we often compromise ourselves and our integrity in intimate relationships and on this day I had asked Yemaya to please bring me someone who could truly love me, next time. The film dedicates itself to my future partner who will bring me the sea, when others thought a drop was enough.

Corridorcruising
https://vimeo.com/451421050/4c5fc55689



I conducted this experiment by attaching my mobile phone to the frame of my chair, just above the front castor. I secured the phone with gaffer tape and ensured that the lens of the phone jutted out, allowing it to not only capture the front castor but the surface on which I was moving. The inspiration for making this short film was to celebrate movement in a wheelchair. An accessible environment breaks down the barrier of immobility, making a statement about the perception society has of us being **'wheelchair-bound'**.

Essentially, we are bound by the architecture of ableism.
The film follows the movement of the wheel, lighting up a smooth surface, to the beat of disco music. Here I am playing with the club lights associated with disco dancing, subverting mainstream depictions of wheelchairs as medical appliances that often render the bodies within them invisible. The title *Corridorcruising* also makes reference to the notion of

cruising, a term used in queer clubs, for when people scan crowds for a potential partner. The rainbow lights, reminiscent of the rainbow flag therefore illuminates and symbolises the intersections between disability and sexuality.

Die Kat en die Voël
https://vimeo.com/378732224/0d3f916d09



Inspired by witnessing my cat, crying longingly for the birds she witnessed from our apartment on the 28th floor, I started writing a love story between a Queer cat and a one-winged bird. I collaborated with iconic animation artist, Stacey Stent. Although this experiment was not filmed, it does explore the notion of how the space you are in, can give rise to ideas. The environment of the ordinary can lead to the extraordinary!

So those were the experiments I wanted to share with you. I'm keen to hear your thoughts, when we meet again Jonas.

I suspect that this is a much longer letter than you had expected, so I will end here. One of my favourite quotes of yours is:

> Our home movies are manifestos of the politics of truth and beauty, beauty and truth. Our films will help to sustain man, spiritually, like bread does, like rain does, like rivers,
> like mountains, like sun. Come come, you people, and look at us; we mean no harm. So spake little home movies. This is the 'auteur theory' (Mekas, 1972).

Perhaps this is our auteur theory, yes Jonas. Perhaps it's just about finding that place from which to speak, that feels authentic, that does not betray your essence.

This is the sense I make of everything for now. Just MAKING films sustains my Being. And that is more than I could ask of anything or anyone.

Thank you again for the visit. It was nothing short of an utter delight.

Until next time…

Love,
Shelley

As I close the envelope and address it with just your name, it fades from material existence.

The end.

Entering the NOW

Mekas was clearly ahead of his time. Currently there are several apps that allow users to document seconds or minutes of their daily life. Krstic (2017:3) explains that autobiographical practices in media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are popular, as are autobiographical documentaries. Mekas was already engaging in this form of filmmaking five decades ago.

His work appeals to me beyond his ability to project practices of the future. I think that the real power is in the celebration of the ordinary. I believe that much of our unhappiness and despair as human beings is our lack of appreciation and gratitude for the quotidian. Cinema can hold the treasures of the ordinary. Cinema can remind us of how small, daily experiences and moments, slowly build a life.

As Mekas says:

> The real history of cinema is invisible history. History of friends getting together, doing the thing they love. For us, the cinema is beginning with every new buzz of the projector, with every new buzz of our cameras. With every new buzz of our cameras, our hearts jump forward my friends. (Mekas, cited in Elder,1993:10)

In a time when the range of our experience as humans is limited by the threat of an invisible virus, we are able to reinterpret our experience through images, constructing a visual structure, which is something that can be controlled, in a world, where control has slipped away.

FADE TO BLACK

Dear reader

I have just received news from Jonas Mekas that he has received my letter and will respond as soon as he can, reminding me that without a body, there are many more places to be!

While I am still in this epistolary mode, I conclude the letter I wrote to you at the beginning. I can only hope that you have enjoyed this path with me and that somewhere a word from me landed somewhere with you, shifting something.

I approached the writing of this exegesis with much trepidation, expecting it to be an arduous experience. I grappled with questions of why one should produce art ***and*** *write about it. As I end this process, I see the immense value in it.*

The first discovery was how essential the practice of structure and silence is to my creative practice. Through testing various routines, I found a way in which to create the ideal time for writing, which is early mornings. Writing is not possible in a vacuum, however and is upheld by a range of other daily activities, that made it possible. This includes waking before dawn, journal writing, a daily meditative practice, light vegetarian home cooking, resting by sunset and creating time for complete silence.

Ahmed (2017:492) notes that self-care is a way in which we reassemble ourselves, "through the ordinary, everyday, and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other."
Audre Lorde (1988) articulates this as follows: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare".

Sylvia Vollenhoven (2021) also lists her rituals of self-care that allow her to create that includes hypnotherapy and regression, trance and meditation, ritualistic practices, listening for guidance, working collaboratively and incorporating lifestyle changes.

I found all of this as essential scaffolding for creative practice

Makhosozana Xaba (2019:48) reminds us that women who write have had to carve out time to write.

> The emotional load and burden that women live with in a patriarchal society eats away at their freedom to be, such that even when they are alone physically, they are in fact sitting with an emotional load of carer, feeder, nurturer, community builder and mother to all. The work of jealously guarding one's time over the many months and years it takes to work on a manuscript is far removed from the magical nature of the creative process as is commonly perceived.

Another revelation that delightfully surprised me was how much I miss telling stories.

As a child, I hit a ball against a wall for hours, creating stories in my mind. My family thought I was destined for a life in tennis and my Uncle, Michael, painted a tennis court against the wall to bring my inevitable glory at Wimbledon one step closer.



Image 36: With my parents, Clive Barry and Pam Barry in front of my story-tennis-court

Yet all I was doing was playing with an unbridled imagination. I started writing stories at around the age of 8 and by the time I reached high school, I wrote novellas,

distributing chapters by the week to my fellow classmates. Somewhere along the line, I stopped telling stories, although poetry and film felt like home to me.

Being part of the black women's writing collective, WEAVE[30], nurtured my growth as a writer. Malika Ndlovu, performance poet and writer, was instrumental in encouraging me to take my writing seriously and in 2000, we published Ink@ Boiling Point: A selection of 21st Century Black Women's Writing from the Southern Tip of Africa. The writing by and about black women also had a significant influence on my development as a writer. Being part of the burgeoning publication wave of black women's writing from 2000-2022 in South Africa, inserted me into an environment where black women claimed literary room. Baderoon (2019:1) explains that writing by black women in South Africa enabled the remaking of public space, while emerging from being largely exiled by publishing and academia.
Much of this exegesis and creative practice considers the remaking of public space. The body with a disability bears the marker of difference and in all the silences about our existence and creative expression, it becomes pertinent, to carve out the space and to wiggle about to create room, as Ahmed proposes. By creating room, we build worlds, by being in them, by bringing our embodied knowledge with us and by recreating the world that has to ultimately transform to include us. Stories are a bridge to inclusion.

Returning to the process of writing and in particular the kind of writing that demands this amount of rigour and discipline, has reawakened a deep love for storytelling within me. The writing itself was a form of creative practice. I will no longer abandon storytelling the way in which I have. My filmmaking will enter a different direction from this point, as I feel called to the writing and making of narrative feature films. This was the greatest revelation of writing this thesis – a resounding and insistent call to return to fiction.

[30] *WEAVE (Women's Education and Artistic Voice Expression)*

As Paul Murphy (Murphy, 2012, cited in Holman Jones, Adams,& Ellis, 2016) asserts,

> Stories also offer us something more, something remarkable: the ability to enter and engage deeply in another's experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and in turn create a map of our futures- a theory of mind and relation- that brings us into each other's beliefs, and intentions without obscuring what makes us different from or holds us apart from others.

By using storytelling as a form of autoethnography, I found a way to think about my creative practice in a register that reflects personal expression.

Tami Spry (2001:727) notes that:

> Autoethnography contributes to the burgeoning methodological possibilities of representing human action. It is one tool among many designed to work in the fields, unseating the privileged scholar from the desk in the Master's House, and de-exoticizing the non-White-male-objective scholar from the realms of the academically othered. And it is a method that calls upon the body as a site of scholarly awareness and corporeal literacy.

Reader, when I first wrote to you, I asked you to enter a world of my making, a private domain of creative practice from the site of a wheelchair. I leave you with the series of my visual experiments, virtual reality film and finally, my experimental documentary. All of these works were made within a set of recurring limitations but these limitations ultimately become tools of liberation. By exploring creative practice from the site of my wheelchair, I am not trying to conform to dominant aesthetics of filmmaking but rather finding my way to pointing to another form of film language.

I hope that you are also able to trace the interplay between the creative work and the writing. Some of the writing found its way into the making of A camera on my Lap and functioned as part of the script. As you can imagine, it was a daunting experience to make a film during a pandemic but by working with the methods of Mekas, I was able to craft something to share with you.

CONCLUSION

This concludes the written component of this work, which is accompanied by the following creative outputs:

- *HERE* (2019), a VR experimental film that addresses issues relating to the place of disability in society.
- *Six visual experiments* (2018 – 2019) which explore the relationship between creativity and space.
- *A Camera on my Lap* (2022), explores the challenge of creating work during a pandemic.

These form the bedrock of the experimental work that is the core of my creative practice.

As Skains (2018:85) posits:

> ..the creative act is an experiment (whether or not the work itself is deemed 'experimental') designed to answer a directed research question about art and the practice of it, which could not otherwise be explored by other methods. We create art to connect with others, to connect with ourselves, and often just for the sake of it. We experiment with our art in order to push boundaries, to ask questions, to learn more about our art and our role within it.
> This is nothing new. What emerges, then, from this methodology, is the exegesis that accompanies the creative work: that knowledge that has remained implicitly within the artist, made explicit and seated within the context of the scholarly field.

The sharing of this implicit knowledge of the process of creative practice research is therefore made explicit through the exegesis and the art work produced. This is grounded in Ahmed's notion that the personal is theoretical. By dragging theory back to life, I have been able to blend artistic practice with an underpinning of academic enquiry.

Just as Ahmed's encounter with black women's writing led her to question hierarchies of citation, I found that thinking and writing about the practice of a community of artistic influence, led me to find a wealth of embodied knowledge. The experience of these artists of coming up against walls and finding their way to the site

of invention, gives me courage to continue making work. Without writing by and about these practitioners, a vacuum would have existed. We owe it to future generations to keep some form of record, especially as people who are relegated to the margins of society. By doing so, we also continue to answer Welbon's question: How did she do it?

Ahmed reminds us that "A life can be a manifesto. When I read some of the books in my survival kit, I hear them as manifestos, as calls to action; as calls to arms. They are books that tremble with life because they show how a life can be rewritten; how we can rewrite a life, letter by letter " (Ahmed, 2017:523).

If our lives can be manifestos and we claim agency, we can enrich the cinematic gaze by ensuring our place in it. Campt (2021:13) aptly explains how we are using technology to both document and change our reality. "Our repository is no longer handmade albums or scrapbooks; it is now Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, (Black) Twitter, and numerous other self-curated online collections made by ordinary people seeking to capture the vicissitudes of Black life. "

If we consider Ahmed's proposition that a life can be a manifesto and a call to action, it is my hope that we all work towards a more inclusive, equitable society. This starts with acknowledging the personal as the theoretical and by the self-curation of our lives. This way we become owners of the gaze and speak back to a history of erasure. The following quote from Ahmed (2021:137)leads me to the final conclusion of this exegesis:

> Spaces can be occupied by being intended for specific purposes. When spaces are in-tended for specific purposes, they have bodies in mind. Perhaps we can more easily tell whom spaces are intended for when those for whom they were not intended turn up.

It is therefore a political act to create space – space in which to articulate your ideas that reflects embodied knowledge, space to move freely, space to create, space for all bodies.

May we reclaim space. We are HERE. And in Ahmed's words, "we have turned up."

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APPENDIX A : IMAGES

Image 1:
Kahlo, F. *Without Hope/ Sin Esperanza.* (1945). Oil on panel 360 x 280 mm (without frame), Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico. Available from: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/without-hope-frida-kahlo/rgHBxF7ESC2qmQ?hl=en

Image 2 :
Anon. (no date). *The Blue House: Frida Kahlo's La Casa Azula.* [Photograph]. Available from: https://duendebymadamzozo.com/la-casa-azul/

Image 3:
Kahlo, F. Self-portrait with Portrait of Dr Farill/ *Autorretrato con el Retrato del Dr. Farill* (1951). Oil on Masonite. 41.5 x 50 cm. Private collection. Available from: https://www.fridakahlo.org/self-portrait-with-the-portrait-of-doctor-farill.jsp

Image 4:
Kahlo, F. *What the water gave me/ Lo que el aqua me dio. (*1938*)* Oil on canvas. 91 cm × 70.5 cm. Collection D Filipacchi. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_the_Water_Gave_Me_(painting)

Image 5:
Kahlo, F. *The Broken column / La columna rota.* (1944). Oil on Masonite. 39.8 cm × 30.6 cm.Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Broken_Column

Image 6:
Filmstrip sequence from *Entry* (2003).
Available from: https://vimeo.com/373557047/09fb670e6b

Image 7:
Video Still: *Re:incarnation* (2018).
Available from: https://vimeo.com/372871814/1a1351526c

Image 8:
The cinesaddle.
Photograph by Shelley Barry (Private collection).

Image 9:
Cardboard Viewer .
Available from: https://www.amazon.com/Google-87002823-01-Official-Cardboard-Brown/dp/B01MQ5J5J4

Image10:
Marching for Freedom.
Ntomela, E. (n.d.) *Photographic Archive,* Johannesburg.

Image 11:
"Why am I here?".
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Image 12:
"Probable field of view".
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Image 13:
Viewers experiencing HERE at the National Arts Festival, Creativate exhibition, 2019.
Photographs by Shelley Barry (Private collection).

Image 14:
Marlene Le Roux/ ACTIVIST-ARTIST HERE (2019).
Viljoen-Stroebel, A. (2019). Private collection.

Image 15:
Able-Bodied sign HERE (2019).
Animation Still by Chapfika, K. (2019). *HERE (2019) animation*. Johannesburg.

Image 16:
Be part of this story. HERE (2019)
Animation Still by Chapfika, K. (2019). *HERE (2019) animation*. Johannesburg.

Image 17:
Marlene Le Roux (ARTIST-ACTIVIST) and Charne Hugo (SINGER). HERE (2019)
Viljoen-Stroebel, A. (2019). Private collection.

Image 18:
A camera on my head: 360 Insta-Pro VR camera.
Viljoen-Stroebel, A. (2019). Private collection.

Image 19:
Rappers Diketso Letlatsa and Sbonelo Nthembu
HERE (2019)
Viljoen-Stroebel, A. (2019). Private collection.

Image 20:
Dancers Jamming HERE (2019).
Viljoen-Stroebel, A. (2019). Private collection.

Image 21:
TVWOMAN: Zizipho Soldati HERE (2019).
Viljoen-Stroebel, A. (2019). Private collection. Johannesburg.

Image 22:
HERALD/MODEL: Anneline Mathiba HERE (2019).
Viljoen-Stroebel, A. (2019). Private collection.

Image 23:
Dancer: Musa Motha HERE: 2019.
Viljoen-Stroebel, A. (2019). Private collection.

Image 24:
Screens in the Sky Mock-Up HERE (2019)
Graphics by Abbot, S. (2019).

Image 25/26:
City and Characters become animated HERE (2019).
Animation Still by Chapfika, K. (2019). *HERE (2019) animation*. Johannesburg.

Image 27:
Galaxy and One-winged birds HERE (2019).
Animation Still by Chapfika, K. (2019). *HERE (2019) animation*. Johannesburg.

Image 28:
Rehearsals: We are Here! HERE (2019).
Viljoen-Stroebel, A. (2019). Private collection.

Image 29:
Dolly Grip: 360 degree Insta-Pro camera rig HERE (2019).
Viljoen-Stroebel, A. (2019). Private collection.

Image 30:
Jonas Mekas.
Photo credit: Craig McDean. Available from:
https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/jonas-mekas

Image 31:
Collage: Jonas Mekas in Action.
Available from:
Image 1: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Jonas_Mekas
Image 2: https://dmtalkies.com/jonas-mekas/
Image 3: https://mubi.com/films/diaries-notes-and-sketches

Image 32:
My first manifesto circa 2003.
Document scan: Barry, S.

Image 33:
Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul.
"File:2013 Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul from across the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.jpg." *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*. 28 Dec 2020, 16:03 UTC. 14 Mar 2022, 13:24 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:2013_Cathedral_Basilica_of_Saints_Peter_and_Paul_from_across_the_Benjamin_Franklin_Parkway.jpg&oldid=521948715>.

Image 34:
Yemaya. Available from: https://esotericyemaya.com/D/post/yemaya/

Image 35:
Poster for A Camera on My Lap (2022).

Image 36:
With my parents, Clive Barry and Pam Barry in front of my story-tennis-court
S. Barry, Private collection.

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Viljoen-Stroebel A. (2022). Pencil on Paper. 5 sketches. Johannesburg.

Filmstrips created by P Dannhauser:

HERE (2019)
https://youtu.be/4KwJsgdsTm4

Where are my Heels (2005)
https://vimeo.com/432803814/2c67334ded

Str/oll (2005)
https://vimeo.com/418023641/774c781a9e

Cry like the Loons (2006)
https://vimeo.com/418015614/b56c67ae7b

Retrato/Portrait (2005)
https://vimeo.com/374148670/275973d604

Whole- A trinity of Being (2004)
https://vimeo.com/373557047/09fb670e6b

Inclinations
https://vimeo.com/425496497/bacc09fb2b

Where we planted Trees (2007)
https://vimeo.com/442308794/dbd0de9ffa

New York/ New Brighton (2007)
https://vimeo.com/440255535/2ae79e7f4e

Diaries of a Dissident Poet (2018)
https://vimeo.com/420601713/c02de783ef

A camera on my Lap (2022)
https://vimeo.com/687161333/ae6d698dfd

31 Days in August (2021)
https://vimeo.com/628025596/b9401efc33
Re:incarnation (2018)
https://vimeo.com/372871814/1a1351526c

Outofreach
https://vimeo.com/372871683/7788dd90e6

Ink/Visible
https://vimeo.com/372871336/c18ca12bf6

Ocean
https://vimeo.com/373556133/fb737b000d
Corridorcruising
https://vimeo.com/451421050/4c5fc55689

Die Kat en die Voël
https://vimeo.com/378732224/0d3f916d09

APPENDIX B

Response to Creative Guidelines.

Shooting Diary: 31 Days in August.
Creative Arts Practice Research:

A reflection on the 31 day pilot of the 365 day project based on the methodology of Jonas Mekas

What will be done?

I will shoot at least ten secs of video, every day for 365 days, commencing on August 1, 2020.

How will it be done?

The footage will be captured on my mobile phone, Samsung Galaxy S9. Moments from everyday life will be captured. After the initial 31 days, I will reflect on the footage and use it to construct a short film, before proceeding with the ongoing project.

Time frame and relation to researcher's previous work

The 365 day project commenced on August 1, 2020 and will complete on August 1, 2021. The project relates to my previous work of capturing images in the environment I find myself in and creating work based on the images generated.

Recordings of observations and documentation of the studio process/ Approach and methodological frameworks:

Notes:

1 August: The sun sets through a tree in the garden. I am not sure how I can sustain an entire month, let alone 365 days with new images.

2 August: I break lockdown rules and visit my aunt and cousin. We sit in the sun and I observe the children. The camera witnesses the joy of freedom felt.

3 August: I do not know what to film and feel anxious. I film a close up of my eyes, reflecting this anxiety.

4 August: My hairdresser, Fiona, comes to cut my hair at home. My brakes are locked and can't really move, so I film a low angle front view, curious about the sight of our masks in frame.

5 August: It is a rainy day and I feel sad that I did not have the opportunity to meet Mekas. I feel lonely and long for kindred souls, artists. I speak directly to camera.

6 August: I feel depressed. I do not film and stay in bed all day.

7 August: I capture a fire I've made.

8 August: Family visits as we celebrate my aunt's birthday in the garden.

9 August: I light orange candles and meditate.

10 August: I try to capture moonlight coming into my room. The image does not show, so I just record darkness.

11 August: I want to film hand sanitizer and play with the image of my hand sanitizer bottle in the slow motion function on my phone.

12 August: I record my mother watering the garden and the cat at my feet.

13 August: I attempt the slow motion function again with my spare set tracheostomy tube, which needs to be shipped to London for repair.

14 August: I feel a bit sick and worry that I may have picked up the virus. I speak directly to camera in the Mexican room dedicated to Frida Kahlo.

15 August: My cousin brings her baby to visit.

16 August: I film my face under the covers, playing with light and shadow.

17 August: I capture a series of images of the shadows of trees on my curtains.

18 August: I record the rain as seen from the Mexican room.

19 August: I record images from my bed of my chair piled with my clothes and tea mug.

20 August: I go to the shops to get groceries and film myself with a mask on, sitting in the car.

21 August: I film the doorway of my mother's room and the light reflected from the television.

22 August: My uncle cooks Chinese food for us in his garden. I also capture the image of a statue of Mary, which he has just repaired.

23 August: I record our neighbour's rabbit who visits our garden.

24 August: I capture the blank screen in my bedroom.

25 August: I film the shadow of a wire-spider.

26 August: I record some potted flowers.

27 August: The rabbit visits the garden again and I capture him eating some foliage.

28 August: I record my mother planting flowers.

29 August: I capture footage of my mom and aunt dancing.

30 August: I record medication on my hand that I am taking for back pain.

31 August: I am officially tired of the experiment and I do not film at all.

The pilot project of the first 31 days of shooting will edited into a short film within a week.

Observations:

What happened: I am not accustomed to filming every day and find that this forces me to do something. However, I am not always inspired to film and find creating in lockdown a challenge.

What changed: I become more aware of my environment and observe it through a need to capture images. I am therefore more alert to my environment.

What was revealed: Being in lockdown greatly reduces the canvas of the world and while I often make films in environments I find myself in, the restriction of movement is tangible.

What is significant: (what was revealed that could not have been revealed through any other method of enquiry)? I believe that by consciously trying to capture something every day requires dedication to your craft, an ability to see your environment through a different lens and to think about the act of creation and inspiration.

How does this compare with the work/ideas of others?
https://youtu.be/Pybw19iwrsU
Mira Nair made this film during lockdown and it was fascinating to get a glimpse into her life during lockdown and how she drew upon the visuals of her surroundings to create work.

What were the problems encountered? The main problem I encountered was feeling restricted with regard to mobile phone adaptive equipment which has not yet arrived. I also felt that it was challenging to film in one environment for such a long period of time, forcing one to find something new every day.