

# **Entangled Intimacies: An Experimental Curatorial Project of Transdisciplinary Becoming-With**

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## **Abstract**

Employing strategic modes of textual and curatorial “opacity” (Glissant 1997: 189), this project endeavours to consider how arts-based research methodologies may be uniquely positioned to explore the chaotic embodied implications of the so-called Anthropocene. This work of arts-based knowledge production and explorative enquiry is centred around an exhibition I have curated entitled *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe*, which constitutes this project’s practical component. The exhibition is being held from 10 February to 6 May 2023 at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg gallery and features newly commissioned artworks by local practitioners Tzung-Hui Lauren Lee, Io Makandal, and Natalie Paneng.

This research report considers the ongoing process of curating this exhibition via a varied textual pathway that follows through a number of different considerations and references. These include an assessment of individual and collective grief, the potential of utilising curatorial opacity as a means of relating to the chaos of ecological degradation, and a discussion of a selection of previous curatorial projects from the last two decades which have engaged this reality through contemporary art. These projects include *DON’T/PANIC* (2011), *Sex Ecologies* (2021-2022), and the ongoing work of Johannesburg based not-for-profit arts organisation POOL (founded in 2015).

The diverse, and at times perhaps disorientating, form of this research report is a curatorial and written reflection on the chaotic implications of more-than-human embodiment in the Anthropocene. This is conceived as an actualisation of curator Stefanie Hessler’s (2020: 249) assertion that “[t]he uneven, uncontainable climate crisis obligates curators to rethink ways of working. Exhibition making in times of ecological disaster ... needs to differ from previous curatorial modes.”

This project works to remain aware of the city of Johannesburg as its site of emergence while also engaging with the globally interconnected reality of the Anthropocene. It thus offers a propositional, mutable, and exploratory gesture towards what contemporary curatorial practice within this uncertain time and place marked by ecological violence may entail.

### **Keywords:**

Curatorial Studies / Contemporary Art / Curatorial Practice / Ecology / Anthropocene / Ecological Degradation / Opacity / Becoming-With / Uncertainty / Death / Loss / Interconnection / Transdisciplinary / Entanglement / Embodiment

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## Introduction

Amongst all other beings in this landscape of destructive human impact, we embody and live the implications of anthropogenic ecological destruction. In a global culture saturated by political, social, and ecological instability, we must thus ask ourselves what it might mean to forge collaborative relationships with those that are perceived as materially, emotionally, or psychically 'other' – human or otherwise. Our context of indistinguishable entanglement, climate chaos, and ecological grief necessitates that we become intimately attuned to this disastrous moment in ways that are appropriately inconclusive and dynamic. It is imperative, therefore, to centre how we, as interspecies planetary kin, collectively embody this destructive moment and how we can find ways of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) of ecological degradation.

It is from this starting point that this curatorial research report and its accompanying practical component propose a creative framework that rejects (or, at the very least, *resists*) the rigid capitalist disciplinary logics accelerating the global anthropogenic climate catastrophe. This work is actualised via a necessarily explorative and open-ended curatorial research endeavour that sees itself as an ongoing, inquisitive process of arts-based knowledge production and collective becoming. This is centred around a process-based, contemporary art exhibition I have curated entitled *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe*. The show features newly commissioned artworks by Johannesburg based artists Tzung-Hui Lauren Lee, Io Makandal, and Natalie Paneng, whose engagingly fecund creative practices have greatly inspired the *Entangled Intimacies* project and to whom it is heavily indebted. This project is being executed in collaboration with the Goethe-Institut South Africa and Wits School of Arts History of Art department's Young Curators Incubator programme. The exhibition portion of the work is (as of submission of this document) currently being held at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg's exhibition space from 10 February to 6 May 2023.

The works in the exhibition were conceived collaboratively in relation to the curatorial concept and are open to change and evolution over its three-month timeline. They are posed as nodes within a transdisciplinary, arts-based research environment orientated towards the unanswerable and expansive questions posed to us by climate chaos. The framework for this project's unfolding follows Kathrin Busch's (2009: n.p.) assertion that “artistic forms of knowledge do not restrict themselves to applications of theory, but rather begin to develop into hybrid formations of knowledge.” *Entangled Intimacies* engages and actualises these forms of hybridised arts-based research and knowledge production through both the indeterminate

outcomes of its processual, exhibitionary practical manifestation and the meandering nature of this written research report component. The explorative and experiential nature of the two co-constitutive elements which comprise this curatorial research endeavour were conceived in partial response to, and in conversation with, the previous two iterations of the Young Curators Incubator.<sup>1</sup> Both of these consisted of relatively static, predominantly photographic exhibitions that were also installed at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg space and, as such, partially set the stage for my project's processual unfolding.

The audacious inconclusiveness of the *Entangled Intimacies* project's articulations is inspired by artistic research's "fundamental openness to anything that oversteps the framework and conditions of the previously possible, in other words, [its] openness to experience the unknown, or the impossible" (ibid.). Working in this malleable and explorative way is particularly pertinent when considering the pervasive and destructive nature of the so-called Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup> Within the curatorial realm and beyond, this anarchic and violent environment of ecological catastrophe necessitates experimental, strange, and unspecified research methodologies to account for its chaotic characteristics. Indeed, curator and writer Stefanie Hessler (2020: 249) asserts that...

[t]he uneven, uncontainable climate crisis obligates curators to rethink ways of working. Exhibition making in times of ecological disaster, and grappling with the effects of ongoing colonial capitalism palpable on a planetary scale, needs

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<sup>1</sup> The first of the two previous exhibitions produced as part of the Young Curators Incubator was called *Umnyakazo* (2022). This show comprised of a reframing and expansion of 2 series of photographs by Johannesburg based artist Thembinkosi Hlatshwayo, entitled *Slaghuis* and *Slaghuis II* (2018 - 2019). These photographic works were exhibited along with poetic textual interventions and linework that had been etched into the grey walls of the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg's gallery space, and a moving image intervention staged in the closed-off room to the left of the space. This first iteration of the Young Curators Incubator was curated by Luvuyo Equiano Nyawose and ran from 9 April to 2 July 2022.

The second exhibition produced as part of the Young Curators Incubator 2022 programme was entitled *Practices of Self-Fashioning* – it was curated by Nkgopoleng Moloji and ran officially from 28 July to 21 October 2022 (though, in fact, it ran until the end of January 2023). This show was centred around a restaging of archival photographs from the GALA Queer Archive's Kewpie Collection; a personal archive of pictures once owned by a renowned District Six, Cape Town-based hairdresser and queer performer of the same name. The exhibition intended "to explore the relationship that queer-identifying people have with space and movement within the urban landscape" (Moloji 2022: n.p.). The opening of the show was activated by a performative intervention by artist Tandile Mbatsha but, aside from that, the exhibition consisted exclusively of 2D photographic works affixed to the walls and occasional newspaper clippings. Neither *Umnyakazo* nor *Practices of Self-Fashioning* featured any activations (in the form of events or evolutions in the works present, for example) throughout the times they were respectively up.

<sup>2</sup> 'Anthropocene' is an incredibly contested word with its roots in geological analysis that has been generally adopted within wider academia to discuss the conditions of our complicated ecological reality. It is used as a blanket term to refer to the current ecological epoch in which human activity is having an irrevocable impact upon the natural world. This term (despite being used to an increasing degree across various fields) cannot truly encompass the complexity of that which it attempts to describe. As such, many scholars across various fields have suggested alternatives, though 'Anthropocene' still seems to remain the most popular – gaining increasing traction in global discourse and parlance. I will critically engage with the usefulness of this term further on in this text but, for now, it is used in order to bring an, albeit insufficient, name to the social and environmental conditions which have precipitated this study.

to differ from previous curatorial modes. Curatorial practice is increasingly assessed not only by its ability to create a convincing argument, support artists, or revisit art history, but also by the way it addresses and responds to the structures in which it is embedded.

This research thus addresses how contemporary curatorial practice is a uniquely fecund means of relating to the climate catastrophe from outside of the disciplinary strictures which perpetuate it, with particular consideration of its situatedness within the socioecological conditions of Johannesburg, South Africa.

The *Entangled Intimacies* research project (within both this research report and its inexorable practical element) melds curatorial research, artistic praxis, creative writing techniques, and engagements with climate change-related discourse. In bringing together these various elements, this work tentatively forges differentiated pathways away from the more typically didactic, simplistic, or easily consumable curatorial methodologies which are ultimately ineffectual at engaging the chaotic conditions of the Anthropocene. The overlapping literary and physical spaces of this curatorial research thus together “provide a cognitive situation where to grasp these questions [concerning the Anthropocene], instead of translating them using ordinary criteria in order to produce an ‘opinion’ on the matter, can make all these epistemic relations turn, can set them in motion again” (Martínez 2012: 51). The written and practical works both, in their own ways, encourage the reader or viewer to consider their ever-changing emotive and somatic relationships to the works and their concepts, rather than simply considering them on intellectual levels. This, in turn, encourages reflection on the overarching themes of the project – those related to the entanglements of more-than-human embodiment within anthropogenic climate disaster. These are themes which ultimately work to dislodge “the erroneous belief that it is somehow possible to exempt ourselves from Earth's ecological community” (Wright 2014: 278).

### **Structure**

In line with the project's explorative inspiration, the form of this written work itself unfolds in an equally processual, meandering, and not necessarily directional line through sedimentary layers of thought, theory, and practice. I have chosen this way of writing and working because, for me, it is the most effective means of engaging the multitudinous influences which have contributed to the project's formation within my own conceptual framework. Additionally to this, it is also the most appropriately chaotic means of addressing this disastrous ecological moment that the project aims to think with. As such, this research report comprises more a thought experiment (informed, as it is, by various overlapping themes and disciplines) than it does any kind of instructive or didactic how-to guide on curating in the Anthropocene.



Given the diverse, sprawling nature of both this curatorial project's theoretical inspiration *and* its practical manifestation, to write a simplified pedagogical report would be a disservice to its aims. This work is intended to be inherently resistive to simplistic explanation and must thus be told in an appropriately explorative manner within this research report. The structural, linguistic, and material framework of this project thus extends curator and theorist Simon Sheikh's (2017: n.p.) assertion that "[i]deas must ... not only be enacted, but embodied, which always accepts a lessening of curatorial authorship or authority." In this way, it is my hope that – by weaving an embodied web of relational texts and interdisciplinary practices – the concept of the work will take form for the reader or viewer individually, not *only* via my own subjective curatorial lens.

Having said this, however, the research report does follow a loose structure onwards from this section into its first chapter, which constitutes an extended introductory articulation that further lays the conceptual and curatorial grounding for the project's unfolding. This first chapter introduces the central themes for the work, with a particular emphasis on Édouard Glissant's (1990: 189) notion of "opacity" and how it influences the conceptual framing of the project. The first chapter also introduces death and grief as pivotal concepts within the work's conception, before presenting a note on the problematic terminology of the Anthropocene which brings some additional context to the discourse surrounding the more-than-human.

The report's second chapter extends my contemplation of personal grief and goes on to relate it to the general curatorial framing and methodology of the *Entangled Intimacies* project. This begins the project's essential work of attempting to "become-with" (Wright 2014) the innumerable more-than-human processes which are all-too-often avoided within Eurowestern culture. My personal experiences of grief following the death of my father are here – via a network of interdisciplinary texts and a filmic analysis – related to the chaotic collective experiences of life within the environmental conditions of the Anthropocene. This is discussed in relation to the potentiality of contemporary curatorial practice as a means of exploring these interstitial experiences via necessarily inconclusive research processes. The somewhat autoethnographic excursus of the first and second chapters brings attention to a central mortal vein which runs throughout the work – one that is perpetually set in relation to the global climate crisis and the disciplinary structures which bolster its continuation.

The third chapter of the report critically analyses a select group of curatorial projects which have previously engaged the complexity I am attempting to speak to. These works are discussed in relation to how they have influenced my own curatorial endeavour. The projects

engaged in this chapter (including *DON'T/PANIC* (2011), *Sex Ecologies* (2021-2022), and the ongoing work of Johannesburg-based not-for-profit arts organisation POOL) come from both local South African and international arts ecosystems. This portion of the study features primary, secondary, and creative or interpretive research methodologies. This analytical section of the report is inspired, in part, by Irit Rogoff's (2016: n.p.) notion of "embodied criticality" – a way of engaging exhibitionary practice that she proposes in opposition to the judgmental myopia of *criticism*. Embodied criticality reorientates curatorial analysis away from the reductive (and arguable impossible) aspiration to "find an answer," instead turning toward "questions [themselves] until they point us in some direction we might have not been able to predict" (ibid.).

The fourth chapter of this research report critically reflects on my role as an early-career curator within the process of realising the *Entangled Intimacies* exhibition and wider project. Here I discuss what I believe to be the conceptual, logistical, and aesthetic successes and challenges of the project, and how these may be actualised further into the future by both myself and ongoing researchers, curators, and artists. This final chapter of the research report also reflects and comments on the engaging creative practices of the artists whose works are featured in the exhibition. Spanning a variety of differentiated modes of artmaking, these practitioners' predominantly process-driven or durational pieces constitute the bedrock of this project's central articulation. They extend the exhibition's conceptual and material reach far beyond any singular or normative critique of climate change, pushing it to consider a broad range of relational, interconnected concerns. This final chapter of the report reflects on how, through this diverse work, the project articulates an acute awareness of how "[o]ur task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (Haraway 2016: 1). These artworks present opportunities to consider this violent and incongruous ecological epoch *in conversation with* a necessarily diverse and changeable mixture of political, social, technological, and historical concerns.

## Chapter 1: Some Notes on Death, Opacity, and Terminology

Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and *obliterate the dailiness of life*.

– Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2007: 27, emphasis added)

I know now that my mourning will be *chaotic*.

– Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary* (2010: 44, emphasis in original)

Chaos is order and disorder, excessiveness with no absolute, fate and evolution. ... Death is the outcome of the opacities, and this is why the idea of death never leaves us. ... We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone.

– Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1997: 193-194)<sup>3</sup>

After the death of my father just over two years ago, the general effect of what we might call my *grief* over his loss has been that my life ceases to piece together. His death came – although it had been somewhat imminent since his stage 4 cancer diagnosis a year and a half prior – as such an inconceivable shock, such an unbearable break in the fabric of my reality, that it caused the formal, informal, and ostensibly insignificant elements which seemed to constitute my existence to fall apart. As Joan Didion (2007: 27) states in her kaleidoscopic assessment of grief *The Year of Magical Thinking*, the loss of my father “obliterate[d] the dailiness of [my] life.”

Following my parents’ divorce, my father and I lived alone together for roughly 9 years. Two of those were spent in the country where we were both born and brought up (the United Kingdom) and the rest, up until his death in 2020, were spent in South Africa; a place wholly unknown to us. Because our lives were so unmistakably enmeshed, one, in many ways, *did not exist* without the other, and his death threw my now discordantly monological life into strange relief. If, before the moment of his loss (if it may be thought of as a singular contained moment, rather than the very condition/s of life), there was a taken-for-grantedness of both the presence of my father and the system which held him in place, then his death cleaved these mutually dependent and unstable realities. On both quotidian and fundamentally

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<sup>3</sup> As with this first chapter, each section of this research report begins with a few select epigraphs from various sources (including, but not limited to, both fiction and nonfiction writings). These extended quotations are placed throughout the text as, in line with Sylvia Wynter’s (following Martin Heidegger) (2003: 331) proposition, they “orient the reader as the Argument struggles to think/articulate itself outside the terms of the disciplinary discourses of our present epistemological order.” These quotes may or may not be directly engaged within their respective sections, though they are placed in relation to them in order to allow the reader nondirectional entry points into their various themes.

experiential levels, these entities were sent adrift within the maelstrom of memories, feelings, and forms of embodiment that no longer hold true for me in the same way they did before.

Roland Barthes, in his posthumously published diaries chronicling his tumultuous mourning process after the death of his mother, touches on the complicated reality of grief through an emphasis on its abstraction. He emotively references the ways a person's absence can make life appear uniquely strange, scratching at the blaringly clear yet persistently deferred spectre of mortality that simultaneously steps out of view and brings form to life itself. In its overwhelming capacity, Barthes (2010: 58, emphasis in original) is “[s]truck by the *abstract* nature of absence; yet it’s so painful, lacerating. Which allows [him] to understand *abstraction* somewhat better: it is absence and pain, the pain of absence – perhaps therefore love?” This somewhat convoluted, rhetorical statement attempts to bring form to the totally disorientating effects of death on the living within an onto-epistemology that systematically occludes ‘life’ from ‘death,’ ‘soul’ from ‘body,’ and ‘human’ from ‘nonhuman.’ Barthes’ poetic reflection posits that loss allows him better access to the abstract nature of (human) existential reality, while also evoking its potential to make way for another form of decidedly more hopeful abstraction; that of an undefinable “love” (ibid.).

Édouard Glissant, as shown in this section’s third epigraph, also reflects on the dissonance of death – its inconceivable incommensurability – and how this may precipitate a similarly productive shift in perception toward his now-famous notion of *opacity*. Death, he tells us, “is the *outcome* of the opacities, and this is why the idea of death never leaves us” (Glissant 1997: 194, emphasis added). Despite its inevitability and ever-presence, death – along with its associated grief – remains obfuscated and disengaged within contemporary Westernised anthropocentric life. Glissant seems to suggest, then, that if we are to reckon with mortality – and, therefore, *all other imbricated elements of life* – we must lean into its imperviousness and learn from its unknowability. In other words, intimately familiarising ourselves with the true, infinite opacity of existence through its supposedly inevitable loss is essential.

### **1.1. The artful potentiality of a deathly opacity<sup>4</sup>**

I am discussing, from the outset of this research report, this fecund theoretical framework of opacity in conversation with my own intimate experiences of loss to set the stage for the delicate and articulate net of this project’s concerns to come to the fore. The convergence of Glissant’s conception of opacity with a highly personalised experience of grief is here

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<sup>4</sup> The title for this section is partly inspired by the name of Maneo Mohale’s emotive debut poetry collection: *Everything is a Deathly Flower* (2019).

performed in order to begin the work of bringing together these ostensibly disparate themes into one formal, yet necessarily inconclusive, curatorial project. Melding these textual and aesthetic referents here works to home in on this ongoing curatorial research's central concern: the all-encompassing, chaotic socioecological conditions of the Anthropocene. This creates space for the vital curatorial work of “[a]ttuning oneself to forms of knowing and being that engage different temporal and spatial scales” (Hessler 2020: 267).

Glissant's consideration of opacity allows us access to an awareness of (or connection to) the multiplicity of earthly being which, in his consideration of its varied *texturality*, becomes visible only by focusing on the subjectivities (or *opacities*) of its individual elements. In his assertion that “the idea of totality alone is an obstacle to totality” (Glissant 1997: 192), he implies that we cannot gain access to the true nature of being by viewing it as one conglomerated object, but that we must instead understand its interconnectedness as a vital *web* of mutual (and, I might add, interdependent) individuality. From a curatorial perspective, if we are to stand a chance at engaging this broader texturality of being in relation to the more-than-human specifically, we must employ differentiated ways of considering this disastrous time and place. In the context of this study, these are “curatorial methodologies that focus on transformation and embracing incompleteness, in order to avoid the pitfalls of western thinking and adequately respond to the precariousness and uncertainties of climate change” (Hessler 2020: 267). Here my very subjective take on Glissant's (1997: 194) notion of death as the “outcome of the opacities” is used as a referential and transcendental entry point into a project that engages more-than-human perspectives in relation to the climate catastrophe. This works to centre the diverse, and oftentimes unsettling, interconnections that characterise terrestrial life in this disturbing epochal moment of unmatched anthropogenic ecological crises.

As such, a critical discussion of the fallacious Eurowestern conception of death as an unquestionable *totality* – along with its associated and occlusive *finality* – arises as a theoretical and somatic point of departure orientated towards considering the panoply of more-than-human experiences within this bound planetary ecology of mutual becoming. This project considers this complex interrelatedness through both written and practice-based explorative curatorial methodologies to, as Donna Haraway (2016) has famously proposed, “stay with the trouble” of this monumental moment of seemingly unbridled ecological destruction. The project does not, therefore, in any way mean to suggest that art or curation may be viewed as wondrous silver bullet solutions to climate change, but rather that they are indispensable means of *relating to* the vastness of the issues it poses. I am thus proposing we view these practices as intimate modes of knowledge production, research, and worldbuilding that are

perhaps uniquely positioned to consider the implications of the various and overlapping (ecological, social, political, economic, etcetera) crises of our time.

This research endeavours to bring forth moments of embodied thinking and reflection which, albeit inescapably human, are orientated towards a consideration of the reality that “to be a one [that is, to exist, feel, and die as an ‘individual’ entity in this world] takes much more than one” (Haraway 2015: 262). Rather, it takes a cacophonous, orgiastic world of co-constitutive more-than-human liveness, mutuality, and collaboration. By using an experimental curatorial project as its vessel and linchpin, this research reflects on the complexly volatile reality of global climate catastrophe while also avoiding the tendency to reinforce anthropocentric worldviews. This is achieved by focusing on artworks and literary references that consider a wide gamut of concerns, with particular reference to the articulations and movements of the more-than-human world. Curatorial and arts-based research processes are uniquely poised to engage these slippery and unruly concepts as they constitute forms of “‘wild’ knowledge that ... [do] not occur within the space and framework of the expected” (Busch 2009: n.p.). Though these processes are “likely to remain inadequate to account for the rich alienness of other forms of life” (Hessler 2020: 267), they nonetheless constitute an earnest attempt at “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) of this moment that would otherwise be impossible.

## **1.2. A note on aims and situatedness**

One of the central aims of this research project is to excavate how the potential theoretical-material interstices between the fine arts, climate change research, curatorial practice, and the experimental ecologies have been explored within the South African contemporary arts landscape and beyond. I then use this particular contextuality, in conversation with the intimate experiences of personal loss, to frame and construct my own critical curatorial engagement with these themes. This study is conceptualised within a context that remains aware of the socioenvironmental conditions of Johannesburg as a city where the complexly intertwined histories of violent resource extraction, capitalism, and coloniality can be intimately and quotidianly felt to this day. The intersectional capitalistic, racial, architectural, and environmental impacts of the city’s mining history cannot be overstated because, as Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (2007: 281) propose, Johannesburg is littered with “the debris of wealth extraction. From all around, among and beyond the gold dumps, the city rises.”

Extractive violence and its ongoing impacts permeate Johannesburg, its human and more-than-human inhabitants, and its architectures via pervasive material and social remnants. For example, dust from the city’s expansive mine dumps (having been picked up by wind currents and carried all over the metropolis) interweaves this environment and continues to impact

people and nonhuman beings across the city. This still of course effects predominantly lower income and racialised peoples as a direct result of the apartheid regime's racist and uneven socioeconomic delegations of space and population division. Indeed, as Kathryn Yusoff (2018: xiii) asserts, "[t]he Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence."<sup>5</sup> These socioenvironmental movements which have continued impacts on Johannesburg's inhabitants thus embody "the past that is not past [which] reappears, always, to rupture the present" (Sharpe, 2016: 9). This is particularly evocative when thought in relation to grief and mourning as ways of relating to the climate crises. This is because, in both instances, ostensibly 'past' actions or events (the death of a loved one and ecological degradation, respectively) are folded over into and onto the present moment. The imbricated lived realities of history, the climate crisis, and grief in this way perpetually re-assert themselves in this place and time as, to return to Didion (2007: 27), "sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life."

It is my hope, then, that this work facilitates a conceptual and embodied link between individual grief or mourning and the collectively felt onto-epistemological problematics of the Anthropocene. These issues manifest in a variety of different ways but can be most acutely felt or considered in relation to how the (human) body engages with, feels, and inhabits its environments. The fact that inhabitants of Johannesburg are permeated, to varying degrees, by dust deracinated and distributed from the mining process mirrors the recent discovery that microplastics now flow freely through our veins (Carrington 2022; Leslie et al. 2022). These violent, uncanny, and uncontrolled consequences of extractive (petro)capitalism dislodge the fallacious notion that we can, in any way, conceive of human lifeworlds as somehow differentiated from those of the more-than-human or environmentally toxic.

The sprawling, violent, and inconclusive conditions of the Anthropocene highlight the reality that "the human body [is] not ... a citadel, but something porous and vulnerable to exposures. *The world passes through us and we are not unchanged*" (Kenney 2015: 268, emphasis added). By following a line of enquiry through personal or individual grief into an assessment of this strange environmental moment, this project considers how "we might come closer to understanding grief and melancholia as a kind of recognition [of the more-than-human world]. A way of ... allowing the ungrieved to be grieved and as a form of and perhaps for survival"

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<sup>5</sup> By remaining aware of (though not conceptually limited by) locality and situatedness, this research work thus aims to "ensure that [these] platforms for developing new forms of knowledge are created in ways that contribute meaningfully to the writing of local curatorial practices and art histories" (Ntombela 2017: 172).

(Harris and Jones 2019: 30). The problematic, embodied conditions of the Anthropocene necessitate that we consider these forms of relation anew, remaining always aware of the grievous and uncertain implications brought on by anthropogenic environmental degradation.

Creating space to conscientise local artgoing publics towards these pressing realities is particularly pertinent within the context of South Africa, due to its precarious position within the so-called Global South. This is because these parts of the world are “being forced to pay, economically, ecologically and socially, for the effects of climate change in comparison to the Global North in relief funds, croplands and lives” (Johnstone 2020: 100). This act of drawing attention to the climate catastrophe through curating might thus be conceived as a non-moralistic enactment of what Maura Reilly (2018) has termed “curatorial activism.” Although originally coined to refer to curatorial projects that deal with race, gender, and sexuality, the idea of using curating as a means of tacit activism is pertinent with reference also to the urgency and pervasiveness of ecological degradation.

### **1.3. Curatorial opacity in response to climate chaos**

With reference to culturally or artistically orientated practices (such as curation) in particular, Amitav Ghosh (2016: 17) proposes that we can understand this moment of ecological disaster as “present[ing] a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our common-sense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general.” Furthermore, any curatorial project which aims to engage – as this one does – questions surrounding the convergent more-than-human histories, ecologies, narratives, and materialities that constitute existence in this uniquely strange place and time must do more than “compartmentalize climate change as a science problem, [as this] limits and misdirects our response to it” (Coats 2020: 120). In light of this, it becomes clear that the cultural sector must face the tremendous challenges posed by the Anthropocene with decisively exploratory and speculative frameworks. These are those which operationalise ongoing research, situatedness, and speculation towards “the constitution of new realities” (Rogoff 2019: n.p.). This is characterised by a movement away from the colonially minded rigidity, facticity, and disciplinarity that has done little but plunge us further into the abyss of ecological degradation. It is within the complex theoretical-physical mire of association between death, grief, and the embodied, more-than-human experiences of the Anthropocene that this project takes on its necessarily undulating, opaque, and changeable form.

In line with Glissant’s cautioning against viewing opacity as a totality, this curatorial research process is therefore conceived as an open-ended conversation between its constitutive written, performative, and artistic elements. The process thus maintains cognisance of its



inability to render the true opacity of these pieces or the gestalt of their collective articulation/s. This arts-based research endeavours to create a space (both texturally in this research report and physically through its practical manifestation) for reflection or exploration where the complications and somatic upheavals associated with the “hyperobject” (Morton 2013) of climate change may be considered from varied more-than-human perspectives. This is, however, performed with an implicit understanding that the inherent limitations of the human purview<sup>6</sup> will undoubtedly preclude any definitive identification with the more-than-human. It is orientated, instead, towards the belief that, through careful consideration, we may broaden our perspectives away from a *purely* anthropocentric epistemology.

This work, despite (or perhaps because of) its necessarily nebulous inspiration, further follows Glissant’s (1997: 1) poetic notion that “thought in reality spaces itself out into the world.” This project is thus also orientated toward asking arguably unanswerable questions around how this illusive concept of ‘thought’ (along with its formalised academic cousin known as ‘theory’) may be actualised towards creative and/or artistic ends within this internationalised environment of violent ecological, social, and corporeal destruction and disintegration. There is a tacit hope amongst these words, then, that the dense implications of life in this strange epoch – driven, as they are, by seemingly unbridled capitalist degradation, expansion, and resource extraction – are, through this project, made to appear to the reader or exhibition visitor somewhat (even if only to the most minute degree) *otherwise*. This follows Ashon Crawley’s (2015: 88) assertion that, if we are to imagine and employ the necessarily liberated worlds of mutual becoming and thriving required to survive on this planet together, we must “be attentive to otherwise possibilities for our existence, to think otherwise possibilities for modes of inhabitation.” To believe in the potential for art to facilitate a journey towards this strategically othered viewpoint is to be open to the possibility of seeing “[w]hat is and might be the grammar of our being” (Brand 2017: 64).

Both the writing process of this research report and the working methodology for its associated practical component follow mutable and differentiated – though, of course, also oftentimes intersecting – pathways, to various ends. Their mutual and overlapping articulations do not claim to answer the greater questions posed by their initial framing/s, but rather work to

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<sup>6</sup> The idea of a singular human perspective is, of course, impossible to define or argue for also. This is a fallacy orientated towards a humanist ideology which, if engaged unquestionably, disregards the incredibly diverse nuances that characterise human (and, indeed, more-than-human) experiences. The conception of ‘humanness’ as a category has historically been constructed in relation and opposition to an ideological ‘nonhumanness’ which has, in turn, been produced within a dense web of colonial racialisation and hierarchisation. For more information on this see Wynter’s article “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument” (2003), Denise Ferreira de Silva’s book chapter entitled “Before *Man*: Sylvia Wynter’s Rewriting of the Modern Episteme” (2015), and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s book *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (2020).

propose a moment for thinking- and “becoming-with” (Wright 2014) between the reader/viewer and the natural world that is orientated towards a troubling of the violent logics of humanism and anthropocentrism. This curatorial research report and its accompanying, exhibition-centred practical component therefore serve as propositional and overlapping spaces of engagement that may precipitate an attunement towards the strangeness of the wider environmental conditions of the Anthropocene. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (2015: 21, emphasis in original) suggest that...

[L]earning to think-with and become-with the uncanny sign of the Anthropocene isn't some fatalistic exercise ... but a comportment to the fragility of encounters, shared but separated, incommensurate but not lamentable for being so. The Anthropocene does not mean we are merely 'all in it together'; we are in it inasmuch as it is in us, this geological reformation, through our shared separation. ... [A]rt's *labour* is both a sensing and a spacing of the shared separation of the Anthropocene. ... It is best not to approach such an immense reality head on, but to come more slowly and from the back, following a queer line.

My work for *Entangled Intimacies* thus gestures towards the, perhaps utopian, notion that “following a queer line” through the mire of signification and embodiment presented to us within this catastrophic ecological moment may present a strategically fecund opportunity for reflection and critique through art.

For this research, employing explorative methods of contemporary curatorial practice thus provides an opportunity to consider the complexities and entanglements that characterise the Anthropocene without dogmatically delineating or precluding its expansive impact. Actualising an indeterminate curatorial method in relation to this chaotic global ecology therefore asks how art might “speak without creating an order that excludes the disorder created by the senses” (Martínez 2014: n.p.), and thus precipitates a turn toward the disorderly conditions of climate change. This methodology intends to “force the viewer to rethink the relationship between the part and the whole: between art and the world” (Christensen and Heise 2018: n.p.).

#### **1.4. A note on terminology: ‘Anthropocene’ etcetera**

Before getting into the central articulations of this research, I must first preface and rationalise my use of the term ‘Anthropocene’ throughout. Anthropocene is a term which, as I have indicated, presents us with a complex linguistic and socioenvironmental challenge. Because of this, it should not be utilised in the manner, and to the extent, that this research report does without a critique and assessment of its usefulness and problematics. Although the term has

now become synonymous with – and, in many ways, inextricable from – climate change discourse in the public consciousness and lexicon, the contemporary history of the word (along with the many multifaceted terms which have sprung up and been proposed by countless scholars in response to it) must be engaged and critiqued here.

The term ‘Anthropocene’ was, according to Will Steffen (2021: 1784), first introduced “by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 at a meeting of the Scientific Committee of the IGBP (International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme) in Cuernavaca, Mexico.” It was conceived as a name for the ecological epoch in which we find ourselves, where human action – via the burning of fossil fuels and other known processes of environmental destruction – is now having an irrevocable impact on the natural environment. Since its introduction – due to its, arguably reductive, catchall nature and convenience – the term has had a meteoric rise in fame and usage over the last roughly 20 years, featuring in almost every field of human intellectual production. Indeed, from its relatively unknown beginnings, the word has gained incredible currency, to the point where it has since been used in everything from mainstream pop music to literary studies and, increasingly, the fine arts. Davis and Turpin (2015: 20, emphasis in original) put this huge growth in popularity down to the fact that, as they see it, “[w]hat most characterizes the Anthropocene is that it is an era of *intensity*, and the worlds we are making through our art practices, science, and research are not made to measure.”

In a strange double bind of semantic hubris, the word Anthropocene – although initially conceptualised to render the human impact on the natural environment – inadvertently recentres those *particular* human actors most responsible for ecological degradation (overwhelmingly those originating from or based in the Global North). This definitional insufficiency has been criticised extensively because the term can thus be seen, at worst, to be outrightly dismissive of those (both human and nonhuman) who will suffer disproportionately from the climate catastrophe (Haraway and Kenney 2015; Haraway 2016; Yusoff 2018; Davis et al. 2019; Johnstone 2020). In an attempt to critique the violent actions of humanity in a fallaciously flat, transcendent manner – rather than in one which pins the responsibility of climate change upon those who truly deserve it – the Anthropocene thus arguably misrecognises the implications of its own conception. Davis et al. (2019: n.p.) assert that, “[i]ndeed, the Anthropocene’s suggestion that ‘humanity’ writ large is responsible for catastrophic environmental change has been the subject of extensive and indispensable critique.”

Furthermore, the term has gained widespread criticism due to the fact that, as Yusoff (2018: 1-2) states, ...

[i]t has been taken up in the world, purposed, and put to work as a conceptual grab, materialist history, and cautionary tale of planetary predicament. Equally, this planetary analytic has failed to do the work to properly identify its *own* histories of colonial earth-writing, to name the masters of broken earths, and to redress the legacy of racialized subjects that geology leaves in its wake.

Yusoff here acutely articulates the immense importance of understanding the ways that the linguistic supremacy of the Anthropocene can do more harm than good. This is accelerated significantly, she argues, if our usage of this term does not retain a critical awareness of its own aims – those orientated toward climate justice (which is, of course, also tied to racial, species, economic, and social justice movements). Haraway similarly evokes the cumulative and overlapping impacts of the violent legacies Yusoff discusses, but with specific reference to more-than-human actors and how (particularly Western) human societies must urgently restructure their relationships with them. She asserts that “[w]e are all responsible to and for shaping conditions for multispecies flourishing in *the face of terrible histories, but not in the same ways*. The differences matter – in ecologies, economies, species, lives” (Haraway 2016: 116, emphasis added).

In order to redress the true insufficiency of the term to reference that which it attempts to summarise, scholars have presented linguistic alternatives to ‘Anthropocene’ in abundance. One prominent example is Haraway’s (ibid: 101) term “Chthulucene.” This is employed for its ability, for her, to “entangle myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages – including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus.” The use of this term thus attempts to centre differentiated perspectives, those which exist antithetically to the hegemonic social system bell hooks (1984: 18) famously calls the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchal class structure.” This system upholds, through masculinist and economic domination, the processes that continue ecological degradation. Haraway’s Chthulucene specifically attempts to draw attention to how this nuanced hierarchisation works in relation to the more-than-human.

Two other common portmanteaus which also work to render the socioeconomic factors that have influenced the Anthropocene, and which are commonly used in a similar vein to Chthulucene, are ‘Capitalocene’ and ‘Plantationocene.’ These terms respectively speak to the inherence of capitalism and the plantation (and associated chattel slavery) economy to the implementation of ongoing ecological degradation. These terms perform astute considerations of the violent histories and presents of extraction, control, and exploitation which are unquestionably linked to the contemporary climate crises. However, they remain incredibly specific (they are, in many ways, also orientated towards North American ontological

conditions) and are thus not necessarily sufficient to engage the globally-defined, more-than-human perspectives this project hopes to consider.

Throughout this research report I thus use the term Anthropocene in order to bring an, albeit insufficient, name to the social and environmental conditions which have precipitated this study's realisation. With a consideration of its problematics, I hope working *with* this complication constitutes an attempt at "staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016) of not only the disastrous ecological conditions we are placed within, but also the language we have been given to make sense of them. At its best, the Anthropocene presents us with...

a term that beckons environmental justice thinking, asking what worlds we are intentionally and inadvertently creating, and what worlds we are foreclosing while living within an increasingly diminished present. ... [It thus] creates a need to think through the interconnections and interactions of these events in conjunction with political economic logics and their attendant debts to the future (Davis and Turpin 2015: 6-7).

Similarly, Astrida Neimanis (2017: 15) proposes that "[t]he idea of the Anthropocene, in its most useful sense, places some demands upon humans to account for past actions and recalibrate present ones." It is in this vein that my project hopes to operationalise the language of the Anthropocene, alongside that of more-than-human discourse, towards indeterminate explorative ends.

## Chapter 2: On Grief as a Prelude to Curatorial Becoming-With

Like a good academic, I thought books were for answers.

– Helen Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk* (2016: 30)

The unknown, ... the unforetold, the unproven, that is what life is based on. Ignorance is the ground of thought. Unproof is the ground of action ... The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.

– Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969: 70)

The conscious and unconscious choices we make in relation to language ... begin to reveal to and for us the ways that – often despite ourselves and our desired politics – we remain bound to structures of violence we wish to disavow. Conceiving of ourselves as intellectual masters over those bodies of knowledge (broad or discrete) that we have tasked ourselves to engage connects us to historical practices of mastery that our work seeks to explore and redress. We must with increasing urgency revise the very idea of (and the languages we use to describe) our work as intellectuals – *with what resonances, and toward what possibilities.*

– Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (2018: 9, emphasis added)

In learning to live with my own abstracting grief, I attempted to ‘make sense’ of it through analytical, written processes and academic theorisation; conceptual distractions which were ultimately insufficient means of handling such an unquantifiable pain. Indeed, as Helen Macdonald (2016: 30) laconically puts it in her poignant memoir on loss, love, and falconry *H Is for Hawk*, “[I]ike a good academic, I thought books were for answers.” Despite its self-preservatory facet, however, this inclination (perhaps compulsion) toward the abstract and written gave way to a path through the mire of grief and isolation I was navigating. Forced, in other words, to change the form of my life, the impulse to construct a sensical reality around my existence swept in to protect me from the psychically, emotionally, and materially ruinous effects of grief. In my search for a sensical sublimatory form for my grief, I looked to queer ecology as an epistemology that searches for differentiated means of relating to the natural.

Specifically, I turned to an analytical lens that coupled artistic analysis *and* queer ecological theory, thus taking immense influence (both academically and emotionally) from what I saw as this burgeoning field of thought’s unique ability to point to the truly unknowable vastness of

the natural world – of which we are of course, for better or worse, an inextricable element.<sup>7</sup> I wanted to explore ways of thinking outside of the human bodily or Western socio-political timescales, ontologies, and epistemologies that had, following my father’s death, led me to feel so disconnected from the transcendently experienced terrestrial processes of living, dying, and becoming-with that characterise this planetary bond. Put another way, in retrospect I can recognise that the loss of my father (taking place, as it did, within the disfiguring environment of an ongoing climate crisis, international pandemics, and growing right-wing ideologies) necessitated that I reframe my relationships with the more-than-human elements around, within, and constitutive of my own being. In losing the most stable elements of life, then, one is struck by the simultaneous multiplicity and isolation of existence. The always already tenuous, anthropocentric bedrock supporting the false centrality of human life falls away, setting the lumpy yet fecund stage for other(ed) forms to emerge.

## 2.1. Something akin to hope

One might say that, through an exploration of the interstitial fields of queer ecology and artistic analysis, I was searching for the kernel of hope – that which Barthes (2010: 58, emphasis in original) identifies as a form of “love” – within the “*abstract nature of absence.*” This loss was and still is, for me, both intimately familial and collectively felt. Finding (or at least *looking for*) the hopeful glint, albeit oftentimes not immediately recognisable or directly apparent,<sup>8</sup> within the seemingly overpowering folds of grief and toxicity that pervade our lives is a practice of learning to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) of loss in its myriad forms. It is an act born of both the isolating, indefinite, and continued work of learning to live without someone *as well* as the violent, unevenly distributed implications of sharing an increasingly toxic planet. I am articulating the elision of these two, seemingly dissonant ideas here in order to pre-emptively gesture toward the imbricated reality of these affective forms. While the loss of a family member is often an intimate and painfully personalised experience, its inescapability intersects (as, this project argues, does everything) with all other kinds of being – at turns painful and joyous – in this intricately interconnected planetary ecology known as Earth.

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<sup>7</sup> My Honours research paper, completed in 2021, was particularly concerned with this concept. Entitled “Gesturing Beyond the Human: The Queer Ecological Imagination in Contemporary South African Art,” this research paper engaged and analysed select contemporary South African artworks from a queer ecological perspective. For more information on queer ecology see Timothy Morton’s article “Guest Column: Queer Ecology” (2010), Karen Barad’s article “Nature’s Queer Performativity” (2011), Nicole Seymour’s book *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (2013), and Jonathan Mullins’ article “Queer Ecology: Shared Horizons after Disturbance” (2020).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the processual act of eking out inklings of hope may not even be intentional or identifiable as such to the person performing it at the time of its enaction. This was indeed the case with the writing-theorising-feeling process I somewhat unintentionally employed following my father’s death.

I do not evoke the ethereal concept of hope as/or love here in an uptake of some kind of blind positivity (or, indeed, a human-centric *positivism*), but rather to render how a Glissantian opacity has manifested within my own interstitial experiences of grieving, relating to, and becoming-with the lively processes that mark our terrestrial being. The engagements within my previous research of the intricate relationality between ecological theory, emotive memory, embodiment, and the knottily interlaced reality of earthly, more-than-human being can be seen as an ideological precursor to this project's speculative proposition. This curatorial work continues this kind of tentative extraction of hope from loss by utilising it within a more material, practice-centred form. Thinking additionally with the fecund lens of critical opacity alongside that of experimental ecology, we might also posit here that the perceived nonsensicality of dying and/or grieving can give rise to a potentiality within the complex arena of the Anthropocene.

Anne Harris and Stacy Holman Jones, in thinking about the queered and mournful implications of this violent ecological epoch we find ourselves in, also evoke the principal of love within their poetic considerations of both anthropomorphic and ecological grief. Amidst this inarticulate storm of environmental loss and uncertainty, Harris and Jones (2019: 27, emphasis added) propose that we should try to “use writing about loss as a reminder that the promise of love always contains, ultimately, the promise of grief. That *to avoid grief is to avoid love altogether*.” It is this aim or principal of utilising creative practices (be they written, curatorial, poetic, or more formally artistic) as means of conceptualising the intertwined realities of grief in this orgiastic, more-than-human milieu that this chapter performs – albeit in a roundabout way. The aim here is thus to work toward an understanding of...

ourselves as bodies among and in relationship with other bodies (animal-bodies, thing-bodies, plant-bodies) that help us to understand our own individual grief, suffering and mourning, as interconnected with the degradation of the planet, a continuum of alienation that has reached epic proportions (ibid.: 20).

From this point of departure, this project is conceived as an attempt to gesture toward the ineffable, at once mournful and potentially critically productive, realities of earthly embodiment through/as anthropogenic climate change.

These realities – much like the feelings associated with what we come to know as *grief* – are intimately and pervasively felt, but increasingly allusive in their undefinable form, presence, and embodiment. Taking my own, arguably quite common, experiences of human mourning as a starting point, then, I conceive of grief here as making life uncannily *abstract* in its seemingly violent and absolute finitude. Along with this uniquely abstracting process, we could also conceptualise an opening up of the milieu of the experiential or agential (not necessarily



human) subject to take cognisance of other(ed) forms of terrestrial reality, temporality, materiality, affect, embodiment, and understanding. This may (or, equally, in line with thinking the potentialities of the project more broadly, may not) be effectively articulated here via an exploration into the opaquely outstretched, tentacular, and unruly points of convergence between Anthropocene studies, experimental ecological theory, the posthumanities, feminist and queer ecologies, and concepts surrounding more-than-human worlding (the list goes on).

Following this line of thinking, here I would like to ask how might we make use of the abstraction of grief – of death’s perceived boundedness – toward conjuring both human and more-than-human realities otherwise? How can we best orientate, in Barthes’ terminology, toward something akin to a love for (or, perhaps more accurately, an intimate mutuality or relationality with) those who have ‘gone,’ those who are still ‘here,’ and those whose bodies flow somewhere in between this false duality? Thinking further with Glissant, how might we also find, and hold onto, an opacity in relation to both post- and more-than-human forms or processes of embodiment in this precarious moment of ecological, social, and political crisis (particularly within and across the disciplinary landscapes that foreground anthropocentric facticity and dense scientific discourses)?

These are questions that this research fundamentally cannot answer. I nonetheless evoke them here at an early stage of the project’s processual unfolding, however, to propose an explorative framework for the ongoing work it performs in and through the world that continues to mould its uncertain form. In an effort to provide a speculative entry point into the nebulous concepts this research thinks with, I now turn to a discussion of a film which sits at an uncanny point of convergence between my own reflective experiences of mourning and the wider conceptual concerns of the *Entangled Intimacies* project.

## **2.2. Tenacious snails: the slipperiness of death, decay, and more-than-human embodiment**

Peter Greenaway’s *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1985) is one of the last films I can remember watching with my father before he died. This strange arthouse film about grief, decay, captivity, and more-than-human relationality seems strikingly prescient in retrospect. Now appearing to me as a spectre of things to come, this cinematic memory has laid dormant in the folds of my mind for quite some time, only resurfacing as I reckoned with how to enter into the process of writing this text. As a true cinephile at heart, my father introduced me to a wide variety of films – both alternative and ‘mainstream’ – throughout my upbringing, though it is this one that seems to re-present itself again and again in my mind, finding mnemonically and bodily disruptive pathways into the contemporary moment. In thinking with this film as part of this

transdisciplinary journey, I attempt to make sense of why I find myself so drawn to the complicated enmeshment of the climate catastrophe and its somatic implications. This also gives way to wondering how a curatorial intervention into these ideas may serve as one of the few forms of knowledge production potentially capable of intimately engaging their pervasiveness.

*A Zed & Two Noughts* follows distraught zoologist twin brothers Oliver and Oswald Deuce as they grieve over the simultaneous violent deaths of their wives in a car crash, caused by a swan on the street outside the zoo at which they both work. In attempting to bring order to their now seemingly nonsensical lives, the brothers turn, in their respective ways, to obsessing over the circumstantial and coincidental events surrounding the accident. Alongside this hyper-analysis of the crash and its (social, meteorological, environmental, etcetera) minutiae, they also turn to what is, to them, the solid ontological grounding of their scientific discipline – one undergirded, as it is, by anthropocentric observatory facticity and Darwinian evolutionary hierarchies. Specifically, over the course of the film, Oliver is seen obsessively rewatching David Attenborough's eight-part natural history docuseries *Life on Earth* (1979) while Oswald, in the zoology lab, creates painstaking experiments to photographically document the decompositions of various natural organisms (figure 1). These include – amongst others – apples, a bowl of prawns, an alligator, a dalmatian, a swan, and a zebra. The tactics they both employ, however, prove fundamentally unfruitful.



**Figure 1** – still from Peter Greenaway's film *A Zed & Two Noughts*, 1985. This image depicts a collection of apples being photographically documented through various states of decay while, in the background, the dead body of a crocodile decomposes under the same photographic observation.

The incessant mournful clamour within the brothers appears to grow stronger throughout the film, despite their rigorous and epistemic engagements with the ostensibly measurable elements of this ultimately analytically impervious world. Indeed, in her vibrant and engaged analysis of the film, Paula Willoquet-Maricondi (2003: 56, emphasis in original) asserts that the film...

suggests that the brothers' problem is one of perspective or outlook, not one of lack of information. While their emotional pain is real, it is exacerbated, not helped, by an error in epistemology: they approach life and death as an antinomy – as life *or* death – an oppositional binary that calls for a resolution in favor of one or the other term. Were the brothers to adopt a more ecologically informed understanding of life and death processes, they would realize that life and death exist along a continuum that is cyclical, not linear. They would also realize that their pain cannot simply be explained away.

In asserting that the film's protagonists are presented to the viewer as lacking in an appropriate or well-adjusted perspective on mortality, Willoquet-Maricondi here suggests that to learn from the film's internal moral logic is to gain an understanding of life, death, decomposition, and wider being as not *only* always ecologically, somatically, or psychically interrelated. Following her thinking, we can also posit that to be in considerate relation to more-than-human beings is also to deconstruct the self-evidence of anthropocentric disciplinarity and the false dichotomy between the so-called 'hard' and 'soft' sciences. This dovetails with the central concepts of my project insofar as it works to bring form to the ways that siloed and hardened disciplinarity – particularly with regards to thinking otherwise with the more-than-human – is an insufficient, if not outrightly violent, means of engagement.

As the brothers continue deeper into the boggy entrapments of grief, they can, on multiple occasions, be heard poetically reflecting on how long it takes the human body to decay. Toward the end of the film, amidst the din of clanging camera flashes in the decomposition lab, Oliver ruminates on the precluding nature of anthropocentric timescales and lifeworlds, and the associated inclination – albeit futile – to wield taxonomic order over these indiscrete processes. He says:

I sit here for hours. It's like sitting among lighthouses. Each lighthouse giving you a bearing on lost spaces of time. For tens of thousands of photographs [are] taken here, all taken very patiently because decay can be very slow. Nine months for the human body, they say (*A Zed & Two Noughts* 1985).

In conceiving of the mechanised apparatuses used to document these forms of organic matter in various states of decay as *lighthouses* orientating the viewer to *lost spaces of time*, Oliver

performs a literalising figuration wherein human means of navigation are metaphorically used toward an understanding of something outside of his linear comprehension. His fixation on the documentation and concretisation of this natural process within observable scientised time, however, denies him a connection to the reality he desperately seeks. The film argues, then, that the aqueous, undulating, and more-than-human abstract temporalities that guide the modes of embodiment (in various states of 'animation') which exist outside of the human epistemological purview outrightly resist any form of singularisation or observation.

In a strange suturing of the grief they are experiencing and the obstinate scientific lens through which they observe it, the brothers' preoccupation with the decomposition process thus then turns to that of the human body. This comes to a head in the final section of the film, in which they attempt to document their own decay through photographic evidence after mutually injecting each other with some form of unnamed lethal substance. The following morning, however, their plan is foiled when an influx of snails invades the wooded field Oliver and Oswald have chosen for their experiment, along with their bodies and the scientific equipment set up to photograph their decomposition (figures 2 and 3). The snails' unruly and bumptious presence literally short-circuits the apparatus with which the twins were posthumously expecting to image their own bodily entropy. This conclusive assertion of ecological 'poetic justice' (for lack of a better term) renders the true futility of the twins' macabre experiment(s) and, more generally, their anthropocentric epistemologies. David Pascoe (1997 cited in Willoquet-Maricondi 2003: 70, emphasis added) thus asserts that "[t]he twins were destroyed by the very system of representing the world they so punctiliously established; their investigation ends in failure because *the world refuses to be constrained by artificial discourses, and nature overcomes the limits of their devices and desires.*"

### **2.3. Relinquishing mastery**

The snails in *A Zed & Two Noughts'* final scene, through their (from an anthropocentric lens) inconsequential yet tenacious being, articulate the true opacity of the natural in the face of a humanist taxonomy. Following this line of thinking, these unrelenting and disruptive gastropodous bodies might also be seen as a prototypical example of why we must – when thinking inescapably within the sensuous lexicon of the ever-tenuous human – resist the notion that we can obtain *mastery* over the ecological. Like Oliver and Oswald, we too collectively now inhabit a (politically, emotionally, somatically, ecologically, etcetera) broken world. Here the intellectual systems propping up the unity or singular totality of the human body, the Western capitalist culture that affirms its existence, and the more-than-human environment which has been (linguistically, economically, and politically) constructed to serve them both, all sit at precarious states of disrepair. This presents us with the oppositional possibilities of

either dogmatically following an anthropocentric epistemology toward its, and our, own inevitable demise<sup>9</sup>, or to do the troublesome yet potentially productive work required to think outside of this structure. This is where deconstructing the humanist, colonial notion of mastery in favour of a practice of becoming-with may be invaluablely useful, which is what this project begets.



**Figures 2 (top) and 3 (bottom)** – stills from Peter Greenaway's film *A Zed & Two Noughts*, 1985. These images show the more-than-human calamity brought about by the snails on the twin brothers' final, posthumous experiment.

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<sup>9</sup> This mode of relation would be akin to that which the twins in *A Zed & Two Noughts* attempt, mournfully yet unsuccessfully, to employ.



Julietta Singh (2018: 20), in her kaleidoscopic engagement with humanist and decolonial theories, posits that “[t]he act of unthinking mastery is ... a vehicle through which we can begin to change fundamentally our thinking and practices of this style of being human.” *This style* of humanness here perhaps refers to that which constructs a false hierarchy placing the human at a position of authority and moralistic, colonial sovereignty over all the land, the sea, and their expansive inhabitants. To resist an anthropocentric mastery is then to “begin to exile ourselves from feeling comfortable at home [in disciplinarity] ..., turning instead toward forms of queer dispossession that reach for different ways of inhabiting our scholarly domains – and more primordially, of inhabiting ourselves” (ibid.: 8). Singh’s evocation of a primordial inhabitation in the (human) body and self, one unmediated by epistemologies or theoretical/scientific frameworks, reiterates the need to hold onto Glissant’s opacities, in both a metaphysical and literal sense.

Glissant (1997: 190) asserts that we must learn from the infinite ability of the opacities to “coexist and converge.” He shows us that these expanding forms are continually “weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, *give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures*” (ibid., emphasis added). Yielding to the ecologically aligned *weave* of opacities is thus inherently an act of unthinking mastery, one that may create space for attunement to other(ed) textualities within this fabric of all-encompassing and multiplicitous opacity. Inspired by the potentiality of opaque thinking, this project – in both its written and practice-based research forms – thus resists the formalised need to perform an intellectually and artistically stifling intelligibility, particularly within the context of the nonsensical imbricated *naturecultural* (Haraway 2016: 125) environment of the Anthropocene.

By employing abstract and collective modes of thinking and artmaking, the work performed by this explorative curatorial project is thus characterised by an opaque, transversally orientated framework. This constitutes, both theoretically and in a form of praxis, an attempt to tentatively enact what famed author Ursula K. Le Guin (1969: 70) – in what is arguably her most prescient work of speculative fiction *The Left Hand of Darkness* – refers to as “unproof.” This *unproof*, in my employment of the term, is seen as a conceptual form of non-mastery orientated towards an explorative journey that exists outside of the reductive ‘fact’ versus ‘fiction’ (or, equally, ‘theory’ versus ‘practice’) duality. As shown in this chapter’s second epigraph, for Le Guin, (ibid.) “unproof is the ground for action.” This philosophical modality inherently does not lead to any foreclosed or definitive answer, solution, or destination, but rather necessitates a journeying toward the perpetually unknowable. It encourages a consideration of life that is

orientated away from the epistemological strictures imposed on more-than-human relationality, those which occlude the potential for conviviality between the human individual and their planetary kin (human and otherwise).

Similarly, art historian and curator Chus Martínez (2012: 48) calls this mode of working and thinking a process of “disowning knowledge.” Far from a form of ignorance, or even anti-intellectualism, this is a process which entails – via a non-specific mode of journeying otherwise through the conceptual and corporeal alike – “a function that provides clues toward a mystery, that is: *how to live in a groundless world*” (ibid.: 49, emphasis added). As both *A Zed & Two Noughts* and the increasing uninhabitability of this planet show us, the normative anthropocentric forms of knowledge we use to relate to this place which we all share have proven to only contribute to its accelerated destruction. Contemporary curatorial practice is one of the few artistic and research-orientated processes defined by its drive toward explorative and interdisciplinary forms of knowledge production that do not presuppose or preclude their own outcomes. In this way, it presents itself as a potential conduit for the kind of necessarily undefinable, process-driven work needed to engage the climate catastrophe in differentiated ways.

Languishing in, and thinking with, opacity as a mode of disowning knowledge within a more-than-human milieu can thus productively unmoor us from the fallacious yet assertive fixity of anthropocentric, disciplinary mastery. Via a process grounded in curatorial theory and practice, this project then tries to make sense of (or at least create space to think around) our collective fragmentation and grief amidst the unnameable – as of yet unknown but intimately felt – entanglements that characterise life in this precarious time and place.

### Chapter 3: Curating Climate Chaos

Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces.

– Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (1928: 16)

‘[A]rt’ is above all the name of that which remains clear of ends and goals. ‘Art’ – provided we do not confuse it with decoration, the aesthetic, the museum, or the art market, nor with subjectivity, ‘commitment,’ etc. – means: *technique ... without an end or goal*.

– Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Existence of the World Is Always Unexpected”  
(2015: 90, emphasis in original)

The ‘more-than-human’ is a kind of antidote to our current crisis. It’s a way of thinking another possibility, it is critical we recognise our interconnectedness into everything around us. I think part of signalling this in exhibition practice is to allow for seepages and a porosity within work and in relation to institutional forms so as to trouble the limits and edges of both. Another means of pointing to this interconnectedness is to keep a project in flux, in a state of becoming and evolving – resisting both fixity and singularity.

– Amy Watson (2023: n.p.) (appendix 2)

In her transgressively queer ‘biographical’ novel *Orlando* (1928), Virginia Woolf – while describing a particularly fraught moment of poetic anguish for the story’s then-adolescent titular character – pontificates on the ultimate insufficiency of artistic practices for rendering the true vibrancy of the natural world. Upon coming across a laurel bush which derails Orlando’s bumptious writing process, s/he is struck by the inability of language to render its complexity. The book’s narrator (or, as they are satirically referred to throughout the novel, its *biographer*) informs us that the young writer’s disconcertion can be attributed to the fact that “[g]reen in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; *bring them together and they tear each other to pieces*” (Woolf 1928: 16, emphasis added).

This somewhat violent visual analogy, wherein nature and letters (the latter of which here stand in for all forms of human artistic pursuit) quite literally *destroy* each other, sets the stage for Orlando’s central struggle throughout the novel. This is one that persists throughout their over 300-year-long life – during which they spontaneously metamorphose from male to female at roughly age 30 – and which forms a pivotal theme for the character’s metatextual lifework



poem “The Oak Tree.” This ongoing struggle is predominantly concerned with how art may allow us to trouble the stringent Eurowestern epistemological frameworks that place nature at odds with (human) expression – those which moralistically impose themselves upon the slippery infinitude of mortality, sexuality, gender, and, overarchingly, nature itself.

Woolf does not, however, outrightly denounce language (and, therefore, art more broadly) as some cumbersome burden in perpetual opposition to the complexities of life but, rather, as something with the potential to give rise to new pathways of relationality. Elise Swinford (2011: 198), in her analysis of *Orlando*’s explorations of grief, gender, and nature, similarly asserts that...

just as the illusive nature of Orlando’s gender is not an obstacle but instead another vehicle through which he gains varied life experiences, literature as illusion does not necessarily carry with it the negative implications of a lie or deception – literature is deceiving to the point that all language is a deception, a necessary but often hindering tool of self definition.

For Orlando (and perhaps equally Woolf herself), then, language is a tool to transmogrify, rather than disfigure, the natural within creative processes of personal and collective growth. Despite the mutual antipathy Woolf describes between nature and language, she suggests that it is in fact our necessary task, through creative pursuits, to nonetheless attempt to bring forth the reality of the un/natural here and now – albeit via the insufficient, anthropocentric tools at our disposal.

*Orlando* thus asks us to consider how artistic pursuits can be actualised towards reconfiguring, reframing, or – as may be necessary – *outrightly rejecting* the stifling disciplinary contexts we inhabit, in order to articulate the true and radical unknowability of more-than-human worlds. Perhaps, in this way, through creative work we collectively embody a perpetual state of becoming, as Orlando does in terms of both their gender and poetic expression. Herein we are always working *toward* the goal of making sense of this chaotic moment, despite knowing it may well be ultimately futile. With reference to curating specifically, taking this into consideration helps us to “conceptualize and even implement new forms of world making that are fluid, rather than static, and always in the process of becoming, rather than fully resolved” (Hessler 2020: 259).

*Orlando* here not only facilitates an interdisciplinary connection between literature and the fine arts, but also, conceptually, it aligns to this project’s underlying themes centred on “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) of the Anthropocene. Despite Woolf’s assertion that nature and language are incongruent, Orlando’s persistence in completing and publishing their

magnum opus “The Oak Tree” – an extended poem about life and nature – towards the end of the book results in its commercial success. This success is not, however, followed by a positively conclusive ending to the story, but rather one which famously leaves the eponymous character’s fate open to mutable change into the future. The incommensurable duality between resolution and incompleteness upon which the novel is (un)resolved might be read, in the context of this study, as a strategic artful “opacity” (Glissant 1997: 189) orientated towards creative exploration in the face of dogmatic, preclusive, and destructive environmental or socioecological conditions.

I have thus chosen to open this third chapter of my research report – which will go on to discuss previous curatorial projects that have engaged climate change and/or ecological thinking to varying degrees – with an extended reference to *Orlando* as, in both form and content, it tacitly gestures towards the aims of this study. My reference to Woolf’s skilfully constructed, dynamically queered ecological lens is not intended to place too heavy an emphasis on the literary within my curatorial work, but rather to add another facet or entry point to its explorative aims. Contemporary cultural work concerned with climate change (and more-than-human relationality more broadly) is, by definition, concerned with a world of messiness and chaos, and this study’s referential texts (including *Orlando* and *A Zed & Two Noughts*) are thus equally multivocal and diverse.

These texts set out a research framework that reflects Elena Filipovic’s (2013: 17-18) claim that exhibition making (and curatorial practice more broadly) should be viewed as a “place for engagement, impassioned thinking, and visceral experience ... but not necessarily as the platform for the sort of empirical knowing that we have all too often been led to believe is important to the artwork and the exhibition alike.” This intertextual strategy pieces together an appropriately variegated inspirational plurality of intergenerational, transdisciplinary, and perhaps even multispecies interlocutors. These are all speaking – albeit in different tones, pitches, frequencies, volumes, and timbres – of a common goal of planetary kinship, intimacy, and collaboration. As mentioned above, this plurality is orientated toward the impossibly cryptic but vital question of “how to live in a groundless world” (Martínez 2012: 49) – both collectively and subjectively.

This multivocal framework is taken forward into the remainder of this chapter. It discusses and analyses a group of local and international contemporary curatorial projects aimed at the broad questions concerning climate change, partly via Rogoff’s (2016: n.p.) concept of “embodied criticality.” This concept is activated in an effort to move away...

from criticism which is a form of finding fault and of exercising judgement according to a consensus of values, to critique which is examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to criticality which is operating from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness (ibid.).

In this way, mine and the reader/viewer's *embeddedness* within this curatorial study and the climate catastrophe are thought through and analysed in relation to these previous projects, but not as critical arbiters of their 'success' or 'failure' to achieve any given aims. This process is thus employed through a lens of explorative criticality and reflection, rather than one of myopic criticism which precludes collaborative cross-pollination of curatorial concepts and practices.

### **3.1. On the im/possibility of environmental overemphasis**

The question of how best to engage the anthropogenic climate disaster through curatorial practice has posed a dense and multifaceted challenge to arts practitioners since its recognition as an unparalleled problem facing earthly life on a global stage. One significant, institutionally funded curatorial project that thought with and through this environment of ecological precarity within a South African locality was *DON'T/PANIC* (figures 4 and 5). Curated by Gabi Ngcobo and held at the Durban Art Gallery between 28 November and 11 December 2011, this work was timed to coincide with the COP17 United Nations Climate Change Conference which was also being held in Durban across the same dates. The project featured a selection of public programming events and a catalogue (published by Jacana Media) to accompany its central exhibitionary element<sup>10</sup> – all of which were funded by and produced in collaboration with the eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality, Goethe-Institut South Africa, and Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Ngcobo (2011: 9) asserts that the project saw itself as “responding to the subject of climate change, with the aim of unsettling both those who snub the subject and those who pay it an overwhelming amount of attention.” It is this suggestion that an individual, exhibition, or other creative research endeavour *could* in fact “pay [climate change] an overwhelming amount of attention” (ibid.) upon which I focus throughout my analysis of *DON'T/PANIC* in this section.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The exhibition featured artworks by many prolific local and international artists including Clive van den Berg, Dineo Seshee Bopape, David Koloane, Donna Kukama, and Penny Siopis.

<sup>11</sup> Before conducting my engagement with *DON'T/PANIC*, it is necessary to first acknowledge that my analysis of the project is based purely on viewing the show through photographic documentation and textual remnants (the same can be said for my discussion of *Sex Ecologies* below). As I was not able to experience it in person, my understanding of the show inevitably comes from an unfortunately limited perspective – gleaned predominantly from the exhibition catalogue and other online sources. I have nonetheless chosen to focus on the exhibition in this section as I feel it is a vital project to discuss in relation to the progressive arch of (South African) curating in relation

In relation to my own conceptual and curatorial frameworks which view the climate catastrophe as enmeshed within and through the condition/s of our being, this conception is critiqued as representing a somewhat dualistic attitude to the unquestionably pervasive effects of climate chaos. I thus conclude that it is arguably impossible to, as Ngcobo suggests, *overemphasise* climate change – particularly within a creative project orientated toward its effects, but also more generally in wider practice. This notion is also discussed in relation to Ngcobo’s professional tendency toward strategic methodologies of refusal within her wider curatorial practice – a concept akin to my implementation of Glissantian opacity. This relates to Ngcobo’s conception of art (with particular reference to the climate disaster) as a form of knowledge that “occup[ies] the space between that which can be done and that which remains impossible” (ibid.), from which I have gleaned a great deal of inspiration.



**Figure 4** – still from the *DON'T/PANIC - Open Forum at Durban Art Gallery* [YouTube video](#), produced by Goethe-Institut Subsaharan Africa. This image shows an example of a public arts-centered event concerned with climate change in South Africa – held at the exhibition *DON'T/PANIC*, 2011, curated by Gabi Ngcobo at the Durban Art Gallery.

The curatorial concept for *DON'T/PANIC* was centred around an exhibition which featured artworks that were either referentially or tacitly related to climate change, or which were in fact produced without it in mind at all. Ngcobo’s (ibid.: 10-11) ...

primary [curatorial] approach [for this project] was to read into images, experiences and processes in which artists are not necessarily making direct

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to the Anthropocene, which this chapter partly takes as its focus. Furthermore, despite its importance within the wider gamut of local curatorial projects related to climate chaos, there is relatively little public information available about *DON'T/PANIC*. Addressing it here thus also encourages further engagement within similar future projects.

comments on issues of climate change. What [she] was most interested in were moments where the artwork slips through certain barriers and where artistic practices reflect the inability to separate creative pursuits with how we relate to the spaces we inhabit – the environment in its broadest sense.

What is most interesting about this statement, for me, is that it emphasises the necessity for ecologically minded curatorial practices to be *aware* of the intimate interconnections of embodied life on this planet, but also seems to somewhat disengage from the direct immediacy of this imperative. By selecting pre-existing works which simply *felt* evocative of the concept, Ngcobo performed here a suggestive, yet undeniably potent, evocation of the conditions of the Anthropocene through art, while also being indirectly dismissive of its true ubiquity. This choice was intended “to allow a variety of artistic gestures to be in conversation with one another, to clash, to allow tensions to emerge, relationships to be formulated only to be broken again” (Ngcobo 2013: 144). However, within my analysis of the project, this perspective does not effectively remain aware of the inextricability of the climate crises from our available modes of (curatorial and artistic) embodiment.

Ngcobo was given total creative control over the show and, as such, the explicit decision was made to not commission new work for *DON'T/PANIC* but, as I have mentioned, to rather select pre-existing artworks – many of which do not directly engage with the context of climate disaster in their original conception. The exhibition was thus actualised through a lens that intentionally refused to align its constitutive artworks with the conditions of the Anthropocene. This was because Ngcobo (ibid.) “did not want the exhibition to be ‘greenwashed’, nor did [she] want to burden artists to respond to these questions based on their urgency, which in this instance was also connected to an international event of a global scale.” While this rejection of commissioning is posed as a process of rightfully unburdening the artists from having to perform the urgency of the climate disaster on a global stage, it neglects the fact that these works were/are produced within, and thus inescapably linked to, the conditions of global anthropogenic ecological chaos and are nonetheless marked by its violent impact. I do not mean to imply here that *all* art and curatorial projects must *explicitly* perform their relationship to ecology but, given this project’s self-aware and proposed engagement with climate change, the relative lack thereof causes a somewhat obstructive slippage.

What I am phrasing here as perhaps a lack of direct engagement with the Anthropocene might equally, however, be understood as an extension of the common thread of intentional refusal to perform a specified curatorial clarity which runs throughout Ngcobo’s practice. As an arts practitioner whose curatorial projects often engage and trouble interstitial ideas relating to geopolitics, de/postcoloniality, racialisation, history, *and* ecology, her work typically

necessarily rejects didacticism in favour of experimental chaos or impenetrability. For example, at the time of executing *DON'T/PANIC*, she was also producing a number of other high-profile international exhibitions which embodied this notion, as well as working regularly alongside a group of other South African and international arts practitioners on a collaborative project entitled The Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR).

This latter project was originally conceptualised in 2010 by Ngcobo in collaboration with Los Angeles based curator Sohrab Mohebbi. The collective project's website describes its concerns thusly:

CHR has responded to the demands of the current moment through an exploration into the historical legacies and their resonance and impact on contemporary art. By addressing current urgencies, which have grown over the debris of the issues of the past, CHR ... raised questions about the political potentials of artistic interpretations of histories (Center for Historical Reenactments n.d.).

The aim of the CHR was thus, in part, to investigate the reciprocal, and oftentimes oppositional or nonsensical, relationship between contemporary artistic production and normative, singular, or monological historical hegemony. This was particularly posed in relation to the contemporary impacts of the apartheid regime on South African society. The CHR therefore proposed a disruptive and audacious structure that, as Katja Gentric (2022: 67) proposes, was "poised as a point of convergence. This point, ephemeral, transient, trans-cient or farsighted, and at the same time retro-futuristic, is a site where images are salvaged out of layers of forgottenness or disremembrance" Conceptualising the CHR as a collective site for salvaging and piecing together disparate and disremembered fragments might bring some context to Ngcobo's choice to resist any direct link to the climate crisis within the intentionally abstruse framing of *DON'T/PANIC*. Though the CHR was/is not *directly* concerned with ecology, it nonetheless engages the notions of precarity, agency, chaos, and colonial inheritance or haunting which curatorially structured *DON'T/PANIC*'s relationship to climate change.

Ngcobo was also the head curator of the 10<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale entitled *We Don't Need Another Hero* (2018), the curatorial framework of which further extended the wider conceptual underpinnings of her practice. Similarly to her engagements with monolithic historiographies through the CHR, Ngcobo aimed for the 10<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale to propose "a plan for how to face a collective madness" (Berlin Biennale Blog n.d. cited in Krivanek 2019: 57). This was facilitated through inevitably indeterminate processes of collaborative making and worldbuilding that, she asserts, attempted to facilitate a necessarily "self-reflective Berlin Biennale ... [in which] disorder or a different order is therefore unavoidable" (Ngcobo 2019:

57). Ngcobo's employment of differentiated, self-reflective, and thus inherently *disorderly* curatorial framings is certainly also evocative and reflective of her conception of *DON'T/PANIC*. With these relational projects in mind, her intentional choice to work with what she terms "art that has the ability to touch but never with the aim of embracing; art that is disobedient and disruptive; art that refuses to be an overt functional tool and therefore has the power to act against the general drift of the world" (Ngcobo 2011: 9) in *DON'T/PANIC* may be better understood. In bringing together artworks produced in various (both locally South African and international) contexts, as well as in relation to varied subject matters outside of climatological concerns, one can assume that Ngcobo was thus intending to facilitate a dialogue across and through these differentiated locales and practices. This was perhaps thus orientated toward facilitating a more nuanced discussion around the Anthropocene than was being had at the time (the early 2010s).

In relation to artistic research centring climate change *in conversation* with the typical facets of Ngcobo's practice, her way of working allows for the emergence of "a non-moral form of address that offers a range of discursive, visual, and sensual strategies that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression" (Davis and Turpin 2015: 4). *DON'T/PANIC* thus presented a vitally conversational intervention into what curatorial projects concerning climate change may look like in this strange time and place. However, Ngcobo's intentionally unspecified polyphonic methodology – albeit essential and poetic in relation to the confusion of this global moment – resulted in the work not engaging with the conditions of the Anthropocene to the extent to which it was arguably capable.

She proposes that she is "interested in art that possesses a power to stir conversation and renegotiate the systems of exchange, when different narratives clash, creating confusion and uncertainty rather than one-dimensional stories" (Ngcobo 2019: 58). In relation to this, her aim with *DON'T/PANIC* of "unsettling both those who snub the subject [of climate change] and those who pay it an overwhelming amount of attention" (Ngcobo 2011: 9) may be seen as an attempt to unsettle the arguably extractive sociopolitical implications of the COP17 United Nations Climate Change Conference itself. This, however, (much like the supposed conceptual links between the chosen works to the overall theme of climate catastrophe) does not seem to be extrapolated upon within the curatorial framing of the project and is thus, perhaps intentionally, left to personal viewer speculation. Therefore, while Ngcobo's working curatorial methodology for *DON'T/PANIC* was (in line with her wider practice) characterised



by an intentional refusal to *directly* engage the climate catastrophe, it nonetheless claimed to be constructed around it and, as such, must be critically engaged.



**Figure 5** – Installation view of *DON'T/PANIC*, 2011, curated by Gabi Ngcobo at the Durban Art Gallery, featuring Bright Ugochukwu Eke's *Between Earth and Clouds*, 2011. Photograph: Bright Ugochukwu Eke.

In relation to the *Entangled Intimacies* exhibition, Ngcobo's approach here in part inspired my drive to work towards creating an exhibition that features commissioned and durational artworks – which I discuss in the final chapter of this research report. These works, which are orientated toward processual change, were conceptualised and produced through a conversational, collaborative approach that responds to the wider curatorial concept, and thus allows for it and the artworks to grow in conversation with one another. In the conception of the exhibition, this commissioning framework allowed for the three respective artists' practices (which, for the most part, do not typically engage climate change discourse *directly*) to evolve into, through, and in conversation with this lens. This was actualised through my own consideration of these artists' practices as imbued with a, in some ways latent, potentiality to engage the central conceptual and material themes of the project. This framework exists as somewhat responsive to Ngcobo's approach of selecting artworks which already existed in their completed forms, and which did not necessarily engage the topic of climate change in any direct capacity.



Ngcobo (ibid.: 10) frames *DON'T/PANIC* as “not a platform to provide answers but rather one in which a series of questions, speculations, proposals and processes are assembled to create a space to sharpen reflection and encourage resistance.” However, the combinational effect of both the static nature of the exhibition’s constitutive artworks, and their lack of intentional engagement with concepts concerning climate change, slightly deadens this explorative intention – albeit articulated through the lens of her wider experimental practice. The exhibition set out to “shun the exigencies of the moment; by steering clear from discourses adept at looking at things from a singular way of being [the artworks in the exhibition] start to be part of something more fluid and thus more enabling” (ibid.: 14). It is of course *vital* to employ ways of being, thinking, knowing, and working that lean into fluidity and multiplicity – indeed, this is perhaps the central theme of my own curatorial project. I do not see, however, how this could be possible *without* facing the conditions which bring about this necessity: the very “exigencies of the moment” which Ngcobo (ibid.) attempted to “shun.” In order to bring forth these explorative, anti-binary frameworks, employing conceptual and practical methodologies which work backwards from, but are not overdetermined by, the conditions of this disastrous and catastrophic moment is imperative.

### **3.2. Sex Ecologies and the fecundity of collaborative commission-based curatorial practice in response to the Anthropocene**

Curator and writer Hans-Ulrich Obrist (2014 cited in Vesters 2016: n.p.) proposes that “[t]he very idea of an exhibition is that we live in a world with each other, in which it is possible to make arrangements, associations, connections and wordless gestures, and, through the *mise-en-scène*, to speak.” Obrist here implies that the exhibition form is *inherently* tied to somatic and social interconnectedness. Similarly, Martínez (2012: 55-57, emphasis added) asserts that “[a]rt is not a pretext for thought, but rather a thought that operates by means of constant exchange between different systems that vacillate between the abstract and the concrete and that *make us vacillate between them as well.*” Obrist and Martínez thus here suggest that exhibition making provides an opportunity for creating differentiated pathways for thinking and knowing in relation to both art and the (human) body or socius. In this way, artistic and/or curatorial practices present moments of corporeal and cognitive seepage, allowing variegated layers of thought and form to commingle which could not have done so otherwise.

If this is indeed the case (as I believe it is), then curatorial projects featuring exhibitions dealing with the embodied disasters of the Anthropocene must necessarily bring these notions into the realm of more-than-human relationality. This is because, by virtue of not only their forms as exhibitions, but also through their subject matter, they are undeniably tied to entanglement within and *beyond* the human (as, of course, everything ultimately is). I am proposing this way

of working as a possible means of precipitating a “heightened attentiveness to nonhuman modes of sensing and relationality ... [that] might open up the possibility for more ecological, speculative modes of encounter and worldmaking” (Gray and Sheikh 2018: 175). It is from this propositional opening notion that I will now go on to discuss an exhibition entitled *Sex Ecologies* (2021-2022) (figures 6 and 7) which, despite its conceptual *adjacence* to the climate catastrophe, is nonetheless centrally related to its implications.

*Sex Ecologies* was curated by Stefanie Hessler – along with a small team of additional curators and coordinators – and held from 9 December 2021 to 6 March 2022 at the Kunsthall Trondheim in Trondheim, Norway. It was funded by and conceived in collaboration with The Seed Box (a Swedish environmental humanities collaboratory), the Goethe-Institut Norwegen, and the Institut Français Norvège. The project’s central exhibitionary element featured newly commissioned artworks by 9 international artists, all of whom were asked to produce works in response to the project’s aims and central concept. All the works in the show were developed in collaboration with the other participating artists, along with “an advisory board for cross pollination composed of researchers ... from disciplines like gender studies, environmental humanities, communications, and Indigenous studies” (Kunsthall Trondheim 2021: 6) – all of whom met regularly via online meetings.



**Figure 6** – installation view of *Sex Ecologies*, 2021-2022, curated by Stefanie Hessler at Kuntshall Trodheim, Norway. Photograph: Daniel Vincent Hansen.

The project featured an exhibition, public programme, and publication and, according to its online guidebook, it “explores gender, sex, and sexuality in the context of ecology. The exhibition is founded in the belief that environmental and social justice go hand in hand. Through a transdisciplinary approach, the exhibition critiques understandings of nature, gender, sexuality, and race that attempt to objectify and naturalize them” (ibid.). Although being primarily concerned with the relationships between (particularly queered) sexuality and ecology, the show’s conceptual framing is undeniably entangled within the central ideas surrounding the Anthropocene. This is clear particularly in relation to Hessler’s wider curatorial practice and writings, the majority of which have been centred around the potential for curation to engage the conditions of the climate crisis.<sup>12</sup> The show traversed artistic themes spanning environmental toxicity and microplastics, aqueous relationality, ongoing environmental imperialism, and the animated or agential qualities of microbes and shipworms. *Sex Ecologies*’ varied concerns thus extended the typical themes of Hessler’s practice by further considering how arts-based research surrounding climate change must be necessarily explorative or expansive *and* specifically intentional.



**Figure 7** – installation view of *Sex Ecologies*, 2021-2022, curated by Stefanie Hessler at Kuntshall Trodheim, Norway. Featuring Okwui Okpokwasili with Peter Born, *Repose without rest without end*, 2021, video installation, dimensions variable. Photograph: Daniel Vincent Hansen.

<sup>12</sup> For some more information on this, see Hessler’s article “Tidalectic Curating” (2020) and book chapter “Curating in-between systems: Politics, ecology, and art” (2021).

Through dialogical processes of arts-based research and creative co-production, *Sex Ecologies* was able to push the limits of its artists' respective practices into explorative and unknown directions. Ways of working such as this – which create space for differentiated spaces of collective unknowing and becoming – are essential if we are to ever engage critically the chaotic and bewildering conditions of the Anthropocene. To quote Hessler (2020: 249) again, this situation “obligates curators to rethink ways of working. Exhibition making in times of ecological disaster ... needs to differ from previous curatorial modes.” The kinds of creative systems for producing, sharing, and feeling knowledge that were actualised through the work of *Sex Ecologies* create unique and indispensable spaces for considering the multitudinous, rhizomatic, and messy implications of ecological degradation. They are fundamentally orientated towards the aim of thinking through how we embody these crises, but their outcomes are not precluded by this aim. They thus “make the conditions of the [curatorial] system, its structures, and its environments such that communication can unfold, while fostering prerequisites that allow for increasing complexity, or information, to evolve” (Hessler 2021: 547). This way of working is committed to a process of collective attunement and becoming that has, in many ways, inspired my creative framework for the *Entangled Intimacies* project.

The accelerated, and *accelerating*, nature of the climate catastrophe is precipitating a more intentional and interrogative turn toward these concepts within contemporary curatorial practice. This rather immediate turn reflects how “[t]he field within which we operate is no longer limited to just one system or to always being the same: neither is the role and position of the curator” (Hessler 2021: 547). If contemporary curatorial practice centred around the Anthropocene is to effectively take this into account, then working methodologies orientated towards thinking through specific ideas which also still retain a strategic opacity are essential. The production of *Sex Ecologies* was driven by a transdisciplinary and process-based commissioning approach that allowed for an engaged and embodied experience within its exhibitionary element. This work (along, in many ways, with that of *DON'T/PANIC* – albeit in another way) thus constitutes an act of “critical thought ... that does not rush to embody itself, does not rush to concretise itself, but allows us to stay with the questions until they point us in some direction we might have not been able to predict” (Rogoff 2016: n.p.). These ways of working allow for collectively evolutionary and collaborative projects to materialise – those which engage multifaceted concepts and varied aesthetics, but which nonetheless speak of a common goal and urgency. It is this fecund and articulate potential for embodied open-endedness in relation to climate chaos which I believe *Sex Ecologies* and, as I will now go on to discuss, the work of Johannesburg based arts organisation POOL both particularly achieve.

### **3.3. POOL and the explorative potential of transdisciplinary, ecologically minded curation in Johannesburg**

A green substance disorientates the body underfoot. It is a strange, sticky roughness that seems to cling to – or scratch at – the foot as each step is made. The methodical unconsciousness of the processual lifting, landing, pressing, and re-lifting once more of the heel, ball, and toes is, at least for a moment, ruptured. This unruly material will not disengage from the walker's body without asserting its uncanny presence. As such, one is made to feel as though the, otherwise typically overlooked, corporeal mechanisms and procedures that characterise our being have been strategically *disrupted*. The perceptive gumminess felt between the foot and floor interrupts the aseptic environmental expectations one might have in a neoliberal world wherein the unified human subject's body must move seamlessly or uncritically over and through smoothed surfaces. This immediate sensorial awareness forces one to, when entering this space, almost instantaneously look down and become acutely aware of their surroundings. In so doing, the tacky substance underfoot is shown to be, upon closer inspection, a layer of grass green sandpaper which has been installed across the floor of an exhibition space.

This sandpaper was a central element of Nina Barnett and Jeremy Bolen's exhibition *The Weight in the Air* (2022) (figures 8 and 9), held at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg's Origins Centre between 22 March and 30 July 2022, in collaboration with POOL – a Johannesburg based not-for-profit contemporary arts organisation. This material set the stage and held dominion over the exhibition's primary exploration, one which intended to draw the viewers' attention to the relationships between their respective bodies, the bodies of other earthly beings, and the expansive environments they cohabit.

The handout pamphlet from the exhibition proposes the sandpaper as a spatial intervention orientated towards considering the reverberations of the human body within any given environment. In relation to the exhibition's titular installation piece *Weight in the Air* (2022) (figure 8) (which featured, alongside the sandpaper, fans automatically triggered by human entrance set to physically activate blue gum trees, piles of raw bricks, and blue plastic strip curtains), the handout proposes that...

[w]alking on the sandpaper surface makes one aware of the sound and vibration of their own body. A body moving in this space is creating more particulate through friction with the floor. This dust is airborne through the currents of the fans (sensing the body's movement), and the museum's air conditioning system. This piece is intended as an experimental prompt to bring awareness



to the systems that circulate dust around the world and the impact of our bodies on these cycles (*The Weight in the Air* 2022: n.p.).

Throughout this work, Barnett and Bolen thus create a site within which human bodies and actors are productively implicated and encouraged to consider their own presence – a consideration which is often intentionally disengaged and sterilised within the typical ‘white cube’ exhibition model.



**Figure 8** – installation view of *The Weight in the Air*, 2022, featuring *Weight in the Air*, 2022, by Nina Barnett and Jeremy Bolen at the Wits University Origins Centre, the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Photograph: Ngoma Mphehlele.

Danika Govender (2022: n.p.) playfully proposes that Barnett and Bolen’s environmental approach to installation making allows the artists to, “[i]n no prescriptive terms, ... instigate an Anthropocene. *The Weight In The Air* gives no clear answers. Instead, it provokes more questions.” As Govender suggests, the creative techniques or tools utilised to create the exhibition do not construct a prescriptive or didactic structure through which one is obligated to engage this work. Instead, through a carefully balanced environment of delicate playfulness and artistic candour, access to the concepts which have informed the space is facilitated through the viewer’s body. This somatic, speculative, and at times confrontational attitude to space, concept, and materiality precipitates a kind of viewership which is *felt* rather than simply *seen*.

In an expansive interview I conducted with POOL’s co-founding director and curator Amy Watson (2023: n.p., emphasis added) (appendix 2), she proposes that “[i]n efforts at making [the] abstract [conditions of the Anthropocene] more concrete, some practitioners choose to work in ways that are immersive and sensory so as to allow audiences to experience something; *to privilege a kind of somatic knowingness over an intellectual knowingness.*” *The Weight in the Air’s* green, sandpaper coated flooring is thus one small but highly effective means of tapping into an audience’s “somatic knowingness” (ibid.). It is an enactment of a curatorial and/or artistic practice that strategically entangles the human exhibition visitor’s form within the *meaning* of the work on display, without linguistically prescribing their means of entry into it.



**Figure 9** – installation view of *The Weight in the Air*, 2022, featuring *The Sensors*, 2022, by Nina Barnett and Jeremy Bolen at the Wits University Origins Centre, the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Photograph: Anthea Pokroy.

This way of working evokes a key theme within POOL’s wider programming – one concerned particularly with the embodied implications of the climate crises, and which has been a common thread within the organisation’s curatorial work since its inception in 2015.<sup>13</sup> Watson

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<sup>13</sup> Although I am here focusing on POOL’s consistent engagement with ecology or Anthropocene-related concepts, this is of course not exclusively what the organisation does or concerns itself with. As I have mentioned, it is, however, certainly a recurring theme within its expansive programming.

asserts that, from the start, it was essential for the organisation to engage themes surrounding anthropogenic climate chaos. This was because...

not only did [these themes] feel urgent, prescient, and resonant, but also the practitioners we were interested in engaging were considering and re-considering these subjects in really interesting ways. ... Like any interesting curatorial practice, we wanted to speak to the urgencies of the here and the now. I can't imagine how we would have programmed without considering the Capitalocene, Anthropocene or questions of ecology. These are the questions of our time. In our context [Johannesburg] specifically it would be amiss to not look at the legacy of extractive regimes and to not consider the multiple ecological crises that are unfolding in the city in which we are based. ... POOL's programming points to our earth as both fragile and resilient and deeply interconnected.

POOL's mutable, engaged curatorial and artistic practices are thus generally orientated toward the consideration of how these "questions of our time" (ibid.) might be thought anew, both within this locality and beyond. The organisation enacts creative, embodied methodologies that "experiment and play with instituent forms, exhibitions, public programming and publications as spatial and discursive practices" (POOL, n.d.). POOL's work thus presents an opportunity to consider how independent, Johannesburg based transdisciplinary curatorial endeavours may be means of engaging the chaotic conditions of life in the Anthropocene *otherwise*.

I am here proposing we view these curatorial practices as speaking to potential existential and theoretical more-than-human worlds that exist *outside of or in opposition to* the constrictive and violent systems which perpetuate climate destruction. Ways of thinking with and through the more-than-human are particularly impactful when considered and actualised across various disciplines, aesthetics, and methods. As such, Watson (2023: n.p.) asserts that "[t]here's something potent about being able to bring people from different disciplines together and having them feel something out collectively." This is a process which she believes can precipitate a "space of shared unknowingness, vulnerability, and experimentation." Hessler (2021: 544) similarly posits that these "spaces outside of art and in-between different disciplines can become productive lacunae, fostering complexity rather than linear progress, essentialism, and causality. Instead, they open up unbounded realms to explore and develop." Transdisciplinary and, by extension, interlocutory curatorial practices thus present opportunities for the true "opacity" (Glissant 1997: 189) of the Anthropocene to come to the fore.



To return to this chapter's speculative opening sentiment, although it may well be true that human artistic and more-than-human communicative modes are doomed to proverbially "tear each other to pieces" (Woolf 1928: 16) when brought together, we must nonetheless creatively reckon with this condition of epistemological incongruity. The chaotic social and ecological environment through which we wade necessitates this – as all the projects discussed in this chapter make clear. Considering the more-than-human in nuanced and intentional ways through curatorial work is thus "a way of thinking another possibility, [because] it is critical we recognise our interconnectedness into everything around us" (Watson 2023: n.p.). Curatorial work concerned with the issues of the Anthropocene should thus, as I have argued throughout this chapter, be executed in such a way that it *leans into* the volatility of this precarious moment – in both embodied form and concept. Inspired in part by the projects mentioned here, this is something I have attempted to foreground through my curatorial framework and methodology within both this research report and the *Entangled Intimacies* practical component, which I go on to discuss in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Collectively Materialising *Entangled Intimacies*

We can never disconnect from Earth's ecological community, because we are always becoming-with, in a living multispecies world composed of phenomena and transitions. But we *can* terribly damage our ability to respond to that world. Failing to attend to ecological connectivities does not break them, but leaves them disfigured. These neglected connections hang in the air, like exposed faulty wiring, pulsing with a deadly charge.

– Kate Wright, “Becoming-With: Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities”  
(2014: 280, emphasis in original)

An exhibition is ... a leasing of space and time, and as such, it must be made to redraw the boundaries of private, urban, capitalist, and affective spaces. ... It is an occasional structure, like the coffee or the celebration, whose ethics extend beyond the functions of selection or circulation. It is a gathering, a constellation, a means to unite people, objects, ideas, movements, or gestures, all connected together by a shared purpose and a shared space.

– João Ribas, “Curating as Spatial Resistance” (2015: 32)

Sometimes you *think* that a place can hold the concepts we intend to expand, but perhaps we have to be more self-reflective and realise that the environment is in fact not open to that. I like to think about how the research process is either constrained or allowed to evolve when thinking about future solutions. Like, how much compromise do people actually have energy for when trying to find solutions to the issues we collectively face? It seems very little, even when all we ask is that the audience *witness* the work.

– Natalie Paneng (2023: n.p., emphasis in original) (appendix 3)

The *Entangled Intimacies* project constitutes a process that does not, and will never, know its own end or beginning. It has been constructed in this way out of conceptual, logistical, historical, and environmental necessity. As I have argued above, the task of both this research report and the practical project it is inextricably linked to is to foster alternative ways of feeling, looking at, and engaging with the embodied implications of the global climate crises. As such, the work expands into pasts, presents, and futures of disaster and environmental toxicity it cannot fully comprehend. This is facilitated through open ended, dialogical curatorial and writing processes of collective becoming that do not predict or preclude their own conclusions, but are rather orientated toward the true opacity and chaos of this moment. As this report's

title suggests, the project generally thus focuses on *becoming-with* the more-than-human through communicative and artistic modes that trouble anthropocentrism and lean into the inescapable processes of interconnectivity that characterise our collective planetary being.

This project is therefore posed to engage how “[b]ecoming-with nonhumans, and appreciating their capacity for meaning-making and worlding, may enhance our ability to respond to the disturbing and amorphous becoming-withs of the Anthropocene” (Wright 2014: 280). Wright’s “becoming-withs” here also, as I have mentioned, bring attention to the pervasiveness of our collective processes of dying-, decaying-, and mourning-with – particularly as they are accelerated through unbridled capitalist environmental degradation. Bringing attention to this facet of our being helps to emphasise how we are ultimately simply “bodies in relation and how [by considering this] ... we might come closer to understanding grief and melancholia as a kind of recognition” (Harris and Jones 2019: 30). It was from this starting point that the practical manifestation of this curatorial research was founded, and from which it continues to grow – conceptually and materially. The notion of using the transcendence of death or grief as a point of departure towards a collective (within both human and more-than-human realms) recognition conceptually undergirds this project’s process of evolutionary unfolding and exploration. This was centred around the co-production and progressive conceptualisation of the *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe* exhibition, forthcoming publication, and public programme upon which this chapter focuses.

This project sees the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg’s exhibition venue as a site for processual collaborative arts-based research orbiting around a central exhibitionary node featuring works by Johannesburg based artists Tzung-Hui Lauren Lee, Io Makandal, and Natalie Paneng. My choice to approach and include artists who operate within the artistic, social, and environmental ecologies of Johannesburg was intentional as their works thus help the project to lean into its situatedness within this particular environment, without being *overly* dependent on it. This choice also extends to the other practitioners involved in the project, such as interdisciplinary designer Naadira Patel (founding director of graphic design studio Softwork), who designed the project’s posters and visual identity (appendix 1), and experimental book bindery PULP Paperworks’ Victoria Wigzell who is producing the exhibition’s accompanying forthcoming publication.

As I mentioned in this research report’s introduction, the exhibition is currently being held until 6 May 2023 and, as such, sees itself (in conversation with this written research component) as a durational and process-based spatial experiment, rather than a didactical static and aseptic environment. The exhibition is a collaborative environment of installation-orientated

worldbuilding that, through experiential artworks, considers what ecologically minded experimental arts-based research practices may look (or *feel*) like in this particular philosophical and naturecultural environment (Haraway 2016). These aesthetic and conceptual concerns are intended to engage differentiated thematics and new artistic mediums to those that have been previously explored within the Young Curators Incubator programme thus far, as these have been predominantly photographic and visual works (see note 1). The *Entangled Intimacies* exhibition is also enlivened through an ongoing public programme of events that are conceptualised and executed in collaboration with the artists featured in the show and, in turn, contribute to and activate the exhibition space.

The exhibition element of this project is constructed as an open-ended environment for group inhabitation and thinking. This is centred around a selection of artworks that were produced through a dialogical commissioning process that (while of course being executed in response to the theoretical underpinnings of the wider *Entangled Intimacies* project) were conceptualised and continue to materialise in conversation with Lee, Makandal, and Paneng's respective artistic, theoretical, and aesthetic concerns. The project is thus not *wholly* exhibition-orientated, but instead views the physical manifestation of this research as creating a site for, as the title suggests, co-constitutive play and engagement around, though not precluded by, its conceptual themes. This process is considered to have the potential to extend the typical forms these artists' works have taken in the past, in order to extend both their own and the project's conceptual and artistic reach. The exhibition environment serves as a kind of 'lab' to, as Makandal (2023: n.p.) poetically mentions in our group conversation conducted for the forthcoming exhibition publication (appendix 3), explore "the science of imaginary solutions."

#### **4.1. Engaging the more-than-human through fluid artistic coproduction**

I will go on to discuss the potentiality for growth within the exhibition further in the next section. For now, however, I would like to first detail and bring context to my particular intention in reaching out to each of the three artists who were commissioned to produce work for the exhibition, in order to explain why I feel their respective practices engage the thematic concerns of the project. Engaging a wide variety of materials, subject matters, and modes of artistic production, these transdisciplinary artists were approached as their practices together create a panoply of nuanced, site-specific articulations around the themes associated with climate disaster. The artists were all asked to think in specific relation to the space of the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg gallery together with myself in order to create an appropriately explorative and, ultimately, strategically inconclusive or opaque research environment. The exhibition was constructed in this way so that it might be poised to engage the themes of the

work through a methodology orientated toward collectivity which, nonetheless, understands each person's role and contribution as distinct and subjective.

Maria Lind (2009: 66) has contextualised the desire for working in this collective way as...

the wish to practice generosity and sharing as an alternative to contemporary individualism and the traditional role of the romantic artist [or, in the context of this research, contemporary curator] as a solitary genius and marketable identity. ... Collective activities ... are connected to a desire to withdraw from the art market and exploitation, to turn away from the production of objects and from marketing. Wanting to be a stronger force in society is a kindred motivation as is a desire to create an intellectual and emotionally stimulating work situation.

Lind thus understands collective practices of curation and/or artmaking as a facet of what we might call the turn toward decapitalisation within the conceptual and contemporary arts. This move towards mutuality may, by extension, be thought of as a disinvestment from the structures which bolster the climate catastrophe, as these are also inherently linked to systems of capital exchange and (environmental) exploitation. The collective work of the project thus looks towards modes of decentralised exhibition making which are nonetheless focused around Lee, Makandal, and Paneng's works. With this in mind, I now go on to discuss the artists' practices more generally and their pieces in the exhibition individually, in order to give some context to their respective inclusions in the *Entangled Intimacies* project.

Working from an expanded sumi ink and charcoal drawing and calligraphic practice (figure 10), Lee's art considers her diasporic experiences and wider Chinese-South African cultural heritage. This is mediated through reflections on global and interpersonal flows of cultural, linguistic, and physical energy. Her work is predominantly installation based and, as such, "is occupied with the translation of two-dimensional mark-making, such as writing, to three-dimensional space" (FORMS Gallery, n.d.). This is also often mediated through computer rendering technologies which she uses to create expansive digital environments that, in essence, serve as embodied and further abstracted experiences of her 2D drawn pieces. This lens of inhabited digitality is also referential to another central tenet of her work concerned with the traditional Chinese concept of *qi* – roughly translating to "breath," "air," "steam," or "vital energy/force." This philosophical notion references the flows of energy, atmospheric conditions, and (within Lee's work) the invisible technological communicative signals through which we relate to one another and the more-than-human realm. These are often depicted through dynamic and intricate cloud formations in Lee's transdisciplinary work (figure 11).

Through her consideration of *qi*, Lee’s art “refer[s] to the cycles of life, nature, the body and ‘psychophysical energy’” (ibid.). This is particularly resonant when one considers her use of sumi ink throughout her practice, which is made from ash collected from her burning incense during Buddhist prayer. This cyclical process of death, burning, and material collection plays itself out in her drawings “which allows [her] to physically draw with meaning” (Lee 2023: n.p.). This facet of her work engages *Entangled Intimacies*’ speculative consideration of grief as a means of relating to the complications and imbricated embodied disasters of climate chaos.



**Figure 10** – Tzung-Hui Lauren Lee, *11 October* (detail of triptych installation), 2023, digital video projection, sumi ink and charcoal on paper, and 3D rendering, 4.8 x 1.5 x 1.5m. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 11** – installation view of *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe*, 2023, featuring *11 October*, 2023, by Tzung-Hui Lauren Lee at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg. Photograph: Thabang Radebe.



**Figure 12** – installation view of *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe, 2023, featuring 11 October, 2023, by Tzung-Hui Lauren Lee* at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg. Photograph: Thabang Radebe.

She asserts that while the “concept for the exhibition definitely aligned with [her] practice, ... the climate crisis isn't always at the forefront of it” (ibid.). As such, though she has produced largescale works before, I was particularly interested in how Lee could perhaps experientially expand her typical considerations of the atmospheric into a means of engaging the Anthropocene. The reoccurring cloud motifs Lee uses to explore the notion of *qi* through her abstracted drawing work – which, in this context, consider the embodied implications of ecological degradation – were thus the starting point from which she approached her piece for the *Entangled Intimacies* exhibition. She speaks about this in relation to her use of sumi ink as a material remnant of burning thusly:

I like to think about what is held within the air, along with the human experience and embodiment of it. We live to pray, we live to burn, and we live to survive – that is what's held in the air that surrounds us and what I wanted to explore with my triptych in the exhibition (ibid.).

The work she refers to here is a contemplative and monumental triptych installation entitled *11 October (2023)* (figures 10 to 12). This piece consists of three 1.5 metre<sup>2</sup> panels, the left and right of which are moving image projections which have been angled off the wall to wrap around the viewer – these two flank a central drawn piece. The left panel shows a video work depicting slow-moving clouds, the middle a largescale sumi ink and charcoal drawing, and the right a 3D rendering of metallic globules suspended within an infinitely blank inky space, through and into which the viewer flows. This final panel of the piece is open to change and may evolve in form over the course of the exhibition timeframe.

The implications of Anthropocene embodiment which have inspired this project are gestured to throughout *11 October's* both delicate and bold presence. For example, the flight-like, almost hypnotic suspension of the far right video piece takes the viewer on what appears to be both a macro- and microscopic journey through the central drawing and, by extension, the processes of burning and atmospheric manipulation necessary for its material production. This is further explored through the triangulated physical structure of the overall work itself. Along with the symmetrically placed benches in this part of the exhibition space, the angular form of the piece partly encloses the viewer's body and troubles any simplistic or unidirectional passage through it.

Paneng similarly uses digital technologies to create her artworks, but in a very different capacity. Through porous processes of filmic worldbuilding and installation making, her art is orientated towards considering processes of personhood, self-construction, and embodiment – particularly in relation to the artificial or rhetorical qualities of online culture and discourse. Jared Sloan (2023: 39) proposes that Paneng's vibrant practice “plays with the freedom and malleability of digital selves, not bound to any one personality or identity.” Her predominantly moving image and installation based works are often pervaded by sleek, partially vaporwave inspired aesthetics, a highly saturated (at times alien) tonality, and faux natural materials such as AstroTurf. These qualities together create phantasmagorical environments that critique the fallacious division between the ‘digital’ and the ‘real,’ or the ‘human’ and the ‘nonhuman.’ She typically works through modes of strategic self-assertion, wherein her body and face are placed within her videos and physical works so as to remain cognisant of the inescapably limiting and subjective human purview.

Similarly to Lee's understandings of networked and wireless digitality as an expanded physical environment, Paneng's artworks materially inhabit, and are conceptually produced from within, an indistinguishable interstitial landscape between the physical and the technological. The concept of worldbuilding – from both material, installation-centric and digital perspectives – is thus perhaps the defining characteristic of her artistic process. Despite the fact that the “narratives [which pervade her video pieces] are usually quite abstract, ... the climate crisis blends into the works [she] make[s] too, because they're oftentimes about finding *alternative* worlds” (Paneng 2023: n.p., emphasis in original). For the *Entangled Intimacies* exhibition, this notion was a significant facet to the work she produced/is producing, because it takes cognisance of the necessity for imagining and constructing differentiated worlds to that which we currently inhabit – characterised, as it is, by extractive violence and ecological degradation.



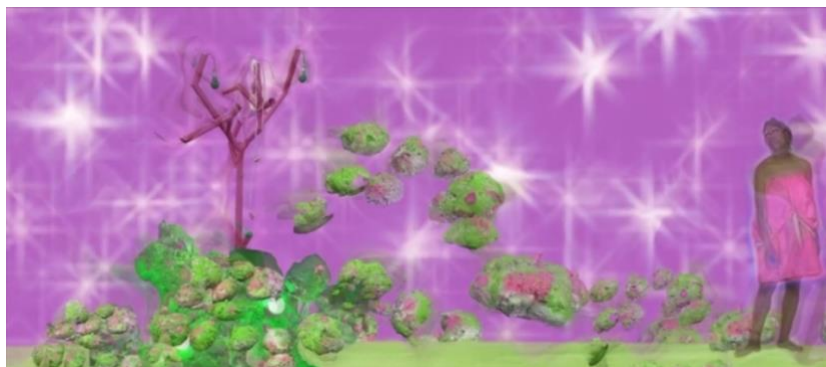


**Figures 13 (top) and 14 (bottom)** – installation views of *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe*, 2023, featuring *Setlhare sa Lesedi (Tree of Light)*, 2023, by Natalie Paneng at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg. Photograph: Thabang Radebe.

In our group discussion, she asserts that the curatorial framing of the show encouraged her... to reconsider or readapt how I frame my work in some ways. Usually, I myself am the focus of the art and the framing comes from that, but this project really allowed me to think more about how the world and environment *is* the concept, versus me being a concept engaging within an environment. For this work, I am considering my practice as a space for research: what kinds of research I do, what angle this research takes, and how to share this research as/once it's realised are all major themes (ibid., emphasis in original).

This dynamic relationship with the curatorial concept for the project resulted in her expansive installation piece produced for the show (figures 13 and 14) which “is driven by a ... ‘green energy’ solution that grows from a fictitious man-made aerosol product” (ibid.) entitled ‘Future Formula.’ The work playfully responds to the global energy crisis (specifically inspired by the ongoing experiences of load shedding in South Africa), with a particular focus on its relationship to the unsustainability of extractive capitalism and the linguistic politics of greenwashing.

The installation is structured around a central steel sculpture entitled *Setlhare sa Lesedi (Tree of Light)* (2023) (figures 13 to 15), featuring glowing green light bulbs which protrude from its angular, artificially-coloured fuchsia branches. Through a network of tentacular wires and vine-like extension cords which snake from its base, this tree figure is the power source for a continuous, sonorous sound intervention and three monitors which each play unique videos related to the space. These video works are in a perpetually fluid state of progress and flux, because they are intended to be updated as the show evolves over time. As such, they stand as digital sites for documenting Paneng’s durational artistic research mentioned above. This is inspired by her conception of the space as a laboratory for “invent[ing] imaginary solutions that aim to prompt thoughts that could change actions into the future” (ibid.).



**Figure 15** – still from Natalie Paneng’s video *Future Landscape*, 2023, single-channel digital video with sound, 01:44 min. This work was produced for the *Entangles Intimacies* exhibition and is intended to grow and/or change over time. The video can be seen playing on the far-right monitor in figure 13. Image courtesy of the artist.

Through architectural interventions and durational installation work, Makandal also sees her art as a process of reckoning with and drawing out these imaginary solutions. As perhaps the only artist out of the three participating in the exhibition whose work *explicitly* deals with more-than-human relationality and the implications of the climate disaster, Makandal's (2023: n.p.) self-conception as a "practitioner in the science of imaginary solutions" is particularly pertinent. Similarly to Lee, Makandal's turn toward installation-based pieces grew out of a desire to expand her abstract drawing practice into an embodied, felt environment. However, while Lee and Paneng typically turn to technological means of engaging the chaotic conditions of our time, Makandal's work, in both form and concept, is "bound to ecological concerns – particularly those concerning the material relationality between urban, human-made environments and natural worlds" (ibid.). Her resultant work is characterised by an understanding of exhibition making as a process of considering the imbricated ecological, social, and interdependent more-than-human milieux, to which we are inextricably tied.

Much of Makandal's more recent work is also concerned with "feminist and environmental embodiments of process, entropy, urban ecology, and hybrid environments during a time of environmental shift" (Makandal, n.d.). Her prolonged engagements with the cyclical processes of entropy suggest a connection to the accelerating and unifying conditions of loss, mourning, and grieving brought about by the climate crises. To return to Barthes (2010: 58, emphasis in original), this intentional engagement with death and/or mourning "allows [us] to understand *abstraction* somewhat better." In the context of this study, the abstract conditions into which we might be allowed a better understanding through these artworks are those we inhabit (in both life *and* death) as bodily subjects of the Anthropocene.

As with her pieces for *Entangled Intimacies* (figures 16 to 22), Makandal commonly incorporates organic materials into her installations which allow for the othered earthly beings who constitute our planetary kin to become co-collaborators within the art. She contextualises this facet of her work thusly: "I have very deliberately worked with our more-than-human counterparts as participants in the creation of the pieces. I took a step back as the maker and set up the situation for the work to then produce itself *with* these other creatures" (Makandal 2023: n.p., emphasis in original). Her work in the exhibition thus intimately investigates these themes through the use of slow (on the human scale) organic growth processes. These are facilitated through her use of the natural mediums of generated soil, clay (figure 16), compost, fungi, and decay throughout, across, and over which new life germinates.



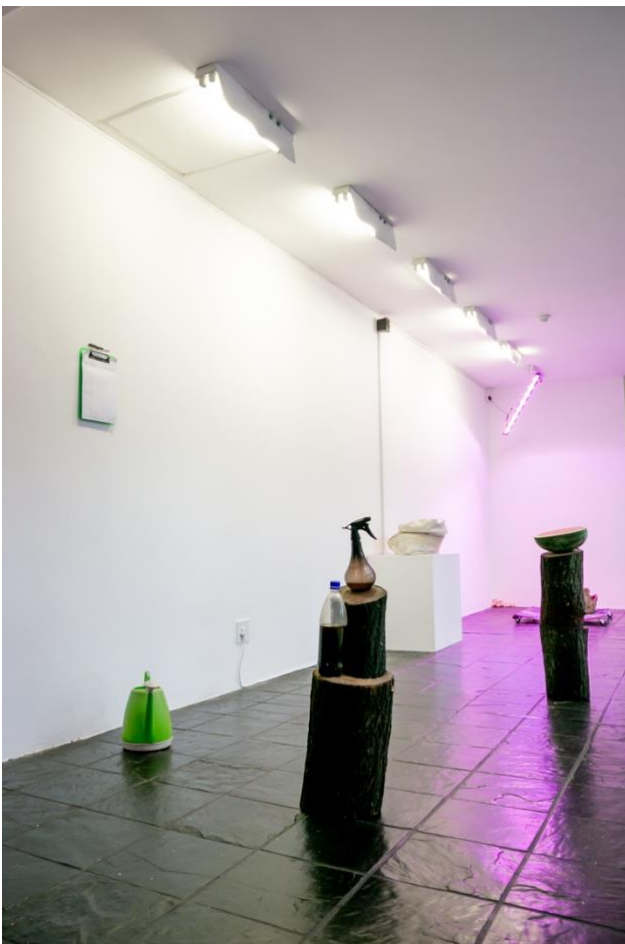


**Figure 16** – Io Makandal, *Slow Fusion II* (detail), 2023, clay, wood, soil, grass seed, water, grow light, and plastic sheet. This work was produced for the *Entangles Intimacies* exhibition and is intended to grow over time. It was “created from slabs of clay that have been used to make impressions of the surfaces throughout the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg building” (ibid.). The piece can be seen to the far-right of figure 17. Photograph: Thabang Radebe.



**Figure 17** – outdoor installation view of *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe*, 2023, featuring Io Makandal’s installation piece *Science of Imaginary Solutions*, 2023, at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg. This image also shows Makandal’s site-specific outdoor drawing *In Our Blood*, 2023, petroleum jelly on outer glass window which is picking up atmospheric dust and particulate over the course of the show. Photograph: Thabang Radebe.

Makandal's pieces are orientated towards a consideration of more-than-human modes of inhabitation, communication, and rebirth as means of relating to the ecological crises we collectively embody. She sees "the three-month-long duration of the show as an opportunity to really explore and experiment with growth and decay" (ibid.). As delicate enactments of the durationality of the *Entangled Intimacies* project, Makandal's pieces constitute moments of collective research enacted in collaboration with the powerfully agential processes of the more-than-human. This is enacted in conversation with Lee and Paneng's interventions, as all of the pieces continue to grow, decompose, and/or de/rematerialise over the course of the show's run. These works are staged both inside and outside of the exhibition space in order to precipitate a dialogical porosity within and through the architectural and ideological structure of the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg building (figures 18 and 19).



**Figure 18 (left)** – installation view of *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe*, 2023, featuring Io Makandal's installation piece *Science of Imaginary Solutions*, 2023, at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg. Photograph: Thabang Radebe.

**Figure 19 (right)** – outdoor installation view of *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe*, 2023. This image shows Io Makandal's durational installation piece *Untitled: WIP*, 2023, plaster, pine wood, water, and grass seed, 40 x 18 x 130cm, placed at the entrance of the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg building. This artwork features grass seeds which have been mixed into plaster and will grow out of, and thus crumble or destroy, the plaster over the course of the exhibition. Photograph: Thabang Radebe.

## 4.2. The exhibition as past, present, and future process

The engaged evolutionary process of the exhibition constitutes a collective gesture toward the implications of life within ecological and somatic degradation or chaos. The ontological and epistemological messiness of the Anthropocene necessitates a curatorial process that simultaneously views the object- or experience-orientated exhibition space as both a grounded/ing context *and* a critical point of departure for further adaptive and performative engagement. This way of working has and continues to engineer the disastrous and as-yet-unknown implications of the Anthropocene *into* the structure of the project itself, rather than simply having the work *respond to* this environment and/or concept.<sup>14</sup> This curatorial methodology is enacted as a recognition, once more, of how “[t]he uneven, uncontainable climate crisis *obligates* curators to rethink ways of working” (Hessler 2020: 249, emphasis added) in order to effectively reckon with it.

The production and conception of the artworks which feature in the exhibition, as mentioned above, were facilitated through a process that worked backwards from an initial group meeting in the Goethe-Institut exhibition space. Herein myself and the artists (bar one who joined us via video call from Leipzig, Germany) thought collectively about how the exhibition could critically engage the Goethe space, rather than simply be *held* by it in a performance of institutional or academic neutrality. This methodology was employed as a means of considering the environment of the Goethe-Institut in dialogue with the particular themes associated with embodiment of the climate catastrophe around which the exhibition is framed. This initial meeting was then followed by regular online and in-person group meetings, studio visits, and a collective WhatsApp group and Google Drive folder via which ideas were presented and workshopped in preparation for the exhibition. Through these conversational and collaborative channels we not only discussed the ongoing processes of making the artworks, but also shared readings and inspirational material as well as discussed the conceptual, logistical, and, at times, bureaucratic institutional facets of the exhibition making process.

Through these vitally convivial communicative channels, myself and the artists became co-creators of the project more widely. The philosophy and material of the show were thus produced through a polyphonic process which then simultaneously fed into the general concepts of the work – those relating to ecological mutability, interdependence, and imbrication. This is also formally enacted through the group conversation which constitutes

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<sup>14</sup> This conception of building the *form* of the work from its concept is similarly employed in the explorative construction and interdisciplinarity of this document itself.

the exhibition publication's textual material (appendix 3). Aside from being central and indispensable to this project's intentions and subject matter, these processes of co-authoring help to facilitate collaborative ways of working that "create space for artists to speak for themselves" (Watson 2023: n.p.).

I was (and still am) drawn to these kinds of collaborative, polyphonic, and dialogical methodologies not only because producing artistic work in this way "is unusual for group exhibitions, where artists mostly work alone and do not meet until the opening" (Kuntshall Trondheim 2021: 6). As well as allowing for "a whole entirely new thing to emerge [as a result of] ... shifting the conditions of production" (Watson, 2023: n.p.) in this way, I also feel as though this process- and practice-based methodology embodies the indeterminacy and chaos of the socioecological moment this work speaks to. It was, is, and will be important, then, for this curatorial project not to work towards an end or ultimate realisation/resolution, but rather to understand changeability as the work's irresolute condition. This curatorial method enacts an understanding that completion is an ultimately impossible goal, particularly with reference to the expansive, violent, and unknowable implications of the Anthropocene. The project is rather orientated towards a collective becoming that is "attentive to otherwise possibilities for our existence, [one that] think[s] otherwise possibilities for modes of inhabitation" (Crawley 2015: 88).

The artworks in the exhibition are articulations of mutable artistic practices that – via sonic, digital, and organic evolution – remain cognisant of their own potential for growth or change throughout the show's three-month run. The processual self-consciousness built into the exhibition's execution thus produces its own kind of knowledge that engages, through both the forms and subject matters of its works, a "somatic knowingness" (Watson 2023: n.p.) in relation to the Anthropocene. As I have mentioned above, this kind of arts-based research and knowledge production plays itself out through both Lee and Paneng's evolutionary video works, as well as the processual, agential growth and/or decay of Makandal's more-than-human materials.

These explorative, ongoing research methodologies are orientated towards destabilising the monolithic forms of, typically scientific, knowledge that typically mediate and abstract our embodied relationality with the climate disaster and the more-than-human. In this way, the *Entangled Intimacies* exhibition engages Busch's (2009: n.p.) notion that "[s]een from the viewpoint of art, one might recognize the contingency and fictional quality of knowledge, or the aspects of oppression and exclusion inherent in knowledge structures." In this way, the project more widely embodies a fluid and collective opacity in opposition to the normative



disciplinary structures of knowledge making. This then constitutes an “act of unthinking mastery [that may become] ... a vehicle through which we can begin to change fundamentally our thinking and practices of this style of being human” (Singh 2018: 20).

#### 4.3. The watermelon problem: on the work responding to the space responding to the work



**Figures 20 (left) and 21 (right)** – Io Makandal, *On Decay/Dying or Where are the black seeds?*, 2023, watermelon and natural wood plinth. This was a durational work intended to rot over time in the gallery space. Left photograph: Thabang Radebe (taken on 10 February 2023, before visible decomposition), and right photograph: Rory Thomas (taken on 15 February 2023, a day before the work was removed from the space).

The task of working within the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg was, and continues to be, both challenging and rewarding in equal measure. Of course, the *Entangled Intimacies* project would quite literally not exist (at least not nearly in the same capacity) had it not been for the institution’s generous support and funding, for which I am incredibly grateful. Having said this, however, the challenges of working within this environment must be engaged, specifically in relation to the concept of the show itself. One particularly interesting, at times discordant, dynamic between the institution and the exhibition materialised around Makandal’s durational artwork *On Decay/Dying or Where are the black seeds?* (2023) (figures 20 and 21) – it is this piece upon which I will focus in this section.



*On Decay* was a durational artwork made from a watermelon placed upon a plinth of precariously stacked wooden logs. It was brought into the space to, as the name of the work suggests, rot and decompose over the course of the show. The intention had originally been to replace the fruit with other watermelons, foods, or objects – each of which treated with different biotechnological or organic materials (such as pesticides or natural growth agents) – to observe how they would each break down differently within the space as an extended articulation of Makandal’s ongoing organic research. The work was placed intentionally and somewhat obstructively within a thoroughfare area of the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg’s gallery space. This corridor-like area of the gallery links the public-facing parts of the building to the guarded administrative, operational office space and through which the majority of its staff pass on a daily basis.

This placement was an intentional artistic and curatorial intervention into the rather clinical, administrative, or arguably bureaucratic environment surrounding the gallery thoroughfare. This was an act which “forces the viewer to encounter the piece ... [and] disrupts people’s easy passage through” (Makandal 2023: n.p.). The choice to place the work in such a conspicuous location thus can be seen as an enactment of João Ribas’ (2015: 28) conception of “curating as [a practice of] spatial resistance.” In viewing curatorial practice in this way, he proposes that...

[t]he function of the exhibition would then be to gather, propose, or expand spatial and behavioral modes of resistance that are artistic and curatorial as well as spectatorial, allowing for the emergence of new paths and trajectories that are physical, affective, and ideational – trajectories that might resist the ‘magic’ that makes things work (ibid.: 29-30).

In this way, *On Decay*’s presence within this in-between, transitional area of the gallery space was intended to somewhat unsettle its simplistic and smooth functioning. The fact that those who regularly walk through the space were, for lack of a better word, *forced* to confront the object by circumventing it meant the work held strategic space for its own processual decomposition in such a way as to “resist the ‘magic’ that makes things work” (ibid.). Or, in other words, resist the ideological and anthropogenic systems which keep the processes of death and decay at a false distance from neoliberal human lifeworlds.

Due to the natural light which pervades this thoroughfare space, after roughly three days (much sooner than expected) of being in this environment, the watermelon began visibly decomposing, moulding, oozing, and emanating a slight sickly-sweet odour (figure 21). It was at this point that the work began causing some distress within the institution. Though there was little official confrontation from Goethe’s internal cultural project management staff about

the work, Makandal and myself began hearing rumours that some people within the environment (particularly the Institut's German language colleagues) were becoming *highly* disturbed by the piece, calling for its immediate removal. It should be noted at this point that we were not receiving *direct* communication from the institution, but rather what can only truly be described as hearsay. As such, it was then decided between Makandal and myself to keep the work in the gallery, but with an added space where people were encouraged to post their own anonymous comments on the work (figure 22).



**Figure 22** – installation view of *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe*, 2023, featuring the response wall (left) accompanying *On Decay/Dying or Where are the black seeds?*, 2023, by Io Makandal at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg. Photograph: Rory Thomas.

The comments, which are still up in the space as an inconclusive recognition of the watermelon's past presence, range from serious – and, in some instances, almost incensed – criticism, through to satirical or sarcastic commentary poking fun at the situation. For example, one viewer wrote “If you leave this watermelon long enough it will metamorphose into a mold monster and devour us all!,” while another simply opted for “Disgusting!!!” This wall-based conversation continued on until (and even after) the day the watermelon and its plinth were removed: 16 February 2023, less than a week after the exhibition opened. The decision was made finally to dispose of the work after comments began circulating amongst the staff that

viewing the decay of the watermelon was making some people ill, which (whether or not it was true) we of course wanted to avoid at all costs. This suggestion was reflected on the response wall, with someone commenting “There’s mold on the watermelon & I am severely [sic] allergic.”

Though it is unlikely that the institution’s response to the work had any explicit social or political drive,<sup>15</sup> what I would like to focus on here is how this response may be seen as a case study to think with and about the ideological systems which continue our disconnection from the more-than-human. What is perhaps most interesting about this confrontational interaction between the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg space and *On Decay* is its speed and vehemence. That the intensity of hatred for this organic object – this *fruit* – was gained in such a short period of time might be seen as evocative of the deeply entrenched, typically Eurowestern, refusal to engage the realities of death, decay, waste, and consumption that perpetuate global ecological degradation. We can thus conceive of the reaction to the work as symptomatic of the wider capitalist psychological, social, and somatic logics which govern neoliberal societies. These violent logics are those which (through resource extraction, lack of social or economic care, etcetera) condemn bodies, objects, landscapes, and cultures that do not perform normative productiveness or aesthetic beauty to invisibilisation or dispossession. This, in turn, bolsters normative culture’s necropolitical inability to recognise the pervasiveness of death and destructive human impact. This is particularly evocative when considered in conversation with the reality that the ‘Global South’ suffers the consequences of the Anthropocene disproportionately in relation to its contributions to it (Johnstone 2020).

We might then also consider the issues associated with the watermelon as indicative of the wider complications that anthropogenic climate chaos brings to the troublesome and codified category of the ‘human’ – which is, in and of itself, a colonial construction (see note 6). Indeed, sociologist Scott Hamilton (2017: 579, emphasis in original) suggests that...

the Anthropocene threatens not our physical security, but our *ontological* security: our deep and normalized conceptions of humanity and what it means to be a human ‘self’ in a stable and continuous world. By replacing the foundation of ontological security in modernity – the uncertainty of death – with a new uncertainty of *anthropos*, the result is an existential discontinuity emanating from our own human selves.

*On Decay*, despite its materially deceptive simplicity, embodied this self-reflective condition and, as such, troubled the limits of what the Institut’s environmental and institutional framework could handle. In essence, as a piece of durational artistic research, the work was a slow,

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<sup>15</sup> Judging by the comments on the wall, this disgust at the work was, in fact, most likely driven by a discomfort motivated specifically by the *smell* of the object’s decomposition.

processual, and poetic testament to the inevitability of death and its cyclical relationship with birth articulated through a slowly dematerialising organic object – one you might very well find sitting in a quite typical domestic environment. Despite this, however, the piece nonetheless caused a veritably explosive institutional reaction suggestive of our social and material preclusions from the vitally inescapable processes of living-, dying-, decaying-, and becoming-with the more-than-human.

In this way, *On Decay* – which may yet exist in another form as the exhibition continues to remake its own evolutionary shape – asks questions of the audience around our capability to live, die, survive, and perhaps even *thrive* in this world of multispecies cyclical upheaval *together*. The piece encouraged (or, perhaps necessarily, forced) the viewer – and, by extension, the institution within which the work was staged – to ponder how we may be able to reconcile our violently preclusive relationship with death, decay, and the Anthropocene. As Makandal (2023: n.p., emphasis added) asserts, the reactions of disgust and derision towards the work in its original form are “particularly relevant to questions around what the future holds for us, how it may look, and *how we must get comfortable with the uncomfortable*.” It is therefore essential that we disrupt – through whatever means (curatorial or otherwise) available – the psychosocial inertia which upholds the increasingly destructive processes of anthropogenic ecological degradation being wrought upon the Earth.

Through small, intentional, and intimate moments of connection between and across the more-than-human world, this vital change in thinking (however uncomfortable it may be) becomes possible. This necessary work of learning, through mutuality and interdependence, to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) of the Anthropocene may perhaps only be facilitated through the kinds of somatic knowledge production and artistic, poetic, and nuanced interventions offered by *Entangled Intimacies*. Indeed, through strategically opaque, chaotic, exploratory, and collaborative modes of curatorial worldbuilding, it is my hope that this project constitutes (as one erudite viewer wrote on the response wall) “a beautiful monster, [one] that helps us grow into new beings.”

## Conclusion

Addressing the expansive conditions of the Anthropocene from the limited human purview is, due to its amorphous and generally incomprehensible size, an ultimately impossible task. It is potentially fraught with the problematics of anthropocentric thinking, deterministic language, and the divisive tendencies of political rhetoric that can (and indeed often do) create violent social, environmental, and climatological conditions. Despite these issues, however, engaging the embodied chaos of anthropogenic climate disaster from varied (artistic, linguistic, scientific, etcetera) perspectives is nonetheless the necessary and undeniable task of our time. This project thus articulates a way of viewing the climate catastrophe *otherwise* through artistic and literary modes of research and engagement so as to precipitate differentiated – and perhaps therefore more dynamic, constructive, or reciprocal – lines of relation between and across the more-than-human world. It is with this notion in mind that, in concluding this research report's changeable journey through thought and practice, I am once again drawn to a quote from a work of literary speculative fiction.

In her socioecological dys/utopian novel *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia E. Butler (1993: 3) famously declares: "All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is Change." Butler's unequivocal assertion here is that the condition of change is the one true constant – it is, she proposes, the true, mutable form of our collective being. Within the uncertain and destructive context of global ecological degradation, this is a notion which opens us up to both an unnerving level of uncertainty *as well* as the potent liberatory potentiality inherent to the imagining of unknown, fruitful futures. In its most compelling form, this is an act that creates conceptual and material landscapes wherein our planetary kin may be able to thrive "not through abstract knowledge, but through the affective capacities of our own bodies and the bodies of the more-than-human world" (Wright 2014: 279). It is this affective, somatic dialogue – through which we embody and mediate the fluctuating and catastrophic environment of the Anthropocene – which this project brings to the fore.

Butler's statement is particularly pertinent to this project because not only does it align with its central thematics relating to somatic uncertainty and chaos as embodied implications of the Anthropocene, but it also engages its ongoing, inchoate shape. When considered in relation to the fact that the *Entangled Intimacies* exhibition is still ongoing (and thus still open to physical, aesthetic, and conceptual evolution) as I write this conclusion, Butler's (1993: 3) assertion that "The only lasting truth / Is Change" perhaps best articulates this project's nuanced yet necessarily inconclusive form. This is one, as I have discussed above, which

works towards engaging this chaotic reality through the uniquely fecund potential of contemporary art as a form of transdisciplinary knowledge and research production. To return to Busch (2009: n.p.), these experimental, arts-based forms of knowledge generation are those characterised by “a fundamental openness to anything that oversteps the framework and conditions of the previously possible.”

*Entangled Intimacies* does not suggest that artistic and/or curatorial practices may be posed to provide any answers or solutions to the climate catastrophe *in isolation*. Rather, this project’s necessary and undoubtedly inconclusive work aids in facilitating unique, non-hierarchical modes of engagement with the Anthropocene across and in conversation with different kinds of disciplinary or planetary thinking, being, and becoming. This project is therefore intended to help us collectively reckon with, as Martínez (2012: 49) suggests, “how to live in a groundless world.” Through open-ended processes of embodied and collaborative research, this study thus endeavours to think through how contemporary curatorial practice may be an inimitably potent means of precipitating this process. The strategically opaque and tentative work of this project is poised to enable collaborative modes of relationality and reciprocity orientated towards becoming-with more-than-human worlds, rather than violently extracting from them. This is proposed both in relation to contemporaneity and further outwards into other, as-yet-unknown but inevitably entangled, multispecies pasts, presents, and futures.

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*A Zed & Two Noughts*, 1985. Film. Directed by P. Greenaway. United Kingdom: Curzon Artificial Eye.

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**Figure 3** – still from Peter Greenaway's film *A Zed & Two Noughts*, 1985. This image shows the more-than-human calamity brought about by the snails on the twin brothers' final, posthumous experiment.

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**Figure 14** – installation view of *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe*, 2023, featuring *Setlhare sa Lesedi (Tree of Light)*, 2023, by Natalie Paneng at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg. Photograph: Thabang Radebe.

**Figure 15** – still from Natalie Paneng’s video *Future Landscape*, 2023, single-channel digital video with sound, 01:44 min. This work was produced for the *Entangles Intimacies* exhibition and is intended to grow and/or change over time. The video can be seen playing on the far-right monitor in figure 13. Image courtesy of the artist.

**Figure 16** – Io Makandal, *Slow Fusion II* (detail), 2023, clay, wood, soil, grass seed, water, grow light, and plastic sheet. This work was produced for the *Entangles Intimacies* exhibition and is intended to grow over time. It was “created from slabs of clay that have been used to make impressions of the surfaces throughout the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg building” (ibid.). The piece can be seen to the far-right of figure 17. Photograph: Thabang Radebe.

**Figure 17** – outdoor installation view of *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe*, 2023, featuring lo Makandal's installation piece *Science of Imaginary Solutions*, 2023, at the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg. This image also shows Makandal's site-specific outdoor drawing *In Our Blood*, 2023, petroleum jelly on outer glass window which is picking up atmospheric dust and particulate over the course of the show. Photograph: Thabang Radebe.

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**Figure 20** – lo Makandal, *On Decay/Dying or Where are the black seeds?*, 2023, watermelon and natural wood plinth. This was a durational work intended to rot over time in the gallery space. Photograph: Thabang Radebe (taken on 10 February 2023, before visible decomposition).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Poster for the *Entangled Intimacies: art, more-than-human embodiment, and the climate catastrophe* exhibition at Goethe-Institut Johannesburg, South Africa. The visual identity and poster for the project were designed by Naadira Patel of Softwork Studio.





## **Appendix 2: Transcription of an interview with POOL co-founding director Amy Watson, conducted on 18 January 2023**

**Rory Thomas:** Could you first please give some background on how/why you personally were drawn to curatorial practice and what, in turn, was the impetus for starting POOL?

**Amy Watson:** I trained to be an artist at the University of the Witwatersrand. I was initially working at Johannesburg Art Gallery and project managing a project called Africa Remix with Clive Kellner ahead of relocating to London. I later studied a Masters in curating at Goldsmiths College, University of London. At the time, there wasn't scope to study curatorial practice outside of an archival practice framing in South Africa. I also felt like it *could* be a creative practice and I needed to go to a place which understood it as such and necessarily distinct from practising as an artist.

I've come to understand that, as a curator, you have a responsibility to publics and to the practitioners and partners that you work with, and I suppose, as an artist, you have a responsibility firstly to your practice and that those can at times be conflicted. I found practicing as an artist isolated [me] and that there was something inherently collaborative about the curatorial that required working closely with others and across disciplines which I found really compelling. Of course many artists are able to collaborate and not all artists work within the traditional sense of a studio practice. It is this scope of the curatorial to work with artists working radically differently across different contexts to produce something, I suppose, bigger than the sum of its parts that I find really compelling.

Coming back from the UK, starting POOL felt like a really urgent thing. I recognised that a lot of the independent arts organisations in South Africa were driven by artists. ... There's a different kind of emphasis between an artist-led organisation and a curatorially-led organisation and I felt it was really important to have something that was distinct from an artist-led organisation and one that was founded outside of friendship circles. I think a lot of artist-run organisations have a set lifespan and they often serve the very artists that found them – though I don't think that that's a bad thing ... but, in an arts landscape that isn't necessarily healthy, and by this I mean: representative, dynamic, or sustainable, it felt important to have a curatorially driven independent space. It felt urgent to develop a platform that was able to look within and beyond the local and work nationally and internationally – that wasn't centred on a circle of friends supporting each other's works but rather thinking outside of friendship circles altogether.

Mika Conradie [POOL's co-founder and, up until 2021, its co-director and co-curator] and I found each other through an introduction by Dr Rory Bester. Mika was, at the time, interested in the idea of working itinerantly – not having a specific project space to realise projects but working across a number of different spaces. I found the thought of that exhausting and was concerned we would have to constantly gather and re-establish audiences from space to space. [This] would mean we'd have to gather resources around that at each stage. It's been interesting to realise now, at the stage POOL is currently, that you can operate itinerantly once you've established what it is that you're doing, the kind of practice that you work with, and, to a certain degree, the subjects you engage. Having established an audience and following that are trusting of what it is that you're doing and willing to follow you wherever you go I think allows for a freedom that POOL enjoys now. I think that happens by having a space audiences can rely on for a certain period of time that people come to anticipate a certain kind of programming. [In this way] you essentially establish a kind of base of followers, audience members, and publics that are willing to take certain leaps with you as an organisation.

Mika and I have always acknowledged the value of what space does to a project; that space is in no way a neutral thing and that having projects that respond to space can potentially amplify some of the concerns that the artists, and we as a team, are thinking through. Being able to work in that way also means you get to tap into various other kinds of funding and audiences that might come with a particular given space. ... [This allows us] to challenge the kind of existing institutional formats that are inherent for these certain spaces, however uncomfortable that might make some of these institutions. ... I wanted to foreground that Mika and I didn't forge POOL through friendship, certainly a kind of kinship evolved but through a professional working relationship. I think that's allowed for a very particular kind of way of working and a level of commitment to this project that, perhaps if we had started POOL as friends, POOL might have become something different. In some ways POOL started in resistance to projects that centred a set of artist's practices and that had life spans of only about three to five years.

**RT:** I really like the idea of finding ways to create organisations consisting of groups of people from various backgrounds that can break down that cyclical ossified structure [and speak to a variety of publics]. ... Speaking about publics, something I've struggled with with this project has been that Goethe sees itself as kind of for everyone – it doesn't see itself as having a singular public. ... How do you deal with the need to make something accessible to any given public without reducing it?

**AW:** It's a fine balance. You definitely want to speak to that audience that maybe exceeds an art world discourse. I do find more and more that I am aligning myself with a policy of trying to write as plainly and as simply as is possible. I think we risk speaking only to each other and ourselves if we do speak in rhetoric that only a few can access. Of course I'm not suggesting compromising on what it is that you're saying or that the written form can't enact or embody the very meaning it is carrying but that we work to use language that can be accessed across vastly differing life experiences. There's something potentially potent about this as it can allow your project to circulate beyond arts or culturally informed audiences in Johannesburg; it allows it to have a wider significance and I think there is also something confident about not hiding in art rhetoric. It is great to read a text where someone's been willing to divest of terms that perform their knowledge on the subject and their curatorial expertise.

...It is also of course invaluable to create space for artists to speak for themselves; to have a lot of the key material around what an artist is producing co-authored with the artist to try and get as close to what that moment is and to try and keep that accessible. It is a balancing act of not losing the complexity of what you're saying, but allowing more people to speak to and with projects. ... You will also find that there are some terms that you cannot dispense with, however problematic, and you can point to the limits and assumptions of these terms.

...

**RT:** I am particularly interested in POOL's ongoing and explorative programme of exhibitions, events, etc. that deal with ecology or, perhaps, Anthropocene-related concerns (I am thinking here, to name a few, of projects such as *Theatrum Botanicum* (2018), *Thinking the Sea as Practice* (2019), *Holding Water Ocean Thinking* (2019), *The Weight in the Air* (2022), and *On Breathing* (2022)). Although this is of course not exclusively what POOL does, it is certainly a recurring theme within its expansive programming. What has led you to this theme and why does it remain such a fervent point of enquiry for you?

**AW:** Mika and I were drawn to these subjects before working together. ... So we arrived at the conception of POOL already with these areas of interest that we had both been researching independently. I think I was drawn to these areas of enquiry because not only did they feel urgent, prescient, and resonant, but also the practitioners we were interested in engaging were considering and re-considering these subjects in really interesting ways.

We wanted POOL to be a space into which we were able to channel our own interests, but from within and resonant within the context in which we live. Like any interesting curatorial

practice, we wanted to speak to the urgencies of the here and the now. I can't imagine how we would have programmed without considering the Capitalocene, Anthropocene or questions of ecology. These are the questions of our time. In our context specifically it would be amiss to not look at the legacy of extractive regimes and to not consider the multiple ecological crises that are unfolding in the city in which we are based. ... POOL's programming points to our earth as both fragile and resilient and deeply interconnected.

... When we were initially discussing what kind of mandates and urgencies that POOL was to engage, one of those things was speaking to the fact that there are numerous South African practitioners – or practitioners working with material from South Africa – that have a lot of circulation and visibility in Europe and the Americas, but not much in South Africa. So, it was important for us to have this work be seen, engaged, rethought, and refigured in the South African context. ... I think, in South Africa, we unfortunately do have a kind of drain of practitioners leaving or going into other industries because there isn't enough support here, nor in the right ways, to keep practitioners working as artists and curators in this context. This environment becomes so damaging that we start to think of ourselves as separate. I think that that kind of isolation becomes really problematic – a lot of what we're engaging does have resonances elsewhere and shared connections elsewhere. I think the funding landscape in South Africa does do this unintentionally and, as a result, it pits practitioners against each other when, in actual fact, we'd be so much stronger if we partnered, shared the resources that we *do* have, and to work on a different scale altogether and across locations. This situation can quell collaboration because there's a small amount of money and to divide it between many people doesn't always make sense.

...

**RT:** What have you found to be the challenges, if any, associated with engaging the amorphous subject matter associated with the Anthropocene? From a curator's point of view, how have you worked to overcome these challenges while still allowing for experimental artistic practices (which often articulate a certain strategic opacity) to remain central? What kind of working methodologies and practices have you employed to circumvent – or, indeed, work *with* – the obstacles associated with independent curatorial practices in our local environment?

**AW:** I suppose the challenge is that, with audiences, there's a certain kind of fatigue and an apathy. But then also within that same audience there's a deep curiosity which I've really enjoyed – audiences are curious; they are open, wanting to know, and understand. I think it's

primary to not patronise your audiences by underestimating what inherent knowledges they bring to any encounter, further I think it's critical to point to and support an embodied and sensory knowledge that audiences do carry. Working across disciplines has been a really powerful way of bringing together numerous audiences and allowing our work to be based within research that, I suppose, a world that subscribes to scientific methodologies can be open to.

There is a balance between allowing for there to be explorative, experimental, and more tangential ways of thinking, and also then having a kind of scientific modality which relies on a linear and often binary way of thinking. Largely I try to be led by artists in this process – they identify the different practitioners they want to engage with across disciplines and I think that there's an incredible richness and nuance when you work across these disciplines. It's not only the function of being able to bring in different audiences and accessing new publics to consider these questions with, but it's also about allowing for something new to evolve that neither one party had arrived with. There's something potent about being able to bring people from different disciplines together and having them feel something out collectively.

That unknowingness is something I find I chase together with artists that I'm very compelled by. I think that's the way in which I want to continue working going forward – there's something great about working in a process-based way. I always hope that, through this process, you're allowing for something else to take shape that nobody really is entirely in control of. I think that's interesting for everybody – it allows a shared learning experience and a disinvestment from any specific outcome, which I think is necessary. For audiences to see something that is entirely resolved is also not always interesting. I like to work in a way that is not entirely meant to be conclusive or singular, but rather loose, porous, and rhizomatic. ... I do also like the idea of being vulnerable and I think there's something generative about coming from different disciplinary specificities and not necessarily having a common language, but forging that language together and not knowing what the outcome might be. ... I think you have to fight really hard to protect that space that you and the artists have; to protect that unknowingness – the feeling of doing something with somebody that you know is going to evolve into something interesting, but you have no idea what it is yet.

... In this way POOL has always looked towards practices such as jazz, for whom improvisation is an inherent part of working together. So, thinking through the very simple rubrics of the way in which jazz musicians might improvise live on stage and speak to each other and take risks with audiences has really inspired Mika and I. Often a melody needs to be there – or a rhythm that audiences are left holding from the very beginning – that's returned

to after a big explorative and experimental excursion. This creates a kind of shared responsibility both between the practitioners, and between audiences and practitioners, that allows us to go together somewhere collectively where we all don't know what the outcome is. I think that's been really powerful for me and Mika in the absence of other critically engaged curatorial spaces in Johannesburg. We found refuge in jazz spaces ... because the musicians were up on stage not knowing what was going to happen which precipitates a kind of shared vulnerability, which I think is what I wanted to point to. There's something really powerful about getting people together and creating that space that allows them to be vulnerable together.

... From a curatorial perspective, in order to protect that space of shared unknowingness, vulnerability, and experimentation, you often have to not have practitioners engaging with the institution at all, and for you to rather mediate that relationship. Although this can be incredibly overwhelming and, at times, we do need to share some of what's happening in the back end. But this has to be done in such a way that it doesn't stifle the creative process and that is integrous to the process that's being undertaken. POOL has always had to balance that negotiation of being transparent with practitioners about what's happening and supporting the kind of conditions under which work can be produced. You can really stifle and crush those conditions by having practitioners have to foreground a funder, institution, or timeline.

...

**RT:** How do you think we might, as curatorial and arts practitioners, effectively engage the dispersed experiential/embodied facets of the Anthropocene while retaining the fecund potential of explorative modes of working, thinking, and becoming(-with)?

**AW:** Some creative practice engaging the Anthropocene – or what some prefer to call the Capitalocene to reflect the unequal stakes in global crises – attempts to give a human sense to the scale, quantity or pervasiveness of loss or forthcoming loss, and the repercussions of this. Tim Morton refers to climate change as a 'hyperobject' because it's beyond the scale of a single human's ability to conceptualise it. In efforts at making this abstract more concrete some practitioners choose to work in ways that are immersive and sensory so as to allow audiences to experience something; to privilege a kind of somatic knowingness over an intellectual knowingness, which in moments may be experienced collectively.

The 'more-than-human' is a kind of antidote to our current crisis. It's a way of thinking another possibility, it is critical we recognise our interconnectedness into everything around us. I think part of signalling this in exhibition practice is to allow for seepages and a porosity within work

and in relation to institutional forms so as to trouble the limits and edges of both. Another means of pointing to this interconnectedness is to keep a project in flux, in a state of becoming and evolving – resisting both fixity and singularity.

**RT:** One thing that I'm learning through this process is that when curating, particularly when working with a vast or undefined public, you have to learn to allow the work to perform its capacity (and for you to frame it in such a way that allows this process), while also creating a framework for people to engage through your curatorial lens. How do you think one might reconcile this dynamic?

**AW:** I would try to ascertain what the common denominator is. If you know that you're going to have audiences from radically different experiences in space, which is more often than not the case, then one of the common denominators is the very human and physical experience of that space. There are things that you can do within a space that can encourage audiences to feel their way through an experience. There are tools that a curator can use to be able to start manifesting an experience that might be a shared experience they can almost rely on their audience having in the space. Working with light, colour, sound and acoustics, smell, temperature as well as the choreography of an audiences' trajectory and the assumptions of an institutional or project space are all available to curator(s) and practitioners to work with.

Considering how the practical concerns of installing can inform that experience that the visitor has is vital. ... The installation process is an incredibly creative space. Protect that space for yourself and the artists, installation can be interesting, exciting, unknown, and experimental. Allow it to be as such – it doesn't need to be a regimental process. Once certain key things are in place, for example the work is largely realised, and it's in the space, there's scope to play. Undo some of the ideas that you thought were a given – in this way you can trouble the expectations an audience has of a space and institution. Certain conventions of that space can be ruptured, and you can, in this way, have your project be a little more discovered and less certain or announcing of itself.

There's something really important about allowing people to understand the Goethe space differently. I think it would be powerful to challenge the edges of that institution. ... It's also great to allow the project the freedom to change. If you let a project evolve it can take the pressure off you and the artists and then you might find that there's a whole entirely new thing that emerges because you shifted the conditions of production. Once you've taken the pressure out and managed the institutional bureaucracy, you can really allow yourself and the artists to play. I think of these as some of the tools that are at our disposal to be able to fend

off the institution in order to protect that unknowingness and work through it with the artists within the specifics of a given space or institution.

**RT:** So, on that, I was wondering how do you manage the pressure of deadlines without handing that pressure off to an artist? Holding the space for that unknowingness without creating a transactional relationship is so important, but seems so difficult.

**AW:** I find that a way of doing this without it being too onerous is to share the expectations of a deadline. I never want to delineate or pressurise the output onto one individual, but rather choose to speak about our shared responsibility. I find that allows for a language of co-authoring even if that co-authoring isn't necessarily strictly happening all the time. I think that alleviates some of the pressure on artists to feel like there's some onerous output.

If you find that an artist is reaching a stalemate and that there isn't necessarily a clear way forward for them, you can also point to the other possibilities of this site and of how the project might evolve within the exhibition format. It doesn't need to be a static work. So, for example, if you have a film work that is incomplete and perhaps you only have audio that the artist feels is resolved, you can think about how you can work with that material, and allow it to be something that can be fleshed out at a later point in the exhibition run or project life-span. You can always add and remove material from night to day. Like I said, exhibited artwork doesn't need to be static and maybe that frees up artists from the pressure of having to produce something that's fully resolved and finite. There can be something great about using this length of time – allow the project to evolve, because that can really inform and manifest some of the key ideas that you're thinking through. ... I think it's okay to allow those curatorial processes to be alive and active within your work – they don't need to be fixed, hidden or managed.

Sometimes as a curator protecting a space of unknowingness with practitioners does require fielding the funding and institutional bureaucracy. This can be exhausting and unsustainable at times. That said, I find I am working more and more with practitioners who recognise this labour and see it as part of our collective work and part of how we collectively think through the artwork and exhibition itself without it overdetermining the project.



**Appendix 3: Transcription of “On Viewing the *Entangled Intimacies* Exhibition as a Site for Imaginary Solutions: Tzung-Hui Lauren Lee, Io Makandal, and Natalie Paneng in Conversation with Rory Thomas.” Group discussion conducted on 22 February 2023, originally convened for the forthcoming *Entangled Intimacies* publication.**

**Rory Thomas:** Could you please first give some context to your respective artistic practices, perhaps touching on some of the central themes and mediums which reoccur in your artworks?

**Tzung-Hui Lauren Lee:** The central themes of my practice surround ideas relating to the poetics of space and meaning in material. I've always been inspired by transnationalism, diasporic cultures, and the movements between people and bodies. I like to think about this in relation to my Chinese and Buddhist philosophies relating to the air and ecology that surround us. The idea of meaning in material concerns how, for me, the material of an artwork has to be meaningful in order to create something with a purpose. I can't make myself use materials that don't add anything to my practice or don't align with those ideas.

**Io Makandal:** Increasingly my practice involves working with processes and duration. I have always been bound to ecological concerns – particularly those concerning the material relationality between urban, human-made environments and natural worlds. Currently I'm working more with compost or rather soil generation as methodology and material and, through that, working with living and dying organisms. I like to play with the tensions and relationships between more-than-human and human worlds.

**Natalie Paneng:** I use my body, brain, and worldbuilding to create environments that share narratives. These narratives are usually quite abstract, but the climate crisis blends into the works I make too, because they're oftentimes about finding *alternative* worlds. My practice is always quite speculative and playful, particularly in relation to my own reality and what I think is important to reflect on. I always use the digital to bring things to life but now, more recently, I'm also trying to create installation environments that heighten these digital representations. This allows people to experience the work as an immersive feedback loop, encouraging them to physically experience the process of making the work.

**RT:** The *Entangled Intimacies* exhibition attempts to engage the climate crisis through considerations of and engagements with more-than-human embodiment. How has this curatorial concept challenged or aligned with these wider facets of your practices?

**IM:** I always try to use the architecture that I exhibit in, to create a conversation or a provocation for the viewer. For this exhibition, I have drawn a window mural on the side of a quite narrow corridor running through the gallery – this disrupted thoroughfare space really forces the viewer to encounter the piece. While, in earlier works of mine, I employed a maximal and overwhelming approach to space, now I feel like my installations have become more intentional material conversations. In this instance, I have placed a watermelon, which is decaying, in conversation with generated soil that will then be observed to see what emerges out of it. For these works, I have very deliberately worked with our more-than-human counterparts as participants in the creation of the pieces. I took a step back as the maker and set up the situation for the work to then produce itself *with* these other creatures.

The soil is held by a sculptural work created from slabs of clay that have been used to make impressions of the surfaces throughout the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg building. This clay has thus caught some of the organic and otherwise debris in the space, which has become part of the conversation these materials are facilitating around decay and/or growth. Those works were put in the thoroughfare to disrupt people's easy passage through, which we have had some interesting responses and reactions to.

**THLL:** The concept for the exhibition definitely aligned with my practice, although the climate crisis isn't always at the forefront of it. I like to think about how all the materials that I use are related within a wider context. Drawing within my practice is particularly personal to how I experience my environment, because my drawing and calligraphy work is partly inspired by the process of burning incense through prayer to our ancestors. The smoke from this incense is then collected and made into sumi ink, which allows me to physically draw with meaning.

When I was younger, ... using these materials felt like a way of navigating the ideas of diaspora, transnationalism, longingness, and belonging. But, also, more recently, through drawing cloud formations, I want to consider and understand the flows of air. I like to think about what is held within the air, along with the human experience and embodiment of it. We live to pray, we live to burn, and we live to survive – that is what's held in the air that surrounds us and what I wanted to explore with my triptych in the exhibition.

**NP:** The curatorial framing encouraged me to reconsider or readapt how I frame my work in some ways. Usually, I myself am the focus of the art and the framing comes from that, but this project really allowed me to think more about how the world and environment *is* the concept, versus me being a concept engaging within an environment. For this work, I am considering my practice as a space for research: what kinds of research I do, what angle this research

takes, and how to share this research as/once it's realised are all major themes. The exhibition's framing prompted me to think more about the surrounding elements of an artwork, not just what's inside or what lives within.

... It took me so long to engage the topic because my usual modes of execution really centre me as the medium and the means of navigation. But in this situation, it was very slow because every element or feature had to come to life in order for the next thing to happen. For example, nothing could conceptually come to life until I had made the central tree and placed it within the space – then slowly the videos came together in a true process of step-by-step conceptual and material worldbuilding.

**RT:** I think your considerations of the process tie in really nicely with my next question. Given that the exhibition is staged as an explorative site for ongoing research and play, how do you each see your work/s in the exhibition evolving or changing (if at all)?

**IM:** That durational aspect of the curatorial concept is really exciting to me. I see the three-month-long duration of the show as an opportunity to really explore and experiment with growth and decay and ideas around that. It's one thing trying these processes out in your studio, but to have them be viewed and critically engaged with while they're happening allows for more nuanced conversations, tensions, and disruptions around the works. I have deliberately put four main works that allow for that unfolding and changing in the environment. ... This also brings up the question of how the works are viewed and how they may provoke the people that experience them. It's been very interesting to see how the cultural politics around how people respond to these objects can be foregrounded.

**RT:** On that, your piece which consisted of a watermelon left to decay within the gallery space caused quite a bit of internal institutional discord. Would you like to comment on that?

**IM:** It seemed that there were very different relationships to observing (or being exposed to) decay, festering, or rotting that played themselves out in the gallery. The watermelon work was very disturbing to some people in the Goethe-Institut space, and I think that was an important thing to observe in conversation with the curatorial framework. This is particularly relevant to questions around what the future holds for us, how it may look, and how we must get comfortable with the uncomfortable.

...

**THLL:** In terms of growth or change for the works in the exhibition, for me, because the videos take so long to render, load shedding makes it very difficult to achieve – that’s why the clips might appear disjointed in the 3D piece. I hope I have the opportunity to make a cohesive video that goes through the world instead of one with a ‘chopped’ look.

**RT:** It’s interesting to think about how a facet of the crises we live in has impacted the very *form* of your work itself. The technological and machinic disasters we inhabit have made themselves present within the work, whether we like it or not. I think that also ties in with how Natalie’s work may progress too.

**NP:** Yeah, I am really interested in the possibility of sharing the conception of the world with the viewer and diving deeper into the humour of this kind of research as the videos progress and materialise. I also like the idea of the tree having a more developed life over time – particularly thinking about what materials can represent growth on a metal object. The work is driven by this whole narrative that’s centred around a ‘green energy’ solution that grows from a fictitious man-made aerosol product. So, I want to extend this narrative and make it clear to people because, when you present completed research, so much is lost and all you see are the outcomes. Now that the environment is there, I’m interested in developing it further in a performative, playful way.

**RT:** I love the idea of demystifying the research process. It seems that, particularly in commercially driven art practice, we are drawn to presenting very unified objects that are ready for economic exchange and consumption, which is unsustainable. I like that you’re unsettling and playing with that in your work by coming back to the videos and allowing them to expand in the future.

**NP:** Absolutely, and I also wanted to say that it’s so interesting how the watermelon work developed. ... I mean, the idea of the show is to have dialogues about fast consumption and climate chaos, but, when trying to think through those ideas, the environment can become resistive. Sometimes you *think* that a place can hold the concepts we intend to expand, but perhaps we have to be more self-reflective and realise that the environment is in fact not open to that.

I like to think about how the research process is either constrained or allowed to evolve when thinking about future solutions. Like, how much compromise do people actually have energy for when trying to find solutions to the issues we collectively face? It seems very little, even when all we ask is that the audience *witness* the work. ... This is also what I am playing with

through the green lighting within my installation for the exhibition. It is a comment on the concept of 'green energy' or 'greenwashing.' It's not genuine green energy, it's just green light. In that way, the work critiques how, socially, we love to be aligned to the *language* of sustainability, but not necessarily the processes needed to maintain it.

**IM:** I like what Natalie said regarding constraints and greenwashing. I feel like I am often asked to dismantle the proverbial box but, the moment one starts taking that 'box' apart, you're reprimanded and asked to put it back together.

...

**RT:** Each of your works in the exhibition articulate nuanced and irreducible threads within the wider conversation centring anthropogenic climate chaos. What are some of the conceptual and material challenges or opportunities for artistic practice that you feel these chaotic environmental conditions pose?

**THLL:** Through my practice I am engaging with ideas around how emotional and physical survival requires burning, but this also effects the environment in which we live. For example, in China these spiritual associations with burning are very prevalent, but so are factory-based mass production and pollution. In Beijing specifically, you can't leave the house some days because the pollution is so bad that it will severely affect your lungs, which I think speaks to the entanglements we are thinking through.

**RT:** Yeah, absolutely – I think art can be a way to reference and engage this disruptive moment without being too analytical or didactic; without saying "this is what's wrong and this is how we have to fix it." There is no real silver bullet solution to the climate crisis, but there *are* differentiated ways of thinking about it.

**IM:** I've always drawn upon Alfred Jarry's conception of pataphysics: the science of imaginary solutions. I feel like that's quite literally what we're doing – inventing imaginary solutions. There's an important, sometimes lighthearted, but also very serious play there on how we can create contaminations that bring about something new or novel, from which we could possibly speculate something *e/se*. I think, as artists, we are practitioners in the science of imaginary solutions – or at least that's how I see myself as a maker. I am constantly toying with these notions to try and find playful solutions.

**NP:** I really love that idea of the science of imaginary solutions. On a human existential level, I am always asking myself what solutions *can* exist and what my impact on the world might be. So, to reflect on that, I suppose you can either try solutions that have only a tiny second of impact, or you can invent imaginary solutions that aim to prompt thoughts that could change actions into the future. My whole thing is artificiality – I almost exclusively use artificial materials which, although not being necessarily sustainable, as a practice engages the possibility of creating imaginary solutions.

**IM:** I like how your work, Natalie, grapples with our relationship to the artificial because, ultimately, we can't live without it. For me, it's unrealistic to think that we ever *will* live without it. I mean, we have created this environment and it's created us – to move forward together, we are going to have to find a solution *with* it, because we are so dependent on it.

**RT:** That's also something that I feel is really engaging within Tzung-Hui's work. It's interesting how the physical drawing has been expanded into a digital video environment. This is then referential to the invisible, yet pervasive, digital world that we inhabit physically but that we mediate through screens.

**THLL:** That way of thinking and working came from the Covid-19 pandemic. I wanted to work with physical materials but only had access to computers 24/7, so I began playing with how I could have extended hands through a computer. I try to translate how I see space into a digital world that becomes a replica of a drawn one.

**NP:** For me, the digital also allows for the speculative scene to be seen. It's funny to think about how digital tools allow us to do that, but also contribute to the cycle of consumption and destruction.

**RT:** I suppose that's also what makes this such an interesting challenge – because that dynamic is inextricable from our lives. We live within systems that are, ultimately, contributing to our collective demise but that we can't opt out of. By productively co-opting that machinery, you are able to create environments that make people challenge what it is that we're doing to the world. ... I think there's a beautiful potency in thinking about art as a way of disinvesting from typical disciplinary ways of producing knowledge and knowing, in order to create our own means of doing that.

**THLL:** I approached this type of research as a means of prompting a question. While making an artwork, however, I do feel that the idea has to align with the object when the viewer engages it.

**IM:** I often wonder why we are so bound to that structure.

**THLL:** Now I'm feeling that way, too [laughs]. It is so limiting.

**IM:** Yeah, I've always tried to challenge that. When I returned to academia to complete my MFA after 10 years of professional practice, it was extremely challenging to be bound by these kinds of structures and rules of knowledge production. It feels like the world demands that we generate knowledge that is comprehensive and explanatory. I get that it needs to be *understandable* but, at the same time, why can't we work in ways that force the viewer to question their assumptions of what constitutes information and research? I feel like art should try to do that – it should make one question what they're looking at.

**RT:** Édouard Glissant's (1990: 189) notion of "opacity" has been incredible for me in thinking through this disciplinarity that you're referencing. Ultimately, this strictness is a means of perpetuating the problems that we're trying to break down. It seems, however, that every time that we try to engage this opacity or bring a strategic lack of explanation the system cannot hold it. We are all dissatisfied with this structure, yet it holds itself up so violently and, in that, is also literally deconstructing our environment. I mean, we're being destroyed by it because we can't let go of these structures. That's why there's this fecundity or potentiality within art practice – it is perhaps one of our very few means of engaging these problems *outside of* those structures.

**NP:** I think it's also important to reject what's not relevant in order to bring about new possibilities. I like using my work as a long rejection. Our artistic practices allow us to say one thing very slowly through multiple different engagements. Although I may be creating other worlds, I always have to remember that the work is coming from me, and that it's being enacted through human thoughts, emotions, and processes. I allow myself to be messy in order to have the real thing alchemised in the end, versus trying to work within *any* strictures that may compromise that work. A certain form of rejection has to be inserted into everything.