

**Space,  
Ritual,  
Absence:**  
*Liminality  
in South  
African  
Visual Art*

Presented by The Research Centre,  
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**TOP** Space, *Ritual, Absence*, 2011, University of Johannesburg FADA Gallery, installation view showing Minnette Vári, *Rebus*, 2008 and Steven Cohen, *Golgotha*, 2007–9. Photo: Ben Law-Viljoen  
**BOTTOM** Space, *Ritual, Absence*, 2011, University of Johannesburg FADA Gallery, installation view showing Serge Alain Nitegeka, *Tunnell*, 2011. Photo: Ben Law-Viljoen

## ESSAYS

- 01 Transaesthetics and Liminality in South African Visual Art**, by James Sey
- 02 Inside-Out**, by Mary Corrigan
- 03 Liminality and Magic in the Weavings of Allina Ndebele**, by Philippa Hobbs and Nessa Leibhammer
- 04 Pump up the Parlour**, by Alexandra Dodd
- 05 Inaccurate Truths**, by Sean O'Toole
- 06 Enclosing the Upstart**, by Myer Taub
- 07 Vacated Spaces**, by Virginia MacKenny
- 08 Caught by Traffic**, by Zen Marie
- 09 Near Wild Heaven**, by Rat Western



Space, Ritual, Absence, 2011, FADA Gallery, University of Johannesburg, installation view, FADA Gallery. Photo: Ben Law-Viljoen

## PROLOGUE

The “liminal” refers to the threshold: that which exists in an in-between state, not fully realised, fully understood or fully accepted into the socius. Things and beings that exist in a liminal state are properly at the margins, often not accorded a full legal, epistemological or psychological identity. As such they acquire a range of different meanings and functions in society – attracting power, magic, danger and mystery, but also suspicion and repressive control.

Liminal spaces are those in which the normal rules and mores of society are suspended, thus allowing for transformation and new confluences to happen – they are also transit zones, such as hotels and airports, where people move from one place and state, to another, and are therefore subject to different rules and controls to those which exist in society.

Liminal zones are also spaces of spiritual or social power, spaces outside of “normal” social structures. Such zones include disputed political territories, asylums and internment camps, shrines, caves, seashores and crossroads. They may attract dispute and contestation, but can also represent spaces in which no political or social action or decision can yet be taken until the decision is made to exit the liminal zone.

South African visual art, especially in its contemporary guise, might be fruitfully reappraised as a unique treasure trove of the liminal because of its inherent opposition to the notion that the other is an opaque unknowable, that an inherent barrier exists between the self and the other, between the mad and the sane, or between the imperial subject and its colonised objects.

The essays in this special feature respond to and examine the notion of the “liminal” in a variety of ways. Also, the exhibition *Space, Ritual, Absence*, curated by James Sey and Leora Farber at the University of Johannesburg’s FADA Gallery in March this year, presented works by South African artists that interrogate or explore various kinds of liminal zones or states (a review of this exhibition by Gerhard Schoeman can be seen on the *Art South Africa* website). The curators included works that may have been read and interpreted in other contexts but that, under this new rubric, were considered in new and interesting ways.

The artists in the exhibition were: Dineo Seshee Bopape, Joni Brenner, Steven Cohen, Neil Goedhals, Jackson Hlungwane, Nadine Hutton, Wopko Jensma, Claire Jorgensen, Brent Mestre, Samson Mudzunga, Serge Alain Nitegeka, Berni Searle, James Sey, Penny Siopis, Minnette Vári, Rat Western.

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# Transaesthetics and Liminality in South African Visual Art

**ESSAY 01** JAMES SEY

In his famous essay *The Accursed Share*, Georges Bataille writes,

*Man's disregard for the material basis of his life still causes him to err in a serious way. Humanity exploits given material resources, but by restricting them as it does to a resolution of the immediate difficulties it encounters (a resolution which it has hastily had to define as an ideal), it assigns to the forces it employs an end they cannot have. Beyond our immediate ends, man's activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfilment of the universe.*

The point Bataille makes is both macroeconomic and ideological, in that it implies the key problem of profit for a global economy of expenditure. He goes on to say:

*the living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of the system; if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit – it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.<sup>1</sup>*

Bataille favours a few areas of human cultural endeavour as expressing, in a productively symptomatic way, this economy of excess: art, sex, food and gifts are among them. All of these are regarded as social phenomena bound up in a ritual exchange or circulation of meaning in which value is not attributable to the principle of surplus, and thus performs different social functions.

In *The Transparency of Evil* Jean Baudrillard writes: *There is much talk of a dematerialisation of art, as evidenced, supposedly, by minimalism, conceptual art, ephemeral art, anti-art and a whole aesthetic of transparency, disappearance and disembodiment. In reality however, what has occurred is a materialisation of aesthetics everywhere under an operational form ... Our images are like icons: they allow us to go on believing in art while eluding the question of its existence. So perhaps we ought to treat all present-day art as a set of rituals, and for ritual use only; perhaps we ought to consider art solely from an anthropological standpoint, without reference to any aesthetic judgment whatsoever.<sup>2</sup>*

Baudrillard's vision of art in contemporary culture, which he terms a "transaesthetics of indifference", is focused here on the possibility of art having a "ritual use", one which would be more clearly understood from an anthropological point of view than an aesthetic one. The implication he draws from this, that "we have returned to the cultural stage of primitive societies", is a profound one.

Baudrillard's use of the term "indifference" is not the common usage, and has more affinity with its use in Agamben or Schnitz – that of states of being or politico-legal identity which are co-extensive and

mutually dependent but still opposed to each other. Baudrillard's "materialisation of aesthetics under an operational guise" takes away the social power of aesthetic objects and practices. His argument that art should be restored to anthropology rather than aesthetics raises the Benjaminian spectre of the relationship between "iconic" art and the sacred. The aesthetic realm, in Baudrillard's argument, has become "indifferent" to the value of the aesthetic sign, and the aesthetic is thus indistinguishable from other contemporary phenomena such as economics and sexuality in its over-determined dependence on self-reference and the symbolic. It has lost the ability to exist as a discourse of excess, in Bataille's sense. Baudrillard's suggestion that art should return to the anthropological is one Bataille would have welcomed, however ironically meant.

Baudrillard also suggests that such role for art returns us to the "cultural stage of primitive societies". This points to the way in which art formed one of the key demarcations of the difference between the natural and the cultural for earlier societies, a bridge between an aesthetic regime of representation and supernatural or overtly religious phenomena. It is in this "anthropological" mode that art can be best understood as liminal.

That which is liminal acquires a range of meanings and functions in society – attracting power, magic, danger and mystery, but also suspicion and repressive control. In the transit zones of hotels and airports, people are always moving from one place, and state, to another, and are subject to different rules and controls to those which exist in society. Liminal zones are also spaces of spiritual or social power in which things can happen outside the normal realm of social structure. These spaces – disputed political territories, asylums and internment camps, shrines, caves, seashores and crossroads – attract dispute and contestation, but can also represent a place in which no political or social action or decision can yet be taken. A good example is the insane asylum where, while the inmate cannot have medico-legal or moral status as a full citizen, they also cannot be held responsible for their decisions and actions.

Liminal bodies are always caught in a curious almost-becoming, a state of absence, which is held in place sometimes quite literally. The rights of a body to certain observances and status are suspended by the absence, for example, of citizenship in the case of the illegal immigrant, or of clearly attributable, socially sanctioned gender and sexual object choice in the case of transsexuals, transvestites, bisexuals and even homosexuals in some cases and places. Cyborg bodies form another subcategory of the liminal form.

But it is in liminal rituals, markers of the state between exclusion and inclusion from a social group,

that we see bodies and consciousness existing in a different and suspended state between two categories. Rituals marking initiation into adulthood are prime examples of this. In the state of liminal ritual, the state itself is of interest, rather than the fact that a liminality might buffer two states of social exclusion and inclusion.

Rituals that demarcate an individual's "sovereignty" also demarcate liminality, in which a being has to be strictly policed, and maintained as the reason for a necessary exception of the exercise of power in all political states. Giorgio Agamben observes:

*It is not the exception that gets subtracted from the rule, but the rule that, suspending itself, gives raise to the exception and only in this way can constitute itself as rule, by constantly maintaining a relation to it. ...*

*The situation that is created by exception can neither be defined [sic] as a factual situation, nor as a situation of right, but institutes between the two a paradoxical threshold of indifference.<sup>3</sup>*

This is the paradox of sovereignty:

*Just as sovereign power is presupposed as state of nature, that is then maintained in a relation of exclusion with respect to the state of right, so does it separate itself into constituent and constitutive power and still relates to both by placing itself in their point of indifference.<sup>3</sup>*

If we thus assume that liminal states bear an epistemological relation to the state of exception as Agamben defines it, it is primarily in that they induce the exercise of the exception in sovereign power in order to police liminality itself. By doing so the liminal – and its most extreme version, *homo sacer* – illustrates the paradox of sovereignty and the violence it can commit.

Further complicating this is the extent to which the imposition of a state of exception is inherent in a globalised and highly mediated body politic. The global, free market-driven and largely democratic system that the fall of communism ushered in seems to be constantly in debate with itself about the roles and function of supposedly universal democratic principles. The use of torture in camps is one such debate, but another is the increasingly attenuated right to privacy, which comes under threat from the rise of a globally mediated tabloid and surveillance culture.

In *The World is Flat* Thomas Friedman describes how the global economy relatively easily overcomes national difference and unequal power relations by appealing to the universalism and mobility of the new world order. In this apologist account, capitalism is made ubiquitous by information systems, and opportunity abounds as market forces overcome boundaries of time and distance through a global communications-driven logistics system.<sup>4</sup>

But there is a very important by-product of the



## I wanted to be blonde with blue eyes

Penny Siopis, *Obscure White Messenger*, 2010, 8mm film transferred to DVD, Installation view, FADA Gallery. Photo: Ben Law-Viljoen

globalisation process that Friedman's proselytising examples of Indian call-centre success in the US market elides. This is the rise of the liminal cases of the refugee and the slum. As Žižek puts it in *In Defence of Lost Causes*:

*The explosive growth of slums ... especially in the Third World mega-cities ... is perhaps the crucial geopolitical event of our times ... Since, sometime very soon, the urban population of the earth will outnumber the rural population, and since slum inhabitants will compose the majority of urban dwellers, we are in no way dealing with a marginal phenomenon. We are witnessing the fast growth of a population living outside state control.*<sup>5</sup>

As Žižek points out, the fact that slum dwellers exist outside of state control in relatively unregulated areas of urban sprawl brings them into the same political category as refugees who present an administrative and macro-economic problem to national governments. Both populations exist in a marginal juridico-political state coterminous with the state of exception: "the defining feature of the slum-dwellers is socio-political, it concerns their (non-) integration into the legal space of citizenship with (most of) its incumbent rights ... a slum-dweller is a *homo sacer*, the systematically generated 'living dead' of global capitalism."<sup>6</sup>

This should lead us to consider how the minority citizens of biopolitical states, party to the rights of such citizens, will dispense such rights over the majority of those existing in liminal states in slums and refugee camps.

On its emergence from apartheid, South Africa was faced with two major tasks of aesthetic introspection – how to resurrect its neglected and actively suppressed art history in the form of black and other indigenous art; and how to reconcile its new status as a nation with a global discourse in which

otherness was becoming disavowed in favour of global homogeneity and branding. The process by which this emergence was undertaken is symbolic in itself – a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) regulated the confession of sins and, within its legislative boundaries, the dispensing of expiation. This therapeutic process for the nation is analogous to the treatment of a symptom.

The nation state lives in uneasy disequilibrium with globalisation. The programme of nation building at the level of culture and the arts in South Africa is partly driven by the country's position as a fairly successful emerging economy and an influential postcolony. South Africa's status as an authority on post-colonial political identity is also driven by the international prominence given to the civic use of the testimony to and confession of trauma that marked the immediate post-apartheid expiatory process of the TRC.

Yet, against both the national view and the global economic regime of the aesthetic lies the lived experience of liminality in much South African art. The liminal is a penetrating means to understand South African art because of its demonstration of the mobility and fluidity of otherness, of the deflation of the notion that an inherent barrier exists between the experiencing self and the close but distant other, between the mad and the sane, or the imperial subject and its colonised objects.

Making art outside of the institution, as many black artists in the apartheid era were forced to do, was a non-professional impulsion outside of the framework defining it as art and its creators as artists. The affinities between this subaltern position for many artists, as well as those working within the art system but who were counter-intuitive or perhaps revelled in and used their position as liminal figures in the

creation of work, is little explored or understood.

These affinities and anti-social or "anti-aesthetic" formations in South African art history take place in a larger social and historical context – and an anthropological context of ritual as a liminal response to repression and a means of maintaining a being in a state of exception. This is the background of definitions of madness and "outsiderness" dictated by race, of separate institutions to cater for those differences, of different and parallel epistemologies, even, eugenically ordered to exclude blacks and reduce them to *homo sacer* in apartheid and colonial South Africa. Art, as both discourse and practice, was not exempt from these exclusionary strategies, and South African art history has never really considered what this might mean for artists – not only black ones – who were affected by them.

If liminality can be understood as a lens through which to view our transaesthetics of indifference, we will need to understand the relation of ritual to aesthetic meaning in our society and history, as well as the nature of liminal aesthetic experience in all its guises, so that practice and theory might embark on a road together for once.

1. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*. New York: Zone Books, pp. 20–1.
2. Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*. London: Verso, 1993, pp. 18–19.
3. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989, pp. 22–3, 48.
4. Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006.
5. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes*. London: Verso, 2008, p. 424.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 425.

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# Inside-Out

**ESSAY 02** MARY CORRIGALL

UNRAVELLING THE CULTURAL POSITIONING OF MOSHEKWA LANGA'S "SKINS"



Moshekwa Langa, *Untitled*, 1995, mixed media, dimensions variable. Image courtesy Iziko Museums of Cape Town

Existence is defined only in terms of position, asserted the abstract painter and theorist Peter Halley.<sup>1</sup> The observation, made in relation to the abstract flow of goods, capital and information, applies to the artwork and by proxy its creator in the art circuit, where positioning not only substantiates existence but determines the artwork's marketability and the theoretical underpinnings it engenders. The artist's role in determining their position and that of their products is limited. As Jean Baudrillard notes, "a subject can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He is now only pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence."<sup>2</sup> In such a context, the artist and his/her work is produced and constructed by others – critics, gallerists and theorists.

This essay examines how Moshekwa Langa's eponymous solo exhibition in 1995, held at the now defunct Rembrandt van Rijn Gallery in Johannesburg, was culturally positioned and, to a degree, evaded positioning to satisfy a variety of art-historical agendas. My focus is on an *Untitled* work he produced for that show, which has become informally known as "Skins" because of its resemblance to

animal pelts. The significance of this exhibition pivots on this work that came to serve as a marker for what the art intelligentsia at the time deemed a turning point for South African art. For many this exhibition marked the arrival of a black artist whose work was undeniably contemporary because it evinced characteristics of neo-conceptualism. As Clive Kellner put it:

*Langa provides the sense of a future, where aspiration can be granted at the end of the proverbial yellow brick road. By mimicking Langa's success, albeit in his shadow, we are all offered the opportunity to be part of what is coming, as Langa epitomizes everything that the establishment has been seeking: he is a young, black, conceptually based artist.*<sup>3</sup>

Thus Langa's 1995 exhibition serves as a valuable entry point not only into understanding how notions around contemporary art were negotiated at this juncture but also how it is presently conceived. But before I unravel the hype around the exhibition it is worth taking stock of the historical context that predated it, which sheds light on the traditional/contemporary dialectic that subtly underpinned the

reception of "Skins".

In Ricky Burnett's landmark *Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art* (1985), black artists showed alongside whites for the first time under the contemporary rubric. Burnett eschewed aesthetic absolutes, implying that in post-colonial third/world contexts such value systems are inappropriate. Nevertheless, he suggested that the white artists' contributions to the exhibition were undeniably "sophisticated" because of their advanced skills and the manner in which their work demonstrated an awareness of "art developments in other parts of the world."<sup>4</sup>

A similar attitude prevails in Steven Sack's *Neglected Traditions* exhibition (1988). He wished to admit art by black artists into the South African canon but he unwittingly implied that black African cultural expression that predated the likes of Gerard Sekoto and John Koenakeefe Mohl, who appropriated a socio-realist/impressionistic mode of painting, was not modern.<sup>5</sup> Here we begin to see how efforts to remove one set of boundaries provide the foundation for another and how notions of contemporaneity –

both temporal and ideological – are defined.

Burnett identifies urban artists with contemporary expression, implying that artists in these locales “tend to look at the precedents set by the official white culture.” Thus the urban/rural dichotomy collapsed into the traditional/modern dichotomy, which substantially shaped how contemporary African art was defined. Salah Hassan warns against such dichotomies, insisting that they oversimplify the study of contemporary African art while underestimating the “intellectual” vigour inherent in supposedly traditional artistic practices.<sup>6</sup>

Langa was born in 1975 in Backenberg, near Potgietersrus. At fifteen he moved to KwaNdebele, where he might have been exposed to the colourful geometric painting style associated with the Ndebele, though the works at his 1995 solo presented no links to this heritage.

The installation dubbed “Skins” consisted of torn cement bags covered in dark splotches, recalling the patterns of animal pelts. Although the cement manufacturer’s branding remained visible, the ersatz animal hides implied a connection to an African idiom. Animal hides are connected to a number of ethnicities in South Africa that use them in traditional dress, so their affinity to traditional culture is generalised. Latterly, animal skins, popular as décor accessories, serve as shorthand for “Africanness”. The manner in which Langa’s faux animal skins were displayed suggested that they were not decorative objects: fixed onto several wires with the aid of pegs they appeared more like garments drying on a washing line.

His employment of a trite African motif could have been viewed as an ironic gesture, undercutting stereotypical notions of art created by black artists and expectations that it should bear links to their ethnic identity. It could also demonstrate ways in which tradition has evolved in urban contexts.

The “skins” weren’t the art objects per se: Langa photographed the faux animal hides on the washing line and presented the work as an installation, according to Stephen Hobbs,<sup>7</sup> then curator at the Rembrandt van Rijn. Or at least, it was an “installation” from Hobbs’s perspective, for the nineteen year-old Langa was apparently ignorant of contemporary art discourse.

Influenced by his own frame of reference, Hobbs obviously made selections according to what he perceived to be valuable. As a practicing artist he situated his own art-making within the neo-conceptualist movement that had come to predominate contemporary practice in South Africa from the late eighties when the likes of Alan Alborough, and later Kendell Geers, had been creating art under this rubric. Thus it seems likely that in the year following the first democratic elections, when the art community was looking to “democratise” art production and display, black artists perceived to have embraced the conceptualist ethos would have been noticed. Langa fit the bill and was admitted into what Hazel Friedman termed “the elite club of white boys known as neo-conceptualists.”<sup>8</sup>

Part of Langa’s appeal was the fact that he was able to embrace this supposedly advanced vocabulary despite being an untrained artist from a rural background. Consequently he was dubbed the “wunderkind” of a new post-apartheid era. Langa was aware of the level of curiosity he inspired. “When I started to show my work, I felt forced to talk about the experience of ‘otherness’ rather than the poetic gesture, which is really what interests me,” he observed to Elizabeth Janus.<sup>9</sup> Thus it is clear that the dynamics surrounding

his inclusion within the local art canon also highlighted his exclusion.

Langa didn’t offer any explanations about his art and none of the works on the show boasted a title. Perhaps aware of the stereotyping his work might be subjected to he had chosen not to position it, but this left it vulnerable to imposed interpretations. Kellner perceived the ambiguity of Langa’s work to be driven by a strategy to usurp Western hegemony: “Since conventional forms of access are denied, western cognitive practise does little to unveil the paradoxical meanings that lie at the core of his practice.”<sup>10</sup> Fixing Langa’s art as neo-conceptualist flattened its paradoxical nature, though the label also seemed an easy fit. Neo-conceptualism was distinct from pure conceptualism in that it embraced the postmodernist impulse in that “the documentary or text was replaced with a cynical materialism that presumed to criticise the commodity system.”<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, Langa’s appropriation of cement bags in “Skins” is in line with this feature and also conformed to a “critical strategy of contextual insurgency”, which Tony Godfrey identified as specific to conceptualist practice.<sup>12</sup> However, given that at that period of Langa’s career he had little if any awareness of these terms, one has to question how valid it was to impose them on his work. As Okwui Enwezor asks: “what does it mean to nominate something as conceptualist, something that acts like, looks like and resembles those practises, but whose chief concerns may lie elsewhere?”<sup>13</sup>

Use of the readymade object is not particular to neo-conceptualism: there is a precedent in so-called traditional modes of art-making in Africa where objects of mass consumption are used instead of indigenous materials, for example in the use of Barbie dolls in the production of Ndebele dolls.<sup>14</sup> Superficially, Langa’s “Skins” shares some similarities with these supposed hybrid forms. Jean Fisher resists positing such forms as hybrid, suggesting that this risks advancing them as “an essential opposite to the new denigrated ‘cultural purity’”. Fisher prefers to peg such products as the result of syncretism, which is concerned with “constantly mobile relations that operate on the structure of languages and at the level of performance.”<sup>15</sup>

To resolve the quandary regarding the positioning of Langa’s “Skins”, Olu Oguibe and Hassan might make a case for it being read under the banner of African Conceptualism.<sup>16</sup> It seems as if there was no appropriate language at the time with which to frame his work.

Because of the overt generic reference to African tradition in “Skins”, and the foregrounding of Langa’s rural origins,<sup>17</sup> it was argued that Langa was “caught in a complex overlap of colonial education and rural/traditional matrix,” which Kellner said forced Langa to occupy that “narrow divide that is torn between authenticity and tradition.”<sup>18</sup> Thus while Langa was hailed as the first black neo-conceptualist, he was also positioned at the threshold of the gates of Western contemporary practice. And while there is a trend towards countering fixity in this context it seemed that it disrupted the validity of the artist’s output.

The idea of Langa as a rural, untrained artist was to some degree an imposed construct. He wasn’t disconnected from urban culture or global movements. He also enjoyed a private education at the Max Stibbe Waldorf School in Pretoria, where he received school art training.

The perceived duality of his existence and the sense of displacement thought to be expressed in his art made him immediately attractive to the international

art community and in 1996 he showed work in several international exhibitions.<sup>19</sup> In the context of the post-1994 heightened interest in art from this country, Langa embodied the optimism that defined this era as his ability to produce such progressive art despite his circumstances was proof that history could be transcended.

It has been suggested that Langa took up a residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam in 1997 because he was fed-up with “the sense of confinement that came with being typecast in South Africa.”<sup>20</sup> His subsequent art-making has also been compelled by a desire to defy circumscription. He almost altogether dispensed with the signature forms of his early work and turned first to photography to tackle the politics of identity that had overshadowed his career. He has remained in the Netherlands but this new location hasn’t completely dislodged the typecasting he has been subjected to. In an interview with Kathryn Smith in 2000 Langa observed that:

*I didn’t want to make objects because the constraints that came with making objects was that everything I touched in Amsterdam was misunderstood. I could make a simple gesture but it would be “a gesture made by an African and then by a South African”. It’s been described as “too clever”. Making stuff that you can’t quite pin down is a way of dealing with the situation without really dealing with the situation.*

1. *Arts Magazine*, vol. 60, no. 7 (March 1986).

2. Cited in Amelia Jones, ed., *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, p. 100.

3. “Emerging Voices/Radiant Child: Moshekwa Langa” in *Atlantica* no. 17 (1997), p. 160.

4. Ricky Burnett, ed., *Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art*. BMW South Africa, 1985.

5. The term “modern” here is interchangeable with “contemporary”.

6. “The Modernist Experience in African Art” in Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor eds., *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*. Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1999, p. 219.

7. Interview with Hobbs 20 August 2009.

8. “The Creation of a Wunderkind” in *Mail & Guardian*, 2 August 1996.

9. Elizabeth Janus, “The Discomfort of Distance (Finishing the Double Bind)” in *Moshekwa Langa: The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago*. Geneva: Centre d’Art Contemporain, 2002, p. 91.

10. “Emerging Voices/Radiant Child: Moshekwa Langa” in *Atlantica* no. 17, 1997, p. 61.

11. Robert C. Morgan, *Art into Ideas: Essays on Conceptual Art*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 40.

12. Cited in Colin Richards, “The Thought is the ‘Thing’ in *Art South Africa* vol. 1, no. 2 (Summer 2002), p. 35.

13. “Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on ‘African’ Conceptualism” in Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe eds., *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*. Forum for African Arts, 2002, p. 72.

14. As documented in Anitra Nettleton et al, *Engaging Modernities: Transformations of the Commonplace*. Johannesburg: Standard Bank, 2003, p. 52.

15. “The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism” in Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 237.

16. Oguibe and Hassan suggest that conceptualism can be traced back to African Classicism, thus African artworks that might not readily fit a Western concept of conceptualism can still claim to be linked to this movement. *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*.

17. At the time of the exhibition Langa was living in Johannesburg.

18. “Emerging Voices/Radiant Child: Moshekwa Langa” in *Atlantica* no. 17 1997, p. 157.

19. *Young Art in South Africa* held at the Galerie Frank Hänel in Frankfurt, *South Africa at the Forefront* at the October Gallery in London and *Colours* in Berlin.

20. According to Tracy Murinik in “Artist always on Tour” in Emma Bedford ed., *Fresh: Moshekwa Langa*. Cape Town: Iziko South African National Gallery, 2003, p. 10.

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# Liminality and Magic in the Weavings of Allina Ndebele

**ESSAY 03** PHILIPPA HOBBS AND NESSA LEIBHAMMER

Iconography in twentieth-century South African weavings was most often associated with decorative abstractions, replications of artworks or benign narratives. In contrast, many weavings by Allina Ndebele (born 1939) deal with social and political issues formulated as allegories, or narratives with a moral message. Developed between 1978 and 2004, when she practiced as an artist-weaver at her studio in Swart Umfolozi in rural KwaZulu-Natal, her stories typically use fictional characters (often animals) to describe events by suggestive resemblances, rather than by direct reference.

Of special significance in the oeuvre of this accomplished weaver is the complex theme of liminality, with its attendant states of exclusion, dispossession and magic. Moreover, the frequency and complexity of these ideas in her work begs the question of how she herself identified with these states. Having been brought up on a Christian mission, then having studied and worked at two further missions, Ndebele later recovered Zulu customs and spiritual connections previously denied her. In this transgressive enterprise she risked isolation and censure. Compounding this complexity was the experience of being a black South African under a repressive apartheid regime, another marginalising factor that helped shape her relationship with her artwork and its subjects.

A striking early example of Ndebele's allegorical weaving style is *The Bird and Animal Indaba* (c. 1980), an account of social ostracism, couched as a story of the original exclusion of bats from classification within the animal kingdom. Purple and turquoise threads define a flock of slender birds gathered around a large, lone bat. Beyond, ranks of animals draw together in an interrogation of Bat to establish his identity. The story supplied by Ndebele tells how the animals declare that, since Bat flies, he must be a bird. Yet the birds do not count him as one of their own; only as an animal that can fly. He is not properly one or the other.

Despite the focus on Bat's physiognomy, anatomical correctness is of no consequence in Ndebele's representation. Indeed, slippages between animal and human identity are evident, as Bat takes on some anthropomorphic characteristics. He has arms attached to his body, separate from his decorated wings, as well as extended legs; and he stands upright rather than hanging upside down as a stationary bat would. Nor does Bat have the characteristic pronounced ears for hearing the rapport of his high-pitched echo. Compared with the highly developed orientation normally possessed by this species, this bat is disoriented.

Ndebele herself has played a role in Bat's plight. By placing the half-caste in the centre of the scene, and by exaggerating his scale in relation to the other animals, she has enhanced his singularity. Hot colours make his appearance as vivid as possible, perhaps suggesting his threatened position, or emotional

states of anxiety. The circle of forms compressed around Bat suggests their obsession with hierarchies of classification. Through this pictorial organisation Ndebele has exaggerated Bat's difference, calling us to join the other creatures in the examination.

Although *The Bird and Animal Indaba* itself does not reveal the outcome of the animals' parascientific deliberations, Ndebele's written story tells us Bat's fate. The tribunal decrees that he should be destroyed when next he joins their gathering. It is for this reason, Ndebele tells, that bats are forced into seclusion, sleeping during the day and flying at night. Redolent with suggestion of apartheid's race classification under the Group Areas Act, and with the skewed science that apartheid encouraged to entrench a notion of difference between human "types", this weaving captures an experience of scrutiny, censure and exclusion.

What is perhaps significant is Ndebele's own relationship with the outcast Bat. While colluding with the animal scientists by emphasising his difference through her compositional arrangements, she has also awarded him the largest and most intricate form of all the animals, as well as a frontal pose and eye contact with the viewer. Making sure that we understand that he defies typology, she nevertheless confers a heroic gloss to this anthropomorphised flying mammal.

Allina Ndebele articulates a more political theme of exclusion in *Apartheid Among Animals* (1993). Engineering a story of political segregation to conjure an experience of being outside the establishment, she narrates the story of Chakijana, a slender mongoose who is fugitive from the mainstream, like Bat in *The Bird and Animal Indaba*. But Chakijana wants the advantages of acceptance by the privileged class of "horned animals", particularly information on their planned seizure of land. He resolves to infiltrate a meeting called by the animals so that he may uncover the land-seizure plot. However, only horned animals may be admitted to this group. He duly secures an abandoned set of horns to his head with *inomfi* glue and arrives at the meeting. But, while sleeping, he is exposed when the contraption falls off his head. Ndebele's account assures us that the outcome of Chakijana's impertinence is evident today, as mongooses hide in holes and live secluded lives. Notwithstanding his exclusion on unjust grounds, Chakijana is an imposter, so has to resort to deception. Limited in his resources and deemed unworthy through physical difference, he insinuates himself into the socius through subterfuge. Finally, he becomes a social outcast.

Seen from the perspective of an historical Zulu worldview, Ndebele's allegorical protagonists such as Bat and Chakijana are condemned to the margins, excluded and socially disabled. In Ndebele's weavings social and political exclusion through the allegory of the animal kingdom resonates with parallels in human behavior. However, the resemblance is not

complete as animals suffer a particular disadvantage. Unlike humans, they do not have lineage ancestors to appeal to.

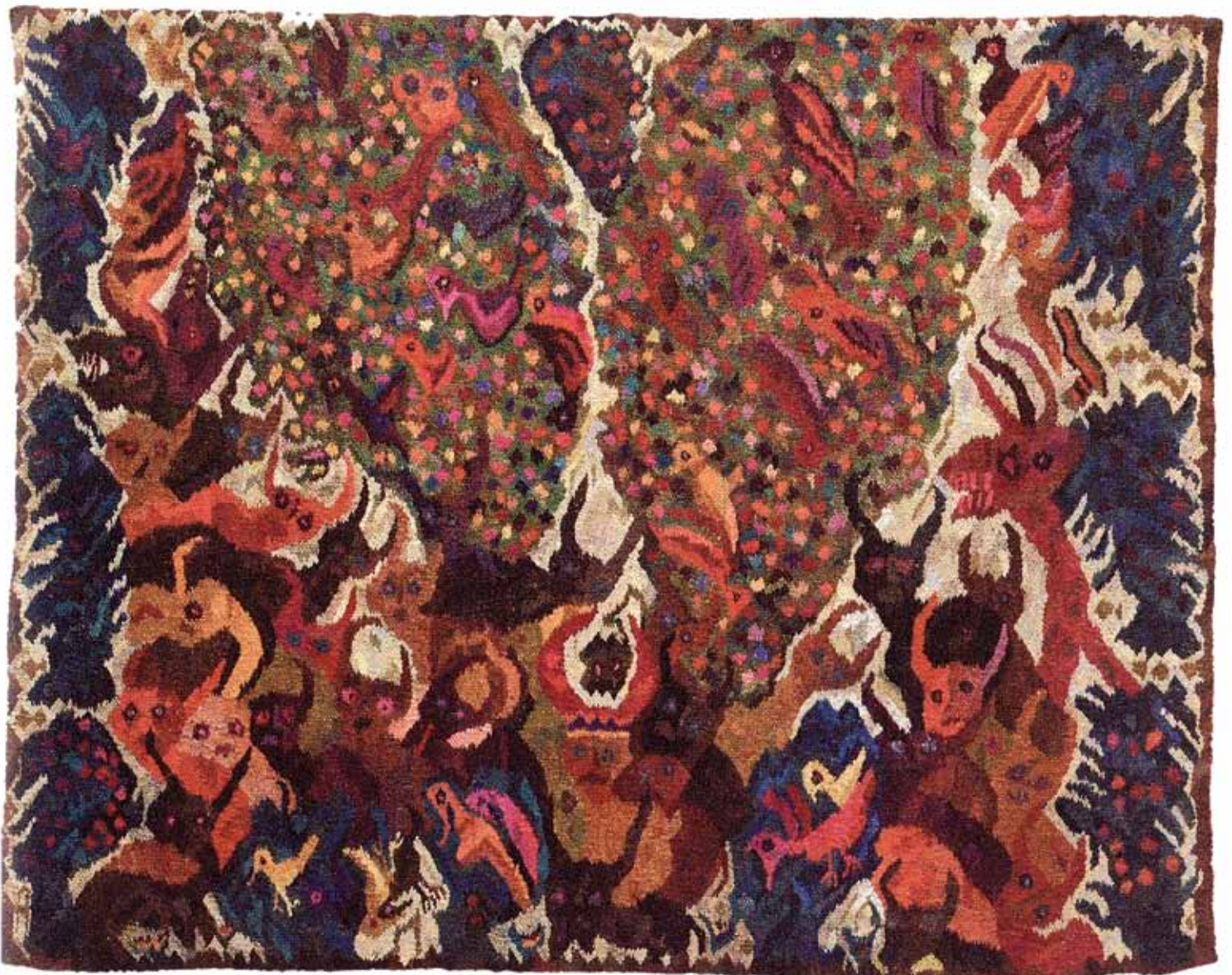
In works dealing more overtly in human affairs, Ndebele references a spiritual system that is particularly African and more specifically Zulu. It is through the understanding of the structures that govern this epistemic system that states of liminality can be more fully understood.

Although the setting up of binaries is problematic, there does seem to be a distinction between Western notions of threshold and liminality, and those emerging out of African symbolic systems. In the West, liminals are usually dispossessed and removed from the mainstream, whereas in historical Africa they were often integral to society. In the latter, leaders, metalworkers, hunters, healers and diviners were "liminal", but were nevertheless accorded high social status. Almost invariably they were considered dangerous and powerful because of their ability to traverse the margins of defined tropes of being.

In historical African symbolic systems, nature and its spirits are a source of power – a chaotic but necessary realm. This is the obverse of the homestead with its cultivated fields; the place of culture and stability where lineage ancestors watch over their living descendents. Ancestors expect that the moral and social standards of the family be upheld and proper respect be shown to elders and themselves. To step beyond the threshold of the homestead into the purview of the ancestors is to enter the unpredictable space of liminality, power and peril. Only those with special powers can move between the cultured, cultivated world and the potent realms of nature and spirit.

One such character is Ndebele's demonic Nqakamatshe, a sangoma who lives next to the river Mbizankulu that traverses *Nqakamatshe and His Muti Magics* (1999). Because of his power, Nqakamatshe can control the fearsome Mamlambo, a cryptid half-snake who lurks beneath the water's surface. Nqakamatshe abuses his powers by seducing married women from the nearby village. When their husbands plan to avenge the insult by killing the delinquent sangoma he is alerted by his ancestors. He appeals to Mamlambo to support him in the imminent battle, and the cryptid duly devours Nqakamatshe's enemies. The ancestors subsequently experience a change of heart because of his misuse of the supernatural abilities with which they had entrusted him. They withdraw his powers and banish him to the depths of the Mbizankulu.

Nqakamatshe is a liminal in line with the accepted status of a sangoma. But through his transgression of the required moral code he forfeits the benefits that an ordered and exemplary life would have secured. However, not all of Allina Ndebele's liminals are condemned. Sometimes she rescues her characters from a life of social obscurity through magic and the assistance of the ancestral spirits. The story *Magagasi*



Allina Ndebele, *Animal Meeting/Apartheid Among Animals*, 1993, weaving of hand-spun karakul and linen warp, 166 x 210cm. University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, Johannesburg

and the Magic Animal (2003) finds a poor man, Magagasi, alone in the forest. Here he encounters a magic animal, which talks, laughs and changes its colours "like a chameleon". The two-tailed creature with a golden collar instructs Magagasi to appeal to his ancestors so that his reduced homestead can be replenished. On establishing contact with his ancestors, he is duly rewarded with a kraal full of cows.

The condition of "threshold" is the crux of almost all of Ndebele's mature images, with a duality of *modus operandi* inherent in the domains of homestead and wilderness; and of the living and the spirit world. And while, her process has involved the Western materials and weaving technique taught her by Swedish weaver, Ulla Gowenius, at Ceza Mission Hospital and later Rorke's Drift, Ndebele has also accessed spiritual and dream states to find inspiration for her images and ideas. Of special importance is her contact with her grandmother's spirit, as well as procedures to facilitate access to this, such as using her specially constructed *amaqugwana* (traditionally built and styled home) as the locus of this communion. Her unique images are thus drawn from an uncertain space between two of the most important resources in her creative life: her Swedish weaving training and her ancestor.

There are intriguing parallels between Ndebele's

life and the allegories she has chosen to depict. As a woman born during apartheid to a family that struggled to feed and educate their children, she experienced religious, political and economic exclusion. She chose the life of an artist with its uncertain future over her nursing training; she lived in three mission environments but ultimately embraced Zulu spirituality; and as a career artist she lived and worked in a remote rural area. Ndebele clearly identifies with liminal characters such as Bat and Chakijana.

Ndebele's weavings are a fertile ground in which to explore concepts of liminality and magic as they appear and reappear in different modes. They also probe concepts of boundaries and socially-sanctioned limits to human behaviour, exploring both Western and African notions of threshold and transgression in a richly developed set of motifs.

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# Pump up the Parlour

**ESSAY 04** ALEXANDRA DODD

## ENTANGLEMENT AND DESIRE IN THE WORK OF NICHOLAS HLOBO

In creating his unsettlingly sexual sculptures, Nicholas Hlobo stitches and weaves together materials like coloured silk ribbons, black rubber, gauze and leather. For him, each of these materials has a cultural inheritance, and his works are layered with references to Xhosa tradition, as well as to his own gay identity, to race, ethnicity and the limits of language. Much has been written about Hlobo's roots in Xhosa culture in an attempt to articulate the complex nuances of his cultural and sexual identity as it informs his art.

Here I wish to pursue a more precarious tack, exploring the unexpected spatial connotations in his Standard Bank Young Artist Award exhibition, *Umtshotsho* ('youth party') in which several gloopy, black, humanoid or alien forms are situated in a salon-style setting that conjures the restrained parlour-room antics and highly mannered mating games of nineteenth-century novels. To what extent does this muted Victorian subtext, point to a more decadent and outré metropolitan aspect of his entangled cultural inheritance?

I am currently engaged in trying to fathom the relationship between a Victorian past and a postmodern, postcolonial present through explorations of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century South African texts and artworks, which revise themes or tropes that initially sprung to life during the nineteenth century. The question at the heart of my project concerns what this act of symbolic retrieval achieves or allows for in the public realm of the present. In what ways are contemporary South African artists and writers grappling with this country's troubled colonial inheritance to reveal less binary understandings of nineteenth-century social relations, and in what ways do these fresh conceptions of our past disrupt and revivify rote thinking about racial and sexual difference to forge more productive forms of identity-making for the future?

With regard to the title of the installation, *Umtshotsho*, or "youth party", the artist explains that the term refers to a traditional rite marking the transitional phase young people go through as they start waking up to their sexuality, but points out that "the works are not trying to tell a story about an old way of partying for teenagers, but to look at the new conventions and draw similarities between different times."<sup>1</sup>

In an essay entitled *Under the Covers, Out in the Open* in the catalogue published with the exhibition, Mark Gevisser explores the ways in which this installation embodies a complex entanglement of biographical resonances for Hlobo, stemming from his vicarious

childhood experiences of *umtshotsho* rituals in the village of Newtown outside Idutywa in the Eastern Cape. Hlobo never went through the ritual himself. "The *umtshotsho* he has created here, then, is in part a fantasy, a willed reconstruction of a world Hlobo was denied; one in which he imagines he might have had the opportunity to channel his own illicit desires," writes Gevisser, who goes on to narrate the tale of Hlobo's tentative coming out, his "self-guided *umtshotsho*" which unfolded in the steamy confines of Skyline, Johannesburg's iconic gay bar at the Harrison Reef Hotel on the corner of Pretoria and Twist Streets in Hillbrow.<sup>2</sup>

Gevisser's essay offers a compelling glimpse of the multiple worlds Hlobo inhabits: "Xhosa son, Eastern Cape homeboy, gay cosmopolitan, artworld rising star."<sup>3</sup> An exploration of the complexities of Hlobo's cultural and sexual identity, it deepens our understanding of the work within a social-realist frame. But in reading the work solely through this conceptual mesh, we risk silencing a range of other interpretive possibilities that hover outside the terrain of documentary realism, which has dominated South African art and literature for decades. My reading here is an attempt to effect a temporal shift away from the dominant tenor of present-day South African cultural production and analysis, which has tended to be glaringly contemporary (or located strictly post-1948), inscribing a hegemonic pattern of thought and cultural production that perpetually re-inscribes the dethroning of one mode of nationalism and its replacement by a new (more heroic and ethically justifiable) form of nationalism. Irrevocably caught up with the politics of the present and the traumas of the recent past, much South African cultural production is inscribed within a monotonous temporal narrative that enshrines the monumentality of 1994 as the date of our national becoming. I am interested in exploring the degree to which texts and artworks that reference the nineteenth century undo the valorised pre- and post-1994 conception of history – and therefore of the present – as the only version via which the citizens of this country are capable of imagining themselves.

From an epistemological perspective, the Victorian archive is strongly tainted because of the centrality of race and the racial sciences to nineteenth-century knowledge production. My project is catalysed by a desire to write back to aspects of postcolonial theory in order to trigger what might be a fuller, more healing response to the Victorian archive, which is arguably in danger of being dismissed as ethically contaminated, and therefore erased or overlooked.

In stepping into the liminal zone of the past, I seek to retrieve and recover discarded material – wasted history, trashed narratives – and recycle them so that they might be valuable in the making of fresh conceptions of the future.

Retracting our focus for a moment from the strangely humanoid rubber forms in the installation, let us give attention to the furniture and the unexpected spatial connotations of the installation. The figures are situated in a salon-style setting that conjures the restrained parlour-room antics and highly mannered mating games of nineteenth-century novels, introducing a vague sense of inherited European manners, restraint and propriety to the room. The elaborate brass lampstand and the curvaceousness of the carved wood and upholstered couch place them in an era that pre-dates the clean geometric lines of Modernism, conjuring a sense of the Victorian parlour.

Keeping in mind the title of Hlobo's installation, it is worthwhile noting here that the Oxford English Dictionary derives the word "parlour" from the middle English "parlur", from the Old French "parleur" ("to speak") and that the earliest recorded use of the term in the thirteenth century denoted a space at a remove from daily work, reserved for social interaction. In the nineteenth century the parlour was the domestic space in which young women received their suitors, who would sit a modest distance from the lady, conversing politely, perhaps in the presence of a chaperone.

"It was within the space of the Victorian parlour that the men, women and children of middle class Britain acted out the dramas of domestic life. These domestic settings were of critical importance in shaping Victorian experience, delimiting the horizons of character, and constituting the particular visual, spatial and sensory embodiments of human culture at a particular historical moment," writes Thad Logan in *The Victorian Parlour*. "The parlour, whether in life or in art, is a site at which we can explore potentially explosive disturbances in psychic and social fields and can trace attempts both to articulate and resolve such disturbances."<sup>4</sup>

Entering the parlour from a postcolonial perspective, I am not interested in the resolution of disturbances. Rather, I am drawn to the productive possibilities initiated by disruption and disturbance, and turn here to the popular literary phenomenon of the mash-up or postmodern parody as it relates to the nineteenth-century novel. A notable example of this form is Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), a fiercely irreverent pastiche that combines



**LEFT** Nicholas Hlobo, *Kubomvu*, 2009, found table, found lamp, rubber inner tube, ribbon, red light bulb, installation view, Monument Gallery, Grahamstown. © Nicholas Hlobo. Photo: Carla Liesching and courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg **RIGHT** Nicholas Hlobo, *Izithunzi*, 2009, rubber inner tube, ribbon, organza, lace, found objects, steel, couch, installation view, Monument Gallery, Grahamstown. © Nicholas Hlobo. Photo: Carla Liesching and courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

Jane Austen's 1813 novel, *Pride and Prejudice* with elements of contemporary zombie fiction.<sup>5</sup> This postmodern parody not only reconstructs a classic of the Western canon, but enacts wilful violence on its form. What is it about Austen's text that inspires this desire for such radical reconfiguration? And what does it say about contemporary responses to hallmark, canonical notions of the nineteenth century? In both its cult popularity and its parodic intent, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* provides a touchstone for my reading of Hlobo's parlour scene, affirming the transfiguring power of this installation and its intent to disrupt the familiar and disturb the normality of the received stereotype.

On closer inspection the red light and the lamp tassels suggest that this might not be the kind of parlour where a bit of stiff-upper-lip repartee between nervous suitors unfolds beneath the watchful eye of a dowager aunt stirring her tea or doing a little tapestry at the walnut occasional table in the corner. No, this is a much less cosy set up. The mood is unsettling; the darkness of the room, the ruby light and the effusions of black rubber evoking an off-limits salon-privé atmosphere that is strangely gothic, sinister and bewitching. The found-object sculpture featuring the lamp and occasional table is aptly named *Kubomvu* or "beware".

To immerse us in the mood of this particular parlour a little more, I turn to Will Self's novel, *Dorian*, in which he reprises Oscar Wilde's, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, mapping Wilde's late-nineteenth-century moment onto Thatcher-era Britain and finding uncanny similarities between these two fins-de-siècle. Describing Dorian's lair, Self writes:

*Those who did happen to be invited back for a nightcap, and to have their body toyed with as if it were an anatomical model, found a domicile with all*

*the posed artificiality of a small but expensive hotel, or the stage-set for an antiquated play. The furniture was of mahogany and leather, the standard lamps were of brass. Mirrors were bevelled, invitations were propped on the mantelpiece. There was the occasional piece of chinoiserie. The prevailing colours were russets, maroons and browns. The floor coverings were Persian kelims on top of carpet, which, as is invariably the case, imparted an overstuffed atmosphere – and this despite the fact that the whole of the ground floor was one single room. Fustiness was the order of things and revival was the style, without there being any real indication of what it was that was to be revived.*<sup>6</sup>

Hlobo's is not a faithful or realistic conjuring of the Victorian parlour. Unlike the one depicted by Self, this parlour is devoid of decorative trinkets and bric-a-brac.<sup>7</sup> In an act of dissociation, the *Umtshotsho* parlour is shorn of the accumulations of detail that crowded the Victorian parlour. The hewn-down elements of this parlour, or imaginarium, operate in a similar way to the Victorian dress that dominates sculptural installations by Mary Sibande. Like the dress, the Victorian couch and lamp function as a "mnemonic device", an associative pattern that helps recall the Victorian-era quite broadly – tapping into an attendant array of cultural associations lying inert in the mind. Recalling the nineteenth century in this way instantiates odd flashes of uncertain hybridity.

While Hlobo's strange figures might simultaneously evoke tribal initiation ceremonies and adventures in urban clubland, their setting appears to conjure the spectral presence of an inherited set of European mores. The excesses of Victorian taste seem to have been transferred to the very bodies of the *Izithunzi* or shadow creatures, who appear to be exploding beyond the seams of their own physical limits, bulging onto the furniture and oozing into the space

around them like some weird liquorice ectoplasm. Hlobo's dark, lurking, semi-human figures are so strikingly unlike any other figurative sculptures we've commonly encountered that they conjure new vocabularies of feeling.

Although postcolonial theory has accounted for the complex enmeshment of European and African values and the creation of transcultural forms with the contact zones of the public sphere, there is little to account for an equivalent entanglement in the realm of intimacy and sexuality. Rather than hankering after exhausted binary notions, which stem from the nineteenth-century intensification of colonialism and reinstate cultural essentialisms in the present, Hlobo's figures articulate an embodied, physical sense of an entangled cultural inheritance. In its most utopian strains, *Umtshotsho* might even point the way towards an unknown and unfettered post-human future.

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2. M. Gevisser, K. Ratele and J. Mergel, *Nicholas Hlobo: Standard Bank Artist Award 2009*. Cape Town: Michael Stevenson, 2009, p. 11.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
4. T. Logan, *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 1.
5. S. Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Quirk Books, 2009.
6. W. Self, *Dorian*. London: Penguin, 2002, p. 156.
7. The development of consumer capitalism led to the establishment of the middle-class home as a privileged cultural space, while a confluence of particular historical conditions gave rise to middle classes eager to consume and display mass-produced goods. The parlour, in particular, was a site of collection and display comparable to the museum, department store and trade fair.

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# Caught by Traffic

ESSAY 05 | ZEN MARIE

IN SEARCH OF AN AESTHETIC METHODOLOGY?

The French saying, *bête comme un peintre – as dumb as a painter* – owes its biting wit to a reduction of the visual arts to mere imitation. The painter (as emblematic of the visual arts) copies reality and presents an audience with a view, a spectacle: an image. This image, produced by the naïve painter, is illustrative: it *points to* a scene as it depicts a reality. Of course this is the traditional, conservative perspective of the *beaux-arts*, which is often reduced to the ocular: the image is privileged as an essentially visual operation. Fast forward through the history of art to the mechanisation and commercialisation of the creative industries. Images are made and circulated at such profusion and pace that they become increasingly complex as cultural icons. This provokes questions on the status of the image. What is its link to an external reality? How does it play with ideas? How does it do its magic? And, crucially for my purpose, how does it operate in the game of knowledge production? In this questioning of the image or aesthetic object the artist is a conjurer of exquisite theories and sinister knowledges who often crosses the space between theory and practice, blurring the boundaries. This essay asks after the specificity of this space between theory and practice. Does the artist bring a fresh perspective into theoretical reckoning? And does theory make art more rigorous?

## Jou Alma Mater

The Academy is one of many places that mediate art in South Africa, the Fine Arts department serving as the first hurdle for would-be practitioners. That most practicing artists in South Africa hold BA Fine Arts degrees has bearing on the way young artists formulate their ideas, their formal and conceptual allegiances and, ultimately, their practices. In this context, the idea of theoretically engaged art practice is not strange at all but rather dangerously accepted as the norm.

Fine Arts majors are often given watered-down theoretical compilations in the form of a “greatest hits” of art theory. Added to this way of teaching theory is the reality that students are far more committed to “studio work” than to “class work”. The result of this diluted theory as supplement to practice is like a seven-year-old with an AK47. The kid may be able to work the machine but God knows how many people will die.

The acceptance of practical work *as* research becomes more problematic the further up the academic food chain you go. Especially fraught is the relationship between theoretical (conceptual or written) work and practical aesthetic work. Musical compositions, theatre performances and exhibitions are often

adorned with clumsy theoretical retrofitting. The danger of post-theorisation is that the artist misses the fertile potential contained in an engaged theory/object relationship.

Conventional academic research privileges the written word, which most artists see at best as a second home. Academia furthermore requires a research process with clear goals and a clearly defined and measurable methodology. While the arts necessarily resist universal or standardised systems of measurability, methodology is perhaps more open. Surely there is a methodology that the creative arts can offer academic research? In the spirit of probing the possibility of a methodological insight, I introduce *The Big Boss*.

## The Big Boss

*The Big Boss* was my contribution to a one-week residency in Durban hosted by the Netherlands Institute voor Media Kunst (NIMK) and Dala, a Durban-based art/architecture and activism collective. The project challenged my intuitive, perhaps even formulaic, instincts towards making work.

Being a lover of the *woofers* and the *MAG wheel*, I decided to work with the aesthetic practice of taxis modification. Durban, more than any other city in South Africa, has a rich tradition of modifying cars, and this audio/visual form of expression is performed by a number of taxi drivers.

It took me a few days to find the man/car combination that was just right. Mark Chinsamy, owner/driver of *The Big Boss*, delivered the overall synaesthetic experience that I desired. I travelled around Durban with Mark, engaging him in discussion on the “spatial dimensions of global spectacles on the occasion of the 2010 World Cup” – the theme of the residency. Mark had a lot to say. I generated almost ten hours of video, covering topics from class/race divisions of property, to the nature of urban spatial dynamics in Durban, the nuances of taxi driving, and the often illicit and nefarious taxi industry. At the end of filming I was at a complete loss about what to show in the exhibition. There was enough footage for a documentary on Mark, who was keen on a “day in the life” type of film, starring himself. However, with no time to edit, this was near impossible. The other problem I faced was that his candid, no-holds-barred description of the taxi industry reinforced negative stereotypes of taxi drivers.

As my deadline approached the project took on an eloquence and efficiency that only a combination of fear and a lack of time could produce: a 3:24-minute music video shot to *Waka Waka* by Shakira with *The Big Boss* as the star, and a “live” discussion

with Mark at the KZNSA Gallery. Inviting Mark to engage in discussion released me from the worry of being gunned down for misrepresenting him. But there were other issues at stake. The discussion was a frightening prospect. I was opening up the process that Mark and I had entered into some days before, to a real-time engagement with an audience best described as white, middle-aged, wealthy, art-loving Durbanites. What thrilled me about this was the presentation of Human as Rarefied Object – more Saartjie Baartman than Gilbert and George. The entire project smacked of a poorly conceived anthropological exercise. It was ethnography at its *participatory* worst. I was going to parade the “native” to the *society for the arts*, who would be shocked, entertained and titillated. I also assumed that I would be taken to task for such an impotent critical gesture, and my process shown up for the charlatanism that it represented. I was looking forward to being the fall guy for pseudo-anthropology in art.

Unfortunately, it was not a total failure. The audience *was* shocked, entertained and titillated. But in spite of my hopes I was not crucified. Anthropological methodology and I went unscathed.

The good art-going citizens of Durban got a chance to interact with an authentic taxi driver. They asked him why he played his music so loud and drove so badly. Mark and I discussed the finer points of car modification and the non-taxi-travelling audience got their first encounter with a real life, all-star taxi. They got a chance to take photos and to sit in *The Big Boss* with the music turned up loud, though not *too* loud as the sound system would have shattered the windows of the KZNSA Mark told us.

This project suggests that there could be a way to think, and rethink, events, people and places outside of conventional research. *The Big Boss* represents a kind of *thick* or *sensuous* form of data collection that speaks about – if not *does* – something that could be considered a form of *visual thinking*.<sup>1</sup> It suggests a challenge to the words normally used to describe the group of people designated Taxi Drivers, that goes beyond the conventional production of both images and words.

While *The Big Boss* contains many elements consistent with contemporary trends in visual anthropology, it resists categorisation as anthropological research project. The point, however, is not to try to locate *The Big Boss* as research, but to view it as a theoretical statement in itself. It is not a question of drawing out an analysis of the phallic signification system that the project no doubt lends itself to. It is rather a question of sitting with (or inside) *The Big Boss* and understanding the logic that it screams out in 1000W over six channels.



Zen Marie, *The Big Boss*, 2010, video stills from HDV (3min 24s)

## Practice-Led Research: A Question of Liminality?

Contemporary developments in the tense relationship between theory and art, or art as theory, come largely from the academy. This is in part to find a proper institutional frame for textual objects that do not neatly fit within the conventions of a written thesis or recognised research outputs. But universities seem unable to push a radical agenda that challenges the neat epistemological structuring of the non-written object.

The challenge of rethinking epistemological structure from the point of view that the aesthetic object proposes is diminished by technocratic or bureaucratic rationalisation. As a result, artistic research is generalised by the academy in a way that neutralises its singularity: its ability to *performatively* do something different. This difference (or even newness) is in part to ask how sound or image might function as theoretical text.

The conservatism of the academy is similar to the conventional and equally conservative articulation of the liminal as a non-space that is, by definition, uninhabitable. The emphasis is on transition or movement from one state to another between binaries. The possibility of dwelling on the threshold in a neither-nor, in-between or undecidable space seems a threat to the proper or the mainstream. The carnival must end and people must speak and act as hegemony demands. But what if the liminal were treated as a valid in itself. What if *becoming* was infinitely deferred and ontological security was sacrificed for a radicalisation of epistemological form? What if the binary opposition between here and

there, this state and the other, were relinquished in favour of a dialectical relationship, but one in which any attempt at synthesis was deferred in a daring attempt to listen or to see something different?

To consider aesthetic configurations from these liminal positions, in a way that is not censored, politely revised or neatly translated, prompts a redefinition of the terms by which researchers, academics and policy makers approach such objects (or subjects). The Big Boss taxi can be seen as a liminal object as it resists classification or ordering, it is an affront to decent taste and correct politics. It sits between spaces as it pans through the cityscape. To what extent then is this point of resistance a potentially transformative one in attempting to organise the way conventional research is done? What research methodology does this kind of aesthetic object suggest?

The emergence of practice-based doctorates creates a frenzy of classification and structuring, the systemisation of creativity and the rationalisation of texts not primarily word-based. In this project a proper methodology to accommodate aesthetic practice is eagerly sought. This urgency for deriving methodology, for stabilising a set of practices that almost by definition are heterogeneous and contradictory is itself a threat to a radical perspective of aesthetic positions as research. The academy would seem to require a procedural approach, to establish a generalised methodology that can be applied to a range of research projects. We should perhaps follow Sarat Maharaj who proposes an academy that ... *is not seen as a fixed site, Know-All centre but as a straggle of self-organizing educative-creative events and conjunctures, each springing up afresh from scratch, as it were, for whatever art research project. The academy*

*becomes less a monolith establishment, more a series of micro-labs or nano labs that take shape within a band of knowledge practices – within modalities of the haptic, retinal, computational, the frequencies of sonic grime, the somatic, performative, digital amongst others. Each time art research is floated, we might say, a microlab has to be knocked together.*"<sup>2</sup>

Maharaj urges a shift from *know-how* to *no-how*, a form of post-structural provocation that sees methodology as an academic straitjacket that restricts rather than opens up the potential of the aesthetic object to new epistemological form. To embrace "no-how" is to ask the process itself to be accountable to knowledge production. The "no-how" keeps procedure at bay as reflexivity is prioritised. This challenge to postpone measurability is perhaps a utopian one. It is, however, one that is important to strive towards if research practices are to be invigorated by perspectives from the arts.

To view *The Big Boss* as a research project, as a theoretical statement, is to provoke a discussion on the nature of research; of art and the role that theory plays across these registers. While ideas of *practice-led research* have become fashionable in contemporary academia, they are still tainted by the disciplinary and technical ordering that academia requires. The debate is one of classification and structure. It becomes a question of how the medium we use suggests a logic or epistemological ground.

1. Sarat Maharaj, "Know-how and No-how: Stopgap Notes on 'Method' in Visual Art as Knowledge Production" in *Art and Research* vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring 2009), p. 4.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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# Inaccurate Truths

ESSAY 06 SEAN O'TOOLE

## THE CASE OF LITERARY FICTION AS ART CRITICISM

A young man, his name is Neville Lister, a university dropout who affectedly smokes a pipe and works as a road painter's assistant, is given a book by his father. "Just look at the pictures," says Neville's dad, who is concerned about his son's undecided lifestyle.<sup>1</sup> Neville seats himself upright on his childhood bed, props the book of photographs on his knees, and looks at the pictures. They are by Saul Auerbach, a highly regarded South African documentary photographer. "The images were dense and sunken," remarks Neville; "they seemed to have settled beneath the glossy surfaces like gravestones."<sup>2</sup> It is not the young, angry and uncertain Neville who is telling us this but his older, more composed, if still uncertain self. "The images were familiar and strange," Neville tells us of Auerbach's photographs. "I turned the pages with the unsettling feeling that I had looked through the book before and forgotten."<sup>3</sup>

Traversing multiple pasts, Ivan Vladislavić's new novel *Double Negative* records how a seemingly small event, an encounter between this morose youth and a taciturn documentarian, Auerbach, magnifies across time. The four-decade sweep notwithstanding, *Double Negative* is a concise novel, brisk in its march from beginning to end; it is also a richly textured piece of writing, fully immersed in the physical and psychic geography of Johannesburg. The novel was initially published in limited edition alongside a book of photographs of Johannesburg by the photographer David Goldblatt. *Double Negative* arose out of a request from the photographer that Vladislavić, who has written critical essays for William Kentridge and Willem Boshoff, contribute a piece of writing to this proposed book. The novel that resulted offers an unstable portrait of its companion author.

*Double Negative* consciously avoids being about Goldblatt. The short, stooped man with blue eyes who has been, for the past six decades, preoccupied with visually recording Johannesburg is never explicitly invited into the world of Vladislavić's novel. Instead, he is evoked, hinted at, summoned like an ancestral spirit, leaving the reader to imagine the extent of the gap that distinguishes Goldblatt from Auerbach, a small, bony photographer, we are told, who wears khaki shorts and combat boots. "If you want to find out about Saul Auerbach," offers Neville early in the novel, "go ahead and google [sic] him. He has three pages on Wikipedia and gets a mention on dozens of photography sites."<sup>4</sup> This occasions a wry observation from Neville, who still remembers research as having once involved thankless trips to libraries and newspaper archives: "You could become an expert on Auerbach without getting up from your desk."<sup>5</sup> The same is true of the figure whose portrait hazily comes in and out of focus through Neville's account of him. In 1964, around the time of the first rumblings of dissent against Clement Greenberg's formalist allegiance to the flattened surface of abstract paintings, Susan Sontag, then a debut novelist

working as a university teacher, wrote "Against Interpretation", a brief but influential essay on the taming impulse of modern criticism and "the revenge of the intellect upon the world."<sup>6</sup> A half-century later, Sontag's luminous essay continues to present a radical challenge to critics and historians. Reading it today, one senses that it was written with a reader from some proximate future in mind. Speaking to the proximate now, Sontag offers: "What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more."<sup>7</sup> To what extent is art criticism capable of doing this? Sontag's use of the transitive verb "to recover" presents a difficulty. Do we need to retrieve something that is lost, or is she suggesting that criticism is ill and needs to recuperate – or both?

Much contemporary commentary on art criticism is marked by serial repetition of the words "crisis" and "death"; you could say that these are its prevailing tropes. Is this commentary on commentary merely a form of rhetorical gamesmanship? After all, writing about art is published everyday, much of it uneven and stamped with an expiry date, but some acute and brilliant. As James Elkins and Boris Groys have pointed out, the issue is not so much the quality of this writing as the sheer volume of it. Art criticism, rather than serving as a much-needed palliative, has begun to mimic the operating logic of the environment it comments on. Maximal, uninterrupted broadcast is now its defining imperative – like disaster coverage. But then this is hardly news. Although written with the bracing verve of a manifesto – "we must," demands Sontag – "Against Interpretation" was in its own way concerned with crisis and death; the crisis presented by "elaborate systems of hermeneutics"<sup>8</sup> and the death of effects (a lessening of sensuality or eroticism) it produces.

Surely, though, crisis and death are not the only way to frame debates around interpretation? In 2003, James Elkins published a chapbook emblazoned with the question: "What happened to art criticism?" It got complicated, is my answer. Art criticism has become a specialist craft, allied in tone and style to academic scholarship; at the same time, it is more journalistic, essayistic, curmudgeonly, poetic and undisciplined. The outcome is a borderless practice incapable of yielding sustained and reliable epistemic truths. This is not entirely unwelcome, especially if you accept that this imprecision presents an invitation to rethink the orthodoxies that constrain art criticism.

It is necessary here to distinguish art criticism from art history. Early in his slender volume, Elkins offers, "Art criticism is not considered as part of the brief of art history: it is not an historical discipline, but something akin to creative writing."<sup>9</sup> In other words, art criticism is not of the academy. This statement requires some explication. I would argue that our understanding of art criticism is bounded by certain definitional compromises: it is writing that directly or elliptically concerns itself with a visual referent;

it is informed by art-historical fact and as such is an "evaluative discourse";<sup>10</sup> and it is filed under "non-fiction".

Does knowing what art criticism is, ontologically speaking, necessarily help explain what we expect or want it to do? I am inclined to say no. Perhaps then we need to start thinking the other way round and let our desires fashion the form of the critical response. This is not as simple as it may sound. Is it possible to describe commentary on a photograph – say of a black couple holding a chrome fender bearing a TJ number plate – as art criticism when that writing not only claims its own autonomy as a work of work, but also eschews discursive engagement and tells many, many lies? If we rigidly apply the definition of art criticism I offered, the answer is simple and emphatic: no. Art criticism, at least in its more routine and formalist incarnations, is circumscribed by a basic journalistic imperative: it must tell the truth. It shouldn't lie, it *mustn't* lie. Art criticism that lies, that is writing that embraces falsehood and fabrication – literary impulses in other words – as part of its narrative strategy, is not art criticism.

And yet this is exactly what Ivan Vladislavić and Richard Powers do in their novels *Double Negative* and *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985), two remarkable (and remarkably different) pieces of literary fiction that are the outcome of committed looking at photographs, and that could credibly stand as penetrating art criticism. Their credibility is not entirely unproblematic. In Vladislavić's novel, Neville reminisces over a portrait he saw Auerbach make of Veronica Setshedi and her sons, Joel and Amos, seated in a backyard shack in Kensington, another photo of the boys (when they were triplets) part of the composition. This scene, constantly recalled in *Double Negative*, is a fabrication. And yet so convincing is this fictional image in addressing the subjectivity, mood, tonal attributes and idiosyncrasies of Goldblatt's practice, right down to those increasingly strained and declaratory captions, that I shrugged off Auerbach and pegged the work as Goldblatt's.

Richard Powers, an American novelist, takes even further license. Powers was a computer programmer when, in the early 1980s, he encountered one of August Sander's social portraits, *Young Westerdale Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1914) at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. "I went up to the photograph and read the caption," Powers explained in a 2002 *Paris Review* interview, *and had this instant realisation that not only were they not on the way to the dance, but that somehow I had been reading about this moment for the last year-and-a-half. Everything I read seemed to converge onto this act of looking, this birth of the twentieth century – the age of total war, the age of the apotheosis of the machine, the age of mechanical reproduction.*<sup>11</sup>

The reference to Walter Benjamin is apposite; Neville Lister is equally enamoured by Benjamin's



David Goldblatt, *On Eloff Street*, 1967

image-inspired language and ideas. “That was on a Saturday,” continued Powers. “On Monday I went in to my job and gave two weeks notice and started working on *Three Farmers*.”

In his debut novel, Powers names Sander’s three smartly dressed young men Adolphe, Hubert and Peter and makes them speak. “Shut up, you,” says Adolphe shortly before the jibing youths encounter Sander, an archivist with a nineteenth-century preoccupation with human types and differences. “Your pants are open and your intelligence is showing.”<sup>12</sup> In a 2007 interview, Powers, whose novel includes pages of finely attuned art criticism alongside conventional narrative, elaborated on why things turned out the way they did: “I felt right away, in the face of the glance of those farmers and the huge historical narrative that the photo launched in my mind, that the only form large and supple enough to respond to that picture was the novel”.<sup>13</sup> I like the adjective supple; it keeps company with agile, limber and flexible, not words used to describe art criticism. I would exclude John Berger from the crude sweep of this statement. Berger was also moved by an encounter with Sander’s photograph. Instead of a novel, he wrote an essay, a brief fluorescent meditation on the hegemony of the suit, published in 1979. Berger, who quotes Benjamin’s appreciative remarks on Sander’s “unprejudiced observation”,<sup>14</sup> acknowledges that his essay is limited: “There is as much descriptive information in this image as in pages by a descriptive master like Zola”.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the only thing that allies *Double Negative* to *Three Farmers* is their mutual interest in using literary

fiction to address photography. How they go about this task differs greatly. Powers embraces multiplicity. “If I do anything out of the ordinary, it’s trying to weave together frames that are more conventionally dramatic with frames that resemble more discursive or essayistic genres,” Powers has said.<sup>16</sup> Vladislavić is not a bricoleur; he embeds his discursive insights into the fabric of his narrative. Unlike Powers, he also holds Goldblatt at a distance, perhaps too much so if you’re hoping to find out what Vladislavić thinks of Goldblatt. The fictional photographer is, however, not an entirely impregnable barrier. “I agree,” says Auerbach, “a photograph is an odd little memorial that owes a lot to chance and intuition ... I packed my camera bags and went out to take photographs, while more sensible men were building houses and balancing the books”<sup>17</sup>

It is not that formally attuned writing cannot achieve lightness. It does, often. To improvise on something Neville said, if you want to find out about Saul Auerbach’s real-life approximation, read Michael Godby’s meticulous biographical essay, “David Goldblatt: The Personal and the Political”.<sup>18</sup> It is rare, though, that a quantum of facts will penetrate the “immutable tranquillity” of a photograph, to misquote Junichiro Tanizaki.<sup>19</sup> To expect criticism to do this, “to comprehend the mystery of shadows”,<sup>20</sup> is a flawed desire. “Meaning is not an end but a between,” argues the poet Charles Bernstein, who believes that Frank O’Hara’s poetry qualifies as art criticism. It is realised, insists Bernstein, “through multiple, incommensurable, or overlaid discourses”.<sup>21</sup> The novel is not the only means to achieve this, but as a

literary form it is more attuned to nuance, ambiguity, rapture and incompleteness. Incompleteness is my abiding impression of Vladislavić’s novel. It leads you to a threshold, at which point it is up to the reader to complete the rest of the journey into those dense and sunken photographs, so familiar and strange.

1. Ivan Vladislavić, *Double Negative*. Cape Town: Umuzi, 2010, p. 25.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
6. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*. London: Vintage, 2001, p. 7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
9. James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003, p. 8.
10. Noël Carroll, *On Criticism*. New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 15.
11. Kevin Berger, “Richard Powers, ‘The Art of Fiction No. 175’” in *Paris Review* (Winter 2002–3).
12. Richard Powers, 1985, *Three Farmers on their Way to a Dance*. London: Atlantic Books, 2010, p. 15.
13. Richard Powers, *Operational Wondering*. Berlin: Mono. Kultur, 2007, p. 7.
14. John Berger, “The Suit and the Photograph” in *About Looking*. New York: Vintage, 1989, p. 31.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
16. 2007, p. 6.
17. 2010, p. 195.
18. Michael Godby, “David Goldblatt: The Personal and the Political” in *David Goldblatt: Fifty-One Years*. Barcelona, Actar Editorial, 2002.
19. Junichiro Tanizaki, 1933, *In Praise of Shadows*. Stony Creek: Lee’s Island Books, 1977, p. 20.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
21. Charles Bernstein, “Is Art Criticism Fifty Years Behind Poetry?” in *Parkett 84*. Zurich: Parkett, 2009, p. 146.

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# Vacated Spaces

ESSAY 06 VIRGINIA MACKENNY

## CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN WATERCOLOUR

Watercolour's portability and quick drying time made it the medium of choice for colonial travellers recording their journeys into the *terra incognita* of South Africa. François Levaillant (1753–1824), Thomas Baines (1810–75) and Thomas William Bowler (1812–69), among many others, recorded the flora, fauna and landscape that they saw on their travels. Watercolour thus gained a certain historical legitimacy as a tool for observational studies, but remains less accepted as a serious medium in the Fine Arts.

Perhaps part of the reason for this is watercolour's very lack of physical presence. It is utterly different in material weight and permanence from its big brother, oil paint, but this relative "lightness" can act as a core value in the production of meaning. In particular, a peculiarity of watercolour technique that is strongly reliant on the absence or near absence of pigment on the support can reinforce its usefulness as a liminal medium.

**I** In most "how to" watercolour books there is a section on the handling of light where the practitioner is advised that "your white paper must be retained for your highest light".<sup>1</sup> One is often encouraged to leave areas of the page untouched, white or blank as key moments of denotation, thus positing a unique conception of the nature of watercolour's powers – a place where the figure/ground relationship becomes uncertain, as "nothing" denotes "something". In "Autobiography of an (Ex)Coloured Surface", Angeline Morrison writes that "blank or monochrome space stands out as resolutely illegible ..."<sup>2</sup> Ironically, however, in watercolour painting, blankness often makes the whole legible if applied as a form of highlight. Blankness clarifies three-dimensionality – the form of the thing, in Cartesian terms the *res extensa* (extended thing) or, as Descartes translated it, "corporeal substance" – in an unexpected way.

**II** While Morrison perhaps too easily equates the monochrome with the blank space, many of her points are pertinent to both. Noting that "all blank space is potentially baffling" she adds that "monochrome introduces chaos into the system it inhabits primarily by foregrounding the blankness that is usually understood to signify background, thus disturbing the received logic – the 'solid ground' – of painting".<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true of watercolour. During the Spier Contemporary 2007 selection process the first work to be given an unequivocal and unanimous "yes" for inclusion was a watercolour. Gabrielle Raaff's *Dis-location* (2007), a series of aerial views of Cape Town, reinvigorated the tradition of watercolour landscape in a way that caught the

panel's attention. Raaff presented precise and delicate images of different socio-economic landscapes from Cape Town: Joe Slovo informal settlement in Langa, the township of Mitchell's Plain, the working-class Grassy Park and the affluent Bishopscourt. Raaff knows people who live in each of these places. Since she was the victim of two holdups at gunpoint, her vicarious visits to these sites were prompted by a real fear of *actually* visiting them. Using Google Earth she rendered roofs of structures as viewed from satellite images and left the surrounding areas blank. The work is exemplary in its economy of means and richness of implication.

Utilising one of the basic techniques of watercolour – leaving the paper white – Raaff conflates the ground of the land with that of the page, putting into play a visual dislocation that mirrors the displacement of many communities in South Africa. At the same time the inherited privilege of a suburb like Bishopscourt is simply and effectively highlighted by the availability of open space around the buildings so that the work lays bare the economic disparities in the landscape. Thus the tradition of landscape painting in watercolour, typically used as a means of recording topographical relationships, is relied upon, but expanded, to reveal socio-political concerns in the South African context.

In a later work entitled *Neighbours* (2009) Raaff compresses two locations into one. Taking another view of Bishopscourt, she superimposes upon it details of shacklands that have, as it were, decamped to the spacious gardens of the privileged. Thus the generous spaces of Bishopscourt, previously occupied by swimming pools, begin to fill as new neighbours move in.

**III** Colin Richards's watercolour *Veronica Veil* (1996) works in contradistinction to this. In this work the artist vacates the space of the image leaving only the ground – the cloth in this case – that carries it. Richards creates a Veronica veil<sup>4</sup> that, contrary to legend, carries no image.

The story of the transferral of Christ's image onto the cloth with which St Veronica wiped his brow as he stumbled on the road to Calvary has been recreated in numerous paintings, particularly during the Baroque period. St Veronica is often represented holding a cloth showing the image of Christ's face or the cloth is presented alone with the imprint of Christ's head. Richards, in the first work of his Veronica veil series, opts for the latter, but depicts the cloth devoid of image.

Referencing a well-known Francisco de Zurbarán image of the Veronica veil, *The Holy Face* (c.1631),<sup>5</sup> with its precise pinning and shaping of the corner folds of the cloth, Richards relies on the viewer's

knowledge of art history to identify his own image. That he does so is of particular relevance here as he co-opts the veil in a number of iterations, but needs both Christian and artistic references to inform our reading of his work (in one manifestation he utilises it to carry the weight of the death of Steve Biko).

Richards's piece is not an exact copy of the Zurbarán, in which the forms are slightly generalised and the centre of the cloth has virtually no demarcation bar the ghosting of Christ's face. Richards's cloth is more complex, in both its shape and the nuances of light and shadow. Pinning the material in a similar manner to Zurbarán, and working from life, he records the smaller folds that unsettle the space where the image of Christ's face would normally reside.

While Richards has made several works in this series, only the first is a watercolour. The nature of the medium for this originating work was of specific importance to the artist – a point Richards clarifies when he observes, "the original Veronica is ... a watercolour of sorts". Elaborating, he notes that the fluids that the human body produces – "tears on the face, the sweat, in some measure the blood,"<sup>6</sup> – are all "water of the body" and therefore, in their own way, "all are watercolour".<sup>7</sup> His *Veronica Veil* has thus "embedded into its construction an awareness of its ... relation between fluids". In the work he "sought the feel of the suspension of pigment in a medium the living body is made of and can consume, and indeed produces. Indeed must consume and produce, to stay alive."<sup>8</sup>

Seeing parallels between the act of making this watercolour and the genesis of the image on the original Veronica cloth, Richards wanted "the medium to sink into the substrate. Into the very fibre as it were ... soak and stain with the surface contingent on these processes". Even where the pigment may fail to do this and "lays on the surface almost like a powder, and will not sink" Richards sees a relationship with the interaction between the human body and the cloth used to wipe it – "what remains on the cloth after contact with the face" puts him in mind of "contact and trace ... two surfaces, one more absorbent, the other (skin) *in extremis*."<sup>9</sup> Richards's interest lies in the image transferred via the stain – a term often associated with watercolour. This continues in the subsequent works, although the stain is read as imprint. For instance the digital prints enable an impression, as it were, to stem from the first watercolour – a further moment of transferral from an originating point and thus, like the original Veronica veil, also indexical.

When Richards eliminates the image of Christ's face in his first *Veronica Veil* he is left with a white cloth. For a painter, the originating point of creation is most often the *tabula rasa*<sup>10</sup> – the blank canvas upon which representation enacts itself. Symmetrically arranged,



**LEFT** Colin Richards, *Veronica Veil*, 1996, watercolour on paper, 32.5 x 24cm **RIGHT** Gabriell Raaff, *Neighbours*, 2009, watercolour on Fabriano, 92 x 112cm

centrally placed and flat to the picture plane, his Veronica cloth bears all the hallmarks of an icon albeit without the image of a saint or holy person. It is here that Richards activates a liminal threshold between blankness and image, for his Veronica veil is vacated of image and yet still meticulously rendered with careful attention to naturalistic detail. Long fascinated by the magic of illusionism, Richards conjures the vision of a cloth, thereby activating our sense of presence. He also creates a surface empty of image, rendering absence using a medium that is so barely present that through the veil of its pigment, its transparency, the ground of the paper can be seen. It is this ground that illuminates, from within the painting, the light that appears to fall on the cloth from without.

Richards's *Veronica Veil* is a meticulously chosen vehicle to conflate and confound, in the tenuous medium of watercolour, a reverence for the power of the image while questioning notions of the original and authentic. Cognisant that Christ's stumbling on the road to Calvary is accompanied by Veronica, whose name is thought to derive from Latin and Greek, *vera eikon*, as true icon or true image, Richards erases the source image, allowing the cloth itself to occupy the place of creation, representation, valorisation ... and doubt.

#### IV

In 2001 Marlene Dumas made a series of twenty watercolour Indian ink<sup>11</sup> works entitled "Blindfolded" that explores the theme of the blindfolded man held captive. Many of her images come from the press of the day documenting political events in the Gaza Strip. She depicts twenty men, fifteen of them blindfolded. In eleven of these, the whiteness of the blindfold is created by leaving that part of the page blank.

Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall's catalogue essay for the exhibition *Intimate Relations* asks "What does the *Blindfolded* series show us? – what do we see?" They note a certain irony in the question, "since

what is dramatised is *not* seeing – a being blinded to sight".<sup>12</sup> Morrison asks another version of the question: "... if there is nothing to see, what can you find to say?" The whiteness of the paper both rebuffs and invites our gaze. Morrison points out that "once blank space is foregrounded, 'framed', and actively presented as a separate entity in its own right, then historically received notions of meaning are radically destabilised."<sup>13</sup>

A blindfold renders one sightless, hence Mbembe and Nuttall assert Dumas's images are "portraits of the unseeing".<sup>14</sup> While sight is clearly denied those blindfolded, so too the viewer of the image views a literal blank at the site/place of the blindfold. Empty, as it contains nothing for our eyes to grasp, this "emptiness" at the same time becomes a place for/of projection.

It does so in two ways. In the first the paper or ground appears to provide not just the highlight on a form, but also its colour, the whiteness of the cloth. In the second the representation of the blindfold becomes a place of internal visualisation. Mbembe and Nuttall note this in a poetic turn of phrase in which they posit a reading of blindfolding as a "folding away of the I/eye"<sup>15</sup> as the gaze is inverted, turned inward, both in the men who are blindfold and in our own interior vision.

An/other place of seeing is opened up. The place of representation, rendered blind by the lack of pigment and silent by the absence of articulation of media, provides a space of projection — where there is nothing, there can be anything. That which is rendered mute may speak volumes. We see what is not there – nothing becomes something.

#### V

In each of these works a transmutation of sight occurs in the site of looking. In each there is also an embedded violence: Raaff's aerial city views render visible the forced removals of communities, which in turn provides the historical background for Raaff's own experience of violence; Richards references

the debilitating progression to death of Christ on the road to Calvary to speak to the martyrdom of Steve Biko and the rupture of faith in any certainty; and Dumas utilises the white cloth that operates as cover or blindfold to act as, and open up, a place of projection for an empathetic engagement with captured men.

To see each of these artists utilise a medium more often associated with flower painting and front-room parlours to hold the weight of such history, is to see how such work may create/cross a threshold that takes us intimately and quietly close to the brutal. Thus this threshold of vision hovers in its liminal possibilities ...

1. Adrian Hill, *The Beginner's Book of Watercolour Painting*. London: Blandford Press, 1959, p. 34.

2. Angeline Morrison, "Autobiography of an (Ex)Coloured Surface: Monochrome and Liminality" in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Discrepant Abstraction: Annotating Art's Histories*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, p. 135.

3. *Ibid.*

4. The apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus relates the story of St Veronica wiping the sweat from Christ's brow as he walks to Calvary. The cloth, or *sudarium*, is stained by Christ's sweat and an image of his face imprinted thereon.

5. Zurbarán made at least ten images of the Veronica veil (Julián Gallego and José Gudiol, *Zurbarán, 1598–1664*. New York: Rizzoli, 1977).

6. Colin Richards, "Drawing the Veil". An unedited draft of this essay is available at <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/8062?show=full>, listed as HWS-354.pdf.1999.

7. Email to author, 18 February 2011.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. The term in Latin literally means "scraped tablet" – apposite for Richards's veil given the erasure of Zurbarán's image.

11. Definitions of watercolour refer to it as a "water-soluble" medium. Some mention that watercolour needs to be water-soluble *after* application. Indian ink is water-soluble, but dries insoluble. Dumas regards her Indian ink works as watercolours. She notes: "I use so much water ... on such thick paper that the different tones of blacks and greys become the colours of the water drawn ... Indian ink is the blackest type of watercolour I need." (Email to author, 3 March 2011).

12. *Marlene Dumas: Intimate Relations*. Amsterdam: Roma, 2007.

13. Morrison, p. 136.

14. Dumas, 2007, p. 128.

15. *Ibid.*

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# Enclosing the Upstart

**ESSAY 08** MYER TAUB

## UPSTAGING THE ENCLOSURE

*Change is not an interlude but a condition of our work.*<sup>1</sup>

A series of images is presented without commentary.

The upstart, as defined in various sources, is self-important, presumptuous, iconoclastic, difficult, impenetrable experimental and a parvenu.

### The Museum

If, in its bourgeois incarnation, the museum is a creator of the image of history, and if in its potentially critical form, the museum can be the perpetually changing creator of the necessary space of reflection in which to know our histories in the thinking, political mind, and ethical mind, what immorality is to deny history in its living contradictions. To marginalize the historical events of the post colonial movements, the legacies of slavery and persistent endemic racism, the feminist challenge and its intellectual revolution to contain and package them like vaccinated tamed doses of social poisons which publics can be moderately inoculated by managed exposure to a spectacle of their alien otherness is a political act that is as violent as it is craven.<sup>2</sup>

### The Upstart and the Museum

In 2008, I received an email from Susan Glanville Zini, Director of Institutional Advancement at Iziko Museums, Cape Town to begin an exploration of how to activate Iziko's museum spaces through performance strategies. These strategies would be similar to those explained by Charles R. Garoian, who justifies his reasons for activating museum spaces with performance and performance art as a way to provide accessibility and attract an audience beyond traditional museum demographics, to rupture privileged institutional structures and to transform the museum space from a repository of objects to that of aesthetic contemplation and contestation.<sup>3</sup>

I was quite surprised to receive this offer from Glanville Zini because I work subjectively from the margins in a multi-disciplinary field of performance and theatre, interpolating marginality within my practice-led research. Often I associate the notion "marginal" with my own practice and myself: I am the outcast excluded from conventional practice because of my own ethics and unconventional reasoning. But after several meetings and revised proposals, four performance projects were created for the museum. Each was to be performed at special museum sites in relation to their specific museum displays and on commemorative days incorporating themes of identity, slavery and HIV/AIDS. The four projects were *Miss Nothing* (2008), *1808* (2008), *Implantation* (2009) and *Christine's Room* (2010).<sup>4</sup> After reflection, I have concluded that each project demands its

own explication. In this essay I concentrate on *Miss Nothing* as a case study, as it is an example of how a project unravels. Its making and its redisplay here can be considered as a demonstration both of enclosing the upstart and upstaging the enclosure.

### *Miss Nothing: Performing Histories as Absence*

Iziko Koopmans de Wet house Museum is a lesser-known museum house nestled between modern buildings in Strand Street in central Cape Town. The house originally belonged to social activist, art collector, socialite and Boer War humanitarian, Maria Koopmans de Wet. Koopmans de Wet occupied the house for most of her life, living there as a widow with her sister until her death in 1906. Thereafter the house was given to the state. The main issue – in relation to the historical re-activation of the house and its historical owner – was how to negotiate the commissioning party's desire to reactivate the house and its owner's histories through dramatisation and re-enactment and with my own interest in locating strategies to activate marginal histories.

On my first visit to the museum house, I was drawn to the empty frames signifying portraits of Koopmans de Wet's invisible domestic servants that are hung along an empty upstairs corridor. On one of the empty frames, there was an inscription: "Miss Nothing".

*Miss Nothing* became the project's title, serving as a catalyst for exploring invisibility within this particular historical milieu and in relation to contemporary, quotidian Cape Town. There was also a playfulness here suggesting a longing for nothing conditioned by absence. I chose to work with one professional performer, Marika Williams, along with several women from a drama project that I had initiated at an HIV/AIDS Wellness Clinic, also in central Cape Town. We began rehearsals with visits to the museum house, after which we mapped the visits in a different, neutral space to implement a process of reflection and to activate an alternative experiential narrative that did not rely on any particular, given archive. From this mapping, the image of a snake emerged as a potent symbol. I suspect that the snake was a manifestation of the concern about most of the women's HIV status. It was as if the museum, its occupants and histories were a projection of an almost-aerial perplexity. Working in a museum house was something distant and foreign and, paradoxically, close to the fragile proximity of what these women might call their intimate concerns about existing in the everyday. The duality of place meant a duality in narratives: contemporary and historical, sub-textual narratives co-existing and competing, ready

to displace and upstage one another.

This struggle emerged as a tea party that would be played out as a performance at the museum house on National Heritage Day in September 2008 and 2009.

Marika Williams co-created the character that she performed as *Miss Nothing*. Maria Koopmans's domestic servant – *Miss Nothing* – is a jolly but troubled, working-class, Cape coloured woman who is first seen cleaning the exterior of the house with a scrubbing brush and talking in the contemporary, Cape coloured dialect. She intends to clean the house of its colonial exterior before the tea party. But she has been locked out of the house along with the public. After much insistence and banging on the doors by *Miss Nothing*, the museum is ceremoniously opened by one of the caretaking staff. *Miss Nothing* begins what seems to be a conventional tour of the house, the rooms of which are installations of a period drawing room and dining room. Halfway through her tour, she is interrupted by the entrance of a kitchen girl who has found a snake in a potato bag. The girl's entrance, played out in slow motion, combined with her muted screaming, disturbs the convention of the museum tour. Her entrance is a counter-intuitive movement through the space. It disrupts the enclosure of an apparently historical, lived-in space. This movement is then transferred onto *Miss Nothing* (and later the other performers) who suddenly abandons convention and moves "organically" in the adapted environment. Performing a counter-rhythm that moves and turns the enclosed space means unsettling its attachment to specific histories and, at the same time, rethinking museum history, imagining in-between, liminal spaces both in that history and in its contemporary displays.

The kitchen girl flees upstairs to hide under one of the original four-poster beds. *Miss Nothing* begins to search for the girl to alleviate her fears of the snake. Along the way she meets other women in various rooms who are writing or praying – performing as suggestive, ephemeral ghosts of another time. *Miss Nothing* enters the master bedroom where the kitchen girl is hiding under the bed. She tries to pull her out but after much resistance from the girl, she gives up. She discovers and is strangely drawn to a cheval mirror with mahogany uprights and frame, becoming absorbed by her own reflection in the glass. She embraces this moment and persuades the audience to study her reflection with her, surrounded and enclosed as she is by curiosities and historical artifacts, portraits and furniture. The performer disrupts her own performance and upstages its representation through an evocation of her innermost self. Now, as Marika Williams and not as *Miss Nothing*, she says:

*I am lost. I am lost because I have lost all sense of memory, of where I came from and who I am. We are the children without names, we are nothing and you can't miss something that you never had, so I become Miss Nothing. Trapped in a house with lost souls. A place not a house to be more accurate because we've been scattered like broken pieces so maybe it's up to you to remember to dream, to put the pieces together so we can live together in your memory.*

Having the performer conclude the performance with her own internal monologue demonstrates her investment in and ownership of the work. The monologue also reflects the tensions between space and place, enclosure and performance.

To consider how these tensions operate means further reflection on what occurs as dislocation in this operation. The fundamental characteristics of performance – activation and the non-static – disrupt the enclosure. But in addition to this, the performance itself is upstaged or disrupted by the re-display of the performing self. Marika Williams co-created the character Miss Nothing, combining her intuitive comic sensibilities with research, museum visits and conversations exchanged with the curator of the museum. But the performance mask was eventually displaced when the performer discovered her reflection in the mirror – her own sense of loss – and then questioned the limitations of the project. Perhaps this was because the project was always going to be unresolved as a conduit through history to a fragmented present. Williams's monologue throughout the performance was never really consistent but this did not matter. It served as a palimpsest, lending the work reflexivity so that it was able to critique itself and generate its own history of engagement. The performance thus perforated the historically and physically enclosed spaces of the museum.



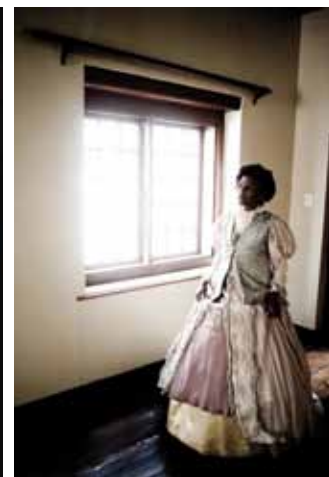
1. Judith Matsai cited by Griselda Pollock, "Un-Framing the Modern: Critical Space/Public Possibility" in Griselda Pollock and Joyce Zemans, eds., *Museums After Modernism: Strategies of Engagement*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. ix.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 32–3.

3. Charles Garoian, *Performing Pedagogy: Towards an Art of Politics*. Albany, NY: New York State University Press, 1999, pp. 211–2.

4. The work of *Christine's Room* was presented in a paper called "Re-Voicing the Document" at the conference Drama For Life, Wits School of Arts, 3 September 2010. The work of *1808* was submitted as a proposed paper called "1808: Performing the Museum" for the Inclusive Museum Conference, Wits University in July 2011. *Implantation* appears in an essay called "I am the Cup of water without the Cup" in Leora Farber, ed., *Imaging Ourselves: Visual Identities in Representation*. Johannesburg: Research Centre Visual Identities in Art and Design, University of Johannesburg, 2009.

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# Near Wild Heaven

## ESSAY 08 RAT WESTERN

### DIGITAL INSTALLATION AS A LIMINAL ART PRACTICE

*Science-Fiction is sometimes just an excuse for dressed-up swashbuckling and kinky sex, but it can also provide a kit for examining the paradoxes and torments of what was once fondly referred to as the human condition.*<sup>1</sup>

In all good science fiction narratives, we are reminded that the computer, the Internet and the technology that is broadly termed “the digital” have their origins in the military industrial complex. And, like most things in the pulp comic or Orwellian genre, these tools – originally designed for warfare and social control under the threat of the atomic cloud – have grown far beyond the designers’ dreams of command and become their own anarchic, mutable systems. The attempt by man to define and control social conditions – the endeavour to classify the experiential into something quantifiable – has often led to the discovery or inadvertent creation of a new indefinable condition, space or philosophy. Aliens (both green ones and ones from much nearer lands), mythical creatures, magic, atomic weaponry, bizarre scientific experiments and the criminally insane all suggest liminal themes in current online culture. If one can look past the kitsch, the easy sentiment and the dubious use of 3-D animation graphics, the digital environment provides a unique space in which to explore rites of passage. As Margaret Atwood suggests, lose the dodgy costumes and the comment on human condition becomes clearer.

#### On Binaries

Liminality as a space, time or condition – “betwixt and between” as cultural anthropologist Victor Turner describes it, or “threshold” as the Latin root denotes – implies a state between two polarities. But the nature of these polarities and their social categorisation shifts in history. There is a point between blue and red we describe as purple. In the context of human identity, the purple might be the racial, cultural or gender hybrid. We understand, or rather, have historically been convinced to see these polarities as opposites when really they are points on a sliding scale on which each point or hybrid integer is potentially, if not currently, definable.

It might be clearer to understand liminality as a condition within a binary system (i.e. a two-part system of potential complementaries) rather than something outside and between systems where it might, perhaps, eventually formulate its own system or categorisation.

The digital as a system is made up of binaries both conceptually and technologically. First, technologically: it is a system which is constructed as a series of switches either “on” or “off”, represented by ones and zeros. This is the DNA code of the digital.

Every number expressed in the binary system is a combination of these two digits.

Second, conceptually (to name but one of the digital’s conceptual pairings): the nature and history of this technology is at the same time creative and potentially destructive. The virtual is creative because one may use it to construct and define entire virtual worlds. But it is potentially destructive because, while constructing these worlds, we come to believe that the virtual is somehow also real, and so we feed it our identities, our data, and give it power beyond itself.

#### Force and the Infraempirical

*Force is infraempirical. No scientist has ever observed a force. Not even Newton saw gravity. Only force-effects are observable. ‘Force’ is a word used to designate the repeatability or iterability of effects.*<sup>2</sup>

We believe in the liminal in the way a scientist believes in the particle within the atom that he cannot see because of certain effects he can observe. The liminal is a force and is therefore infraempirical. It is impossible to perceive or represent this condition in and of itself. We may only observe or attempt to embody its effects.

How, then, is the liminal a theme that is realisable in the visual arts? The visible is not sufficient, because the infraempirical is not an object. The liminal seems thus to be something much better suited to representation within the performing arts. The liminal condition needs to be enacted. However, a simple observed performance would equally not be sufficient. We need to have full use of all our receptors for this perception – all five senses and a sixth, our psychological or emotive sense. We must be immersed in order to perceive, comprehend or have empathy for the liminal.

#### The Digital and the Analogue: Simulacra and the Sublime

*Here, simulation is not to be understood as an inferior reproduction of an original or as artifice, but rather as a constructive means for expressing affect and sensation and for revealing the creative dimension of space.*<sup>3</sup>

Philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche, Klossowski, Deleuze, Massumi and Haraway, to name but a few, have debated the relationships between “the real” – the representational (the world of appearances) – and the virtual realm (represented either as a “dangerous divine madness” or a productive creation and sublimation of the world). There are many names for these conditions and the links or flows between them: the possible, the actual, the real, the virtual, the potential.

What I am referring to here is a technical process

(not without philosophical connotations), a division between that which is made using the digital and that which is made in other ways (the analogue). Between, behind, beneath and beside these spaces, however, is an indefinable: the nature of the relationship of digital vs./4 analogue, the virtual vs./4 the real.

This indefinable space within culture, that which is ineffable, is often expressed as something transgressive because it does not fit, but also transcendental because it must be felt rather than described. Such space is not mere simulacra, but the sublime.

The digital constantly references the analogue (the physically, tangibly real). The virtual is a simulacra where belief can be wholly suspended and all perception treated as “real” even though the stimulus is in essence “nonexistent”, fake. It is possible to see the digital simultaneously as a conglomeration of opposites and a constant flow between the real and the virtual.

#### Case Study: Dead Media

In light of these theoretical musings, I present a case study of my own digital installation exhibition *Dead Media*, which I hope demonstrates how digital installation can be an apposite medium for representing, or rather experiencing, the liminal.

Digital processes allow an artist to play with time or the representations of time that surround a concept. They allow for the creation of something virtual, fabricated, but still recognisable as something that takes place in the physical realm. Movement gives the semblance of life. The analogue objects are signs and symbols of the thematic process. They are objects on which the progress of time may be observable in real time, or that bear witness to the effects of time already past.

In creating a multi-sensory, site-specific environment, the *Dead Media* installation gave the viewer an opportunity to read its theoretically liminal concept as an actual lived process, a disconcerting, indefinable condition that is experienced by the viewer when they enter the space. The installation’s digitally created, light-emitting insertions into a darkened, pre-existing museum of physical, analogue objects create a “space in between” where it is possible to become cognisant of the liminal.

The subject matter of *Dead Media* is universally liminal: death and, by extension, preservation. The installation suggests something like an Egyptian cult of the dead in which preserved artefacts may be legible to some future culture and hence win new or rather extended life.

*Dead Media*, which was part of the main programme of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival in July 2010, was a site-specific installation in the Albany



LEFT Rat Western, *Inertia*, 2010, image for light box RIGHT Rat Western, *Territory*, 2010, video still, infinite loop

Natural Sciences Museum in a room called the Dr Hewitt Gallery. This room ordinarily functions like a miniature museum in its own right. The objects on display are eclectic and vary from specimens across the animal kingdom to mineral and fossil samples, botanical drawings and pressed plants, Neolithic tools, mounted insects, taxidermied animals, stuffed heads and a plastic dinosaur. This Victorian room has inadvertently become an archive of an archive, preserving not only seemingly random scientific and cultural artefacts, but also an outdated mode of cluttered and politically incorrect museology.

*Dead Media* was appended to this analogue hall of symbolic mirrors, scented with formaldehyde and moth balls. The gallery was darkened and various light-created and light-emitting, digitally composed and electrically generating objects were inserted. Thirteen battery-illuminated, glass specimen jars containing digitally manipulated and layered images were included in the existing Victorian vitrines. These specimens were concept jars, representing varying unrepresented and unrepresentable (to the scientific mind), human, abstract conditions: *Aspiration, Curiosity, Inertia, Detachment, White-Wash, Remains, Blind-Spot, Presence and Reprieve* to name a few.

The idea was to create a kind of “time capsule” (that popular invention of the space age), a storage unit in which people preserve artefacts, cultural references, the newspapers of the day along with future hopes or plans, messages to the beyond, in order to blast them into space, entomb them publicly for a fixed period or just simply bury them in the back yard. This stockpiling is reminiscent of fifties and sixties cold war bunker-building, the bunker itself serving

not just as a palliative or defence against death, but a memoir, an anticipation of the demise of culture as we know it generally.

Entering the exhibition one entered a mausoleum; not a grave, but a funeral parlour or an online memorial to the cult of death. At the same time, its “time-capsule” element was also a celebration of life, the hope that, should the physical miraculously survive the test of time, a future might retain the tools to perceive and interpret the symbols so preciously preserved.

The exhibition included a sound-piece trolley, installed proximitous to, and illuminating, the botanical display. This piece, dubbed *Weapon of Mass Consumption*, contained piles of reddened, deciduous leaves, not specially sampled or articulated but swept up and piled. This decaying excess masked a CD player that emitted a subtle recording of cutlery and crockery clinking – a private, silent dinner party.

Installed in the mineral sample case was a more abstracted work. Scratchings on back-lit mirrors referenced electronic circuit boards (motherboards) – the physical main-frame of the digital or atomic diagrams – or, zooming out, star charts.

In aural, as well as visual, accompaniment, were four video works. These were framed in faux gilded frames referencing Victorian oil paintings – pseudo, electronic Thomas Baines.

The first of these contained a dead and decaying rat covered in flies. This virtual vignette displayed the absence of life-cycle process that ought to have played out in the exhibit’s taxidermied shadow puppets. This rot and decay, being the natural order, has long been denied to the museum’s normal, physical exhibits.

The next was a decrepit, virtual hall of moving, gilded

frames – a play within a play. Each represented ornate frame contained something botanical in motion: that sun and wind might once have played in moving trees is suggested, but through dried and preserved remains.

Thirdly, was *Flying/Falling*, a work that makes one unsure if one is soaring up and over or falling down – the point of view is wholly relative.

The last was a map key to my secret desire for the physically inserted, abstract concept jars. This virtual jar contained constantly moving, architectural thresholds. If the technology or my budget had allowed, the layered jars would, instead of printed images, have contained shifting, digital, conceptual references, changeable and dependent on the point of view of the viewer.

The exhibition was accompanied by a daily, but unnoticed, performance by the artist. Each day all the battery-operated objects had to be turned on in the morning and off again at the end of the day to preserve the battery life – each day, a check, a replacement or a recharging. On the last day this constant life-giving, resuscitating process ceased. I did something fatal to rechargeable batteries. I let them run completely flat – to flicker and to die, one last time. To eventually go out, in the dark.

1. Margaret Atwood, “The Birthday of the World and Other Stories” in *Writing with Intent*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005, p. 131.

2. Brian Massumi, *Parables For The Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 160.

3. Todd Satter, “Simulacrum in the Tableaux Vivants of Thomas Demand”, 2010, [www.anyspacewhatever.com](http://www.anyspacewhatever.com).

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