

The image features a top-down view of two fragments of reddish-brown terracotta pottery. One fragment is in the upper right, appearing as a smooth, curved rim. The other is in the lower left, showing a jagged, broken edge with a dark, porous interior. The background is a coarse, textured surface of the same earthy brown color, with subtle variations in tone and texture. The lighting is soft, creating gentle shadows and highlights on the pottery and the ground.

JOHAN THOM
GRASP



ART BY LINDA LEE
Linda Lee's 'The Last Supper' is a large-scale artwork consisting of hundreds of small, light-colored, cup-like objects arranged in a grid pattern on the floor of a large, empty room. The objects are made of a material that resembles paper or fabric and are arranged in a way that suggests a large group of people sitting at a table. The artwork is a commentary on the human condition and the fragility of life.



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WILL YOU STILL BE MINE

This photograph documents my recent performance, *Will you still be mine* (the weight of my body in ice) at Casa Wabi, Mexico, earlier this year. For the performance I explore the weight, form, force, and feel of my body rendered as a block of ice. It takes four of us to slowly carry the block to the beach in the blazing heat of the Pacific summer sun. Then, owing to its weight, the solid block of ice becomes an unmanageable, even dangerous object as it is momentarily freed from gravity and repeatedly lifted by the waves. Slowly a hole forms in its center, allowing me to carry it and throw it back into the sea – again and again, until it fragments and disappears completely. Perhaps the ocean doesn't want me. But still, my frozen body melts away and ultimately blends back into the warm ocean current. A material form dispersed in space and time.

INTRODUCTION

Sven Christian

Johan Thom and I are standing next to the kiln at the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture. It must be the third or fourth time we've stacked the kiln this month, and by now, we've developed a routine. Having unpacked the previous load, Thom arrives with a box of dried clay forms, placing them on the long wooden counter by the outdoor sink, near the kiln. There are hundreds, pressed in either his left hand, right hand, or both. The specifics are important. We must be careful not to mix them up. Those in the box designated "LH" (left hand) are stacked together, and so on. The process is inevitably slow and methodical, like making paper or pasta. We talk to pass the time.

I ask whether he's familiar with Dineo Seshee Bopape's *We need the memories of all our members* (2015). Catching my drift, he points me in the direction of Gabriel Orozco's *My Hands Are My Heart* (1991): a photographic diptych that has stuck with him since childhood.¹ Still, my mind wonders back to Bopape and the ceramic 'constellations' that she included as part of her installation, which were made from 'squishing' clay in the shape of a fist to 'displace a void,' and her question about 'how to mark one's presence to oneself' (Bopape 2017).

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1. In it, we see two close-ups of Orozco's hands, shot against the cropped backdrop of his bare torso. It's the same image twice, only in the first, his hands close around a piece of wedged clay, whereas in the second, his thumbs outstretch like a rorschach to reveal his impress. 'I think in my work the idea of receptacle, or the idea of the recipient is important,' Orozco said of the diptych. 'And in this case, the photography of the work represents both the area of containing the clay between the hands and opening up and having that space in between.' Like a "before" and "after" sequence, its power lies in the gap; the distance between.

FOLLOWING
SPREAD
Photographic
documentation of
CONTAINER,
2010. Maya Sarovar
Public Park in Bodh
Gaya, Bihar, India.

But also her installation :*indeed it may very well be the _____ itself* (2016), and what she says about its reference to the game Marabaraba, where a series of holes are dug in the soil, with rocks placed inside. When you play you move the rocks around, she explains, shifting 'presence from one place to the next, displacing emptiness and displacing the idea of absence, or the idea of presence, continuously' (2017).

It's a feature common to Thom's work, too, this sense of the fleeting and fragile — some elusive, finite thing, always on the tip of one's fingers, always out of reach. Not the thing, but what escapes it — what it means to *grasp*, rather than to *hold*. Some existential question about our capacity to inhabit a place, a body, a self... To be *some* thing in and amongst a world of *other* things.

I recall his work *CONTAINER* (2010), which he presented during a lecture performance at the Villa-Legodi in 2022; the first to activate the space.² It was made (or unmade) in 2010 at the Maya Sarovar Public Park in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India. A large hole, approximately 5 metres in radius and 1.2 metres deep, is dug out, primed with cow dung, then filled with turmeric, before being refilled with the same soil and covered with the same grass. One could say it's a work about connection, things that stick. But it's also about things that slip, from the 'so-called Spice Route' and the nuptial associations of turmeric to the forgotten history of a local university, Nalanda — a key site of

2. The performane formed part of a symposium organised by The Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts in United States (IDSVA); The African Centre for the Study of the United States at Wits University (ACSUS-Wits); The African Centre for the Study of the United States at the University of Pretoria (ACSUS-UP); and the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture. See Thom 2022.

scholarship between the fifth and twelfth centuries (Thom 2022). 'Today very few people know of this historical centre of learning,' concludes Thom, 'and one might say that it has all but disappeared from view' (2022).

Here, as in much of Thom's work, mind and matter, time and place, coalesce. Yet the goal, as I see it, is not towards some kind of aggregate or whole. In other words, Thom does not resent the disappearance of Nalanda University. Unfortunate as it may be, the work makes no serious attempt to keep its memory alive. In pointing to it, however, Thom is able to tell us something about the conditions that led to its disappearance. What matters is not the thing, what one can see, but how it exists in relation to everything else, particularly that which is hidden. His game, like Bopape's Marabaraba, is one of *sous rature*³, where absence is used to convey presence, and vice versa.

'The official representatives of the government of Bihar visit the site to look at the work,' he recalls. 'They are deeply dismayed to find nothing worth seeing.'

At least this time round there'll be a book, I think, as we place the last load in the kiln and shut the door.

3. See Derrida 1976 [1967]. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press: 61.



GRASP: AN INCOMPLETE SERIES OF EIGHT ECHOS

Johan Thom

Everything in the universe is an echo. If the birds in the opinion of certain linguists are the first creators of sound who inspired men, they themselves imitated nature's voices.[...] where did the night birds borrow the trembling, thrilling sounds which seem the repercussion of a subterranean echo in old ruins? "...all the sounds of natural scenes — still life or animated — have their echo and their counterpart in living nature.

— Gaston Bachelard
*Water and Dreams: An Essay on the
Imagination of Matter* (1982/42: 94)

An incomplete series of written and photographic echoes. To the reader, they may not at first appear to be those of nature. But I assure you, they are. I might be writing them, but the words carry deep within them the traces of our natural world, or at least, what counts for it these days. As Bachelard makes clear, 'everything in the universe is an echo'. In this way we may say that humans — indeed all living things — echo nature not only through 'cultures' but in the very material technologies and discoveries that accompany and help shape them. (I am done with the nature/culture divide. Can we just let it go now, for once and for all?).

Bachelard (1983/42: 1) suggests that all poetic 'images' have the power to do the seemingly impossible: they can cross vast stretches of time and make the past present in the here and now. Such images "...stem directly from matter. The eye assigns them names but only the hand truly knows them" (ibid). In this tactile way material images become genealogical. With a bit of imagination and critical rigour, we might trace — or even generate — numerous possible pathways that connect different echoes across time and space, and in the process neatly dispense with the first man, animal, voice problem too. In this way, multiple points of origin



may resound. From such points of shared origin and intensity numerous waves of sound and energy refract, rolling out from the great rippling of echoes that is all life on earth. Even in a single life, tracing these multiple points of intersection soon exposes the veritable, near ever-expanding web of possibilities that lay just beyond this one, or that one, or all of them — it really does not matter. They simply exist and, by way of this simple fact, more will come into being.

Now, perhaps I can no longer know what is true, but I can feel the force of some echoes as they meet, amplifying one another, whilst others remain quiet, unactivated or even wholly cancelled out. If I carefully attend these forces, tracing the power of their amplitude and impact in my own life, there might be some hope of the emergence of a narrative. But I am careful: I am not interested in mining such fool's gold. I am not an actor. Rather, I am interested in tracing the nonsensical, factual intersections of matter that (re)produce the echos that have impacted my life with such force that I eventually became a keeper and a maker of images — an artist.

**ECHO I
(the first clay ball)**

I wonder how long it took humans to make a round ball from clay? As an artist and educator who has worked extensively with the shaping of various materials throughout my life, I am going to make a fairly educated guess and say that it took approximately 1000 concerted efforts spread across many thousands of years and many different spaces. This may sound ridiculous, but it's likely a very conservative estimate.

We take so much for granted when it comes to our limited knowledge of the world that it is nearly impossible to comprehend the amount of time and

Installation view of *Grasp* (LH+RH+LHRH) (2024), and *Will you still be mine? (the weight of my body in ice)* (2024), at the Kromdraai Impact Hub

effort required to make even the smallest advances therein. Put in context, when someone manages to do just that in academia today we award them with a PhD. In much the same vein, the first human to make a round clay ball did so against the backdrop of available knowledge at the time. By our standards, this might seem like very little. That said, we really cannot judge; stuck as we are in our present worldview and its limitations.

Much like the time before we knew about the wheel, gravity, steam power, germs, the atom, evolution, and quantum theory, there was a time before the idea of a round clay ball existed. Once this idea came into being, even in the most rudimentary form, it still required genuine effort and time to develop the knowledge tacitly embedded in its form (I think of the wheel, but there are many examples, including a great variety of vessels, weapons, and artworks). Added to this is the simple problem that, as a 'discovery', the humble round ball of clay may well have been made and lost on a number of different occasions and places throughout pre-recorded history.

Many generations may have passed before people who lived in close proximity to mud began to deliberately smear it on themselves, or make rudimentary marks therein. (This action would certainly predate the first engraved markings made with more sophisticated tools in rock-faces by any humanoid species). Such deliberate mark-making may also have been accompanied, at some point, by the crude, manual fashioning of discrete clay forms. I think of the proverbial mud-cookie, but even the use of such basic shapes would not necessarily have led to further formal or conceptual advances (in terms of 'roundness'). The wet mud-cookie is a poor means of self-defence and, in its unbaked form, not very useful. I suspect our ancestors threw them at each other for fun for a very

long time. But play is not to be frowned upon, and at some point in our collective past someone must have found that they could roll a small compacted ball of clay in their hands. It would nonetheless take ages before the first clay balls could be fired successfully and functionally utilised — for example, as bullets for early slings (possibly during the Upper Palaeolithic times, now near 50,000 – 12,000 years ago). Until we could control fire and produce more advanced weaponry and tools, unfired clay balls may have only functioned as decorative, ceremonial, or symbolic entities. Unfired adobe or mud-brick forms for the construction of so-called 'earth structures' — a practice dating back more than 5,000 years — do not include the use of round three-dimensional forms (Grieseler *et al* 2021).

Playing with mud is an almost universal rite of passage. The body meets the soil in a primal, sensory fashion, hinting at the story of our origins, the productive possibilities of our lives, as well as the rituals that accompany our passing. It is one reason I found Kazuo Shiraga's *Challenging Mud* (1957) such a striking work of art. Eventually, in 2008, I chose to respond to it in my own context-specific way: I covered my body in 23-carat gold-leaf and asked some friends to bury me alive just outside Pretoria.¹ That said, the tactile gestures of holding, compressing, and feeling the thick, sticky, wet substance at some point almost instinctively translates into the act of rolling a small ball out of it between the palms of both hands.

To this day, I remember closely watching my toddler son while he was stuck playing in the mud, so to speak. Covered from head to toe, he seemed to delight in

1. The single-channel video installation *Challenging Mud* (after Kazuo Shiraga) (2008) refers.





PAGES 20–23
Video stills from
Challenging Mud
(After Kazuo Shiraga),
2008. Single-channel
video installation
projected onto
the floor

making the most rudimentary round shapes. Roughly hewn and brown, these wet shapes could be called 'balls', but only in the most generous, thinly stretched use of the term. But, in retaining the shape of his hands, they were more or less round. Most came to rest upon the ground next to him, like anthills.

In the years that followed I carefully and methodically showed him how to make more sophisticated shapes from the mud, including pathways, miniature walls and rivers, and even small round balls and rudimentary blocks that could be used for a variety of structural and decorative purposes. For years, my garden was a disaster, until he began to prefer other forms of entertainment. In hindsight I realise that it was actually an incredible amount of information that I had so casually passed on to my tiny boy. At the time I was simply playing with him in the garden and showing him a way to keep himself busy and away from the television.

I know for sure that the maker of the first round clay ball was very pleased with their handiwork, feeling that deep sense of accomplishment that Marx would later lay at the heart of his own musings about the diminishing value of human labour in a capitalist society. Such pride in the products of our labours could very well have led the way to further material developments. As Marx understood, it's as if we as humans can almost not help valuing, protecting and cherishing the things we make with our own hands, from start to finish. More than that, we like to show them to others, whose appreciation thereof might also justify our time spent, whilst making us more valuable members of the community. After all, being able to make things by hand requires real skill and knowledge. Accordingly, having some verifiable proof thereof during a time where such skills were still in short supply, might not have hurt your chances of finding a

prospective mate. (Always remember the ostentatious stages purpose-built for the act of showing off by the Australian Bowerbirds during mating rituals).

To return to the quote by Bachelard, one might imagine that the maker of this first round ball would have felt a genuine need to celebrate the echoing of other forms present in nature achieved by their handiwork. Such round forms could hitherto only be found in the near absolute mysterious, even dangerous space that was the surrounding natural world. (Think of calabashes, round stones, shells, various fruits, seeds, and vegetables — each with their own value and possible use, be it food, a water container, weaponry, or a form of adornment). Yet here in their hands was another one borne from the deliberate and manual manipulation of seemingly inert material. Today, few comprehend the deep sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that comes from making something from scratch that actually resembles something else in the world. At heart, I think it is about agency. Put differently, the creation of form was once the sole purview of the gods, no longer.

The evolutionary step from being hunters and gatherers to becoming makers, the veritable (re)producers of our external reality, was a shift in human consciousness so absolutely earth shattering that we really cannot imagine its impact in hindsight. Today we largely take it for granted. But its impact on human consciousness must be placed up there with those of the greatest discoveries and developments in human history. Copernicus may have looked to the stars, but I think we really ought look more to the hands.

For Nietzsche, all human knowledge is the result of countless painful incisions onto and into the bodies of our forebears. Just think of the many hands that

had to struggle with mud and clay until something remotely useful came of it, even if only aesthetic in nature. That said, for all our cultural achievements, the memories of our very distant past are still hardwired in our DNA. Moreover, as Bachelard (1964/94, xvi) reminds us in *The Poetics of Space*, the "... poetic image ... is not an echo of the past. On the contrary: through the brilliance of any image, the distant past resounds with echoes".

I suspect this is why people remain so deeply fascinated by our capacity to produce realist images and works of art of all kinds — even as we have long surpassed the levels of technical skill and knowledge required to achieve this first act of mimesis. It reminds us that once, not too long ago, such relative mastery over materials and our external world was simply unthinkable.

Nearly 2000 years ago, Plato was, arguably, the first to understand that, as a species, we had already moved beyond the relative limits of mimesis alone. He famously called artists liars. But some memories have to keep haunting us time and time again, echoing their long distant presence even as we develop new ways of understanding and representing the world.

ECHO 2 (imprimatur)

About twenty years ago I first saw *My hands are my heart* (1991), a striking photographic diptych by the contemporary Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco. From a formal perspective, this artwork is quite straightforward. Shot directly from the front, the first photograph in the sequence shows the artist holding a single lump of damp clay enclosed in both hands. In the second, the artist opens his hands to reveal the imprint of his fingers in the material. Voila. A bit of manual magic.

Back then, I understood the work first as a gestural performance, a minimalist one-off that drew my attention to the power of bodily actions and the place of photography therein. No doubt, this understanding is partially due to the fact that I encountered the artwork in an exhibition catalogue by Paul Schimmel (1998) plotting the close relationship between bodily actions and abstraction. Very recently, I have had to reevaluate my response. For one, I never knew there was a larger series of works by Orozco where he developed the idea in greater detail. Secondly, during the course of the past year, I have spent a great deal of time working with clay and exploring its material relationship to my body and our knowledge of the world.

By final count I made nearly 1500 individual fired clay forms this past year alone. But I am no expert in clay, or ceramics, for that matter. Nor am I purely a sculptor. One glance at the range of artworks included in this book confirms my aesthetic interest in a broad range of artistic forms (including performance, sculpture, process-based work, and even photography). My relatively early exposure to this work by Orozco, and many others like it, strengthened my resolve to produce artworks that are both deeply conceptual and material in nature.

From 2009–13 I studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. There I would detail the performative, material relationship between the body, the artwork, and the viewer. In hindsight I can see how my choice of artists included in the written part of the study was also closely aligned to my developing artistic focus and career trajectory. I devoted a chapter in the dissertation to the work of a photographer (the late Santu Mofokeng), an installation artist working with the transformation of found objects



Every sentence draws blood, 2012.
Documentation of a public performance; found text and water-based tattoo ink.
Villa Dunkelpunt, Kassel, Germany,
7 September 2012

JOHAN THOM

(El Anatsui), and another who utilised the spatial constraints of the gallery and the interworking of language and touch to highlight the viewer's embodied response to the artwork (Willem Boshoff). I completed the study by way of a discussion of a performance of my own, *Every sentence draws blood* (2012).

It was developed to prod the close link between the body and language for an academic conference held as part of Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany. (I briefly note a clear nod to the concrete poetry of the Brazilian author Dêcio Pignatari contained in the piece. Traces of this later).

Throughout the development of my artistic career I have engaged with raw materials. These include the

materials of the body (its flesh and blood, for example) but also organic and industrial materials such as soil, water, honey, salt, sugar, copper, and more. With minor exceptions, up until quite recently, I viewed the medium of clay through the twin lenses of its industrial production in South Africa and its concomitant usage as an intermediary in the production of sculpture. I also never received any formal training in ceramics and, rather shamefully, have to add that clay in South Africa is often problematically bogged down by its tedious, biased relationship to the notion of 'craft'.

Although some notable contemporary South African sculptors such as Guy Du Toit, Malcolm Payne, Jeremy Wafer, and Wilma Cruise have historically

engaged with clay on a more elemental, formal, and conceptual level, in my experience these remain isolated examples. (I add Belinda Blignaut here but, like me, she is a relative newcomer to this material conversation). To be certain, I have great respect for artists such as Bonnie Ntshalintshali, Muziwanidle Gigaba, Eugene Hön, and many others whose use of ceramics far exceeds the biased, neocolonial ambitions of functional, decorative craft in South Africa (especially, but not exclusively, in historic relation to the creative skills and artistic ambitions of black artists).

Even as a young artist, I have always looked for a raw, elemental and bodily engagement with the medium — one that might be said to broadly resemble the formal and conceptual interests of minimalist conceptualism. In our country, such an interest might be considered the purview of a select few, were it not for the fact that the trajectory of my life experiences led me to other ways of understanding the origins of my aesthetic concerns and preferences.

ECHO 3 (my hands on my head)

Apart from my exposure to art as a student, artist and lecturer, the most important impact on my work remains that of my formative years as a child growing up in the harsh and unforgiving landscape of Johannesburg's East Rand.

I grew up in a town called Boksburg, a conservative Afrikaner stronghold during the 1980s. Back then, Boksburg was defined as much by a feeling of broody violence (which permeated almost all aspects of daily life) as by the very real materiality of its surrounding industrial landscape. It was not pretty. I still experience deep feelings of anxiety when I drive past it. Growing up in Boksburg, I came to accept mine dumps,

polluted rivers, barbed-wire fences, grey-brown fields of grass with isolated patches of green, stacks of bricks, huge piles of soil, and assorted waste as the facts of life. The other 'facts' were uglier, both physically and psychologically. Everyone in Boksburg seemed to delight in regularly beating everyone else to a pulp. The bullish peacocks of authority. The perverse cycle of ridicule and humiliation only intensified the further down the neocolonial version of Mazlo's wonky triangular hierarchy you went (with black South Africans obviously unceremoniously dumped at the very bottom). No one was exempt. But as the saying goes, a beaten dog bites. One finds refuge where one can. The amount of time I spent outdoors exploring the hideously deformed landscape with friends was only matched by the amount of time I saw my mother working in her small artist studio at home. There she was, a veritable grown-up, day after day producing odd things like spray-painted gold toilets and massive abstract paintings that seemed to be of absolutely no interest to anyone else in this godforsaken town. Except for the art world.

I do not have the time to adequately trace my mother's personal history here. Suffice to say that throughout her rather exceptional life, she always dreamed of becoming a famous artist. She studied art at university on more than one occasion and had many exhibitions, raking up an award or two in the process. She cried when we saw Roni Horn's beautiful glass sculptures at the Tate in 2009. At some point in the mid-1970s, her father gifted her a near-lifelong subscription to the magazine *Art in America*. I read them all before I was fifteen (at which point I suspect her father simply forgot to renew the subscription — he had Alzheimers, a fate that she would eventually suffer too). Roundabout the age of twelve I remember seeing a photograph in the magazine showing a bunch of naked people standing around in some large gallery with a wooden floor

partially covered in canvas — a red tinged photograph showing a line drawn across the body of one female participant, brush in hand raised high above her head; and another, a thin man, towards the left, flaccidly standing about with straggly unkempt hair.

My mother had amassed a small but formidable library of largely western/European art books and related publications that we were allowed to read without any fuss. (I do remember she had some black and white photobooks that were considered a touch too risqué to leave about until we were in our late teens). Her library included all the *De Arte*'s up to that point², western art historical surveys, monographs on some of the great European modernists (Picasso, Matisse, Pollock), numerous art theoretical books (including Sontag and Gombrich) and many, many more.

This is how I came to know the work of Charlotte Moorman, Nam Jun Paik, Francis Bacon, Judy Chicago, Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Toulouse Lautrec, Georgia O' Keefe, Chuck Close, Audrey Flack, Chris Burden, and other contemporary twentieth-century artists. Much later, during my postgraduate studies, I would spend hours in libraries tracing the nearly invisible history of non-western, (pre)twentieth-century African art and its associated cultural practices. But this I have written about elsewhere³.

I am sure that the contents of my mother's art books would have been of little interest to me would they not have been coupled with the realisation that

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2. An ongoing South African academic art journal, in publication since 1965.
 3. See Thom 2024.

such ideas still had a 'home' — a space that was less constrained than the rest. From an early age, my mother insisted on taking me to every contemporary exhibition in Johannesburg and Pretoria and even to some of her crits at the University of South Africa. What stands out most from this memory is the simple realisation that the art gallery was also the first place where I saw black and white artists exhibiting and talking side by side, as if they were somehow equal. It was a stark difference from life in the radically and racially segregated town of Boskburg. Regardless of the serious problems of such an assumption in South Africa at the time, for a young mind, even this was proof enough that under tyranny the practice of art was in principle at least a touch more permissive than the practices of everyday life.

In this way, during my pre-teens, I saw firsthand the works of a broad mixture of South African pioneers such as Gerard Sekoto, JH Pierneef, Maud Sumner, Maggie Laubser, Phuthuma Seoka, Noria Mabasa, Jackson Hlungwani, Walter Battiss and Johannes Maswanganyi. From around the late-1980s she would take me to see artworks by a newly emergent, more clearly politicised group of artists such as William Kentridge, Diane Victor, David Koloane, Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi, Norman Catherine, and Willie Bester as part of group exhibitions such as the *Volkskas Atelier* and the *Vita Art Now*, held during the 1990s. In terms borrowed from the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari's two volume series *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972/80), I gradually came to feel that art represented a possible 'line of flight', some rupturing possibility, no matter how small, in the status quo. No wonder my mother loved art so.

Today I know that the art world is a very troubled home too. In my experience, it has the dubious distinction of

being at once a space that can make career politicians blush at their naiveté whilst simultaneously making kindergarteners over-confident about their levels of expertise and rhetorical prowess. But for me the actual making of art always remained a private affair, driven by the physical need to lead a more free, creative life. Our perennially troubled art world serves as a stark reminder that no space is safe from the blunt reality of tyranny, no matter which form it might take and who its representatives might be. Besides, growing up in Boksburg, I knew from an early age that the body was indeed a battleground. This realisation, coupled with my extended early exposure to art and the art world, meant that I also knew that if you were going to have a voice in this complicated, conflicted terrain, you had best be humble enough to realise you are not the first, nor the last. In art as in life.

By the age of thirteen we had moved to the east of Pretoria, a Shangri-La in comparison to the mean streets of the East Rand. I was happy to live in a more peaceful, less openly hostile, space. But I still somehow missed the mine dumps, the constant presence of stacks of bricks and heaps of soil on every street, the large swathes of extruded natural materials and nearby signs of industry. These things had crawled under my skin, become lifelong traveling companions. From around the age of fourteen I too began to spend countless hours in my room, drawing and making all kinds of art, nearly failing high school in the process. My father also had a decent workshop and he allowed my brother and I to work there as long as we kept it clean and organised. There I learned to weld, use the wood saw, work with chisels and the grinder and often made my own versions of my mother's gold toilet⁴.

By the age of nineteen I was exhibiting nationally. To no great acclaim. It would take many years before I could see through the layers of anger and disappointment

I (still) feel about the socio-economic situation in South Africa, this most beautiful, most unequal land. Only by the end of my Masters degree in 2003 would I find my voice. I began to understand the creative link between materials and the body that had been the latent driving force up until then in my practice. Although I had adequate technical training during my undergraduate years, my two excellent supervisors (the late art theoretician Muffin Stevens and the excellent artist Jan Van Der Merwe) actively encouraged me to look further afield. No matter how outrageous my suggestions, they always prompted me to search further for ideas that did not fit the dominant narratives and conservative aesthetic forms that had so over-defined South African art and society, past and present. Travel, they said (and between them and the head of the school — sculptor Ian Redelinghuys — they later helped me to do just that).

I remember Van De Merwe telling me one day about an early performance/video work by the Belgian artist Jan Fabre. Apparently, for the work, Fabre had first sanded down the wooden leg of a table and then proceeded to treat his own leg the same way. In the process, he broke the skin and exposed the flesh underneath it. This idea had a huge impact on me, not least because I was interested in the body and performance, but given our obsession with race in South Africa, it also seemed to touch a raw nerve. Besides, as someone who is tactile by nature, the work suggested that touch had some kind of combined

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4. After completing my postgrad studies in 2014 I had a recurring nightmare for about a year: Somehow, someone had discovered that I actually failed Matric maths. In order for me to keep my subsequent qualifications I had to return to high school and pass the subject.

poetic-political power, located in its very materiality; one that was well worth exploring in greater detail.

PS: A short list of things I now find largely useless:
1. Art stores. With the exception of good paper and overpriced tubes of oil paint you can find almost everything you need to make a good artwork elsewhere (including a hardware store, a building supply yard, a general goods wholesaler, an electronics retailer or outside in the veld).

ECHO 4 (intermission)

After years of cultural isolation, South Africa re-entered the global world of contemporary art with the first and second Johannesburg Biennales, in 1995 and 1997, respectively. From 1990 onward the apartheid regime finally crumbled and we had our first democratic elections in 1994. I was eighteen at the time, and duly cast my vote in the first free and fair elections ever held in our country. Optimism was the order of the day and the festivities lasted for more than a decade. (The mess, the mess. It's all fun and games until the time for the cleanup arrives and the questions start). For a new generation of artists raised with the internet, the impact of these massive international exhibitions on our myopic, conservative art world cannot really be adequately explained. For me, being in my first year of Fine Art at the University of Pretoria, they were a breath of fresh air.

In my own clueless way, I felt somewhat vindicated when I saw firsthand the experimental works of Kendell Geers, Antonio Olè, Thomas Hirschhorn, Adrian Piper, Hans Haacke, Alfredo Jaar, David Hammons, Tania Bruguera, Coco Fusco, Wayne Barker, Kay Hassan, Steve McQueen, Angela Ferreira, Isaac Julian, Santu Mofokeng, Georges Adéagbo, Romuald

Hazoumé, Cildo Mereiles, Lorna Simpson, and many, many more. But I was stuck at art school learning how to draw triangles and spheres. (At the time the division of Fine Arts at the University of Pretoria was still seriously conservative — even in the subject of Art History we were still learning about Cimabue and literally counting the panels of the Sistine Chapel).

Many others have written about the relative successes and failures of the Johannesburg Biennales, but no other single event has ever brought so many artworks by so many local and international artists together again in South Africa. By my count, nearly 460 artists officially participated in these two exhibitions. The who's-who of international art critics and curators also came to South Africa, visiting the exhibitions, doing studio visits, and bringing their much needed experience and insight to our little pond. In the process, many excellent South African artists became incredibly successful without having to first kowtow to the needs of the art market and its ever-changing, fashionable preferences. But it didn't last. Nearly a decade later in 2006 the artist and erstwhile *enfant terrible* of South African art, Kendell Geers, described South African art as '...the kind of stale growth that one finds underneath large rocks' (Boshoff and Thom 2007).

Since then our post-apartheid government has managed to neglect most of our cultural institutions into oblivion. Private individuals, foundations, and art galleries have largely taken over the role of being the custodians of our various cultures. Mostly, this has meant adapting one's cultural practice to the brutal logic of Neoliberal capitalism in some way or another. (With apologies to Francisco Toledo, we never once chased away any international franchise company like McDonalds. No, we welcomed them with open arms. We still do). Regardless, not all work produced under

this newly established pot-bellied, indifferent order and its greedy cronies is poor or even too brazenly commercial. Resistance is not entirely futile, but nor does anyone seem to really care. Besides, serious independent journalism is nearly dead and the art criticism that remains now is almost a completely academic affair or brazenly commercial.

Universities, NGOs, and private art academies have become the troubled havens of serious non-commercial artists. In 2020 I curated a survey exhibition of fifteen excellent artists' works who call academia a permanent home. The exhibition was provocatively titled *New World Order* and held as part of the Turbine Art Fair. The aim was to make the work of these artists more visible and draw attention to the newly emergent, though not unproblematic, paradigm of 'art-as-research' in our country.

Also, I felt there was a growing disconnect between our practice in academia (the work we produce and the work we expect our students to produce) and what the market expects — all things worth thinking about. It still seems somewhat disingenuous to only teach students about the best and brightest examples of contemporary art from around the globe when their chances of participating in this scene is less than one percent per graduating group. Even though the remit of academia puts research first, it does seem like a bit of pragmatism helps.

To date, I am sure that I have sold less than ten artworks in my entire career as a professional artist. I have thrown away, gifted, and swapped more works with other artists than that. Were it not for the support of a small number of privately established, not-for-profit spaces in South Africa I do not know if my work would have amounted to much. The market for serious work is almost non-existent in South Africa, and to be fair,

much of the work is simply too expensive. Added to this is the fact that the 'local' art market has effectively collapsed and our best contemporary galleries no longer cater for local artists or collectors. At least I knew early on that academia was a viable career option and have managed to pursue it with some success thus far. In turn, it has given me the freedom to make the work I want whilst pursuing a number of national and international research-based projects.

I briefly want to mention a story about Phyllida Barlow who I was fortunate to have met during my time at the Slade. Before she became a superstar after forty years of teaching (she retired in 2009), she used to recycle her artworks once they returned from exhibition. In her practice, the notion of debris played an important role (Barlow, Harrison *et al* 2021: 23). This comes as no surprise. But what I took from it was that one ought not be precious about one's work once done with it. You make things because you have to make them. Often non-commercial artworks just amount to a huge logistical headache once they return to you. Take decent photographs and move along. (As I write, I am on the phone with the London based artist and lecturer Wayne Binitie. Binitie attended the Slade at the same time as I and through some personal connection knew Barlow much better. He reminds me of her impeccable sense of humour as we ponder the relative lateness of the broader public appreciation of her work. Neither of us are actually convinced most members of the public really appreciate the work — it's just too crazy. She was an artists' artist).

Today it often seems like one's identity has once again become a prison cell. At least this time you can decorate it as you please and get as many visitors as you want. You just can't go out alone, ever (unless you are accompanied by an ever growing list of terms and bona fide dis/qualifications). More worryingly, it

Sequence of video stills from the production of *RH#1: Right heel (the weight of my body in clay)*, 2024. Casa Wabi, Mexico

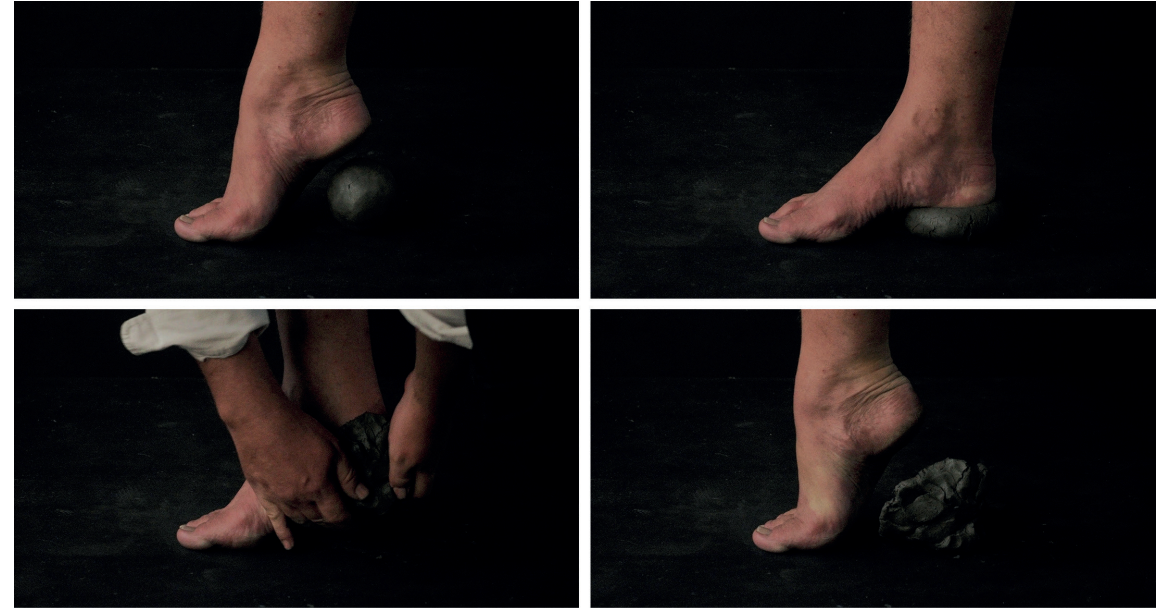
seems that many young artists not only accept this, but willingly participate in their own subjugation to this insidious form of (self)supervision. I often quote the wonderful poet Lesego Rampolokeng (Gurney 2006): 'Artists have fallen in love with their chains and polish them with their brains'. Echo away.

In 2008, when I still had a studio at the Bag Factory in Johannesburg, I would saunter over to the studio of David Koloane for friendly visits. I loved talking to him and, in the warm early inner-city afternoons I would, as often as not, find him in his studio working or napping quietly. One day, after discussing the shameful refusal of the apartheid government to issue him a travelling visa in 1982 in order to attend the first Triangle Workshops in New York, he bluntly said: 'Art is a matter of freedom, and freedom is always a matter of space.' Even and especially the space inside your head, your heart, and, I would add, your hands.

ECHO 5 (the lowly heel)

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to visit and produce work in Mexico. I attended the Casa Wabi residency programme in Puerteventura, on the west coast of Mexico. Puerteventura is about two hours from the cultural heartland of Oaxaca, which I visited too (I cannot include its impact on my views about art here but it was significant). Casa Wabi is perhaps best known for its architectural design by superstar Tadao Ando. But, as an artist, I knew of it first by way of its clay programme.

Casa Wabi was started ten years ago by Bosco Sodi, a contemporary Mexican artist who today is globally renowned for ambitious sculptural works in clay. He has a studio at Casa Wabi too. Naturally, he ensured that the residency has excellent ceramic facilities, access to



natural clay quarries, and the human expertise required to fire ambitious works. Besides, Oaxaca is well known for its abundance of pre-colonial clay artefacts of all kinds — something I would later witness firsthand when we dug into the soil to complete an art project at a local school and almost immediately began to find old clay shards therein.

I had planned a number of artworks for completion whilst on residency in Mexico, including a community engagement project that would give me the opportunity to work with clay for the first time. In brief, I wanted to work with members of the community to create a larger shape out of modular clay forms that could be individually inscribed with information related to their everyday lives, fired, and finally buried under the soil. The resulting work would function like a future archeological find, driving home the evergreen

democratic point that art and history belong to all of us, not just those who are deemed 'important' or 'creative'. I duly completed this work but my in-depth engagement with clay actually began quite casually one day whilst visiting the clay pavilion and doing material tests for it.

I was walking a lot every day at the residency. To be sure, I have always preferred walking to any other means of transport. Time and space permitting, I can spend up to six hours a day wandering around the city or the veld. It was scorching hot in Mexico. One day I was sitting at the table testing the form and feel of the clay against various parts of my body when I had the urge to feel the cool clay on my foot. I stuck my toes into it but it felt messy and the results were not aesthetically or conceptually interesting. As an aesthetic form a footprint is mortifyingly cliché and I had no inclination to try make one in clay. But then I remembered an experience I had as part of a project that I was working on at the Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg, with a number of artists, in 2023. During the project I had asked a fantastic dancer, Thulisile Binda, to dance on a two-volume copy of the Oxford Dictionary that I had inherited from my maternal grandfather. The result was an immediate synergy of concept, movement, and material form. I subsequently shot a video of her feet gently engaging with these loaded objects. At the time, I also remember thinking that while the movement of her ankles, toes, and soles was interesting enough, today we carry most of our weight on our heels. The time had come to explore this idea further.

The lowly heel. Somewhat incomprehensibly at first, lines from Beckett suddenly began to spark about my head, even as J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) kept stomping about my heart. (It still does, every time I see a stretch of open land and

a fence). But this time the dull thud was louder than normal. Michael K's hopeful — but ultimately ill-fated — journey on foot through the harsh South African landscape stood in contrast to the polite European stroll and its embodied literary namesake, the flâneur. For Micheal K, walking had a serious purpose and life-changing outcomes. Now throughout my life I have seen, read about, and even produced homages of all kinds to various parts of the human body. This includes almost all our external appendages, as well as our discrete organs. Just consider the litany of contemporary artworks where the hands, nose, and head bobble about, make their presence felt in one way or another. But the heel? Not so much.

True, some people might still suck your toes and praise your bridge, but your heel is a horse that gets reigned in well before it ever aspires to pleasure and freedom. No, horsey-heel. You stay right there! Keep planting us firmly in the soil of the earth and let the rest of us go walkabout instead. Well, remember Achilles? He wasn't shot in the heart, pancreas, liver, or head. No. His greatest weakness was the one place no one ever thought to look — the space his mother held him firm while she dipped him in the river Styx. Interestingly, other versions of the myth say she held him in the hearth, burning away the vestiges of mortality until his father stopped the act out of concern for his safety.

This was enough to get me started. I took the ball of clay in my hands and folded it around my right heel in the most logical, ergonomic manner possible. Structurally speaking, the amount of clay used could not be too much or too little as the shape had to still release with ease whilst remaining rigid enough to retain its final form (also meaning that there could be no undercuts). If certain areas of the form were much thinner than others I suspected that they would lead to

Installation view of
*RH#1: Right heel (the
weight of my body in
clay)*, 2024. Installed
at Casa Wabi, Mexico

the appearance of cracks in the process of drying. (I don't mind cracks, but they ought not undermine the structural integrity of the form). You also still have to fire the thing, and it could easily explode in the kiln if the clay was moist or contained small pockets of air in thicker areas. So the clay first had to be prepped properly, meaning it must be rigidly compacted before beginning and then still treated carefully as I folded it around my heel. Furthermore, the shape would require a makeshift handle to remove the clay from my ankle. I duly left a rough lump underneath the heel (this area would eventually become the 'base' of each resulting shape).

The moment I removed the clay from my heel I was intrigued with the result. The inside retained the formal properties of my heel along with each line and imperfection of the skin, like a fingerprint. Overall the form was at once plant- and vessel-like; almost alien at times — something and nothing. From experience, I knew that to really understand and make something worthwhile, the relative 'nothing' of the heel-print would have to happen many times before its material presence could be meaningfully integrated into my life and art. The invisible presence of the heel also somehow required greater physical mass to make its point.

I love accumulation as an aesthetic strategy, but it cannot be for its own sake or to generate spectacle only. It must be a relentless form of material specificity, like the sun that rises and sets. To paraphrase Beckett, the sun really has no other alternative. This is how I ended up asking the residency for the weight of my body in clay (approximately 101kg) to complete the work. The use of my weight is a formal strategy that I have been employing for many years to establish and lend some coherence to the material limits of many of my sculptures and performances. In this case, the



limit also seemed apt, given the conceptual concerns regarding the weight of one's material presence, one's footprint — here concentrated in one spot, the heel.

The process of making this near incompressible form was now repeated to produce a much larger processed-based installation. In the end, it consisted of over a 165 variations of the shape. But first I set to work like a machine, savouring the long, mindless hours of repetitive labour. I love the feeling of being lost to the narrative, getting stuck in my own nonsensical thoughts and processes. For me it is a matter of exploring while doing, of thinking most deeply by not actually caring at all. In between the long hours of work I would try to conjure its final form. It was vital that I choose carefully, so I made drawings and maquettes to test various configurations of the installation. The maquettes didn't really work. They lacked the material presence required to resolve the problem. I now started packing the shapes into various forms in and around my studio.

In this way I considered packing all the forms in a circle or displaying them on wall mounted shelves, but both ideas seemed too obvious and commonplace. Besides, the work needed more from the viewer: Viewers had to gift their time if they wanted to meaningfully engage with the work. Tit for tat.

Finally, I settled on the idea of a relatively thin wooden base, approximately nine metres long and eighty centimetres wide. The long, sloping shape would slowly rise from one side of the floor to a height of approximately one metre on the other. Ideally, the base would be painted the same colour as the floor, to better integrate with the architecture. Visually speaking, the shape resembles a pathway but it still allows for access to each clay form included therein. The individual shapes could be seen from the top, making the heel print clear whilst also

allowing for profile views of their external form nearer to the one raised side.

I gifted the work to Casa Wabi as a way of saying thank you. Besides, I couldn't take it home as it was simply too expensive. Casa Wabi graciously accepted. They would take care of the work and more people might actually see it. By sheer coincidence, two old friends have since seen it in person, temporarily installed in the residency's offices. Anyway, this took care of the logistical problems surrounding the artwork and I could move on to the next idea as soon as I returned to South Africa.

ECHO 6 (in which I remember a dragon)

I have been working in academia for more than twenty years now and have become intimately familiar with the deep-seated intellectual suspicion of artworks therein. It is hardly unique in this regard, perhaps just easiest to identify.

In the academic world of today, language and its indexical properties mostly rule the roost along with concrete instrumentalist outcomes. Not all language is indexical, in a functional sense, and poetry of all sorts has more or less the same problem as any other form of art in this regard. (Even the pure sciences struggle with this problem). Art schools, private galleries, and museums used to be fairly immune to this bias. Today this is no longer true. Although all this is hardly the fault of language and its many splendored variants, its pivotal role therein cannot be denied.

You do not need to study art formally to make things of genuine poetic value or power. But if you want your work to function in the rarefied world of academic, research-based practice and/or the global

contemporary art world, you had better know your story. Enter the ubiquitous artist statement or artwork text.

As an artist, you mostly cannot rely on the work to virtue signal by the sheer force of its form and materiality alone. This is mostly true because people do not actually look at and think about artworks all that carefully. I am constantly astounded by this fact, even in academia. Artworks are not pragmatic arguments or linguistic propositions with universal pretensions or clear indexical meanings. Artworks are more ambitious than that. Artworks strike directly at the the various points in our being where we feel and experience the full force of meaning in our lives. Certainly, these intersecting points change as we change, individually and as a society. It is not like chess where the rules and playing field stay the same.

No artwork worth its salt requires any defence, partially because it was never a clear linguistic proposition to begin with. In my view, artworks are open invitations for dialogue and the questioning of meaning, not veiled invitations to a Kafkaesque trial of some sort. Nor is anyone seriously suggesting that you suspend your capacity for 'reason' or 'logic' during the sensual, material encounter with the artwork (shades of Kant). But rather, that, during your bodily encounter with the artwork, you also use those critical capacities to think deeply about the changing place and value of specific experiences, desires, objects, ideas, and even other living creatures that may be of real meaning in your life. See what I meant earlier about naiveté?

The simple fact is that this is not what mostly happens. Susan Sontag knew this some seventy years ago already. But things change. Back then, art institutions could only dream of being as powerful and varied as they are today. (To be fair, such power is contingent

upon their acceptance of the changing pressures and limits they encounter within society too. In this regard the contemporary art fair is probably the easiest fish to shoot in the barrel, but there are many other examples). The late American critic Dave Hickey, with whom I was once lucky enough to exchange a few meaningful emails, also knew this well. Just read his essay on Robert Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio* (1978), included in Hickey's *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (1993). True, Hickey hinges much of his critique of the then-contemporary-art-world and its institutions on the notion of beauty, or rather, its abandonment thereof. Exactly because I think beauty is always a relational construct, this makes some sense. (But read it for yourself and make up your own mind). Regardless, I think his larger point stands. Exactly because artworks intervene in the most intimate of spaces — your personal relationship to meaning that obviously includes your value system/s — they are always prey to social and moral grandstanding by the politically opportune and the ethically corrupt. (This is why people often take the challenges inherent in some artworks so seriously). Anyway, I am particularly suspicious of such political arguments about artworks in the public sphere, even and especially when I agree with the points being made.

On one hand, today we see the sort of shallow oversimplification and instrumentalisation of artworks that only the power hungry, administrators, and bureaucrats can ever fully subscribe to. On the other, there is the salient realisation that we as artists really have to stop this abuse of our work. But it is a Catch 22. We must play along and submit to these restrictions or risk amounting to naught. So we do what they ask and carefully write down what our artworks mean. And they die. But some artists, even excellent ones, still prosper, all while proudly dragging the carcasses of their work and its promises of freedom

behind them wherever they go. The outrage. (But before you judge, first help pay their bills. Besides, there really is no joy in begrudging anyone else their hard won artistic success until you have walked a mile in their shoes).

A carcass may be a dead lumpy thing but it can still be classified and put in its place. Through the instrumental language of its classification, we may know whether it is any good (look at its pedigree, its place of origin, breed, and the diet it was fed on); we know what it 'does' (it feeds and nourishes us, providing exactly so many calories per serving); and we know where it belongs (in the butchery or on the dinner plate, but, you know, the museum will do). In the same way, the unscrupulous wall text often serves as an instrument to arrest the meaning of the work and confine it to a single space and moment in time. Even worse, all the aforementioned reduces the magical capacity of the artwork (to be personally and intimately meaningful) to a set of intellectual operations or processes that even the most dull administrator can evaluate for its 'originality', 'relevance', 'integrated use of medium and concept', 'depth of research', and whatnot.

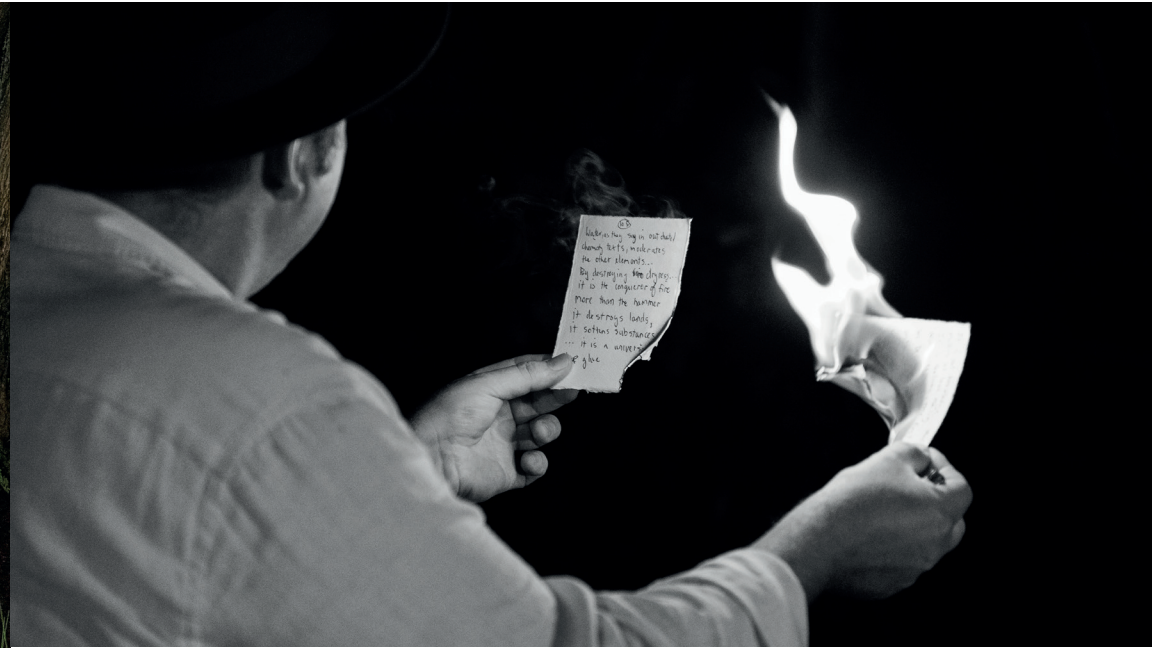
In the Christian version of the world, only Jesus could perform the miracle of resurrecting the dead. Good news. In the art world, no such special power is required to remedy the situation. Here, artworks can be brought back to 'life' by simply leaving them alone to mean what they mean to different people, regardless of whether you agree with them or not. Besides, there are much better ways of writing about art than explaining the artwork to death, including those pioneered by our allies in creative writing. Be more creative. Think outside the box. Sure, but as an artist I often find it is too much for me to still have to do this as well. I then rather go about the task by carefully describing the work and its various components (such

as the process of its making, the form of its installation, and so on). Sometimes, when I get really angry, I say nothing at all. Anything else makes me feel like a fraud.

In hindsight, perhaps Sontag's *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (1966) just didn't go far enough. Interpretation was never only the revenge of the intellect against the artwork and the unruliness of the material world at large. It was an attempt at its banishment and slow death by the politics of human abstraction and its various institutional proxies. Certainly, in the case of the artwork, no material thing with such mysterious power could be left to its own devices. But in the absence of its banishment and death, more sophisticated tools of control are required. As for the spaces where freedom flourishes? They just need to be controlled with more vigour and less *joie de vivre*. This is solemn, priestly business, after all.

ECHO 7 (the space in my hands)

The solo exhibition at NIROX Foundation for which this catalogue is published was already planned well in advance of my return from Mexico to South Africa. The exhibition would consist largely of sculpture and include some recent pre-existing artworks such as the sculptural installation *Time after Time* (2023). We were also hoping that some of the work I had planned for completion in Mexico would form part of the exhibition. This primarily includes the artwork which would later be called *Will you still be mine (Del Mar) #1* (2024). The reason for such optimism was that *Del Mar* was a direct response to another performance by myself, *When my feet fall asleep they dream of having gills* (2024), completed at NIROX just prior to my departure for Mexico in March 2024. Echoes. Many would follow in quick succession, leading to the production of a number of new artworks in Mexico



Photographic documentation of *When my feet fall asleep they dream of having gills*, 2024, presented at NIROX as part of the webinar “The Blazing World, Or the Climatological Imperative”, organised by the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA) in the United States, 22 March 2024

and South Africa. This includes the artwork *LH+RH+LHRH (Grasp)* (2024), a massive site-specific installation consisting of 990 individual clay pieces — the subject of this section.

The idea of the body print in clay had been lying dormant in my mind for almost twenty years before I made the installation at Casa Wabi. At this point I had seen firsthand numerous examples of body prints in clay, all with different conceptual approaches and material outcomes. I had also already made a number artworks where my hands were either the primary subject or the tactile featured prominently therein. These include *The labyrinth* (2004), *Panopticon* (2009), *Illumination* (2010), *Thank You* (2011) and *Recital* (2019), among others. In one artwork completed circa 2011–12, I spent exactly a year touching two books everyday

for thirty minutes, each until a clear continuous path on the outer of their pages could be discerned. This work has never been formally exhibited or documented and now greets visitors to my home on a small table in the entranceway.

Following the experience of working so intensively with clay in Mexico, an uneasy mixture of ideas related to space, touch, materiality, and labour converged. This mish-mash of ideas, memories, and experiences began to suggest that while our hands were the vital organs that connect us to our surrounds — active, powerful components in the production of art, knowledge, and wealth, for example — their daily labours remain under-appreciated and even willingly neglected. I must mention the numerous, longstanding interactions that I have had



PAGE 54 [CW]:
Still from *Panopticon*,
2008. Single-channel
video loop on
mounds of salt and
glass plates (125 x
120 x 45 cm); Still
from *Recital (Decoy)*,
2019. Single-channel
video loop. Sound:
Wayne Binitie;
Documentation of
Thank You, 2011.
Performance with
slump oil, milk, glass,
mustard seeds (14
February), Bodh
Gaya, India;
PAGE 55: *Fiction/*
Non Fiction (line),
2011–12. Special
edition books
(Charles Dickens:
Five Novels and Grays
Anatomy) physically
touched each day for
a year, with a custom
slipcase in American
Walnut (18.5 x 18.5
x 28.5 cm)

JOHAN THOM

with the artist Olu Oguibe, too, as they now form an indelible part of my understanding of the importance of the value of labour, ethics, and the space of art therein. But other ideas would soon return to haunt me.

Whereas my understanding of Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet Series* (1990 – ongoing) made clear the ongoing discrimination against touch (and the blind) by way of the conventions of art in the gallery space ('Do not touch'), Orozco's work first alerted me to the creative, productive value of the labour of the hand by way of its sensuous, playful interaction with clay. Certainly, as an artist, I also felt that, to some extent, I knew the space (and freedom) contained inside my hands. After all, these were also the tools from childhood that helped me carve out a small space for myself in this world. That said, too many of us are used to having their bodies and its labours under-appreciated by society, for one disingenuous reason or another.

A perfunctory etymological investigation of the term 'labour' (see for example Seabrook 2013) quickly reveals its dark, coercive roots. It suggests that, for all the promises of 'some great reward' (thank you Depeche Mode), labouring bodies remain stuck in a violent cycle with no real chance of actual 'redemption', financial or otherwise. Escape from this cycle remains the exception, the purview of a lucky few, and not the rule. But labour is never materially disembodied: bodies always do the work. Moreover, from my past studies in the UK, I knew that the body has historically been written out of knowledge, especially western philosophy and thought. This might be particularly true for the bodies of women and non-Europeans but, overall, it applies to everyone and it is no coincidence. In Latin the term 'proletariat' contains the direct bodily meaning 'offspring' or 'progeny', meaning

that proletariat could only serve the state by way of producing babies — little bodies for future use as labourers. Who would want such filthy, toiling, unthinking bodies to be included in anything as grand as philosophy, history, or even a revolution? (If we start including the great unwashed we will soon have to include all sorts of unsavoury characters, even animals!). Not even Marx, who in 1850 called them the 'lumpenproletariat' — a class of 'boorish', 'stupid' people who contributed nearly nothing to the struggle of the working classes. No, the lumpen, toiling body was no more than a dumb piece of clay that ought to be shaped and moulded by those in power. Failing any actual use, it could be discarded like a relic from our ignoble past or a broken vessel. (In our contemporary society, the body has become moderately useful again. Now it can scroll through online content and produce wealth for others by way of 'likes', 'loves', and 'views'. Just do not expect any payment for your labour and time — it's paid entertainment for your benefit after all. Doomscroll indeed).

Upon my return from Mexico I came to feel the need to produce a new installation for the exhibition at NIROX that would make visible the veritable writing out of existence of the material whilst highlighting its close relationship to the body (by way of manual labour and the tactile). But ideas are patient, and if you are an artist you know that materials may resist, challenge, and even surprise you when you begin to interact with them. Like bodies, materials are often 'volatile' (to paraphrase Grosz 1994).

The first time I made a print of the inside of my hand, roundabout June 2024, I was alerted to the fact that I never knew what the negative space in my hand actually looked like — despite looking at and using them every day! More specifically, although I was delighted by the result, I immediately understood my

GRASP



Detail of
Grasp
(LH+RH+LHRH)
(2024) at the
Kromdraai
Impact Hub

task to be more related to the idea of negative space, both formally and conceptually. Whereas the clay form made present the negative space inside the hand at the specific moment of grasping, it still retained the hand as an invisible presence (and vice versa).

When we commonly talk about 'negative space' in art, we actually mean space as measured against the form of a specific object or compositional element that is the actual focus of our analysis. But what if the very visual form that is supposed to be the focus of your analysis somehow begins to oscillate between claiming its material presence as fact, whilst utilising that very factualness to alert you to its absence? It was a paradox worth pondering. This time, neither Beckett's sun nor Michael K's weary feet came to the rescue. Again, the problem required some deep, creative thinking, as well as the input from a number of other voices, past and present.

From experience, I knew that the best way forward was to get stuck in. I resolved to produce 330 clay

hand prints, each of my left hand, my right hand, and both hands put together, making for a total of 990 clay shapes. This seemed logical. Mathematically, this number subscribed to a rule of thirds; the sheer material mass and volume of such a large group of clay shapes would be compelling and, though I cannot attest to the complete veracity of the quote, I clearly remember accompanying the performance artist Marina Abramović to her childhood home sometime in Belgrade in 2006 when she ventured, 'You must do something simple like open a door a thousand times before it becomes meaningful'. At the time, she was showing me examples of her early student work where the strategy of repetition was already evident. Well, 990 was close enough.

I cannot quite explain to a reader what it was like to make this many hand prints in clay during the three month period from mid-June to September 2024. The entire process was simultaneously mindless and filled with wonder. Although I was edging dangerously close to opening what my good-humoured friend,

the artist Luis Canseco, from Mexico, had called an ‘insane factory’, each print was in fact always entirely unique. The small clay forms seemed to bounce off one another, generating a series of visual and material affinities that were surprising in their own right. The growing body of assorted shapes now began to resemble bones, plants, flowers, tools, formalist sculptures, and even genitalia. Through their near endless repetition each form somehow became more specific. To be sure, I wasn’t getting ‘better’ at making these forms, but I was becoming better at knowing exactly what it takes to generate aesthetic forms by physically grasping a lump of clay in your hand/s.

I know a chef who, through years of experience, can tell you exactly how a ball of dough of 150g feels just by holding it in her hand. (She can do this with many of her common cooking ingredients and at a few different weights). No such luck for me. Depending on how I felt, I used many different sizes of clay lumps and even then, the final shapes often had little to no resemblance to the amount of clay used — other than saying the final form was slightly larger or smaller than another. Despite the overt similarities in the process of manual production, the whole process largely defied easy standardisation. The only strict guideline I followed throughout was that the amount of clay used for each shape had to fit into my hand or hands (or even between the fingers) without too much of it spilling over to the ‘outside’ — over the finger, arm, or knuckles, for example.

By no stretch of the imagination were the clay shapes difficult to make. Each simply required a high level of care and focus to complete. I found that if the lump used was ever so slightly smaller than the one before, and if I rested it on the edge of my hand — on the skin connecting the thumb and index — the result would be vastly different than having done so just one or two

millimetres closer to the middle of the hand. Moreover, through slight variations of applied pressure, two identical clay lumps placed in exactly the same spot in the hand would also amount to the production of two entirely distinct clay forms. There was simply no ideal or blueprint to aspire to. It was an intuitive process that constantly required an extremely high degree of sensitivity, both in the tactile handling of — and responsiveness to — the material as well as that of any subsequent decision-making on my part.

The problem of what to do with this assortment still needed to be resolved. I made many drawings and spoke to a few close friends and colleagues as the work progressed. I considered making mirror-clad bases for them, throwing all the shapes together into a single heap, and even turning the exercise into a video. An object per plinth would perhaps be visually astounding, but with the available resources (financially and spatially) it wasn’t possible. Besides, I hate using plinths for no clear conceptual reason, regardless of how impressive they might look. This time, and quite fortuitously, the problem of where to exhibit the installation would lead to the most conceptually rigorous solution.

I was in regular contact with the exhibition’s curator, Sven Christian, as well as Benji Liebmann (head of NIROX Foundation) during this entire time. In my experience, logistical problems such as space often lead to conceptual solutions on the part of the artist and artwork. I regularly discussed the project with them and made the problem of the exhibition space theirs too. After all, three minds are better than one. We all quickly agreed on the following: The relative size of each clay object (ranging from the smallest, of about two-and-a-half by three square centimetres to ten square centimetres) meant that displaying them loosely packed in the Sculpture Park would lead to at



Installation view of
Johann Moolman:
Totems (2024) at the
 Kromdraai
 Impact Hub

least three immediate problems. First, they would be easy to steal; second, natural elements such as heavy winds and rain — both common during this time of year — could easily move and damage them; and finally, maintenance. Grass grows. Both visitors and staff walk around the park and this would amount to a gigantic headache that required constant oversight. The best solution would be a massive covered space. By complete coincidence, such a space had recently become available to NIROX, by way of one of its newly established partner organisations.

Across the road from NIROX is The Hub — a community-orientated space that facilitates socially-driven, research-based projects with a broad focus on the surrounding area and its communities. Right next to it is a huge, largely unused cattle shed; mostly

used intermittently for related events and workshops. At the time, this space had only been used once for an exhibition of artworks by the late sculptor Johann Moolman (whom both my mother and I knew well). This survey exhibition, held in early 2024, was also his last. Moolman sadly passed away only a few weeks after the opening.

Cancer. We all knew he was terminally ill and although the thought weighed heavily on us, there was real joy to be found in celebrating his life's work so close to the end of it. Many of us spoke at Moolman's opening, including Sven Christian, my old lecturer the artist Gordon Froud and myself, among others. Many more of his supporters and members of the public were in attendance. At the time, Moolman — who sat in a wheelchair — also spoke fondly about the years he spent playing as a child in the veld in the very area the exhibition was being held — the Cradle of Humankind.

For him, as for me many years later in Boksburg, he could never quite get rid of the red-brown soil stuck under his fingernails and feet. These childhood memories of the earth, its materials and forms, shaped his work until the very end. In Moolman's case, the most rigorous examples of his artistic skills and conceptual focus were all totemic in form, ergo the title of the exhibition *Johann Moolman: Totems*. Moreover, Moolman was a graduate of St Martin's School of Art in London in 1976, the year I was born. Later, upon his return to South Africa, he would lecture my mother in art. These fateful coincidences gave me a deeper affinity for his work and his subsequent journey as a South African artist, albeit one somehow slightly off the beaten track. Benji helpfully suggested that we consider hosting a part of my exhibition at NIROX at The Hub too. Although no one said it, it seemed an appropriate way to keep the conversation going. Sven and I would visit the space to investigate and confirm.

Installation view
of *Johan Thom:*
Grasp (2024) at the
Kromdraai
Impact Hub

The Hub is a massive, partially covered space of approximately thirty-five by fifteen metres with a cement floor and roughly plastered, stained white walls. It has a high ceiling of approximately four-and-a-half metres and, although it does have walls on three sides, it is completely open toward the west of the surrounding valley, with expansive views of the mountainous landscape. As soon as I visited the space, the answer to its final form seemed wholly self-evident — as if there never were any other worthwhile alternatives.

I could use the entirety of the space to pack out the installation whilst using the walls for exhibiting related artworks. These would include a series of clay shapes placed on rough shelves from treated wood, with the large-scale photograph *Will you still be mine (Del Mar) #1* overlooking the distant landscape, where the work *Dwell* (2024) would later be permanently installed. The square geometry and large floorspace has a smaller entrance on the south-west, which also meant that I knew how most people would access the exhibition. As an installation artist I could utilise this information to loosely guide the viewer's embodied interaction with the space and the artworks contained therein.

From many years of putting up my own and other artists' exhibitions, I felt that the best way to accomplish this is to consider the matter from an integrated conceptual and material point of view. (The 'material' here obviously includes the body and its senses but also the more formal aspects of exhibition design and related scenography — including its architectural surroundings and methods of display, for example). I always mentally and physically 'walk' an exhibition space a number of times during the planning and installation phases, in the process measuring my bodily reactions to its formal elements (including the artworks on display). I then carefully consider how such embodied



responses might influence and further my conceptual understanding of the exhibition as whole. I repeat this process for each work, as I move them around and/or make final adjustments. In this regard, and with more than a 1000 shapes to display in the venue as a whole, a Walther De Maria-like grid made the most sense for the main installation, *LH+RH+ LHRH (Grasp)*.

For *LH+RH+ LHRH (Grasp)* I decided to place all the clay objects in three grid-like formations directly on the cement floor. Each grid was 3.3 x 10 metres and would contain 330 individual clay shapes. The placement of these three rectangular grids would be directionally aligned with the dimensions of the space. The result would be a formal and conceptual synthesis between the material dimensions of the installation, the exhibition space, the rest of the artworks on show, as well as that of the landscape onto which the view of the artwork would open. Formally speaking, the entire exhibition was now conceived as a series of rectangular spaces within a larger rectangular space — an installation, a large-scale photograph, a large brick, and a horizontal 'window' to the distant landscape. This rigid structure would be broken by the organic nature of the forms on display as well as a series of wall-mounted shelves of varying sizes, spaced intermittently throughout. (On these shelves more complex elaborations of the handprint as method and form could be found).

The minimalist installation of *LH+RH+ LHRH (Grasp)* would resemble a large archive of specimens/'finds' neatly packed out in such a way as one might associate with an active site of anthropological/archeological discovery. I had no inclination to catalogue the forms by way of some system other than placing them in these three grids. Besides, I would include a brief wall-text in the space that would hint at these possibilities. But given the overall concept, the look

and feel of the exhibition space (an old shed), and the context (the Cradle of Humankind) it was a useful association, signifying notions of discovery, history, time, materiality, and labour.

Visitors accessed the exhibition by way of the south entrance. Upon entry, they encountered the first grid of *LH+RH+ LHRH (Grasp)* directly in front of them. In the distance, the installation stretched across most of the space, occupying near the entirety of their field of view. Once they lifted their eyes and surveyed the works on the walls, the distant landscape was similarly framed as an image toward the west. (The overt employ of such relative visual spectacle was in fact a ruse, a thought to which I will return). In order to reach the rest of the installation, as well as the various works and wall text displayed, viewers first had to walk around the objects on the floor. As they did, they would likely look down, bending their bodies toward the earth to see the individual clay pieces. This gesture is also reminiscent of the act of looking at your hands or discovering something of value on the floor, as if to say, 'Look, this is what you lost, forgot about, or simply missed'.

Finally. A ruse and a provocation. We are such visual creatures, yet we miss so much of life's value. This seems particularly true even and especially when it concerns things that are not of immediate value to us or are so commonplace that we can afford to forget about them. As an artist I thought I knew my hands. Though I certainly knew them better than most, I never actually took the time to appreciate them in their full materiality. Mostly they were my tools. The same could be said with all the material forms I inherited from my ancestors.

But what if I were actually a touch less interested in such immediate revelations? What else could there



PAGES 68–69
Johan Thom
installing *Dwell*
(2024) in the reserve
adjoining NIROX
Sculpture Park

be beyond the immediate, the sensible, that which is already known, traced and ready to be ‘critiqued’ or ‘investigated’? Negative space. Why had I not looked there more often?

I suspect that, in this negative space, there exists throughout our long history a million other beginnings, false starts, and thwarted attempts at meaning — all of which came to naught because we were too busy looking at the world from afar, beguiled by the easy charms of our intellectual focus and its capacity to make sense of things. If sight were the handmaiden of thought, and abstract thought the pinnacle of meaning, this was a position mere hands could never dream of aspiring to. They were too closely involved with the outside — the mute, lumpen mass that is the material world — to be trustworthy.

What did we miss and how many more ideas, inventions, and possibilities will suffer the same fate? I really cannot say, but in my own way I have at least attempted to give this question a temporary material form. (On more than one occasion, I have looked for the keys to my home, only to find them laughing in my hands).

ECHO 8 (Coda)

It seems fitting to now briefly turn to you, the reader. After all, like an artwork, no written text ever aspires to existing in a sealed echo chamber. I am no great author, yet through the power of language I think I have managed to share something about my work as an artist and the manner of my being in this world. Perhaps my meanings were both clear enough when it mattered and obscure enough, when it really mattered, for you to have made some space for them in your life. It therefore seems fitting to conclude by returning to

the words of one of the most enduring echoes in my own life.

In 1996, Susan Sontag (Temple 2018) wrote a letter to the late great Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), in which she laments that we no longer need to live in fear that the great library will be burnt down — for the tiger is already in it. Sontag was of course mostly lamenting the fate of literature and books in our changing society (but this was never her only remit). Whereas I truly love books, I have never been one for nesting in libraries as if all the worthwhile knowledge in the world somehow only exists in written form. Nor, as the careful reader will have noticed by now, have I thought to myself that the tiger only lives in a library. Today it roams free. (If you are reading this text on a cellphone I hope it bites your hand).

I have loved objects for as long as I can remember and I have loved making them too. I hope I have enough energy and freedom left to make many more. But, as much as this essay is about objects and their relative power, it is about the people who have, in one way or another, taught me what it means to care about the world — to care so much that you end up producing meaningful artworks of all kinds (including books, music, theatre, poetry, and various forms of visual art). Still, others have graciously returned the favour and taken care of these things in their own particular, meaningful way. Certainly, every relationship has its ups and downs. But whether or not a work of art or text (including my own) is good or bad is really beside the point — as long as it exists, others will be made. And, much like the bird call that echoes the sound of the river, of a falling rock, or the rain and crashing thunder, any form of self expression will, in time, evolve from the barest guttural squawk into a fully-fledged song of its own. The tiger can never eat us all.

PAGES 72 – 77

Documentation of
Thom's performance
with *Time after time*
(2023) as part of the
exhibition *Things*
appear and disappear
at Kalshnikov Gallery,
Johannesburg, 2023







BETWEEN CHICKEN AND DUST

Sikho Siyotula-Siegemund

Since waking up, uTata, my father, keeps telling the same two stories over and over: the story of his birth in a rondavel, between chickens and dust, and that of uTa'om'khul' uJoni. uTata has always been a storyteller of note, with a broad collection of histories, myths, legends and futures—intsomi of the Xhosa. Anyone who knows uTata well, also knows his canon of tales. He has told and retold it over many years, with slight (and at other times major) renditions, depending on the day and audience. In past times, even when he seemed to bend a story to its limits, he always managed to keep true to its character, so that each story remained particular. No one story melted into the next.

The story of uTata's birth was never a part of his cannon. For those familiar with his tales, it seemed to have forcefully crashed into his memory or been mysteriously unlocked from some dormant, unknown repository. Here it had been hiding, I suppose. Its appearance must have been triggered by what I can only describe as a jolt to his mind caused by his third stroke. In the story of his birth, which he has been telling relentlessly and feverishly to anyone who will listen, uGogo, my grandmother, is in labour while uTat'om'khulu, my grandfather, is off working. Upon hearing of her labour, uTat'om'khulu sends a horse. This horse is for uGogo to ride from their mountain village home to the local hospital twenty kilometres away. uGogo does not make it to the hospital. Instead, she gives birth to uTata at a home in a neighbouring village, unable to make it to the hospital because of her debilitating pain. uGogo gives birth in a rondavel between chickens and chicks that uTata swats away on his entry into the world. He can still see the room where he was born, dimly lit, with those chickens clucking about. Sometimes, when uTata tells the story, uGogo is on the horse. Sometimes, uTata himself is steering it.

'Stop telling this story. Stop—telling—it—right—now!' 'I cannot hear it one more time!' uMama, my mother — uTata's wife of forty years — says one day in rage.

Unlike the story of uTata's birth, the story of uTat'om'khul' uJoni is one that those who know uTata's cannon have heard countless versions of. uTat'om'khul' uJoni — named Grandfather Soldier after his occupation — is a grandfather of unclear ties, who served as a soldier on the front lines of World War II, fighting for the English. The story is usually told as follows: 'In the wake of the Second World War, convoys arrived in the mountain villages of the Hlubi people, where uTata grew up, seeking men to defend His Majesty King George VI and all of humanity from the horrors of the Germans. Out of protest, many from the mountain villages did not answer that call. They owed no allegiance to a White King they had never met, who reigned over them not from the sky or with a long name narrated through poems and song but from oceans away. While many refused to go, uTat'om'khul' uJoni, along with others, did respond. uTat'om'khul' uJoni returned from this tour as the soldier he had signed up to be.

'Nqi! Nqi! Nqi!' a deranged soldier would wake the village, banging on pots and pans or anything in sight, very often a bell. He would come out at night, ringing a bell, for all to come out of their rondavels and fight. From his return to his death uTat'om'khul' uJoni lived out these repetitive episodes as the village crazy. He brought that distant war, oceans away, to the deceptive tranquillity of the remote mountains of the Transkei. Its horror echoed at the foot of the Drakensberg, through all of uTata's childhood, to live on in uTata's canon. uTata, like uTat'om'khul' uJoni, has lost pieces of his mind since waking up. Of all the stories in his canon of tales, this is the one that haunts him now. The one of a

crazy man, returning from a crazy war.

Long after uTat'om'khulu's defence of His Majesty King George VI and the rest of humanity against the horrors of the Germans, I married a German man. A German man called Jan. Jan from Stralsund. Stralsund is one of the northernmost cities in Germany, located in the east. Founded in 1234, the city boasts a 780-year history. After the Second World War, Germany was split into East and West, and Stralsund became part of East Germany. Due to the constrained resources of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which governed East Germany, many of Stralsund's ancient structures were preserved, escaping the 'tear-it-down-and-build-anew' culture of West Germany's post-war reconstruction. At the reunification of Germany, these buildings were renovated and preserved with new funds and ideas about old objects. They made it into the next millennium by dodging bombs, bullets and hanging on by a thread, perhaps also through pure luck. At least, this is how I have heard the story being told.

The city of Stralsund is located on the German mainland and is separated from Rügen, Germany's largest island, by the Strelasund, a narrow strait in the Baltic Sea. The city of Stralsund takes its name from this strait. The Baltic Sea flows through it, stretching from the eastern to the western shores of Germany and various other countries, eventually connecting to the Atlantic Ocean via the North Sea through the Danish straits. This body of water is home to the Siegemund family, into which I married.

uTat'om'khul' uJoni was not alive to see the lobola negotiation between the Siyotulas of the Drakensberg and the Germans of the Baltic Sea, but at least one of uTata's fathers — simply uTat'om'khulu to me — was. Like uTat'om'khul' uJoni, uTat'om'khulu spent a large part of his life imprisoned for defending his people and

humanity against the horrors of a different time. While uTat'om'khul' uJoni was in a prison of the mind (as result of his service), uTat'om'khulu was put in a physical prison as a result of his. He spent eighteen years as a political prisoner on Robben Island, surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. uTat'om'khulu and his political ideas are shrinking. The Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC), to which uTat'om'khulu devoted so many years of his life, is fading from South Africa's political memory. At this exact juncture, he seems to wear his political insignia more than ever. A PAC badge on an oversized dark green suit has become his unmistakable signature. This was no different at my lobola negotiations. At the lobola, nothing much came out of him. He sat quietly as one of the elders, watching as the younger generation negotiated with their sympathisers, as is custom.

On the day of my lobola, my ninety-three-year-old grandmother, uGogo — uTata's father's sister — could not maintain the silent dignity bestowed upon, and somewhat expected of, an elder like her and uTat'om'khulu. She spoke loudly and clearly, not to impart wisdom from her three marriages, a customary practice I had dreaded and successfully pleaded to exclude from our proceedings, but rather to defend me on matters over which I had less control. uTat'om'khulu, uTata's brother, tried to have me wear a headscarf, iqhiya, to meet my in-laws for the first time. uMama, my mother, hated iqhiya. I have countless memories of her tossing it straight off her head as soon as we got home from family events, where she had spent hours — sometimes days, weeks — playing versions of the blushing bride and hardworking makoti. I did not hate the idea as much as she did. I think it is rather sweet, perhaps in some ways even sexy. A show of your newfound status — married and veiled to the world. Nevertheless, I know how men use the idea of ukutwal' iqhiya as a way to control what women should

and should not wear, how they should and should not appear in the world. So, I was glad when our matriarch, the oldest member of our family, spoke up for me in the way that she did.

Playing gymnastics on my headscarf was uTat'om'ncinci's latest stunt. He had not so long ago, speaking as a dignitary in front of our whole family, and in the presence of our to be in-laws, called uGogo and her attending peers, 'our gallery of living ancestors', to everyone's collective gasp. While uGogo wasn't particularly gobsmacked by uTat'om'ncinci's remarks on her long shadow and existence as the 'walking dead', his ordering of iqhiya on my head was an action she did not let slide.

'Now you want women to veil themselves at home? That is a nonsense that can never exist.'

'This is your home, the place your navel was buried, a place to rest your skull', uGogo said to me, but aloud so that everyone would hear.

'And it will always be your home to come back to; that will not change today.'

'Respects are not paid to your home; they are paid to your in-laws house. You show respect to our sympathisers in their house according to their customs. Here you appear naked, flesh, and bone, as you are.'

Memory, I am learning through uTata, is something of a sieve or drain. I hope that no matter what shape mine may take one day — no matter what it drains out and crushes to dust — to always delight in the memory of uGogo, the head of 'our gallery of living ancestors,' speaking for and to me on my wedding day, with uTat'om'ncinci mid-split.

uTat'om'ncinci's exercise of power over seemingly mundane matters was not at all surprising. He is well known for his inappropriate displays of power at significant moments. So much so, some have come

to view these flare-ups as a form of madness. The more generous attribute them to the disappointments of life, while others suggest they stem from serious delusions of grandeur for titles of a world long gone. After uTata's stroke, uTat'om'ncinci proudly called himself the 'last man standing,' in reference to the unfortunate fate of his brothers — two dead, and uTata holding on by a thread.

uTata is the eldest among his siblings. While this status no longer holds the significance it once did, it does mean he inherits uTat'om'khulu's role as the leader of our house. His place in the world is deeply rooted in history and the drama of the family court. Shortly after the passing of uTat'om'khulu, uTata unapologetically departed from the expected norms associated with his role. Instead of being a pendulum traveller, between his father's homestead — where our family has lived and been buried for centuries — and his workplace eGoli (Johannesburg, or more broadly, Gauteng), as would be expected, uTata chose to settle in Pretoria, permanently making it his new home. Controversially, he declared that he would also be buried in Pretoria rather than in our family cemetery kuQumbu eQotira, nestled in the Drakensberg. 'Anyone who wants to find me,' he ended this declaration, 'can find me here in Pretoria, eTolbanie.'

On the day of our lobola negotiations, Jan and a collected committee showed up in Pretoria, at the front gate of eTolbanie. They waited, baking in the sun. uTata had long told versions of how this would unfold as part of his canon of tales. He would make his sympathisers, our future in-laws, wait as a show of pride about his daughters.

'Three girls! Oh my, oh my, oh my, the cows that will come one day,' he would often say with excitement.

'The cows are at the gate, Tata! Wont you let

them in now?'

'No. I am still stretching myself out.'

He would practice his play. On the day the cows were actually at the gate, he did make his sympathisers wait, but probably not as long as in his rehearsal. Our family sang joyfully with Jan's committee on the other side of a gate until uTata saw fit to let them in.

Jan from Stralsund, in my dad's post-stroke, increasingly elusive mind, is often confused with Jan van Riebeek.

'No, Tata, this is not that Jan. This is Jan from Stralsund, your son-in-law.'

'Jan! Oh yes, Jan. I know, this Jan.'

'Hello, Jannie.'

'This young man brought us the cows we asked for, to Pretoria. He showed his face: this, is, what, I, love.'

'He paid his respects; he, brought, us, iLobola.'

'And where is Sigurd?' he asks, as if a forgotten thought has suddenly resurfaced.

Jan and I have a son named Sigurd. His name, derived from Nordic languages, translates to 'defender of victory.' Sigurd is named after a legendary dragon slayer from Norse mythology, renowned for his bravery and prowess in battle. According to mythology, Sigurd gained wisdom by tasting the blood of the dragon he slayed. This act allowed him to understand and communicate with birds, including dragons, for the remainder of his life.

In uTata's now slippery mind, Sigurd — who is visiting him and uMama from Potsdam, Germany — is sometimes envisioned as a paramilitary arriving in South Africa from German South West Africa. According to uTata, Sigurd parachuted in, swam across the Atlantic to reach the Cape, and then trekked up

the N1 to Pretoria to visit him.

'I saw him land right here in the South West,'
uTata insists.

'Tata, it's called Namibia now.'

'Yes, yes, I know the South West.'

'Also, Tata, uSiggy is not a soldier. He's only two years old.'

After his second stroke, I thought the next one would be his last. Now, with three strokes behind us, we live side by side with death. Living with death feels like a perpetual state of emergency, requiring constant adaptation — being flexible and prepared to act at any moment. We know uTata's time is near. The complaints department is just about closed. I've grown accustomed to death. I've cursed it, pleaded with it, and now I've resigned myself to carrying it with me wherever I go. I've rehearsed the same script — not once, not twice, but three times:

'Okay, this is it; Okay, I'm ready; Okay, I'm fine, we'll be fine.'

Amidst these declarations, life persists — two weddings, two births. Life keeps giving, and uTata clings to what remains. In his prime, he vowed he'd rather die than be confined to a chair. Now, life's value outweighs all else — he'll grasp at it, no matter the cost.

When I visited uTata shortly after he emerged from his coma, he recounted how he came to waking.

'Sikho, you know, it doesn't hurt. You realise something is wrong only from how others react. The stroke itself doesn't hurt. Anyway. It was a beautiful day; we were young boys running towards the river, just like in our youth. We stripped off all our clothes as we ran toward the cliff to jump, as we always did when we were young. Some friends who were ahead of me jumped in, but I turned back at the last moment. That's how I woke up from the coma — I decided not to jump.'

'You need to be at peace with death; 'We're a-a-a-

a-a-I-I got to die one day.'

uTata would often belt out Brook Benton's *If You Think God is Dead* with a bluesy swagger. Looking back, he may have been far more afraid of death than he let on. From what I remember, he always sang just that one line and never the next — 'but no man can time it'.

For some, death takes their person swiftly. For us, we are losing ours bit by bit. I am desperately missing some of those missing pieces. Fortunately, others faded with the strokes. His rage has subsided, leaving only the patterns it once dictated; hinting at the darkness from which it emerged:

'I don't like my nurse — she's rude, scowling, too thin, dark, with a bony ass!'

'Please stop. That's rude, it's cruel to say such things.'

'It's rude, but true. That dark thing. That, dark, thin, ugly, thing! She does not respect me, she does not listen to me.'

'But Tata, uMama is dark, and uGogo, your own mother, was dark too.'

'Yes, but your mother is beautiful! I could strangle her, but without her, I would surely have died.'

I'm not sure how to explain it other than an instinctual, desperate call to your parents, when all sense seems to disappear. Now, at his most vulnerable, his mother — sometimes confused with uGogo, his father's sister — and uTat'om'khul' uJoni are all he seems to care about. They are the constant; all he remembers about life. The rest of his family and aids are characters, able to leap into history, transcending the boundaries of time. Things exist as one in his brain. He calls out to the dead, believing they are in the next room. He swears the neighbour's cat, that walks on the wall outside, is a tiger. His fear of this tiger is real. The demons of his superstitions are real. His fears haunt him. There is a snake under his bed.

Nails — he is fixated on his nails; he has to cut them all the time.

'Please get me the nail clippers; this fingernail is bothering me.'

Water — he compulsively asks everyone for a glass of water.

'uTata is in a very bad condition. He had a stroke on Sunday when he collapsed. They thinned out his blood, and are confident that the clot that caused the stroke has been dissolved. The doctor fears he may not walk again. He has been put in an induced coma. They will know the extent of the damage once the swelling goes down.'

There are many 'okays' and 'thank yous' when uMama and I talk to uTata's doctors about what is going on. But of course nothing is okay. Nothing at all.

'Okay, so this is a CT scan,'

'It looks different from the last one we saw, because it is a different kind of scan.'

'Does this one move?'

'Yes, yes, it can move. Let's go, sorry about that,' the doctor says, fiddling with the video on her computer screen.

'Let me just go to the bottom; there. So, you start seeing the stroke right there.'

'You can see the second one was not as bad as what we see now with the third one. Okay?'

'Okay.'

'And so you say the left side is the side with the stroke?'

'No, it's the right side.'

'The right side controls the left side of the body, so he's got left-sided weakness as a result.'

'Oh, okay, I understand. Thank you.'

I report back all the black, white, and grey matter to my three siblings without the 'Okays' and 'Thank yous' of the doctor's office.

'uTata is still in the red. They say he will be in the clear once he is past the seventy-two-hour mark.'

'Does that mean he is still in high care? What does "in the red" mean? That he cannot walk, that he might not wake up?'

'It means, the swelling is progressing to the other side of the brain, meaning he may not wake up is a possibility, but the doctor says that she does not think this will be the case. She did say that, should he recover, he will most likely live with some form of disability.'

uTata does eventually wake up.

'Tata?' I call out, standing right in front of him on my first visit.

He moves his gaze around the room, blindly following my voice. I move deeper into the room and only then do I appear in his gaze.

'Oh, Sikho!'

He greets me cheerfully, visibly fighting back tears. I see the very familiar drooping of the face, I have seen twice before. I greet him in Xhosa, fighting back my own tears. He smiles, revealing further the extent of his paralysis. By his chuckle, I know that the irony of my greeting and question, 'Molo, Tata, unjani namhlanje?' ('Hello, my Father, what beast are you today?') is not lost on him.

Our eyes and throats are full. A single blink, which I have been trying to control, sends tears rolling down my cheeks. Now we are both in tears.

'A beautiful one.'

He answers my ridiculous question with equal absurdity.

'I—am—a—beautiful—one.'

'Ask even my father's sister — the head of our gallery of ancestors.'

'She said so at my birth.'

uTata's is learning to walk again. uMama repeats the same instructions as prompts when he practices his stride:

'Hold yourself up. Step forward. Now with the cane. Why are you going that way? No, don't step like that — you'll fall. Focus.'
 'I'm tired.'
 'No, you're not. If you sit, you'll fall. Focus!'
 'Nowadays, everyone is telling me what to do.'
 'Yes, maybe sometimes you should listen: Hold yourself up when you walk; don't slouch. Kick — as if you're kicking a ball: one, two, then use your cane. Now kick: one, two, cane; kick-one-two-cane.'

uTata, has been dancing with death for some time. Until now, this dance has been somewhat private. This time round, there will be no hiding, no complete healing and presentation of that healed whole on the other side of strife. This time round, uTata's dance is between brick and skull. Here, things seem to appear and disappear: sometimes he is at his childhood home in the mountains, then he is living in my childhood home. He calls out to his dead aunt, his father's sister, whom he believes is in the next room; to his dead brother; and to his youngest daughter, who no longer lives at home.

'uGogo is not alive anymore, Tata. We buried her; you were there, remember?'
 'uTatomncini passed away.'
 'uSun'sane lives in another country.'
 'We don't live there anymore.'
 'You don't live there anymore.'
 'We are here now.'
 'You are here now,' we say to him, with no clarity of where exactly "here" or "there" is.

We, his family, are learning to navigate these gaps in his memory, trying to make some poetic sense of them. This is our real life after the rupture. Those

black-and-white scans show dead spaces. Everything is jumbled up now: history, life, past, present, and future are making their way around those scabs. What is still alive is firing, unable to reach its intended destination. It spills and oozes around the trauma; it squirts out, as we try to catch sense of what is going on. We are losing him, one bit at a time. Things appear and disappear, unannounced. Our 500-year-old history has two legs, and it just walked in through our front door. We know our shadow is long; how long we cannot say. Your grandchild landed on our coast. Your crazy grandfather is ringing that bell again. He lost his mind fighting on the other side of the ocean, and now your mind is going too. It is your mother on that horse; she is in labour, giving birth to you, in a rondavel, between chicken and dust.

PAGES 92 – 95;
98 – 101
Installation view
of *Time after time*
(2023) as part of the
exhibition *Things
appear and disappear*
at Kalshnikov Gallery,
Johannesburg, 2023





UNHOUSED MEMORY

Sudeep Sen

The dead's hollow sockets have perfect vision.
Suspended in air with a tensile string —

a perfectly-proportioned brick balance
pendulum's torque-swing and its cranial arc.

Aerodynamics, theatrics, trance — collide
without collision. Evasion, a balletic art —

timing is everything. Brown, black, white —
focus, out-of-focus perception is delusory.

Do we have cataract, or are we clear-sighted?
Whose gaze is it — skull, brick, your, mine?

What is concrete, are formed abstractions —
in that helix, there is pin-point sharpness.





GRASP: THE DENSITY AND MASS OF CRITICAL THOUGHT

Wayne Binitie

In his 2014 publication *Sculpture and Touch*, historian Peter Dent charts the origins, approaches, and identities of art since the Renaissance. Overturning the hierarchical dominance of vision, Dent gathers a diverse collection of essays that resonates with Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* (1603), where the Apostle Thomas is depicted as a skeptic who refuses to believe until he could see and feel the crucifixion wounds of Christ. Dent quotes Dutch author Cees Nootbaum:

At the entrance to the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela there is a marble column with deep impressions of fingers, an emotional and expressionistic claw created by millions of hands, including my own. I was not a man of the Middle Ages, I was not a believer, I arrived by car. If you disregard my hand resting the marble, had I never been in that place, the claw would still be there, eroded in the hard stone by the fingers of all the people now dead. Yet, by laying my hand in that hollow one I was participating in a collective work of art. An idea becomes visible in matter: that is always wondrous.¹

Dent's interest in tactility here exemplifies many threads running through Thom's work, including the im/material ability of art to act as a powerful source of mediation that prompts both the senses and intellect. Moving beyond ontological binaries of life/death, positive/negative, Thom's installations *Autoportrait* and *Time after time* (2023) suggest an affective power of touch that evokes a shared and collective immediacy of collapsed time and material place. Moniker Wagner (2015) suggests that notions of the 'material' as an aesthetic category are recent. Ideas of material are often negated to a lowly sphere of academic activity in its day-to-day application and Wagner argues that, through its proximity to 'matter' — a concept from

Autoportrait
2022
Three-channel video on
infinite loop
Cinematographic credit:
Gareth Fradgley and
Alet Pretorius

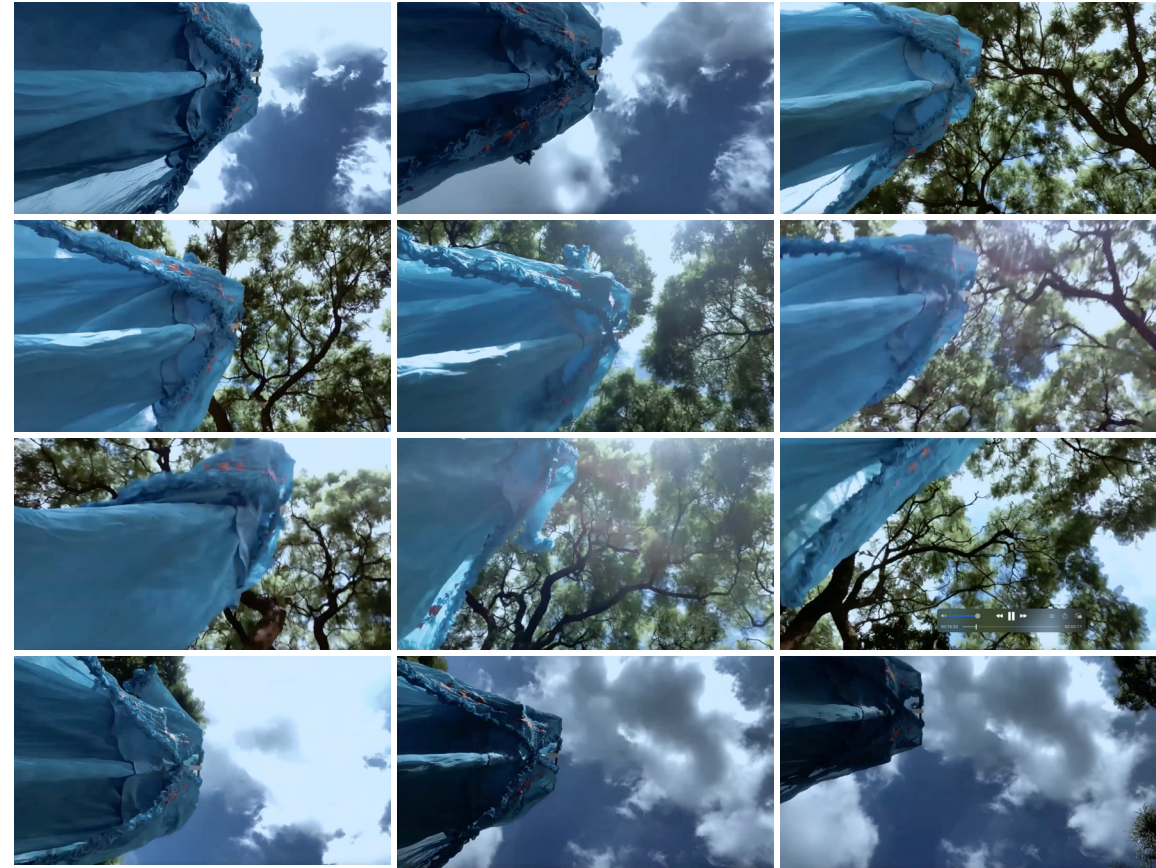
which she says ideas of material were 'slowly extracted' in the modern era — notions of material are culturally charged with a philosophical significance that date back to antiquity as part of its conceptual pairing with 'form'.

What is clear from the work of recent scholars, including Monica Wagner and Lange-Berndt, is that notions of material and matter still constitute a highly contested field of enquiry. Most academic research into materials is more closely aligned with writing than the practice of making. Within such a framework, contemporary artworks that deal more directly with the experience of everyday materials are not held in the same intellectual regard as the work of theorists.

As pointed out by Rosalind Krauss (1999) in her analysis of a 'post-medium' condition, this art-historical prejudice stems from how modernist thinkers such as Clement Greenberg, in the 1960s, treated the subject. Less well discussed in academic scholarship is that Greenberg's essentialist notion of the distinct autonomy of material was not concerned with everyday materiality itself but rather invested in the goal of arriving at a medium specificity of visual purity and transcendental form.

In such terms, materiality acquires an abstract status referred to by art historian Hope Mauzerall as non-physical and removed from the everyday: 'Materiality or matter here is recognised but then cancelled out.'² Art historians such as Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois, Bryony Fer and Caroline A. Jones have since rejected Greenberg's position to argue for a reformulation of modern art to include an art of tactility, embodiment and materialist thought processes.

It might also be argued that, with the exception of Fer, in her writings on Roni Horn's 2007 *Library of Water*, notions of material are still not given full intellectual



weight. As exemplified by the psychoanalytical critiques of Freud and Lacan, many academic thinkers continue to derive their understanding of material from the logics of the unconscious and the repressed. Within the limits of this ahistorical and atemporal position these authors' ideas of material and materiality are not permitted to be contingent, subversive or shocking in the fully physical sense of matter and meaning but are frequently used to think about other passive bodies as impartial cultural indexes pointing elsewhere or nowhere.

Photographic documentation of *Panopticon*, 2008. Single-channel video installation with looped projection on mounds of salt and glass plates. Sizes: 125 x 120 x 45 cm

In contrast, the temporal and spatial histories of materials articulated by Gernot Bohme, Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor can be identified as a contemporary form of historical enquiry into the material and immaterial, human and non-human levels. Thom's performative sense of time and place, matter and memory, can be found in the writings of Pallasmaa, when he suggests:

As a reaction to the loss of materiality and temporal experience, we again appear to be becoming sensitive to messages of matter, as well as to scenes of erosion and decay. Materiality, erosion and ruins have been favoured subject matters of contemporary art from Arte Povera and Gordon Matta-Clark to Anselm Kiefer and the films of Andrei Tarkovsky. The art of Jannis Kounellis expresses dreams and memories of matter, whereas Richard Serra's and Eduardo Chillida's uniquely authoritative masses of forged iron awaken bodily experiences of weight and gravity.³

I first experienced Thom's work *Panopticon* (2009) while a fellow postgraduate student at the Slade School of Fine Art in 2009. This installation comprise a vertical video projection on mounds of salt, mounted on unpolished half-round glass shelves. In the gallery space, visitors observe a pair of floating hands which mysteriously appear to show salt flowing continuously through small holes in each palm.

In an age dominated by the virtual and the visual, Thom's tactile approach here points backwards to Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* and forwards to what Pallasmaa refers to in *The Thinking Hand* (2009) as a fusion of the interior mind and exterior world. Where Caravaggio's Apostle Thomas is depicted as a skeptic who refuses to believe until he could see and feel the crucifixion wounds of Christ,



Thom's Apostle Thomas implies an attitude of felt certainty in the form of an unquestioning acceptance in both the intellect and the senses. Thom's use of salt and video seem to suggest, that it is only through this alchemical reconciliation of oppositional tensions in society and the self then, that the wounds of the past can be healed in the present.

Liquid modernity is a phrase coined by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2002) to describe a fragile and dematerialised society that has moved from a hardware to a software based one. Pallasmaa sees liquid modernity as driven by technological acceleration, resulting in spatial rupture, sensory loss and increased

TOP:
Will you still be mine?
(the weight of my body
in ice)

2024

Edited video and
photographic
documentation of
performance at
Casa Wabi, Mexico,
25 May 2024;

BOTTOM:
Installation view of
Time after time
(2023) as part of
Johan Thom: Grasp
at NIROX Sculpture
Park, 2024.

PAGES 110–111

Video still from
Autoportrait, 2023.
Three-channel video
installation with
mound of soil and
mixed media

environmental isolation. In counterpoint, Thom's tactile use of 'negative' space in his recent ceramic sculptures, installations and works on paper all address the difficulties of grasping a corpus body of knowledge within the sensory/cognitive, technological/analogical divide existing within academic theory and practice.

As can be evidenced in both *Grasp (My right hand)* (2024) and *Will you still be mine? (The weight of my body in ice)* (2024), Thom's works tacitly embody the argument for the rethinking of matter, touch, material and density. In his current solo exhibition *Grasp*, Thom posits that above and below the pressurised surface of volatile critical debates, density also denotes the mass, volume and weightlessness of critical thought being imprinted on — and within — the floating world of liquid modernity.



Endnotes

1. Cees Nootebaum in Dent, P. 2020. *Sculpture and Touch*. Routledge, 1.
2. Mauzerall, H. 1998. *What's the matter with matter? Problems in the criticism of Greenberg, Fried, and Krauss*. *Modern Art*, 85.
3. Pallasmaa, J. 2000. "Hapticity and time." *Architectural Review* 207(1): 78–84.



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Thank you to the Casa Wabi, through which I first had the opportunity to visit Mexico and encounter clay as a sculptural medium. I produced a great many artworks whilst on residency in Mexico and I think such creative growth truly is a reflection of Casa Wabi. Here I must specifically mention Bosco Sodi, Carla Sodi, Mariana Vinalay, Juan Pino, Gustavo Parra and Dulce López for their kind support, feedback and friendly assistance throughout my stay and the production of my work. Fellow resident artists Luis Cansecco and Marina Azahuo were invaluable co-conspirators, sounding boards and even participants in many of the works. Along the way both became lifelong amigos too.

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worked tirelessly to realise this project, assisting with its production, its installation at NIROX and finally with proofreading, editing and design of the catalogue. Tristin Roland and Caitlin Le Roux (then both Masters students in Fine Arts at the University of Pretoria) also assisted with the installation of the work and, in the case of Roland, the later management of the process too. I also want to thank the young Austrian intern at NIROX, Paul Trieb, for the excellent drone videography and accompanying photographs of the exhibition.

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The University of Pretoria (UP) has been my professional home now for ten years. I am always thankful to have the opportunity to work, grow and live at UP. I specifically want to thank my colleague Professor Jenni Lauwrens from Visual Studies for her enthusiastic support of the exhibition but also for her active, collaborative involvement with the associated community outreach engagement project, *The Grasp Sculpture Kit*. Regarding the latter, I must also thank Prof Lauwrens' students from the SOA210 module and members of the visually impaired community at the university and beyond, for their considered public interaction with the prototype of the *Grasp Kit* during the stages of its research and development. Thank you to all my colleagues and my students in the Visual Arts Division for their ongoing support of my artistic research and a

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Thom at
The Institute of
Graphic Arts of
Oaxaca, founded
by Francisco Toledo
in 1988.

the installation of *Grasp* at NIROX. We are all lucky to have your critical eye to document the changing world of contemporary art with real expertise, care, and love.

Alet Pretorius, longtime friend, photographer, and journalist of note. Your photographs of the various works of art, public engagements, and performances that form part of my work including this project give it a life beyond the moment. Your commitment to your craft keeps it alive and hopefully will inspire many others to remember the importance of photojournalism in our ever-diminishing public world of serious photography and in-depth journalism.

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— Johan Thom (Pretoria, 10 February 2025)



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SVEN CHRISTIAN is a writer, editor, and curator. In early 2022, he was appointed curator of NIROX Sculpture Park and the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture. Recent exhibitions include *Small Things* (2024–25); *Khalid Albaih: Khartoon!* (2024); *Relief* (2024); and *Lines of Sight* (2024). He completed an MA in Contemporary Curatorial Practices at the University of the Witwatersrand (2020), and holds a Bachelor of Fine Art from Rhodes University (2011). Sven is also the editor of *FORM Journal*, *Walter Oltmann: In Time* (2025); Ashraf Jamal's *Strange Cargo: Essays on Art* (2022), co-editor of *Bruce Murray Arnott: Into the Megatext* (2023); Coral Bijoux's *Dreams as R-evolution* (2020); and William Kentridge's *Why Should I Hesitate: Putting Drawings to Work* (2019). Between 2017 and 2018 Sven was an Assistant Curator at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA). His writing has been published by Routledge, *OnCurating*, *The Garage Journal*, *Ellipses: Journal of Creative Research*, and *The Thinker*, amongst others.

SUDEEP SEN is a leading international poet whose prize-winning books include: *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins), *Aria* (A K Ramanujan Translation Award), *Fractals: New & Selected Poems | Translations 1980–2015* (London Magazine Editions), *EroText* (Penguin), *Kaifi Azmi: Poems | Nazms* (Bloomsbury), *Anthropocene* (Pippa Rann, Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize & Wise Owl Literary Award); *Red* (from where 'Unhoused Memories' is taken, was written during his NIROX residency) and *Rock* complete 'The Eco Trilogy'. Edited landmark anthologies include: *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry*, *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (Sahitya Akademi), and *Converse: Contemporary English Poetry by Indians* (Pippa Rann). *Blue Nude: Ekphrasis & New Poems* (Jorge Zalamea International Poetry Prize), *Rock*, and *The Whispering Anklets* are forthcoming. His photography, represented

by ArtMbassy, Rome/Berlin, is part of private/public collections. The Government of India awarded him the senior fellowship for "outstanding persons in the field of culture/literature." Sen is the first Asian honoured to deliver the Derek Walcott Lecture and read at the Nobel Laureate Festival.

SIKHO SIYOTULA-SIEGEMUND earned a Fine Arts degree from the University of Pretoria in 2011. Since then she has travelled extensively for her artistic and academic pursuits. Currently a research associate at the University of Pretoria, Siyotula-Siegemund has also been a research fellow at the University of Potsdam in Germany and is an alumna of the Research Training Group Minor Cosmopolitanisms, supported by the German Research Foundation. In 2023, she received a joint doctorate from the University of Potsdam in Germany and the University of Pretoria in South Africa. Her work is strongly influenced by her background as a visual artist and her research interests in practices of blackness in contemporary visual arts and intercultural relations. She is particularly interested in the creation of visual images in the digital age and their impact on reshaping cultural narratives.

JOHAN THOM was born in Johannesburg in 1976. He is a contemporary South African artist who works across a variety of media including sculpture, video, performance, drawing, printmaking and photography. He is currently living and working in Pretoria and is an associate Professor in Fine Art at the Department of Visual Art, University of Pretoria. From a narrower focus on the body in his earlier work, Thom's interests have gradually shifted to an exploration of the performative relationship between the body, materials and found objects. He has worked extensively with a broad range of found objects and materials such as wood, polyurethane foam, clay, plaster, chalk, blackboard paint and many others — often generating messy, corporeal visual forms that extend, question and animate the various forces at stake in our changing, material relationship to the surrounding world.



Installation view of
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Johan Thom

DESIGN

Sven Christian

PRINTING

Minuteman Press

COVER

Detail of *Grasp*
(LH + RH + LHRH), 2024

PHOTO CREDITS

Marina Azahua: 109 (top);
Carla Crafford: 62
Kalashnikovv Gallery: 92-95; 98-101;
Gustavo Parra: 45; Anthea Pokroy: 1-3;
6-7; 16; 58-59; 65; 124-126
Alet Pretorius: 52-53; 68-69; 72-77; 109
(bottom); 110-111; 122; David Thom:
28-29; Johan Thom: 12-13; 20-23; 41;
54-55; 105; 107; 117

VILLA-LEGODI
Centre for Sculpture





WILL YOU
STILL BE MINE

The artist's intention is to create a sense of loss and longing. The photograph on the wall depicts a person standing on a beach, looking out at the ocean. The crumpled paper objects on the floor represent the artist's own struggles and the pain of heartbreak. The title "Will You Still Be Mine" suggests a plea for love and connection in the face of adversity.



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