

**A Practitioner's Guide to Faking It:
Authenticity, Sincerity and Value in South African Experiential
Visual Culture.**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the concepts of authenticity, sincerity, and their perceived opposites in art history: the fake and the forgery. Focusing on the experiential dimensions of art, I examine how these concepts construct notions of value in postcolonial contemporary art. The study is framed by three central research questions. Firstly, why has authenticity, a term best used in evaluating the materiality or provenance of an historical artefact, gained such purchase in validating and branding the conceptual content of contemporary art, particularly from what are considered emerging markets for speculative investment? Secondly, how might sincerity, as an alignment between internal feeling and outward expression, better evaluate the expressive, reflective and experiential qualities of art? Thirdly, how might a materially inauthentic artwork be considered conceptually authentic, serving as a 'creative lie' that reveals sincere experiential truths? The interdisciplinary methodology combines Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological approach to the "realisation of the text", Susan Stewart's conception of "the souvenir" as an indexical trace of experience, Walter Benjamin's notion of the "aura" of an artwork (as that which can only be apprehended through proximity to an original work of art in the here and now), and tourism theorist John P. Taylor's description of the "zone of contact" created through sincere exchange. These frameworks highlight the dialogical processes through which meaning is co-constructed between artworks and audiences. Chapter One seeks to better define and examine conceptions of 'authenticity' and 'sincerity', with Iser and Stewart's ideas applied to a work by Candice Breitz. Chapter Two examines the concepts of the forgery and the fake in relation to the alternate histories created in work by Chad Rossouw, and the critical reception of Andrew Lamprecht's exhibition: *Tretchikoff: The People's Painter* (2011). Chapter Three critiques the influence of museums, branding, market forces, and the role of curatorship, focusing on African representation at the Venice Biennale and the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa. Chapter Four considers live performative works by Lerato Shadi and Sikhumbuzo Makandula as forms of syncretic ritualising, which borrow from tradition but are not traditional (i.e. not 'authentic') but sincere. The study advocates for an experiential engagement with art that values open-ended, personal interactions over fixed narratives or economic imperatives. It investigates sincerity's transformative potential as a lens for understanding art's role in reflecting and shaping local cultural expression, as distinct from a performative 'authenticity' tailored towards international markets.

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Introduction

Map, Key, Legend: Research Questions and Methodology

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.

— Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*

This research project is an exploration of the concepts of authenticity (as it applies to objects of art), and sincerity (in how it might describe an honest alignment between artistic intention and expression). Although authenticity is a quality better linked to objects, whilst sincerity (because it implies some form of enactment) is a better description of a person's actions, sincerity might also be applied to an object as a kind of transferred epithet. If we describe an artwork as 'sincere', what we might mean is that there is an alignment between the artist's intent and means of expression in the work of art which may, in turn, be sincerely experienced by an audience. What I seek to explore is how sincerity may be understood as at the root of the experiential qualities of a work of art and how it may thus be applied to objects as much as it might to performative work.

Underpinning the exploration of these concepts are two key research questions.

Firstly, why has authenticity, a term best used in evaluating the materiality or provenance of an historical artefact, gained such purchase in validating and branding the conceptual content of contemporary art, particularly from what, internationally, are considered emerging markets for speculative investment (i.e. those outside of western cultural centres)? In observing constructs of authenticity as an evaluation of contemporary art, particularly from these so-called emerging markets, one may begin to see how such a system of validation focuses on the economic value of a work of art (its financial worth as an asset-class commodity, bought and sold on the open international market) rather than its cultural value (its collection and preservation within the local context from which the work has emerged). Post 1994, as South Africa emerged from apartheid, the international recognition of our creative outputs that grappled with an emerging collective cultural identity was greatly lauded. Thirty years later, however, the fact that many artists from this context are still required to display something of their national/ethnic identity or an oversimplification of

cultural heritage in order to generate international interest perpetuates stereotypes of identity rather than encouraging the creative expression of unique individuals. The long history of a colonial fantasy of African cultural identity is equally perpetuated by the more recent ill-defined speculative investment category of African Contemporary Art. Supported by international auction houses and locally by the likes of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town, the premise that artistic expression on the continent has a particular 'authentic' identity which supports a specific international investment category is rarely, if ever, critically analysed. Part of this lack of academic critical engagement is a complex system in which critique of an international economic system that supports local creative production in postcolonial contexts (which are underfunded by local sources) may unsettle a major source of financial input, i.e. be a kind of biting the hand which feeds it. The perpetuation of neocolonial systems of financing and control, however, has the potential to unduly influence how the cultural productions of postcolonial contexts are framed and celebrated.

In contrast to an evaluation system which privileges economic rather than cultural value (and in fact, I will argue, may lead to 'performances' of culture for an external eye designed to harness economic potential in ways that are very far from being authentic) I consider a second question: How might sincerity, a term which has fallen out of favour but which describes an alignment between internal feeling and outward expression, better evaluate the expressive, reflective and experiential qualities of art? Through the writings of literary theorist Lionel Trilling (1972) and sociologist Ervime Goffman (1953), I shall explore how 'sincerity', a term used to describe the alignment between internal feeling and outward expression, has fallen out of favour in contemporary parlance. Sincerity's proximity to sentiment and sentimentality (and its emotive rather than rational motives) at best might suggest a naïveté or lack of sophistication, or at worst, a deliberate, calculated and manipulative performance of feeling. I will argue, however, that a study of sincerity may better assist in evaluating an artwork's cultural value as a manifestation or articulation of a particular cultural or historical experience from within the world of that experience.

Fundamental to a study of the concepts of authenticity and sincerity is that which is perceived to be their opposites in fake and forgery. Forgery is a close observation and imitation of multiple factors, both materially and contextually, and thus may be described as a kind of performance of authenticity, one which is entirely insincere. All art, however, is some form of edited or constructed representation and may thus contain an element of fictionalisation. Here arises a third and related question, particularly when one focuses on art's constructed or fictional qualities: *How might a materially inauthentic artwork be*

conceptually authentic i.e. be a kind of creative lie that may still reveal a sincere experiential truth?

In order to attempt to answer these research questions, I will deploy, amongst others, two key concepts linked to notions of authenticity and sincerity. These are Walter Benjamin's concept of the *aura* (2008, p.23), a quality that informs the direct experience of a work of art in the *here and now* (2008, p.21), and tourism theorist John P. Taylor's notion of a *zone of contact* (2001, p.23) as a space in which meaning may be mutually and sincerely created within a cultural exchange.¹ Recourse to these key ideas will recur in this thesis to emphasise the need for a direct and multifaceted experience of art for it to hold any value at all.

Tourism studies, the field from which Taylor's concept of a *zone of contact* arises, has variously debated the definition of 'authenticity,' and the efficacy of using the term as a valuation of cultural expression and experience. Whilst the debate is at times convoluted and potentially reductive, cultural expressions from nation-states and geographic regions outside of the financial global centres of Europe and the US are still subject to a touristic gaze. The lack of local support and funding for the creative arts in these geographic peripheries serves to increase the temptation of a promise of greater exposure and financial support offered by international markets. The inclination to pander to the expectations and desires of these international audiences has the potential to distort cultural expression as a commodity to be sold. Tourism may thus perpetuate structures of neocolonialism and fantasies of the discovery of cultural 'otherness', factors which continue to haunt contemporary cultural expression in postcolonial regions. Tourism theory is thus a useful means to explore questions of authenticity and sincerity as these might be applied to works of South African art. South African culture, in the post-apartheid years, has increasingly been driven by a desire for global recognition, but the gold standard for such recognition often remains embedded in the economic and cultural centres of the world: notably in Europe and the U.S. As is often the case with tourism, this desire for global recognition may often involve a process of flattening identity, a kind of performing of the self for others or a presenting of an 'authentic' self for the benefit of someone from elsewhere, rather than producing an internal critical examination of local society which evinces a sincere, shared appreciation of local

¹ Certain key terms in this thesis are italicised. Whilst they are citations, and should thus more correctly be presented in inverted commas, their repetition may make this use of punctuation distracting or confusing. The use of single inverted commas (as scare-quotes) which highlight that a term needs to be considered as the 'word' itself, implies something other than what it seems to say (as in a euphemism or used ironically), or is something colloquially used or 'so-called', will be expressed in singular inverted commas.

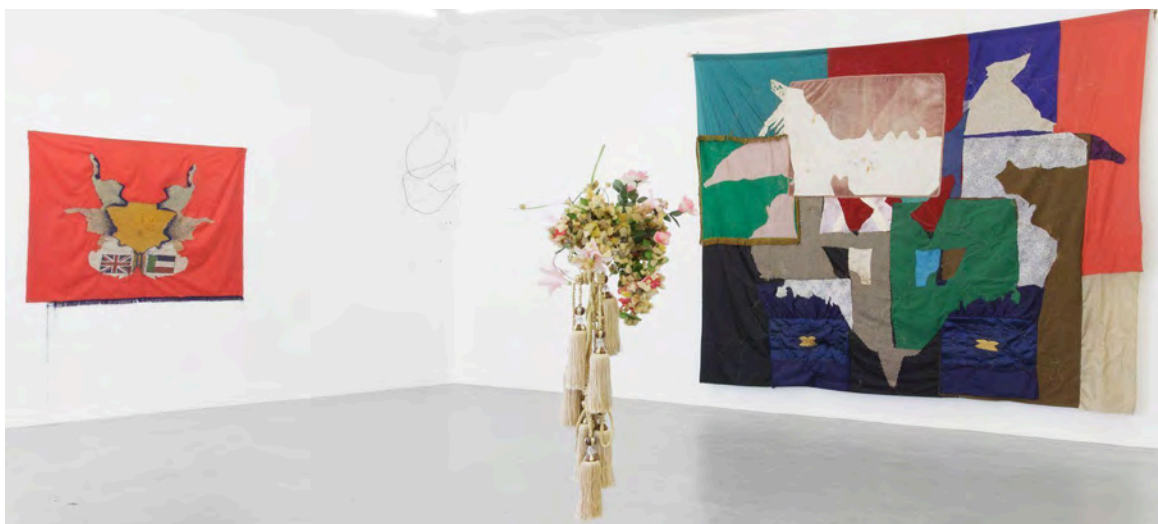
culture. MacCannell (1976), Handler (1986), Wang (1999), Taylor (2001), Reisinger and Steiner (2006) are but some of the tourism theorists on whose work I reflect in order to examine the variable uses of 'authenticity' and 'sincerity' as these apply to cultural experiences inflected by global power discrepancies. From the field of anthropology, I will draw on John and Jean Comaroff's book *Ethnicity Inc.* (2009) or, more importantly, their revisited edited book co-written with George Meiu, *Ethnicity, Commodity, In/Corporation* (2020), in which they observe "the sudden intensification, across the late twentieth-century world, of the commodification of culture and the corporatisation of identity" (2020, p.1) to support my own arguments about an increasingly rapid commodification of culture in postcolonial contexts along ethnic/identity lines. This work also assists in adding important insights on the role of neoliberalism and its impact on neocolonial impulses apparent in former colonial nation-states. The case studies in *Ethnicity, Commodity, In/Corporation* are predominantly from the field of heritage management rather than the sphere of contemporary art, but their observations on identity politics as a means of branding and commodifying ethnicity, often on ill-defined terms, align with my research into the representation of contemporary art in the postcolonial context.

I will return to a more in-depth overview of the key theorists and case studies in the chapter breakdown later in this introduction. Firstly, however, the title of this thesis, *A Practitioner's Guide to Faking It: Authenticity, Sincerity and Value in South African Experiential Visual Culture*, requires a little contextualising. Initially, the proposed case studies for this research were all examples of work whose focus was a live, transitory, or immersive experience. What informed this was a desire to resist work that was object-orientated, not only because digital, ephemeral, and performative work is the focus of my own making and teaching (my positionality as a practitioner), but because object-orientated artwork forms the majority of the kinds of South African art that receive the most attention through journalistic reporting, awards, and high-profile platforms of display. The capacity to commodify objects makes it far more lucrative for gallery systems to put their marketing weight behind such saleable artefacts, and it was this increasing focus on the economic value, rather than the cultural value of art in South Africa, that initially made me wish to focus away from objects.

What emerged in the process of research, however, was a realisation that my interest in exploring the experiential or immersive qualities of artworks was not something limited to time-based, live, transitory, or performative works. Furthermore, the activity of forgery is most tightly connected to object-orientated art although, as I shall argue, it is the means by which these objects make a performance of authenticity that makes them interesting, even when they are proven to be inauthentic.

What prompted this focus on authenticity and sincerity, their opposing concepts of fake and forgery, and the concomitant attention to the experiential nature of art is a certain trend I began to observe within both South African art critique and in curatorial statements, in which these tend to focus primarily on the identity of the maker, and thus make claims for the authenticity of the artworks by virtue of who made them, rather than critically assessing the experience of these artworks and considering whether their concepts are sincere in the alignment between artistic intent, mode of expression, and audience reception. For example, the South African artist Igshaan Adams is frequently defined in press releases in relation to three aspects of his identity: coloured, Muslim, and homosexual.² These references to the artist's personal identity, which often precede any description of his artworks themselves, are variously a paraphrasing of the description of the artist outlined in the press release for Adams's exhibition *Parda* (2015):

Igshaan Adams' work investigates hybrid identity, particularly in relation to race and sexuality. Adams was raised in a community racially classified in South Africa as 'coloured' under apartheid legislature. The term 'coloured' is still used in South Africa to refer to the creole community of mixed raced origins. An observant but liberal Muslim raised by Christian grandparents, Adams occupies a precarious place in his religious community because of his homosexuality (blank projects, 2015).



Igshaan Adams. 2015. *Parda*. Installation view at blank projects, Cape Town. (blankprojects.com).

² See, for example: Matthews, A. 2012. 'Young African Artists—Igshaan Adams', *Business Day*; O'Toole, S. 2015. 'Critics' picks: Igshaan Adams', *Artforum*; Barnitz, M and Goyke, L. 2016. 'Representations of queerness in documentary films and art', *Freie Universität Berlin*; Rappaport, E. 2015. 'Islamic Tradition meets Post-Apartheid Identity in Igshaan Adams Intricate Tapestries', *Artsy Magazine*; as well as two exhibition catalogue publications produced by his gallery blank projects: *Igshaan Adams* (2017) and *Igshaan Adams: When Dust Settles* (2018).

Adams's exhibition *Parda* consists of multiple abstract textile works constructed from a variety of found or recycled materials, including tablecloths, tassels, wire, beads, and an Old South African flag. Several of these works are stitched into shapes that reference Hermann Rorschach's inkblot tests, a clear invocation to the audience to use their own perceptions to abstract their own meaningful interpretation from these amorphous constructions. Yet the context of these projections is already determined for us by a curatorial statement that foregrounds the artist's identity as the lens through which to view the work before the audience are allowed the opportunity of an encounter in which they may make of the artworks whatever they might.

Only one work, *Plate 7 (from the series Neoscope)* (2014), makes reference to Islam through the use of a Muslim burial cloth, and none of the artworks in this exhibition makes explicit reference to sexual orientation unless we are to presume rather reductive ideas about gender identity in relation to flower patterns: a design motif frequently used in decorative arts in multiple cultures, including the Islamic world, where such botanical references are most certainly not an inference of queer identity.³



Igshaan Adams. 2014. *Plate 7 (from the series Neoscope)*. Islamic burial cloth, fabric, thread; 195x138cm

³ Adams is not alone in being subject to having his biographical details and personal identity form the principal curatorial framing of his work. South African artists as diverse as Nicholas Hlobo, Nandipha Mntambo, Mohau Modisakeng, Zanele Muholi, Kemang Wa Lehulere, Robin Rhode, Mary Sibande and Buhlebezwe Siwani have all, at times, been described in their press releases with a focus on their personal identities (in ways that are never equally applied to white, male, middle class South African artists) even when the particular work presented does not directly engage with such themes.

What may also be frequently observed in art press releases, artist and curatorial statements, and art critique (which may often be nothing more than a rehashing of these press releases rather than insightful critical engagement with the work itself) is how themes of the work and the artist's intent are *told* to us as audiences in the broadest terms, often without describing how the work itself actually achieves its impact. This introduces another recurring concern of this thesis: the increased usage of didactic curatorial texts as a prominent part of exhibition practice. Rather than being a discrete textual accompaniment that expands on the content and context of the exhibition in a catalogue or programme note, such explanatory texts have increasingly become a prominent part of the installation itself: vinyl texts occupying vast amounts of wall spaces, often looming larger than the artworks themselves. This marks a trend where galleries increasingly overshadow the displayed artworks with extensive commentary. Vinyl texts, as a strategic curatorial or poetic intervention that may create spatial, thematic and conceptual links between works (in, for example, a group exhibition), are not universally to be decried, but here a distinction must be made between "storytelling", and a term now frequently being used in content marketing circles: the concept of "storyselling". "Storytelling" is a "relaying of tales or stories of experiences, with no end goal in mind other than to share the story itself", whilst "storyselling is a strategy to parlay information about a brand, product, or service in the form of a story and end with a call-to-action ... to get to the heart of [consumer] emotions and show why the product or service is perfect for them" (Von der Osten, 2021). What may be observed in this distinction is not only the idea that the 'story' of a work of art, or a particular narrative of experience by a critic, is viewed as somehow insufficient as a tale in itself to be told, but that "storyselling" is driven by a particular kind of commercial end goal, with possible emotional manipulation, such that the idea or object can be sold, or the viewer 'buys in' to the concept, rather than simply taking pleasure in their own experience.

Writing itself is a creative practice, but the primacy that the written word frequently has in society over other creative forms of expression may lead to multiple tensions between practice and theory, as if those who make are somehow inferior to those who come after to 'explain' in textual form what it is they have done. This may be evidenced in forms of written accompaniment to creative works which dictate or reduce meaning, or close down a direct audience experience rather than complement and inspire further research and contemplation. Certain uses of text may create a kind of authority over the visual or the performative by fixing meaning and presenting this as 'authentic'. This idea may be observed in the following statement by improvisational violinist Stephen Nachmanovitch:

Music represented symbolically is regarded as more acceptable than music happening in real time as sound. We have fallen under the sway of a strange inversion in which symbols are regarded as more real than the realities they represent. Music (or art, literature, theater, science, technology) is often treated as a collection of works arranged on an historical timeline. The scores are regarded as having not only an independent existence, but a higher existence than the performances. Stick a word, mathematical symbol, or other label on a process and you have nailed it down; it seems more real than an un-label-able activity (2007, p.32).

This tension between theory and practice is something reflected in my title: *A Practitioner's Guide to Faking It*. Whilst there is a reductive or hierarchical nature in the way text may obscure the experiential nature of other art forms, there may also be ways in which text complements or heightens an experience and may inspire a reader to go out into the world and test these experiences for themselves. This is then the 'practice' in this study I attempt to practice, as writing is not my usual preferred method of creative expression, in the hope of getting something right, or at least learning in the process.

A principal argument of this thesis is that art, as a reflection on lived experience, may best represent this by being an experience in itself: something which is not apprehended in a single glance, but unfolds and reveals its meaning through extended contemplation and engagement. This experience cannot be fully understood or summed up via an explanatory supplementary text. Rather than something that can be explained via text (or is merely illustrative of a text), I will argue that artworks themselves are a kind of text. The only way to understand that text is experientially, through the experience of 'reading' or engaging with the work, and discovering that experience for ourselves.

My methodological approach is guided throughout by the idea that a work of art only comes into existence and reveals its meaning through the creative relationship between the artwork itself and the audience's experience of it. The literary theorist Wolfgang Iser describes this process as "the realisation of the text" (1972, p.279): a means by which the meaning of a work can only become activated in the process of reading (i.e. experiencing) rather than being intrinsically contained within the work regardless of external engagement. For Iser, "[t]he phenomenological theory of art lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text" (1972, p.279). This phenomenological approach to the reading process can be extended to works of visual and performative art when one considers how artworks operate not as a single closed symbol or signifier of meaning, but as

a set of semiotic references which combine with the audiences' interpretations to co-create meaning through a process of 'reading', experiencing, and discovering. Iser suggests that the meaning of a creative work exists as a kind of virtual entity between two poles which he refers to as the "artistic" (the text created by the author) and the "aesthetic" (the "realisation" of the text by the reader) (1972, p.279). He suggests that "the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realisation of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two" (1972, p.279). Whilst it is possible to hold the physical object of a book, or see the material object of a painting, sculpture, or live performing body, to understand the content and fully apprehend the possible meanings of what the work conveys requires this to be dynamically brought to life through the audience's active engagement. Iser highlights how reading is a creative process where the reader interacts with 'unwritten' aspects, gaps and indeterminacies which compel the reader to use their imagination, shaping the meaning and enriching the reading experience. He describes how "[t]he unwritten aspects of apparently trivial scenes, and the unspoken dialogue within the 'turns and twists,' not only draw the reader into the action, but also lead him to shade in the many outlines suggested by the given situations, so that these take on a reality of their own" (1972, p. 281). Iser also suggests that intentional gaps or indeterminacy in a creative work (ways in which meaning is implicit rather than explicit) allow for multiple interpretations and realisations. He observes that:

It is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself (1972, p.285).

Iser thus argues that these intentional gaps, indeterminacies and implicit meanings stimulate the reader's creativity and foster engagement, making each reading unique. In this active engagement for the audience, Iser suggests how the creative work may have the capacity to be transformative. He notes that "[i]n reading we operate on different levels. For although we may be thinking the thoughts of someone else, what we are will not disappear completely" (1972, p.298). At the same time, he suggests that "[i]n thinking the thoughts of another, [the reader's] own individuality temporarily recedes into the background since it is supplanted by these alien thoughts, which now become the theme on which his attention is focused" (1972, p.295). Reading involves a dialectical process whereby readers decipher the text while simultaneously discovering unformulated aspects of their own consciousness. This interaction may lead to self-reflection and personal growth, mirroring the structure of real-life experiences. In order to be immersed in the interpretation of a creative work (and to take on

a kind of shared consciousness that the work produces between the two poles of the artist's intention and the audience's interpretation—what I will argue is the sincere *zone of contact*) Iser observes that the creative work must not merely affirm our assumptions on a particular theme for “it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences” (1972, p.295).

The capacity for objects to provoke a desire to imagine an accompanying narrative will be explored through Susan Stewart's definition of ‘the souvenir’ (1993). Whilst also a literary theorist, Stewart's focus is on objects and their ability to operate as semiotic signifiers which inform and articulate implicit narrative meanings. The souvenir in the context of tourism may first seem to be associated with mass-produced curios, however, Stewart's definition is more akin to personally selected mementoes. She suggests that souvenirs serve as referents to past experiences, evoking narratives that connect the object to moments of desire, longing, or nostalgia for the unrepeatable and fleeting: “events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative” (1993, p.135). She suggests that a souvenir is inherently a fragment or trace of the original experience, carrying an *aura* of loss (1993, p.136). Unlike mass-produced collectables, she argues, souvenirs gain value from their personal significance to the possessor as mementoes of individual experiences, rather than from their material properties. The souvenir is also an object which reflects a search for authenticity tied to the past, often viewed through the lens of nostalgia. She observes that “[t]he substituting power of the souvenir operates within the following analogy: as experience is to an imagined point of authenticity, so narrative is to the souvenir” (1993, p.136). The souvenir's perceived ‘authenticity’ arises from its distance from the present and its role as a symbolic point of origin for narrative construction. The ways in which Stewart suggests a souvenir brings past experiences into the present (and provokes a desire for narrative) resembles ways in which Benjamin suggests that the *aura* of an artwork brings a sense of history and distance into the *here and now* of the viewer's present (2008, pp.21-23). These narratives, Stewart argues, can never fully realise the original experience and should never be definitively articulated. The souvenir explained merely becomes a random object rather than a fragment which, through its incomplete but metonymic relationship to the past, inspires narratives of experience that “articulates the play of desire” (1993, p.136).

The souvenir may operate as a metaphor for works of art not only in how they might carry the indexical traces of the artist's creative process and intent but also how the partial or fragmentary nature of such signifiers (and what Iser describes as the intentional gaps and indeterminacies) evoke the active participation of an audience in imagining potential

meanings and developing a unique narrative of experience. Iser's approach to the realisation of text and Stewart's notion of the work of the souvenir will be further explored and applied in Chapter One, with particular reference to a work by Candice Breitz. Both concepts, however, inform my methodological approach throughout the thesis, as does the approach of sincerity.

Before exploring the key themes and case studies of the chapters which are to follow, however, it may be worthwhile to consider a slightly broader context of recent history in South African art and society that led me to the focus of this study.

Cause and Affect

In his editorial introduction to a collection of essays by Walter Benjamin, Michael W. Jennings observes how, in the 1930s, Benjamin wrote of:

the capacity of [an] artwork to encode information about its historical period (and, in so doing, potentially to reveal to readers and viewers otherwise inapprehensible aspects of the nature of their own era), and the way in which modern media—as genres and as individual works—affect the changing human sensory apparatus (2008, p.9).

In his essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', Benjamin speaks not specifically of the conceptual content of an artwork but rather its means of production. Conceptual content, however, cannot be divorced from modes of production or, for that matter, the larger societal politics governing modes of production. Benjamin also observes the nature and role of history in adjusting our changing perceptions of the world: "[j]ust as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history" (2008, p.23).

Writing in his introduction to the 1999 republication of *The Tourist* (1976), social scientist Dean MacCannell describes a certain sense of redundancy he felt, in hindsight, in writing a book that sought to explore the ethnography of modern society (as a deferment from an exploration of 'primitive' or 'historical' culture) at an exact moment when the notion of modernity was being called into question via postmodernism. He suggests that the crisis of historicity propounded by any self-proclaimed 'post' moment carries with it a "nostalgia for the bourgeois or Cartesian subject, and a Eurocentric past—the very institutions and concepts which the critics seek to deconstruct" (1999, xviii).

The desire for authenticity has become increasingly pervasive in recent years perhaps because of the tangled web of cause-and-effect that the various 'post' prefixed theories of the late twentieth century proposed in a crisis of temporality. Authenticity implies a single truth and its authentication, and in so doing, infers both the ideas of origin (and adjunct originality) and an authority which would determine this. Stewart contemplates this increasing societal desire and nostalgia for authenticity thus:

As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence. 'Authentic' experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated (1993, p.133).

In addition to what might be best described as a form of primitivist nostalgia that drives a desire for 'authenticity' is another impulse identified by anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff in their book *Ethnicity Inc.* (2009). In this volume, the writers reflect on the relationship between culture, neoliberal capitalism, and the rampant commodification of ethnic identity. What they observe is the rise from the late twentieth century onwards of a global phenomenon in which diverse (frequently marginalised) ethnic groups are reshaping themselves to fit corporate ideals and, in tandem, how corporations are appropriating ethnic practices to tap into new markets and increase consumer demand. They note that "just as culture is being commodified, so the commodity is being rendered explicitly cultural—and, consequently, is increasingly apprehended as the generic source of sociality" (2009, p.28). The corporatising and commodifying of identity may bring economic advantages and even a sense of social cohesion as ethnic groups attempt to reclaim or reposition aspects of culture under a unifying umbrella brand that masquerades as 'authentic' identity. In South Africa, however, we might observe how the subsequent disillusionment with the concept of the 'Rainbow Nation' offers a cautionary narrative as regards how the generic branding of difference as unifying ultimately fails to grasp the heterogeneity of culture by oversimplifying difference or ignoring complex social tensions, which seldom fulfils the mutual benefit such branding might seem to promise. As Comaroff and Comaroff note in their follow-up publication with George Meiu, *Ethnicity, Commodity, In/Corporation* (2020): "[w]hile resorting to a reliable, homogeneous brand image might make sense for purposes of marketing washing powder, 'selling' a nation in the same manner—especially one claiming to embrace diversity within a democracy—was not only futile but dangerous" (2020, p.25).

Cultural practice in post-apartheid South Africa has long wrestled with the politics and aesthetics of representation.⁴ In the introduction to *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity, and Politics in Contemporary South African Art*, Brenda Atkins observed that during the apartheid era, the focus on aesthetics of resistance predominated and “were deployed in a largely polarised political terrain, with artists ... focusing on the brutality of the larger ‘common enemy’, the apartheid state” (1999, p.15).⁵ Very real risk to the artist was inherent in these aesthetics of resistance, not merely in a sense of professional success or failure. Cultural practitioners who created such aesthetics ran the risk of being arrested, interrogated, and tortured. Their works could have been censored and they themselves banned and exiled. But this position taken by Resistance Art “often considered [it] more strategic to disseminate oppositional images than to be critical of the assumptions underlying artistic production, or the conditions of its reception” (Atkins, 1999, p.15). Following Benjamin's logic, the mode of production for Resistance Art was strongly inclined towards that which could be quickly and covertly produced and seen by as many people as possible. It is potentially for this reason that oppositional images were most commonly produced as murals, flyers, or print posters. A subtler approach was also used by other artists in their conceptual content, employing metaphor and requiring a fair amount of visual literacy on the part of the viewer. In this way, artists could use allegory as a kind of plausible deniability to avoid censors e.g. Penny Siopis's *Patience on a Monument* (1988) or William Kentridge's *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City After Paris* (1989). Although both these works are now included as part of the Grade 12 art history syllabus in the category of South African Resistance Art, it is perhaps reductive to analyse either work using the same terms employed by artists whose intention was very expressly a form of activism in their use of banned images and political slogans. Siopis herself reflects on how, whilst not unhappy with the political readings of her work, she “sometimes feel[s] frustrated that an emphasis on the political often results in reductive

⁴ A very minor percentage of the material in this introduction and in Chapter One of this thesis formed part of the introduction to my published chapter: Western, R., 2017. ‘At the Risk of Being Sincere: Participation and Delegation in South African Contemporary Live Art’. In: O'Grady, A. (ed) *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.179-204.

⁵ A seminal edited volume on the issue of racial and identity representation in South African contemporary art at the time, this book seems to have lost the vogue it once had in South African art schools. Commendable for its attempt to include diverse voices through an open call for submissions on the topic, Atkins explains in her introduction that the predominance of white contributors might be cause for critique. She notes that, “despite an inclusive editorial policy designed (somewhat naively it seems, in retrospect) to make *Grey Areas* as representative of the post-apartheid moment as possible ... ironically ... [it] might well be described as representative of this moment, although not in the terms we had imagined” (1999, pp.14-15). On re-reading *Grey Areas* so many years later, I am struck by how pertinent many of the debates still are when it comes to the representation of identity and race. The arguments put forward are often more nuanced and complex in local history and character than many of the theorists borrowed from Europe and the US to introduce students to critical race theory now. Whilst global trends may inform debate, a failure to observe local conditions and subtleties may leave us continually trying to compare and catch up with Europe and the US, a condition which seems counterintuitive to any decolonising project.

responses to complex and ambiguous situations” (cited in Smith. 2005, p.3). Siopis views her creative praxis, both at the time and going forward, as more of an act of reimagining social conditions as allegory: a site of reflection and a less direct political commentary. She, nevertheless, acknowledges how the perspective of time passing can affect the reading of a work: “history creates ways of looking as well as making, and sometimes what becomes visible later was invisible, but present, earlier” (cited in Smith. 2005, p.3).

Moving on from Resistance Art, and the early post-apartheid debate on the politics of identity representation embodied in *Grey Areas*, I would like to look at a moment nearly fifteen years on. In 2013, I gave a presentation at the SAVAH (South African Visual Art Historians) conference in which I reflected on how, nearly 20 years into democracy, the ‘brand identity’ (to use a corporate capitalist term because this is how the art world was beginning to feel) of South African visual arts was taking a concerning, commercially-centred turn. A partial focus of this talk was a reflection on how the looming twenty-year anniversary of South African democracy had inspired a number of curated exhibitions and full-colour, coffee-table style tomes operating under a shared ambition to define and reflect on a ‘now’ moment in the South African contemporary art world. Two such examples included a group show at Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town: *South African Art Now* (29 November 2006-6 January 2007) and the book *South African Art Now* by Sue Williamson (published 2010). Despite bearing no official relationship to one another, these two collections of art analysis had clearly borrowed the title from the successful, international art publication series by Taschen Books: *Art Now!*⁶ Perhaps both curations of South African art hoped to borrow some of the aura of authority of this series in defining a South African zeitgeist. Neither venture had much longevity in sparking academic or art-critical debate.

There were also many similarities in the artists chosen for both the exhibition and the publication. Understandably, from the Stevenson Gallery’s point of view, these were drawn from their own stable of artists. Less understandable was the inclusion of the same stable of artists in Williamson’s book, with only minor additions by artists drawn from other high-end (but still commercial) galleries. This observation led me to consider further what trends could be discerned from noting the kinds of South African artists who were receiving international acclaim and prestigious national awards, who formed part of secondary and tertiary curricula on art-making, and who were vigorously promoted as representatives of the entirety of this country’s cultural production. Whether at the Venice Biennale, winning the Standard Bank

⁶ This comprehensive publication (in multiple updated volumes produced since 2002) operates as something of an encyclopaedia of contemporary international art or, as the second volume describes itself on its flyleaf: “The Who’s Who of Contemporary Art” (Grosenick, 2005).

Young Artist award, or being featured on group shows of South African artists at prominent international galleries, one thing was apparent in the same names repeatedly emerging: all were in some way part of a high-end, commercial art gallery system.

Beginning to suspect something of the larger commercial politics that was informing modes of production in the kinds of art and artists who were receiving attention, I considered the modes of production themselves and the conceptual content. Underlining much of the conceptual content of these stables was an overwhelming preoccupation with constructs of identity. It is understandable, post-1994, that a quest to represent previously unrepresented aspects of our cultural identity would be the topic *de jour*. Rather than developing this narrative into more complex investigations of the range of social comment now possible in a post-apartheid context, however, the needle seems to have gotten stuck. The search for diverse representations of the broad spectrum of social comment has become solidified into presuming an authentic construction of both an artist's identity and their voice, which must construct authentic objects that speak *to* that construct of an authentic identity rather than *with* it. Authenticity, in this regard, presents an argument as a *fait accompli* and identity as a fixed interior state—to critique the work is thus to critique the authority of an artist's identity rather than the work as a separate expression, which makes for very tricky terrain.

Despite many conceptual advances in art-making and art theory over the latter part of the last century (in Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' (1967), Danto's *After the End of Art* (1997), and Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), for example), I reflected in my presentation on how artistic practice in South Africa had remained strangely Modernist in its construction and outlook at least in so far as the artists who are broadly recognised and acclaimed. What is curious is the very traditional form this work takes, particularly if one is to take into account Benjamin's concern with how an artwork can influence and utilise "changing human sensory apparatus" (2008, p.9). In a world of increasingly interactive technologies, the fact that artwork should have remained at this point, in this country, largely as a visual, tangible object, something to be collected, which expects its audience to be a passive disembodied eye, is bizarre. Yet international platforms for local artists, market systems, and awards for excellence in the field have largely remained the exclusive playing field of artists whose works command an aura of authority. This authority is conveyed through the dominant commercial gallery system which packages pre-chewed concepts as 'authentic' either because they have marketable objects or simplistic narratives which can be locked to a two-dimensional identity construction of the artist. Both make for good sales, but there are serious artistic and cultural consequences in this simplification of cultural expression, which is both easy to market and easy to sell. Local art systems are not entirely

to blame for this cultural identity production. An examination of contemporary international group exhibitions of South African artists reveals that 'authentic' identities—often read as being based primarily on an oversimplified conception of race, gender, sexual preference, or some combination of these—seem expected because international audiences, in their own way, are desirous of postcards from Africa not entire essays from a particular country with its own complex history and cultures.

In reflecting on these statements nearly eleven years on, I note that whilst there are more private commercial galleries (and therefore, one can hope less monopoly), there is still a decided lack of funding for public arts institutions, and no major curated exhibition has taken place at any of these institutions with the scale and prominence of the 1995 and 1997 Johannesburg Biennales or even Simon Njami's *Africa Remix* in 2007. Although *1910-2010: From Pierneef to Gugulective* (2010) at the Iziko National Gallery in Cape Town, curated by the then museum director Riason Naidoo was an attempt to create a survey show exploring a diversity of South African artmaking over a period of a hundred years, its reception was marred by sensationalist journalistic criticism. A core concern for these critics was the rather hasty (temporary) removal of the museum's permanent collection of colonial-era works on display, by Thomas Gainsborough, Joshua Reynolds, and Thomas Baines, in order to accommodate the extensive and diverse range of artefacts from the museum's own collection as well as loans from forty-eight other national collections (Thamm, 2010). There were those who felt the exhibition was merely opportunistic given the coincidence with South Africa's hosting of the FIFA World Cup and offered "too much on display in the name of collective, ideologically loaded South African identity, branded concomitantly with the 2010 World Cup" (Schoeman, 2010, p.58). Others felt that Naidoo lacked any vision in offering this extensive overview and that his curatorial strategy was merely a form of political revisionism that offered "no thesis to propound, no argument to advance and no interpretation to propose" (Pollak, 2010, p.1).

I saw this exhibition, and whilst it was perhaps a bit cluttered and somewhat lacking in orientation for viewers less familiar with the history and trajectory of South African visual art, it was a genuine attempt to get the museum's collection out of the archive and on display such that the public could experience these works for themselves. Sadly, there was insufficient budget to produce a catalogue archiving the event, which may have featured curatorial essays debating the exhibition's content and discussing its pertinence at this point

in South African history. Some of the more positive reviews of the show (Corrigall, 2010 and Williamson, 2010) have also now been deleted from the internet.⁷

What predominates in a search for criticism about the show is an article from *The Guardian*, UK, by David Smith, in which the author asserts that the negative reviews were racially motivated (Smith, 2010). Smith continually emphasises Naidoo's identity (a South African of Indian descent) by referring to him as "black" and "non-white", terms in our context which are both inaccurate and possibly offensive. Such an explanation of the politics at work in this situation is reductive, and whilst there may have been some criticism which was no more than veiled racism, there were also many other issues, including a lack of museum funding and limited time (6 weeks) to install the exhibition which could have stood to have generated more nuanced discussion about the state of public museums in South Africa. As Corrigall observes in her critique of Smith's article, "we shouldn't always offer racial difference as an explanation for every phenomenon or disagreement when there may be other forces at work" (2010). As I shall explore in more detail in Chapter Two, the fact that Naidoo also received his share of criticism for helping curator Andrew Lamprecht's to stage a retrospective of Tretchikoff's work at the museum in 2011, suggests that this conservative backlash had less to do with race or political revisionism within the museum, and more to do with what these critics saw as a pandering to the popular appeal of certain kinds of art formally excluded from the museum. Attempts to democratise the experience of a public museum are, however, important considerations for audience development and visitor numbers in order for the institution to retain some social relevance.

In recent years, a surge in interest in performance art has led to more platforms and exposure for this genre, most particularly the growth of the Infecting the City Festival and the launching of the ICA Live Art Festival, both run by the Institute for Creative Arts at UCT. As an alternate means of cultural expression, and one which is more focused on the live experience and less fixated on the tradeable object, this rise in prominence of the medium is refreshing. Concerns with the logistics of packaging such works into a specific spatial and temporal curated programme, whereby audiences may tour (in a set time) a number of works in a restricted location in the city of Cape Town may still present challenges to performative works whose duration or site-specificity fall outside of these set perimeters. Digital art, as another time-based medium, has also received better attention in recent years with the ISEA2018 (International Symposium on Electronic Art) hosted in Durban (2018) and

⁷ A useful resource I have used to access online articles that have now been removed (for multiple reasons, most particularly ongoing hosting costs to retain certain archives) is the *WayBackMachine*, a non-profit library and archive of internet resources which would otherwise be lost as a record of particular moments in history.

the annual Fak’ugesi African Digital Innovation Festival (founded in 2014). The National Arts Festival (NAF) has also, in the past few years, developed the Creativate Digital Arts Festival as a medium-specific, curated programme within the main festival. Digital Arts, however, continues to be run as a side project or a separate entity entirely from the visual or performing arts. Often more concerned with modes of production than conceptual content, this art form is more commonly aligned locally to the design and technology industries. No digital artist has been selected for the Venice Biennale nor won the Standard Bank Young Artist Award. In 2013, the NAF launched a Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Performance Art. This seems peculiarly redundant as individual recipients self-identify as theatre practitioners, choreographers, i.e. those working in the medium of dance, or visual artists, and could equally have received the award in these genres. The addition of this genre seems to retain a pre-assumed notion that theatre makers use narrative and proscenium arches and that Fine Artists are object makers. It has not been awarded every year, suggesting that the pool is not large enough to warrant its distinction. Since 2007, all winners of the visual art category have been represented by one of the major commercial galleries. To be represented by a gallery in South Africa, one must (in part) make saleable objects. There is a functional reason for this selection, as galleries often invest additional capital for the award winner’s show to promote and market their artist. There is nothing wrong in this practice by itself, but when artists selected for this award are *only* drawn from this pool of gallery stables, it implies that commercial success rather than conceptual merit is what is being rewarded. Market forces thus distort what is lauded as exemplary creative practice in the visual arts.

In some senses, it is hardly surprising that artists who are represented by commercial galleries should seem to dominate. The art market, and its incumbent team of experts in sales and promotion, ensure that some voices are heard above others. The increasing prominence of art fairs on the continent has ensured that marketability, corporate investment, and private collectors drive what is lauded as cultural capital because it drives economic investment. Reductions in acquisition funding to public art institutions like Isiko South African National Gallery and Johannesburg Art Gallery have meant less capacity to acquire new works and to host large-scale exhibitions reflecting the contemporary cultural production of the nation. In this climate, it is the commercial gallery curator and not the museum art director who is the high priest of this art world.

Touring the Territory

The way one describes a story, to oneself or to the world, is by telling the story. It is a balancing act, and it is a dream. The more accurate the map, the more it resembles the territory. The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless. The tale is the map that is the territory.

—Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*.

This thesis consists of four chapters, each of which explores a slightly different area which relates to the overarching focus of the research questions. Chapter One seeks to better define and examine the conceptions of authenticity and sincerity. Chapter Two explores the work of forgery and the fake. Chapter Three is addressed to the influence of curatorial narratives, brand identities and market forces on the role of the museum. Chapter Four examines performativity and the application of forms of syncretic ritual in live art. The methodology of the study is necessarily interdisciplinary, and is thus underpinned by theoretical conceptions drawn from a number of disciplines, in order to examine encounters with artworks as primarily experiential, where an engaged interaction is necessary for the full realisation of meaning. From tourism studies, I draw principally on Taylor's notion of the *zone of contact* as a connection point in which meaning is sincerely and mutually constructed between cultural producers and audiences). From art history, I explore Benjamin's conception of the *aura* of an artwork as that which can only be apprehended in proximity to an original work of art in the *here and now*). From literary studies, I extend the phenomenological approach to the process of reading as described by Iser, in order to emphasise the interaction necessary for a work of art to become realised in the minds of an audience. This is complemented by drawing on Stewart's definition of the souvenir as a metaphor for the fragmentary nature of semiotics within a work of art whose intentional incompleteness evokes the active imagination of its audience to provide a personal narrative of resolution. Through the application of these ideas to the selected case studies, I seek to answer my three key research questions: why has authenticity gained such purchase in validating the conceptual content of contemporary art from so-called emerging markets, how might sincerity, rather than authenticity, be a better description of the experiential qualities of artworks, and how might a *materially inauthentic* artwork be *conceptually authentic*: i.e. sincere? For the most part, these chapters begin with a foundation in theoretical concepts that pertain to that chapter but there are also cross-currents between the chapters. Each chapter examines a case study or a number of case studies that relate to the focus of that chapter and which exemplify the key tenets raised by the theoretical approaches that frame each chapter.

In Chapter One, I consider 'authenticity' in detail by exploring different kinds of definitions proposed by diverse theorists to determine which aspects of objects and experiences are to be judged as such and settle on terms which best define my own argument. Art historians Megan Aldrich and Jos Hackforth-Jones's (2012) classification of two types of 'authenticity'—*material authenticity* and *conceptual authenticity*—are defined in relation to multiple other theoretical definitions from fields as various as anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and market research. *Material authenticity* and *conceptual authenticity*, however, are the predominant key distinctions between two types of authenticity used throughout the thesis.

I then consider a brief history of the term 'authenticity', its associations with ideas of origin and originality, and how a desire for 'authentic' experiences may be one driven by a form of nostalgia in a post-industrial age. Walter Benjamin's concept of the *aura* of an artwork is discussed in terms of how it informs constructs of authenticity (and audience perceptions thereof) but also how it relates to ideas of both ritual and tradition. Personal perceptions of a form of truth expressed by a work of art may be fundamental to the experience of an audience, but I will argue that rather than 'authenticity', this quality is better described by the term 'sincerity'. 'Sincerity', the alignment between internal feeling and outward expression, whilst it may better suit certain qualities now described as authentic, will be considered in how the term in contemporary parlance has fallen out of favour, may sometimes seem to imply the opposite of what it means, or creates a sense of discomfort because of the naïveté or lack of sophistication it suggests. In defining sincerity, but also tracing a history of its decline in usage and reasoning for the contemporary discomfiture with the term, I draw on literary theorist Lionel Trilling's *Authenticity and Sincerity* (1972) and sociologist Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). Despite the relative age of these publications, their views on the compromising of 'sincerity' in modern social interactions have arguably only become more relevant with the advent of globalised virtual technologies and social media. The performative nature of the term 'sincerity', in that it is an enactment of internal feeling to an external audience, leaves it open to similar kinds of critique that have been levelled against the artifice of theatre. This will be explored in relation to Dean MacCannell's discussions on *staged authenticity* (1999, p.98) in tourism and John P. Taylor's suggestion that sincerity is a more nuanced approach to experiential tourism because it takes place in "the zone of contact among participating groups or individuals" (2001, p.23).

I consider in more detail the concept of the souvenir as defined by Stewart, something which may be far more loaded in its personal resonance of a remembered experience, or, as I shall argue (when the exact origin of such objects is unknown), may act as a prompt to creative

narrative imaginings when used in a work of art. These ideas are considered in relation to *Ex Libris South Africa* (2009) by Candice Breitz, a Cibachrome photograph that depicts a collection of books, presented as found objects, all collected by the artist in a single visit to a tourist-orientated, second-hand bookstore. The work was made expressly as limited-edition prints for the South African art news and criticism website *ArtThrob*, who have exclusive rights to sell this work and retain a percentage of sales to support their ongoing online archive. This case study was chosen not only for how, as a depiction of a collection of books, it may serve to introduce a philosophical reflection on the nature of texts as objects, images of texts, and images as texts and how Iser's notion of the *realisation of the text* might be applied to works of visual art, but also because it exemplifies how a work may be *materially inauthentic* but *conceptually sincere*. The work for sale is accompanied by an explanatory text by an unknown author, which claims the work "collectively...catalogue[s] a diverse range of anxieties, fears, hopes and expectations pertaining to life in South Africa over nearly a century" (*ArtThrob*, 2020b). I will, however, argue that this description is reductive and explore other possible readings of the work, including how the books depicted are not necessarily representative of lived South African experience but rather how perceptions of certain South African experiences have been represented and frequently perpetuated with an international, rather than local, audience in mind. In the case of this work, a representation of books published and now sold, second hand, in a tourism bookstore, *Ex Libris South Africa*, however, may be a sincere souvenir of the artist's own experience visiting the bookstore and perhaps reflecting on her own complex position as a South African who has long lived away from her birthplace. The intention of the work may also be described as sincere, having been made expressly for and in support of *ArtThrob* editions, i.e. it is a work made about representations of South Africa in support of a journalistic institution whose focus is representing South African culture from a local point of view.

Chapter Two is structured around a consideration of both *material* and *conceptual inauthenticity*. It thus considers the fake and the forgery, with a focus on the alternate histories created in selected artworks by Chad Rossouw, and the public and critical reception of Andrew Lamprecht's retrospective exhibition, *Tretchikoff: The People's Painter*, at the Iziko National Gallery (2011). Firstly, focusing on philosopher Dennis Dutton's insights into how forgeries challenge concepts of authenticity, I consider ways in which forgeries may become, with time, authentic souvenirs of the modes of perception and the means of production of the time in which they were made. Such works may inspire popular interest even when (and often because) they have been proven to be fake. This is exemplified by the case study of the Dutch forger Han van Meegeren whose sale of forged Vermeers to Nazi officers became a post-war *cause célèbre*. I further explore the enterprise of forgery by

examining how, as a craft, it may make a performance of authenticity by observing and distorting methods used for authentication and appropriating what performance theorist Sibylle Peters terms “the blind spots of these figurations of knowledge” (2002, p.122). Peters suggests that a practical study of forgery may reveal much of how history determines authenticity and that such a research project may engage multiple interdisciplinary approaches. This idea is considered in relation to artworks by Chad Rossouw, which may be best described as alternate histories which stage and imagine divergences from accepted history. Rossouw crafts his images and objects not as mere depictions of a fictional world, but rather as if they were genuine historical artefacts, even though they may reference vastly different contexts. Through his meticulous attention to material details, each object or series suggests an alternate history, often disrupted by slight alterations or deliberate fabrications. Mimicking the presentation of genuine historical items in museums, these fake artefacts hint at a narrative of events, leaving interpretation radically open to the viewer. The focus in engaging with his works lies not in verifying their authenticity, but on speculating about the narratives they provoke as a metaphoric and fictional mirror of real-world events. Roussouw’s work thus directly engages with notions of authenticity by standing such ideas on their head and instead presenting works of art that are sincerely inauthentic in order to tell different stories, stories that provoke alternate reflections on history: *materially inauthentic* objects which are nevertheless well researched and therefore *conceptually authentic*. Despite his work’s resonance with a complex array of South African cultural histories, including apartheid conspiracies for nuclear power, colonial fantasies of the nouveau riche, which are unquestioningly incorporated in contemporary architecture, and problems of the desire for ‘authentic’ cultural belonging, which haunt a long history of human migrancy on the continent (from as far back as the mesolithic age), Roussouw’s work has seldom attracted critical or journalistic attention. The only extant, in-depth, academic research on Rossouw’s work is his own MFA thesis in which he describes his creative methodology as an act of creating, curating and juxtaposing selected objects, images, and texts and allowing them to suggest and imply multiple possible connections, rather than explicitly dictate these. He suggests that:

Whether or not there is an intelligible broader interpretation available, the result is that in attempting to rationalise the linking principle, one pays closer attention to the details of the stories. In other words, by implying correspondences between apparently unrelated narratives, one reads the texts with a searching eye (2010, p.12).

What is important about this quotation is Roussouw’s conception of his artworks as texts that tell or prompt stories, stories which can only be fully realised through the ‘searching’

engagement of an audience reading for meaning. This methodology in his work mirrors Iser's observations on the effect of indeterminacies or intentional gaps in a creative work: "while the reader is seeking a consistent pattern in the text, he is also uncovering other impulses which cannot be immediately integrated or will even resist final integration" (1972, p.290). Rossouw's approach is thus one in which he deliberately creates a *zone of contact* for his audience to become actively engaged in the process of meaning-making by revealing, through his intentional gaps, other potential narratives or associated individual experiences beyond the control of the artist but which may be more experientially enriching for the audience.

A slight distinction may be made in the field of aesthetics between forgery and fake, for whilst the first involves an invested intent to deceive, fake is used, as philosopher Roger Scruton observes, to describe that which is cheap, shallow or possibly manipulative as a form of 'false currency' which has no value in an exchange (cited in Nerdrum, 2014). This is a consideration of *conceptual inauthenticity* rather than *material inauthenticity*, i.e. fake concepts rather than forged objects. This superficiality leads Scruton to consider how kitsch and sentimentality are essentially a form of fake in art, and that their lack of emotional depth is a divisiveness which leads to cliché. In contrast, philosophers Michael Tanner and Robert Solomon observe that sentimentality may need a careful examination relative to the social acceptability of emotional expression in history, and the lack of originality associated with it may well be the universal quality of certain emotions in human rites of passage. Tanner and Solomon, in opposition to Scruton, argue in defence of sentimentality when it can be understood to be sincere, as the line between what might be construed as 'proper' or 'appropriate' emotional expression, and therefore influence audience reception, is subject to changing historical, sociological patterns.

These ideas are applied in Chapter Two to an examination of the public and critical reception of Andrew Lamprecht's retrospective of original paintings by Vladimir Tretchikoff: *Tretchikoff: The People's Painter* (2011) at Iziko National Gallery in Cape Town. Although the exhibition was successful and attracted large audiences to the museum, certain critics objected to what they perceived as the veneration of work which had been rejected by the academy of Tretchikoff's time due to his work's sentimental content and perceived kitsch style. What can be seen in some of this critique is a kind of retrofitting art history when, for example, art critic Lloyd Pollak observes that his "images of blacks are patronising, paternalistic and ethnographically inaccurate ... [he was] a fifth-rate artist and retailer of the most invidious colonialist bigotry" (cited in Aboobaker, 2011). These concerns about the objectification and othering of Tretchikoff's sitters were not concerns that led to his initial rejection by the art

academy and are criticisms which can (and have) been applied to some of his contemporaries who were well lauded by the academy of the time. Tretchikoff's sentimental themes and style were at the root of his academic rejection although, as I will argue, it may be observed through statements made by the artist himself, there was no deliberate intention to be manipulative in this approach i.e. his deployment of sentiment was entirely sincere. Sentimentality and kitsch, when used cynically as a conceptual motif in contemporary art, are well studied and academically accepted even though this may take a formulaic approach in casting judgment on less sophisticated tastes i.e. produce works which are *materially inauthentic*, deliberately *conceptually insincere*, and may make use of irony in ways which are themselves a kind of cliché. We should, therefore, question why Tretchikoff, whose use of sentimentality is sincere, should be deemed far more reprehensible and less worthy of academic study (despite his popular appeal) than artists such as Jeff Koons and Paul McCarthy who utilise the same sentimentality, often more gratuitously, with cynicism to manipulate an audience's response. Lamprecht, in presenting this retrospective of Tretchikoff's work, made no claims for the academic merit of the work but was instead acknowledging the artist's wide popular appeal (a fact of visual culture history notable in itself). In presenting the opportunity for audiences to experience the original paintings themselves, Lamprecht proffered a sincere invitation for viewers to engage with Tretchikoff's work (its history and its controversy) and make up their own minds about the merit (or lack thereof) for themselves. In 2009, a 'newly discovered' version of Tretchikoff's iconic painting *The Lost Orchid* sparked controversy when it was speculated that it is a forgery and the matter remains inconclusively settled as it has not been the subject of any published academic study to date. As I will detail, Tretchikoff's enormous popular appeal, the high prices original works achieve on auction, and the lack of academic engagement, which provides no official sanction, leaves his work open to potential forgery and misrepresentation.

Chapter Three examines the role of the museum, the creation of brand identities, market forces, and curatorial narratives in determining notions of authenticity. I explore how reductions in local funding for arts production, public museums, and audience development have meant that market forces (commercial galleries and international art fairs), rather than academia and civil society (museums, universities, NGOs), play a larger role in determining our current cultural landscape. A complete lack of criticality in observing who these audiences are becomes a mere pandering to external expectations and is reductive or dismissive of local cultural nuance and complexity. I present a brief history of the hijacking of African national representation at the Venice Biennale, which is followed by an examination of the role claimed by Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in archiving African

contemporary art, in which I consider who might be the presumed audience for these platforms. While there is substantial international focus on repatriating colonial-era artefacts held in Western museums, scant academic attention has been paid to how international funding and growing investment speculation in contemporary art from regions like Africa, Asia, and the Middle East leads to a form of cultural branding designed to align with Western market tastes. This economic influence may dictate where and how art from former colonies is exhibited and sold, often reinforcing generic identity classifications. Reduced funding for museums in postcolonial contexts limits their ability to acquire acclaimed cultural works, exacerbating the issue. This third chapter seeks to question whether international recognition equates to 'authentic' cultural value, especially if it neglects local complexities and reception. I examine the challenges that the museum, as an inherited Western trope of archiving culture, may face in the context of Africa, which may not always be best suited to objects and forms of expression which were never designed for reception in a white cube. In support of this, I draw on art historian Sydney Kasfir's (1992) overview of the tensions created by presumptions of 'authenticity' as they relate to the cultural expression and production of creative artefacts in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Focusing on a history of museology in the African context, Kasfir observes a long history in which the cultural outputs of indigenous peoples have been marginalised as mere ethnography rather than 'art' as defined by western European audiences—a false taxonomy that is often perpetuated in contemporary postcolonial contexts. How this false dichotomy affects the museum curation of African art is further considered through the observations of art historian Anitra Nettleton (2013) and archaeologist Sven Ouzman (2006), who both make arguments urging for more eclectic experiential curation in postcolonial museums where audiences may be allowed to make their own connections between the juxtapositions of objects on display.

This chapter thus concludes with an examination of the BBC podcast series: *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, with a particular focus on the final episode, *Object 101*. I have chosen this final episode to examine in detail the means by which the choice of objects illuminates how one may use human-made objects, including artworks, to tell a story of history rather than only seeing objects as proof of history. The format of this podcast (which includes multiple interviews with a diverse range of people both inside and outside of the museum) is narrated by the director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, in a highly self-reflexive manner. This narration style emphasises the importance of storytelling as a drawing together of multiple threads, which in turn may be drawn out in multiple directions by the listener, rather than offering an authoritarian view from nowhere whose singularity of purpose may operate only as a form of 'storyselling'. As MacGregor notes, "telling history through things...can only be *a history*, not *the history*", for each person who visits a museum will

make their own journey and connections and by that process find how “their own histories will intersect with everybody else’s. And when that happens, you no longer have a history of a particular people or nation, but a story of endless connections” (BBC, 2010c, 4:17-4:55). The narrative format of *Object 101* as a curatorial presentation of objects archived by the museum (either as found traces of material culture or artworks expressly designed for a museum context) treats both as of equal cultural value and may have much to teach us, given the tendency of museums in postcolonial contexts to create a hierarchy between objects of art, craft, and ethnography.

In Chapter Four, I consider live performative works by Lerato Shadi and Sikhumbuzo Makandula and the ways in which each explores a kind of syncretic ritualising through embodied memory and a reconstituting of oral histories. Pertinent to their work is theorisation on newly invented forms of ritual by anthropologist Ronald L. Grimes, who observes an assumption made by many scholars of ritual that, in order to be ‘authentic’, ritual must necessarily have a basis in tradition, i.e. follow in the same pattern passed down and unquestioningly reiterated through time. Grimes has conversely observed forms of contemporary ritualising, which he describes as creative and critical (1992, p.21). These rites are invented, inventive, and self-consciously reflexive, and whilst they may not be described as authentic, as they inherit no legacy in the form of tradition, they may well be described as sincere, as a self-conscious criticality can be observed in the construction of new forms of semiotics used to express ritualistic intention. Grime’s interest in invented and syncretic rituals is informed by how these emerge as responses to societal change, particularly in postcolonial contexts. This invention of new forms of hybridised culture (as a strategy of survival) is echoed in Homi Bhabha’s advocacy for the subversion of binaries between dominant Western culture and romanticised pre-colonial pasts. Bhabha highlights the need for cultural expression to be transnational and translational, emphasising the complexity of navigating cultural signifiers in a globalised world where ‘authenticity’ and ‘tradition’ are often constructed or invented. From the field of performance studies, the distinction made by Alan Parker between two types of performances referencing ritual is drawn upon to analyse syncretic ritual as a form of semiotic communication in live art. These are *ritualising* performances, which resemble sacred rites without directly referencing cultural traditions, and *ritual-like* performances, which draw on tradition but emphasise functional behaviour over symbolism (Parker, 2019, p. 244).

While Shadi and Makandula both explore personal and/or public archives as a means to prompt their own artistic research, their work diverges from the commercial object-driven

trend prevalent in South African contemporary art. Instead, as I will detail, they investigate how the body holds memories and how certain physical acts or performative rituals serve as means to access embodied memory, whether it be historical, personal, or genealogical. Through their live performances, both artists endeavour to unearth these embodied memories (in themselves and in their audiences), offering them momentarily for a kind of shared contemplation. Although these ritualised performances may borrow certain signifiers from more traditional rites and acts, neither can be said to be traditional (i.e. they are not authentic). I will explore how both artists, however, present an honest *zone of contact* to their audiences, whereby meaning may be communally constructed, and their works may be described as sincere.

If we can observe anything of Benjamin's attention to "the capacity of [an] artwork to encode information about its historical period (and, in so doing, potentially to reveal to readers and viewers otherwise inapprehensible aspects of the nature of their own era)" (2008, p.9), then it is this: the commercial gallery system and international speculative investment are steadily replacing local academic critique and public museums as the arbiters of authenticity. It is for this reason that I wish to interrogate the nature of sincerity in creative practice, not in opposition to authenticity, but as a different lens which may enable us to ask different questions. As I shall explore, the contemporary discomfort with sincerity is marked by a concern with the perceived quaintness or lack of sophistication the term engenders. Additionally, as sincerity is inherently performative (an external expression of inner feeling), there is a risk of misjudgement by others, who may perceive it as disingenuous, exaggerated, or deliberately manipulative. It may thus be unsurprising that a preference for authenticity has arisen, as the term can be seen as far more authoritative and aligned with external validation rather than with issues of subjective enactment and interpretation. The possibility for a work of art to produce an experience in an audience, I shall argue, lies in its capacity to present a sincere narrative, and to draw a viewer in to interpret that narrative as it unfolds, which is, in turn, enhanced by a sincere engagement in the mind and experience of its audience, rather than presented as a closed 'authentic' artefact. Sincerity is thus a focus of this thesis, but also an intrinsic part of the methodology and herein lies the risk entailed. I will offer a series of narratives that attempt to operate as a process of discovery, as a form of storytelling and not definitive 'storyselling' (whereby a reader may only agree or disagree with the conclusions presented), in which the reader may find things that resonate, consider indeterminacies or gaps with which to fill with their own experiences, and hopefully allow for a *realisation of the text*, thus underlining the importance of the experiential in the creation of meaning in texts and artworks alike.

The case studies in this thesis have been selected not only for how they explore or contextualise the theoretical premises of each chapter from a practical angle but also because, for the most part, I have first-hand experience of them as an audience (although in many cases long predating any intention to use them as a focus for academic study).⁸ A second reason for their selection is the limited (and in some cases, the complete absence of) academic critical engagement with these works. The case studies presented are not a contradiction of all work represented by commercial galleries. They are simply different or, in some way, under-represented ways of working. These artists, or the specific works or exhibitions on which I have chosen to focus, rarely feature in critical commentary, and when they do, much of what they do is either misrepresented or not interrogated in terms of how it actually achieves a particular kind of experience within audiences. In writing about them, I wish to record what they do or have done—to simply say here was an experience once and suggest how we might find value in the actual experience of that artwork rather than judging it solely by virtue of who made the work.

⁸ Works by Rossouw, Shadi, and Makandula I attended in person, although any documentation taken at the time for was personal use and not of the quality of the professional documentation arranged by the artists. Andrew Lamprecht's Tretchikoff exhibition was the focus of his MFA in Curatorial Studies which was conducted through Rhodes University in 2010-2011. As a staff member, I attended his initial postgraduate presentations. In 2021, I visited Zeitz MOCCA and Bikini Beach Books. In the process of writing, it became evident that the works I wished to discuss were not necessarily the ones on display at Zeitz at the time I visited. Many exhibitions since the initial launch have been solo, rather than group, exhibitions which do not give a broad range of the artists the museum purports to represent in a limited timeframe. There are several changes that have been made to Bikini Beach Books since January 2009 when Breitz sourced the books for her work *Ex Libris South Africa*. Images of the venue in this thesis are predominantly archival to best represent the space as she might have explored it.

Chapter One: Authenticity, Sincerity, Tourism and the Souvenir

Authenticity, a concept used to describe that which is judged as real, accurate, or genuine, ought to be rather easy to define. That the term may be context-specific, contingent on which element of something is to be defined as such, and often variable depending on who is making the evaluation or authentication, can make the concept much like a bar of wet soap: the harder one attempts to grasp it, the more likely it is to slip. In this chapter, by way of an introduction to some of the philosophical concepts that will be revisited in the chapters that follow, I examine the concepts of authenticity, sincerity, performativity (how the first two concepts might be thought to be 'staged', as well as their relevance to performance art), and forms of narrative which may evolve around objects of art to elucidate their provenance, or explicate an artist's intent.

Tourism theory will also inform my exploration of these primary concepts. Often thought of as antithetical to authenticity, the word 'tourist' may have negative connotations in how it is synonymous with shallow, cursory or fake experiences. Whilst art history's concern with notions of authenticity primarily rests on the accuracy of the provenance of art objects, tourism theory (as a species of anthropology) is frequently occupied with authenticity in relation to experiences. Tourism and art may share some common ground, not only in how art galleries and museums are a source for tourism, but in how both may involve a form of staged experience for an audience, whether this constructed nature is made apparent or not.

First, I examine a number of theorists who have attempted to delineate kinds of authenticity in order to articulate what I mean when using certain adjectival qualifiers to determine what elements, in works of art, are to be qualified as authentic. This is followed by a consideration of the origins of the word, and of the historical and social conditions, which have fermented an increased desire in a quest for authenticity in the contemporary moment. Walter Benjamin's theories on the effect of technological reproduction on authenticity are then considered with a particular focus on how he defines *aura* and original, and conflates ideas of ritual and tradition. Sincerity—a concept related to, but distinct from authenticity—is then reflected upon in relation to literary theorist Lionel Trilling's musings on how the word has fallen out of favour and come to be eclipsed by the use of the word 'authenticity', and the risks of sincerity in a jaded world which, whilst desirous of authenticity, may intrinsically distrust sincerity. Tourism theorists Dean MacCannell and Ning Wang's writings on ideas of authenticity (and the means by which it may be staged and constructed in tourism) are then explored and subsequently contrasted to the work of tourism theorist John P. Taylor, who

embraces the idea of sincerity in tourism and how it may create a *zone of contact* between tourists and local communities in an act of shared construction of value. The performative quality inherent in sincerity is then considered by examining sociologist Erving Goffman's perceptions of sincere and cynical social interactions in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). Trilling is then revisited for his observations on how performance in the theatre, and notions of sincerity relative to the actor, have been problematised through cultural history most expressly by Plato and Rousseau. An emphasis in performance art (arising in the 60s and 70s) on the authenticity of real actions may thus naturally follow as a declared opposition to the commercialism of art objects, and the perceived artifice and escapism of the theatre. Defining 'real' in such constructed circumstances may still reveal a staged quality, and underlines the necessity for being explicit as to what elements in any work of art are to be described as authentic.

The chapter concludes with an examination of literary theorist Susan Stewart's observations of the souvenir, in particular, how the decontextualised trace may provoke a desire for an accompanying narrative of provenance. Similar to 'tourist', the word 'souvenir' may have negative associations with mass-produced, culturally inauthentic objects. The souvenir, however, in the sense that Stewart uses the term, is a memento of experience, something emblematic of loss, and retained as a fragmentary trace of the past, although its material form may vary. For many theorists of authenticity, the term is loaded with forms of nostalgia, a desire for an original that is thought to be better exemplified by historical or more traditional objects and modes of production than what is produced in contemporary post-industrial societies. The souvenir, as a fragmentary trace in the present, that speaks of the past, may resonate with these ideas of authenticity, although its individual personal significance may have more to do with notions of sincerity. Art objects may be comparable to souvenirs in that they are indexical traces of a creative process and indicative of the artist's intent. The need to supplement these objects with explanatory artist and curatorial statements has seen a rapid increase in recent years and would seem to follow the idea of Stewart's souvenir as something incomplete, decontextualized and thus in need of a supplementary narrative. There is a distinction, however, that must be made between narratives which contextualise (and are therefore a complimentary addendum) and curatorial texts which are explanatory. Explanatory texts ignore the fact that art objects are designed as experiences, not only traces of experiences, and as such, may be 'read' as texts in their own right. Explanatory curatorial texts and artists' statements may seek to supersede the direct experience of a symbolic object by justifying their right to exist and implying that a contemplation of them must follow very narrow preassigned narrative paths. These ideas are explored by means of a discussion on a work by Candice Breitz, *Ex Libris South Africa*, (2009), in which themes of

the book as both *object* and *idea*, the souvenir, the collection, tourism, and national identity (a topic often constructed around ideas of authenticity) may be seen to resonate.

Contextualising Kinds of Authenticity

As an eschatology, the narrative of authenticity, when applied to culture, finds its corollary and model in the 'tragic' experience of modernity. It is made to correspond to a perceived death in the Western psyche, which has abandoned its authenticity in the quest of progress and technology, and has thus become enmeshed in the rigours of Time.

—John P. Taylor, *Authenticity and Sincerity in Tourism*.

Authenticity as a concept always implies its antithesis. To describe something as authentic suggests that there exists something else, something other, which may call this quality into question. When it comes to describing a work of art, this opposite concept is not necessarily fake or fraudulent, but could, in fact, be an honest copy made for any number of reasons, including educational purposes (as in students who copy works of great masters); replicas made of works too environmentally sensitive for public viewing; or a reproduction made through another means e.g. a photograph of a painting. Honest copies may be passed as forgeries by unscrupulous sellers who append to the work false provenance or fake proofs by way of added forged archival material. Works of art may also be wrongly credited to a different maker. These works are not inauthentic, merely misattributed—a false Da Vinci, but a genuine Renaissance sketch. Authenticity is thus context-specific.

This contextual nature of the term makes it important to distinguish between different kinds of authenticity depending on what aspect of an object or experience is being evaluated. In so doing, one may contemplate whether the term is appropriate in defining certain phenomena or stretching a definition too far. In an initial draft of this chapter, I identified three theorists in the fields of philosophy, tourism and art history who offer terminology to define kinds of authenticity (Dutton, 2003; Wang, 1999; Aldrich and Hackforth-Jones, 2012). I subsequently discovered a study by psychologist George Newman and marketing researcher Rosanna Smith which combines two of these sources (Dutton and Wang) with three others proposing definitions of kinds of authenticity. In a literature review of these theorists, Newman and Smith search for correlations whereby they, in turn, may provide a set of parameters that might be more precise in qualifying which aspects of objects or experiences may be subject to authenticity judgements. It, therefore, made sense to reincorporate my observations of proposed kinds of authenticity in the order Newman and Smith offer, so as to comment on

their overview and how their conclusions (in combination with Aldrich and Hackforth-Jones's terms) may inform the scope of my study.

Newman and Smith observe that whilst concepts of authenticity may greatly determine how people interact with objects and experiences, the term's definitions are not always mutually agreed upon, depending on which aspect of an object or experience is to be evaluated as authentic. Here, they note, that whether judgements of authenticity are applied to objects (artworks, historical artefacts, consumable commodities e.g. food and drink) or to agents (artists, museum curators, chefs, corporate entities) these may have significantly different criteria depending on the field of study which motivates their evaluation (aesthetics, philosophy, marketing, tourism, sociology, psychology) (2016, p.609).

Firstly, Newman and Smith observe a marketing and semiotic study by Kent Grayson and Radan Martinec (2004) in which they propose two kinds of authenticity: *indexical* and *iconic*. Drawing on the semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Peirce (1867-1910), Grayson and Martinec define *indexical authenticity* as a type which relates to a spatiotemporal fact i.e. whether the object in question can be provably traced to a particular time, place, or maker (2004, p.297). In contrast, *iconic authenticity* is less concerned with factual provenance, and more concerned with whether the object or experience is stylistically in keeping with certain expectations (2004, p.298). This second kind may be helpful in interrogating artefacts which may be difficult to archive in their individual original state such as consumables (food and drink made to a specific method and recipe), rites or rituals (performed in a lineage of tradition), or kinds of re-enactments (film or television adaptations that observe attention to accurate historical detail). Grayson and Martinec also suggest that *iconic authenticity* may be applied to fictional experiences or characters e.g. the Sherlock Holmes Museum in London (2004, p.299). The authenticity evaluation here is not one based on a real-world truth, but whether the article or experience is aligned with a particular canon informed by the original fictional work.

Secondly, Newman and Smith consider philosopher Dennis Dutton's (2003) categorization of two kinds of authenticity in the field of aesthetics: *nominal authenticity* and *expressive authenticity*. Dutton defines *nominal authenticity* as "the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring ... that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named" (2003, p.258). In this definition, one may observe some similarity between *nominal authenticity* and *indexical authenticity* in the preoccupation with traceable material proof of an object's factual relationship to an historical time, place, or maker. *Nominal authenticity* may, however, suggest the correct qualification of an object's provenance, whilst

indexical authenticity implies a study of traces which may not lead to the presumed provenance claimed for an object, and thus not result in a conclusive “correct identification”. Dutton describes his second form of authenticity as *expressive authenticity*, a quality that: “ha[s] to do with an object’s character as a true expression of an individual’s or a society’s values and beliefs” (2003, p.258). A distinction may be noted in how *nominal authenticity* may best qualify the conditions of an object, whilst *expressive authenticity* is an evaluation of the agency involved in the making (or display) of said object. It is important to note, however, that Dutton’s *expressive authenticity* is still a value judgement related to the object as indicative of the maker’s intention and resulting expression, and not a moral judgement on their honesty of character, more generally. In this theorisation of kinds of authenticity, Dutton notes that *nominal authenticity* may be more readily agreed to as an objective truth, whilst *expressive authenticity* is more subjective as it relies on expert perceptions of value (2003, p.267).

Next, Newman and Smith note a sociological study by business management scholar Glenn Carroll (2015). Carroll proposes two kinds of authenticity: *type authenticity* and *moral authenticity*. In this study, Carroll observes the social constructedness of perceptions of authenticity in his desire to classify kinds of authenticity. *Type authenticity* he defines as something which “fits appropriately into a classification for which it has been assigned or someone has claimed for it ... whether the object meets the criteria for inclusion or membership in the type or genre or category” (2015, pp.7-8). The second kind of authenticity he proposes, *moral authenticity*, draws from existential philosophy and considers whether the means of production of an artefact or experience (object) aligns with the values professed by the producer (agent). *Moral authenticity*, thus, may share something with the definition of Dutton’s *expressive authenticity*. Carroll notes that “a person is said to be authentic ... if she is sincere, assumes responsibility for her actions, and makes explicit value-based choices concerning those actions rather than accepting socially imposed values and actions” (2015, p.8). He further explains that *moral authenticity* may be evaluated against whether “the individuals or collectives involved in the establishment and maintenance of the object have sincerely attempted to enact their true morals” (2015, p.8). Carroll’s repetition of “sincere” and “sincerely” and his use of the term “enact” is pertinent to my argument as a whole, as will be examined later in this chapter.

Authenticity is a concept in tourism studies which has been debated from many angles, often in ways that provide more problems than solutions. The difficulty in finding an agreed definition, and the ways in which certain applications of the term have a reductive descriptive capacity may, nevertheless, be well worth exploring if only to consider how the application of

the word requires critical attention. The complexities of these debates will also be returned to later. For now, it may be sufficient to follow Newman and Smith in their observation of tourism theorist Ning Wang's taxonomy of authenticity, in which he suggests three types: *objective*; *constructive* (or *symbolic*); and *existential* authenticity. Wang uses the term *objective authenticity* to describe objects whose authenticity may be proved by an "absolute and objective criterion used to measure authenticity" (1999, p.351). In this definition, *objective authenticity* may be comparable to *indexical authenticity* and *nominal authenticity* in its focus on objective, provable material facts. *Constructive authenticity*, Wang also describes as *symbolic authenticity* because this kind of authenticity relies on a construction agreed upon by appropriate authorities as symbolic of a kind of authenticity. He writes that these symbolic objects and experiences may "appear authentic, not because they are inherently authentic, but because they are constructed as such in terms of points of view, beliefs, perspectives, or powers" (1999, p.351). This kind of authenticity may then be comparable to *type authenticity* in that a category may define a set of criteria by which certain objects may be classified. His third definition of authenticity, *existential authenticity*, refers specifically to the experience of the tourist and may, he remarks, in fact, have nothing to do with the toured sites or objects, but rather "involves personal or intersubjective feelings activated by the liminal process of tourist activities" (1999, p.351). Newman and Smith equate the individual perception-based quality of *existential authenticity* to yet another definition put forward in a marketing-oriented sociology paper by Eric Arnould and Linda Price (2000) described as "self-authentication" (2016, p.612). What is implied by this term would seem straightforward in how they suggest a form of authenticity that may be determined by individual perceptions of this without external ratification. I will, however, subsequently argue that external references are required for a definition of authenticity, and that the perceptual condition they describe here may be better defined by examining other extant terminology.

Finally, Newman and Smith's literature review notes another consumer marketing-oriented paper by Michael Beverland, Adam Lindgreen and Michiel Vink entitled 'Projecting Authenticity Through Advertising: Consumer Judgments of Advertisers' Claims' (2008). In this qualitative study, the authors observe consumer responses to advertisements by Trappist and Abbey beer producers based on their perceptions of three kinds of authenticity. These they describe as *pure authenticity*, *approximate authenticity*, and *moral authenticity*. Whilst this study is based on consumer perceptions of advertising, rather than whether the advertisers necessarily adhere to the qualities inherent in these kinds of authenticity, the kinds of authenticity proposed may still have some philosophical merit in their abstract ideals. *Pure authenticity*, Beveland et al. describe as "unbroken commitments to tradition and place of origin (a continued connection to the place of founding) ... the product has remained

completely unchanged from the original ... a continuance of historic practices, including means of production, place of production, and product styling" (2008, p.7). As the object under consideration is a reproducible consumable, there is no unique original, but the authentication process here relies on whether the product is an authentic reproduction made using an original recipe and adhering to historical methods and techniques of production. Beveland et al. define *approximate authenticity* as something less determined by fact and based more on audiences' perceptions and feelings as to whether a product aligns with their expectations, their "symbolic or abstract impressions of tradition" (2008, p.9). The authors note that their research participants use words like "aura" and "mystique" to describe these impressions (2008, p.11), words which will appear again in this thesis in very different contexts. They also observe one participant who rejects the authenticity of a particular product because "he perceives that it is not sincere—it is effectively all style with no substance" (2008, p.11). From this statement, they conclude that "*approximate authenticity* involved abstract cues that combined to create a sincere impression" (2008, p.11). While Beveland et al. reference Grayson and Martinec's *indexical* and *iconic* forms of authenticity in the development of their ideas of *pure* and *approximate authenticity*, their *moral authenticity* makes no reference to Carroll and seems to have emerged through a similar commonsense application of the term moral. Here, they define their *moral authenticity* as something which "comes from the sense that a passionate creator is involved in making products, and is motivated primarily by their love of craft, rather than the possibility of financial reward" (2008, p.12). It may thus be argued that, similar to *approximate authenticity*, Beveland et al's participants may consider a product to be *morally authentic* if they perceive the producers to be sincere in their motives behind their craft.

Newman and Smith, having noted these various other kinds of authenticity, propose their own taxonomy based on:

four broad kinds of authenticity judgments, which can be organized along two relevant dimensions: the type of entity that is evaluated (object vs. agent) and the source of information that is consulted (external vs. internal) (2016, p.613).

First, they suggest *historical authenticity*, which combines *indexical* (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), *nominal* (Dutton, 2003), *objective* (Wang, 1999), and *pure authenticity* (Beverland et al, 2008) by comparing how each of these kinds most specifically relates to unique objects whose authenticity may be scientifically proven or have external evidence of provenance. They note that such authenticity "judgments tend to be binary in nature" (2016, p.612). Secondly, they propose *categorical authenticity*, an amalgam of *iconic* (Grayson and

Martinec, 2004), *type* (Carroll, 2015), *constructed* (Wang, 1999), and *approximate authenticity* (Beverland et al, 2008). This taxonomy may be helpful in evaluating objects or experiences whose authenticity is relative to a particular category or style and where the object is either consumable, repeatable or in some way difficult to archive as a singular original object e.g. food or performance. Although Newman and Smith clarify that this form may likely be “evaluated on a continuum” (2016, p.62), this kind of authenticity nevertheless presumes there is some external reference or set of agreed criteria against which to test such an authentication.

Things begin to get a bit muddier, however, when they propose *value authenticity* as a mixture of *expressive* (Dutton, 2003), and *moral authenticity* (Carroll, 2015; Beverland et al, 2008), a judgement of “the extent to which someone is intrinsically motivated and eschews greed, or the extent to which someone’s behaviour embodies the values of a particular culture” (2016, p.613). Firstly, this is something of a misreading of Dutton’s *expressive authenticity*, for whilst it shares some aspects with *moral authenticity* in the concern with an alignment between the maker’s intent and means of expression in an object as a reflection of societal values and morals, these may relate to the societal values at the time of making which may not necessarily align with contemporary thinking on appropriate or honest moral conduct. This can be seen in how Dutton reflects on the way the aspiration to determine the authenticity of an artwork:

comes from a general desire to understand a work of art according to its original canon of criticism: what did it mean to its creator? How was it related to the cultural context of its creation? ... What could its original audience have been expected to make of it? What would they have found engaging or important about it? (2003, p.260-261).

Expressive authenticity may then equally be a form of *categorical authenticity*, particularly when evaluating historical artwork or fiction. Secondly, *value authenticity* has a subset of ideas Newman and Smith refer to as *self authenticity*, which includes *existential authenticity* (Wang, 1999) and that they suggest is not evaluated against external references “since they pertain to highly personal, subjective judgments” (2016, p.613). I find this last claim positively ludicrous, as it extends the meaning of authenticity to include an individual internal subjective impression, rather than a process reliant on a provable or socially agreed fact relative to a predetermined set of external criteria. At a time in history where it is all too common to hear or read the terms ‘your truth’ or ‘my truth’ (as if *the truth* needed to be adjusted to suit individuals’ feelings about facts), it is perhaps unsurprising. For Newman and Smith, with their particular research focus on psychology and marketing, their interpretation of the

meanings of authenticity (in which they are well supported by the theorists they cite) may place greater emphasis on audiences' perceptions of authenticity, rather than objective processes of authentication. These observations are less useful for fields of study less focused on consumer experiences and brand identities, and more concerned with archiving cultures, such as museum studies or art history, although I will discuss this kind of economic value creep (over societal or cultural value) in Chapter Three of this thesis.

In an article on authenticity in tourism, Yvette Reisinger and Carol Steiner suggest debates on the definition of authenticity in this field confuse rather than clarify discussions and “should be replaced by more explicit, less pretentious terms like genuine, actual, accurate, real, and true” (2006, p. 66). Their reasoning is that authenticity does not function as a discipline black box, a concept whose role “is to allow progress in the development of Knowledge” (2006, p.66). ‘Actual’, ‘real’ or ‘true’, while these terms might describe some aspects of culture (a concept with many links to tourism) may be inaccurate, however, when describing certain other elements of culture (including audience receptions) that embrace metaphor or fiction as a representation of, or reflection on, society. In this overview of kinds of authenticity, it is, therefore, necessary to determine what forms of authenticity may be useful in analysing works of art (which may be relative to socially agreed constructions of what denotes ‘real’, ‘genuine’, ‘actual’ or ‘true’), and whether there are other pre-existing terms, (as Reisinger and Steiner suggest) which might better suit a discussion of certain aspects without inventing new terminology or attempting to stretch authenticity so far that its definition includes what is antithetical to its meaning.

Initially, I had hoped to delimit two terms in this thesis to define concepts of realness or honesty of expression: authenticity (that which is provable and related to objects or some external concrete manifestation) and sincerity (that which is believed, expressed, perceived and related to actors/agents and audiences' impressions). There may, however, still be some merit in making a slight distinction between two kinds of authenticity. The first kind of authenticity, which seems to be the most aligned with its associations with genuine, truth, real or original, can be seen in *historical, indexical, nominal, objective, and pure authenticity*. Art historians and Directors at Sotheby's Institute of Art, Megan Aldrich and Jos Hackforth-Jones, refer to this kind of authenticity as *material authenticity*, where the attribution of an object and its provenance may be determined through empirical observations of the “physical condition of art objects ... in conjunction with available documentation” (2012, p.8). This would appear to be the most clear and commonsense terminology as the adjective describes exactly what is used to determine authenticity i.e. material evidence, whether as part of the object or in combination with external archival

documentation. Their second proposed category of *conceptual authenticity* is far broader and involves a contextual consideration of the social construction of authenticity. Whilst they offer no decisive definition, they suggest that *conceptual authenticity* may be contemplated in a relationship between intent and material manifestation by considering:

more abstract questions [such as] what is the relationship between authenticity and originality; can the notion of authenticity be applied to subject matter and/or style; what constitutes either inauthentic or authentic presentation or display of artworks; is a copy or replica less authentic than the original; and, finally, can an object be materially authentic but conceptually inauthentic? (2012, p.8).

This reflection on the *idea* of authenticity is still very much applied to the object, production or display of artworks. Although some aspects may relate to the agents involved, and the alignment between their intent and expression (or sensitivity to the intent and context of the artist in the case of curators), the concept of authenticity in these considerations must still be determined by a mutually agreed or motivated set of criteria rather than an internal perception that takes no cognisance of external factors. My use of *conceptual authenticity* in this thesis may thus bear some similarity to *categorical, iconic, type, constructed* and *approximate authenticity* in that whilst this authenticity is a construction, the criteria for evaluation have some predetermined or externally motivated set of objectives.

Subjective impressions, personal perceptions, and claims of authenticity, whilst not necessarily objectively provable, may have some very real consequences in how they influence cultural producers and their audiences in terms of how they enact and react to objects and experiences. Authenticity, however, in its authoritative status, is not the most accurate word to describe this understanding of interpersonal honesty, for it is less open to conversation and debate and almost always better applied to objects than agents. An honest interpersonal exchange is far better described, as some of the theorists above demonstrate, by using the word ‘sincerity’. Sincerity has, for several reasons, fallen out of favour, which I will return to later. Why the focus on authenticity holds much greater appeal at present may be first further investigated by considering some of its history and social meaning.

Origin[als]

The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it.

—Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

Authenticity is strongly linked to ideas of both origin, and originality. Materially, the identification and authentication of a work of art is evidenced through the history to which it can objectively be proven to have physically borne witness from its point of origin. Conceptually, the notion of 'original' is harder to measure.

What, then, is the origin of authenticity? The Oxford English Dictionary offers nine definitions, with multiple sub-definitions, many of which are now obsolete in their use. A general overview of the definitions would suggest that authenticity implies something "legally valid" (definition one), "possess[ing] authority; entitled to obedience or respect" (definition three), "genuine; not feigned or false" (definition seven), something "that has an objective existence; real, actual" (definition eight) (OED, 2023a). The etymology of the word has multiple sources from Greek, Medieval Latin, Middle French, Anglo-Norman and Old Scots, which may account for so many varied, yet aligned, interpretations of meaning and origin. The OED notes of some early forms of the word that these were most probably "influenced by folk-etymological association with classical Latin *auctor* author *n.* and *auctōritās* authority *n.* (the authenticity of a document being regarded as guaranteed by its author)" (2023b). The 'author' of an artwork cannot, however, necessarily be relied upon in determining the authority of an artwork, especially if authorship may be what requires authentication. Where, then, does the idea of authenticating artwork originate?

Literary critic, Lionel Trilling asserts that authenticity holds its provenance to be the museum:

where persons expert in such matters test whether objects of art are what they appear to be or are claimed to be, and worth the price that is asked for them—or, if this has already been paid, worth the admiration they are being given (1972, p.93).

Here Trilling implies that authenticity in art is a quality that requires verification by experts, and cannot be ascertained by the casual observer. The worthiness of a work of art can only partially be determined by its relation to price. Price is different from value; in that we may value something so highly we consider it beyond price. This is a particular reason to differentiate between *material* and *conceptual authenticity*. The art curator and/or museum expert will attempt to determine the *material authenticity* of objects of art through scientific tests of materials (e.g. chemical composition of pigments/canvas/paper), analysis of archival evidence of its provenance (whether on the object e.g. dealer's stamps or external to it e.g. historical records of sale), and specialist scrutiny of other physical elements (e.g. brushwork, signature) which may determine its origin. *Material authenticity* (an art object's history and

maker) will often influence the financial price (i.e. its economic value) of the work should it appear on the open market. The *conceptual authenticity* of a work of art is determined by more arcane practices of connoisseurship, academic theory, and taste: is such-and-such a work a good example of a particular artist's oeuvre or a specific school of thought? Are the artistic intent, and its means of expression, aligned? In certain cases, is the intent of the work (and its corresponding means of expression) particularly novel given its provenance in history i.e. is it *original*? *Conceptual authenticity*, whilst it may bear some weight on the economic value of a work, is far more likely to determine social or cultural value. This form of authenticity is, therefore, even more susceptible to context, given that academic and societal views are subject to change.

Authenticity, with its associations with concepts of truth and realness, would seem to suggest that a quest for this quality is universal and timeless. Proofs of its presumed opposite in forged documents, false currency, and faked religious relics have arisen at several points in history, in various cultural contexts. Each of these kinds of falsity carries the same motivation: the acquisition of material gain and/or societal power by dishonest means. The contemporary notion of authenticity in art, however, is premised on ideas of individuality—whether this is the singular identifiable maker of the work, its nature as a unique creative object, or a particular novelty of concept. This understanding of authenticity is not shared by cultures and historical contexts whose sense of authenticity in art is the perfect emulation by a student of the masterworks in a certain tradition, in order to further that tradition. There is a much broader scope of history wherein multiple creative works from illuminated manuscripts and church carvings, to ceremonial masks and architectural embellishments in various global cultures, remain anonymous as to their individual makers. The modern idea of a work of art as a product of a singular identifiable artistic genius is also undermined in Western art history by artists such as Raphael, Titian, and Rubens, who utilised multiple assistants to complete their larger works (as many contemporary artists still do, though their product bears only the singular artist's name with the names of technical and artist assistants rarely credited).

The origin of our contemporary fixation with authenticity, and its need for evaluation by experts in a museum, is hard to pinpoint. It seems to dawn slowly, like a migraine, with its own particular aura of nostalgia. Some key events in the last few centuries might suggest some clues: the Age of Enlightenment, with its focus away from an unquestioning faith in religion and onto individual liberties and rationality; the Industrial Revolution, with its capacity for mass production and an associated nostalgia for the pastoral; and Colonisation from which arose a kind of sentimentality about the indigenous cultures and traditions which had

been 'tainted' by contact with Europeans.⁹ Anthropologist Richard Handler suggests that authenticity is "a cultural construct of the modern Western world" and that contemporary fixation with the idea arose "with the emergence of the modern world from the medieval ... as a central element in the individualist worldview" (1986, p.2). In Europe and America, the break from traditions of religion and rural pursuits created by the mass urbanisation of people, the replication (by mechanical means) of multiple products which had once taken time and particular skill to craft, and the mundane repetition of days in the urban environment led to a nostalgia for a rural life once governed by the cycle of seasons. In the postcolonies of the twenty-first century, formerly marginalised ethnic groups have increasingly become aware of how the marketing of indigenous culture may not only provide ways in which to reclaim and celebrate cultural traditions and identity but how such branding of 'authentic' culture may bring economic empowerment. Whilst there are possible benefits in how this commodification and corporatisation of identity can lend autonomy and economic sustainability to communities who have historically found themselves culturally marginalised, and support local claims to resources to which such communities have indigenous rights, there is also, as frequently, a dark side. The branding of 'authentic' culture as a commodity, as anthropologists Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff and George Meiu note, "is seldom free of argument, often sparking bitter disputes ... [and] is quite frequently threatened from within by efforts to privatise shared knowledge, skill, or hereditary status—and from outside by those who seek to profit from that commerce by investing in it on highly exploitative terms" (2020, p.4). They argue, however, that the desire for some form of 'authentic' cultural identity (with its potential to commodify ethnic difference for economic advantage and stability) is not simply reducible to "the spreading tentacles of global neoliberalism" but that "the reifying, rationalising effects of commerce—and also the slippages, spillages, and mutations it spawns—[are a product of] an epoch in which the very nature of being and belonging, of economy and society, of nation and state, has been under reconstruction" (2020, p.2). In an increasingly globalised world, as economic and political tensions have geographically displaced millions of people, this has given rise to all kinds of xenophobia. Taken together with the dreams of pre-contact culture in the postcolonies—an idealisation of a past uninflected by incomers, or repressed by colonial forces—the desire for 'authentic' culture and a nostalgia for a narrative of collective common identity takes multiple forms. For both those living in diaspora, who cannot return home, and those who feel the mass influx of people from foreign places (with very different ways of life) represents a threat to national identity and economic security, there are multiple reasons for cultural groups to become insular on the basis of constructing narratives of 'authentic' identity which are frequently

⁹ This will be explored in more detail later in relation to observations by anthropologist John P. Taylor and art historian Sidney Kasfir.

divisively used for political and economic control, and often inflamed by social violence. However, as Comaroff et al. note, “[i]n the age of finance capital and deregulation, the narrative of the commons and commonality is often just that: a narrative that, with ever greater intensity, romances vernacular authenticity, productivity, creativity, and togetherness—while still being commandeered by those who take control of the means of manufacture and marketing” (2020, p.6).

The rise and mainstream adoption of Artificial Intelligence technologies in the past two years have also underlined the contemporary social desire for authenticity, which can be seen in Merriam-Webster’s announcement of ‘authentic’ as their 2023 word of the year (Merriam-Webster, 2023). The choice of a ‘word-of-the-year’, by various lexicographic publications, is selected as a kind of zeitgeist barometer of annual global events and is determined by observations of data demonstrating an increase in online search trends for that word (Nowakowski, 2023). Merriam-Webster suggests that the increase in searches for the definition of authenticity in 2023 has been “driven by [news] stories and conversations about AI, celebrity culture, identity, and social media” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). These concerns around virtual media and technology’s influence on social interaction are reflected in Collins English Dictionary’s choice of word-of-the-year: ‘AI’, and Cambridge University Press’s choice of ‘hallucinate’ which, apart from its more general use, is a term that refers to “incorrect or misleading information provided by generative AI programs” (Kruez, 2023). Merriam-Webster notes that a quest to look up an accurate definition of authenticity may be motivated by how it is “hard to define and subject to debate”, and that it is frequently used in conjunction with “identity, whether national or personal: words frequently modified by *authentic* include *cuisine* and *dish*, but also *self* and *voice*” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Whether authentic (which is often better applied to objects or constructions which have some origin or fixed set of external criteria against which to evaluate them) is an appropriate modifier for something as potentially fluid as identity, particularly of the individual or personal variety, is highly debatable. Merriam-Webster observes that perceptions of authenticity on the internet, especially when it comes to social media, can greatly influence content producers’ credibility. Consumer-focused marketing expert Eugene Varricchio observes that these perceptions of authenticity, particularly when constructed through raw, unedited, cell phone footage, have led industry experts to favour “video as the future of content marketing [as it is] harder to be insincere on video” and that “social media audiences trust passionate content creators who have a sincere desire to share experiences” (Varricchio, 2023). Again, perceptions of authenticity are described as representations of interpersonal intent that are perceived to be sincere. This begs the question: why not use this term to define this perception rather than describe them as authentic, which implies an authoritative statement

rather than an honest exchange? Merriam-Webster notes that perceptions of a kind of brand identity generated through less mediated video snippets on social media, which seem to affirm producers as authentic content creators, have created a situation in which “authenticity has become a performance” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Varricchio echoes this sentiment and its potential manipulation of audiences’ desire for proof of authenticity by observing that “there’s a fine line between content that attracts an audience and content created to exploit it” (Varricchio, 2023). The choice of ‘authenticity’ as Merriam-Webster’s 2023 word of the year thus makes an interesting follow-up to their 2022 word of the year ‘gaslighting’ which saw a 1,740 percent search increase in that year and can be defined as “the act or practice of grossly misleading someone especially for one’s own advantage” (Feldman, 2022).

All these aspects of a jaded, modern, globalised society seem to have fermented a particular kind of contemporary longing. This longing for a proof of truth and origin is exemplified by the desire for the authentic. Concerns about Artificial Intelligence and its impact on concepts of authenticity, authorship, and originality are by no means new. Questions of what technology might mean for the production and consumption of creative artefacts and experiences, and who might determine their legitimacy, were most influentially raised by Walter Benjamin. A consideration of definitions of authenticity may be further contextualised by examining his claims as regards technology’s impact on art and what he determined to be an authentic original.

Aura, Origin, Ritual and Tradition

Benjamin’s 1935 essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ may have dated in his theorising that technological means of reproduction would strip the auratic mode of the art object and in so doing, “emancipate the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual” (2008, p.24). The essay has received perhaps as much critique as it has a firm following, ranging from criticism of what is seen as Benjamin’s poorly developed ontology (Wollheim, 1980, p.175) to his “infuriatingly imprecise and inconsistent” use of his own definitions (Gilloch, 2001, p.164). The essay’s influence on visual culture theory, however, is still discernible nearly a century after his death. John Berger’s 1972 *Ways of Seeing* may be just one such seminal work, still used in art schools, which owes much to concepts raised in Benjamin’s essay. Sociologists Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour consider that it is, in fact, the essay’s connotations, sweeping statements or philosophical “mistakes [that] are the main source of the fascination which it has exerted, and which, as it appears, it still exerts” (2003, p.91). I suggest that because Benjamin’s analysis of the qualities which pertain to authenticity in art (the *aura*, uniqueness, and a connection to ritual or tradition) still apply,

despite his thesis that technical reproduction would undo them, that continues to make them a relevant starting point for unpacking the construction of the concept of authenticity.

When it comes to objects of art and their authenticity, Benjamin notes several aspects which are worth exploring.¹⁰ The first is what he describes as the *aura* of an art object. This could be described as the tangible, but also metaphoric, resonance of an object. The object is imbued with this resonance through its physical qualities as well as its environmental experiences (i.e. the medium from which it is made, and the effects of time thereon). The *aura* is also affected by the cultural or historical associations that are ascribed to the original object. Secondly, Benjamin notes the *uniqueness* of the authentic object by way of this individual experience, through the passage of time. Thirdly, he observes the relation of art objects to both ritual and tradition: “Originally, the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition found expression in a cult ... the artwork’s auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function. In other words: the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its basis in ritual” (2008, p.24).

When differentiating between an authentic work of art, and the technical reproductions for which his essay is named, Benjamin points to the requirement of the presence of the original in the physical and temporal space of the viewer. He writes:

The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day (2008, p.21).

What the authentic work of art possesses, and the reproduction does not, he argues, is the *aura*. This quality is rather hard to apprehend because it is something present, which also speaks of the past, a kind of temporal blur which he describes as: “[a] strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (2008, p.23). What Benjamin underlines in the nature of the *aura* is the necessity of being in the physical presence of a material artefact which has this quality, a patina of age and experience which one may only perceive through direct experiential contact. It may be easier to align the concept with senses other than the visual (smell or sound), although proof of this may enter the viewer’s perception through visually observed evidence in a kind of synaesthesia. These immersive qualities are lost in a mechanical reproduction, and certainly, a colour plate in a reference book or a digital image on a screen does not inspire the same visceral,

¹⁰ These aspects are interrelated and therefore there is a lack of linearity to his argument. The ordering here is thus for the purpose of my systematisation and not drawn directly from his ordering.

multisensory awe we might experience in the physical proximity to an original historic artefact. A photograph or digital colour print necessarily flattens and removes many of the other sensory facets that might be perceived when being in physical proximity to a singular original artwork or unique historic artefact. Here, Benjamin highlights the immersive qualities inherent in art objects designed as singular experiences: that many of their attributes simply cannot translate when they are reproduced, and this may define their authenticity in that they are unique. What Benjamin adds to the definition of *aura* is not just the physical proximity to a multisensory, dimensional object (a kind of presence in a more conventional sense). Through the *aura*, one may apprehend the life experience of the object, its passage through and across history, so that it may become a kind of portal or bridge between the time in which it was made and the time in which one stands before it. This portal or bridge, however, can never be entered or crossed, although some aspects of the past might come to us in shadows or whispers. The distance between where we now find ourselves and where and when the object originated may thus simultaneously feel very close, and very distant. This paradox of experience may generate a sense of both proof of an historical moment, and a kind of longing for greater proximity to a time in which the object originated and one never experienced.¹¹

In an editorial introduction to Benjamin's essay in a collection of his writings, Michael W. Jennings suggests that:

A work of art may be said to have an aura if it claims a unique status based less on quality, use value, or worth per se than on its figurative distance from the beholder ... this distance is not primarily a space between painting and spectator or between text and reader but the creation of a psychological unapproachability—an authority—claimed for the work on the basis of its position within a tradition (2008, p.4).

This statement may highlight how claims of authenticity may create an unapproachable or unquestionable authority, which may both alienate viewers from deducing their own impressions of a work of art, and create a sense of elusiveness and exclusivity in a canonical tradition. This would certainly align with Benjamin's Marxist desires to unsettle the hierarchy of tradition and its "incontrovertible power [through which the artwork] attains a cultural position that lends it a sacrosanct inviolability [which] remains in the hands of a privileged few" (Jennings, 2008, p.15). It does not, however, entirely square with Benjamin's requirement that the *here and now* of the unique art object is a prerequisite for authenticity,

¹¹ This relation between a physically present object which alludes to the past and generates forms of nostalgia, will again become important later in this chapter when I examine Susan Stewart's theory on the souvenir.

as traditions of authority may merely make claims for this without presenting a physical object for such reflection and inspection.

A physical experience of an historical object in the *here and now*, whilst maintaining all the multisensory aspects that mechanical reproduction would otherwise flatten, alter or remove, will, nevertheless, still have lost something of its original context and the interim experiences which brought it from that time to the *here and now*. It would, however, seem that Benjamin still implies that something of these experiences through time are still apprehensible in the experience of an artwork's *aura*. It is important to remember that Benjamin's *aura* is not something for which he argues there is scientific proof but pertains to a more visceral, primal and personal quality. How much is the drama of this apprehension a genuine perception, and how much might it be a form of theatre created because we are told the work is authentic? It would seem that Benjamin might imply there is some innate quality that the authentic work of art projects via its *aura*, which is not present in reproductions. This may be obvious when compared to mechanical reproductions, but is it also true of forgeries, which seek to replicate not only the basic elements of a work, but make a performance of authenticity by replicating a perceived *aura*?¹² An experiment on whether genuine artefacts project an *aura* that is provably different from reproductions might be conducted, but would require a qualitative study with a large test subject sample group and both an enigmatic authentic work and an extremely convincing forgery to make any objective claims. At present, such studies (as can be seen in Newman and Smith's literature review) tend to focus on how audience perceptions of authenticity might be harnessed for marketing purposes, or influence understandings of psychology, rather than to what degree these perceptions might be accurate.

Benjamin, in his Marxist positionality, writes with some contempt about the nature of ritual and tradition suggesting how these aspects of culture are informed by a kind of exclusive cult value in authenticating expressions of art as opposed to a more broadly accessible exhibition value. To this end, he argues that technological reproduction destabilises notions of authenticity as a form of historical testimony and, in so doing, notes that "what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition" (2008, p.22). A disruption of the hierarchies of tradition, particularly when such power structures are inherited and left unquestioned, is necessary for any revolution or reconsideration of sociological thought. What Benjamin might not have foreseen in his time is the continual, or perhaps increased, desire for authenticity and, how

¹² This performance of authenticity in works of forgery will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

the delimiting of traditionally objective or external measures for this, might create a power vacuum for anyone claiming this authority and utilising these claims of discernment for capitalist gain. Despite his poetic descriptions of the nature of the *aura* in art, Benjamin nevertheless appears eager to do away with the notion of authenticity this may represent when he remarks that “as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics” (2008, p.25). Ritual, however, whether part of a recognised organised religion (or secular hierarchy) or as part of a more recently inventive creative rite as a social construction, carries some form of politics, however muted.¹³

At times, Benjamin uses the ideas of ritual and tradition interchangeably, which is problematic when he conflates matters of (spiritual or personal) belief with accepted authority. He notes the origin of works of art in magical ritual, which were later supplanted in Western culture, by ritual of a religious kind, and still later by ritual of a secular nature in the “cult of beauty” (2008, p.23). The function of the art object in each case, however, is not the same. A work (as a material manifestation) which has formed part of an act of magical-thinking is the residue of that ritualistic act, not the act itself. This kind of work is distinctly different from an anonymous work made as religious instruction for an illiterate congregation, or to demonstrate the power and might of a religious or state institution who acts as patron for the arts. These are different again from a representational painting designed to inspire awe in the viewer at the painter’s technical virtuosity. One cannot use the word ‘ritual’ to describe the ‘tradition’ that informs each. Whilst we can know something about the hierarchy and societal structure which contextualised medieval church frescos and European, eighteenth-century, academic painting, we may only speculate at the context of creation for Mesolithic rock art. Were their forms and meanings decreed by a singular authority, or were they collectively designed and celebrated? Are they even necessarily ritual markers and not merely documentation? Present-day experts of prehistoric art are less inclined to ascribe an exact and universal intent to these works.¹⁴

¹³ The relationship between art and forms of ritual will be discussed in Chapter Four.

¹⁴ Professor of Archaeology Richard Bradley gives an extensive overview of the scholarly debates in defining prehistoric art in *Image and Audience: Rethinking Prehistoric Art* (2009). Whilst mostly focused on Western European and Scandinavian prehistoric art, he introduces many of the changes in global thinking about theoretical definitions of prehistoric art over the last hundred years. These definitions relate to changing perceptions in ethnographic studies as well as archaeology. He problematises ideas of art made by ‘primitive cultures’, debates about art versus craft, and the problems of a “loss in translation” (2009, p.203) when one is not only considering a creative artefact from a different culture, but also a culture lost in time.

Benjamin's conflation of ideas of ritual and tradition raises questions of perception in relation to an authentic object of art: does the viewer recognise an object's authenticity because this has been instructed via the appropriate authority in the manner of tradition? Or is there something else, something instinctive, through which a viewer may sense authenticity in an art object because it has been made as a product of ritual? If this last were truly possible, there would be no need for scientific authentication and there would have been no great art hoaxes in history. The fact that there have been, and that audiences are drawn towards these objects even when they have been proved inauthentic, suggests something of the power of narrative in defining objects of art and inspiring belief. Is there then, in the story of an inauthentic object's origin, a narrative of originality which draws interest? In following Aldrich and Hackforth-Jones's line of questioning, can a *materially inauthentic* object be *conceptually authentic* and vice versa? If authenticity has its basis in tradition, then there may be another quality which inspires its ritual function.

The Risk of Sincerity

Sincerity, as a term, has fallen out of favour in contemporary thought and has largely been supplanted with authenticity, as a more fashionable concept, when what one means is something true, and not false. The two words, though similar, do not, however, mean the same thing. Authenticity, at least of the *material* kind, is provable and increasingly so through advanced scientific techniques and computerised archives. Sincerity, defined by Trilling as a "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (1972, p.2), is much harder to prove. In its expressive quality, it might be more similar to a definition of *conceptual authenticity* in an alignment between intent and means of expression. Indeed, it may just be a more descriptive word for certain aspects of *conceptual authenticity*, except that it is better applied to persons (agents) rather than things (objects). Trilling's definition demonstrates the performative quality of the term: a statement or expression of an interior state. Other definitions of the term, in various dictionaries, imply the need for the noun to which it is applied to have agency: "honesty of mind: freedom from hypocrisy" (Merriam-Webster, 2021); "honesty in intention or in communicating" (Dictionary.com, 2021); "proceeding from genuine feelings" (Lexico, 2021); "not pretending or lying" (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2023); "good faith" (Collins English Dictionary, 2021); "showing what you really think or feel" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2021). Authenticity as a fixed state or quality (however contextual) is an appropriate label for an object, which cannot exercise agency. It is not an appropriate label for people or their intentions, as people interact in society. In a social exchange, sincerity is always an *enactment* of feeling or expression, which we, in turn, may *experience* sincerely as true or false.

In his book *Authenticity and Sincerity*, Trilling examines the history of the term sincerity, considering its changing meaning in the moral life of society. He contemplates to what degree the idea of an essential human nature can transcend a particular historic or cultural context. He reasons that the empathy one might feel for particular literary works, varied in history and language, can sometimes persuade us “that human nature never varies, that the moral life is unitary and its terms perennial” (1972, p.2). At the same time, he notes that other works of fiction can draw our attention to the ever-shifting nature of social morality by means of the assumptions made by the author about the thought and behaviour (and therefore of the moral stance) of the imagined reader. He observes that whilst sincerity was once held in Western culture as the pinnacle of moral character in its adversity to falseness, it has latterly developed a meaning which associates the quality with a lack of worldliness and thus leaves the term dated. He observes that, “when we hear [the term sincerity], we are conscious of the anachronism which touches it with quaintness. If we speak it, we are likely to do so with discomfort or irony” (1972, p.6).

Whilst not universally culturally true, the lack of poise or excess of ardour suggested by the term is certainly not popular in contemporary global society. Perhaps, apart from its dated quality, it is also the overuse of the sentiment by politicians or other public figures (sports stars or celebrities) who, in being caught out in an act of falsity or immorality, will ‘sincerely’ apologize to the public. That the sentiment is only raised subsequent to an act which has called honesty in question, is one reason that its use almost implies its opposite. In the context of a public apology, the word may particularly make an audience squirm because it combines a loss of faith with public displays of emotion designed to garner sympathy from a less-than-receptive audience. The sincere apology is insincere as it is *the discovery* of falsity that has engendered it, not necessarily genuine guilt in the misdeed. It is not believed sincerely, as good faith has been breached in order for the apology to be necessary. If one feels a sense of manipulation, it may be because the speaker who now claims he is being honest, is really saying: now that I have been *found out*, I will finally speak truth. As with authenticity, the use of the word sincerity brings to mind its opposite as it is often used when this quality in the speaker has been called into question.

In a less corrupt scenario, the term sincerity tends to evoke a muzzy sensibility which is earnest, yet lacking in sophistication. Its application to a work of art is more commonly a back-handed compliment. As Trilling notes: “to praise a work ... by calling it sincere is now at best a way of saying that although it need be given no aesthetic or intellectual admiration, it was at least conceived in innocence of heart” (1972, p.6). The ardent exposure of deeply held sentiments through a sincere act is uncomfortable or possibly embarrassing. In a work

of art, sincerity as a sentiment may be misjudged (in its openness or honesty) as either a trick, whose intention is actually to provoke a sense of irony in the viewer, or as outright kitsch in its excessive display of emotion and therefore not an honest sentiment, but shallow, saccharine sentimentality.

Swiss curator Aoife Rosenmeyer questions this contemporary discomfiture by artists to express sincerity:

[Sincerity] is most definitely not fashionable; instead artists and critics hide behind strategies of, at best, self-referential or self-depreciatory glibness, or, at worst, irony and cynicism. The straightforward attempt to be sincere, honest and open whilst leaving something at stake is rare indeed ... Accepting the compromises entailed in living in the modern world, is sincerity possible in art without the artist having to cover their embarrassment through any of the contemporary strategies of dissembling? (2010).

It is not just the fear of artists to express sincerity that renders the concept unpopular, but the unwillingness of a jaded audience to sincerely believe such expressions. Thus, there is a risk in being sincere in one's expression if one's audience is less than receptive, or worse, might use this knowledge of true feelings as a social weapon. There is also a risk in sincerely believing another in case their expression is false, and one might appear gullible or, taken in, be subjected to worse duplicity. The awkwardness associated with sincerity, however, is exactly what makes it risky and, therefore, interesting. It places something at stake, something deeply personal and something very real in the space of experience and emotion. *Material authenticity* requires an emphasis on provable factors to identify the truth and context of an object's origins. *Conceptual authenticity*, particularly for works of art (which are inherently metaphoric devices designed with an audience in mind), may be better defined by considering qualities of sincerity not only within the object—between artistic intent and means of expression—but between the artist and the audience as a contractual vehicle of allegorical emotive communication. Sincerity is thus contractual.

While there are concerns about whether an ill-founded trust in someone's sincerity might make one appear foolish, such a misjudgement might only illustrate that one is inclined to think the best of people in offering the benefit of the doubt. To be mistaken in perceptions of authenticity, particularly as it is implied as the more sophisticated form of judging honesty, is to have been genuinely duped, not only in one's perceptions of others but in one's assumptions that one has a more sophisticated form of discernment. Sincerity, in its relation to forms of agency, means that it always carries a sense of performativity as part of its

definition. Authenticity is not a performance but a fact that does not alter for its audience (although a decontextualisation may seem to change it), unless it is a forgery which uses this performativity to disassemble. That authenticity, as Merriam-Webster observes, has increasingly become a performance, points to how producers who rely on this quality have become increasingly interested in staging authenticity.

Staged Authenticity

Tourism theorist Dean MacCannell is credited with first popularising an examination of the concept of authenticity in tourism, a topic which has since been extensively explored in the field. In *The Tourist* (first published in 1976), he considers how a desire to see the backstage workings of places, as opposed to only the performances constructed with a tourist audience in mind, has led to tours specifically designed for this experience. The presumption that a kind of behind-the-scenes experience that is off the main tourism route will offer a more real insight into the culture being explored, and is therefore more authentic, informs this touristic desire. MacCannell, however, notes that these backstage experiences may nevertheless become another kind of performance, one where authenticity might be staged for the purposes of tourism. He writes of these tours that they are “characterized by social organization designed to reveal inner workings of the place; on tour, outsiders are allowed further *in* than regular patrons” (1999, p.98). Because these experiences are specifically crafted to reveal a sample of the ‘real’ space behind the scenes, however, he also notes that these tours may possess “a staged quality to the proceedings that lends to them an aura of superficiality, albeit a superficiality not always perceived as such by the tourist” (1999, p.98).

In observing this discrepancy between the authenticity of the tour, and the authenticity of the tourist’s experience, MacCannell echoes distinctions made by the theorists at the beginning of this chapter that would seem to suggest different kinds of authenticity in two streams: the actual and the perceptual. Here we might return to Wang, who points out that tourism, in borrowing the concept of authenticity from museology, must make a distinction between “the authenticity of experiences” and “the authenticity of toured objects” (1999, p.351). Wang’s three categories of authenticity—*objective*; *constructive (symbolic)*; and *existential*—are designed to consider how the term is applied to these two categories of objects and experiences. *Objective authenticity* may be quite straightforward in its application to certain cultural artefacts: either the object is an original or historical object, or it is not. Claims of authenticity are slightly more difficult when an object is made in a certain tradition but is not (nor cannot be) *the* original, or when a particular experience presented for tourism was never designed for an external audience (certain rites and rituals), or is no longer part of an extant

living practice e.g. sites of experimental archaeology.¹⁵ *Constructive authenticity* may serve well in defining the authenticity of certain aspects of experiences in which objects or performances are reconstructed or reenacted in line with extant academic knowledge. Whilst one may be aware that these are constructions or replicas and that they may not be exactly accurate in every aspect, or constrained by the presentation to an audience, the use of historically accurate materials, techniques and technologies may still be regarded as authentic and serve to test hypotheses about the means by which certain historical cultures farmed, built or used tools. Whilst such studies are immersive and experiential and may have some educational value, the field of experimental archaeology is well aware that many such insights may still be speculative at best. Authenticity in such experiences must then always be tested against what material evidence there exists without making too many claims about whether any resulting hypotheses are a hundred percent authentic. There is then no duplicity in this form of *staged authenticity* as both the researchers and potential audiences of their educational reconstructions and reenactments are well aware that these experiments are speculative, but trust that the process is based on some kind of research-intensive rigour that observes authenticity where possible.

Both MacCannell and Wang observe the desire in a certain kind of tourist for authentic experiences, and that this desire can become a marketing ploy for less scrupulous operators who are less honest about the fact that what they offer (in their claims of authenticity) is in fact staged. MacCannell views this desire for authenticity as a product of the “instability and inauthenticity” inherent in the progress of modernity, which he says, has led to the perception that “reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler life-styles” (1999, p.3). He suggests that this sense of nostalgia is exactly what drives the sightseer who is “motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived” (1999, p.94). At the same time, he recognises the impossibility of this experience from a tourist point of view as one is not living the ‘real life’ of someone else, merely tasting a potential sample of it: a souvenir around which the tourist may construct his own narrative of experience. If one has managed to avoid the more calculated touristic traps of *staged authenticity*, one is not likely to avoid another kind of *staged authenticity* offered with more innocence of heart in the act of hospitality from a stranger. When we receive guests and invite them into our homes, particularly when we are not well acquainted, we are much more

¹⁵ Anthropological and Medieval archaeologist James Mathieu defines experimental archaeology as “a controllable imitative experiment to replicate past phenomena in order to generate and test hypotheses to provide or enhance analogies for archaeological interpretation” (2002, p.12). Such practical experiments may help test certain conjectures about historical technology or point to gaps or impracticalities in assumptions made about these methodologies. As reenactments, however, they are not conclusive proof, although they may support further academic speculation and enquiry.

likely to attempt to present ourselves as our 'best selves'—we clean the house, put away the laundry, wash the dishes. One may even construct something around the home for the visitor or bring in things we think will make a guest more comfortable. The result is that whilst inviting someone home, they do not come to the version of the home in which we live, but a cleaner, neater, or specifically designed version of home which has been staged for a guest's benefit. MacCannell notes the potential insult of the term 'tourist' "as a derisive label for someone who seems content with his obviously inauthentic experiences" (1999, p.3). The 'tourist', as an insult, is thus applied to someone who cannot see beneath the surface value of his experiences. Used metaphorically, the tourist is not only an outsider, but one who seeks to participate in a community or cultural experience only fleetingly and, through positions of privilege, may treat such brief visits to other people's real-life existences as something exotic or titillating.

Wang suggests that the desire for authentic experiences in tourism stems from a sense that modern society constrains an authentic self. The tourism experience, he writes, is:

a liminal experience, [in which] people feel they themselves are much more authentic and more freely self-expressed than in everyday life, not because they find the toured objects are authentic but simply because they are engaging in non-ordinary activities, free from the constraints of the daily (1999, p.352).

In this description, however, there is a contradiction. Wang offers the liminality of a tourism experience as a means to experience a 'true self' uninhibited by everyday life, but in so suggesting, he also implies the escapism of travel. How can one find a 'real' self by escaping a 'real' (albeit everyday) life? The escapism of travel might allow an individual to reflect on aspects of the self that are not immediately apparent in daily life. It would be incorrect to say that this self is "much more authentic" (Wang, 1999, p.352) rather than merely a different element of the whole self. The idea also does not align with cultures and traditions where authenticity is not an individual experience but intrinsically linked to any one person's ability to be immersed and in alignment with a larger common cultural collective. This notion that a real, truer, or purer form of life exists elsewhere, at a distance or in the past, unsullied by the progress of modern industrialisation, is one inherited from Western, Modernist thought. This can be seen in how Handler, as an American anthropologist, observes that Western anthropology's desire to quantify authenticity in other cultures does not always align with preconceived criteria for this and that "our search for authentic cultural experience—for the unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched and traditional—says more about us than about others" (1986, p.2). Wang observes, in a postmodern context, the varied definitions of the

idea of the 'real' drawing on Baudrillard's (1983) ideas of simulacra and Eco's (1986) writings on hyperreality. Wang notes that these theorists have "abandon[ed] the concept of authenticity altogether. Moreover, they justify the inauthenticity in tourist space" (1999, p.358). For postmodern theorists, however, the notion of authenticity in a material sense is beside the point in defining the validity of an experience. They also do not suggest that such touristic experiences should not be critically examined merely because a lack of authenticity renders them imaginary landscapes. Fantasy scenarios, particularly when they are designed for mass tourism, are social constructs which may utilise myths of authenticity in their conceptual design and marketing to underline, or further, very real hidden political or ideological motives. Reisinger and Steiner also observe a shift in the understanding of authenticity in philosophical theories of the twentieth century. They note that:

Modernists/realists argue there is a discernible objective basis for the authenticity ... underpinned by a fixed and knowable reality. Constructivists argue the basis is social or personal and hence unfixed, subjective and variable ... Postmodernists assert that authenticity is irrelevant to many tourists, who either do not value it, are suspicious of it, are complicit in its cynical construction for commercial purposes, or are aware that it is merely a marketing device (2006, p.66).

This lack of agreement on what the concept might mean is the two theorists' motive for the suggestion that the word 'authenticity' should be replaced with more exacting terminology which can delineate what of a tourism experience is deemed to be real. Wang, however, suggests that this rejection by postmodern theorists of concepts of authenticity may be an opportunity to redefine its definition, yet this reworking of the idea isn't ultimately plausible when there are other extant words to describe the condition he defines as *existential authenticity*. His need to repurpose the term suggests a lingering longing for the idea of original, true or real experiences, and to define these as 'authentic'. That authenticity as a concept by definition must ultimately be proven or agreed, rather than merely perceived or believed, is another reason his re-definition of authenticity does not work.

Of *constructive authenticity*, Wang notes that there can be no finite 'real' in the sense of origin or originals (the pre-definers of authenticity in his *objective* sense) because of the shifting, contextual nature of authenticity. Whilst *objective authenticity* requires material proof, *constructive authenticity* requires mutually agreed external terms of reference, even if these are subject to change with time. Of *existential authenticity*, he writes that the perception of the tourist is all-important:

if mass tourists empathically experience the toured objects as authentic, then, their viewpoints are real in their own right, no matter whether experts may propose an opposite view from an objective perspective (1999, p.355).

Whilst debates around constructions of the 'real' might be answered with a perceptual take on the matter, it entirely depends on what part of the experience is described as 'real'. If one experiences real emotions whilst watching a piece of theatre, one would not suggest this was because the actors weren't acting. One suspends disbelief in the construction of the representation in order to have another kind of belief, one of an underlying truth the actors try to tell with their performative lie.

Wang concludes with an admittance that authenticity needs more consideration in order to transcend the limitations of its definition. Authenticity is fixed when it may be objectively proved, it is contextual when it operates as a social construction, but I disagree that qualities which are personally experiential, and therefore reliant on individual belief, may be defined as authentic. Benjamin's *aura* of an authentic work requires either the *objective* or *constructive* kinds of authenticity Wang suggests to be truly authentic. Forgers attempt to stage this kind of *aura* when faking authenticity. This in itself can be an interesting construction to observe, and forged works can be deeply moving in themselves even when we know them to be fake. If a viewer only believes, however, that what is presented is authentic without external evidence, then they have not had an authentic experience, only one they have sincerely believed. Wang, in describing *existential authenticity*, is simply trying to extend a definition too far. There is another word which could be applied to the condition which he describes with its *Intra-Personal* (true to one's self) and *Inter-Personal* (true to others) modalities (1999, pp.363-364). This word is 'sincerity'.

Trilling draws on exactly this idea of *intra-* and *inter-personal* truth in his discussion of the value of sincerity by citing Polonius's famous advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*: "This above all: to thine own self be true, / And it doth follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man" (Shakespeare, cited in Trilling. 1972, p.3). In using this speech as a definer of the concept of sincerity, Trilling brings attention to the contractual nature of the term: the truth between one's own self and one's actions, and its resultant honesty with others. He rejects any reading of the speech which might see it as purely an expression of self-interest. Rather, despite the character's obvious flaws, Trilling considers this moment as one of transcendence for Polonius, where "he has conceived of sincerity as an essential condition of virtue and has discovered how it is to be attained" (1972, p.3).

In the context of tourism, as opposed to the life of art or theatre, one does not always consider the packaged experiences as re-presentations. Many tourism experiences will style themselves as authentic glimpses into the real life of a particular place or culture. For this reason, MacCannell notes the doubling of duplicity involved in a behind-the-scenes experience which disguises its staged qualities:

The lie contained in the touristic experience ... presents itself as a truthful revelation, as the vehicle that carries the onlooker behind false fronts into reality ... a false back is more insidious and dangerous than a false front, or an inauthentic demystification of social life is not merely a lie but a superlie, the kind that drips with sincerity (1999, p.103).

Here, MacCannell's use of 'sincerity' demonstrates precisely the corruption of this term in contemporary parlance. What does MacCannell mean by suggesting that the false back "drips with sincerity"? That it is too much, or tries too hard, and in so doing, overreaches itself and gives the falsity away? His distaste for the term may explain why Wang, in his wake, is so reticent to use it despite 'sincerity' being a better term for his *existential authenticity*. For MacCannell and Wang, their preoccupation with authenticity in tourism studies may well be informed by their theoretical positions being somewhat in line with the tradition of Western Modernist thinking on the topic as outlined by Handler. Tourism and anthropological studies, which primarily focus on postcolonial contexts, may have very different views on authenticity and whether sincerity is not a potentially more useful concept to analyse more honest forms of a tourism exchange.

A Zone of Contact

Anthropologist John P. Taylor, writing on tourism experiences of Maori culture, identifies that a search for authenticity is often linked to a Western quest for origins, involving a sentimentality about pre-contact aboriginal culture and a nostalgia, which imagines this culture to be in a kind of time-warp stasis prior to European contact. In this imagined pastoral of culture and art, there is thought to be a means of accessing the *aura* of authenticity, which is somehow still traditional and, though fast vanishing, still unique. Taylor notes how advertisements for tourism in the postcolonial context often include this appeal to a Western sense of authenticity, particularly in the context of globalisation, where "the list of endangered natural species is extended to include 'endangered cultures'" (2001, p.13).¹⁶ The mandate of this kind of advertising implies both a sense of history and tradition which

¹⁶ Taylor speaks specifically to examples of tourism of Maori culture in New Zealand, but parallels can be drawn with any tourism cultures which offer such 'staged authenticities' as cultural villages, traditional/'native' dancing, and 'rituals' as a spectacle for tourists.

has been extant for generations, and also a kind of urgency that this traditional way of life is soon to be lost—a kind of *catch-it-while-you-can* limited edition.

Art historian Sidney Kasfir considers the dangers implicit in this way of thinking, which assumes an historic and cultural binary between a pre-colonial and post-colonial heritage of previously colonised people. In this myth, the idea of authenticity and inauthenticity of culture is applied to a:

before/after scenario of colonialism, in which art before colonization ... exhibited qualities that made it authentic (in the sense of untainted by Western intervention) ... [because] it was made to be used by the same society that produced it ... [Whilst] art produced within a colonial or postcolonial context is relegated ... [as] inauthentic because it was created after the advent of a cash economy and new forms of patronage (1992, p.41).

Kasfir, speaking specifically about African cultural heritage, considers the long history of Africa as a variable place with multiple points of cultural exchange, wars, and social upheavals which would have contributed to cultural and societal flux over thousands of years. Whilst European colonialism is a very large contextual change in recent history, it certainly would not have been the only cultural shift in all of Africa's vast history. She notes: "that there is no point in time prior to which we could speak of the ascendancy of 'traditional culture' and after which we could speak of its decline" (1992, p.43).

Taylor riffs on Benjamin's statement that "what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura" (2008, p.22) by saying, "the withering of the aura of authenticity 'at home' prompts the 'fallen' to seek it elsewhere" (2001, p.13). But this *aura* of authenticity sought by tourists in Taylor's initial case studies is, in fact, a *staged authenticity*. One in which, night after night, cultural groups perform an authenticity for visitors at a remove, in which the audience and performers never mingle. The experience is thus not authentic, not only because it is staged, but because it lacks what, in the Benjaminian sense, is required for something to be authentic. These performances are prolifically reproduced, not original nor premised on tradition (as may be an actual ritual, or rite of passage to which a tourist has been invited as a guest), and not conducted in the *here and now* of the viewer as the audience is kept separate from the performers.

In contrast to these *staged authenticities* of Maori culture, Taylor notes another kind of tourism experience on the rise in the Maori context. Advertised as *cultural exchanges* or

interaction experiences, the move towards these forms of cultural representation, Taylor argues, is inspired by a desire for sincerity. He notes that:

sincerity is significantly different from authenticity in that it occurs in the zone of contact among participating groups or individuals, rather than appearing as an internal quality of a thing, self, or Other. (2001, p.23)

In these *cultural exchanges*, audiences are encouraged to interact with Maori people, to engage in conversations about heritage and history, but also current concerns, and to participate in joint activities. In this *zone of contact* or a meeting halfway, Taylor does not see sincerity as a replacement for authenticity, but rather an experience in which value may be mutually created: “[r]ather than seeing value as the emanation of an ‘authentic object’ the moment of interaction may become the site in which value is generated” (2001, p.9). The construction of these *cultural exchanges* may still be viewed by more cynical observers as inauthentic because the experience is still one designed as a performance for an invited guest. This type of *staged authenticity* is, however, not dissimilar to the reconstructed educational sites produced by experimental archaeology, which may serve not only the purpose of tourist edification and entertainment but may fulfil other research possibilities or archival practices in the preservation of aspects of living culture. In both settings, this form of *staged authenticity* is distinctly more honest, and more respectful of tourists and toured peoples alike in that they are treated in their complexity as human beings rather than objects to be gawped at, or idiots who cannot be allowed to interact with the other humans lest they corrupt some pristine idea of an ‘authentic’ culture.

Performing Roles: ‘Staging Sincerity’

Handler, in his observation of authenticity as something both linked to the West and to its favouring of individuality, observes Trilling’s contemplation of sincerity as “privileg[ing] social relationships rather than individual selfhood” (1986, p.3). This weighting between an individual sense of one’s true self and the importance of social relationships causes something of a philosophical quandary for Trilling when it comes to the concept of sincerity. He asks: “[i]f one is true to one’s own self for the purpose of avoiding falsehood to others, is one being truly true to one’s own self?” (1972, p.9). He considers here the role one is required to play in social interactions, which would posit not “being true to one’s own self as an end but only as a means” (1972, p.9). The awareness of the roles we play in social interactions, he suggests, calls sincerity into question. This might imply the idea that when

we are sincere, what we are really doing is 'staging sincerity' for the sake of a public or interpersonal role:

Society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgement may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic (1972, pp.10-11).

The concept of social roles Trilling refers to, and the 'front' and 'back' regions proposed by MacCannell in his ideas of *staged authenticity*, are both drawn from Erving Goffman's seminal work on sociology: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). In this book, Goffman forms a dramaturgical perspective of social life by applying conventions, borrowed from the theatre, to a sociological account of human interaction. This is far more than an exploration of the Shakespearean metaphor that "all the world's a stage" (Shakespeare, 2019, 2.7.139) for Goffman is not applying this only as a metaphor, but as an analytical tool which best describes the ways in which social beings interact with one another. In Goffman's account, he presents participants who are both simultaneously performers and audience. He proposes a sliding scale of social performance and interaction which holds two extremes as its poles: the sincere and the cynical. The sincere performer believes his own performance and can be:

convinced that the impression of reality he stages is the real reality. When his audience is also convinced in this way about the show he puts on ... then for the moment, anyway, only the sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the 'realness' of what is presented (1956, p.10).

As an alternative extreme, Goffman proposes the cynical performer who "has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience" (1956, p.10). Goffman is at pains to point out that social performances are not necessarily one extreme or the other. The confidence trickster will be concerned with the sincere belief of his audience, as this is how he will perform his social trickery. Goffman notes that not all cynical performers have negative intentions (self-interest or personal gain) in mind when presenting a cynical performance: "[a] cynical individual may delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community" (1956, p.11). This kind of cynical performer may offer some falsity of performance to spare another's feelings (what might be described as a 'white lie') or because they feel that their audience's sincere belief in their actions will be

the very thing that ameliorates a situation when no sincere action will serve.¹⁷ One may consider, in these cases, if such dissembling in a social performance could be described as insincere, given that it is driven by purer motives. Is complete honesty always the best policy?

In his examples of everyday performances, Goffman illustrates the contractual nature of sincerity. He also notes the potential temporary nature of a sincere act: “for the moment” at a *zone of contact* inherent to interaction, the sincere exchange may seem real. If we accept Goffman’s thesis that all social interactions may be governed by ‘rules’ of everyday performance, then it may follow that all sincere acts are ‘staged’—not in the sense that they are not real, but because they must be *enacted* which is to say ‘performed’. If we agree with Benjamin that authenticity has its basis in tradition, sincerity has its basis in (socially performed) ritual—that is, belief. It is an act of communion: where two or more are gathered together, there might be sincerity also.

The Untrustworthy Soul: the ‘Real’ Problems of Performance

We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise truth at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.

—Pablo Picasso, *Letter to Marius de Zayas*, 1923.

There is something contradictory about the application of the concept of authenticity to the idea of art. All art is, by its nature, artifice. Art is a constructed item, event, performance or narrative which may make use of symbolic or metaphoric forms which bear some reference to other things in the world. To say a work of art is authentic is to say it is in some way a ‘real representation’, not to say it is the ‘real’ thing. This representational nature of art has, at various times in history as far back as Plato, been plagued by the idea that, because it may take the form of illusion, construction, or metaphor, it is somehow unreal, untrustworthy or merely ‘imitative’.

While accusations of ‘untruth’ have been applied to all metaphoric or representational arts, it is perhaps the theatre which has borne the brunt of this argument through a distrust in the person of the actor: someone who does not articulate constructions at a remove with his pen or brush, but with his entire being in the performance of a character. Trilling considers it no accident that the rise of the sentiment of sincerity in Western culture coincided “to vex men’s

¹⁷ Goffman uses an example of a doctor who offers a placebo.

minds in the epoch that saw the sudden efflorescence of the theatre” (1972, p.10). He contemplates both Plato’s and Rousseau’s derision of the theatre as something which would malform the integral person of the actor. These positions, though similar, are slightly different. Plato held:

that the soul of the actor is deteriorated by identification with such morally inferior characters as he impersonates ... [whilst Rousseau's position is that] by engaging in impersonation at all, the actor diminishes his own existence as a person: his is the art of counterfeiting himself, of putting on another character than his own (Trilling, 1972, p.64).

These two positions present the actor as distinctly an untrustworthy person, because he impersonates others, rather than showing his ‘true self’. This idea is taken further by Rousseau’s contemplation that, in viewing theatre, the audience may also be corrupted because, as Trilling paraphrases his argument: “[t]he spectator ... contracts by infection the characteristic disease of the actor, the attenuation of selfhood that results from impersonation” (1972, p.64). Rousseau, Trilling observes, would have it that in engaging in acts of escapism via ‘impersonations’ of the theatre, the spectator both neglects the ‘real’ people of his daily life and may become compromised in his own individual self-autonomy. The problem with this scenario is what would seem an argument against empathy, the empathy we may feel for others (fictional or real) or require of others. That we are, when we interact with others, only ever waiting our turn to speak our own ‘truth’, rather than contemplating our own worldview in combination with, and in relation to, others expressing theirs. This point of view holds sincerity and the ‘true self’ as a fixed entity which is somehow unchanging (something more akin to authenticity), but also deeply susceptible, in a *zone of contact*, to being corrupted by the opinions and behaviours of others. It ignores the fact that being presented with a fictional character (one who is thus no personal compromise or threat to ourselves as an audience) may lead us to contemplate, in a different light, others we do know for whom the fictional character is a mirror. It ignores the experience of the actor who, in relating some aspect of himself to a fictional character in order to perform this role, finds a hidden truth about himself.

Goffman’s idea of the performance of everyday social roles suggests that all social interaction has some degree of pretence, if only in the editing of aspects of self. We cannot be all things, all the time, to all people. In a representation that is art we must consider then which parts are ‘real’ and which parts are ‘performance’. Perceptions of the artifice of theatre, and the increased commodification of object-oriented visual art (coupled with concerns around the representation of gender and identity) prompted a desire for

authenticity in less saleable experiences through the physical presence of the artist in the emergence of a tradition of body art in the 1960s and 70s. What could be more authentic than a live human body? In this realm of performance art, Marina Abramović reignited the debate around what constitutes 'real' in works of art in the wake of her 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. "To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre," she is quoted as saying. "Theatre is fake ... The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real" (cited in Ayers, 2010). But 'real' and 'fake' are again unnecessarily formalist binaries. Performance art in the contemporary moment comes in many forms, some of which borrow a degree of theatricality in the use of props or characters. The body-orientated, 1970s tradition of performance art from which Abramović tangentially emerged, predominantly presented the performer as 'themselves' rather than a fictional character. The circumstances of the majority of her performances, however, could be said to be extremely constructed and highly symbolic. If one examines the works of other performance artists from a similar time period (Carolee Schneemann, Joan Jonas, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Joseph Beuys), there is no hard and fast rule about which elements of these performances are 'real' and which are 'constructed'. Even when presented with artists as themselves, it is never entirely clear how much they are themselves, and how much they take on a persona that resembles themselves for the purposes of art. If one considers a scope of potential performance art from the highly theatrical character to the subversive everyday intervention, Abramović might fall somewhere in the middle.¹⁸ For all that she placed her own body at very real physical risk in her work, what the audience is presented with is a real body, not necessarily a real, fully-rounded person—an authentic body, perhaps with sincere intent, but not a 'real' scenario.

Performance theorist Peggy Phelan observes the need for a separation between the 'real' and the 'constructed' in art and life. She argues that:

what began in the seventies as an energetic examination of the often arbitrary line between art/life has turned into an erasure of that line entirely. Without a robust sense of 'life' as something other than art, the terms collapse into one another and we are left with an all-performance-all-the time reality, a reality that risks making art nothing more than a mode of documentation (2004, p.271).

¹⁸ An example might be Cindy Sherman (who deliberately disguises the 'true self' in various costumes and poses to perform characters drawn from film and art history in her photographs) in contrast to Sophie Calle (who engages in social interventions or uses everyday interactions with strangers who aren't even aware they are part of a work of art).

If what one aims for in the making of art is its potential as a comment on, and contemplation of, the society for whom we make it, then art needs to be a sincere conversation, not an authentic speech from a soapbox or a 'real' social intervention so much like daily life that we might mistake art for life. Determining which are the 'real' or 'fake' components is only important conceptually in how these inform the nature of an experience and its potential to bleed over into *understandings* of everyday life, whether their impetus is 'real' interaction or a *real* emotional exchange in a 'fake' environment.

Performance art of the kind Abramović represents is one that desires a removal of authoritative contextualising in the tradition of a proscenium arch or other curatorial framing devices (the things which she deems fake) such that the experiential quality of the work is realised, and creates a kind of ritualised value, in an unpredictable sincere interaction or *zone of contact* with an audience.¹⁹ For live performance, the act of making occurs in the moment of presentation to (or interaction with) an audience. For completed objects of art, the display to an audience will always occur at a slight physical and temporal remove from the maker. This temporal distance and fragmentary nature of a singular art object may make extensive curatorial texts tempting in order to contextualise the work in the overall *oeuvre* of an artist. At times, these descriptions may place weight on the identity of the artist as if this is some guarantee of authenticity, as in the Latin origins of the word described earlier in this chapter, "the authenticity of a document being regarded as guaranteed by its author" (OED, 2023b). The *zone of contact* in an object-oriented work of art, however, is not between the audience and the artist but between the audience and the object, as a residue or partial representation of the artist's expression, which generates its own kind of experience. The object of art may be described as a souvenir of the artist's experience in its partial expressive representation. Although, like 'tourist', the word 'souvenir' may be derogative in its implications of a lack of (cultural) depth, this is only one reading of the term, which may ignore the more positive associations of the term as a fragment which might be highly treasured due to its synecdochical relationship to a larger and multifaceted experience. The lack of a complete context for a souvenir object is one which inspires a desire for narrative, but is it necessary for this to be explained through textual accompaniment or are artworks texts themselves which might be read? This might be best explored by an examination of Susan Stewart's theories on the souvenir and in relation to a specific work of art by Candice Breitz.

¹⁹ The creation of forms of ritual are explored further in Chapter Four.

The Souvenir

Fidelity lies in accumulating things—which appear, mostly in the form of fragments or ruins.

—Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*.

In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart contemplates objects as signifiers, and reference points for narratives of experience. Through an exploration of psychoanalytic and semiotic theories on the body and scale, interiority, exteriority, and temporality, Stewart considers this relationship between object and narrative as one which is premised on desire—the longing, for which the book is named. It is not all objects as potential signifiers which interest Stewart, but specifically those which are unique, fragmentary, or are in some other sense distorted or displaced, and therefore evoke or imply an accompanying narrative. Like many of the theorists in this research, Stewart notes an increased nostalgia in the post-industrial age for a point of origin which is in some way authentic. In a society where almost all things can be read as objects (in the sense that they may be commodified), she observes that “[w]ithin the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and, correlatively, the search for the authentic object become critical” (1993, p.133). This desire for a unique object that (as trace) represents an authentic experience, she suggests, is exemplified by the souvenir. It is nostalgia or a longing for what is past, what is unrepeatable or fleeting, and the desire to preserve the momentary, which drives individuals to collect such objects as points of reference or somehow proof of a particular event or time. Stewart argues that:

The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events which are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative (1993, p.135).

The souvenir is initially a referent of a past experience, not the experience itself. It is, therefore, emblematic of loss because it exists as a fragment. The souvenir, as an object, may bear signs, in its materiality, of the experiences to which it has borne witness, but these markers may require a tale of provenance, to decipher these clues i.e. the context of the experience of the possessor for whom the physical object operates as a concrete reminder. For the outside observer, “[the souvenir] is saturated with meanings that will never be fully revealed to us” (Stewart, 1993, p.133). The power of the souvenir to allude to a past experience, now distant, may still inspire a speculative narrative (when an actual one is

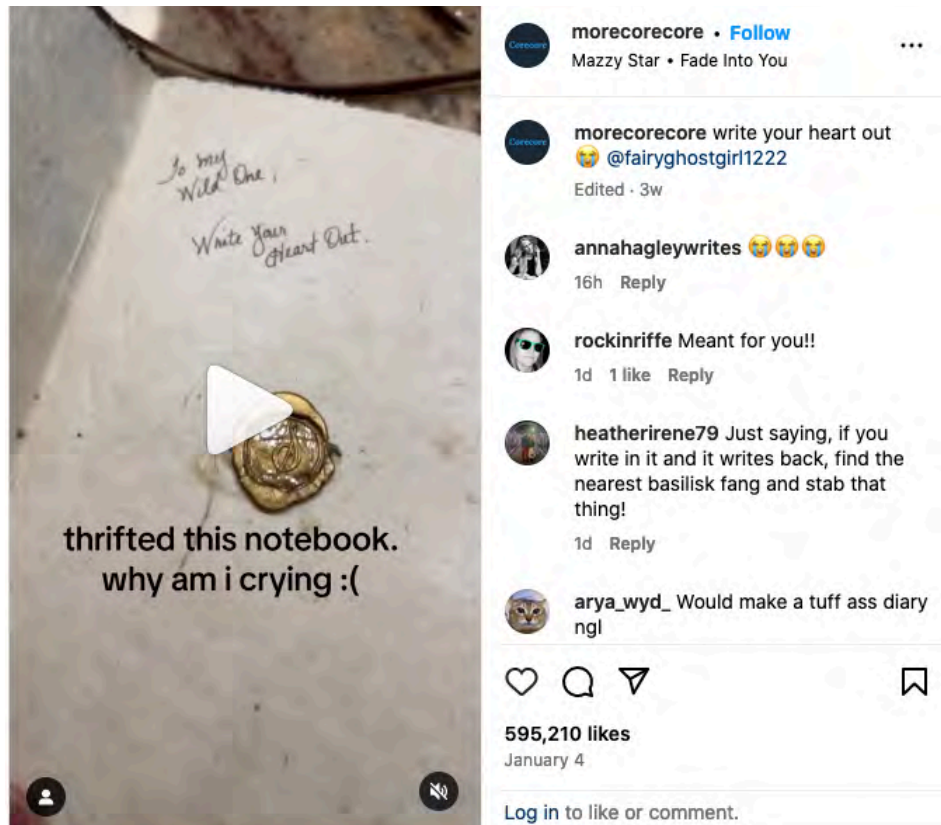
unknown) by its continued existence in the *here and now*. Its nature as a fragment, trace or sample of the context of its original appropriation, may carry something of Benjamin's *aura* through its very existence as a partial material witness. In the physical presence of its viewer, it evokes a desire for a supplementary narrative—a remnant whose puzzle must be solved, if only through projections of imagination. Stewart observes that it is only through its fragmentary nature that the souvenir evokes this curiosity for accompanying narrative:

The souvenir is by definition always incomplete ... the object is metonymic to the scene of its original appropriation ... [it] must remain impoverished and partial so that it can be supplemented by ... a narrative discourse which articulates the play of desire (1993, p.136).

The idea of the souvenir, given the market for kitsch collectables at sites of tourism, might lead one to feel it is the very opposite of evidence of authentic experience. Museum shops and airport tourism outlets sell trinkets and curios which depict the most obvious or literal references to a site, or the culture, from which these objects are drawn. In so doing, they may frequently stereotype, rather than individualise, an experience.²⁰ These souvenirs are often cheaply made, mass-produced, and sometimes not even manufactured in the place, or by the people of whom the artefact is meant to be representative. Stewart, therefore, draws a distinction between the souvenir, which is a representation e.g. “a plastic miniature of the Eiffel Tower” (1993, p.136), and a metonymic, “homomaterial” sample (ie. a materially indexical trace such as a ribbon from a corsage) of an “individual experience” (1993, p.136). She suggests that (regardless of the type of souvenir), its intrinsic value is not in its materiality, but in its personal value as a memento for the possessor. Its value is its capacity to evoke a narrative of experience which led to the object's collection in the first place: “whether material sample or not, it will still exist as a sample of the now-distanced experience which the object can only evoke and resonate to, and can never entirely recoup” (1993, p.136). Stewart writes that the souvenir, whilst a reference to a past experience, becomes (over time) a substitution for this past: one which evokes a “myth of contact and presence” (1993, p.133). The concept of authenticity relating to the souvenir begins to take on a quality of legend, for its existence is not based on current, lived experience. The souvenir's authenticity is placed in “whatever is distant to the present time and space; hence,

²⁰ Items described as kitsch may hold value, not necessarily in themselves (i.e. they are not authentic) but in the experience of the beholder underlined by a personal narrative of this experience (i.e. something experienced as sincere). An investigation of kitsch in relation to value judgments in art is further explored in Chapter Two. Notions of authenticity in national identity, which may become a taxonomy that flattens contemporary art into high-priced curios only marginally different from cheaper kinds of tourism souvenirs, are explored in Chapter Three.

we can see the souvenir as attached to the antique and the exotic" (1993, p.140). Whilst nostalgia and a desire for authenticity were determining factors for the souvenir's preservation, the souvenir's origin in that now-distant context "displaces the point of authenticity as [the souvenir] itself becomes the point of origin for narrative" (1993, p.136). The experience of the souvenir becomes a kind of conflation of experience, as it is not the memory of the object in its original context we experience when we contemplate it, but the memory of the narrative which has collected it and brought it forward to the present moment. The souvenir thus represents "not the lived experience of its maker but the 'secondhand' experience of its possessor/owner" (1993, p.135). I suggest that a third-hand experience may be contemplated if one considers an external party's experience of the narrative evoked by a souvenir: not just the narrative of context, and the experience of its possessor/owner, but an unconnected third party who brings their own history of experience to the contemplation of the souvenir's narrative. Stewart, however, argues that "[w]e cannot be proud of someone else's souvenir unless the narrative is extended to include our relationship with the object's owner or unless ... we transform the souvenir into the collection" (1993, p.137). Here, I do not entirely agree with Stewart, as the discarded souvenir e.g. a commemorative plate, an old trophy, or a box of antique family photographs found in a junk shop, or flea market bric-a-brac stall might still arouse curiosity in the browser. Even the mass-produced trinket or curio may take on here a unique status as it is no longer one of many stacked in neat rows but a specific, individual object. Perhaps it bears traces of its history (and its former owner) through chips, scratches or repairs, a faded price-sticker denoting (through inflation or currency extinction) some now impossible exchange value, or has simply become vintage by the mere passage of time which has eliminated most of its former companions. Whilst we may not be "proud" of this type of souvenir for the exact reasons pertinent to the original owner (its authentic origin), the capacity for such objects to provoke an empathetic imagining of the object's (sincere) original context is still possible. That these objects are offered for sale, and are bought, suggests that their value (although it may not be the same personal value) is not entirely lost when their original owners have discarded them. The potential emotive resonance of such objects (and the desire to project some form of narrative as to the context and circumstances that led to the discarding of such objects) might be seen in the social media post below in which the writer is moved by her finding, in a thrift store, of an empty notebook with a personalised inscription. The infinite possibilities of lost opportunities, relationships, or even the untimely demise of the previous owner are suggested by other users in the multiple comments in this thread.



Video still of empty second-hand notebook inscribed "To my Wild One, Write Your Heart Out"
Post by morecorecore. 4 January 2024. (Instagram)

Ultimately, it is the lack of confirmed context for the object which allows for imaginative projections of pathos and makes this object reminiscent of the six-word-story apocryphally attributed to Ernest Hemingway: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn" (O'Toole, G. 2013). The true provenance of the empty notebook, and how it came to be in a thrift shop may be considerably more mundane, but multiple users have taken great delight in proposing narratives of context, including user *heatherirene79*, who makes a more fantastical leap by jokingly implying that the empty notebook may be Tom Riddle's diary from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998). Whilst the souvenir discarded may inspire such imagined narratives of provenance, none of these can ever be the authentic backstory, and whilst such objects may have many more material manifestations that offer clues as to their origin, we may not wish to know the exact story lest this resolves a mystery and thus removes the curiosity of the object as partial—a contemplative hole that becomes whole and, therefore, potentially less interesting.

Stewart observes a distinction between the souvenir and the collection in that the souvenir typically has personal value, whilst the collection has display value, and is thus more likely to encounter an external audience for its contemplation. She suggests that the "collection is a

form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context” (1993, p.152). The collecting of objects in order to display them under a new taxonomy, she observes, is a form of control, a desire to create a “hermetic world ... which has banished repetition and achieved authority” (1993, p.152). This authority can only be achieved, she argues, if the objects are stripped of their original context so that it may be “possible to generate a new series, to start again within a context that is framed by the selectivity of the collector” (1993, p.154). I am not entirely convinced, however, that a collection, particularly of found objects, can ever truly be stripped of all its context for some aspect of its original function or context will be carried with it. Such is the purpose, in art, of using found objects (as opposed to making them): that they carry some *aura* of their original use or context, which makes the repurposing, or juxtaposition unexpected or worthy of contemplation in a newly offered combination. Whilst the manipulation or distortion of context may offer the potential of constructing new narratives of context for collected objects, I would argue that traces of original context enhance these potential readings. They evoke multiple narratives that supplement the meaning of a work rather than offering only a reading of the collection (stripped of all other context), something only to be understood through the newly constructed narrative claimed for them. Let us consider this idea in relation to an artwork by Candice Breitz.



Candice Breitz. 2009. *Ex Libris South Africa*. Cibachrome photograph. Edition of 60. (*ArtThrob*).

Breitz's artwork forms part of a series of print works offered for sale on the website *ArtThrob*. Referred to as the *Editions for ArtThrob* programme, these limited-edition prints include works by many eminent South African artists: William Kentridge, Sam Nhlengethwa, Kemang wa Lehulere, Penny Siopis, Tracey Rose, Dineo Bopape and Jane Alexander, to name a few. As an online publication, *ArtThrob* focuses on news and critique pertaining to contemporary South African art practice, and is not a commercial gallery. The artworks on the site, however, are sold in part to defray the costs of running the website, paying contributing

authors, and hosting the extensive online archive. Each of the works offered for sale are appended with both a “Description” and a “Biography” (*ArtThrob*, 2020a). The nature of these “Descriptions” across the different works vary. Some merely contain a few lines elucidating the medium of the work and year or place of production. Others include some context concerning the larger body of work from which the single image is drawn, or offer aspects of the artist’s identity or broader scope of interests (which should rightfully be included in the bibliography). Some employ a neutral tone in adding context to the image, whilst others adopt a rather adulatory tone using words like ‘remarkable’, ‘rare’ and ‘significant’, making the text less of an objective description and more like a sales pitch. It is unclear who the authors of these paragraphs are, as it is not uncommon for artists to write statements on their work in the third person, although some of these descriptions make use of quotations from artists expressed in the first person. Whoever the authors are, the purpose of these statements would appear to be curatorial as they are not dissimilar to the kinds of curatorial texts included in physical exhibitions, either mounted next to a work or included in a catalogue entry for a group exhibition.²¹

The description for the above work runs as follows:

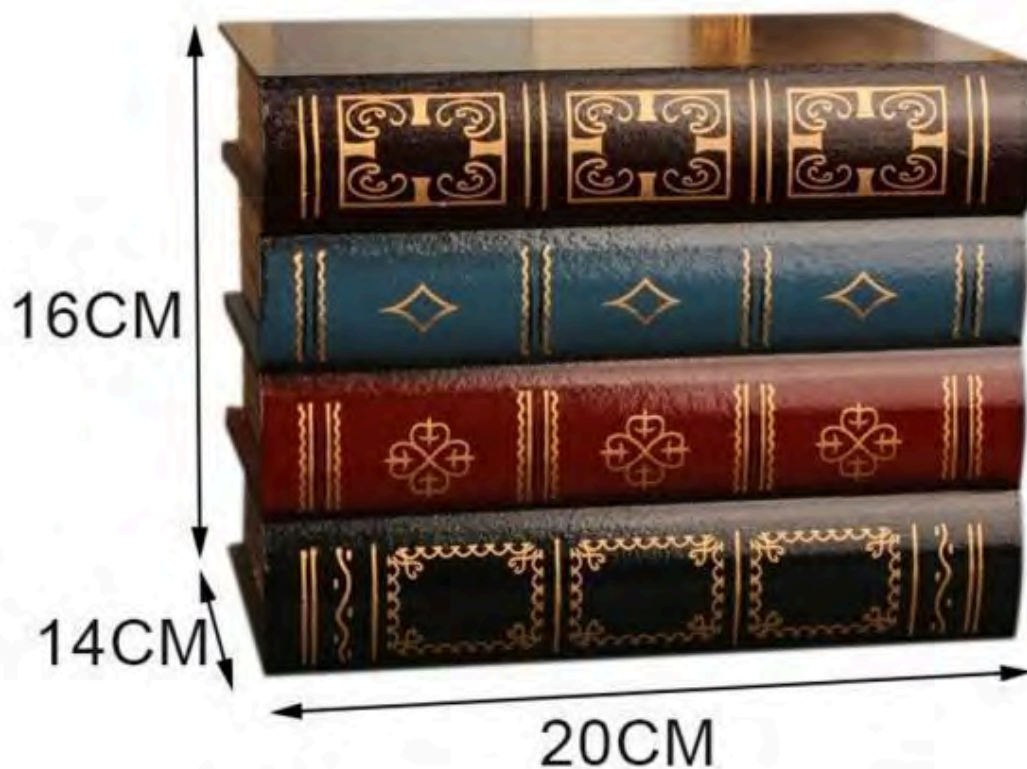
The books photographed for Candice Breitz’s *Ex Libris South Africa* were all found by the artist on the same dusty and neglected shelf within Bikini Beach Books, Gordon’s Bay (South Africa), during a single book-browsing session in January 2009. Collectively they catalogue a diverse range of anxieties, fears, hopes and expectations pertaining to life in South Africa over nearly a century (*ArtThrob*, 2020b).

I will return to this annotation, but first, let us consider the artwork itself. *Ex Libris South Africa* (2009), a Cibachrome photographic print by Candice Breitz (a South African artist resident in Germany since 2002), depicts a collection of books—spines and titles facing the viewer. Very far from being their interactive and expected literary selves, the books presented by Breitz are closed objects.

Literary theorist George Poulet suggests that: “[b]ooks are not just objects amongst others ... A book is not shut in by its contours, is not walled up as in a fortress. It asks nothing better than to exist outside itself, or to let you exist in it” (1969, p.53). Conversely, he argues that other objects, like a vase or a sculpture, “oblige me to remain outside” (1969, p.53). Whilst the vase or sculpture might inspire a curiosity to explore its object nature—run one’s hands

²¹ This relationship between curatorial texts and artworks in exhibition spaces will be revisited in Chapter Three.

over its surfaces, walk around it to observe it from all sides—he suggests that these objects remain closed. Poulet chooses to compare the object of a book to other objects of art, as opposed to more mundane functional objects. A sewing machine or a dinner plate, he suggests, would never inspire the level of contemplation he would extend to the vase or the sculpture.



Fake Book Storage Box sold under Home Decor. (Takealot.com).

In this comparison between the book as object and *object d'art*, there is, however, a misstep.²² The vase may have no other intention, as an object, than its functional one: to hold flowers. The sculpture (as might a painting), may also have been designed expressly for the purpose of decoration. Books as objects are also frequently used as interior decor e.g. in a home library, which, rather than being functional, may operate as a status symbol by staging a particular mood for a room. One may even purchase wooden carved copies of books to fill shelves. These fake books often have another function, that of storage boxes. This empty interior is not, however, the space Poulet refers to when he says of the book: “[y]ou are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside” (1969, p.54).

²² It is interesting that Poulet selects three-dimensional art or decorative objects as opposed to a drawing or painting, which also has a physical dimensional aspect: the front and back of the frame, for example. A figurative painting or photograph might have served his purpose less well, as representational images are potential windows on a scene elsewhere, thus implying a narrative or possible immersive alternate reality rather than placing emphasis on their object status.

Here is the misstep: a conflation and confusion between the book as *object* and the book as *idea*. For it is not the object which Poulet imagines literally unfurls immersively before us as readers, allowing us inside and infiltrating our own interiority. It is in part its narrative, but more importantly, the *ideas* it conveys through the act of reading, which Poulet notes begin to invade our own consciousness and inspire us to draw connections with our imagination.

Stewart writes that: “[t]he reader who arose from the mechanical reproduction of literature is a reader acutely aware of the disjunction between book as object and book as idea” (1993, xi).²³ In this statement, we can see the division between two manifestations of authenticity in any creative artefact: its *material authenticity* (its object nature) and its *conceptual authenticity* (its idea). We expect to be able to read books in order to access the *ideas* they contain and will do this without (at least initially) focusing on each individual word or sentence as a separate signifier. Poulet notes this immersive quality of literature and the suspension of disbelief which occurs through the act of reading:

As soon as I replace my direct perception of reality by the words of a book, I deliver myself, bound hand and foot to the omnipotence of fiction. I say farewell to what is, in order to feign belief in what is not. I surround myself with fictitious beings; I become the prey of language. There is no escaping this take-over. Language surrounds me with its unreality (1969, p.55).

Here, Poulet points to a kind of authority often presumed for text (especially in the context of other forms of creative expression), that it demands to be read, and having read it, it will necessarily impose its will upon the reader. Literature, however, as with other forms of art that require some suspension of disbelief, is reliant on whether we choose to surrender or not. This is another form of artistic exchange or communion that can take place only if sincerity is present. A sincere reader will willingly open themselves up to the experience offered by a fictional text as an alternative reality, but it only becomes one if the text of the book is judged to be sincere, else this sense of immersion doesn’t work at all, and the reader, far from being “bound” to the power of fiction, may simply disagree or choose to stop reading, to give up on an experience as not for them.

In making this assertion for the power of text, Poulet also points to the more common conception of books, that they are *ideas* (more than *objects*) which are accessed through the experience of reading the text. Certain books may, however, emphasise their *object* nature through choices in font, layout, illustration and materials used. These kinds of graphic design

²³ The *idea* of a book or an artwork (at least if they are any good) is never a singular one. The use of the singular is useful here as, perhaps, a collective noun which encompasses all the virtual aspects of a work’s conceptual thought.

considerations are not arbitrary. Any emphasis on this designed *object* nature of the book is an extension of the *idea* of the book made manifest materially.²⁴ Visual artworks—whether two or three-dimensional, figurative or abstract—need to be considered in both their *object* and *idea* format. Poulet, in his observation of vases and sculpture, points to a common misconception about visual art (almost the opposite of what is understood by a book): that they are *objects* first, and *ideas* second. These two notions, as with specific choices in the design of books, are interrelated. Because the materiality of a visual artwork (particularly when they take a sculptural form) is often a signifier in the interpretation of its meaning, it is not so easy to escape the seeming primacy of its *object* status. This does not mean that they cannot be immersive, both physically in scale and intellectually, via acts of imagination. This material nature as a signifier is not reducible to the concept of a closed object, for the choices in materiality are part of the art object's language—its text and its context—and how, as an object, it 'testifies', i.e. may have a form of agency of its own. These signifiers, whether material or representational, are thus like the words of fiction: something which must be 'read' in order for the *idea* of the artwork to come into existence. Poulet notes of the immersion of the reader in the act of reading that: "like fish in an aquarium, words, images and ideas disport themselves [in our minds], these mental entities, in order to exist, need the shelter which I provide; they are dependent on my consciousness" (1969, p.55). Poulet thus points out the necessity of the external mind of the reader wherein these *ideas* may coalesce. The *idea* of the book and the *idea* of an artwork requires the active imaginative engagement of the reader/viewer in the act of experiencing the work in order to come to life, or what literary theorist Wolfgang Iser refers to as "the realization of the text" (1972, p.279). Iser suggests that this *realization* of the work is created through:

[t]he convergence of text and reader [which] brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader (1972, p.279).

Iser describes what seems an almost chemical reaction, with the imagination of the reader

²⁴ Aside from graphic novels which place an emphasis on visually in the process of reading, an example might be *Woman's World* by Graham Rawle (2005), which is a novel composed using collaged fragments of found text from about 40 000 1960s women's magazines. Many novels posing as journals or epistolary novels (i.e. a novel constructed as a series of letters between fictional characters) may utilise different font choices to emphasise the idea that we are reading someone's personal diary or a collection of private letters from disparate individuals. This design approach is often used when the writer wishes to emphasise parts of the narrative that come from a different source e.g. journal entries, personal letters, newspaper articles.

functioning as a catalyst on whatever experiment the author has laid out before us. This virtual property points to the need for a work to be experienced in order for it to exist as an *idea*, for the work of art is more than a sum of its component parts. While the literary work typically contains some kind of narrative structure and, therefore, a temporal frame, if only in the act of reading a book from beginning to end, the successful work of visual art must also imply a reading that cannot be discovered in only a cursory glance.

In *Ex Libris South Africa*, it would initially seem that Breitz is inviting us to contemplate these books as *objects*, rather than the actual *ideas* they contain. Poulet, however short-sighted he might be about sculptures as texts, is right when he states that “books are not just objects amongst others” (1969, p.53). Books, as signifiers, always carry the implication that they contain more worlds than their physical representation. Margritte’s pipe in his *The Treachery of Images* (1929) may not be a pipe, only a representation of one. A representation of a book is never just a representation of its *object* nature, for it always carries with it its implied nature as an *idea*, however inaccessible this might be. In *Ex Libris South Africa*, the viewer is invited to imagine the narrative of this collection of books. The nature of this narrative here is manifold.

As viewers, we are reminded of how—when examining any bookshelf—we may be drawn, or repelled, by individual volumes through their titling, font and colour choices, condition of usage, and what these features suggest to us about both the book’s provenance and potential content. We cannot, however, verify these impressions by extracting Breitz’s books and investigating the contents further. These books, as first-hand experiences of literary texts, are closed to us. As representations of *objects*, however, the image invites us to imagine their stories—both narratives of content, and narratives of origin. The provenance of a particular book, in this case, is never entirely fathomable. The specific history of the individual *object* is only discernible by the visual evidence that suggests that it has one—these are clearly used books. The cracked spines and torn or crumpled covers attest to a history, if not of use, then of misuse—abandoned, perhaps in an attic or storeroom, and nibbled by mice.

When contemplating the *idea* of any of these individual books, we consider or imagine what their titles might suggest about their possible narrative content. These titles range from the poetic to the prosaic, from hopeful to sensationally dire: *The Solution*, *One Miracle is Not Enough*, *Permanent Peace*, *The Night Cometh*, *Small Change*, *Confrontation*, *The Burden of the Present*, *Hijack!* A third possible layer of narrative may include what the viewer remembers about any actual book in the collection they might have read. This narrative is

not the *idea* of the book, but the remembered *idea* of the book. What is remembered is only a series of momentary impressions, a sensibility or a reaction at a given point in time. Texts, on rereading, give up other kinds of impressions than the one remembered. Iser notes that “[o]n a second reading familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem at times corrected, at times enriched” (1972, p.285). This is because the narrative of a text has another kind of narrative when read in relation to the life story of the reader.

A fourth narrative layer arises in what the books, as a collection, may be taken to imply. As a kind of Dadaist poetry constructed through found objects, presented together under the title of the image, we contemplate what each of these titles (and their imagined or remembered content) might suggest as *ideas* emanating from a library of South Africa. This concept of a South African library is fictional, for we are presented with a fifth narrative in the description, or form of curatorial text, displayed with the work online, which describes how this collection came into being. The first sentence of this text is an addendum, or footnote, that adds necessary context and points to an additional narrative, rather than replaces the ones evoked by the image:

The books photographed for Candice Breitz’s *Ex Libris South Africa* were all found by the artist on the same dusty and neglected shelf within Bikini Beach Books, Gordon’s Bay, South Africa, during a single book-browsing session in January 2009 (*ArtThrob*, 2020b).

The second sentence, however, is representative of a trend in contemporary art to display a curatorial instructive text that becomes didactic or reductive in its explanatory nature: “Collectively they catalogue a diverse range of anxieties, fears, hopes and expectations pertaining to life in South Africa over nearly a century” (*ArtThrob*, 2020b). This desire to replace one kind of text with another seems to come from a lack of confidence that an image *is a text* and that audiences will have different ways of reading it. In comparison to a book, this kind of subtitling would be akin to a book jacket blurb revealing the plot of the narrative it adorns. Stewart notes that:

When verbal description attempts to approximate visual depiction, we find a ... reduction of sensory dimensions and, because of the history of the word as utterance in lived social practices, an even greater ideological significance (1993, p.48).

This greater ideological significance is, perhaps, even more true of the written word, given the history of writing’s relationship to authority. The tendency for a bias which lends higher credence to the written description, over the visual representation, is demonstrated by

Poulet's conception that books are *ideas* whilst sculptures are only *objects*. To lock down the meaning of a work to a written description, something like a high-school art history textbook, has the potential of reaffirming doubts about audience visual literacy. Audiences may then come to believe the authoritarian ideological voice of the written description as the appropriate, and only way, to read the image. They may then forgo the use of their own imaginations and sensory capacities to interpret the readings that occur between the individual viewer and the work. Iser explains the dangers of being didactic or overly explanatory with a work thus:

no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the whole picture before his reader's eyes. If he does, he will very quickly lose his reader, for it is only by activating the reader's imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of his text (1972, p.287).

As demonstrated by Stewart, the desire for an accompanying narrative may often be evoked by certain kinds of objects. This narrative text should, however, always be supplementary rather than dictatorial. A work of art as a referent to a particular moment in time or place may have need of additional context. It may be necessary to illuminate the provenance of an artwork or to catalogue the history and temporal frame which may be read differently, at a different time. This written text, however, should expand the experience and not reduce it. It should gesture to details, like dots, which the viewer's imagination is called upon to join. Iser notes the necessity for a work to "be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" (1972, p.280). When curatorial texts or artist statements become didactic in the explanation of the artist's intent, this reduces the capacity for the artwork to be immersive. It is a denial of its experiential qualities. The capacity of a visual depiction to be worth the proverbial thousand words is closed down when it is explained in such a brief and exacting fashion.

Phelan observes that this trend in the visual and performative arts, which carries an overweening need to explain the artwork (through curator/artist statements or performance programme notes), is a desire to maintain control over the reading of the work. She argues against this trend because:

Great art accumulates relevance and meaning as it moves beyond the control of its creators; weak art decides in advance what the piece is about. Constraining critical discussion about

what is and is not relevant to contemporary art not only makes things dull and boring, it reveals a lack of faith in the quality of the artwork (2004, p.571).

Here, Phelan does not claim that the quality of an artwork is to be delineated by the difference between those that have explanatory text accompaniment, and those that do not. She suggests merely that a more successful work will stand up to alternate and varied interpretations. A less successful work, the artist might claim, has only one valid interpretation, and the explanatory text will reveal this lack of nuance in intention. The explanatory text undermines the quality of the work by refusing the intelligence of its audience. Despite this fact, the trend to explain rather than supplement works in written format persists. Descriptive texts add weight to a work's appeal to authenticity, particularly, if this text appears to be endorsed by an expert: a curator or the artist themselves. Authenticity is thus presented as a fact in itself and does not require an interaction with the general viewer to maintain this status. The danger of this trend, in presenting an explanatory narrative as the only authentic reading of the work, is a refusal of possibilities: a denial of varied and imaginative viewer interpretations they might contribute through an experience of the work. It is telling the viewer what they should think, not showing them, or rather asking simply that they think about the possibilities presented. Iser notes how the defining nature of such text may lead to an audience resisting the imaginative labour required in engaging with a work:

The more a text individualizes or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose, so that at best we can only accept or reject the thesis forced upon us. More often than not, the very clarity of such texts will make us want to free ourselves from their clutches (1972, p.283).

This view of the second half of the written description of Breitz's work may seem unduly harsh. This description, whilst limiting, is not entirely at odds with the intention of the artist nor, as Phelan notes, does it necessarily prevent the work itself from being read in its complexity of implicit connections. It is merely an example of how curatorial display and narration can become reductive or create a distraction in how the text defines this collection as a representation of the South African psyche, as if via an official authentic source. *Ex Libris South Africa* is essentially more complex than any sanctioned view on national identity. It is a curious work because it is at once a souvenir and a depiction of a collection. It is a souvenir because, as a photograph, it is a single object which represents the experience of the artist in discovering and attending to these books. It is also a collection because it depicts a series of objects under a title and, therefore, a taxonomy delineated by the artist:

Ex Libris South Africa. Whilst Stewart suggests that our experience of a souvenir is limited by our potential relationship to the possessor, the narrative of these books' provenance is far more interesting than what is claimed for them as a collection. One might liken *Ex Libris South Africa* to a postcard comparable with those that can be purchased in the boutique shop of a major museum. We are asked to imagine this random collection of books, discovered by chance on one shelf of a second-hand bookstore, as somehow suggestive of an archive, a museum display, or a narrative of national identity. This display has not, however, been extracted from an archive, but rather from almost the opposite of an archive, for these books are not carefully kept by a single individual or institution. As a sample of second-hand books, this collection has been selected from the discards of previous readers. This is a reflection on society through its rejects and remainders. The title asks us to consider these as extracts of an imagined library that somehow represents a selected archive from South Africa. But to whose imagination does this library belong?

Investigating more closely the books' narrated point of origin—Bikini Beach Books—we must ask ourselves whether this archive (for want of a better word) of the discarded is representative of the books of a South African imagination, or a vision of the tourist imagination of South Africa.



Bikini Beach Books. Exterior and signage. c. 2012. (ShowMe).

Far from being a side-street stereotype of a dingy second-hand bookstore, Bikini Beach Books is situated on Beach Road in the scenic, tourist-orientated town of Gordon's Bay, 52 kilometres from Cape Town. Here, it overlooks a palm tree-lined, bricked car park whose main function is to service the beachfront promenade and high street shops. This retail strip, which houses an estate agent and several café-style restaurants, includes an ice-cream parlour and a gift shop called Aladdin's Cave. The signage of the bookstore is evocative of 1950's Las Vegas, with another board that advertises: "Books International Books". This last

indicates that the store is not a specialist in *Africana* books and indeed carries many books arranged in a variety of different languages, mostly European. This main signage is offset on the other side by a superannuated board atop a lapa-style, thatched roof which read “SHELLSHOP”.²⁵ Whether the bookstore took over this adjacent souvenir store or was originally intended to also be a shell shop, is unclear.



Bikini Beach Books. 2022. (dk villas).

Interspersed among the tables groaning under the weight of piled books, are shells with their taxonomy ascribed in felt tip marker. A display of South African sea shells is presented in a glass bookcase. These are marked “Not for Sale”, but elsewhere in the store’s multiple rooms are trays of shells arranged by type, and stickered with their sale price. Disco balls, chandeliers made of shells, and dream catchers hang from the ceiling. Books are ordered according to genre by hastily handwritten signage on stickers and spare pieces of cardboard. Fiction is catalogued alphabetically by cut-out letters which adorn the walls, interspersed with educational classroom posters, maps, the periodic table of the elements. This is not a library dictated by a strict Dewey decimal system.

²⁵ This sign and the grass thatched roof has been replaced in more recent years by a canvas awning (thatching perhaps being impractical to maintain, and dangerous as a fire hazard to a store crammed with books). Even more recently, a Mercedes-Benz W126 sedan (circa 1990) has been added to the roof, an affectation which underlines the nature of the store as a roadside attraction.



'Library' of shells (not for sale). Bikini Beach Books Interior. Image: Inolofatseng Lekaba. (Google Maps).



Trays of shells for sale. Bikini Beach Books. Image: Gerrie van der Heever. (Google Maps).

The shop's architectural layout suggests that this building was once a house. The multiple rooms add to the exploratory experience of the store: this is not somewhere one goes to find a specific known volume, but to investigate and make accidental discoveries of one's own. The eclecticism of this ordering, and the hodgepodge of incidental décor, contribute to what

the store seems to represent: the taste of its owners. This is more than a second-hand bookstore, for it is also a curiosity shop. In this context of eccentric cataloguing, juxtaposed alongside seaside souvenirs for sale, the visitor becomes aware of the book as an *object* and potential souvenir of their own journey of discovery.



Bikini Beach Books. Interior views. Images: Craig Groenewald. (Google Maps).

This system lends itself to the exploration of the visitor, a collection that is representative of the individuals who have set it up as such an experience and hardly lays claim to being illustrative of the particular literary expression of any particular national identity. The store includes a large section dedicated to German language hardcovers, as well as smaller sections of Swedish, Dutch and even Welsh language books. These may be representative of what might sell in this shop, as well as the owner's particular interest in the exotic or unusual. There is something about the arrangement of Bikini Beach Books, in its eccentric and wide-ranging jumble of books and natural artefacts, that is vaguely reminiscent of European curiosity cabinets of the 17th and 18th centuries. These collections were originally ordered to the taste and curiosity of their collectors rather than any exacting scientific, geographic or cultural taxonomy. As conversation pieces, and status symbols, representing the worldliness of their possessors, the curiosity cabinet or *Wunderkammer's* "aim was always to create as complete a microcosmic encyclopaedia of the macrocosm as possible" (Beßle, 2015). Though long outdated as a mode of display for any serious collecting or

archiving, the curiosity cabinet as a trope evokes ideas of the exotic and antique, travel and exploration. As a business model, this arrangement of a second-hand bookstore as a roadside attraction in a seaside resort is a clever strategy. It provides, in its exploratory nature, a diversion for days when the outdoor attractions of the beach, or pavement cafes, might be less appealing. That one must take time in this exploration, however, points to the clientele the store expects: those with time on their hands, on holiday, possibly tourists.



Bikini Beach Books. Interior views. Image: Martha Teseling (Google Maps).



Bikini Beach Books. Interior views. Image: Kerry Thomas. (Google Maps).

In this contemplation of Bikini Beach Books as the point of origin for the books in *Ex Libris South Africa*, we might now begin to consider another layer of narrative in the work. A narrative which complicates ideas of identity and which might lend an ironic slant to the claims of the descriptive text, though this is not apparent in its tone. Breitz, though active in

many South African creative initiatives and intellectual debates, has not, in fact, been resident in the country for a good many years. In an artist talk conducted at Art Basel (with fellow South African artist Zanele Muholi and Zimbabwean journalist and curator Valerie Kabov) Breitz revealed that she had left South Africa initially in 1994:

I was offered an opportunity to study at an American university at a very crucial moment in our evolution (it was 1994) so it's always somewhat painful to speak about when people ask me when I left South Africa ... the crucial year of our transition (Art Basel, 2017, 2:33-2:50).

In this artist talk, entitled 'Do Artists Need to Leave Africa to be Successful?', the three speakers discuss the implications of leaving a home country on the African continent for better financial opportunities to support their art practice in Europe and the United States. Breitz goes on to say that she tried to postpone her study opportunity, which was a Fullbright scholarship. When that was not a possibility, she took up the offer imagining:

I would be back in Johannesburg within a year. But life is not that simple, and other things came up, and other possibilities came up, and before I knew it, I had been living outside of South Africa for a great many years. For me, there was never an active point at which I said I am leaving South Africa, it was never strategic (Art Basel, 2017, 3:08-3:20).

Whilst many creatives live internationally, or between countries, and are still considered part of the diasporic community of their country of origin, South African identity is highly complicated in this regard. Many, particularly white, South Africans left the country around 1994, and there is a stigma related to this emigration, as the motivation for leaving was, for many, a fear, or lack of faith, in a peaceful political transition to a multiracial democracy. There is thus a labelling of those who left as having given up on being South African by not remaining resident, regardless of the motivations for leaving. Kendall Geers, a contemporary of Breitz (and also a South African artist now resident in Belgium for many years), notes this almost ex-communication of national identity for South Africans living abroad:

No sooner does one take off from Johannesburg International Airport than one acquires the label 'ex-South African', as if one's identity is something that may be discarded like an old set of clothes (Geers, 2014).

Given this tendency for labelling diasporic South Africans as 'ex-South African', what then can we make of the selection of books made by Breitz for *Ex Libris South Africa*? The work's tale of provenance from a second-hand book store based in a tourist town, along with the

positionality of the artist (as a South African who at the time of making had not been resident in the country for 15 years) calls the very idea of national identity into question. What would it have been like for her to wander through this store, on a holiday visit home, perhaps now feeling like a tourist in her country of birth? How would being away so long, subject to international projections of her sense of national identity, have altered her choices? Is she then better, or less able, to make a judgement about perceptions of “a diverse range of anxieties, fears, hopes and expectations pertaining to life in South Africa over nearly a century” (*ArtThrob*, 2021)? Whilst her more recent experience of living in South Africa might be called into question, her perception of projections of national identity (and how these constructions might be viewed from an external perspective) would be heightened.

During the Art Basel conversation, Breitz speaks about how, working internationally as a white South African, she is “far less likely to be expected to perform, or represent, a certain version of authenticity [of national identity] which is a projection of the outside world” (Art Basel, 2017, 11:29-11:39).²⁶ Constructions of national identity are complex, particularly if one lives in the diaspora, for there is always a lurking false dichotomy that constructs an idea of authentic identity (for those who are immersed in the nation-state by living in it), and inauthentic identity (for those who live away) as if such things are binary. Breitz has considered the complexities of an outsider status (though not necessarily directly linked to her national identity) as something fundamental to her practice. In an interview for an online artist series called ‘Advice for the Young’, Breitz offers advice to emerging artists:

Relativising one’s own experience is so crucial, wherever it is that you are from, whatever it is that you know ... to force yourself into a position that is exterior to what is comfortable to you, so as to be able to fully grasp how conventional your relationship to the world is ... place yourself at a distance from what feels safe and easy (Louisiana Channel, 2018, 0:34-1:10).

Breitz here suggests that the placing of oneself away from the familiar, the comfortable and the known, is necessary in order to critically observe it. The provenance of the books for *Ex Libris South Africa* from a tourist-orientated, second-hand bookstore might seem an *inauthentic* source for retrieving representative artefacts of the local cultural imagination. Given what Breitz says about the authenticity of national identity being a projection of the outside world, this location and the artist’s position, as both insider and outsider, might be most appropriate. She observes:

²⁶ More about this construction of national identity will be discussed in Chapter Three.

I think to step outside of one's own context and one's own position is ... to see ... the limitations of one's ability to tell a story ... when people have understood the relative nature of telling stories they tend to be able to tell better stories (Louisiana Channel, 2018, 1:34-1:59).

While we may never know Breitz's own personal and private story of exploring Bikini Beach Books and collecting these books, there is a broader story involved in complicating matters of national identity. That these books are not so much an accurate reflection of literary concerns of the national psyche, but are rather a potential synopsis of *projections* about national identity, must make us consider who the audience is for this work. Here lies a final layer of narrative, for *Ex Libris South Africa* was not made as part of a larger body of work, or as a singular whim on the part of the artist. *Ex Libris South Africa* was made expressly for a limited edition, artist portfolio of works-on-paper produced and sold by *ArtThrob*. Founded in 1997 by Sue Williamson, *ArtThrob* has, over the years, become an influential archive of contemporary South African art. Including news, reviews and opinion pieces on various debates in the art world; the website also featured exhibition listings from 1997-2015. These listings (both local and of South African artists internationally) are, in some cases, the only record of exhibition press releases available publicly, as the service predated many galleries hosting their own websites. The *Smithsonian National Museum of African Art* observes of *ArtThrob*, that it "has served as an important online resource on contemporary visual arts, with a particular focus on exhibitions and publications that document the involvement of South African artists in the international art world" (Smithsonian, 2021).

We might still question the *material authenticity* in the provenance of the books selected for *Ex Libris South Africa*, but this only seems relevant if one is considering it literally as an archive of *objects*. As a work specifically for *ArtThrob*, we might consider its *conceptual authenticity* or the artist's *sincerity* in donating proceeds of its sale in support of an ongoing documentation of South African artistic production. *Ex Libris South Africa* is thus a souvenir of a virtual archive of *ideas*, made in support of another virtual collection or archive of *ideas*.

A desire for authenticity is a desire for a sense of wholeness, a complete and accurate story. Artworks, in their symbolism, both materially and visually, may present themselves in a seemingly fragmentary state. Some of this will reference the past experience of the artist (material markings and personal inspiration), but it is the interface in the *here and now* between the audience and the object (or performance) which generates the artwork's experiential value: a potential *zone of contact* of shared meaning creation. Although an artwork may not offer a supporting narrative that can be read in a straightforward or didactic manner, this does not mean it is not possible to 'read' the artwork and find this supporting

text in a narrative of the viewer's own experience. The hierarchy of trust assumed by the written word over images, objects or performances may be seen in how authority, authenticity and author all share a root etymology. In a reading of an artwork, something that is a representation, a staging, a fantasy, is it really an *aura* of authenticity we wish to apprehend? Or is it rather an *aura* of sincerity, by which we might interpret or share in the artist's intent? Having observed the complexity of authenticity in various contexts, and the risk and potential of sincerity in describing some nuances of the idea of truth, or an honesty of intent, in art, it may now serve us to contemplate what may be their opposites in fake, forgery, and kitsch in the following chapter.

Chapter Two: Fake, Forgery and Kitsch.

If authenticity and sincerity always imply an antithesis, then a contemplation of their definitions must also take into account those concepts which are held up as a possible contrast. As has been previously demonstrated in Chapter One, neat, diametrically opposed binaries of authenticity (and associated concepts) are not always so easy to delineate. Authenticity's association with ideas of truth, realness, or an original would seem to suggest that its opposite is a lie, an illusion, or a copy. When it comes to art, this becomes complex because of the metaphoric nature art may take by way of fictional narrative, or as a representational device. The very word 'representation' implies a depiction of something other than itself, and, therefore a copy, the original of which exists elsewhere. A work of art may also be a lie in how it creates a fictional scenario in order to reveal some hidden truth metaphorically. The contextual necessity required in defining which aspects of an artwork we are to consider authentic, is also a requirement when considering what we assume to be its opposite: the fake or forgery.

In possible opposition to *material authenticity*, there is both the cheap imitation of original objects, which make no attempt to hide their fakery, and the elaborate forgery, which is intentionally designed to deceive and garner the same value as an original (whether financially or in some other form of cultural capital). Questions of taste and morality might lead one to view the fake and the forgery as less valuable to society than original works of art. At the same time, both are interesting to study as an aspect of a larger ecosystem of creative cultural expression. Mass-produced knock-offs or reproductions might perhaps be seen as an homage to an original work by making a version of it more publicly affordable and accessible. The printed T-shirts, tote-bags, coffee mugs and fridge magnets sold in museum shops are but one form of allowing visitors to have a souvenir of their favourite paintings in their daily lives. Forgery of *material authenticity*, on the other hand, especially if it is masterfully rendered and substantially researched, is a twisted form of creativity, not only in the ability of the forger to emulate what another artist has produced, but in the construction of a narrative which might make the forgery credible.

The opposite of *conceptual authenticity* is much harder to apprehend and is often mixed in with what experts or arbiters of art consider matters of sophisticated taste. The opposite of sincerity is most obviously insincerity, but whether this is deliberate irony, which may have value in satirising society, or shallow and lazy appeals to simplistic emotions is equally a philosophical quandary which often raises more questions than it answers. In this chapter, I consider the case history of the Dutch forger Han van Meegeren in terms of how philosopher

Dennis Dutton observes that forgeries complicate notions of authenticity, especially for museums and their associated experts. Artist and performance theorist Sibylle Peters offers an interesting addition to this examination of *material authenticity* in advocating for the potential study of forgery through a practical application so that one may observe how authenticity (and, therefore, representation in art) is performed. These ideas are then considered in relation to artworks by Chad Rossouw, which might be best described as deliberately constructed artefacts, souvenirs of speculative or alternate histories.²⁷

In contrast to forgery, I then consider what philosopher Roger Scruton refers to as the fake in art. Here, he is more at pains to consider *conceptual inauthenticity* or that which is fake emotion and, therefore, he argues, kitsch in its cheap manipulation of human emotion. The relationship between kitsch and sentimentality is further complicated by philosophers Michael Tanner and Robert Solomon, who consider how intent and changing historical patterns in socially accepted emotional expression may influence audience reception. This is then explored in relation to public and critical opinion generated in response to the 2011 retrospective exhibition of the work by Vladimir Tretchikoff at the Iziko National Gallery: *Tretchikoff: The People's Painter*.

Forging The Fake

Blunt: What has exposed them as forgeries, Ma'am, is not any improvement in perception, but time. Though a forger may reproduce in the most exact fashion the style and detail of his subject, as a painter, he is nevertheless of his time, and however slavishly he imitates, he does it in the fashion of his time, in a way that is contemporary, and with the passage of years it is this element that dates, begins to seem old-fashioned and which eventually unmasks him.

—Alan Bennett, *A Question of Attribution*.

In relation to his concept of *nominal authenticity*, Dutton observes two separate, but related, concepts as oppositions to the authenticity of authorship. These are forgery (or the deliberate passing off of a work by one artist as the work of another) and plagiarism (the passing off of the work of another, as one's own) (2003, p.258). Both concepts are examples of *nominal inauthenticity*, for the work in each case is wrongly attributed to a particular maker.

²⁷ A distinction here should be observed between alternate history and alternative history. Alternate history is a fictional genre in which the narrative observes the course of generally agreed history, but has a particular divergent point (for example, the Axis powers winning World War II in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*). Alternative histories are narratives of history which are hidden or do not comply with a dominant narrative of history recorded, but are nevertheless factual and based on the real experiences of marginalised subjects.

I would argue that the forger and the plagiarist are two different sides of a conceptual piece of false currency: the creator and the destroyer. The true maker of a forgery must necessarily remain anonymous as an author, for the forgery to be successful, and thus cannot claim credit for his creativity. The plagiarist can only hope to successfully pass off the copying of another's work as his own, if there is no obvious trace of the original author and, in some cases, the original work. The forger may then be seen as an anonymous creator who has added a falsity to history. The plagiarist may be seen as a destroyer because, in anonymising the original creator, he has removed something from the chronology of history.

Dutton defines a forgery "as a work of art whose history of production is misrepresented by someone (not necessarily the artist) to an audience (possibly to a potential buyer of the work), normally for financial gain" (2003, p.259). In this definition, Dutton notes that the deceptive intent to pass a work off as something other than what it is, is not necessarily the intent of its maker. Though forgers may deliberately manufacture something with the intent to deceive, it is the seller (whether or not this is the same person), who weaves a false narrative of provenance in order to manipulate the context (and perceived value) of the work. Dutton notes a necessary distinction between the seller who is merely overly enthusiastic, in the suppositions he makes in a sales pitch, and those whose present speculation as fact. He suggests that:

Fraudulence is approached only when what is merely an optimistic guess is presented as well-established knowledge, or when the person making the guess uses position or authority to give it a weight exceeding what it deserves (2003, p.259).

The *intention* to deceive is thus, for Dutton, the crucial point that differentiates forgery from a misattribution. A forgery is thus an *intentional* lie.

The terms forgery and fake are often used interchangeably. Whilst forgery is a kind of fake, not all fakes are forgery. In this distinction, one might consider that the forgery is primarily an antithesis to *material authenticity* for it is the material aspect (the work's physical qualities and provenance) that the forger seeks to distort. A forger might endeavour to play into expectations of *conceptual authenticity* by presenting a particular thematic or style speculated by academic study. An example of this will be shown later in the work of the forger Han van Meegeren. Forgery as a term is usually only applied to things or actions, whilst fake is a concept applied to things, actions, and people. The quality of fake, when used to describe a person, does not always carry the same conscious intentionality that the

forgery does.²⁸ That fake can be used to describe both physical attributions and expressive qualities, means that it can refer to both *material inauthenticity*, and *conceptual inauthenticity*.

Performance theorist Sibylle Peters observes that in contrasting forgery to authenticity, “philosophy has always failed to describe forgery adequately ... [for forgery] rarely defines itself in contrast to truth and authenticity, and instead appropriates their corresponding procedures” (2002, p.122). Peters notes that forgery must take into consideration the modes which authorities use to authenticate works, “dominant historical narratives and archival orders ... [and] use the blind spots of these figurations of knowledge” (2002, p.122) to distort these valuation systems as camouflage. Forgery, in order to be successful, requires a considerable amount of thought, research and expert skill. In its attempt to emulate authentic works by a known maker, forgery may demonstrate a fair amount of creative originality. Fake, by contrast, is not necessarily research or labour-intensive. A fake may be cheaply, and shoddily manufactured without even an attempt to plausibly convince a possible purchaser that it is the original it imitates.

In her article ‘The Academic Laboratory of Fake—a Proposal’, Peters suggests that an appropriate study of authenticity in works of art could be best explored through an academic laboratory that sets out to manufacture forgeries. She observes that “as the history of forgery is the history of detected forgery, fake reveals how representation is performed” (2002, p.122). She suggests that, whilst certain information may be gleaned by examining the history of works which have been exposed as forgery (thus revealing how authenticity has been performed), this is insufficient. Ultimately only forgery which has failed would thus be under scrutiny, for its failure is the reason for its discovery. The act of recreating a forgery would immerse the maker in a range of possible studies from history, social and anthropological conditions, archival procedures, scientific analysis, etc. For this reason, the practical production of forged artefacts would open up a potential for a broader interdisciplinary field of study. She notes that:

examining the operations of forgery involve[s] all the common procedures of academic research, but in addition, when experienced as agency, they expose the fact that we at the same time investigate history and take part in it (2002, p.123).

²⁸ When a person is a forgery, we use the term ‘imposter’, which carries with it the same intention to deceive with calculated consideration to small details, and a narrative of provenance that the forged object exhibits. A fake person is usually a description of someone who is perceived as superficial or, in some way, insincere.

By analysing academic models of thought on authenticity, and related authoritative valuation systems for the purpose of subverting them, Peters suggests a practical researcher of forgery would not merely perpetuate accepted dominant paradigms, but investigate how these are constructed and performed.²⁹ The subversive nature of forgery, through its capacity to undermine figures of authority (who evaluate and authenticate works of art and other artefacts deemed worthy of archiving), is intrinsic to its popular appeal. Aldrich and Hackforth-Jones also note a recent increase in interest by the European general public in exhibitions which explore issues of authenticity, whether this is misattribution or out-right forgery (2012, p.8). They list a number of exhibitions on these themes that drew unexpectedly high attendance, or had exhibition time extended due to popular demand.³⁰ The public interest is driven, they suggest, by the controversy that surrounds such work, as forgery exposed often involves large sums of money and possible legal action (2012, p.8). There is also a kind of *schadenfreude* in observing the embarrassment of the expert authorities who have either been duped, or made false attributions with excessive overconfidence.

An example of the popularist appeal of forgery uncovered can be seen in how Dutton recounts the history of the famous Dutch art forger, Han van Meegeren, whose 1937 painting *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus* was purchased by the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam as an original Vermeer (2003, pp.260-261).³¹ Published academic theory of the time speculated that Vermeer had visited Italy, and that works from this period may yet be discovered. Van Meegeren capitalised on this theory and, in conjunction with some cunning technical strategies in mixing his own pigments, homemade badger-hair brushes, recycled antique canvas, and a craquelure aging-effect, presented his forged work for sale. As provenance, he offered a tale of an Italian family whose pecuniary difficulties required them to dispose of the painting through a third party as they wished for some discretion. This confidentiality is not unusual in the sale of historic paintings of great value. Financial

²⁹ Peters offers no specific case study in support of her claims about fake and forgery other than a particular kind of form following function in the practical example of her original delivery of this paper. The published paper is footnoted to explain how this lecture-performance was initially presented with Peters appearing to read her paper, only for it to be slowly revealed that she is lip-synching when she struggles to keep up with a pre-recording. She suggests that this performance is a practical example by which she intends to “demonstrate some of the claims made in the text ... [in particular] how academic lecturing produces evidence” (2002, p.125). In so doing, she effectively demonstrates how the power of presumed expert narrative is used to construct and perform a rhetoric of knowledge, a formula frequently employed by forgers and academics alike.

³⁰ For example: *Close Examination: Fakes, Mistakes and Discoveries*, National Gallery, London, 2010. *The Metropolitan Police Service's Investigation of Fakes and Forgeries*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London 2010 was extended for two weeks due to public interest. *Seconde Main (Second Thought)* Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris 2010 (2012, p.176).

³¹ This is the title by which Dutton refers to the painting although various sources give it different names including: *Christ at Emmaus*, *The Last Supper* and most commonly used *The Supper at Emmaus*. All three titles refer to the same painting.

instability is not something the powerful wish to advertise, and this avoidance of social embarrassment is a gap frequently utilised by forgers and art thieves alike. Thus, already primed by the academic theory of the time, experts were happy to accept the work as it fulfilled contemporary speculation of Vermeer's conceptual trajectory.



Han van Meegeren. 1937. *The Supper at Emmaus*. (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen).



Dirk Hannema (right), director of the Boijmans Museum, and restorer Hendrik Luitwieler view *The Supper at Emmaus* in 1938. (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen).

Van Meegeren made six more 'Vermeers', each, to our contemporary eyes, more dubious than the last. It was only when one of these, *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1941, was uncovered after World War II in the collection of Nazi Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, that Van Meegeren was required to confess.



Han Van Meegeren. 1941. *The Woman Taken in Adultery*. (Essential Vermeer).

As Van Meegeren was known to be the agent involved in the sale, he faced the charge of selling a Dutch national treasure to an enemy of the state. At that time, because the crime amounted to treason, the charge carried a potential death sentence. Van Meegeren, therefore, pled guilty to the lesser crime of forgery. He was, however, not initially believed and was required to demonstrate his technique whilst in prison, thus making a performance of his performance of representation. Dutton notes that Van Meegeren's "trial itself was a media event, and the worldwide coverage made him a folk hero" (2003, p.261). Van Meegeren's popularity in the public mind points to the interest such creative deception may generate, and the enjoyment we derive from seeing experts fooled. In light of this popular appeal generated by the Van Meegeren forgeries and the admiration given to the skill of the forger as a kind of artist in his own right, Dutton raises a question around the need for accurate expert authentication of artworks. He asks:

if even renowned experts cannot tell the difference between a Vermeer and a Van Meegeren, and if the Van Meegeren has the power to delight museum visitors, as the *Emmaus* clearly did, then why should anyone care very much whether or not the painting is a Vermeer? (2003, pp.261-262).

As a response, Dutton presents two different positions, drawing on the work of Arthur Koestler and then Nelson Goodman. Firstly, he notes Koestler's argument that the sudden discovery of a previously authenticated work as a forgery should make no aesthetic difference to the value of the work:

If the forgery is indiscernible from an original ... or if it fits perfectly into the body of work left by an artist, and produces aesthetic pleasure of the same kind as other works by the original artist, then there can be no warrant to exclude it from a museum (Dutton 2003, p.261).

Koestler suggests that the intrinsic value of a work of art is its aesthetic experience, rather than any factual accuracy in the work's *material authenticity*. In contrast to Koestler's position on aesthetic value, Dutton references Goodman, who challenges the idea that it is impossible to aesthetically perceive the difference between an authentic work and a forgery. "Indiscernible to whom?" asks Goodman (cited in Dutton 2003, p.261). Here, Goodman is not questioning the abilities of experts, but the capacity of human perception at all points in history. Authenticity is contextual, so too is forgery. While increased facility in scientific analysis, or the subsequent finding of conflicting archival material, might ultimately unmask the forgery, it is not just the material qualifiers which may shift over time.

Peters observes that a forgery is a kind of double referent of historical time. These two points in time are “the one that the fake is meant to date back to and the one that the fake is addressed to” (2002, p.122). Taking this idea further, it might be argued that the forgery carries a dual *aura* in Benjaminian terms (although one of these *auras* is fabricated). The forgery thus carries both the markers that have intentionally been included as part of its creation as a fictional artefact, and the unintentional ones which may remain as a contemporaneously unnoticed residue of the object’s design at a specific point in history. Both works of art and their makers are products of their particular cultural and temporal context. It is impossible to stand outside of one’s own contemporary time and predict which aspects of design, social perception, and even moral thought will be lasting, and which may become a quaint artefact of a subsequently dated way of thinking and perceiving. The inclusion of current modes of design, expression, and thinking may actually appeal to contemporary audiences and make a forged work seem more plausible because it subtly suggests to the viewer that their current way of thinking has a classic quality. Ultimately, however, this contemporary appeal will date the work when too much emphasis is placed on appeasing the expected viewpoint of the contemporary audience.

Dutton notes that changes in perceptions over time, and the capacity to perceive the qualities which date the forgery to its time of making, may thus become perceptible at a later date. Even when it is impossible to have this kind of perception at the time of a forgery’s construction, “that does not mean that a difference will not emerge, and later on appear glaring not only to the curator, but to more innocent eyes as well” (2003, p.261). This is certainly the case when we look at the Van Meegeren forgeries. We might wonder why anyone would mistake these works for those of Vermeer. There is a flattening of the picture plane which suggests that photographic references have been used for the figures. The facial expressions, in particular the hooded eyes of many of the characters, and the slightly blurry quality of some of the later forgeries are distinctly reminiscent of 1930s cinema. Dutton even notes the resemblance of some of the characters to the actress Greta Garbo. He observes that this “overall ‘modern’ feel of the painting gave it a subtle appeal to its initial audience, but for the same reason it reveals to our eyes the painting’s dated origin, as much as any 1930s movie betrays its origins with its hairstyles, make-up, gestures, and language” (2003, p.261).

Dutton concludes his discussion on Van Meegeren by observing that the inclusion of forgeries in an extant body of work has the potential to dilute an authentic oeuvre. He notes how newly discovered works by a recognised artist will necessarily be compared to the already authenticated body of work or what Goodman calls the “precedent class” (cited in

Dutton 2003, p. 261). When a forgery is included in the authenticated body of work, any subsequent discovery will be compared to the characteristics of this cuckoo-in-the-nest. If this work is also a forgery, is subsequently included, and the pattern continues in this fashion, spiralling away from the original artist's oeuvre, the authenticated body of work may become so distorted that an authentic work by the original artist might eventually be rejected because it is so significantly different from what is now accepted as the precedent class of works.

The discovery that a work is a forgery, however, is no reason in itself to hide such works (along with the misguided authenticators' embarrassment) from public view. The desire to assign such subversive works to the basement or storehouse is because the very idea of forgery undermines the authority of the museum as an arbiter of authenticity. Peters notes that forgery represents "a continuing threat to the concept of the artist as genius and the work of art as sacred, notions that are central to a reception-based type of cultural education" (2002, p.125). This understanding of authenticity as the museum's *raison d'être* presupposes an idea that authenticity is a fixed quality rather than something, like the cultural artefacts it preserves, which is subject to social and temporal fluctuations. A forgery is still a creative artefact of its time of production. It may yet demonstrate to future audiences much more about the cultural conditions and evaluation systems in which it was accepted as authentic than an artwork made without devious intentions, for it deliberately seeks to distort these conditions. In so doing, it invariably leaves traces of this performance of deception.

Chad Rossouw: A History of Failure

Counterfactual fiction is generally defined by its relation to history, and it comes into being through the writer's choice of a "divergence point," an alteration which creates a new branch of history that confounds or rejects the "real" history we think we know. A divergence point, or nexus point, as it is sometimes called, is an invented or inverted discrete historical event.

—Jack Dann, *The Fiction Writer's Guide to Alternate History*.

The artworks of Chad Rossouw are difficult to categorise for the simple reason that his creativity takes many forms, including found objects, sculpture, printmaking, Photoshop (and other digital manipulation), graphic design, as well as conceptual performances, critical and fictional writing. A search for his works is also not helped by the fact that he no longer identifies as an artist, and much of his *oeuvre* not recorded in reviews is not maintained as an artist's individual portfolio, even privately by the artist himself. Even when solo exhibitions were still part of Rossouw's public presentation, he sometimes preferred to refer

to himself in his artist's statements as a "writer, lecturer and artist" in that order (Butcher, 2012). The quest for traces of his work has thus curiously, and perhaps ironically (given the nature of some of his artworks), taken on something of the performance of an archaeological dig.³² Using my own memory of his work to prompt more specific Google searches, it is clear that the internet never entirely forgets, but more generic searches are not helped by the fact that Rossouw is also better known as an art critic, the editor of *ArtThrob* from 2015 to 2021, and by a previous venture which introduced him to the realm of art criticism and art making under the fake identity of Robert Sloon.



Portrait of Robert Sloon. 2007. Image: Doing it for Daddy.
(*ArtHeat* Fandom Wiki).

In 2006, Rossouw (who was then a student at Michaelis Art School at the University of Cape Town) launched the South African art gossip blog *ArtHeat* under the pseudonym of Robert Sloon. Pre-dating much of the ubiquity of social media, which now keeps niche community groups updated on the more salacious and contentious news in their interest areas, *ArtHeat* was designed as an interactive online tabloid newspaper. It is hard to describe now, when there are so many more options for online citizen journalism and audience commentary, how refreshing *ArtHeat* was at the time. Although often sophomoric in its humour or parochial in

³² I met with Rossouw to discuss his work, but even he is unsure where some of his objects have ended up. Part of his move away from making art is purely financial practicality in not being able to keep up with the costs of producing and storing the work. He openly admits that he's never been very good at keeping records of his own work and speculates that some of his objects and documents may well have ended up in a landfill or an antique shop. This presents a potential future confusion for any antiquarian who might discover his decontextualized fake artefacts.

its reportage, the site provided a journalistic voice which was unsanctioned by official news channels or established institutions—a form of commentary from the virtual peanut gallery. Whilst this is something that in more recent years has palled, with legions of internet trolls and every voice allowed an opinion, at the time, *ArtHeat*'s regular updates and comment section provided a centralised sense of community and social movement, particularly for younger artists, which the official art news in South Africa did not, tending to focus on established events and more serious criticism released only quarterly or monthly at best. Art critic Linda Stupart observed that the site's "anonymity also allows a level of honest criticism and political-incorrectness that is often refreshing" (2006).³³ One-part piss-take, one-part conceptual artwork in its own right, *ArtHeat* generated some broader debate and a minor degree of general consternation from more seriously-minded artists who did not take kindly to the freedom of expression being exercised on the blog format. It was with this anticipation of public reaction in mind that Rossouw designed his journalist persona of Robert Sloon: a slightly altered anagram of 'Born to Lose'. Whilst there was much speculation initially about Sloon's true identity (and conjecture as to whether he might actually be an alter ego for a more established South African conceptual artist), the individual behind Sloon's character became something of an open secret, which lost some of its allure when it was revealed that the real author was someone much less established in the art world. Robert Sloon was far more than a *nom de plume*, for Rossouw's writing in this guise had a particular character distinct from the writings produced under his real name, and he thereby became a conceptual artist in his own right. This perhaps created something of a trap for Rossouw as a young emerging artist, as he was more likely to be given exhibition opportunities as the infamous Sloon than as the lesser-known undergraduate he then was.



Robert Sloon, 2009. *Watching The Detectives*. Photographic performance. (*ArtThrob*).

³³ Stupart, a friend of Rossouw's, was one of the 'insiders' of the *ArtHeat* writing crew. Although her review of the site cannot thus be taken as objective, the focus of her article is about blogs and shameless self-promotion. Her statement about anonymity, affording more honest commentary, perhaps accurately describes her own experiences in writing for the site, and rings true of my own external experience of reading it at the time.

Over the next few years, Sloon exhibited a number of conceptual, obscured photographic performance works playing on the anonymity of this fictional persona. In a review of his works, *You Only Live Twice* (2008), *In a Glass, Very Darkly* (2009), and *Watching the Detectives* (2009), Katharine Jacobs refers to Sloon as a double-agent who “identifies his plight with that of fictional spy, James Bond, who, in order to carry out his job, must reveal his true identity to no one” (2009). Despite the title reference of the 2008 work, Sloon’s film-noir styled detective persona was far more Raymond Chandler’s melancholic Philip Marlowe than Ian Fleming’s dashing Bond. The titles of these works evidence Rossouw’s interest in characterisation and the intertextuality of popular media references as a shorthand for implying layered narratives. Although much more could be written on the Robert Sloon character, he is not the aspect of Rossouw’s output on which I wish to focus. It is important, however, to note this early work as a performance of a fictional or fake character who nevertheless produced real art criticism in the world. Jacobs notes that “there is a sense of loneliness and mournfulness about the alter-ego, appropriate to one who must work tirelessly and anonymously, never receiving acknowledgement for their work” (2009). In this aspect, Rossouw operated much like a forger, whose creative output was at this time only credited to his much more well-known pseudonym.

In 2012, Rossouw’s first solo exhibition under his own name, *A History of Failure*, appeared at the Brundyn+ gallery in Cape Town.³⁴ Whilst Rossouw exhibited single works several times as part of group exhibitions, *A History of Failure* would be one of only two solo shows by the artist under his own name, the other being *The Planet’s Wake* in 2014, again at Brundyn+ gallery. In 2016, Rossouw collaborated with photographer Vincent Bezuidenhout on *She Watches Over*, an interrogation by the two artists of their mutual interest in what came to be known as the Vela Incident. On 22 September 1979, the US spy satellite Vela 6911 detected an unidentified double flash of light suggestive of a nuclear explosion near the South African territory of Prince Edward Islands in the Indian Ocean. Although the event, it was speculated, might also have been caused by a meteor strike to the satellite, 41 similar previous events were the result of nuclear weapons testing, and much of the documentation of the event was kept classified by the U.S. government. Declassified documents from the National Security Council in 2003 and the CIA in 2016, however, reveal that U.S. intelligence had other evidence that the event was most likely a joint nuclear test orchestrated by South Africa and Israel (De Geer and Wright, 2018).

³⁴ The work was first exhibited in 2011 at the Michaelis Galleries on UCT campus as part of Rossouw’s submission for his Masters of Fine Arts degree.

In their artists' statement for *She Watches Over*, the Vela Incident is suggestively conflated with another site of South Africa's secret nuclear testing programme in the 1970s. This other incident was the drilling of two shafts (385 metres and 216 metres in depth, and 1 metre in diameter) between 1975 and 1977 at the South African National Defence Force site Vastrap (Rossouw, 2016). This small military airfield and 700 square kilometre weapons test range in the Kalahari Desert northeast of Upington, was photographed in July 1977 by the Soviet spy satellite, *Cosmos 922*. Detecting this possibility for nuclear testing activity, the Soviets reported this to the U.S., who sent their own Lockheed SR-71 spy plane to confirm the drilling activity and subsequently placed pressure on South Africa to shut this testing down. France then also threatened to cancel their contractual involvement in the establishing of the Koeberg nuclear power station in Cape Town if the testing continued. The site was never subsequently used for nuclear detonation, and the shafts were sealed in 1993 under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (Bidgood, 2016).



Chad Rossouw and Vincent Bezuidenhout. 2016. *She Watches Over*. Installation view: Brundyn+. (VincentBezuidenhout.com).

The exhibition installation of *She Watches Over* consisted of a matt-black, geometric object with mirrors and a print of a heavily redacted, seemingly official, report. Despite the factual history of the Vela Incident and the Vastrap shafts, the exhibition is not a documentary exposé of the real-life events. The audience is given little by way of proof of the events inspiring the work, which are offered up as bald statements that might be equally taken as a fictional prologue establishing the circumstances of a narrative yet to unfold, much like Orson Welles's 1938 radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* or Neill Blomkamp's 2009

film *District 9*. For Rossouw and Bezuidenhout, the exhibition is not about the factual events they reference *per se*; not least because actual evidence is limited and, such that there is, is aesthetically boring. Instead, the work is about the inaccessibility of historic information, the gaps in knowledge this creates, and the frameworks of political power. In their press release, they note that:

Any historical narrative is faced with these lacunae, and can only proceed through speculation and feats of imagination. The delineations of knowing and not knowing, embodied here in the literal lines of redaction, also point outside of the narrative ... The borders of secrecy reveal how government exerts a disciplinary force through the flows and stoppages of information (Rossouw, 2016).

The focus of this work is an absence which can only be retraced through fragments and remnants, and when these are insufficient, it becomes necessary to employ imagination to cohere these traces into some form of speculative narrative. As this kind of fictionalising of history is so easily compared with more crackpot conspiracy theories, for which there is a very tenuous link between real events and the conjecture surrounding them, attention to the aesthetics of the fake artefacts becomes paramount to avoid the whole thing appearing as B-grade science fiction.



A real Vela model satellite. Peterson Air and Space Museum, Colorado.
(Petemuseum.org).

Interestingly, when comparing the geometric object of *She Watches Over* to a real Vela satellite, it is the real object which appears like a prop. The real Vela satellite seems poorly welded together out of recycled parts from perhaps a few solar panels, a metal clothes horse, and a washing machine: a piece of set design for early episodes of *Dr Who*, *Star Trek* or some other low-budget TV production. The airbrushed matt-black of Rossouw and Bezuidenhout's more refined object, at once reminiscent of a virus and some kind of futuristic alien technology, owes more to big-budget film set design than it does to genuine aero-space engineering history. We have forgotten that human beings made it to the moon with technology less complex than we currently access in hand-held and household appliances. Thus, we expect an object related to international espionage and secret nuclear testing to be as impressive as that which we see in blockbuster films. It is this which makes the fake object appear more real because it, as Dutton notes of Van Meegeren's forged Vermeers, appeals to contemporary sensibilities. Much like Hannah Arendt's observations on the banality of evil, the real traces of this time in South Africa's dark past do little to engender the sense of threat, government conspiracy, and potential nuclear disaster. But, with *She Watches Over*, it was Rossouw and Bezuidenhout's desire to evoke contemplation on "the complex interaction between secrecy, government and fear which intersected with South Africa's own history of aggressive Nationalism and modernist aspirations" (Rossouw, 2016). This is thus better served by the heightened contemporary theatricality of the fake object, which is more effective in conveying a sense of menace because its references are not only real events (with which we as an audience may be less familiar), but also evoke the emotions stimulated (and frequently manipulated) by popular contemporary fictions. *She Watches Over* is not only an allegory of covert past events but a contemplation of current secret threats of government conspiracy and war-mongering. *She Watches Over*, in its relation to real events, is perhaps the closest to truth Rossouw gets in his artistic production. His previous two solo exhibitions have the semblance of being records of some real historical event but are always slightly distorted, in some way fragmented, and never entirely explained.

In a review of Rossouw's exhibition *The Planet's Wake* (2014), Niklas Zimmer refers to the artist as a "genius bricoleur" (2004). This is perhaps an apt description of Rossouw's solo output given his usage of multiple media and altered found-object assemblages, as well as the intertextual historical, archaeological and fictional references which inspire his work. A common thread might be found in Rossouw's interest in history and its relationship to a particular branch of science fiction writing variously described as speculative fiction, counterfactual fiction, or alternate histories. Although Margaret Atwood and Ursula K Le Guin have debated whether there is a distinction between speculative fiction and science fiction,

Rossouw, in his use of this genre, is as likely to employ realistic strains of history as he is to reference the more pulp-fiction inspired tropes of intergalactic space travel and mythical monsters and dragons.³⁵ The fantasy settings of the latter might imply a form of escapism, however, as science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson observes: “in every [science fiction] narrative, there is an explicit or implicit fictional history that connects the period depicted to our present moment, or to some moment of our past” (1987, p.54). Science fiction is thus a mirror for speculation on contemporary events, whether the narrative is closer or further in its realism to our own.

Rossouw’s works are not merely illustrations or props for a fictional or imaginative world. Instead, he employs a strategy of constructing objects and scenarios as if they are artefacts of history, although their reference points may be greatly divergent. With a particularly close eye to material detail, each object or set of objects/images/performances implies an alternate history to which the work bears testament. These are frequently subverted with some minor conflation of historical detail or deliberate falsehood. In this way, Rossouw’s fake artefacts mimic (or perform) the way in which authentic objects and documents of history operate in museums of natural and cultural history in that they come to us as traces. The artefacts seem to hint at being a form of proof of some historical incident or record of events, but as the complete narrative of this alternate history is left open for the viewer to interpret, it is the narrative on which we speculate, not whether the artefacts represent genuine evidence of this or not.

This can be seen in the image below, *Parklands: Fairview Crescent*, (2013), a work in a series from the exhibition *The Planet’s Wake* (2014).



Chad Rossouw. 2013. *Parklands: Fairview Crescent*. Lambda Print. (*ArtThrob*).

³⁵ Atwood claims that her work is not science fiction as it does not include wild flights of the fantastical and that the narratives she proposes “could really happen” (cited in Potts, 2003). Le Guin argues that this definition is too restrictive and may be born from a kind of snobbery forced on science fiction which sees the genre as a lesser form of literature. She suggests that Atwood’s position is merely that “she doesn’t want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto” (2009).

The wide-angle photograph shows a landscape in Cape Town, on a border between suburban housing and vacant undeveloped scrubland, somewhere close to Blouberg Strand (which can be determined by the view of Table Mountain in the distance). Upended, and partially embedded in the turf, are what appear to be the remains of some sort of unidentified aircraft. What might be a propeller shaft, fins, and possible engine thrusters may also suggest a form of submersible craft. The positioning of the object suggests that it has crash-landed, rather than that it came to its functional demise emerging from the soil (like some kind of earth-borer imagined by Jules Verne), although an argument might be made for either as the aerodynamics of these component parts seem to contradict one another. Abandoned in this strip of vacant land (between taller buildings in the far distance and the beginnings of a middle-income suburb in the midground), the craft seems at once monumental in relationship to its background, and entirely ignored as it rusts away in this presumed crash site. It would be inaccurate to describe this wreck as forgotten, as it appears someone has trimmed the grass on the verge around it, but only as necessary to keep the grass short as a firebreak, as if the object is no more remarkable than other peri-urban defunct remainders: perhaps, a large tree stump or residual concrete foundations. With the increased use of AI image generators in more recent times we have perhaps become more used to seeing realistic images of surprising or unlikely events. This was not, however, a medium available to Rossouw at the time of the image's making. The caption for the image does not specify whether the image is Photoshopped or whether the image is of a sculptural object inserted into a site-specific landscape (it is Photoshopped, although either option might be as likely given the artist's use of both means in constructing scenarios). To reveal the means by which the work is made would point to the fakery of the image. One may nevertheless assume the craft is a fake object inserted into a real landscape and suspend disbelief in this to consider what the composition as a fragment of a narrative is telling us. The craft is not the only aspect, however, of the image which is constructed.

In the Cape Town suburb of Parklands, many of the roads are circular and named 'Crescent'. There is, however, no Fairview Crescent, only a Fairview End, which offers no similar sightline on Table Mountain, although the kinds of houses interspersed with tracts of undeveloped land are similar. In the nearby suburb of Richwood, there is a Fairview Close, and slightly further away, in Montague Gardens, there is another Fairview Close and a Fairview Crescent, but this is also not the road depicted in the image. These sprawling suburbs on the North-West periphery of Cape Town much resemble one another in their clusters of Tuscan-style new builds, cookie-cutter gated complexes, and nomenclature of streets, whether these are erroneous, given a decided lack of green leafy trees (Forest Lane,

Woodlands Close, Oakland Road, Chestnut Crescent), or anachronistic, given the recent development, in an allusion to some colonial heritage (Whitehall Way, Dorchester Drive, Regent Road, Marlborough Way). *Parklands: Fairview Crescent* is thus not an actual place, although it is like many similar places—newly developed suburbs on the periphery of major cities. The view of Table Mountain seems to suggest some kind of specificity in locating this event, a detail which implies proof ever so slightly out of reach if only one could find that particular road, which looks quite a lot like many others in the vicinity.

To search for the location, one might become lost in a myriad of circular roads with similar names. Lost in space, as another more romantic reading of the word ‘crescent’ might imply. Lost, like whoever might have been piloting the craft before the crash. The before and after of this event remain open for narrative speculation. In blockbuster films, aliens attack New York, and monsters invade Tokyo, but when aliens land in out-of-the-way, seemingly generic, places, these narratives are rarely about the heroism of an urban collective overcoming the odds of superior technology. Instead, such narratives tend to focus on how an external visitation highlights the tensions between individuals in a conservative or closed-minded community. Whether these narratives then reinforce nightmarish presumptions about homogeneity and parochial attitudes in places which seem outwardly so ordinary that nothing of much note might be considered to occur there, or debunk these in an exploration of the complexities of human identity and reveal a hot-bed of intrigue, thwarted ambition, and lost dreams, are but two of many possible imagined narratives that might begin with the ‘what if’ statement suggested by the image: What if a strange craft suddenly appeared in a field in Cape Town’s North West suburbs? How this might play out in one’s imagination may say more about the speculative viewer than it does about Rossouw’s projections on the topic, although we are offered a small biographic clue in the press release for *The Planet’s Wake*: “He was born in 1982, in the bleak suburbs of Table View” (Rossouw, 2014a). The landscape depicted is thus Rossouw’s place of origin, Table View being an adjacent suburb to Parklands. This might explain a conflation of suburbs and street names in the ways in which one might misremember the names of streets from childhood or give no credence, as a local, to the minutiae in town planning that decree one street as being part of a certain suburb and the street one block over as part of another. Yet the choice of Parklands, as the suburb to represent this broader collective of subdivided areas, evokes both a genericism and a form of idealised nostalgia: a nonspecific, ordered suburban pastoral. The craft in *Parklands: Fairview Crescent* may thus be how Rossouw imagines his own origin story as some kind of alien who crash-landed in this area, out of alignment with the norms and values of the place in which he grew up. Or the craft may be an ode to his own abandoned

childhood fantasies, injecting something more exciting into an otherwise seemingly dull and ordered landscape—a super-sized toy spaceship lost or left behind in the grass.

Loss would seem to be an intrinsic theme of the exhibition, given the title of *The Planet's Wake*, although what exactly is being mourned, further than a kind of entropy implied by the weight of history, remains open. The word 'wake' may also refer to the residual eddies and currents produced by the movement of a large body through water or space. The double meaning of the title thus implies two associated themes: melancholy and traces. A similar multiple meaning is also implied in the exhibition title *A History of Failure* (2012), which Rossouw suggests may "point to a chronology of the concept of failure ... refer to a personal record, like a criminal having a history of violence ... [or imply] that history itself has failed to achieve, failed to describe, failed to move forward, failed to be history at all" (2011, p.7). In these two exhibitions, Rossouw draws inspiration from both fiction and history. In bringing these reference points together, he describes in his press release for *The Planet's Wake* (which might equally apply to *A History of Failure*) "three underlying concerns: a worry about truth, authenticity, irony and fakery; the weight of history, both personal and South African; and a fascination with ruins and fragments" (2014a).

All artists and fiction writers invent contexts, characters and imaginative worlds, but what sets Rossouw's two solo exhibitions apart is how they never represent a fully immersive and coherent fictional world. While the works in *A History of Failure* are predominantly based on twentieth-century history and more realistic in the events they reference, those in *The Planet's Wake* observe a larger spectrum of time (including Stone Age archaeology, ancient Rome and more mythical references). The works in both exhibitions are never directly linked in time, place, narrative reference, or medium of execution. Thus, they are fragments and appear, as a collection, more like a curated museum exhibition of particularly divergent natural or cultural history, except that all the objects are fake. But what is the taxonomy, curatorial vision, or historical narrative which has brought these varying objects together? Zimmer observes that the absence of a singular overarching narrative leads the works to "appear curiously real in and of themselves, extra-ordinarily real, and perhaps manage to say more about the privileging of curiously 'fake' objects in the realm of 'art' than if bolstered by a narrative of sorts" (2014).

Rossouw offers some anecdotal written support for his objects, however, much like the annotations for museum artefacts detailing provenance and (possible) prior use, these only clarify a reference point of the individual objects and images. These annotations (displayed

as part of the work's title and caption) may also seek to clarify slight misrepresentations or conflations of history whilst obscuring others, as can be seen in Rossouw's annotation for *Skull* (2013) in the exhibition *The Planet's Wake*:

Skull is based on the ancient Greek funeral rite of placing coins on the eyes of the deceased, in order to pay Charon the ferryman to convey the dead into the afterlife. Although completely common in the popular imagination, the placing of coins on the eyes is totally apocryphal. The archaeological records show coins in the mouth were the standard burial custom. The coin in *Skull* is not an obol, or any other ancient coin, but a contemporary R5 coin (Rossouw, 2014).



Chad Rossouw. *Skull*. 2013. Polyurethane and Oil Paint, five-rand coin. (Proponomicon).

In this description, with its authoritarian tone of an invisible curator, we are informed that the work is a reference to ancient Greek mythology, are initially affirmed in some idea we may have about the placing of coins on dead eyes, only to have this dashed as some other kind of collective misremembering. The coin, which appears convincingly archaic, is revealed on closer inspection to be a contemporary five-rand coin. All this may lead us to speculate what other forms of false 'currency' might be in operation and encourages us to study, with a closer eye, all that is on display to spot the trick. The mood created in revealing some of the careful fakery may in itself be something of a trick for "perhaps in being intrigued,

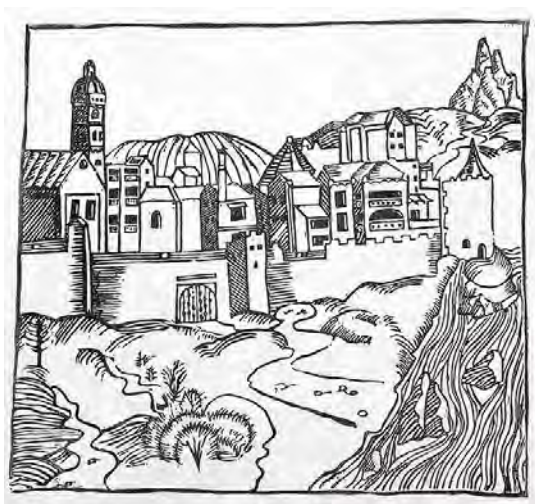
entertained, safe in the knowledge that one cannot be convinced, we are at our most vulnerable: believing that our disbelief is not suspended, we are open to many suggestions” (Zimmer, 2014). Can we trust the curatorial narrator who has so confidently informed us about ancient Greek rituals and confessed to the inaccuracy of the coinage? The authority of these statements is, however, a form of misdirection, for the most obvious fact of *Skull* is that it only has one eye. The reference to ancient Greece thus makes a mental link for the viewer in perceiving the skull as one of a cyclops and, having thus subconsciously categorised the object in relation to a recognisable (albeit mythic) species, we become distracted about where our remembrance of coins on eyes might have come from. In carefully scanning for more subtle forgery, we perhaps miss the (allegorical) elephant in the room: an irony here in that recent archaeological research speculates that the origin of the Greek myth of the Cyclops may have stemmed from the finding, by ancient Greeks, of fossilised skulls of dwarf elephants on various Mediterranean islands (Klingshirn, 2002).

The overall theme of Rossouw’s exhibitions is left up to the audience to configure as they investigate the works and, ultimately, this evokes a mood rather than a finite closed narrative. In a search for his overarching narratives, these fragments or artefacts seem to suggest proof of a kind, but as they are fake specimens, they finally offer no proof at all, leaving us to question what evidence *any* fragmentary artefacts may have in affirming sanctioned narratives of history.

Rossouw observes that his works are designed to create a sense of ambiguity about the past and “how this challenges ideas of historical determinism ... [and] builds up to the idea that the works are not about history at all, but that these representations of the past and future act as allegories to the present” (2011, p.12). Both *A History of Failure* and *The Planet’s Wake* share common themes of dystopia, nostalgia, and ancient or futuristic fallen empires (as cautionary tales) that become synonymous with more recent histories of the failure of modernist ideology and colonial legacies. Although the works reference broad global histories and fictions, the majority are in some way superimposed or reconfigured with some aspect of South African history or location in mind. Zimmer describes this conflation of myth, history and place as “*Star Wars* meets Ancient Rome in Green Market Square” (2014), but Rossouw’s intention is far more sophisticated than a mere restaging of history or myth in a local context. Whether these are wood-cuts of twenty-first century, Tuscan-styled, South African luxury apartment blocks masquerading as medieval illustrations; etchings of faux Roman ruins at the Cape of Good Hope printed on repurposed nineteenth-century bible vellum; or the reimagining of the 77 000-year-old Blombos ochre as a carving on a dragon bone, each work points to how colonial fantasies and myths of origin continue to haunt in

particular, as Rossouw describes it, “the double consciousness of [settler] progeny ... [who must negotiate their] settler ancestry and lived native experience” (2011, p.30).

How to align this double consciousness whilst avoiding cultural appropriation or overtly romanticising a nostalgia for European heritage is tricky to negotiate. Rossouw observes how this stems from a sense of his own displaced identity that struggles with a “desire for completeness and denied experience” but equally acknowledges that this sense of loss and longing “stems from the stodgy angst of a post-millennium, post-apartheid, white male ... a neo-colonial melancholy within myself, the disempowered empowered, that I am resisting, embarrassed about even” (2011, p.30). Embarrassment over one’s perceived privilege, and white guilt are frequently reasons that artists in South Africa have increasingly shied away from an unpacking of this complex side of identity construction relating to settler heritage in recent years. The grappling with the oppression of sanctioned narratives of history, combined with familial mixed myths of origin, is nevertheless something which informs the psyche of many South Africans, not all of them white or male. It is this sense of his own position which lends Rossouw’s work complexity and prevents it from becoming bogged down in nostalgic themes, which could all too easily overrun the work and turn it simply into escapist fantasy. Rossouw uses history and myth playfully but, in so doing, he is critical of how both are constructed as cultural assumptions. The past, for Rossouw, is not a better place but a source of poignant reflections which may still offer imaginative and cautionary tales for the less-than-perfect present. This might be considered in how Rossouw’s series of woodcut etchings depicting twenty-first-century, Tuscan-styled luxury apartment complexes are not simply romanticised illustrations.



Chad Rossouw. 2014. *Bougain Villas*. Woodcut on rice paper. (Brundyn+).



Bougain Villas. Mediterranean-styled, luxury accommodation. Century City, Cape Town. (Booking.com).

These images might seem to function as a form of faux provenance, implying some kind of longevity and heritage, but ultimately point to the fakery and shallowness of such constructions in the context of the postcolony. Genuine medieval illustrations of walled cities may have been as much documentation as illustration, yet the images come to those of us who do not have direct daily experience of historical cobbled streets and real Roman walls as a form of fairy-tale and fantasy. This kind of nostalgia for the architectural remains of Europe is a form of what, as discussed by theorists in my first chapter, might inform a desire for authenticity: that it is something that exists elsewhere, in the past, in the lives of others, and says more about our own psyche than it does about the actual original context. Whether one is of settler descent (and might feel a sense of displacement or lack of continuity and contact with a certain European cultural heritage) or whether one is descended from any number of cultural groups subjugated and repressed by centuries of colonialism, such architecture may inspire mixed feelings of both resentment and awe. This is essentially what such grandiose architecture is designed to do: to create a sense of legacy and exclusivity for those it represents, and alienate and dominate those who are considered marginal to it. Many new constructions, advertised as luxury, borrow historic styles of architecture but take shortcuts in their technical craft or engineering details (painting effects instead of real marble, press-mold stone cladding rather than real stone masonry). Such cost-cutting may thus very quickly deteriorate, and if the designs didn't necessarily appear cheap and tacky to start with, they very quickly will. Expensive materials age in ways that their faults create an *aura* of antiquity, however, anyone who has ever tried to maintain a listed building with damp stone walls, horse-hair lime plastering, and leaking hand-crafted terracotta tiles will know that it takes more than a romantic dream to keep this up, even if one has a few centuries before this is a serious problem. Poorly mixed plaster that cracks, and stone tiles which fall off the wall within five years may quickly illustrate that one has not bought a castle but the idea of one, a cardboard cut-out no more real than a kitsch theme park. These modern buildings may then reveal, even at the time of construction, how their foundations are not a genuine legacy of cultural heritage but a neo-colonial fantasy of one. Whether such a style of building might age to become something to be regarded as of historic significance, much like the Neoclassicism of British Georgian architecture, seems unlikely, when so much of it is so cheaply or poorly constructed. It is worth remembering, however, that Georgian architecture itself was inspired by fantasies of empire and a romanticisation of the antiquities of ancient Greece and Rome.

Architectural remains of great age in Southern Africa are few and far between when compared to more densely populated areas of the world. Such that there are, (e.g. the Kingdom of Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe) tend to remain outside of major urban areas

and thus never become part of the foundational palimpsest of an overlapping and juxtaposed history. Southern Africa is, however, rich in many other traces of a far deeper history of human origin: rock art, stone tools, and fossilised hominid remains point not only to a history of technology, innovation and imagination which long preceded the colonial era but to an even broader scope of time in which these remainders are a proof of origin of all humanity. To what degree, as a South African with colonial heritage, one may resonate with such objects either as a part of shared history (which predates an exodus from Africa) or as part of the multi-layered history of a 'now territorially defined country' is complicated. The history of displacement of those who migrated across this landscape, providing scattered evidence of their long legacy of presence through their rock art and resourceful technologies (that ensured survival in a harsh geography), will always taint a sense of shared national pride in those who cannot trace a direct line of ancestry to these cultural groups. To identify too directly with such heritage as part of a multicultural influence (through one's country of birth) may also feel like a form of cultural appropriation. The desire for a proof of origin or a less fragmented line of history is a sense of longing that may still haunt all South Africans, regardless of their individual cultural histories.

Traces of history may come to us with many gaps, and when these gaps are too large, too incomplete, or the evidence appears boring in how it neither confirms nor denies preconceived ideas, the temptation always exists to simply 'make stuff up'. The impulse to mythologise history is a desire for the myth to be part of history. Myth is a form of history, but one that is metaphoric rather than a factual account. The need to mythologise history is not necessarily a deliberate attempt to make a forgery of history but the desire to give some kind of symbolic order or find a form of pattern recognition that will join the dots to make a neater story, and thus create a sense of structure, meaning and wholeness out of what is otherwise chaotic and fragmentary. This desire for fiction and imagination is something Rossouw explores in his work *Blombos Dragon Bone* (2014).



The Blombos Ochre. Discovered in South Africa. Approximately 77,000 years old. (Ancient Art Archive).



Chad Rossouw. 2014. *Blombos Dragon Bone*. Polyurethane and oil paint. (Brundyn+).

This sculptural work is a mythological reimagining of a real archaeological discovery: the Blombos Ochre, a piece of ochre block carved with geometric patterns discovered in the Blombos Cave archaeological site 300 km from Cape Town. Whilst similar kinds of patterning have been discovered carved into stone, bone and tusk the world over, the Blombos Ochre is the earliest historic artefact of its kind to have been found. It is thus considered the first example of symbolically mediated behaviour i.e. a form of art-making. Henshilwood et al. observe that, in the opinion of many archaeologists, the “appearance of modern cognitive behaviours in Eurasia, associated with *Homo sapiens*, is the end result of an ‘out of Africa’ dispersal of an already symbolic species” (2009, p.28). The find thus suggests that the origin of art-making, at least in so far as the archaeological record has currently discovered, began in Southern Africa. Rossouw’s dragon bone plays with this deep history of symbolic representation. The dragon here might have many meanings, from associations with the mythical monsters depicted in early cartography that denote uncharted territory (‘Here be Monsters’), to an idea of primordial fear and evil—a serpent in the Garden of Eden. What can be supposed about this imaginary dragon is that it has been defeated, else it would not be possible to use its ‘bone’ for carving. Whilst Rossouw, in imagining a dragon as his substrate, references a mythic creature more commonly found in *Eurasian* cultures, the work is equally a return to a more ancient symbolic tradition that emerged in and emigrated from Africa, an idea which complicates the longer history of ideas of the settler and the native-born.

Although Rossouw, as a white man, is not a marginalised subject, as a white South African, he is nevertheless a postcolonial subject: in one part culturally displaced, in another at home. He explores this sense of discombobulation and destination deflected in his work *The Essex Castle* (2011). This tiny model replica of a Union-Castle Line steamship is painted with the geometric shapes and patterns (in contrasting colours) known as dazzle camouflage. The model ship, encased and floating in a Three-Ships whisky bottle, is mounted on an oval of African mahogany, beneath which is a brass plaque which reads as follows:

ESSEX CASTLE - 1946

Soon after World War II my grandparents came out on the passenger liner
"Essex Castle".

It was still camouflaged from when it was a troop ship, making it
impossible to tell where it was heading, or how fast (Rossouw, 2011, p.27).

For any viewer with a minor interest in World War II naval history, there is already a false note here, as whilst several Union-Castle passenger and mail ships were requisitioned as troop ships during World War II, dazzle painting was rarely used.



Chad Rossouw. 2011. *The Essex Castle*. Styrene, acrylic, silicon, glass bottle, jelutong, mahogany and brass.
(Rossouw, 2011, p.26)

Unlike other patterns of camouflage, the purpose of dazzle painting is not to hide the presence of the ship but to utilise the intersecting lines to create visual errors of parallax about the distance, direction and speed of the ship and thus confuse any attempts from enemy fire. The invention of radar and sonar during World War II, however, made the need for visual sighting of enemy craft redundant. Union-Castle ships, like many other passenger-liners converted to troopships (e.g. *HMT Empire Windrush*) were, however, used—because of the increased space created by the conversion to troop carriers—to transport (in much less luxurious style) civilians seeking a new life across the British Empire (Harris and Ingpen, 1994). The inclusion of dazzle camouflage in the model is thus not representative of an historical fact but, as expressed in the last line of the brass plaque, a conflation of history utilised as a metaphor to describe the hopes and fears of the many immigrants who travelled on such ships to new homes in those years after the war

Rossouw's choice of dazzle painting thus seems to evoke some of the false or confused determinism, on the part of the passengers, in terms of where they were "heading and how fast" (Rossouw, 2011, p.27). The clear path obscure even to themselves.

Rossouw notes that his use of the miniature model as an artwork is a redoubling of representation. The artwork is a representation of model building, a form which is in itself a representation of something else: a presumed real ship (Roussouw, 2011, p.27). He observes how the medium of model making is a hobbyist craft with a particular (potentially obsessive) attention to detail and carries with it a desire to shift the power dynamics of real life through the change in scale, thus creating a sense of transcendence and completeness: a capacity to control the miniature world the maker builds. He suggests that the miniature model presents a sense of wholeness in its selective representation of facts through which, "unlike the fragmented and partial views of contemporary life (the "inauthenticity" of mediated modernity), the model can provide both totality and stillness" (2011, p.28). Rossouw observes that miniature model building generates a sense of nostalgia not only in the kinds of objects modelled (steam trains, sailboats, quaint country villages) but also in the meticulous labour of handmade crafting. The pastoral themes and handmade labour of these models seem to lend the scenes a sense of authenticity, but it is a kind which Rossouw expresses in inverted commas: "an 'authenticity' ... [which] is compounded by the model's freezing of time" (2011, p.28). In these observations of miniature models as sites of nostalgic fantasy and arrested time, Rossouw references Stewart, who observes how the miniature, through the distortion of time and space, creates a sense of longing by offering a window on an "infinite time of reverie" (Stewart, 1993, p.65). It is this sense of longing for a complete narrative, or a sense of wholeness, that Rossouw suggests haunts the psyche of (post)colonial settler descendants.

The scale and multiple component parts of miniature models equally generate a sense of nostalgia in how they are comparable to the fantasy of childhood in their resemblance to toys: miniature worlds onto which any number of narratives may be projected. Stewart notes that "the toy is the physical embodiment of the fiction: it is a device for fantasy, a point of beginning for narrative ... To toy with something is to manipulate it, to try it out within sets of contexts, none of which is determinative" (1993, p.56). How we perceive the toys of childhood is distinctly different, however, from the world-building of the miniature model maker. Whilst delight may be taken in the attention to the detail of miniature worlds, there is something about the obsessive, time-consuming hobby which often carries an antisocial undercurrent, if only in the fully adult fantasist who has somehow failed to grow up. Such characters are frequently portrayed in fiction and film as reclusive individuals taking over

basements, sheds and attics with their hobby: socially awkward nerds at best; scheming, secretive psychopaths at worst. This sinister undercurrent may, in one part, be the potential of the meticulously crafted world to provide a projection site for ideological narratives, particularly when the overwhelming accuracy of certain details may seem to offer authenticity of fact whilst masking the deliberate skewing or falsification of others. This is something which Rossouw toys with in *The Essex Castle*:

The lies inherent in the work challenge the function of the model to provide authority, authenticity and transcendence. It provides fakery masked as authenticity, which emphasises the narrative quality of that authenticity and, hence, its ideological function (2011, p.33).

The yearning for a sense of wholeness and a complete origin story are fantasies, which permeate a desire for authenticity. It is into this space of longing which authoritative narratives of history, masquerading as authenticity, may play, although they may just as easily be a neatly circumscribed rhetorical mythos which ignores the complex overlaps with other narratives of history. History is never a neat singular story. The desire to make it so, and create edited rhetorical narratives is ideological, a desire which haunts the postcolony. One does not normally examine a work of art for factual accuracy in its representation, but the miniature model (with an explanatory narrative of representation) presumes a kind of authenticity which Rossouw observes is compounded by the authority of its narrative rhetoric. Although the work does not make explicit exactly which details are fabrications, Rossouw's exhibition programme note offers a further layer of narrative as to how the one presented with the work is a conflation of several ideas. *The Essex Castle* never existed, although his grandparents did travel at some point to the Cape on some other Union-Castle ship. Rossouw's great-grandfather was a painter who was recruited during World War I to dazzle paint ships. The name *Essex* is taken from an American whaleship which sunk in the Pacific in 1820, and the wreck survivors were forced to cannibalise some of their number in order to survive (Rossouw, 2011, pp.32-33). Which of these supplementary narratives are to be believed (except for the whaleship, whose existence and record may be fact-checked elsewhere) is also open to speculation.

In casting doubt on his own reconstructions of history, Rossouw asks us to question how all narratives of history are created and conveyed. Ultimately, the truth of Rossouw's work is less relevant than his capacity to weave together different histories and fictions in order to highlight (in these comparisons and conflations) the metaphors and allegories of contemporary experience. Through the construction of forged artefacts, presented as traces

of a fake history, he also troubles the authority and authenticity of curatorial narratives of art. This sense of doubt is critical to uncovering the lies inherent in the histories of nationalism, identity construction, and cultural production in South Africa. "Living in a country, or perhaps world, in which the tool of history has been (is) a truncheon, leaving us all battered and bruised," Rossouw observes that being willing to question everything, "becomes necessary to understanding our present" (2011, p.8). There can, of course, frequently be no finite or absolute truth uncovered, only multiple currents of probability or possibility, particularly for those whose ancestral lineage is recorded nowhere but in the oral traditions handed down. Rumours and familial myths haunt all families, and there is frequently, like with forgeries, a pleasure to be taken in the story value, whether or not it happens to be true. Equally, narratives of history can tell us as much about the time at which they are recorded as they might about a more distant past. Rossouw's fake objects, if they are artefacts of anything, are of a particular time and an individual's creation in a rapidly changing South African art scene. Rossouw's work, in its deliberate manufacture of artfully created forgeries, thus offers a practical example of Sibylle Peters's (2002) 'laboratory of the fake'. His research into diverse histories and the technical considerations of what may make his forged artefacts convincing (or obviously not so, and thus their destabilising of expectations), is also a serious investigation into forms of supplementary narrative and how they, as accepted dominant paradigms, are constructed and performed. Additionally, I would suggest that what may be observed in Rossouw's work (however conceptual the motives claimed for them) is the delight taken in the craft of making, through the huge range of various materials and complex artistic techniques used. In all the fabrication of narrative, historical research, and testing of unlikely materials, there is a sincere engagement with his subject, even when this is the art of telling lies. *The Essex Castle*, for instance, is a critical investigation of how a desire for wholeness and a singular narrative of origin may play out in conflating various threads of history and presenting this as authenticity. That these can never be entirely accurate and are as likely to lead to narratives that are mere flights of fantasy or constructions of mythology, may seem harmless enough until one remembers that when one believes one's own fictions they may become dangerous ideologies. Rossouw, in grappling with the human desire for myth and fiction and contemplating the dangers thereof, nevertheless manages to bring a spirit of playfulness and occasional humour to his work in addition to the sense of loss and the inevitable entropy of history conveyed. All history may be folly or failure, but the biggest forgery in this is to take traces and remnants of the past and use them as conclusive proof, rather than counterpoints for reflection. To take oneself too seriously in flights of fantasy may lead to the creepy stereotype of the model builder in his attic or basement. Why should we perceive, and imagine in fiction, the nerdy trainspotter or history aficionado with his scale models as something more sinister than a shy individual

engaged in harmless imagination games? Aside from the more extreme versions of cultish fantasy which have informed the ideology of fascist and totalitarian regimes, a discomfort with mythologising might also be an uneasiness with fantasy, play, imagination, or any other sentiment currently considered so naive that an adult engaged in such activities with all sincerity must be hiding and harbouring more sophisticated motives. Out of this contemporary discomfiture emerge ideas related to the fake in emotional register or perceptions of taste, which will now be discussed relative to kitsch and sentimentality.

Faking It: Kitsch and Sentimentality

In the realm of totalitarian kitsch, all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions. It follows, then, that the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch is the person who asks questions. A question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies hidden behind it.

—Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

In a keynote address entitled ‘Faking it’ at *The Representational Art Conference* in 2014, philosopher Roger Scruton uses the concept of Gresham’s Law (first articulated by sixteenth-century English financier Sir Thomas Gresham) to point out the problem of anything operating as false currency (Nerdrum, 2014, 17:46-19:08). Gresham’s Law was formulated by the financier’s observation of the debasement of coinage of his day, either by clipping gold or silver currency, or mixing such coinage with some kind of alloy of lesser value. Scruton explains that when both false and genuine currency is in circulation:

when it comes to the market transaction, you are going to give the fake gold coins and keep the real ones. In general, everyone will be of this persuasion and within months, there will only be the fake ones in circulation, and when they are discovered, will be recognised to be of far less value, and the result will be inflation (Nerdrum, 2014, 18:45-19:08).

Simply put, Gresham’s Law is that bad currency drives out good. This, Scruton suggests, is a phenomenon not only in the world of economics, but also is “true in the life of the mind. False goods exchange more easily because they cost less to the person who offloads them, but promise to bring the same reward” (Nerdrum, 2014, 19:16-19:26). Whilst the concept of forgery undermines the authority of the museum as the arbiter of authenticity, it at least attempts to emulate and disguise itself as part of the recognised canon of cultural artefacts the museum seeks to preserve. Scruton, whilst he does not elaborate on the practice of forgery, regards the antithesis of authenticity in art as the fake—a conceptual, rather than

necessarily a material concern. He argues that this concept of fakery is best exemplified in art by the idea of kitsch. Kitsch, he argues, “is fake art, expressing fake emotions, whose purpose is to deceive the consumer into thinking he feels something deep and serious, when in fact he feels nothing at all” (2016, p.8). In this remark we might note something which regularly reoccurs in the description of kitsch: that it is a commodity, something to be bought or sold to a consumer rather than something to be kept and preserved. In his keynote address, Scruton muses on the origins of kitsch. He notes of medieval church frescoes depicting “sinners being dragged down into hell by demons, or lifted up to heaven by angels” (Nerdrum, 2014, 12:11-12:16) that whilst they may seem sensationalist, no one would think, considering their original context, to call them kitsch. Scruton suggests this is because whilst “they are naïve and perhaps a little bit silly ... nevertheless there is something genuine behind all this, however incompetent it is” (Nerdrum, 2014, 12:27-12:34). It is distinctly difficult to prove, however, if anyone thought when these images were first produced, that they were cheaply manipulative of the congregation's fears of eternal damnation in the same commodity-oriented way Scruton attributes to kitsch. Scruton can perhaps only suggest this point of view because the church embellishments he refers to no longer have the power they once had. They no longer threaten in the current age, with its decline in the power of the church, to eclipse the rational thought of contemporary society through what might be thought of as a melodramatic manipulation of feeling. The removal of such elaborate church decoration by iconoclasts during the Protestant Reformation is usually credited to the objection that such images were idolatrous, or potentially blasphemous displays of material riches. It might be argued that these sentiments, though religious rather than secular, are not too dissimilar to the motives of more recent cultural thinkers who would seek to remove certain kinds of works from display in museums because they are believed to detract from a purer, or deeper kind of thinking and feeling. The reaction to sentimentality, and what has been more recently defined as kitsch, would therefore seem to come in waves.

Scruton suggests that if kitsch is the very definition of fake sentiment in art, then the term (or something like it) should have always been part of human understanding; “it should have always been with us, like original sin” (Nerdrum, 2014, 12:55-13:00). He observes, however, that the particular use of the term ‘kitsch’ seems to coincide with the industrial revolution. Clement Greenberg, who brought the term into academic contemplation in his 1939 essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, is more specific about the concept's origin. He confirms the notion that “kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy” (1939, p.42). This urbanisation process, Greenberg argues, created a situation in which an abstract understanding of culture was no longer the reserve of wealthier classes who had the time,

inclination and education to indulge in cultural pursuits. Culture was no longer the “exclusive concomitant of refined tastes” (1939, p.43). He suggests that the:

peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois ... did not win the leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city's traditional culture. Losing, nevertheless, their taste for the folk culture whose background was the countryside, and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same time, the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption (1939, p.43).

In this statement, we can observe a particular kind of snobbery Greenberg exhibits in suggesting a hierarchy of cultural pursuits: the urban high-art tradition of the leisure classes exemplified by academic painting and opera, the folk art of the country, and the new culture of kitsch which he defines as “popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc” (1939, p.42). In the examples of kitsch Greenberg puts forward, we might note his concern about the mechanical reproduction of works of art. For Benjamin, this capacity of art's reproduction would free it from traditional hierarchies and extend the scope of culture to a broader audience. In Greenberg's view, the mass reproduction of art leads to a loss of originality, thus producing watered-down and shallow concepts. For Greenberg, high-art is presumed to be the better class of culture, for it requires education and time to develop “refined tastes” (1939, p.43). Folk culture, he sees as at least noble in the sense that it is traditional but, because of its links to rural origins, is seen as less sophisticated than urban culture. Kitsch, he suggests, is the product of a need for quick and easy entertainment and thus lacking in depth, thought and sophistication:

Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations ... Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time (1939, p.43).

In Greenberg's definition of kitsch, we might recognise how this applies to overly sentimental, premade Hallmark cards, the cheaply manipulative language of advertising, or the sensationalist narratives of a penny-dreadful. All these might be momentarily entertaining but, he argues, are lacking in substance. One cannot avoid noticing, however, how Greenberg would extend this idea to anything with a popular appeal. There is a conflict of ideas when he observes that not:

every single item of kitsch [is] altogether worthless. Now and then it produces something of merit, something that has an authentic folk flavor; and these accidental and isolated instances have fooled people who should know better (1939, p.44).

If a work has merit, then why would a person who observes this, be misguided in contemplating the worthiness of an object of kitsch? If this work, as Greenberg suggests, possesses some authentic (or is it sincere?) quality, then the person who recognised this is not fooled. Any idea that they should know better is merely a class prejudice that would insist that nothing of merit could be gleaned from a work with a bourgeois popularist pedigree.

Apart from its potentially popular appeal, another complaint levelled against works described as kitsch is the frequent use of an exaggerated approach to human emotions. It is the exaggeration or oversimplification of these emotions (such as love, pity, heroism, grief, nostalgia) that, through heavy-handed use, change a contemplation of human sentiment into a debased sentimentality. Kitsch, when described as fake art, would seem to apply a deliberate intent to manipulate emotions through excessive, or inappropriate, use of feeling which is ultimately shallow but still available for sale. Its purpose is self-indulgence, momentary titillation and monetary gain, not a call to thought or action. It would then seem that there is, in this *intentionality* to be manipulative of shallow feeling, a difference between kitsch and sentimental works of art.

Sentimentality as a concept, however, has faced similar attacks for its direct (and oversimplified) appeal to the emotions. Oscar Wilde, in a letter to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, claimed that “a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it” (cited in Hart-Davis, 1962, p.501). He wrote further that “the sentimentalist is always a cynic at heart. Indeed, sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism” (cited in Hart-Davis, 1962, p.501). As there is snobbery evident in Greenberg’s claims for kitsch, there is a cynicism evident in Wilde’s claims of sentimentality.³⁶ Wilde is also not without his share of elitism when he writes:

The intellectual and emotional life of ordinary people is a very contemptible affair. Just as they borrow their ideas from a sort of circulating library of thought—the *Zeitgeist* of an age that has no soul—and send them back soiled at the end of each week, so they always try

³⁶ Although it should be noted that Wilde was imprisoned in Redding jail for gross indecency at the time of this writing. It is therefore unsurprising that his reduced circumstances and contemplation of past extravagances, follies and what he terms “weakness” in his own behaviour might have engendered the tone of cynicism.

to get their emotions on credit, and refuse to pay the bill when it comes in (cited in Hart-Davis, 1962, p.501).

Here, Wilde implies a hierarchy of feelings by suggesting that ordinary people lack a complex intellectual and emotional life. His observations on the sentimentalist would seem to be in keeping with how the concept of kitsch operates: manipulating the emotions by offering up the very shallowest of experiences which the consumer is happy to indulge in because it comes with very little intellectual and emotional cost. Philosopher Michael Tanner observes of Wilde's statement that "he erred only in thinking that the emotional lives of most extraordinary people ... are in a better position" (1976, p.138). Tanner contemplates whether there is an appropriate means for testing which feelings might be appropriately defined as sentimental, for "it could be the case that most of our feelings were properly categorized as sentimental" (1976, p.128). Tanner, in his essay 'Sentimentality', outlines a number of possibilities, including whether a feeling is appropriate to its stimulus (relationally appropriate), whether the feelings are passive (i.e. had for their own sake as a kind of wallowing) or lead one to some kind of appropriate action in having felt them (e.g. actively attempting to right a perceived injustice if only in one's own behaviour) (1976, pp.129-131). Action in itself, however, is not a sufficient remedy to avoid sentimentality, for Tanner argues that:

sentimentality is predicable of emotions that lead people to quite drastic actions, so that it is often the case that though they may not have earned their emotions, whatever that comes to, they pay for them ... So payment for one's emotions doesn't exempt them from being sentimental (1976, p.131).

For Tanner, it is not necessarily the feelings themselves which would manifest them as sentimental or not, but rather a failure to be critical of one's own emotional register and the cause and effect these may have. The shallowness of feeling implied by the concept of sentimentality may only be a failure to contemplate the reason behind one's emotional reactions. This is easier said than done, as many initial emotional responses are (by their very nature) the opposite of a reasonable, or rational consideration of a situation at hand. The over-analytical approach to the emotional aspect of our reactions, given that critics like Greenberg and Scruton suggest that there are appropriate and inappropriate responses, may become stultifying in itself. Tanner suggests that "the vigilance with which we monitor our emotional lives may well leave little chance of any emotions to survive; and indeed there are anti-sentimentalists whose aim would seem to approximate that" (1976, p.135). The sentimental is considered something that is loaded with feeling, yet this feeling is somehow

inappropriate, excessive and, at the same time, shallow. In this consideration of the contemporary discomfiture with the term sentimentality, there is a potential alignment between its current discredit as a concept (filled with emotion and at the same time lacking depth) and the seemingly opposite meaning contemporary society associates with sincerity.

Philosopher Robert Solomon suggests that the contemporary squeamishness with public displays of emotion (whether appropriate or inappropriate, heartfelt or shallow) may be demonstrated in the origins of the word 'kitsch' itself:

One of several suggested etymologies is that the word is German for "playing with mud", and, toying with this, we might speculate that the 'mud' in question is emotion and mucking around with emotions inevitably makes a person 'dirty' (2004, p.258).

In a consideration of what might be wrong with kitsch and sentimentality, Solomon suggests that whilst emotions are all potentially susceptible to manipulation, distortion, and a lack of criticality, there is nothing wrong with sentimentality in itself. He observes that the "prejudice against sentimentality ... is an extension of that all-too-familiar contempt for the passions in Western literature and philosophy. Our disdain for sentimentality is the rationalist's discomfort with any display of emotion" (2004, p.23). Solomon argues that many of the charges levelled against kitsch and sentimentality are premised not on aesthetics, but on politics—in particular, class prejudices which demonstrate that the objection to sentimentality and kitsch "is, in fact, an attack on unsophisticated taste" (2004, p.257). Ironically, he observes that many of the objections to sentimentality and kitsch stem from "Marxists and their kin who despise the mass-marketing origins of kitsch at the same time that they would defend the people who are most likely to purchase such objects" (2004, p.257). Benjamin's belief that the mechanical reproduction of art might democratise access to it, did not seem to foresee the capitalist market which would grow up around the commodification of such reproductions. One of the many critiques levelled against kitsch is that it is cheap, either in monetary terms, or in the sense of its cost to its audience in intellectual or emotional investment. Thus, kitsch is always presented as something for sale, a commodity which is not worth its price, for it offers nothing. Kitsch is thus, arguably, false currency which, according to Gresham's Law, as Scruton argues, drives out authentic currency.

Another of the many objections to kitsch and sentimental art is its tendency to operate using

stereotypes and cliché.³⁷ It is the lack of originality in works labelled kitsch or sentimental which leads viewers to question their sincerity, as they often reproduce, as if by rote, received illustrations of finer feelings.³⁸ Here, we might see how ideas of authenticity or originality, sentiment or sincerity are not fixed ideas for, as Solomon notes, “one culture’s or one generation’s kitsch may be another’s avant-garde, and what is obligatory as ‘compassion’ or ‘sympathy’ in one age may be dismissed as mere sentimentality in another” (2004, p.258). There would seem to be a cyclic nature to the representation of emotional register in art, or at least one based on a reaction to the invariable dating of one novel way of thinking when it ultimately becomes, through repetition, a cliché.

Greenberg notes that the rise of kitsch in art occurred “simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde” (1939, p.42). Ironically, the artists whom Greenberg considered the pinnacle examples of avant-garde thinking, in particular the Abstract Expressionist movement, have (in their turn) become the original for a particular stereotype of the alcohol/narcotic fuelled machismo or depressive, tortured artistic genius. Scruton observes the cyclic nature which occurs each time some idea in art is presented as original, that they are like “jokes they can be made only once. Hence the cult of originality very quickly leads to repetition” (2016, p.3). He observes how Modernism, as a reaction to much of the sentimental art, music and poetry of the Victorian age, initially sought to recoup some authentic feeling, or accurate reflection on the human experience. Part of this strategy, he suggests, found its purpose in giving offence to unsettle “the bourgeois taste for the conforming and the comfortable, which are simply other names for kitsch and cliché. But the result of this is that offence becomes a cliché” (2016, p.4). He notes of more recent artists, such as Jeff Koons, the attempt to repurpose kitsch as a kind of irony or sophisticated parody. This strategy, which Scruton refers to as “pre-emptive kitsch” (2016, p.4), uses all the excesses of sentimental art—cute baby animals and children, bright colours, gold, and other sparkly materials—to present something in such bad taste that we must assume the artist is being ironic, that the “artist must be telling us something about ourselves—about our

³⁷ Both stereotype and cliché are words which find their origins in the mechanical reproduction of printmaking. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary makes this note on the origin of both terms: “Their original meanings are essentially synonymous, referring to printing blocks from which numerous prints could be made. In fact, *cliché* means *stereotype* in French” (2021b). The concept thus implies, whilst there may be many copies, there is somewhere an original matrix from which these copies are made.

³⁸ What exactly can be meant by an idea of finer or deeper feelings than ones so frequently represented in works accused of kitsch and sentimentality is difficult to gauge. Tanner notes that: “[t]he difficulty is exacerbated by the extreme proximity of at least some sentimental feelings to a phenomenon that ‘flourishes in the same hedgerow’ and yet is in all crucial respects quite different: the phenomenon of emotional generosity, something that I take to be, together with vitality, to which it is closely linked, the most desirable of all human qualities” (1976, p.139). The lack of subtlety which many of the more passionate emotions might demonstrate, and the contemporary discomfort with ardent displays of emotion, may lead many to presume that such expressions are disingenuous.

desires and lusts—and forcing us to confront the fact that we like kitsch, while he pours scorn on kitsch by laying it on with a trowel” (2016, p.9). The desire for authenticity and originality has a particular horror of the cliché. There is much, however, in the human experience (particularly in the realm of emotion) which is extremely difficult to express in an original fashion, for it is in its nature (as human rites of passage, or shared emotion with which we might empathise) universal. Scruton makes a comparison between what he terms “the cultivated tourist and the pious peasant” (Nerdrum, 2014, 21:20-21). In this comparison, he asks his audience to imagine a scenario in a cathedral of some historic importance, perhaps in Italy, where two figures contemplate two very different kinds of sculpture. The cultivated tourist considers the great aesthetic value of a statue by Donatello, whilst a woman in her widow’s weeds (a pious peasant) offers up fervent prayers to a portable, plastic icon of St Dominic.



Vintage Christmas Nativity: 3 Pack Holy Family Set.
Slide from Roger Scruton’s Keynote address.
\$9 USD on eBay. (Nerdrum. 2014, 15:24).



Circle of Donatello. circa 1386-1466.
Relief with the Virgin and Child.
£ 60,000 - 80,000 GBP Sotheby’s Auction
House.

Scruton suggests that such a scenario might lead us to question “whose emotion is the real one?” (Nerdrum, 2014, 22:00-22:01). Whilst the cultivated tourist may be well educated and able to discuss the aesthetic merits of the work by Donatello, he need have no particular belief in the religious faith which motivated its construction in the first place. As a tourist, he samples these great works and, ticking them off on his itinerary, moves on to the next one. The widow, by contrast, sincerely believes in her kitsch plastic icon as a totem and conduit to the divine. For her, it is a cultural artefact of her daily life, not one distanced from her by

time. Scruton suggests that “surely she has the real belief, to her it really matters and maybe she’s pouring out a simple, but genuine heart, in her prayers which the tourist has lost all sight of” (Nerdrum, 2014, 22:43-23:01). Scruton does not suggest that we should value objects of kitsch higher than critically acclaimed works of art just because they may be treasured for their emotional resonance by people with less sophisticated tastes. Having offered up this comparison, and the question it raises about genuine feeling, he does not go on to contemplate the philosophical quandary it suggests about the concept of fake in art. In the juxtaposition of these two characters, one might note the particular loss of faith that requires the cultivated tourist to ascertain his knowledge of authentic works of art by educating himself on what particular aspects critics have observed are meritorious. He may thus identify authentic works of art by virtue of this study, but he needed to be told by external expert authority. For the peasant, the value of her plastic icon does not lie in the object’s aesthetic merit. It does not exist in the object’s materiality at all, for it is only a signifier of her own personally held, and sincere faith.

The Donatello holds value because it has been assigned this through critical acclaim and scholarly study. It also has the merit, which is always dubious as a single qualifier, of having lasted for a long period of time. This is not to say that the Donatello statue Scruton imagines does not indeed possess qualities which are accomplished, awe inspiring, and potentially transcendent in what it leads a viewer to think about its subject matter. It may well have lasted through time because it possesses these qualities, which have been timeless since its moment of creation. It is, as with the contemporary perceptions which made it difficult to discern a Van Meegeren from a Vermeer, a challenge to ascertain at the time of production whether a work will continue to hold these qualities which one era or culture has decided they possess. Thus, authenticity always belongs to history, for time must pass, and the object must survive the various changes in opinion on cultural merit, in order for us to credit an object with this quality. The plastic statue of St Dominic may also, with the passage of time (and despite its kitsch aesthetic or perhaps because of it), come to exemplify some authentic experience. It may be the only one of its kind to survive the ravages of time and remain as a sample of a now-distant sincere faith in the divine for which it once interceded. The contemporary acquisition of such objects, whether they possess aesthetic merit or signify particular cultural meaning, is thus always speculative. Scruton suggests that there are several factors which may warp our ability to distinguish cultural artifacts that hold authentic value from those which do not. One of these is the distinction between price and value:

Prices are fixed by exchange. Everything has a price if you are prepared to exchange it. Things with a price can be substituted for each other. They can be exchanged and compared. But value attaches to the things we are reluctant to exchange and compare (Nerdrum, 2014, 48:14- 48:29).

Scruton notes that the conflation of price and value is particularly distorted in the field of the visual arts because it is a cultural sphere which deals in objects. Objects may be exchanged for a price, and news of inflated prices for art garner public attention. He also notes how art critics may deal in what is nothing more nor less than insider trading. By promoting the work of a particular artist (and at the same time collecting this artist's work), they elevate the prices of their own investment which they promote through their own influence as recognised arbiters of taste.³⁹

In a follow-up book chapter based on his keynote address, Scruton notes that because of the potential for a conflation in the understanding of price and value, and visual arts' object nature which makes it potentially exchangeable, "utter trash accumulates in our museums largely because it has a price tag" (2016, p.10). He thus suggests that even the collection of a work by a museum, where we might assume it has undergone some test of its cultural value to be worthy of acquisition, is no guarantee of its *conceptual authenticity*. The problem here would seem to be the capacity for ownership that singular objects carry. When works can be bought or sold as a commodity, Scruton argues, there is more scope for fake art to enter the market for the potential rewards are great, and the complicity of certain art critics with the art market encourages this. In contrast, he notes that works of music or fiction do not carry this idea of singular possession: "You cannot own a symphony or a novel in the way you can own a Damien Hirst. As a result, there are far fewer fake symphonies or fake novels than there are fake works of visual art" (2016, p.10). By extension of this argument, one may see how the original object of art can distort ideas of value by placing emphasis on its *investment* or *exchange* value, rather than its *experiential* or *cultural* value. This individual possession of original works of art has left it susceptible to theft, and operating as collateral for drug cartels or crime syndicates as a source for "the illicit flow of funds and assets" (SARPCC, 2019).⁴⁰ The art market, as one of the least regulated global industries, is (aside from black-market dealings) also susceptible to grey areas in the import and export business (Artsy, 2017). One of the prime locations for storing works of art, whether for tax avoidance,

³⁹ Scruton gives the example of Clement Greenberg's tandem collection and promotion of art by William de Kooning (Nerdrum, 2004, 1:11:02-1:11:12).

⁴⁰ See also Charney, N. 2009. *Art and Crime: Exploring the Dark Side of the Art World* for an extensive overview of the illicit exchange value of artworks and the difficulties in policing such crime due to multi-jurisdictional technicalities.

or some more nefarious purpose, are freeports. These freeports exist “formally outside of the territorial jurisdiction of any country” and are “extremely secure storage facilities ‘offshore’ where valuable commodities can be kept with the utmost discretion and no one can enter without an appointment” (Artsy, 2017). By storing works of art in this way, they have lost all potential of their *experiential* or *cultural* value to a specific society. The qualities which have classified them authentic: their originality, uniqueness, and often great age (by which they will have accumulated a particular *aura*) have rendered them susceptible to this kind of hoarding. No one will, however, stand in the presence of this *aura* whilst they are thus stored. All the qualities which have rendered them authentic and thus worthy of investment remain hidden. Given that there are no detailed records of these freeport inventories, they are not, in this cold-storage, even a traceable archive. They exist merely as a bank deposit, stored safely until such time as they might be traded for their economic value—potentially to some other ‘dragon’ who will sit on this horde as an investment.

Critics, Museums, and Audiences: The Controversy of Tretchikoff

They came in hundreds, swarming to the gallery alone and in groups to see what all the commotion was about, and they soon proved too much for the long-suffering lift. It broke down at the beginning of the second week and never recovered. The queues waiting to enter the gallery extended down the two flights of stairs and out into Adderley Street. There was deadlock as those on the stairs queuing to get in blocked the departure route of those trying to get out.

—Description of Tretchikoff’s first solo exhibition in Cape Town, Maskew Miller Gallery, 1948, Vladimir Tretchikoff and Anthony Hocking, *Pigeon’s Luck*.

In the entanglement of price and value, emotional register (profound or shallowly manipulative), and the importance of the capacity of a work of art to be experienced (as well as preserved), we must contemplate the relationship between the role of the museum, academic art criticism, and public opinion in negotiating *conceptual* as well as *material (in)authenticity*. As described by Trilling, the admiration of an authentic work of art in a museum is given because of the price paid for a work and the value (financial or otherwise) ascribed by the connoisseurship of the arbiters of authenticity: the museum experts. In this definition, with its appeal to an authority, one must also ask: can admiration be given by the general public to a work of art on purely, personally perceived, aesthetic grounds? As previously noted, the authenticity of a work in relation to a prescient class of similarly attributed works is important for posterity and the study of art and cultural history. It is of

particular importance for older works where the history of forgery has proven that a subtle desire to project contemporary feeling and aesthetics onto the past can cloud the perception of authentic artefacts of history—and potentially the prices paid for them on the open market. When it comes to more recent history, the display of known forgeries, as well as more contemporary works, it becomes necessary to ask whether the position of the art expert or scholar as art historian is as important in discerning what should be of value to society. What, then, is the role of the curator in defining what is worthy of display, and should this be a declamatory statement from sanctioned experts or a process of observing a combination of audience reception and critical opinions? Can viewers contribute to a perception of *conceptual authenticity* as the society who may value these objects of art, and can we perceive the *aura* of an object, or must we be told that it possesses one? Aldrich and Hackforth-Jones ask:

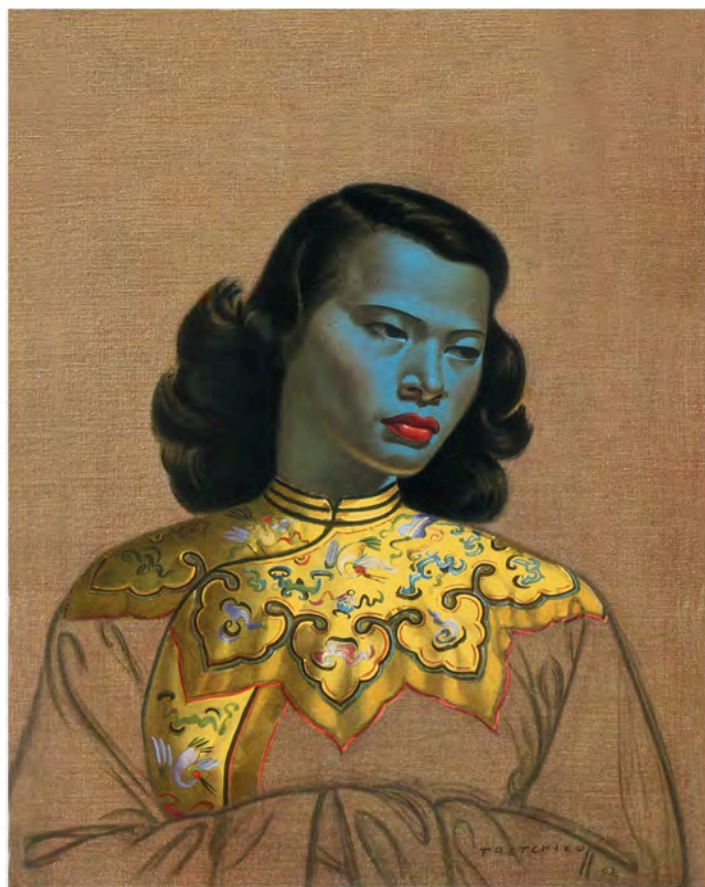
If the art establishment does not authenticate a work, or worse still, declares it a fake, does it then also appear to withhold permission for the public to derive enjoyment from the work? ... to what extent does the construction of authenticity by a recognised authority determine public enjoyment of an artwork? (2012, p.8).

Whilst we may need museums and associate experts to recognise and preserve works of art that have particular cultural and social relevance, the museum is not an organ apart from society, however exclusive it may seem. Adorno observed that “[o]nly when neutralized and reified, does Culture allow itself to be idolized” (1997, p.23). I would turn this statement around and suggest that it is when Culture is idolized, it in fact becomes neutralized and thus may bear little resemblance to, or have resonance for, the society on which it seeks to comment or reflect. MacCannell notes that:

The idea of the museum is one that contributes to the unification of the modern world, to control over tradition and over nature. Modern museums and parks are anti-historical and un-natural ... not, of course ... in the sense of their destroying the past or nature because, to the contrary, they preserve them, but as they preserve, they automatically separate modernity from its past and from nature and elevate it above them (1999, p.84).

Furthermore, if public museums only present a singular narrative of authenticity and excellence, they do not represent the nuances and multiplicity of viewpoints of the cultures they seek to conserve. The museum thus may estrange those who disagree with, or feel alienated by, the approved narrative presented. Alternative views, or popularist works of art (though sometimes considered less authentic), may in fact draw audiences to a museum. A

case in point is the 2011 exhibition *Tretchikoff: The People's Painter*, which was held at the Iziko National Gallery (ISANG) in Cape Town. Vladimir Tretchikoff was spurned by the South African art world of the 1940s and 50s and famously denied entry into the Association of Visual Arts by Irma Stern for what was seen as his overly sentimental style and subject matter. He, nevertheless, made a name for himself by hosting exhibitions and selling photo-lithographic prints of his paintings at department stores—the general public not being overly concerned by this commercial approach nor by his nickname as ‘the king of kitsch’. Prints of his 1952 *Chinese Girl* (also known as *The Green Lady*) went on to become one of the best-selling art prints of the twentieth century, and the original painting sold for nearly a million pounds at Bonhams (London) auction house in March 2013 (Bonhams, 2013).



Vladimir Tretchikoff. 1952. *Chinese Girl* (aka *The Green Lady*).
Reproduction Print of Oil on Canvas. (Tretchikoff.co.za).

The 2011 exhibition saw the daily numbers of visitors to the ISANG double (O'Toole, S. 2013) and still stands as their most popular exhibition in terms of audience numbers (Jamal, 2020, p.12). Despite the popularity of the exhibition, it seems the old snobbery that had sought to ignore Tretchikoff's work was still in evidence. Aside from the floods of viewers who left enthusiastic messages in the visitors' book, the exhibition also drew critical ire. At a

public talk on the exhibition, art critic Lloyd Pollak announced that: “Tretchi’s paintings represent the worst kind of prejudice, voyeurism, crass racial stereotyping, sexism, cultural paternalism

and white colonialism” (cited in Aboobaker, 2011). These observations are a valid argument, but I would ask: Are these representations of prejudice inauthentic? Are sexism, racism and colonial inheritance not an historic part of the South African social and cultural experience, or should we only preserve and display in our museums works that share what we currently think of as the proper moral feeling of our time? When comparing some of the individuals depicted in South African painting contemporaneous with Tretchikoff, by artists recognised by the establishment as being of a higher order (e.g. Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser), there is perhaps much in Pollak’s critique which may also be applied in such generic terms to these artists’ modes of romanticising or exoticising cultural ‘others’.



Maggie Laubser. 1936. *Portrait of a Woman wearing a Sari against a Floral Background*. Oil on Canvas. (Strauss&Co).



Irma Stern. 1945. *Arab with Dagger*. Oil on Canvas. (Bonhams).



Maggie Laubser. no date. *The Old Shepherd*. Oil on Canvas. (Straus&Co).



Irma Stern. 1929. *Young Pondo Man*. Oil on Canvas. (Bonhams).



Irma Stern. 1936. *Portrait of an Indian woman*. Oil on Canvas. (ArtThrob).



Vladimir Tretchikoff. no date. *Flower Seller*. Oil on Canvas. (Tretchikoff.co.za).

Whether considering work by Tretchikoff, Stern, or Laubser it may be all too easy to retrofit a form of art historical critique in the representation of marginalised subjects in South Africa by

white artists but to do so would not grapple with the historical contexts and personal relationships these artists may have had with the individuals and cultural groups they depict. If representations of cultural 'others' as exotic, or of women as sexually available objects of desire, were in themselves directly offensive because they are unrepresentative of current feeling, then museums should jettison much of their archive: no Titian, nor Gauguin, nor Picasso, and definitely no prehistoric fertility icons from any culture. Authenticity is contextual, as are matters of taste. Tretchikoff certainly never intended to represent his subject matter in a blatantly prejudicial fashion. If there are paternalistic overtones to his work, which he saw as a celebration of beauty, then these are representative of certain points of view in the times in which he lived.⁴¹ While the art establishment of his time may have had a more sophisticated taste, the middle classes who purchased his prints *en masse* certainly did not. Tretchikoff, however, was never rejected for prejudicial subject matter, but for an excess of sentimentality and an illustrative style, which his detractors considered kitsch because they claimed it represented a lack of conceptual and stylistic depth. The curator of the retrospective, Andrew Lamprecht notes, however, that "Kitsch is now very much a contested word academically and has moved far beyond the terms of reference associated with it in Tretchikoff's heyday. Despite this, or maybe even because of this, the charge of kitsch levelled against its unwilling 'king' is still for most a problem" (2011, pp.27-28). It can be quite difficult to pin down what exactly it is about Tretchikoff's work that might justify the label of kitsch, particularly if one considers how notions of the decorative, sentimental, naive or formulaic might equally seem, to contemporary eyes, value judgements applicable to many of his contemporaries. Perhaps it is merely the heightened theatricality of Tretchikoff's illustrative style (a residue of his early experiences working as an opera house scene painter and magazine graphic designer) and his commercial success with print multiples which was so far out of keeping with the Abstract Expressionist influenced avant-garde of his time.

⁴¹ In his autobiography *Pigeon's Luck* (1973), Tretchikoff describes the interactions and relationships he had with several of his models. A blind beggar whom he met on the streets of Java was brought back to his studio to paint. The man was paid for his time, and although the studies of this subject may appear patronising, Tretchikoff expresses an appreciation for his co-operation "though he would never see the final result" (1973, p.135). Of his model Lenka (a woman of mixed European and Malay heritage whom he painted many times during the 1940s), he describes not only her beauty in terms that might now make us cringe, but also his surprise and admiration for her intellectual curiosity and her profession as a qualified accountant: something he describes as "a man's job" (1973, p.129). Although Tretchikoff's portraits of Lenka might now be seen as singularly objectifying the female body, his descriptions of their interactions demonstrate a genuine respect for her views and opinions as a fully-rounded person, even poking fun at his own patriarchal assumptions which were hardly uncommon at the time.

In an essay derived from his presentation at the ISANG, 'Tretchikoff: The Supreme Schlockmeister of the 20th Century', Pollak goes on to state:

The People's Painter does not rehabilitate Tretchikoff as its curator [Andrew Lamprecht] and Riason Naidoo, the director of the SANG, obviously hoped. On the contrary, it proved that Tretchi's art remains beyond redemption (2011, pp.7-8).

Pollak here misses the point of a retrospective of Tretchikoff's work. Redemption of the work, in some kind of moral or stylistic way, was not the intended function of the exhibition. As Lamprecht notes: "[f]undamental curation was the fact that I would select works that would present a survey of the artist's output as a whole" (2011, p.30). He also observes that he resisted any pressure to "heighten the perceived 'kitschiness'" of Tretchikoff's work "by drawing attention to works that conformed to many of the characteristics held to be indicative of it" but also "rejected" the idea of "the editing out such works" (2011, p.30). For some audiences, however, there is a celebration of the camp excess and overblown saccharine sentimentality of Tretchikoff's work—an aesthetic which is so 'bad' that it is 'good'—a position which Pollak finds deplorable. If Jeff Koons, however, may work with this aesthetic ironically and receive some acceptance from the academy, why would one not accept Tretchikoff just because he worked with this aesthetic naïvely and gained popular appeal? The argument here may be that Tretchikoff is being uncritical in his use of kitsch, whereas Koons's use is deliberately ironic. Koons's irony and cynicism, however, has become a kind of repetitive formula, generating kitsch out of his use of kitsch. Tretchikoff seemingly believed, however misguidedly, in the sentimental excesses of his work as genuine depictions of human expression and emotion. That many embraced this sentiment might suggest that he was not misguided at all, but sincere, and sincerely believed by many. This observation on a particular operation of sincerity is one which highlights the contemporary discomfiture with the term, particularly if one does not believe sincerely in Tretchikoff's vision. We should, however, ask why someone who employs sentimentality with all sincerity should be judged as so much more deplorable than someone who toys with the same sentimentality in order to be cynical? Are both strategies not approaches with which we should engage constantly and critically, even if only in our own observed reactions to works of art?



Vladimir Tretchikoff. 1944-50. *Self-Portrait*.
Oil on canvas. (Pollak, 2011, p.4).

In his critique of Tretchikoff's *Self-Portrait* (1944-50) Pollak describes the work thus:

Here, he portrays himself in the full-blown High Romantic manner, as a tortured genius exhausted by his heroic, creative travail. The artist—all tumbling coppery locks, furrowed brow and stricken eyes gazing fearlessly into the depths of our soul—emerges from a splurge of shrill Technicolor impasted furrows intended to externalize his inner turmoil. So deep are the troughs, and so high the ridges, they appear to have been excavated by a plough, rather than applied with a brush. This exercise in self-adulation falls flat ... giving the picture a contrived, over-worked appearance (2011, p.5).

There is much in this critique which is valid. The vivid colours, tense, exaggerated facial expression, and stilted, stylized pose with a brush appear forced, exaggerated, too much. Pollak compares this composition to the lyrics, vocal style, and orchestral accompaniment of music performed by Celine Dion, suggesting that both attempt, through the use of contrived compositional formulae to manipulate emotions and “rig a response” which fails to achieve the desired result (2011, p.5). Dion, like Tretchikoff, is, however, a widely popular artist

(despite the different genre of creative output) with multiple platinum albums and millions of sales worldwide, which suggests that not everyone is as convinced by Pollak's claims that the obvious manipulation of emotion necessarily prevents this contrivance of style from being moving. Even those who are well aware of the manipulation of excess emotion may not be immune to catching themselves having an embarrassed minor blub at the end of the film *Titanic* (1997) to the tune of Dion's greatest hit, *My Heart Will Go On*. There is indeed a pretentiousness to Tretchikoff's *Self Portrait*, but it is not safe to assume that this is purposively manipulative (i.e. shallow and deliberately callous in attempting to evoke a response and, therefore, fake). Tretchikoff describes in his autobiography his process in making this work:

I could not decide on a background. I did not want to include the rather corny easel and studio atmosphere that so often ruined otherwise excellent self-portraits ... I did not want to leave the background a void of nothingness, as was customary in formal portraits. I thought often about the problem and decided to try analysing what an artist is all about. The answer came suddenly and seemed so obvious that I wondered why I had made such heavy weather discovering it. The artist was concerned with colour, the whole spectrum of the palette, streaming and whirling through his mind before ever he puts brush to canvas. That was where it all began: not on the canvas, not on the palette, but in the mind. And it was with that idea I set to work on the self-portrait (1973, p.135).

Tretchikoff, here, may inadvertently point to what may be the problem with his excessive background, that it is perhaps too obvious a solution and, by illustrating this with a swirling rainbow, he is essentially being reductive about the imaginative process of creating a work of art. One may also observe that he makes no particular claims for himself in this statement as a specific creative genius, for it is the role of the artist more generally he considers when devising his composition. The work may produce a sense of amusement at the pretentious posturing of the artist as a tortured genius, but if that were a crime in itself, the same may be levelled at many artists whose work has been critically acclaimed. Irma Stern's publicity portrait below is also not without a sense of the overtly dramatic, depicting the artist as a form of silver-screen movie star or film noir *femme fatale*.



Photographic portrait of Irma Stern. circa. 1930s.
Image: Milton Shain. (Jewish Women's Archive).

To apply Pollak's same method of critique as to why this artist may not be managing to achieve quite the desired effect would be unbelievably cruel and entail a complete ignorance of fashions in portraiture used at the time to depict the artist with some *aura* of the romantic or mysterious. If these portraits of the artists seem supercilious or affected to us today, that may simply be because of a change in perceptions and expectations of such images, but this by no means suggests that either artist is not entirely sincere, or being cheaply manipulative, in wanting to depict themselves in this way.

Pollak observes in his essay that it is not just the general public who gravitated toward the exhibition because they enjoyed, and took at face value, the sentiments of these works. He also mentions those he terms the "visually literate" who celebrate Tretchikoff's work quite particularly because "its corny excess and vulgarity provide wry, ironic amusement to the sophisticated spectator" (2011, p.4). For these audiences, it is precisely because the work is 'beyond redemption' that it is fascinating. Pollak concludes that it is this group of "fashionistas, media trend-setters, wannabee with-it academics, telly journalists and pop sociologists" (2011, p.60) who are driving a resurgence of interest in Tretchikoff's work. In an age where social media influencers arguably have a greater impact on contemporary cultural taste than museum curators, his objection to this list of pundits as arbiters of art is sorely outdated. These cultural critics celebrate the naïveté of the works, but also the nostalgia the

prints represent as design artefacts that were so widely a part of mid-century, working- and middle-class homes in South Africa, England, America and Australia.

Lamprecht writes that the intention of the exhibition was neither a celebration of the artist's genius nor, as he describes it (being known in the art world for occasional trickster conceptual antics), some kind of practical joke to exhibit "the 'worst art in the world' in our most venerable art institution" (2011, p.26). Lamprecht, an academic who writes about multiple facets of popular culture (including the use of kitsch as a post-modern aesthetic), was initially approached as a potential curator by Tretchikoff's grand-daughter, Natasha Swift (nee Mercorio). Taking this proposal seriously, he realised that much of what he thought he knew about Tretchikoff and his work was anecdotal and thus, his own knowledge of, and feelings towards, the artist and his work was something he needed to consider more critically (2011, pp.4-6). The project became not only a public exhibition, but formed part of Lamprecht's degree study for a Masters in Curatorial Practice. Lamprecht's intention was thus serious academic research and reflection. It is perhaps the ultimate irony for this academic, who has frequently played with irony as a conceptual strategy, that his sincere approach to a study of Tretchikoff was assumed by many to be cynical. It soon became apparent to Lamprecht that the difficulty in analysing Tretchikoff's work was that so much was overshadowed by the controversy around the artist's marketing and popularity (2011. p.6). Further research led Lamprecht to realise that there was very little written from a truly academic perspective and that the majority of writings were contained in the press and took a harshly critical approach to Tretchikoff's popularity or, conversely, were "breathless in their celebratory, and at times uncritical stance" (2011. p.5). Lamprecht notes that whilst early critiques of Tretchikoff's work focused on a technical clumsiness critics saw in the work and the sentimental subject matter, later criticisms seemed to focus on the unexpected public appeal and accessibility of the work—as if popularity and legibility to the uninitiated was somehow deplorable in itself (2011. p.10). This is also at the root of Pollak's objection to the work's exhibition at the ISANG. As an answer to Aldrich and Hackforth-Jones' question it is as if, because the critics and art establishment have rejected Tretchikoff's work, permission has not been given for audiences to enjoy the work.

If one returns to Tanner's view that the distinction between profound or shallow emotions is simply a question of whether one is being critical of the reasoning behind one's emotions, then to love Tretchikoff's work at face value, to hate it because one should know better that it is poor taste (and not approved of by arbiters of the art academy), or to assume a cynical stance (casting oneself as superior to the lovers, and rebelling against the haters) are all equally shallow received responses to Tretchikoff's work. It may not be so much that

Tretchikoff's work is viewed as kitsch that troubles his record in history but that, what critical responses there are, are so simplistic and facile themselves. Lamprecht observes that, regardless of one's personal evaluation of the work, Tretchikoff should be recognised as a pioneer in creating a market for his works outside the establishment (2011, p.29). This marketing position, occurring in the 1940s and 50s, predates Andy Warhol and others in the pop art movement of the 1960s who adopted similar stances as a conceptual angle. The mass production of Tretchikoff prints, which made them both affordable and accessible for audiences, is a cultural phenomenon and, therefore, a relevant fact in terms of art and visual culture history.



Vladimir Tretchikoff. 1959. *Sunflowers*.

Sold for R1 705 200 by Strauss & Co Auctioneers, Johannesburg. 23 May 2016. (Strauss & Co.)

After much research and contemplation, however, Lamprecht considered that the controversy around this popularism and mass production of prints had perhaps obscured discussion around the original objects: the paintings. It was, therefore, his curatorial decision to include only original paintings in the exhibition. The sourcing of these works was a mammoth task, as the majority of the 92 works exhibited had to be sourced from private collections on four different continents. Pretoria Art Museum and Sanlam Art Collection are the only public or corporate collections in South Africa that own a Tretchikoff (Lamprecht, 2011, p.6). In collectively assembling these original works, it was Lamprecht's intention to create a *zone of contact* between the paintings and the audience. Lamprecht states that:

Tretchikoff: The People's Painter is a sincere attempt to question the absence of a hugely popular, influential, and well-known artist from the 'canonical history' of South African art; to present his work to the public and the critics so that we may all look, hopefully with fresh eyes. ... Whether you then love him or hate him is your prerogative (2011, p.26).

In this exhibition, audiences could then stand before the original objects and judge for themselves, in the presence of the works' *materially authentic* aura, whether the paintings had any *conceptual authenticity* or not. For the ISANG director, Riason Naidoo, the exhibition was in keeping with his vision for the museum to engage with a broader scope of audience development and present more democratised themes and questions. He remarked that: "I have no doubt that some people will be quite critical. I think a lot of people believe that he doesn't have a place in an institution like this. But for me, it's about opening it up and finally addressing Tretchikoff" (cited in Gerardy, 2011). Naidoo thus was not blatantly endorsing the work nor even expressing a particular personal opinion about Tretchikoff but acknowledging, given the artist's role in the history of art making in South Africa, the necessity for the museum to engage critically with the work and the various public opinions thereon.

Material authenticity in the form of potential forgery was also a question which Lamprecht wished to consider in his exhibition. In his quest for academic research on Tretchikoff, Lamprecht mentions an as-yet unpublished report by Prof. Alex Duffey, chief curator of the University of Pretoria's Heritage Collections, commissioned by Graham's Fine Art Auctioneers (2011, p.5). A version of *The Lost Orchid*, which had previously belonged to the murdered mining magnate Brett Kebble, raised speculation after it was auctioned in May of 2009 for R2.9 million (Myburg, 2009). The primary objection to its authenticity was sparked by the fact that the work was not the same as the one reproduced in a 1969 publication by Howard Timmins of Tretchikoff's prints. The auctioned painting differed from the authenticated print in three ways: the absence of a burnt matchstick on the stairs, a misplaced drop on the orchid's petal and, more concerningly, a marked difference in the artist's signature in its shaky rendering and the crossing of the two f's (Myburg, 2009). Artists frequently paint more than one version of a composition, but as Tretchikoff (unlike many well-established artists) has no *catalogue raisonné* other than copies of his prints, there was no means to compare the work to an image or other archival reference of the painting, unless one is subsequently found to compare and prove, irrefutably, the work's provenance. Press reports on the authenticity of the work also seem to be decidedly muddled at first glance. The auctioneer Graham Britz is variously quoted as insisting that the work is by Tretchikoff (Myburg, 2009; *Mail and Guardian*, 2009; Ashbaug 2009a); claiming the issue was an administrative one in the catalogue, which should have noted that the work was a

similar composition by Tretchikoff and not the same famous version depicted in print reproductions (Ashbaug, 2009a and 2009b); that the work had been forensically tested and proven to be authentic (Ashbaug, 2009a, News24, 2009); and finally that the work was “without a doubt” not the original (De Bruin, 2009; *Independent Online*, 2009; *SA Art Times*, 2009). In this array of press reports, there are other factual inconsistencies, including the auction price of the work (reported as both R2.9 or R3.2 million) and words which are variously paraphrased and attributed interchangeably to Tretchikoff’s daughter and granddaughter, Mimi Mercorio or Natasha Mercorio (as she then was).



Vladimir Tretchikoff. 1948. *The Lost Orchid*. Reproduction Print of Oil on Canvas. (Tretchikoff.co.za).

On balance, it seems that the most reliable sources are two articles in Afrikaans from *Die Beeld* by Johan Myburg (2009), first pointing out the discrepancies between the painting and the print reproduction, and Phillip De Bruin (2009), who interviewed Britz in July of that year. The difference in price may be attributed to the hammer price (R2.9 million) and the final sales price (R3,2 million) which includes commission and VAT. The forensic analysis seems only to have proved *material authenticity* in so far as the age of the painting and materials used are authentically comparable to work by Tretchikoff in the 1940s. The signature on the work was challenged by his daughter and granddaughter alike for similar reasons: that the signature was not conducted with a firm hand, and that Tretchikoff never crossed the two f’s. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the two women may have reiterated various versions of the

same statement over the three months the painting was in question. In response to Natasha Mercorio's definitive statements that the work was not by her grandfather, Britz is quoted as claiming that she could not be relied upon because she is not an academic: "Do you want to believe the granddaughter as opposed to a professor who specialises in art? I like to stick to the facts, I can't listen to a granddaughter who just wants some recognition" (cited in *News24*, 2009). Natasha Mercorio is not, however, simply a granddaughter but the director of the Tretchikoff Foundation, a role which no doubt brings her into frequent contact with examples of the signature. Mimi Mercorio echoes her daughter's statements: "as someone who has seen his signature more times than anyone else, it is clear that the signature on the auction painting was done with an uncertain hand. It's definitely not my father's work" (De Bruin, 2009).⁴²

While Tretchikoff's daughter and granddaughter have good reason to claim their expertise in recognising the artist's signature, Tretchikoff's print reproductions are all signed. Given how widely these were distributed, his signature is multiply reproduced online, making comparison by even a less familiar viewer relatively easy. It is, therefore, interesting that none of the multiple news articles about the controversy carried an image of the auctioned work, perhaps alongside an image of the original painting for public comparison.⁴³ The controversy went quiet for over a year until another article appeared in 2010 in *The Sunday Times*, describing the incident as an "embarrassing blunder" for the gallery, which had prevented the sale of the work due to the work being wrongly titled (Ferreira, 2010). It was now claimed that the work was indeed a Tretchikoff, but one much less well-known, entitled *After the Dance* (1944). This seems to be in keeping with speculation made by Britz in July 2009 when he suggested to *Die Beeld* that the work would need to be reaucted with a different catalogue entry labelling it "a painting in the style of Tretchikoff's *Lost Orchid*, possibly a painting by Tretchikoff entitled *After the Dance*" (cited in De Bruin, 2009).⁴⁴ Whilst Prof. Duffey is quoted in the article, no mention is made of what has led the expert to conclusively authenticate this work as *After the Dance* (if he indeed has) other than a mention of a gallery assistant mistakenly removing a label bearing this title from the back of the painting—a claim which Sarah Sinisi, a paintings specialist at Britz's Gallery, refutes (Ferreira, 2010). Equally, no mention is made of the discrepancies around the signature.

⁴²Translated from Afrikaans: "as mens wat sy handtekening meer kere as enigiemand anders gesien het duidelik dat die handtekening op die veilingskildery met 'n onseker hand gedoen is. Dis beslis nie my pa se werk nie" (De Bruin, 2009).

⁴³ The *SA Art Times* article carries an image, but it is so small and low quality that it is impossible to see the match stick, water drops, or signature and thus determine whether this is a picture of the original or the auctioned work.

⁴⁴ Translated from Afrikaans: "'n skildery in die styl van Tretchikoff se *Lost Orchid*, moontlik 'n skildery van Tretchikoff getiteld *After the Dance*" (cited in De Bruin, 2009).

This is particularly strange as, whilst artists' signatures may change over time (due to increasing age or a change in style), *After the Dance* is dated 1944. Authenticated works from this year, as well as before and after, do not observe any marked change in the artist's signature. Nearly 15 years later, Prof. Duffey's report on the work remains unpublished, and no copy of it can be found online. Lamprecht, having read an unpublished copy, refers to the report as "art historically rigorous" (2011, p.5). It, nevertheless, does not seem to have conclusively convinced him that the work was merely mistitled, as he writes in his 2011 thesis that it was his intention to include Keble's *Lost Orchid* in the retrospective, with an accompanying explanatory wall text "aimed to give the public the opportunity to weigh up the evidence and make their own deductions" (2011, p.25). Permission was initially granted, but the work was retracted the day before the official opening. Hans Klopper, a trustee of the Keble estate, is cited in the 2010 *Sunday Times* article as saying: "We still believe the painting has inherent potential value, it's not sold yet, but it will be dealt with in due course. We will sell it at the appropriate time, at the appropriate forum, when we believe the market is right" (Ferreira, 2010). The trustees of the work clearly did not wish to test the work against public opinion: an ultimate irony given that Tretchikoff's original works would never have fetched the high prices they now do if it were not for the court of public opinion on his reproductions. To date, there remains no public record of the subsequent sale of a Tretchikoff work titled *After the Dance* (1944).

Lamprecht observes that the term 'rehabilitation' has been used many times in the critique of *Tretchikoff: The People's Painter*, yet he himself has never used this term, for it assumes a reinstating of the artist to a status he never possessed in the academic realm of art (2011, p.28). Instead, Lamprecht reflects on his "hope that this exhibition will allow Tretchikoff to stand and face a new set of critics, judges and public" (2011, p.29). Lamprecht thus hoped with his exhibition not to ascribe any particular claims for or against Tretchikoff but to create a context in which the audience could make their own deductions about the works' authenticity as a part of South African visual culture. Lamprecht's curatorial approach thus echoes Iser's considerations for successful creative works in that they must not merely affirm our assumptions on a particular theme (whether Tretchikoff has been rightfully disregarded or should be 'reclaimed' and celebrated on the basis of a curatorial statement) but that the invitation to consider the work for itself might allow us as audience to reconsider "our preconceptions and [in leaving] the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences" (1972, p.295). Adorno sums up the need for authenticity to be observed contextually because, as he correctly observes:

No authentic work of art and no true philosophy, according to their very meaning, has ever exhausted itself in itself alone, in its being-in-itself. They have always stood in relation to the actual life-process of society from which they distinguished themselves (1997, p.22).

If it is undesirable for a museum to operate as a stringent gatekeeper of *conceptual authenticity*, it is also undesirable for the museum to be a slave to popular opinion. A happy balance needs to be struck between expert experience and the society the museum was set up to serve. A museum that marks societal trends, but still observes the historical context, is engaging with cultural phenomena as they happen and embracing debate rather than setting itself apart as a definitive authority. In creating a narrative of context, Naidoo and Lamprecht were not presenting Tretchikoff's work as a latter-day discovery of authentic artistic genius presented by an authority. Instead, they sought to engage critically with the legacy and power these images held for the public who purchased them, however camp or kitsch they may be. Observing details of the original paintings which are not easily reproducible in prints, Lamprecht notes that Tretchikoff was a "controversial artist for so many years. So many people have opinions about Tretchikoff, but they have never actually seen an original Tretchikoff. They have certainly not seen Tretchikoffs *en masse*" (Visi, 2011, 1:42-1:48). Naidoo remarked that the museum wished to "acknowledge the millions who loved his work" (*Cape Town Magazine*, 2011). In creating an opportunity for audiences to view 92 original works in one place, the museum asked its viewership to make up their own minds on the quality of the work. Art critic Harold Rosenberg argues "that only art officially cast aside can arouse in the spectator authentic feelings uncoerced by vested authority" (1975, p.156). Rosenberg, a critic who was a firm supporter of the Abstract Expressionist painting movement of the 1940s and 50s, would certainly not have delighted in Tretchikoff's sentimental, representational work. There is, however, validity in his suggestion that an audience's pleasure in a work of art can only truly be considered of their own volition when the work has been rejected by the arbiters of authenticity.

It would seem, however, that Tretchikoff's ongoing written legacy still remains one of generating controversy in the press, rather than academic research and debate. This can be demonstrated by the multiple press articles, which feature very superficial receptions of the retrospective exhibition (both uncritically positive and negative), and the furore around the Kebble work, which has no published academic research substantiating the conclusion on attribution (if any has actually been made). This last is particularly concerning, as a lack of academic research and substantiated evidence of an artwork's provenance are exactly the gaps which forgers and art thieves use to their advantage. Love him or hate him,

Tretchikoff's work fetches increasingly high prices and for this reason (if for no other) academic research is necessary if only to avoid art collectors being defrauded. Apart from the essays commissioned for the exhibition's catalogue publication in 2011, Pollak's scathing critique, and a thoroughly researched (if light-hearted) biography by Boris Gorelik, *Incredible Tretchikoff: Life of an Artist and Adventurer* (2013), the exhibition did not inspire much critical feedback nor academic research. Pollak's critique (although it often betrays a different form of class-prejudice than the one he would like to attribute to the artist) is at least a thorough unpacking—through a close reading of several individual works—of what he perceives to be faulty about them, rather than a blanket dismissal of the artist with no given justification other than the previous controversy which surrounded the artist and his work. Pollak's description of what he perceives in Tretchikoff as the sentimental, heavy-handed, overworked formulas (in both technique and subject-matter) employed to obviously manipulate emotion is particularly interesting if one were to take the same critique and apply it to many contemporary artists currently being lauded as rising stars:

he strives too hard to arouse admiration in the viewer, and in the process the clunky mechanisms whereby he manipulates our emotions become obvious ... far from being overawed by the genius of the artist, we are amused by the sledgehammer obviousness of the devices he deploys to convince us of this ... his presentation strives so hard to impress you that it fails to produce the desired result. You can see through all the artist's dodges and ploys, and instead of being 'taken in' and suspending your disbelief, you tend to chortle at the work's staggering pretentiousness (2011, p.5).

Pollak's critique here is very pertinent, particularly as galleries and market forces frequently pressurise emerging artists to ascribe to a particular formula or thematic of making, thereby illustrating a specific brand identity being carved out for them. Tretchikoff was at least his own brand ambassador, and whilst many felt that his mass-produced prints and resulting popularity were somehow deplorable in themselves, we should not ignore how the rising market for contemporary art is fast eclipsing the role of the academic or the museum in defining the value (typically in financial terms) of what art should be collected. This relationship between the role of the museum, brand identity, market forces and curatorial narrative in determining notions of authenticity will be further examined in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Museums and Market Forces: Branding Identity

In this chapter, I will examine how varying platforms for the display of contemporary art, and the curatorial narratives which frame them, attempt to compete for a role in what art analysts refer to as arts evaluation or validation.⁴⁵ These are terms used to describe processes of determining authenticity but which frequently carry a financial, rather than scholarly, impulse. Historically, public museums have been seen as arbiters of authenticity and are presumed to be a national cultural authority. Yet, there are many reasons why this model of authentication or canonisation is increasingly coming under pressure. The history and politics of museum display are fraught with issues around representation, particularly when it comes to the archiving of artefacts of cultures once considered foreign or 'other' to the initial European audiences for whom this model of display was developed. When the European museum model was exported to the colonies, the expected audiences for these early museums were white expatriate communities. These museums in colonised countries displayed either art in the traditional European style of salon painting, or local artefacts and culture as a form of ethnography alongside natural history. In the African postcolony, as well as in other previously colonised parts of the world, contemporary museum studies and heritage management now grapple with the means of preserving culture in ways which are more inclusive of previously marginalised people and attempt to create a sense of transformative national identity. Financial constraints may, however, frequently pit ideals of nation-building and community participation against the economic viability of tourism.

Curatorial planning sometimes conflicts with the ambitions of the nation-state, which reduces funding whilst potentially requiring more overt and simplistic or even propagandist programming. This can frequently be seen in museum displays which place heavy emphasis on designed poster panels. These synopses, with a few archival images and explanatory bullet points, are increasingly becoming the reductive means (within a limited budget) to articulate complex histories and the interconnectedness of archived objects. Whilst some curators might have grander ideas of how they might prefer to create an immersive experience (and allow audiences to make these connections for themselves through a

⁴⁵ The art consultant or art analyst, whilst they may also take on work as art critics, is distinct from the museum curator or academic scholar of art history. The focus of the art consultant is data analysis, and the reports produced by such organisations tend to focus on quantitative data such as sales and auction prices, or frequency of exhibition on group and solo shows by a particular artist. When qualitative data is explored, this may be more typically a survey of audience attendance and responses and may be used in assisting an arts organisation with assessing the quality and sustainability of its business model. Art consulting is thus market driven whether this is advising a would-be collector on trends that may enhance their investments, or assisting an arts organisation on the economic viability of particular platforms or events.

personal experience of traces of these histories), limited space and budget for securing objects of historic importance, coupled with political agendas that may wish to control the narrative rather than open it up for public debate, have resulted in displays which present history as nothing more than a series of classroom wall posters or study guides. This curatorial strategy may underline common perceptions that museums are only educational (primarily aimed at school learners) rather than experiential (open to a wider audience of varying age groups) and reduce the need to attend the museum as a physical site as their exhibits are essentially reproducible.



Y350?: Old Memorials in New Times. 2002.

Poster series displayed at Iziko Bertram House, Cape Town. (Iziko Museums).

More inclusive exhibitions of work, or greater sensitivity to cultural artefacts never designed to be displayed in an enclosed exhibition hall or white cube, has led to a multiplicity of sites understood as part of heritage studies, and thus, there is a greater need for funding in this sector. National monuments, memorials and site-specific locations of memory equally create tensions around which public, or whose politics, they are created to serve, and frequently lead to debates around what funding might be used to redress, educate or make such sites more inclusive.

The preservation of living heritage by way of local traditions or historic sites embedded in extant communities may also lead to concerns about for whom these traditions or places are 'performed'.⁴⁶ Historian Leslie Witz notes of South African township tours and newer museums in these areas that "there are often disjunctures between how these museums project themselves to their more localised communities ... and their positioning within the marketing apparatuses of international tourism" (2006, p.129). The preservation of cultural

⁴⁶ The idea of performing culture has negative connotations as it implies making a spectacle of some aspects of this for someone else's amusement or evokes the connotations of theatre as something fake rather than authentic real-life, as discussed in Chapter One. Performing culture with an intentional critical awareness of this kind of display, as a form of immersive stagecraft or narrating a sincere story rather than only performing difference, may, however, be a useful analytical tool for developing curatorial practice.

heritage is potentially very economically viable for tourism but may be less culturally meaningful for the individuals who feel it necessary to tailor presentations of their culture to the expectations of an external eye and may therefore be inauthentic for both local participants and visiting audiences alike. At the same time, community sites and museums can be very powerful in memorialising and celebrating local culture and need not be constructed with the principal idea of display to an external audience, even when tourism is welcomed. Lack of access to basic services, however, frequently prevents communities from seeing the preservation of history and culture as a priority in a hierarchy of needs. The history of colonialism, with its habit of collecting culture as ethnographic specimens, also haunts these attempts to rearticulate or reclaim local or alternative records of history and expressions of contemporary culture. The objects decontextualised in museums can have an alienating effect on the communities represented by these artefacts of daily life when these communities do not feel themselves to be the expected primary audience. Witz, in his case study of the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum near Strand in Cape Town, observes how the local community was frustrated by the establishment of this museum, given many other pressing needs for better housing and basic health and education services. This led to some community members posting a note on the museum door on its opening day stating: "Firstly, give us accommodation before you can get this room" (2006, p.126). While tourism may bring in much-needed revenue to impoverished areas, the preservation of legacies of apartheid, such as this migrant labourers' men's hostel, may be a painful daily reminder (rather than a triumph over history) for those who continue to live in reduced circumstances and make minimal revenue fashioning 'traditional' crafts for tourism sales. Far from redressing this history of apartheid repression for the local community, Witz notes that an emphasis on tourism may place such sites and their contemporary community:

within an internationalised tourist representation of traditional Africa as a place of essentialized ethnic rhythms, tastes, and crafts. The result is that the intention to portray the political and economic history of migrancy 'slips almost magically' into tourist expectations of 'authentic Africa', where migrant histories might be exoticized to fit in with the tourist expectations (2006, p.128).

Globalisation, whilst creating advantages in the exchange of culture and ideas, has also perpetuated the marginalisation between what are perceived as cultural centres and the periphery, principally (but not exclusively) for economic and geographic reasons. Here a distinction must be made between artefacts of cultural history, and contemporary art. Whilst we might consider contemporary art to one day become a category of the former, there is still a class and economic distinction between everyday artefacts that may be collected as

exemplars of history or craft, and fine or contemporary art—if only in that their makers tend to be better resourced and make their work with the expectation of achieving higher prices for individual output. We may soon see, however, that whilst having better access to basic resources, these individuals are not necessarily much better placed in the art they prefer to make when it comes to funding related to market forces and international tourism. Much international attention and pressure is being applied to the relocation of historical artefacts plundered during colonial times and stored in European and American museums. Comparatively, however, very little critical attention is being applied to how international funding, rising investment speculation in contemporary art from places described as ‘emerging markets’ in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, and more lucrative opportunities for displaying art and culture in Europe and America are strong temptations for branding culture from these self-same ex-colonies in alignment with the tastes of these market forces. In short, economic forces may play a neocolonial role in determining what art from these places is best seen in high-trafficked cultural centres, displayed under generic nationalist, racial or geographic taxonomies of identity, and bought and sold at increasingly exorbitant prices. The reduction in funding to public museums in the postcolony has a serious impact on acquisitions of new work, and this, coupled with rising prices due to speculative international investment, can mean that local public institutions are unable to afford works internationally acclaimed as a nation’s best cultural production. At the same time, we should ask: is it our best cultural production just because it has garnered so much international (as opposed to necessarily local) attention?

In South Africa, the art museum is in a bind as it is not their curators’ remit to exhibit newly discovered work, and art galleries (whose remit it is), are ultimately retailers.⁴⁷ Thus, international art fairs and private collectors have much greater sway in determining tastes (and, by extension, validating ‘authentic’ culture) than national museums making potentially minor acquisitions. The rise of the international art fair, with commercial art galleries operating as the arbiters of authenticity (at least in so far as speculative investment is concerned), has created a financial ecosystem where works of contemporary art may quickly outprice what any public institution is able to afford. The result is that the preservation of contemporary practice is frequently reserved for the private (often) international collector: an individual who, through their purchasing power, may subsequently begin to dictate the tastes and trends of what determines authentic local cultural production. Equal attention should, therefore, also be paid to private museums, particularly when there is a lack of transparency

⁴⁷ This situation is not necessarily unique to South Africa and may apply equally to countries considered peripheral to the perceived European/U.S. global cultural centre, that have minimal funding for local arts and culture but are, nevertheless, considered to be emerging markets for international speculative art investment.

around how new acquisitions are selected and acquired. Whilst these institutions may be developed with a genuine philanthropy for the arts in mind, the means to display a private collection (with potential tax benefits in making the collection publicly visible) may also serve as a means to legitimate the personal taste of the private collector. By establishing this purview as a public cultural authority, rather than a private personal preference, the private collector may therefore increase the investment value of their collection by exerting an influence over what is presented (frequently with authoritative explanatory curatorial narratives) to the public as authentic culture.

Ultimately, the museum is not the art gallery, although both may share strategies of display and curatorial rhetoric designed to define the value and authenticity of objects in their collection. The museum primarily deals in artefacts of history, and whatever else might be claimed for the individual artefacts, they might at least be scientifically proven to be *materially authentic* objects of their time. The art gallery may exhibit works from any point in history, including contemporary work. The value of these works, however, is not attributed to them because of their *material authenticity* (although this may be a factor in historical works) but because of curatorial claims for their *conceptual authenticity*. As audiences viewing contemporary artworks, it is not the Benjaminian *aura* of an object passed through history that we are asked, primarily, to apprehend, but the merits of the conceptual content as an allegory of, or comment on, contemporary experiences. We are asked to legitimate, or more often are told (through the increased use of rhetorical curatorial texts), that the 'story' on view is a *conceptually authentic* 'story' regardless of whether we are personally convinced. This strategy of the inclusion of explanatory text is, in one part, motivated by concerns for audience literacy or the need to articulate the circumstances of an artefact that has become, in some way, impoverished due to its removal from its original context. While this may make sense in the context of a museum of historical artefacts, the use of explanatory texts to codify works expressly designed for an art museum or gallery should be carefully watched. Artworks are not facts but metaphors, and in this sense, they tell stories in their own way through their representational devices, materiality and titling. An artwork as a metaphoric 'story' which requires another more didactic 'story' to explain it is either a very bad 'story', or is an object being used to further a curator's own narrative as the definer of a singular vision of cultural authority. At the same time, contextualising narratives, artist interviews and curatorial essays can enrich an understanding of cultural artefacts and have their place. These complimentary narratives should seldom occupy the same space or attempt to supersede the reading of an artwork or object. As average members of the public, there may be little one can do to affect a change in the financial politics, which increasingly impacts

what of our national cultural production receives in international attention, by way of platforms or lucrative sales. We can, however, be more critical of the simplistic narratives presented.

Whilst funding to public museums and galleries is being reduced worldwide, it is interesting to note an increase in courses which offer curatorship as postgraduate study. Curatorship is a field which is frequently regarded with a degree of distrust by other creative practitioners for the simple reason that it is often a position occupied by individuals with excellent networking skills but minimal creative ability. Increasingly, exhibitions are advertised as being curated by a particular individual, or set of individuals, without any clarity as to what their creative research contribution has been, not even a curatorial essay. In comparison to the organogram of a theatre, curators may often occupy the position of producer, but less frequently become creatively involved in the way a director might. In South Africa, curatorship is still not recognised by the Department of Higher Education as a subsidy earning creative research output, although there is much appetite for this to change.⁴⁸ Part of this rejection of curatorial practice is the lack of a specified list of implementation guidelines that would qualify this work as sustained and innovative creative research. The development of a defined, qualifying set of academic criteria to determine the creative research and vision necessary in the field of curatorship will do much to separate those who gravitate towards the field with the desire to occupy a position of power as king-maker, and those who are highly invested in creative academic research. As I shall argue, later in this chapter, by means of a more attuned application of supplementary narration and creative conceptual framing, we might begin to differentiate those who merely make claims of authenticity in their position of authority, and those who can substantiate their creative endeavours through sincere audience engagement. Curation, viewed as another form of creative expression, and judged for its merits as art rather than cultural authority, may make some important shifts in the power dynamics which create hierarchies in the field of what ought to be collaborative creative contributions.

In the last section of this chapter, I consider an example of supplementary curatorial narration of museum display through an investigation of the BBC podcast series *A History of the World in a Hundred Objects*. Focusing on the last episode, *Object 101*, issues of collecting

⁴⁸ I am a member of the DHET subpanel review committee for creative outputs in the visual arts and have seen multiple applications for curatorship. While some of these are highly suspect in what involvement the applicant has had in the creative research and development of the project (further than cherry-picking a few artists), others are highly persuasive in the research conducted, originality of curatorial theme, and supported by substantial creative narration of their vision. This last type most frequently involves site-specific installation and/or the inclusion of additional contextual artefacts, historical documentation or other items/performances/programming in addition to work produced by visual artists.

contemporary objects for the museum and the role of art as an allegory for an historic moment, rather than authentic proof of history, will be explored.

Branding Identity, Displaying Nationhood

If what matters about me is my individual and authentic self, why is so much contemporary talk of identity about large categories—gender, ethnicity, nationality, ‘race,’ sexuality—that seem so far from individual?

—K. Anthony Appiah, *Identity Against Culture*.

In a chapter entitled ‘National Authenticity on Display? Exhibiting Art from Emerging Markets’, art critic and market theorist Natasha Degen observes that despite a global trend (increasing since the 1980s) of an international aesthetic for contemporary art, the curatorial strategy of branding museum exhibitions via “nationality remains a convenient taxonomy” (2012, p. 167). The rise of speculative investment interest in emerging art markets from Africa, China, India, and the Middle East has seen the number of nation-themed exhibitions from these regions rapidly increase in Europe and the US since the early 2010s. Degen observes that these exhibitions are often acts of cultural diplomacy, frequently funded by corporate investors with ulterior motives. These motives are, at best, an exercise in public relations intended to establish and strengthen business ties between countries by demonstrating an interest in cultural exchange. At worst, these sponsored events are acts of art-washing, a term used when corporate entities utilise the act of art sponsorship as a kind of philanthropy to cover up, or misdirect attention from, other business activities with a negative public image. Comaroff et al observe that international commercial pressures on nation-building and statecraft in the twenty-first century have resulted in nation-states themselves adopting many of the strategies of neoliberal business models. They note that “[w]hile the state might always have been a corporation in the broadest sense of the term, in recent times it has become corporate ... a metabusiness ... franchising out its operations to the private sector, husbanding its assets, commodifying its collective Geist to attract Commerce” (2020, p.20).

Degan, however, suggests that both the constructs of the museum and the nation-state rely on perceptions of authenticity to codify and legitimate their parameters. She notes that:

[t]he nation-state creates notions of a unique and authentic collective identity in order to define its citizenry. Via museums, the emergent nation-state selects, codifies and

publicises indigenous aesthetic productions as concrete expressions of the national soul (2012, p.167).

She argues that the decline in government funding to public cultural institutions worldwide has created a necessity for museums to frequently rely on corporate sponsorship in order to host major exhibitions. This potentially undermines the museum and its curators as independent expert arbiters of cultural authenticity, as there is essentially a conflict of interest. This is not because any corporate-sponsored, nation-themed exhibition will necessarily present a false image of the cultural identity advertised. There may, however, be omissions or deliberate misdirection from topics that may unsettle the public and, thereby, the sponsor's image. For corporate sponsorship as an act of cultural diplomacy to be successful, the exhibition "must demonstrate an appreciation for a rich history or promote the idea of a burgeoning contemporary culture whilst eluding controversy" (2012, p.169). In answering to a business-orientated funder by lending the museum and its curators' authority to these blockbuster corporate-sponsored acts of cultural diplomacy, Degen argues that "corporate interests supplant authenticity as the museum's creed" (2012, p.169). I would add that with this shift in funding sources from the government of a nation-state to the international corporate sponsor, the museum is thus also compelled to present a flattened, non-controversial branding of national identity for an external public eye, rather than a complex unpacking of societal issues for the internal audiences to which the cultural heritage belongs. Comaroff et al suggest that recent trends in nation branding, as a form of corporatising cultural identity, "reimagines twenty-first-century nationhood through the lens of the commodity form in a manner at once highly self-conscious, widely theorized, and thoroughly fetishized" (2020, p.21). As with the promotion of tourism, nation-themed corporate sponsored exhibitions thus seek to promote ideas of societal stability and, whilst they may suggest a deeper complex history, the culture they promote also tends to encapsulate some air of mystery, the subaltern, or the exotic.

The increased uptake of corporate sponsorship in public museum exhibitions is not the only means by which the influence of museum academic experts (as codifiers of cultural heritage) might be quietly eroded by market forces. Art critic and collecting consultant Mary Corrigan observes of the contemporary art ecosystem on the African continent that "the limited presence or, in some cases, complete absence of museums, foundations and biennales for contemporary art ... together with a resultant lack of influence, have also meant ... that commercial galleries have played the role of the validating sector for art" (2019a, p.3). This shift in market forces' influence on the validation of contemporary art is described by art historian Isabelle Graw as a shift from a "dealer-critic model" where validation is ascribed by

'independent' scholarship in the form of critics and curators to a "dealer-collector model, where private actors increasingly determine what gets valued and on which terms" (cited in Kolbe et al, p.1). External patronage or donations of works to public collections are, of course, nothing new to the system of public museums, many of them having started life as private collections which were subsequently set up in trust for the public interest. Art historian Kathryn Brown, however, observes a difference in the patronage of these early museums where the extremely wealthy collected art with a vision of creating a legacy and securing both their social and financial status through the acquisition of pieces which they believed would accrue value over generations (2019, p.1 and p.6). When donated to public institutions, these works were, in one part, the patron exerting influence with the idea of his taste being preserved for posterity, but were also seen as a form of larger social obligation. Brown argues that in the twenty-first century, with reduced public museum funding and an increase in auction houses making a spectacle of high-priced art sales, "the influence of private gallerists and collectors as controllers of information becomes an increasingly powerful determinant of the broader cultural landscape" (2019, p.7). This has particular relevance for the influence of private museums, which will be discussed later in this chapter. In relation to the public museum, Brown notes a shift from perceptions of the intrinsic value of artwork being its symbolic value in being acquired by a museum and, therefore, its "removal from the market signalling its status as invaluable" to the increased spectacle of art sales which "postulat[es] financial value as the ultimate arbiter of aesthetic worth and, by extension, as the primary marker of a work's art historical significance" (2019, p.5). Corrigan similarly notes how changes in mainstream journalistic reporting on arts have increasingly moved away from art critique and review, a form which assesses the conceptual merit of art as cultural expression, to "the language of commerce as a lens through which to assess art" due to the "interest in making money from art, rather than benefiting from its social or metaphysical qualities" (2019, p.4). This increased commodification of art has implications when public museums cannot afford soaring prices for new acquisitions, and private collectors may donate (or merely lend) works to acquire symbolic value via the public museum. This, in turn, bolsters the financial value of similar works the collectors retain in their collection but which they intend to 'flip' relatively quickly rather than preserve for generations.⁴⁹ This situation, Brown suggests, has serious implications for the sustainability of collections as art history, as

⁴⁹ In an article entitled 'What Happens When a Collector Promises to Donate an Artwork and Then Flips It at Auction Instead?' *ArtNet* Art Business Editor Tim Schneider cites a number of examples where private collectors, who have promised to donate works purchased to public institutions, instead swiftly sell the works on auction for many times the purchased price. He also reveals that many of these sales were initially agreed to at significant discount because of the prestige of having the artist's work included in a public collection. Reneging on the promise of donation not only deprives the artist of the full price of their work, but drives up sales prices in the secondary market such that public institutions cannot afford to acquire the work of these artists (Schneider, 2009).

the emphasis is not on cultural value for society but investment value as “culture is driven by a sector of the art market that promotes a rarefied group of artists for the purpose of maximizing profits” (2019, p.6). Artists thus working towards a system of sales to collectors may feel it necessary to tailor their makings, much like any other saleable product, as a form of consumer brand. Brown suggests that when “artists themselves are recognized as global ‘brands’, the market has developed a self-reinforcing logic” (2019, p.5) where art production is not geared towards cultural expression but what might best determine speculative investment sales. This, she observes, has resulted in “a particular trend within art collecting and museum culture, namely, a shifting of public heritage into private hands” (2019, p.8). Global appeal in the branding of artistic practice may be as problematic as forms of flattened nationalist branding, or rather, the latter (in its oversimplified presentation of identity politics for an external eye) may be exactly what gives work from emerging markets a global appeal. Corrigan notes that these local-global tensions on contemporary African art “begin to bear down on and reshape not just the system, but also—one could argue—art production itself” (2019a, p.3). In this scenario, national identity as a curatorial theme may thus become representative not of local perceptions on the topic, but of external international expectations.

Nationhood as a convenient curatorial taxonomy for exhibitions is, of course, not limited to corporate-sponsored events and is perhaps best known as a strategy for the Venice Biennale, whose showcasing of work via national pavilions has led to its being regularly dubbed the Olympics of art. Founded in 1895, the event grew from a national celebration of Italian art to gradually include 29 permanent international pavilions in the *Giardini* (the main exhibition site), many of which were built in the early twentieth century and continue to be owned and maintained by the associated national ministries of culture (Harris, 2013). Art critic M. Neelika Jayawardane observed of the 2017 Venice Biennale that these positions of central pavilions in the *Giardini* are, for the most part, reserved for European and other nation-states with strong international economies, whilst smaller and less well-financed nation-states are relegated to the periphery where they can hire venues on an ad-hoc basis. She notes that this “spatial geography of pavilions ... replicates the world’s political and economic power structures” (2017). For nation-states with a permanent pavilion and regular government funding for the arts, there is potentially more transparency in the relationship between a national ministry of arts and its corresponding local arts community in curating who will be included each year, as the platform is planned long in advance. For nation-states who must scramble at the last minute for funding and visas, or whose departments of arts and culture are not those initiating the national participation at the Biennale, the process is open to multiple kinds of dubious, fraudulent and opaque practices.

A Scramble for Africa: African Representation at the Venice Biennale.

The presence of African artists at Venice has always been marked by a kind of disjuncture. What should the objects from here say to people there? Whose story should they tell? What is the role of counter-narrative and dissent in a space that often looks and feels like a United Nations art Olympiad?

—Sean O’Toole, *Counting the Years, Numbering the Artists*.

In 2007, the 52nd *Venice Biennale* introduced for the first time an African Pavilion. Previous iterations of the *Biennale* had included Egypt and, sporadically, South Africa as the few representatives from the entire continent of Africa.⁵⁰ Whilst it was a move in the right direction to include more contemporary art from the African continent at a purportedly international exhibition, it is necessary to ask: in what way does the labelling of contemporary art under the banner of a whole continent perpetuate, rather than advance, pre-existing ideas of creative practice from Africa in the contemporary moment?

The African Pavilion at the 52nd Biennale showcased works drawn from the Sindika Dokolo Collection, located in Luanda, Angola. The press release for the show, entitled *Check-list Luanda Pop*, made several ambitious claims including the desire to “turn the Western world’s perception of the African continent on its head”, not to be represented at the Venice Biennale “as a poor yet tolerated relative, but as a complete entity who would be shown due respect” and to take cognisance of an urgent need for African creativity “to avoid being hijacked against its will yet again” (2007, p.3). To this end, the curators sought to premise the pavilion on the idea of an African collection: one collected by Africans, for viewing by Africans, rather than a collection of African creativity put together for an external European audience: “[w]e have consciously chosen to create an African collection of contemporary art rather than a collection of contemporary African art” (2007, p.10).

Art historian Sydney Kasfir describes the history of European collecting of African artefacts, during the colonial period, as a form of patronage which created an external taxonomy of Western taste. This form of sponsoring through collecting has continued to create a separation between what is considered a work of art, and what is merely an ethnographic curiosity. Kasfir suggests that:

⁵⁰ For an overview of a 100 year history of African representation at the Venice Biennale please see: Sytsma, J. 2024. ‘African Art, the Venice Biennale, and the Politics of Visibility’. In *Methodology, Ideology and Pedagogy of African Art* (pp. 152-169). Routledge.

[s]een from an anti-colonial ideological perspective, collecting African art is a hegemonic activity, an act of appropriation; seen historically, it is a largely colonial enterprise; and seen anthropologically, it is the logical outcome of a social-evolutionary view of the Other: the collecting of specimens as a corollary of 'discovery' (1992, p.42).

It is with this awareness in mind that co-curator Fernando Alvim writes in the *Check-list Luanda Pop* press release that "the very idea that in the 21st century, the African contribution to the history of world art should be reduced to the level of decorative craftsmanship makes my blood run cold" (2007, p.9). It is this colonial legacy of othering the cultural production of Africa as exotic or primitive that Alvim takes as a goad to undo such labelling by providing a differing narrative from an interior perspective. He considers this legacy of an art/ethnography divide an issue which should be challenged, and a change in these perceptions should be championed by all local cultural players, from individual artists to institutions of state and learning. His concern is that "if we cannot tell the world who we are, if we do not show them the best that we can do, we will never see an end to incomprehension, condescension and prejudice" (2007, p.9). The need to reclaim the narrative of the cultural production of African countries from an internal vantage point is a necessary step in the decolonial project. There is, however, an ironic bind which is nearly impossible to escape when presenting these narratives to an external European audience. The Venice Biennale is a cornerstone in the international art scene, and one which remains (despite the increased inclusion of various non-European pavilions in recent years) dominated by Western notions of art and art practice. By exhibiting work on a platform labelled broadly 'African', how possible was it for any curator to break the legacy of ideas that Africa is a homogeneous, exotic place; or disrupt expectations of what constitutes African aesthetics?

Despite the curators' ambitious motives to present a differing, more authentic, internal narrative on the contemporary cultural praxis of Africa, the *Check-list Luanda Pop* was not without controversy. Whilst the show was curated by Simon Njami (fresh from his success with the *Africa Remix* exhibition) and Fernando Alvim (Director of the Luanda Triennial, Angolan artist, and curator of long-standing in the African context), Congolese businessman Sindika Dokolo was a somewhat lesser-known figure for the European art world. Investigation of his background led the online publication *ArtNet* to publish an article revealing some speculation as to the source of Dokolo's wealth. In an article entitled 'Art and Corruption in Venice', journalist Ben Davis revealed that Dokolo's father, who had set up the Bank of Kinshasa, had been implicated in defrauding the institution by "channel[ing] money to members of his own family ... bilking the state and normal depositors of more than

\$80 million dollars when it imploded in 1986” (Davis, 2007). The article also goes on to note Dokolo’s marriage to Isabel Dos Santos, the daughter of former Angolan dictator José Eduardo dos Santos, and a high-profile business woman in her own right with alleged links to affairs of state corruption and the exploitative Angolan diamond business. A follow-up article by *ArtNet* published a rebuttal from Dokolo, who had threatened legal action if the original article was not removed. It also revealed that the majority of the Dokolo collection was far from an exercise in African collecting (as proclaimed by the *Checklist Luanda Pop* press release) but rather had been “assembled from a 500-work collection of contemporary African art amassed by the German shoemaker Hans Bogatzke [and] purchased by Dokolo from Bogatzke’s widow” (*ArtNet*, 2007). In January 2020, Dokolo and Dos Santos’s assets were frozen by the Angolan state amidst a financial and legal controversy involving an outstanding debt of \$1 billion in state loans (Durón, 2020). Corruption, dubious financial dealings and money laundering in the art world are, of course, not exclusively linked to nations that might be seen as emergent or peripheral to a Euro-American centric artworld. That these nations often have so few sources of more transparent or local government-led funding (with genuine public-participatory oversight) increases the gap for those with ulterior motives to hijack these creative platforms and perpetuate simplistic stereotypes of cultural production.

A case in point is the Kenyan pavilion, which in 2013 caused controversy due to its commission by an Italian citizen, Paola Poponi (unknown previously in the art world), and curated by herself and another Italian, Sandro Orlandi (Muñoz-Alonso, 2015). Of the featured artists, only two were Kenyan (Kivuthi Mbuno and Chrispus Wangombe Wachira), whilst the rest of the lineup consisted of one Italian and eight Chinese artists. The exhibition title, *Reflective Nature: a New Primary Enchanting Sensitivity* and the justification (by the curators for including so many non-Kenyan artists) that the show sought to “eradicate cultural difference” led art critic Wendy Teo to comment that the show was “a frightening manifestation of neo-colonialism vulgarly presented as multiculturalism” and that the “cursory inclusion of the two Kenyan artists is Primitivism at its very worst” (Teo, 2013). Whilst one Italian artist and two Kenyans were represented, the show was predominantly Chinese and in this, one cannot ignore the potential politics at play when considering the corporate relationship between Kenya and China. Chinese industry and investment in Kenya grew from \$186.37 million in 2002 to \$3.27 billion in 2013 (Moses, 2015). It is, therefore, unsurprising that questions of neocolonialism were being raised in what seems like a hostile takeover of another country’s cultural platform.



Kivuthi Mbuno. 2013. *Ndovu na Mbumba (Elephant and Family)*. Crayon on Paper. (African Contemporary)

When again in 2015, the Kenyan pavilion was curated by Poponi and Orlandi (now featuring the same Italian artist as the previous iteration, two Kenyan and six Chinese artists), social media was abuzz with outrage. Many of these commentators are recorded in an article by digital activist Ndesanjo Macha in which he asks the question: “Did Kenya sell its art scene to China via Italy?” (2015). Importantly, it is not just the inclusion of foreign artists and the limited Kenyan representation or its minister of culture’s lack of interest in the process which provoked this outrage.⁵¹ It is also an insult to an otherwise vibrant local art scene in being represented by a total absence of curatorial vision and the substandard quality of work on show which one commentator described, perhaps aptly, as “shit (in a nutshell)” (Boswell cited in Macha, 2015). An online petition was launched to “Renounce Kenya’s fraudulent representation at the 56th Venice Biennial 2015 & commit to support the realisation of a national pavilion in 2017” (Kenya Contemporary, 2015). Later investigation revealed that the 2015 Kenyan Pavilion exhibition had been funded by Chinese real estate developer and art collector Yan Lugen (Ruiz, 2017).

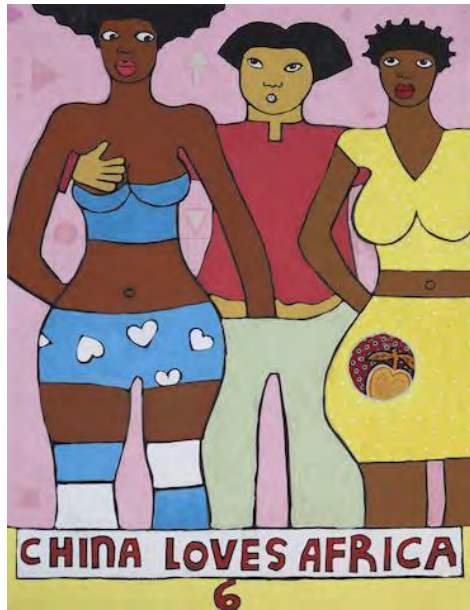
⁵¹ Many pavilions have over the years included artists from other nationalities e.g. British Liam Gillick representing Germany in 2009, or Israeli Yael Bartana representing Poland in 2011. These inclusions met with little controversy, perhaps because these foreign artists were exploring themes in their work related to social, structural, political or historical conditions of the nation-states they were representing. This underlines the absurdity of authentic national identity as a taxonomy for cultural representation as if the country of one’s origin naturally requires one to represent this cultural identity in one’s work. With the Kenyan Pavilion, it is the completely unrelated content of the work presented by foreign nationals to the contemporary cultural context of Kenya, the token inclusion of specific Kenyan artists whose work perpetuates a kind of primitivist naivete, and the limited opportunities for Kenyan artists to exhibit internationally, which makes this pavilion appropriation so obviously offensive.



Michael Soi. 2015. *The Shame in Venice 1*. Acrylic on Canvas. (Okay Africa).

In response to the 2013 and 2015 Kenyan Pavilion controversy, Nairobi-based artist Micheal Soi produced a series of acrylic paintings entitled *The Shame in Venice*. In *The Shame in Venice 1*, above, Soi comments on the controversy by illustrating how the funders, curators and artists were caught, figuratively, with their pants down. The theme of Chinese/Kenyan politics is not, however, a side path for Soi. His ongoing series *China Loves Africa* was begun in 2012, and whilst both the style and political commentary have become more sophisticated over the years, even the initial works by Soi are very far from the naive, nature or tribal-themed, apolitical work chosen for both the 2013 and 2015 Kenyan Pavilions. Whilst the simple cartoonish forms and bold colours are reminiscent of commercial sign painting popular across much of Africa as a kind of outsider pop art, Soi's work is a deliberate pastiche of this aesthetic. By combining this pop aesthetic in some cases with compositions which reference Soviet realist art, Soi creates ironic propaganda posters with an African twist. In *China Loves Africa #6* (2012), for instance, Soi draws on Sino-Soviet propaganda posters to suggest that Chinese neo-colonial involvement in the continent is akin to sexual exploitation.⁵² That Soi, and many other contemporary Kenyan artists, engage in political satire and other more sophisticated conceptual themes that critique contemporary Kenyan social conditions raises questions about the ulterior motives of those seeking to promote instead an apolitical Primitivist vision of Kenya's cultural landscape as a representation of the nation at the Venice Biennale in the twenty-first century.

⁵² It cannot escape notice that many Sino-Soviet propaganda posters (in attempting to promote a spirit of political fraternity) have included, to a contemporary eye, an unintentional homoerotic undercurrent. Whether Soi seeks to avoid what might be a distracting controversial side issue (given Kenya's legal stance on homosexual relations) or to translate the representation of fatherland to motherland, and thus better represent both Kenyan symbolism and the power dynamics between the two countries, is perhaps up for debate. The consideration nevertheless demonstrates semiotic sophistication.



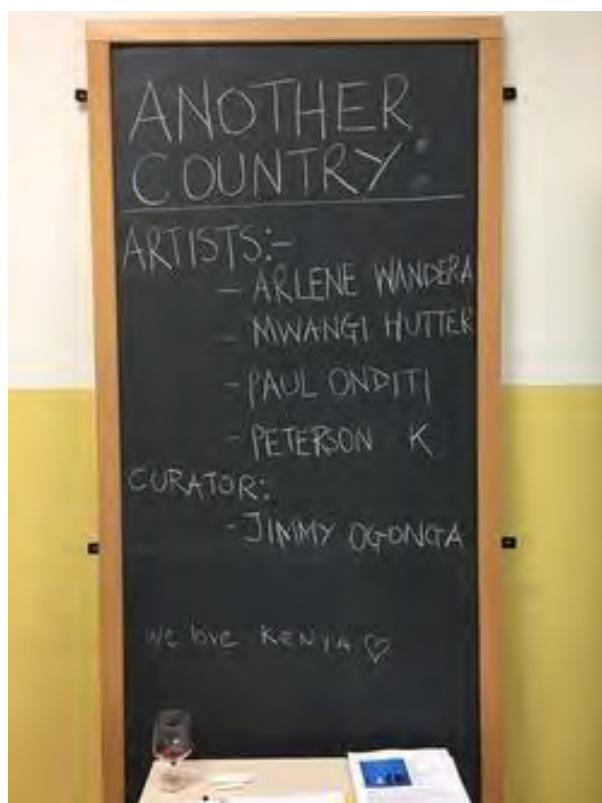
Michael W. Soi. 2012. *China loves Africa #6*.
Acrylic on Canvas. (Bonhams).



Ge Wei. 1962. *The friendship of the peoples of China and the Soviet Union is everlasting*. Propaganda poster.
(Chinese Posters).

Lavinia Calza, director of Nairobi-based gallery ARTLabAfrica, observed of the controversy that “the problem is there is no political will at government level to change the situation, and governmental support for the arts in Kenya is dismal” (cited in Muñoz-Alonso, 2015). This observation is not limited to the Kenyan arts ministry as many African countries struggle to convince government officials that the Venice Biennale is a worthwhile diplomatic, cultural investment. Government officials, ill-informed about local arts and culture, are also easily persuaded to offer national sanction to individuals who come with proposals for a national pavilion in Venice when they can demonstrate the proposal already has substantial private sector funding.

In 2017, despite promises from the Kenyan government to fund a future pavilion and an official announcement of support from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and the Arts, the money did not materialise (Biennial Foundation, 2017). This forced curator Jimmy Ogonga to rush around just weeks before the event to secure alternate funders for his proposed exhibition: *Another Country*. Partnering with the Venice-based non-profit Zuecca Project Space, a Kenyan artist residency programme, and the coffee company Hausbrandt, Ogonga was able to scrape together a bare minimum to get four of his five selected artists and their work to Venice (Ruiz, 2017). The artists saw their venue for the first time (a disused third floor of a school at the back of the island of Giudecca) and needed to begin installing just four days before the opening.



Welcome Board for Kenyan Pavilion, 2017: *Another Country*.
(The Art Newspaper).

There is a sad irony in how this last-minute organisation echoes and demonstrates the creativity and resourcefulness it requires for many artists resident on the African continent merely to follow their passion as cultural practitioners. There is, however, no glamour nor sustainability in this make-do perseverance which, whilst it might make for a triumphal against-the-odds anecdote here, unfortunately, perpetuates stereotypes of the African artist as an underdog whether the protagonists would like to play this role or not.

To describe the circumstances of this exhibition (with the disorganised lack of ministry funding, the ad hoc ardour of the curator and artists, and the sympathetic last-minute funders) as authentically Kenyan is potentially insulting because it is a stereotype. Stereotypes, however, become the cliché that they are because the lack of original circumstances is, unfortunately, all too common. To describe the exhibition as sincere brings to mind Trilling's observations of the word as a backhanded compliment. As curator Ogonga observes of the show: "It may not be the grandest exhibition, but it is ours" (cited in Ruiz, 2017). The endeavour to bring this Kenyan representation to Venice in 2017 was sincere, but can this only be said because there are no other obvious motives to undermine or scupper the curator's intention? Were Alvim and Njami any less sincere ten years earlier in

their ideals for their curatorial vision of *Check-list Luanda Pop* simply because the source of their funding (perhaps unknown to them) turned out to be tainted? Were they aware of the origins of Dokolo's collection as a wholesale purchase from the deceased Hans Bogatzke's estate, or did they genuinely believe the collection was a reflection of Dokolo's own interest in the contemporary art of Africa? It might be far too easy to make a moral judgement here if the curators were to some degree aware of the less-than-authentic dealings which informed this opportunity they had to increase the intellectual critical debate around African contemporary art. To do so, however, ignores the fact that many curators and artists may be faced with the moral quandary of converting dubious funding into what they hope will be, through their own sincere investment, ultimately a platform for a greater good. The choice is not between good or bad sources of funding, but frequently between dubious sources or none at all.



Arlene Wandera with her work *On the Ladder*. 2017.
Kenyan Pavilion 2017: *Another Country*. (The Art Newspaper).



Paul Onditi. 2016. *Regardless Negative*. Mixed media. Kenyan Pavilion 2017: *Another Country*. (ARTLabAfrica).

Kenya is hardly the only national pavilion at the Venice Biennale to court controversy, yet issues of dubious funders or unscrupulous curators attempting to dupe national departments of culture into supporting their proposals are sadly common on the African continent. In 2011, art dealer Monno Mokwena sparked controversy when he was unilaterally selected, without a tender process, as the curator for the South African 2011 pavilion. Then Minister of Arts and Culture, Paul Mashatile, made this announcement just one month after a previous statement “that budget constraints are too tight to allow for participation in the [2011] Venice Biennale” (cited in Blackman, 2013). Mokwena’s subsequent selection of artists provoked more press outrage, not only because of a lack of a public consultative process but because the majority of artists selected came from his own commercial gallery.⁵³ This conflict of interest was compounded after the fact by a 2013 audit of Mokwena’s R10 million expenditure in 2011, which allegedly uncovered two fake invoices (Blackman, 2013). Further investigation was not forthcoming, yet the taint of scandal no doubt prompted the curators of the next two South African pavilions in 2013 and 2015 to offer a broad smorgasbord of artists. Ostensibly, a larger number of artists could be seen to be more representative, yet a lack of thematic overlap (further than the artists’ national identity) leads to curatorial visions which are exceedingly tame.

In 2022, the announcement of the debut of a Namibian pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale raised similar conceptual and quality concerns to the 2013 and 2015 Kenyan pavilions. Italian Marco Furio Ferrario (a construction consultant for travel lodges in Namibia with no

⁵³ See *South African Art Times*, May 2011, pp.8-11 for a compilation of press complaints.

previous experience in curatorship or links to the local Namibian art scene) was announced as the curator of the inaugural Namibian Pavilion in Venice. His proposed exhibition consisted solely of sculptural works from a series entitled *The Lone Stone Men of the Desert*, which were made by a site-specific artist who prefers to be known only by the pseudonym RENN. The official website for the Namibian Pavilion cites ideas of gender and cultural fluidity and a need to put the artwork before the identity of the maker as reasons for the artist's choice to remain otherwise anonymous under this pseudonym (Namibian Pavilion, 2022). It was, however, subsequently revealed that RENN is a 64-year-old white man who was born in Johannesburg and whose links to the contemporary Namibian art scene are largely non-existent (*Artforum*, 2022, Proctor 2022a). A collective calling themselves Concerned Artists Namibia began a petition to oppose the exhibition as a representation of Namibia at the 59th Venice Biennale. The issues here had less to do with the underhanded attempt to disguise the artist's identity (a white, male South African) and more to do with the conceptual framing of the work as in any way representative of local Namibian contemporary art.



RENN. 2021. *I wonder how the other are doing* (No. 1 - 7). Desert stone, iron bar and landscape.
(Biennale Namibia).

Aside from the fact that RENN's work is not locally lauded, he has not exhibited in Namibia in either a solo or group exhibition, prerequisites (as the petition notes) that are the standard

expectations for any artist to represent their country in Venice. A chief concern was the theme of the work, which the petitioners decried as “highly problematic as it engages in the historically racist premise that indigenous peoples are perceived to be closer to nature ... [which] has been used to justify oppression of indigenous peoples by labelling them as naive and subhuman” (Concerned Artists Namibia, 2022). As with the Kenyan pavilions of 2013 and 2015, these colonial myths of primitivism and ‘otherness’ in art from Africa persist to fulfil the recurring nightmare of cultural hijacking Alvim and Njami hoped in 2007 to upset. Not being able to be present at the international art table on one’s own terms makes it all too possible for others to attempt a kind of national identity theft. The petition was unsuccessful in prompting the Namibian government to withdraw its sanction of the pavilion officially, but it did prompt the main sponsor, the luxury travel company Abercrombie and Kent, to withdraw its support (*Artforum*, 2022). That the other minor funders were all luxury hotels or had links to the tourism sector underlines Ferrario’s motive in taking this work to Venice. This was never about showcasing the artistic merits of Namibian contemporary art, but a tourism brochure to advertise to the rich in Venice the ‘unspoilt delights’ of exclusive resorts in Namibia (Burocco, 2022).

Although there was greater representation than ever from African countries at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022 with positive feedback, including Uganda’s debut exhibition receiving a special mention for the Golden Lion award, Kenyans again didn’t receive their funding until the week before the event (Proctor, 2022b). Cameroon made its pavilion debut with an exhibition entitled *The Times of Chimera*. Co-curated by Sandro Orlandi Stagl (who had previously become infamous as one of the curators of the Kenyan pavilion in 2013 and 2015), the Cameroonian selection perpetuated the same lack of national representation, with only 4 of the 28 selected artists coming from Cameroon (Mambeh, 2022). Endorsed by the Cameroon Ministry of Arts and Culture, the pavilion, however, received no government funding but was sponsored by the Global Crypto Art-Decentralized Autonomous Organization (GCA-DAO), a collective of artists, blockchain investors, and crypto art collectors. The ulterior motive of the sponsorship is evident in how the Cameroonian pavilion was billed as not only the country’s debut but also the first NFT art show in Venice (Chow, 2022). The pavilion was displayed in two parts. The physical exhibit at Liceo Artistico Statale Michelangelo Guggenheim, featured the four Cameroonian artists as well as four internationals whose work makes no reference thematically to Cameroon. The other part, more widely publicised, featured NFT artwork, none of which had been made by a Cameroonian artist (Mambeh, 2022).



Participants of the crypto art exhibition at the Cameroon National Pavilion. 2022 Venice Biennale.
(Radio France Internationale).

Cameroon's pavilion was thus not only used to showcase unconnected works by Italian, Spanish, and Israeli artists, but was a thinly veiled marketing ploy to push the concept of NFT artworks as investment opportunities.

It is difficult to describe in brief here the merits and pitfalls of Crypto art (or NFT artworks) as such considerations would need to take into account longer discussions around the uptake of this form and its relationship within the global art market.⁵⁴ As a relatively new speculative investment trend and medium of artistic production, it is perhaps too early to observe the long-term impact and cultural value of this form. It is no doubt useful for artists to be able to 'mint' digital artworks (or digital versions of physical artworks) via Blockchain. This process enables smart contracts which render work copyrightable and traceable to their authors thus establishing provable chains of ownership and providing an authenticated provenance for an artwork. Some of the highest-grossing NFTs have some merit as conceptual artworks with themes related to the dark web and issues of freedom of the press.⁵⁵ That NFTs have suddenly become so popular as a speculative investment and that many selling for exorbitant prices exhibit little artistic or cultural merit (other than their chain of sale at

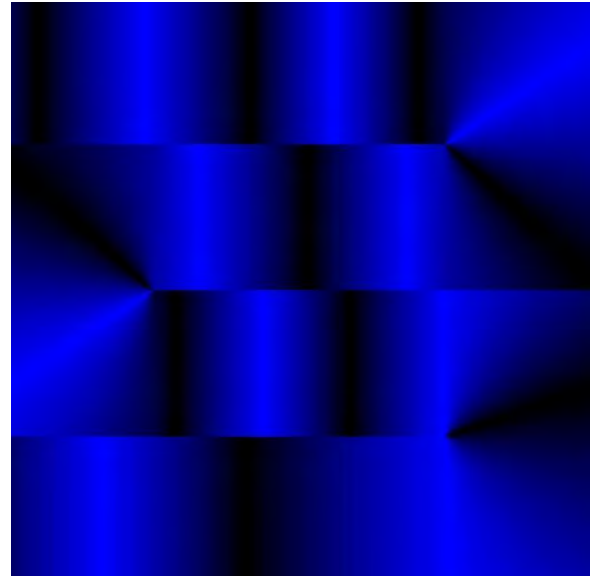
⁵⁴ Bsteh and Vermeylen (2021) and Samudra (2022) both offer a useful overview of extant literature and interviews with professional stakeholders on the future potential of the medium of NFT artworks.

⁵⁵ For instance, Julian Assange and Pak's *Clock*, (last sold for \$52.7 million) is an NFT timer which counts the days *WikiLeaks* founder Assange has spent in jail, and Edward Snowden's *Stay Free* (\$5.4 million), whose proceeds were donated to the Freedom of the Press Foundation, consists of digital copies of "court documents associated with the landmark decision ruling the National Security Agency's mass surveillance violated the law" (Thomas, 2022).

increasingly ridiculous prices), points to an economic investment bubble which is highly volatile.⁵⁶



mpkoz (Michael Kozlowski). 2022 *Chimera*. On-chain generative art. A work from *The Times of Chimera NFT exhibit*. (Vogue).



Rafaël Rozendaal. 2022. *Observation NFT*. A work from *The Times of Chimera NFT exhibit*. (Vogue).

Economic sociologist Olav Velthuis, observes that the Venice Biennale began with an associated sales office but that this was retracted in 1968 following student protests which decried the exclusive bourgeois event for its focus on the economic value rather than the cultural value of art. Despite this move away from the obviously commercial, Velthuis nevertheless notes something he refers to as ‘The Venice Effect’: the symbolic value (in Bourdieusian terms) a showing at the Biennale has, which can be converted into economic value at commercial international art fairs (2011). The blatant promotion of the investment potential of NFT art at an event which is, in spirit (if not in actuality), about promoting national culture rather than economic value, is vulgar, to say the least. That many Crypto artists use pseudonyms, or online avatars, which disguise all aspects of their cultural origin, age, and gender, makes this showcase of the medium (and its usurping of a platform for Cameroonian artists) not only a crude form of identity theft but completely redundant at an event whose premise is the showcasing of artists via a taxonomy of national identity.

Simon Njami notes that the underrepresentation of African states (and the subsequent opportunities for unscrupulous funders to steal these platforms for their own purposes) lies in

⁵⁶ In December 2021, *Right-click and Save As Guy* by XCOPY was purchased by Cozomo de’ Medici for \$7 million. The work was first sold for \$90 and then for \$174,195 making its most recent sale a percentage increase of more than 3,500 (Thomas, 2022).

the fact that many African nation-states do not recognise the soft political power art may carry. He notes that: “as long as African nations don’t have a consciousness of the importance of the Venice Biennale, then Africa won’t be well represented” (cited in Proctor 2022b). Yet his claim that the average \$300,000 to \$500,000 it costs to participate at Venice is a small amount for any state budget does not take into account the additional expenditure it requires locally to develop arts and arts audiences so that the Venice Biennale can be viewed as a prestigious national achievement, rather than an exclusive side venture. Hannah O’Leary, head of Modern and Contemporary African Art at Sotheby’s, notes that the “investment needed to stage a national pavilion is huge, and many of these countries need to invest first and foremost in public art engagement and support at home” (cited in Proctor 2022b). In 2013, the South African Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) spent R21.6 million on a twenty-year lease for a building in Venice for the South African pavilion. At the same time, R23.1 million was cut from the budget for the DAC’s National Development Project and the National Arts Council (Blackman, 2013). The price, therefore, of only a handful of artists being viewed on an international platform came at the cost of several potential projects and incomes locally where the money could have been spread more broadly and, given the exchange rate, spent more efficiently. Here is the bind of international representation: the potential to attract international interest in local culture comes at what cost to local expenditure on cultural support and development?

While critics lauded the increase of African representation at the 2022 Venice Biennale, Zimbabwean curator Valerie Kabov observed that “virtually every African artist included had been exhibited at Frieze London and or at Art Basel in the previous year, and less than half of those African-born artists in the exhibition live and work on the continent” (cited in Proctor 2022b). Here, she notes that whilst it may appear that more African nationalities are being represented, these are frequently individuals who already have some level of success in garnering international attention (and prices for their work) for whom Venice is neither a springboard nor an international debut. Whilst the taxonomy of national pavilions at Venice may have become (in an increasingly globalised world) somewhat redundant, these controversies in curatorial themes and funders demonstrate that concerns around authentic national representation are more of a burning issue for some countries than others. In this consideration, should we be more concerned that the individual artists have authentic ties to the nation-state they represent (through birth or official documentation), or should we be considering whether the themes of the work represented hold some resonance for the cultural landscape of the home countries they represent? How many of these national pavilions take the trouble to showcase the same work again in local contexts? If it is difficult for artists from an economically disadvantaged context to get themselves and their work to

Venice, how many people from their country of origin are likely to see the work? Who, then, is this work for? Who is to determine the contemporary authenticity of national cultural expression represented, or does this become yet another performance of African identity for a European audience?

Zeitz MOCAA: Curating Contemporary Art Africa?

If one of the roles of the public museum is to preserve heritage for the interest and education of diverse audiences throughout time, it is important to question the collective and individual choices that underpin the creation of such cultural narratives as well as the social and financial forces that shape them.

—Kathryn Brown, *Private Influence, Public Goods, and the Future of Art History*.

In September 2017, the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA) held the official grand opening of its premises in a converted complex of grain silos on Cape Town's Victoria & Alfred Waterfront. The ambitious project, described as the continent's largest ever art museum, cost more than R500 million, took ten years as a project to develop and was variously hailed in the press as the African equivalent of the Tate Modern in London or the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Burke, 2017, Davis, 2017, Williamson, 2017).



Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Victoria & Alfred Waterfront in Cape Town.

Image: Iwan Baan. (*ARTnews*).

Originally built in 1921, the grain silos were, for many decades, the tallest building on the Cape Town skyline. The site's original function was discontinued in 2001, after which, the developers of the V&A Waterfront, having recognised the building's historic significance, debated its various possible uses (Zeitz MOCAA, 2019). Finally settling on an art museum, London-based architect Thomas Heatherwick was brought in to design the conversion. The concrete silos were sliced through with diamond-reinforced cable to create an impressive cathedral-like central atrium. The adjacent building was converted into nine stories of 80 white-cube galleries. Having settled on a design, all the project needed was an art collection. The museum's website describes that the "desire was to house something of public civic significance, and something open to the public" (Zeitz MOCAA, 2019). The project partnered with former CEO of Puma sportswear Jochen Zeitz who had been working since 2008 with his art advisor Mark Coetzee to develop his own collection of contemporary African art. The partnership thus gave Zeitz naming rights for the museum, and Mark Coetzee became Zeitz MOCAA's first executive director and chief curator.



Zeitz MOCAA atrium. Image: Iwan Baan. (*TimesLIVE*).

In March 2015, journalist and author Matthew Blackman wrote an open letter, published in *ArtThrob*, to Jochen Zeitz and Mark Coetzee, citing a number of concerns he had in the formulation of the new museum. These included the one-man selection system for new acquisitions (without broader consultation or an acquisitions committee) and conflicts of interest with funders who are also private art collectors. This last, he argues, would allow these individuals to have prior access to the museum's collection policies, creating the potential for a form of insider trading in the local art market. Another market-related concern Blackman raised was how he had been informed by local gallery curators that they were expressly tailoring their stables and exhibitions with Zeitz MOCAA's acquisitions in mind. These predominantly white-run commercial gallery ambitions, he suggests, are not necessarily driven by selection on merit but whether the work might broadly appeal to a rather ill-defined quality of 'Africanness' whether this is the race or nationality of the artist or some other woolly qualifier in the theme, aesthetic, or choice of medium. He writes that these buying habits are "beginning to create an art environment that does not reflect Africa but is instead a simulacra constructed by the commercial galleries at the behest of a museum ... the argument could be made that ZMOCAA is promoting a white concept of what Africa looks like" (2015). On issues of transformation and development, Blackman notes the lip-service being paid to inclusivity via free access days but no planning proposed for audience development or grassroots outreach projects, as well as the very Western approach to museum practices underlined by an exclusive upmarket Zeitz Ball event designed after the red-carpet event of the New York Met Gala. Blackman does not oppose the adoption of certain Western museum practices but argues that the wholesale replication of these traditions should come with critical thought around the translation of these for a local context and "must lie in its strength to do so, competing on equal terms and with equal academic interest and not an unsuccessful pale copy of the West" (2015). Blackman introduces his letter by wishing to declare his position, not as someone who may delight in merely placing themselves in opposition to so large and newsworthy artistic project, but whose critique is offered in the spirit of strengthening a potentially important institution with a long-reaching impact for art on the continent. "One of the criticisms that the ZMOCAA will inevitably face," he observes, "will be that it is merely a copy of a 'Western museum.' It is already a collection funded by a European (Jochen Zeitz), designed by a European (Thomas Heatherwick) and curated by a white male (Mark Coetzee)" (2015). Blackman received no response to his letter, and for the most part, local published news and opinion articles that led up to the museum's opening in 2017 were effervescent in their positivity with almost no cautionary criticality.

The Zeitz MOCAA website describes the museum as a “not-for-profit public institution”, yet the initial organisational structuring of the museum, including the private ownership of the building, the housing of a private collection of a singular individual, as well as the non-transparent policies surrounding new acquisitions suggest that this is very much more a private museum rather than a public institution. In a paper entitled ‘The Global Rise of Private Art Museums a Literature Review’, the five authors (who are predominantly, but not exclusively, situated in the field of sociology) observe that studies on this phenomenon are difficult to align due to the fact that many different disciplines engage the topic of private museums from alternate angles (Kolbe et al. 2022). One of the key factors they review is that definitions of what constitutes a private (as opposed to a public) museum may encompass a multitude of differing kinds of institutions, from private residences; school, religious or corporate collections; as well as institutions which, on the surface, seem to operate like public museums in terms of public access, but whose administration and management have any number of complex arrangements. Each of these private museums is subject to differing kinds of legal, professional, and accessibility standards, yet a common thread that may be observed in the extant literature distinguishing public versus private museums is the expectation that public institutions must in some way serve the public interest whilst this is not the requirement of a private institution (2022, p.3). While the minutiae of what distinguishes a public museum from a private one may have very different meanings for those involved in legal or policy-making fields, for the general public, the distinction might rest less on the legal structure and more on perceptions of how any such museum operates as an influence on the broader social and cultural sphere. Given the serious lack of funding for public museums in South Africa (and the continent more broadly), the potential power vacuum this creates for private museums and investors to take the position of cultural authenticators and validators looms large. As Kolbe et al. note, “the figure of the art collector as the distinguishing feature of private museums is a sign of the growing influence of collectors on processes of arts evaluation and legitimation” (2022, p.2). Blackman points to this in his open letter, not only in observing the art market influence in privately funded acquisitions but in the donations of similar collected work made by Zeitz (and/or Mark Coetzee) to the Iziko South African National Gallery (2015). Blackman rightly points out that ISANG might have declined the donations on ethical grounds, but limited resources for the museum make this position highly unlikely. He compares these donations to a form of colonialism in that a ‘foreign’ institution is inserting its narrative of art history into a national public museum. He argues that “this is not only creating a hegemonic distortion of history but also a distortion in the market, in that the stature of these artists is increased by the fact that they are now part of two prominent collections rather than one” (2015). The seeming philanthropy of these donations to ISANG thus might be seen as a means, not only

to bolster the cultural capital (and therefore the art historical importance) of the Zeitz MOCAA collected works, but also the market value of Zeitz's own personal collection.

Brown equally notes a general concern for the authenticity of art history in the rise in influence of private museums globally, particularly when an institution “lack[s] transparency and public accountability” (2019, p.6) but may nevertheless exert great influence due to their economic power. She suggests that “these developments risk the creation of an art history from above, where the financial power of a circumscribed demographic translates into the promotion of specific intellectual, social, and aesthetic values for uncertain periods of time” (2019, p.16). Sustainability is a genuine concern in the case of Zeitz MOCAA for whilst initial publicity claimed that Zeitz “will commit his collection in perpetuity, underwrite the running costs of the Museum and provide a substantial acquisition budget” (Art Africa, 2013), by the time of the official opening the story had changed. In September 2017, V&A Waterfront's CEO David Green told the press, “If we misled, we apologise ... It is a 20-year loan or Zeitz's lifetime, whichever is longer” (O'Toole, 2017a). Which works currently housed in the museum belong to Zeitz's personal collection and which were subsequently acquired for the museum's archive still remain unclear to the public as the extent of the loaned collection was never disclosed. The museum's website also makes no distinction or clarity on the individual works which form part of Zeitz's collection and which the collection of the museum.⁵⁷

To what degree Zeitz MOCAA is accountable to public interests, given many factors which qualify it as a private museum, can be difficult to untangle. Two points, however, may stand out in classifying the museum's public/private status. The first is a remark by Joachim Zeitz in which he describes the museum as “a public museum with a private collection ... It's not my museum or the Waterfront's—it's for Africa, Africans need to come on board” (cited in Jaggi, 2017). Secondly, as *ArtThrob* founder and artist Sue Williamson notes, Zeitz MOCAA is a registered NPO and, as such, is subject to the rules of the South African Nonprofit Organisations Act of 1997 in order to maintain this status and receive the associated tax benefits (2018). Quoting from this Act, Williamson observes that “one of the objectives of the Nonprofit Organisations Act is to encourage and support NPOs in their role towards meeting the diverse needs of South Africa's population, by inspiring them to maintain

⁵⁷ Curiously, the website's information tab ‘art and artists’ does not disclose specific works in the collection, as do the sites of other international museums with which it would like to be compared, but merely lists the artists collected. The only image of a work by these artists is typically a zoomed-in detail shot functioning as a decorative banner behind a photograph of the artist. Textual information focuses on the artists' biography with no detail on the importance given to any work collected. This underlines the brand identity of the artist rather than the importance of any specific examples of their work (see <https://zeitzmocaa.museum/art-artists/>).

adequate standards of transparency and accountability” (cited in Williamson, 2018). Whatever the legal status of Zeitz MOCAA as an institution, it is clear from statements made by both the V&A Waterfront management and Zeitz himself that the museum’s intention is to house a collection and run an institution for the public benefit, as such, it may be argued that transparency and accountability to the public in various institutional processes are imperative.

In 2018, Mark Coetzee was fired from Zeitz MOCAA following allegations of serious misconduct towards junior staff members and creating an abusive work environment (Villette, 2018). Blackman (2018) and Williamson (2018) both penned articles for *ArtThrob*, making several practical suggestions on how administration, museum policy, transparency, development programming, and curatorial research rigour could be improved in the wake of the scandal. Some of these suggestions are being addressed to a certain degree, according to the new executive director and chief curator, Cameroonian-born Koyo Kouoh. In a March 2023 interview, Kouoh mentions a ‘mobile museum’ set to tour marginalised areas in Cape Town and a research fellowship partnership with the University of the Western Cape “to train a new generation of African art curators” (cited in Cotterill, 2023). Both initiatives are, however, not immediately evident in visiting the museum’s website via either their education tab or press room. A Google search is required to reveal any information on the mobile museum, which produces only three relevant results: the article in which Kouoh is quoted, and two tabs on the Zeitz MOCAA website not signposted from the principal site.⁵⁸ The Zeitz MOCAA & University of the Western Cape Museum Fellowship Programme, now with its second year of fellows, has been widely publicised in terms of the individuals selected and the opportunities the course of study offers the fellows in academic qualification and work experience. The final presentation or practical results of this course of study for public interest is sadly under-advertised. The culmination event for the 2022 fellows, *trans*missions*, was a single afternoon symposium in which the fellows reflected on their work experiences relative to the museum’s curated exhibition *When We See Us: A Century*

⁵⁸ The first is a press release from February 2023 which announced that a prototype of the mobile museum would be on show at *Investec Cape Town Art Fair*, an event whose ticket price for entry is R150 - R460 depending on access level. A link is included for a brochure on the prototype but returns an error message that the file does not exist.

(See: <https://zeitzmocaa.museum/exhibition/workshop/zeitz-mocaa-mobile-museum/>)

The second link announces a two-hour family-orientated workshop, ‘Let’s make a mobile museum’ with education officer Amy Cornfield on 22 April 2023. The workshop is advertised as free for children, but they must be accompanied by an adult at R230 a ticket.

(See: <https://zeitzmocaa.museum/exhibition/family-children/family-learning-workshop-lets-make-a-mobile-museum/>). Images of neither event are archived online.

of *Black Figuration in Painting* but the event seems not to have generated a press release (only being advertised by two posts on social media) nor a publicly archived recording of the symposium. While the participants of the fellowship programme will undoubtedly receive considerable work experience, particularly in a museum large enough to house several departments (arts education, institutional advancement, curation, exhibition and collections management), there is still quite a gap between these relatively inexperienced young curators and some of the high-profile curatorial associates described on the museum's website with the rather ill-defined epithet 'curator at large' some of whom do not reside in Cape Town nor even on the African continent. In his article 'The Geist in the Granary: What Zeitz MOCAA must exorcise' Blackman quotes the museum's mission statement: "Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA) collects, preserves, researches, and exhibits twenty-first-century art from Africa and its Diaspora" (2018). The word 'researches' is one he feels raises many questions relative to the choices in programming at Zeitz MOCAA, particularly when compared to researched curated exhibitions in international museums. In an interview with the *Mail and Guardian*, Blackman describes the initial curatorial set-up of the museum:

at Zeitz it was only the head curator and then there were all these weird people called curators at large and adjunct curators—but they had nothing to do with the museum and its practices. They were just names on a piece of paper. And then there was this group of recent graduates who were on one-year contracts and were getting paid about R92 000 a year (cited in Arts Desk, 2018).

The discrepancy between the age and experience (or indeed on-the-ground participation) of the various individuals accredited with some responsibility in curatorial design is not the kind of healthy power dynamic which Blackman believes might encourage academic rigour and debate necessary for a museum of this scale. Williamson, in her article 'Zeitz MOCAA: The Way Forward', also points to this issue of a lack of "mid-level curators operating on a daily basis within the museum itself" (2018). While she applauds the hard work of junior staff members who fulfil multiple complex roles in the running of the exhibitions, she observes that "with its 80 galleries, it is clear that there is an enormous amount of serious curatorial work to do" (2018). In July 2019, Zeitz MOCAA announced the appointment of experienced curator Storm Janse van Rensburg as Senior Curator, and Tandazani Dhlakama as Assistant Curator (Olivier, 2019). In June 2020, Janse van Rensburg penned a sincere meditation on how the various research staff at Zeitz MOCAA were using the period of

Covid-19 lockdown to develop a series of individual research questions which resulted in fifteen different presentations to the group of staff “with case studies and references as a way for us to rethink, and improve on the way we work” (cited in Olivier, 2020). This article is one of the few times the broader public has been introduced to staff members and their roles in the daily management of the museum, as the website has no information on specific staff and their roles, only a list of the names of the trustees and global council members. Research questions from staff, Janse van Rensburg notes, included many pertinent issues around sustainability, communication, scope and reach via digital programming, the inclusion of African oral traditions, improving the open access of the museum library as a research resource, publishing and archiving, and inclusivity (Olivier, 2020). It would be very interesting to view some of these presentations, case studies and conclusions, but they are not publicly available. Many changes and improvements to the museum and its running will undoubtedly take time, and perhaps many more teething problems, given the still relative youth of the institution as an organisation. It cannot escape notice, however, that answers to many of the staff research questions, including sustainability, communication, digital (or should that be virtual?) programming, archiving, library access, and inclusivity, could be substantially addressed by improving the museum’s website. This seems highly necessary to align the museum with a degree of accessibility for the broad scope of African (and diasporic) publics it purports to represent but who may be geographically very distanced from a physical museum at the very tip of the continent.

One of the major challenges for the museum, particularly around perceptions of elitism and inclusivity, is its geographic location both in the city of Cape Town and its position in the tourist hub of the V&A Waterfront. Journalist Rebecca Davis notes that “placing an African art museum in the heart of what is now the most expensive real estate on the continent may seem to some to be fundamentally at odds with what such a museum should signify” (2017). Ultimately, however, she observes that the institution is a corporate venture as it is this economic capital which has afforded its development at this scale in the first place. This, she suggests, was made clear by V&A Waterfront board chair Elias Masilela who, at the official museum opening, described Zeitz MOCAA as “a museum in the heart of commerce” (2018). Kolbe et al. observe another recurring motif in certain literature on various kinds of private museums. This is how “private museums’ cultural offerings tend to be more market-oriented. Stressing the spectacular buildings of star architects, these studies also tend to highlight museums [as] recreational and entertaining rather than their curatorial or

conservation function” (2022, p.3). This observation would seem to align with Zeitz MOCAA due to its impressive building design, location in a high-trafficked tourist area, and generic still under-defined remit of collecting ‘Contemporary Art Africa’.⁵⁹ One of the research questions from Janse Van Rensburg’s Covid-19 workshop with Zeitz MOCAA staff that would be very interesting to hear reflections on, was asked by research assistant Phokeng Setai: “How does the museum re-inscribe Africa into a discourse, but without integrating it within a framework that did not have space for thinking about it?” (cited in Olivier, 2020). Whilst perhaps a little clumsy in its articulation, the question is nevertheless pertinent because what does it mean to be a contemporary African museum showing art from the continent and diaspora? Where and what are the limits of the definition of contemporary African art: geography, nationality of birth, race? How does one create a discourse around notions of African contemporary art if the framework itself is not being critically examined? Chief curator Kouoh is also not particularly clear on the scope of this in her interview with the *Financial Times*. Whilst declaring herself intrinsically a pan-Africanist, she also remarks, “I like to make the joke that America is just another African country, that Brazil is just another African country” (cited in Cotterill, 2023). This would seem to suggest that either the notion of African contemporary art is not one linked to geography or nationality (but the racial origin of the artist or some other kind of aesthetic or thematic quality in the artwork) or that the whole concept of this description for contemporary art is redundant.

Views on the merits of labelling contemporary art and artists with the qualifier ‘African’ are diverse, as can be seen in a series of quotations compiled by Corrigan in her report analysing the contemporary African art eco-system: *The Top 50 Artists & The Top 20 Curators Who Validated Them*. In response to the question: “Should African art be shown in isolation of art from elsewhere, as is the case with numerous survey shows?” the opinions of several curators are divided into three columns: Yes, Yes/No, No (2019b, p.35). Here, Kouoh is one of only two comments in the Yes column; both curators quoted motivating the need to create visibility for contemporary African artists, whom they feel are still underrepresented internationally. Those in the Yes/No column, however, see the labelling as a convenient means to gain international exposure but would ultimately prefer to do away

⁵⁹ I have not found any explanation, commentary on, or questioning as to why the museum is entitled ‘Museum of Contemporary Art Africa’ as opposed to ‘Museum of Contemporary African Art’. Whilst many languages place adjectives after the noun, these would still take the adjectival form: Art African. The primary language of the museum is English, something complexly problematic not only in South Africa with its eleven official languages, but in its lack of equal representation of the other broadly spoken colonial languages on the continent (French, Portuguese, German, Arabic, etc.) as well as the multitudes of African languages and dialects from 54 countries. The title thus scans as a brand name for which there might be assumed to be multiple branches: ‘Museum of Contemporary Art: Africa’.

with the label. Curator Paula Nascimento from Angola states that “I think it is probably a necessary step towards what we want—to have contemporary African artists in different exhibitions ... Ultimately, the goal would be to get rid of the label of ‘contemporary African art’ and deal with artists and the artists’ work” (cited in Corrigan, 2019b, p.35). Similarly, Rocco Orlacchio (curator of Voice Gallery in Marrakesh, Morocco) observes how the perception of his gallery as African can be useful when in Europe because the fact generates interest. At the same time, he remarks that “I don’t like the label ‘African’. I think it is a big limitation, and good artists are good artists, it doesn’t matter where they come from” (cited in Corrigan 2019b, p.35). Curators in the *No* column perceive the labelling of contemporary art as expressly African as a limitation or boxing in of a genre that should be allowed to develop alongside contemporary art from elsewhere. Hannah O’Leary, Head of Modern & Contemporary African Art at Sotheby’s London, notes that “I think it’s much more interesting to see African contemporary art being incorporated into international collections and international shows and stepping away from the kind of ‘Africa as a theme’, and just recognising these artworks as great artworks and these artists as great artists” (cited in Corrigan 2019b, p.35). Emma Mennell, curator of Tyburn Gallery (a commercial gallery in London), does not feel her stable of artists would prefer to be identified in this way and that the definition of African contemporary art is “limiting—we’re developing, we’re growing, we’re defining ourselves. I don’t think it’s necessary to put us in a box entirely” (cited in Corrigan 2019b, p.35). An examination of Tyburn Gallery’s stable of artists’ biographies reveals that all have some connection with Africa, but this is never expressly foregrounded, and the artists work in a diverse range of mediums with a variety of themes. If there is some similarity in aesthetics or style, this is likely to be the particular taste of the gallery owner (as might be viewed in any commercial gallery stable) rather than any specific national or cultural identifier. Senegalese curator N’goné Fall is more adamant in the rejection of the contemporary African art label for she sees it as a definition which carries a political charge. “Artists were like, hold on, why are you insisting that I’m African, and you’re not saying that that one is European,” she says, “is it because you want to keep me in that periphery and exotic box? That’s why artists have been resisting that” (cited in Corrigan 2019b, p.35).

The potential convenience of identifying as a contemporary African artist in opening opportunities for greater exposure, better platforms and more lucrative sales in Europe and the United States, may be one that is hard to resist. Valerie Kabov, curator of First Floor Gallery in Harare, observes in her interview with Candice Breitz and Zanele Muholi, ‘Do Artists Need to Leave Africa to be Successful?’ at Art Basel in 2017, that the divergent geographies, cultures, climates, languages and time zones that span the 54 countries on the continent of Africa make a taxonomy of Contemporary African Art (qualified by any idea of a

shared aesthetic) completely ludicrous. She considers the term a construction of the international art market, with its recent rise in investment interest the defining factor which has created the category. With the potential financial incentives of aligning one's art with this category, she notes:

an interesting side effect [in that] ... it has created a phenomenon of re-identifying with the continent by artists who have been living in the diaspora and who are now taking advantage of the art market's fascination with Africa to re-identify as African ... I have heard personally artists saying that there is, in fact, market pressure on them to do that (*Art Basel*, 2017, 10:20-11:11).

Breitz observes, from living many years in Europe, that "there is a certain expectation from the Western Market (which is predominantly American and European driven) that artists from outside of that system will perform their authenticity in certain ways" (2017, 11:40-11:50). She does not, however, believe that this is necessarily a mercenary strategy on the part of artists, but that it is rather "more of a function of the various kinds of meta critical or curatorial market forces which frame and present artists" (2017, 12:19-12:30). Muholi responds to the talk's title question that leaving South Africa to live permanently abroad is untenable to them. To do so would mean abandoning the local community for whom they are an activist. They observe that living abroad might lead one to forget the impetus of work connected to a particular community and losing "your politic or your personal politic" (2017, 7:05-7:07). At the same time, they note that a major factor of where one shows one's work is where there is a gallerist or a venue who is willing to show that particular kind of work, particularly if the content of the work may be perceived in some contexts as politically risky. Muholi is also careful to note that circumstances for individual artists may be different and that it is impossible for one individual to speak to all the variety of artists on the African continent. That all three speakers highlight the problems of thinking of Africa as a homogeneous space (with the same issues or limitations affecting a range of individual artists) makes one wonder who decided the title of the talk as each repeatedly argues against answering the terms of the question in a limited or overarching fashion.

One potential methodology to achieve visibility, resist the market forces imposed on artists working within commercial gallery spaces, and retain curatorial power over the nature of artwork produced has been to establish artist collectives. Gugulective (established 2006), a collective of artists, musicians, writers, DJs, rappers and poets active in Cape Town's eastern townships, had, for a few years, a modicum of success not only with their collective installations and photomontages, but with a series of talks, exhibitions and events hosted in

a shebeen called Kwa-Malmli's in Gugulethu. The idea of focusing on this venue being to exhibit work and present intellectual discussion in the space where the work was produced, rather than being drawn into the urban centre (Goodman Gallery, 2010). Similarly, the eleven black women who founded the iQhiya Collective in 2015 describe their aims to establish “a network for black female artists in Cape Town to offer each other support while gaining visibility in the art world” (Mashabela, 2017). What might, however, be noted with both collectives is that once certain of their members establish a particular degree of international recognition as solo artists, the productivity of the collective dries up. Gugulethu last had a collective exhibition in 2010, the year their member Kemang wa Lehulere won the MTN New Contemporaries Award.⁶⁰ Their social media feed thereafter becomes a sporadic list of press releases of artistic endeavours focusing on black consciousness and empowerment, but not necessarily events produced by members of the collective, and stops in 2020.⁶¹ iQhiya ceased working collectively or even posting on social media in 2019, the year two of their members (Bronwyn Katz and Buhlebezwe Siwani) were featured in ten separate international exhibitions.⁶² The political vision of artistic collectives can be hard to maintain for any group of individuals as the increasing responsibilities of adult life place greater emphasis on financial stability and begin to dilute youthful idealism. The allure of international markets (which may provide far more stability than local recognition) is thus a continual temptation to let go of collective ideals. The risk here is not just the inevitable maturation from emerging periphery to local establishment, where artists might still effect change and influence on the context from which they come, but that one might (despite the best of intentions) entirely embrace a life elsewhere and never return. Comaroff et al. observe how indigenous communities continually face tensions between commodifying their cultural production for economic benefit, and maintaining its collective value and authenticity:

it is primarily against something larger, against what is seen to be the rapacious tendencies of global capital that indigenous movements have grown up all over the planet to champion indigenous stewardship of the commons: to wit, local communities have increasingly taken strong, often eloquent, stands against the commercial erosion of their territories (2020, p.5).

⁶⁰ wa Lehulere was subsequently the recipient of a number of residency fellowships including Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern (2011); Ampersand Foundation Fellowship in New York, (2012); Swiss Arts Council Residency in Bern; and Resident at Rijksakademie in Amsterdam (2013). The receipt of such residencies and multiple other international awards and solo exhibitions would thus have removed him far from the context on Gugulethu as well as Cape Town for a very extended period. For a complete list see: <https://blankprojects.com/Kemang-Wa-Lehulere-Bio>.

⁶¹ See: <https://www.facebook.com/gugulethu.gugulethu>

⁶² See: <https://www.facebook.com/iqhiya/> and <https://www.instagram.com/iqhiya/?hl=en>

They note, however, that branding culture along ethnic identity lines may also often create ambivalence, as it simultaneously reinforces a particular construction of cultural identity, and subjects it to external economic pressures: “[t]he more power it packs ... the more the process of incorporation itself is subject to critique and argument over its ownership, efficacy, and implications” (2020, p. 4). For contemporary artists whose output may be inflected by local cultural experiences (but is not a product fashioned in a lineage of cultural tradition), debates around what would render the work true to one’s origins in order to maintain or legitimise a position within a collective, can limit individual artistic expression. Artists may thus end up self-exoticising (i.e. limiting their creative expression to that which becomes a performance of cultural identity) rather than being free to make work as a unique individual—a position which ironically reaffirms external market pressures. The tension between losing sight of one’s context (the means of inspiration for one’s work), and the promise of gaining greater exposure and better sales internationally is a continual difficulty for artists from countries where there are minimal exhibition platforms or local markets for artwork.

It is in light of this that Zeitz MOCAA, as a major new platform and purchaser of contemporary work, positioned itself as a means by which local artists might receive exposure and ensure significant works remain on the continent rather than being purchased by international museums. The categorising of contemporary art as African in a contemporary museum in Africa, however, still raises questions as for whom such a display might be designed (locals or tourists) as the adjective implies a difference from the same category of art without the adjective. Williamson, on the launch of the museum in 2017, observes the possibilities for the museum “to re-imagine the position which contemporary African art holds in the world right now, and to make Cape Town a fixed destination for curators wishing to see that art framed by local discourse” (2017). This statement suggests that the focus of the museum rests more on gaining global recognition than on the preservation of culture for the edification and education of local audiences. Art anthropologist and museum theorist Vibe Nielsen argues that the tension between global ambitions and local affinities may create a situation of ambivalence for artists exhibited at Zeitz MOCAA. Through a series of interviews with exhibiting artists, she observes how these artists felt themselves struggling to “achieve the right balance between being ‘African’ enough to fit under the sellable label of contemporary art from Africa and ‘global’ enough to be recognized as contemporary artists capable of competing with internationally renowned artists from elsewhere” (2023, p.82). A lack of debate, definition or curatorial vision on what constitutes contemporary African art (particularly from a local perspective) is compounded, Nielsen

suggests, by a desire for global recognition “a longing to be ascribed a positive status in a global world order still dominated by the legacies of colonialism” (2023, p.84). The positioning of Zeitz MOCAA in various speeches at the opening event, she observes, all seemed to be presenting a narrative of the platform as a first for Africa, the undercurrents of which may be disturbingly aligned with narratives of colonialism and corollaries of discovery, something which may also apply to the increased international investment interest in the genre of contemporary African art. “We built this museum so you can feel proud of who you are,” Coetzee told the school children attending the grand opening (cited in Nielsen, 2023, p.77). This statement suggests that his audience has no other means to feel a sense of national pride in the arts. British architect Heatherwick claims in Zeitz MOCAA's Audio Tour that the museum is “Africa's first place for contemporary African artists”, a statement which, as Nielsen rightly notes, ignores the long history of any public museums and private galleries on the continent. Citing Homi Bhabha, she observes how Heatherwick portrays himself as “a saviour of an old, derelict building in Africa ... [emulating] the approach of Africa's former colonizers who similarly claimed to be the first inhabitants of an otherwise empty and wasted land whose history had to be begun by European colonizers” (2023, p.86). In terms of selection criteria for the museum's inaugural exhibition, Nielsen was informed that the artists on show were selected on the basis of whether their “maker was either from Africa or the African diaspora or had worked in Africa for a substantial amount of time” (2023, p.82). One of the reasons given by Coetzee for the museum's focus on twenty-first-century African contemporary art is the decline in acquisitions by not only public museums but also private corporate collections, “so the 21st century has not been dealt with adequately. I think that's a role that we can fulfil. And if we don't commit to that right now, the work is not going to stay on the continent” (cited in Williamson, 2017).

It is always tricky for a museum to collect contemporary work, as insufficient time has passed to ascertain what of a multitude of present productions may stand the test of time. This idea will be explored further later in this chapter. The criteria for selection and the fear that important African contemporary art might leave the continent, however, do not adequately explain the motivation for Zeitz MOCAA's purchase and proud display at its inaugural exhibition of Liza Lou's *The Waves* (2013–17). Liza Lou is a white woman from Los Angeles, and whilst she has set up a studio in KwaZulu-Natal to generate work with local bead workers assisting her in her large-scale bead installations, it is unclear how these contributions might be accredited as creative cultural production as opposed to a labour force.



Liza Lou. 2013-2017. *The Waves*. Installation view. Zeitz MOCAA. Panels comprised of glass beads and nylon thread. (Zeitz MOCAA).

Lou's work with beading can be viewed on the website of Thaddeus Ropac, an international group of commercial galleries, where her interest in this medium can be seen extending as far back as 1995 when she made a series of beadwork portraits of US presidents.⁶³ Whilst there is no reason to suspect that Lou's assistants are not ethically treated nor adequately compensated for their labour, it is perhaps a stretch to suggest that the work is intrinsically African because its labour force is African, the work was made in Africa, or that the medium of the work is glass beads. Equally, none of the individuals whose identity seems to qualify the work as African, are credited by name. Apart from concerns around whether the work is expressly African, as a contemporary work, it is also hard to observe any great conceptual profundity or technical merit in the piece. Whilst the scale is impressive, the work and its associated artist statement give no clarity as to why the work should be regarded as ground breaking or exemplary of a defining moment in either contemporary practice or art history.

In Nielsen's interview with Nandipha Mntambo, the artist expressed disappointment that in Zeitz MOCAA's collection, "not every artwork is related to the continent and its cultural heritage" (2023, p.89). This perspective, Nielsen suggests, "reveals an essentialist understanding of Africa as a unity with a specific cultural heritage ... distinguished from the non-African and shared with Africans from elsewhere" (2023, p. 90). Whether one agrees or disagrees that there may be such an essentialism, this is the assumption that the taxonomy

⁶³ See: <https://ropac.net/artists/57-liza-lou/works/11918-liza-lou-american-presidents-143-19952000/>.

of contemporary African art makes by including the adjective African—the category Zeitz MOCAA claims to represent and thus should endeavour to define more clearly. Nielsen is correct in noting that whilst beads and the animal hide (which is a signature of Mntambo's work) may appear 'African' given many associations with traditional practices on the continent, the mediums are by no means exclusively African and are used by artists from multiple contexts (2023, p.89).



Nandipha Mntambo, Installation view of *Material Value*, Zeitz MOCAA. 2017. Sculpted cowhide.
(Zeitz MOCAA).

Mntambo, as a black woman born in Swaziland and now living and working in Johannesburg, may have several reasons for her practice to be aligned with an idea of African contemporary practice further than the materiality of her work. It is not her own representation in the museum that troubles her, but rather the many others who are omitted due to the inclusion of art and artists with very tenuous links to notions of contemporary African culture. A lack of a clear definition and centuries of colonial, geographic, and racial marginalisation on the continent is thus, as Nielsen notes, exacerbated by “exhibiting artworks under the sellable label of contemporary art from Africa, in a setting, where centuries of African material culture are neglected” (2023, p.90). Whether there is indeed a universal essentialism in what it means to be African is debatable. What can be observed in the history of the display of culture from the continent, is that it frequently fits poorly into Western modernist white-cube strategies of museum curation. This was a concern raised by commercial gallerist Michael Stevenson:

Often it has been asked if the high-modernist white cube form is appropriate, and MOCAA's position in this regard will be at the core of how the museum will come to be regarded. The term 'art' is fraught when seeking to understand creative imagination on the African continent because of the diverse backgrounds and training of African artists (cited in Sieff, 2017).

Nielsen's interview with artist Sethembile Msezane about her work *Signal Her Return I*, 2016, reveals some of these problems. The installation work consists of an eighteenth-century bell knotted with hair and surrounded by hundreds of candles.



Sethembile Msezane. 2016. *Signal Her Return I*. Eighteenth-century bell, hair, and candles. (Zeitz MOCAA).

Msezane informed Nielsen that health and safety regulations at the museum would not allow the installation's multitude of candles to be lit despite, as the artist claims, how "they stand like that in most Zulu homes and do not burn down the house!" (cited in Nielsen, 2023, p.88). More puzzling is the curators' refusal to dim the lights in the exhibition space as the artist would have preferred "to mimic the dim lighting of the township house in the Johannesburg suburb of Soweto where she grew up" (2023, p.88). Msezane thus felt she had to compromise her artistic vision in order to comply with the Eurocentric exhibition practices of the museum but was not willing to resist these at the risk of losing the opportunity of exposure for her work. This reticence to change the lighting for the installation speaks to a laziness in curation for it is not uncommon for contemporary artwork anywhere in the world to desire something different from the white-cube track lighting designed for paintings hanging on a wall. Whether this is to create a reference to a kind of place or mood, or simply to create a sense of drama in an installation, it is not an unusual request for an artist to make, so as to display their work in alignment with their creative vision. That the museum

has been able to make lighting compromises for artists with much higher public profiles suggests that the public image of the artist, rather than the quality of the individual work, will dictate the quality of curation it will receive. If the museum curatorship felt that Msezane's work was worthy of display, then the work should have received equal attention and consideration towards the artist's vision regardless of her emerging status or public reputation and not leave her feeling compromised: merely grateful for the opportunity to be selected.

Aside from the feelings of the artists, Nielsen questions whether Western-style museum practices necessarily do much for the museum itself as "the galleries look generic and much like contemporary art museums anywhere, and the internal spatial organization gives no indication that the museum is located in Africa" (2023, p.90). At the same time, she notes that as a contemporary museum, they might escape much of the criticism "galleries like the Iziko SANG, the JAG and the Standard Bank Gallery are exposed to from curators, who oppose their inclusion of so-called 'traditional' or historical African artworks" (2023, p.94). One does not, however, escape history by not including it, nor by failing to grapple with the politics of African art and culture historically displayed in museums as ethnography. Whilst Zeitz MOCAA's museum display is restricted to contemporary work, the contents of the museum shop downstairs are revealing of the kinds of visitors expected at the museum. Museum shops internationally have any number of ridiculously high-priced tat. For the most part, these are related to the museum holdings: one's favourite work on a poster, mug, T-shirt or tote bag. Perhaps more useful, are extensive catalogues from the museum's curated exhibitions, monographs on artists, or other related art books.



Items available for sale from the Zeitz MOCAA online shop. (Zeitz MOCAA).

The vast majority of objects for sale in the Zeitz MOCAA museum shop, however, are 'traditional African craft' orientated. Beaded jewellery, woven bowls, leather bangles, African print handbags and throw cushions, and wire-work animal ornaments are available at up to

ten times the price that they can be obtained at a local craft market, often from the makers themselves. While the museum has not 'elevated' these objects to museum artefacts, and thus encountered the complexities faced by older museums of decontextualising them and turning them into ethnography, they certainly do trade in them as tourist curios. What might this relationship between the kinds of objects for sale in the museum shop (as souvenirs of a visit to the museum) and the exhibited works (which are essentially branded by a market-orientated taxonomic classification of contemporary practice) say about the museum's intentions in curating contemporary African art?

This brings to mind concepts of *moral authenticity* discussed in the first chapter, as articulated by Carroll (2015) and Beveland et al. (2008). Whilst *moral authenticity* is essentially a form of sincerity in an alignment between intent and action/expression, it may be worthwhile to use the term as used by Carroll and Beveland et al. here, given their particular focus on manifestations of sincerity in corporate or consumer-type enterprises.⁶⁴ There seem many areas (which have thus far been observed) in which Zeitz MOCCA is not, in its means of production, lack of transparency, and the experience for artists and audiences alike, living up to its mission statement about collecting, preserving, researching, and exhibiting of twenty-first-century art from Africa, certainly not by the standards of any international museum which adopts far more rigorous processes. In addition, in its physical and its online shop, we may literally see what items are considered a worthy memento of the Zeitz MOCCA experience. Of course, there is nothing wrong with museum shops selling the odd generic tourism souvenir or partnering with local craft enterprises to create employment opportunities. That such items should predominate over items related to the museum and its art collection, however, particularly given the troublesome history of the hierarchy of art and craft in the African context, demonstrates not only a lack of *moral authenticity* (i.e. sincerity) but a complete lack of criticality in terms of the history of cultural artefacts treated as ethnography on the continent.

Whether Zeitz MOCAA will one day become a research powerhouse and significant platform for the validation, preservation and research of contemporary art in Africa as well as living up to the multiple claims in its vision statement around education, development, and broad access for the continent remains to be seen. What is apparent is that, for many, it occupies the space of a tourism curiosity for visiting Europeans and an extension of a marketplace for

⁶⁴ As a quick reminder here, Carroll defines *moral authenticity* as a sincere alignment between a producer's own moral code and the resulting production or experience they create for consumers, whilst Beveland et al. suggest this is a quality which rests on a producer's passionate interest in the product or experience they create rather than the financial incentive.

international investors interested in affirming trends in Contemporary Art Africa (whatever they think that means). Critique of the museum from artists on the continent may also be limited due to a lack of alternate high-profile venues or a perceived fear of the sway the museum may have to hamper the careers of those with dissenting opinions. This can be seen in an article for the *Mail and Guardian* by a trio of arts and culture editors who cite several individuals' negative experiences and opinions about the museum most of whom preferred not to be quoted by name (Sosibo et al. 2018).⁶⁵ Joseph Gaylard, former Director of the Visual Arts Network of South Africa and current Head of the Johannesburg office of the Swiss arts funder Pro Helvetia, is, however, substantially quoted. Gaylard's extensive experience in research, curatorship, arts management and funding, and associated policymaking lends some weight to the article, which might otherwise have come across as mere hearsay due to the majority of other quoted individuals wishing to remain anonymous. Of Zeitz MOCAA, Gaylard observes:

From the built form and location of the museum through to the approach to collecting and curating, the institution poses fundamental questions about what direction our cultural polity or body politic is moving in ... It takes the discussion about what public cultural institutions in contemporary South Africa and Africa could or should be into a place that is very far away from the lived experience of the vast majority of people here and elsewhere on the continent, and into a place that is very much wrapped up in the accumulation of various kinds of capital on the part of a small coterie of collectors, dealers, gallerists and anointed artists (cited in Sosibo et al. 2018).

Gaylard's overview of the institution points to the difficult uphill battle posed for any employee at Zeitz MOCAA who would sincerely like to take a more critical and complex approach to the institution's vision statement. Aside from the museum's wobbly start in poor organisational structure, lack of transparency, and an ill-defined thematic in its category of collecting one must battle other more complex and broader perceptions of its geographic location. Asked about her views of the museum, artist Mbadi Mdluli remarked, "If the museum is in Cape Town it should stay there ... Cape Town is really for those who can go to Europe and buy a freaking Picasso" (cited in Burke, 2017). Mdluli's comment reveals an

⁶⁵ It is interesting to note that the three authors of this article, Kwanele Sosibo, Milisuthando Bongela and Zaza Hlaethwa (whilst arts and culture editors) primarily focus their individual journalism on music, fashion and film rather than visual art. This may be one reason for the three joining together in the authoring of so brief an article so that they might share their overlapping knowledge in a field not strictly their primary remit. Or it may be that, despite their alternative fields of arts and culture interest, and because of their relative youth as journalists, there was a perceived security in not being the only author of the article.

opinion held by many South Africans and others on the continent that the city itself isn't quite 'African', being widely perceived as a tourism destination for wealthy Europeans. Issues on the need to focus on grassroots arts education and development, and how this is rarely associated on the African continent with museums are revealed in a statement by Ugandan curator Daudi Karungi: "You do a beautiful museum, but who is going to go there? This is not Europe where people go to museums all the time. What is urgent is the education of artists, the public, critics and collectors. People should celebrate [Zeitz MOCAA] but it doesn't mean it will make a significant difference" (cited in Burke, 2017). Karungi's view may illustrate both the problematic history of museums with issues of representation of culture for African audiences as well as a certain exhaustion with critique of such places some may feel when there is so much other important work to do for arts education on the continent. Whether critique of institutions like Zeitz MOCAA may lead to any positive critical or conceptual changes, or whether it is best left to take up its own private position as a tourist attraction, something that makes minimal impact for the vast majority of artists on the continent, is open for debate. What should be observed, however, is that silence is often taken as consent.

Utopia: the Museum as a No-place.

While all utopian worlds are built out of other worlds, only better, the museum literally takes the world apart at its joints, collects the pieces, and holds them in suspension. Identified, classified, and arranged, objects withdrawn from the world and released into the museum are held in a space of infinite recombination.

—Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *The Museum: A Refuge for Utopian Thought*.

Whether Zeitz MOCAA, in focusing on contemporary art from the twenty-first century, has either escaped certain kinds of critique levelled at older museums which curate African art and culture, or perpetuated colonial ideas regarding which forms of culture from the continent might be elevated to the status of art and what might be excluded or compromised (due to their inability to fit neatly into modernist Western museum practices of the white cube) has been variously explored by critics in the previous section. What they all agree upon, however, is that a greater degree of curatorial rigour is required in approaching what a display of contemporary art in Africa, or representing African culture, might look like. In order to interrogate this further, it will be useful to consider some of the history and challenges faced by the display of African culture in museums influenced by traditional Western models and the politics of representation these create.

In her essay 'The Art Museum in Africa—a Utopia Desired?', art historian Anitra Nettleton observes the nature of museums as no-places: utopias which, whilst they preserve the material objects of culture, are in their selecting and editing of these objects, freezing only partial aspects of nature, culture or history. She notes that, in museum archives, objects of interest "are 'filed' in particular repositories, wrapped or laid out, and pinned like dead butterflies into cultural immobility" (2013, p.415). Here, she echoes MacCannell's sentiment that museums, through the act of preservation, inevitably separate these artefacts by placing them unnaturally as apart from, or higher than, their contextual origins. Archaeological theorist Sven Ouzman also observes this stripping of context when objects of material culture are displayed in the museum by noting that "museums violate one of the key tenets of archaeology—the importance of context" (2006, p.274). The display of archaeological artefacts, whose age and usage are often only determined by expert knowledge such as synchronous finds in the same layer of soil, or close scientific analysis of decomposed material residue (on or around the object), must then necessarily find other ways to convey this circumstantial information.

This contextual separation of cultural artefacts takes an even more extreme form, Nettleton argues, in the context of art museums where objects of primarily aesthetic value (art) are separated from objects which may also carry a functional value (craft). She suggests that this distinction, fundamentally a Western aesthetic tradition, ascribes a lack of authenticity to craft objects as their functional nature renders them somehow inferior due to their relationship "to repetition, to revision and to an apparent or supposed lack of individuality or originality" (2013, p.416). The art museum thus creates a hierarchy of aesthetic objects, one which, she argues, "excludes not only most of the aesthetic production of those parts of the world in which distinctions between art and functional objects were not made, but also the more numerous forms of Western popular and folk art" (2013, p.416). This segregation of objects whose designed purpose is primarily aesthetic contemplation from those aesthetic objects which also serve some daily functional or ceremonial purpose has long plagued the concept of the museum in previously colonised nation-states. Nettleton observes that, in many African countries, there is little distinction between the art museum and the museum of cultural heritage, where objects of antiquity, historical cultural heritage, and contemporary artistic expression are all gathered in the same building (2013, p.416). In African countries where such distinctions are made, she notes that these countries have a history of a larger European settler community. In countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, art museums were initially set up with examples of European Fine Art and later acquired work from their white settler communities. Creative work from local black communities was, in contrast, relegated to museums of ethnography. When these latter types of museums

attempt to include contemporary works of art by individuals from the cultures whose historic traditions they seek to preserve, she argues that this inclusion of more modern forms of work “simply act to turn these artists’ works back into Ethnography” (2013, p.417). The received European model of the museum in the postcolonial context thus either perpetuates divisions in cultural artefacts between the aesthetic and the functional (and with this divide is carried a classist and/or racist schema by holding one form of creative expression as superior to the other), or postcolonial museums of modern and contemporary art are delimited to forms of cultural expression within a relatively short time frame i.e. “the colonial or postcolonial periods” (2013, p.418). How, then can one create a museum of art in an African context without perpetuating the problematic hierarchical divisions between aesthetic and functional creative works or limiting the temporal scope so that it would appear as if creativity did not occur in these contexts prior to colonisation?

The no-place of the museum as an archive of a particular culture, as has been observed by Degan, shares an ideology with constructions of the nation-state. Degan draws a comparison between how the ideology of the nation-state and the authority of the museum are both defined by, and come to rely on, constructions of authenticity (2012, p.167). Nettleton suggests, however, that these constructions are equally informed by an imagined invention in that “the making of national museums is in itself driven by a utopian desire or impulse, built on the fantasy of a united and singular population, a nation” (2013, p.418). In the postcolonial context, particularly in countries with a strong history of settler and immigrant populations, any singular idea of national identity becomes fraught with the multitudes of histories, re-examinations of marginalised histories, and the contemporary realities of people who (in some cases now mixed in their heritage) might identify with any one or other group, or none at all. In a museum, representing both the historic and contemporary creative outputs of divergent cultural groups in a society such as South Africa (though it is hardly alone in its complex cultural multiplicity) may become unwieldy, particularly when potentially another hierarchical structure raises its head: whose work or culture is more authentic in expressing a nationalist identity, and therefore, most worthy of collecting? When identity politics become a broad thematic which informs curatorial selection, does this not then presuppose that the most preferred exemplars of artistic or cultural production, for the purposes of furthering nationalist agendas on cultural identity, are those which take a self-reflexive approach to demonstrating this formula of identity (rather than a more personal or individual narrative) i.e. works which, despite the globalisation of contemporary culture, somehow perform their cultural identity rather than contemplate more universal human themes from a personal perspective? Such a curatorial vision runs the risk of turning contemporary praxis back into ethnography, for the focus is not on what the work

says (or leads its audience to think about their own lives) but on who has made the work and whether this person's identity aligns with the object under contemplation as an authentic cultural expression.

In addition to these hierarchies of cultural objects, Nettleton raises another difficulty in representing cultural artefacts which have not been designed for the Western conception of art as strictly aesthetically contemplative. Once these are placed in a museum, the need to contextualise the objects potentially becomes overweening. In museums of the ethnographic, the context of cultural objects is frequently illustrated by dioramas "in glass cases, often accompanied by the living dead in the form of mannequins" (2013, p.422), a strategy which Nettleton suggests "ends up foregrounding its own artifice" (2013, p.423). Ouzman notes that the desire to overtly contextualise these objects, often via wordy information boards (which he calls a "tyranny of text"), ultimately becomes misleading as it is a "glossing [of] detached objects with text [that] compounds confusion" (2006, p.247). Rather than elucidating the meanings of an object, extensive use of text may run a kind of interference which locks down the experience of the object to an officially sanctioned understanding. In postcolonial environments, he suggests that the use of text (as explicative definers of decontextualised objects) may, in fact, create a kind of alienation from cultural objects because "the limitations of language are marked in postcolonial contexts where many people cannot or will not read" (2006, p.274). Apart from matters of literacy, this observation also raises the issue of which language should be utilised. The option to include multiple languages by way of democratising the experience adds to the textual noise, which drowns out the experience of the object itself. Ouzman suggests that museums of cultural history, archaeology and ethnography might benefit from borrowing a strategy:

more common to art galleries than to museums [that is, to] display objects unencumbered by text stressing the incommensurability of writing about objects. Feelings of wonder and a greater appreciation of the object as material manifestation are the fruits of such a tactic (2006, p.275).

Ouzman, here, emphasises the importance of the viewer's own experience of cultural objects by limiting the explanation of how they should be read and leaving a gap for interpretation. The viewer's experience is thus heightened by the act of contemplation and deciphering or relating to the object on a personal level. That cultural objects should be deemed to require extensive explanation of context, presents the question: for whom, exactly, are these collections on display? For historical items, there is often a necessity for some illumination on the use or circumstances in which an object was found as these

artefacts are removed, not just from a particular cultural context, but may have meanings which have been lost to time. Certain objects of antiquity are, however, unknown in their function and therefore, any explanation is merely speculative. The educated guess about an object's function may carry more weight than the uninitiated contemplation, but this places an unnecessary burden of proof on objects as pristine examples, rather than fragmentary residues, of culture and history. Ouzman suggests that, in such cases, it is far "better to foreground the object's right to exist as an interesting but sometimes unknowable and unknowing entity ... [through which] we may have a more modest but honest view of material and human agency" (2006, p.280). Ouzman thus encourages curatorial strategies which let go of strictly defining objects and instead present them as a site of shared speculation and contemplation. These strategies of display may thus inspire curiosity and active thinking in the viewer about the nature of objects and their meaning (in relation to lived experience) in a way that dictatorial definition will not do. Denuded of over-explanation, contemplation thus becomes a conversation or a creation of a *zone of contact* where an audience may bring their own meditations on human experience in relation to an object, however culturally or temporally displaced. Ouzman suggests that this more subtle approach to defining objects in the museum may also lend agency to the object for:

Having imputed into you the capacity to speak for whole cultures and epochs is an enormous responsibility. As a fragment with specific life histories, an object necessarily embodies temporality, but [is] often fragmented with imperfect knowledge of its context (2006, p.280).

His position on objects possessing agency in this way may seem a strange kind of anthropomorphising to some readers, yet, as he notes: "acknowledging an object as a living entity or having life potential accords with many indigenous conceptions of material culture embodying sentience" (2006, p.277). When the objects we gaze upon have been made with this tradition in mind, is it not inauthentic to present them as if they were merely things and not objects that live? The contemplation of objects as synecdochal of their cultural contexts of origin requires objects to speak to us of these connections. The closer this 'voice' may get to the material objects themselves (as experiential representations), the less requirement there is for text to operate as imperfect translation. With a mind open to 'hearing' this material interpretation, objects may thus communicate to an audience a shared human importance of their functional, ritualistic or empathetic resonance. It inspires a curiosity that asks a viewer to put themselves in the place of the makers and users of these objects, to remember or imagine what and how they were used by a fellow human being.

Whilst a certain amount of information may be necessary to provide an inroad to understanding an object, too much textual explanation places the object at a remove from this experiential openness.⁶⁶ This sets the objects up as foreign, as made by people whose way of life is so incommensurate with our own that we cannot be allowed to imagine and therefore decode or empathise with what might well be cultural artefacts from our own respective traditions. Even in the contemporary art museum, such dictatorial text may turn the art object (or the identity of its maker) into a kind of ethnography, a failure of trust in human empathy, where the artist's origin, background and intent must be explained to us because we are expected to be so culturally numb.

Issues of conservation (and fear of theft or deliberate damage), however, have limited the possibility of utilising multiple human sensory capacities for exploring objects in the museum. This taboo of touching the works, or standing close enough to smell them (often expressly dictated by signage, glass cases, alarms which sound if one stands too close, or custodians who will have you removed if you do anything but look) has thus placed an emphasis on the visual experience in the museum. The predominance of the visual (as opposed to other senses) as a means of negotiating the utopia of museums is one that Nettleton observes has a complicated history in the tradition of Western art museums. Citing Classen and Howes (2006), Nettleton recounts how touch was often a primary sense when experiencing objects in European museums prior to the 20th Century. This tactility, however, was more frequently employed when engaging artefacts:

obtained from peoples indigenous to other parts of the world to demonstrate cultural and supposed character differences ... Tactility was opposed to rationality, reason to sensuality, and indigenous peoples' artefacts were thus more susceptible to the senses than were paintings or even sculptures from the West (Nettleton, 2013, p.417).

If one ignores the racist suppositions made about the tactility of these indigenous objects or the incumbent fantasy about 'primitive noble savages' somehow more sensuous in their creative artefacts, there is a simple design reason for an emphasis on tactility. Many of these objects were made to be held, used, or even performed. It is a function of their design to be tactile, for they are not made, as Western academic painting is, just to be seen, but to

⁶⁶ Discrete labels containing information such as Maker (if known and/or culture/place of origin), Date (of creation), Title (or function), Medium (particularly where this is not self-evident) is sufficient to reveal enough speculation about a work. Occasionally, brief information about the conditions of an object's discovery (for archaeological objects) may be relevant when something is found in an unusual, or unexpected location or circumstances. These accompanying narratives, however, become a tale of their own and are not necessarily an explanation of the object, but may inspire more imaginative speculation.

be touched, smelled, moved, and possibly heard. These multisensory aspects are a part of their construction, and many of them may require use to keep them in working order: the immersion in water to prevent certain materials from drying out, the application of animal fat to maintain suppleness or prevent deterioration by invasive species, the playing of instruments to keep them in tune. Even the sweat and oil from human hands may be used to keep certain objects in working order and requires regular application to build up a protective patina. These methods of alternative conservation for functional objects are not only anathema to the Western tradition of classical painting, but positively dangerous for these artefacts as the same sweat and oil which preserves a wooden implement or leather surface will corrode and potentially destroy an oil painting. Nettleton notes that a change in position about the appropriateness of touch in the museum ironically coincided with the European export of museums to the colonies at the end of the nineteenth century. In these contexts, indigenous objects were displayed without the tactile or multisensory experience previously employed in Europe, rendering them culturally inert “even though they were on display in places nominally accessible to the African peoples who had made and used, and therefore handled them extensively before they came to this resting place” (2013, p.417). This detached display of objects which are culturally understood as functional, or parts of life with a greater (potentially spiritual) significance than might be perceived through a glass case, can only have had an alienating effect. These early museums were not originally designed for the indigenous cultures whose artefacts they collected but for the education and edification of the white settler communities who wished for their own mini-version of European museums. Often labelled or explicated in captions with language that echoed the primitivising attitudes of early white colonial audiences towards indigenous people, one may observe how these artefacts were displayed with a distinct audience in mind, i.e. not the people who had made these objects or the audiences the makers had in mind. When this strategy of explaining objects via text is utilised for more contemporary objects, this kind of contextualising again suggests that the museum anticipates viewers who are not of, or from, the culture from whence these objects originate. When objects are expressly made for a contemporary art museum context (which has become global in many of its cultural conventions), the need to explain the work becomes positively bizarre. Again, who are these works for, if it is deemed that they need such textual explanation?

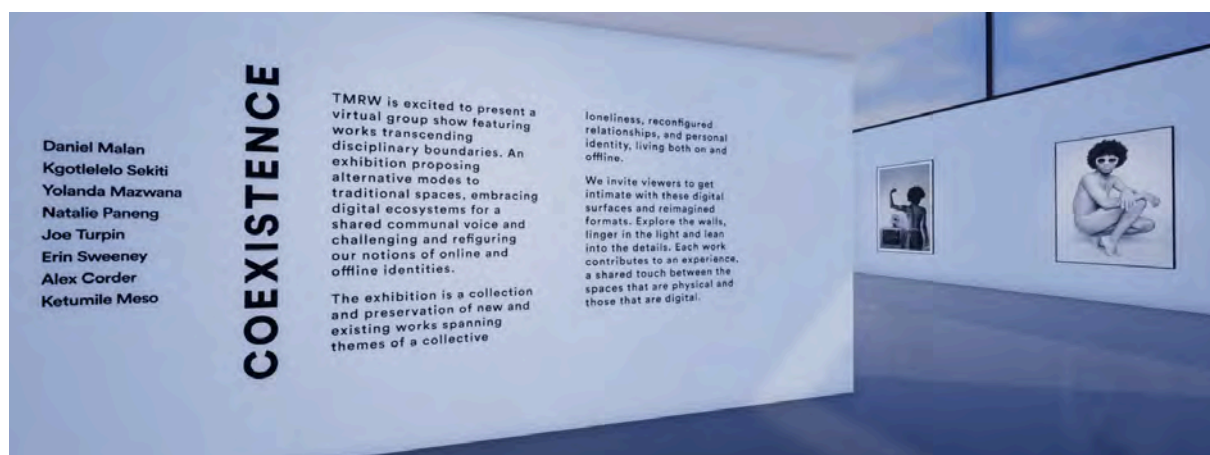
Despite Ouzman’s observations about the more minimal approach to the use of text in art museums, this curatorial strategy has taken the complete opposite direction in recent years with more and more use of text, often scaling the written word up so it becomes an entire wall feature. Art museums (perhaps concerned about viewer visual literacy) have increasingly sought to contextualise even the work which is expressly designed for white

cube gallery spaces. Despite the pitfalls of excessive text as a reductive curatorial strategy, its use is actively encouraged. This can be observed in a critique by Williamson of the debut opening exhibition *All Things Being Equal* (2017) at Zeitz MOCAA, in which she suggests that the absence of textual accompaniment was a fundamental flaw of the exhibition. She notes that “the lack of an exhibition catalogue was a serious problem, one exacerbated by the absence of wall texts contextualising individual artist’s works” (2018). Certainly, as Williamson observes, catalogues are useful records of major exhibitions. They operate as an in-depth interface between the public, the curators and their vision (presumably accompanied by some degree of research), and the work itself. Including academic texts by other writers which consider the theme (sometimes tangentially or poetically), as well as more information on the artists and the conceptual merit of selected work, catalogues may add further context to the exhibition. Catalogues are, however, addendums, academic tools, and archives of past exhibitions—a kind of behind-the-scenes bonus feature—and should in no way be explanations or translations of live physical events. What perhaps incited the critique from Williamson was not so much the absence of a catalogue or explanatory wall texts, but a complete absence of a curatorial vision which a critic of Williamson’s experience should be able to read in the works and their placement without a need for textual explanation. That she looked around for some orientation in the curatorial narrative via text suggests that she couldn’t find it by any other means: in the juxtaposition of objects, titling, taxonomy, or sense of an exploratory journey where each of the works becomes a clue in a physical navigation through the museum space.

Excessive use of didactic contextualising narratives not only reveals a lack of faith in one’s curatorial vision and an audience’s intelligence but may disrupt any kind of multisensory immersive experience in the space of the museum. Nettleton also observes the distracting nature of the attempt to recontextualise art objects via hermeneutic text. She notes that artist statements, curator statements, audio tours, interviews with the makers and explanatory videos overwhelm the visitor who “is liable to become so caught up in reading both the display and the text, listening to audio guides, watching videos and so on, that the object gets lost in a morass of information” (2003, p.423). Nettleton suggests that both the textual adages and the fake immersive environments, far from “reinstat[ing] the work in a supposedly ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ place of contemplation or use” (2013, p.423) in fact, highlight the de-contextualisation of the creative artefact in the utopia of the museum. I would add that these excessive accompaniments, rather than orientating the culturally uninitiated, instead, alienate the visitor. Either this quantity of text is overwhelming in the amount of reading the scale and scope suggest is imperative to understand the exhibition, or

it is insulting in its implication that the viewer cannot be left to make up their own mind about how the creative objects resonate with their own world view or particular cultural heritage.

Ouzman notes that “this privileging of language over object stresses an outsider-looking-in stance that does not adequately reference the object’s originator community, temporality or geography” (2006, p.274-275). The use of text to reinforce some kind of context for work in a decidedly literal fashion ultimately breaks the spell of immersion in discovering the work for one’s self. This curatorial strategy presupposes a position for the viewer, one where he is cast as an outsider who must be *told* what the work is about, thus suggesting that the cultural objects are not relatable for the life experience of the presumed viewer.



Coexistence. (2020). Installation view of virtual group exhibition. The Mixed Reality Workshop (TMRW), Johannesburg. (*Bubblegum Club*).⁶⁷

As a solution to the quandary of how to present objects of art, craft and material culture in postcolonial contemporary museums, both Nettleton and Ouzman suggest a return to (or rather a reclamation of) curatorial strategies of the “eighteenth-century European Wunderkammer” (Nettleton, 2013, p.424) or the “curiosity cabinet” (Ouzman, 2006, p.292). Whilst both acknowledge the painful history of such collections as colonial devices which sometimes sought to “exoticize and denigrate” (Ouzman, 2006, p.292) the cultural artefacts of foreign places, perhaps by employing these strategies on all cultural artefacts, we might inspire some of the more innocent intentions of these display strategies: curiosity as a verb

⁶⁷ *Coexistence* was a virtual group exhibition put together during the Covid-19 lock-down by The Mixed Reality Workshop, a gallery and project space in Johannesburg which focuses on the intersection of Virtual Reality or Augmented Reality technologies with physical works of art. Although entirely virtual, (and therefore able to communicate the curatorial statement via simpler means) this exhibition includes a virtual giant vinyl wall text alongside a 3D-modelled visitors’ desk to emulate the real-life experience of visiting a gallery, underlining how normative this device has become. While vinyl texts have long been used for exhibition titles and the names of exhibiting artists, they are more frequently being used to describe the purpose of the exhibition at increasing scale and great expense, often adding very little to the context or meaning of the display.

on the part of the viewer (a desire to know) rather than a noun applied to an object and thus a form of exoticisation. In juxtaposing objects of history, function, aesthetic contemplation and contemporary art, Nettleton suggests that the museum might “override the boundaries of disciplines, to create different sets of boundaries which can be dismantled as quickly as they are set up, to create a roll-over of utopian visions which ... inevitably critique the status quo” (2013, pp.424-425). Ouzman observes that these more multisensory exploratory approaches to museum display “by emphasizing nontextual more performative ways of conveying knowledge, and by representing the past and present, ... helps retain the elements of wonder and awe that are often strangled out by cookie-cutter design languages” (2006, p.292). Ultimately, whether one takes a more minimalist or a more baroque approach to this juxtaposition of objects, it is through this elision and collision of cultural artefacts that curatorship begins to weave the possibility of story. By encompassing a sense of time, as well as people and place (in a comparison and contrast), a narrative may begin to be drawn out by each viewer in terms of the juxtaposed fragments, images and objects. This curatorial strategy is one that should be performed through object and image selection and placement, not dictated through text, so that the museum, whilst it might remain a utopia (and as such a place, is thus perfectly imaginary), nevertheless becomes a no-place which inspires imagination. Well-researched immersive stories, not explanatory speeches, are what curatorship is all about. And there is an art to that.

Narrating the World: A History.

The subject of the museum is the past; its collections are the embodiment of art history. It is as art history that the museum is on solid ground, in respect to both its function and its competence ... the closer the museum approaches to the present the shakier becomes the foundation on which it operates.

—Harold Rosenberg, *Art on the Edge*.

The need to create extended contextual narratives for museum objects may be ill-placed in the context of a museum where the viewer’s physical and multisensory experience of objects and images should be primarily engaged by the artefacts themselves and whatever sensory *aura* they project. Creative strategies in the presentation of contextualising research via museum websites and audio narration can, however, increase the reach of curated exhibition programmes beyond the physical space of the museum. These almost always work better when they are a separate, stand-alone, creative endeavour rather than some form of supplementary or accompanying description which would distract from the physical experience of such exhibitions. A useful example of this can be seen in the radio and

podcast series: *A History of The World in 100 Objects*. In January 2010, on BBC Radio 4, the director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, began to narrate this series. The ambition of the programme was to tell a version of “humanity’s history through the objects we have made” (BBC, 2010a). Each episode focuses on a particular object from the British Museum collection, which is unpacked through MacGregor’s description of its context of origin, its social (and sometimes political) significance, and its (occasionally speculated) original function. Through a broad overview of time and place, this series tells a story of human-made objects that range from an approximately two-million-year-old, stone chopping tool originating from the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania (the oldest human-made object in The British Museum), to a twenty-first-century Muslim credit card, compliant with Sharia law. The series includes objects from across the globe, and from various points of history. MacGregor frequently weaves in events in history which may seem separate, but relate to the object under discussion. One particular example of this is an artefact whose history of acquisition and cultural assimilation has been literally carved and stamped upon it: a wooden Sudanese slit drum. Originating in Southern Sudan, this buffalo-shaped drum would originally have been used for special occasions, to transmit messages over long distances, and to call warriors to war. It was brought north with the slave trade to Muslim Khartoum, where it was rebranded with Islamic designs carved across its body. British Museum curator Chris Spring, notes of these carvings that:

On one side, the designs are incised, though interestingly, they are carved in relief on the other, a process requiring the removal of a good deal of wood, thus radically altering the sound of the gong as well as its visual appearance (BBC, 2010b).

This physical transformation of the object has thus changed not only the object’s visually signified allegiance, but also its ‘voice’. In this episode, an additional element of experience is added when the drum is played so that the audience can hear what it sounds like, and are also invited to imagine how this might have changed in the object’s physical alteration (BBC, 2010b). After the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, the drum was found by the conquering British army. Their commanding officer, Lord Kitchener, had the object stamped with a little crown denoting it as the property of Queen Victoria. When the drum entered the British Museum in 1937, it was again emblazoned with its acquisition registration number.



Sudanese slit drum. late nineteenth century. The British Museum. (BBC: *A History of the World in 100 Objects*).

The *aura* of this object is thus perceptible not only in the distance between its original context and its museum display, but through all the additional anecdotes which have been inscribed on its form to demonstrate provenance and passage through history. Removed from its original context and significantly altered, this drum nevertheless tells a bigger story of different intersecting societies, wars, colonialism, travel, religion and the various moments in this journey where the object was reappropriated and assimilated through literal markings on its form. Whilst many other aspects of the physical object may be apparent to someone viewing it live, these changes through history, and the literal branding and stamping to denote a change of ownership, may not be. A narrated story thus becomes a useful means to convey this information and add context via a different platform for the object. MacGregor, in his narration of the series, notes the desire of this curatorial project to draw connections between objects by way of narrative:

Telling history through things, whether it's a mummy's coffin or a credit card, is what museums are for. And because the British Museum has collected things from all over the globe, it's not a bad place to try and tell a world history ... it can only be *a history*, not *the history*. When people come to the museum, they choose their own objects and make their own journey around the world and through time. What they will find is that their own histories will intersect with everybody else's. And when that happens, you no longer have a history of a particular people or nation, but a story of endless connections (BBC, 2010c, 4:17-4:55).



Detail of tail of Sudanese slit drum showing stamp of Queen Victoria. The British Museum.
(BBC: *A History of the World in 100 Objects*).

This series (now available as a free downloadable podcast) was somewhat unusual for two reasons.⁶⁸ The first was the extremely broad curatorial vision it took as an overview of a history of humanity. Museum displays in the contemporary era are much more likely to be arranged by a more specific taxonomy of time/place origin: delineated by a national, historic or ethnographic categorization, via functional type (e.g. farming tools, musical instruments) or some other ordering drawn from scientific classification which denotes taxonomic rank: kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species. These types of museum displays render the objects in them as examples of a particular category, rather than samples with an external referent: the collector or the original context of collection. *A History of the World in 100 Objects* takes a different approach by presenting a curatorial vision which seems more similar to old-fashioned, privately-owned curiosity cabinets—the predecessors of many now publicly orchestrated collections.⁶⁹ Taken individually some of these selected objects are

⁶⁸ This curatorial strategy (often taking a literary format) has since gained much popular appeal as a kind of scavenger hunt of history, sign-posted by souvenirs whose narrated context is utilised to illustrate a broader sense of world order. *The Smithsonian's History of America in 101 Objects* by Richard Kurin (2016), *The Story of the World in 100 Species* (2016) by Christopher Lloyd, *A History of America in 100 Maps* (2018) by Susan Schulten, and *The History of the World in 100 Animals* (2020) by Simon Barnes are just some examples in recent years.

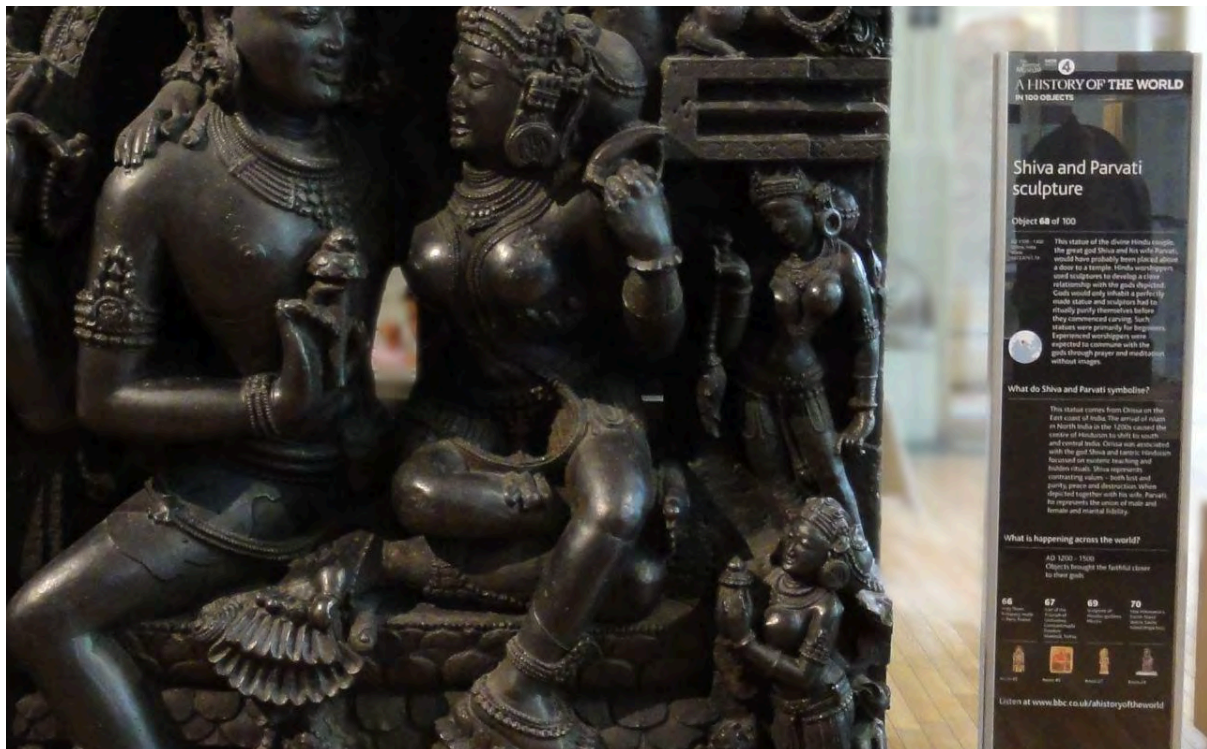
⁶⁹ The British Museum itself began its life in this way: absorbing the collections of the Anglo-Irish physician and scientist Sir Hans Sloane. The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology and Pitt Rivers Museum were both the result of donations of private collections to Oxford University. Elsewhere in Europe, the Grünes Gewölbe in Dresden, Fondation Calvet in Avignon, Teylers Museum in Haarlem, Kunstkamera in St Petersburg, and Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan are just some examples of private collections of art, antiquities, science and natural history that evolved into public institutions.

functional, some ceremonial, some are works of art, and others are political statements. Woven together, they suggest a world vision that is much more interlinked and globally relational to other contemporaneous historic events than more siloed histories of the world often suggest. Although each object ranges from across space and time, the programme still contains a singular thread in the only determining factor governing their selection: that they are human-made objects evoking a history of human beings.

The second unusual curatorial strategy was the focus, not only on the individual objects in their material form, but on the narrative these objects evoke with contributions from various historians, archaeologists, and other cultural theorists about issues that flesh out the context of the object as a cultural and/or historic signifier. Whilst audio tours in museums are not uncommon, they usually function as addendums to what is on display. Their focus is on explaining, or contextualising, the exhibits and are designed to be listened to in the context of the museum.

In *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, the focus is on an overarching narrative of human history of which the curated objects are but souvenirs. Each object is described in objective detail but to this is added the various speakers' own more personal or emotive reactions to the objects. It is entirely possible to listen to the series without visiting either the museum or even its website to view the photographs of each object. The narrative of this exhibition thus travels out, and away from the museum in its physical form, to become a story which can be heard in almost any context. In the context of the museum, the objects in this series are accompanied by relatively little written description. The information panel merely details (in less than 500 words): the original context of the now displaced object, its circumstances of acquisition or discovery, and minor details about its potential use or symbolic value (if known) in its original cultural context. This textual accompaniment thus acts as a map key or footnote of additional information and at no point attempts to supersede (or box-in) the physical experience of the object, either through a narrow definition of its meaning, or predominance of scale of the written word.

See: Alexander, E. 1995. *Museum Masters: Their Museums and Their Influence*, and Impey, O. 2001. *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*.



Shiva and Parvati sculpture. Object 68 with contextual information panel. The British Museum.
(BBC: *A History of the World in 100 Objects*).

One must, of course, acknowledge the particular privilege a museum such as the British Museum has to be able to present such a vast overview of a history of world objects. This collection is well-financed and long-standing (established in 1753), and thus its archive is the product of several centuries of collecting, often by ethically dubious means of conquest and colonial rule. What might be more relatable for smaller, younger, or less well-financed institutions is a follow-up episode commissioned by BBC Radio 4 in 2020. Released on Christmas Day 2020, and titled *Object 101*, the aim of this episode was to reflect on the past ten years since the series finished, and select an object which would be exemplary of what has been a rather tumultuous decade. MacGregor explains:

Radio 4 asked me to select a further object. *Object 101*. Something made since 2010 and brought into the collection of the British Museum. Something that, in fifty or a hundred years' time, will capture this last decade. Which, by then, will merely be a blink in the eye of history (BBC, 2020, 3:04-3:24).

In this statement, MacGregor highlights what is distinctly tricky in archiving objects of material culture as examples of a particular contemporary moment in history when that moment is still ongoing. Museums with the resources of the British Museum may collect and catalogue multiple objects that may only be displayed once a certain amount of time has passed. For smaller museums, or those with limited acquisitions budgets, one cannot simply collect

multiple objects in the hope that time will tell whether these have been a wise investment or not. Rosenberg points out that the museum's underlying foundation is one based on a notion of history; this is in part why the matter of authenticity, particularly of the *material* kind is such an important remit for such institutions. When the focus of history approaches a more contemporary moment, and the matter of a work's *conceptual authenticity* is its premise for acquiring it (i.e. whether its intent and means of expression are particularly exemplary of its moment of production), this becomes much more difficult. We simply cannot stand outside of our own cultural moment and critically evaluate with the perception that the future might more clearly see. In contemplating the museum's basis in ideas of history, Rosenberg questions its limitations:

How far from the present the past is thus becomes a decisive question. Art of last year? Of five years ago? A generation? Does this painting, that object, have an authentic place in art history, or are they being admitted provisionally—at the expense of the budget and the trust of all the artists who have been excluded—to satisfy demands stimulated by fashion or publicity? (1975, p.283).

Despite the relative impossibility of accurately predicting the future cultural value of a particular artwork or object, the need to make speculative decisions is necessary, particularly for museums with small acquisitions budgets. The further one travels from the time of making, the more likely it is that works worthy of collecting will become so inflated in price that museums (who may now confidently assert they are deserving of acquisition) can no longer afford to do so. This dilemma of foretelling the future places publicly funded institutions in an invidious position. They must collect and preserve cultural artefacts, but must also do so at a reasonable price whilst still being accurate in their identification of what is worthy of merit. Rosenberg further notes that “museum decisions that come forward into the present-day art project into the future. And when the past is left behind, the museum's historical supports dissolve. What is expertise in regard to the art of the past becomes gambling with respect to the art of today” (1975, p.283). Gambling is indeed a part of any speculative collecting, but one should not think that this is entirely governed by chance without any expert reflection. Museum acquisitions boards are typically made up of a number of diverse experts who offer an opinion, debate, and ultimately vote on what should be purchased and what rejected—thus never leaving one individual solely responsible for the writing of history. Ideally, there should be no conflict of interest on the part of these experts. We also should not forget that history is always written by those in the past who tell a story they think will be most relevant, or which they most wish to edit or preserve. What comes to us in the future may seem a cogent and coherent narrative for the simple reason that all the

additional information or possible alternative paths have been edited out—whether deliberately or not.

In the case of *Object 101*, MacGregor was not asked to identify something which was to be acquired by the museum, but instead select something that had already been catalogued and could signify the 2010-2020 decade as a stand-alone object. MacGregor was thus selecting from an already refined pool, yet the British Museum's ongoing acquisitions list is sufficient to still make such a singular selection a difficult task. The original object series, MacGregor outlines, was the product of "teams of people both inside and outside the British Museum, working over a number of years" (BBC, 2020, 03:26-03:30). In contrast to this extensive research process, BBC Radio 4 gave MacGregor only three weeks to research and identify *Object 101*. The focus of this episode thus becomes not primarily a discussion of the final selected item, but the process of identification. To assist in this process, MacGregor notes the convenience the Covid-19 pandemic had lent him in being able to connect with several high-profile (normally extremely busy) individuals via video conference. The purpose of this consultation was less about suggesting individual objects, and more about a shared deliberation on what global concerns could be considered to be most prescient in the decade 2010-2020. The plot for the episode thus begins with a consideration of contemporary global context and narrows down what could be considered exemplary of this context, rather than starting with an object and oversubscribing what it could mean as any one signifier of its period in history. This contemporary object identification is significantly different from the more historical items in the series. For historical items, their *aura* of authenticity is undisputed and acquired through their mere survival through time. One cannot go back and select a more preferred prototype.

For his consultation process, MacGregor invited two renowned researchers in the form of Cambridge historian and classicist Mary Beard, and the broadcaster and natural historian Sir David Attenborough. In complement to these two well-established academic figures, he invited three much younger individuals who, interestingly, are all authors: British-Libyan writer Hisham Matar, Nigerian novelist Chibundu Onuzo, and British writer and activist Scarlett Curtis. It is perhaps most pertinent (for a curatorial vision that relies so heavily on the construction of narrative) to consult not only the more traditional academic experts of history but also those who write and fictionalise the contemporary world in which they live. Collectively, this group identifies three topics which they consider to be the most pressing in the past decade: climate change, the ongoing crisis in the Middle East (particularly in Syria), and the Covid-19 pandemic. Central to these concerns and the consequent global awareness of these issues is the smartphone, through which, as MacGregor puts it:

“everyone sensed a new energy in the idea of a global community based on digital media and the sharing of images” (BBC, 2020, 07:26-7:34). Beard is positive about what this potential of a shared sense of fragility (brought home by the pandemic and the means to connect digitally) might mean for a collective capacity to identify and address global issues. Matar is less confident, citing how the mobile device is not only a means for sharing actual events, but also a conduit for lies via the phenomenon of fake news. Onuzo, too, is less hopeful, observing the empathy fatigue so often the result of being bombarded with frequent news of ongoing disaster. She observes:

Human beings don't like to reflect on their fragility. Nobody wants to talk about millions of people dying, and not being able to do anything about it. So actually, I think, we might be going back to what everybody has been longing for: business as usual. Which is sad (BBC, 2020, 13:11-13:24).

The smartphone as a means of communication, representative of the shifts in how humanity understands and interacts with the world around us, might not be a bad choice as a material souvenir of the past ten years of history. There is, however, a difficulty in archiving such a device as its interactivity (which is primarily virtually based rather than manifest in the object's materiality) is the core essence that makes this object interesting. Additionally, unlike many of the historical objects in this radio series which were built to last (and thus retain evidence of their use value), the smartphone often carries built-in obsolescence to fuel the market for more complex and up-to-date devices. The device thus, very swiftly, becomes non-functional and leaves little display value of its former usage.

MacGregor goes on to explore (in the various recent acquisitions of the museum) more physically tangible manifestations of digital technologies' impact on society. These include downloadable protest posters which were shared as printables on social media during the Arab Spring in 2011, and popular hashtag statements emblazoned on Covid-19 masks. The Covid-19 mask, whilst it may seem to be an appropriate candidate for *Object 101*, perhaps also will not serve, as the curator of the museum collection of these masks, Julie Anderson, points out:

These masks tell a lot of stories. But because we are still experiencing this global situation, I don't think we are going to know what these stories are until long in the future when we have a chance to reflect and look back with maybe a more objective eye (BBC, 2020, 22:54-23:09).

This seems a recurring problem with many of the potential objects put forward: enough time has not passed for the lasting impact of these objects to be accurately assessed. MacGregor finally narrows down his selection to two objects. Interestingly, both are primarily works of contemporary art, rather than functional objects, which share a conceptual theme in the exploration of concepts of wayfaring. These are Piita Irniq's *Silent Messenger* (2020) and Issam Kourbaj's *Dark Water, Burning World* (2017).



Piita Irniq. 2020. *Silent Messenger*. The British Museum. (Stone Specialist).

Piita Irniq, a Canadian-Inuit artist, was commissioned by the High Commission of Canada in the UK to create his *Silent Messenger* (2020) for the British Museum exhibition *Arctic Homelands, Changing Climates*. The sculpture takes the form of a stone cairn, or what is traditionally called in Inuit culture, an inuksuk. The term literally means “that which acts in the capacity of a human” or “person substitutes” (Hallendy, 2009, p.60). Historically, inuksuk have functioned for many thousands of years as signposts for wayfarers in the tundra of the Arctic Circle: an environment limited in naturally occurring landmarks. Their function is multiple and may be used as navigation aids, or to demarcate areas of good hunting and fishing, or to point to caches of stored food or supplies. They may also indicate specific sites of spiritual reverence, or have astronomical or meteorological significance.⁷⁰ In more recent times, inuksuk have been constructed as memorial sites to commemorate fallen Inuit or Canadian soldiers in parts of the world far from their original location in the Arctic Circle. On

⁷⁰ See Hallendy, 2009 pp.60-63 for a more complete list of possible uses.

Juno Beach in Normandy, a different inuksuk by Irniq was erected in 2005 to commemorate the Inuit who served in World War II (Hallendy, 2009, pp.56-57). Another was constructed by a group of Canadian infantrymen near Kandahar Airfield to commemorate four fallen comrades in 2002 (Hallendy, 2009, pp.58-59).



Piita Irniq. 2005. WWII Memorial at Juno Beach, Normandy. (Hallendy, 2009, p.57).



Memorial at Kandahar Airfield. 2002.
Erected by 3rd Battalion of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. (Hallendy, 2009, p.59).

Irniq's *Silent Messenger*, as a commissioned artwork made specifically for the British Museum (rather than one taken from its original context of creation and use by Arctic travellers), could be argued to be an inauthentic object from an historical perspective. The authenticity of the object's materiality may also be questionable as the object has been constructed from Kentish Ragstone selected from the Hermitage Quarry in Kent (Gallagher Group, 2020) as opposed to any rocks brought from the Canadian Arctic Circle. This strategy of acquisition, however, is infinitely more ethically sound than removing an ancient inuksuk from its original location, where it may well still serve as a functional or sacred device. It is also important to note that *Silent Messenger* was acquired fundamentally as a contemporary artwork, not (at least in the present moment), as an historical artefact. With the encroachment of climate change and melting ice caps in the Arctic Circle, the way of life for the Inuit, who negotiate their environment by way of these sculptures, is under threat. Irniq's work thus follows in a long tradition of sign-posting the human experience, although this inuksuk is symbolic of this practice rather than literal or functional. MacGregor argues that the work operates as a symbol of hope and resilience given inuksuks' original denotation

of human intervention and signposting as a means of survival in an otherwise desolate landscape with harsh conditions (BBC, 2020,33:50-33:52). I would suggest that it also carries a darker reading, one linked to the use of stone cairns elsewhere in the world as grave or memorial sites, or Mesolithic stone constructions whose exact function has now been lost to us in time as ways of life ultimately shift and change. *Silent Messenger* may thus be regarded as a memorial, not this time to a single person or group of people, but to an entire way of life now under threat.



Three lead model ships. 400-300 BCE. Tartus, Syria. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. (Fitzwilliam Museum).



Issam Kourbaj (in collaboration with poet Ruth Padel). 2017. *Dark Water, Burning World*. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. (Fitzwilliam Museum).

In contrast to the scale of Irniq's megalithic stone structure, Issam Kourbaj's *Dark Water, Burning World* (2017) is a series of miniature boats each about the size of an adult's opened hand. Kourbaj (a Syrian-born artist who has lived since 1990 in Cambridge, UK) was initially inspired to make these small boats by reflecting on the Syrian refugee crisis in relation to three historic Syrian model ships from 400-300 BCE in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. His work, as acquired by the British Museum, consists of 12 miniature boats fashioned from recycled bicycle mudguards and containing extinguished matches. Whilst the *Object 101* episode makes mention of Kourbaj's collaboration on this work with the poet Ruth Padel, what is not made clear is that the scope of the original work is much larger than these material artefacts now acquired by the museum. In a public talk entitled 'Between Art and Poetry', Kourbaj and Padel discuss their collaboration between Kourbaj's objects and Padel's poetry accompaniment. Padel, a poet and essayist on issues of global migration, was visiting the island of Lesbos in 2016 and witnessed boats of Syrian refugees arriving on the beach there. She telephoned Kourbaj from Lesbos to say "We must do something together to honour the refugees and islanders welcoming them" (Royal Drawing School, 2021). The first

iteration of this collaborative installation took place in March 2017 at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, to commemorate the sixth anniversary of civil uprisings in Syria. Kourbaj's boats were displayed alongside the antiquities which had first inspired him, and Padel recited her poem, a fragment of which was included on the display panel beside the installation.

This read:

...and their stories our stories
steered by the small
star-light of cell phones

waves like rings of a tree
rings of the centuries
rocking and spilling
on the windy sea
as if water kept its shape
after the jug has broken
one shining petrified moment
before the shattered pieces fall away
(Renee Pfister Consultancy, 2017).

The artist and poet went on to tour the installation with poetic performances to several venues including the Victoria & Albert Museum (2017), Aldeburgh Poetry Festival (2018), New York University (2019), Columbia University (2019), the Venice Biennale (2019), and the Museum Tériade on Lesbos (2019). In each iteration, the work has changed and responded differently to the space, the venue, and the audience. The seventh anniversary of the Syrian uprisings (2018) was commemorated with 1000 of these small boats arranged around the altar of the King's College Chapel in Cambridge. In addition to the main installation and performance at the Venice Biennale, Kourbaj took several of the boats and installed them each day at a different location around the canals of the city (Royal Drawing School, 2021. 30:40-30:56). Thus, Kourbaj's boats remained not only in the official museum and gallery spaces of the main installation but travelled out into the wider world as small reminders. Perhaps they were only incidentally glimpsed by members of the public, and to some never explained or understood. Yet they existed (for a time) as part of the daily fabric of the city, as a reminder and memorial of the refugees who have come to Venice from many parts of the world, starting with the first Venetians who first established this city in a boggy, mosquito-infested marsh: Roman citizens fleeing the various onslaughts of 'barbarian' invasions in the wake of the fall of Rome (Bosio, 1987).

Observing a rather different reaction from audiences in Lesbos from those elsewhere in the world, Padel comments that she began to reflect on the nature of this work and who it is for.⁷¹ She asks:

How do these people who are working with this tragedy every day and there is no escape from it [*pause*]. Do they really want art made about their experiences? ... I had really only been thinking about the [sea] journey, and that's dangerous enough, but there's another journey immediately afterwards, which is the journey that lasts a lifetime, of integrating into the other society ... I do not know how you can make poems about that, or art which speaks to the people ... it's just a very, very complicated problem (Royal Drawing School, 2021, 34:36-36:20).

In Padel's meditation on the work's meaning for those who have lived these experiences, there is an important consideration that all creatives need to take into account when working with such emotive themes. To what degree does the abstraction of traumatic events (through the imagination of art) speak to people's experiences by way of catharsis? And when can these representations become too raw for those who may have, to a degree, necessarily emotionally cauterised themselves to cope with the overwhelming circumstances they face on a daily basis? Because it is not made clear what the reactions of the audience on Lesbos were, one can only speculate. Kourbaj, however, feels that the purpose of the work was not necessarily catharsis for those who live the realities of Syrian refugees, but rather to draw attention to the refugee crisis for those who seem to have forgotten this is an ongoing issue. He observes of the role of creative practitioners that: "it is our function to somehow flag the problem, not to find the solution" (Royal Drawing School, 2021, 37:12-37:17). He notes that the tenth anniversary of the Syrian uprisings precipitated more media coverage, but that, looking back on the situation over those ten years, one might observe how the issue has slowly faded in public awareness.

MacGregor notes in *Object 101* how more literal representations of global events can ultimately lead to viewers becoming inured to the trauma depicted in documentary images: "We began this conversation by talking about the ability of the mobile phone to spread images. But one of the consequences of that, is that the images have lost their power ... we see them so much" (BBC, 2020, 29:35-29:48). In contrast to the potential empathy exhaustion of more direct representations, MacGregor muses on his own responses to *Dark Water, Burning World*: "What I find surprising, and affecting, about these little boats is that

⁷¹ Padel is not explicit about the nature of the reception the work received in Lesbos, merely implying that audiences were less receptive than elsewhere in the world.

actually matchsticks in an old mudguard have a greater capacity to engage my imaginative emotion with the fragility, the vulnerability, with the despair of the people making that journey” (BBC, 2020, 29:50-30:31). What MacGregor observes in his reaction is the synecdochal capacity that these simple materials have to represent a sincere human experience. These are not depictions of an event happening to someone else in a different context which (in a visually overstimulated world) might be potentially tuned out after the first shock of news has receded. The humble materials of spent matchsticks and recycled mudguards are not culturally specific. As a metaphor, the work thus brings home (through universally domestic objects) the fragility of human life in a spent match and the resourceful vulnerability in recycling modes of rickety transport.

MacGregor finally refines his selection of *Object 101* to *Dark Waters, Burning World*. His reasoning here is because of the work’s capacity to speak to both a specific historic event, and also a more universal human experience. He suggests that the work is: “an object that can translate for us all an experience beyond words, which is both a unique event and a continuing, constant part of human history. An object that will not only inform, but move us” (BBC2, 35:20-35:34). Kourbaj comments on the selection of his work as *Object 101* noting that it is an honour, but a responsibility as he “did not set out to make a historic piece. I made a piece that is in reflection to what I have heard, what I have seen, and what I worked with Ruth [Padel] about” (Royal Drawing School, 31:31-31:42). At the same time, he is pleased that the work’s universality “could speak to many different people around the world, reflecting many tragedies of migration with their humble material” (Royal Drawing School, 31:52-32:04).

For Kourbaj, the power of this work is in its repetition as a performative collaboration: one which reinvents itself in relation to the object and words, but also the varying environments, audiences, and time passing. He encourages audiences to hold the objects. In some boats, new matches are placed and lit. The work thus, each time, becomes a living experience: a votive, a ritual, an offering. What is collected and displayed by the British Museum as *Object 101* is only the material residue of this commemoration. These remainders may still retain power in reflecting on an ongoing issue which is both specific (in relation to the Syrian crisis) and historical (in reflecting on multiple points in history when different people have had to flee their homes and travel so precariously with but a tiny hope for survival). The work as a commemorative, collaborative and repeated ritual in varying environments, however, lives outside and beyond the museum for at least as long as the artist and poet choose to revisit it with live audiences.

What is interesting about both of MacGregor's shortlisted objects, *Silent Messenger* and *Dark Waters, Burning World*, is how both works are, unlike all the other historical objects in this series, in some way *materially inauthentic* although they reference, or are inspired by, other objects which are *materially authentic*. *Silent Messenger*, (whilst it follows in a tradition of inuksuk objects made elsewhere) is materially a reconstruction using materials derived from non-traditional sources as well as an individually designed contemporary work of art. *Dark Waters, Burning World* was inspired by little antique replicas of boats in a museum collection but is distinctly different in its form and material. The objects collected are not the entirety of the original artwork because the work is not only the material objects but the ritual around them, which includes audience interaction as well as the poem as a narrative compliment.

Inside the museum, the artefact remains as but a fragment of this particular story: a souvenir whose accompanying narrative is the ongoing story of refugees and migrants throughout history. Both works may, nevertheless, be considered *conceptually authentic*, not in how the works necessarily align with the individual practice or identity of the artist personally as of great relevance to history and society (as if the identity or particular biography of an artist is sufficient to render a work of particular authentic importance). Instead, it is how both works comment on and capture a metaphoric reflection on pertinent issues in society (global warming and refugee crises), which are undoubtedly significant historic occurrences even whilst they are still ongoing. As representations of these events, they thus comply with what Rosenberg points out is the museum's underlying foundation: a record and archive of history. The works are not proof of these historic events, but proof of commentary on these events, which are much bigger than the artists themselves.

By shortlisting objects for the episode *Object 101*, which relate to concepts of migrancy, memorialisation, and travel from specific cultural and historic vantage points (but which may equally have universal resonance), the narrative of the audio series allows for the inclusion of factors relating to these works, which would be very difficult to fully represent in the physical museum installation. In concluding the series with these works, MacGregor underlines not only the journey of a contemporary moment whose destination may be difficult to define in the present, but the remit of the museum as a collector of global history: something which is an ever-evolving narrative through time.

Local Context/Global Recognition: Performing Curated Stories

The modern curator plays the same role as the missionary because the art is labelled as being from the continent and still taken to Europe. This does not make me feel good because the work is not staying within the community in which it is made. The effect that has on the artist is that they're starting to believe they are better than their community, where the stories come from. And it results in violence, it results in self-harm, it results in artists alienating themselves from their community because they forget. They forget who gave them the stories.

—Athi-Patra Ruga

(cited in Mary Corrigan, *Contemporary African Art Ecology: The Top 50 Artists & The Top Curators*).

The role of the public museum as an arbiter of authenticity is a notion premised on the institution as a national cultural authority. Yet, as has been observed in this chapter, the very idea of the museum, its modes of display, perceptions around inclusivity (or exclusivity) of collections and expected audiences, its funding models and means to procure new acquisitions have never been more challenged. The complete absence of such platforms in some countries to critically codify and qualify what material culture is worthy of collecting, celebrating, and preserving leaves many gaps that less scrupulous players in the field may occupy to their own advantage. Contemporary artists from countries with minimal platforms for their work must then seek international recognition rather than local affirmation in order to make a living with their craft, a process whereby they may be required to brand their work, and themselves, in terms which appeal to tourism interests rather than competing on equal terms with contemporary artists from elsewhere. At the same time, the increased interest in contemporary art as an asset-class investment prized for its economic, rather than cultural value, has led many wealthy private individuals (with none of the necessary academic credentials in artistic research) to assume positions as cultural influencers in order to further their own financial interests. A lack of critique of the role of curation and broad curatorial themes around nationality, which do not investigate what this construction might mean, may perpetuate histories of colonialism and cultural differences in a desire to package culture for international expectations. Categories of art which utilise reductive geographic adjectives, such as contemporary African art, presume there is an intrinsic difference between contemporary art in more general terms and contemporary art from Africa. Those at the perceived global centre of culture (Europe and the United States) are thus awarded recognition based on the quality and content of their artworks as individuals. In order to receive the same recognition in these spaces, artists from countries which are generating speculative investment interest (predominantly previous colonies) are still, however, required

to brand their identity in some way i.e. to perform their difference or exoticism to an international audience.

Contemporary art is essentially a global phenomenon, and whilst it may take many forms or have particular aesthetic themes and trends, these are much more likely to be the artist's own individual style influenced by very specific individual cultural experiences than any broad classifier based on their racial heritage or nationality of birth. Whilst local and global expectations can feel conflicting for many artists, being able to tell a universal story with or from a particular cultural point of view is possible, as can be seen in the works *Silent Messenger* and *Dark Waters, Burning World*. Neither work (nor their artists) was selected as an exemplification of the contemporary moment for the podcast episode *Object 101* purely on the basis of their cultural or national identity. Although the artists' interest in issues relating to their particular cultural heritage may localise the works to a certain degree, both works were short-listed based on their capacity to speak to larger global concerns and common human themes in history (climate change, migrancy, conflict, transience, and memorialising) rather than the identity of the artists. In *A History of The World in 100 Objects*, MacGregor demonstrates how curatorial research and narrative may weave together objects displayed in a museum to create an immersive interest and sense of inquiry by telling a story rather than dictating a meaning. While the objects in this physical exhibition leave sufficient gaps for viewers to reflect on their own experiences of narratives of history, the podcast series similarly weaves together different voices and points of view without dictating how the objects should be experienced or presuming a particular kind of expected audience. The series allows the scope of the exhibition to reach a wider audience but, unlike reductive bullet-form poster presentations, inspires its audiences to do more research as there remain many threads which may be followed.

What is also of interest in the range of objects selected for *A History of The World in 100 Objects* is how there is no division nor hierarchy created between functional objects, decorative craft objects, and works designed as art, whether these are contemporary works designed for museum type spaces or historical works of art made for other places. At no point in this narrative are some objects merely ethnography, whilst others are afforded some elevated cultural status. All objects are treated equally in how they are fragments which come together to tell a larger story, not of one group of people at a distance, but a greater history of all humankind in which all the objects may be reflection points of our shared humanity.

Contemporary art as a means of cultural communication has become increasingly global in many of its conventions. This underlines how a taxonomy of its curation via nationality, or other forms of oversimplified identity classification, serves very little purpose in furthering an understanding of diverse creative expression. That such branding of the identity of makers (rather than critical engagement with the metaphoric content or symbolism of the work) is useful for corporate or market-orientated investment is abundantly clear, and should be challenged, particularly when the seeming convenience of this taxonomy is not critically engaged or is presented as normative. When the collection of a work is authenticated by the identity of its maker rather than an acknowledgement of the relevance of the work itself in a greater context of cultural meaning, then one has a very twisted vision of an 'artist as genius' by a mere accident of birth, rather than a track record of accomplished production. Rosenberg observes that the emphasis in the idea of the 'artist as genius' is not their biography nor unique insight as an individual person in the world, but in their relationship to a particular practical skill as an artist. The artist is not a genius because they were born so, or made so by a particular biographical path, but a genius because of their talent in a particular area:

[t]he artist does not exist except as a personification, a figure of speech that represents the sum total of art itself. It is painting that is the genius of the painter, poetry of the poet, and a person is a creative artist to the extent that he participates in that genius (1983, p.13).

In Rosenberg's view, the artwork is thus not defined by the 'genius' of its maker, but the 'genius' of the maker is affirmed by the quality of his work. Even with established artists who have a long track record of accomplished production, not all their objects are necessarily worthy of collecting. When the collection of cultural artefacts moves forward into the contemporary moment and the museum cannot use the circumspection of history to justify the authenticity of these objects, then *conceptual authenticity* is not constructed simply because of the identity of the artist, but supported by an argument for the quality and relevance of a particular object in relation to a broader cultural landscape. When that broader cultural landscape is ill-defined and has no curatorial vision, then there is no criticality. This results in a complete lack of authenticity of any kind. When there is a determined curatorial vision, as can be seen with *A History of The World in 100 Objects*, then the possibility to bring many different kinds of objects together to create interesting and unexpected narrative links may be achieved without creating a hierarchy of value between them. When artists are validated merely on the basis of their identity, then whether or not one puts other more traditional crafts next to this work on the basis of shared origin, one is creating a kind of ethnography.

Whilst the museum is understood as a repository and presumed authority on authentic artefacts of history, these will always be somewhat stripped of context. In a consideration of the role of the museum as a no-place (which displays decontextualised objects but must nevertheless find a means to explain the relevance of these collected items), it may be useful to contemplate, as performance and museum studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett does, the nature of the utopian space of the museum as a theatre rather than only a factual-based archive. "It is a theatre in the root sense of the word", she suggests, "a space structured to accommodate viewers, and theory, which links viewing with contemplation or speculation. But the museum is also theatre in the sense of dramaturgy, stagecraft, and performance" (2004, p.187). The reflection on the museum as a theatre, and curatorship as a means of performing narratives in space rather than dictating meaning through text may lead to stronger curation in the display and juxtaposition of objects. By critically performing different narratives rather than proclaiming a singular truth for any one or other objects (and requiring them or their makers to perform roles as oversubscribed representatives of cultural authenticity and authority), curatorial visions which seek to present narratives of history as one of many possible intersections and iterations (*a* history, not *the* history) may do much to make audience experiences more inclusive. Theatres also typically do not run the same show for extended periods of time unless there is a particular public demand for this. In this way, they are sensitive to audience reception. The museum, as a perceived arbiter of authenticity, may place much pressure on the need to define this archiving by assuming narratives of authority. But, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes, many processes of museum collecting, "fragmentation, aggregation, selection, juxtaposition, connection, contrast, excess, and confusion", will mean that "despite [the museum's] best efforts to create certainty, [these processes] produce unpredictability" (2004, p.190). This unpredictability is, however, something she views as a positive as it may lend the museum many of the qualities inherent to the objects it collects as an immersive spatial experience: an artwork in itself, not just a repository where artworks may be viewed. These ideas echo strategies of display advocated by Nettleton and Ouzman in how they may create a *zone of contact* between audiences and the experience of the museum as a space for reflection, contemplation and curiosity.

The space of the museum may, however, always struggle with the archiving of certain kinds of creative expression, particularly when these are live, interactive, or site/situationally specific modes. This can be seen in the exclusion of the live elements of *Dark Waters*, *Burning World*, where traditional museum collecting (and therefore decontextualising of objects) has meant that it is only a fragment of the work in the form of a few of the boats and a quotation from Padel's poem which has been acquired by the museum. The materiality of

these boats is still highly effective and affecting in conveying the intent behind the work, but its live interactive aspect can only ever exist as a recorded footnote. Live performance as a medium of contemporary art in South Africa, and the African continent more broadly, has gained in popularity over the past decade. Whilst live acts present many challenges for traditional models of archiving authenticity typical for the museum, the medium of performance may be highly effective in creating sincere *zones of contact* between an artist and an audience. This will be examined in the next chapter through a focus on acts and definitions of ritualising in the work of Lerato Shadi and Sikhumbuzo Makandula.

Chapter 4: Ritual as Process: Semiotics and Sincerity

In this chapter, I explore works by two South African creative practitioners: Lerato Shadi and Sikhumbuzo Makandula. While both are performance artists in one shape or another, each is distinctly different. There are, however, possible overlaps in their approach. Performance as a shared medium would naturally seem the obvious corollary to draw. It is, however, not only their individual approaches to the physicality of the live-performing body, which makes for an interesting comparison. Instead, as I shall detail, it is their use of an individual system of signifiers, which each deploys in their live acts to speak to shared cultural experiences with their audiences, that turn their acts into kinds of ritual. These two artists share themes of trace, history, narrative, song, presence, haunting and memory, which they gesture towards: each with a complex set of semiotics which resists a neat textual explication of their work. More importantly, while documentation of their work is possible, in essence, none of these works can be genuinely experienced outside of the live performances that are the culmination of their praxis. Both, tacitly or explicitly, invite their audience into a kind of experiential and participatory witnessing in the *here and now*, even when the work draws on historical events or projects ideas about the future. As re-enactments or recreations of events which exist in other ways outside of the performances presented, their work problematizes the idea of authenticity even when the presence of the physical body of the performer would seem to lend the work this label. They could, however, both be argued to be sincere in how they each present a *zone of contact* which invites an audience to bring their own readings to the work, and thus translate the experience personally, creating a kind of shared contractual meaning.

While both Shadi and Makandula work with ideas of a personal and/or public archive, their work resists collecting in the commercial object-driven sense that is currently driving so much of the rising speculative investment interest in African Contemporary Art. Instead, they both explore how the body has memory and how certain physical acts or performative rituals are modes of tapping into embodied memory, whether historical, personal, or genealogical. Through their live performances, both artists attempt to bring these embodied memories to the surface for momentary compilation and transmission to an audience who will then, too, become an embodied archive of the experiences they have witnessed.

Ritual: The Secular and The Sacred

ritual

noun

- 1) a way of doing something in which the same actions are done in the same way every time
- 2) a fixed set of actions and words, especially as part of a religious ceremony

—Cambridge English Dictionary.

The common understanding, reinforced by dictionary definition, of the term 'ritual' separates the concept into two forms: secular everyday actions which one repeats as part of a routine or habit, and sacred signifiers which ceremonially demarcate rites of passage in specific or unique instances. Ritual thus represents a paradox as it denotes both the conventional and the profound: acts that are either mundane or extraordinary. Both definitions underline the idea of repetition and tradition, yet (as discussed in the first chapter) conflating ritual with tradition will not serve. Rituals may form part of specific traditions, but context is all important. A conflation of ritual with tradition implies a long-standing legacy, and these kinds of cultural acts as stable and unchanging, often with a kind of orthodoxy tied to a particular recognised religious doctrine. Rituals may borrow from traditional codes and signifiers of meaning, ancient in their origin, but as strategies of cultural survival, they may be hybrid and imaginative in inventing new forms.

Ritual theorist Ronald L. Grimes observes that "ritual in the context of colonialism and other culture-contact situations ... arises as [a] critical and creative response to radically altered social configurations" (1992, p.21). Grimes observes a change, which occurred in the mid-1960s, in the definition and theory of ritual from something considered "static, structural, conservative" to that which is better understood as "flowing, processual, subversive" (1992, p.21). He credits this change not only to the popularisation of research by cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (with his theories on *liminal* states and *communitas* observed in rites of passage) but also to the socio-political revolution occurring globally and in popular culture of the 1960s. In considering ritual's relation to tradition, he observes how many ritual theorists and practitioners will consider both terms intrinsically linked, potentially as a strategy to "deflect explanation of ritual" and thus place it "beyond the range of mere human creativity ... beyond the reach of criticism" (1992, p.23). Aligning ritual with tradition lends it authenticity and authority. The authenticity of ritual acts is thus explained through their longevity in tradition (this way of doing is what our ancestors did). It is thus passed down as an act recreated the same way through time to a community who would seek to align

themselves with a presumed cultural homogeneity of their forebearers. The authority of ritual acts is premised on them being a sacred practice decreed by a particular divinity sometime in an ancient past or a time before time. Grimes, however, argues that the notion that ritual practice received in this way—as something passed down and therefore static and traditional—is an illusion which is problematised by too short an overview of the process, often compounded by a lack of historical records which might observe changes over time (1992, p.24). In addition to the presumed definition of ritual as something always synonymous with tradition (and therefore not creative or invented), Grimes points to three other problem areas that ritual theorists conventionally attribute to the definition of ritual. These are a “view of ritual as ... collective (rather than individual), pre-critical (rather than self-conscious and reflective), and meaningful (i.e., referential)” (1992, p.23). Grimes’ complications of these expected binaries in the definition of ritual will be explored further in relation to the work of Shadi and Makandula, who both use ritual as a methodological form in their art-making. What is important here is how Grimes notes that these pre-assumed notions of the definition of ritual render the forms of ritual difficult to critique, being “so widespread and unquestioned as to make it virtually sacrosanct” (1992, p.23). It is these received definitions of ritual which, he argues, make them all the more necessary to critique.

In an address to Duke University’s *Humanities Futures* programme, Grimes observes how much of his more than 40 years of research has focused on two concepts: “ritual creativity and ritual criticism” (Duke FHI, 2015, 0:46-0:49). He explains how these two concepts, creativity and criticism, have been regarded in certain academic circles as contradictions when used to describe the practice of ritual. He goes on to describe how it was never his intention to be controversial in using these terms but that they arose as part of his own fieldwork observations:

What I thought I was observing was people making stuff up, changing stuff, editing stuff. What I overheard was people criticising the mass, the dances, the songs ... So what I thought I was hearing, what I thought I was seeing, was creativity and criticism simply as an obvious fact in front of my face (Duke FHI, 2015, 1:20 1:41).

As he continues his explanation, it becomes clear that the reason his terms of ‘creativity’ and ‘criticism’ seem so contradictory to many of his peers is a subtle distinction in the societies and cultures that each is observing in an anthropological study of ritual. Coming from a background in theology, philosophy and comparative religion, many of Grimes’s peers study ceremonies in globally recognised religions or remote, isolated tribal communities where ritual would seem to carry some kind of orthodoxy or is presumed

(through a limit in external cultural contact) to have stabilised into a finite traditional form. To take Grimes's view on these ritual forms as traditional (and therefore static, lacking in examples of creativity and criticism) is simply a lack of temporal perspective on cultures that change at a glacial pace. Grimes's research, however, has focused on more contemporary or syncretic celebrations and ceremonies in postmodern and post-colonial contexts. These forms of ritual practice could be said to be as much popular culture as they might be spiritual rites, something which Grimes notes his peers have historically considered too marginal to feature in their traditional theorisation of ritual (1992, p.22). Whilst ritual is central to cultural concerns, the margins are where actual rites occur, whether in traditional or more recently invented rituals. According to Turner, it is this marginal, interstitial place in society and the ambiguous, sometimes paradoxical nature of ritual participants (or those undergoing rites of passage) that creates a necessary liminal space for ritual:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ... are necessarily ambiguous since this condition, and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space ... [as] such their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols ... liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness (1969, p.359).

To be cast out of society in one form, so as to be re-assumed in another form through a rite of passage, requires a crossing-over into these (sometimes paradoxical) marginal states and spaces. For Homi Bhabha, reflecting on those who regularly experience social marginality in postcolonial contexts, the development of critical strategies for social survival emerges in creative expression that may borrow from spaces and positions that are unexpected for more canonical forms of culture:

The transmission of cultures of survival does not occur in the ordered *musée imaginaire* of national cultures with their claims to the continuity of an 'authentic' past and a living 'present' (1994, p.172).

In describing the potential for culture to act as a strategy of survival for the postcolonial subject, Bhabha has observed the necessity to neither be assimilated by a dominant colonial Western cultural hegemony nor to romanticise an 'authentic' pre-colonial past, but to find ways in which the binary between these two can be subverted and thus create a third space of cultural expression. In remarking on the hybridity of this potential third space, Bhabha has noted the cultural displacement of the postcolonial subject. In this displacement and against a backdrop of contemporary cultural globalisation, he remarks on the need for culture as a

strategy of survival to be “transnational and translational” (1994, p.172). Any translation or decontextualising of specific cultural signifiers, however, becomes complex as signs and symbols do not necessarily carry the specific cultural resonance or social value they may have accrued in their original context. When, however, an original or authentic context for culture is lost or displaced, and its “embedded myths of culture’s particularity cannot be readily referenced ... [one becomes] incredibly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition” (1994, p.172). Bhabha thus both recognises the invented nature of culture as tradition and advocates for creative strategies in employing signs and signifiers to subvert presumed binaries between social groups and cultures. To do so is not merely to emulate the tradition of one culture or superimpose that of another but to find the synergies and gaps to create something else—to find a liminal space, one which is not just marginal but creative. Signifiers, language, or points of reference are not always precisely translatable to all audiences everywhere. This is true of any work of art and is not limited to contemporary works in a postcolonial context or works made by marginalised subjects. What is vital to translational or transnational creative strategies is an exercise in mutual empathy rather than a reductive process of only employing universal symbolism. By allowing an audience glimpses of what they may find familiar, such that they are drawn in, they may then have the scope to do their own further research to make interpretations and translations (and thus empathise) with what they are called to witness.

What, then, can we make of contemporary artistic practice that embraces traditional ritualistic signifiers? Do we regard these as a kind of appropriation or re-representation, much like Magritte's pipe (a picture of the thing, but not the actual thing)? Or is art that utilises ritual forms potentially also a kind of ritual? These become essential questions to ask when the use of ritual signifiers as a trope is becoming more frequent in contemporary South African art. The inclination towards these kinds of signifiers is manifold. One may be the need to harness semiotic languages that already have a symbolic order and resonance for the audience one is addressing, they may also be valuable channels for the artist to address the subconscious or an ancestral lineage and feel a more natural position to seek out a muse in consulting the divine. On a more superficial level, we must not forget the desire of commercial branding to favour neatly packaging artists via anything which might appeal to ideas around ‘authentic’ cultural identity. The use of traditional cultural signifiers in contemporary art, particularly when they have a basis in ritual, becomes even harder to critique, not least because any question around the authenticity of an individual’s cultural heritage is insulting, but because pre-assumed notions about the nature of ritual (particularly when it is labelled traditional) render it seemingly above critique and to do so, a form of heresy.

A Zone of Contact: Something More than Breakfast

Here, it may be helpful to return to performance theorist Peggy Phelan's concerns for a distinction between life and art in performance by contemplating an observation by Margaret Atwood, best summarised as "something more than breakfast" (2006, p.127). In an essay entitled 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature', Atwood recounts a personal experience to describe the need for something other than the obvious to occur when taking a slice of life and constructing it as art, in particular, if one is inviting an audience to witness. To illustrate this point, she recounts an anecdote of her then five-year-old daughter and her friend co-opting others in the house to watch their performance of a 'play' (2006, p.126). The performance begins with the two little girls eating breakfast, which, in expectation of some kind of melodrama, Atwood humorously compares first to Ibsen and Shaw. When this ritual of breakfast eating continues, creating greater expectation, Atwood begins to contemplate more atmospheric or absurdist performances: Pinter, Ionesco, Andy Warhol. The description is undoubtedly dramatised with these comparisons for narrative effect, but we have all been there, watching (or reading) something, wondering why we have been called to be an audience when it seems nothing other than 'breakfast' is occurring. Particularly if we are not invited to participate in the act of breakfast eating, we wait dry-mouthed for some Pavlovian reaction to a metaphoric bell ringing, clarifying some kind of meaning. Sometimes we may continue in our role as an audience long after we have given up hope due to some kind of sunk-cost fallacy or fear that we are intellectually faulty in only seeing before us (to mix metaphors) a naked emperor.⁷² The inclusion of recognisable ritual forms in art lends a third complication to the art/life distinction. Art is not life, and life is not ritual, although ritual is a part of life in a constructed form. Art is a part of life in a constructed form. Can art be ritual, or ritual be art, or should there be a subtle distinction? Breakfast, after all, is a kind of ritual. If breakfast is to be presented to us as art, then we need something more or at least the invitation to participate in the sacrament.

Choreographer and performance theorist Alan Parker makes an important observation about performance works that employ ritual as a methodology. This is necessary to consider if one is attempting to escape the bind that ritual is only ever traditional (and therefore never creative or invented) and, in this presumed authenticity, beyond critique. Parker makes a

⁷² It might indeed be of some interest to witness an actual naked emperor eat breakfast, if merely for the novelty of the event. Here, I refer to Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale *The Emperor's New Clothes* which takes the metaphor of *something more than breakfast* one step further when audiences begin to imagine (out of desperation) that there is more to a work than what they are seeing, which they are at fault for not comprehending.

distinction between two kinds of performances that reference ritual. The first he describes as *ritualising*, a mode of performance which may appear as a kind of sacred rite but “where the performed behaviour itself may not directly reference existing cultural rituals or traditions” (2019, p.244).⁷³ The second is *ritual-like*, actions which may reference or are “connected to ‘tradition’ but are performed in a ‘profane’ manner where the functionality of the behaviour is emphasised over any resultant symbolism” (2019, p.244). By making these distinctions, it thus becomes possible to analyse the appropriacy of the use of ritual as a methodology or form of semiotic communication in creating a work of art. It is insufficient for a work of contemporary art to merely recreate an existing ritual form as a spectacle without thought, or intention, behind what the act translated from a traditional context might mean. To do so would be to merely offer the spectacle of breakfast or, worse, the kinds of tourist-oriented cultural performances Taylor critiques as “objectification of culture viewed on the stage that which would ‘kill’ the culture on display” (2000, p.14). To follow Parker’s second form of ritual use or performances that employ *ritual-like* methodologies in a secular or profane context, it may be the intention of the artist to subvert ritual traditions and thus expose latent hypocrisies in what are presumed to be sacred acts. Parker demonstrates an effective use of this last strategy in his close reading of Sello Pesa’s performance *Limelight on Rites* (2019, pp.253-257). Pesa presents his audience with a hyperbolic and theatricalised re-enactment of a funeral. In this chaotic piece, the audience watches two male dancers waltz with an evidently empty coffin to loud house music. Other characters interact with the audience: one distributing flyers for a funeral policy, another enacting some kind of communion liturgy or libation with wine, fruit and a candle. A feast table is brought in. Plastic chairs, fake grass and flowers are arranged in an installation. A businesswoman at a desk flips through paperwork and walks in and out of the space whilst talking on her phone. Pesa’s work borrows signifiers from more traditional funerary rites but also makes a display of the ‘backstage’ of the urban African funeral industry, which has become increasingly commodified. Parker notes Pesa’s intention in presenting this clash of activities to draw attention to “the conflict between indigenous cultural traditions (and knowledge) and urban, westernised [commercial] rituals of death and burial” (2019, p.253). Pesa presents this re-enactment of a ritual not to celebrate its cultural value or to demonstrate its cathartic possibilities but essentially to do the opposite: to objectify the commercial commodification of funerary rites in order to critique them. *Limelight on Rites* engages with its audience but, in the end, offers no transcendence. This is not a failing of the work but rather its success: it points to the inauthenticity of adopted urban funerary rites by demonstrating the

⁷³ Although Parker does not draw on Grime’s work, Grimes also uses the term *ritualising* to describe new, emergent or personal forms of ritual activity which may, or may not, be linked to more traditional forms of ritual. He describes this as “the activity of incubating ritual ... the act of constructing ritual either self-consciously and deliberately, or incrementally and editorially” (1992, p.41).

commercialised insincerity in the industry. It could thus be argued that *Limelight on Rites* is not a re-enactment of a ritual but an anti-ritual, one which asks its audience to contemplate presumed or unquestioned social pressures when it comes to sacred rites.

In contemplating work by Lerato Shadi and Sikhumbuzo Makandula and arguing for the work's sincerity as opposed to its authenticity in the use of ritual forms, it is perhaps better to observe Parker's other mode of the use of ritual as a semiotic in performance art: that of *ritualising*. Whilst both artists use *ritual-like* signifiers in their work, it is their acts of *ritualising* that invite an audience to participate in some kind of rite, and offer a *zone of contact* where the audience may bring their own readings and experiences to an interpretation of the work. As a process of *ritualising*, the methodology of both artists draws inspiration from ideas of an archive. These are not necessarily literal physical archives (although Makandula references history that can be researched outside of his work) but rather kinds of embodied memory influenced by genealogy and oral history. Distinctions and overlaps in methodology might be observed in Shadi's uses of labour, presence, and erasure, and Makandula's use of sound, witnessing, and cleansing. An understanding of how the problematic binaries Grimes identifies in ritual definition are, in fact, an ebb and flow between these states will also be pertinent.⁷⁴ In addition to motifs and practices that relate to ritual, the case studies in this chapter, as I will discuss in detail, may also be compared in their alternative approaches to the concept of an archive translated as embodied and performed memory.

The Archive and Authenticity, Memory and Sincerity

There's a thermodynamic cost to storing information about the past that has no predictive value for the future ... To be maximally efficient, a system has to be selective. If it indiscriminately remembers everything that happened, it incurs a large energy cost. On the other hand, if it doesn't bother storing any information ... it will be constantly struggling to cope with the unexpected.

—Philip Ball, *How Life (and Death) Spring From Disorder*.

In his chapter 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits' Achille Mbembe refers to the relationship between the word 'archive' and its implicit link to an architectural structure. This edifice is both a literal building that houses such an archive, as well as a physical site operating as a "symbol of a public institution, which is one of the organs of a constituted state" (2002, p.19). Jacques Derrida returns to the origin of the word in order to unpack its

⁷⁴ That ritual is defined as: "collective (rather than individual), pre-critical (rather than self-conscious and reflective), and meaningful (i.e., referential)" (1992, p.23).

meaning. Starting with the Greek roots of the word, he refers to *Arkhe* as both a place of “commencement and the commandment” (1995, p.9). The word, meaning both a source of origin and of authority, very specifically refers to a place. It draws its history from the Greek *arkheion*, which was literally the house of *archons* or magistrates of a city who stored documents of law at their places of residence.

Despite the implications of the word, however, an archive is not an origin. The archive is what remains *after* something has happened. The archive is not a beginning; it is an end which hopes to project to the future. In returning to this source, we do not return to the beginning. Instead, we return to the end of something—something that has been deemed a precedent by accumulating certain of its remainders and traces whilst discarding others.

The archive, as a physical place, may be controlled because it may have doors, locks, and other bars to access. In this way, there is a singular source for authenticity and authority. It is a site that poses as memory, but it is dead memory. Archives become places in which these dead are buried. Whether for health reasons or religious ones, the dead must have a place—their residue is equally assigned to the dustbin or the archive: a place which is preferably sanitary or sanctified because “[t]he best way to ensure that the dead do not stir up disorder is not only to bury them, but also to bury their ‘remains’, the ‘debris’” (Mbembe, 2002, p.22).

The archive as a system can only ever preserve a certain percent of possible remainders. The reasons for this are several. Documents and objects are selected or edited based on what may be considered, at the time they are collected, to be of possible value to the future. Thus, there is an element of prediction in archiving. Documents and objects are selected or edited based on the rarity or increasing scarcity of a particular object or how they reflect a dwindling or endangerment of a specific way of life—something that has almost, in the moment of collecting, already become a thing of the past. Thus, there is an element of nostalgia in archiving. Documents or objects that have been stored elsewhere—and have survived by sheer luck, sentimentality, or bad housekeeping—often come into an archive. A famous author’s shopping lists, lotto scratch cards, doodles, unpaid bills, old clothes, or chewed pens may be bequeathed or stored elsewhere and endure because no one has the heart to discard something that, by mere chance, has managed to survive long enough to

accumulate the dubious merit of a patina of age.⁷⁵ Thus, there is an element of arbitrariness in archiving.

On the basis of these archived remainders, a particular accompanying narrative is implied and endorsed—one that is deduced by experts and presented as a kind of historical ‘truth’ because decreed by authority and supported by the *aura* of these authenticated objects. These documents and objects are souvenirs of history. The souvenir, if we remember Stewart’s vision of this, is contextually impoverished and thus is in need of a contextualising narrative. The narrative to which the archive attests is always, in part, imaginary because it must both attempt to encapsulate memory and hypothesise a prophetic quality. This narrative may be well researched, expertly deduced and well supported by elements within the archive, but we should not ignore the politics or social conditions under which specific objects or documents were initially collected whilst others were destroyed.

The archive is a record of two periods of time. It is a record of the moment it seeks to preserve, and it is a record of the time at which the residue of that moment was collected. Physical archives project linear narratives of history: threads that run through from the past to a projected future crossing out the present. Any predictive quality the archive may seem to possess in its value to a future audience can only be imagined. This imagining pairs the ambitions and expectations of the curators at the time of collecting with an imagined future audience and their wants. But, these two parties are never in direct exchange. Their present moment is bridged by an authenticated document, but they are never contemporaneously present. The archive cannot preserve embodied lived experience, so whilst it may encapsulate two kinds of pasts and attempt to predict the future needs of those accessing it, it cannot conserve a present moment.

Memory is antithetical to the archive as place because the archive preserves as was. Memory recalls, calls again in many different places, something into the present moment and, however faulty, something lives again. Memory does not reside in a singular place but rather in the hearts and minds of those who share an experience. This memory can be transmitted to others and may mutate its form as this witnessing is recalled to the present by yet another recalling. This transmission may seem like a disease because it is not

⁷⁵ An example of this can be seen in the acquisition of the painter Francis Bacon’s London studio by the Dublin based Hugh Lane Gallery. After securing the studio as a donation from the artists’ heirs in 1998, the museum director Barbara Dawson assembled a team of conservators, curators, and archaeologists to facilitate the relocation of the space in its entirety including the architectural features. Through a precise mapping of the space including the exact location of all objects including the dust, walls, doors, floor and ceiling, these objects were then all packaged and able to be reinstalled in Dublin exactly as they had been in their former London location (Hugh Lane Gallery, n.d.).

controllable, does not reside in a singular place, and thus is often devalued because it is not endorsed by an authority or expert. It is, therefore, a threat to any archive claiming to hold the key to an authentic historical truth. The archive as a place, Mbembe observes, thus may function “to thwart the dispersion of these traces and the possibility, always there, that left to themselves, they might eventually acquire a life of their own” (2002, p.22). This is not to say that the archive has no value as an aid to memory. It operates as a site of memory when accessed by whichever researcher returns to revisit the debris of the past. It is not that we should prefer memory to archive, experience to object, but that we should not prioritise the object without the experience of it.

In contrast to the archive as a place, and the documents therein as objects, is the possibility presented by the live performing body. Phelan discusses the ephemeral nature of performance by proposing that “Performance ... becomes itself through disappearance” (1993, p.146). This would suggest that it is impossible to archive performance because one could only preserve its absence through its remainders. She continues that: “the document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present” (1993, p.146). The absence of the live performing body is just that, an absence and not a presence. As a conduit for memory (something like a microfiche reader in a library), the presence of a live physical body may become a channel of witnessing, not just archived or researched histories, but other kinds of experiential or genealogical memories.

Performance theorist Rebecca Schneider suggests that through the act of remembering an experience, a memory that can be shared and thus passed on, performance does not disappear but remains housed in bodily memory. She points to how the discrepancies in such remembering or possible re-enactments would seem to suggest a lack of historical truth. “In performance as memory,” she notes, “the pristine sameness of an ‘original’, so valued by the archive, is rendered impossible—or, if you will, mythic” (2001, p.102). If two witnesses to a crime remember details differently, does this mean that one of them is lying and that the idea of witness testimony is invalid? Schneider points out the cultural bias of the Western idea of the archive. That there is only one version of historical truth, denies alternative perceptions of history and “assume[s] that memory cannot be housed in a body and remain, and thus that oral storytelling, live recitation, repeated gesture, and ritual enactment are not practices of telling or writing history” (2001, p.101). The body is an object that, like other objects, carries traces of its experiences. The body is different from other objects because of its ability to bear witness to these experiences may be an active provocation, rather than a passive catalyst, for memory. As both a house for an alternative archive and as a souvenir object that can evoke memory through choreographic gesture and

performed narrative, the body may give live embodied testament to its own experiences and evoke memory for an audience before which it performs. This is what the case studies in this chapter do: they emphasise the sincerity of live re-enactment, the act of exchange, rather than an appeal to an authentic representation which requires no audience. Shadi and Makandula's physical performances use their bodies as sites of memory and their actions thus become conduits for alternative forms of archiving made present.

Work in Progress: Lerato Shadi

99 dreams I have had
In every one, a red balloon
It's all over, and I'm standing pretty
In this dust that was a city
If I could find a souvenir
Just to prove the world was here
And here is a red balloon
I think of you, and let it go.

—Nena, *99 Luftballons*.



Lerato Shadi. 2007. *Hema (or Six hours of out-breath captured in 792 balloons)*. Digital video projection, sound. Duration 5 min 26 sec. Edition of 5 + 2AP. (Stevenson Gallery).

The first work I encountered personally by Lerato Shadi was a video of a performance work she made in 2007: *Hema*. The title in Setswana can be loosely translated as the noun 'Breath', but also as a more immediate imperative to action encapsulated by the verb 'Breathe!' That this work entered the gallery system as an abridged video piece (5 minutes 26 seconds representing 6 hours of action), with accompanying editioned documentary photos for sale from Stevenson Gallery, may tell us much about how the then art world felt about embracing site-specific durational performance in all its complexity. This documentary format, nevertheless, created greater exposure for a work that might not otherwise have been seen outside of its site-specific live form. *Hema (or Six hours of out-breath captured in 792 balloons)* was performed in the stairwell at the Cape Town offices of the advertising and marketing communications agency Ogilvy. What has been lost to time is a particular penchant, in the mid-noughties, for South African advertising, marketing and design companies to collaborate with artists (particularly performance artists) in creating 'art open days' at their offices. I was invited to be involved in a couple of these in Johannesburg around the same time. Most of us (being final-year students or fresh graduates and thus young and simply grateful to have a platform) perhaps didn't question fully the intention of these kinds of events. We were paid for our participation, but not an amount that I remember for either its generosity or exploitation. We were being paid for our art, and that, as a young artist, is sometimes a novelty in and of itself. Looking back on the experience, I genuinely believe that whichever marketing executive or art director thought up these ideas of 'art open days' had good intentions. In creating a space for young artists, the companies could simultaneously inject a sense of occasion and ongoing creativity for their employees and visiting clients alike. What they didn't anticipate was the need for such events to have a firm curatorial vision, or that the kinds of audiences the event would attract (coming from a corporate world) expected attractive paintings hanging on a wall with easily digestible concepts, if any at all. Instead, we mostly got in the way of the daily running of a business, confused visitors about whether the live acts were art at all, or upset corporates if they were visually literate enough to understand that some of the site-specific work was intentionally critical or subversive about the space in which we had been invited to work. We also attracted some of the darker side of office politics. As students, many of us had worked as children's birthday party entertainment, dressing up as fairy-tale characters, painting faces and doing craft activities with the children to earn rent or art-supply money. I recall comparing these 'art open days' to our work as children's birthday party entertainers with performance artist Anthea Moys. We had both been involved in both activities and mutually observed that one would be lucky to get through either event without a tipsy, beer-clutching dad of a five-year-old; or a creepy advertising executive becoming a little too interactive or making some sly remark about whether one did "adult parties too". The misogyny of the

corporate world aside, one reflection that we might have had about our interactions in these spaces might be a self-critical one: that what we were offering with our performative interventions was little more than party entertainers, and thus, not taken with any more gravity of meaning than that which we put in.

It was against this backdrop of experience that I encountered Shadi's *Hema*. The subtlety of the work and the artist's commitment to durational performance was a far cry from the chaotic, interactive or perhaps forced 'team-building' industrial theatre those of us at the Johannesburg office 'art open-days' thought had been expected of us. For *Hema*, Shadi sat on a plinth on an upper landing of the architecturally attractive industrial stairs at Ogilvy's open-plan offices and blew every one of her out breaths into multi-coloured balloons for six hours. Once a balloon was filled, she tied it off and let it go—drifting where it would on the air currents in the central stairwell. The multi-coloured balloons might have added some sense of party or celebration, yet, as a slow process, there is also something poignant and desultory as each balloon drifts down the staircase: like souvenirs of a party one has missed. It was also possible, for those going about their daily business in the building, to simply ignore Shadi going about hers. For here is the interesting mirror Shadi's *Hema* provided: one kind of quiet (potentially ignored) creative labour in comparison to the labour of the building's employees. What parallels might we draw between the products of Shadi's labour (colourful balloons filled with hot air, drifting slowly downwards) and the products of the labour of an advertising and marketing company? Yet the work resists so simple a critique of the corporate business realm of advertising as merely vacuous and fleeting. Of her process for this work, Shadi recalls:

On my out-breath, I exhaled only into the balloons. There's an important element in that for me. The honesty. There's no way for the audience to know that that's what I did. But I know, and that's the important thing (cited in Krynauw, 2022).

Shadi's commitment to enact this work with honesty of process through an extended durational performance does not simply conjure a cynical view on the stereotype of the advertising executive: puffing out hot air into little bags of stretchable rubber which fail to fly. Instead, the work becomes about the act of work itself. Durational performance necessarily brings with it uncontrollable aesthetics of exhaustion, boredom, and audience fatigue. The work both is, and is not, about spectacle. It is not the kind of short, snappy spectacle usually associated with the advertising industry or sales pitches. It is a spectacle in that Shadi sits in full view, like patience on a monument, labouring each breath into the balloons she births as a meditation on, and a votive for, unseen labour. Whether the minor minions of the agency,

scurrying up and down the stairs during this performance, necessarily recognised this ritualised acknowledgement of their own unseen labours has never been recorded. It was, however, a live act which had some kind of ritualised power in its moment of enactment.

Hema was subsequently taken up in its abridged video form and exhibited at several venues around South Africa, thus launching a career in performance art for Shadi. The abridged documentation, the sale of prints of the performance, the explanatory subtitle (*or Six hours of out-breath captured in 792 balloons*), the use of multiple colours in the balloons, and the site specificity of *Hema* are aspects of the work that make it distinct from Shadi's subsequent work. The meditative quality of subtle, quiet, repetitive actions, the extended duration of the performance, and the underlying theme of unseen labour are, however, hallmarks of all Shadi's work.

Shadi's performances of mundane daily tasks, with a focus on their meditative embodied quality, create a contemplative intersection between the two understandings of ritual: the repetitive daily habit and the transcendental sacred rite. This can perhaps be best seen in her multiple works that include knitting and crochet, which I will examine in more detail later. Equally, Shadi simultaneously employs both a *ritual-like* (albeit profane kind of ritual) and a *ritualising* methodology in her performances. Given the monotonous tasks which Shadi most frequently employs as strategies of performance, one may question to what degree Shadi is, in fact, following a possible dictum of *something more than breakfast*. It is, however, her focus on elevating daily tasks through sustained labour, and making this into a *durational* spectacle in a gallery space, which shifts the performance from a mere representation of ordinary labour into a meditation thereon, or a kind of "telling-time differently" (Shadi cited in Legalamitlwa, 2016, p.5).

Shadi has also utilised the powerful, yet seemingly mundane, tasks of writing and erasure in her works, for example, *Makhubu* (2014). *Makhubu* (which may be translated as 'wave') sees the artist write an endless concentric circle of red pencil text about her own imagined future, over a period of 6 days, only for her to erase her text, leaving it illegible. A residual, however, remains in the red circular blur on the wall and the red stained erasure-sheddings which litter the floor. Shadi notes that her performances "look at life as an act of creation, considering that every moment leaves behind a memory, a trace, something tangible or ethereal that refers to it, or marks its passage" (cited in Tsmule, 2010).



Lerato Shadi. 2014. *Makhubu*. Live Performance. Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva), London. Duration: 6 working days. (leratoshadi.art).

Lerato Shadi. 2014. *Makhubu*. Live Performance. Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva), London. Duration: 6 working days. (leratoshadi.art).

Although there are similarities in theme and method with her written works, I have chosen to focus on the works which do not include actual text. Shadi's processes of knitting and crochet are a form of 'writing' her embodied memories into the world. That the actions are never truly translatable into legible text, and that the residual of this act of 'writing/knitting' is a dimensional object which can only be 'read' in a tactile form, focuses the audience's attention on the physical act and the labour of 'writing/knitting' as an embodied form, rather than an exact narrative of what is being 'written'. There is thus an emphasis on 'thinking' with the body rather than the mind.

Fundamental to Shadi's approach are her preparations for her performative acts, which include breathing exercises drawn from meditation practices, fasting, and other dietary limitations that emphasise bodily awareness. Shadi utilises these practices as a mode of tapping into a form of embodied intuition as she considers the way in which the body might be said to have two brains: the literal one, which controls rational and logical reasoning, and another, which intuitively feels the gut instinct. "I work with my gut," she notes, "I *feel* with it. When something feels right, I feel it. It's how I know something is 'working'" (cited in Krynauw, 2016). For Shadi, this heightened bodily awareness becomes a kind of shamanistic

channelling of bodily memory: “There are times when you can understand something mentally but not experientially. So, how does it *feel* to know the body has a memory?” (cited in Krynauw, 2016).

Grimes observes that the perception of ritual as pre-critical sets the process of *ritualising* in opposition to a state of being which is self-conscious and reflective. He notes that for ritual theorists with this viewpoint, “rituals are assumed to be in the body and therefore not in the mind” (1992, p.28). To have a self-conscious or reflective awareness of this process would thus, it is presumed, somehow break the spell or have a “shattering effect” (1992, p.29), rendering the enactment insincere. For these ritual theorists, the act of *ritualising* is process, rather than product, orientated, a view with which Grimes and I might be inclined to agree. Grimes, however, notes that ritual theorists would take this one step further by “defining ritual as outside of means/end logic [and thus implying] that it is irrational and therefore incapable of grounding critique” (1992, p.28).⁷⁶ For ritual practitioners and artists alike, it is not necessary for a product to be complete before engaging in the act of self-awareness or critique of the actions one employs, even when in the midst of a process, however irrational the muse might seem to an outside observer. The logic of self-consciousness or self-reflexivity disrupting the process would consider the painter who takes a step back from his canvas before deciding on his next brush stroke or the musician who corrects her hand position for the next bar as somehow rupturing the magic of making. Critique and reflection can be contained in a corrective gesture and is not necessarily a separate post-facto academic debriefing. Grimes observes how some ritual theorists assume a binary between body and mind when assuming a disjunct between embodied acts and critical awareness. He argues that the “human body is not only object but subject. It has its own way of questioning, arguing, asserting, thinking—it has its own form of wisdom” (1992, p.32). For those engaged in creative processes, critical and reflective decisions are frequently embodied and defy any rational explication, at least in so far as the practitioner is able to articulate these verbally. This does not, however, mean that the choices are without an understanding of how to work with instinct and, with experience and practice, become a form of physical intelligence based on bodily recall. For Shadi, the body as a site of memory and source of creative intuition may extend further than her own physical form or run deeper at the level of DNA to include her place in a genealogical legacy.

⁷⁶ For a full overview of Grimes's critique on ritual theorists Goody, Hobsbawm, Wagner and Connerton see Grimes, R. 1992. ‘Reinventing Ritual’, *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 75(1), pp. 28-35.

In a catalogue essay for Shadi's solo exhibition, *Noka ya Bokamoso*, curator Joan Legalamitlwa notes Shadi's lineage in a long line of firstborn daughters (2016, p.5).⁷⁷ Shadi has remarked that the use of feminine-associated crafts in her work is a means of tapping into a legacy of women's work and reflecting and "honouring her grandmother in thinking about her history that is overlooked and erased" (Makandula, 2016). Yet it is not the image of a benign, gentle grandmother knitting pastel garments for small children, which Shadi evokes in her fashioning of blood-red trails of knotted wool. As noted by M. Neelika Jayawardene, Shadi has limited technical skill in being able to fashion functional garments, instead, in her performance *Mosako wa Nako*, she "produces a scroll, a seismic graph on which she leaves a cryptic record of the conditions in which she exists and produces work" (2016, p.18).⁷⁸ In embodying the act of crochet, Shadi is not authentically mimicking the exact tasks her grandmother may have enacted. Instead, she focuses on the labour of crocheting each stitch as a sincere contemplation of this labour, as a means of recording history or time passing in her own lineage of unseen and unrecorded female labour.



Lerato Shadi *Mosako wa Nako*, 2014. Live performance. Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin. Duration: 10 working days. (Art at a Time Like This).



Lerato Shadi *Mosako wa Nako*, 2016. Live performance. National Arts Festival, Grahamstown. Duration: 10 working days. (leratoshadi.art).⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *Noka ya Bokamoso* may be translated as 'The River of the Future'.

⁷⁸ The title can be loosely translated as 'River of Time'.

⁷⁹ Grahamstown's name was officially changed to Makhanda in 2018. The city is thus referred to by its name at the time of this work's performance.

She describes how in this task: “the stitches become the representation of past moments, drops that contain the lived universe of emotions and thoughts” (cited in Pollack and Verhallen, 2020). *Mosaka wa Nako* is a work that has been performed three times: in Berlin in 2014, in Grahamstown in 2016, and in Brazil in 2019. For each of these performances, Shadi occupies a chair on a plinth, crocheting from a large ball of red wool for six hours each day, over a period of ten days. During these performances, she does nothing other than crochet: not eating, nor drinking, nor interacting with the visitors to the space. By the end of the performance, there is a long red strip that extends nearly the entire length of the gallery space. The strip thus forms a kind of carpet: a metaphorical river of ancestral lineage that records Shadi’s own labour as she reflects on labours past and extends these thoughts and actions into the future.



Barbara Kruger, 1989. *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)*. (The Broad).

Legalamitlwa considers Shadi’s recurring use of red in her works as a kind of cautionary note or a “Red for Danger” (2016, p.7). The colour choice is perhaps more multifaceted than this. Firstly, red is clearly an aesthetic consideration as a contrasting colour to the white gallery spaces in which Shadi performs and her preference to perform in either entirely black or white clothing. Secondly, this minimalist colour palette might be compared with the same colour choices (selected for their power to make a bold, simple statement) in the work of Barbara Kruger, thus situating it within a lineage of feminist artmaking and perhaps the

connection that resonates with Legalamitlwa. Thirdly, and most importantly for Shadi's work, is a reference to the colour of blood. This is not necessarily blood in the sense of violence or as part of some sacrifice, despite the ritualistic nature of the work, although these are undercurrents. The theme of blood extends the idea of a meditation on genealogical lineage, which is evident in two earlier interrelated wool-based works: *Selogilwe* (2010) and *Se Sa Feleng* (2010).



Lerato Shadi. 2010. *Selogilwe*. Video projection. Duration: 7 hours 3 minutes. (leratorshadi.art).



Lerato Shadi. 2010. *Se Sa Feleng*. Performance and installation. Duration: approx 3 hours. (leratorshadi.art).

For *Selogilwe*, Shadi sits lotus-fashion upon a white plinth and knits a thin red strip that extends from her midsection like an unfurling umbilicus. This work was performed for video and is recorded in an uninterrupted seven-hour documentation. The choice to document this act, rather than perform it live, is a practical one so that the video of *Selogile* can be played as a documentary record alongside a subsequent performance, *Se Sa Feleng*. As an extension of this work, Shadi then uses the chord knitted in *Selogile* for the performance *Se Sa Feleng* in which she clambers around a white geometric frame weaving the chord from between her legs to form a lemniscate around the central bars. Taken together, these two works do not situate Shadi as the culmination of her genealogical lineage but as one component in a longer line. In *Selogilwe*, she traces history as a line extending into the past from her own navel. In *Se Sa Feleng*, she utilises this chord to 'birth' an infinity symbol wrapped around the white bars of a geometric structure built to her own proportions. Whether the cubes are a cage that confines the wrapped chord, a support structure for it, or if the lemniscate is the glowing, flowing heart of a more formal rigid structure is left up to the audience's interpretation.

Given the extended duration of her live performances, and the Setswana titling of her work (for an artist who has now lived and worked for many years in Berlin), it is perhaps pertinent to ask who Shadi imagines her audience to be. Many of her works have been shown both in Europe and in South Africa, yet very little about the works is changed, never pandering to any one kind of audience and their potential entry point into the work. "I don't assume I have a 'universal' audience or one kind of audience member. I also don't assume that people interact or consume work in the same way," notes Shadi (cited in Krynauw, 2022). That her work operates on several levels of potential interpretation speaks to how Shadi has perhaps found aspects of Bhabha's *transnational* and *translational* cultural signifiers embodied through simple daily gestures. At the same time, her titles are embedded in her own cultural heritage by using her mother tongue. Jayawardane considers that Shadi's deliberate choice to label her work without providing translations is a conscious act whereby "she not only emphasises otherness of the other, but also tells us that the other should not always have to labour to make themselves easily understood, or be comprehensible for those from the hegemonic culture" (2016, p.28). The roots of this interpretation can be seen in Shadi's own commentary on her choice of titles when she observes that:

I am very much aware that it's mainly Tswana speakers who will understand ... But I also know that marginalised people don't have a problem with not fully understanding. It is mainly people who are used to being spoken to [in their own languages] who usually demand a translation (cited in Sosibo, 2022).

Jayawardane's interpretation is, ironically, one from a Western hegemonic perspective, for Shadi is not always in all contexts some kind of 'other', nor does she deliberately choose to perform her identity as some kind of authentic cultural exotic for her audiences. Her titles are in Setswana because this is her language and culture. It is also important to note that these are not simple words or phrases which Shadi has chosen not to translate for the sake of being mysterious or obscure to those who do not speak Setswana. The titles are not translated because they do not translate simply. To do so would lose much of the nuance or multiplicity of meaning and render the titles merely descriptive rather than poetic. *Selogilwe*, for example, means literally 'to plait' or 'weave'. It also has associations with putting things down in their appropriate place, the act of tracking where things go, or making things neat: a linking of ideas that can be seen in the English, once explained, but which is not an immediate understanding of the word translated into that language. *Selogilwe* is also a name, both as a given name and a surname, perhaps in this context underlining the idea of genealogical lineage. *Se Sa Feleng* is the first part of a Setswana idiom: 'Se sa feleng sa tlhola', which, if it has an English equivalent, might be 'all good things come to an end'. The Setswana, however, places more emphasis on the unnaturalness of that which does not have a necessary conclusion. Shadi describes it as: "That which does not end is an abomination of nature" (cited in Tsumele, 2010). By taking only the first part of the idiom, the work might be directly translated as 'that which does not end' or, more neatly, as 'that which is without an end'. Yet the work is not precisely about eternity or infinity—despite the use of the lemniscate configuration of the red woollen chord. Instead, the work is a play on the potential of an infinite line, one which, in the case of genealogical lineage, is neither unnatural nor infinite but rather, like the idiom, as yet incomplete.

Titles for Shadi are also something that comes to her as a form of instinct, a process which she does not take lightly. In a conversation with curator Bonaventure Ndikung about her exhibition *Maru a Pula Is a Song of Happiness*, she talks about how she finds the process of titling challenging (KINDL, 2021). In this interview, she describes several new abstract textile works fashioned from the crocheted residue of her performance works, which she has temporarily tilted *Series*. "These works are called *Series*," she observes, "but that is not the title, yet. I am waiting for them to give me their titles" (KINDL, 2021, 7:46-7:55). In this statement, one can see not only how Shadi grapples with the correct naming of her work, but also how she returns to previous works as part of her ongoing process as an artist. Her body of work (like her themes of familial lineage and her own subjecthood) continues to be revisited, recontextualised and contrasted with both the past and the future. These concepts are never entirely finished for Shadi but rather are things to be returned to and reinterpreted as her practice continues. She describes how the title for *Maru a Pula Is a Song of*

Happiness came to her as a remembered earworm, a song from her childhood, whilst she was taking a bike ride in Berlin.⁸⁰ With the song playing in her head, exploring a very different landscape to the one in which she grew up and thinking about the two different geographic and cultural attitudes to impending rain, she describes how she suddenly instinctively knew that this was her title. She describes this revelation as “the heart as a place of knowing”, a kind of understanding that she cannot explain in the moment, but an instinct which she trusts (KINDL, 2021. 9:07- 9:13). She then, somewhat jokingly, apologises to her interviewer, Ndikung, for lacking a more articulate or intelligent reasoning for this instinct behind her choice of titling. “It’s as intelligent as it can get,” he counters, “because it is so by the heart” (KINDL, 2021. 10:37 10:42). Ndikung thus echoes Grimes’s view that to consider the body as somehow stupid because the instinct is harder to articulate verbally is a false dichotomy: “the body is cognitive, not stupid, and conversely the mind is embodied” (1992, p.32). For Ndikung, it is the perfect synergy between the body and the mind which creates an intelligent understanding of one’s creativity.

By embracing this bodily intuition as a form of becoming whilst making, a research through practice, there is thus no formula to the titles Shadi selects, and it is reductive to see these as merely a performance of culture or of difference. These titles come from a sincere personal reference point and are deeply rooted in Shadi’s own cultural experiences, yet they are also selected for their potential multiple layers of meaning. Shadi acknowledges that not all her audiences will grasp the multiple layers of meaning she puts into her work and that some audiences will have a superficial experience in not giving the work time or not attempting to research and translate for themselves if they do not understand. She notes, however, that for those who do put in more time, the work will “reveal itself more to you. Then, when you give it even more time, you reveal *yourself* to the work. Where—hopefully—you understand that the conversations you’re having about the work have more to do with you than it does with me” (cited in Krynauw, 2016). Thus, Shadi paints her practice as a conversation with, rather than a speech to, her audience. She presents a *zone of contact* in which the references her audiences draw, and the associations they make with her ritualised depictions of mundane labour are as equally valid as the ones she puts in.

For her exhibitions, *Maru a Pula Is a Song of Happiness* (2020) at KINDL (Centre for Contemporary Art) in Berlin, and *Di Sa Bonweng* (2022) at blank projects in Cape Town, the full-length seven-hour video of *Selogilwe* was installed. Shadi contemplates how audiences

⁸⁰ *Maru a Pula* (meaning ‘Clouds of Rain’) is a 1976 hit song by South African jazz singer Letta Mbulu. In the lyrics, Mbulu describes a time of drought and the joy impending storm clouds bring to a thirsty land.

might engage with this work, given that it is highly unlikely that any visitor would sit and watch the entire video.



Lerato Shadi. 2022. Installation view of *Di Sa Bonweng* featuring *Selogilwe*, the residue of *Mosako Wa Nako*, and one of the *Series* works. blank projects, Cape Town. (leratorshadi.art).

Instead, she likes to think of the work as a kind of hourglass that marks the time and contemplates “how the people who get the most out of the work are probably the people that work at the museum, like the guards, who see it every single day” (cited in Sosibo, 2021). She reflects on how her durational works are an acknowledgement of and a “monument to unsung labour that makes spaces of privilege like galleries possible” (cited in Sosibo, 2021). At the same time, she is fully aware of her own privilege in relation to the hidden labour she seeks to memorialise in her durational works and that her actions, whilst extreme as a live performance, are nothing compared to the daily tasks that go unnoticed: “the labour that people do, not for seven hours or 10 days, but for years and years. It’s not really a big comparison” (cited in Sosibo, 2016).

Grimes notes that critics of self-ritual/ritualising (or those who would always define ritual as collective and not individual) perceive such acts as selfish or possibly narcissistic, and there is indeed a cautionary note here, in that “the temptations to ego-inflation, intercultural imperialism, and self-deception are high, especially if a self introjects the notion that it is *the* source of ritual” (1992, p.28). The dangers of self-aggrandisement are exceptionally high if a self claims to be the only one able to perform these kinds of rituals or denies the origin of their interpretations. This is never the position that Shadi takes. Her durational acts, and the meditative discipline that she brings to attempting to elevate this unseen labour, thus creating a ritual of this, is not without a commitment to trying to walk in the shoes of others

for just a small section of time, even though she is ever conscious this is but a symbolic drop in the ocean when compared to the actual labour on which she seeks to reflect. The binary between self and society is, however, a false dichotomy as “bodies are enculturated and cultures are embodied” (Grimes, 1992, p.27). Particularly from the perspective of South African indigenous ethical philosophy, the notion of humanity, *botho* in Setswana (one of the Sotho languages), or *ubuntu* (in the Nguni languages) makes no such distinction between the individual and the collective in society.⁸¹ It would, however, be a limitation to view Shadi’s work only in terms of its interconnectedness within the culture and language in which she was raised, as if her actions are beyond translation.

Her practice draws on personal experience and lineage and is often about black female bodies, but this is not all it is. “It’s okay for you to see me as Black and for me to see you as white” she observes, “But it is not okay that all you see about me is Black because being Black is part of who I am but not all that I Am” (cited in Legalamitlwa p.8). The complexity of individual identity and Bhabha’s call for translational and transnational creative acts by postcolonial subjects can perhaps be seen in a reincarnation of meaning in Shadi’s reenactment of *Hema* as part of the group exhibition *Undisciplinary Learning* in Berlin, 2016.⁸²

Curated by Janine Halka, Suza Husse, and Julia Lazarus, the exhibition, which takes the novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* by Peter Weiss as a starting point, appeared at multiple venues around the city of Berlin. Shadi’s chosen site, the *Schwerbelastungskörper* or heavy load-exerting body, is a residual architectural experiment created by Adolf Hitler’s chief architect Albert Speer to test the practicality of building large architectural structures such as a giant triumphal arch on the marshy ground of Berlin as part of Hitler’s vision for the Berlin capital of his Nazi Third Reich. In an article entitled ‘Stones Do Not Speak for Themselves’, historian Clare Copley notes that the structure was recognised for its historical significance and received protection status in 1995, yet has never been converted into anything with a more functional use bar housing a museum of its history. The structure “deemed too close to residential apartments to be safely demolished ... [thus remains] primarily as an unintended yet enduring monument to National Socialist megalomania, dislocated from the city it was designed to reshape” (2009, p.219).

⁸¹ The notion of *botho* is derived from the Setswana proverb “Motho ke motho ka batho” (A person is a person through other people). In the Nguni languages, *botho* is *ubuntu*, again derived from a proverb: “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (I am myself because of others).

⁸² Shadi has now been resident in Berlin for over a decade.



Lerato Shadi. 2016. *Hema*. Performance at Schwerbelastungskörper. Duration: 4 hours. (leratorshadi.art).

Although Shadi, as a Batswana South African, has no particular relationship in her birth identity to the history of Nazi Germany, as a long-term resident of Berlin, however, residual architectural structures which monumentalize racist and fascist histories cannot fail to have a resonance with her own experiences of apartheid legacy monuments. In observing that the very concept of selfhood is a social construct, Grimes argues “that self-generated rites are a form of social expression” (1992, p.27). The process of translating *Hema* for a reenactment at this site is thus one not directly linked to any authenticity of Shadi’s cultural history but an individual, human, and personal embodied ritual act, and a social comment on the society in which she now feels embedded. On one level, the performance is a sincere reflection on quiet resistance that commemorates the labours of those who worked secretly and silently in the history of Berlin to bring down totalitarian injustice: one kind of living, breathing labour that, by its sheer durational persistence, may ultimately see oppressive regimes fall. In another reading, the process set against the architecturally monumental becomes about the futility of all labour, particularly when one kind of labour is so grandiose in its ambition that inevitably, the passage of time renders these schemes ludicrously Ozymandian: Breathe ... let go ... this too will pass.

Songs, Tales and Spaces, Reminding the Nation: Sikhumbuzo Makandula

Amabali may be remembered because they explain how certain present circumstances came to exist. Each tale is a separate unit, and they are not thought of as a sequence over time. It is up to the genealogy to take care of chronology. The *amabali* are free in form, and their transmission is random in that there was no institutionalised means of making certain that they were remembered.

—Jeff Peires, *A History of the Xhosa ca. 1700 - 1835*.

In Sikhumbuzo Makandula's practice-led Masters thesis, he writes about being introduced to two interconnected concepts in relation to grave sites, these being: *emalinden*i and *ifihlo* (2019, p.18). *Emalinden*i (meaning waiting, or that which is in waiting) and *imfihlo* (something hidden or a secret) are pertinent to Makandula's creative methodology, a process which often begins with a quest for traces of alternative histories in formal historical archives. In addition to this text and image archival research is his interest in *iminombo* (genealogies), *izibongo* (praises), *amabali* (tales) and *iingoma* (songs). His attention to these forms of oral historiography is not a precise theoretical analysis in anthropological terms, but rather an uncovering of living memories as sources for embodied memory and multi-dimensional prompts for live performance. In drawing threads together among these various lineages of orature, Makandula quests for both absences and connections between narratives of history. He brings this research together in interactive, processional, and often site-specific, ritualistic performances, which sometimes feel like a kind of seance and frequently use various stopping points or stations, similar to Christian liturgical devotions. In this process, Makandula demonstrates a multimodal approach as researcher and practitioner, as psychopomp and high priest with references to both Christian ceremony and African spirituality, which come together as a syncretic ritual.

In order to conduct a close reading of Makandula's work and examine some of his live performances, which I will explore in more detail later, it may be best to begin by following something of his own creative research process. The processional nature of many of Makandula's performances becomes a kind of journey through history, and so it makes sense to emulate something of this processional quality. Whilst some artists may begin with a particular theme or overarching narrative, which they then strengthen or develop through the finding or making of artefacts that relate to the informing concept, Makandula's research process begins with a fragment of a song, sound, or gesture; or with a place; or with a material archival trace—a photograph, letter, or document. In comparison to image makers, Makandula's process could thus be better described as a form of collage rather than painting. Having encountered a particular fragment or trace which acts like a prompt, he then

sets out to find other fragments with which to juxtapose and flesh out the narrative around this encounter, whether this is archival research in museums or libraries, or through conversations with historians, heritage practitioners, and community elders whose situational knowledge has not been formally recorded (Makandula, 2019, p.12).



Sikhumbuzo Makandula. 2016. *Ukubamba elentulo*. Digital Photographic print. (Makandula, 2016, p.25).⁸³

The concepts of *emalinden*i and *imfihlo* resonate as metaphors throughout Makandula's research, as his is a process of locating alternative histories which are 'hidden' or perhaps 'secret' but are nevertheless 'waiting' in archives or oral traditions to be discovered. *Emalinden*i and *ifihlo*, as Makandula describes them, are terms that relate to ritual practices surrounding the burial of amaXhosa kings (2019, p.18). In these practices, the resting place of a royal subject is kept secret from the general community, with only select individuals being privy to the location in order to protect the remains from sorcerers and, perhaps, more earthly-minded interfering third parties. In world history, the purpose of keeping burial sites secret are manifold: from protecting tombs from would-be plunderers of artefacts interred with the dead; to preventing religious or political followers of the deceased from claiming any part of a body as a potential relic of a martyr; to hiding evidence of unlawful killing or genocide thus depriving the surviving relatives of the catharsis of knowing their loved ones' final end. Furthermore, as historians Robert Edgar and Hilary Sapire note: "bones and burials have

⁸³ *Ukubamba elentulo* might translate as 'To hold/catch a position or title'.

been invested with special meaning in South Africa's recent political history" (1999, p.95). They equally observe that issues of repatriation or ceremonial reinterment of human remains have a much longer history and that "these battles over bones from a longer colonial past represent an attempt to reclaim a dignity and control over the bodies lost to further the causes of colonialism, 'progress' and science" (1999, p.96). Historian Nomalanga Mkhize also observes how human remains in the context of post-apartheid South Africa are both "powerful yet problematic symbols" (2007, p.1). In one situation, she argues, they can be utilized successfully to stir up public opinion and encourage people to challenge accepted historical narratives, thus resurrecting alternative forms of cultural expression and remembered histories. At the same time, however, regulations protecting burial sites and social taboos around human remains may lead to a silencing, or to an abstention from any action, in order to avoid political controversy (2007, p.2).

Makandula's interest in history, archives, and the search for material remains is not always directly focused on the political and legal complexities of literal human remains. In his research, however, these matters (and the colonial legacy of storing physical remains in archives) have surfaced. As an undergraduate student at Rhodes University, his one particular quest was to find out whether the notion that the human remains of Alban Njube Lobengula Khumalo (grandson and heir to King Mzilikazi, the founder of the Ndebele kingdom in Zimbabwe) were stored at the Albany Science Museum in Makhanda was truth or merely rumour. Makandula's quest was inspired by Sisonke Khumalo, a friend and a Khumalo clan descendant, who remarked that: "Lobengula [Khumalo's] bones are kept at Albany Science Museum in Grahamstown" (2019, p.18). This comment and lyrics from the song *Mzilikazi* (2001) by Dorothy Masuka, which lament the loss of the king's progeny in "foreign lands" then led to an investigation that illustrated for Makandula the secrecy and bars to access the archive may sometimes represent.⁸⁴ He recounts in his MA thesis his, perhaps less than subtle, ploy to gain information by asking of the archivist at the Albany Science Museum whether he might be allowed to 'borrow' a human skull from the museum to cast as a mould for one of his academic artistic projects. The problematics of this query are not only in the secrecy and politics surrounding the keeping of human remains in archives, although this is a factor in one part. Human remains, unlike other archived materials, are at once objects and subjects by virtue of their previously being part of a living human being. Thus, their existence in an archive, rather than a cemetery, is fraught with the colonial history of treating human subjects as objects. In addition to this, is the concern for

⁸⁴ These lyrics from "Mzilikazi" are: "Mzilikazi Watshona phi? Washiy' abantwana phants' emazweni. (Mzilikazi where have you wandered off [died]? You've left your progeny in foreign lands)" (cited in Makandula, 2019, pp.18-19).

the archivist that any interaction with an historic artefact (that might be considered an unstable, anti-archival process) might cause damage to the objects that it is their core duty to preserve. Art students wishing to run amok with mould-making processes on the collection are probably any archivist's worst nightmare, regardless of the nature of the object under consideration. The archivist's simplistic response to Makandula may thus have multiple motivations: "Mister, you should not go around asking for skulls. Yes, we do have skulls of human remains, but they are not allowed to be used by the public" (cited in Makandula, 2019, p.19). Finding little success at the museum, Makandula subsequently discovered, from consulting three Makhanda-based historians (Julia Wells, Nomalanga Mkhize, and Enocent Msindo), that Alban Njube Lobengula Khumalo had been buried in an old cemetery in Fingo Village, Makhanda at a place known as Kwa-Ndancama (2019, p.19). Makandula notes a sad irony in that the name of this site literally translates as "the place of giving up" which, he suggests, "echoes Alban Njube Lobengula Khumalo's quest and hope of ever going back to a country of his birth in Matabeleland, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe" (2019, p.19).

Makandula's subsequent research into Khumalo's life story led to a discovery of several archived letters (circa 1900) penned between Khumalo and Emma Sandile, eldest daughter of the Xhosa Chief Sandile of the Amangqika.⁸⁵ Njube (as he preferred to sign himself in letters), Emma, and her brother Gonya (as heirs to various indigenous chiefdoms who were in conflict with the British colonial government in the Cape during the latter half of the nineteenth century) were all taken from their native lands under the guardianship of Cecil John Rhodes and Bishop Robert Gray to be educated at Zonnebloem College in Cape Town.⁸⁶ Historian Janet Hodgson describes the intent of this western education in Christian missionary schools as a process whereby "[t]he future African leaders were to be pulled out of their society and totally immersed in the incoming culture so that on their return home they might implant the new values, beliefs and practices within their indigenous social fabric" (1987, p.146). This particular process of exile and alienation from their culture of birth may also be seen as taking the high-ranking progeny of African chiefdoms and using them as "hostages for the peace and prosperity of their country" (Daymond et al. 2003, p.91). These royal children were rarely, if ever, allowed to return home despite their various written requests to their guardians (Rhodes and Bishop Gray) which Njube and Emma share with one another in their correspondence. Njube describes himself as a "unwitting decoy-cum-hostage" (cited in Makandula, 2019, p.27), whilst Emma describes herself as feeling like a "savage hostage in the land of our forefathers" (cited in Makandula, 2019,

⁸⁵ These letters come from multiple sources, including published books as well as archival papers, found by the artist in the Cory Library for Historical Research at Rhodes University.

⁸⁶ I use their first names here to distinguish these individuals, as there are multiple Khumalos and Sandiles who were part of this missionary education programme.

p.30). Although the teenagers initially were relatively willing converts to the so-called 'civilising agenda' of their Christian education, in later life Emma describes her sense of conflict between her adopted faith and traditional amaXhosa practices as "the problem that wrought our destruction" (cited in Makandula, 2019, p.30). Makandula, in his research, thus found the final resting place of Njube's mortal remains in a graveyard, but also found evidence of a very different kind of 'body snatching' in the personal accounts of teenage students of royal lineage who attended Zonnebloem College in the late nineteenth century.

Makandula's quest here, for a specific and real object/subject, speaks to his desire to begin his creative research endeavours with an authentic object or document—a starting with a literal end and an investigation of how histories lead toward and away from this preserved point. Theatre practitioner and theorist Aoife Monks, in an article entitled 'Human Remains: Acting, Objects, and Belief in Performance', considers how the presence of authentic objects as a prompt for performance draws on Stanislavskian acting theory. She describes Stanislavski's uses of 'real' and 'true', in relation to performance, as terms employed interchangeably and observes that he formulates an "acting theory in which belief, truth, and the real operate in a circular, and often tautological relation" (2012, p.361). This, she suggests, can be seen in how Stanislavski motivates that "what is conscious and credible gives birth to truth, and truth evokes belief" (Stanislavski, 2008, p.361). For Stanislavski, this evocation of belief is one that draws on an actor's experiences in order to portray a more credible representation for the theatre, i.e. one which is arguably more about a *suspension of disbelief* and may be distinct from an *evocation of belief* for the purposes of (cult) ritual. Monks notes a particular challenge human remains pose as props in "representational art, [in that they] continually insist on their own distinctive history and autonomy" (2012, p.362). This challenge to the representational nature of theatre through the use of real, historically inscribed artefacts is one that Monks argues runs "the risk of piercing the illusion, uncoupling the dramatic sign from its referent" (2012, p.362). In essence, she suggests that the authentic artefact, which in the case of human remains is loaded with its own biography as subject (and not actor), runs the risk of upstaging the actor in the minds of the audience in a fictional work.

For Makandula, material remains operate less as props in his performances and more as relics. This in itself may speak to the nature of his performances, which, whilst theatrical in some of their stylistics, are neither theatre nor fiction but begin in tracing historical fact. Historian Alexandra Walsham notes an ontological difference between a relic and a representation in that a relic "is not a mere symbol or indicator of divine presence, it is an actual physical embodiment of it" (2010, p.14). Relics are thus both reminders and kinds of

time capsules that link the present and the past: “a kind of umbilical cord that connects the living and the celebrated dead, they carry messages from beyond the grave and provide a mnemonic ligature to a world that has been lost” (2010, p.15). This notion of a relic is complex, for whilst it would seem necessary for such objects to be authentic, Walsham also notes that incidences of forgery and replicas in the history of sacred relics “do not necessarily serve to demystify them in the eyes of believers” (2010, p.14). Instead, many consider these souvenirs of a narrative of faith as representations that become authentic through sincere belief, much as a Catholic communion host becomes the body of Christ through a process of transubstantiation. Equally, for Makandula, it is not necessary for him to incorporate authentic objects in his work, merely to have researched that something like what he conjures into his work does or did exist.

If this leap in logic seems nonsensical to the more secularly minded, it may be useful to consider how Grimes problematizes the presumption that ritual is meaningful in the sense that it is referential. He observes that, in any request for ritualists to provide a neat definition of the signs and symbols used in rites, “one quickly finds that there is little connection between how much people can articulate about a symbol's referents and how meaningful it is to them” (1992, p.35). In defining the meaning of any ritual act, it is, perhaps, unhelpful to dissect the component parts of the performance and ascribe finite symbolism or didactic interpretation to any one gesture, object, sound or recitation. As with a close reading of other creative forms—visual art, theatre, poetry—it is the combination of factors, and a layering of semiotics, that resonate with audiences who determine the work's success and attribute meaning to the whole. Art, it could thus be argued, is similar to how Grimes describes ritual in that it becomes “meaningful by virtue of what it does socially, not just by virtue of what it refers to” (1992, p.35).

Fundamental to Makandula's practice is a grappling with two components of spirituality: that of his staunch Anglican upbringing and a family legacy of African spirituality. In an interview with art critic Athi Mongezeleli Joja, Makandula speaks about becoming aware, in 2008, of a spiritual calling:

And the calling that I had needed me to trace back my lineage, basically ... I discovered that I come from a family of practitioners, of healers, something that in the family ... a Christian family, was silenced actually. It was never spoken about, even till today (cited in Joja, 2016a).

Rather than entering into a more traditional process of *ukuthwasa* and becoming an initiate with a sangoma guide in a rite of passage separate from public life, Makandula has instead explored his dual spiritual influences in his creative practice. This may be what lends Makandula's work a sense of sincerity in that the rites he performs as art are not mere representations of rites but actual ritual processes of discovery. Joja describes this exploration of Christian symbolism and African spirituality in Makandula's work as a kind of double consciousness. This, he also observes, lends the work a level of honest reflection in that it brings to the work a "spiritual sensibility but in such ways that it distinguishes itself quite tidily from the theatrical turn to shamanism, slowly formalised as an aesthetic referent in much of contemporary South African art" (2016a). Joja describes this slightly differently in a reworking of his interview with Makandula for the artist's exhibition catalogue *Ubuzwe* (2016b).⁸⁷ Here, Joja describes Makandula's double consciousness as a "spoilsport", an attitude to cultural hybridity that stands in contrast to "the pervading melodramatic shamanism, slowly formalised into an aesthetic in the mainstream local art context" (2016b). Joja thus notes both the sincerity in Makandula's work and how it stands in opposition to other contemporary South African artworks that present ritual themes in purely representational (and sometimes crass) terms.

Other audience responses also reflect the layering of symbolism in Makandula's work and how it creates meaning for them. The narrator of the Institute for Creative Arts (ICA) podcast, Catherine Boulle, likens his work to:

stepping into a carefully curated collection. Each sound and image and artefact that he introduces carries a particular history that he has excavated and examined in collaboration with academics, musicians and writers. But this is not an archive we are permitted to observe passively (ICA, 2020, 4:14-4:39).

Makandula's process is one of asking questions of history sometimes relating to the sites in which he performs, and questions of his audience, such that the evolution of meaning and any closure in the work is as much what he brings with his research to the collective experience, as it is concerned to provoke audience engagement and participation. Adding to this understanding of a layered, collective construction of meaning is how Dr Nomusa Makhubu, Makandula's MA supervisor, describes her encounters with his work:

One generally does experience it as a ritual. It's something that you are undergoing ... it's a spiritual experience. It's in the way that he uses music. It's in the way that he gets people to

⁸⁷ *Ubuzwe* means nationhood.

participate. You become part of the society that's trying to change something (ICA, 2020, 4:44-5:05).

Grimes notes that in unpacking the meaning of ritual, one needs to consider how the combination of symbolism works not as references but as evocations. To describe this, he quotes philosopher Dan Sperber who observes how “symbols work like smells ... they evoke rather than refer” (cited in Grimes, 1992, p.36).



Sikhumbuzo Makandula. 2016. *Ingqumbo*. Participatory processional performance in High Street, Grahamstown. Image: Gcobani Sakhile Ndabeni. (ICA).

For the curator, Khwezi Gule, acts of evocation and remembrance are pivotal to Makandula's practice, particularly when related to works such as *Ingqumbo* (2016) and *Inhlambuluko* (2018).⁸⁸ Both these works are processional, where Makandula and his musical collaborator, violinist Christopher Jardine, led an audience (both invited and curious onlookers) between various locations in the urban environment, pausing at specific colonial historic sites and monuments. *Ingqumbo* (2016) took place on a September evening on Grahamstown High Street.⁸⁹ Starting at the Cathedral of St Michael and St George, the audience was then led by Makandula (dressed in a long black trench coat and balaclava) up the High Street traffic island to the Elizabeth Salt Monument, then to the second 1820 Settlers Monument, a granite post-and-lintel structure reminiscent of Stonehenge that was erected in 1953 on the same site to replace an earlier design from 1921 (Martinson, 2017). The audience was finally led to the Drostdy Arch. Here, a ladder and a hangman's noose had been installed in what is

⁸⁸ *Ingqumbo* may be translated as 'Wrath' and *Inhlambuluko* as 'Cleansing'.

⁸⁹ Grahamstown's name change to Makhanda was only officially gazetted in 2018, making this the city's name at the time of the 2016 performance of *Ingqumbo*. Makhubu, who was born and raised in the city, however, speaking in 2020, suggests that in *Ingqumbo* Makandula is "working with the spirits and the ghosts of... not of Makhanda, actually, but of Grahamstown ... that space is heavily haunted ... it's got a colonial history that's so readily present. It's in the buildings, it's in the design of that city. You smell it, you feel it, you taste it every day" (ICA, 2020, 20:47-21:15).

now the main entrance to the Rhodes University campus, but was historically the entrance to the site for public executions. The audience was handed Molotov cocktails and a single match, whilst Makandula placed a skull replica containing smouldering *impepho* atop the ladder.⁹⁰ He then disappeared into the twilight, leaving his audience to negotiate, along with their single match, the experience for themselves.

Inhlambuluko (2018), a procession through the Cape Town city centre, took its inspiration from a history of protest songs and marches. It began at the Robert Gray Memorial, went on to St George's Cathedral, and subsequently ended in the Company Gardens at the Cecil John Rhodes statue, where a model of a skull was placed and the slave bell was rung. For this work, Makandula and Jardine wore long white shirts trimmed with red and elaborate frills at the wrists and collars. These are reminiscent of choir or altar boy vestments with ruffles: a sartorial affectation for European men that extended through much of the period of the Age of Discovery and early colonialism.



Sikhumbuzo Makandula, *Inhlambuluko*. 2018. Processional performance.

Stations at Robert Gray Memorial and Company Gardens. (Makandula, 2019, pp.40-42).

⁹⁰ *Impepho*: *Helichrysum odoratissimum* or African Sage is used in its dry form as an incense used in ceremonies of cleansing and to summon ancestors.

In both these works, Makandula performs actions at each station that are designed to draw attention to these spaces: to question or disrupt the seeming naturalisation of these monuments or buildings as part of the everyday urban landscape. At times, using *imbola* (red ochre), he annotates monuments with the names of historic figures not included in the officially sanctioned memorialisation of events.⁹¹ This can be seen in the image below where Makandula has inscribed the names of Emma and Gonya Sandile on to the monument commemorating Bishop Robert Gray as a reminder that he was, in part, responsible for the displacement of these two children from their cultural and dynastic inheritance.



Sikhumbuzo Makandula, *Inhlambuluko*. 2018. Emma and Gonya Sandile Memorial (intervention with *imbola*) on Bishop Gray Memorial. (Makandula, 2019, p.48).

At other times he burns things: his altar boy cassock or a Bible. In other instances, he burns *impepho* or distributes salt in an act of cleansing. Gule questions whether, given these ritual acts of purification, it is accurate to refer to Makandula's work as performance or if it is "perhaps better conceived as ritualised acts of remembrance, which serve as catalysts for healing" (2019, p.270). Makandula, himself, notes that he prefers to refer to these works as interventions rather than performances (2019, p.29). The question of the continued public monumentalisation of colonial figures was a burning issue in the direct wake of the Rhodes Must Fall student protests (2015/16) and thus made the works *Inggumbo* (2016) and

⁹¹ The loaded nature of *imbola* as a material will be discussed later.

Inhlambuluko (2018) timely and topical. Makandula's approach in symbolic burnings, *imbola* annotations, and ritual acts of cleansing is, however, more subtle than the more radical views that would physically remove these legacies of painful history. This may be, in one part, his own interest in history and how it has been written (and may thus be annotated or corrected), as well as the awareness that the removal of physical reminders of painful legacies does not necessarily remove them in the mind. Gule observes that even in monuments and memorials of events and persons post-1994, these constructions rely heavily on a "genealogy [of] western forms of commemoration ... [with] aesthetic forms that ... tend to rely on the monumental, statuesque, 'look but don't touch' formalist approach" (2019, p.274). He argues that these practices of monumentalising have predominantly ignored local sensibilities of history and African processes of commemoration, including indigenous religious practices that venerate the ancestors, which are often more ephemeral (2019, p.274).

Whilst *Ingqumbo* (2016) and *Inhlambuluko* (2018) are pertinent works that introduce some of the symbology that Makandula revisits in his processes, they are both works that speak back to, or attempt to redress a history where the European colonial legacy is the central component. It is for this reason, with Gule's observation about more indigenous forms of commemoration, that I wish to focus predominantly on Makandula's subsequent work *Ingoma ka Tiyo Soga* (2018/19). The central figure and history being commemorated in this work (although entrenched in the history of colonialism) is an African one. This work marks a maturing in Makandula's work from merely speaking back to, or annotating, colonial history and evolving into an illuminating of histories from an African perspective.

Ingoma ka Tiyo Soga

The installation and performance of *Ingoma ka Tiyo Soga* (The Song of Tiyo Soga) (2018/19) takes its impetus and inspiration from the life and work of Rev Tiyo 'Zisani' Soga. Soga, a Xhosa missionary and composer, was born in 1829 in the rural village of Thyume, Eastern Cape. He received his education first at Lovedale Missionary Institution and later travelled to Scotland for higher education. Soga was the first black South African to be ordained as a priest in the Presbyterian church and made substantial contributions to the early translations of the Bible into IsiXhosa (Lipschutz and Rasmussen, 1986). Returning to South Africa and working as a missionary in the Eastern Cape, Soga was both a black

intellectual involved in the establishment of African Christian theologies and an advocate for Xhosa tradition and culture. In this dual position, Boule observes how “historians have often written of Soga as a divided character standing in and between the [two] worlds” (ICA, 2020, 29:09-29:17). This position of dividedness, however, is one which can only be seen as the product of postcolonial thinking, where the acceptance and infiltration of the so-called ‘civilising’ Christian agenda marked an insidious starting point for so much colonial violence that followed. For Soga, in the nineteenth century, circumstances and forms of resistance were far more complex than perceiving a conversion to Christianity as a form of cultural treachery.⁹²

Makandula, who recognises Soga’s ongoing legacy as an intellectual and a composer, is also quick to rectify this perception of Soga as a personality in conflict:

I wouldn't see [Soga] as a divided person per se, but I would ... say he negotiated the two spaces as both: a Xhosa who happens to be a Christian. Whereas other missionaries were very much about “you need to do away with certain traditional rights”. He saw the good and the bad, so he had this kind of a dual life (ICA, 2020, 29:25-29:48).

The 31 hymns that Soga composed for the Presbyterian hymn book and their continued use in schools, churches, social events and reformulation in protest songs is of particular interest for Makandula. He recounts in his thesis how Soga’s hymns, such as *Lizalis’ idinga* and *Khangelani Nizibone*, still form part of his daily life (2019, p.6) and how, as a child, learning and singing a family hymn (*ingoma yekhaya*) formed part of a daily family ritual which was followed by “orating evening prayers as dictated by the Anglican prayer book and liturgy” (2019, p 11).⁹³ The songs of Tiya Soga are thus, for Makandula, as much a part of religious practice as they are a memory of childhood and familial enculturation. Music and sound form a strong part of this ritual process, and it is with sonic elements that Makandula often begins his creative thinking process. This is echoed in a piece of advice I witnessed Makandula offering an art student who was researching historical figures for whom there is a limited recorded archive. He recommended that the student try to imagine not only how the (still extant but altered) physical spaces these people occupied might have appeared in their

⁹² For his PhD in Religious Studies, (*Subversive Subservience: A Comparative Study of the Responses of Tiyo Soga and Mpambani Mzimba to the Scottish Missionary Enterprise*) Malinge Njeza notes that, whilst contradictions and ambiguities may be observed in the writings of Soga, this by no means suggests that his religious conversion represented total conformity. Njeza writes that whilst some may have come to view Soga as “timid and subservient ... [his] discourse and praxis also reveal the other side of a subtle and careful dialogue, even subversion of Scottish Christendom” (2000, iiv).

⁹³ Makandula’s family hymn is Hymn 24 in the Anglican isiXhosa hymn book, *Zuhlale nam ngoku litshonile ilanga* (*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide*).

time, but also to imagine what kinds of music they might have listened to, or sounds might have formed part of their daily life.⁹⁴ In this imagining, Makandula suggests not only an evocation of the visual in history but also the aural, which might lead to other sensory perceptions (smell, touch) and a more rounded perception of history to evoke empathy through a creative embodiment of the past.

This focus on soundscapes—or what Makandula refers to as *sonic aesthesis* (2019, p.45)—is a starting point for his imagining how old photographs or documents can become animated. In addition to this is a consideration of how certain sounds speak as social signifiers that structure community life. He recalls: “for as long as I can remember, the sound of a church bell symbolically denotes someone’s passing in the community, but later I associated [the bell] with my schooling life” (2019, p.14). A bell as a musical instrument is both a percussive instrument (thus carrying a potential repetitive rhythmic quality) and a melodic instrument (in that bells can be scaled to alter tuning and, therefore, set different pitches and create melody). As a starting point for inspiring a soundscape, bells can be incredibly diverse.



Sikumbuzo Makandula (with bell and skull) outside the Cathedral of St Michael and St George, Grahamstown. 2016. (africanah.org).

⁹⁴ Makandula is a colleague of mine at Rhodes University and was previously an undergraduate student under my supervision. I thus have thus been privileged to observe not only the development of his research process, but how this has come to fruition in his current role as a lecturer.

Most important for Makandula, in the development of his interactive processional performances, is the history of bells in the ordering of social life:

Once you ring just a bell, it could be a church bell, or it could be a school bell, within the public space, you are inviting people to recall, or rather to remind people, how they're socialised. And by doing that, then you are allowing them to negotiate with history at a one-on-one level (ICA, 2020, 08:03-08:21).

The bell in Makandula's work is a call to audiences to recall, and this call-and-response strategy is one that plays out on various levels within his performances. The bell is also a guide which announces certain actions and concludes interactions in order to move audiences on to another station in his processional work.

Ingoma ka Tiyo Soga was initially performed as part of the ICA Live Art Festival at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town in September 2018. In 2019, it was reconfigured with curatorial assistance by Zodwa Tutani for the National Artist Festival in Makhanda. This included the artefacts of the performance forming part of a longer stand-alone exhibition and featured a lecture by Dr. Nomathamsanqa Tisani, an expert on eighteenth and nineteenth century African historiography, who situated the life and work of Rev Tiya Soga. The performance of *Ingoma ka Tiyo Soga* began with the figure of Makandula dressed all in black and surrounded by his audience as he circled the room whilst ringing a brass bell. His outfit of a flowing black robe, veil and gloves was topped with a black bowler hat. Makandula was completely hidden in this guise, which partly resembles Victorian widow's weeds, and is rendered gender ambivalent through the choice of headgear. Makandula frequently makes use of highly theatrical combinations of costuming and headdress. These function less to create a spectacle of himself as a performer, and more to disguise his individuality as a particular human being, and underline his role in performances as an officiant. Makandula describes this costume as speaking to a form of *ukuzila*: "to mourn, but to mourn for the country, for that which hasn't happened ... to mourn for things that haven't been said" (ICA, 202, 31:40-31:50). In the background, audience members could hear *Umbono ka Ntsikana*, a song by Mthwakazi, although the performers were as yet still out of sight.⁹⁵ The song recounts the history of the prophet Ntsikana and the first missionaries who brought the Bible and messages of Christianity to the amaXhosa chiefs. During this phase of the performance,

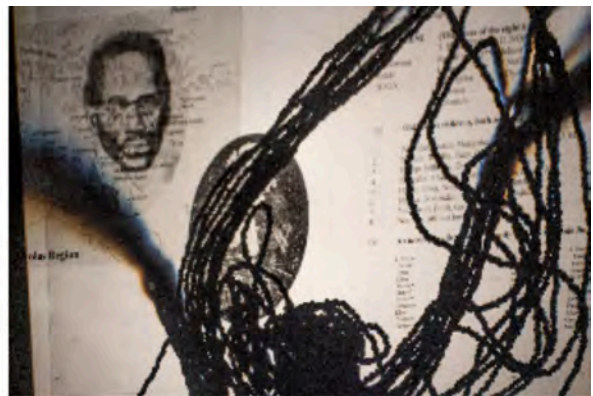
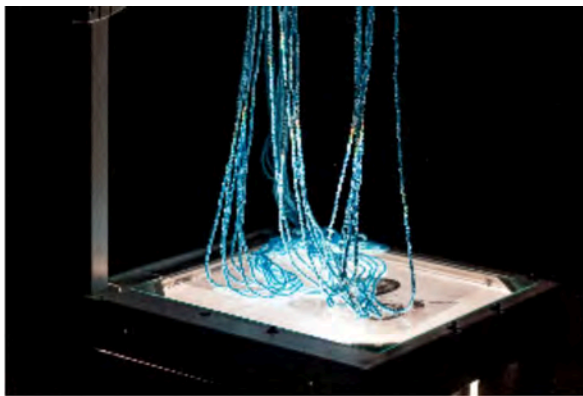
⁹⁵ Mthwakazi is a musical duo originating from the Eastern Cape made up of Bongiwe and Luyolo Lenga, although Bongiwe (as the singer) is sometimes referred to by herself as Mthwakazi. Their music is a combination of traditional Xhosa bow-based instruments, opera and African choral music. The duo are highly influenced in their compositions by nineteenth century South African black composers and have adopted a style which they refer to as "Xhopera", a conjunction of Xhosa and Opera (Mthwakazi, 2016).

Makandula, somewhat blinded by his mourning veil, distributed communion wafers to the audience with the words *Zisan' Ingoma* inscribed on them. The commandment is drawn from Soga's middle name Zisani, (meaning "What bringest thou?") and *ingoma* (meaning song).⁹⁶ Makandula's use of this middle name is a clever play on the name's meaning, asking his audience: What songs do you bring? This is an invitation and an evocation for audience members to bring forth their experiences or remembrances of Soga's songs. Makandula notes that there is a fair amount of improvisation in his constructions of a performance. Whether the audience takes this invitation to be a literal call to share in vocalising a narrative or merely bring these remembrances to the front of their minds as they share in an act of taking a communion wafer, both are equally valid responses.

Once this eucharist was concluded, Makandula led the audience to a lightbox on which were photograph transparencies of early missionaries who operated in the Eastern Cape as well as contemporaneous amaXhosa chiefs. Members of the audience were then selected and handed nails to place on the heads of the missionaries depicted on the lightbox. Makandula describes the significance of this gesture as one intended to "allude to the violence the missionaries brought upon the amaXhosa" (2019, p.46). The symbolism of the nail is perhaps even more layered, but I will return to this later. The same audience members were simultaneously given a blue bead and directed to place these on the pictures of the amaXhosa chiefs. Blue beads, known as *isidanga*, are Xhosa traditional signifiers worn to represent the revered elderly status of both men and women. The blue beads thus represent a means for the audience to acknowledge the status and wisdom of these royal elders in an act which Makandula describes as "dignifying" them by acknowledging their status which was subsequently lost in the colonial missionary agenda (2019, p.46). To conclude this station in the performance, Makandula placed *isidanga* on a photograph transparency of Tiya Soga and his Scottish wife Janet (née Burnside), thus sanctifying both as traditional Xhosa elders despite Janet's European heritage.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Soga is not always credited with this second name, Zisani or Sani, as African literary theorist Joanne Davis notes it is the name given him by his mother rather than his father, contrary to Xhosa custom at the time (2012, p.17).

⁹⁷ Janet Soga outlived her husband by 32 years, subsequently taking care of her elderly mother-in-law in Mgwali. She remained in the Transkei to ensure that her children (the youngest of whom was but a year old when their father died) became proficient in both Xhosa language and culture before returning to Scotland with them for further education. Six of the seven children who survived into adulthood subsequently returned to South Africa, which suggests how rooted the family felt in their Xhosa heritage (Camissa and SAHO. n.d.).



Sikhumbuzo Makandula, *isidanga* in *Ingoma ka Tiyo Soga*. 2018. (Makandula, 2019, p.51).



Tiyo Soga and his wife Janet Burnside Soga. circa 1856. (Research Gate and Camissa Museum).

At the next station, audience members were invited to watch video documentation of Makandula's visit to Tiyo Soga's grave. As part of his research for this project, Makandula visited and engaged with elders about oral histories in the Eastern Cape villages of Mgwali (where Soga established a mission) and Thuthura (where he is buried) in order to "trace and walk the landscape where the Sogas resided [and] also to factor in the current socio-political history of what governs these spaces now" (2019, p.48). An essential aspect of these visits was also to observe how songs, in their rhythmic and tonal interpretation, form part of current services in the church where Soga once presided. In this video documentation, Makandula is accompanied by Felicity O'Brian, Soga's great-granddaughter. After opening the metal gate to the graveyard in Thuthura, O'Brian removes her shoes in respect and approaches Soga's grave. Here she announces

herself by reciting her lineage of the Jwarha clan. Makandula then introduces himself with his lineage of the Amantshilibe clan and declares his intentions about the research he is embarking upon. Makandula refers to this act as a kind of reporting to, but also *ukubeka ilitye* or a laying of a stone in an act of remembrance.⁹⁸ The video is projected onto an *ingcawe* blanket, a white blanket with a black stripe, which was originally an object given to foster trade between missionaries and amaXhosa chiefs. Initially, it was used by counsellors to the chief but has come to signify the status of the elderly and the wise in Xhosa society. Makandula states that he uses the blanket to honour Soga's status as a wise ancestor. He also observes that the object (and its legacy) is not without double meaning, noting that Soga himself wrote of the blanket "warning the people of the dangers, the good and the bad that is brought by the white missionaries" (ICA, 2020, 35:15-35:21).

Audience members were then signalled by a bell to move to yet another station, where Makandula anointed each of them with a cross on their foreheads. Rather than one made of ash, as is typical of such a rite in Christian liturgy for Ash Wednesday, these crosses are made of *imbola*. *Imbola*, or red ochre, is a complex material in Xhosa history, given its roots in traditional African spiritual rites and ceremonies. Social anthropologist Leslie Bank writes about the history of a particular cultural identity schism in rural Xhosa society between "so-called Red (*abantu ababomvu*) and School (*abantu basesikolweni*)" people (2002, p.632). In this division, the *abantu ababomvu* are associated by their visible use of *imbola* with traditional Xhosa spirituality, whilst the *abantu basesikolweni* are Christian converts. In less polite terms, the *abantu ababomvu* are referred to as 'non-believers' or 'heathens' and the *abantu basesikolweni* as 'believers'—as if there is only one faith and practice worthy of belief, and that the two are mutually exclusive. Bank observes that this anthropological theory of cultural distinction has evolved and become less marked (and therefore less popular for socio-anthropological studies). He, however, also suggests that even if "Red and School are no longer as visible as embodied identities as they were in the 1950s ... they are nevertheless inscribed in the collective social memory" (2002, p.633). This legacy of division between converts and non-converts to Christianity can be seen in how Soga's position, in embracing both, is subsequently perceived as being a divided identity. Makandula's use of *imbola* in a rite that otherwise bears more resemblance to Christian ritual thus conflates these two paths of belief.

⁹⁸ This video documentation, 'Ukubeka ilitye at Rev. Tiyo Soga Grave 2018' can be viewed on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyNuYAh-0Q4&t=144s>

After the audience were anointed with *imbola* crosses, the musicians then entered the space and, once anointed in their turn with *imbola* crosses, gathered around another *ingcawe* blanket, this time situated on the floor. This marked the climax of the work, where the sound of singing, drumming and bows (both a *umrhube* and a violin initially being played in the same tapping style as traditional Xhosa bowed instruments) came together in a unique composition. Violinist Christopher Jardine, who worked with Makandula for *Ingqumbo* (2016) and *Inhlambuluko* (2018), observes of those performances that the music he was inspired to produce was very much about jagged sounds and a lack of polished performance in order to enhance the sense of disruption in the works. For *Ingoma ka Tiya Soga*, he considers how the various instrumentation came together. Jardine observes: “When it comes to translating the concept into sound, it is a conversation ... the violin resonates as a chordal instrument, and so does the voice, a calling and a responding” (ICA, 2020. 37:27-37:39). Instead of sound operating as a disruptive or discordant device, the musicians now came together in an improvisational discourse as each drew on their own remembrances of Soga’s life and songs for inspiration.



Sikhumbuzo Makandula, 2018. *Ingoma ka Tiyo Soga*. Participatory performance at Iziko National Gallery, Cape Town. Still from documentation video. (YouTube).

Whilst the musicians knelt and continued to play and sing, Makandula opened a bible. After smearing *imbola* on the pages, he began, rhythmically, to hammer nails into the Bible, in time with his collaborators. In the later version of this performance, the audience was passed this Bible and invited to participate in this hammering in of the nails.



Sikhumbuzo Makandula, 2018. *Ingoma ka Tiyo Soga*. Participatory performance at Iziko National Gallery, Cape Town. Still from documentation video. (YouTube).

The use of *imbola* and the hammering of the Bible, as well as Makandula's previous acts of burning his altar boy cassock and a Bible for his works *Ingqumbo* (2016) and *Inhlambuluko* (2018) respectively, have generated mixed feelings in his audiences, particularly those more conservative in their Christian beliefs. Makandula was questioned about these actions by the security staff at the Isiko South African National Gallery after his performance of *Ingoma ka Tiyo Soga* in 2018 and again by older members of his audience in his 2019 version in Makhanda. It is too simplistic, however, to read these actions as mere acts of anarchy, sabotage, or blasphemy. Makandula writes that "the bible ... is used in my artistic work to critique the shortcomings of state apparatuses" (2019, p.28). It is not so much the Christian faith, nor any of its more positive messages and teachings, that Makandula seeks to question but rather what has been done in the name of Christian religion to justify atrocity. This can be seen in how he responded to audience questions at Isiko in 2018:

I needed really to kind of give them a history as to how the work is researched, the violence that came with the church, and how people imbibed or really internalised that violence. We no longer ... have a white missionary, kind of forcefully. But I think now we have these black preachers, evangelicals who ... actually misconstrue the word to perpetuate a particular agenda (ICA, 2020, 40:22-40:49).



Sikhumbuzo Makandula. 2018. Burnt Bible from *Inhlambuluko* in front of St. George's Cathedral, Cape Town. (Makandula, 2019, p.45).

Makandula is also not an iconoclast nor a fascist book burner. His interventions and annotations at historic monuments are temporary and additive rather than subtractive. He thus subverts their original intention rather than permanently defacing or effacing them. Whilst the act of burning books may be, to some, disturbing (by mere inference of the history of such actions), these are never special copies of a Bible nor the only version. No original object nor knowledge is, therefore, destroyed by his actions. What, then, can we make of the symbolism of burning and nailing? Whilst there is a degree of disruption and antagonism intended by these actions, it must not be forgotten that burning and nailing have their own resonances within Christian and, indeed, other religious practices. Makandula instead considers these gestures a form of public questioning:

For me, those actions ... whenever I do them, I do them publicly ... I don't come into these spaces thinking that I'm just going to burn the Bible and think that's okay to burn the Bible ... I think it's to really to think ... once that Bible is lit up, what comes out of that gesture? (ICA, 2020, 41:37-42:00).

Burning is not only associated with destruction but also with sacrifice and illumination: flame which lights a darkness, smoke by which messages are sent, and ashes out of which something else might arise. Similarly, nails are a means by which not only the Christian saviour was sacrificed, but several others were martyred and subsequently became saints to act as intercessors in the faith. An intriguing parallel might be drawn here (in the act of nailing a sacred artefact and a request for intercession to an ancestral or other spirit) with the culture of the KiKongo peoples of late nineteenth-century Congo. These groups, who came

under the influence of Swedish Missionaries at the time, began to produce *nkisi nkondi* as part of their traditional spiritual practice (or ‘nailed fetishes’ although the translation is problematic). I do not wish to get into this too deeply as this is not a direct influence for Makandula, but the parallels of ritual symbolic appropriation are of interest. Most simply put, the nails embedded into such personal totems are prayer gestures to the incumbent spirit as requests to intercede (often with retribution) in matters affecting the possessor of the *nkisi nkondi*.⁹⁹ Nails may therefore be read equally as signifiers of violence, martyrdom and intercession. One should also not forget the violence of Christian religion, to which Makandula suggests we have become inured, that the cross is a torture device and that communion is a symbolic ingestion of blood and flesh—symbols steeped in allegorical and commemorative sacrificial violence. For the older Christian audiences at the Eastern Cape performance of *Ingoma ka Tiyo Soga*, Makandula observes it was not the nails that caused confusion and consternation but the paradox of using *imbola* on the Bible. Yet despite the confusion or possible disapproval of these audiences, these challenges took the form of questioning rather than sanctioning Makandula for his actions: “for them, it was about a conversation really, that they haven’t had. This intergenerational conversation around how, as black families, what we understand is religion” (ICA, 2020, 41:15-41:29).

Makandula devises his ritualistic performances as a mode of his own questioning of history and religious symbolism. He forms no finite answers in this initial research, instead, bringing these actions to his audience as a means of collectively reflecting on these questions and inviting participation in a *zone of contact* as a provocation for audiences to witness and account for their own action or inaction around received histories and ritual. He believes, as many of his audiences have described, that there is a catharsis in these rituals, a way in which history can be negotiated and a way in which “justice ... is done” (ICA, 2020, 43:29 - 43:32). He contemplates his role in this work as a kind of intercessor whose “responsibility is to illuminate certain histories” and in this he considers the meanings of his names Sikhumbuzo (remembrance) and Sizwe (a nation) or “one who reminds the nation” (ICA, 2020,00:15-00:44). The work is ultimately collective in its resolution, however, before all this can be put before an audience, Makandula is one who searches and ‘digs’ for both what is *waiting* and *what is hidden* or *secret*.

⁹⁹ A more thorough explication, including the historical links to Swedish missionaries, can be read in: MacGaffey, W. 1990. The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo “Minkisi.” *Etnofoor*, 3(1), pp.45–61.

Ritual and Art: Individual and Collective, Creative and Critical

The creative reimagining of ritual behaviours through performance thus becomes an exploratory methodology for unearthing new knowledge and insight from the archive through the disruption, subversion and challenging of old knowledge inherent in the rituals themselves.

— Alan Parker, *Effigy in the Archive*.

To return to the question of whether art can be ritual, there is perhaps no finite answer to this, and the debate around it might fill several books. That there are similarities between the methodological approaches to art and ritual, that art has a history in the formulation of ritual, and that many artists employ acts of *ritualising* or *ritual-like* signifiers in their work is evidently true. The case studies in this chapter involve two South African artists who very directly consider their work kinds of ritualistic acts and it is clear that audiences also read these works in this way.

In the works discussed by Shadi and Makandula, we can observe how their artworks involve and complicate the signifiers and definitions attributed by ritual theorists to the study of ritual. As considered by Grimes, however, these complications of creative and critical, individual and collective, self-conscious rather than pre-critical, and meaningful as a whole (rather than merely referential in symbolism) are factors which define them as syncretic ritual rather than exclude them by the terms of more traditional ritual theorists.

In both artists' work we can observe a process of *self-ritualising* where the rites they perform are creative personal inventions, even if they draw on existing traditions. While these processes begin as individual quests, the histories they tap (whether archived, oral or embodied memory), as well as the audience to whom they present the work, ultimately make the work and its resolution collective. Both artists also make use of *ritual-like* symbolism, whether these are mundane daily tasks, in the case of Shadi, elevated to a status of the profound through a meditative performance process, or sacred signifiers reappropriated and remixed in a new liturgical form, in the case of Makandula. While both employ intuitive thinking in the development of their work and the live enactment, there is a conscious reflection and preparedness in the research process, which can by no means be described as pre-critical or unconscious. Although Shadi is more subtle in her approach, both artists' work is a form of societal critique. Makandula's work, whilst generally observed by audiences as a form of ritual, is not beyond criticism which, in some ways, he actively encourages as a means to begin a conversation with audiences on the nature of religious belief.

Finally, for both artists, a close reading of these performances, materials used, or names given might add more dimension to the works. To reduce any of these gestures, sounds or translations as signifiers by which we might claim: now here I understand the reference, is to miss the meaning created by the whole. For ultimately these are live, durational, (sometimes participatory) experiences: not mere representations of art but, as their audiences witness, sincere ritualistic acts.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the three key research questions that have informed this study, one might conclude that a principal distinction between authenticity and sincerity is the emphasis sincerity places on the experiential, interpretative, and often subjective readings of an artwork as opposed to an authoritative, conclusive, and externally validated understanding of artworks frequently associated with the concept of authenticity. The potential subjectivity of sincerity is at the heart of its risky nature and why it is so frequently mistrusted as global politics, neoliberal market forces, technological advances, and social media impact on an increasingly cynical globalised society. These same pressures, nevertheless, increase desires for authenticity, whether this is an abstracted idealisation of provable objective ‘truth’ value, or a kind of nostalgia for a previous time in which one imagines the complex deceptions of our contemporary era did not exist.

Increased technological advances, whilst they give rise to developments such as AI deepfake videos, may also offer us specialised scientific methods to detect forgery, particularly when it comes to proving the *material authenticity* of art objects, including radiography, infrared and ultraviolet imaging, and pigment chemical analysis. Yet what might be observed in the authentication of works of art and having them accepted as works attributed to certain artists (particularly when such artists are high profile and their works garner astronomical prices) is that authentication is frequently still a matter of connoisseurship controlled by elitist institutions who have dynastic (rather than sound academic authority) in controlling how such attribution may influence the art market value of these works. This may be observed in several episodes of the BBC One documentary television series *Fake or Fortune?* (2011-2024) in which journalist Fiona Bruce and art dealer and historian Philip Mould employ the expertise of a broad range of art historians, scientists, and conservators to investigate, in each episode, the provenance and *material authenticity* of a different work with questionable attribution. They have multiple successes in combining archival research and material scientific analysis to authenticate and have a particular attribution accepted by the relevant authorities. There are multiple episodes, however, during which (despite substantial material evidence and proof of provenance) the work’s attribution is not accepted by the single individuals or legacy institutions whose controlling interest in accrediting works occurs via their publication of recognised *catalogue raisonné*—a prerequisite for auction houses to accept marketing works in certain price brackets. Reasons for this continued rejection of a work are seldom forthcoming, or are offered as

opinions without sound evidentiary logic on what appears to be the mere whimsy of those in a position of power.¹⁰⁰

Whilst one may hope that rigorously applied archival research and scientific analysis of material elements of a work of art would confirm its authenticity and secure its value as an investment, what this long-running television series demonstrates is that there is no surety in a market where the name applied to a work, rather than its materially provable age or quality of production, significantly changes its financial value and this can be swiftly (and often with little justification) removed. It would thus appear that authenticity, when it comes to the evaluation of works of art on financial terms, is liable to all kinds of subjectivity, often unrelated to the art object itself and wrapped up in complex, unexpressed politics of power between those assigned the roles of authentication.

One of my principal arguments for contemplating sincerity as a means of art evaluation is the consideration of what the work actually does in expressing a point of view or creating an experience for the viewer. It is a basic tenant of financial value that something is worth whatever others are prepared to pay for it, but if this is the only means by which we value things, then we never allow ourselves to make up our own minds about the value of a

¹⁰⁰ See Season One: Episode One 'Monet' (2011), in which an oil painting *Bords de la Seine à Argenteuil* (Banks of the Seine at Argenteuil) is speculated to have been painted by Claude Monet. Despite extensive scientific evidence that the work was made in 1875 (as claimed) with pigments and canvas of the type used by Monet, a complete chain of provenance, and the analysis by multiple experts who attest that the brushwork and signature is that of Monet, the work was rejected by the *catalogue raisonné* publisher The Wildenstein Institute. Professor John House, an academic from The Courtauld Institute of Art (with over thirty years' experience in the works of Monet and who himself was convinced of the work's authenticity), reports the institute's reasoning in the episode as "we don't think it looks right" (BBC One, 2011, 51:17). House follows up this statement by observing that the director of The Wildenstein Institute, Guy Wildenstein, also remarked that the painting "had [previously] been seen by his father, the late Daniel Wildenstein and that Daniel Wildenstein himself had not thought it was a Monet and that he could not go against his father's opinion" (2011, 51:26-51:36). See also Season Four: Episode Two 'Renoir' (2015) in which again substantial material scientific evidence is ignored by The Wildenstein Institute and it is speculated that the issue here is a rivalry between the institute and another French publisher of *catalogues raisonnés*, The Bernheim-Jeune Gallery. See also Season Seven: Episode Two 'Nicholson' (2018) where a still-life (*Glass Jug*) previously accredited to the British painter and print-maker William Nicholson was purchased in 2006 for £165,000. The work was featured in a previous *catalogues raisonné* published by the purchaser's late aunt, (art dealer and Nicholson expert, Lillian Browse) but excluded post the 2006 sale in a new *catalogues raisonné* by Patricia Reed: a decision which may reduce the resale value of the work by as much as a hundred times its purchase price. Investigations in this episode reveal an underpainting of *fresias* also thought to have been painted by Nicholson and cited as 'lost' in Reed's publication, chemical analysis that matches paint both in the works by the same artist and in his archived paint box, and expert analysis of the artist's handwriting on the reverse of the canvas that includes the work's title as well as a note about train times from Paddinton Station during the time the picture is suspected to have been created (1931-1939). Reed remains unconvinced that her exclusion of the work is an oversight, expressing that whilst the canvas board and the paints may have come from the artist's studio there is "insufficient proof to attribute the work to William Nicholson" (BBC One, 2018, 55:02-55:04).

cultural experience and leave ourselves open to whichever trend the 'storysellers' suggest we should buy into in all senses of those words. Most importantly, when we accept that value is created by those who tell us certain experiences are more valid than others, we prevent ourselves from having experiences, or from making experiences to share in a *zone of contact* with others. Through the case studies in this thesis, I have asked my reader to consider: even when we know that the authenticity of a work does not follow in a line of accepted tradition, when the artist deliberately plays with how authenticity is performed, or the work has been discredited by respected authorities despite (or perhaps, because of) this, it may be possible to engage with the sincere content of the work and realise our own experiences.

My methodological approach, drawing on Iser's phenomenological approach to "the realisation of the text" (1972, p.279), has been to explore how the meaning of an artwork arises through the interactive and experiential relationship between the work and its audience, rather than being fully contained within the work itself. The creation of meaning emerges dynamically through the audience's engagement with implicit gaps, indeterminacies, and semiotic references. This interaction fosters creativity, personal reflection, and transformation, as the audience navigates between the artist's intention and their own interpretive processes, often challenging their preconceptions to gain new experiences. The realisation of the artwork in the consciousness of the viewer (in order for the work to come to life and produce shared meaning) highlights the fragmentary parts which must come together in order for this alchemical process to occur, but the process is never only the sum of its parts. Similarly, Stewart's concept of the souvenir highlights its role as a fragmentary object that evokes personal narratives tied to past experiences, often marked by longing or nostalgia. As a metaphor applied to a work of art, the souvenir operates as a semiotic trace, inviting audiences to project their own interpretations and narratives onto its partial, metonymic connection to a point of origin. This interplay of signification and imagination mirrors Iser's idea of intentional gaps, emphasizing the audience's active role in co-creating meaning through their engagement with the object or artwork.

In drawing the multiple threads of this thesis together, it may be worthwhile to reconsider why the selected case studies are pertinent to a study of the contemporary moment in South African art and where further comment on issues raised may be needed.

Candice Breitz is an internationally respected artist, although little of the work she has made in the past twenty years either reflects or is considered in relation to her experiences as a

South African living abroad.¹⁰¹ This particular positionality, however, makes a reading of her work *Ex Libris South Africa* (2009) particularly interesting in relation to her status as both an insider and an outsider of a culture that is often subject to reductive international projections. Chad Rossouw's exploration of complex layers of South African history, particularly how this relates to postcolonial inheritance in South Africa and a desire to mythologise histories in which there are too many gaps or no coherent narratives, has seldom been written about.¹⁰² His decision to move away from making art may mean that his work may now never receive much critical reflection, although his methodology of creating alternate histories and his inventive use of forgery techniques remain a useful case study for artists wishing to work with allegory as a form of investigating unrepresented or alternate takes on history. Lamprecht's retrospective of Tretchikoff's work generated high audience numbers and critical controversy, yet hardly any academic reflection on the exhibition has been published subsequently.¹⁰³ Zeitz MOCCA, as I have detailed, has been critiqued on various journalistic platforms, but the problems raised with the gaps in their curatorial vision and dubious policies around the collection, new acquisitions, and what the museum may actually mean for the local context and reception of art from the African continent needs further academic investigation, particularly from those the museum claims to represent.¹⁰⁴ Lerato Shadi has received a fair degree of critical reception but, as noted in Chapter Four, some of this has a tendency to exoticise her in ways which focus on her identity more broadly as a black woman rather than ways in which she references very specific cultural signifiers from her Batswana heritage and how these are locally received.¹⁰⁵ Despite, or perhaps because of these very specific, personally relevant, cultural references, Shadi is able to bring sincerity to her process of durational performance and allow her audiences to read her work in the way it

¹⁰¹ Nor should such themes be necessary as artists should be able to make work about whatever they want. That Breitz has been able to achieve international success without 'performing' a limited view of her national identity is notable in itself, although whether this is because she is based in Europe and therefore able to access better resources is a point for speculation.

¹⁰² Existing critique of Rossouw's work is limited to the three articles cited in Chapter Two (Butcher, 2012; Jacobs, 2009; and Zimmer, 2014) and reflections by the artist himself in press releases from his archived website and his MFA thesis.

¹⁰³ Aside from the sources referenced in Chapter Two, art historian Okechukwu Nwafor penned a mostly positive review of the exhibition for *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* (Nwafor, 2012) and artist Karin Preller produced a review of the exhibition publication for the South African art journal *De Arte* (Preller, 2012). After this, academic publication on Tretchikoff seems to have dried up. Preller offers a possible reason for this by noting that "the complete absence of literature on Tretchikoff since 1973 can most obviously be ascribed to the fact very few academics or critics would dare risk their reputations by venturing into any serious discussion of Tretchikoff" (2012, p.80).

¹⁰⁴ For criticism in the South Africa Press, as referenced in Chapter Three, see Blackman, 2015; Blackman, 2018; Davis, 2017; O'Toole, 2017a; Sosibo, Bongela, and Hlaethwa, 2018; and Williamson, 2018. Whilst much academic writing focuses on the architecture of the Zeitz MOCCA project, criticism of the museum as an institution itself is limited to minor asides (e.g. Brown, 2019, p.13). Nielsen's 'Ambivalent Art at the Tip of a Continent' (2023) is seemingly the only sustained criticism of Zeitz MOCCA (internationally or locally) yet published.

¹⁰⁵ For existing critique on Shadi, see Jayawardene, 2016; Krynauw, 2022; Makandula, 2016; and Sosibo, 2021, as referenced in Chapter Four.

makes sense for them, rather than dictating to them what it is they are experiencing. Makandula's processional works have been discussed primarily in terms of how witnesses have sincerely experienced these as a form of ritual or an experience which they found to be transcendent.¹⁰⁶ What I have attempted to do instead is to detail his extensive research process in finding particular snippets of history in archives and in oral traditions in order to explore a much longer history of the intertwining of colonialism and Christianity in creating contemporary South African sensibilities. The ephemeral nature of these performances, and the way in which Makandula brings certain songs, sounds, gestures, and signifiers together without a predetermined idea of how audiences will interact with these, means that no two iterations of his work are exactly the same in a direct experience of them.

What is also of interest in Shadi and Makandula's work, as noted in Chapter Four, is how they engage with all potential audiences and consider the views of those very often thought to be outside of the spectacle of a work of art: the security guards and museum attendants. Performative and conceptual works have sought, historically, to place emphasis on the position of such roles in a gallery or museum, but Shadi and Makandula simply consider how the views held by these people are valid in their individual subjective experience and not merely as regards their occupation or perceived marginal role. Here may be the marker of sincerity in art-making, for what one is making or cares to express and communicate can only have value as an experience if one considers carefully and critically all to whom this is addressed.

In the End, The Beginning

To analyze rituals as 'expressing' inner states of feeling and emotion, or 'symbolizing' theological ideas or social relations, or 'representing' psycho-physical states of the human organism, is to neglect the question of how they might be instrumental, how they might actually *do* things.

—William Sax, *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy*.

Benjamin's description of the historical importance of ritual in developing the auratic power of an artwork has, perhaps, never been more pertinent. Whilst the nature of rituals and ritualising in this thesis have been examined specifically in relation to the working methodology of Shadi and Makandula, there may also be something in the nature of ritual which pertains to other works of art in how they might inspire belief, not by virtue of their

¹⁰⁶ For existing critique on Makandula, see Gule, 2019; Joja, 2016; and the ICA Podcast, 2020, as referenced in Chapter Four.

component symbolism or authorship, but in what they actually *do* in creating an experience in which meaning is mutually created between artist, artwork and viewer.

In an article entitled 'SA Art Market Resembles a Service Industry for the Super Rich', South African art critic Sean O'Toole muses on a recent visit to Accra and his experience of the Ghanaian art scene which he found refreshing and reminiscent of a certain time in South Africa in the 1990s when artists, in his view, were making bold innovative work. What O'Toole experienced was a particular "mood of spirited experimentation" which he suggests may only be possible "partly because Ghana is still unfettered by the domesticating impulses of a robust art market" (2017). The "domesticating" role market forces play in watering down conceptual content in South Africa, either by predetermining what themes or forms artwork should conform to in order to be marketable, or being reductive in describing what the work is actually about in a direct experience of it, has been a recurring concern in this thesis. What O'Toole describes of his encounter with the art scene in Accra at that moment, is the opportunity he felt to actively engage with the artwork on its own terms and make up his own mind about what that experience meant to him.¹⁰⁷ This suggests an experience of a clearly unmediated *zone of contact* between O'Toole as audience, and the art and artists he encountered.

In this thesis, I do not argue that sincerity is more important than authenticity. There are many areas in which the authenticity of something is paramount (particularly in the case of historic works) in order for further reflections on the work and its particular significance in the context of history to be affirmed. To return to Stewart's assertion, however, the increasing desire for an idea of authenticity, one which creates a "myth of contact and presence", is a scenario in which this "nostalgic myth" actually begins to supersede a zone of experiential "contact and presence" (1993, p.133). The importance of sincerity can be observed in how Dutton argues that "if it is possible for art ever to express anything whatsoever, then questions of sincerity, genuineness of expression, and moral passion, are in principle relevant to it" (2003, p.14).

The expression of sincerity has perhaps never been riskier as more of our lives are increasingly played out on the internet. Trilling makes a salient point about the compromise of individual selfhood in the face of culture and society by referencing what David Riesman termed:

¹⁰⁷ This experience of the Ghanaian art scene as one that is focused on education, diverse public engagement, "art that felt rooted in the country", and "programming [that] isn't determined by the West's agenda" is one shared by art historian Grace Linden in an article for *The New York Times*. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/05/travel/ghana-contemporary-art.html>

the 'other-directed' personality ... [one] whose whole being is attuned to catch the signals sent out by the consensus of his fellows and by the institutional agencies of the culture, to the extent that he is scarcely a self at all, but, rather, a reiterated impersonation (1972, p.66).

Although Trilling was writing in the early 1970s, this idea of an individual self being almost completely lost because of the need to be perfectly aligned with the popular culture or social consensus of others has perhaps never been more apposite than in the age of social media and cyberbullying. The influence this may have on the modes of art production in the contemporary age may be various. One may decide to present a certain oversimplified view on a contentious issue as if one is being oppositional. If one already knows there is strong support for that point of view, such artwork only confirms settled opinions or causes and is thus not actually oppositional, merely pleasing. Conversely, one may present a point of view which is unpopular simply for the sake of being disruptive and generating a response, rather than because one cares to invite debate. In a recent conversation with Makandula, he recounted to me an experience at a conference where an artist, who has generated considerable online vitriol and some death threats due to the nature of their work, was presenting this as proof of the relevance of their work. Makandula asked them, "Are you prepared to die for the views you are expressing?" Receiving a negative response, he asked, "Then what exactly is the point?" (pers comm, 9 October 2023). It should not be necessary to be willing to die for every view one expresses but, in the history of our country, many creatives were willing and some indeed did die for the right to freedom of expression. This is our legacy and should make us braver in standing up to systems that stifle such freedoms.

Belgian curator Frie Leysen stated in her keynote address to the 2015 Australian Theatre Forum that: "Art should not please. On the contrary. Art has to show where it hurts in our societies, in our world. We urgently need the courage back to pick up this role of disturbers again" (cited in Watts, 2015). Pleasing or disturbing are, however, binary choices. There must be a finer balance between either acquiescing to the opinions and positions of others and thus losing our essential selfhood and individual autonomy, or speaking our plain 'truth' for the sole purpose of unsettling the views of others.

Art which is only ever speaking plainly, in the sense that it tells us directly its motives, is boring and didactic. We may need a degree of metaphor, misdirection, or trickery to overcome the jaded circumspection of an audience and thus deliver a sincere point of view. Perhaps, rather than 'pleasing' or 'disturbing', what we should instead demand of art is that it

causes us to think; that it is contemplative; that artists sincerely ask themselves questions and so, in turn, ask these of an audience as a means and not an end to mutual interaction.

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