Making Beyond Nothingness:
An Artistic Challenge to the Unaesthetic Language of the Public Space

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Declaration

I declare that this is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of *PhD in Visual and Performing Arts*, Durban, South Africa. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, nor has it been prepared with the assistance of any other body or organisation or person outside of the Durban University of Technology.

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August 2021

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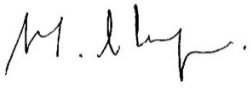

Signed: Date: 30 August 2021

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Abstract

This project constitutes a practice-based research enquiry of two interrelated components: an exhibition of creative work, *Nothing Matters*, and an accompanying exegesis. The creative work on exhibition comprises a range of small- and large-scale outputs that incorporate drawing, photography, sculptural work, and re-imagined 'found' objects, all produced between 2017-2021.

The overall title of the project, *Making Beyond Nothingness: An Artistic Challenge to the Unaesthetic Language of the Public Space*, embodies the paradox at the heart of the pursuit. How to create 'something' of conceptual and aesthetic compulsion from a language of nothingness, whether it be 'found' in the surrounding temper of the public space or, in art, in various manifestations of the 'dematerialised object': the void; the empty canvas or gallery; the 'invisible' work; or the detritus of the everyday?

The written component – the 'dissertation' – traces my style through points of reference in the development of Conceptual Art (Chapter 1) before turning, more generally, to examples of my previous work (Chapter 2) and, in Chapter 3, specifically to my reflections on the creative works that form the exhibition to be examined.

To quote from the Institutional guideline preamble to the PhD in Visual and Performing Arts, "The body of applied creative work is formulated in relation to the research problem outlined in the dissertation; there can be no formal separation between the examination of the creative work and the dissertation."

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Introduction

The aim of this project has been to produce and exhibit a series of artefacts, thematically titled *Nothing Matters*; an exhibition supported by this exegesis. This is not an art historical, sociological or philosophical study, but a visual exploration in which the artworks form the core of the project. To refer to Linda Candy (2006), the approach I have taken may be termed art-as-research or practice-based research in that the form and execution of the artefacts are the prime contributors to knowledge and should invoke or provoke the response of art critics and the viewing public. Over the period of the study, conducted from 2017 to 2021, I made a substantial body of work, a curated selection of which comprises a range of small- and large-scale outputs that incorporate drawing, photography, sculptural work, and re-imagined 'found' objects. The reflections contained in this exegesis serve as an inseparable component of the 'making'.

In this introduction, I provide some reflections on the methodological approach to understanding art practice as research, and on the origins of the title of my study and exhibition. The written component – the 'dissertation' – traces my style through points of reference in the development of Conceptual Art (Chapter 1) before turning, more generally, to examples of my previous work (Chapter 2) and, in Chapter 3, specifically to my reflections on the creative works that form the exhibition to be examined.

'Making': a method of practice

Traditional academic research asserts that a problem is posed and proven with evidence. Such an approach is largely weighted within a quantitative paradigm as evinced in the hard sciences. Practice-based research, in contrast, is a practical approach to a PhD in a creative domain. My personal view is an important component of the sense-making procedure in that "the imaginative and intellectual work undertaken by artists is a form of research" (Sullivan 2005: xi). Hazel Smith and Roger Dean concur, noting that "creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research outputs" (2009: 5).

Practice-based research (PBR), therefore, can be utilised as a reflexive and subjective process of form-making. Reflexivity may be defined in broad terms as "the capacity of any system of signification to turn back upon itself, to make itself its own object by referring to itself" (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982: 2). Research of this type allows for researchers to incorporate their own "subjective experience of things and events" into the work (Grech 2006: 38). This permits the researcher to unearth innovative forms of

expression, which leave the work open to the subjective interpretation of others and can lead both the researcher and the audience to unanticipated discoveries. A PBR method also allows for lateral findings and arcs that can lead to unexpected insights, which add an element of "chaotic uncertainty" (Grech 2006: 38) to the potency of the work. The method for most contemporary artists aligns itself directly with the process of making and exhibiting and it is almost taken as a given that work is made not as an outcome of absolute certainty, but is consciously constructed in a manner that encourages a dialogue of interpretation.

As I have said, I do not set out a 'problem' to be resolved; rather, my work involves a conceptual and creative probing of an aesthetic object that, I hope, also elicits contemplation. What I am suggesting here is an emergent design. According to Brittany Pailthorpe "an emergent design is a qualitative research approach that refers to the researcher's ability to adapt research to new concepts, ideas and findings, all of which occur throughout the course of the making" (2017: 1). There are overlaps here with what, in the early 1940s, Kurt Lewin termed "action research". "No action without research; no research without action," Lewin concluded (qtd in Adelman 1993: 8).

The principle informing Lewin's concept of action research is based on an action and reflection cycle, broken into phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The cycle can begin at any stage and does not stop after one circuit has been completed, but rather begins another circuit; hence, it is actually a spiral rather than a cycle. As Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead explain: "In your action enquiry you would identify something of concern, try a different way of doing things, reflect on what was happening, and in the light of your reflections try a new way that may or may not be more successful" (2006: 9). Such a comment by McNiff and Whitehead is useful as a guiding structure: that is, illustrating how the natural course of developments within practice-based research overlaps with an action research cycle or spiral. The approach supports the principles and practice of an emergent design.

'Unusable' language and the public space

The period in which most of the work on exhibition came to fruition coincides with the final years of Jacob Zuma's presidency and the chaotic legacy this left behind. The years 2009-2018 saw South Africa descend quite spectacularly from its post-1990 'rainbow' possibilities to the kleptomania of a *gangsta* state. Public language was celebrated in a form of anti-intellectualism, in which terms such as *tenderpreneurship* and *state capture* entered the lexicon. Populist politics expressed itself in cliché and

catchphrase. The term ‘white monopoly capital’ (coined, ironically, by a public relations company in the very metropolitan North that is depicted, in populism, as an enemy of Africa) was thrown about with fervour. When asked to clarify the phrase, ‘radical economic transformation’, the then ANC secretary-general, Gwede Mantashe, declared that now, at this stage of the ‘revolution’, was not the time for conceptual clarity. In fact, at the Zondo Commission into state capture (14 April 2021), Mantashe spent an inordinate amount of time trying the Commission’s patience with nit-picking distinctions between ANC deployment policy and ANC cadre deployment. In 1962, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas coined the term ‘public sphere’, which he defined as “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas 1989: 176). Habermas’s ideals are clearly tarnished by Mantashe’s political games and gamesmanship.

The language of slogan, however, is not confined to South Africa. Almost coincidental with the Zuma years, the slogan as substitute for thought has characterised public language in ‘Brexit’ Britain and, in the United States, with the Trump presidency of random tweets and fake news. The times are characterised by a strange combination of social media’s ‘free’ expression – where a bystander’s video clip was instrumental in helping a jury return a guilty verdict in the case of George Floyd’s murder – and social media’s power to ‘cancel’ particular aspects of culture. In the digital era, where voices can be raised and amplified supposedly ‘freely’ on social media, some voices are subject to an enormous amount of scrutiny and unseen oversight. An overarching metaphor of the times might be surveillance, both good and bad. What affects the global world, of course, also affects South Africa. Digital communication has joined the local to the global, and vice versa.

There are different ways of attempting to intrude art-making into such an uncongenial public space; different ways in which artists, like myself, who live in South Africa can position their work in relation to local/global interactions. To take two almost diametrically opposed approaches: 1) Brett Murray’s work *The Spear* (2010) – a life-size painting of President Zuma, genitals exposed – made the news for all the wrong reasons. Its ‘art’ claim was stifled by a political/public uproar which saw the work defaced in the public space of the art gallery; 2) William Kentridge, in contrast, opposes the ‘wooden language’ of the public space in methods of indirection: much as artists in the former Eastern Europe did, who, although under constant surveillance, managed to outwit a dumbed-down regime. In Murray’s case, an ‘unaesthetic’

reaction overwhelmed any consideration of *The Spear* as an aesthetic object. In Kentridge's case, the aesthetic charge is paramount in provoking thought.[1]

My own approach to making art is to permit the aesthetic to tease the viewer (and myself, in the course of the work's emergence) into thought. My scope is not narrowly local, but wishes to enter the zeitgeist of the times: a mood in which moments of lightness are weighed upon by the threat of a re-assertion of authority over the individual human being. These are times where, for example, Covid-19 decreed lockdowns have been a boon to a 'policing' of the society, worldwide. My work *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)* (2019-20), for example, embodies, equally, my reading of the consequence of surveillance on Julian Assange's life and an echo in memory of my own formative years in the dark corridors of apartheid South Africa. Or perhaps I have flickerings in my present consciousness of regular Facebook raids on the personal details of millions of people. All of these hints and jolts came to me, in any case, as an artist located now, in South Africa.

Nothing matters

The phrase, *Nothing Matters*, embodies the paradox at the heart of my endeavour. At one level, the words suggest negation; at another level, the phrase invokes a more philosophical consideration that is linked to a history of artistic thought and practice. How to create artefacts that use the language of nothing, the void, the blank, the omitted, the interpretation of nothingness, as a vehicle to oppose the 'unaesthetic' language of the public space? What has been called 'nothingness in art' suggests not so much a homogeneous movement as a trajectory that began in the early part of the 20th century and which has retained notable markers in various art movements, since. I quote the contemporary British art critic Matthew Collings:

Nothingness is a principle that first emerged in modern art at the time that pure abstraction emerged. These were the years immediately after 1910, particularly in the work of the Russian artist, Kazimir Malevich. Since then, absence has been a constant presence in Modern Art, and we have seen a steady stream of radical blanks, nothings and voids. (2006: 144)

[1] See Kentridge's animated films: *Felix in Exile* (1996) and *City Deep* (2020), in which he passes political commentary on both the former apartheid government and the current ANC government. He does so by viewing the unfolding socio-political landscape through the lens of his self-developed characters who are for the most part 'ordinary citizens': the mining magnate Soho Eckstein and the more vulnerable Felix Teitlebaum. Kentridge uses these characters as a more indirect way of speaking to the inadequacies of the ruling elite.

The traces of 'nothingness in art' may be found in numerous artists who include Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Barry, Yoko Ono, David Hammons, Marina Abramović, Yves Klein, Martin Creed, Teresa Margolles, Tom Friedman, Roman Ondàk, and Michael Asher, to name but a few. Whilst many of these artists use, or used, the 'blank canvas' or the concept of the invisible as a challenge to the art establishment itself (e.g., what constitutes art?), my intention is to create aesthetically arresting works that in their apparent nothingness invoke substantive matters: matters that too often in the societal realm are denuded of their own complexity. Such an ambiguity of destructive telling and creative making, of course, is central to the most influential art movement of the last 150 years, Modernism (an 'aesthetics' of modernity) and its ongoing adaptations under the umbrella of Postmodernism, in my case particularly in Conceptual Art. Susie Hodge summarises the character of what is generally called Conceptual Art:

> Having emerged in the United States and Europe in the 1960s and continues, Conceptual Art has never been a cohesive movement, but covers several types of art […]. It insists that visual beauty and technical accomplishments are no longer important, and believes that ideas are more valid than technical skills. (2019: 43)

Such is the general definition. Actual works range from 'game-playing' to profound engagements with substantive concerns; from fakes and jokes to bold attempts to open the aesthetics of form to new ways of seeing and thinking. In my own exhibition of works, I hope that viewers will find creative artefacts that, while suggesting a negative corollary, transfigure negation into something that matters.

Before attempting to reflect on my own practice, however, I offer in the next chapter a selective overview of movements and works that might be said to have contributed to the field of concepts in art: the field from which my practice has emerged. No artist is entirely 'original'; and as Pablo Picasso is said to have remarked – whether the remark is apocryphal or not – all art is theft. The question is: is one a bad thief (a mere copier) or is one a good thief (an innovator in one's own right)?

Chapter 1. The Dematerialised Object: Mapping 'nothing' in something

In this chapter, and as a prelude to my reflections on my own work, I shall sketch what I regard as 'moments' in the shift from the autonomous artwork (broadly, Modernism) to forms of art in which the materiality of the artefact vies with the imposition of a concept or an idea. This is what Lucy Lippard referred to as the "dematerialisation" of art which Kathryn Smith suggests is "a reaction against formalism and the commodification of art. Objects were deconstructed and replaced by philosophical principles. Ideas determined – even become the exclusive evidence of – form and process" (2011: 124).

What has been called 'nothingness in art', or 'the eloquence of absence' (see Brennan 2011) or what Ralph Rugoff, Director of the Hayward Gallery, refers to as: "art about the unseen" (2012) suggests something of a journey already taken. This is not a journey in the sense of a cohesive movement with a manifesto or even a group of artists with a collective agenda; rather, 'nothingness' appears in and through various Modernist movements and via the segue of Conceptual Art into a more general Postmodern 'condition', which we now call Contemporary Art. In his book *Nothing Matters (a book about nothing)* (2011), Ronald Green observes that:

> It should not really be surprising that modern artists are fascinated with nothing. It is a very human attribute to be beguiled by what we do not have, often more than what we do have. In the world of exploration, *nothing* would be the ultimate unknown area: across the frontier from where we are to where we and everything else disappears. To where we cannot be. (2011: 137)

Omission, extraction and invisibility

The categories that have come to define a somewhat sporadic lineage of 'nothingness in art' include the blank or emptied canvas, the empty gallery, thin air, the invisible art object, and the notion of "additive subtraction", a term coined by artist Jasper Johns in 1953 to describe the process of producing an artwork by removing, rather than adding, marks.

Some of the artefacts which I have produced for my exhibition make a contribution to such 'subsets', albeit from altered suppositions. For example, the 'void' evident in the steel fabricated

hollow chamber in *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)* (2019-2020), reflects an empty space, an abyss, punctuated by extended surveillance mirrors on prosthetic-like steel arm-brackets. Not quite an empty gallery, but an illusion of the empty space nonetheless.

The 'blank landscape' created in the work *Erasing a Heart of Darkness* (2017-2019) – by physically erasing the words from Joseph Conrad's novella – has a direct relationship to the ideas posited by an 'additive subtraction'. While Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning* (1953) may come to mind, my work probably has a more direct comparison with Australian artist Christian Capurro's project *Another Misspent Portrait of Etienne de Silhouette* (1999 - 2007), the erasure, by hand, of the print a 246-page issue of *Vogue Hommes.* My work obliterates words on a page; the idea in Conrad's novella, however, retains its provocation in our literary tradition.

My glass ampoule, *Cremation of a Heart of Darkness* (2019), is filled with the dust of the words scratched and collected from erasing the print copy of Conrad's novella. Another work that comes to mind is Marcel Duchamp's *50cc's of Paris Air* (1919). Duchamp's glass vial, visibly empty, is supposedly filled with the invisible air as referenced in the title. Whilst my artefact does not play on the idea of air as its primary medium, it is nonetheless a homage to Duchamp's progressive vision of something within apparent nothingness.

A more detailed account of these works will be discussed in Chapter 3. I hope, in the meantime, that the works to which I have briefly referred here strike a reader/viewer as unusual or provocative. I make no claim to being an 'inventor' of the conceptual style. I have mentioned Duchamp as a precursor, but the 'tradition' in which I might be placed gathered its momentum only from around the 1950s in a 'dematerialisation' of the revered artefacts of Modernism:

B*y* a continuously alternating succession of rejection and replacement since 1800, art of the highest cultural level was progressively dismantled until, in painting and sculpture for example, it was finally reduced by 1970 to its basic building blocks in Minimal Art, and then abandoned altogether in the 'dematerialization of art' movements: principally Conceptual, Environmental, Ecological, Performance and Installation Art. (Mann 1995: n.p.)

In the *Les Guêpes* of July 1848, Jean-Bapiste Alphonse Karr pronounced his by now famous epigram "*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*", which is usually translated as "the more things change, the more they stay the same." In academia, we talk of 'originality', by definition that elusive 'something new', when in fact this can only be represented in relative terms. We all stand on the shoulders of giants, and any systematic extrapolation of history, be it philosophical, socio-political or in the arts in general, will reveal a multitude of influence and carbon copies, oftentimes repeated in cycles. In the context of this research, the question, then, is how far back do I revert in locating my practice with regards to acknowledging my indebtedness and thereby contributions to a continuum?

In the pivotal text, *The Dematerialization of Art*, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler note that:

> The artist has achieved more with less, has continued to make something of 'nought' fifty years after Malevich's *White on White* seemed to have defined nought for once and for all. We still do not know how much less 'nothing' can be. Has an ultimate zero point been arrived at with black paintings, white paintings, light beams, transparent film, silent concerts, invisible sculpture, or any of the other Projects mentioned above? It hardly seems likely. (1971: 275-76)

Lippard and Chandler, as well as Collings (2006), suggest that a site of origin for the beginnings of 'nothingness in art' could be found in the Russian avant-garde artist and art theorist, Kazimir Malevich whom we locate in the art movement, Suprematism (1915-1925). Collings alludes to the years immediately after 1910, while Lippard and Chandler refer more specifically to the work of Malevich's titled *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918). Malevich had been working on a series of white-on-white works from around 1916, but the series was only exhibited a few years later. Regardless of the precise date of these exhibits, Malevich was undoubtedly a forerunner of the Minimalism of the 1960s and the Conceptual Art movement, usually dated 1966-1972. His approach appeared surprisingly progressive for its time, yet the 'dematerialisation' of art, so critical to the Conceptual Art movement's ethos, was not so much an abrupt fissure as a persistent turn from naturalistic description. Malevich is an important 'location point' within this trajectory.

Figure 1. Kazimir Malevich .1918. *Suprematist Composition: White on White*

Looking for nothing in Modernism and beyond

In the half-century between 1886, the date of the last Impressionist exhibition, and the beginning of the Second World War, a change took place in the theory and practice of art which was as radical and momentous as any that had occurred in human history. It was based on the belief that works of art need not imitate or represent natural objects and events. (Hamilton 1983: 18)

From the 17th to the 19th century, the official art academies across Europe controlled the art world, which was governed by the strictures of defined and realistic academic art styles. "The Royal Academy […] had been the court-protected citadel of 'serious' art for a century and a half" (Cheney 1945: 8). Spearheaded by Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), Realism (1830-1890) was the first art movement to reject the traditions instituted by these official art academies:

The emancipation of art from the state and from religious institutions, combined with its forced removal from the sphere of everyday production, led to the possibility of a new role for art […]. Painters or sculptors were no longer simply the servants of established religion or aristocratic patrons. They could work according to their individual desires in a new, separate field of pure art, while society, in the form of the gallery, the critic and the marketplace, would judge them on their merits. (Bradley and Esche 2007: 9)

Having released itself from the authoritarian prescripts of the art academies, Impressionism is considered to be the first Modernist art movement: "Audaciously for the time, a group of Paris-based artists held an exhibition that was independent of the Paris Salon and its strict rules" (Hodge 2019: 13). This marked an acceleration of an emphasis on the new; an ever-evolving attempt to reflect the rapid progress brought on by the Industrial Revolution through experimentation and innovation:

Paris became a battleground for advanced art during the late nineteenth century, as artists and the critics who championed them debated the merits of a rapid succession of new movements, from Impressionism and its challengers onward. (Galenson 2009: 4)

The critic Harold Rosenberg remarked that "the only thing that counts for Modern Art is that a work shall be NEW" (qtd in Galenson 2009: 3). And it was already in 1855, in a moment of prophecy, that Charles Baudelaire, the poet and critic, "observed that the growing acceptance of change in nineteenth-century society would inevitably have an impact on artists' practices" (qtd in Lippard 1971: 24). In 1968, Modernist critic Clement Greenberg noted that, "Until the middle of the last century innovation in Western art had not had to be startling or upsetting; since then, … it has had to be that" (qtd in Galenson 2009: 1), while Lippard wrote: "The art scene itself is an endless self-corrective process; its workings are more evident the more it accelerates and condenses. Today movements are just that; they have no time to stagnate before they are replaced" (1971: 27).

From the artist's perspective, caught in the vortex of compulsory innovation, Louise Bourgeois recalls:

What modern art means is that you have to keep finding new ways to express yourself, to express the problems, that there are no settled ways, no fixed approach. This is a painful situation, and modern art is about this painful situation of having no absolutely definite way of expressing yourself. (1998: 166)

Figure 2. Eadweard Muybridge. 1887. *Plate Number 137. Descending Stairs and Turning Around*

As a thought experiment, Eadweard Muybridge's *Plate Number 137. Descending Stairs and Turning Around* (1887) could be seen as an appropriate metaphor for the precipitous, conflicted and somewhat confused trajectory of art in Modernism. Each step down suggests the gradual dissolution of the artwork until its final death knell is rung by the proponents of the Conceptual Art movement in the mid-1960s, in which the 'dematerialisation' of the artwork had reached its inevitable conclusion and with it, apparently, Modernism itself. The genesis of much of the body of work that constitutes what we might call 'nothingness in art' logically arises with the Conceptual Art movement, although – as I am suggesting – there are significant precursors in the form of individual artworks a considerable time earlier, Malevich being one such progenitor.

This study is not a taxonomy of the art movements through Modernism, although it is acknowledged that each movement, from Impressionism onward, had a role to play in advancing the shift from an art of classical everyday representation to one in which pretty much anything

goes. We begin with the Impressionists and leapfrog the Post-Impressionists to where we locate Pablo Picasso, arguably the most influential artist of the modern period. Influenced by Cezanne's conceptual framing and stimulated by Matisse's use of different techniques and materials, Picasso abandoned the tradition of creating illusions from fixed viewpoints and began to depict identifiable objects from several angles at once. Along with George Braque he abandoned linear perspective, a standard method employed since the Renaissance, in search of depth and distance in painting. The painting of objects with multiple viewpoints within the same frame resulted in the geometrical shapes that a critic called "little cubes", and the movement Cubism (1907-1914) was named and born.

Picasso stated at the time, in conversation with his photographer friend, Brassaï (aka Gyula Halász):

> Photography has arrived at the point where it is capable of liberating painting from all literature, from the anecdote, and even from the subject. In any case, a certain aspect of the subject now belongs to the domain of photography. So shouldn't painters profit from their newly acquired liberty, and make use of it to do other things? (Qtd in Goldberg 1988: 431)

Picasso's comments indicate his rejection of the traditional academic naturalistic representations of the world, citing the irrelevance of this approach based on the exactitude of the photographic reproduction. However, it was not until the Dadaists and Surrealists with their photomontages that the actual photograph as a medium became the source of the artworks. Notwithstanding this, it is noted that:

> Cubism changed the relation of art to the public, and, in so doing, changed the nature of the art public itself. It excluded those who merely responded to pictures and replaced them with spectators who knew what made pictures important. (Rosenberg 1983: 162)

Early in 1912, Picasso made a small oval painting titled *Still Life with Chair Caning*. The work incorporates a section of oil cloth, printed to imitate chair caning, and glued onto the canvas. "This was the first collage, that is to say the first painting in which extraneous objects or materials are applied to the picture surface" (Golding 1988: 104). Whether they know it or not, Picasso hovers

behind art students today when they summarily construct images from random bits of disjointed materials and apply them to a surface, or when the acclaimed South African artist Jane Alexander was awarded the Mercedes-Benz Award for South African Culture (2002) for her black-and-white photo collages.

Figure 3. Pablo Picasso. 1912. *Still Life with Chair Caning*

The invention of collage "struck the most violent blow yet at traditional painting," because it violated a fundamental tradition that had been honoured since the Renaissance, that nothing other than paint should be placed on the two-dimensional surface of the support, and because it did this in a particularly irreverent way, by using "bits of rubbish" (Golding 1988: 105).

This period, historically labelled as part of Analytical Cubism (1907-1912), morphed into a second phase known as Synthetic Cubism (1912-1914). The primary shift involved the introduction of brighter colours and collaged elements made of unconventional elements. Picasso and Braque used *papier colle´,* stuck on pieces of wallpaper and brightly coloured sections of found papers, as a way to symbolise objects with flat colour planes. These radical departure points have had a

consistent bearing and influence throughout Modernism: an influence that continues today, often without any knowledge of the origin. We have Rauschenberg's 'combine' works of the 1950s which in turn further liberated the 2D canvas for generations thereafter; Julian Schnabel's brash 'plate paintings' of the 1980s; while those ubiquitous pre-school children's artworks, constructed from collaged pieces of brightly coloured paper, are all extensions of these seismic shifts in the early 1900's. So the story of Modernism goes.

In Russia, Cubism spawned a further two movements, Constructivism (1913-1932) and Suprematism (1915-1925). Vladimir Tatlin, after having seen Picasso's Cubist constructions in Paris 1913, returned to Russia and focused on producing three-dimensional structures, completely abstract in form and utilising industrial materials, not those within the recognised fine-art purview:

> Whereas Picasso remained committed to representation and used found objects to make visual puns that suggested recognizable forms, Tatlin constructed his works abstractly, so that scraps of wood, metal, or glass no longer suggested familiar objects. (Galenson 2009: 294)

Where Tatlin rejected painting as decadent and bourgeois and advocated making art connected to workers' daily lives, Malevich "stood for the idea that painting could make a contribution to the new Soviet society by remaining apart from daily life" (Galenson 2009: 294).

Malevich believed that the time had come for art to abandon imitation of the external world: what was now needed was "the formation of signs instead of the repetition of nature". These new signs would be ideas, "flowing from our creative brain" (Malevich 1999: 239). In his Manifesto of 1915, Malevich claimed that artists "should abandon subject and objects if they wish to be pure painters" (1915: n.p). Malevich's maverick interventions, theories on art, and the experimentation in his practice were pioneering in many respects:

> The revolutionary potential in Malevich's works and theories and the revelation of their primogeniture and significance as confirmed in the works of many different artists of the second half and end of the twentieth century. (Shatskikh 2012: xi)

Malevich was subjected to contempt from other Russian artists, however, most notably those of the opposing avant-garde movement Constructivism, a critic announcing, “The only good canvas in the entire exhibition is an absolutely pure, white canvas with a very good prime coating. Something could be done on it” (Lutkevich 1923: 183). In spite of this, Malevich is acknowledged as the artist who:

> Terminated the tradition of five long centuries in Western painting, departing from the triumvirate of fundamental tenets that had secured creative man in his world: a ceaselessly illusionistic representation of observable experience; realism as a measure of truth; and requisite accuracy proclaimed through perspectival systems. (Crone and Moos 1991: 3)

Nothing and ‘the blank/emptied canvas’

Noting the shock that *Suprematist Composition: White on White* had created on its debut in 1918, Malevich conceded, “The square seemed incomprehensible and dangerous to the critics and the public [...] and this, of course, was to be expected” (1959: 68). Yet already in 1915, Malevich had shown his *Black Square* (1915) painting, a black square on a white background, which many denote as the symbol of Suprematism, with writer José Maria Faerna acknowledging that “It represents nothing and it expresses nothing. It is the ‘ground zero’ of painting, an image reduced to its most elementary components, an empty form that conveys nothing but the stamp of the painter's hand” (1996: 6).

Malevich was concerned that his reduction of the image to the non-representational would be regarded as meaningless, but as Zhadova put it:

> His pictures can be described as images of the world’s cosmic space. But they are not copied from nature; this is not the space one sees by looking at the blue sky above one’s head. They are hypothetical images, conceptual images, plastic formulation images, ‘factorizations’ carried out by the artist’s imagination. (1982: 53)

And Chan would add: “Whereas Suprematism touted the use of color and form to communicate the philosophical ideal of the absolute, Constructivism focused on the objective material attributes of the work of art” (1998: 3).

The principles of each movement provided stimulus to the dematerialised art object, each an acknowledged contributing influence on Minimalism in the 1960s, which in turn became the final inspiration for the total rejection of the object in favour of support for the idea as the artwork. Thus, the all-white, untransformed canvas functions as a site of proposition, a space activated principally by the mind. Historically, it has become a focus of dissent, an arena explicitly concerned with the disbandment of image and the emergence, in its place, of concept.

Malevich’s *Suprematist Composition: White on White* in 1918 was a notable first attempt at approaching the possibility of pure and empty white; however, it was not until 1951 that American artist Robert Rauschenberg produced entirely monochromatic white works. Earlier examples of entirely monochromatic paintings are recorded, for example, in 1921, when the Russian Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko produced paintings in the primary colours of red, blue and yellow, works which he described as the ‘death’ of painting. He proclaimed: “I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, yellow. I affirmed: it's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no more representation” (qtd in Bois 1993: 238).

Some of Yves Klein’s experiments with monochrome paintings also predate those of Rauschenberg’s by several years, but many of these were only shown privately and it was only in 1954, with the publication of his book *Yves Peintures* (1954*)*, that similar examples of these earlier monochromes are recorded publicly. Rauschenberg’s *White Painting* (1951) was produced by applying household paint to canvas with rollers. With this approach he achieved smooth surfaces that provided the first instance of a visually 'blank' pictorial space; an audacious demarcation of absence that was quickly adopted by other artists and modified to a wide variety of mediums.

Figure 4. Robert Rauschenberg. 1951. *White Painting*

Many of these early works seem founded on an obdurate reduction to, and emphasis on, negation. More recent explorations, however, suggest a shift away from such an intent. Instead, current adaptions of the all-white image frequently incorporate a rhetorical function, suggestions of a primary narrative or even, in some cases, perceptive analytical assessments of the trope of the empty canvas itself.

Art & Language, the pioneering conceptual art group founded in the 1960s in Coventry, England, positioned their interventions as a questioning of the assumptions of conventional modern art practice and criticism. They produced a series of works titled *Secret Painting* in 1967 and the following year, in both white and black versions. The works are reminiscent of Rauschenburg's *White Painting*, but with the accompanying text: "*The content of this painting is invisible: the character and dimension of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to the artist."*

Thus presence is transfigured into something entirely irrelevant – a painting that has no substance, even as it announces it has substance, but substance hidden. The *Secret Painting* series echoes a

Duchampian tactic to activate the viewer's imagination. Duchamp once had a collector hide a self-chosen object inside a ball of twine, which he immediately sealed inside a metal frame, thereby ensuring that no-one would know the identity of the object. The 'core' of this work, *With Hidden Noise* (1916), remains a mystery today, as does the identity of the 'real' work in Art & Language's series of *Secret Paintings*.

Aside from his several cynical and humorous examples of virtually irrelevant sculptures, the artist Tom Friedman has also created various 'improvisations' on the blank canvas, each of which mischievously cites art historical precedent as well as passing astute observations on viewing the invisible. *1000 Hours of Staring* (1992-1997) is mockingly construed to be infused or, as Yves Klein called it, "impregnated" with the artist's aura. As Roberta Smith responds:

> This can seem, at first, like a Conceptual Art hoax, but it could be said to honor, in glorious isolation, the intense visual scrutiny that all successful artists expend on their work, the long hours of looking, looking, looking in order to figure out how to make it better. And the stared-at paper is not all that different from the dragonfly, which is so perfect that the hours spent making it are all but invisible. (1997: n.p.)

The Catalan artist, Ignasi Aballí, has had a deep interest in the continued explorations of the various presences - physical or otherwise - that lie behind perceived absence. *Gran Error (Big Mistake)* (1998–2005) consists of a square of correcting fluid covering a square of black paint. Based on the artists preoccupations with the symbiotic relationship between absence and presence, it is likely that the 'mistake' the artist suggests consists of attempts to prioritise the invisible over the tangible: "I came to the conclusion that I preferred to suggest the presence of a painting rather than show the painting directly. I was more interested in leaving the image in suspension" (Aballí 1998: n.p.).

The New York-based Swiss artist, Bruno Jakob, has devoted much of his artistic preoccupations to the production of such 'Invisible Paintings': specifically works achieved by exposing paper or canvas to various elements that renounce almost all traces of their presence. These include works on paper or canvas that suggest the exposure to light, air, Zurich snow and even the tracks left by snails eating their way across paper sheets. (These ideas have precedents. In *Things and Words,* (1969), Korean artist Lee Ufan exposed three sheets of paper to the elements outside the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum for an extended period, prior to exhibiting them inside the museum.) Whilst Jakob's works might be somewhat unusual, they remain feasible, especially if one considers his

more challenging alternatives, in which, it is alluded, the works are imbued with ‘love’, ‘brain air’ and other distinctly imperceptible sensations. Jakob’s *Untitled (Horse)* (2003) is a black and white photograph that depicts the artist standing with an empty white canvas directed at his equine subject, attempting to capture a psychic portrait of sorts.

Figure 5. Bruno Jakob. 2003. *Untitled (Horse)*

In a similar vein, Jakob’s *Weisses Lächeln (White Smile)* (2010) sets out to infuse a suspended piece of white paper with a diverse range of experiences and sensations including ‘breathing’, ‘air’, ‘light’, ‘brainwaves’, and ‘thoughts of painted images’. The empty or emptied canvas - from its tentative beginnings with Malevich in 1918 and its declared arrival in Rauschenberg’s *White Painting* of 1951 - has a protracted and varied series of rearticulations and interpretations. In short,

the emptied canvas exists as one subset within the trope of nothingness. (The work of artists Latifa Echackch[2] and Nina Walton[3] are also notable contemporary examples of the 'blank/emptied canvas'.)

Hovering behind such works is Marcel Duchamp. To return to the precursor – we might say – of conceptual art, Duchamp describes the root of his early work as: "A desire to break up forms – to 'decompose' them much along the lines the Cubists had done. But I wanted to go further – much further – in fact in quite another direction altogether" (qtd in Sanouillet & Peterson 1973: 124).

Duchamp's first major work, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), an obvious reference to Muybridge's early chronophotograph, was derided immediately for being a parody of Cubism. Duchamp viewed the work as "a static representation of movement – a static composition of indications of various positions taken by a form in movement – with no attempt to give cinematic effects through painting" (qtd in Sanouillet & Peterson 1973: 124). The pejorative responses by his fellow painters merely amplified Duchamp's disdain: "The whole trend of painting was something I didn't care to continue. After ten years of painting, I was bored with it … from 1912 on I decided to stop being a painter in the professional sense" (qtd in Tomkins 2013: 55).

Instead, he noted, "I was interested in ideas – not merely in visual products." (qtd in Sanouillet & Peterson 1973: 125) and "paint was always a means to an end, whether the end was religious, social, decorative, or romantic. Now it's become an end in itself" (qtd in Kuh 1962: 89-90). Duchamp is almost jeering in his remarks, "And then of course I just wanted to react against what the others were doing, Matisse and the rest, all that work of the hand" (qtd in Tomkins 2013: 55). The Abstract Expressionist painter, Robert Motherwell, said of Duchamp, "[he] was the great

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[2] Latifa Echackch, a French-Moroccan artist creates works that interrogate and reflect on the historical and cultural constructions pertaining to her cultural identity. *Frames* (2006) consists of Islamic prayer mats that have been methodically unstitched, leaving only the enveloping fringe or 'frame' to remain.

[3] Walton abandons the frame and paint altogether. *Death of Painting* (2020) creates 'canvases' of colour through the use of overlapping lines of colour thread. Walton makes empty 'canvases' of colour and then undoes them to nought, the process and the 'work' evident only in photographic documentation.

saboteur, the relentless enemy of painterly painting (read Picasso and Matisse), the asp in the basket of fruit" (qtd in Cabanne 1979: 12).

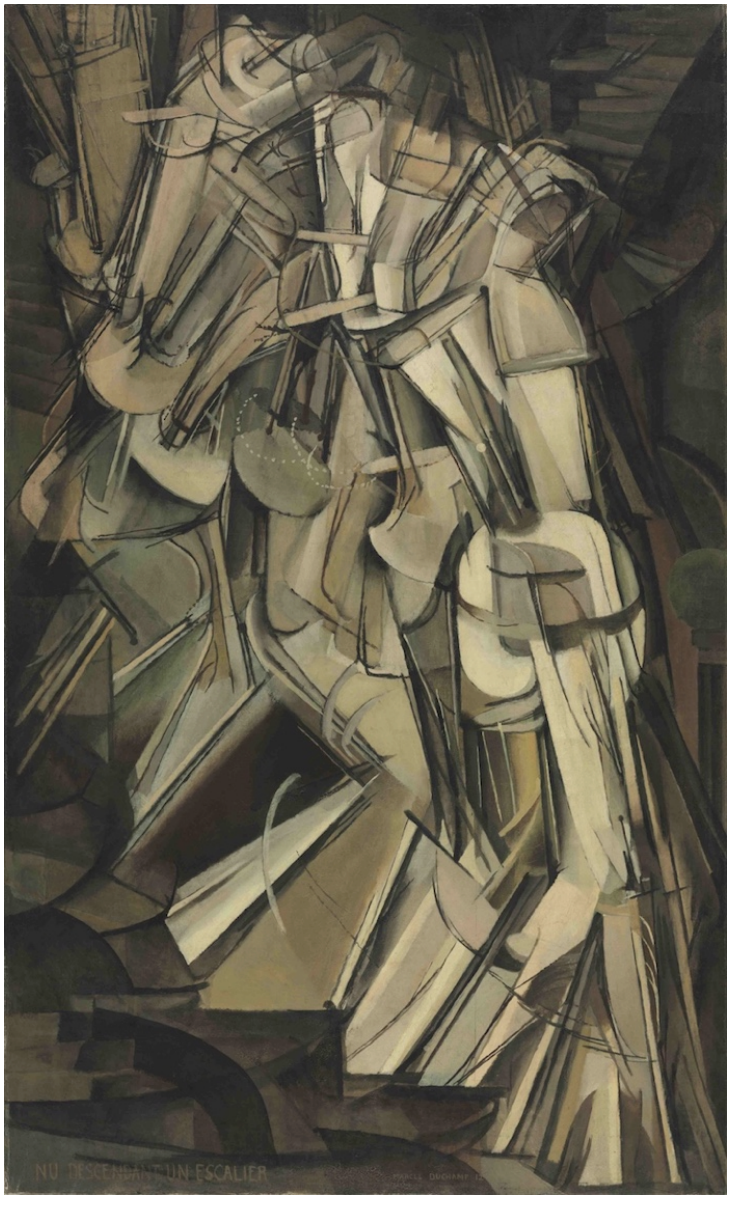

Figure 6. Marcel Duchamp. 1912. *Nude Descending a Staircase, No.*2

In 1913, Duchamp mounted a bicycle form with a wheel upside-down onto a wooden stool. Simply titled, *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), this was the first of what Duchamp called "readymades". To quote Hopkins: "Duchamp's antipathy towards the 'craft' associations of visual art, and his concomitant belief that ideas should replace manual skill as the prime components of works of art, led to his selection of 'readymade' items as art objects" (2004: 9-10).

Of the readymades, Duchamp himself explained:

The readymade can be seen as a sort of irony, because it says here it is, a thing that I call art, I didn't even make it myself. As we know art etymologically speaking means to 'make,' 'hand make,' and there instead of making, I take it readymade. So, it was a form of denying the possibility of defining art. (Qtd in Ades, Cox & Hopkins 1999: 151)

Figure 7. Duchamp photographed with his work: *Bicycle Wheel* (1913)

Although Duchamp described the origins of the *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) as a "happy idea", it is possible that it owes its idea to Picasso's innovation of the collage a year earlier. In a retrospective moment in 1971, art critic Clement Greenberg postulated the following:

He would seem to have attributed the impact of Cubism – and particularly of Picasso's first collage-constructions – to what he saw as its startling difficulty; and it's as though the bicycle wheel mounted upside-down on a stool and the store-bought bottle rack, he produced in 1913 were designed to go Picasso one better in this direction. (Qtd in Masheck 1974: 126)

Robert Motherwell, in attempting to reconcile the enormity of the influence of both Picasso and Duchamp on the artworks that would be produced from that point on, declared:

Picasso, as a painter, wanted boundaries. Duchamp, as an anti-painter, did not. From the standpoint of each, the other was involved in a game. Taking one side or the other is the history of art since 1914, since the First World War. (Qtd in Cabanne 1971: 7)

With artists and art movements sounding the triumph of the social and technological developments of the time, World War I (1914-1918) erupted and shattered illusions of progress. It would have been impossible for this disaster, one of mass human carnage as a consequence of previously revered technological advancements, not to have had an immense backlash. Outside of the devastation arose Dada (1916-1924), which began as a literary movement in 1916 in Zürich, Switzerland. Both Dada and its successor, Surrealism (1924-1966), were committed to making art from the absurd and the unconscious. It was a nihilistic movement that formed in horror over the atrocities and follies war. The Dadaists were anti-war and questioned the nature of a society that allowed the war to happen. "The war is based on a crass error," Hugo Ball wrote in his diary on June 26, 1915. "Men have been mistaken for machines" (qtd in Trachtman 2006: n.p.). Hans Arp, one of the founding group of Dada in Zurich, elaborates:

Revolted by the butchery of the 1914 World War, we in Zurich devoted ourselves to the arts. While the guns rumbled in the distance, we sang, painted, made collages and wrote poems with all our might. We were seeking an art based on fundamentals, to cure the madness of the age, and a new order. (Qtd in Hopkins 2004: 8)

A corollary movement, Futurism, had declared in a manifesto: "We declare that the magnificence of the world has been enriched by a new beauty, the beauty of speed […]. We want to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness." (Marinetti 1909: n.p.). The manifesto had been silenced; it was replaced by the Dada and the Surrealist pursuits of disruptive methods of expression through "explosions of elective imbecility", absurdism, nonsensical and illogical juxtapositions or unexpected associations, were a means to challenge a society that "seemed all too complacent about a senseless war" (Trachtman 2006: n.p.).

Whilst the Dadaists (and Surrealists) owed their development of the 'photomontage' to Cubist collage, Hopkins notes that:

> They would have been deeply uncomfortable with the idea, implicit in much of Cubism, that formal innovation alone provides a rationale for art. Much as the art of Cubism aimed to shock or disorientate its viewers into rethinking their relations with reality, it was ultimately 'autonomous' art; art about art. (Hopkins 2004: 3)

The original phrase *L'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) is accredited to the poet Théophile Gautier, who first assumed the slogan in the preface to his book *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). To quote Asadi and Salimi: "Indeed, this slogan was introduced in defiance of those who – from John Ruskin, to much later Communist advocates of socialist realism – hold the mind-set that the value of art was to serve some moral or didactic purpose" (2013: 2).

For the cultural theorist Peter Bürger, writing in the 1970s,

> The mission of the early 20th-century European avant-garde thus consisted in undermining the idea of art's 'autonomy' ('art for art's sake') in favour of a new merging of art into what he calls the 'praxis of life' […]. In Dada a basic distrust for the narrowness of art frequently translated into open antagonism towards its values and institutions. (Qtd in Hopkins 2004: 2-4)

Earlier on, the artist James Whistler, disinclined to sentimentality and moral allusion, stated: "Art should be independent of all claptrap – should stand alone [...] and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love,

patriotism and the like" (qtd in Spencer 1998: 300). To which Nietzsche retorted that "Art is the great stimulus to life: how could one understand it as purposeless, as aimless, as *l'art pour l'art*?" (1895: 32).

Hugo Ball, to whom the origins of Dada are attributed, took refuge from the War in neutral Switzerland. Reflecting on the state of the art at the time, Ball observed:

> The image of the human form is gradually disappearing from the painting of these times and all objects appear only in fragments [...] The next step is for poetry to decide to do away with language. Everything is functioning; only man himself is not any longer. (1996: 55)

Dada, then was not so much a style, but more of an attitude: "Previously there had not been an artistic movement so self-consciously international … In one of its most important innovations, Dada fashioned itself as a network, a web of connections linking actors and local groupings, which served as a conduit of ideas and images" (Dickerson 2006: 1). The artist Hans Richter, who had first-hand accounts from within the Dada movement, elaborates:

> Our provocations, demonstrations and defiances were only a means of arousing the bourgeoisie to rage, and through rage to a shamefaced self-awareness. Dada was not an artistic movement in the accepted sense; it was a storm that broke over the world of art as the war did over the nations […]. These took different forms in different countries and with different artists, according to the temperament, antecedents and artistic ability of the individual Dadaist. The new ethic took sometimes a positive, sometimes a negative form, often appearing as art and then again as the negation of art, at times deeply moral and at other times totally amoral. (1965: 9)

Having moved to New York in 1915, Duchamp had aligned himself with the Dada movement in New York along with Man Ray and Francis Picabia. Notoriously, in 1917, Duchamp bought a porcelain urinal from a hardware store, inscribed the name R. Mutt on its rim, and submitted it under that fictious artist's name to be presented on its side, with the title *Fountain* (1917).

Figure 8. Marcel Duchamp. 1917. *Fountain*

The work was presented to the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, of which Duchamp was himself a committee member. Although the work was not rejected outright, (the rules stated that all artworks would be accepted if the fee was paid), it was never shown. Tomkins elaborates: "The ensuing controversy produced a heated debate over the boundaries of art that became a central issue in generating the art of the second half of the twentieth century. It is primarily because of this that many art critics consider Duchamp the greatest influence on the art of that era" (2005: 125).

"*Fountain*", wrote the Committee, "may be a very useful object in its place, but its place is not an art exhibition, and it is by no definition, a work of art" (qtd in Camfield 1989: 27). In an extended interview with Cabanne, Duchamp recounts from his own perspective:

> The “Fountain” was simply placed behind a partition and, for the duration of the exhibition, I didn’t know where it was. I couldn't say that I had sent the thing, but I think the organizers knew it through gossip. No one dared mention it. I had a falling out with them and retired from the organization. (Qtd in Cabanne 1971: 55)

Duchamp would have been disappointed had the object been accepted. When it was ‘supressed’ he said:

> As it was, I was enchanted. Because fundamentally, I didn't have the traditional attitude of the painter who presents his painting, hoping it will be accepted and then praised by the critics. There never was any criticism. There never was any criticism because the urinal didn't appear in the catalogue. (55)

Thomas McEvilley declared in 2005 that, “the readymade has exerted more influence on the sculpture of the last two generations than all other models and influences put together” (2005: 24), while Tomkins notes that, “by the end of the nineteen sixties Duchamp was widely recognized as the most influential artist of the second half of the twentieth century” (2005: 125).

Despite Duchamp’s *Fountain* coming some four years after his first readymades in 1913, it became the iconic work not only of the time but continues to be *enfant terrible* of works which are ‘not art’. One can only surmise as to why this is the case; perhaps it has something to do with the infamy of its (non) exhibit or is it the choice of object itself? Was Duchamp implying that the artwork was worthless, literally useful for nothing more than urinating on? Given the outrage over World War I, the disdain for the bourgeoise and their assimilation of the artwork as commodity and taste, what more appropriate retort could Duchamp have presented?

Nothing and 'thin air'

Duchamp's *50cc of Paris Air* (1919) was an extension of his readymade artworks. He purchased an 'empty' glass ampoule from a pharmacist in Paris as a souvenir for his close friend and patron, Walter C. Arensberg. A vial with nothing in it may be the most insubstantial 'work of art' conceived, but from a molecular perspective, air is not considered nothing. However, in an art museum, carefully presented, the work deflated expectation, almost entirely. Given the fact that the ampoule was accidently broken in 1949 and then repaired, the meaning of the work as original genius was rendered even more unstable.

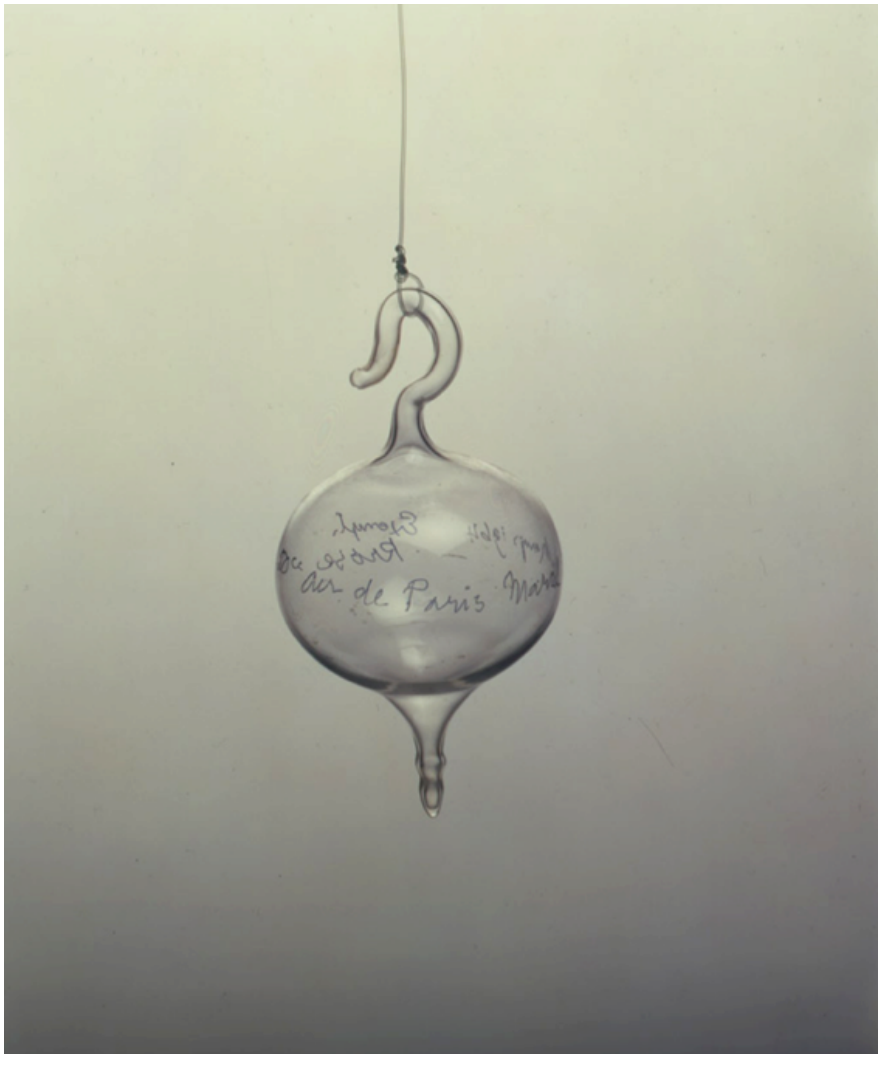

Figure 9. Marcel Duchamp. 1919. *50cc of Paris Air*

Duchamp's *50cc of Paris Air* is both a primary 'location point' in both signifying the beginnings of the immaterial or invisible in art, as well as conceptually denoting once again the dematerialised art object as a site of purpose, long before its heralded 'genesis' in the Conceptual Art movement, some 50 to 60 years later. Air as a medium is surprisingly prevalent in both modern and contemporary art, captivating artists' attention by its elusive nature. Despite appearing invisible to the eye, it is somewhat tangible when heated or cooled or when it gusts into galleries. Many subsequent artists have produced artworks using air as the primary 'material', yet Duchamp's is the only work in which the essence remains permanently trapped; "unwitnessed in any physical sense, yet nonetheless 'felt' due to the nostalgic, emotionally-driven associations with place engendered by its presence" (Brennan 2011: n.p.).

Air as central artwork was 'revitalised' in the 1950s. Yves Klein, whose oeuvre is in innumerable ways at the core of the history of the immaterial art object, was also captivated by the properties of air. His intensive investigations into the use of air and other natural forces as a radical new form of production are articulated in voluminous archives of plans, sketches and essays. These are supplemented with additional archival film footage of the artist "using compressed air to deflect a flow of water - an experiment mounted to demonstrate the viability of a 'toit d'air', or air roof" (Brennan 2011: n.p.). Klein interacted with leading architects and designers over an extended period but none of his improbable propositions were realised before his untimely death in 1962, leaving a series of other artists to direct his 'architecture of air' into new possibilities.

The Dutch artist Marinus Boezem was arguably the first to work with air in a manner akin to what Klein had foreseen. One of the first exhibitions to showcase conceptual art to the Netherlands was an exhibition titled, *Show V*, in 1965, and Boezem's contribution consisted of detailed drawings in which various air doors are placed where people can walk through them. People were to have the experience of warm air and cold air. The air doors arise as currents are blown into the room (noted by Van Duyn, Edna and Witteveen 1999). Although a somewhat restrained proposal compared to Klein's more ambitious plans, the work successfully defined space using solely incorporeal means.

Boezem's work, *Signing the Sky above the Port of Amsterdam with an Aeroplane* (1969), is entirely generated from air and embodied by (eventual) absence. Precisely as the title states, an

aircraft's contrail (vapour trail) was used to spell out the artists surname – BOEZEM – in the leaden sky above Amsterdam's harbour, the transient text dissolving almost as soon as it was formed.

Figure 10. Marinus Boezem. 1969. *Signing the Sky above the Port of Amsterdam with an Aeroplane*

Does such a vapour trail raise the question that we – the viewers – are the victims of a hoax? The lingering influence of Duchamp's readymades have the ongoing capacity to stretch art to the limits of what might constitute art. The snigger of a joke, anyway, was always entertained by the primary influence on Duchamp of Dada even as, by the 1920s, Dada had begun to lose its novelty of appeal and seemed to give way, in turn, to Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, epitomised in the work, respectively, of Salvador Dali, Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol, while 'outliers' like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns probably never quite severed links with the Duchampian 'idea' in the artefact. (Other notable contemporary examples of the use of 'thin air' as artwork, include Martin Creed[4] and Jeppe Hein[5].)

[4] Creed's *Work No. 200. Half the air in a given space* (1998), consists of half filling a given space with coloured balloons. The work divides the given space in half, the visitors pushing through a wall of 'marshmallows' which is both exhilarating yet claustrophobic and 'thin air' then takes on an entirely different meaning here. Each balloon is filled, as with Duchamp's sealed glass ampoule, with nothing but air. In some iterations of the work some 37 000 balloons have been utilized, and this amounts to half of the space, filled with nothing. The conundrum is then, which half is that exactly?

[5] Jeppe Hein's work *Invisible Labyrinth* (2005) uses a grid of infrared signals to define and distinguish various invisible maze-like layouts. The visiting art public are provided with digital headphones that vibrate whenever they ram into one of the invisible 'walls', thereby having their route through apparently empty space controlled remotely.

Nothing and "additive subtraction"

In 1953, Rauschenberg, then a young upstart artist – asked the well-established Willem de Kooning if he could erase one of de Kooning's drawings as an act of art. As Rauschenberg tells the story, de Kooning was intrigued by the proposition and after a careful selection, he gave Rauschenberg a multi-media work on paper that he thought would be difficult to erase (this after deciding against some drawings he really liked, and others which were done in pencil and would be too easy to erase). It apparently took Rauschenberg nearly a month to get the paper relatively free of any trace of the original artwork. According to Stanska:

> Rauschenberg's, *Erased de Kooning* (1953), has been hailed as a landmark of postmodernism because of its subversive appropriation of another artist's work, and it has also been understood as a rejection of the traditional practice of drawing as the foundation of painting. It was also a literal act of iconoclasm – so typical for our times now. (2017: n.p.)

The work actively sought to redefine art through a very conscious nullification of the work of a distinguished primogenitor. Rauschenberg's process of generating an artwork through the removal, instead of the adding, of marks was described by Jasper Johns as "additive subtraction":

> It attests to the power of absence when specifically associated with a former state; an act that can never be viewed entirely as a destruction or negation, but rather as a kind of 'reverse' palimpsest in which concatenations of removal flicker across nominally blank surfaces. (Brennan 2011: n.p.)

Since 1953, many artists have re-enacted Rauschenberg's original act of erasure, infusing the action with additional nuance in concerns ranging from the issue of what is being erased to the conditions under which the erasure is performed.

Figure 11. Robert Rauschenberg. 1953. *Erased De Kooning*

By removing all the black squares from her *All White Chess Set* (1966), for example, Yoko Ono seeks to counteract the competitive element in a game of chess. If this game were to be played, it would require communal negotiation, lateral thinking and collaboration. Ono's subtraction, her removal of the colour black, from a game based on the conjecture of combat is, in the words of critic Shana Nys Dambrot, "a visceral reminder that it's impossible to fight an enemy who is indistinguishable from yourself" (qtd in Brennan 2011: n.p.).

Figure 12. Yoko Ono. 1966. *All White Chess Set*

Art & Language made a series of unconventional cartographic interventions, none more peculiar than the 1967 intervention, exhaustively titled:

Map to not indicate: CANADA, JAMES BAY, ONTARIO, QUEBEC, ST. LAWRENCE RIVER, NEW BRUNSWICK, MANITOBA, AKIMISKI ISLAND, LAKE WINNIPEG, LAKE OF THE WOODS, LAKE NIPIGON, LAKE SUPERIOR, LAKE HURON, LAKE MICHIGAN, LAKE ONTARIO, LAKE ERIE, MAINE, NEW HAMPSHIRE, MASSACHUSETTS, VERMONT, CONNECTICUT, RHODE ISLAND, NEW YORK, NEW JERSEY, PENNSYLVANIA, DELAWARE, MARYLAND, WEST VIRGINIA, VIRGINIA, OHIO, MICHIGAN, WISCONSIN, MINNESOTA, EASTERN BORDERS OF NORTH DAKOTA, SOUTH DAKOTA, NEBRASKA, KANSAS, OKLAHOMA, TEXAS, MISSOURI, ILLINOIS, INDIANA, TENNESSEE, ARKANSAS, LOUISIANA, MISSISSIPPI, ALABAMA, GEORGIA, NORTH CAROLINA, SOUTH CAROLINA, FLORIDA, CUBA, BAHAMAS, ATLANTIC OCEAN, ANDROS ISLANDS, GULF OF MEXICO, STRAITS OF FLORIDA,

This was a title which reduced much of the geography of North America to a skeletal framework consisting of nothing more than an explosion of names. The only inclusions are the labelled outlined shapes of Iowa and Kentucky which now float as islands that have lost their geographical relevance, symbolically drifting in a sea of nothing.

Joseph Kosuth's collection of works titled *10 Definitions of Nothing* (1968) is suitably presented as typographic replicas of various dictionary definitions of the word 'nothing'. In so doing Kosuth underscored the excess of contradiction in nothingness itself. The volume of words required to define that which is not, coupled with the varying approaches to its iteration, *10 Definitions of Nothing* encapsulates Kosuth's predilection for self-negating wordplay, a continuing and defined feature of his practice up until today.

Kosuth's *Zero & Not* (1985-1986) finds yet another perspective from which to approach the absence/presence dichotomy. The artist examines the work and influence of Sigmund Freud by reproducing Freudian texts and then striking through the words with black lines. The text remains somewhat legible, an illusion perhaps to the enduring legacy of the 'founder' of psychoanalysis. Such an interpretation is frequently contested, however, and the work could instead be a critique of Freud's presuppositions regarding the unconscious aspects of our psyche:

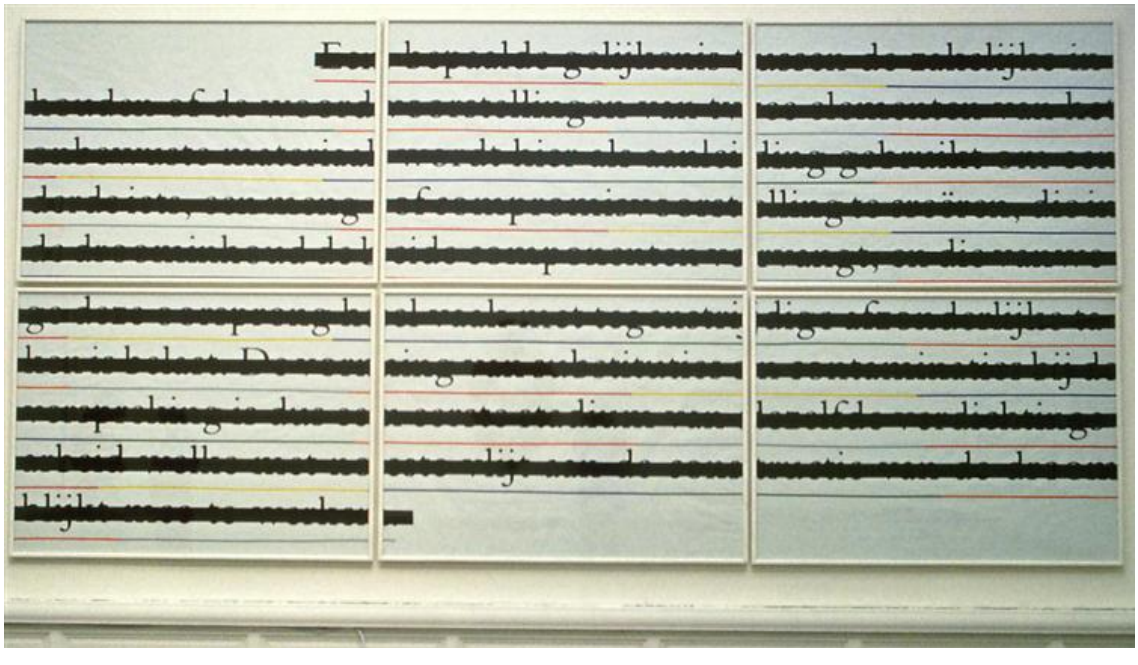

Figure 13. Joseph Kosuth. 1985-86. *Zero & Not*

Because the text is both legible and illegible, this artwork offers us an interpretation of how language and meaning are reliant on the flow of words and their relationship to one another. This is what Kosuth calls the "texture of reading". In addition, for the artist, by using only Freud's words as the basis for his own work and yet putting them under erasure, the work interrogates the notion of artistic as well as psychoanalytic authorship and authority. (Morra 2013: 107)

Another work in the vein of 'additive subtraction' is Tom Friedman's *Erased Playboy Centrefold* (1992). Is this an irreverent prod at sexual mores? The possible readings of his work are multiple. In the first instance, it is recognised that the erotic, especially in the male mind is stirred by the visual. Hence, by removing the centrefold image the artist allows his title by itself to carry the sexual connotation. His 'additive subtraction' asks implicitly whether arousal is stimulated by the sense or the mind. Responses will differ not only between women and men, but beyond any binary division of the sexes. We enter the realm of the idea, or Conceptual Art. (Olve Sande's *The Fire Sermon 1-111* (2011)[6] is a striking contemporary example on the ideas of 'additive subtraction', leaning more towards abstraction).

Nothing and 'the empty gallery'

By 1958, Yves Klein, one of the more experimental outliers of the period, produced his celebrated, "although cumbrously titled" exhibition *La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée: Le Vide (The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility: The Void*), [thus] providing art history with its first truly notable engagement with the immaterial artwork" (Brennan 2011: n.p.).

What has subsequently been reduced as a title to *The Void* consisted of the entire gallery removed of all of its furnishings except for a large cabinet, and then painted completely white. Klein indicated that the 'feel' of his presence was the artwork. Despite apparent emptiness the opening was anything but empty of curious viewers. Archival footage shows Klein walking around the

[6] "*The Fire Sermon I-III* is a set of drawings extracted from the annotations and marks made by Ezra Pound in the draft for the modernist poem The Waste Land. By removing the underlaying text, these marks are rendered as abstract expressionistic drawings without any apparent motivation. As every mark on the paper embodies a part of the original manuscript that was edited out or changed, these drawings are tempered and structured by the editors response to a text that these very same lines has made inaccessible to the viewer" (Sande 2011: n.p.).

empty gallery, contemplating the bare walls, and appearing to reflect on the non-existent artworks. The work, "a radical embrace of nominally empty space that was quickly adopted by other artists […] is still being echoed in the exhibition strategies of numerous contemporary figures" (Brennan 2011: n.p.).

Figure 14. Yves Klein in the *Void Room* (Raum der Leere). 1958.

Robert Barry continued in Klein's footsteps, as it were, in his work *Closed Gallery.* Shown from 1969 to 1970 at galleries in Turin, Los Angeles and Amsterdam, the work consisted only of a text label on the Gallery door informing the general viewing public that the space was closed for the duration of the exhibition.

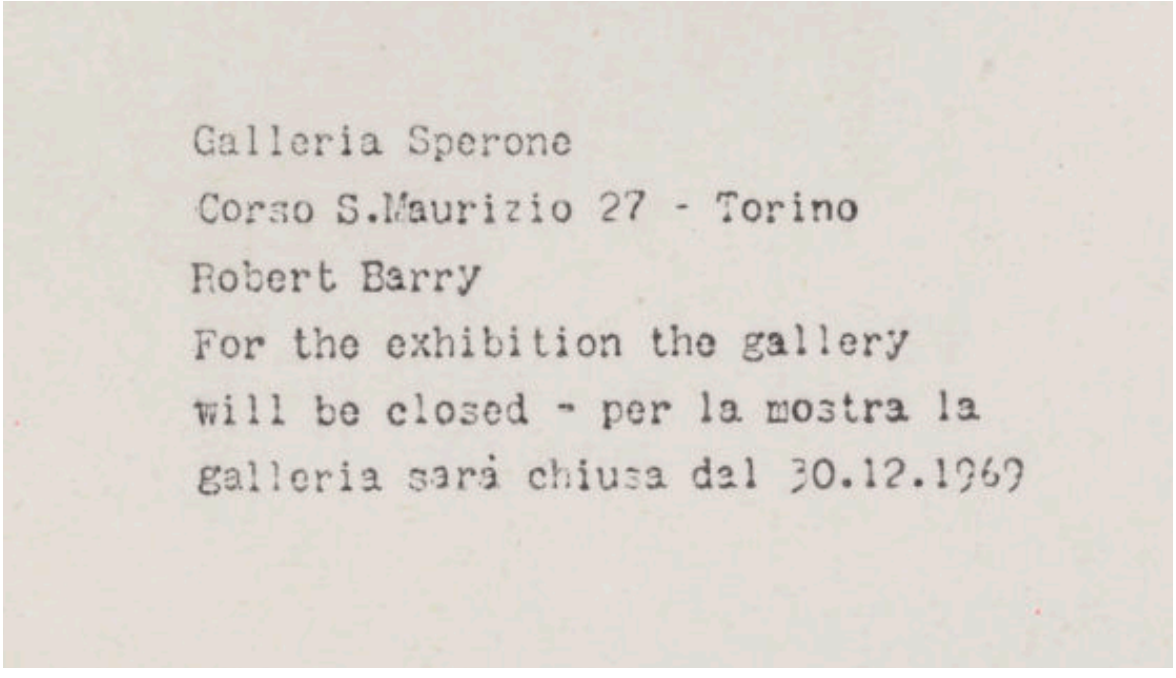

Figure 15. Robert Barry. 1969. *Closed Gallery*

In 1968 the Argentinean artist, Graciela Carnevale, transformed the 'empty gallery' into a site of political agitation and critique. Invited guests arrived at the opening and found themselves inside an empty store (an improvised exhibition space). The windows had been concealed with posters. Once everyone had safely entered, Carnevale locked the doors from the outside, leaving the audience trapped inside. It was only about an hour later that a passer-by was attracted to smash the front window to allow the audience to escape. As they exited, presumably in a state of shock, each 'participant' was handed a piece of paper with an account that drew parallels between their own experience (ordeal) and the acts of torture by the Argentine military junta on its citizens.

Michael Asher's contributions to the 'empty gallery' entailed a critique of institutional space. His first work in this vein was at the Claire Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1974. Not content with an empty gallery, Asher had the partition wall removed, so exposing the adjacent shielded office to the exhibition area, thus "He exposed the day-to-day functions of the gallery in its commercial capacity. Asher simultaneously brought the normally unseen economic underpinnings of both the gallery and the work to the fore" (Rorimer 1990: 2). The 'work' entertains ideas in conjunction: the gallery as the preserver of art; the gallery as a business enterprise.

Figure 16. Michael Asher's *'empty gallery'*. 1974.

The relationship of art as business features, too, in Maria Eichhorn's show, *Money* (2001), at the Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland. The artist contributed her entire budget allocation for the exhibition to cover the cost of long-overdue repairs to the museum. The show consisted of an exhibition poster and catalogue that summarised the full extent of necessary renovations, including an itemised list of each repair and its cost. Museum-goers were greeted by plumbers, builders and electricians going about their work. The catalogue text, the only tangible record of the show, comprised a detailed account of the Kunsthalle's finances:

> Although intended as an alternative portrait, Eichhorn's research in fact revealed a long history of mismanagement, including the fact that money granted for repairs had repeatedly been used for other purposes. Her philanthropic gesture was therefore transformed into a very different critique, placing the Kunsthalle, rather than funding bodies, firmly at the centre of its history of neglect. (Brennan 2011: n.p.)

The politics of the empty space, as espoused by Eichhorn and Asher, continued in the work of American artist David Hammons. His 2002-2003 exhibition, *Concerto in Black and Blue*, occurred in the vast, unlit warehouse-like space of the Ace Gallery in New York, navigable by visitors only

through the use of supplied small blue LED torches. Suggestive of the International Surrealist Exhibition in 1938, which was also only visible by visitors' flashlights, Hammons's show differs in that there were no artworks to observe.

The show consists of the interplay between the darkness of the gallery and a moving blue light, the effect being abrupt shifts of colour and illumination. Like the flashing light of a police vehicle? Or does Hammons's African American identity suggest the Blues as both a musical genre and vital symbol of black American history? With the Blues having its origin in the slave plantations of the American South, the exhibition experience evoked its own melancholy. Or did it? Would the same associations have been made had the viewers not known that Hammons was an African American? At what point is an art of concept located in the text of the work? At what point is the viewer the real 'maker' of the work? As Marcel Duchamp declared in a speech to the *American Federation of Artists* in 1957, "The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act" (qtd in Sanouilett & Petersen 1973: 139).

The empty or apparently unoccupied gallery is a recurrent theme in the work of the Slovakian artist Roman Ondák. *More Silent Than Ever* (2006) "addresses the oppressive social landscape: the pervasive culture of surveillance that existed under the former Communist regimes in Eastern Europe" (Rugoff 2012: 25). The installation consists of an empty room with a single entry and exit point and a wall label indicating the presence of a concealed listening device. Surveillance, of course, is no longer the preserve of dictatorial regimes, but is an omnipresence of the contemporary AI (artificial intelligence) world. (Chris Burden[7] and Marina Abramović[8] are other notable examples of producing work on the 'empty gallery').

[7] Chris Burden's performance *White Light/White Heat* (1975) consisted of the artist lying on a triangular platform he had built into the space, lying out of view high above visitors' heads. "During the entire piece, I did not eat, talk, or come down. I did not see anyone, and no one saw me" (Burden 1975: n.p.).

[8] In the performance, *The Artist Is Present* (2010), Abramović located herself firmly within the gallery space for 3 months, for all to see. Never a word spoken, it is estimated that through the duration of the 90 day performance, Abramović met the gaze of over 1000 visitors. The artwork is here presented as the artist, the only dialogue being the intimacy of a stare, which arguably is fleeting, intangible and transient.

Figure 16. Roman Ondák. 2006. *More Silent Than Ever*

Nothing and 'the invisible artwork'

Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951) had already proved instrumental in the pursuit of aesthetic absence. In 1961, the Parisian art dealer, Iris Clert, invited Rauschenberg to contribute a portrait of her as part of an exhibition at her gallery. He sent a telegram simply stating, "*This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.*" One can hear echoes of Duchamp: "It is art if I say it is."

Of all the artists involved in the dematerialisation of the artwork, Robert Barry's expressions of absence are among the most cohesively 'present'. His *Inert Gas* series (1969) saw the artist discharge canisters of krypton, xenon, argon and helium on the Californian landscape. The action

(or the work) exists only in the form of photographic documentation and anecdote. Barry conceived of his performative actions as a recurring, almost ritualistic operation:

> The important part of making the piece was that I simply returned the gas which had been taken out of the atmosphere, stored in a container in a measurable volume, and then would be used commercially […] thus creating a kind of cycle. (Qtd in Weh 1995: n.p.)

Andy Warhol, notorious for his ubiquitous silkscreen image multiples of Campbell Soup cans and Marilyn Monroe(s), also had an 'invisible' moment. His *Invisible Sculpture* (1985) consisted of an empty plinth with a label that simply stated: 'Andy Warhol, USA/ Invisible Sculpture / Mixed Media'. The work is often described as part performance in that Warhol is said to have walked up to the empty plinth, attached the label to the wall and declared that his aura would remain with the pedestal. The gesture is clearly suggestive of Yves Klein's personal aura in *The Void*.

Figure 17. Andy Warhol. 1958. *Invisible Sculpture*

What we might label ‘theatre of the absurd’ is carried over from Warhol to the provocateur Tom Friedman, whose conceptually varied practice is often combined with cynical humour. This is clearly demonstrated in his *Untitled (A Curse)* (1992), perhaps a mocking gesture at Warhol’s *Invisible Sculpture*. Friedman presented a plinth, but instead of claiming its ‘emptiness’ declared that the platform was supporting a large ball of space that had been cursed by a witch. In order to give additional credence to the concept of an ‘authentic invisibility’, Friedman ensured that the transportation crate for the work always included additional height space to accommodate the hexed air. (Maurizo Cattalan’s *Untitled (Denunzia)* (1991), is another significant contemporary example of the ‘invisible artwork’.)[9]

In tangible terms, assessments of reality can be significantly transformed by what is withheld or omitted. Whilst the examples of ‘invisible’ art that have been mentioned above literally infer concepts and illusions of nothing as the work itself, other artists have conceived works of ‘invisibility’ by highlighting the neglected, forgotten, and ignored. In the realm of a ‘politics of invisibility’ it is a question of making visible that which has been consciously relegated to obscurity. This is closely aligned to many of my works produced as the core of this study.

Although New York artist David Hammons’s practice is eclectically diverse, several of his more enigmatic works skilfully express semi-visibility as a strategy of prevarication or inaccessibility designed to suggest wider realities. In an untitled exhibition held in a TriBeCa shop in 1995, Hammons added his own unlabelled sculptures to the New York store's stock of African and Asian artefacts. Upon entering the ‘gallery’, visitors were handed a piece of paper with a list of artworks. The schedule of works functioned as a navigation device for those who preferred not to take the challenge of testing their artworld nous as to what the exhibition had on display.

Many of his pieces actually incorporated the shop's merchandise, confounding the experience of detecting which items constituted Hammons's work. As Fusco said: “One's grasp of things could be measured by whether one knew, for example, that the stack of toilet paper on the table was not the store manager's weekly supply, but one of the artist's trademark sardonic one-liners” (1995:

[9] Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan is concerned with the fabrication of entertaining yet illuminating absurdities. *Untitled (Denunzia),* consists of a police report that methodically records the claim that an invisible sculpture had been stolen from the artist’s car.

n.p.). There were more than a dozen of Hammons's conceptual gags hidden in and amongst the artefacts from Africa and Asia, one of which was *Tape Duck* (1994), a wooden mallard covered in silver duct tape, peering out of a wooden dresser. Fusco continued:

> [Hammons is] a masterful investigator of how an oppositional black cultural identity can be generated through a dialogue with 'high' culture, particularly as it is articulated through standard English. His method relies on punning and other kinds of word games that short-circuit the dominant cultural interpretation of any given object or term to be redirected for his own purpose. (1995: n.p.)

The show consciously invokes a muddling of identities, which has become a consistent marker of Hammons's practice as an African American artist, and it also suggests "the tendency for marginal or minority presences to be misrepresented, lumped together or generally rendered only partially visible" (Brennan 2011: n.p.).

Figure 18. David Hammons. 1994. *Tape Duck*

The thorough questioning of the media and the manner in which it records and represents topics provide the conceptual fulcrum for much of the political work of the New York-based Chilean artist, Alfredo Jaar. Curiously (given the artist's own nationality), Jaar's political preoccupations centre around Africa, not only with regard to its complicated political and cultural histories, but more especially in the manner in which such histories appear to be distorted or diminished in the West.

Searching for Africa in LIFE (1996) assembles 2128 issues of the American *Life* magazine spanning six decades (1936 to 1996). The purpose is to highlight an almost total absence of cover stories devoted to the continent: "Five alone refer to the continent but in them only photographs of animals are shown, completely sidestepping the troubles of the population; a criticism of the image of Africa (or the "non-image") the publication gave to society" (S.H. 2020: n.p.).

In an even more extreme example of the West's neglect of Africa, Jaar's *Untitled (Newsweek)* (1994) is a compilation of 17 digitised images of the covers of *Newsweek*, beginning in April of 1994, with the final cover appearing on August 1, 1994, a time of the Rwandan Genocide. Jaar's documentation highlights the fact that it took *Newsweek* 17 weeks before it finally acknowledged the horrors of the mass culling of the people of Rwanda. In an interview with Laura Hubber, Jaar reflects back on his outrage, "A million people were killed in less than 100 days, and *Newsweek* magazine took seventeen weeks to feature it on its cover …" (qtd in Hubber 2016: n.p.). In week 17, *Newsweek* finally acknowledged the genocide with a cover picture of a child in a refugee camp overlayed with the text "Hell on Earth". Jaar was further outraged:

> It's a very cynical cover in a sense, because it says, "Hell on Earth," and it's too late. It's been hell on Earth for the last seventeen weeks. When that cover came out, the genocide had ended already, and the press was already starting to focus on the plight of the refugees around Rwanda and those displaced within Rwanda. (Qtd in Hubber: n.p.)

A more recent video work of Jaar's, *May 1, 2011* (2011), focuses on White House reports of the assassination of Osama bin Laden. A screen displays an 'official' photograph of then President Obama and his security team as they apparently witness a live video feed of the 'event'. To the

left, an identical monitor is positioned, its screen a white illuminated void, the empty space suggestive of the footage apparently being observed.

Figure 19. Alfredo Jaar. 2011. *May 1, 2011*

A caption to the right of the White House image lists all the political figures present, while an empty white card next to the equally blank screen records nothing. Jaar's work affirms a deep suspicion of pictorial representation, in which an absence accentuates by ironic construct, a weight of presence: the killing of the USA's number one enemy.

According to some cultural critics, Conceptual Art spells the end of Modernism. By rejecting the art object and replacing its significance with the idea or concept, we enter a 'Postmodernism' of endless interpretation, of relativism and parody. Whereas Modernism struggled to hold things together even as things fell apart, Postmodernism might revel in the 'disorder' of things over universal truths. In tracing the various genres attributed to the 'nothingness', 'the eloquence of absence', the 'unseen', we have inadvertently mapped out a route backwards to the founding inspirations of Conceptual Art in Duchamp's 'readymades'.

Nothing and Conceptual Art (1966-1972)

Within this period of scattered transitions, as artists scrambled to find an anchor of sorts, some tended to move across and through different movements, perhaps unconsciously so, in attempts to articulate their various concerns. This is true also, as we have seen, for Yves Klein and Robert Rauschenberg. This was a pivotal and transitionary period that arguably went on to influence the current climate of what today we call Contemporary Art, itself a contested term or – dare I say it! – concept. As Lippard summarises:

> There has been a lot of bickering about what Conceptual Art is/was; who began it; who did what when with it; what its goals, philosophy, and politics were and might have been. I was there, but I don't trust my memory. I don't trust anyone else's either. And I trust even less the authoritative overviews by those who were not there. (1973: vii)

The public space of the mid-1960s was one of discontent, confusion, reaction and dissent: "During the late 1960s a number of artists in New York began to identify their work as Conceptual Art. In a number of respects, Conceptual Art paralleled the earlier Dada movement. Like Dada, Conceptual Art was a protest" (Galenson 2009: 310). In this regard, Sol LeWitt, one of the more prominent early voices within the movement, observed in 1968 that "American life is rapidly breaking down. We have riots, wars, etc. The middle-class morality is breaking down […]. There is no reason that the artist should feel he is part of something that is so decadent and so completely without any purpose" (1995: 84). In such a comment, and half a century later, we hear echoes of Dada, post-World War I. The art critic and cultural commentator Lucy Lippard, an outspoken and vehement advocate of the rising concerns of the Conceptual Art movement, provided a necessary counter-voice to Clement Greenberg's decree of 'the aesthetic' and reflects on the public place at the time:

> The era of Conceptual Art - which was also the era of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the counter-culture-was a real free-for-all, and the democratic implications of that phrase are fully appropriate, if never realized […]. However, it was usually the form rather than the content of Conceptual Art that carried a political message. The frame was there to be broken out of. Anti-establishment fervour in the 1960s focused on the de-mythologization and de-commodification of art, on

the need for an independent (or "alternative") art that could not be bought and sold by the greedy sector that owned everything that was exploiting the world and promoting the Vietnam War. (1973: vii)

Lippard continues to recall how she saw this period unfolding and shifting from the last throws of the reduced object to the idea as a stand-alone proposition: “I came to it [Conceptual Art], as did most of my artist colleagues, through what came to be called Minimalism” (1973: viii), that is, an extreme form of abstract art that arose in the United States in the late 1950s in reaction to what it regarded as the pretentiousness of Abstract Expressionism (such as Jackson Pollock’s spontaneous application of paint). As art critic, Justin Wolf adds, Conceptual artists were influenced by “the brutal simplicity of Minimalism, but they rejected Minimalism's embrace of the conventions of sculpture and paintings as mainstays of artistic production" (2012: n.p.). Or to return to Lippard:

Although Conceptual Art emerged from Minimalism, its basic principles were very different stressing the acceptively open-ended in contrast to Minimalism's rejectively self-contained. If Minimalism formally expressed ‘less is more’, Conceptual Art was about saying more with less. It represented an opening up after Minimalism closed down on expressionist and Pop excesses. As Robert Huot said in a 1977 billboard piece: Less Is More, But It's Not Enough. (1973: xiii)

The final blow to Minimalism may best be exemplified in the work of Sol LeWitt, one of the Conceptual Art movement’s more vocal proponents: “Sol LeWitt's *Buried Cube Containing an Object of Importance but Little Value* (1968), a gag piece, where LeWitt supposedly interred a simple cube in a collector's yard, and with it he buried Minimalism's object-centered approach” (Wolf 2012: n.p.).

In 1967, the editor of *Artforum* sent the artist Sol LeWitt a letter stating that he, LeWitt, seems to be in favour of avoiding “the notion that the artist is a kind of ape that has to be explained by the civilized critic”. It was an open invitation for LeWitt to contextualize his own practice, from the artist’s perspective. LeWitt published an extensive essay in the June 1967 edition of *Artforum* simply titled “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, in which he asserts: “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses the conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair” (1967: n.p.). LeWitt followed up his original essay with “Sentences on Conceptual Art”,

first published in 1969, in which he explains: “Ideas can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical” (1969: n.p.).

Neither statement reads as a manifesto, but rather as personal reflections on an evolving movement. LeWitt’s essays have become significant additions to a rather paper-thin archive of this period, bolstered by retrospective articulations and Lippard’s seminal book *Six Years* … (1973). To quote Wolf, again:

> An amalgam of various tendencies rather than a cohesive movement, Conceptualism took myriad forms, such as performances, happenings, and ephemera […]. Their chief claim - that the articulation of an artistic idea suffices as a work of art - implied that concerns such as aesthetics, expression, skill and marketability were irrelevant standards by which art was usually judged. (2012: n.p.)

Yet the works to which I have referred from the Conceptual Art movement and its subsequent iterations can all trace their origins ironically, to the influence of the ‘aesthetic’ movements, artists and artworks in the diverse strands of Modernism. The unifying factor in these strands is described as:

> The absorption of the lessons learnt from other twentieth-century art movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism, Suprematism, Abstract Expressionism and the Fluxus group, together with the ambition once and for all to 'free' art of the Modernist Paradigm. Most importantly, perhaps, conceptual art of the 1960's and 70s sought to overcome a backdrop against which art's principal aim is to produce something beautiful or aesthetically pleasing. (Schellekens 2019: n.p.)

With the benefit of hindsight and the gamut of explorations, manifestos, cycles of denunciations and affirmations, and the standing on the shoulders of the giants before, the Conceptual artists of the late 1960s leveraged these cumulative influences to proclaim the independence of an alternative track:

> Conceptual Art is one of those art movements that has self-reflectively scrutinised the status of art. It advanced an institutional critique that interrogated the practices and traditions of the artworld, the gallery system and the modernist art discourse. It also advanced a socio-political critique that sought to redefine

the function of art within the wider social sphere. Artists clustered under the term "conceptual" explored how meaning is materially and discursively created in the art context, and how artworks can manipulate the chain of signification and subvert meaning beyond that art context. (Kalyva 2016: 2)

The 'new identity' that Conceptual Art proclaimed, then, reveals inevitable signs of the preceding several decades: "Conceptual artists link their work to a tradition of Marcel Duchamp, whose ready-mades had rattled the definition of the work of art. Like Duchamp before them, they abandoned beauty, rarity, and skill as measures of art" (Wolf 2012: n.p.).

Figure 20. Damien Hirst. 1990. *A Thousand Years*

Damien Hirst, the 'bad boy' and figurative lead of the yBas (Young British Artists) – a collective persistently valued for its innovation – openly acknowledges the borrowing from earlier traditions, explaining that: "At a certain point everyone at [London] Goldsmiths [College] believed that rather than avoiding taking directly, we could take from everybody […]. It was just getting all these influences and piling them together into our own thing" (qtd in Temkin 2005: 58). In reference to

his own work *A Thousand Years* (1990), Hirst is even more explicit, "In my fly-killer piece, the lights were like Dan Flavin and the box was like Sol LeWitt. I put all that in knowingly" (58). Echoing Picasso's comment on art as theft, Hirst notes: "I remember just thinking: 'Steal everything.' Because it's all been done already" (qtd in Mayer 2015: n.p.).

The yBas – now a misnomer as many of these artists are currently in their mid-fifties – included the independently celebrated artists Tracy Emin, Chris Ofili, Sarah Lucas, Marc Quinn and Rachel Whiteread to name a few. Dame Rachel Whiteread has experienced a much-heralded career, one which, according to Mullins, owes its origins to a single work made in 1968: "Rachel Whiteread's trademark practice of casting negative spaces, that runs through her entire oeuvre, has been seen as a reaction to a single work [Bruce] Nauman made in 1968, *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair*" (2004: 72-73).

Mullin's acute observation of Whiteread's practice, coupled with Hirst's comments of unashamed 'borrowing', highlights the predicament of contemporary artists, post the Conceptual Art movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Lippard and Chandler had already begun to sense the 'death' of the artefact as it disintegrated into nothingness (save the idea itself, and which has ultimately left contemporary artists with little choice but to either become a bad thief or a good one, as I mentioned in my Introduction):

> During the 1960s, the anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive processes of art-making characteristic of the last two decades have begun to give way to an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively. As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art […]. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete. (Lippard & Chandler 1971: 55)

Did Lippard and Chandler really foresee Tom Friedman, who then gave us a blank piece of paper at which he claimed to have stared for 1000 hours over a five-year period? Or that Warhol would present us with a solitary plinth and nothing else? Or that Roman Ondák would present us with an

empty space filled by the 'all-seeing eye' of an apparent surveillance'? Or, instead, were Lippard and Chandler's observations simply 'signposted' for them in advance by Malevich, Duchamp, Rauschenberg and Klein, amongst others?

The Conceptual Art movement should be seen as the endpoint of a dissolution of the art object, reduced to a mere idea; and at the same time as the beginning-point of either a continued fascination with the idea as primary to the artwork, or a harking back and a pastiche of making in a combination of old-styles. In principle, it could be said that since the Conceptual Art movement of the period 1966-1972, there have been no new art movements aside from the continuing iterations of various and earlier styles of art. The explorations of the non-art object (as a protest against the commodification of art) can be traced in exemplars of Conceptual Art which include Performance Art, Video Art, Installation Art, Land or Environmental Art etc., all of which have been the mainstay of work produced post-1970, and which continues today. This, to a large extent, affirms Fredric Jameson's assertion that:

The writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds - they've already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already […]. So the weight of the whole modernist aesthetic tradition - now dead - also weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living, as Marx said in another context. (1998: 7)

This is reiterated somewhat more optimistically by Shira Wolfe, who states that "A more expanded notion of Conceptualism holds that men and women in all corners of the world had been working in a conceptual manner since the 1950s on themes ranging from imperialism to personal identity. In this sense, Conceptualism becomes a Global Conceptualism" (2017: n.p.).

For the philosopher Elisabeth Schelleken, this is a *fait accompli*:

For although the work created during that time might generally be conceived as more directly anti-establishment and anti-consumerist than later conceptual art, the spirit of early conceptual art seems to have carried on relatively undiluted into the very late twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, as witnessed by pieces such as Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998), Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), Ai Weiwei's *Surveillance Camera […]* (2010). (Schellekens 2019: n.p.)

For all intents and purposes, the Conceptual Art movement of the late 1960s was the embryonic phase and gestation period for what would ultimately give birth in the 1970s to what became known more broadly as Postmodernism:

> That postmodernism is indefinable is a truism. However, it can be described as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning. (Aylesworth 2015: n.p.)

The debates about what is and what is not Postmodernism are as varied and as conflicted as the debate about the what, where, and when that constitute Conceptual Art.

…

I have attempted an overview of interpretations on what I regard as significant markers through a Modernist 'history of art', particularly key markers in the increasingly 'dematerialised' art object. These markers have included responses to either stylistic transitions or major social transformations of the time. There are several key observations.

The initial embrace of the 'new' (Modernism) and a conscious attempt to 'push' the boundaries of art were abruptly halted with World War I. That the 'science' of technology had allowed this war to happen was incomprehensible and cultural producers began a series of 'rejections', using the art object to express their dissatisfaction. After World War II there was a resurgence of civil protest coupled, in the West at least, with an excess of consumerism. This saw artists attempting to counter the art establishment's commodification of the art object by turning to intangible forms of expression (the concept as artwork, ephemeral performances, etc.)

What is striking, however, is that the majority of the artworks within the metropoles of North America and Western Europe, while posturing resistance and dissent, are somewhat self-imitative

with the viewer at times treated as a dupe to be duped. In contrast, work by artists on the periphery of the metropole are usually anchored to an idea of substance. The works of David Hammons, Alfredo Jaar, Roman Ondák and Graciela Carnevale, to highlight but a few, bear stark contrast to those works of, for example, Tom Friedman, Art & Language, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Yves Klein. Hammons is African American (a marginalised minority within the United States), Jaar (Chile) and Carnevale (Argentina) are both South American, and Ondák (Slovakia) is eastern European. While their works subscribe to notions of using absence as a core tenet of their practice, the focus of these works is socio-political; the purpose being to raise awareness of the omitted or that which has been consciously maligned. There is an urgency of purpose in these works, which sits in opposition to the seemingly more luxurious position of those artists from the 'centre' whose works appear to be more 'self-centred' in their contributions.

Given such a dichotomy – admittedly, a simplification but useful in charting a 'position' – the question for me is where do I stand as an artist?

Chapter 2. Prelude: Reflections on a journey of self

The following is documented banter between French art critic, Pierre Cabanne, and Marcel Duchamp:

CABANNE: One has the impression that every time you commit yourself to a position, you attenuate it by irony or sarcasm.

DUCHAMP: I always do. Because I don't believe in positions.

CABANNE: But what do you believe in?

DUCHAMP: Nothing, of course! The word "belief" is another error. It's like the word "judgment," they're both horrible ideas, on which the world is based. (In Cabanne 1979: 89)

As a Fine Art student in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was subjected to an onslaught of '-isms', most intrusively by Postmodernism and together with a dose of the post-structural and deconstruction theories of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. At the time, I was somewhat captivated by the postmodern pursuit of pluralism, multiplicity and pastiche. The notion of relativism seemed appropriate, even obvious. How could there be anything other than multiple perspectives based on the complexity of any given context? The stark realisations of how an apartheid system had controlled and manipulated public opinion to its own ends, cemented a deep mistrust in 'the truth' or anything that purported to be an 'absolute'. This aligned with the postmodern prescript of an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard 1979), the metanarrative in South Africa being apartheid.

Then, as now, the art world in South Africa took images from the locality while 'understanding' the images within theoretical structures that travelled from the North to the South. Such was the local/global interaction in the several books that tried to document art during the times of the anti-apartheid struggle including Ricky Burnett's *Tributaries* exhibition and catalogue in 1985 (a new inclusive take on contemporary South African art), Gavin Younge's *Art of the South African Townships* in 1988, Steven Sack's *The Neglected Tradition* in 1989, Sue Williamson's *Resistance*

Art in South Africa 1990 and Williamson's co-authored *Art in South Africa: the future present* with Ashraf Jamal in 1996.

South Africa had emerged from the 1980s where culture, at least outside of the art school, was seen as a 'weapon of the struggle', but the continued weight of expectation both locally and abroad ensured that forms of 'struggle art' continued well into the 1990s. It is interesting to note that in 1988, South African Anti-Apartheid veteran, politician and cultural commentator, Albie Sachs had already called for a rethinking of a 'struggle language' in the realm of art:

> It is not a question of separating art from politics, which no one can do, but avoiding a shallow and forced relationship between the two. In the first place, repeated incantation of the phrase results in an impoverishment of our art. Instead of getting real criticism, we get solidarity criticism. Our artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work; it is enough that it be politically correct […]. The range of themes is narrowed down so much that all that is funny or curious or genuinely tragic in the world is extruded. Ambiguity and contradiction are completely shut out. (1988: 187)

Put another way, Sachs was advocating a reclamation of the individual voice; a break from the platitudes that had already begun to wear thin in the South African context. In 1997 I was accepted as the first South African to participate in the two-year residency programme at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. It was at this time that my perceptions of my own work, and in fact that of many of my South African contemporaries, shifted dramatically. With the benefit of distance from South Africa and coupled with my interactions with artists from various parts of the world (and their divergent 'styles' and conceptual concerns), my own world began to open up.

This was not so much a 'Damascus moment'; rather I have vivid recollections of wandering through room upon room of Bruce Nauman's work at the Hayward Gallery, London in 1998, bewildered at the range of expression and the poignancy of works that appeared conceptually timeless. *Dark* (1968) consists of a solid 'slab' of rusted steel 1.2m x 1.2m x 100mm thick and weighing more than two tons. "It's just a steel plate with the word 'Dark' written on the bottom," Nauman explained to *Avalanche* magazine editor Willoughby Sharp in 1970. "I don't know how good it is, but it seemed to be a germinal piece to me" (qtd in Sandoval 2015: n.p.). Nauman's

'spatial' works in which he explored the psychological effects of space and light within architectural installations have had a significant influence on my practice over the last 20 years. It was during my residency in Amsterdam that I began to identify myself as an artist from South Africa, a clear distinction from being a South African artist. By implication I was wanting to allow myself, as a South African, the possibility of access to the world.

The series, *Proposals for Where I Would Like to Live* (1997-1998), was made during my stay in Amsterdam. Each had a number (1 through 7) attached to the common title, distinctions residing in different subtitles, all inferring simple physical spaces of isolation and retraction. As an example, the first work in the series titled, *1. Proposals for Where I Would Like to Live: Outside, Upright*, consisted of a cast-cement section of a generic space; two walls with a floor and simple skirting board.

Figure 21. Greg Streak.1997-1998. *Proposals for Where I Would Like to Live: Outside, Upright*

The title implied that the space proposed for living was inside the walls. The accompanying work, *2. Proposals for Where I Would Like to Live: Inside, Upside Down,* was an inverted hollow replica of the previous work and cast in white plaster of Paris. Having suggested internal space in the first work, the viewers were now invited in their mind's eye to turn the 'room' upright. The series continued to propose living under the floor, above the ceiling, inside a solid lead block, and so on. Whilst presenting the viewer with suggestions of elements of architectural spaces, the series was in fact suggesting spaces of psychological removal from reality; a metaphor for my own sense of dislocation, perhaps as a white South African in a time of change.

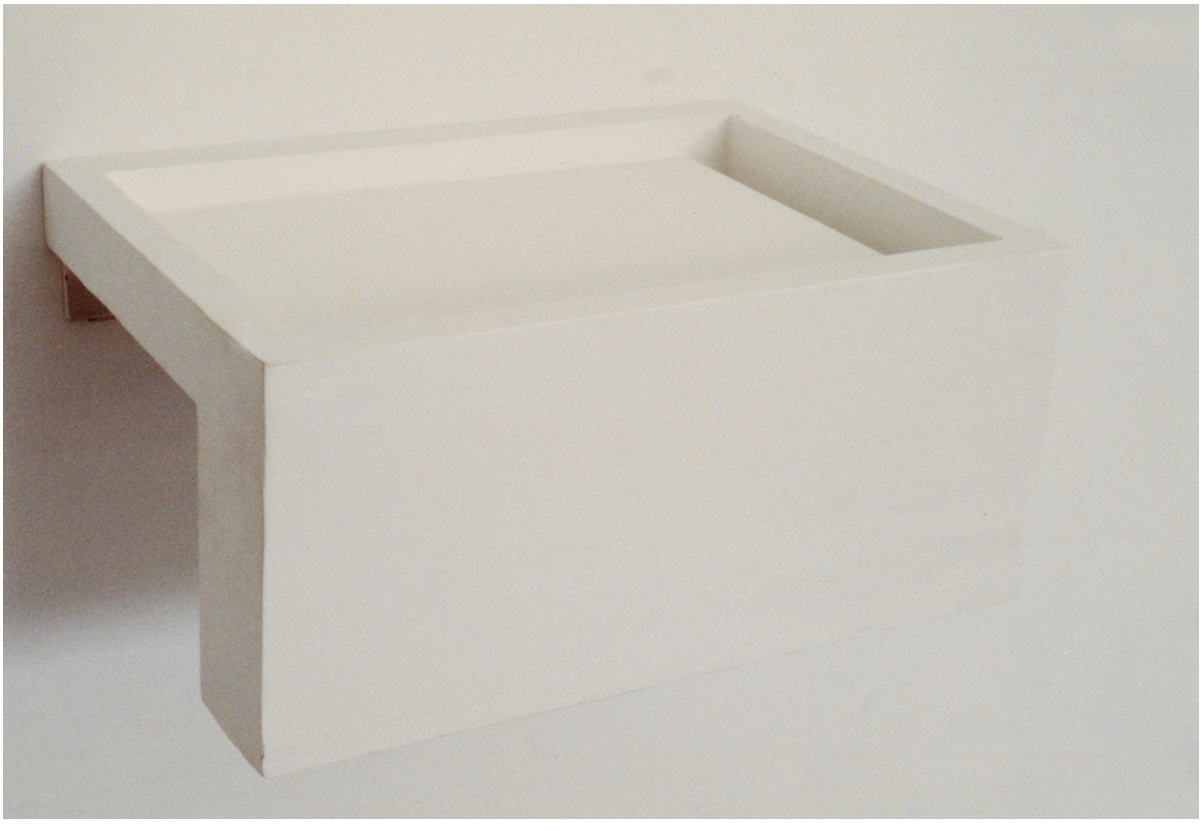

Figure 22. . Greg Streak. 1997-1998. *Proposals for Where I Would Like to Live: Inside, Upside Down*

As the distinguished South African art critic, Virginia Mackenny, put it:

Proposals for Where I Would Like to Live (1997-8) hints, via its title, at utopianism, but refuses to deliver any level of expected comfort. These 'proposals' instead present the viewer with maquettes; variations on small architectural spaces; modernist in form but loaded with referential associations. Essentially inaccessible they speak of isolation, enforced restriction, hermeticism and introspection. (2001: n.p.)

These works were pivotal to me in evoking the mental correlation of the political climate that at the time prevailed in South Africa: a kind of transition from the apartheid past to nowhere that could fill canvases with connection, let alone with any certainty of belonging. Such an in-between-ness was further explored in a large-scale work titled *Semi-Detached* (1998). As Mackenny responded:

A room-sized box, covered in black sound-proof insulation foam with no entry point, which becomes less a place of refuge and more one of solitary confinement or imposed seclusion, suggesting, as the title reinforces, a dislocation from life. (2001: n.p.)

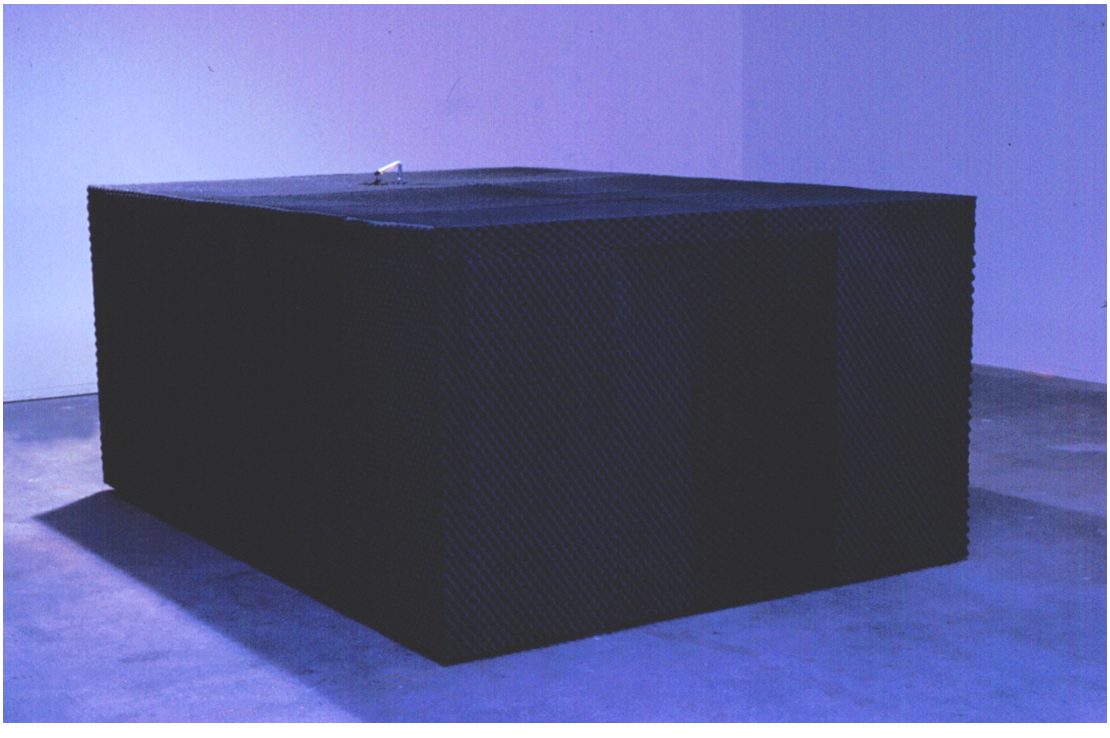

Figure 23. Greg Streak. 1998. *Semi-Detached*

The room had a small ventilator mounted into the roof with a bracket holding a microphone positioned above to amplify the sound of the spinning fan. The sound was projected via external speakers into the surrounding exhibition space. Sound-proof foam is predominantly used to isolate and contain noise from inside a space, yet here the room is clad on the exterior, a further barrier to an inaccessible inner world.

On my return to South Africa in 1999, I began to use video as a medium to explore the idea of interstitial spaces:

Greg Streak's *Three Colours Red, Yellow and Blue* (1999-2000) is a video trilogy of optical primaries […] In Streak's work *Dreams in Red* (1998-1999) the alizarin crimson that seeps beneath the prone figure is bloody. In *Leaving (blue)* (2000) the growing spread of the liquid indigo gradually mirrors the sky on its surface and the departing figure signals separation and its attendant emotional blues. In *Jaundiced (yellow)* (2000) the acid yellow stain that spreads through the water wherein floats the figure has a uric quality to it […]. In each piece a tinted liquid moves across the screen, colouring the reading of what we see. (Mackenny 2007: 1)

Kathryn Smith comments that

It is probably fair to say that compared to the late 1990s, one would be hard pressed to find an artist in South Africa who remains currently committed to video in formal terms, that is, as a medium with its own specific material qualities, with the exception of Minette Vári and Greg Streak (who has an equally developed practice as a sculptor and social activist). (Smith 2011: 141)

Figure 24. Greg Streak. 1998-1999. Still from *Dreams in Red*

Figure 25. Greg Streak. 2000. Still from *Leaving (blue)*

Figure 26. Greg Streak. 2000. Still from *Jaundiced (yellow)*

My preoccupations within this trilogy were to create interstices; to place the viewing public in a non-finite place, one which I felt best described the ambivalence of transition in South Africa in the late 1990s.

This theme continued in a site-specific installation work I made for the !Xoe Biennale in the small town of Nieu Bethesda in the Klein Karoo.

Hermit (2000), is a minimal, bevelled, cruciform shape sunk into the earth. Simultaneously archaic yet reminiscent of what we're told evidence from alien landings might look like, *Hermit* is a suffocating, invisible tomb – the criss-cross roofs of a house, bastion of domesticity and signifier of culture rather than nature, now subsumed by its harsh environment. Considering Streak's on-going project "Proposals for places I'd like to live", there is a sense of irony here. Hermits, in many instances, choose their isolation. It's a self-imposed imprisonment rather than an enforced one. (Smith 2004: 366)

Figure 27. Greg Streak. 2000. *Hermit*

Several years later, as part of an exhibition titled *Silence* (2002), I revisited the desolate area of Nieu-Bethesda, making another site-specific work:

Streak's piece, *Drain*, is denser, and more responsive to the particularities of the site […]. The crumbling cement circle frames a steel collar rusted in the manner of a Richard Serra […]. The metaphoric work performed by this installation is obvious enough in an exhausted corner of a dry farm, but what makes it really compelling is its formal control, and its suggestion of an emptying beyond anything imagined by the tourists who come to Nieu-Bethesda to cleanse their grubby urban souls. (Dawes 2002: 50)

Figure 28. Greg Streak. 2002. *Drain*

Artist and critic, Kathryn Smith has a marginally different interpretation of the work:

Streak's *Drain* (2002) is an arresting and poetic response to the psychological trauma of nothingness. In the floor of a disused reservoir, a structure designed to hold, contain and preserve, Streak sunk a drainpipe fitted with a steel collar. Lined with coal dust, the interior of the pipe appears fathomless and infinite. An

emblem of emptying, removal, even purging, Streak likens its industrial, impersonal form to 'a chamber in the body of an organism', an orifice in a void whose quiet presence seems rather deadly. (2004: 366)

The South African visual art environment in the early 2000s, still somewhat euphoric of a new dispensation, is possibly best represented and distilled in the 2004 publication *10 Years, 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa,* edited by Sophie Perryer, in which a selection of my work appears, reflected on by Kathryn Smith. Yet by now the term 'democratic' had begun to lose its confident attachment to the hopes of a 'new' nation.

My practice continued to posit alternative ways of negotiating a personal response to the unfolding socio-political climate, both locally and globally. It would have been remiss for an artist to have been too inward, given that in South Africa – as I said in my Introduction – we are unavoidably caught in the crosshairs of globalisation. What plays itself out on a foreign stage, be it a civil war, a terrorist attack, or political insurrection has its impact on us locally. Our financial currencies, food supply chain, fuel price, and so on are all interconnected.

Towards the later part of 2008, as part of a solo exhibition titled *Accumulative Disintegration*, I produced a large-scale work that could best be described as part-sculpture, part-drawing. *For Every Time I Wish You Hadn't* (2008) consists of a wooden panel 2750mm x 1830mm x 50mm that had been inscribed with thousands of marks achieved through manually scoring the wood surface with a cutting blade attached to an electric angle-grinding machine. The surface was painted with a variety of dark grey acrylic paints and then sealed with black floor polish, producing a rich lustre.

The surface is at once falling apart and simultaneously coming together – like magnetised iron filings. It could almost be a wind-swept grassland or a vigorously disturbed water surface; it could be a virus under a microscope. The title however suggests an all-encompassing complicity to some form of indiscretion. It could refer to an account of intimate contravention or outwardly as a marking of colonial imposition. The darkness of the work is ironically imposing and seductive. (Ferreira 2008: 2)

South African art critic, Peter Machen, wrote of the exhibition:

If ever an exhibition title resonated with the spirit of the times, it is *Accumulative Disintegration*, from acclaimed South African artist Greg Streak. As the first decade of the 21st century starts to draw to a close,

it often seems that the world – the climate, the economy, society itself – is falling gradually apart. (2008: n.p.)

Figure 29. Greg Streak. 2008. *For Every Time I Wish You Hadn't*

In 2009 I was invited to participate in a group exhibition titled *no(thing)* at the UCA Gallery in Cape Town, curated by Veronica Blaine. The premise of the exhibition was to "explore notions of emptiness within emotional, psychological and physical spaces." One of my contributions to the show was a work titled *Abacus for Longing* (2009) and consists of a galvanised steel frame 1800 x 1150 x 180 mm bracketed to the wall and strung with approximately 10 000 wire ties held in place by wire gyres (10 lines of 1000 wire ties). The work is a metaphor for absence, markers of longing. Despite an apparent abundance of wire, each wire marker, like the scratches on a prison wall, registers and records loss.

Figure 30. Greg Streak. 2009. Detail of*: Abacus for Longing*

Biopsy (2010), which formed part of my solo exhibition *Nothing Lasts Forever* held at the Soledad Senlle Gallery in Amsterdam, continued in the vein of *Abacus for Longing*. The work consists of 57 000 wire ties, methodically fed onto a connecting wiring system and joined together to create a circular, spiral work that measured 1220mm in diameter and 100mm in thickness. The work floated, suspended 50mm off of the floor by a concealed mild-steel flat bar ring. Without the title, the work would exist in complete abstraction, the viewer abandoned and left to make visual references to objects conceived of their own making in the real world. In this case, the title *Biopsy* refers to a medical procedure in which a core sample is taken from potentially infected parts of the body for the express purposes of analysis. The galvanised wire form now becomes a conversation point with the viewer. In an interview with artist and critic Robin Cook, she suggested that the title "seems to reference some malignancy, or 'rot' that has been excised", I replied, "I sense that we live in a time where there is a lot wrong. The works are intimate reflections, metaphors for this abnormality and what I see as a social haemorrhaging" (in Cook 2011: n.p.).

Figure 31. Greg Streak. 2010. *Biopsy.*

The title *Biopsy* implies that something is wrong (just not what is wrong) and leaves this as a starting point of conversation; the viewing public or art critic may elucidate further as to their own interpretations based on shared or dissimilar experience. In hindsight, I was unable to articulate the exact cause of my discontent and I was using the making of the work to explore and express an intuitive sense of 'dis-ease' – to refer back to my Introduction – perhaps this is the 'dis-ease' of the Zuma presidency or a global zeitgeist?

I have previously mentioned the work of South African artist, Brett Murray. On 22 May 2012, two men, Barend la Grange and Lowie Mabokela, walked into the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg and defaced his painting of Jacob Zuma, *The Spear* (2010). My own practice at this time was focused on the production of works for my solo exhibition, *Seeing Red, Feeling Blue* (2013), which took place at the Commune 1 Gallery in Cape Town. These works continued to investigate my

dissatisfaction with the political climate, but not in a direct one-on-one portrayal of a public figure, as in Murray's *The Spear*.

Figure 32. Brett Murray. 2010. *The Spear* (after having been defaced)

I was grappling with how to strike upon an appropriate visual approximation to the temper of the time. If the 'indirection' has affiliations to the artworks of Modernism, the approximation also meant to take what is valuable from Conceptual Art: make the audience think through analogies of suggestion.

Precious Nothing (2012-2013) explored the motif of the doodle, a gesture of random nothingness, as a three dimensional proposal. The work consists of one continuous line of 400m of galvanised wire that was powder-coated a cobalt blue. There are two distinct points, a beginning and an end that sit at the two furthest points of the piece from each other. They are connected to each other, but via a maze of chaos. The visual somersaults that the eye performs in tracing the path between the two 'ends' could suggest new possibilities within turbulent times.

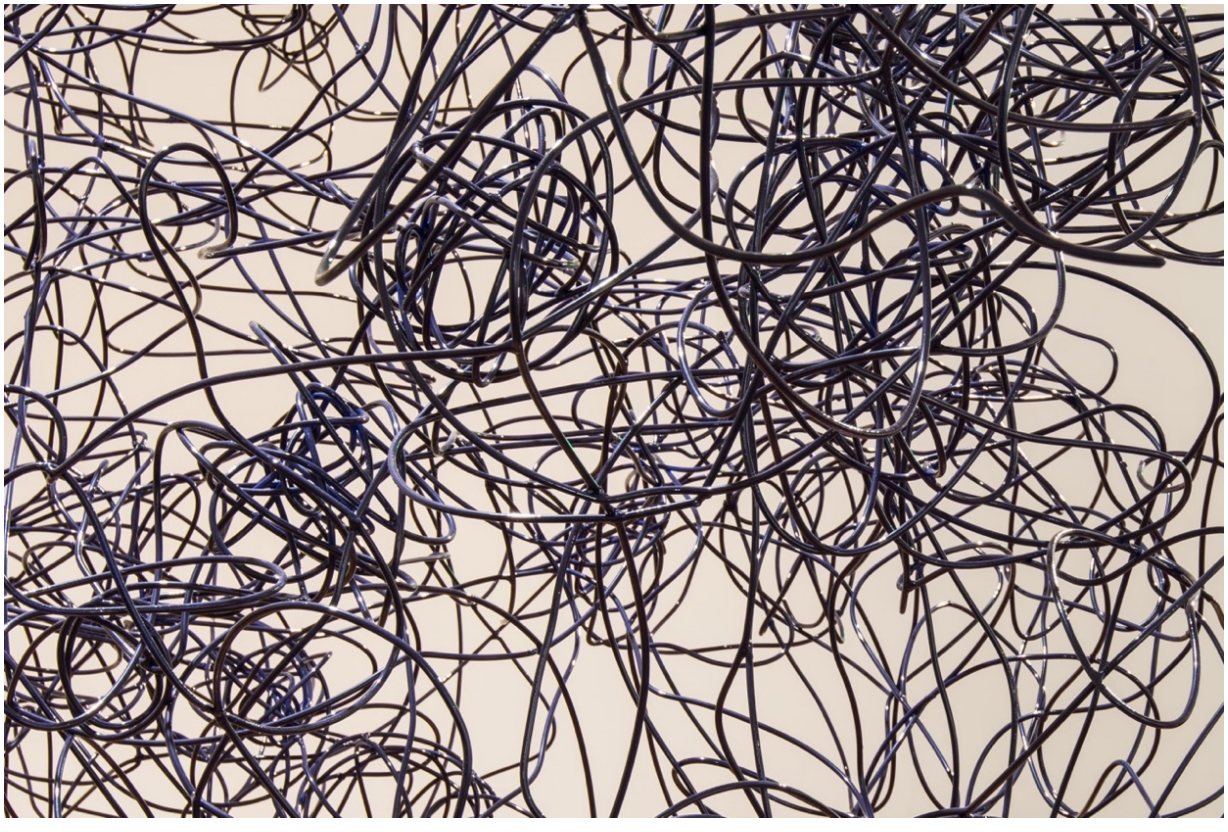

Figure 33. Greg Streak. 2012-2013. Detail of*: Precious Nothing*

Another work, *Hotspot* (2013), 2100mm in diameter and presented 500mm off the wall, in both scale and suggestion, is a sculpture of conceptual and aesthetic impact, at least for the literary critic Michael Chapman:

Part Zulu telephone-wire bowl (*imbenge*), part satellite dish, the work captures the hybrid and complex character of contemporary South Africa; indeed, the character of many configurations of the South of the globe. Red telephone wire –an older conduit of transmission –is tightly woven into an upwardly elevated dish and cone, the shape of a satellite emission point. *Hotspot*, accordingly, embodies in content and form a single point of both communication and contention, in which Third World speaks to First World, or vice a versa. Who speaks, who listens? Where does power reside? *Hotspot* is an innovative exemplification of a South African 'reality', in which the traditional, the modern and the postmodern exist, visibly and audibly, in the life of the present-day... a reality in which digital communication and contention are as ubiquitous in the spaza shops of KwaMashu as in the boardrooms of e-commerce. (2019: 3)

Figure 34. Greg Streak. 2013. Studio photo: *Hotspot*

…

Having framed an ‘art historical’ context and a brief introduction to my own ideas and practice as an exhibited artist, the reflections that follow are focused on the works that I have produced within the parameters of this doctoral study: that is, the works on exhibition for the scrutiny of the examiners, and for a time, to the general public.

Chapter 3. Nothing Matters: Reflections on an exhibition of works

I see the practice of art in a similar way to the South African artist, Jeremy Wafer who articulated it "as a form of critical inquiry, as conceptually reflective research" (2016: 5). In my studio process, I aim towards interdisciplinary dexterity, reflected in a diverse range of exploratory methods and techniques. As I said in my Introduction, this includes object-making, the re-articulation of appropriated objects, video works, photography, drawings, and installation. My practice is not defined by a singular mode of reflection but rather categorised by varied explorations of both material and medium. In my case, material and process are driven by the conceptual necessity of each project.

Given a Western art canon of diverse stylistic, philosophical and conceptual achievement, contemporary artists have much on which to draw with regards the possibilities of representation, or so it may seem. The position, in fact, has also constraints. Already in the 1980s, the political theorist Fredric Jameson alluded to a world in which artists and writers had little to do since everything had already been done; all that was realistically left was to repeat various available combinations, the best of which had already been conceived and produced (1989: 7). It is a curious position to contemplate. Does this indicate that cultural producers are essentially redundant, and that our outputs are nothing more than regurgitations under the pretext of innovation? Or is this not a case, as I have pointed out earlier on, of 'the more things change, the more they stay the same'?

One could argue that Duchamp's purchasing of a urinal at a plumbing shop and having it installed in an art gallery is not really different to that posited by Damien Hirst's work: *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991). Hirst had a tiger shark caught and suspended in a glass and steel tank filled with formaldehyde. Both works appropriate 'found' objects (urinal or shark) and apply minimal interventions (artist's signature; shift in representation of perspective).

Figure 35. Damien Hirst. 1991. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*

The conceptual nuances, however, are different. Duchamp's primary focus was a radical proposal as to 'what is art', whilst Hirst, some 74 years later, no longer had to argue what constituted art, but could focus on thematic preoccupations; in his case, preoccupations with death. Can we then state that Duchamp would not have been able to produce the work that Hirst made because the technological and production facilities were not at the earlier artist's disposal in 1917? A counter-argument could be that if Duchamp's object had not been granted the status of art, Hirst would not been able to envisage his 'shark tank' as a work of art.

Be that as it may, the point is that we – conceptual artists – are indebted to Duchamp but are not confined to bland imitation. As T.S. Eliot phrased such a relationship in 1919 between tradition and the individual talent (that he was referring to poetry does not limit his observation): "The existing order is complete before the work arrives; for order to persist after the super-invention of

novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly altered" (qtd in Enright and de Chickera 1962: 295). I hope to suggest in my reflections (that follow) that I have 'slightly altered' what other conceptual artists have produced.

The convention is to exhibit one's work in the 'white-cube' of a gallery context. Given that my works reflect the 'grit' of the public sphere – the raw 'outside' world – it seemed more appropriate to exhibit the works in an equally visceral space. Through the generosity of a friend, I was able to appropriate the 50m x 6m mezzanine floor of a large-scale industrial panel-beaters premises. While the works could be contemplated in semi-autonomy, they were inextricably linked to the surrounds: the industrial hub outside of the space, and the voluminous warehouse filled with pantechnicons under repair. The exposed steel girders, bracing substrates and corrugated steel walls declare the no-frills environment; my works position themselves within the brutality of this location.

Figure 36. Context view of the exhibition *Nothing Matters*

As part of my display of artefacts, I include a ‘Method Wall’. This consists of framed sections of my sketch books: drawings and text that reveal the processing of ideas of works that were realised, and others that still exist only as ideas on paper and perhaps will be made in future. There is also a large-framed section of quotes and texts that provide a backdrop to some of the concepts that have informed this study. As part of the *Method Wall*, a large-scale work titled *Methodology Mosaic* (2016-2019) incorporates 20mm x 20mm thumbnail prints of all 1208 images that formed the 3-year process of photo documentation for a curated series of photographs collectively titled *Nothing Matters* (2016-2019).

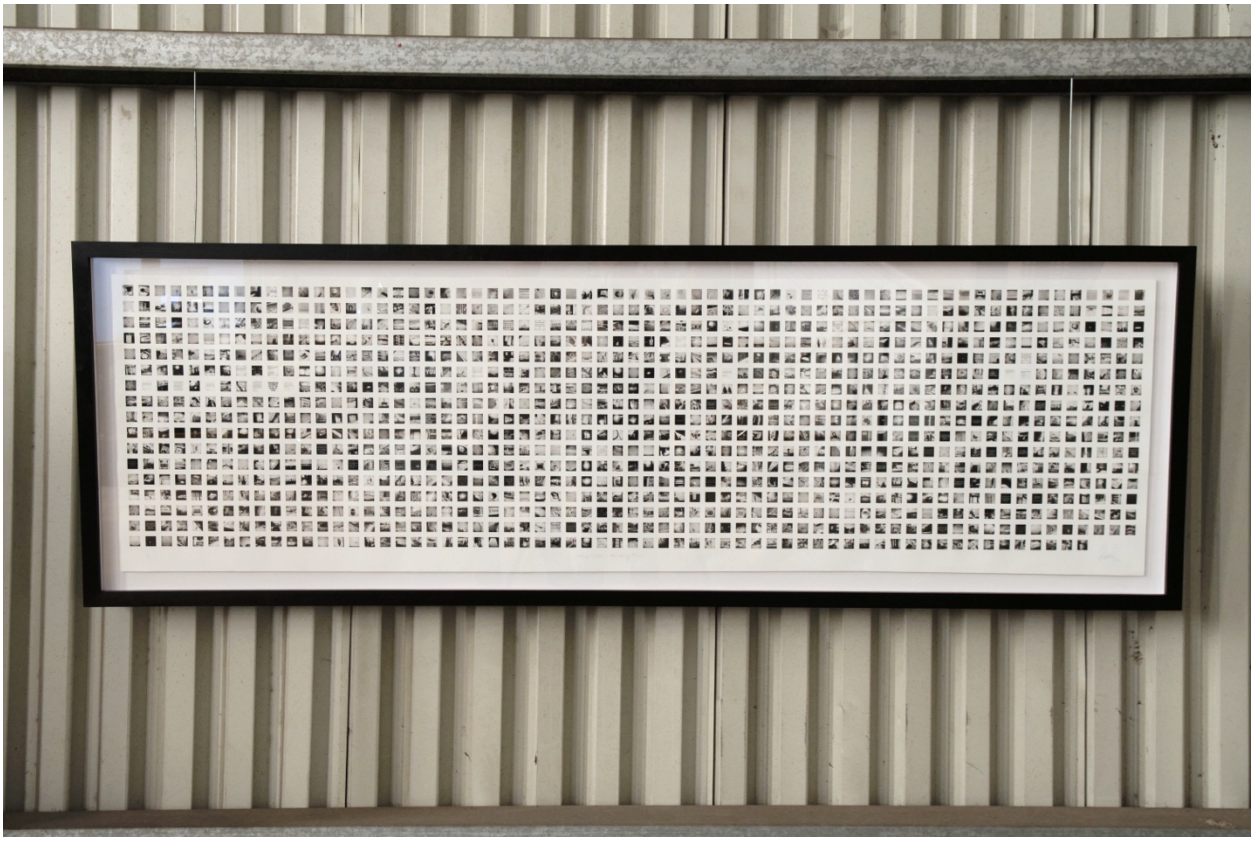

Figure 37. Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Methodology Mosaic*

I include these process works to indicate the emergence of my research in its progression to final realisations. The *Method Wall*, therefore, offers the viewer the opportunity to cross-reference working ideas with the artefacts on display: a contribution to the dialogue between the artist, the artefact, and the viewer. (See Appendix: pages 136-150).

Line to Sartre (2017)

In the initial stages of this research, my preoccupations turned to the more existential interpretations of nothingness, and what 'nothing' could infer. My investigations at the time included searching for found objects that held symbolic suggestion for me and that, through a 'repositioning', I could hope to prompt a shift in perception from the object *qua* object to conceptual consideration.

Figure 38. Greg Streak. 2017. *Line to Sartre*

Line to Sartre was one of the first works in this endeavour. It consists of an old rotary-dial telephone densely woven over with black telephone wire. The work is based on the transformation of a found object through a simple weaving intervention. On a formal level, the process of presenting a found object as an artwork owes its accepted (more or less) possibility to the early 'readymades' of Marcel Duchamp and his *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), *Bottle Rack* (1914), *With Hidden Noise* (1916), and, perhaps, *Fountain* (1917). At the time, Duchamp had also placed on public

record his aversion to painting and other artworks, specifically his objection to these artworks pandering only to the eye, what art critic Clement Greenberg called the 'aesthetic'. "Aesthetic in this context refers to the perception of the world's surface through the senses, primarily sight; felt visual discrimination (what Duchamp called 'retinal')" (Cabanne 1979: 11). Duchamp was equally dismissive of the requirement of *la patte*, or the artist's touch.

Line to Sartre was woven by a highly skilled craftswoman who lives in a rural area north of the city of Durban where I live. I found a rotary telephone at a stall in a second-hand market, and then bought several rolls of black telephone wire from a local manufacturer. I handed the found object (telephone device) and the raw materials (black telephone wire) to the craftswoman with careful instructions on the density and type of weave I was requiring. Two weeks later I met up with her again, paid for the service and had my artwork completed. In this exchange, I recognised that I did not have the requisite skills to achieve what I had in my mind's eye as a completed artwork, and I had therefore 'subcontracted' that aspect to the appropriately skilled individual. In almost every sense, then, this work aligns with Duchamp's ethos, principally that the idea is foremost. But in my case, the idea is directly linked to the 'aesthetic': to the choice of materials, presentation considerations, the title, etc. The challenge was to find the most appropriate materials and method to articulate the idea that the work is trying to posit.

What is the idea? I cannot presume to share what any viewer might make of the work; of a woven rotary telephone placed under a glass box that could suggest a museum vitrine. The outdated telephone instrument is covered in telephone wire and, in a sense, the object has subsumed or consumed itself. While noting an incongruous combination of traditional Zulu weaving and a more 'modern' instrument of communication, the viewer might observe that the cables and power plug, though still attached to the object, are disconnected from any source. The artefact has solidity, it has 'being'. At the same time, the artefact has no use value; it suggests nothingness beyond its aesthetic curiosity.

To have connection within disconnection, or vice versa, or to transfer Sartre's paradox of *Being and Nothingness*, from his book of that title (1943), might set up analogies to pursue. The object, however, is meant at the same time to frustrate any extended analogy between existentialism as a

philosophy and the abbreviation of a big idea. Ultimately, *A Line to Sartre* is nothing but itself, its own being. It is about something, I think, nevertheless. (See Appendix: pages 151-152).

Erasing a Heart of Darkness (2017-2019)

I began with the idea of wanting to erase a book by literally scratching away the words; to take an object associated with content and abundance and remove this very function, thus leaving empty pages of nothingness. I am not sure where this idea came from, but I do recall the traces of a work I saw at the PS1 Gallery in New York in late 2007. From what I remembered the work consisted of a framed piece of paper onto which was glued a single 'dot'. This was part of an ongoing series by Belgian artist Kris Martin, titled *End Points,* in which he has isolated and extracted the last full stop from various sources of literature. So, the project I had set myself was to erase a book of its contents, but the questions I was asking myself were:

1. To what end; what would this represent conceptually?
2. What book, and could the choice of book perhaps be the answer to my first question?
3. How could the erasure, this subtraction of content, speak to substance?

I recalled reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) in my early twenties, and it seemed appropriate on many levels. Firstly, it is one of the most read/discussed books in literary studies; secondly it reflects back on the African continent (the Congo), my own context; and thirdly, it has received retrospective criticism from a postcolonial lens, most notably from Chinua Achebe who firmly stated:

> The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked. (1977: 788)

It should be noted that Achebe has received equal backlash for his interpretations.

Over the course of 10 months in 2017, I began a slow process of physically erasing the words of Conrad's book. I bought two copies and carefully cut each page down to the same size. Two copies were obviously needed as the book's pages are printed back-to-back, and I required each page in their singular form. Every word was erased by physically scratching the print away with razor blades, with only the chapter number and page numbers remaining, and then on the very last page of the book, in the very last sentence, where it says, "the heart of an immense darkness", I left the three words "heart of darkness", and thereby attached the empty pages to an invocation of the title.

From the outset, I noticed that in erasing the words, there was a fine dust that was accumulating. This collection of the dust/ashes, the 'cremated' remains of the book, filled a small plastic container. These processes evolved into two fully realised works.

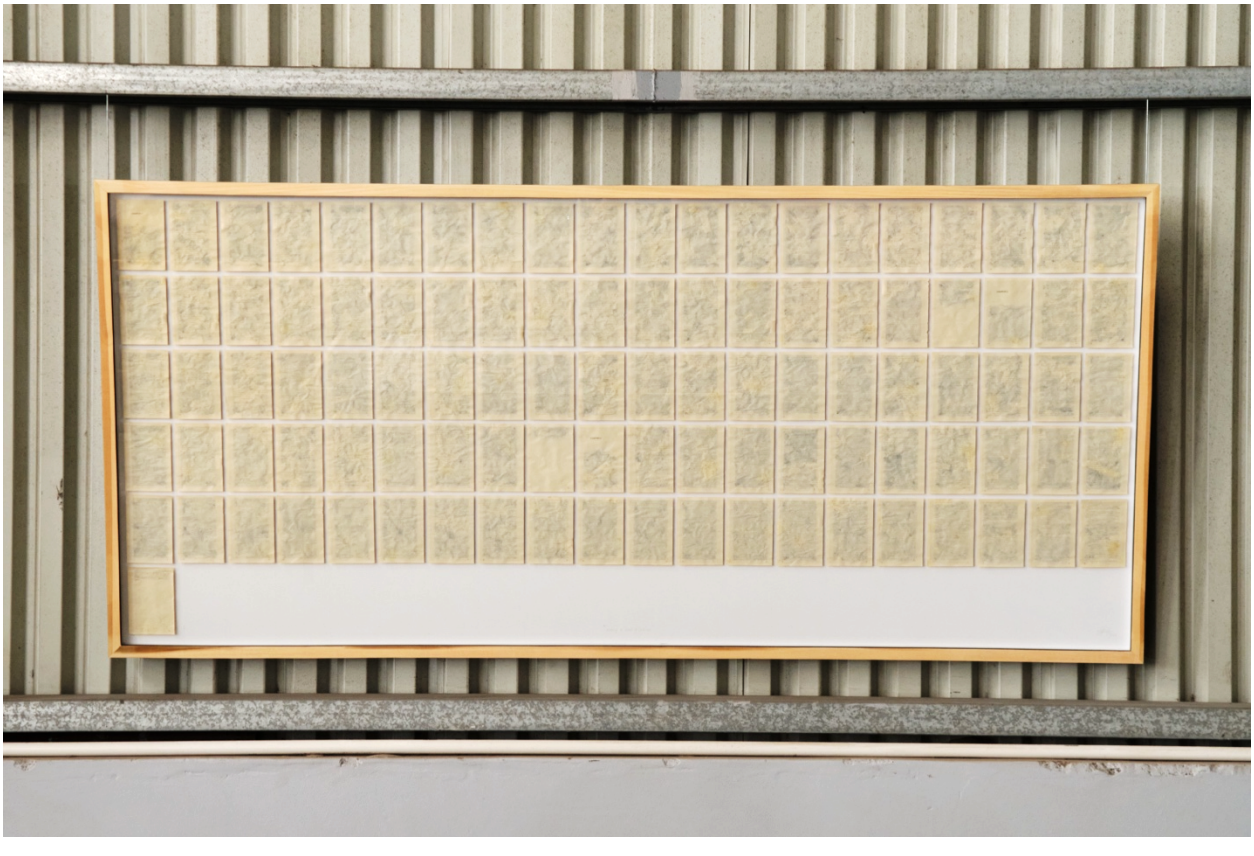

Figure 39. Greg Streak. 2017-2019. *Erasing a Heart of Darkness*

Erasing a Heart of Darkness (2017-2019) consists of a box frame with glass front measuring 2470mm x 1135mm and a depth of 50mm. Inside the recessed frame are 5 rows of 20 pages of the

erased text, with the 6th row containing but one single page with the words “heart of darkness” remaining. Each page has been glued to a backing of a 5mm foam core slightly smaller than the pages, which gives the illusion of the pages floating in the air. The pages reveal the physicality of the process of the erasure; scarred, patched and translucent to a certain extent, as the scratching away of the words has left the already thin paper eroded with the exposure of some of the words behind the page. If the pages tore in the process, they were mended with pieces of paper from the book itself (off-cut trimmings from sizing the pages to the same dimensions).

The method of erasing the words by physically scratching them away seemed unnecessarily labour-intensive, given the fact that (as many pointed out) the pages could be scanned, and the words digitally removed in minutes and reprinted. I was aware of this possibility, but conceptually this did not align with my project. I did not want the pages to be pristine, but disfigured and blemished, thus revealing a truth to the process. Even whilst I sat removing the first words on the first page, the distant idea of the end result was clear. I wanted a landscape of pages of nothingness, activated into ‘being’ by leaving those three words in the last sentence on the very last page. It was crucial that these pages reflected the process of their reality: that the seeming absurdity of achieving this visual nothingness was by slowly and methodically scratching away for hours on end. The presence of the process should be evident in the resultant absence of the words.

The work has an unavoidable relationship to Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased De Kooning* (1953), a work seen as the genesis of a subset of works that Jasper Johns described as “additive subtraction”, in which the created work is a result of removing, rather than adding, marks. (In addition to *Erased de Kooning*, some notable works that have explored the range of possibilities enabled by Rauschenberg’s original act of erasure were referred to earlier on, including the works of Yoko Ono and Tom Friedman).

Recalling Rauschenberg’s *Erased De Kooning* (1953), which has been interpreted as iconoclastic, Rauschenberg got permission from De Kooning to erase his artwork. The original De Kooning drawing was then represented as Rauschenberg’s artwork, a sleight of hand, or of authorship. Yet, despite Rauschenberg’s work setting out to redefine art through the deliberate cancellation of the work of an esteemed precursor, he was an admirer of De Kooning. Accordingly, one of the many

ironies embedded in the work is the fact that the older artist's presence, so evident in the title, was granted a kind of ongoing acknowledgement.

My scratching away a copy of Conrad's novella could also suggest a desecration of sorts. But print is a mass-produced phenomenon. The 'idea' of the novella is not destroyed. Rather, my hope is that the resulting artefact has the aesthetic appeal (in its solidity of 'something') to provoke fresh thought about a cliché of the colonised mind: that Africa is a 'nothing' or, at least, a convenience of the metropole, as in two recent comments by the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, come to mind. Given the constraints of Brexit on UK/EU trade, Johnson wishes to renew links with his "friends on the far side of the World". At the same time he repeats, ad nauseum, the dangers of the "South African variant" of the coronavirus. (A virus from the heart of darkness, no doubt.)

In November 1997, Gerard Jan Van Bladeren walked calmly into the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and made seven sliced incisions into Barnett Newman's *Cathedra* (1951), using a Stanley knife. He said he did so because "I just hate abstract art and realism." There was national and global outrage, but what lay at the root of this indignation? Was it a case of a horror expressed at the attempted destruction of an artwork which has come to represent part of an archive of artworks reflecting and embodying a particular time and place in history, or was the indignation a result of the art establishment's concern about the artwork's monetary status? Perhaps the difference can be split, but it is worthwhile noting that Newman's *Onement VI* (1953), a work from a similar period, was sold in 2013 at auction for $43.8 million.

This introduces the corporate face of the art world, itself a powerful component of society which wields significant authority in conferring status and manipulating market prices. As previously indicated, the public space of the mid-20th Century witnessed revolutionary and anti-establishment reactions, none more vocal than the Conceptual Art movement of the late 1960s. The very insistence of the 'dematerialised' artwork, art reduced to an idea, had the express purpose of boycotting the art establishment, the gallery system, and ultimately the commodification of art: all seen as an extension of a capitalist system that had brought death and destruction, most dreadfully in the Second World War.

But ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same’. Conceptual Art has no more success than the Dada movement in disturbing the commercial value of art. It was in 1973 that Lucy Lippard, conceded her disappointment:

> Hopes that ‘conceptual art’ would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively ‘progressive’ approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded. The previously anti-materialist Conceptual artists had been co-opted, […] the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by (and still more unexpected, showing in) the world's most prestigious galleries. (1973: 263)

The symbolic value of art, therefore, has tangible real-world value; The symbolic element within the artwork, nonetheless, makes for interesting debate.

In 1989, Drew Scott’s work *What’s the Proper Way to Display a US Flag*, incited controversy and anger. His installation, invited the public to walk on the US flag. Had he placed a bath towel on the floor, we would have dismissed the exercise. But what was the issue here? Is the American flag nothing more than a coloured piece of fabric? (Is Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* nothing more than pieces of printed paper?).

The point is that symbolic value can invoke direct action. The ‘flag’ becomes the symbolic embodiment of a country for which some have literally given their lives. We attach real-life consequence to notions of originality, monetary value, symbolic value, and intention (conscious or not), amongst many others. These ‘attached’ values can have dire consequences, ranging from imprisonment to death. Rauschenberg’s empty smudged page – *Erased De Kooning* – is activated into the complexity of its origins by virtue of its title. While his work was both a direct assault on the traditional notions of what constitutes a drawing and more broadly on ‘what is art’, my work, *Erasing a Heart of Darkness*, situates itself more on a socio-political spectrum. The blank pages of the work retain a ‘trace’, perhaps a ‘palimpsestic’, of that spectrum. (See Appendix: pages 153-155).

Cremating a Heart of Darkness (2017-2019)

The dust, the ash-like consequence of scratching away the book *Heart of Darkness*, was originally collected in a container with no real intent other than to register a 'memory' of words turned to dust, with the obvious connection to the ashes of our demise. Indicative of an emergent research design, however, the process of making suggested additional possibilities that were previously not considered. In 1919, Marcel Duchamp created a work titled *50cc of Paris Air*, which was ostensibly a sealed-glass vial containing, as the title states, 50 cc of actual Paris air. In 1970, John Baldessari burnt all of the paintings he had created between 1953 and 1966 as part of a new piece, titled *The Cremation Project*. The ashes from these paintings were baked into cookies and placed into an urn, the resulting art installation consisting of a bronze plaque with the destroyed painting's birth and death dates, as well as the recipe for making the cookies.

Figure 40. John Baldessari. 1970. *The Cremation Project*

In keeping the remains of the scratched-out pages of the novel, perhaps I had an almost unconscious recollection of the two works mentioned above, prior to my own idea taking shape. My resultant artwork, *Cremating a Heart of Darkness* (2017-2019), consists of a glass vial, blown to the shape that deliberately mirrors Duchamp's ampoule of 1919, and contains the dust from the pages of Conrad's book. What appears to be a grey-powdered residue encompasses the words of Conrad's book, compressed into a glass container; the phoenix to the ashes, as it were, or Duchamp's glass ampoule, or Baldessari's material 'dematerialised' to nought.

Figure 41. Greg Streak. 2017-2019. *Cremating a Heart of Darkness*

A visionary for his time, Duchamp predicted the dissolution of the art object well before its final 'death' decades later. Duchamp's propositions were directed at the redefinition of what art is or could be. Baldessari's belated cremation serves a similar purpose. Produced in 1970, his work was another iteration of rendering materiality of art as nothing but an idea. This is not so much a case of 'art for art's sake' as an extension of what might constitute art. My own contribution centres around the possibilities of what 'nothing' can imply. In this respect *Cremating a Heart of Darkness* has resonance with some of the work of the British artist Cornelia Parker, particularly in her work *Exhaled Cocaine.*

Exhaled Cocaine (1996), presents the viewer with a pile of brown incinerated cocaine under a glass vitrine. Parker convinced customs officials in the United Kingdom to give her the ashes of seized and 'cremated' cocaine. When exhibiting the work, she expressly adds the label: *With thanks to HM Customs & Excise,* and in so doing "encourages in us a process of questioning, both about her relationship with Customs and Excise and our responses to a pile of now useless and destroyed mind-altering drugs, no longer to be inhaled" (Miller 2008: 135). As in many of Parker's works, *Exhaled Cocaine* "celebrates volatility and impermanence with imaginatively transformed found material" (Blythe 2020: n.p.). The pile of incinerated cocaine suggests multiple conceptual allusions for the viewing public to explore.

It is in the same vein that *Cremating a Heart of Darkness* hopes to make a contribution. Unlike Parker's *Exhaled Cocaine*, however, my title ties the work to a more specific political purpose than an allusion to a recreational drug. We are reminded of my observation in Chapter 1 on the wider, more general allusion in mainstream metropolitan artists to consumerism against the more pointed political artefacts from the peripheries of South America and the former Eastern Europe. Placed in juxtaposition, *Erasing a Heart of Darkness* and *Cremating a Heart of Darkness* are meant to provoke thought about an ugly colonial past that in various contexts still invokes fierce debate. A history that deserves to be obliterated into nothingness retains the presence of something, something that is necessary for us not to forget. (See Appendix: pages 156-158).

Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void) (2019-2020)

This work consists of a steel column, 2000mm in height and 720mm in diameter. The column is not solid but constructed out of 10 steel modules stacked onto one another, and with a 520mm diameter inner void. The dimensions have a direct relationship to an adult human frame, the inference being that a person could stand within this inner space: a place of refuge or self-isolation.

In a previous iteration, this steel column was originally titled *Drain* (2002), and was installed as a site-specific installation, sunk into the floor of an abandoned farm reservoir in Nieu-Bethesda, in the Great Karoo, South Africa (see the previous chapter). After this project was completed, the work was disassembled and stored. Artist and art critic Virginia Mackenny wrote of the work at the time:

> Exceptionally minimal in form *Drain* is a monument to the travails of human endeavour in a harsh terrain. Lacking visible verticality, it is barely evident in the landscape. Consisting of a steel-collared drainpipe sunk into the middle of the cement floor of an abandoned reservoir, its interior, with the aid of some cola dust, plunges into the deep darkness of unknown depth […]. Whilst 'to drain' is to make dry, discharge and carry waste it is also to deplete and exhaust. Streak's *Drain* may be physical or psychological and it embodies a 'place identity' that images great emptying. (2011: n.p.)

The current reincarnation now stands two metres tall and has three laser-cut brackets attached to the outer surface of the uppermost module. Black powder-coated, steel 'arms' extend from these brackets and support three convex mirrors, each 600mm in diameter. These 'prosthetics' become the only way to view 'the void' in the centre of the structure, as the height precludes most people from being able to see into the interior from floor level. An additional component to this work is a hidden CCTV camera that monitors the work. A wall label indicates this.

The orange/brown surface of the steel column, patinated by years of rust, recalls some of the minimalist Corten steel structures of Richard Serra. Serra's constructions, however, are more distinctive due to their scale. "Serra has always stressed the 'internal necessity' of sculpture, always insisted on the 'uselessness' of art in general" (Foster 2000: 195). This minimalist 'neutrality' is not an aspect of my construction. The hollow internal space, made visible by the

strategically located and angled convex mirrors, looks to be an endless black hole and evokes the psychological aspects of nothingness, as expressed by the notion of ‘the abyss’. The space is hermetic with no access.

Figure 42. Greg Streak. 2019-2020. *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void*)

Figure 43. Richard Serra. 2007. *TTI London*

Reference has already been made to the countless iterations of the void, predominantly in the form of the 'empty gallery', as in Yves Klein's earliest and most infamous example, *(The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility).* While the open core within my construction is not an empty gallery, it is a vacant space, nonetheless. The 'surveillance mirrors', the wall label indicating a hidden CCTV camera, and the title all imply a strong presence surrounding this empty space. Unpacking the title, *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)*, suggests that the viewer, courtesy of the positioned mirrors, is looking at 'me'. But where is 'me', then? Deep within the bowels of the hollow core out of sight, or hidden and observing via the CCTV live audio-visual feed, somewhere remotely?

One may be reminded of the Chinese artist and social activist, Ai Weiwei, who is no stranger to surveillance. Operating in a 'controversial' space within a dictatorship has consequence. Weiwei, beaten and detained for 81 days without charge in April of 2011, exited his 'detention' to find the exterior of his home monitored by 15 surveillance cameras, 24 hours a day. As a marker of his release after a year, the artist created the work *WeiweiCam* (2012), a self-surveillance project in

which he installed four web cameras that sent a live 24-hour feed that was publicly viewable from the website weiweicam.com. After only 46 hours of broadcast, the Chinese authorities ordered the shutdown of the website, which had over 5 million views in those two days. The artist comments on his purpose:

In my life there is so much surveillance and monitoring – my phone, my computer… our office has been searched, I have been searched, every day I am being followed, there are surveillance cameras in front of my house. So I was wondering why don't I put some [cameras] in there so people can see all my activities. I can do that and I hope the other party [authorities] can also show some transparency. (Qtd in Lai 2012: n.p.)

The mischievous graffiti artist, known as Banksy, has produced several works with biting social commentary on the prevalence of CCTV surveillance. His simple, yet powerful stencil work titled *What are You Looking At?* (2004), is sprayed onto a wall in Marble Arch Street in London.

Figure 44. Banksy. 2004. *What are you looking at?*

A city-installed surveillance camera has been strategically rotated to face an opposing wall, and now focuses its sights on Banksy's text intervention, black stencil-sprayed words that read WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT? The work, humorous and poignant, both pokes fun at, and reprimands, the invisible authorities. One of the ironies within the mythology of the artist is that despite the abundance of CCTV cameras that dominate the public sphere, the artist's real identity remains unknown.

During the months spent both scratching away the words from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* and collecting the scrapings in powder form, I used the time to listen to numerous audio-clips on YouTube. It was at a time when Julian Assange and Edward Snowden were holed up, respectively, in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and in an undisclosed location somewhere in Russia. Both are seen as the 'poster boy' whistle-blowers of global misconduct as played out by influential individuals, corporations and governments. Their exposure of the Orwellian scale of secret global surveillance was the inspirations for my work, *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void).*

Speaking to the Russian news-site RT in an interview on the 2 May 2011, Assange is explicit in his condemnation of the social media giant, Facebook:

> Facebook in particular is the most appalling spying machine that has ever been invented … Here we have the world's most comprehensive database about people, their relationships, their names, their addresses, their locations and the communications with each other, their relatives, all sitting within the United States, all accessible to U.S. intelligence. (Qtd in Reisenger 2011)

In this regard, the responses from US government agencies indicate a duplicitous public rhetoric: "While US government agencies endorse the democratic potential internet and social media, the official reactions to the WikiLeaks disclosures of US diplomatic cables (Cablegate) and the criticisms in the U.S. media reveal bias in relation to transparency and democracy" (qtd in Pieterse 2012: 1910). Both Assange and Snowden, however, were maligned as traitors for 'fascist' behaviour. Yet the Cambridge Analytica scandal in early 2018 would vindicate them in this regard. It was revealed that the British political consulting firm, Cambridge Analytica, had harvested the personal data of millions of Facebook profiles without the person's consent and used the profile information for political advertising purposes.

In February 2020, the South African Constitutional Court ruled that the Regulation of Interception of Communications and Provision of Communication-related Information Act (Rica) had failed to safeguard the rights of citizens to privacy. It would appear that no-one escapes 'big brother'. Already in 2013, I had made a work in response to the proposed Protection of Information Bill, referred to in shorthand as the 'Secrecy Bill'. At the time, the South African government was attempting to legislate that incriminating evidence (especially about politicians and leading authoritative figures) could not be made public under the pretext of 'protecting' individual rights. *Archive for Amnesia* (2013) was a bronze cast of the front section of an old library index card unit. It appeared to be embedded in the wall with the front-draw section protruding out. All of the 24 drawers were intact with empty name plates and drawer handles, none of the drawers obviously open.

Figure 45. Greg Streak. 2013. Detail of *Archive for Amnesia*

With global surveillance in the news, the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa, curated an exhibition titled *How to Disappear* (March 2020*).* The exhibition featured several prominent artists responding in different ways to:

Surveillance capitalism – a term coined by author Shoshana Zuboff to refer to the use of human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data. [One of the works on the exhibition] *Peripheral Vision* (2017) includes four photographic portraits of Mounir Fatmi in which the artist's face is partly obscured behind a large geometry protractor held at eye level. The work addresses the question of vision as a set of cognitive processes and mental operations that contribute to the perception of our environment. In this work Fatmi signals the way we perceive what surrounds us and encourages a new awareness of what connects us to the world and of the comprehension of its limits. (Goodman Gallery 2020: n.p.)

Figure 46. Mounir Fatmi. 2017. *Peripheral Vision*

To return to *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)*, its construction with its telescopic mirror appendages references the idea of the architectural design of a Panopticon. The Panopticon is a type of institutional building and a system of control designed in the 18th century by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham. Michel Foucault reactivated the idea in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), referring to a "psychological violence" as it pertained to this form of architecture. As Jenna Corcoran commented, "Jeremy Bentham's 18th Century Utilitarian Panopticon penitentiary design (1785) of an annular building of cells surrounding a central watchtower, where a single supervisor is placed to invisibly observe the inmates, is a remarkable control mechanism" (2010: 8). In this scenario, the prisoners, never

knowing when or if they are being observed, begin to police their own behaviour: “This architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers” (Foucault 1977: 201).

Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void) attempts to introduce some of these contradictions. It allows viewers both to sit in the place of the observer in a work that simulates the idea of the architectural panopticon (a voyeur into the inner space) even as the viewers might be aware that they are also being observed. The work alludes, therefore, to its own constructed deception; it serves as both a site of potential refuge and also a warning. ‘The void’ in my work is not so much absence as a provocation to thought about concealment and vulnerability. (See Appendix: pages 159-163).

Dark Matter (Political Landscape 2017-) (2017-2019)

In early 2017, I began scribbling in black ball-point pen onto a roll of Fabriano paper. The idea was to apply the ‘doodle’, that quintessential motif of arbitrary randomness. The purpose was to transfer the unsystematic, layered scrawl into something substantive. I covered the surface with a density of random marks, leaving some areas less drawn than others, and then intensifying other areas to a state of an almost impenetrable darkness. This was done for hours on end in an open studio as I subjected Fine Art students and colleagues to the work and process as they moved through the space.

After around 120 hours of intense ‘scribbling’ and some 160 black ball-point pens later, I decided that the scale, form and composition had reached an end point. The final work at this stage consisted of a large section of Fabriano paper filled with the chaos of varying densities of black ball-point scribble; dark, ominous and unruly. I cut the paper size down to the dimensions of 2443 x 1510mm, a conscious cropping which would create an outer frame that fitted the proportions of the Golden Ratio, in which the relationship of the length to the width creates a surround of perfect harmony and balance. I wanted to set up the idea of a perimeter of calm, equilibrium and accord,

containing this dark, conflicted mayhem; I wanted to suggest some hope amid the disillusionment and perhaps some order around the chaos. I crumpled the entire sheet of paper into a large ball, sprayed it with starch and then teased it back open, using the natural creases to create a landscape of peaks and troughs. This was mounted onto a large sheet of black foam core to ensure that the integrity of the landscape forms was retained. The resultant work, *Dark Matter (Political Landscape 2017-*), consists of a custom-made box frame with glass front, 2423mm x 1510mm x 210mm in depth, that is placed horizontally into a mild steel angle-iron frame, elevated 800mm off the ground and viewed from above. The work reads as a topographical landscape of dark chaos (much like a landscape that would be seen from an aeroplane). The title shifts the abstraction of the work to suggest an emotional metaphor for the troubled times in which we live, a symbolic landscape of turmoil and conflict.

Figure 47. Greg Streak. 2017-2019. Detail of *Dark Matter (Political Landscape 2017-)*

The work was made incrementally over several months in 2017 whilst I was simultaneously making other artefacts. During the initial phase, I was also removing the text from the pages of *Heart of Darkness*. During the day I scratched away the text, reducing the content of words to blank pages, and in the evenings I would be in my studio, transforming the large sheet of Fabriano paper, from a blank void into a chaotic network of dense black ball-point scribble; a motif ultimately resembling and denoting nothing in particular. The conscious attempt was to reduce each work to a state of nothingness with the purpose of advancing a 'dialogue' of response between the work and the viewer.

This notion of an artwork reflecting an act of apparent randomness (the incessant accumulation of the doodle) recalls the works of many artists during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Most notable were some of the early video works of Bruce Nauman, which were made between 1967 and 1969, of himself performing monotonous actions in his studio. Ruth Burgon, researcher and curator elaborates: "In these films and tapes, all recorded in black and white, Nauman performs various mundane and repetitive actions: stamping, jumping, playing the violin, bouncing balls, but mostly walking" (2016: n.p.).

During this period of the sixties, as artists began to explore the dissolution of the art object, walking became an expansive gesture; a means to map and use the action further to disrupt the modernist notions of 'the artwork'. Unfortunately, the titles of these works did little to alleviate the banality of the gesture. Michelangelo Pistoletto rolled a large ball of newspaper as he walked around the streets of Turin, the title *Walking Sculpture* (1967) being very much a literal description of his action. In so doing, Pistolletto deposed the sculpture from its traditional plinth, and simultaneously removed it from the gallery context. Walter de Maria questioned what a drawing could 'be' when he created two parallel chalk lines, twelve feet apart, and extended these to a mile in length. With its post-minimalist undertone of 'what you see is what you see', the work, predictably titled *One Mile Long Drawing* (1968), was executed in the Mojave Desert in California and takes the drawing into a space and scale never seen before, via the act of walking.

> Walking became part of what the critic Lucy Lippard called the 'dematerialisation' of the art object, as it collapsed into conceptual or performative practices that sought to challenge the structures and economics of the art institution. (Burgon 2016: n.p.)

Martin Creed's *Work No. 293, A Sheet of Paper Crumpled into a Ball* (2003), reverses much of Pistoletto's liberating gesture of 1967. Creed's work consists of an A4 piece of paper, crumpled into a tight ball and presented in the gallery under a Perspex vitrine on a white plinth.

Figure 48. Martin Creed. 2003. *Work No. 293, A Sheet of Paper Crumpled into a Ball*

It is unlikely that it was Creed's intention to subvert Pistoletto's action. In fact, the artist toys with a similar sceptical relationship with the art market as did Pistoletto, a tenet of the Conceptual Art movement. In an interview with the *Independent* (online), Creed states of the work, "'People do buy them and I've seen one in someone's house. It was on the mantelpiece,' he says. And then he laughs" (*Independent* 2008: n.p.).

These gestures or provocations, in which the boundaries of what can constitute an artwork are stretched, have historical precedent beginning with Duchamp, have had numerous iterations throughout the course of the Conceptual Art movement, and continue today. My scribbled landscape has affinities with these works, but attempts rather, via scale, implied form (topographical landscape), and title to entice the viewer into a realm of critical reflection on a dark and overarching political climate, both locally and globally.

Dark Matter (Political Landscape 2017-), then, suggests a discordant public space. From a personal perspective, the work, together with the other works to which I have referred so far, impinges upon my concern over my position as an individual and a maker of things within a global climate in which it appears that our social, political, economic, spiritual and emotional compasses are misaligned with the human environment, physical as well as psychological. Such a consideration has been compounded by the current Covid-19 global pandemic. We occupy a public space in which leadership has revealed its limitations (beaten by a virus). Consequently, the balance between chaos and order begins to dissolve into the deliberately undifferentiated chaos of *Dark Matter*... But, of course, a chaos that, in art, is assiduously crafted. The paradox involves a destructive image that is given shape through creative making. (See Appendix: pages 164-166).

Fake Empire (2019)

"Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present, controls the past" – the haunting line from George Orwell's dystopian classic *1984* (written in 1949) seems eternally prophetic, but possibly encapsulates most accurately the current zeitgeist of the global public space. The protagonist of Orwell's novel works for the government in a department which is ironically titled the Ministry of Truth, where he actively amends historical records to make the past conform to whatever the totalitarian government (Ingsoc) wants the past to be. Orwell was anticipating the reality of a citizenry manipulated by a single political party, achieved by the control and manipulation of information. It does not take a quantum leap of the imagination to grasp the potency of the power accrued with information control. This is given an exaggerated relevance in our current space of the internet and social media platforms, which enables the

dissemination of information, both accurate but increasingly false, at rates never conceived as possible before.

The levels of deception in contemporary society have reached such heights that the terms 'post-truth presidency' (Alterman 2004), 'post-democracy' (Couch 2004), 'post-fact world' (Pomerantsev 2016), 'weaponized lies' (Levitin 2017) and 'post-truth' (McIntyre 2018), have been coined to describe the oratory climate of the times. It is an oratory which is dominated by appealing to emotions disconnected from truth or policy, and which repeats these assertions in the face of factual evidence. "'Truth decay', a term used to describe the diminishing role of facts and analysis […] has joined the post-truth lexicon that includes such now familiar phrases as 'fake news' and 'alternative facts'…" (Kakutani 2018: 8). Noam Chomsky's assertions of a "manufactured consent" (1988) are affirmed by Allan MacLeod: "The media is a weapon of the elite in the battle for your mind. They are not plucky truth-tellers but, for the most part, are enormously powerful corporations propagandizing us for their own interests and agendas. They do not challenge power; they are power, the voice of the powerful" (2019: 10).

Fake Empire consists of a set of encyclopaedias suspended from a mild-steel bracket that is attached to the wall. A 50mm core has been removed from the centre of each book, and a steel pipe of equal dimension skewered through the core, allowing the viewer to peer through the pipe from the front cover to the back of the set of books, almost like a lobotomy hole in the head. Whilst the encyclopaedia amassed knowledge, A to Z with an index, the work suggests the redundancy of this 'pre-digital' form of knowledge in today's age of the Internet and search engines. The hollow core of each of the books denotes missing information, thus rendering each page as somewhat meaningless, or at least open to misinterpretation. The title of the work, *Fake Empire*, alludes to the problematic limitations of this form of knowledge as it was often a biased representation of history and facts from one dominant perspective. At one level, I might be seeming to endorse Jean Francois Lyotard's concept of Postmodernism: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). But the Postmodernist distrust of meta-narratives has its own consequence: an open forum for unvetted opinions that must not be criticised for fear of being 'deplatformed', or 'cancelled', contributes to a dysfunctional public space; or babble of discordant voices. So, an insidious use of propaganda

to enforce a dominant position, a singular ‘grand-narrative’, has given way to uncited testimonials from anyone with a keyboard and an internet connection. The single and the multiple narrative can both be damaging in the search for truth, however imperfect such a search might be.

Figure 49. Greg Streak. 2019. *Fake Empire*

When one considers Lyotard’s own comment on his magnus opus, *The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979*)*, we are confined to a ‘nothing’ land of fake assertion, which does not bode well as a direction for the future:

Lyotard later admitted that he had a (less than limited) knowledge of the science he wrote about, and to compensate for this knowledge, he ‘made stories up’ and referred to a number of books that he hadn't actually read. In retrospect, he called it ‘a parody’ and ‘simply the worst of all my books’. (Anderson 1998: 24-27)

The dangers of ideas on the loose were further highlighted by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989, as a check on separating the influences of race, class and gender, but a term that has morphed into imprecision to suit different agendas: As Coaston notes:

She compared the experience of seeing other people talking about intersectionality to an 'out-of-body experience,' telling me, "Sometimes I've read things that say, 'Intersectionality, blah, blah, blah,' and then I'd wonder, "Oh, I wonder whose intersectionality that is," and then I'd see me cited, and I was like, "I've never written that. I've never said that. That is just not how I think about intersectionality". (2019: n.p.)

The problem is that often the facts that lie outside of abbreviated texts and decontextualised images (as on social media platforms) have been omitted, or are not even referenced, but are necessary components for genuinely informed positions and robust conversations. A factually unchecked piece of content, passed on, begins a chain reaction of misinformation which has consequences in real-world terms. Kakutani elaborates on the inevitable fallout: "Nationalism, tribalism, dislocation, fears of social change, and the hatred of outsiders are on the rise again as people, locked in their partisan silos and filter bubbles, are losing a sense of shared reality and the ability to communicate across social and sectarian lines" (2018: 7).

The Slovenian philosopher and researcher Slavoj Žižek has repeatedly asserted that "The most efficient lies are lies with truth, lies which reproduce only factual data" *(*2019: n.p.). Misinformation, spread virally at the push of a button, often carries truth, but omits the completeness of the message which leads to oversimplification, misinterpretation and an incorrect narrative that is virtually impossible to reel back in: "An unhappy truth of human psychology makes it hard to abolish lies once they have escaped into the world: We seem to be predisposed to remember statements as true even after they have been disconfirmed" (Harris 2013: 38). Cognisance of this psychological paradox can be manipulated for intentionally divisive outcomes.

If *Fake Empire* can provoke some questions about the value of knowledge, and the impact of its omission, then the work will have had a purpose. (See Appendix: pages 167-169).

Useless and Vital Information (2019)

A similar contribution characterises *Useless and Vital Information* (2019) in which a clear acrylic tube is filled with paper disks. The tube rests in cradles created by two brass brackets that support it slightly away from the wall surface. The title suggests that we are observing a preserved and captured vial of irrelevant information, a special holding cell of apparent nothingness. On closer inspection, one realises that this work consists of the cores that were removed from the set of encyclopaedias, meticulously put back together again as separate books with covers front and back, one by one and compressed for posterity into the acrylic tube. The seeming futility of this process has a certain connection with the emptied pages of *Erasing a Heart of Darkness*, or even the endless scribbled landscape of *Dark Matter…* . Should this preserved biopsy of information be accessed, it would also be of little meaning as the original pages from where key information was removed are required for adequate comprehension. *Fake Empire* (2019) and *Useless and Vital Information* (2019) speak, I hope, to the difficulties of truth-telling in our times. (See Appendix: page 170).

Figure 50. Greg Streak. 2019. Detail from *Useless and Vital Information*

Nothing Matters (2016-2019)

In 2016, I registered a public Instagram account (@Nothing___Matters) for the purpose of documenting my PhD project. I used this online outlet to process ideas and consolidate the rationale of the present study. To reiterate, the nature of practice-based visual art research is one of an emergent design: the research unfolds through the course of experimentation in both a reflective and reflexive manner. This Instagram platform seemed an appropriate method to document such a process over time: a form of an online reflective journal, as it were.

Figure 51. Greg Streak. 2016-2019. Detail from *Nothing Matters: Dead-ends*

What began as a documentation of the genesis of artefacts began also to reflect things that revealed a scope of dysfunction, a neglect and a social entropy that I encountered in my daily rounds. I became absorbed by the seemingly arbitrary and inconsequential, but with the idea of documenting this in photographs of things that elevated the status from the trivial and random to something meaningful: from nothing to something that matters.

I never studied photography as an elective in art school; neither have I involved myself in any of the technicalities of the medium. Besides, these were irrelevant to the concerns of this photographic journey. As an image-maker, my concerns were to adapt my eye to see the 'outside' of a conditioned frame of reference; to find the outlier images that reflected a connection to what I felt was 'real'.

Figure 52. Greg Streak. 2016-2019. Detail from *Nothing Matters: Collapse*

Some days, a flood of images materialised, and then there were periods when there did not seem to be anything to contribute to the process. Through the course of my daily routine, I was constantly observing my immediate environment for moments of neglect or surprise that would mostly go unnoticed. A truncated cable left exposed was as equally significant as the fractured sunlight passing through my bathroom window.

I made the conscious decision to stop taking any further images in April 2019, three years to the day that the journey began. During this period, some 1208 images were produced and curated as part of this Instagram account. While the beginnings of this 'photo essay' were without specific boundaries, a code of sorts did emerge. I only used my mobile device to capture and process the images. All images were black and white and in a square format. All images were loaded onto the online platform of Instagram without personalised commentary about the images. No image was premeditated or staged. After three years, the project was terminated.

There is some similarity in method to the process-driven works or what became known as 'action works', which characterised the activity of making works during the late 1960s and 1970s. In an attempt to create new avenues of creative exploration, artists like Richard Long would pre-empt an intuitive outcome by placing a set of criteria or rules prior to embarking on certain projects. In this way, these artists controlled particular formal aspects, but then allowed the process to define the resultant work, not dissimilar to my own approach. Long is possibly the most significant exponent of these types of works, a large portion of his oeuvre dedicated to his "walking" works, as described by Rosengarten:

> Each walk is contained by a particular idea that precedes it, a kind of schema that articulates variables of geometry and geography, distance and time, but also difficulty and ease: *A Six Day Walk over all Roads, Lanes and Double Tracks inside a Six Mile Wide Circle Centred on the Giant of Cerne Abbas*, (1975), or *A Hundred Tors in a Hundred Hours* (1976), or *A Line of 33 Stones, A Walk of 33 Days* (1998) or *Hours Miles*: *82 Miles in 24 Hours, 24 Miles in 82 Hours* (1996). (2009: 3)

The relationship of my project to Long's practice, and the practice of others of this period, is tenuous and has similarity only with regards to the ideas of a guiding format or delineated parameters. On a photographic level, the works of Ed Ruscha are more closely aligned with my

project, in particular his series *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, captured in his ground-breaking 1963 book of the same title. Ruscha explained that the title of the book originated prior to the taking of the photographs, as Costello and Iveson elaborate:

> In other words, it provided the nub of an instruction which he then duly carried out along Route 66. This suggests that Ruscha was engaged in a very specific kind of artistic activity – that is, following a predetermined route in his car and systematically recording just the gas stations. This pervasive automaticity (instruction, car, route, camera) is what makes the books perplexing and different from other photography books. (2010: 2)

The process adopted by both Long and Ruscha contains a similar emotional detachment and a more severe set of instructions, whereas my own project, in contrast, developed a set of guidelines more organically while my 'subject' was an unfolding one. In the South African context, some of the works of David Goldblatt have affinities with my project, in particular his "less acknowledged interest in incomplete or partially demolished buildings, in razed fields, rubble, and waste" (Mudie 2019: n.p.). Goldblatt, nonetheless, immersed himself in projects of specific focus, and his extensive research into these 'subjects' is evident in the images. His photographs do not have the appearance of a fleeting, chance encounter (as mine do), but rather of a sustained inquiry:

> This critical approach to photography and its subjects – to analyse and understand, get right to the core of things – has characterised Goldblatt's practice from the outset […] the resulting images are united by an unwavering desire to comprehend detail and complexity. A nuanced approach, far removed from impartial observation, is revealed through the images. (Kent 2018: n.p.)

Further, Goldblatt's images have "carefully worded, caption-like titles […] vital to conveying [their] intricate meaning" (Mudie 2019: n.p.), and which become descriptions of time, place and history, much like the titles in Richard Long's work. My photographic titles are, in most cases, one-word associative place-holders that encompass a series of images with no suggestion of specifics. The nothingness of randomness is paradoxically a principle of organisation.

Accordingly, the three-year project was broadly titled *Nothing Matters*, a title which has become the overarching title for the entire body of work that constitutes this study. I have spoken to the 'codes' that developed in the early stages of the project; many of these, however, developed out of necessity rather than in any pre-planning. Given the approach, I never knew what images I would

‘find’ and where or when I would find them, and so my mobile phone (iPhone 6) became the obvious device of choice to capture these images. Fortuitously, my phone had a square-format shooting option built into its software, as Instagram automatically crops images to these proportions. Moreover, images can only be uploaded onto Instagram via a mobile phone application, and so my phone became the central one-stop shop for capturing, processing, uploading, and archiving all the photographs.

Figure 53. Greg Streak. 2016-2019. Detail from *Nothing Matters: Light*

With hindsight, my phone as the mechanism for the production of this entire body of photographic work is crucial to the focus of the project. Images reflect, for the most part, the dystopic grit within society, captured with relatively low-tech means, and aligned conceptually with the character and immediacy of the intent. Conversely, a series of high-end photographic images printed with archival ink on archival paper and framed, would be incongruous to my intent.

In order to create a series of thematically linked works from the 1208 images, I started with a digital on-screen 'cull'. This process was difficult in the sense that there was no ultimate plan as to which images were to be saved, which were to be discarded. The initial phase was intuitive. The image was either evocative to me or not: and subjectivity was my rule of thumb. This process whittled the stock down to around 370 potential images. These were then printed as low-resolution hard copies. Within the square format, I had decided that printing them at 200mm x 200mm would be sufficiently readable without compromising the picture quality. The second 'cull' was more difficult than the first. What were the images about? What was being suggested within the images, and were there distinct similarities and differences amongst them which suggested that certain groupings could emerge? I became somewhat paralysed and conflicted at this point, as I felt checkmated by my own inability to articulate some clarity from a three-year process that to all intents and purposes had pulled me along in its slip stream. It was not so much a question of having had no idea why I had photographed the images when I did, or what the conceptual paradigm that framed them was, but rather the struggle was how to distinguish different aspects within the plethora of black and white images.

As a series, these images speak to the ethos of this study: to observe and document visual moments and details of the seemingly inconsequential, the random and the arbitrary, and to imbue the images with value. This required the elevation of images of apparent worthlessness to contemplative consideration. As a rejoinder to the barrage of billboard advertising images of fantasy and illusions of perfection (what British filmmaker Adam Curtis references as a 'hyper-normalisation') I wanted to focus on that which was broken, abandoned, or dysfunctional, but to notice also those fleeting moments to which we have become desensitised, and to capture such moments for contemplation.

In many ways, I was using the social media platform of Instagram as a convenient repository for the immediate processing and archiving of these images. The irony is that, for the most part,

Instagram is predominantly a platform for posing and posturing, and is inundated with images that have had so many filters applied to them that it is virtually impossible to distinguish which images are real and which are mostly digitally created. The images on my account served as a complete counterfoil; no colour, raw, eviscerated, and with nothing apparently exceptional – a stark reflection representing elements of society as they are – without deceptive filters or styling.

Sifting through the images, certain themes started to emerge. Perhaps again this is an exemplification of an emergent design. I flicked through the images one by one, and made a list of words that the images invoked. This was a process to ascertain how many different themes or contours of meaning the images seemed to suggest. The process was open-ended in that the word associations were markers for potential groupings, but not definitive groupings. The themes that emerged were in some cases and with some degree of predictability, synonymous of one other. Broken, absent, lonely, trash, disembowelled, dead, disconsolate, dark, dejected … but also light bursts, details, and reflections. Sometimes it was quite obvious what an image was broadly suggestive of, while at other times the images seemed to be hybrids of several themes.

From the various piles of images that accrued during this process, each was spread out across the floor and different compositional possibilities were considered. Images that felt extraneous at even the initial stages of compositional play were excluded. Each pile was subjected to various possibilities and this resulted in another pile of rejected images developing alongside those that were retained. Each grouping was then again individually relooked at with the intention of creating a final curation of what remained within the separated piles. Some of the piles had only a few images, whilst other piles were more substantially populated. Those with fewer images were placed in a landscape format, one after the other. The piles with more images were placed into a grid format. A pile of 13 images, for example, did not fit into a neat grid. In this process images were rejected based on their either seeming to be visually weaker than the other images, or in some instances because they seemed to be the ‘odd ones’ out within the grouping. Through this process, there were examples where images that had been discarded suddenly found their way back into another series that was originally a less obvious fit in its overall theme. It should be recognised that many of the images within this overall body of work could easily have been included in a number of the other defined groupings.

Figure 54. Greg Streak. 2016-2019. Detail from *Nothing Matters: Disemboweled*

Once I had made this final edit, 27 different sub-series remained. The decision was then to title each of this series *Nothing Matters* with a subtitle that spoke to the curated images in that grouping. (Ironically, of course, something has mattered: an interpretative structure of nothingness.) Some of the original words that I had used in order to separate images from one another were retained but, for the most part, new subtitles emerged.

In the design and layout of the images for final printing, I decided to create a 20mm gap between each image in order to construct a visual continuity across the entire scope of the work, but also to ensure that there was just enough space for each image to breathe from the next, but not a large

enough space that the relationships between the images would be diminished. The compilation of 27 works that make up the collective *Nothing Matters* were designed, printed and framed. For the purposes of this study, the list below records each sub-set within this series, all produced between 2016-2019:

Nothing Matters: Absence
Nothing Matters: Alone
Nothing Matters: Anthropoid
Nothing Matters: Blind Spaces
Nothing Matters: Broken
Nothing Matters: Collapse
Nothing Matters: Dead-ends
Nothing Matters: Details
Nothing Matters: Disemboweled
Nothing Matters: Drain
Nothing Matters: Echo
Nothing Matters: Erase and Rewind
Nothing Matters: Expired
Nothing Matters: Exposed
Nothing Matters: Fleeting
Nothing Matters: Forsaken
Nothing Matters: God
Nothing Matters: Inner
Nothing Matters: Light
Nothing Matters: Liminal
Nothing Matters: Matrix
Nothing Matters: Misplaced
Nothing Matters: Reflect
Nothing Matters: Scars
Nothing Matters: Sisyphus
Nothing Matters: Vacant
Nothing Matters: Waste

The above body of works contains a total of 196 images which have come to embody the essence of a 3-year process, distilled from an archive of 1208 images.

Figure 55. Greg Streak. 2016-2019. Detail from *Nothing Matters: Alone*

This photographic series developed spontaneously and constitutes speculative reflections on the environment that I inhabit and traverse each day. I am not an anthropologist, documenting and analysing images for fixed interpretations. The photograph is a 'fixed thing', it freezes a moment and there is a relationship between the ephemerality of the situation in its own time and the photograph's ability to hold that situation, so it can be reflected upon. The artwork asks for that reflection; it asks the viewer to respond.

Several of the images capture moments that involve light, either in the subsequent shadows that are cast from a light source (*Nothing Matters: Inner* and *Nothing Matters: Fleeting)*, or in the way in which light highlights everyday objects (*Nothing Matters: Reflect*) or in natural light in its pure form (*Nothing Matters: Light*). These images serve both as a direct document of those moments of light that would ordinarily pass us by unnoticed while, as a group, suggesting – perhaps – more ethereal aspects of light as metaphors for hope and transcendence.

Most of the other images bring to the fore a general state of disjuncture that I witnessed during my driving around and walking through different areas of the city. I photographed two urinals in a public restroom, dysfunctional, and covered with black plastic refuse bags (*Nothing Matters: Forsaken*). There is the rusted outer shell of an air-conditioner unit which sits in a state of collapse on the outside of a building (*Nothing Matters: Broken*). There is a disintegrating set of concrete steps leading to nowhere (*Nothing Matters: Dead-ends);* a large pipe projectile vomiting a stream of muddy water onto the beach (*Nothing Matters: Disembowelled*); a large plastic garbage bin with cracked-open sides spilling its contents (*Nothing Matters: Waste)*; and the skeleton framework of a billboard with its banner content torn and dangling (*Nothing Matters: Vacant*).

With the local municipality incapable of efficient service delivery, is Durban, as a letter writer to the newspaper put it, now 'Dirtbin'? The human consequences of urban decay are evident in the silhouetted figure, huddled in the mist under an old concrete railway bridge structure (*Nothing Matters: Alone*) and the figures carrying discarded trash for recycling purposes to eke out an existence (*Nothing Matters: Sisyphus*). Yet Sisyphus is a metaphor of ambivalence: the struggle of existence reveals human resilience. (I think back to my work, *Line to Sartre.*)

Although the images in this series were taken prior to South Africa experiencing the impact of the Covid-19 global pandemic, the images are perhaps indicative of the decay that had already set in and was only to worsen when the pandemic, the resultant self-contradictory policies, untrustworthy information and overall political mismanagement became the everyday 'normality'. Many countries are reeling from the human and socio-economic consequences of hard lockdowns. As the American philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris reflects:

> People are experiencing solitude to a degree that is not normal for them and for most of us there's been a forced reprioritization of values. We have a vantage point from which to see how we've been living all these years and the kinds of things that have captivated our attention. Much of that has been stripped away, or at least shuffled to a degree that many people are experiencing even a silver lining to this quarantine, because they're experiencing better time with their families in many cases or this heightened sense of uncertainty; the sense that really anything can happen at any time and that's always been true. But we live most of our lives as though we take a lot for granted and taking those things for granted amounts to a kind of death denial, and a sense of control that has never really been factual. (2020: n.p.)

Figure 56. Greg Streak. 2016-2019. Detail from *Nothing Matters: Sisyphus*

Such an ambivalence has been an unfortunate yet fortuitous outcome of my photographic venture: by using tropes of nothingness, perhaps these images provoke the viewer into reimagining the ordinary.

Figure 57. Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Liminal*

In consequence, the four images that constitute *Nothing Matters: liminal* (2016-2019) point to intermediary moments. Each captures the space between two consecutive moments. In the first image, the bow of a ship in the foreground is just about to move across the land mass in the background, known as The Bluff (Durban, South Africa). There is a distinct relationship between the dark mass of the ship's hull and the landscape. The image captures the moment just before the paths cross: a sliver of space separates ship and land for a split second. One could argue that this image is not about the ship or the land mass, but about that space between the two: the light between the dark. The composition, however, does open up a series of alternatives: mobile vs static, rounded vs angular, entry vs exit. The 'frozen' moment opens up many possibilities of interpretation.

In the second image, my daughter Hazel stands with her body braced for impact and her feet apparently levitating centimetres above the water surface of a swimming pool. It is a moment of stillness, of poise, amid a turning world.

The third image in this sequence is that of a crisp, jagged edge of a sand bank running alongside a lagoon mouth and being eroded by the incoming tide. The image tries to capture the tenuous nature of the edge of this precipice in that moment before it would collapse and eventually be totally engulfed by the incoming tide. Another still moment within flux.

The final image in this series captures suspended water droplets and small wave formations from the rain falling into a large plastic basin. This was the result of a particularly heavy downpour as evidenced by the overflowing basin that forms the focus of the photo; a point of meditation in an

‘unromantic’ surrounding of a seeming wasteland behind the basin. What emerges from apparent randomness are transitional moments; so often overlooked in the momentum of life, but, isolated here, for moments of pause, in the passage of experience.

Figure 58. Greg Streak. 2016-2019. Detail from *Nothing Matters: Liminal*

Jeff Wall, the Canadian artist who is known predominantly for his large-scale backlit Cibachrome photographs, distinguishes between what he calls his unstaged ‘documentary’ images and the ‘cinematographic’ pictures produced using actors, sets and special effects. The more staged works, in which he appears to have captured a fleeting moment, have some resonance with those in *Nothing Matters: liminal*. But only with regard to the sense of a ‘captured’ moment. There are numerous differences, not least scale and colour, between Wall’s back-lit images and the black and white ‘naturalness’ of my photographs. My own images are ‘real’, in that they rely on spontaneous capture with the relatively low-tech means of a mobile phone.

Wall’s ‘cinematographic’ photographs are large complicated production events. *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (1993), an ode to the woodblock print *Yejiri Station, Province of Suruga* (ca. 1832) by Katsushika Hokusai, re-creates a 19th-century Japanese scene in contemporary British Columbia. Utilising actors, it took Wall over a year to produce 100 photographs in order "to achieve a seamless montage that gives the illusion of capturing a real moment in time” (Tate Museum 2020: n.p.).

Figure 59. Jeff Wall. 1993. *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*

My purpose in *Nothing Matters*, in contrast, was to document moments of decay and glimpses of hope in the most direct ways possible: that is, to see the unusual in the normality of the day; to create forms of representation that transfigure the ordinary of negativity (nihilism) into suggestions of imaginative restitution.

Following the release of his film *HyperNormalisation* in 2016, the film-maker Adam Curtis was asked in an interview what his thoughts were on what the then newly-elected US president, Donald Trump represents, to which he replied:

> My working theory is that he's part of the pantomime-isation of politics […] he tweets something absolutely outrageous which he knows the liberals will get upset by, the liberals read his tweets and go "This is terrible, this is outrageous," and then tell each other via social media how terrible it all is. It becomes a feedback loop in which they are locked together. In my mind, it's like they're together in a theatre watching a pantomime villain. The pantomime villain comes forward into the light, looks at them and says something terrible, and they go "Boo!!". Meanwhile, outside the theatre, real power is carrying on but no one is really analysing it. (Qtd in N.B. 2018: n.p.)

Nothing Matters (2016-2019) focuses on what is outside the theatre. It offers a counter-narrative to the 'hypernormal' distraction to which we are subjected in the 24-hour world of social media. (See Appendix: pages 171-197).

Dad **(2021) – and an epilogue on nothingness**

Nothing brings a halt to 'meaning' more abruptly than the finality of death. My father died of a massive heart-attack on the 7 March 2010, at the age of 65. It was sudden and unexpected. I had not seen him for some weeks before his death. When I next saw him, he had been washed, clothed and placed into a coffin, with the lid pulled back so that his face was exposed. There was white plastic covering his body up to just below his neck. He was cold to the touch, with traces of purple/blue behind his ears, a result of the heart attack. I took photographs of him at rest. He appeared calm and peaceful. He was cremated a day later, and my sister and I divided his ashes between us.

Throughout this study, I knew that I wanted to address death as a component within the scope of what nothingness can represent while at the same time to make something in homage to my father. This resulted in the artwork, *Dad* (2021), in which I used an acrylic ink overlay onto a printed photograph of my dead father with powdered traces of his ashes embedded in the image.

Using body material as a medium to enhance the conceptual impetus of an artwork has precedents[10].

Teresa Margolles is a Mexican artist whose work researches the social causes and consequences of death. Her work, *Aire* ('Air', 2012), appears to be simply that, something approximating the works of 'thin air', thus continuing that path of nothingness after Duchamp, Klein and Boezem. The installation simply consists of two air-conditioning units mounted in opposite corners of a relatively small room, with curtains of transparent plastic strips that loosely seal off the room's openings, insulating it with a minimum of visual interference or physical restriction. On entering the room, the viewer is confronted by the blank space and an immediate concentration of cool air. "With little else to go on, one was left with a heightened awareness of what constituent elements there were: the emptiness of the white room, the air-conditioning machine, the palpable coolness of the air, the small title label on the wall" (Wafer 2016: 36). For those unfamiliar with Margolles's practice:

This installation is by all appearances anodyne; nevertheless, as viewers read the wall texts that usually accompany her works, they learn that the air conditioners, which require water to cool and humidify the air they produce, employ water used to clean the bodies of anonymous murder victims. By running these machines constantly, Margolles disseminates the traces of these dead bodies throughout the gallery, effectively spreading them through the work's atmosphere. (Bacal 2018: 26)

[10] Marc Quinn's work *Self* (1991-) is an ongoing work started in 1991 and remade every 5 years. The artist made a plaster of Paris mould of his face, and over 5 sessions extracted 10 pints (5.7 litres) of his own blood. The impression of his facial features was then filled with the stockpile of his own blood and frozen. Once it had frozen solid, the blood head was mounted inside a Perspex box filled with silicon oil at a sub-zero temperature.

Controversial South African performance artist Steven Cohen mourned the death of his life partner and collaborator Elu Kieser in a performance titled *Put Your Heart Under Your Feet … And Walk!* (2017). Performed at the Montpellier Danse festival in France, Cohen dressed in a frock made of four gramophones, proceeded to eat a small portion of Elu's ashes "as an ultimate act of ritual mourning" (Blignaut 2017: n.p.).

The artist worked as a forensic technician in the Mexico City morgues, and this work attempts to bring some attention to the invisibility of the anonymous victims of "the politics of the drug wars, [and highlights] the relation between economic inequality and crime and violence in particular" (Wafer 2016: 36). In the catalogue essay for the seminal exhibition *Invisible: Art About the Unseen 1957-2012*, curator Ralph Rugoff writes of the work: "Eschewing visual forms of representing the victims of violence, Margolles instead creates a much more intimate experience of human tragedy as visitors feel the moist air on their skin and mentally conjure their connection to the absent bodies of the dead" (2012: 25).

It was to the 'intimate' and not to the social, however, that I turned to in *Dad.* (Yet at the same time I ask myself if the social ever really overshadows the personal.) Making objective formal and conceptual decisions about a personal process felt incongruous. The work needed to be on a 'small' scale to correspond with the personal subject matter. Having made the decision to use black acrylic inks as the drawing medium, the 200mm x 200mm format, as prevalent in the entire *Nothing Matters* photographic series, seemed a logical and visually satisfying format. I wanted to incorporate traces of my father's ashes into the image of himself, a visual tautology that references the works of Margolles and others in the use of body matter.

The 'ashes' referred to in *Cremation of a Heart of Darkness* were symbolic; in reality, nothing more than the soft powdery dust of the book's words scratched away and preserved as 'ashes'. Human ashes, as I came to realise after my father's death, are coarse shards of splintered bone-matter and not the soft residue we associate with the word 'ash'. In *Dad*, the use of acrylic ink was selected because the ink pools, spills, and has the effect of the image dissolving and dissipating. The inclusion of traces of my father's ashes set up several challenges. Building the image with ink requires a systematic layering using the translucent quality of the ink to create the varying densities within the image. The ashes could be applied to the darkest areas, as the ashes are opaque once applied to the paper surface and would 'flatten' other areas of the drawing. I took smaller samples of bone-matter to ground between two small stones, thus creating a texture that approximated fine sand. This required some psychological distancing from the emotional valency of the process (compressing bits of my father between two stones), which ultimately triggered the physical realisation that, in the end, we are in fact nothing more than matter. These ground particles were

mixed with wood glue, water and ink and applied to the paper surface. Occasionally, the ink 'bled' or dripped outside of the image frame and instead of cropping these 'mistakes' with a traditional mount board, I decided to incorporate the spills as an additional conceptual layer to the work, the areas appearing to be dissolving out of the image and beyond the frame. Like many of my works in this research process, *Dad* poses age-old existential questions. In Albert Camus's existential classic *The Stranger* (L'Stranger), the chaplain unsuccessfully attempts to redeem the soul of the murderer, Meursalt:

"Have you no hope at all? And do you really live with the thought that when you die, you die, and nothing remains?" "Yes," I said. (Camus 1958: 147)

My attempt to 'affix' my deceased father in a work of art by embedding his physical ashes in a work of art, to concretise his absence, has ironies and contradictions that have not escaped me. Unlike Meursalt, I choose to believe that there is purpose in both life and death. Hence, the paradoxical title of my project: *Nothing Matters*. (See Appendix: pages 198-199).

…

Figure 60. Greg Streak. 2021. Detail from *Dad*

Postscript

In recent times, there have been two substantial international exhibitions at significant art institutions attempting to create a synthesis of artworks that essentially address nothing. The exhibition, *Voids, a Retrospective*, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris (2009) "cites only those historic and contemporary exhibitions in which an entirely empty space was, reflexively, both the subject and object of the show … it formally refuses to portray diverse modes of emptying, such as disappearance, invisibility, refusal and 'dematerialization'" (Rehberg 2009: n.p.). Accordingly, the curators chose the works of nine artists within a 51-year period. The works 'represented' their absence by a label and a descriptive wall text outside every room (an extreme and controversial choice of representation (or not), with the exhibition being refused by several other leading museums in other countries).

The exhibition is of nothing and given substance in an exhaustive 528-page catalogue, "…edited by the team of artists, curators and writers behind the show (Mai-Thu Perret, John Armleder, Gustav Metzger, Mathieu Copeland, Clive Phillpot, Laurent Le Bon and Philippe Pirotte) it acts as a supplement, and is replete with a broad range of related and peripheral illustrations, interviews and primary and secondary source texts" (Rehberg 2009: n.p.). Independent art historian, Reiko Tomii, writes of the show:

> Between Nietzsche's "death of God" and the ascent of Buddhism in twentieth-century America and Europe, the idea of "void" has permeated Western art and culture, and the means by which artists and thinkers have dismantled conventions of reality and perception with acts of emptying, removing, destroying, or emphasizing nothingness, are numerous, as this massive survey testifies. (Tomii 2009: n.p.).

Reflecting on the exhibition, art critic Tom Lubbock commented:

> These works follow a typical trajectory of modern art. Step by step, from reduction to reduction, we make a clean sweep, from figuration to abstraction, to a uniform canvas, to a blank canvas, and then to a blank wall […]. Sometimes the emphasis is on absence, on contemplating nothingness. Sometimes it's on noticing what you might have overlooked. (Qtd in Lichfield 2009: n.p.)

The reflections serve more as generic commentary on the genre of absence in art than on the specific character of the exhibition.

The second exhibition, Ralph Rugoff's *Invisible: Art about the Unseen 1957-2012*, at the Hayward Gallery in London (12 June–5 August 2012), is a more thorough investigation and illumination of key works as well as more recent and less prominent works that constitute the 'empty artwork'. Rugoff's curation incorporates 26 artists, ranging from Yves Klein, Yoko Ono, Claes Oldenberg and Chris Burden to Tim Friedman, Roman Ondák and Theresa Margolles.

> *Invisible* ultimately reveals that there is no limit to the possible meanings of invisibility in art. Works that share a similar blankness can convey remarkably varied content. An empty room or unoccupied plinth may function as a sign of mystical sensibility, a haunting past, or a cursed presence. Invisibility can conjure the evanescent and the sublime; alternatively, it can evoke individuals and social groups who have been politically 'disappeared' or terminally marginalized. (*e-flux* 2012: n.p.)

Within the catalogue of contributions, both exhibitions acknowledge the possible antecedents of a 'trajectory of nothingness' by including earlier work; yet both mark the beginnings of this emptiness with Yves Klein in 1957 or 1958 depending on which version of his empty room is decided upon as the seminal work. On the 14th May 1957, Rugoff noted that as part of an exhibition that Klein held at Galerie Colette Allendy in Paris, he included a seemingly empty room. The more celebrated version is Klein's now infamous *The Void* exhibited in April 1958 at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris, the original title being *The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility, The Void*.

My own contributions to the archives of the 'dematerialised' art object or 'nothingness in art' is both as a critique of and an addition to the continuum of utilising 'empty gestures' or 'the idea' as a means of reflecting on the public space. While early iterations of the 'invisible artwork' constituted a rejection of the Modernist 'aesthetic', a reduction of the object to the idea and a rejection of the commodification of the art object within the consumer society of the 1960s, my work uses the trope of 'nothingness' to speak to the substantive issues in society. Mike Brennan's text, *The Eloquence of Absence* (2011), has proved to be a substantive guide to tracing the various subsets within the trope of nothingness. As I have stated, the 'dematerialised' art object did not

suddenly ‘appear’, but emerged over an extended period of affirmations and rejections through various Modernist art movements. The key precursors of what became the Conceptual Art movement, in my opinion, were Kazimir Malevich and Marcel Duchamp. But they too were benefactors of earlier influences. On the elusive notion of ‘originality’ I thought that perhaps Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* in 1913 could be posited as original. This illusion too was shattered, however, on paging through a book on Duchamp, in which the author, Janis Mink, shows a drawing of a wheel jack (c. 1912), the similarity with Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* is immediately apparent.

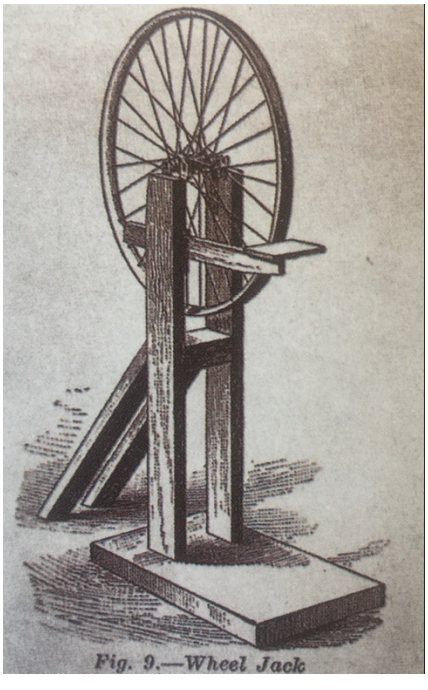

Figure 61. Drawing of a wheel jack c. 1912

Figure 62. Marcel Duchamp. 1913. *Bicycle Wheel*

In 1923, Duchamp declared that he was giving up making art to play chess. This provided him a ‘shield’ from the distractions of the art scene. Maurizio Cattelan announced his ‘retirement’ in 2015, siting that he felt he was ‘repeating himself’. But in 2016, a new work emerged. The work is a faux Carrara marble tomb stone (made from polyurethane), with a gold inscription reading THE END. “It seems that the artist’s short-lived hiatus was an artwork in itself - and perhaps fodder for more ambitious pieces to come” (Gotthardt 2016: n.p.).

Perhaps the most extreme example of the artwork as ‘nothing’ is found in the final gesture of prominent American artist Cady Noland “who has not exhibited any new work since 2000, and

specifically after dismantling her final artwork (for a group show at New York's Team Gallery). Destroying and stowing parts of the work in bins around Manhattan, she effectively quit the art world in disgust at its hypocrisies and inequalities" (Herbert 2019: n.p.).

Blanks, voids, empty and invisible works are alive and continue to be used to evoke and provoke responses from art critics and the viewing public. It is hoped that my exhibition, *Nothing Matters*, together with my exegesis, has added something to nothing.

…

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Appendix

NOTHING MATTERS

An Exhibition by Greg Streak

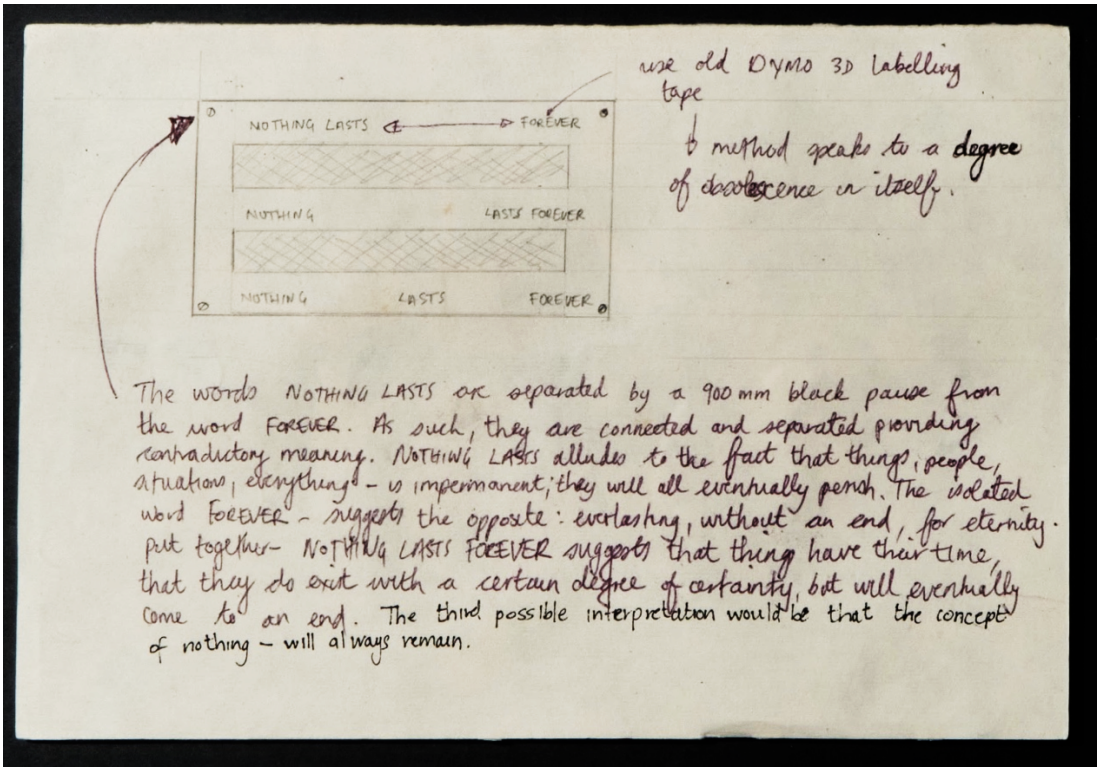
A Practice-Based Research for the degree of *PhD in Visual and Performing Arts*

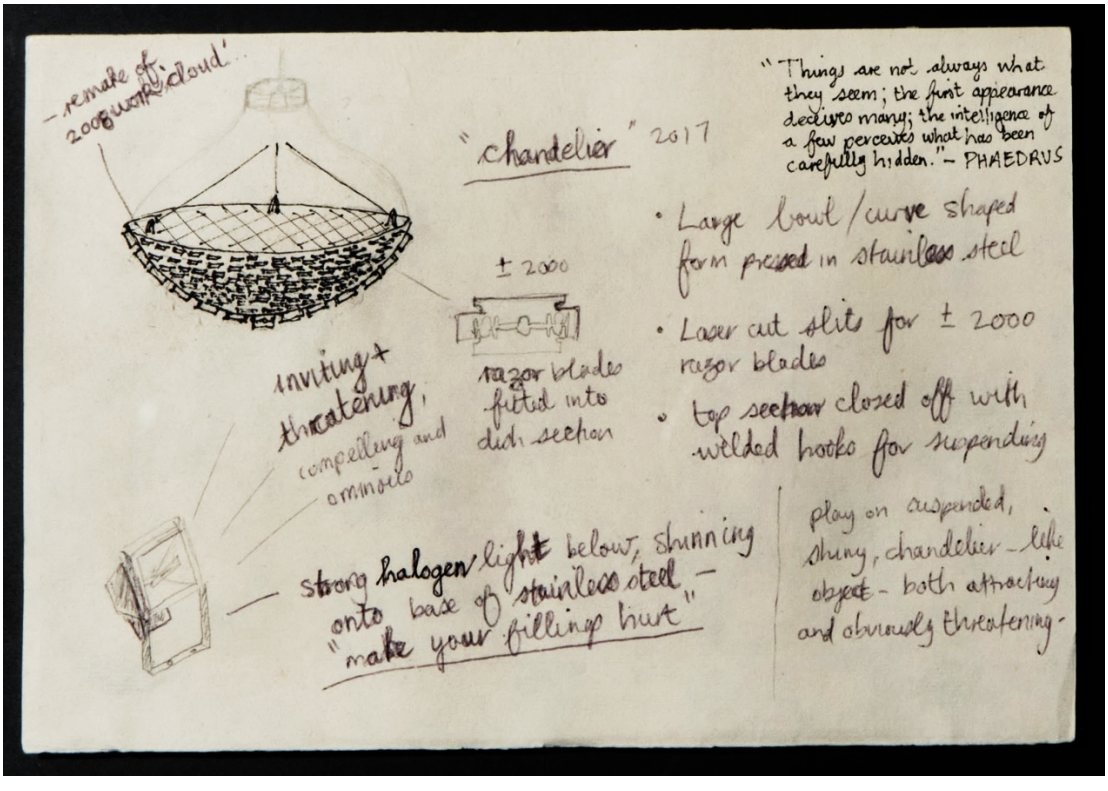
400 Sydney Road, Durban, South Africa
August / September 2021

Context / installation views of the exhibition *Nothing Matters.* 2021

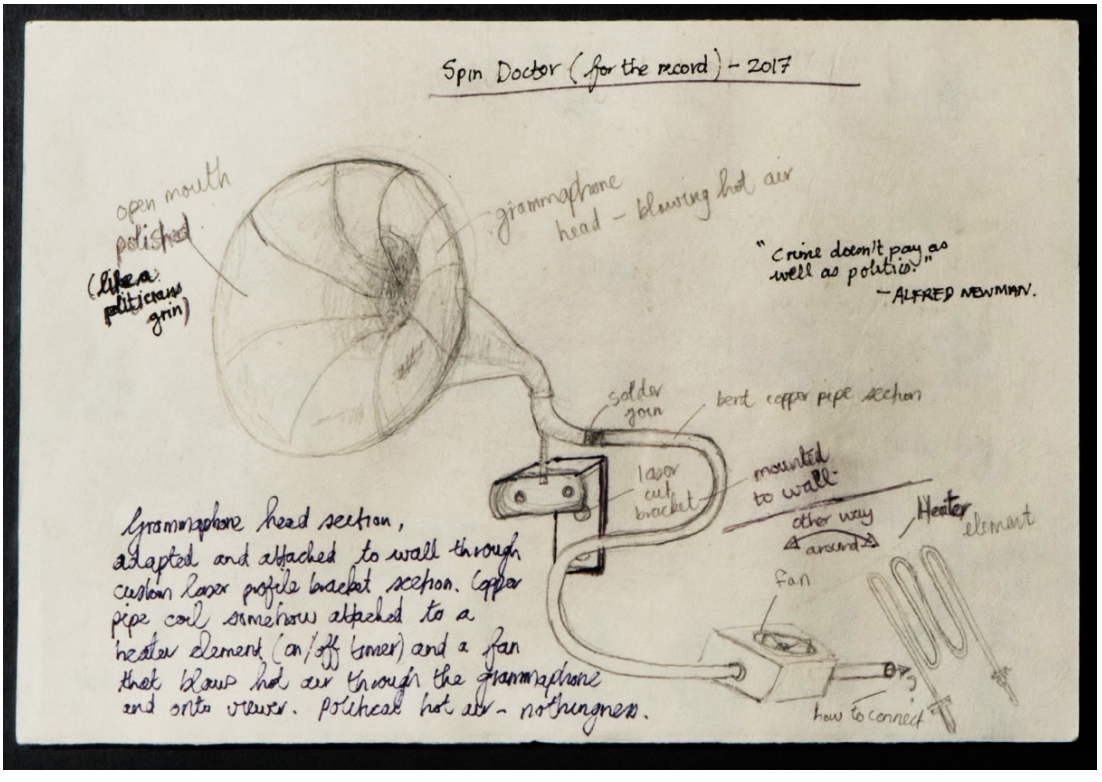
Context / installation views of the exhibition *Nothing Matters.* 2021

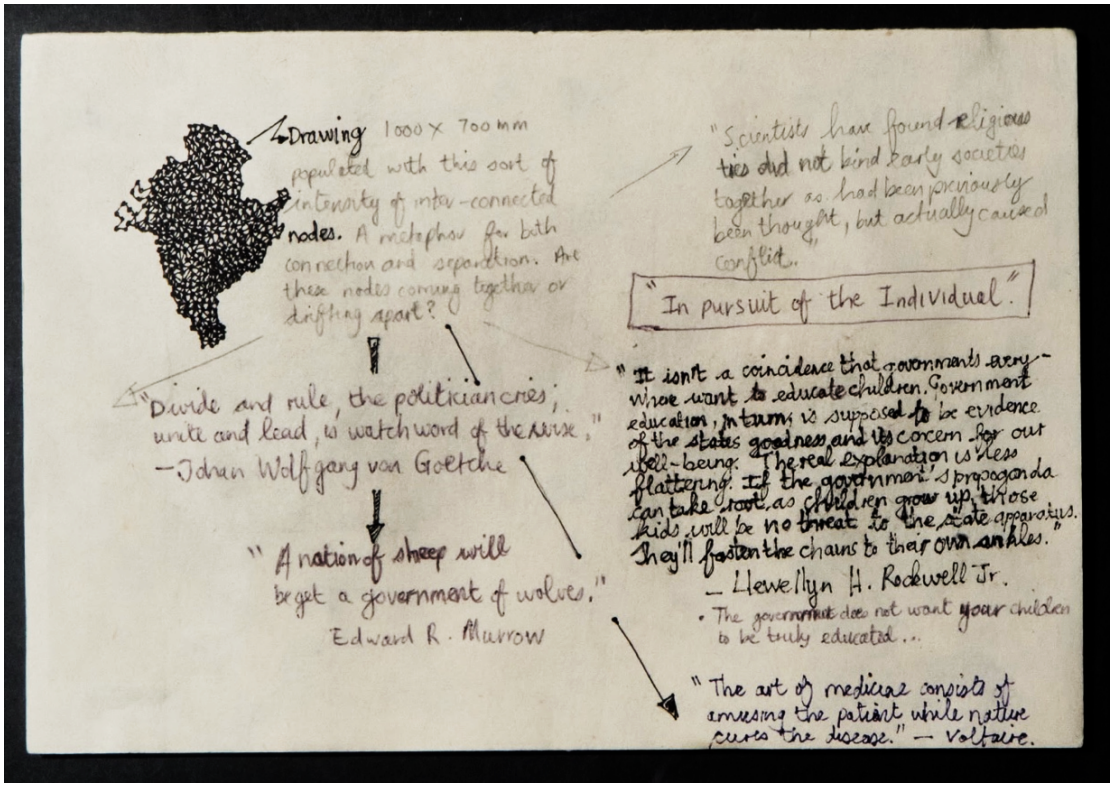
Context / installation view of the ‘Method Wall’: Quotes, sketches, text – processes of the creative act



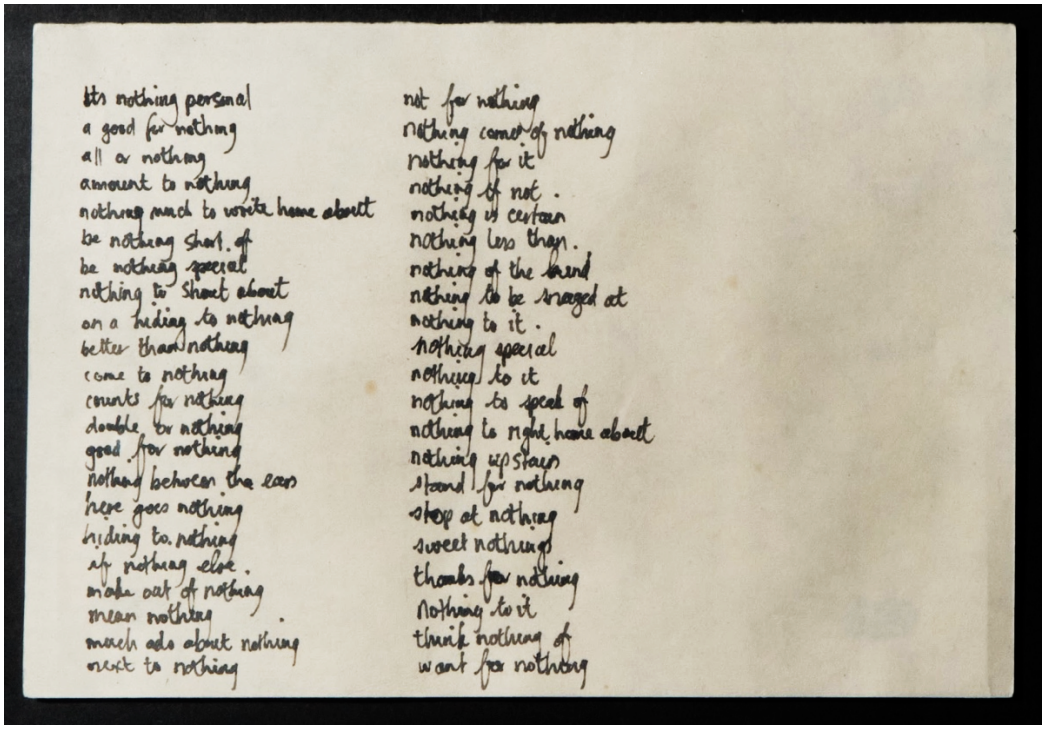


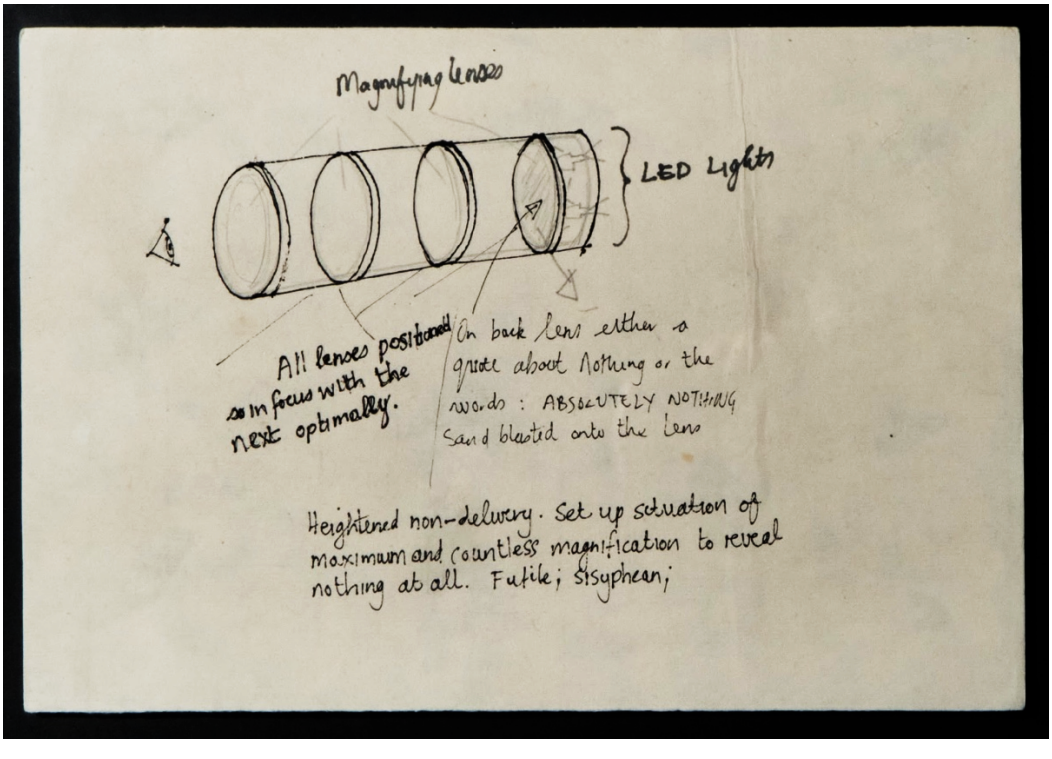
Drawing details from the 'Method Wall'



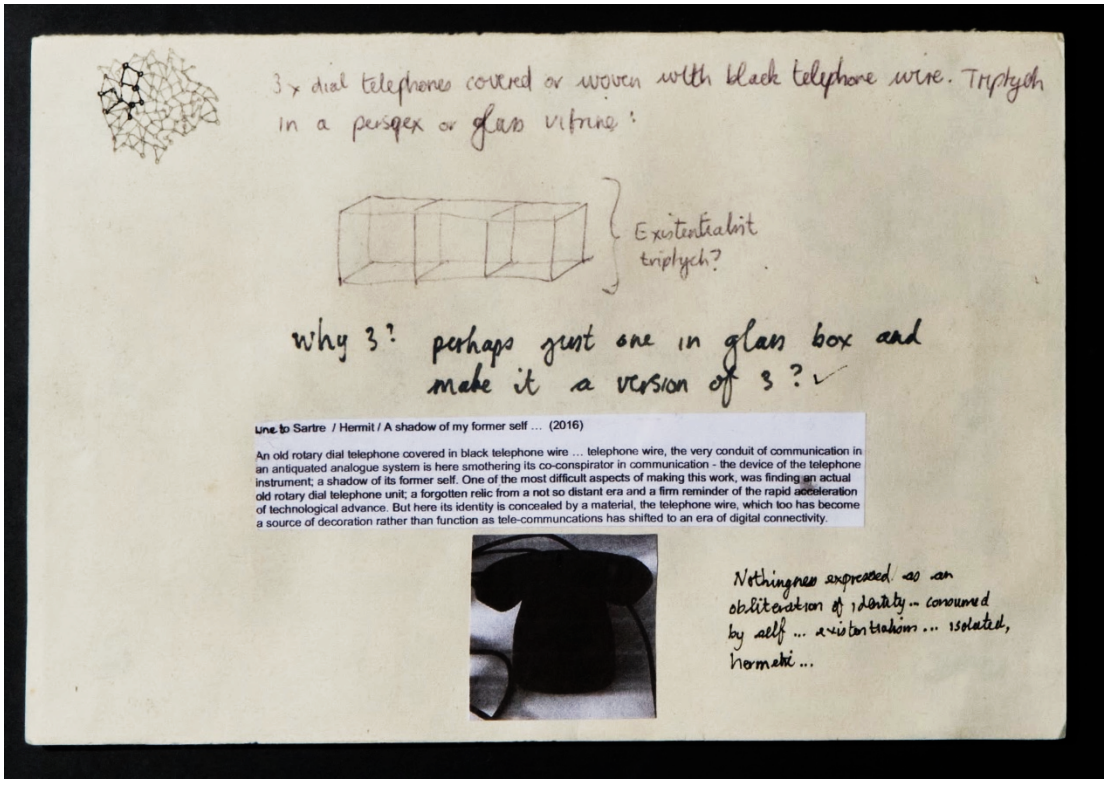


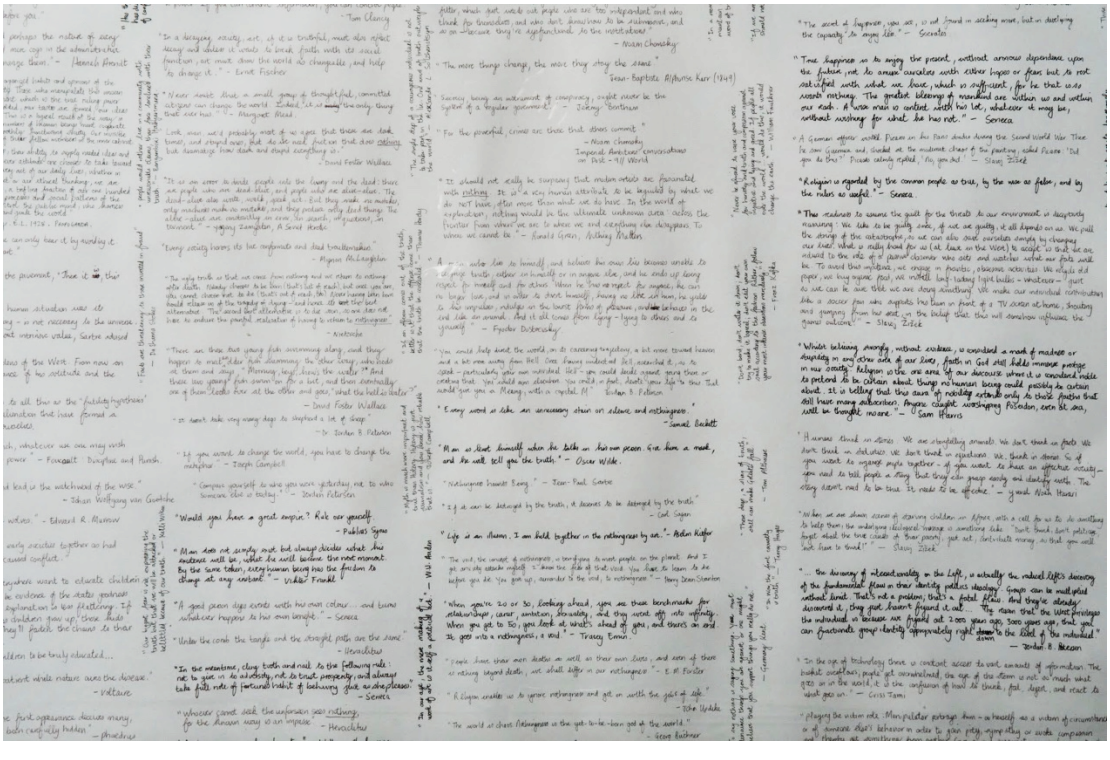
Drawing details from the 'Method Wall'





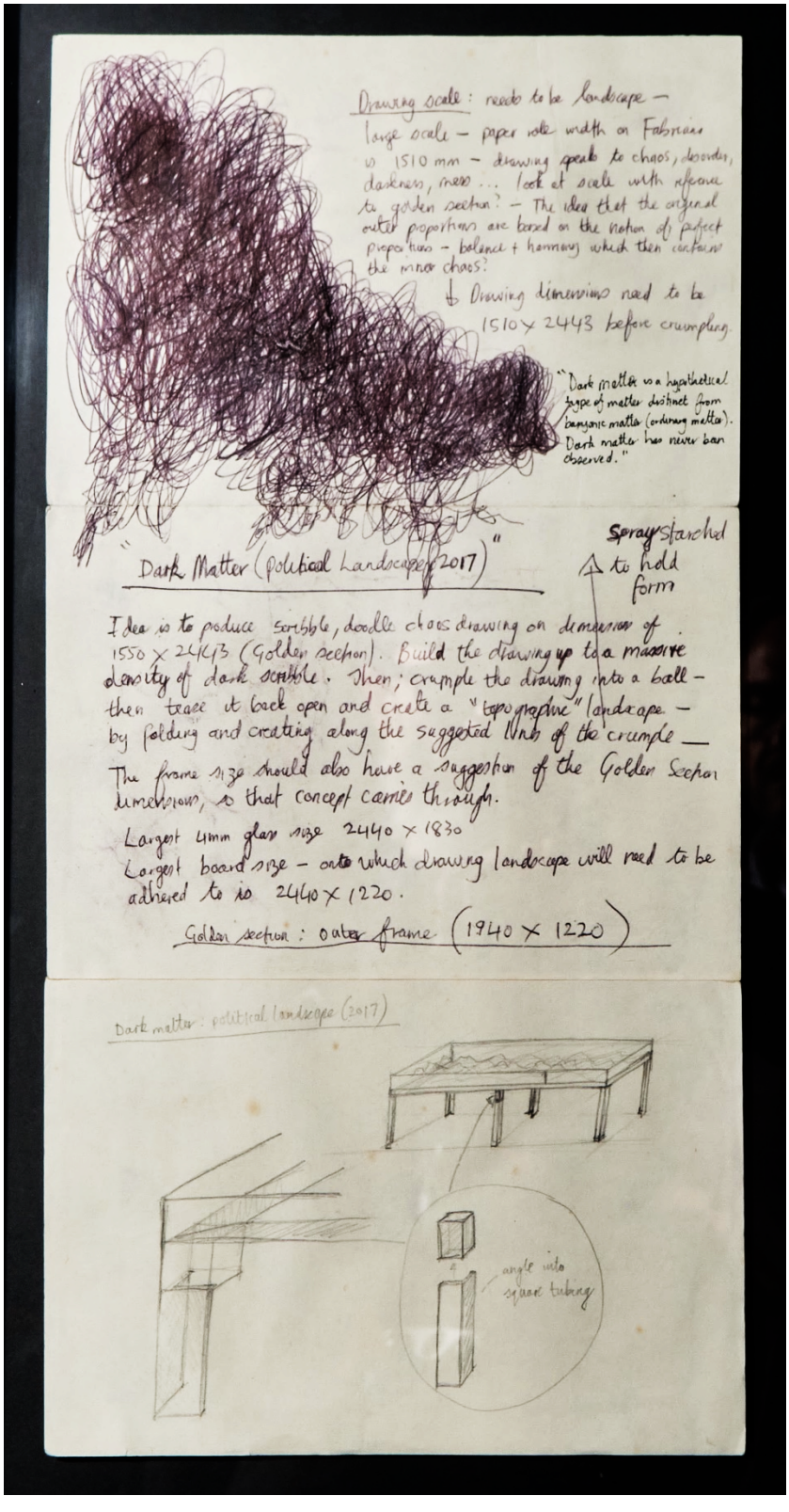
Drawing details from the 'Method Wall'



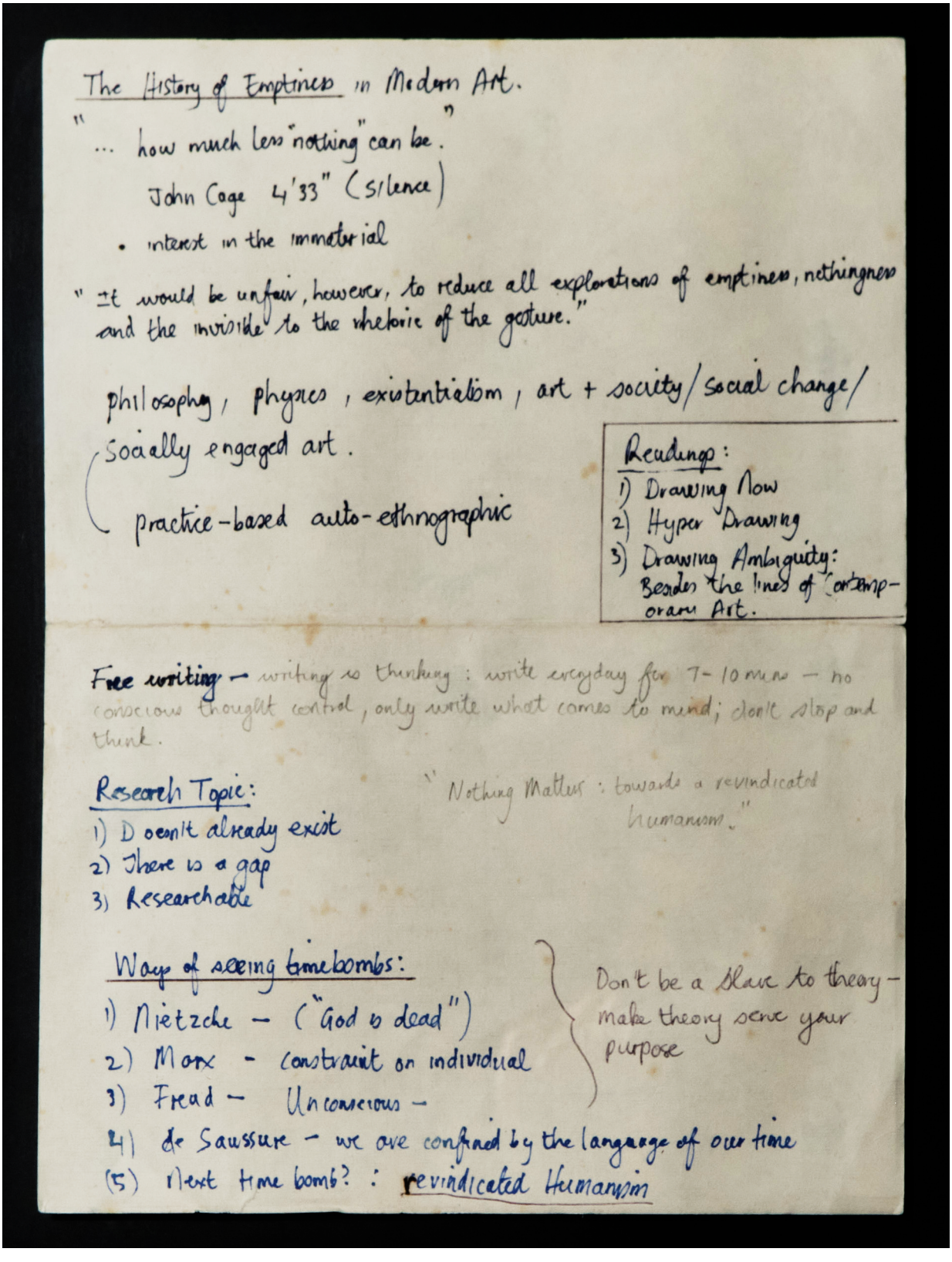


Drawing, text and quote details from the ‘Method Wall’

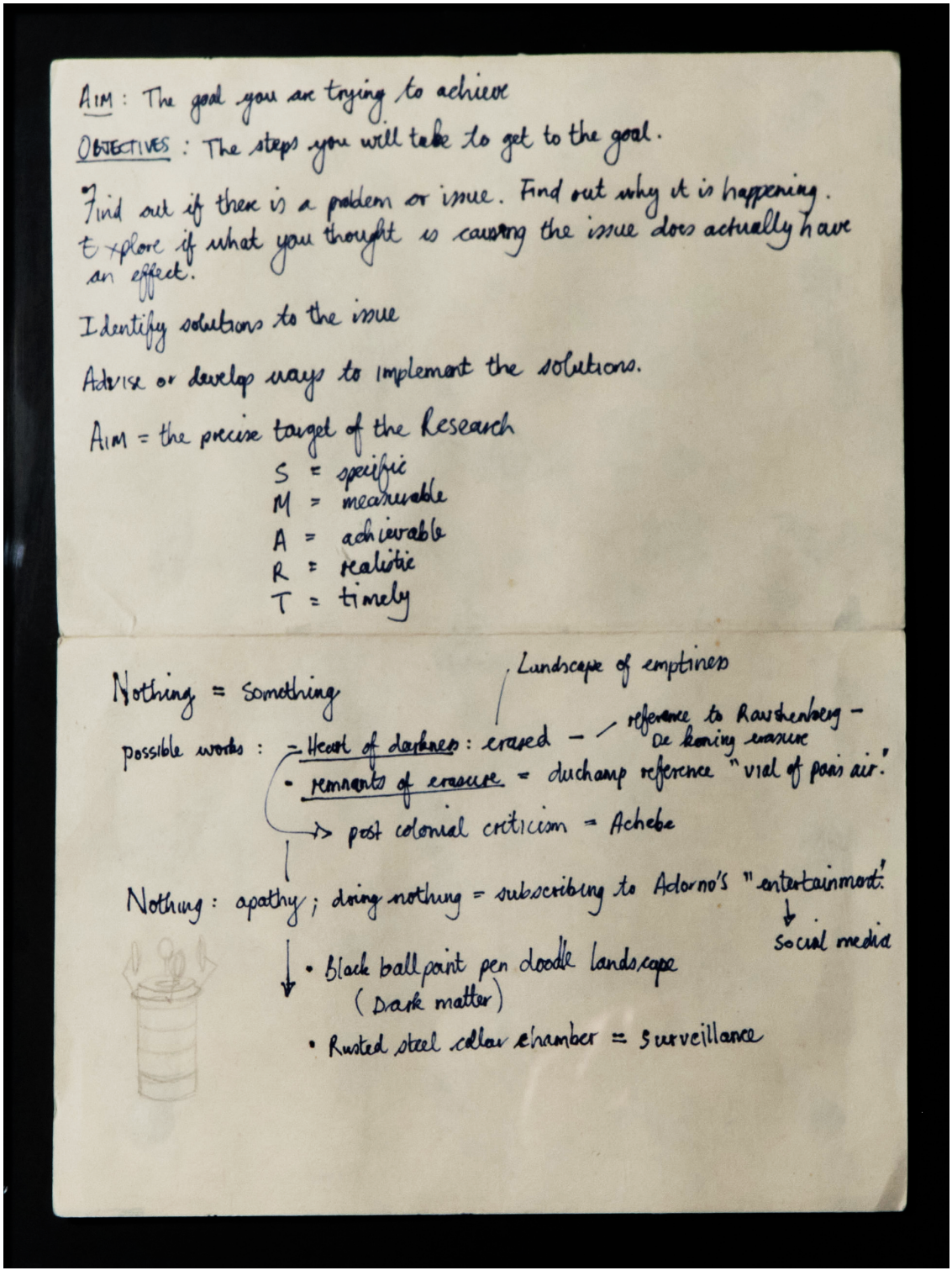
Context / installation view of the ‘Method Wall’: Quotes, sketches, text – processes of the creative act



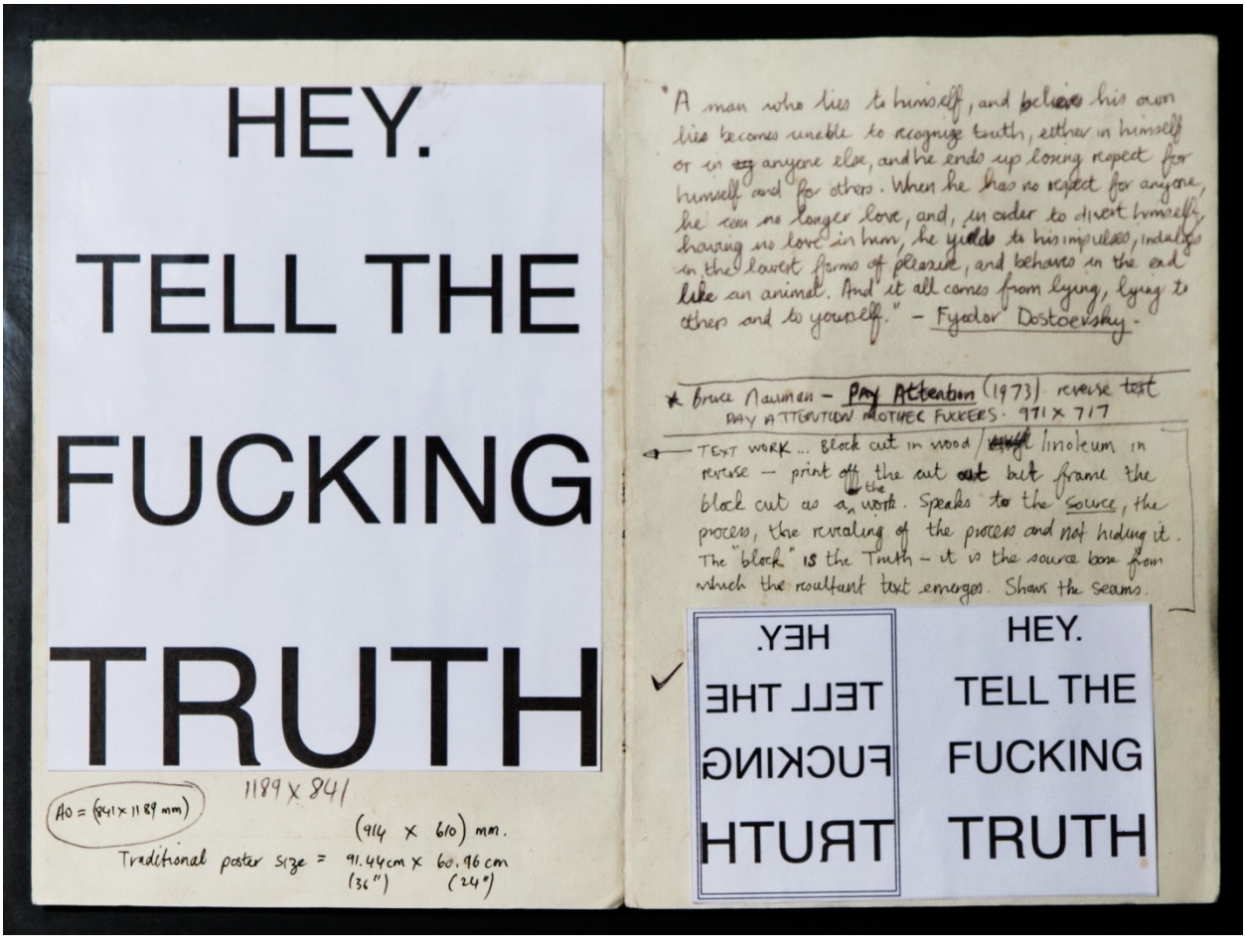
Drawing detail from the ‘Method Wall’



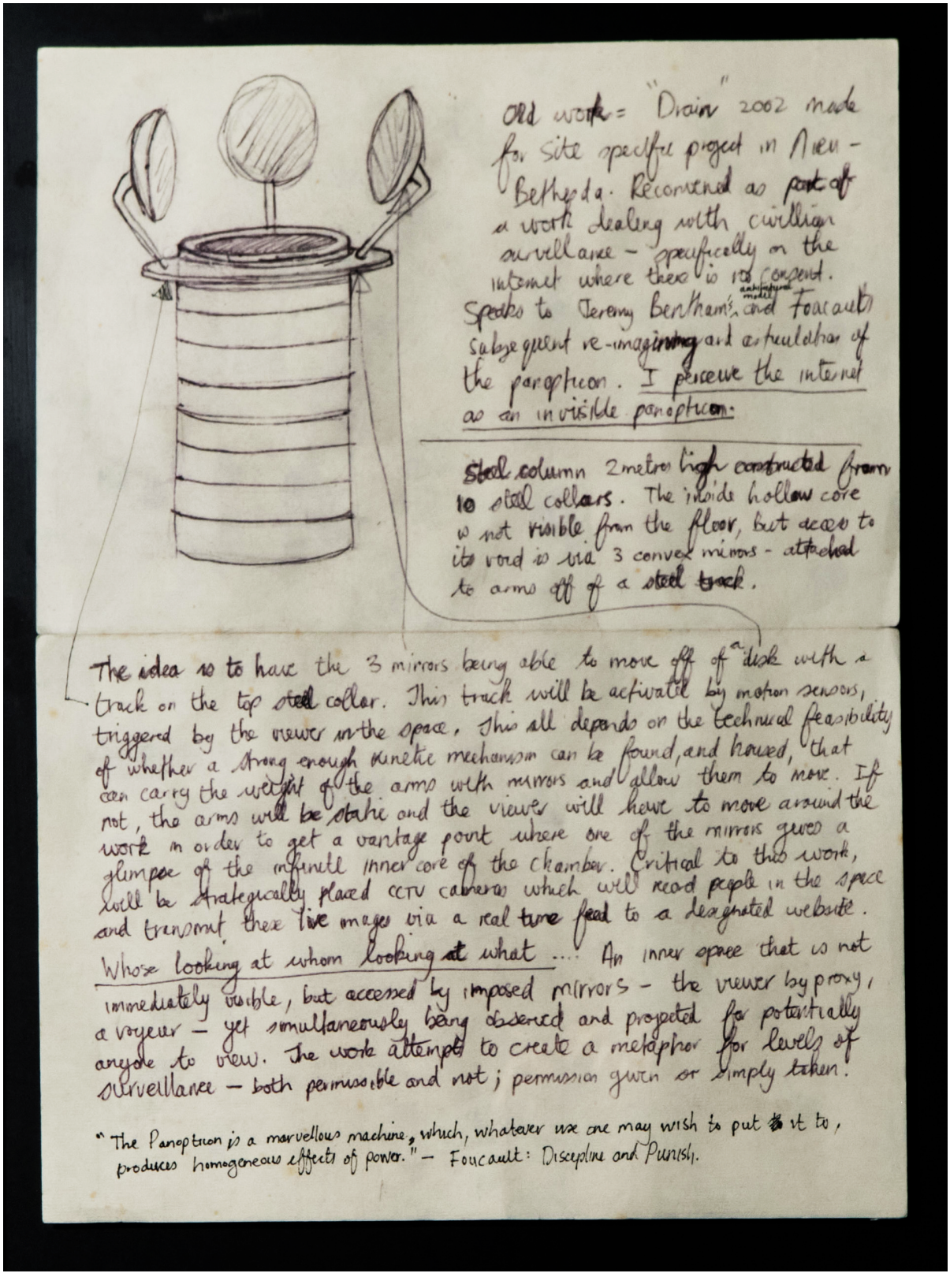
Drawing detail from the 'Method Wall'



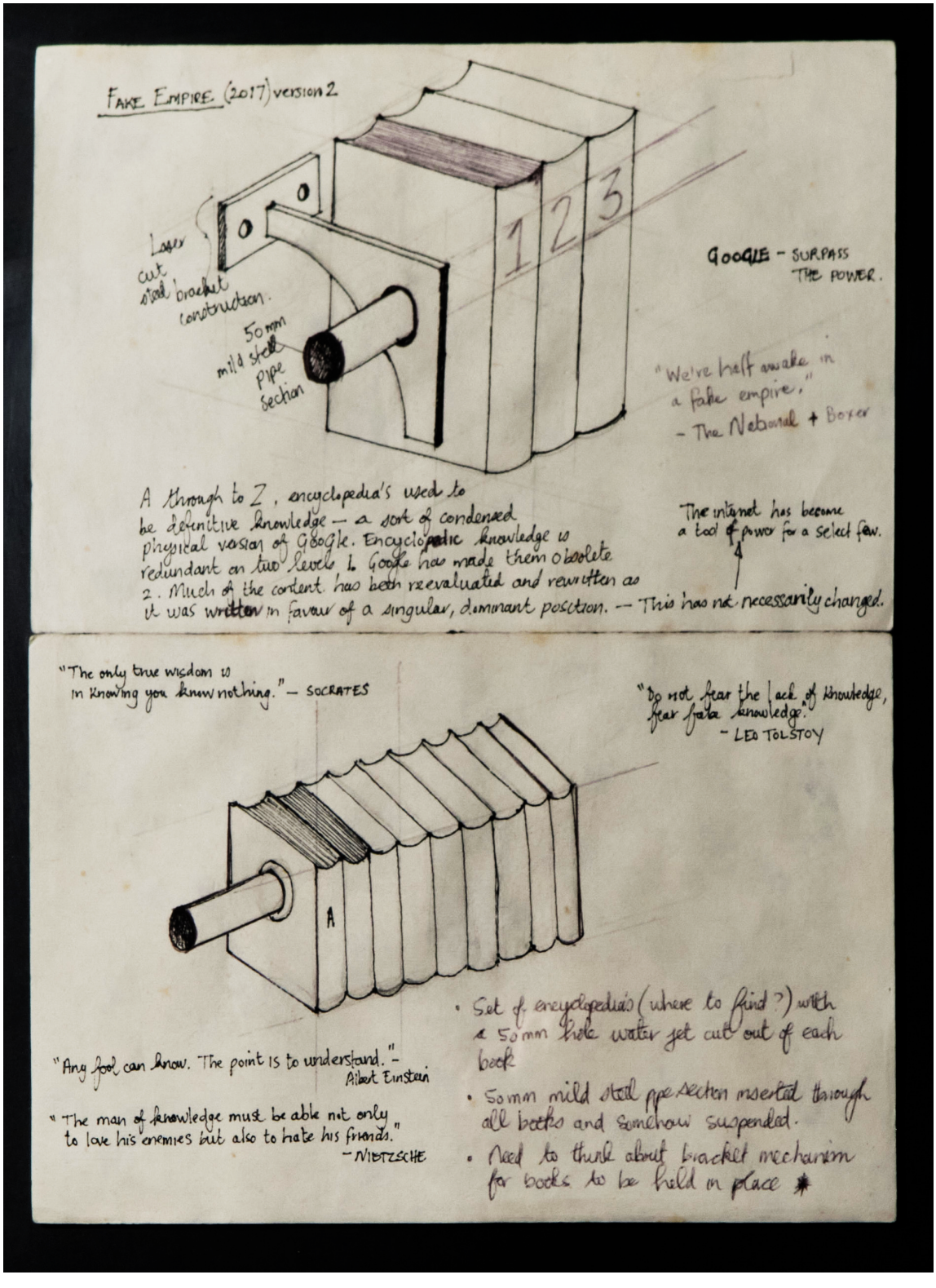
Drawing detail from the 'Method Wall'



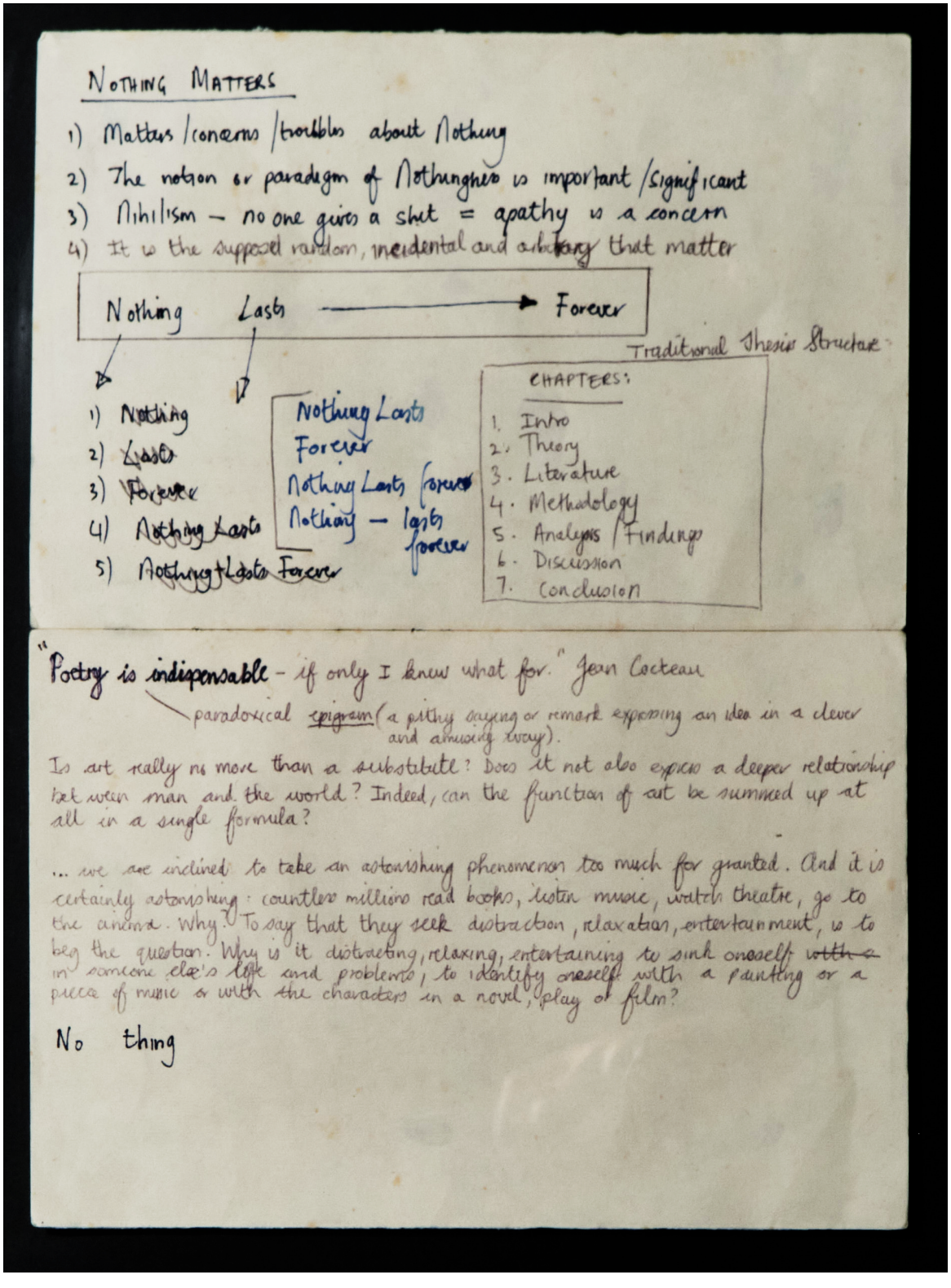
Drawing detail from the 'Method Wall'



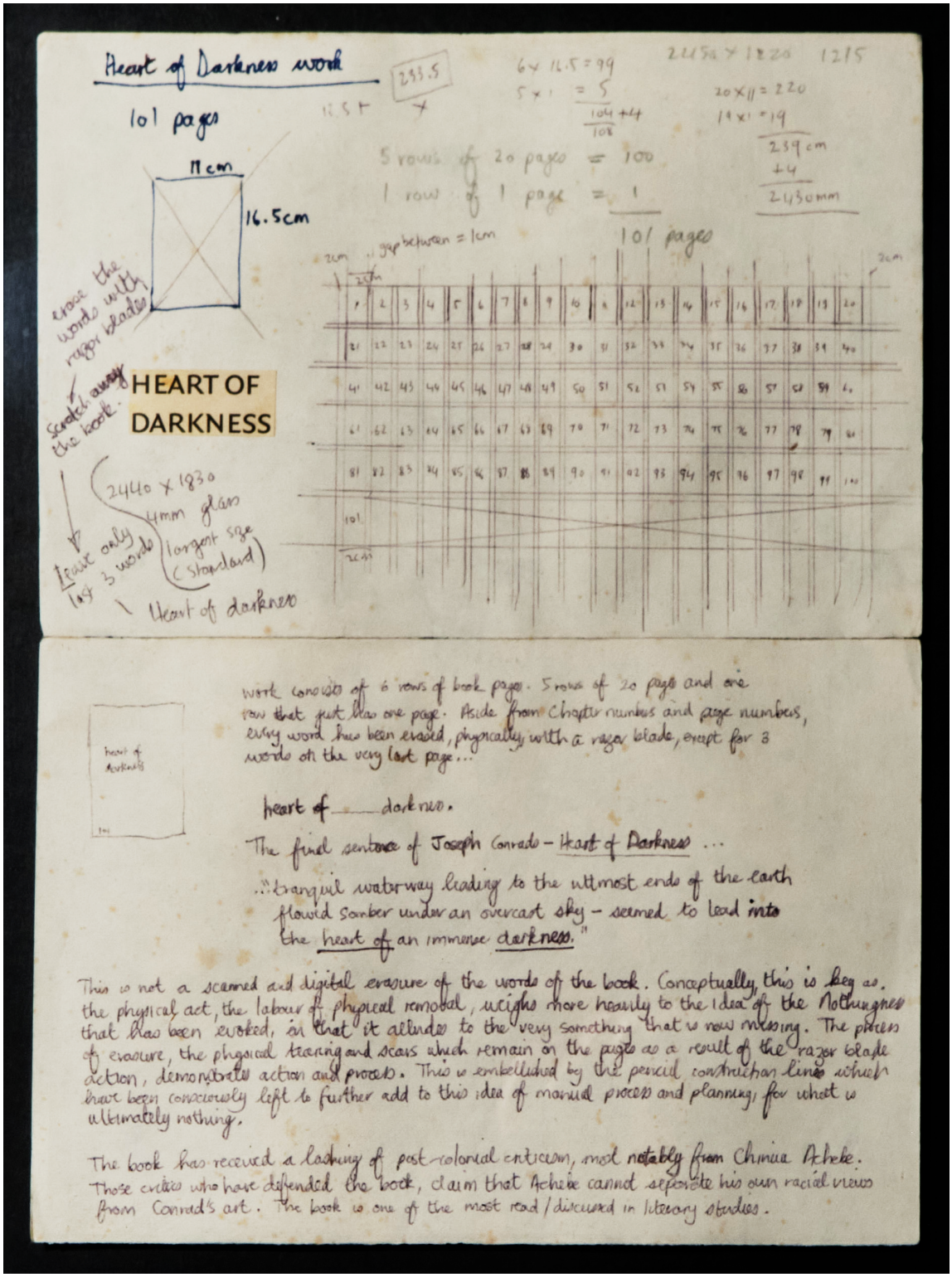
Drawing detail from the 'Method Wall'



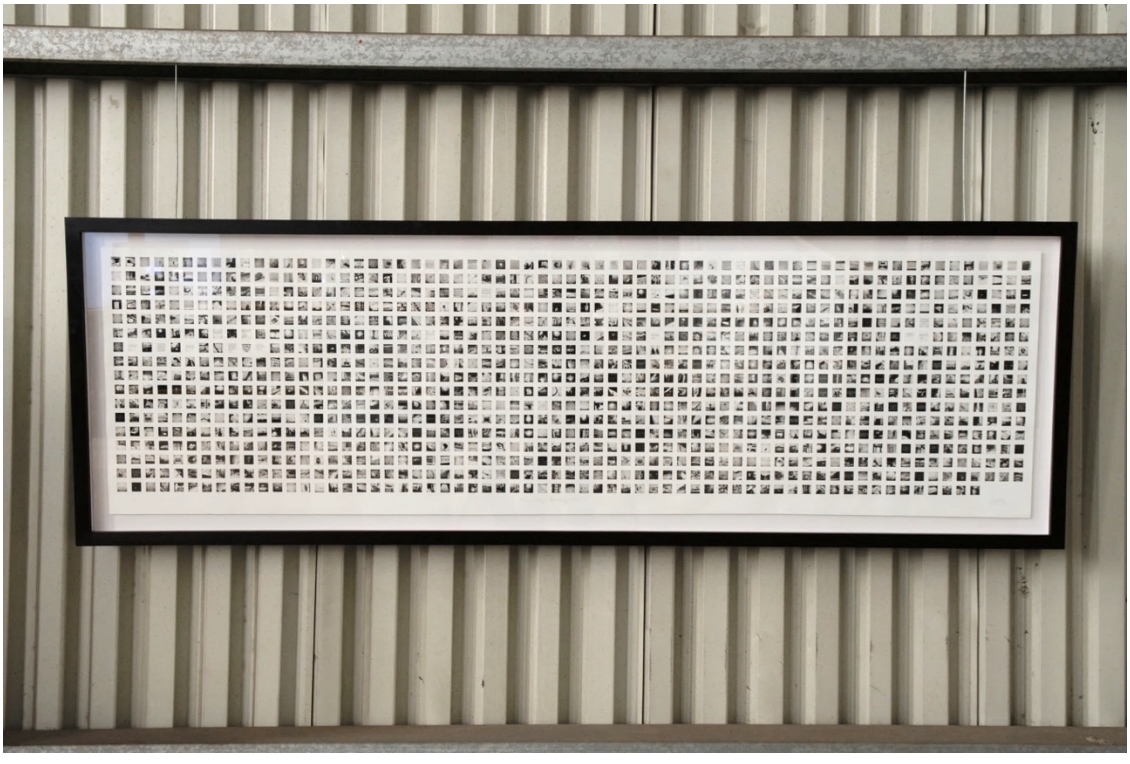
Drawing detail from the 'Method Wall'



Drawing detail from the 'Method Wall'



Drawing detail from the 'Method Wall'



Methodology Mosaic. 2016-2019. Part of the 'Method Wall'

Thumb-nail prints of 1 208 images, a 3-year process of photo documentation. Edited and collectively titled, *Nothing Matters.* Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 2150mm x 690mm

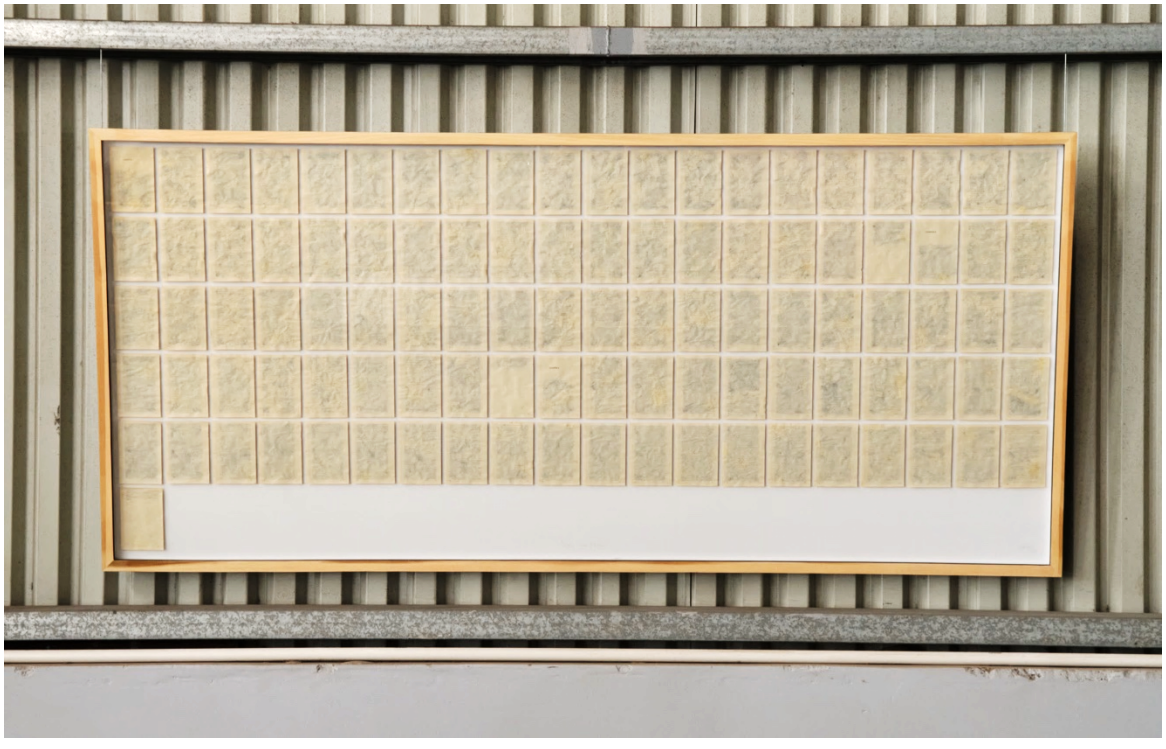
Detail of *Methodology Mosaic*. 2016-2019

Greg Streak. 2017. *Line to Sartre*

Rotary telephone, woven telephone wire, 5mm glass box, powder coated laser-cut / CNC bent mild steel bracket.
750mm x 350mm x 300mm

Greg Streak. 2017. *Line to Sartre*

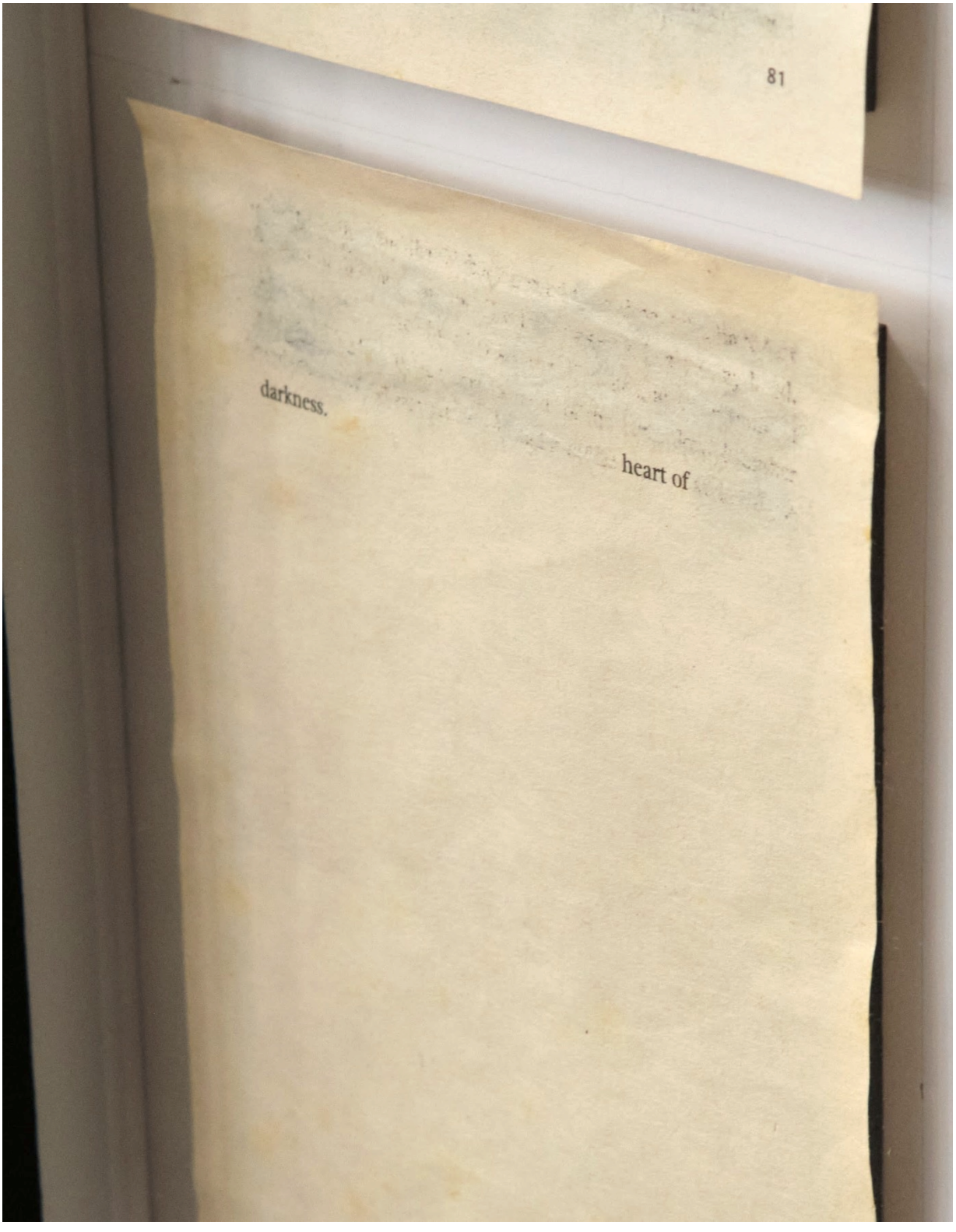
Detail from *Line to Sartre*



Greg Streak. 2017-2019. *Erasing a Heart of Darkness*

Scratched away pages from Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, foam core, box frame and glass. 2470mm x 1135mm x 50mm

Details of *Erasing a Heart of Darkness*



Detail of *Erasing a Heart of Darkness*

Greg Streak. 2019. *Cremation of a Heart of Darkness*

Blown glass, collected ‘ashes’ from scratching away Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*. 210mm x 100mm

Greg Streak. 2019. *Cremation of a Heart of Darkness*

Greg Streak. 2019. *Cremation of a Heart of Darkness*

Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void): Installation view

Greg Streak. 2019-2020. *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)*

Mild steel, convex mirrors, hidden CCTV camera. 3200mm x 1800mm

Greg Streak. 2019-2020. *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)*

Details from *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)*

Detail from *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)*

Greg Streak. 2017-2019. *Dark Matter (Political Landscape 2017-)*

Fabriano paper, black ball-point pen, birch ply box frame and glass, powder-coated mild steel table frame.
2425mm x 1250mm x 1000mm

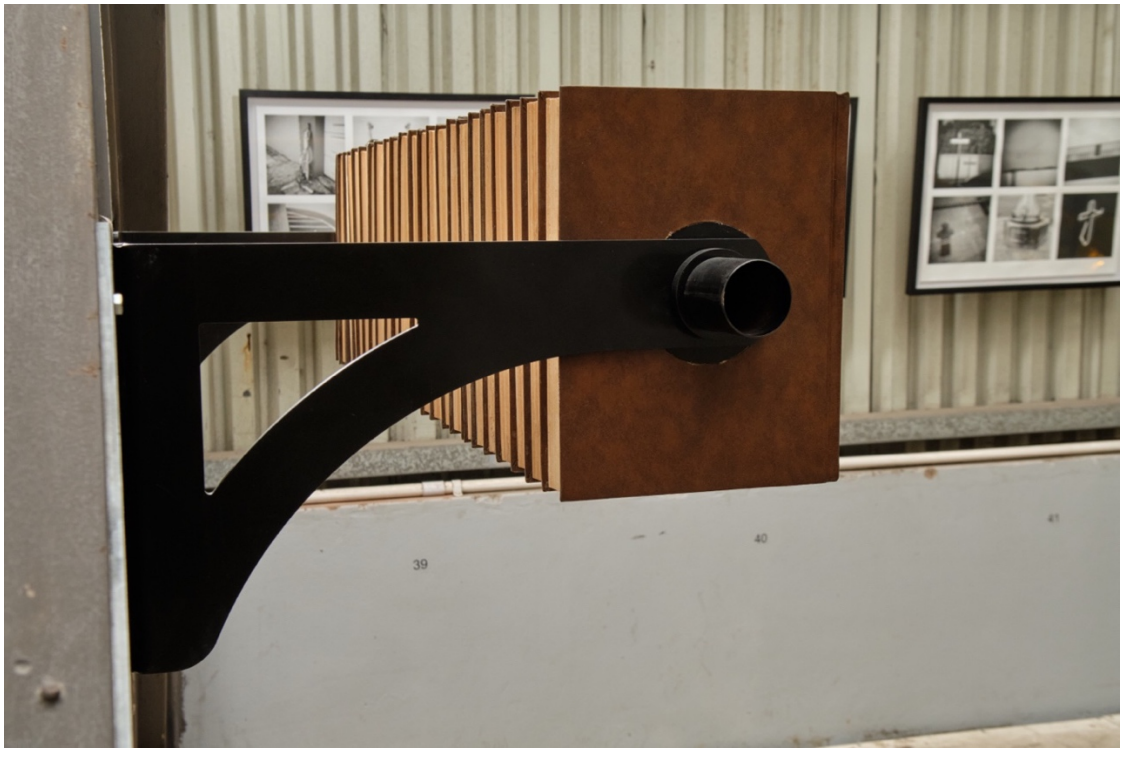
Details from *Dark Matter (Political Landscape 2017-)*

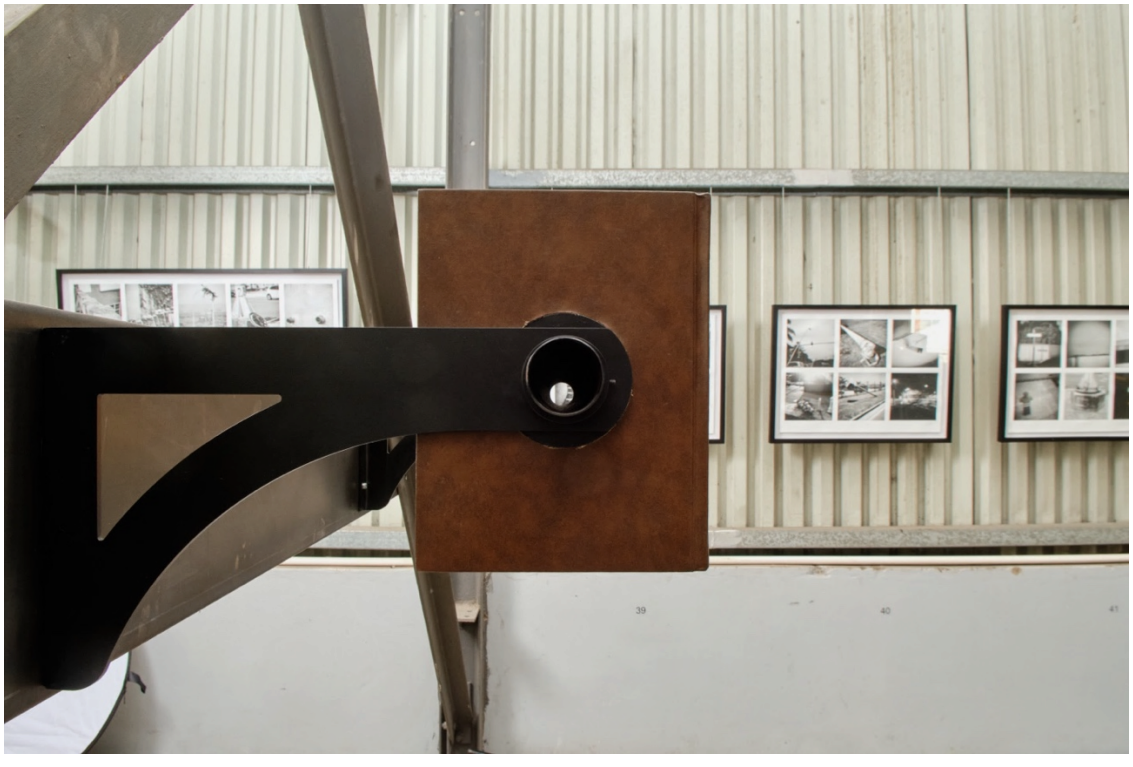
Details from *Dark Matter (Political Landscape 2017-)*

Greg Streak. 2019. *Fake Empire*

Set of water jet cut Britannica Encyclopedias, 50mm mild steel pipe, laser-cut and CNC bent mild steel brackets. 1200mm x 510mm x 370mm. 2nd in an edition of 3

Greg Streak. 2019. *Fake Empire:* Installation View



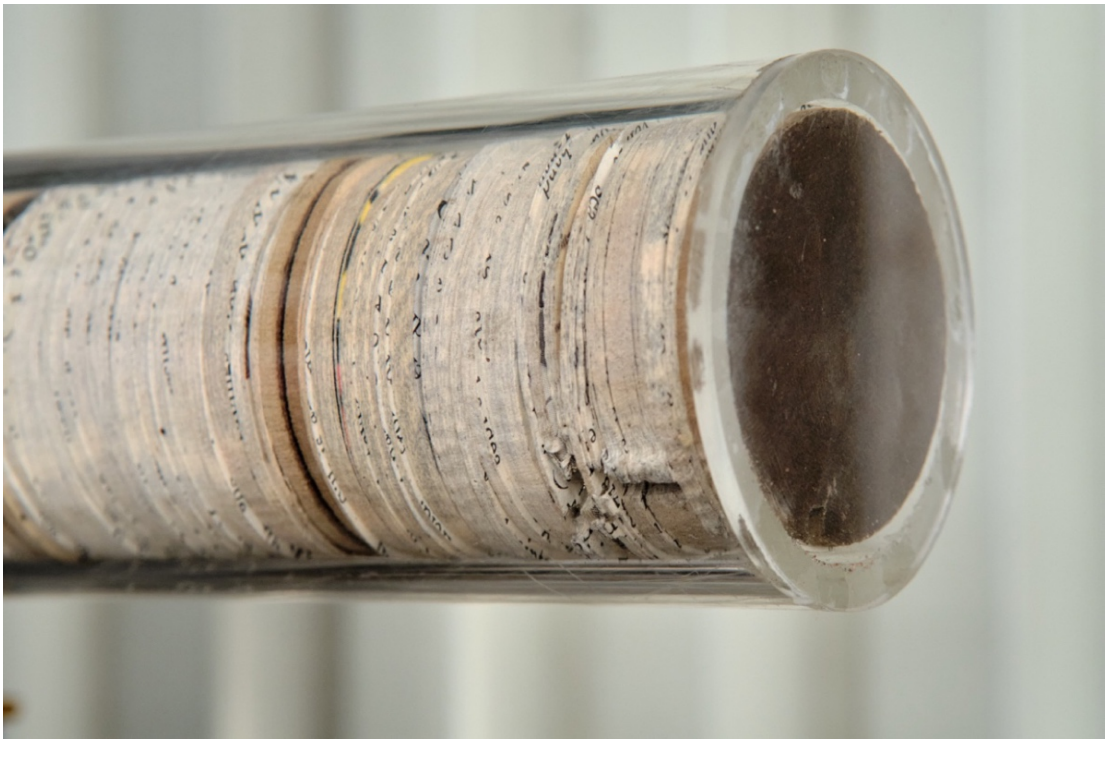


Details of *Fake Empire*

Detail of *Fake Empire*

Greg Streak. 2019. *Useless and Vital Information*

50mm acrylic tube, paper disks, laser-cut mild-steel, brass brackets. 1000mm x 60mm. 2nd in an edition of 3



Detail of *Useless and Vital Information*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Absence*

Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1200mm x 355mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Absence*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Alone*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1200mm x 570mm.

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Alone*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Anthropoid*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1200mm x 355mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Anthropoid*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Blind Spaces*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 985mm x 355mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Blind Spaces*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Broken*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1210mm x 1040mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Broken*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Collapse*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 765mm x 570mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Collapse*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Dead-ends*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1200mm x 355mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Dead-ends*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Details*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 985mm x 800mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Details*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Disemboweled*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 985mm x 1020mm

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Drain*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 765mm x 570mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Drain*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Echo*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1200mm x 355mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Echo*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Erase and Rewind*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1200mm x 355mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Erase and Rewind*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Expired*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 985mm x 800mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Expired*

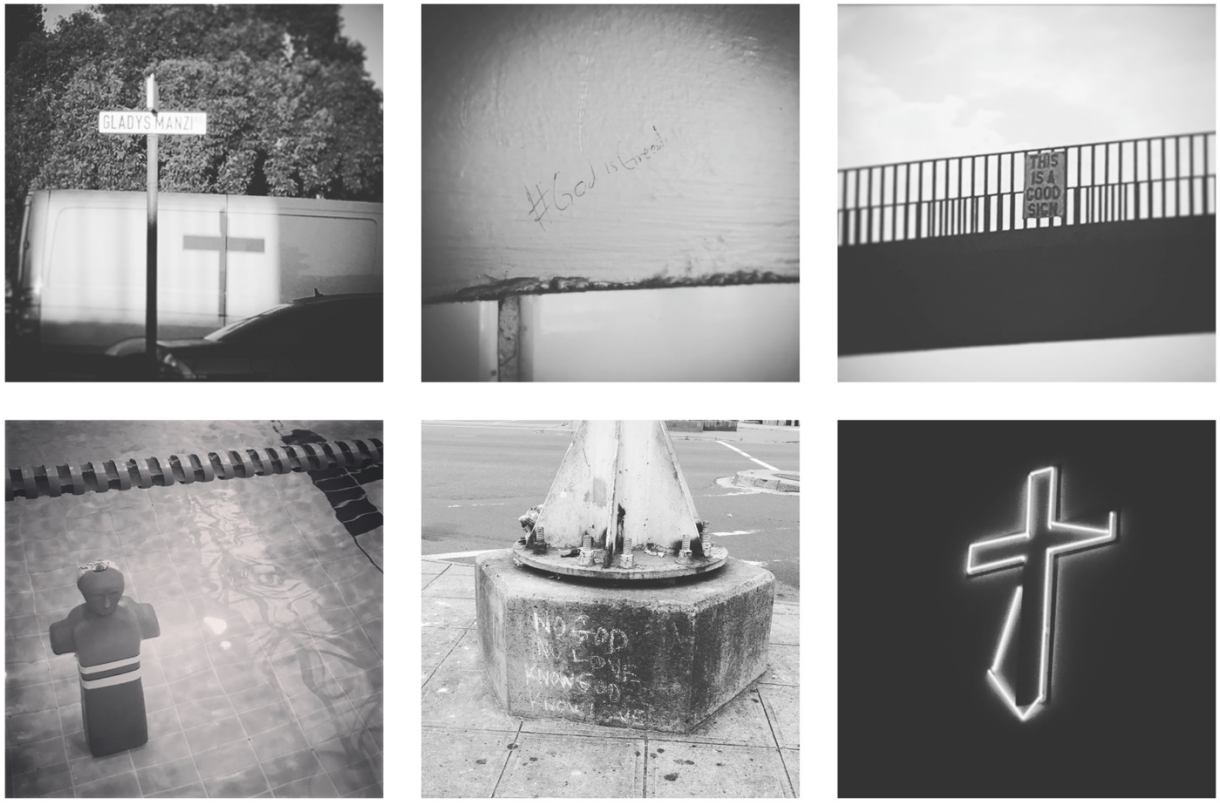
Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Exposed*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Fleeting*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1200mm x 355mm.

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Fleeting*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Forsaken*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 765mm x 570mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Forsaken*



Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: God*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 765mm x 570mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: God*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Inner*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 985mm x 355mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Inner*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Light*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 765mm x 570mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Light*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Liminal*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 985mm x 355mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Liminal*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Matrix*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 765mm x 790mm

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Misplaced*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 985mm x 800mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Misplaced*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Reflect*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 765mm x 355mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Reflect*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Scars*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1200mm x 570mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Scars*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Sisyphus*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1415mm x 570mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Sisyphus*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Vacant*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1200mm x 355mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Vacant*

Greg Streak. 2016-2019. *Nothing Matters: Waste*
Black and White digital print on archival paper, wood box frame and glass. 1200mm x 970mm

Detail from *Nothing Matters: Waste*

Greg Streak. 2021. *Dad*
Digital print, acrylic ink, embedded human ashes, box frame and glass. 300mm x 300mm

Detail from *Dad*