



An Art of Nothing, an Art of Something: The Local in the Global or the Global in the Local?

Greg Streak

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An Art of Nothing, an Art of Something: The Local in the Global or the Global in the Local?

Greg Streak

The solo exhibition, *Nothing Matters*, was installed on the mezzanine floor of an industrial panel beater warehouse at 400 Sydney Road, Durban, South Africa. The exhibition was open to the public from September–December 2021. The objective of the exhibition was to create ‘something’ of conceptual and aesthetic compulsion from a language of nothingness, whether it is ‘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 following is a dialogue between literary critic Michael Chapman and artist Greg Streak regarding the exhibition.

Keywords: nothingness in art; local; global; truth-telling

*Michael Chapman:*¹ An exhibition in the middle of a pandemic! Unusual, but no more unusual than the exhibition space: the mezzanine floor – if mezzanine is not too grand a word – in a panel-beating shop in Durban’s Sydney Road, a road of industrial warehouses. And then, the title of the exhibition, *Nothing Matters*. The sound of heavy vehicles entering and leaving the warehouse, sounds as if something matters despite the lockdown.

Greg Streak: Well, the industrial setting for an art exhibition might seem anomalous, but not really. There is a well-established precedence of artists making use of ‘alternative’ spaces, that is, not the conventional gallery space, most prominently in the 1960s in the United States where artists actively boycotted the art galleries which they saw as repositories endorsing the excessive commodification of the artwork. My solo exhibition, *Nothing Matters* (2021), comprised a range of small- and large-scale objects that incorporated drawing, photography, sculptural works and ‘found’ objects, all produced between 2017 and 2021. Industrial material figures largely in the objects, the found objects having been moved from everyday settings and re-positioned within the title of the exhibition, the title itself embodying a paradox. How to create something of conceptual and aesthetic compulsion in the surrounding temper of the public space or, in art, in various manifestations of the ‘dematerialised object’: the void; the blank canvas, empty gallery or thin air.

MC: Given that the works reflect the grit of the public space – the ‘raw’ outside world – the exposed steel girders, bracing substrates, and corrugated walls of the exhibition space are integral to the conceptual impetus of the work.

GS: My work tries to position itself within the brutality of this location. As part of my display, I included a ‘Method Wall’ (Figure 1). This consisted 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. The ‘Wall’, therefore, offered 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.



Figure 1. Method Wall (detail).

MC: The ‘brutality’ of the location notwithstanding, the first work that I look at has a somewhat esoteric title, *Line to Sartre*.

GS: In the initial stages of the project, my preoccupations turned to the more existential interpretations of nothingness, and what nothing could infer. My investigations 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 a more conceptual consideration. *Line to Sartre* (2017) was one of the first works in this endeavour (Figure 2). 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 (the telephone device) and the raw materials (the 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 almost every sense, then, this work aligns with Duchamp's ethos, principally that the idea is foremost. At the same time, the idea is linked to an 'aesthetic' in the choice and presentation of the material.



Figure 2. *Line to Sartre*.

MC: What is the idea?

GS: I can't 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'. But 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 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.

MC: Your eclectic mix of materials – weaving, plastic, metals – reminds me of Andries Botha's work of the late 1980s, particularly his monumental *Dromedaris, donder en ander Dom Ding*e

(1988), suggesting that the 17th-century arrival of Van Riebeeck's ships signalled the beginning of a history of conflict. But let me also draw a distinction between *Dromedaris ...* and *Line to Sartre* – Botha's work is unambiguously political.

GS: In *Dromedaris ...* Botha captured the politics of the 'struggle' years, sharp in alternatives. Our politics today is often more ambiguously entwined in the wider world. If I may turn to *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)* (2019–2020), a work consisting of a steel column, 2000 mm in height and 720 mm in diameter (Figure 3). 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. Or, indeed, surveillance from above. There are three convex mirrors, each 600 mm 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.

There are many 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: The Void, made in 1958*. 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. The full title 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?



Figure 3. Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void).

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 h 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 h of broadcast, the Chinese authorities ordered the shut-down of the website, which had over 5 million views in those two days.

The mischievous graffiti artist, known as Banksy, has also 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. 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.

While constructing *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)*, I listened 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 my inspiration for this work.

MC: Global, certainly. But what about the local? Is surveillance a preoccupation of the South African public space? Even if it were, is the state, shambolic as it is, capable of systematic surveillance?

GS: 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. 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 'authority' 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 (Figure 4). It appeared to be embedded in the wall with a protruding front-draw section. The 24 drawers had empty name plates and drawer handles, none of the drawers obviously open.



Figure 4. Detail of *Archive for Amnesia*.

With global surveillance in the news, the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg 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. *Me, Looking at You, Looking at Me (The Void)* attempts to allow viewers 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 a warning.

I take your point, however: global, certainly, but what about the local? Given a Western art canon of diverse stylistic, philosophical, and conceptual achievement, artists in South Africa have had much on which to draw with regards the possibilities of representation, or so it may seem. As far as an art of the idea, or Conceptual Art, is concerned, one could argue that Duchamp’s purchasing of a urinal at a plumbing shop and having it installed in an art gallery is not very different from 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).

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 deduce that Duchamp in 1917 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? A counterargument could be that if Duchamp’s object had not been granted the status of art, Hirst would not have been able to envisage his ‘shark tank’ as a work of art.

Be that as it may, the point is that we – conceptual artists, whether in South Africa or elsewhere – are indebted to Duchamp but are not necessarily 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 1919 [1962]: 295). Andries Botha’s inventive use of Western and African materials and perceptions gave us something new. I hope that I’ve ‘slightly altered’ what other conceptual artists have produced.

MC: Eliot’s observations seem pertinent to two works that allude to my own field of literary studies.

GS: In *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 (Figure 5). I’m 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 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:

- To what end; what would this represent conceptually?
- What book, and could the choice of book perhaps be the answer to my first question?
- 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 on the African continent, my own context; and thirdly, it has received retrospective criticism from a postcolonial lens, most notably from Chinua Achebe who firmly stated that 'Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist' (1977: 788), an opinion that has been strenuously defended and strenuously refuted.

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 its 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 last page of the book, in the last sentence, where it says, 'the heart of an immense darkness', I left the three words 'heart of darkness', thereby attaching the empty pages to an invocation of the title.

From the outset, I noticed that in erasing the words, a fine dust 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.

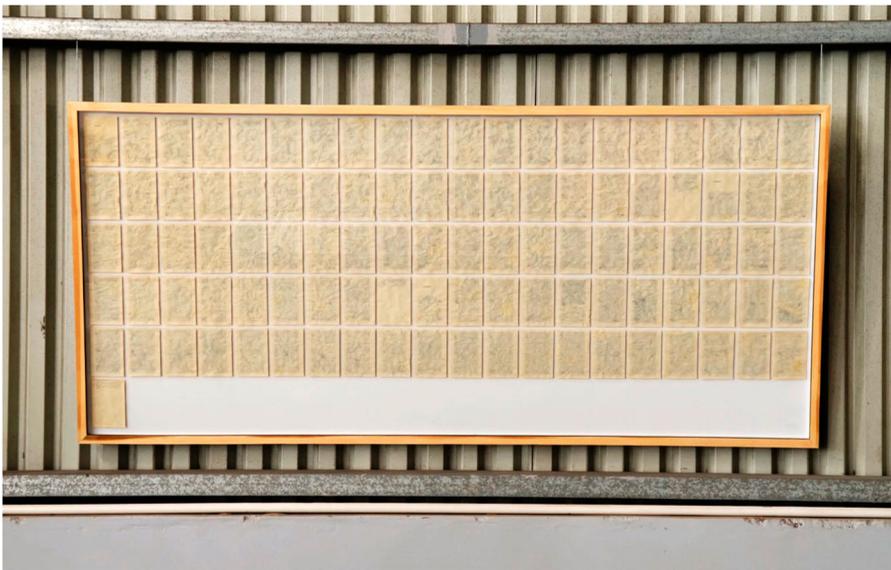


Figure 5. Erasing a Heart of Darkness.

Apropos my comment on the influence of Western art traditions, *Erasing the Heart of Darkness* 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. 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 the work setting out to redefine art through the deliberate cancellation of the work of an esteemed precursor, Rauschenberg 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 at 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. 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.

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. The process of making, however, suggested additional possibilities. In 1919, Duchamp created a work titled *50cc of Paris Air*, which was ostensibly a sealed-glass phial containing, as the title states, 50 cc of air from the city of Paris. In 1970, John Baldessari burnt 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 a recipe for making cookies!

My work, *Cremating a Heart of Darkness* (2017–2019), consists of a glass phial, blown to the shape that deliberately mirrors Duchamp's ampoule of 1919 and containing the dust from the pages of Conrad's book (Figure 6). Or, like Baldessari's material 'dematerialised' to nought. My contribution, however, is less about what is art, and more about the possibilities of what 'nothing' can imply. In this respect, the work has resonance with some of the work of the British artist Cornelia Parker, particularly her work *Exhaled Cocaine* (1996), in which she 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 added the label, *With thanks to HM Customs & Excise*. The pile of incinerated cocaine suggests multiple conceptual allusions for the viewing public to explore.



Figure 6. Cremating a Heart of Darkness.

Similarly, *Cremating a Heart of Darkness* wishes to push perceptual possibilities. Unlike *Exhaled Cocaine*, however, my title ties the work to a more specific political purpose than to an allusion to a recreational drug. Placed in juxtaposition, the two 'Heart of Darkness' works are meant to provoke thought about an ugly colonial past that still invokes fierce debate. A

history that deserves to be obliterated into nothingness, accordingly, retains the presence of something that is necessary for us not to forget.

MC: The politics of the local infusing the politics of the global. Or rather, politics talk embodied in art talk ... ²

GS: A dialectical tension between the artefact and the idea – a tension that I seek in my own practice – can be traced back, as I've suggested, to the founding inspirations of what we now call Conceptual Art. By rejecting, or at least modifying, the autonomous object (modernism) and replacing its significance with the idea or concept, we entered a 'postmodernism' of endless interpretation, of relativism and parody. Whereas modernism struggled to hold things together even as things wanted to fall apart, postmodernism revels in the 'disorder' of things over and above any notion of universal truth. In tracing the genres attributed to 'nothingness' – the 'eloquence of absence' (see Brennan 2011), say – we inevitably map a route back to Duchamp's 'readymades'. The difficulty is how to go forward from such a weight of 'tradition'.

MC: You've suggested ways forward not only in your own work, but also in the work of Banksy and Parker, to name but two. You also mentioned the Chinese activist-artist, Ai Weiwei. Here's a point I'd like us to pursue. Would it be fair to say that Conceptual Art in the metropole, or let us say, the global North, is more 'postmodernistically' inspired – the fetishes of consumer excess, say – less substantively socio-political than Conceptual Art in the global South?

GS: A generalisation, perhaps, but a useful pointer. In 1968 the Argentinean artist, Graciela Carnevale, transformed the 'empty gallery' – a recurrent metaphor of Conceptual Art practice – 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.

The empty, or apparently unoccupied, gallery also features in the work of the Slovakian artist Roman Ondák. His *More Silent Than Ever* (2006) addresses the memory of a culture of surveillance under the former Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. 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. As I have suggested, surveillance is no longer the preserve of dictatorial regimes, but is an omnipresence of the contemporary AI (artificial intelligence) world. Nonetheless, there is an urgency of purpose in the works of Carnevale and Ondák that 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.

MC: Given such observations, where do you stand as an artist?

GS: As a Fine Art student in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was subjected to an onslaught of '-isms', most intrusively by postmodernism together with a dose of the poststructural 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 – Jean Francois Lyotard’s scepticism towards metanarratives, the metanarrative in South Africa being apartheid. Then, as now, the artworld 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.³

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 the work 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. 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.

The series, *Proposals for Where I Would Like to Live* (1997–1998), was made during my stay in Amsterdam. Each work had a number (1 through 7) attached to the common title, distinctions residing in different subtitles, all inferring 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 7). 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 (Figure 8). 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.

As the 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.)



Figure 7. Proposals for Where I Would Like to Live: Outside, Upright.

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. My practice continued to posit alternative ways of negotiating a personal response to the unfolding socio-political climate, both locally and globally.⁴ It would have been remiss for an artist to have been too inward, given that in South Africa – as both of us have suggested – 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.

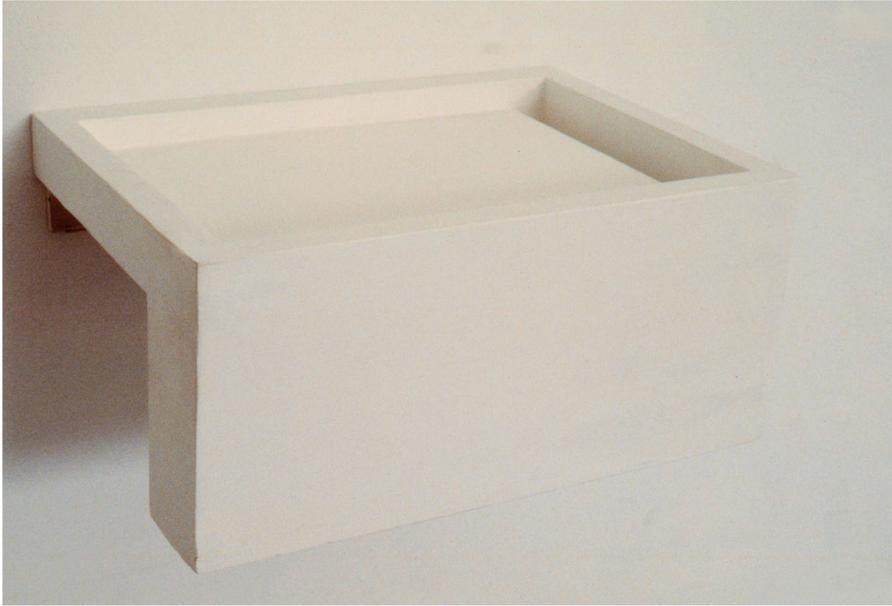


Figure 8. Proposals for Where I Would Like to Live: Inside, Upside Down.

MC: So, the local in the global or the global in the local?

GS: ‘Glocal’? 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 cut the paper size down to the dimensions of 2443×1510 mm, 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.

The resultant work, *Dark Matter (Political Landscape 2017–)* suggests a discordant public space (Figure 9). 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. Hence, the paradox at the core of the exhibition, encapsulated in the title, *Nothing Matters*.



Figure 9. *Dark Matter (Political Landscape 2017-)* detail.

MC: This ‘glocal’ unhinging that you speak of, the discordant public space; do you have any sense of what factors are contributing to this ‘madness’?

GS: ‘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. 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. 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 (2019) consists of a set of encyclopaedias suspended from a mild-steel bracket that is attached to the wall (Figure 10). A 50 mm 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 10. Fake Empire (2019).

When one considers Lyotard’s own comment on his magnum opus, *The Postmodern 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. As Anderson stated:

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’. (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, to quote Coaston:

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 which 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).

MC: I think it was the Slovenian philosopher and researcher Slavoj Žižek who has repeatedly asserted that ‘The most efficient lies are lies with truth, lies which reproduce only factual data’ (2019: n.p.).

GS: Indeed. 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 pre-disposed 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.

MC: I presume that the work *Useless and Vital Information* (2019) (Figure 11) is a companion piece of sorts to *Fake Empire* and in which you seem to continue probing this area of ‘information packaging’ and control?



Figure 11. Useless and Vital Information (2019).

GS: Yes, a similar contribution, 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* and *Useless and Vital Information* speak, I hope, to the difficulties of truth-telling in our times.

Notes on Contributor

Greg Streak is a lecturer in Fine Arts at the Durban University of Technology. He is an interdisciplinary practitioner working in sculpture, video, installation, and documentary filmmaking. He completed his practice-based PhD in Visual and Performing Arts in 2021. Streak sees the practice of art as a form of critical inquiry, a conceptually reflective research.

Disclosure Statement

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Notes

1. Michael Chapman is a leading literary critic whose publications include *Southern African Literatures* (1996) and, most recently, *On Literary Attachment in South Africa: Tough Love* (2022). His collection of essays, *Art Talk, Politics Talk* (2006), includes ‘The Artist and the Citizen: Complimenting/Complementing Andries Botha’.
2. *Art Talk, Politics Talk* (2006), includes ‘The Artist and the Citizen: Complimenting/Complementing Andries Botha’.
3. 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.
4. 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 publication *10 Years, 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa* (2004), edited by Sophie Perryer, in which a selection of my work appears. Yet by the term ‘democratic’ had begun to lose its confident attachment to the hopes of a ‘new’ nation.

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