

CONTEMPLATIONS  
WRITINGS  
TRACES

# SOIL CONVER SATIONS





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# CONCEPT\*

Soil Conversations presents a series of propositions, stretching over time and space. Concerning history and possible futures while thinking with soil as something rhizomatic – it questions the concept of linearity, making a case for the interstitial. What does it mean to think with – and of – soil as a space of meaning and identity making? As a space for excavation? And as an archive of history and a political actor?

Under the proposition: “soil is everything” the exhibition offers a look at the granularity of the ground we stand and build life on, as a moment of close observation, where details, parts and particles become traces of a whole. Following the rationale of the relationship between us and earth, the exhibition looks at soil as a planetary boundary and as connecting tissue between material politics and social theory. If we think of the terrestrial as a political actor, then it becomes possible to think about soil through art – grounded in a multiplicity of narratives, knowledges and materials the artists chose to work with.

Soil has often been negotiated as both, public good and private property and with that, has stirred many debates around the rights of access and movement of people, as well as the rights of nature. A notorious historical example for the fight for soil is the Berlin Conference 1884-1885, and the subsequent haphazard division of the African continent amongst the colonial powers. However, contemporary situations of displacement and the rise of migration between borders by people who have been displaced from their home countries, add new nuances and textures to debates about homelands and the right to movement.

As a resource, soil continues to be exploited for its precious metals and capacities. As territory, soil forms the geography by which we identify ourselves and as a concept, it is an embodied mixture of nurture, trauma and cycles of life. In that breath, Soil Conversations follows Puig de la Bellacasa’s observation that: In contrast with visions of exhausted soils prey to a voracious humanity eating its nest, transformative involvements with soil’s aliveness assert the ecological significance of human – soil interdependency and disrupt persistent binaries between living and inert, species and belonging, the earthly and the spiritual, endurance and breakdown, the cosmic and the domestic, knowledge and mystery.\*

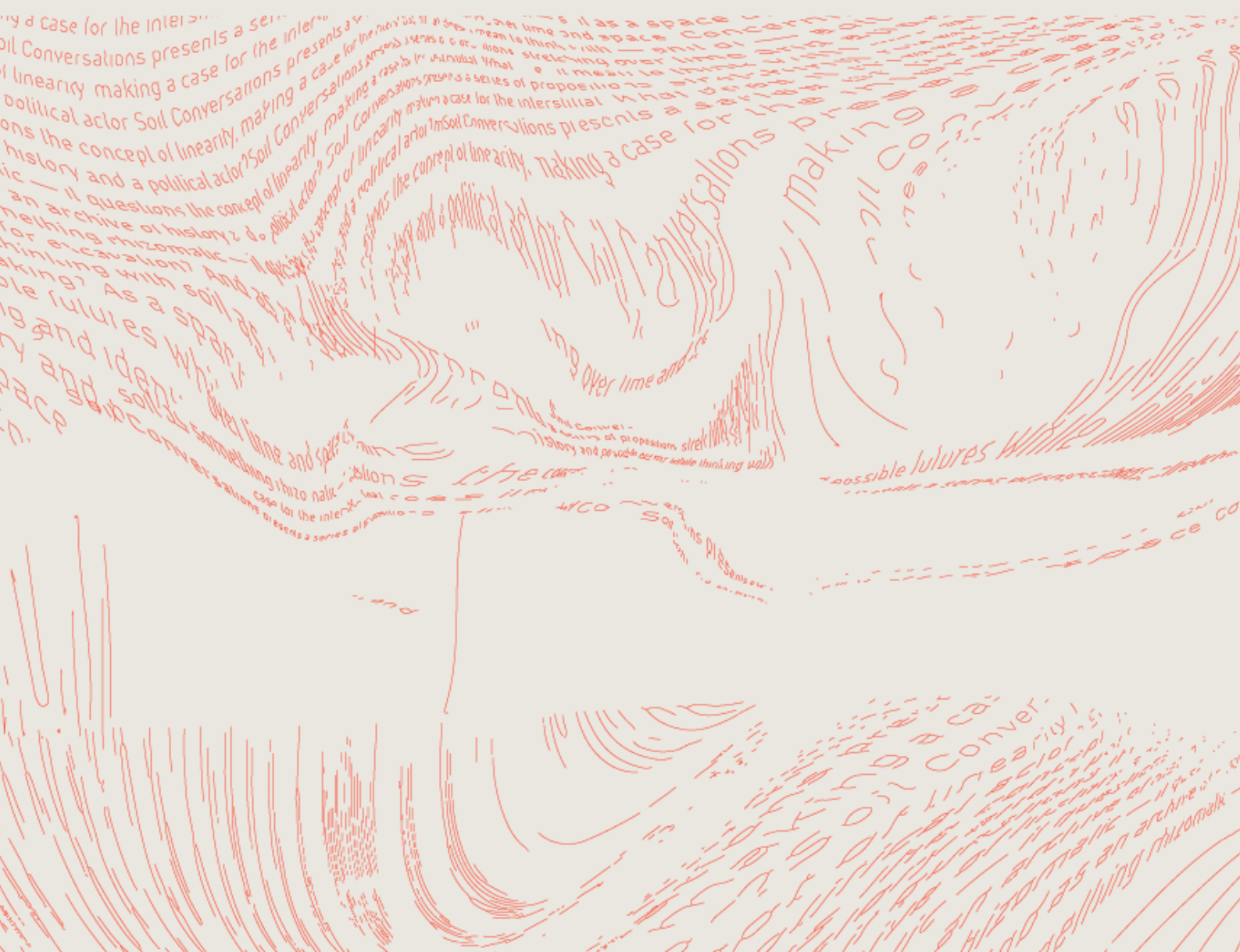
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\*Maria Puig della Bellacasa, Preface in: *Thinking with Soils Material Politics and Social Theory*, 2020, Bloomsbury Publishing.

Carrying de la Bellacasa's thought further into the discourse of the analogue and the digital – which is forming new territories and can be explored and experimented with as an interstitial space – something that's recently evolved into a normalised modality, especially after COVID-19 catalysed a global rush to the digital sphere. Paradoxically, voices loudened to reconnect with the earth, while connection had just been limited to a flat screen. But the body remembers – even in the transition between particles and pixels, we carry the histories inscribed into our corporealities into this digital terra nullius. The digital, a space of pixelated dialects, where one can exist beyond the borders and boundaries history and its politics have defined for them, yet is still not completely free from them.

The exhibition investigates the relationship between ourselves and the environment we live in, both in digital and analogue spheres. Topics of land, history, spirituality and the body – as physical manifestation and theoretical representation – are integral parts of the artworks part of Soil Conversations. By defying a linear ontology of history, Soil Conversations seeks to explore the plurality of the past, and future scenarios which lead into the unknown, aiming to engage with the speculative as a defining position of the here and now, and as a relationship between us and the world – the inner and outer space.

\*Concept by Nisha Merit, in editorial collaboration with Lindiwe Mngxitama



# INTRO DUCTION

## **Nisha Merit**

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Nisha Merit is an independent curator, writer, and producer between Johannesburg and Berlin. Her texts have been published in the magazine SWAG and in the 2023 book 'Lost Libraries, Burnt Archives'. Her collaborative work as a curator is based on Process as Practice and offers an extension to the institutional system, defined in para- an entity that is neither against the institution nor fully defined by it. Applying this methodology Merit works transdisciplinary with practitioners, spaces, and practices. Process Practices is a method of attentiveness and deep care for the subject matter and its products. Being an active part of a process and exchange between people and objects. The acknowledgment of the multitude of realities that exist in the diversity of lives. The openness to learning new or different ways of working, thinking, and articulating projects and subject matters, creates interstitial spaces for knowledges and processes to be articulated and shared.

## **Yolanda Kaddu-Mulindwa**

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Yolanda Kaddu-Mulindwa is the director of the municipal galleries Neukölln, the Department of Visual Arts and Art in Urban Space of the district of Neukölln. She studied art and cultural history at the University of Augsburg and completed her master's degree in art and visual history at Humboldt University in Berlin. She was a curatorial assistant for the Festival of Future Nows 2014 at Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin and in 2017 at Hamburger Bahnhof - Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart and worked for Light Art Space (LAS) in 2018. From 2017 to 2019 she worked for the art book publisher Frölich & Kaufmann. As a freelance curator, in 2021 she conceived and organised two art festivals as part of the DRAUSSENSTADT initiative.

## Soil Conversations - a soliloquy

Nisha Merit

I started to appreciate this word or rather act over the past two years quite a lot - soliloquy - a monologue addressed to oneself, thoughts spoken out loud without addressing another. And I had plenty of them while writing the concept for Soil Conversations. There is a beautiful moment when thoughts become animated, livened by one's own breath and voice. Suddenly they feel like a resonating body that responds back to you even though they consist of the same words the initial thought was made of. This in-betweenness, of off becoming that might be thought of as the interstitial - the small spaces in between things as it is described. It is easily overlooked or dismissed yet holds so much potential in its connectedness. Thus the interstitial became the curatorial method for Soil Conversations as a whole. I reflect on the things that grew from it.

What informed Soil Conversations, was literally, a conversation about the reality of living in Johannesburg, which through collaborations and partnerships grew into an exchange between Johannesburg and Berlin.

Less as geographic paradigms but understood as spaces that hold artistic conversations, that are informed by their own moving and morphing realities and somehow manifested within art practices, materials, and ideas. The intention was to create a project that extends itself and renders its concept within visual art, performances, talks, and writings.

Anchored by the partner institutions: Johannesburg Art Gallery and Galerie im Koernerpark (Berlin), which brought a specific spatiality to the exhibition, influencing the conversations, and the engagement between audience and artworks. The exhibition opening on 26th of May in Berlin and on 26th of August 2023 in Joburg marked the beginnings of a six-month engagement with and through Soil Conversations, including the works of nine artists/duos, eight writers, four performers and a cross-disciplinary engagement through talks and walkabouts.

Now, at the time of writing, the closing of the exhibition is one month away, and I am wondering what my relationship to it is now.



instagram screenshot: Ana Mendieta, Imágen de Yágul, 1973/2018. Color photograph. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.



Like a ball of clay, it has been changed by so many moments, impacted by others, shifted through unexpected turns and altered its consistency throughout.

In an almost-retrospect I see myself confronted by an interesting dilemma, the classic cartographer's dilemma - translating the elliptical mass onto a flat surface. How to look at a multilayered project like Soil Conversations with all its connotations, issues, ideas of Soil, land, history, identity, female divinity, the psychology of space, the speculative and so on ... ? The project's attempt was never to comprehend any of the aforementioned vast concepts, it was the idea to prompt and to nurture exchanges and ideas, yet a longing for closure persists - of a project, budget, chapter?

In this contemplation, what keeps coming up with excitement are the many causal sequences, the moments something split into a multitude and grew beyond the initial idea, that I am most thankful for.



Image of myself holding one of Nolan Oswald Dennis' 3D printed objects at the engagement with his and other artists work at Javett-UP, 2022.

All these numerous walkabouts, conversations, talks and especially the extended Soil Conversations that the writers have created are a testament to the interstitial concept.

The brief to the writers was to use Soil Conversation as an archive and departure point, similar to the idea of soil as a bearer and holder of an archive made of parts and particles. The exhibition was there to start a thought that can be carried in every possible direction and thus permeates something that grew out of a particular yet offers something that is relevant to a beyond. The concept and artworks became the fertile ground for this engagement.

I am hugely grateful for the community that held Soil Conversations and the collaboration between friends, colleagues and institutions that all agreed on being part of this project.

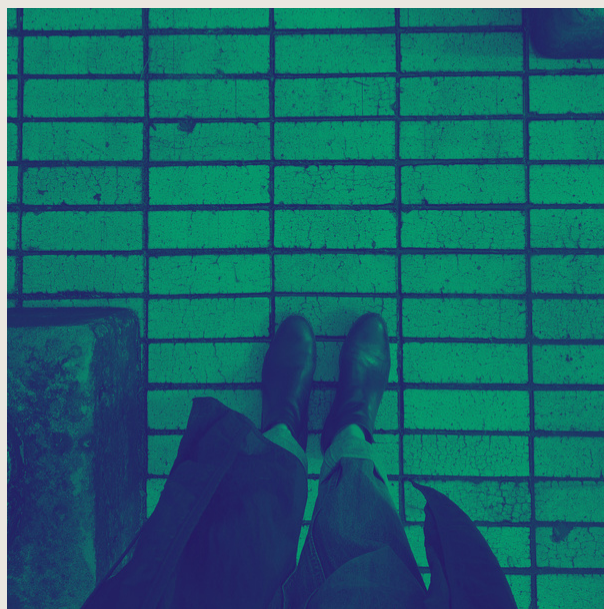


Image of myself standing at the Johannesburg Art Gallery when researching for the concept of Soil Conversations, 2022.

# Introduction

## Soil Conversations

Yolanda Kaddu-Mulindwa

The project "Soil Conversations" has already accompanied me since January 2022 - for me personally it represents a journey towards my own history, identity, past and future as a Black German.

Together with curator Nisha Merit we have realised two iterations - at Galerie im Körnerpark in Berlin (27.05.-30.08.2023) and at Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) in Johannesburg (27.08.-18.11.2023). Specifically, what is this exhibition about and what are we showing?

It is about what we stand and walk on and it is an elementary part of our lives: soil. Food grows from it and we build our houses on it - it is therefore one of the foundations of our lives.

With the selected artistic positions, we let countries and continents, cultures, history, present and future enter into dialogue. This dialogue began in May 2023 at the Galerie im Körnerpark and continued in August 2023 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. The text contributions by authors from Germany and South Africa were not only artist's or artistic work texts, but also contributed to a larger and complex theme and context and conveyed different perspectives. Especially in Mahret Ifeoma Kupka and Magnus Elias Rosengarten's texts, the question of one's own identity as a Black German becomes center stage and with it associated experiences of growing up between two worlds and questions of hegemony. Observations following are examinations of the element earth as an archive of memories and the understanding that soil is alive and thus marked like a body by traces of history and past experiences as well as the soil's ability to transform and regenerate itself.

The works presented encourage us to rethink our relationship with soil and reflect on how easy and humble our relationship with earth once was and how we have distanced ourselves from it over the years. Education about our ecosystem takes place at a young age and should, of course, always be put to the test. Even though the earth can regenerate itself with its transformative and life-giving power, it still needs our cooperation in order to be protected from destruction, a destruction that would ultimately also destroy us along the way. We need to find new ways to have a future worth living.

Soil Conversations creates intercontinental connections, because one unifying element of humanity is the earth we live on. A discourse between the analogue and the digital world has been developed as part of the project, enabling a thematic discussion and continuation of the dialogue between people from different backgrounds on all continents via the website [www.soilconversations.com](http://www.soilconversations.com).

It invites us to question our own relationship to the environment we live in. Involving the public is important to us, so we have created an extensive accompanying programme with performances, workshops and talks to allow heterogeneous voices to be heard and experienced.

As the source of life, soil is important for everyone and cannot be ignored. We should therefore take care of it intently, just as Mother Earth takes care of us.

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# WRITINGS\*



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\*The brief for the text commissions was to use *Soil Conversations* as a departure point and research moment from which to expand from. The intention was not to create exhibition profiles but a rhizomatic web of ideas, thoughts, prompts and investigations that live beyond the temporary manifestation of an exhibition and can start more conversations and connections when they are read, shared and used in the future.

## Speaking of Humunism

Tomke Braun

Pine forests stretch extensively around Berlin, their fragrance reminding me of summer. Like most forests in Germany, they were created for timber production and thus bear witness not only to the shaping of a landscape by the nature of its soils, but also to the impact of humanity. Pines are some of the few tree species that grow well in the sandy soil of the Mark region in Brandenburg, but their dominance also means that there is little organic waste that could be composted into humus\*. Soil organic matter is needed, however, for other plants to colonize, hence forests remain unchanged without extensive reforestation programs and are particularly vulnerable to the drought of recent years.

Ideally, soils are living organisms that respond to their geographic and climatic conditions and are in a constant state of change. The geographic specificity, as well as the simultaneous ubiquity of soils, makes them a universally understood mediator of history and an allegory for memories beyond their biological significance. As foundation of life and symbol of decay, the earth that soils contain carry spiritual and emotional significance for many people. This text sets out to explore the complex layers of meaning that land and earth convey, interlocking social, feminist, and historical perspectives that show us one thing above all: That a bit of soil carries utopian potential if we unearth various historical layers and, in contact with non-human living beings, imagine a new future.

At first glance, compost may appear to be a collection of waste and scraps, messy and dirty. But on closer inspection, compost reveals itself to be an extremely complex ecosystem that

becomes a source of new life through a process of decay and decomposition, in which nutrient-rich soil is created. Drawing on an understanding of constant change, Donna Haraway argues in her book *Staying With The Trouble*, "We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities"\*\*. Compost is a kind of recycling system in which organic materials break down under specific conditions to become humus. According to Haraway, humans play an equal role in the process of transforming organic materials into fertile soil alongside numerous microorganisms, worms, insects, and other living beings, not only as active participants but also as mere material bodies. Considering this complex system, it is not surprising that "human" and "humus" are etymologically linked and that this is reflected in the line of connection between humans and soil. In her essay *Troubling time/s and ecologies of nothingness: re-turning, re-memembering, and facing the incalculable* Karen Barad also recognizes and confirms a mere thin line between the human and non-human:

"Etymological entanglements already hint at a troubling of assumed boundaries between allegedly different kinds: Earth, humus (from the Latin), is part of the etymology of human, and similarly, Adam (Hebrew: [hu]man[kind]) derives from adamah (Hebrew: ground, land, earth), giving lie to assertions of firm distinctions between human and nonhuman, suggesting a relationship of kin rather than kind - a cutting together-apart". \*\*\*

\*Haraway, Donna: *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2018.

\*\*Barad, Karen: *Troubling time/s and ecologies of nothingness: re-turning, re-memembering, and facing the incalculable*, in: *New Formations*, 2017(92), p. 83. <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:92.05.2017> / Translators interpretation, adaptation

\*\*\*As a biologist and scientist, she first worked together with her husband Raoul Francé-Harar and, after his death, independently on researching soil erosion, which was mainly caused by extensive agricultural use. Francé-Harar was specialized in composting and therein lying processes of harnessing goods. Using new methods, she scaled up the processes of domestic garden compost, where nutrient-rich humus is created. Francé Harar developed novel waste recycling systems for the Hungarian and Mexican governments after 1945 to counteract soil erosion.

Barad argues that these linguistic connections suggest that there is more of a kinship ("kin") between humans and nonhumans rather than a fundamental difference ("kind"). In accordance, Haraway connects the different protagonists in "humunism" in a way where the dominance of humans is ended and they enter into a reciprocal and cooperative relationship with nature. The cycle of decay and transformation that humans initiated on the compost is also an ideal allegory for Haraway to describe the coexistence of species because it thinks of including the mortality of bodies, as in, their own individual temporal limitation. While Haraway uses humunism to emphasize the idea that humans are inseparable from their environment and are in a symbiotic relationship with other living beings - even after death, Barad focuses on the possibilities of connections that we could entertain. Humans must now conceive of their own future in a constant interaction with other human and non-human beings, and compost can show us what these relationships can look like.

Compost is a place of constant change, where the old is almost completely recycled and thus the new is created. However, if one looks at the earth in its sedimentary layers of rock, the past is still chronicled in it and often clearly visible. Barad describes in her above mentioned essay the ability of soil to store memories and at the same time be a place of life and death: "Land is not property or territory; it is a time-being marked by its own wounds and vitality, a layered material geo-neuro-biography of bones and bodies, ashes and earth, where death and life meet".\*\*\*\* Barad's characterization of land as "time-being" is visible in artist Silvia Noronha's series "Shifting Geologies" (2020-). Through scientific forms of presentation she admirably highlights the human impact on the earth through resource exploitation and extraction.

The "Shifting Geologies" series are multi-layered sculptures in which the artist has fused natural materials with artificial ones. The resulting works are reminiscent of rock samples from geological research in their shape, size, and sedimentary nature. Noronha combines earth and soil samples with glass, plastic or electronic waste and compresses them under enormous pressure. It resembles geological processes that normally extend over several millennia. Through combinations with magnifying glasses and drawings, Noronha references scientific methods in her project, which has been ongoing since 2020. Her investigations serve as an approach to the created objects and, by extension, to the larger questions on the relations between humans and nature. Noronha's work intriguingly combines a view from the future to the present with materials drawn from the past. Just as layers of soil bear witness to climatic conditions of other millennia, different temporalities flow into one another in her sculptures, conveying a compressed image of our present.

The discourse on earth touches on both scientific findings and philosophical thought. Art and science are equally involved in gaining perspectives on our present, and so many exponents engage with both fields. Annie Francé-Harrar (1886-1971), scientist, author, and artist who studied humus, compost, and the human relationship to nature is, for instance, a pioneer of this way of working. In her book "Animal and Love", for example, she combines observations from the animal kingdom with illustrations and uses them to talk about society e.g. former feminist emancipation movements or queer forms of love. Her best-known book, "Last Chance - for a Future without Misery"\*\*\*\*, is an urgent call to counteract the exploitation of earth and to introduce sustainable waste management\*\*\*\*\*.

\*\*\*\* Joachim Wolschke-Buhlmann and Gert Gröning: *The Nationalist Social Garden and Landscape Ideal. Bodenständigkeit (Rootedness in Soil)*, in: Richard A. Etlin (ed.): *Art, Culture, and Media under the Third Reich*. University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 73 f.

\*\*\*\*\* Translators interpretation / adaption  
 \*\*\*\*\*Ebert et. al: *Die Versuchsanstalt. Landwirtschaftliche Forschung und Praxis der SS in Konzentrationslagern und eroberten Gebieten*. Metropol, 2021.



Silvia Noronha, *Shifting Geologies*, 2020 ongoing / pics by cvk\*

She didn't consider the various facets of her practice as separate from one another, but rather closely linked.

Similar to the approach of many contemporary artists like Noronha, Franc -Harrar uses literature and art to convey her scientific concerns on a social level. To create worlds was an important practice in Franc -Harrar's artistic work.

Her science fiction novel "Fire Souls"\*\*\*\*\* published as early as 1920, already makes clear the urgency of her scientific concerns. The book is about a utopian society that make it possible through scientific achievements to make food from air molecules. Agriculture and the cultivation of food is made obsolete and finally the last people who have not yet been integrated in the cities, can be "liberated" from their rural life and move to the highly developed, technologized cities.

Henrik, the main protagonist and voice of reason is the scientist warning of interventions to fragile ecosystems. But his appeals go unheard and humanity creates

innovations that pose a new kind of threat to their own existence. Albeit a little pathetic, the title already hints to the fate that the narratives have in store for humanity. Unsurprising plot twists and the character Henrik itself communicate the warnings the author has from her scientific point of view. Although this dimension of the novel still seems contemporary, other motifs of the author seem problematic from today's perspective with regard to the social developments that actually took place during the times described and that can themselves serve as examples for the political reach in the discourse on soil and land. In her afterword Sandra Thoms, as publisher of the revised new edition 2021 consequentially refers to the fact that certain terms had to be changed in order to avoid evoking ideologies not intended by the author.

A dangerous proximity of eco-lifestyle and racist, nationalist tendencies still persists, especially in German-speaking countries. Historically, some ecological movements have been linked to the National Socialist ideology of blood and soil. This connection was characterized by an idealized notion of a

"healthy" and "pure" nature, which was accompanied by a racist hierarchy. With the concept of "blood and soil" an ethnic ideology was justified that emphasized the intrinsically racist protection of one's own country. In this sense, garden and landscape planning was declared a political task during the National Socialist regime, and terms such as "groundedness" and "rootedness" were used by various representatives in an ideological sense projected onto the selection of plants and the design of gardens\*\*\*\*\*.

The interconnection of these ecological, locality-oriented ways of thinking led as far as biodynamic systems and medicinal plants being cultivated by prisoners in the Dachau concentration camp and their questionable products even to being tested on them\*\*\*\*\*. To this day extremist groups misuse ecological arguments in some cases.

For example, there are some right-wing ideological movements in rural areas where Reichsbürger, followers of the Anastasia movement and others try to build alternative models of society based on biodynamic agriculture away from political structures. These groups often use eco-lifestyle as part of their propaganda to spread nationalist or racist views. In congruence with Francé-Harrar, soil is in all its complexity from an ecological standpoint contested place, which decides the future of humanity. However, knowledge of landscape, earth and soils must also be seen as a political; only in doing so can the effects of racist and colonial pasts be made visible and voices of resistance be heard\*\*\*\*\*.

To this day, global interdependencies seen in the continued extraction and overexploitation carry the colonial structures of the 19th and 20th centuries.

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\*\*\*\*\*As cited in Elisa Piper: *The Facist Garden: Horticultural Ideologies, Nazi Herbalism and Weeds as Anti-Fascist Memorial, Hinterlands #3*, 2022/2023

\*\*\*\*\* cf.

\*\*\*\*\*MADEYOULOOK: Garden of Others, Podcast series, veröffentlicht bei Primary, online unter: [https://soundcloud.com/weareprimary/gardens-of-others-episode-1utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/weareprimary/gardens-of-others-episode-1utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)

Particularly in mining precious metals and rare earth elements in various African and South American countries, especially for the production of technical devices, a repetition of economic dependencies can be witnessed. The video "Venus Alchemises Below" (2023) by artist Natalie Paneng responds to such postcolonial entanglements in a humorous way. In the video, the artist's various avatars move across the screen dancing against a backdrop of brown earth. The artist takes on the form of avatars representing various precious metals such as diamonds, platinum and gold. They shift in and out of focus like in old television images always seeming to disappear any minute. In recent decades, technology has entered the tense web of humanity and nature as another player. Paneng's focus is the texture of earth and she equates it with pixels in her video.

In her works, Paneng empowers herself through presenting her own identity when she stages herself as "Venus" and as an "alchemist," thus creating a link with postcolonial discourses as seen in the works of literary scholar Saidiya Hartman. Her essay "Venus in Two Acts" (2008) is a moving exploration of identity, exploitation, and the construction of historical narratives through the story of Sarah Baartman, who was taken from South Africa to Europe during times of enslavement to be exposed here as "Venus". Hartman highlights the ongoing legacy of racism and misogyny and critically questions the representation and erasure of marginalized voices when retelling the stories.

Audio- and visualizing is also crucial for artistduo MADEYOULOOK. In their podcast series "Gardens of Others"\*\*\*\*\* (2020-2021), they explored humanity's relationships to plants and soil from a postcolonial perspective. They use various interviews with professionals in landscape design

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\*\*\*\*\*As cited in Francé-Harrar, Annie: *Die letzte Chance für eine Zukunft ohne Not*. BTQ Eigenverlag, 2008, p.55.



still from: Natalie Paneng, Venus Alchemises Below, 2023

and gardening as base of analysis, and the gardens they discuss as microcosms, to examine the problems of contemporary political life and ask questions about coexistence. To what extent is access to a garden a privilege, and what forms of labor and care does it take to tend gardens? What plants grow where and why? The artist duo continues to explore gardens and landscape for their work part of the exhibition "Soil Conversations 2023". The exhibition features a film excerpt "Menagano" (2023), which is based on a publication of the same name.

In it the camera moves along densely entwined shrubs and trees. Through poetic shots, the camera wanders through this thicket, finally ending up in a landscape still covered by fog. Lightly trotting music plays in the background and a memorable narrators voice switches back and forth between several languages. Set in the Bokoni region of South Africa, the film is part of MADEYOULOOK's ongoing exploration of the pervasiveness of landscape through memory and trauma.

Their practice of resistance consists of developing their own Black perspective on the landscape, thereby challenging existing images and patterns.

It becomes obvious that soils are full of contrasts, where past and present, locality and globality meet. They represent the tension between rational observation and speculative imagination. By exposing historical layers of the ground and taking on new vantage points and perspectives, as MADEYOULOOK invites us to do, we can gain access to utopian potential. In reviewing the ecological urgency conveyed by Annie Francé-Harrar and the political complications that must be considered when discussing soils, a foundation is laid for new ways of seeing. Maybe we can pay homage to a post-Harway *humunism* on a journey of acknowledging our own mortality and adhere to our connections within a larger network of living beings. Only with universal process-oriented ways of thinking that consider an ongoing collective movement, can we face the challenges of the present.



still from: MADEYOULOOK, Menagano, 2023



## notes after - land & -scape

Nolan Oswald Dennis

Let us, for the duration of this text, imagine that landscapes are made, not found. Like most things which are made they are also often made-up. They exist at the murky interface between how we see and what we know. What I mean is that landscapes are fundamentally technopolitical objects and methods of objectifying. Processes resist objectification and so the landscape becomes a technical and political substitute for the land (which, for our purposes within and beyond this text, is a set of processes, not an object). The landscape conditions what we see and recognise as land by privileging a representation of the land (an abstraction) over an experience of the land (a relation).

\* \* \*

A lullaby in voice and violin echoes against the hard walls of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG). A *Decomposing Lullaby* by Mia Thom loops an ethereal soundtrack to two silent works by Natalie Paneng whose blurred boundaries and overlapping parts dissipate and coalesce in sync with some unknown, perhaps unknowable, rhythm. *Venus Alchemises Below* and *Venus Finds Balance*, occupy the beginning-end of the exhibition project *Soil Conversations*. Two monitors rest on a bed of earth and iridescent fabric, this is *Venus Alchemising Below*. On the monitors a ghostly anti-presence of a figure, glitches across and beneath a field of soil. Light ripples across the video as if, in some way, this soil is also a pool of water. Above this work, a projector beams images over a wall print of a familiar figure standing on the bank of a stream, this is *Venus Finds Balance*, one foot seemingly in the water, the other on the land.

Or more precisely both feet in the muddy interspace between. The projector repeats this image over the wall print, the projector lenses slightly out of focus, echoing the figure in light while subtle movements annotate the print. I read a diagram in the image as "so-> above so-> below". Two re-cycle diagrams rotate on either side of the print. Spectres abound. They ask: how to look, so to see?

\* \* \*

According to photographer and theorist Santu Mofokeng we recognise the South African landscape through terms inherited from our "Apartheid ancestor" and reiterated through our "art institutions and museums, in monuments and memorials, and in the nomenclature and place names".<sup>\*</sup> These terms form the structures of sharing that constitute, constrain and enable claims on the South African landscape. Cultural critic and novelist Njabulo Ndebele notes the implications of this inheritance as the "ultimate 'leisureing' of colonial history" through the institution of the game lodge as a particular kind of cultural institution which "impedes the emergence of an image of Africa and its diverse cultures as transforming historical phenomena."<sup>\*\*</sup> That is, it fixes the landscape as objects rather than processes. Landscapes are rarely, if ever, a representation of the land itself. It is instead the substitution of representational forms for actual relations in order to transform (or obstruct the transformation of) those relations.

\*Santu Mofokeng's Land- scapes, Johannesburg: Warren Siebrits, 2008. Exhibition: 12 August-12 September 2008.

\*\*Njabulo S Ndebele. *Fine Lines from the Box: further thoughts about our country* (Roggebaai:Umuzi, 2007)

This Apartheid inheritance, while complex in its machinations, helps us to understand - "landscape [as] not a genre of art but a medium"\*\*\*. In which case the meaningfulness of any particular landscape is necessarily greater than the significance of its content. If we understand a medium as the interface between technologies and bodies\*\*\*\* then landscapes become intersections of our personal capacities for seeing and the technical conditions of the image. I should probably note that my use of landscape here is drawn from the "desperately confused" western terrain of landscape which encompasses:

"natural, pictorial, symbolic, mythic, imagined, built, and so forth"[...] "as means to artistic, social, economic, and political ends (some nefarious, some not), as well as the manner in which landscapes of all sorts act on and shape us, as if agents in their own right".\*\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

Heavy black curtains enclose a viewing room. An excerpt (which I think of as a trailer) from *Menagano*, an upcoming film by the artist duo MADEYOULOOK plays on a large screen hanging above eye height. A bench invites viewers to sit down, exaggerating the viewing angle. I sit down and crane my head back to take in the screen. A deep voice narrates in sePedi. Images emerge as if from a dense fog, the atmosphere heavy with clouds. Looking up at this film as it cuts between close-ups of grass, trees, rocks, and rock fences my disorientation breaks suddenly, and in silence, upon a view of the landscape. It feels like, sitting below the screen looking up at the land, I can suddenly locate myself. My head at this moment, misidentifies as the camera itself, lying just above the ground.

\*\*\*Landscape Theory, J. Elkins & R. De Lue ed. New York: Routledge, 2008

\*\*\*\*Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999, F. Kittler trans. A. Enns, Polity Press: Cambridge. 2010

\*\*\*\*\*Landscape Theory, J. Elkins & R. De Lue ed. New York: Routledge, 2008

My body, inconsequential, beneath it. I think of all that is hidden beneath the surface of the land and remember Paneng's *Venus Alchemising Below*, with its unstable cohort of glitching figures. There are no people visible in this film. For a moment, I forget that I am a person, in this film, invisible. Sound gently returns to the film and the camera cuts across various scenes, lingering finally on a pool of water.

\* \* \*

Santu Mofokeng offers an anti-definition of landscape as a portmanteau of two words: "land (the verb) and scape (to view)"\*\*\*\*\*. While most landscape theory is concerned with the act of looking, and the methods of constructing a view, the thing being looked at, the "land" itself is generally under or over naturalised.\*\*\*\*\* Mofokeng shifts the grammar of land from noun (even proper noun The Land) to land as a verb, an action or the state of something in process. Viewing (-scape) then is always in relation to doing (-land) rather than to an inert object (-land) over which claims of ownership might be simplistically resolved. Landscape is then the practice of viewing a process (or processes) rather than an object. However, we must avoid normative assumptions of viewing. Colonial looking works for the construction of colonial landscape. In contrast, Mofokeng's "to view" echoes what bell hooks calls the right to gaze, an oppositional practice of looking in rebellion against anti-Black looking relations. This is not just a defiant act of looking where one is not permitted to look but a declarative looking which reclaims agency. As hooks puts it "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality."\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\* Santu Mofokeng's Land- scapes, Johannesburg: Warren Siebrits, 2008. Exhibition: 12 August-12 September 2008.

\*\*\*\*\* Landscape Theory, J. Elkins & R. De Lue ed. New York: Routledge, 2008

\*\*\*\*\* bell hooks, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-31

The idea of viewing-doing reaffirms the politics of landscape representation as a transformative act rather than an archival one. Representation is inseparable from redefinition (that is to determine what this land is) and so always forms part of a claim of ownership over the land. Extending Ndebele's game lodge landscape outward we can see landscapes then as "the concrete manifestation of the movement of the dominant culture across time and space, and its ability to replicate itself far away".\*\*\*\*\* We see how landscape reproduces the land in its own image - or at least is a critical element in the socio-political reproduction of land. Which helps to understand that contestation at the level of the landscape (that is the aesthetic practices by which we see and refigure the land) is contiguous with reclaiming the land.

\* \* \*

My favourite entrance to the JAG is from the north, walking across Joubert Park, the largest public green space in downtown Joburg, and between the vaulted roofs of the 1987 extension. This is the back entrance in the original plans. If you enter JAG from this direction you begin *Soil Conversations* with Paneng's installation. This is not how I enter or exit when I visit *Soil Conversations* but the memory of this alternate route haunts my visit to the show, subtly suggesting the possibility of two beginnings to the exhibition. Two endings as well.

The southern entrance to JAG is the historical main entrance and looks across the Metrorail lines which cut into the earth and continue below street level. This trench is where the train lines enter and exit the underground tunnels leading to Park Station. These lines run east to Germiston and then northward to Pretoria and further into southern Africa or south toward Durban, Gqeberha and the ocean.

There is a large fence between the railway and the gallery. If you enter JAG from this direction, you begin *Soil Conversations* near MADEYOULOOK's installation. This is the actual beginning of the exhibition, starting with the exhibition wall text and lo Makandal's work *This Too Shall Pass: iteration #4* and *Untitled (Clay impressions series: JAG #1)* which forms a poetic prelude to MADEYOULOOK's installation. In my mind at least, the shadow of the other entrance unsettles this sequence, perhaps inverts it.

I'd like to think of these works as punctuating the beginning-endings of the exhibition. In the south end *Menagano* (excerpt) forms one node and in the north end *Venus Alchemises Below* and *Venus Finds Balance* by Natalie Paneng form a compound node (with *Decomposing Lullaby* by Mia Thom). I'm inclined to read axial relations as spectral, to see *Menagano* and the Venus dyad as intensities of a shared spirit with variable but opaque expressions. Both works gesture towards moments of rupture, wherein the political stakes of the work are made legible, for example in Paneng's ghostly figure kneeling at the waterside in *Venus Finds Balance*, or the murmuration of short cuts in the tempestuous middle sequence of *Menagano*. These ruptures are countered by gestures against revelation. The works simultaneously open lines of possibility while critically curtailing any easy (read careless) sublimation of the anti-Blackness and misogyny of the landscape (even, or particularly, in the form of Black gendered suffering).

\*\*\*

If we understand the landscape as a medium through which the political, economic, ecological and spiritual relations of land are rendered visible and invisible. Then these two

works offer us ways to question the adequacy of our grammar for thinking beyond the Apartheid inheritance, or critically toward the end of the Apartheid inheritance.

This residual political and cultural supremacy, our Apartheid inheritance, is enabled by control systems which legally proscribes (and now economically segregates) access to and exclusion from the land and claims over the landscape. Taken as a whole this cultural-legal framework institutes a white-supremacist sensibility over the landscape. Indeed, insofar as it pertains to landscape (not necessarily land itself), the combination of proscribed movement (access) and language (narrative, aesthetic, grammar) form the basis of white-supremacist claims over the South African landscape.

In trying to determine who "owns" the South African landscape Mofokeng bypasses what he describes as "a cacophony of sounds narratives and narrations, a delirious, rather, a deleterious mix of claims" and offers in their place a programmatic re-definition of landscape as a particular kind of social construction, a sociogenic matter. To borrow from the philosopher Sylvia Wynter "the code, the law of the code, the principle, which functions as the ground of the history [...] will itself be the a priori or ground of the history to which it gives rise". Which is to say the landscape is produced, simultaneously as it reproduces, the anti-Black society from which it emerges.

I am interested in understanding the enclosure of history as a zone of knowledge in which Wynter's sociogenic coding grounds our understanding of the landscape as already restricted by what indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls the "classification" systems, rules of practice and methods developed to allow for knowledge to be selected and included".

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\*\*\*\*\*Santu Mofokeng's Land- scapes, Johannesburg: Warren Siebrits, 2008. Exhibition: 12 August-12 September 2008.  
 \*\*\*\*\*David, Scott, The re-enchantment of Humanism: An interview with Sylvia Wynter. Small Axe 8: 119-107. 2000  
 \*\*\*\*\* Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2012. Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples. London; New York : Zed Books, 2012

That is, we are embedded in a history which demands we reflect on the landscape as a medium caught between power and powerlessness. Or more appropriately to understand the landscape as a medium of interrogation and reclamation, which is nonetheless also the medium of dispossession and redefinition. To return to Smith, landscape operates alongside other forms of colonial "redefin[ition of] the world and where indigenous peoples were positioned within the world". The question of course is what happens when the dispossessed use landscape as medium for our own projects of redefinition and relocation?

To paraphrase media theorist Friederich Kittler: "the eye armed with lenses performs a paradoxical operation [...] as it extends and amputates itself at the same time". Mofokeng describes his own landscape project in parallel terms "reclaiming the land for myself". A retro-reflective gesture which reinstates the material stakes in viewing the land. A reclamation of land through landscape. It seems to me that Mofokeng asks us to embody the paradox suggested by the landscape differently, to ask, what kind of powers emerge at the "interface of the inner and outer – interior / exterior – worlds, where the objective / subjective environment inform/determine the experience of being at a given time and space". To go beyond normative codes which condition us to see in images of the South African landscape the question "how did it feel to be a colonialist?". Sensibilities of dispossession, possession and reclamation form the field of contestation in the South African landscape. Actual repossession alongside.

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 \*\*\*\*\*Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999, F. Kittler trans. A. Enns, Polity Press: Cambridge. 2010  
 \*\*\*\*\*Santu Mofokeng's Land- scapes, Johannesburg: Warren Siebrits, 2008. Exhibition: 12 August-12 September 2008  
 \*\*\*\*\*Santu Mofokeng's Land- scapes, Johannesburg: Warren Siebrits, 2008. Exhibition: 12 August-12 September 2008  
 \*\*\*\*\*Njabulo S Ndebele. Fine Lines from the Box: further thoughts about our country (Roggebaai:Umuzi, 2007)

The liquid surfaces of *Venus Alchemises Below* first rendered through iridescent fabric and then again digitally over the soil in video unsettle the material credibility of their landscapes. We might be dealing with something other than the representation of a landscape. The iridescent fabric shimmers like polluted puddles in the soil, reflecting the room in shimmering misshapen patterns. Maybe it's a representation of a landscape in the absence of material relation? The digital ripples over the soil in the video highlight the figures glitching in and out of screen, they glow as if covered in oil. Perhaps this is a rendering of unreliable materiality. If reliability is a measure for trustworthiness these gestures carry the weight of mistrust. Better still the rejection of a material sensibility perpetuates phallogocentric white supremacy. It's particularly interesting that it is not the soil but the not-water which holds the weight of this scepticism.

I am reminded of a conversation where writer and critic Zoe Samudzi suggests:

"in order to better begin to comprehend the multiple temporalities of/in/on land, oceanic thinking ironically might be more methodologically useful. Tidalectics permit land's [biochemical-spiritual-political processes] to inhabit the same fluidity as water."

The final scenes of *Menagano* take place in the twilight of a darkening landscape. The hills silhouetted against the sun reflecting against the clouds, slowly disappearing into the black of the night sky, or is it another darkness? The final light we see is not the sky but its reflection in a pool of water, ripples distort the image. A chorus sings as the screen fades to black. I am still looking up. *Menagano*, with its meticulously shot and edited scenes, makes bare the

excruciating ambiguities of media as "a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy".\*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Menagano* resonates with two forms of discomfort in me. A sense of dread that something is hidden beneath the surface of this landscape, that these images are hiding something all too familiar *out there*. While at the same time a sense of unease with the beauty of the actual landscape images reproduced in the film. A creeping sense that this *kind of* enjoyment is not for me, that I am not meant to appreciate this, to possess this feeling. A fear of falling into something too unfamiliar *inside myself*. If landscapes emphasise representation of the land over relation to the world, I am left wondering what kind of relation is possible where representation is a part of the destruction of relations? To paraphrase hooks: a history of white representations of landscape have done violence to the image. Is a liberation of the image possible? Ndebele, thinking along similar lines leaves us with a simple answer "there is no peace for those caught in the process of becoming."

\*\*\*\*\*Nolan Oswald Dennis and Zoé Samudzi, Land: experience, Myth & Memory, 2022 <https://onscreen.thekitchen.org/media/land-experience-myth-memory>

\*\*\*\*\*Njabulo S Ndebele. Fine Lines from the Box: further thoughts about our country (Roggebaai:Umuzi, 2007)

\*\*\*\*\*Njabulo S Ndebele. Fine Lines from the Box: further thoughts about our country (Roggebaai:Umuzi, 2007)

# Grounding

Zara Julius

"If the olive trees knew what is happening to the hands that planted them, their oil would become tears"

– Mahmoud Darwish

\*

I was not raised Hindu, but I grew up participating in a fair amount of yajnas in my mother's backyard as a child. Yajna is a Vedic devotional and sacrificial ritual in which offerings are made to *Agni*, **fire**, for the maintenance of cosmic order, or to commune with the gods.

Timed with each collective incantation of mantra, each participant in the ritual successively pours ghee, grain, incense or the like into an open fire as oblations, imbued with the intention of the mantra. After which the ashes, pregnant with the sonic, the spiritual and the sacrificial, are returned to the earth.

Throughout Vedic poetry, the word yajna is used as a symbol that affirms a multiplicitous world in which the divine, cosmic forces, the lived human experience, and the mythical not just coexist but also coordinate. Yajna, and this excess it implies, is in many ways a refusal of individuation; it insists on a relationality that applies not only to the macrocosm and microcosm simultaneously, but also multiple concepts of time; past, present, future and cosmic – all in the continuous tense.

\*

There exists no grammar outside of ontology to describe the paraontological – that which is outside of the paradigm of modernity. To know ourselves and the world, we must engage in a different kind of work.

\*

\*Maroons are descendants of Africans in the Americas and Islands of the Indian Ocean who escaped from enslavement and formed their own settlements.

Santiago de Cali, Colombia is often touted as the second largest 'black city' of Latin America, but walking through the city, one would never think it. Much like the topography of Cape Town, Cali is a bowl surrounded by a series of hills that form a lip around the city. On the western outskirts of the city is Cerro de los Cristales (Hill of the Crystals) where – surrounded by **quartz** rock – stands the statue *Cristo Rey* (Christ the King). At 26 metres in height, the statue depicts Jesus Christ with his arms stretched out, towering over the city. North-east of this sculpture lies another 26-metre tall monument on Cerro de las Tres Cruces (Hill of the Three Crosses). Once you reach the top, you're greeted by an expansive view and three imposing metal crosses.

The story of how these crosses came to be, is a wild one...

There once lived a "demon", Buziraco, who plagued the city of Cartagena. It's said he was worshipped up on a hill by indigenous and African maroon\* societies\*\* amidst the sounds of drums, dances, tobacco **smoke** and liquor. When an Augustinian monk arrived in Cartagena on a civilising mission, he declared that it was indeed the devil who lived on this hill. So he gathered a group of men, and together they summoned the demon, who had been incarnated as a goat, for an exorcism. And expelled him from the city. A few years later, Buziraco emerged in Cali and extended his power by taking the shape of a dark, billowing cloud that stretched over a hill in the city for the next 300 years. In 1837, Cali was shrouded in death due to smallpox, dengue, leprosy, fires, plagues and poor **crops** – all, in the opinion of two Franciscan monks from the Royal Court of Quito\*\*\*, attributed to the power of Buziraco.

\*\*Of course the demonisation of the cultural practices of racialised persons and runaway slaves is a tale as old as missionary-colonialism and the racial project.

\*\*\*The Real Audiencia of Quito was an administrative unit in the Spanish Empire which had political, military, and religious jurisdiction over territories that today include Ecuador, parts of southern Colombia, parts of northern Brazil, and parts of northern Peru. It was created by Royal Decree in 1563 by Philip II of Spain.

On May 3 1837, the monks went up the hill closest to the dark cloud in procession, carrying bamboo crosses with the idea of exorcising the Buziraco from the city. The moment they planted three big crosses into the ground, a deep voice emerged from the hill, cursing the city. It was the Buziraco, now held captive in the soil of the hill. The processions continued every year, and the **bamboo** crosses were renewed to ensure the demon was held captive in the hill. In 1925, however, there was an earthquake in Cali, and Buziraco liberated himself from the ground, knocked down the crosses and destroyed several churches in the city. In this way, the ancestral demon returned to the city with renewed strength. Permanent metal crosses were built 12 years later, some 400 years after the initial procession, to finally capture Buziraco once again. Every night, they are illuminated by the globes set in their structure.

It was maybe my third day in Cali when my host and I hiked up the hill to visit Buziraco, trapped in the soil. Pointing out the city's different urban landmarks, my host said "...y eso es Cali negro / and that is black Cali", as he gestured far into the distance. Whilst the Caleña population is about 27% Afro-Colombian, urban spatialisation has occurred mostly along class and racial lines. Like many sites of settler-colonialism, the co-implication of race and space in Cali presents the realities of de facto racial segregation, labour migration, and unequal service delivery. During Spanish colonisation of Colombia, Cali held a strategic position for trade with its location between gold mining regions and the still active sugarcane plantations that surround the city's bowl. Of course both sectors profited almost exclusively off Black and indigenous labour – the labour of those who fled the plantations and the mines to commune with Buziraco on the hill.

Santiago de Cali, is often touted as the second largest 'black city' of Latin America, but walking through the city, one would never think it unless you knew where to go.

But at night, you're reminded...

Like in the Natal region of South Africa, most sugarcane plantations in Colombia still rely on manual labour to harvest it. The cane is burnt before it is harvested. And at night the hills surrounding the city glow with the embers of the cane, illuminating the silhouette of Cristo Rey, and creating a mirror to 'las Tres Cruces' illuminated. Nightfall, the crop, fire, Buziraco, and ultimately the ground itself remind us of not just the enduring haunting of racial, missionary enslavement and anti-Blackness, but also of Black life, resistance and its co-presences. Past, present, future, and cosmic.

\*

Due to its nature as a grass, cane can be cut off, and still, it regrows an extended stalk to be harvested in the next season. This regrowth is called a ratoon. Every cane variety that is produced has a parent variety, going back many many years, and often to distant geographies. In this way, sugarcane is often thought of as a generational crop.

\*

*"Searching is an act of repair. Searching is an attempt to seek out - even if not to find - what has been lost in the landscape due to multiple phases of expulsion from the land. What has been lost may be the memory of loss itself, and as such, searching is in part an act of memory repair. **Searching is ritual...** Searching is an act of reclaim that is tangible when memories feel ethereal, when the hills are misty and our vision is blurred..."*

– MADEYOULOOK

\*

Indeed when we think with the ground, with *landscape*, we can traverse time and space, and allow ourselves to complicate our worlds. And hold new (and old) ones, simultaneously. The landscape remembers...and re-members, even if there are prevailing systemic structures that aim to obscure this memory and searching work.

In *These Bones Will Rise Again* (2018), Panashe Chigumadzi grapples with the memorialisations of anti-colonial heroine Mbuya Nehanda\*\*\*\* and her own late grandmother Mbuya Chigumadzi in the wake of what she dubs Zimbabwe's 2017 "coup not a coup". She writes, "There are many questions and I am looking for answers. The kind of answers that slip past the facts of history books or analyses by pundits and experts. Answers that are not party politics... Instead, the answers I need are answers to politics that are about how we live, hope, dream, cry, laugh, pray and believe. As I search, I realise that if I want different answers, I need different questions." In her quest for answers, Chigumadzi's work unpacks the fraught binaries of birth and death; and of teleological time.

She writes, "In this battle for time and history, the ancient civilisation of Great Zimbabwe built out of the landscape's **granite** stones was a thorn in the side of the Rhodesian settlers, who defended their right of conquest on the grounds that the very same native tribesmen whose ancestors had built the city had only recently come down from out of the trees."

\*

Fire, quartz, smoke, crops, bamboo, granite and the ground offer us a humility before time. They ask us what it might mean to valorise the immaterial as a legitimate pathway to piecing

together who we are and where we are – in flesh, spirit, and landscape beyond the unreliable facts of history, and the colonial pursuit for permanence and time-dominance. What does the ground remember and how does the ground speak?

\*

*"If a black landscape aesthetic can perceive from the sky, can it also know the sky from the ground?"*

– MADEYOULOOK

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\*\*\*\*Mbuya Nehanda is a female figure who not only led Zimbabwe's First War of Liberation (First Chimurenga) but also, in another manifestation, is said to have provided guidance for the Second Liberation War.



## The Land That Holds Us

Zayaan Khan

Clay is the matrix that holds soil, the smallest particle in the sand and silt mix, touching rock and fossil and even plastic these days. Here in this part of the southwestern Cape, South Africa (although geology does not consider the frivolous natures of colonial borders), these clays and are usually found in two different kinds; the soft and pure kaolin white clays and the colourful sedimented clays, rich in minerals like iron and cascading in colours from shades of terracotta, brown, beige, purple, red and black. These soils are relics of prehistoric beings, actual animals, plants and microbial bodies broken down until only microscopic carcasses remain; mingled with ancient planetary sediment. Going to the beach is a movement in time, each grain could be as recent as a few hundred years to many hundreds of millions and the sheer quantity of them reveal gentle stories of existence beyond our scope of telling.

I try to hear the stories as I dig my feet in, as I step into the icy waters that throw sand in all my creases and crevices. I let the sand run through my fingers and then I dig down to find the wet sand, the hard sand, the sand suitable for sand castles and toy excavators and while my sons busy themselves I wait for the wind to bring the knowing.

Before I had children I used to walk these sand dunes as a balm for depression, urged on by our dog Meisie because I surely would have stayed in bed otherwise. We would just get lost, walk the small stretch of dune up and down until we couldn't see the road or the sea. I recall a couple of times while looking for plants and nests and life, with the hum of the ocean as white noise backdrop and the traffic a distant buzz, coming into a dune and being surprised that there were

people there, surprised that I didn't hear as I approached, hearing them only as soon as I had crossed the cusp. It taught me about the wonder of these dunes as sound sinks, at least when voices are kept at a reasonable audibility – though on one occasion I stumbled into an argument that was only audible when I stood up at the top of where they were sitting within the dune. The sound came at me as if in a tunnel, drowned out by wind and sea and the loudest thoughts swirling in my head as they wanted to do in a depressive state. We all paused, startled at the sight of each other and I recalled the story I'd heard on local radio, about *madrassahs*\* Islamic schools in the dunes, having found no archival evidence, the theory landed at me as I witnessed this moment. I apologised and moved on, their tension broken and they began to gather their things and left.

I have heard anecdotal stories of *madrassahs* held in quiet spaces to hide them from colonial rule, as any form of gathering was outlawed. The dunes were a popular choice to meet, especially at that time when dunes still made up a large part of the Cape's landscape in the city and coastal surroundings. I carry that with me a lot, as inherited memories, the idea of these sand classrooms holding space for political education, I imagine this while sand falls through my fingers and remains soft at my toes. The idea of the sand as safe space delights me because we curse it so much; it doesn't grow food well, it doesn't hold water well, there is so much we see as wrong with it but it tells stories older than us. The way this land held those in resistance and so, some hundreds of years later here we are as descendants of these political prisoners who came to the sea to settle upon the sand.

\*Arabic for a place of study, it has come to be used as a place for Islamic Study

These initial madrassahs were spaces for Islamic education initially but because of the climate and the colonial nature of society in general in the years of slavery, "such schools taught more pupils of colour than all the other educational institutions in the Cape colony put together," as historian Robert Shell\*\* says. These dunes taught people, they witnessed revolutions being dreamt and held the visions of teachers who wished cultural freedoms for their students. Islam in the early days at the Cape quickly became a refuge for these practices, a place to exercise birthing rites and funeral rites, to express beliefs that connected you to community without being outlawed, a place where indigenous knowledge and peace could be in the same space and time – something that became increasingly hard to come by. Along our Peninsula, the ocean sand meets the mountain in a sliver of incredibly heightened diversity. The ecotone of where mountain and sea connect must have conjured so many fascinating conversations as they formed some million years ago. The water does incredible things where it will dissolve all dissolvables and help leach clay out of the matrix that holds itself into the soils and rocks that were set down as molten forms when the earth moved itself around. It's all a complex system of time, chemical change, pressure and a lot of talk with water.

Water is a secret ingredient in some ways, you wouldn't think it by seeing or feeling dry rock but so much of the way rock lives is because of its historic relations with water, between the freezing and fast flowing ways of water, in its ability to separate sediments, to carry across vast distances and the different solutes that travel with – salt from the sea or tannins from the mountains, and always many minerals. Cape Town is a movement of sand flats and clay rises, of shale and granite and quartz, and then when you get to the very top of the rocky mountainous outcrops, sand meets you again,

sometimes even with prehistoric seashells 1.000 m above sea level. My foraging nature embedded in pattern-recognition has long been seeking moments of uncontaminated spaces, healthy systems of life to collect from. The tragedy is that we have inherited diseased land, polluted waters and a disconnected way of being with land. A post-Apartheid South Africa has pretty much the same political economy as colonial ways, a free market economy is not concerned with the health of our soils or reforming land.

These days I am mostly looking for clay which really, starts off as looking for colour then looking for cracked earth forms on the surface of the soil. Today we are caught between pollution and conservation areas, "no take zones" prohibiting the removal of even a single leaf or grain of sand. It's an insult to me as a child of multiple inherited stories of forced removal, and while conservation is vital in the rapid decline of biodiversity, it does not consider why biodiversity is in decline and places the oppressors as saviours of the ecological crises they themselves created. To counter this, I simply follow my own story and seek clay from fallow sites of forced removal and think about continued forced removal of people and other animals, plants and entire habitats. So I harvest from roadsides brutally carved out of sacred mountains, or construction sites where endemic species



close up of: IO Makandal  
Untitled (Clay impressions series: JAG #1)  
2023

\*\*Shell, Robert. Madresahs and Moravians. Muslim educational institutions in the Cape Colony, 1792 to 1910. Department of Historical Demography, University of the Western Cape, New Contree, No. 51. North West Univeristy Publication. May 2006.

are threatened, I take clay from river beds and landslides, uprooted tree root balls and constructed dams. I let these clays sit and welcome time to mould plasticity, eventually processing the clay to refine it and see which ways it wishes to be worked on.

As I build stories of collected clay, I start to see veins of knowing within the material, from millions of years old deposits or from a shale mudrock that crumbles to clay in a stone wall, there are nodes of connection and nondescript evidence of these soil bodies holding onto clues as silent time machines. Some seed perhaps rooted here or the concrete and limestone is proof of forced removal, perhaps an old egg casing or the skeleton of a tiny lizard who drowned is showing us life. Clay in its nature is traditionally defined by its plasticity, as in its ability to hold water, separating it from other soil classifications of loam or sand or silt. Plasticity is the way clay can form a coil and snake its way around your finger or hold its shape when being moulded into a bowl. In the absence of water clay turns brittle and dry, powdery to the touch and tends to crack as it pulls itself towards itself, forming a mosaic of wilted shells in its wake.

Because of its fine particles, clay is easy to separate and keeps to itself, pulling away from the memory that it was once rock or animal or plant body, that it formed from glacier or river, twisting and transmuting rock into clay and back again. There is definitely something about this timescale that twists in a long extended infinite loop of forms, and when we add the tensions of really high temperatures to transform that clay into ceramic it buys time that in our human ways of knowing is practically instant. I have started a gentle library of clays and of plants turned into ash found on travels and forages. It's a gesture towards glaze as their ash melts in the kiln, the higher their silica content the better. Thinking about these lives - these soils and plants, as mineral brings ways of connecting everything to everything else, blurring the lines of time and space, decentering the self and the



close up of: Silvia Noronha (BR, 1984)  
From the series: Shifting Geologies  
2020 - ongoing

anthropocentrism that keep us comfortable. I wonder how to emulate the way that dunes silence sound, or what clay does to sound waves when wet and concaved, if anything at all. There is this distinct meeting and dichotomy of sand and clay and the pull of sound between them, I am sure of it, but I do not know where to host this conversation between them and recognise the way they have been having this conversation for millennia. It's a strange but thick with knowledge thinness, a borderland that nobody ventures into that I'm aware of. Well, perhaps the bats and shrews that live here do, moving in their sound beams and their silent but full-of-sound quiet.

One thing I have learnt only through experience is that the gift of lullaby is to regulate both screaming child and weary caregiver, it is a rope to pull you through the hard times and tide over the long times where it feels like you have been helping this person sleep for hours. Sometimes it does nothing and deeper modes of regulation need to be sought out. This whole thing is a wonder though, I am certain these sounds and discomforts hold their own sound beam physicality, they hold value and merit in ways our senses cannot ascertain. Like bats who move in sound beams so much so that their worlds are never silent even though to us it seems they may be. There's a peace in this dichotomy, a weird and intense way of being I can only surrender to and connect it through the in-between spaces of early motherhood

I've been living in, where terror and sweet dreaming meet. In the quiet then incredibly loud moments between baby sleeping and baby awake, and how this balances tenderness of quiet and loud, love and heightened stress, and how the land holds me in this. I will wake up moments before the baby wakes up screaming, and this baby is particular because there is no gentle wakening or graduating crying like my first born, this baby screams 0 to 1000 in a second and it brings so much anxiety for when the night comes. In that moment when I wake up, the dread gently eases into my body as I pray for sleep for everyone, especially those sleeping closest to me, yet I know that me waking up is simply a precursor to the cries that don't seem to calm unless I breastfeed. Now though, we have weaned off each other, a most gentle and honestly, easy process, much like this baby is in the daytime, mellow and pleasant. Like sand and clay, so different but part of the same soils that make up this land, any land in fact. There is something about the way this land holds us, perhaps to do with the land praxis of time, *landtime* that feeds human time in an ancient way, not a new capitalist way. That after time the terror of waking to be unable to soothe a baby is not a fear I am conditioned in, as exhaustion and distraction move us on towards new stresses and delights. One thing I have learnt only through experience is that the gift of lullaby is to regulate both screaming child and weary caregiver, it is a rope to pull you through the hard times and tide over the long times where it feels like you have been helping this person sleep for hours. Sometimes it does nothing and deeper modes of regulation need to be sought out. This whole thing is a wonder though, I am certain these sounds and discomforts hold their own sound beam physicality, they hold value and merit in ways our senses cannot ascertain. Like bats who move in sound beams so much so that their worlds are never silent even though to us it seems they may be.\*\*\*

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\*\*\*With reverence to the bat and acoustic sensory systems research of Inga Geipel at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, see also: Geipel I, Jung K, Kalko EKV. 2013 Perception of silent and motionless prey on vegetation by echolocation in the gleaning bat *Micronycteris microtis*. Proc R Soc B 280: 20122830. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2012.2830>.

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## Not quite white anymore

Mahret Ifeoma Kupka

I can no longer remember every detail of my first trip to the place where my mother was born. I was twelve years old, an age when children slowly pay less attention to cuddly toys, but are still happy to snuggle up to a soft furry body at night. On this journey I was accompanied by a small panda bear. In retrospect, an interesting choice. A panda in Nigeria, or rather in an area south-east of a place that was given its name in the course of its colonisation by the British in 1897, in reference to the Niger River that runs through the country.

I tell this story because when it comes to the topic soil, I always have to think of my first encounter with what for me was a very special soil: deep red, brown, heavy, a soil that could hardly be any more fertile. At that time, I had traveled to Nigeria with my parents and brother to see where my mother had spent the first years of her life and to meet the people who could not come to visit us in Germany. We went by bus from Lagos to Abia State, the last stretch by my mother's cousin's car, who had picked us up at the bus stop. The wheels of the car churned up the red earth. The road was unpaved, deep green forest to either side of the road. It was hot and humid and when we arrived, our skin was sticky and covered in a thin coat of red earth. I looked at my panda cuddly toy, which I had held in my arms the whole time, and saw that the light areas of the black and white fake fur had turned red. They were never going to turn completely white again, even after repeated washing.

There is a strange metaphorical quality in these words. It makes me think of the boy Jem who, in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee, tries to wash his dark skin *white* in 1930s South of the USA in order to escape the racism of his time, a motif that recurs in countless variations in literature, film and autobiographical stories. I also have to think about how this journey had changed me, how my daily lived experience could never again revert to bearing as much *whiteness* as it had largely been before. My place within the complex grid of national belonging, cultural ancestry and emotional self identifications had changed then and has been continuously changing ever since. I had come into contact with a particular soil and it was as if tender roots had formed, protruding from my body into the ground and connecting with a centuries-old fabric, a network of non-linear linkages spreading like mycelium regardless of time and space beneath the surface of the earth. Of course, I had no concept for it at the time, nor might I have been able to describe what I had felt. Today I know that these roots I felt connected with what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari called the rhizome. They are not to be confused with an anchor that binds me to a certain place. The roots are rather to be understood as a delicate yet determining string that can latch onto an all-encompassing web here and there, sometimes taking on the function of an anchor, but in actuality remaining flexible. It is up to me to find the places where there are moments of connection, of belonging.

According to the matrilineal traditions of the Igbo culture, *ethnicity* is determined by descent from the mother's line. My mother is Igbo and therefore my brother and I are also Igbo, regardless of whether we were born in Igboland, grew up there or not, and also regardless of our father's *ethnicity*. In this sense my belonging is a result from being interwoven into a cultural network that clearly transcends any nation-state. Whether I am also German is irrelevant in this context. I am the first-born daughter of my mother, *Ada*, and thus the bearer of the culture. The insignia *Omu Arochukwu* bequeathed to my mother by her mother are passed on to me and it is my task to carry them on into my descendancy. There is an interwoven-ness, a kinship that I first felt in the place that never questioned my existence and role.

Such forms of affiliations were translated into valid citizenship law after Nigeria's formal independence on October 1st 1960. Until today, every person who has at least one birthparent who is a citizen of Nigeria is automatically a Nigerian citizen, too. The different rules of descent of the various ethnic groups brought together on the territory of today's Nigeria are reflected in this compromise and became internationally recognisable. The respective ethnic and cultural affiliation is still relevant alongside citizenship. I am from *Obinkita*, even though I had never set foot on this soil until I was 12 years old. The fact that I was born several thousand kilometers away is irrelevant. Belonging to soil works without contact to soil.

I would like to build on this idea taking into account that deadly conflicts are still alive based on ground affiliations today. German National Socialists had a radically exclusionary idea of belonging. They extended it with the idea of purity of blood. Belonging to the nation of Germany and the identity of an individual were determined by common blood and ancestry as well as by the connection to one's own German soil.

A return to nature and agriculture were propagated as the ideal model of life. This blood-and-soil ideology served as the basis for racist policies and the persecution and murder of marginalized groups.

The deadly dangers of ethno-nationalism can still be observed today in many existing conflicts. Efforts to decolonize carry the risk of romanticizing ideas of supposed pre-colonial *pure* nations that never existed and foster the exclusion of all plurality and complexity. Decolonisation without a simultaneous decolonisation of power structures, knowledge and epistemologies will perpetuate existing (colonial) hierarchies and inequalities. Wouldn't we need very new approaches that rethink land ownership? Who owns soil? Is belonging to ground without belonging to its soil conceivable? What inclusive forms of living together are possible? Do we need to think about other forms of identity that detach their origins from the idea of ground and much rather start and continue to grow in hybridity?

Homi K. Bhabha sees hybridity as a kind of "third space" that forms beyond any binary opposition and in which new identities and forms of expression develop. It could be about no longer thinking about belonging, but developing other forms of being together. Dominant cultural norms and discourses could be destabilized and alternative forms of identity and knowledge constructed. The challenge is to remain open to complexity, to acknowledge the multi-layered nature of identity and to take into account its historical and socio-economic contexts. It remains ambivalent.

In a way, this puts my brother and me in a conflict of belonging. We are both Igbo and German. However our identities can by no means be limited to either, if only because neither Igbo nor German represent formulated identity concepts, but rather we are permanently required to shape them individually for ourselves.

To whom will I bequeath my *Omu Arochukwu* if I do not give birth to a daughter? How will I continue the traditions and thus contribute to their preservation and change? Being German is a historical process of negotiation and a point of conflict that continues to this day, which I myself as a German citizen with my life story, challenge again and again. Who am I? Equally important is the question of *where* am I, where am I and can be *myself*.

Over the years, the black and brown panda cuddly toy has disappeared from my life. What remains are memories and a few photographs: of me sleeping under a mosquito net, cuddled up to the little bear or laughing in an armchair in my great-uncle's house in Aruchukwu, the panda on my lap. The ongoing debate with identity, origin and belonging has remained - will remain. Whenever I step on this deep red, powerful soil, I feel accepted, at home without being at home, because home is where my books are, my clothes, my things, the people with whom I can share all of this. This soil allows me a moment of connection, a reminder that these moments can be anywhere, anytime. The soil is inside me.

# Speaking in sedimented tongues and untranslatable lexicons: on geographies of loss, rememory and hauntedness

Lindiwe Mngxitama

Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say.

Zora Neale Hurston, "**Dust Tracks on a Road**"\*\*

Like the dead-seeming rocks and like Hurston, we all have memories within that came out of the material that went to make us. We are radioactive and filled to the brim with these memories (and histories) that both stitch us together and pull us apart. Some inheritances are not those of wealth but rather, they are legacies of loss returned to us in figures of ghosts stuck in purgatory, that attempt to make haunted houses out of people or out of places. Like the millions of separate particles that come together to make soil, this is a (re)imagining and reckoning – in words, in thought, and in critical creation – that seeks to unfold in the space of multiplicity. Moving through "residence time" – in the quivering tension of the in between – unstitching to restitch questions on conditions of land dispossession.

...this is a history that chokes...

What shifts when we begin to think of land dispossession in a language of loss, rememory and hauntedness, in the manner of a looping staccato song that refuses linearity, cohesion, and containment? Perhaps what shifts are the boundaries that demarcate what *can* be called

Into question, what can be turned towards to be looked at, and therefore what can be *known*. In *TSA Contemporary Art Magazine's Collector's Series: Artists & Cities (2022)*\*\* speaking to Zayaan Khan in a piece titled "on delicious joy and dancing around the spectrum of time, space and place", I speak about one such possibility, engaging with what can be known when we begin to think about land dispossession, and its lingering legacies in a language of loss, rememory and hauntedness. I write: *What land, water, seed and air give us as People of the Global Majority who have been made marginal by white capitalist supremacy, is a cosmology and sites/sights of remembrance and connection that far transcend the material facts of these commons. These are not only places we turn to for nourishment and sustenance – in a relationship of mutual reciprocity – but it is also to land and water we go, to commune with our ancestors, to remember Things lost and disappeared and to return to ourselves.*

Continuing to unpack these considerations in an activation and collaboration between musician Sibusile Xaba, Berlin-based curator, writer, and researcher Kathy-Ann Tan and I,

\*Hurston, N. Z. 1942. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. United States: J. B. Lippincott Company.

\*\*Oyebode, B. 2022. *TSA Collectors Series: Artists and Cities*. Nigeria: The Sole Adventurer Art Media Limited.



that took place at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in September 2023 called *Sifting Through Soil: On Memory, Resistance and Repair*. Through a discursive journey and audio interventions we addressed soil as a memory vessel and archive, medium and a site/sight of resistance and repair, as well as its violent encounters considering the relationship(s) between the body and soil. I found myself wanting to engage more with haunted places rather than with haunted bodies, although a separation of the two is not always possible, nor is it always constructive. In *Landwalks Across Palestine and South Africa* (2023)<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, Writer and Professor Tshepo Madlingozi speaks of what he calls “worldlessness”, as the consequence of land dispossession and how it severed indigenous people from a spiritual and material conduit – the land – and therefore their connection with the human collective, non-human beings, the living and the yet-to-be-born. Prof Madlingozi writes: *Land dispossession must be understood as a position, or leading to a status of worldlessness – that is being without a world. An important consequence of landlessness and worldlessness is pariahdom; the idea that people who have been dispossessed of their land become pariahs in the land of their birth... I therefore propose to move away from the idea of land dispossession as the idea of losing a material good. Without land there is no identity, no belonging, no culture, and no ontology. Land dispossession presaged the shattering of the socio-cultural world of indigenous people – ‘ilizwe lifile!’.*

Keeping the concepts of “worldlessness” and “residence time” close, I think that to live in the afterbirth of Apartheid, and its lingering material, cosmic and ontological legacies of land dispossession, is to be a time-traveller like the character of Dana from Octavia E Butler’s *Kindred*<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>. There is no way of ignoring the fact that soil holds memory.

Here, soil is not just a portal that collapses and transcends the space of a-haunting-past, the present and a future-in-suspension, however, it also becomes animated as a living witness through the invocation of memory. An ever breathing, eroding and sedimenting witness and archive. During her keynote titled *Black. Still. Life* given at the 2019 *Performances of Nothingness* symposium, writer, academic and professor Christina Sharpe speaks of “residence time” in relation to soil and an untranslatable lexicon of blackness saying that:

*Human blood is salty and sodium has a residence time of 260 million years, and what happens to that energy that’s produced in the water? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We black people exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which everything is happening now, it is all now.*

...this is a history that haunts...

When thinking about worldlessness and land dispossession in the syntax of dominant discourse, we are often limited to a space that engages with these conditions in relation to people who have been violently separated from, or have had to leave, their land of origin. This limitation suffocates and dries out the possibilities of being able to think through – with resistance and refusal – the brutal imagination of white supremacy and the still oozing wounds inflicted by it on Black and Indigenous people who have been made worldless, and continue to exist as such, on their soil of origin. Where time for example Apartheid and place, let’s say South Africa have had their say. Where their memories have seeped into the materials of our making, like soil that is a collection of matter, grief and promise. Writing about land, loss and love in *Things That Can & Cannot Be Said* (2016)<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>, author Arundhati Roy holds this very condition of being made worldless and pariah in your very

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>Berlanda, T., Ho-Tong, M., Khalifeh, M., & Laïdi-Hanieh, A. 2022. *Landwalks Across Palestine and South Africa*. South Africa: University of Cape Town and The Palestinian Museum Birzeit.  
<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred*; London: Headline Book Publishing, 2018.

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>Cusack, J & Roy, A. 2016. *Things That Can and Cannot Be Said*. Great Britain: Penguin Books.

land of birth by the legacies of white supremacy's brutal imagination accountable. Roy writes:

*What sort of love is this love that we have for countries? What sort of country is it that will ever live up to our dreams? What sort of dreams were these that have been broken? Isn't the greatness of great nations directly proportionate to their ability to be ruthless, genocidal? Doesn't the height of a country's 'success' usually also mark the depths of its moral failures? And what about our failure? Writers, artists, radicals and malcontents - what of the failure of our imaginations? What of our failure to replace the idea of flags and countries with a less lethal Object of Love? Human beings seem unable to live without war, but they are also unable to live without love. So the question is, what shall we love?*

She continues:

*Writing this at a time when refugees are flooding into Europe - the result of decades of US and European foreign policy in the 'Middle East' - makes me wonder: Who is a refugee? The refugees fleeing from wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria to Europe are refugees of the Lifestyle Wars. But the thousands of people in countries like India who are being jailed and killed by those same Lifestyle Wars, the millions who are driven off their lands and farms, exiled from everything they have ever known - their language, their history, the landscape that formed them - are not. As long as their misery is contained within the arbitrarily drawn borders of their 'own' country, they are not considered refugees. But they are refugees. And certainly, in terms of numbers, such people are the great majority in the world today. Unfortunately in imaginations locked into a grid of countries and borders, in minds that are shrink wrapped in flags, they don't make the cut.*

...this is a history of "Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us"\*\*\*\*\*.

Thinking about South Africa as entangled with its history of Apartheid, and as a product of Apartheid, means thinking about and with a history that chokes. It is to know *and* feel through daily confrontation like daily bread - especially as a Black person still living within the borders of Apartheid's Afterbirth - that one cannot question matters of land and soil without thinking about states and conditions of haunting, without ghosts stuck in purgatory pushing their way through an filling up the space between you and this land. I feel this Knowing so Deep bubbling beneath my skin as I watch an audio visual excerpt from MADEYOULOOK's piece *Menagano* (2023). The piece is an:

*exploratory study on what might constitute a black landscape aesthetic... 'Menagano' considers how knowing the land intimately and from within informs aesthetic imaginations of land that disrupt colonial understandings of the landscape tradition and touches on modes of visual language-making that represent the multiplicities of relationships with the land and its inherited memory, trauma, and possibilities.*

The excerpt from *Menagano* is 5 minutes and 18 seconds long, and is made up of visuals and shots of various landscapes. "An old-growth forest, a mountain range, or a river valley is more important and certainly more lovable than any country will ever be. I could weep for a river valley, and I have. But for a country? Oh man, I don't know..." (Roy, 2016). The piece is made up mostly of silence, except for the sound coming from the landscapes being documented. This silence reminds me of absence and how it has a presence and a history. I think of the violence, material and immaterial, that has taken root in the space left by the conditions of absence ushered in by land dispossession. By being made worldless. This haunting that is

\*\*\*\*\*Sharpe, C. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

simultaneously visible and invisible; a haunting made visible by South Africa's contemporary topography that reaches out and touches its historical making, and a haunting that is invisible in relation to the cultural, spiritual and ontological assault that comes from being dispossessed of your land. As I continue to watch *Menagano*, I also begin to think of its omnipresent silence and thus of its echoes of absence coming from the wake, as speaking in an untranslatable lexicon of blackness, of speaking to us in sedimented tongues.

...this is a reckoning with history that knows the personal is political and the political personal...

My paternal grandfather was a farm worker, he was also a healer, I met him once before his passing. In thinking about him I am led to a piece written by Andile Mngxitama, his son, in 2014 for the Chimurenga Chronic titled *Not Only Our Land But also Our Souls*. Seeking to think about land theft beyond the material, to dig deeper and excavate in thought the story of loss that is the Black experience he writes:

*When one loses a lover, it's not so much the loss of this beloved person, but a loss of one's capacity to love without fear again in the future. One grieves for not only the past, but also a future that is linked with the present in ways that already are too damaging. A charred future without? Without understanding the dialectical relationship between history and the future we end up being unconscious agents of a history we wish to obliterate. We have to plumb the heart and soul of history, crack open the narratives and data that organise our contemporary agonies and desires.*

*When I reported these thoughts, a friend pointed out that I had, by accident, put my finger on three things that haven't been sufficiently reflected upon: namely love, loss and land! My friend indicated that a loss to death is traumatic, but nevertheless a loss fully accounted for and for which closure, of sorts,*

*can be attained. Loss of land is altogether more devastating because we are condemned to encounter it every day - in passing koppies, smiling mountains and angry rivers - as a loss that exists as a gain for the other. The loss of land dramatises the loss of too much for the African who became the Black - a void and a great menacing silence. This loss is the most complete. Perhaps then it makes sense for melancholy to be weaved into the pieces that shattered and became the Black condition. Blackness as an experience of worldlessness is congregated in a Song of Mo(u)rning and muffled gags of choking, like those one hears when watching Lerato Shadi's piece *Motlhaba wa re ke Namile*, (2016). In the video work and performance piece - captured on location in Shadi's home village of Lotlhakane in Mahikeng in the Northwest Province of South Africa - we see a 7 minutes and 35 seconds long close-up shot of Shadi, ingesting and choking on red soil. As Shadi continues to eat the soil and suffocate on it, as one continues to hear the buzzing fly, *Motlhaba wa re ke Namile* mutates from a video performance piece into a reckoning or confrontation, one that becomes increasingly difficult to bear witness to. It is as if you yourself are choking as Shadi struggles to swallow the soil symbolising these histories of rot and worldlessness. However, there is another story being told by Shadi's work, that of refusal and epistemic silence in its exploration on how the act of consuming soil to commit suicide, sometimes practiced by enslaved people, has been overlooked as an act of resistance.*

Holding all three close - thought, feeling and excavation - I make my way towards the end of my (re)imagining of and reckoning with soil. As I listen to them speak to each other in sedimented tongues and untranslatable lexicons of geographies of loss, rememory and hauntedness, it is clear that thinking about and through land dispossession in the logic of material dispossession, and therefore, in the

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logic of land restitution or redistribution will never be enough in accounting for and returning what was lost and continues to be lost by Black people because of land stolen. To think from Black and its untranslatable lexicon, which is to say to think from soil, requires us to dive deep into “the heart and soul of history”\*\*\*\*\*. It needs us to listen to the silence and muffled echoes, and to meet there in the place of resistance. It is to know, as Bryan Stevenson says, “There are tears in this soil from all those who laboured under the indignation and humiliation of segregation. But in this soil there’s also opportunity for new life. A chance to grow something hopeful and healing for the future.”

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\*\*\*\*\*Mngxitama, A. 2014. ‘Not Only Our Land but Also Our Souls,’ Chimurenga Chronic. Available at: <https://chimurengachronic.co.za/not-only-our-land-but-also-our-souls/chr>

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## un | der | min | ling

Magnus Elias Rosengarten

From the moment I received the request to write a text for the exhibition "Soil Conversations", I was met with autobiographical associations. The essay was to aim at relating to the curatorial and artistic stance of the exhibition and also to create space of contemplation for new perspectives and approaches to the multi-layered motif of soil. The exhibition's core themes belonging, the relationship between humanity and nature, spirituality and geographical connectivity led me to my own roots in Germany and my relationship to this country. It made sense, given my family history, to look at my point of reference to soil and ancestry through this lens.

My associations in connection with the essay assignment were primarily autobiographical because the *white* German side of my family comes from a rural background meaning soil and agriculture naturally played a central role in their lives and their survival for many generations. Because I only spent the first few months of my life on my ancestor's farm in Münster (North Rhine-Westphalia) and later, regularly, the summer vacations, my childhood memories are fragmented. As I was socialized in a medium-sized, West German city, it left a gap between myself and the rural background that shaped the history of my German family so clearly and that continued to expand over the years. So I was surprised that the title and curatorial approach of "Soil Conversations" immediately had me ruminate over these rather personal associations, spending a few days understanding where these images emerged from. Knowing that the aim of "Soil Conversations" also explicitly correlates notions of soil and identity made me both curious and - especially from the position of an Afro-German person - quite uneasy.

How could I explore this connection in Germany as someone who shares lineage with German *whiteness* and at the same time is incessantly excluded from the national narrative? This text digs deep, looking at layers of personal and collective experience and dissecting historical constructs that extend into the present. The mapped area of the farm was identity-forming and, because it was cultivated, it also provided direct breadwinning across generations. It defined a home that was in direct exchange with and depended on the surrounding nature. As all these visual impressions flooded my memory, I became aware of my ambivalent and conflicted relationship to them. The question of belonging, of personally belonging to my family and heritage was made present. These images, impressions, moments, experiences, summer vacations and family celebrations centering belonging left traces in the subconscious, always making me question whether I *actually* did belong? A kind of foggy perception that produced a void or undefined space between my body and my family ties. Adrian Piper and other contemporary artists negotiate the aforementioned physical and mental state in their oeuvre through performative practices but also with motion pictures. In one of her earliest series, *Mythic Being* (1973-75), the artist, a Black light-skinned cis woman wearing afro and costumed in large sunglasses and workman's clothing, takes on the cliché embodiment of a Black cis man, filming herself on the streets of New York. Piper is particularly interested in the reactions and palpable projections of passers-by and how these influence their self-image; how gazes and the clichés they reveal about minoritised groups in majority-*white* spaces often stereotype individuals and force them into certain roles.

"Mythic Being"<sup>\*\*</sup> is a series of works consisting of drawings, photographs, texts, and video that draws attention to the construction of race, gender, and class in social interaction. In his work "The Wretched of the Earth"<sup>\*\*</sup>, psychiatrist and intellectual Frantz Fanon describes the phenomenology of racism in Western societies as "atmospheric", i.e. omnipresent, inherent in them and thus impossible to escape.

Germany, with its legacy of the Völkisch movement and the resulting inhuman chapters of National Socialism all the way up to groupings of today's extreme right, is a prime example of a territory atmospherically contaminated with racism<sup>\*\*\*</sup>. The obsession with *whiteness*, a collective subconscious deeply anchored in the belief that Germanness and phenotypical characteristics are linked, the categorical evasion of a colonial legacy and the vehement denial of the fact that Germany is a country of immigration are all symptoms of missed opportunities to come to terms with history.

central belief of nationalist propaganda is the blood and soil ideology, which claims a "unity of racialized people"<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> and space and describes a physical,

A spiritual, mental and psychological imprint of "racialized individuals and collectives" given by "nature". The deeply questionable and racist imagination of a unity of (*white*) bodies and space, claimed as naturally given and unquestioned, persists to haunt this country's present and its definitions of nationality. Here, the land is seen as nurturer of *white* bodies and producer of a norm that excludes and literally suffocates anything deviant. The self-declared *white* supremacy is the perfect execution of Western hubris. The question "Where are you from?" is a brilliant example. It claims to be an innocent question and is amply discussed amongst people who experience racism. Non-

*white* German people find themselves in a boundary crossing question game on a daily basis and have to experience what it means when being German is exclusively defined by being *white*. The *white* questioning side thus reinforces its own "natural" belonging while simultaneously excluding the questioned person by means of arbitrarily chosen physiognomic features.

To this day I am fascinated by my relationship to Germany, by my physically and psychologically deeply anchored knowledge of belonging and not belonging at the same time. This liminal state is schizophrenic in nature because I am simultaneously there and not there, at least for the majority of the society that surrounds me. I've long been wondering what this does to us Black, brown, and non-*white* bodies who had to go through *white* (educational) institutions, and grew up surrounded in a social climate that is institutionally, structurally, and spiritually designed to erase us?

Fortunately, centuries of work by Black and PoC activists in a wide variety of German social spheres, in politics, literature, culture, and the visual arts, attest to the fact that an erasure is not possible. The exhibition "Trotz Allem: Migration in die Kolonialmetropole Berlin"<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> (Despite Everything: Migration in the Colonial Metropolis of Berlin), recently organized at the Stadtmuseum Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, presents its own historiography of various migration flows in and around Berlin, ranging from the present to the Kaiserreich. It attests to a constantly persistent presence and participation of non-*white* communities in various spheres of urban society, and at the same time testifies to an incredible resilience to the toxic climate of *white* German supremacism. The exhibition traces the lives of various families, from West Africa, Egypt, and China in the late 19th and 20th centuries,

\*A <https://adrianpiper.weebly.com/mythic-being-1973-1975.html>  
 \*\*citation from German version *Die Verdammten der Erde*, Suhrkamp 1981 (translator's comment)  
 \*\*\*<https://www.bpb.de/themen/rechtsextremismus/dossier-rechtsextremismus/230022/die-voelkische-bewegung/>  
 \*\*\*\* the same

\*\*\*\*<https://www.fhxb-museum.de/index.php?id=267>

ending a human and emotional depth to academic debates about migration and immigration that this discourse often lacks.

One photograph\*\*\*\*\* in the exhibition burned itself into my memory: The two young Black women Leni Garber and Ejanga Egiomue, daughters of colonial migrants who came to Berlin at the turn of the century, walk elegantly and fashionably dressed on the streets of Berlin around 1939. A few meters behind them, an older *white* woman turns her head in surprise. Leni and Ejanga move so carefree and casual in public space. I am interested in whether there is also fear behind the happy facade, especially in the year of the outbreak of war. How do the two women experience the first years of World War II, with all the racist and inhumane rhetoric and propaganda in Germany? What does it do to their self-image and the question of belonging?

As a curator, writer, and performer, I situate my work within a globally connected Afro-diasporic art world that I have helped shape over the past five years from Germany and specifically Berlin. My interest in the body, embodiment and corporeality as a medium and carrier of diverse identities' narratives, whether they are cultural, gendered, sexual or spiritual and religious, aims to subvert the *white* gaze and offer spaces for previously denied ourstories and bodily presence to unfold. I use the verb to *undermine* in two ways, metaphorically as an action that "work(s) little by little on the destruction of something,"\*\*\*\*\* and literally "to remove the earth in the soil underneath something".\*\*\*\*\* It describes an almost surgical intervention that requires a lot of precision, perseverance and a microscopic vision to allow a re-location and an act of inscribing self in the soil. During this process of extraction, we must replenish the ground with new soil, because its current composition destroys the presence of our bodies, creativity, beauty, and potential.

While reflecting on my origins and my work present the im-possibilities in which Black German cultural producers, artists, curators and authors, etc. are made to work and convey their content. The burning question arises, how conditions and systemic power imbalances can be altered to, especially in the German art and cultural landscape, help provide a "fertile ground" that allows a multiplicity of identities, bodies, and movements to "germinate and sprout"? A ground that is historically, discursively, and politically made incapable of sustaining diverse creativity,

narratives, and embodiments must inevitably undergo a reassessment and understand its hostile composition in order to then reorganize itself, hopefully successfully.

Audre Lorde's conceptualization of the "eros"\*\*\*\*\* or "erotic" can help understand how an aforementioned change management can be initiated. Far away from purely sexual associations, the U.S. poet, feminist, and activist, who was also instrumental in shaping the Afro-German movement in the 1980s, particularly in Berlin, understood the "erotic" as a deeply feminine force that resides in all of us and manifests itself primarily in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feelings. Approaching and facing them is an essential step in the process of self-confrontation. Patriarchal structures prohibited accessing self-awareness for centuries, especially for female identified people, because those in power naturally knew about what kind of a catalyst of strength self-connectedness is and that unconscious, ignorant people have always been more compliant.

I believe that *white* German people must truly face their history, face the emotional truth that their legacy includes contempt for non-*white* existence and that these fascistoid ideologies continue to work into current structures of

social coexistence. They must actively choose to build a different, new society that resolutely rejects *white* supremacy and uplifts and appreciates all human life. In this new society being German cannot and can never again be equated to being *white*. So far notions of coming to terms with historic legacy have often been approached intellectually and academically, thus avoiding emotional confrontations with the past. A more holistic healing process, however, decontaminates the ground this country is built on and prepares it for a true celebration of human diversity.

Those undergoing a healing process need to face their deep-seated existential fears, unresolved traumas and crises of one's own sexuality, and unprocessed potential for violence being projected onto created "others." Lorde's appeal to nurture a sophisticated relationship with oneself as a way of accessing a primal source of personal happiness, reflects this very process of self-reflection in order to ultimately enter into healthier relationships with fellow human beings and the environment.

My thoughts and associations in this text are not only addressing necessary steps and tasks aimed at the *white* German society. My main concern in this essay are all the Black German cultural workers. This is an attempt to address questions like, how we can position ourselves in a landscape of political upheaval, but also of continued hostility to our talents, abilities, strengths, and beauties; How do we plant ourselves with confidence in soil that is intent on our disappearance rather than our deserved appearance, which thoroughly upends the maxim of Germanness that still holds true today.

My biographical reference to soil and agriculture in West Germany and the closeness to German *whiteness* and its inherent gaze have given me a specific perspective on West Germany and especially on its deep identity crises. I was and am a disruptive force in an environment that resists understanding blackness as belonging to it, far off seeing it as inherent.

The surroundings only dare to observe from a distance, with a scrutinising gaze and a judgmental sovereignty. This behaviour creates and maintains a norm in which one's own position of being "right" and "natural" is confirmed repeatedly. The fundamental weakness of a viewpoint coined by *whiteness* is its lack of imagination and a lack of knowledge about strategies of resistance. These strategies can help overcome fears that are projected onto the supposed "other" and enable a deeper understanding of power-critical coexistence.

It is a privilege, in my opinion, to be able to undermine this questionable *white*, German prerogative of interpretation. Planting oneself and inscribing oneself in hostile soil requires strong abilities of resilience and a self-awareness that can withstand daily hostilities. Training this "muscle" from a much to early age on, became a necessity for a lot of us, fighting for visibility and credibility within society. In times of worldwide strengthening of the political far right especially in Europe and Germany, who refer to the perverted idea of blood and soil ideology, our bodies and voices existing is more important than ever. Our existence alone is testimony for a resistance to historically racist and colonial Europe. That I can have ancestry in Münster, Addis Ababa, Toronto, New York and L.A. all at the same time is beyond the imagination of many *white* Europeans. And yet we are growing in number.



## Thinking through/with Soil: Reflections on Digging, Composting and Sanctuary

Kathy-Ann Tan

In their single channel video, “Notes on Digging” (2020), the artist Kiyann Williams describes soil or dirt as at once “a metaphor for all the things that once made me ashamed of inhabiting this body” and “the possibility for transformation, regeneration and to become something otherwise.” The video details the process of installing their public artwork, *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns* (2020) – a group of sculptures of arms and hands formed out of soil that reach toward the sky, that was originally installed along the banks of the Powhatan (James) River in Richmond, Virginia, on the site of the Richmond Slave Trail where some of the first enslaved Black people touched land in what Williams calls “the new/ruined world”.\*

The piece was inspired by Lucille Clifton’s poem “won’t you celebrate with me”, and emerged as a response to Christina Sharpe’s meditations in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* about how to memorialize an event (the afterlives of enslavement) when the latter is still very much ongoing in the present. In the video, Williams describes their urge to dig as simultaneously an act of self-preservation – digging to root out the histories that are embedded in the soil, of colonial violence against enslaved persons and its contemporary manifestations of gendered and racialized violence against Black queer and trans people – and as a labor of love – to uncover, bring to light and tenderly hold the “traces of stolen life [that] were left behind in the soil”.

Firmly planting the arm and hand sculptures into the soil is thus both a gesture of marking and acknowledging the site’s history of colonial violence, as well as an act of re-inscribing and re-claiming that space in the present with the lives, stories, poetry, art, breath, joy, hope and thriving of Black people that the artwork symbolizes.

Williams is known for working intimately with soil in their work\*\*, by tasting it, rubbing it and sculpting it. They recall how, the first time they worked with soil as an artistic medium, they knew it was medicine, something that would hold them together, ground them, and keep them rooted. Soil thus became a medium of grounding, healing and transformation for the artist.

Kiyann Williams’ work on/with soil is an interesting point of departure for considering how this seemingly ubiquitous medium offers complex ways for us to reflect on our own relationship with our surroundings, to think about the ways that different bodies and subjectivities are allowed (or not, as the case might be) to occupy and navigate public spaces, and to contemplate how we engage with the traces of histories of colonialism, enslavement, genocide, looting and extraction that are rooted in the land. How, indeed, can we reconcile the notion of soil as memory, archive and vessel that holds the vestiges of forced migration, genocide and land dispossession,

\*Unsurprisingly, the installation was removed by park rangers because of the lack of a permit. Nevertheless, an expanded version of the work was part of the group exhibition *Monuments Now: Call and Response* at Socrates Sculpture Park in NYC in 2020-2021. The exhibition catalogue can be found here: <https://socratessculpturepark.org/monuments-now-exhibition-catalogue/>

\*\* Examples include their performance *An Intimate Encounter with Dirt* (2018), their performance, *Meditation on the Making of America* (2019) at The Shed, New York City in which, using soil as a primary material, the artist outlines a rough map of the USA and critiques the violence of settler colonialism and extraction or, more recently, *Ruins of Empire* (2022), a 13 feet high x 8 feet wide earthen ruin that references the Statue of Freedom, a historic bronze monument that sits at the top of the US Capitol Building.

with the more affirmative nature of soil as sustenance? How can we hold and bear, not bury, the violent past (and its present-day manifestations) of plantation politics, enslaved and indentured labor, settler colonialism, land dispossession, extraction and racial capitalism together with the possibility for repair and resilience, for decomposting, transformation and the regeneration of new life that soil holds out? How can we grieve, mourn, mark, commemorate, build, repair, re-claim and re-construct, on/with/in soil?

In pondering these questions, I am reminded of Julietta Singh's work that is attentive to the ways in which ongoing legacies of colonial violence have left indelible effects on our natural and lived environments, and how necessary it is to engage in decolonial practices of what she terms "unthinking mastery"<sup>\*\*\*</sup>. In *The Nest*, Singh's currently-in-production (at the time of writing) feature-length experimental documentary with filmmaker Chase Joynt, she returns to her childhood home in Winnipeg, Manitoba, to re-discover the house as a hub for intersecting histories of anticolonial feminist struggle and interracial alliances – from the life and times of Annie Bannatyne, the Métis matriarch who built the house in the 19th century and was a central figure of the anti-colonial resistance movement in Canada, to the stories of the current occupant of the house, Christine Common-Singh (Julietta Singh's mother), who was once famous for her eco-feminist activism in Winnipeg.

The documentary raises the question of how bodies that occupy architectures become part of their legacy and, conversely, how we might understand ourselves as co-inhabiting the histories of spaces and architectures that have their own story to tell.

How can we develop a practice of deep listening in order to hear the tale that the architecture of a place wants to tell, calling

back to life its previous manifestations like ghostly palimpsests? What kinds of physical and emotional labor are involved in situating oneself in a place in order to receive, transcribe and render its story, hence entering into a contract of relationality with history and its discontents? As Dionne Brand famously writes in *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001), "One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience. Where one can be observed is relative to that history."

Ruminating these thoughts, I am reminded of a section from Dionne Brand's long poem, "Land to Light On", in which the speaker describes her experience of living in an unfamiliar country as one that leaves her feeling dislocated, misplaced, in exile, at sea without the promise of arrival:

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*What happens to histories and stories that can only be told by not telling, that must be told in their un-telling?<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> To the histories of racism, genocide, forced migration, deracination, colonial violence, extraction and exploitation that have indelibly left their mark on the land? How do we respond to the legacies of these entangled histories that have not only become sediments in the bedrock of the soil, but are also still clearly reflected in the street names and signs, the monuments and archives that have been built on top of the ground? Is it ever enough to re-name, re-claim and re-purpose these spaces, or do we need to burn it all down?*

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (2018).

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (2008)



Kiyan Williams, still from *Notes on Digging*, 2020

V i

Maybe this wide country just stretches your life to a thinness just trying to take it in, trying to calculate in it what you must do [...] land fills your throat [...]. It always takes long to come to what you have to say, you have to sweep this stretch of land up around your feet and point to the signs, pleat whole histories with pins in your mouth and guess at the fall of words. (2022, 305)

The images of land filling the speaker's throat and the pins pleating whole histories in her mouth enact a painful silencing of voices and stories like hers that are excluded from the "grand narratives" of history. Conversely, the colonizer's language feels strange and foreign in the speaker's mouth, and it takes her too long to find the right words to express what she wants to say.

As a result, she has to resort to pointing at signs and guessing at the meaning of words. In this poem, the land does not offer nourishment or refuge. Rather, it is barren, cold, acrid, stretching the speaker's sense of self into a "thinness" that does not allow her to thrive, leaving her unable to collect her thoughts, literally dissecting her into "whole parts floating in heavy lake water" (ibid.). The experience of traversing this strange land leaves the speaker feeling exhausted, isolated, alone, and the poem ends with her "giving up on land to light on", renouncing all hope of sanctuary.

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*The haptic register of soil. To run one's hands through dirt, feeling its richness and moistness, digging and working it with one's fingers, getting bits of earth under one's fingernails. Breathing in the heady scent of earth, tasting it, sifting through layers of memory and that which remains.*



Kiyan Williams, *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*, 2020

*To dig into soil means digging into the past, the layers from topsoil to bedrock forming a documentation or archive, much in the same way the rings of a tree trunk record its growth. I wonder if soil can ever extend complete sanctuary to the living organisms that inhabit it, that find refuge in its darkness and dampness, whole ecosystems that shy away from the piercing light of day. I recall what Audre Lorde memorably wrote about darkness as a "place of possibility within ourselves", and I am convinced that life in the soil has so many things to teach us about how to live life on the soil.*

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In thinking about the possibilities of soil as sanctuary and foundation for repair and regeneration, I find myself re-reading Bayo Akomolafe's essay "Coming Down to Earth" (2020). In it, he writes about the importance of radical and unprecedented forms of shared inquiry, black fugitivity<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> and political organizing in times of ongoing global crisis and

pandemic that are grounded in an understanding of our relationship with the "rich ecologies" (human and non-human) that surround us. He calls this practice one of "composting", or "the disciplining decentering of a different metaphysics of destruction<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>". It is this process of composting or "com/post/activism", Akomolafe argues, that creates room for sanctuary, which he defines as "a fragile putting-into-work the very notion of companionship in a wilder world" in which we are relationally "held together by the not-knowing and the accountability to others around us" (ibid.). Akomolafe's ruminations on composting and sanctuary are useful to a consideration of the critical endeavor of challenging, countering or "writing back<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>" to site-specific histories and narratives of colonialism. First, it speaks to how a decolonial and intersectional feminist practice of citation can be understood as just that – composting and sanctuary –, at once providing a means of paying homage to the work of radical thinkers,

\*\*\*\* In the sense of Fred Moten's definition of "fugitivity" as "a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed" (2018, 131).

\*\*\*\*\* [www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/coming-down-to-earth](http://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/coming-down-to-earth)  
\*\*\*\*\* A common term in postcolonial theory to denote a critical redressing of colonial narratives and its attendant centring of imperialist and orientalist perspectives.

writers, philosophers and activists who have come before, while creating and holding space for new critical voices. It is through the process of composting that these earlier seminal writings can be broken down, sifted through, sedimented and become the nourishing, fertile ground from which new thoughts and ideas, political urgencies and realities can spring forth. Second, in line with the long duration of composting, Akomolafe extends an invitation to regard planning and study as an extended commitment and long-term/life-long practice that would create a sustainable model of critical inquiry.

This drawn-out process reminds me of the slow but steadily persistent work that the ongoing street-renaming initiatives in Berlin\*\*\*\* (e.g. the re-naming of the M-Straße in Mitte and streets in the Afrikanisches Viertel) are doing in order to challenge the ways in which constellations of power/violence have been embedded in certain spaces and how they continue to have effects on the present-day. While things have been moving frustratingly slowly, this initiative has nevertheless brought together a diverse group of activists, scholars, artists and cultural workers who continue to redefine the parameters of sanctuary and solidarity against the backdrop of racism, genocide, extraction and colonial entanglements in the postcolonial city.

To come full circle: As Kiyon Williams voices in their single-channel video “Notes on Digging”, it is by thinking through/with soil and engaging in a deep spiritual practice of connecting with the land, that the artist is able to “transcend the myth of the individual” and understand themselves

as “part of something greater and larger and ancient and vital”, specifically, as part of a longer historical trajectory of Black trans struggle, resilience, survival and flourishing. For me, thinking through/with soil opens up ways for us to question and be critically reflexive of how we exist in relation to one another and to our surroundings. It invites us to partake in a kind of deep listening, empathy and softness in connection with that which exists outside of and beyond us. Such a practice not only cultivates the conditions for new forms of radical study, collective fugitivity and resistance, but also lays the groundwork for a decolonial practice of decomposition, transformation and regeneration that will sustain us and, hopefully, many more future generations to come.

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[berlin.de/kunstundkulturmitte/geschichte/erinnerungskultur/strassenbenennungen/artikel.1066742.php](http://berlin.de/kunstundkulturmitte/geschichte/erinnerungskultur/strassenbenennungen/artikel.1066742.php)  
 I would like to note here that this website, its attempt at “neutrality” and fact (e.g. including the arguments of those against the renaming of the streets), merely reproduces the violence that the street re-naming initiatives have addressed and critiqued. The full spelling of M-Straße in this document is an unnecessary provocation.

# AUTHORS\*



## Tomke Braun

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As a curator and author, Tomke Braun deals with multidisciplinary artistic practices and questions of representation. From 2018 to 2021 she held the artistic direction of the Kunstverein Göttingen and realized exhibitions and performances with AA Bronson, Melike Kara, Sylbee Kim, Nile Koetting, and Monira Al Qadiri, among others. Since 2019 she has regularly curated various projects with the Berlin platform Creamcake, including 3hd, a hybrid festival format, and the touring exhibition "Techno Worlds" realized with the Visual Arts department of the Goethe-Institut Munich. As publisher and editor, she works on various book projects with artists and institutions. In 2019 she was curator-in-residence at the Goethe-Institut in New Delhi, India. She completed her master's degree in curatorial studies at the Goethe University and the Städelschule, Frankfurt a. M. with a thesis on affect theory and performative exhibition formats.

## Nolan Oswald Dennis

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Nolan Oswald Dennis is a para-disciplinary artist based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Their practice explores 'a black consciousness of space' - the material and metaphysical conditions of decolonization - questioning histories of space and time through system-specific, rather than site-specific interventions. They hold a Bachelor's degree in Architecture from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and a Science Master's degree in Art, Culture and Technology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Their work has been featured in exhibitions at the Goodman Gallery (Johannesburg, Cape Town, London), Palais de Tokyo (Paris), MACBA (Barcelona), AutotItalia SouthEast (London), CAN (Neuchatel), the Young Congo Biennale (Kinshasa), FRONT triennial (Columbus) among others. They are a founding member of artist group NTU, a research associate at the VIAD research centre at the University of Johannesburg, and a member of the Index Literacy Program

## Zara Julius

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Zara Julius (b.1992) is an interdisciplinary artist, researcher and vinyl selector based in Johannesburg, South Africa. She is also the founder of Pan-African creative research and cultural storytelling agency, KONJO. Her work is concerned with the relationship between performativity, frequency, concealment and fugitivity in the settler (post) colony, with a special focus on what we call the 'Global South'. Working with sound, video, performance and objects, Zara's practice involves the collection, selection, collage and creation of archives (real, imagined and embodied) through extensive research projects. She is especially engaged in thinking through the internal workings of the Black sonic, and how they might help us imagine new futures, and experience different present(s). The bulk of Zara's projects have focused on mapping the sonic and spiritual mobilities of spiritual rapture and rupture with congregants of syncretic religions, and on (post)apartheid narratives around race and place as they pertain to intimate archiving practices. She holds a BAHons in social anthropology from the University of Cape Town and a MAFA in Fine Art by Research and Practice from the University of the Witwatersrand. Zara has exhibited and presented her work across South Africa and internationally.

## Zayaan Khan

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Zayaan Khan works as an artist, consultant, food transformer, ceramicist, writer and researcher. She is intrigued by the local urban and ecological environments and their interchangeable relationship in order to understand the elements that build ecosystems. Through curiosity, research, experimentation and engagement, her work found a resting place through food as a means of understanding the world, particularly land and our collective heritage. She is influenced by traditions, both inherited and the creation of new ones, reclaiming culture and reviving tradition through progressive interpretation in order to enact a listening of the future and a steady present survivalism. She continues to build the Seed Biblioteek, a seed library highlighting the story of seed.

## Mahret Ifeoma Kupka

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Dr. Mahret Ifeoma Kupka is an art scholar, freelance writer and, since 2013, senior curator at the Museum Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt/Main, Germany. In her exhibitions, lectures, publications, and interdisciplinary projects, she addresses the issues of racism, memory culture, representation, and the decolonization of art and cultural practices in Europe and on the African continent. She is a member of the advisory board of the Initiative of Black People in Germany (ISD) and of TEXTE ZUR KUNST and a founding member of the Neue Deutsche Museumsmacher\*innen (a network of BIPOC museum practitioners in Germany). In addition, she has been and continues to be active on international juries, scientific panels, and search committees. She studied Economics in Heidelberg as well as Aesthetics/Media Theory, Philosophy, Curatorial Practice, and Exhibition Design at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design, where in 2015 she received her doctorate in art and media theory.

## Lindiwe Mngxitama

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Lindiwe (Lindi) Mngxitama currently lives and works in Johannesburg, their first Love. They are an African Literature – postgraduate cum laude – alumni from the University of the Witwatersrand, was Editor of Bubblegum Club from 2019 to 2022, and is now Copy Director for the agency silo of the organisation. They have written and directed plays and short documentaries, worked as a collaborator, along other academics and cultural workers, and took part in A4 Arts Foundations Distributed Residency as part of Bubblegum Club's art collective.

Her writing has appeared and been featured in various print and digital South African, African and international publications including TSA Art Magazine, Dazed Digital, The Face Magazine, ArtThrob, Something We Africans Got, Mail and Guardian and more.

As a storyteller, curator, artist, director and academic-in-cry-sis, Lindi thinks of the worlds she creates through language as radical spaces of (re)imagination and critical questioning. Word woven worlds that engage with H/historical and socio-political legacies that construct and govern society and shape subjectivities. Her work, praxis and writing seek to bring to the centre the narratives of those bodies and their interior worlds, radioactive and overflowing with H/history – often relegated to the periphery – to ask who and what moves at the margins, why and how? And are rooted in Affect, Play, Phenomenology, Critical Race theory, Post-Colonial theory, Queer theory, Black Pessimism and Black Feminist Thought.



## Magnus Elias Rosengarten

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Magnus Elias Rosengarten primarily works as a writer and curator in the fields of performance, discourse, and film/video, recently at the Gropius Bau and Berliner Festspiele in Berlin. He has written and produced for ContemporaryAnd Magazine (C&), Artforum, Berlin Biennale, and arte/ZDF, among others. Magnus Elias Rosengarten also presented work at the Kraine Theatre, New York City (2016), the California African American Museum, Los Angeles (2018), and Ballhaus Naunynstraße, Berlin(2023).

## Kathy-Ann Tan

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Kathy-Ann Tan (she/they) is a Berlin-based independent curator and writer interested in alternative models of art dissemination, exhibition-making, and institutionality that are attuned to issues of social justice. Her work revolves around creating spaces for conversation, sharing, and empowerment that lies outside of academic formats and larger institutions. She puts decolonial and intersectional feminist perspectives into practice by working with local BIPOC and queer artists to develop immersive exhibitions where there is space for artistic research, encounter, dialogue, and exchange. She is the founder and artistic director of Mental Health Arts Space Berlin, a non-profit arts/project space that centers on the mental health, experiences, knowledges, histories, and narratives of BIPOC, queer, and otherwise marginalized artists and cultural workers. She is also the initiator of Decolonial Art Archives, an on- and offline platform that aims to collaboratively build a forum for artists in the visual arts and performance to network and develop sustainable collaborations across different countries and contexts.

# TRACES\*



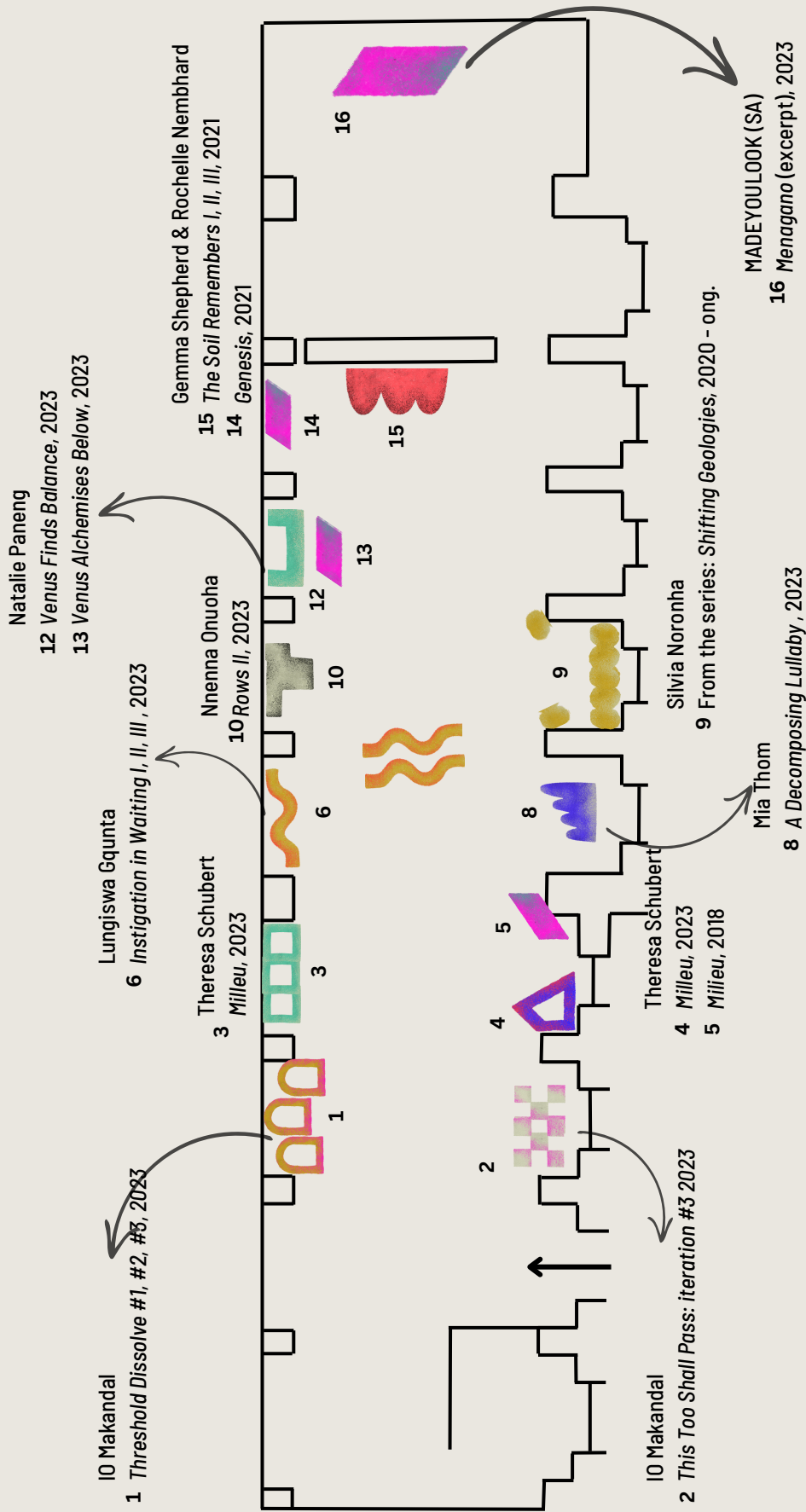
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\*Artworks and descriptions. Interpretations and measurements.

Wherever possible we asked the artists to respond in situ and opened the possibility to adapt their works to the environment shown.

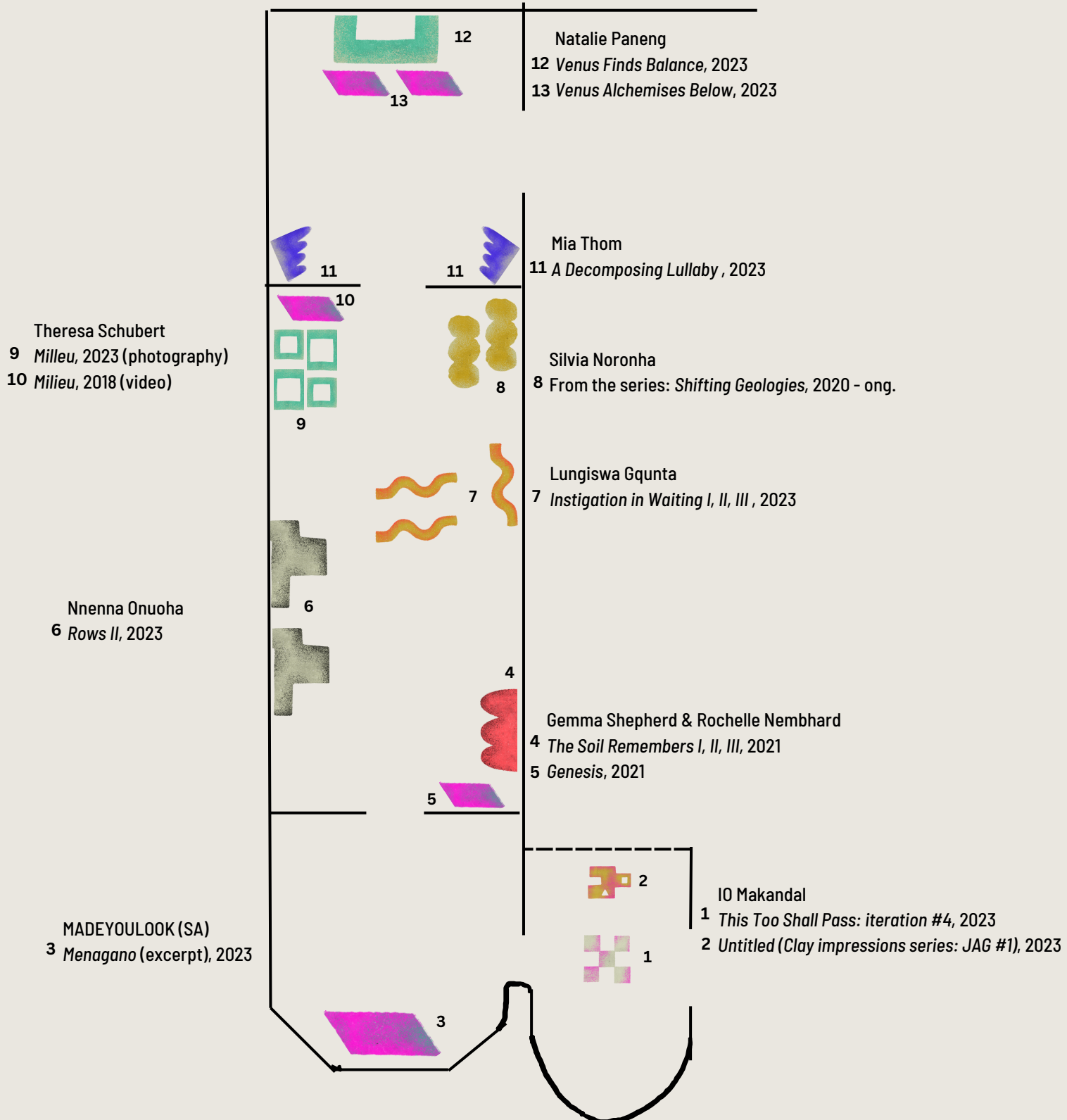
26.05 - 30.08.2024  
 Galerie im Körnerpark

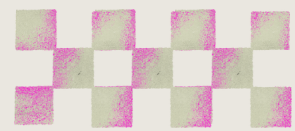
BERLIN



26.08 - 18.11.2024  
Johannesburg Art Gallery

JOBURG





**IO Makandal (SA, 1987)**

***This Too Shall Pass: iteration #4***

**2023**

**Natural fibre carpet, mycelium, soil residue, effective microorganisms, acrylic, steel bolts and cable, 90 x 125 cm**

*This Too Shall Pass* is the artists' long-term engagement with nature's cycle of decay and birth. Using living materials that will over time use the carpet as a resource to grow in an environment that is largely considered sterile, preserving, and distant from the touch. It investigates the idea of material culture as static and calls on us to reposition our ideas of value - between holding on and letting go. Preserving and change. In this iteration of *This Too Shall Pass* the viewer is confronted with the next stage of the process of decay. Termites have eaten away at portions of the fibre, mycelium grows in various patterns. The fibres of the carpet are brittle, revealing its material fragility. This is a metaphor for the ways in which Nature digests Culture.



***This Too Shall Pass: iteration #3***

**2023**

**Natural fibre carpet, coconut husk, soil, effective microorganisms, seeds, LED grow lights, 250 x 345 cm**

*This Too Shall Pass* is the artists' long-term engagement with nature's cycle of decay and birth. Using alive materials that will over time use the carpet as a resource to grow in an environment that is largely considered sterile, preserving, and distant from the touch. It investigates the idea of material culture as static and calls on us to reposition our ideas of value - between holding on and letting go. Preserving and change.





IO Makandal (SA, 1987)

*Threshold Dissolve #1, #2, #3*

2023

Cotton, soil, stone powder, ground rye, water vapour, effective micro-organisms, wood frames:

35.5 x 45.5 cm // 83.5 x 83.5 cm // 91.5 x 91.5 cm

The earth drawings are a continuous investigation by the artists of using earth pigments as material that looks at the multiplicity of soil concepts - categorised by history into land, borders, and the duality between 'them and us'. Cultural, and political connotations of belonging and tradition - all of which are questioned in the artists' use of soil as material in a largely sterile environment such as the white cube. Disentangling it from the heavy burden which was inscribed on it and using its poetic property, its aliveness makes this growing artwork into an experience that can be engaged with.

TITLE is ultimately a carrier of its own culture, encroaching into the white cube and disrupting a perception of binary thinking, but proposing a moment of circularity, connectedness, and appreciation of that which is largely disconnected from our built environments. It offers a moment of contemplation and reconnection.





IO Makandal (SA, 1987)

*Untitled (Clay impressions series: JAG #1)*

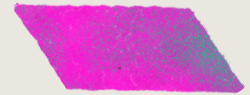
2023

unfired earthenware clay, generated soil,

The artist's clay impressions series transfers traces of the architecture of insitutional sites using clay slabs which are then made into vessels. Much like the Greek vases of ancient Greece performing as an archive and document of the time, these clay impressions hold information of the architecture, in this specific case, the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Unfired, the clay holds the information for a moment in time only to later transform again with the transience of the material. If fired the material record can be preserved for future readings. It is a play between transience and permanence and a contemplation of what traces are left behind.



MADEYOULOOK (SA)  
*Menagano* (excerpt)  
2023



Video, sound  
05:18 minutes

This film is based on the publication *Menagano*, an exploratory study on what might constitute a black landscape aesthetic. The publication responds to the political and historical context of the tradition in South Africa and lays out a set of questions and propositions informed by a contemporary community of practice as well as long-established black interpretations of landscape. *Menagano* considers how knowing the land intimately and from within informs aesthetic imaginations of land that disrupt colonial understandings of the landscape tradition and touches on modes of visual language-making that represent the multiplicities of relationships with the land and its inherited memory, trauma, and possibilities.

This presentation is an excerpt from an in-progress film work, developed during their fellowship at the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program.







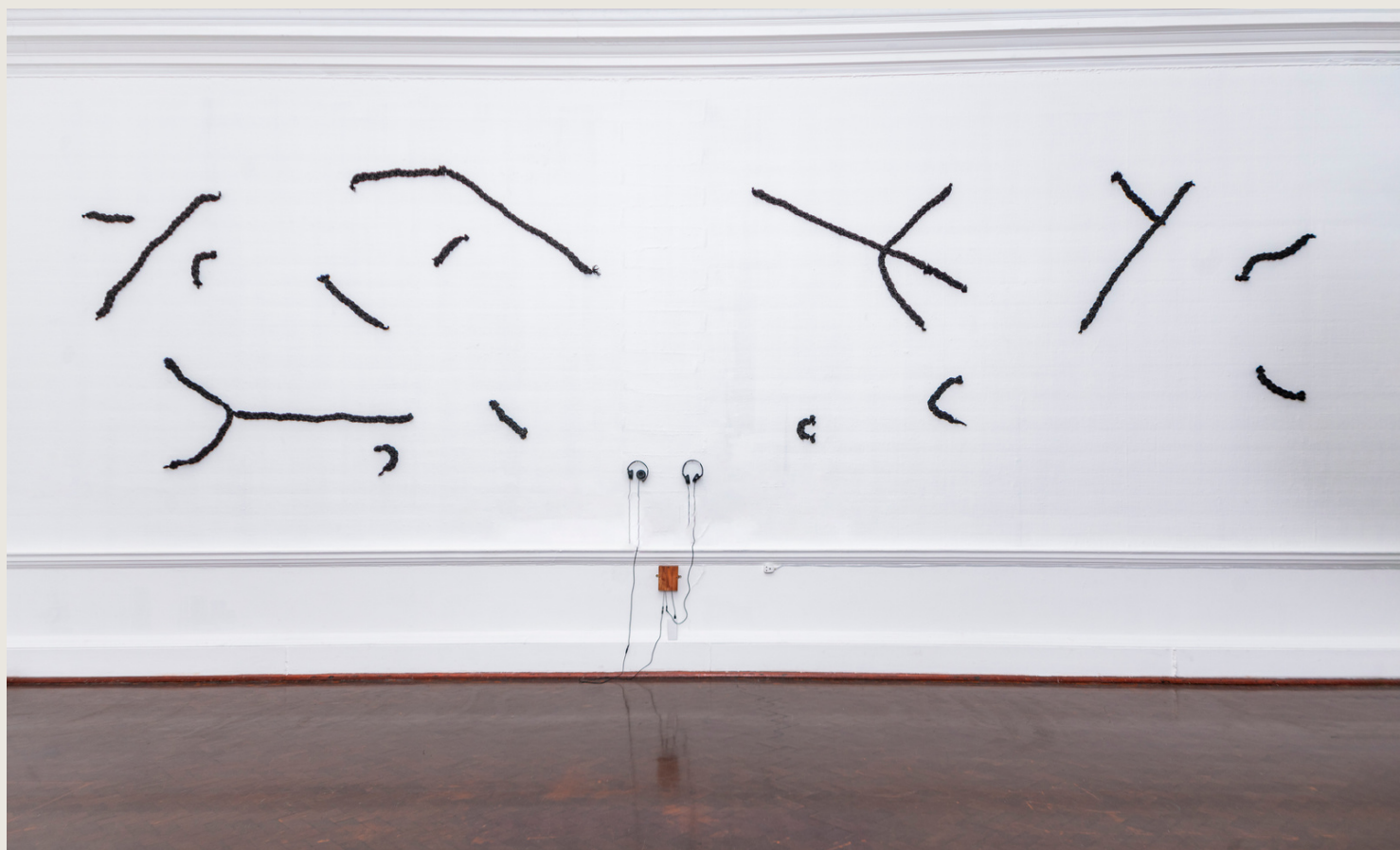
Nnenna Onuoha (GH/NG)

*Rows II*

2023

Hair extensions; 500 x 340 cm  
audio; 27 minutes

The series *Rows* is a body of work comprising braided maps and sound compositions. *Rows I*, which showed in the Berlin iteration of *Soil Conversations*, centers the M-Straße in Berlin, Germany, and the status of various campaigns to rename it due to the racist nature of the m-word as well as the street's connections to histories of enslavement. The accompanying audio is composed of sounds that the artist has recorded around the street over the past 5 years, including trains entering the U-Bahn station, and pedestrians walking past, but also sounds of protest, memorial marches, and walking tours, that have taken place along the street, as well as interviews with scholars and activists for and against renaming. *Rows II* depicts the 16 other M-Streets located throughout Germany (in Annaberg-Buchholz, Bingen am Rhein, Bonn, Coburg, Dillingen an der Donau, Eibenstock, Eisenbeg, Ettlingen, Fürth, Gotha, Kölln, Radebeul, Schwäbisch Hall, Weiden in der Oberpfalz, Wittenberge, Wuppertal). The accompanying audio excerpts and transcriptions thereof are from conversations held with activists and academics on either end of the renaming debate.

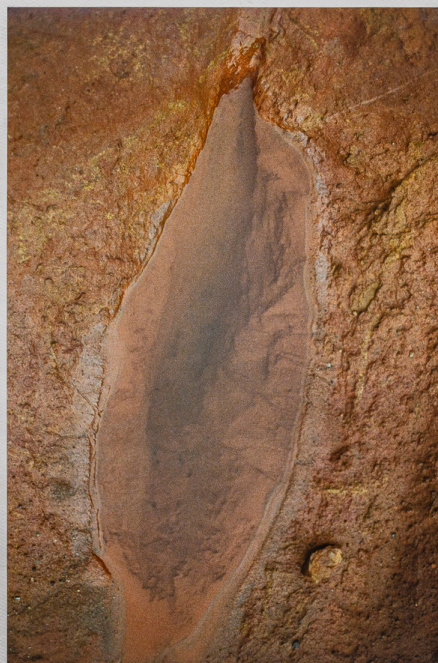


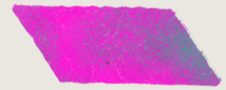


Gemma Shepherd (SA, 1993) & Rochelle  
Nembhard (UK/SA, 1989)  
*The Soil Remembers I, II, III*  
2021

Photography on Vliestapete  
150,3 x 100 cm

As part of the artist-duo film project Genesis, the tryptic is an exploration of the relationship between the female body and the earth. Steeped in the connection of the female divine and our Mother Earth the photographs celebrate a sensual and powerful gaze upon the earth's surface and rock formations in the shape of vulvas. Recalling the words of a famous South African resistance song "Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo' - You strike the women, you strike the rock", which came to symbolise the courage and strength expressed at the Women's March of 1956 as South African women refused to give in to increasing oppression. Yet these images also speak to the ongoing violence inflicted upon the earth and upon women's bodies within our violent society and the continuous struggle for equal respect.





Gemma Shepherd (SA, 1993) & Rochelle  
Nembhard (UK/SA, 1989)  
*Genesis*  
2021

video, sound, shot on camcorder, iPhone, drone  
6:19 minutes

This collaborative film was made by the artist-duo in the chaotic solitude of 2020/21 and explores the relationship between women and rocks, as the origin of life, titled Genesis. As the artists describe: Genesis was born out of the inner grappling we have both experienced as women in South Africa. The work started long before its physical production through a series of individual deaths and rebirths. The film pays tribute to the physical embodiment of portals that women have, being a liminal space between the seen and unseen worlds, and how that is reflected in the earth. Our hope lies in reawakening respect for the fragility of life, re-centering to the middle ground between the tensions of two opposing forces – creation and destruction, joy and pain, yin and yang. This is where the Great Mother is, where she has always been. This is the origin of life, alive in the rocks, alive in the body of women.

Directed by: Gemma Shepherd and Rochelle Nembhard, Edited by: Jarred Figgins, H&M: Justine Normz

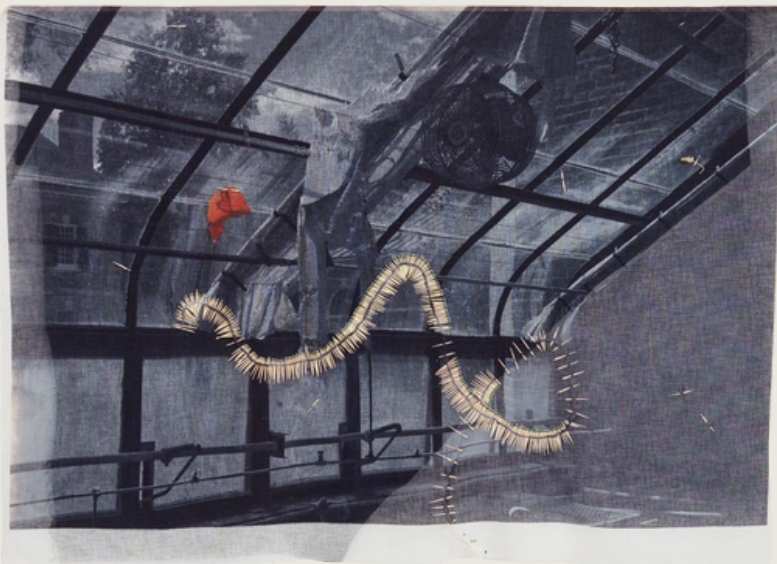
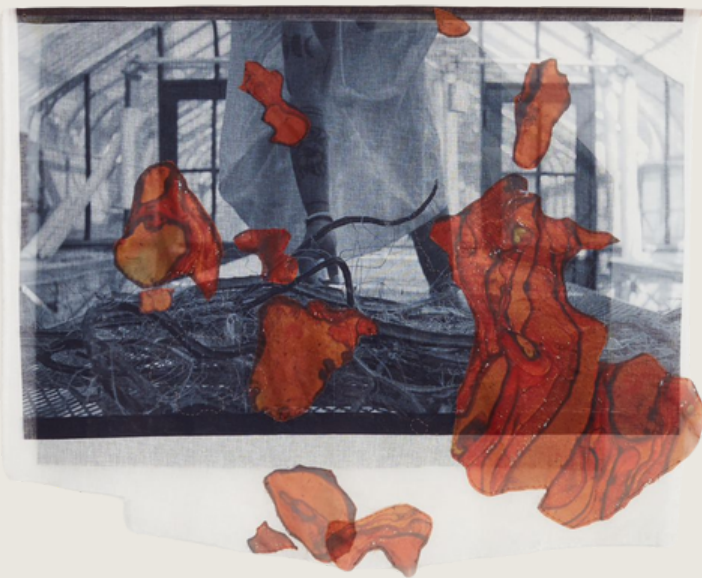


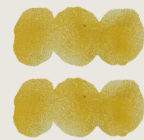


Lungiswa Gqunta (SA, 1990)  
*Instigation in Waiting I, II, III*  
2023

Digital print on fabric and cotton thread  
48 x 120 cm // 181 x 129 cm // 148 x 155 cm

*Instigation in Waiting* is a series of works conceptualised during a residency the artist attended in Washington DC. in 2022. Working in an abandoned greenhouse with leftover plants, the studio space forms part of the research practice and informs the artwork. Part performance, part photographic and fabric work, the artist investigates materiality as a membrane for story-telling. The greenhouse here becomes a symbol of an artificial and accelerated environment designed to keep displaced plants, often deemed 'exotic' and to push growth, cheap labour, and limitless consumerism - aspects that fuelled colonial powers as well as the greedy system of capitalism, speaking of continuous toxicity of care. The black female body and the few remaining dried aloes become the survival force of selfcare in an otherwise hostile environment. Here the artist looks at the female social position, labor, and resistance through a material engagement between care and violence in conjunction with the historical implications of today's systems.

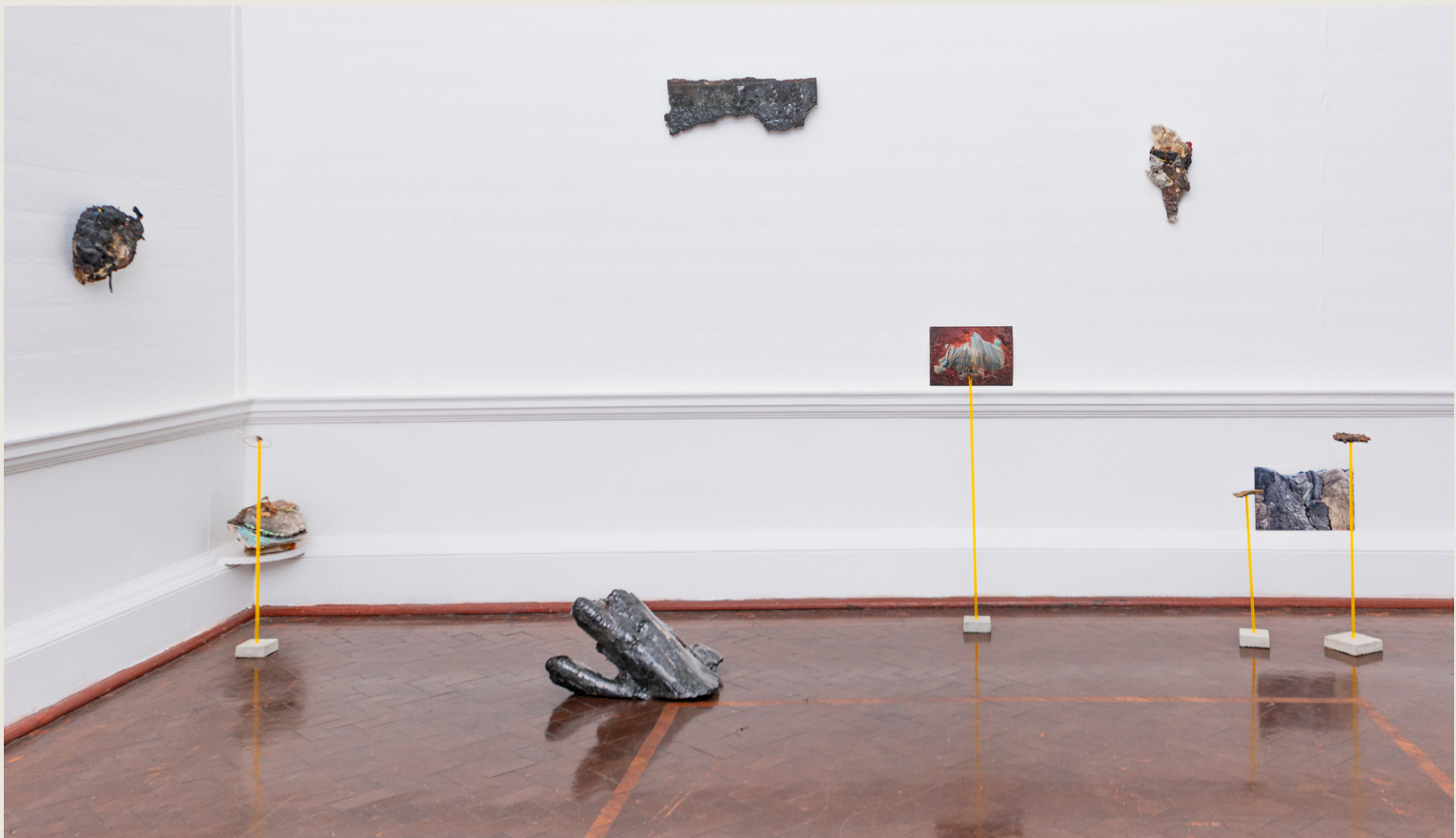




Silvia Noronha (BR, 1984)  
From the series: *Shifting Geologies*  
2020 - ongoing

Photographic prints, soil samples, mixed waste & other  
materials after simulation of rock formation process, sizes variable

Shifting Geologies is an ongoing and expanding artistic research project that began in 2020 and has been in steady motion ever since in which the artist directs her gaze towards a possible future. In the spatial installation, she refers to how archeological findings might look in a distant future, at the same time addressing what this will reveal about how we treat our environments in the now. Through a process in which found materials are exposed to extreme heat, the artist imitates an event that is part of geological developments - for example, in the formation of metamorphic rock, which is created by rising temperatures or pressure deep in the earth's crust, yet retains its solid state during mineralogical transformation. Human-made and organic materials fused together and pressed into one another, the objects, combine excavation practices known in geology as well as speculation and world-making.







Theresa Schubert (GER, 1983)

*milieu 5*

2023

Performance with human feet, voice, text, and urban ground. Living sculpture with bacteria, human microflora, molds, yeast, peptone, agar-agar, glass petri-dish, 80 x 80cm.

The series Milieu seeks a change of perspective in the Anthropocene, in which the focus is unalterably on humans and their needs. Despite the knowledge of the catastrophic effects of human actions on nature and animals, the incalculable effects on the environment and the climate, humans are blindly steering towards their own destruction. Ignorance and hybris function as blinders and obscure the view of the consequences of capitalist globalisation, even though the drama is constantly present.

In this durational piece, the artist directs the spotlight far away from people and their self-centredness and devotes herself to the omnipresent invisible, that which constantly surrounds us, that which we carry with us and on us: microbia. In their multiplicity and omnipresence, they carry information about people and their surroundings.





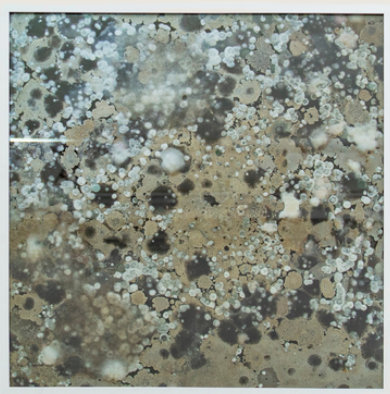
Theresa Schubert (GER, 1983)

*milieu*

2023

Photographic print  
80 x 80 cm // 80 x 120 cm

The photographic prints are like time stamps of the development and formations of the microbia the artist has cultivated within the glass petri dish. Made visible the largely unnoticed, yet omnipresent and integral parts of life, the microbia create their ecosystems of relationships and conversational movements. By close-looking and enlarging the tiny parts and particles, the artist creates an interface between science and art, between wonder and acknowledgment.



*Milieu 1,2,4*

2018

Photographic print  
50 x 70 cm





Theresa Schubert (GER, 1983)

*Milieu*

2018

video work

The series *Milieu* seeks a change of perspective in the Anthropocene, in which the focus is unalterably on humans and their needs. Despite the knowledge of the catastrophic effects of human actions on nature and animals, the incalculable effects on the environment and the climate, humans are blindly steering towards their own destruction. Ignorance and hybris function as blinders and obscure the view of the consequences of capitalist globalisation, even though the drama is constantly present. In this durational piece, the artist directs the spotlight far away from people and their self-centredness and devotes herself to the omnipresent invisible, that which constantly surrounds us, that which we carry with us and on us: microbia. In their multiplicity and omnipresence, they carry information about people and their surroundings.



Mia Thom (SA, 1994)  
*A Decomposing Lullaby*  
2023

Violin and voice, 13:30 minutes

This piece explores music as a mode of intimate relating within intra/interpersonal, and non-human structures. Fostering an embodied bond and relational 'blueprint,' the lullaby is an ancient practice that speaks to our earliest experiences of both attachment and music. Lullabies can be seen to enact forms of transformation. They punctuate the daily flow of time and mark a shift from day to night, from activity to rest, and sleep. Shifting emotional states and altering consciousness, they echo through sleep and dreams. "A Decomposing Lullaby," composed in collaboration with Mikhaila Smith, is played, and sung, by Thom, lying down. Requiring adjustment to strange and sometimes awkward positions whilst performing, the piece, written for this position, necessitates reorientation. As a matter of coincidence, or synchronicity, the physical act of playing the violin lying down counterbalances the instrument's relationship to gravity. Initially evoked by recounting a childhood memory, a lullaby for lying down as 'grounding' practice for connecting with the inner child, and simultaneously, for contacting the earth below. Premised on ecopsychological concerns, the piece invites an imaginary movement downward, drawing both performer and listeners into a speculative subterranean soil-space.





Natalie Paneng (SA, 1996)

*Venus Finds Balance*

2023

Digital textile print, 200 x 150 cm

With this mixed media installation, the artist responds directly to the complexity and multilayeredness of the granularity of soil and translated these attributes to the digital soil as pixels nurturing the speculative, the dream, and the made-up. A means to speculate on identity which is largely defined by society's history. The digital sphere allows to create worlds that can exist beyond these parameters. In an exercise of world-making the artist uses digital tools that render playful and substantial to concepts of identity, speculation, and representation. In *Venus Alchemises Below*, the artist inhabits digital, metaphysical space, exploring what lies above and beneath the soil and the fibers of the matrix, and yet it connects us to this very moment existing physically in space.

Intangible

Tangible

Harmony

Disharmony

Grounding

Surface

Landscape



Natalie Paneng (SA, 1996)  
*Venus Alchemises Below*  
2023



Video Art  
4:44 minutes

With this mixed media installation, the artist responds directly to the complexity and multilayeredness of the granularity of soil and translated these attributes to the digital soil as pixels nurturing the speculative, the dream, and the made-up. A means to speculate on identity which is largely defined by society's history. The digital sphere allows to create worlds that can exist beyond these parameters. In an exercise of world-making the artist uses digital tools that render playful and substantial to concepts of identity, speculation, and representation. In *Venus Alchemises Below*, the artist inhabits digital, metaphysical space, exploring what lies above and beneath the soil and the fibers of the matrix, and yet it connects us to this very moment existing physically in space.

Source  
Mineral  
Memory  
Roots  
Rhizome communication  
network





**„How to Serve a Mud Cake“  
Performance by Helena Uambembe  
in Berlin**

„Helena Uambembe continues her exploration of the Angolan Border War, this time from the perspective of women and children, with a recipe for a mud cake made with the children of Pomfret. [...] ‘the soil in Pretoria has enough colonialism in it so it’s perfect’ with childlike innocence represented by playing with mud always in the shadow of the violence the machete promises. The combination of these symbols is Uambembe’s contemplation of putting together a broken world. Uambembe’s placement of images and narratives [...] challenge[s] a specific version of the past and present within public discourse. The warnings and carefully worded instructions are an expression of the revolutionary potential of small acts of care. It is an exploration that in every tragedy, there is a possibility of redemption.“

Excerpt from a text by Fadzai Muchemwa, 2021

**„Forces in Soil“ by Ela Spalding with  
sound and song and reading in Berlin**

„I invite you to put your feet on the ground – if possible, be barefoot. If you aren’t outside, imagine the connection of the floor with the soil beneath. Take a deep breath and let your shoulders drop, your face relax, your arms hang with the force of gravity. Take this moment to realize that you are on the skin of the Earth; the medium that connects the organisms and air above, and the organisms, rocks and water below.“

– Ela Spalding



**„The Forgotten“ by Billy Langa performing the exhibition in Joburg**

A guide towards recalling into what the body remembers and what it stores. A glimpse at how the voice grows over time and lapses into layers of information. Sounding memory.



**A musical performance by Sibusile Xaba as part of a conversation in Joburg**

South African curator and writer Lindiwe (Lindi) Mngxitama, musician Sibusile Xaba and Berlin-based curator, writer and researcher Kathy-Ann Tan invite you to join them in a conversation, sonic engagement and discursive journey through considerations of soil and its various manifestations as memory vessel and archive, medium and site/sight of resistance and repair but also violent encounters, and the relationship(s) between the body and soil.



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# ARTISTS\*



## Lungiswa Gqunta

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Lungiswa Gqunta deconstructs spatial modes of exclusion and oppression by addressing the access to and ownership of land, unraveling multisensory experiences that highlight persistent social imbalances – legacies of both patriarchal dominance and colonialism. She aims to disrupt this status quo with material references to guerrilla tactics and protest: her installations consist of quotidian objects with the potential to become weapons and means to defend in the struggle that opposes the slow violence imposed by oppression in relation to labour, racial, class, and gender inequalities. Specifically catering to context and audience, her works provide positive references and care to people of colour, and impose discomfort, confrontation, and caution in white (cube) spaces. Hereby, Gqunta aims to reassert black people into the landscape, shedding light on sedimented knowledge, and thus creating a site for non-traditional forms of excavation in which discovery and erasure are simultaneously present. More so, she counters the PTSD that haunts society and poses forms of collective healing in which music and female strength play a crucial role. These matters are highly relevant in current times: addressing inequality, land ownership, labour, and the pervasive, ongoing legacies of racism.

## MADEYOULOOK

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MADEYOULOOK is a Johannesburg-based interdisciplinary artist duo between Molemo Moiloa and Nare Mokgotho, operating since 2009. MADEYOULOOK engages different approaches focused primarily on producing projects, events, discursive programs, lectures, and publications. Although MADEYOULOOK's practice is significantly directed towards socialities and relationalities, the forms these projects take on occasionally culminate in exhibitions. The works of MADEYOULOOK take as their point of departure everyday black practices that have either been historically overlooked, deemed inconsequential, or simply had limited rigorous engagement, particularly within the formal houses of knowledge production. These works encourage a re-observation of and de-familiarisation with the every day and the spacing of black imaginaries. In reworking and interrupting how we view ordinary black lived experiences and the every day, we are 'made to re-look' and question societal relations. MADEYOULOOK then makes a claim for everyday black livelihood and relationality as constituting knowledge and having the ability to model ways of practicing and being. These everyday practices have the potential to bring about different perspectives to enable epistemic shifts and create new possibilities.

## Io Makandal

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Io Makandal (b. 1987) is an interdisciplinary artist based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Working primarily with drawing, photography, organic matter, and installation, her practice is concerned with feminist and environmental embodiments of process, entropy, urban ecology, and hybrid environments during a time of environmental shift.



## Rochelle Nembhard

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Rochelle Nembhard is a multidisciplinary artist born in the United Kingdom to British-Jamaican parents. She relocated to South Africa in 1994 at the dawn of post-apartheid South Africa and was raised between South Africa and South Asia. Having lived and studied in Bangkok, Nembhard went on to complete her Masters in Museums, Galleries, and Contemporary Culture, a TATE-run program at the University of Westminster in London. She has been collaborating with Congolese/South African Musician, Petite Noir (Yannick Ilunga) for the past six years working as his Creative Director – producing strong award-winning visuals for his album “La Vie Est Belle /Life is “and “ La Maison Noir/The Black House.” In 2018, Elle Magazine recognised her ambition by naming Nembhard as a future leader in art, design, and technology in a cover feature. Nembhard and Petite Noir co-created “Noirwave”, a movement that highlights and celebrates the diverse hybrid identities and experiences of the Diaspora.

## Silvia Noronha

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Silvia Noronha (\*1984 Brazil) lives and works in Berlin. Noronha is interested in engaging with material agency in a participatory and collaborative process. In her art practice she investigates how to observe and make space for matter to perform its own existence, in its own rhythm and beyond rational meanings. Since 2015 Noronha has been a pseudo-chemist in speculative geology practice, here she understands soil as media, which concentrate multidimensional information, especially about time. Incorporating a wide range of soil components including earth, clay, glass, electronic waste, and plastic the artist creates events that are part of geological developments. Here, an imaginative landscape is illustrated, gathering worldly experience and projecting how Earth may unfold from here and now.

## Nnenna Onuoha

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Nnenna Onuoha is a Ghanaian-Nigerian researcher, filmmaker, and artist based in Berlin, Germany. Her films and videos centre Afrodiasporic voices to explore monumental silences surrounding the histories and afterlives of colonialism across West Africa, Europe, and the US, asking: how do we remember, which pasts do we choose to perform and why? A second strand of her work focuses on archiving Black experience in the present to chronicle how, amidst all this, we practice care and repair for ourselves and each other. Nnenna is currently a doctoral researcher in Media Anthropology at Harvard University and Global History at the University of Potsdam.

## Natalie Paneng

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She is awkward, complex, and has a quirk to her expression. Residing in Johannesburg and in the cyber village called the Internet. Natalie Paneng is a digital artist who completed a BADA(Hons) from the University of Witwatersrand in 2018. Majoring in Production Design (Set and Costume design) as well as art management. Natalie makes use of both her self-taught digital skills and theatre background to create multi-disciplinary work. In her, she explores what it means to have an online presence, the persona we develop online, and how the internet and its algorithms control and influence us. Her videos and art become a way for her to interrogate as well as share how she manifests and navigates the world she lives in and creates for herself. The internet is MTV and she welcomes you to her crib.

## Gemma Shepherd

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Gemma Shepherd, b.1993 is a Cape Town based interdisciplinary artist using photography, video, and object art to meditate on issues of self, belonging, and becoming. Being mixed race Shepherd grew up in a liminal state of 'in between, pushing her into an internal grappling with her own identity, place in society, and life at large, which she navigates through multiple mediums. After completing a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Cape Town, she entered the fashion industry, which ultimately led her to photography; her predominant medium for the past few years. While Shepherd phases in and out of various creative spheres, she is consciously navigating multiple mediums without confining herself to any particular one. Since 2020 Shepherd has been collaborating with Rochelle 'Rharha' Nembhard on a project exploring the relationship between women and earth, the most recent of which has been published in the British Journal of Photography.

## Theresa Schubert

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In an aesthetic between alchemy and science fiction, Theresa Schubert's multiple award-winning works question anthropocentrism and enable alternative visions and/or new sensory experiences. Schubert is a Berlin-based artist, researcher, and curator exploring unconventional visions of nature, technology, and the self. She holds a Ph.D. in Media Art from Bauhaus-University Weimar. Her practice combines audiovisual and hybrid media with conceptual and immersive installations or performances. That includes organic matter and living organisms, algorithms, and artificial intelligence becoming part of the artwork not just as material but as meaningful co-creators. More recently, she works with immersive video environments and 3D Laser Scanning to challenge modes of perception and question the human-machine relationship in hypertechnology societies where the nature-culture divide seems to dissolve in the digital realm.

## Mia Thom

Mia Thom (b.1995) is a Cape Town based, interdisciplinary artist. Her work is informed by researchers who recognise the ways in which sound can alter the perspectives we hold of objects, spaces, and experiences. Thom's practice, which explores a relationship between photography, performance, music, and sound, delves into experiences of speculative realism – a philosophical way of thinking that does not rely on only one framework for reality. It attempts to make us "think beyond the limits of what we, as human beings, were long considered able to think, speculating instead about the nature of the non-human and what such thinking might provide for the many issues we face in our contemporary moment" (Beier & Wallen, 2017:149). Thom's interest in the voice reflects ethical, poetic, and psychological concerns. Thom proposes an ethical listening, to voices and bodies, human and nonhuman. To perceive space and site through its sonic possibilities and engage with visual mediums through practices of sound-making or listening (Voegelin, 2014). Thom also works as a photographer documenting artwork and exhibitions. She is currently completing an undergraduate degree in Psychology (UCT).



## PERFORMERS

### Billy Langa

Billy Langa, South African dancer, actor, playwright, and educator is a graduate of the Trevor Huddleson Centre and the Market Theatre Lab. Langa takes a curious approach to theatre – puzzling out what it means to those who perform it and those who witness it – that's deeply relational to the body.

There in the soil sits a call to story and memory.

"Those who study STONE, study MEMORY. Erosion as History. Erasure as Amnesia..."

Lebala- (Field) Lebala- (Forget) A journey through soil as a trip through time. A performance That begs the space to inform its direction. The specificity of site and the story that begins to unfold. Movement and displacement.

## Helena Uambembe

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Helena Uambembe is an Angolan-South African artist whose work interrogates the dyadic relationship between the political (world politics) and the domestic (personal politics). Drawing from personal and familial history, Uambembe maps the ideological and intimate space created by the historical and colonial links between Angolan, Southern African, and global history. Born in South Africa in 1994, her Angolan parents fled the Angolan civil war back in 1975 and settled in the embattled Pomfret with other families of the 32 Battalion. This complex family history (itself a disruption of currently accepted narratives of post-colonial Africa), the 32 Battalion, Pomfret, and her Angolan heritage are dominant themes in her multi-disciplinary approach. In 2022 Uambembewas awarded the Baloise Art Prize 2022 for her installation What you see is not what you remember, shown at Art Basel, Statements Section. She currently based in Berlin where is a fellow of the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD).

## Ela Spalding

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Ela Spalding (Panama, 1982) is an artist-facilitator exploring the space of art as an elegant conduit to practice and convey expanded notions of ecology and interconnectedness. Her professional background is in film, photography, dance, and somatic awareness practices with a keen interest in sound, well-being, and nature's processes. She combines these influences to invite listening and resonance within and without. Her artwork has been shown in the XIII Bienal de La Habana, Cuba (2019), the X Bienal Centroamericana in Costa Rica (2016), Bienal de Artes Visuales del Istmo Centroamericano (Bavic9) in Guatemala in 2014, as well as collective exhibitions in Panama, Germany, and Austria. She is the founder and director of Estudio Nuboso - a nomadic platform for exchange between art, science, nature, and society, addressing environmental issues in different bio-cultural contexts. They are members of the Green Art Lab Alliance. She's currently developing the Suelo Methodology with EN as a guidebook and course for people to implement around the world. She also teaches an online course on Art, Ecology, and Environmental Activism with the Node Center for Curatorial Studies. Based in Berlin, she visits Panama when possible for work and recharging.

## Sibusile Xaba

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Sibusile Xaba carries forth the Maskandi / Mbaqanga tradition of the KwaZulu Natal midlands, from where he originates. Steeped in the lineage of Zulu guitar giant Madala Kunene (Sibusile's first mentor) & warrior chants of vocal master, Shaluzo Max, he not only owns these influences, but pushes the envelope as only a maestro with a keen ear for the future does.

