

On Mystical Form

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third-party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

April 2019

DEDICATION

I'd like to thank Alet Vorster and Wilhelm van Rensburg for introducing me to the work of Dan Rakgoathe at GALLERY AOP. Rakgoathe's work triggered a new chapter in my artistic development. It has pulled me from the analytical into the direction of the mystical, specifically as an investigation into the nature of form. I see this thesis as a culmination of the practical and theoretical research I've done as a result of my encounter with Rakgoathe's work. As a thesis that applies analytical thinking to the complexities of a mystical modality, it is an attempt to understand the unknown with exactitude in mind. In this attempt, Rakgoathe's work has been my guide. I have in my collection a print by Rakgoathe called *Dancing Love*, pictured above in my studio. I am fortunate in that I've had the opportunity of sustained viewing of this evocative mystical work for a period spanning years rather than the minutes one is generally afforded in museums or private collections. *Dancing Love* has arranged my feeling and thinking about mystical form and led me to the core focus of this study.

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INTRODUCTION

On the form of this thesis

This is not a conventional thesis. It brings together ideas that do not self-evidently belong together. The common denominator throughout is myself: my conceptual and art-making process. The ideas I present in this thesis are woven together by the common thread of my work, which spans drawing, painting, printmaking, film and video, performance and writing, sculpture and installation. Since my own development as an artist has not been strictly linear – my practice has developed serendipitously – this is not strictly a standard, linear academic text: I break from academic form intermittently into memoir, specifically to provide autobiographical information that is pertinent to my work. When I do so, I follow the form I use for my artist statements: I speak candidly and simply about my work and the events surrounding what I do. In the context of this thesis, the memoir form allows me to include information that serves as clarification of my core focus by example – on an experiential, autobiographical level in relation to my work. For the sake of clarity, I have limited these sections to introductions for each chapter. Chapter one and six, which deal with my own work, are necessarily autobiographical in tone.

In addition to my introductions, I have included somewhat anecdotal information in various captions to some images throughout, as well as footnotes. These captions serve to provide collateral information without directly participating in the thread of my discussions around the core focus of this study. They are, so to speak, conversationally apocryphal but not irrelevant. Apart from this idiosyncratic intertextual practice, I have taken care to follow the conventions of academic writing

throughout the body of this thesis, using references and citations as is standard practice.

A note about the work included in this thesis: when I refer to my own work, I am referring to work that has been exhibited and reviewed in addition to the work I have made specifically with this study in mind. The requirement for practice-led research is that one is examined only on work completed for the study, but since this project is a culmination of all my previous research, this reference to earlier work is necessary. In discussion of my previously exhibited work, I have taken care to reference relevant information in the public record and to provide supporting articles and material from my own collection in the form of addenda. I also provide addenda for articles sourced online, rather than hyperlinks wherever possible.

The six chapters do not follow a strictly expositional argument as in conventional quantitative theses but should rather be read as six distinct essays on the topic of mystical form as I define and employ it. Each refers to an encounter with artists as they influenced me and helped me to develop my own distinct artistic engagement with them. With mystical form as the nexus of this web of spatially, temporally and geographically diverse influences, I see this Masters project as a formalisation of my artistic practice. It is because of the nature of the central theme – which is averse to definition by a strictly linear analytical approach – that I have chosen a somewhat multifarious form for this thesis. Therefore, each chapter may, individually and in combination with the others, be considered as an approach that presents my understanding of the central theme of my study.

Research question

The central theme and core focus of my study (both in my practical work and writing) is reflected in the title of this thesis, “On Mystical Form.” My core research question throughout this thesis is **what is the nature of mystical form?**

Chapter outline

In the first chapter, I address my research question by discussing how I came to define mystical form in my own work, specifically the first installation I did for this study, *Auntie Doreen*. In the second, I discuss the work of Dan Rakgoathe to identify specific examples of mystical form. I discuss the plastic and procedural (technical and axiomatic) attributes of these examples of mystical form, and how these forms evoke affective and cognitive responses that lead the viewer to historical (chapter three) and current themes (chapter four), that are pertinent to how it is that we come to knowledge in art. In a fifth chapter, I discuss an approach to ontology that has informed my understanding of form and seeing. Since my field of competence is within the artistic tradition, rather than philosophy or mathematics, I limit my discussion of ontology to being informed by an artist whose approach to form and seeing is one that I am well versed in, the English landscape painter John Constable. In chapter six, I discuss the Duchampian nominalist mode and my own work for the practical component of this study, specifically in the light of the formalisation and re-definition of my practice which I see as the culmination of this study.

As an appendix, I have included an essay on the influence of transfinite arithmetic on non-objective painting. While not directly addressing my core research question, the appendix further contextualises my study – and my approach to form and seeing – within the shared cultural history between mathematics and art. The appendix positions my understanding of form within that cultural history, wherein mathematical and artistic definitions of form share an affinity. While I refer in my appendix to examples and themes pertinent to and associated with Modernism, I am not seeking to define Modernism or locating my own investigations within the frame of historical Modernism, as much as I am in a historical discussion of a very particular zenith point of contact between mathematics and art. The appendix positions my own work and thinking within specific approaches to *mathematical thinking as they relate to art* rather than mathematics itself or *modernist thinking*. In discussing the influence of, for example, intuitionist mathematics on Mondrian, I focus when and how Mondrian came into contact with intuitionist mathematical thought, rather than commenting on intuitionist mathematics or how and why Mondrian's work has been

interpreted and discussed in Modernist and Postmodernist debates. In addition to Mondrian, one might also follow a similar approach with, say, the influence of intuitionist mathematics (in the form of topology) on the large-scale sculptural works of Richard Serra. Though I do mention Serra, it is apropos the influence of topos theory on the development of my own work. This is not to say that I share Serra or Mondrian's *thinking*, but simply that I share with them the influence of intuitionist mathematical thought. Like them, I have a broad belief that mathematics and art share a common cultural history. The shared history of mathematics and art remains a purpose and definition in select artistic practice today, and is vital to my own practice.



Fig 1. Kazimir Malevich (1878 – 1935) *Black Suprematist Square* 1915. Oil on linen, 79.5 x 79.5cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

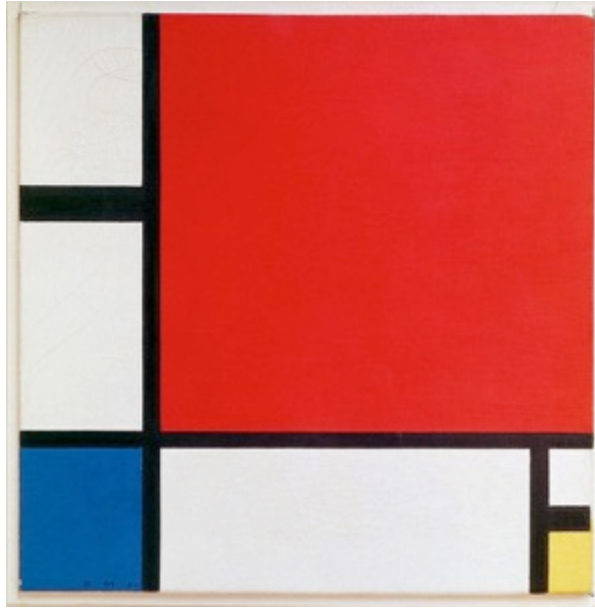


Fig 2. Piet Mondrian (1892 – 1944) *Composition with Red Blue and Yellow* 1930. Oil and paper on canvas, 59.5 x 59.5cm, National Museum, Belgrade, Serbia



Fig 3. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Bait al-Hikma, Part 1_05*, 2011. Lithographic ink and pen on paper. 1000 x 660mm. Corporate collection.

Similarly, when I discuss the work of John Constable in chapter five, I am not interested in how Constable has been positioned by revisionist research as participating in the groundswell of sentiment around nature that lead to modernist thinking. Given my research question, I am primarily interested in Constable's way of seeing and understanding form, particularly in relation to my discussion of mystical form in Dan Rakgoathe and my own work.



Fig 4. Dan Rakgoathe (2004) *Mystery of Space* 1975. Durban Art Gallery collection.



Fig 5. John Constable, *Rainstorm over the Sea*, 1824 – 1828. Oil sketch. Photograph: John Hammond/Royal Academy of Arts.



Fig 6. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Eyes*, 2012. Lithographic ink and pencil on paper, 760 x 560mm. Private collection.

CHAPTER 1: ON MYSTICAL FORM IN MY WORK

Introduction

In the exhibition catalogue for *FUN AND GAMES...* my second exhibition at GALLERY AOP in 2012, discussing the artist Bridget Riley I said that, comparatively, “I am agnostic when it comes to form” (Van Schalkwyk. 2013: 24). I stick by the statement: I associate neither form nor devotion with religion or belief, nor do I consider ‘mysticism’ as ‘proof’ of the existence of god or, as in the case of Malevich, connected to some esoteric Absolute.¹ Yet, my work is not purely formalist², inasmuch as I include act and gesture as a central part of my practice.³ In my own work I have found mystical form co-emergent with an approach to modality⁴ where gesture and formalism may be understood as being *compossible*⁵ – a special case wherein the unknown is made visible and understandable as form through a way of working focused on plastic⁶ technique and axiomatic procedure.⁷ In short, I have found mystical forms as being visible, analysable, knowable immanentisations of the unknown within the knowable⁸. Just as mystical forms appear to me in an unknown

¹ I discuss Malevich’s connection to the Absolute in my Appendix

² For the definition of formalism I use here, refer to my discussion of Rodchenko in my Appendix

³ On the importance of act and gesture to my practice, see Wilhelm van Rensburg’s introduction to my first exhibition, *Bait al-Hikma* where he states that “the act in Van Schalkwyk’s drawings is paramount” and connects my work with Gutai, tachisme, Richard Serra, Anni Albers, Eva Hesse, Pollock and Malevich (Van Schalkwyk, J. 2013: 7-11).

⁴ My understanding of modality is based on reading *The Philosophy of Logic* (Jacquette, 2002) and selected essays by the American philosopher and logician Ruth Barcan-Marcus (1921 – 2012) on the topic of modalities. W.r.t. mystical form, I should say that what Barcan-Marcus calls “extra modal operators,” (for example, possibility) would have to be accepted in any analytical system capable of accounting for my understanding of mystical form. Logics or systems of analysis that allow solely for affirmation and negation would consign mystical form outside of participation in what is analysable, due to its ambivalence and mutability. Having said that, I do not know enough about logic or analysis to speak with authority on this topic. I just know that I agree with Barcan-Marcus and not with Quine (Willard Van Orman Quine, American philosopher and logician, 1908 – 2000) when it comes to the introduction of extra modal operators to traditional logic, which in my mind is clearly not capable of accounting for the variety of forms that float about my studio.

⁵ Compossibility is a term from mathematical lexicon that describes a situation wherein something is possible only in combination with something else or other things, and not in isolation.

⁶ I use the formal art theoretical term as used when describing the ‘plastic arts,’ being art that results from making. In this usage, plastic is akin to malleable.

⁷ ‘axiomatic procedure’ to me means processes or procedures based on chosen or defined principles or axioms.

⁸ I use ‘knowable’ rather than ‘known’ specifically because I do not want to claim that mystical forms are necessarily ‘known.’ I discuss the equivalent of the unknown and the knowable in mathematical thought in my Appendix as being related to the infinite and the finite. The difference between ‘knowable’ and ‘known’ seems to me to be a question of number inasmuch as what is “knowable” might be finite or infinite, rational or irrational in number, but nonetheless calculable mathematically. What is

manner within a context that I can understand – my own work as a direct result of the experiments that constitute my practice – they are understandable, communicable, evocative forms by which the viewer may come to the same knowledge of the unknown in a manner that is known and familiar to them – through the act of viewing.

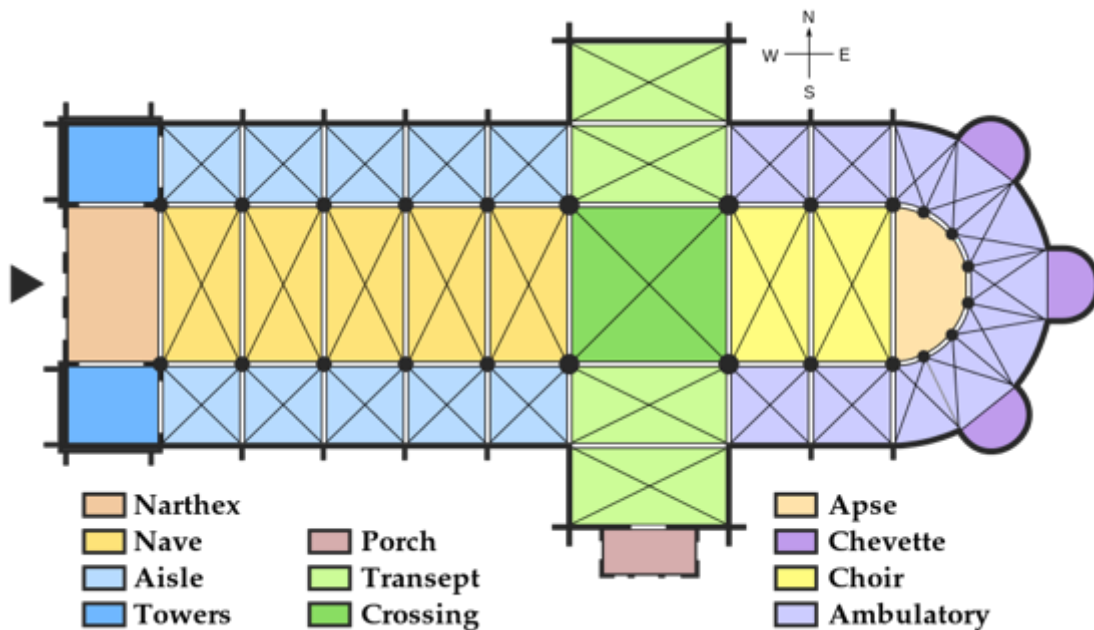


Fig 7. Schematic of architectural terms used in churches with layout corresponding to main exhibition space of GUS.



Fig 8. My *Scherzo* exhibited at GUS as part of *Drawing a Group Show*, 2015.

‘known’ would be the result of the calculation – a resultant number itself, which may be rational or irrational, known or unknown. Therefore, it would be perfectly acceptable for a mystical form to only communicate the unknown-ness of the unknown as known within the knowable. A footnote to this footnote would explain how funny this is, but that would probably cease to be funny, negate its own funniness, be unfunny or negate the funniness of both the secondary and primary footnotes.



Fig 9. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Futility of Action* series, 2015. Four gestural movements: *Prelude*, *Courante*, *Scherzo* and *Divertimento*. Lithographic ink and graphite on paper on board, each 2000 x 1300mm. Private collection.

Scherzo (bottom left) is the third movement of four works on paper wherein the gestural action I followed to make the work was based on the kind of vigorous, light or playful composition that usually comprises the third movement of a four-movement work in classical music.

While mystical form has been a concern in my work prior to this study, the first work I did for the course was my installation *Auntie Doreen*, (Fig. 10) exhibited at GUS in August 2017. I chose to install *Auntie Doreen* in the apse⁹ of the gallery. I had

⁹ Discussing my work exhibited at GUS throughout this essay, I use terminology that is particular to the architecture of churches. I am working off the diagram above

exhibited at GUS once before, when I showed *Scherzo*, (Fig 9) one of my larger works on paper as part of *Drawing a Group Show* in 2015. I enjoyed seeing that work in the context of the space which, with its warm lighting and history of devotion, felt more apt than the impersonal viewing experience I had become used to at art fairs. Compared to the artificially lit conference halls of the Sandton Convention Center or the CTICC, I felt that GUS had a certain sense of humanity, intimacy and stillness that attracted me. I liked that, in comparison to where my work had been exhibited before, GUS was a more provincial space, and that it was removed from the pressures of the commercial marketplace. I felt it was a space where I could focus on the source of my inspiration, rather than having to focus on the impact of my work as spectacle, or on it's being influential, negotiating trends or being desirable in terms of its stated value – all of which are concerns when exhibiting work at commercial galleries or fairs. So, when I returned to GUS with *Auntie Doreen*, I had two things in mind: to explore the nascent devotional qualities of the gallery space, and to check the kind of responses my work would get from the academic establishment. What I did not know was how closely the experience would refresh my inspiration.





Fig 10. *Auntie Doreen* (detail) sculptural installation, 2017. Dimensions variable

Auntie Doreen, GUS, August 2017

Choosing to exhibit in the apse of the gallery required some preparation. The space was filled with stacks of unappealing conference room style chairs, large, heavy wooden boards covered in Dutch wax cloth prints with generic African designs, cardboard boxes filled with the kind of trash (water bottles, scraps of paper, empty crisp packets) that should have been disposed of in the moment by many but instead had been discarded into the unseen recesses of whatever was at hand. There were beanbags and floor cushions too, along with a number of wooden beams of differing sizes and unidentifiable use-value. Together, the objects spoke of a space used as a community center, which is something I enjoyed. If I wanted to exhibit in the apse, I would have to do my part to respect the usage of the gallery by others and move everything to an ancillary room, which I did, taking care to treat all these objects with respect. For an hour or so, I had fun restacking them in the ancillary room as an impromptu construction, making sport out of what would otherwise have been a chore.

Once I'd emptied and swept the apse, save for a few boards too heavy to move on my own, I set about cleaning the window. It had not been cleaned for some time. I washed the window and its burglar bars, polished the glass with newspaper so it would dry clear, and did the same with its interior pane, allowing fresh light to shine through. It made a big difference to me: having prepared the space, I felt I could go ahead and do the work I had in mind. *Auntie Doreen* required that I recreate an event for which I still felt a certain amount of shame. In February 2016, alone at home, I lost my cool in the kitchen and ended up breaking a tea service handed down to my girlfriend by her mother from an auntie Doreen. Returning home, my girlfriend took a photo of the detritus (Fig 11). I printed the photo, worked with the image using a photocopier, and stuck the result on the wall next to my statement (Fig 12).



Fig 11. Juanita Petronio, *Untitled*, 2016. 35mm black and white photograph.

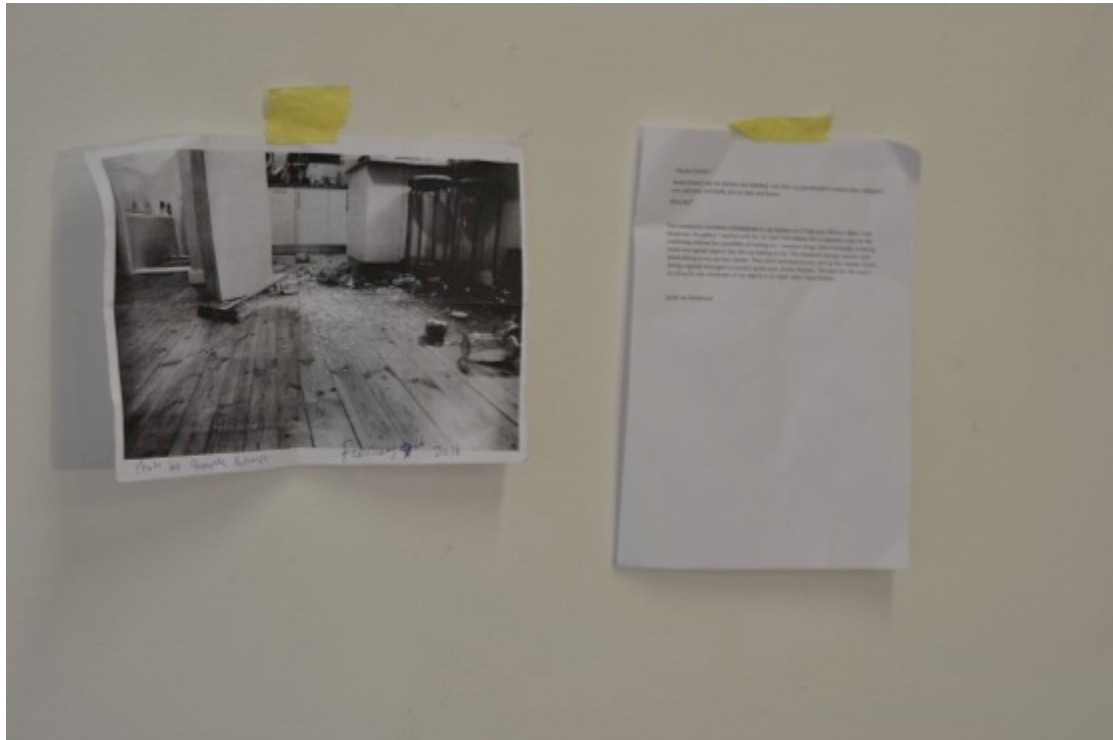


Fig 12. Installation detail of *Auntie Doreen* showing printed out photocopy of Juanita Petronio's photograph.

The photograph became a reference to an event that became a watershed for me in terms of how I approach my practice and how I live. I resolved to repair the tea service and to recreate the scene as a sculptural installation. It would be uncomfortable for me to show this work, but I felt I had done the necessary preparation, choosing a space that was architecturally the most private in the building and in terms of its historical usage, the most reverential. After the exhibition, I set about the task of resetting *Auntie Doreen*.



Fig 13. Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978, Transparency in light box, 159 x 234cm.

Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa



Fig 14. Eugene Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, Oil on Canvas, 1844. 73.7 x 82.4 cm.
Philadelphia Museum of Art (copy by Delacroix of the larger work in the Louvre).

Auntie Doreen as a re-enactment of a scene of destruction speaks to Jeff Wall's *Destroyed Room* from 1978, which, in turn, speaks to Delacroix, one of my favourite painters. The theme of *creation and destruction* in my work is one I return to, particularly in relation to the mutability of mystical form. But it is also important to consider this theme art historically as linked to Romanticism and what it means to be taken over by great emotion, or as in the case of Byron in *The Death of Sardanapalus*, what it means to remain stoic within destruction. *Auntie Doreen* is also a formal, stoic examination of an instant of rupture. I am trying to make sense of what happened around me, about the destruction I caused, but also about the way forward.

Anecdotally, when I lived in New York, I used to visit *The Death of Sardanapalus* in the Philadelphia Museum whenever I could. The first time I was in the museum, I was surprised at how small this major work of art history was. I had assumed it was a much larger painting. Many years passed before I realised that the version at the Philadelphia Museum was in fact a small copy Delacroix made for himself when the original, much larger painting, now in the Louvre, was sold. Of course, in the interim, I had told loads of people that *The Death of Sardanapalus* was in fact a very small painting.

Resetting *Auntie Doreen*

Resetting *Auntie Doreen* was not something I had intended to do. I suppose that after exhibiting the work, I felt I needed to still be intimate with it, as one would calm a horse down after riding it hard, or a dog after a day spent chasing birds. I wanted to thank my materials through repeated touch. I wanted to pat my work on the back for a job well done: “real pedigree stuff,” I wanted to say to it, or “good job.” Or perhaps,

in our most private moment together, I might whisper in its ear that I had “never seen anything quite like it before.”

Resetting *Auntie Doreen* became an artwork (Fig 15). Having swept up the constituent forms, I returned them to the glass jars they were transported in and set about separating like from unlike until the lentils, split green peas and popcorn kernels were distinct again. In the process, something happened that I did not expect: a number of unintended forms joined the work when I swept the gallery floor. I discovered them only in resetting the work, a process I did twice.¹⁰ I found a ladybird, bristles from a broom, remnants of another artist’s work, fragments of detritus, and chips of shells from the walnuts my grandmother used to grow. I gathered these forms together in a small plastic container with a lid, like the ones you get at Steers to take away 1000 Island dressing. At first I thought of these accidental objects rather drily as ‘unintended forms’ but once I had some time to enjoy their magic properly, and perhaps because of their originating within the devotional context of the apse of GUS, I began to think of them as *mystical forms* and what that term meant to me (Fig 16). This thesis is the result of that thinking, which has allowed me to make sense in a formalised way of my current work relative to my prior work, and to look at the work of other artists with fresh eyes.

¹⁰ I did not get any decent pictures of the installation at GUS, so I repeated the installation in the 3D Clean Room at the Department



Fig 15. Resetting *Auntie Doreen*, documentation of process.



Fig 16. Unintended or ‘Mystical forms’ I found through resetting *Auntie Doreen*.

In resetting *Auntie Doreen*, I also found split green peas that had yellowed and in their shape looked like popcorn kernels (Fig 17). Those I put in a separate pile that I called ‘split green popcorn kernels’. I saw them as forms that were examples of *confusion*.¹¹ I think they are funny. They speak of a *humour* and levity lacking in my original installation. Looking at these would cause me to smile and I thought, next time I would like to be okay with including *confusion*, either in visual/sense perception or cognitively in terms of understanding in my work: I would like to mess with myself and the viewer a bit more, be more naughty, have more fun, have some humour about the work.¹² In the discussions of mystical form that follow, I relate my usage in terms like *mutability*, *doubt*, *ambivalence* and *confusion* (chapters 2, 3 and 4) to these split green popcorn kernels. They really made me think about the nature of things.

¹¹ When I think of confusion, I also think of something like the use/mention confusion, which according to Wikipedia “is a foundational concept of analytic philosophy, according to which it is necessary to make a distinction between using a word (or phrase) and mentioning it.”

¹² In Chapter six, I discuss how I did do this with my *Preparation Piece*



Fig 17. “Split green popcorn kernels.” Forms that confused me by appearing as being ‘possibly’ either split green peas and popcorn kernels at the same time. The confusion would only last for an instant, and obviously these are in fact split peas that have yellowed, but every time one of these peas confused me, I’d set it aside. It is pretty humbling to be repeatedly confused by a dried legume, especially if you know it’s coming. I guess if they ask me what I did to get my Masters, I’ll say that I counted lentils, and that I learned a bit about the sluggishness of my species compared to the lightning wit of the lowly legume.

In touching some of the split green peas individually, they had shed their husks (Fig 18). I collected the husks and put them in a separate pile. Perhaps, I thought, these husks of something else – perhaps a prior self of the split pea – these fleeting things that barely were, or at least can be seen as remnants of a state of becoming that already was... perhaps these were the real artworks... or perhaps not.¹³ I liked not being sure. I liked not being certain or having to be certain: whether I knew the answer or not would not alter the fact that the husks were there. I had just never been aware of them before, and now that I was, how could I be so immediately *anthropocentric* in my thinking, as if these husks needed *my understanding* of them to fit into *my thinking* when they were doing perfectly well existing before I came along?¹⁴ I thought about the totality of knowledge I had when I was a boy and how that differs from the totality of my knowledge now. I thought about the knowledge of

¹³ The delicacy of these husks are reminiscent of the “evanescent effects” of Constable that I discuss in Chapter 5.

¹⁴ I discuss the awareness of anthropocentric thinking in current artistic practice, specifically the work of Pierre Huyghe, in Chapter 4

my prior self, my current and my future self. I thought that my current self really does not exist. I am either my prior or future self. Which is to say that I am always in a process of becoming. Like the husks that separated from the peas with touch, so does my prior self serve as a reminder of the knowledge my current self has disrobed. In the discussion around *being qua being, becoming, and appearing* in chapter five, I refer back to my split pea husks. They really helped me to consider the way things are.

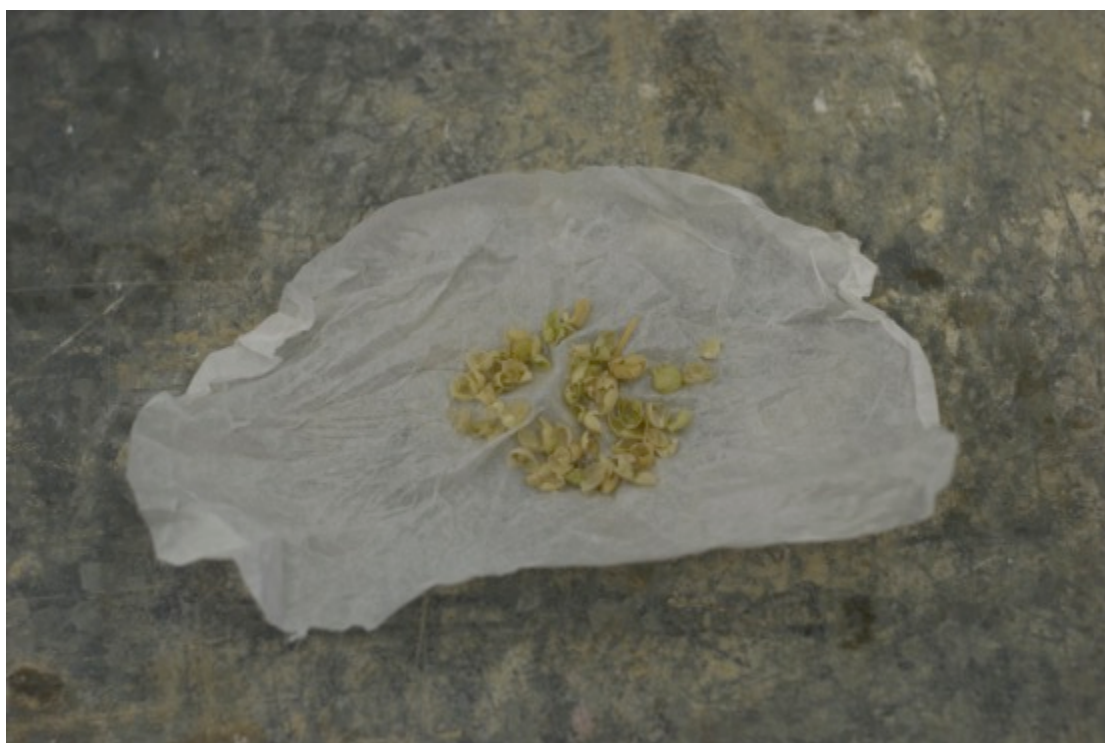


Fig 18. Split green pea husks. It is difficult to explain how precious these are to me now. I look at them with the same admiration as I do John Constable's cloud formations, of which I'll speak in Chapter 5.

The process of installing and resetting *Auntie Doreen* got me thinking about why I thought the way I did about the constitution of an artwork. Why was I always all about making 'something?' Couldn't I rather make *nothing*? Isn't that closer to what I really, really want to do – doing and making nothing at all? If not *nothing at all*, how close could I come to *making nothing*, and how busy could I become *doing nothing*?¹⁵

¹⁵ These questions reflect the nature of current artistic practice. Of his monumental installation *After Alife Ahead* of 2017, Pierre Huyghe has said that "I'm interested in letting, in a certain way, self-organizing systems try either to find or to not find a symbiosis. I try my best not to intervene within it" (Russeth. 2017). In 2011, Los Angeles based sculptor Sean Duffy held a

After resetting *Auntie Doreen* a couple of times, I stopped wanting to read anything galleries wanted to tell me about what the work in a new exhibition meant. I'm not sure if the work and my aversion to a specific use of *meaning* is related, but rather than going to events I was being told were meaningful, I would do things I was interested in. Or I would tag along with friends to stuff they wanted to see. I went to the IMAX. I went to the symphony. I went to the aquarium, the botanical gardens, the beach, a museum, an art museum and, finally, one or two galleries. The galleries showed new work. The same people were still there, at the openings, looking cool, talking without dancing. What does all this super-meaningful new work actually mean, I wondered? What if meaning is generated over time, by being touched by the ordinance of time? Is all new work just intrinsically meaningless? New work (and I include my own herein) may be prominently displayed, well positioned and valued, and it might even contain all the attributes necessary to generate meaning, but what if, without participating in the ordinance of *time* as an ordinal (1st, 2nd, 4th), it remains cardinal (1, 2, 4), which is to say essentially *variable* (x, b, z) and only *potentially* meaningful? What if new work is merely a *placeholder* for meaning to occupy and inhabit over time? In the discussion that follows, when I speak about *rhythm, dancing and improvisation*, I have this relationship of the ordinance of time and meaning in mind. *Auntie Doreen* really made me consider time.

Conclusion to Chapter 1

I have introduced what I mean by mystical form by showing how I came to it in my work. I have discussed how these forms made me think of the nature of things, the way things are and time, and how they made me ask broad, big questions about my practice and how I approach art and my participation in the art world. In the next chapter, I discuss mystical form in the work of Dan Rakgoathe.

“Garage Sale” at Suzanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects to raise funds to become a race car driver. According to the press release, “Duffy’s current project is to become a race car driver—and prepare for a grueling 1000 mile test of endurance, skill and character. This quixotic adventure is designed to mine his family’s involvement in off-road racing in the 60s and 70s, to explore father/son relationships (not to mention constructions of masculinity), and to disrupt suburban ennui. Utilizing the all-too-familiar format of the mid-life crisis, Duffy has acquired an impractical vehicle with exceptional power (in low gears) and outfitted it in zebra stripes” (Duffy. 2011).



Fig 19. *Auntie Doreen* in reset form: glass jars with split green peas, red lentils, pop corn kernels and my grandmother's nuts.

The nuts are from walnut trees my maternal grandmother planted some years ago thinking that one day people were going to pay top dollar for nuts. Like in so many things, she was right.

CHAPTER 2: ON MYSTICAL FORM IN THE WORK OF DAN RAKGOATHE

There are far too many things that go on beyond cognition of the average man, far too many things that prevail than we are aware, things that in their negative and positive aspects affect us – it is only a fool who cannot admit that there is something he does not know – Dan Rakgoathe (Langham. 2000: 32).

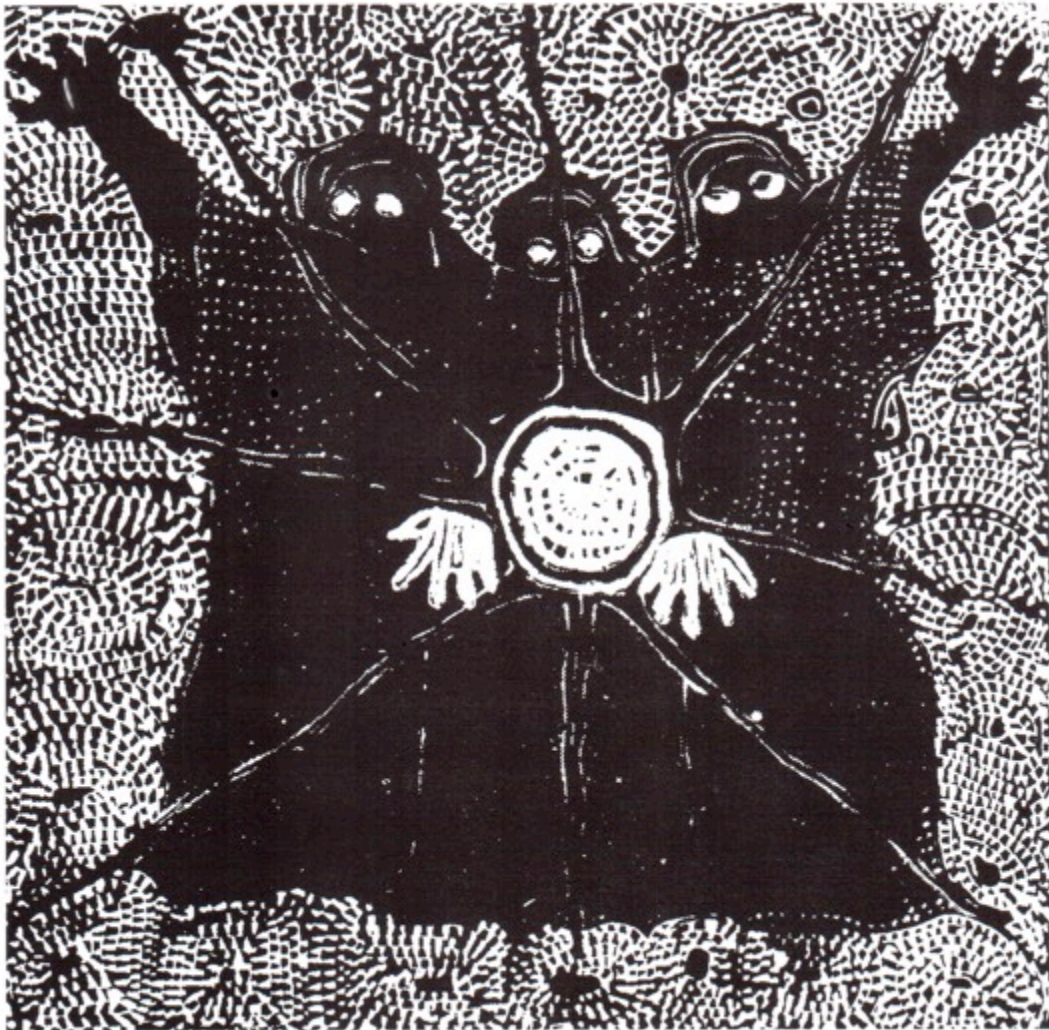


Fig 20. Dan Rakgoathe *Cosmic Trinity*, 1974. Linocut, 36 x 37cm. Smith Borkum Hare (Pty) Ltd, Johannesburg.

Introduction

In a broad survey of South African printmaking published in the January/February 2018 issue of *Art in Print* magazine, Nadine M. Orenstein (Drue Heinz Curator in Charge of the Department of Drawings and Prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) writes that she “was particularly struck by the visionary etchings of Dan Rakgoathe” (Orenstein. 2018: 36). That *Art in Print* chose to lead the article with an image of *Cosmic Trinity* (Fig 20) reinforced the importance that Orenstein placed on her first interaction with Rakgoathe’s work. It is significant that in her survey of South African printmaking, Rakgoathe’s work stood out most prominently. This is even more significant given the fact that so little has been written about Rakgoathe’s work. The only extant publication on his work is *Unfolding Man: The Life and Art of Dan Rakgoathe* by Donvé Langham, published in 2000 when Rakgoathe was still alive. Almost twenty years after his death, Rakgoathe remains an artist massively underappreciated in South Africa and abroad. While the political dimension as to why Rakgoathe, along with a generation of South African Artists from the 20th Century (specifically those who attended the Ndaleni art school) remains underappreciated is examined in *The Art of Life in South Africa* (Magaziner. 2017), the reality remains that not nearly enough has been written about his work, given its importance to a generation of South African printmakers and artists active in the contemporary sphere.¹⁶ Orenstein mentioning Rakgoathe in an international printmaking periodical of *Art in Print*’s stature is significant. More significant still perhaps, is the inclusion of *Cosmic Trinity* in reproduction. For those who care to look, Rakgoathe’s work has the potential to convey great meaning.

What follows is my interpretation of some of Rakgoathe’s work including *Dancing Love*, edition number 6/20, which has been in my possession since 2013 (Fig 21). In this chapter I am interested in **identifying mystical form in the work of Dan Rakgoathe.**

¹⁶ Rakgoathe’s work was included recently in the exhibition *A Labour of Love* (August to November 2017) at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. (<https://friendsofjag.org/news-stories/2017/8/4/a-labour-of-love>)



Fig 21. Dan Rakgoathe *Dancing Love*, date unknown. Etching, 22.5 x 15cm. Jacob van Schalkwyk private collection.

Interpreting *Dancing Love*

On the level of form, *Dancing Love* presents something of a logical puzzle: the composition contains a number of elements that alternate in terms of visual priority *and* visual language to create a whirling, classical cyclical composition in the Romantic tradition¹⁷, wherein some forms are not immediately intelligible but in all cases clearly defined by chiaroscuro.¹⁸ That the composition – and by extension the subject of the work – can be interpreted in one of two consequent ways (depending on

¹⁷ I refer to my introduction where I mention the influence of the Romantic tradition (Jeff Wall, Delacroix) on my own work, specifically *Auntie Doreen*. The theme of creation and destruction is prevalent in Rakgoathe in the form of life and death or, in terms of the creation and destruction of form.

¹⁸ In drawing and painting, chiaroscuro is defined as the technique of alternating light and dark tone. It is said to be an invention of Leonardo. Constable's definition is vastly more profound. He defines chiaroscuro as "that power which creates space." (Leslie. 1951: 316) I discuss Constable's approach to chiaroscuro in Chapter 5.

which one of two forms of primary importance is given visual priority by being considered as antecedent), further complicates interpretation of the subject of the work. When viewing *Dancing Love*, there is some *doubt* as to what its subject is: is it a man dreaming, a dancing woman, or both?¹⁹

The ‘mystical modality’ in *Dancing Love*

Listing the primary forms in the composition, clockwise from the bottom left describes the puzzle: a male human head that could be a fish out of water; a wild, ibis-like bird; the head of a woman wearing a magical headscarf; a circular vortex; another circular vortex; a rooster, a dark cloth. Two of these forms, the vortexes, are non-representational. Similar supplementary non-representational forms are scattered throughout the composition, any one of which could take priority as focal point. Here I refer to the constellation of oval and spiral vortex forms that surround the female head above the striped dark cloth. The cloth itself can be read as either a blanket under which the body of the male head lies in a dream state, or, the dress of the woman dancing.

In terms of visual language, both birds – the rooster and the ibis – are depicted representationally. The head of the woman is comparatively hidden – being neither fully non-representational nor as clearly illustratively defined as the birds. Finally, the male head that could be a fish out of water is the form perhaps most clearly emphasized by chiaroscuro in the composition, but is at the same time the most difficult to define: it is both one thing and another at the same time, depending on how one interprets the composition. On the level of form, we are presented with a number of varying elements that do not adhere to the same visual language. Considered as a totality of forms, *Dancing Love* is both figurative and abstract. Nor is it in a style on the verge of representation and non-representation as is the case with the drawings and paintings of Ernest Mancoba.²⁰ There are no roosters in Mancoba.²¹

¹⁹ On forms that inspire doubt, refer to my ‘split green popcorn kernels’ wherein the classification and understanding of form is not immediately possible.

²⁰ Ernest Mancoba (1904 – 2002) was a South African-born sculptor and painter who spent most of his life in Europe. Mancoba was a member of CoBrA, a European avant-garde movement active from 1948 to 1951 “built upon the fusion of Art and Life through experiment to unite form and expression.” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COBRA_\(avant-garde_movement\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COBRA_(avant-garde_movement)))

Rakgoathe makes use of clearly definable forms, even if his rooster has a vortex for an eye, or his ibis is adorned by mystical markings. *Dancing Love* is a composition that contains multiple forms of primary and secondary visual priority, wherein forms that are secondary are allowed to take priority either by continued viewing or choice. This combination of figurative and abstract forms in a single composition, along with the ambivalence of primary and secondary forms in terms of priority, is what I define as the *mystical modality* in *Dancing Love* and the examples of Rakgoathe's work I discuss below.

Two interpretations of *Dancing Love*

There are two consequent interpretations of the composition to consider. These two interpretations follow from prioritizing either one of two primary antecedent forms: the male head or the female head. I will start with the first interpretation I had upon seeing the work: I first saw as primary antecedent form the male head protruding from a blanket at the bottom left hand side of the composition. With a droopy eye, the young man finds himself somewhere between sleeping and being awake. He is in a *nether-space* where dream-forms are appearing to him around his bed. He recognizes some of these forms from his daily life, like the rooster. Others are more symbolic – the ibis – and others are abstract – the vortexes. Hierarchically, he is surrounded by a) forms identifiable in nature b) symbolic forms based on forms identifiable in nature and c) forms that have been abstracted, possibly from nature. These abstract forms may be thought processes or meditations, possibly based on processes occurring in nature that are familiar to him but lead to the unknown.²² While he is weary of them

²¹ Hans Ulrich Obrist: *Interviews, Vol.1* of 2003, contains an invaluable conversation with Mancoba in Paris, conducted in March of 2002. Asking the 98-year old Mancoba about “the oscillation between figuration and abstraction” in his work, Obrist records Mancoba giving a response that explodes the binary dichotomy between figuration and abstraction in European art: “In my painting, it is difficult to say whether the central form is figurative or abstract. But that does not bother me. What I am concerned with is whether the form can bring to life and transmit, with the strongest effect and by the lightest means possible, the being, which has been in me and aspires to expression – in the stuff or any material that is at hand. Our history has brought about, little by little, this dichotomy between abstraction and figuration, which provokes, more and more, a terrible atomization in the very essence of life. In no domain more than in the arts has this systematic dichotomy caused such destruction of the very foundation to the human identity, as both belonging to nature and sharing in the essence of an ideal being” (Obrist. 2003: 60- 61). What Mancoba is saying is that the foundation of human identity is not one wherein the affirmation of reason (“belonging to nature”) as premise, implicitly negates mysticism (“the essence of an ideal being”). To be clear, his logic is explicit: any conclusion arrived at using such a binary understanding of the foundation of human identity – one that affirms reason at the expense of mysticism – re-enforces and provokes “a terrible atomization in the very essence of life.” While Mancoba and Rakgoathe differ greatly, in my opinion the ‘mystical modality’ of Rakgoathe, wherein he includes both abstract and recognisable forms, is no less profound than the oscillation between figuration and abstraction in Mancoba, in that it too allows for the expression of human identity in its fullest definition.

²² I call these thought processes, meditations or rituals *axiomatic procedures* in my own work, a term I will repeat and elaborate on throughout this thesis

he also knows that these meditations, these mystical thought processes, combine in constellation to form the face of a woman. It is only in this nether-space where the boy and the woman come into contact. She does not exist either in the presented hierarchy of nature or symbolism. Only in the nether-space do they get to dance. It is only through the mystical modality that they can form a relationship with each other. It is only in the mystical modality that they are *compossible*. In this interpretation, the title refers to a metaphorical, mystical dance with Love.

A second interpretation is consequent of taking the head of the woman wearing a headscarf at the top right hand of the composition as primary antecedent form. In this interpretation, *Dancing Love* depicts a woman dancing. The woman is wearing a striped cloth dress from which her legs protrude. She is dancing in a flattened, non-recessive space. In this flattened space, she is surrounded by recognizable forms: a rooster, which is a common addition to domestic scenes in peri-urban townships and rural South Africa, an ibis-like creature of symbolic significance, a number of evocative abstracted vortexes, of which a constellation appears on her headscarf and sleeves. She is either giving birth to a young boy, who's head is protruding from the hem of her dress, or she is dancing around a form that could be a fish. In this interpretation, Rakgoathe is depicting an embellished scene where the title refers to the central form, a woman dancing. This woman is either Love as a mystical divine force: love itself – an emotion and concept depicted in forms recognizable and meaningful to the artist – or more literally still, she is the depiction of a specific individual loved by Rakgoathe, like Nomalizo²³. Considered together, the two interpretations of *Dancing Love* – one literal and the other metaphorical and mystical – set up a dialectic that is allegorical to *artistic epistemology*, that is how it is that we come to knowledge in art.

***Dancing Love* as allegory of artistic epistemology**

²³ There is a biographical counterpart to the kind of special case mystical relationship that is the subject of *Dancing Love*. Langham writes that the love of Rakgoathe's life was a short-lived interaction with a girl called Nomalizo Wilma Ncwana when he was 23 and she 17. His love of Nomalizo was, "he believes, the only true love he ever experienced. It was a love that ultimately became a catalyst for the awakening of a much deeper, mystical experience of divine love" (Langham. 2000: 46).

Interpreted as an allegory, *Dancing Love* depicts the mystical relationship between the artist (the boy) and inspiration (the woman). Rakgoathe is depicting how it is that the artist comes to new information. In *Dancing Love*, the artist encounters new knowledge in the mystical modality. It is only here where the artist and new knowledge is compossible – in the nether-space of dreams and visions, where things are ambivalent and doubtful, where forms are both recognisable and abstract (the vortex, the vortex-eyed rooster, the ibis), where there is room for confusion and misapprehension but also love: whereby a union or synthesis is established through which the artist and the object of his affection may form a relationship. In the mystical modality, the artist and his inspiration can dance. Theirs is a dance that steps between the known and the unknown, clarity and confusion, dream and reality, doubt and certainty.

Dancing Love depicts a modality wherein forms do not need to be understandable to participate or be counted. In the mystical modality a rich variety of forms are present, not all of which have to be fully formed or comprehensible. Here the artist comes into contact with a variety of forms that range from being immediately recognisable to ambivalent, confusing, nonsensical, irrational or leading to misapprehension. Perhaps the mystical modality is akin to pure multiplicity, or what Badiou²⁴ imagines as \emptyset : the empty set, the void.²⁵ Either way, it is exactly through this confusion in the presence of such a rich variety of forms that the artist is able to enter into an intimate relationship with the unknown. By ‘unknown’ I simply mean that which is not familiar or known to the artist, but I also mean the ‘big’ unknown: the wealth of knowledge that lies outside of what it is we know. Perhaps it is through this relationship with the unknown whereby the artist is able to come to new knowledge that transcends the mystical modality. I know from my studio practice that the process of making art is a constant process of making the unknown known. In this process, I am the first viewer. I also know that as a viewer, coming into contact with art is to know something of the unknown repeatedly. It is almost effortless to make the argument that when we see art, we become familiar with what we have not been

²⁴ Alain Badiou (b1937) is a French philosopher who’s approach to ontology I discuss in Chapter 5. Along with Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Leotard, Badiou founded the faculty of Philosophy of the Universite de Paris VIII in 1969.

²⁵ I discuss Badiou’s pure multiplicity in Chapter 5

familiar with before. Of course, once I had identified Rakgoathe's approach to mysticism through *Dancing Love*, I wanted to try it in my own work immediately. It is not that I was eager to receive some sort of mystical revelation. I just thought I might find some new forms and I was eager to learn. I set about making a series of drawings called *Tropi*, which I exhibited in 2014.



Fig 22. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *S2 Tropi*, 2014. Lithographic ink, litho crayon, graphite on paper. 760 x 560mm.
Private collection.



Fig 23. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *S1 Tropi*, 2014. Lithographic ink, litho crayon, graphite on paper. 760 x 560mm.
Private collection.



Fig 24. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *S3 Tropi*, 2014. Lithographic ink, litho crayon, graphite on paper. 760 x 560mm.
Private collection.

All three these works began with drawing concentric circles in graphite. Even in reproduction, the spiral form is visible. I found it very difficult to find an escape from this way of working. The spiral is intoxicating and inviting, a sort of formalist siren song not to be heeded. I found an exit through the story of Giotto's show of mastery in Vasari, where (as I have it) Giotto simply drew a perfect red circle in response to a request from the Pope for painters to prove their skill to him. Word is, he drew it from the hip, using a pelvic movement to guide his brush. This connects with how I feel about the sacrum. Anyhow, I drew myself out of the spiral with the work below, called "Exit through Giotto's circle." I include it here because the graphite spiral is much more prominent in reproduction than in the *Tropi* works above.



Fig 25. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Exit Through Giotto's Circle*, 2015. Lithographic ink, litho crayon, graphite on paper. 760 x 560mm. Private collection.

Entering the mystical modality in my work: *Tropi*, *Apotropos*

In my introduction to the exhibition *Topoi, Tropi, Apotropos* at GALLERY AOP in 2014, I wrote that

I was drawn to Rakgoathe's use of the spiral, a shape I first became aware of in fever dreams as a child. I decided to, through the act of drawing, focus on coming into contact with transcendental events - moments of understanding that may not necessarily fit within a coherent system/philosophy in a purely analytical way. Each drawing would begin with concentric circles drawn with graphite, after which I would simply try something new to me (Van Schalkwyk. 2014: 15).

By beginning each drawing (Fig 22 – 25) with concentric circles drawn in graphite, I was attempting to enter Rakgoathe’s mystical modality in my own work. I should say that I work flat on a workbench. At the scale of these drawings (760 x 560mm), continuously drawing a circle at speed entails that I draw from the base of the spine: the ‘concentric circles’ are really the result of one continuous gesture whereby I move my body such that my drawing arm may move freely all over the page. I am not making tiny little circles using my wrist or fingers as prime movers of the instrument. I am drawing from my sacrum, which is a special part of the body I associate with opening up the unknown.²⁶ When drawing these circles – which really became a single circle – I would sometimes close my eyes. I’d lose track of time. Because of friction, the graphite would burn my fingers. I’d do this until I’d feel outside of the ordinance of time, staying there as long as I could, before closing up the composition – which I saw as the site of a ritual –with lithographic ink loaded onto scrapers. In the work I am doing for this study, I am adopting a similar approach to my materials. I am not so much interested in a meditative space as I am in a ritual space wherein I may enter the unknown or otherworld through gesture. By gesture I mean working from the sacrum, for which wielding an axe on wood is just as good as working a stick of graphite on paper. I usually adopt a certain axiomatic procedure when I work. In my *Tropi* and *Apotropos* drawings, the axiomatic procedure I adopted was to try and enter a mystical modality through losing track of time drawing from the sacrum with graphite, thereafter closing the ritual space with lithographic ink. I’d see what happened afterwards. Following from this approach to my work, there is a certain amount of preparation, experimentation and improvisation by which I structure my practice. I will expand on these terms throughout this thesis.

Further Interpretations of Rakgoathe’s work

²⁶ I will discuss the importance of anatomy classes at Pratt under Salvatore Montano in a later chapter. ‘Sal’ taught his students that the sacrum was, as its name suggests, a sacred bone that would be placed on top of the skull in ancient burial sites. On the link between the sacrum and the unknown or the ‘otherworld,’ I refer to *the Mesoamerica Sacrum Bone: Doorway to the Otherworld* by Brian Stross. Stross argues “using ethnographic, linguistic, and iconographic evidence, that the sacrum bone was a "sacred" bone, that it played a significant part in some Prehispanic Mesoamerican iconographic and cosmological traditions as it did in some Old World cultures, that it was related to reproduction, fertility, and reincarnation, and that in Mesoamerica the sacrum represented one index of the more generalized but variously manifested "portals" or doorways permitting translocation of shamans, spirits, and deities between worlds or levels of the cosmos” (Stross: 1).

A good work of art must be infinitely suggestive of ideas, it must grow, it must bring forward from the onlooker even more than what the artist could have thought of. Different people have different interpretations. All interpretations are valid, relative to the onlooker. I want my work to appeal to the onlooker, independent of my intentions. It must inspire certain subtler ideas, to bring forward things which are not necessarily the intention of the artist – Dan Rakgoathe (Langham 2000: 126).

Rakgoathe not only encouraged multiple interpretations of his work, but considered it an innate ability of a “good work of art” to be “infinitely suggestive” of ideas and interpretations. There are a number of works reproduced in Donvé Langham’s book, *The Unfolding Man, the Life and Art of Dan Rakgoathe* that, like *Dancing Love*, encourage multiple interpretations by the kind of compositional ambivalence described above. Spanning a period equivalent to the majority of Rakgoathe’s output, *Trap of Fatalism*, 1973, (Fig 27), *Horse Totem*, 1978 (Fig 28) and *Feline Totem*, 1977 (Fig 29), all present compositions that encourage the onlooker to form multiple interpretations of the work in question through sustained viewing. Given that so little has been written on Rakgoathe’s work, and none at all on *Dancing Love* specifically, I found it instructive to interpret related work from his oeuvre to better understand the subject of *Dancing Love*.



Fig 26. Dan Rakgoathe *Mother and Child*, 1988. Pen and ink. Tyrone Gallery, Johannesburg.

In *Mother and Child* of 1988 (Fig 26), I interpret a composition wherein one cannot be sure which form is that of the mother or that of the child. At least four or five figures are presented as being intertwined through an all-encompassing embrace wherein caregiving is transferred from child to mother as much as from mother to child. Most pertinently to our discussion of *Dancing Love* is that similar forms surround the central circular composition of embracing figures: a rooster, an ibis-like bird with mystical markings, constellations and tranches of abstract forms, peacocks and a pheasant-like bird that could be a guinea fowl. Are these forms symbolic of the attributes Rakgoathe recognizes in his definition of Love, whether it be that between *Mother and Child* or that of *Dancing Love*? Does the rooster signify vigilance, regular effort? Is the peacock symbolic of enticement, of being called to greater realization? Is the ibis-like bird the reminder of the greater world, of movement, migration, of long journeys towards greater, perhaps more ancient knowledge?



Fig 27. Dan Rakgoathe *Trap of Fatalism*, 1973. Linocut, 43.7 x 31.7cm. Durban Art Gallery Collection.

In *Trap of Fatalism*, (Fig 27) I see Rakgoathe using a similar compositional tool as in *Dancing Love*: human forms positioned at the bottom left are connected by line and shape to a comparatively more abstracted, circular vortex wherein figures are depicted in another realm of existence. There is an open channel of communication between the figures of these two worlds. They can see each other. Some are depicted gesturing, calling out across the divide. Others seem surprised or shocked at what they are witnessing. There is death on both sides: the cluster of rolling heads depicted at the bottom left are either dead or close to it. Within the vortex, if not all the figures are already dead, while still able to communicate with the living, some of them appear as

passively as some of the rolling heads. The vortex itself is not kaleidoscopic in its implied movement: it does not extend or recede into space as much as it wants to tick over like the gear of a mechanical timepiece, each slot of its seven-legged cephalopod-like division teetering on counter or clockwise rotation, the motion of which its inhabitants and audience cannot influence: the wheel that is formed has an intelligence of its own and cannot be manipulated by the living or the dead.

With sustained viewing, it is revealed that the dead heads on the bottom left hand side are but the most visible forms in a brook of semi-conscious busts that source from the blackest recesses underneath the vortex-wheel. We are witnessing not a dialectic between the living and the dead perhaps, but a self-contained life cycle of the living to and from dead – humans as insects, stripped of causal memory, born as larvae, dying as spent moths only to return as shells of themselves, repeating a trapped existence from which there is no escape in life or in death. I interpret *Trap of Fatalism* as a nightmare image, a warning against foregoing free will. While it shares a compositional tool with *Dancing Love*, I interpret the latter as decidedly more optimistic. I feel that comparatively, it is a celebration of a relationship with the mystical that while lonely, is free in its imagination within the dream.



Fig 28. Dan Rakgoathe *Horse Totem*, 1978. Etching, 14.5 x 22.5cm. Private collection Yvonne Winters.

In both *Horse Totem* (Fig 28) and *Feline Totem*, (Fig 29) humanoid forms are positioned as the suckling litter of each animal form in question. Deriving nourishment from a zebra-like equestrian form – this is a particularly Sub-Saharan equestrian motif – embellished and ordained figures, ceremonially clothed and faceless, congregate in chorus to deliver an interpretation by consensus of a new celestial dawn fed by the stripes of the horse that has a clear and uninterrupted view on the horizon. The figures, while we cannot be sure, are facing the viewer. We are forced by their empty features, by the indictment of their collectively absent stare, to interpret perhaps not their message per se, but the message they have weaned from the horse's mouth. I interpret *Horse Totem* as a complex depiction of mystical revelation.



Fig 29. Dan Rakgoathe *Feline Totem*, 1977. Aquatint, etching and softground, 15.1 x 22.7cm.
Johannesburg Art Gallery Collection

Feline Totem presents a similar depiction, but here I feel the forms are confused. Where the forms in *Horse Totem* have been clearly synthesized, in *Feline Totem* they remain in a state of synthetic confusion. We can analyze them – they are distinguishable – but their exact characteristics remain incompletely formed. In *Feline Totem* the mystical revelation has arrived in confused form. The viewer is left, like the artist, to pick up the disparate pieces, to make sense of what shards have been received, to collect the shrapnel of information– as in Picasso’s *Guernica* (Fig 30) – to compensate by completion, always inaccurately, the lexicon of the message by synthesis in the wake of misapprehension or confusion. While the root of the confusion is not categorically stated in *Feline Totem*, we may look to the trapped and anxious expressions of the humanoid forms within the central feline form.



Fig 30. Pablo Picasso *Guernica*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 349.3 x 776.6cm. Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid

I have never seen *Guernica* in person. I am making a visual link between Rakgoathe's *Feline Totem* and Picasso's *Guernica*. In both images, anguished, confused figures occupy the composition. We know that Picasso painted *Guernica* in response to the bombing of the Basque village of the same name. I argue that Rakgoathe's *Feline Totem* depicts confusion. In the images of my own work, forms are fragmented and scattered as a result of destruction.



Fig 31. Scattering of forms in my *Preparation Piece*, GUS, August 2018



Fig 32. Scattering of forms in my *Auntie Doreen*, 3D Clean Room, 2017

Unlike *Horse Totem*, where the humanoid forms seem to have congregated freely around the equine form in collaborative unison to deliver an intelligible message, in *Feline Totem*, they have been consumed by the interlocutor of the dispatch: a hand is seen at the totem's mouth, perhaps that of another messenger being swallowed. Appearing at once trapped inside and floating towards the belly of the totem, they are not being nourished by the vision – we can see the totem's teats unoccupied – they are being trapped, unable to communicate clearly, unable to wean any clear information from the feline totem, which is looking back on a number of celestial objects, the originators of the dispatch, none of which may or may not be the signal of a clear new dawn. I interpret *Horse Totem* and *Feline Totem* as snapshots detailing the sending and receiving of mystical information and *Dancing Love* as a survey of a lasting relationship between sender and recipient formed by a myriad of clear and jumbled messages over a lifetime.



Fig 33. Dan Rakgoathe *Cosmic Trinity*, 1974. Linocut, 36 x 37cm. Smith Borkum Hare (Pty) Ltd, Johannesburg.

Rakgoathe's *Cosmic Trinity*

When Langham writes in *Unfolding Man* that with *Cosmic Trinity*, Rakgoathe “integrates the myth of Ramasedi [which I explain later] with his broader understanding of God,” (Langham. 2000: 151) she makes a statement central not only to understanding *Cosmic Trinity*, but Rakgoathe’s work in general. There is a clear belief system at the foundation of Rakgoathe’s work, the understanding of which sheds light on many of the questions raised in the interpretations above. In his own explanation of *Cosmic Trinity*, Rakgoathe states that “God to me is the realisation of being. The greatest attribute of this being is love.”²⁷ Rakgoathe sees God, being and love as inextricably linked. If *Dancing Love* can be interpreted as a work wherein ‘the greatest attribute of the realisation of being’ is depicted as dancing, *Cosmic Trinity* details Rakgoathe’s definition of God and more pertinently, the origins thereof. His is a definition that counts both African mythology and European mysticism – specifically Rosicrucianism, which I discuss in the next chapter – as origin myth.

In explaining how his definition of God is related to the “African concept of God,” (Langham. 2000: 152) Rakgoathe states that,

All that can be conceived as God is God as the Prime Mover, God as the Process and God as the product... God the masculine is the Prime Mover which is known as ‘Ra’, and God the Process could be regarded as the maternal creative power

²⁷ Dan Rakgoathe in (Langham. 2000: 152). There is a link between Rakgoathe’s use of ‘love’ and Badiou’s use of ‘relation,’ if relation is seen as that which binds all forms that participate in being or a situation. I discuss Badiou’s ontology in Chapter 5.

of God which is ‘Ma’. And God the Product is the complete manifestation of life as we see it in our own lives and in nature and in animals. (Langham, 2000, p152)

By dividing godhood into a trinity that reflects three stages of becoming, Rakgoathe is adhering to ancient African Genesis myth as told to him by his grandmother, encapsulated in the etymology of the Sotho word ‘Ramasedi’ which refers to the “three-fold concept of God, which is made up of ‘Ra’, the male creative principle of God; ‘Ma’, the feminine creative principle of God; and ‘lesedi’, meaning light” (Langham. 2000: 151). In the opening chapter of *Unfolding Man* Langham retells the story of Ra and Ma as told to Rakgoathe by his grandmother:

A long, long time ago there were two people, Ra and Ma. Ra was the father and Ma was the mother. And these two people so loved one another, my child, that they came to live together. And when they were together Ma said to Ra, what shall we create? And Ra said to Ma, my love, we cannot create anything, because we are in darkness. We cannot see – there is not light. Therefore let us create light. So they came together, and then what came into them was the most powerful force that there ever was, that is love. And out of this love they created light, and the whole world of nations sprang from this light. So it is love, my dear, love is what brought the world into being. When they say God is love, it is true, according to African Genesis (Langham. 2000: 7).

Rakgoathe’s repeated depiction of male and female forms, exemplified by *Manifestation of Duality*, (Fig 34) where the masculine and feminine are connected by form, or by umbilical illumination as in *Duality on the Cosmic Plane*, (Fig 35) are therefore more than mere depictions of affection or unity between the sexes. They are visual depictions of a creation myth shared by African Genesis and a specific school of thought in European mysticism embodied by Rosicrucianism.

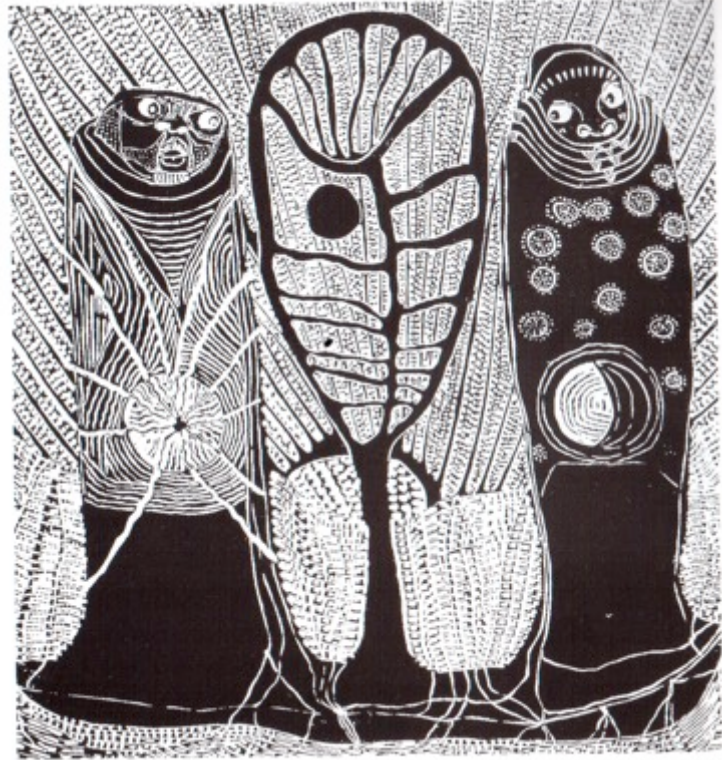


Fig 34. Dan Rakgoathe *Manifestation of Duality*, 1974. Linocut, 30.5 x 29cm. University of Fort Hare Collection



Fig 35. Dan Rakgoathe *Duality on the Cosmic Plane*, 1978. Coloured Linocut. Tyrone Gallery, Johannesburg.



Fig 36. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *T2 Duality* (diptych). 2014. Lithographic ink, litho crayon, liquid tusche, graphite. 1320 x 560mm.
Private collection.



Fig 37. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *T5 Duality* (diptych). 2014. Lithographic ink, litho crayon, liquid tusche, graphite. 1320 x 560mm.
Collection of the artist.

These two diptychs of 2014, which I called in the exhibition documentation “formalist proofs of gestural abstraction” are “based on the proof of duality found within category theory, which is proof by reversed or mirrored morphisms of a closed Cartesian category” (Van Schalkwyk. 2014: 5). Unlike Rakgoathe, I was not interested in a mystical interpretation of duality, but a mathematical one, specifically through category theory. I drew my *Dualities* ambidextrously, working on both pages of a diptych at the same time, mirroring my actions as I drew. While my approach is quite different, I share an interest in the nature of duality with Rakgoathe.

What is remarkable about Rakgoathe’s definition of God is not that he adheres to African Genesis myth as told to him by his grandmother, but that he found a way to suture her definition to this specific school of European mystical thought. Around 1967, after “reading a notice in a magazine about the mystical Rosicrucian Order, [Rakgoathe’s] subsequent enquiries resulted in him joining this world-wide mystical fraternity” (Langham. 2000: 54) She writes (in 2000, when Rakgoathe was still alive) that “Dan has remained affiliated to the Rosicrucian Order, and much of his work, including many of the mystical titles, reflects his underlying philosophy of Rosicrucianism” (Langham. 2000: 53) and that “he was provided with specific guidance and concrete information in the form of monthly monographs, which he found intellectually as well as intuitively satisfying” (Langham. 2000: 55). Rakgoathe himself commented on Rosicrucianism that, “I believe that being a Rosicrucian has helped me a lot, because I practiced a lot of the techniques to do with health” (Langham. 2000: 55). Apart from techniques to do with health, other themes covered by Rakgoathe’s monthly monographs included “matter and its vibrations, the different phases of human consciousness, the laws of life, the Rosicrucian ontology, metaphysical healing, the evolution of the soul, the mysteries of birth and death, and the religious and mystical traditions of the past” (Langham. 2000: 53). To understand the subject of Rakgoathe’s work in general and *Dancing Love* in particular more clearly, in 2013 I set about finding out more about Rosicrucianism. In doing so, I came across a number of ideas pertinent to this study that have all influenced my work.²⁸ In the following chapter, I discuss Rosicrucianism historically and how it relates to a deeper understanding of Rakgoathe’s mysticism and his approach to form.

Conclusion to Chapter 2

²⁸ I am not a Rosicrucian, nor do I seek to join any associated order or make myself visible to an invisible fraternity through the publication of this or any other work in written or visual form.

I discussed the importance of Dan Rakgoathe's work to my own and showed similarities between some of my work and Rakgoathe's. I discussed different interpretations of some of Rakgoathe's compositions and the implications those interpretations have on how we come to knowledge about Rakgoathe's work but also how the dialectic inspired by interpretation of the mystical forms in his work leads us to question how it is that the artist comes to knowledge. I identified the mystical modality and particular characteristics of what I see as mystical forms in Rakgoathe's work: confusion, misapprehension, ambivalence and doubt, but also love.

CHAPTER 3: ON DOUBT: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MYSTICAL FORM

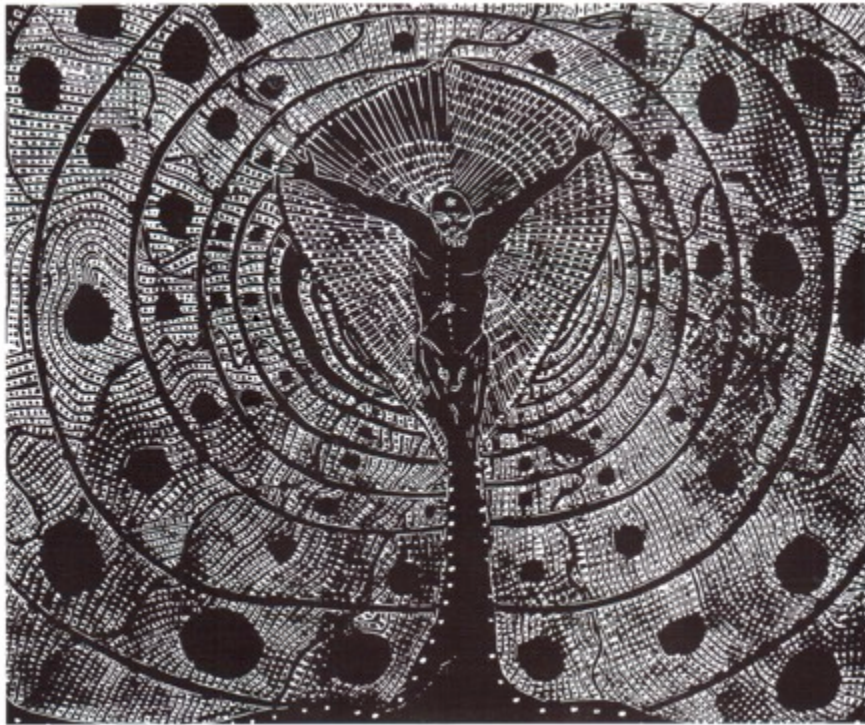


Fig 38. Dan Rakgoathe *Mystery of Space*, 1975. Linocut, 55 x 46cm. Durban Art Gallery Collection



Fig 39. Robert Fludd (1574 – 1637) *Utriusque Cosmi Historica*, Oppenheim, 1617, title page engraved by Johann Theodor de Bry.

Before reading in *Unfolding Man* that Rakgoathe was a Rosicrucian, I saw a visual link between his work and Rosicrucian imagery, in this case, de Bry's engraving for Fludd's publication *Utriusque Cosmi Historica*.

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss Rosicrucianism historically to gain a deeper understanding of one of the roots of Rakgoathe's mysticism, an approach to knowledge that was hitherto unknown to me. In the process of doing so, it became clear to me that what I considered as mystical form in Rakgoathe plays not only a vital role in how it is that Rakgoathe came to new knowledge, but that the implications of mystical forms as being forms that inspire doubt are far wider than I had anticipated. The presence of doubt in Rakgoathe's use of form has implications on how it is that existence is defined in Cartesian thought, which is to say at the very foundation of modern philosophy and how it is that we interpret the natural world. It is not my intent to argue for or against a re-interpretation of Descartes.²⁹ I am not at all qualified to make

²⁹ Cartesianism "is the philosophical and scientific system" of René Descartes (1596 - 1650), the French philosopher, mathematician and scientist "often regarded as the first thinker to emphasize the use of reason to develop the natural sciences." (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartesianism>) Descartes "has often been dubbed the father of modern Western philosophy, the thinker whose approach has profoundly changed the course of Western philosophy and set the basis for modernity" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_Descartes).

any broad statements about mathematics or philosophy and our understanding of nature – nor do I want to. I am simply following the trail of breadcrumbs presented to me by coming into contact with Rakgoathe’s work. In many ways, this chapter is a report of what I discovered through wanting to know more about what exactly I was looking at when viewing *Dancing Love*.

What is Rosicrucianism?

In her introduction to *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* of 1972, historian Frances A Yates notes the “strange vagaries in which the use of the word” (Yates. 1772: xiv). Rosicrucianism has become involved, so much so that “most of the literature on ‘Rosicrucianism’ is unusable by the critical historian, except as a means of leading to original material” (Yates. 1972: xiii-xiv). Yates’s book is “a *historical* study” concerned with “the Rosicrucian phase of thought, culture and religion... directed towards indicating the *historical* channels through which the phase was distributed” (1972: xiii). Yates admits that *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* took her into territory hitherto uncharted by serious historical study:

The main reason why serious historical studies of the Rosicrucian manifestos and their influence have hitherto been on the whole lacking is no doubt because the whole subject has been bedeviled by enthusiasts for secret societies. (1972: 206)

Google searches on Rosicrucianism return results that lead to websites called “witchesandwitchcraft.com,” “crystalinks.com,” and “ancientpages.com.” All offer various sensational definitions of Rosicrucianism as, for example “a woo-peddling secret society,” (RationalWiki.com) or lead to YouTube channels that are self-proclaimed collections of “some of the most influential and thought-provoking videos on YouTube” (WeTube). Yates writes, already in 1972 that, “there is a vast literature on Rosicrucianism which assumes the existence of a secret society, founded by

Christian Rosencreutz, and having a continuous existence up to modern times.” She adds that, “in the vague and inaccurate world of so-called ‘occultist’ writing this assumption has produced a kind of literature” wherein Rosicrucian history “becomes involved with the masonic myths” to the extent that “the enquirer feels that he is sinking helplessly into a bottomless bog” (Yates. 1972: 206). It is for these reasons that in my discussion of Rakgoathe’s affiliation with AMORC I choose to follow Yates into a “serious *historical*” analysis of Rosicrucianism and not focus at all on the kind of dubious information that had already clouded the history she attempted to unearth in 1972, before Google.



Fig 40. *Frederick and Elizabeth as King and Queen of Bohemia, with Four Lions*. Print issued in Prague at time of their coronation, 1619. National Portrait Gallery photograph. Caption as provided by Yates in her list of illustrations, p vii

What is Yates’s historical perspective on Rosicrucianism?

According to Yates, historically Rosicrucianism emerges with “certain documents published in Germany in the early seventeenth century, generally known as the

‘Rosicrucian manifestos,’” which claim that “new advances in man’s knowledge are at hand” (1972: xi). More specifically, Yates writes that

‘Rosicrucian’ in this purely historical sense represents a phase in the history of European culture which is intermediate between the Renaissance and the so-called scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. It is a phase in which the Renaissance Hermetic-Cabalist tradition has received the influx of another Hermetic tradition, that of alchemy. The ‘Rosicrucian manifestos’ are an expression of this phase, representing, as they do, the combination of ‘Magia, Cabala, and Alchymia’ as the influence making for the new enlightenment” (1972: xi – xii).

Rosicrucianism emerges at a critical point in Europe’s transition from Hermetic Renaissance thinking and scholasticism towards the age of reason. Yates argues that the influence of the alchemical tradition of John Dee³⁰ was introduced to mainland Europe from England, in part through the royal wedding of Princess Elizabeth, daughter of James I, to Frederick V, the Elector Palatine of the Rhine in 1613. London, she writes, “went wild with joy at what seemed a continuation of the Elizabethan age in this alliance of a new, young Elizabeth with the leader of the German Protestants and a grandson of William the Silent³¹” (1972: 1). To sketch the cultural context, at the time of the wedding, “Shakespeare was still alive and in London; the Globe theatre was not yet burned down; Inigo Jones³² was perfecting the

³⁰ John Dee (1527 – c1609), eminent English mathematician, astronomer, astrologer, occult philosopher and advisor to Elizabeth I. According to Yates, “a brilliant mathematician” who “related his study of number to the three worlds of the Cabalists.” His “*Preface to Euclid* provided a brilliant survey of the mathematical arts in general... his study of number was related to astrology and alchemy, and in his *Monas hieroglyphica* he believed that he had discovered a formula for a combined cabalist, alchemical and mathematical science which would enable its possessor to move up and down the scale of being from the lowest to the highest spheres” (1972: xii).

³¹ Yates details the “atmosphere of Europe” between “the sixteenth-century wars of religion and the Thirty Years War” as a period of ongoing strategic jostling between “the Union of German Protestant Princes, formed to counteract the League of Catholic Princes,” with “the person of the Emperor of Germany, and on whether the Hapsburgs could retain control of the imperial office” as ultimate goal of great strategic importance. Yates links this jostling of control to an attempt by the Sidney tradition in England, “the *beau ideal* of Protestant chivalry,” direct descendants of William the Silent in “the Calvinist rulers of the Palatinate” and Henry of Navarre (leader of the Huguenots in France) to establish “a Protestant League in Europe” since at least the time of Elizabeth the Great in 1577 (1972: 15 -16).

³² British classical revivalist architect (1573 – 1652) of original Somerset House Chapel and, according to Yates, “very important” in the authoritative history of Freemasonry, the *Constitutions of Freemasonry* published by James Anderson in 1725, wherein Anderson suggests “that it was in association with the introduction and spread of the ‘Augustan style’ by Inigo Jones that Freemasonry as an institution, distinct from masonic legend, began in England” (1972: 214).

court masque; Francis Bacon³³ had published *The Advancement of Learning*. The English Renaissance was at a high point of splendour, developing into the dawning intellectual promise of the seventeenth century” (ibid) and, while “there is no evidence to support this interesting theory,” it has been suggested “that the masque in *The Tempest* was added to the play to make it suitable for performance” (Yates. 1972: 2-3) before the bride and groom to be. Frederick V was “invested with the Order of the Garter³⁴” (Yates. 1972: 4) by James I. Francis Bacon “took time off from his other studies” (ibid) to devise the entertainment for the wedding. Songs were sung about the joining of the Rhine with the Thames, the unification of Germany with Great Britain, and how “the stars in their courses rain down harmonies on this marriage³⁵” (Yates. 1972: 5) that solidified a pact by marriage between two great Protestant powers of the age³⁶.

Of course the Habsburgs³⁷ would have none of it. When Frederick V claimed the throne to the Bohemian empire after the Defenestration of Prague³⁸ in 1618, James I looked the other way while a combined Habsburg army ran through Prague in an hour at the Battle of White Mountain³⁹ on 8 November 1620, bringing a swift end to

³³ Sir Francis Bacon, 1561 – 1626, English philosopher, statesman, scientist and educationist. According to Yates, “Baconian insistence on experiment, and on collecting and testing scientific data” guided the efforts of the Royal Society, (Yates. 1972: 190) the oldest national scientific institution in the world, established in 1660, dedicated to the improvement of natural knowledge.

³⁴ According to Yates, “the very special significance attached to the Order of the Garter was again an Elizabethan tradition. There had been a great revival of the Order... during the reign of Elizabeth, who had used it as a means of drawing the noblemen together in common service to the Crown... in defence of the causes for which the Order stood, the fighting of the Dragon of Wrong and the defence of the Monarch” (1972: 3). Thus awarding the Order of the Garter to Frederick V identified him directly with the highest echelons of political power of the Elizabethan era and by extension the narrative of Saint George and the Dragon, dating back in English mythology to the eleventh century and as early as the seventh century in lore.

³⁵ Yates links the work of Johannes Kepler under Rudolphine Prague in 1604 to the central texts of Rosicrucianism which claimed that “God will allow a great influx of truth, light, and grandeur, such as surrounded Adam in Paradise, to be poured forth on mankind” when she writes that “new stars have appeared in the constellations Serpentarius and Cynus,” noting that these ‘new stars’ “were discussed by Johannes Kepler who thought that religious and political changes were heralded by these stars” (1972: 48). By the time of the wedding, the discovery of ‘new stars’ by Kepler would have been seen as hugely significant and the reference to their ‘courses’ should be seen in the light of the hugely significant impact of astronomical observations in Europe at the beginning of the 1600s. It is key also to understand the link between astronomy and the rediscovery of Euclid’s geometry to the accurate description of celestial motion and how this impacted central tenets of Catholicism.

³⁶ Yates underscores the significance of the union: “On the day of the coronation a commemorative print was published. It shows Frederick and Elizabeth as crowned king and queen of Bohemia. In the background, Reformers and peace have triumphed over Counter-Reformers and war. Four lions represent the alliances on which the new king and queen of Bohemia can count. The lion was Frederick’s own heraldic animal, and the lion on the left is the lion of the Palatinate, holding an electoral crown. Then come the double-tailed lion of Bohemia, the British lion with its sword, and the lion of the Netherlands” (1972: 20).

³⁷ The House of Habsburg occupied the throne of the Holy Roman Empire continually between 1438 and 1740.

³⁸ “...at a stormy meeting in Prague, two Catholic leaders were thrown out of a window, the incident known as the Defenestration of Prague, another step in the train of events leading to the Thirty Years War. Bohemia was now in a state of open rebellion against its Habsburg sovereign.” At play in the Bohemian rebellion was the hope “of a reform of the church through the empire which had been a European dream ever since the time of Dante” (Yates. 1972: 18).

³⁹ The Battle of White Mountain “riveted the Habsburg domination on Europe for another generation and initiated the Thirty Years War, which eventually whittled away the Habsburg power. The Battle of White Mountain was thus a crucial event in European history” (Yates. 1972: 23). Underscoring this, Yates reasons that, “had Frederick succeeded in keeping open a liberal

Frederick's brief rule and triggering the Thirty Years War. Apart from destroying the Bohemian empire, the Thirty Years War laid waste to Heidelberg, where its *Bibliotheca Palatina* was looted and distributed amongst the victors.⁴⁰ The period of relative religious tolerance under Rudolph II in Prague, where Tycho Brahe and Kepler were allowed to construct their telescope detailing the movements of the planets, where Veronese was commissioned to create work, came to a final, violent end. In his haste to flee Prague, Frederick V left the Order of the Garter to fall into Habsburg hands. With the Bohemian court exiled to The Hague, Frederick, derogatorily called 'The Winter King' to denote the brevity of his rule, was ridiculed in pamphlets as a garter-less weakling.⁴¹ (Fig 41)

corridor from Holland to Venice through Germany, the advance of thought repression in Italy, from which Galileo was to suffer, might have been checked" (1972: 27).

⁴⁰ Yates makes a compelling argument that the central myth that presaged the Rosicrucian documents, that of a mythical figure called Christian Rosenkreuz "propagated by Andreae in the *Chemical Wedding*" (1972: 91) was in fact "a kind of 'magic parable' which, as in the case of John Dee's *Monas hieroglyphica*, might include very serious scientific work, particularly in mathematics" (1972: 92). Whether or not the argument holds, the underlying role of mathematics in Dee and the new knowledge promised by the Rosicrucian documents is clear. Unfortunately, according to Yates, proving or disproving her argument may be impossible: "The destruction of books and papers at Heidelberg when the town fell into the hands of the enemies may mean that much of the evidence was irrevocably destroyed" (1972: 92). At play then in the events surrounding the Battle of White Mountain was not just control of the Bohemian empire, but the introduction perhaps of a new way of understanding the world through mathematics – the central tenant of Cartesian reasoning – an idea that would only take root more than a hundred years later.

⁴¹ "The fierce propaganda war launched against Frederick of the Palatinate after his defeat used every weapon of ridicule and satire against him. Large numbers of satirical prints were circulated. These consisted of single sheets containing pictures, the meaning of which is explained in dogged verse" (Yates. 1972: 14).



Fig 41. *Frederick as a Garterless Pilgrim and The Garterless Frederick doing Menial Tasks*. German Prints, 1621.
Caption as provided by Yates in her list of illustrations, (1972: viii)

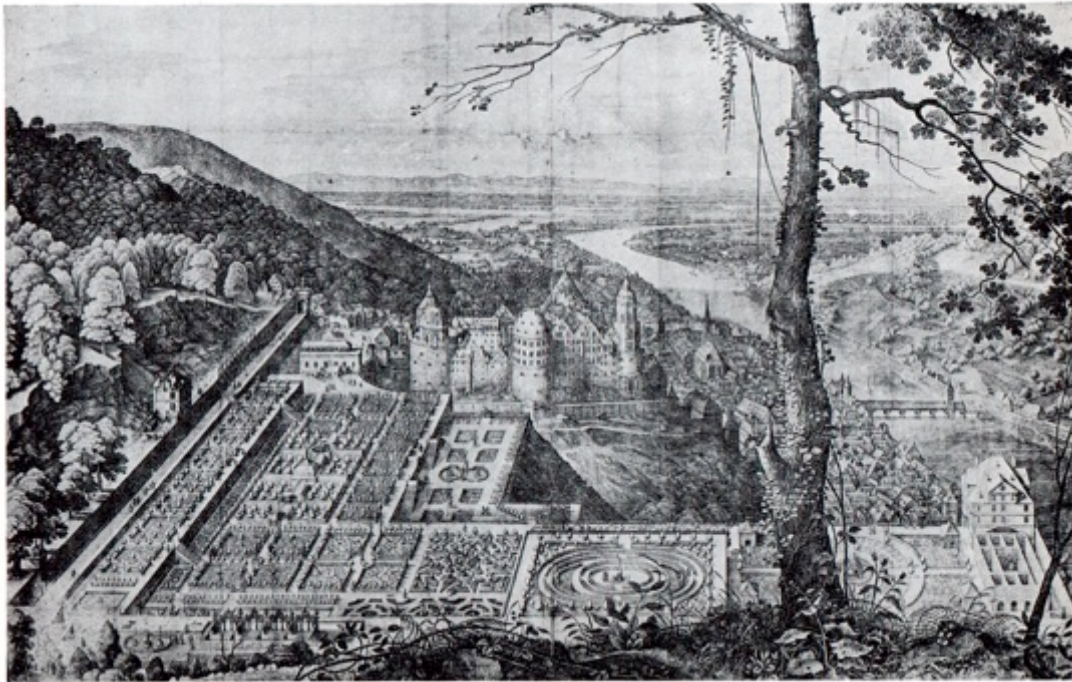


Fig 42. *Heidelberg Castle and Gardens*, engraved by Matthieu Merian. From Solomon de Caus, *Hortas Palatinus*, Frankfurt, 1620. National Portrait Gallery photograph. Caption as provided by Yates in her list of illustrations, (1972: vii)

What is the significance of Heidelberg Castle and the Palatinate?

In the period between their wedding of 1613 and the Battle of White Mountain of 1620, Frederick V and Elizabeth Stuart resided in Heidelberg. Yates writes that “Heidelberg castle was to become a centre whence strange and exciting influences were to emanate in the years following Elizabeth’s arrival there” (1972: 11). The presence of Salomon de Caus⁴² at Heidelberg revived interest in “Renaissance garden design, in mechanical fountains which could play musical tunes, in speaking statues and other devices of this kind, the taste for which had been stimulated by the recovery of ancient texts” including that of Vitruvius⁴³, the great Roman architect of the first century BC, who recommended the accomplishments necessary for “the true architect to know” as “the arts and sciences based on number and proportion, music,

⁴² Salomon de Caus (1576 – 1626) was “a French Protestant and an extremely brilliant garden-architect, and hydraulic engineer... on intimate terms with Inigo Jones” (Yates. 1972: 11).

⁴³ Yates describes the link between Vitruvius, de Caus and Inigo Jones as follows: “Vitruvius had stated that architecture was the queen of the mathematical sciences, and with it had grouped the other arts and sciences. Inigo Jones was concentrating on architecture and on theatrical design as intimately connected with architecture and its subsidiaries, perspective and mechanics. Salomon de Caus concentrated on garden design, which, in the Renaissance, was closely affiliated to architecture, dependent, like the queen of the mathematical sciences, on proportion, perspective, geometry, and employing the newest refinements in mechanics for its decorative singing fountains and other embellishments” (1972: 11). Historically, in the Palatinate we are therefore at a meeting point between Euclid, Vitruvius, John Dee, de Caus and Jones, not least at the level of geometry.

perspective, painting, mechanics, and the like” (1972: 11). While de Caus set about transforming Heidelberg castle into a garden of mechanical marvels, a series of documents and replies were published in Germany announcing the existence of a fraternity of Rosicrucian Brothers who presented themselves through the publication of two manifestos, the *Fama* and the *Confessio* of 1614 and 1615 respectively, as “setting forth an alternative to the Jesuit Order” and as “a brotherhood more truly based on the teachings of Jesus” (Yates. 1972: 42). Yates argues that the publication of these documents were inextricably linked to the Palatinate, the wedding and union of Frederic and Elizabeth and the unification of Protestant Europe with Great Britain, specifically the alchemical tradition and influence of John Dee. Her examination of these documents – from which the modern order of Rosicrucianism AMORC that Rakgoathe was a member of originated – is fascinating reading but well outside the scope of my study. What is pertinent to our better understanding of Rakgoathe’s subject matter is the “illumination of the whole wide world⁴⁴” through the new knowledge described in them, and the significance of a “chemical wedding⁴⁵” at the core of Rosicrucian doctrine. The unification of male and female figures in Rakgoathe’s work, with a historical understanding of Rosicrucian mythology at hand, now takes on extra significance in the form of a marriage of the alchemical tradition of Dee on the side of Elizabeth with the mechanical-magical Hermetic tradition of Frederick, with the enlightenment of the whole wide world as stated purpose. I think it is remarkable that Rakgoathe recognized the compatibility of his African Genesis teachings of ‘Ramasedi’ with a moment of short-lived humanism in Europe central to Bohemian history and mythology.

Did Rosicrucianism presage the Age of Reason?

⁴⁴ The *Fama* and *Confessio* describe the illumination of the world, with their announcement of Rosicrucian doctrine as metaphorical trumpet call: “And thenceforth our Trumpet shall publicly sound with a loud sound, and great noise, when namely the same (which at this present is shown by few, and is secretly, as a thing to come, declared in figures and pictures) shall be free and publicly proclaimed, and the whole wide world shall be filled withal” (1972: 255).

⁴⁵ “*The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rozencreutz* is the English translation of the remarkable German romance, or novel, or fantasy, published at Strasburg in 1616. It is the third in item in the series which launched the Rosicrucian furore. The series came out annually for three years, the *Fama* in 1614, the *Confessio* in 1615, the *Wedding* in 1616, each adding to the mounting excitement about the Rosicrucian mystery.” The *Wedding* strikes clear parallels with the marriage of Frederick V with Elizabeth and their life at Heidelberg. It is a romance “about a husband and wife who dwell in a wondrous castle full of marvels and of images of Lions, but is at the same time an allegory of alchemical processes interpreted symbolically as an experience of the mystic marriage of the soul – an experience which is undergone by Christian Rozencreutz through the visions conveyed to him in the castle, through theatrical performances, through ceremonies of initiation into orders of chivalry, through the society of the court in the castle” (Yates. 1972: 60).

The promised Rosicrucian Enlightenment, which came to an end with the Battle of White Mountain, takes place on the cusp of a radical “shift from magic to mechanism” that would herald a new era in Europe: “the seventeenth-century philosophy that was to replace Renaissance philosophies was Cartesian mechanism... It is one of the more profound ironies of the history of thought that the growth of mechanical science, through which arose the idea of mechanism as a possible philosophy of nature, was itself an outcome of the Renaissance magical tradition. Mechanism divested of magic became the philosophy which was to oust Renaissance animism and to replace the ‘conjurer’ by the mechanical philosopher” (Yates. 1972: 113).

Reading further, I was surprised by how directly Cartesian mechanism came into contact with the central event that triggered the downfall of the Bohemian empire:

When Descartes heard that his general, the Duke of Bavaria, was marching on Bohemia, he joined the Catholic and Imperial army, was at the famous battle of Prague (The White Mountain) and entered Prague on 9 November with the victors (Yates. 1972: 115).

On how it came to be that Descartes witnessed the Battle of White Mountain, Yates writes that

In 1618 the young Descartes left France for Holland and enrolled himself in the army of Prince Maurice of Nassau. It was rather a strange step for the Catholic, Jesuit-educated Descartes to take, but the explanation given is that he wanted to see the world and enlarge his knowledge of men and life. In this reflective mood, Descartes moved in 1619 into Germany, having heard news of strange movements there, of a revolt in Bohemia, and a war between Catholics and Protestants about this... Descartes went into winter quarters at a place on the Danube, where, warmed by a German stove, he fell into a series of profound meditations. On the night of 10 November 1619, he had dreams, which seem to have been a most important experience, leading him towards the conviction that mathematics were the sole key to the understanding of nature (1972: 114).

So, by the time Descartes witnessed the fall of Prague, he had already experienced the profound meditative state that would lead to his *Discourse on Method*, and almost exactly a year earlier, had had a series of dreams that convinced him that mathematics

were the key to understanding the natural world. Reading the first paragraph of Descartes's second discourse,⁴⁶ I now understood his words differently, against the stark backdrop of the coming Thirty Years War:

I was, at the time, in Germany, whither the wars, which have not yet finished there, had called me, and as I was returning from the coronation of the Emperor to join the army, the onset of winter held me up in quarters in which, finding no company to distract me, and having, fortunately, no cares or passions to disturb me, I spent the whole day shut up in a room heated by an enclosed stove, where I had complete leisure to meditate on my own thoughts (Descartes. 1968: 35).

I find it profound that the father of modern philosophy went into a dream state at the age of twenty-three that caused him to *doubt* everything to be certain about the world, after which, he joined an army that would destroy the empire of a ruler whose daughter Descartes would later dedicate his *Principia Philosophiae* to.⁴⁷ Does Descartes's doubt have some of its origin in witnessing the fall of a regime, tolerant to mechanism over scholasticism, in Prague? Did he perhaps doubt his allegiance to the Hapsburg military cause once he entered Prague? Whatever the cause, Descartes's doubt was fraught with great anxiety. His was not a dry, intellectual doubt, as the following passage makes clear:

The Meditation of yesterday has filled my mind with so many doubts that it is no longer in my power to forget them. And yet, I do not see how I shall be able to resolve them; and, as though I had suddenly fallen into very deep water, I am so taken unawares that I can neither put my feet firmly down on the bottom nor swim to keep myself on the surface (Descartes. 1968: 102).

Descartes's doubt is not one of a flippant 'maybe I will, maybe I won't.' As a young man enlisted in an army, with the battle approaching, Descartes experiences doubt as

⁴⁶ I am using the Sutcliffe translation published in paperback by Penguin in 1968.

⁴⁷ Descartes was based in the Netherlands for more than twenty years before his death, the same country that harboured the Bohemian Court in Exile. Yates confirms that Frederic V, "was an intellectual and a mystic, and deeply interested in music and architecture. He passed on philosophical tastes to some of his children. His eldest daughter, another Princess Elizabeth, had the honour of having the *Principia* of Descartes dedicated to her" (1972: 14).

intensely as a drowning man experiences a sudden expanse of water too deep for him to stand in. ‘Doubt’ in Descartes, criminally cleansed by mistranslation in recent sources as ‘difficulty,’⁴⁸ is a matter of death and death with any outcome of life a matter of reasoning, of *thinking clearly* at all costs as a matter of survival. By the time Descartes publishes his *Meditations* in 1641, the Thirty Years War has destroyed most of Europe, Galileo had been condemned by the Catholic Church, Descartes had been living in the Netherlands for decades – in exile out of the reach of the Inquisition – where he had conceived a daughter only to watch her die at five years old. To translate his ‘doubt’ as ‘difficulty’ is to drastically limit the meaning of Cartesian thought to a parochial scientific-empiricist doctrine that forces artificial limitations on the full variety of forms Descartes had in mind when he went into a trance-like state on the Danube in 1619. I want to be clear that the main motivation for me writing this section of my study is to present as cogently as possible the argument that in my corresponding practical work I am thinking about the forms that have been expelled from participation within what Descartes would have defined as reason and what we would now call analyticity. I define ‘mystical form,’ the subject of this study as exactly the varieties and species of form that have been denied the proper respect of careful evaluation and study afforded to an increasingly narrow set of forms considered as being fit for analysis. Mystical forms are those, to use the improper translation of ‘difficulty’ in Descartes, that promote and inspire ‘doubt’ rather than ‘thought’ beginning with those immediately eliminated from Descartes’s project by his contemporary Mersenne⁴⁹ and continued ever since. With this in mind it is instructive to re-examine one of the earliest efforts to systemize Descartes’s thought.

Is there a relationship between mystical form and doubt?

⁴⁸ I refer to the stark contrast between a recent translation of Descartes’s *Meditations* by Desmond Clarke (Penguin Classics 1998), which uses “difficulty” and that –by the same publisher in the same series – of F.E. Sutcliffe (Penguin Classics 1968), which uses “doubt.”

⁴⁹ Marin Mersenne (1588 – 1648) was a French polymath and priest and a friend of Descartes instrumental in defending and promoting Cartesian philosophy. According to Yates, “Through his massive attack on the whole Renaissance tradition, Mersenne cleared the way for the rise of Cartesian philosophy” (1972: 111). However difficult, and under the fear of witchcraft caused by the Thirty Years War, Mersenne diligently and at great personal risk disentangled Cartesian thought from the Hermetic tradition, including the influences of Magia and Cabala on Rosicrucian thought and corresponding influences on Descartes, who was accused of being a Rosicrucian during the Rosicrucian Scare in France of 1623 (See Yates 1972: Chapter VIII). Of Mersenne’s personality, Yates writes that he was “a gentle and lovable character” who’s extreme negative reaction to the Rosicrucian scare (he believed them to be evil bogeymen) was “influenced by fear” (1972: 112). No doubt in extricating Descartes from being associated with Rosicrucianism, Mersenne would have been forced to strictly limit the implications and underlying motivations of Cartesian thought to defend it from destruction by the forces of a Counter-Reformation in full, violent swing at the time.

Spinoza writes in 1660, in his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, that,

In short, whatever other reason for doubting be devised, there could be adduced none of such a kind as not at the same time to make him most certain of his existence. Indeed, the more reasons are adduced for doubting, the more arguments are simultaneously adduced to convince him of his own existence. So, in whatever direction he turns to doubt, he is nevertheless compelled to utter these words: “I doubt, I think, therefore I am” (Spinoza. 1998: 9).

It becomes clear through Spinoza’s finely ground lens that the central dictum of Cartesian thought is not one arrived at victoriously, but rather through defeat, exasperation and exhaustion to the point of expiration. Not only is the dictum of ‘I think, therefore I am’ a statement that positions thought – as a matter of desperation – at the apex of a propositional hierarchy where existence is consequent of thought (and therefore what is analytically definable), but in Descartes according to Spinoza, *the very necessity of thought itself is contingent upon doubt in absolute extremis*. This is to say that ‘I am’ not because I think. Rather more bleakly, ‘I am’ because I am plunged into infinite, immediate doubt, and it is only *because* I doubt that I am forced to think, and *only therefore* do I exist. Existence according to Descartes is consequent not of thought in and of itself, but thought inspired by imagination and doubt. We exist *first* as a consequence of being plunged into immediate, infinite doubt. Our ability to analyse or employ reason to prove our existence *follows from* our being plunged into doubt. This is why Rakgoathe’s work is so vitally important, and why the theoretical and art historical interpretation his work should be a matter of urgency: because he has left us with a lifetime’s supply of images of that inspire doubt at the level of form. In Rakgoathe’s mystical modality, mystical forms evoke the ambivalence, confusion and misapprehension that plunges us into doubt. To see these forms only as pertinent to the nether-space that Rakgoathe inhabited throughout his life is to limit their importance: these are forms that inform the very thought by which we affirm our existence. Rakgoathe’s compositions do not merely present us with idiosyncratic dreamscapes or apocryphal mystical landscapes. If we follow his mysticism –the dialectic contained in his compositions combined with his African

Genesis and Rosicrucian mystical roots – Rakgoathe’s images are filled with a species of form that depict a relationship between thinking, imagination, existence and perception. It is an intimate relationship that dances between what we can and cannot perceive, what exists and does not, what is known and unknown. With Rakgoathe, we dance across the very limits of reason and perception, plunging now into doubt, now into the imperceptible. Twirling away in confusion, we return to the world with misapprehension and ambivalence, remembering and revering our love of the unknown – a love that is at the core of everything we know and think and are able to perceive.

Conclusion to Chapter 3

I substantiated the broader interpretation of Rakgoathe’s work – that it is also about epistemology – through a thorough discussion of Rosicrucianism from a historical perspective, highlighting how themes within Rosicrucian doctrine correspond to themes that are common in Rakgoathe’s work. While they may inspire doubt, ambivalence and confusion, I argued that the imaginative and evocative force of these forms lie within the variety of forms originally included in Cartesian thought. I highlighted the importance of ‘doubt’ to ‘thought’ and ‘existence’ in Descartes and linked that importance to mystical form. In doing so, I affirm my own secular understanding and employment of mystical form, in which the dualism of ‘reason’ and ‘mysticism’ is undone.

CHAPTER 4:

MYSTICAL FORM AND RETHINKING ARTISTIC PRACTICE TODAY

Introduction

In my catalogue of 2014 for *Topoi, Tropi, Apotropos*, referring to my research into Rakgoathe's Rosicrucian mysticism, I wrote that, "I was struck by this historical link between the Hermetic tradition and contemporary mathematics" (Van Schalkwyk 2014: 12). Looking back now, this is an extremely broad statement. Nonetheless, at the time, I was trying to find a way to incorporate what I had found in Rakgoathe within my practice. In the drawings for that exhibition, I attempted to find my own kind of mystical modality. Following these I made my *Futility of Action* series, which I discussed in the introduction to this thesis. While working towards a new exhibition for GALLERY AOP, it became clear that the gallery would close its doors. This was an event that would plunge me into doubt, leading to the mess in my kitchen that has become the origin point of this study. Before that happened, I made one drawing that I consider as pertinent to my investigation of mystical form: with *Bourrée*, (Fig 43) I found an axiomatic procedure by which I could draw by dancing to a specific rhythm, in this case that of the baroque bourrée rhythm. I had begun to imagine an exhibition wherein I'd draw a number of rhythms by dancing. It was not to be (yet). When the GALLERY AOP closed, my work was interrupted, an event that set me on a sojourn that has led to the redefinition of my practice. In the following chapter, I discuss this redefinition beginning with my understanding of perception and mutability in Descartes. I then discuss current thinking about the relationship of artistic practice to nature, specifically that of the Italian-American writer, art historian and curator Carolyn Christov Bakargiev (b 1957).⁵⁰ The central concern in this chapter is **how I am approaching mystical form in my practical work for this study.**

⁵⁰ Christov-Bakargiev is "director of both Castello di Rivoli and Fondazione Francesco Federico Cerruti and she is the Edith Kreeger Wolf Distinguished Visiting Professor at Northwestern University. She was the Artistic Director of dOCUMENTA (13) which opened in Kassel on June 9, 2012. Previously, she was interim director of Castello di



Fig 43. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Bourrée*, 2015. Graphite on paper on board. 2000 x 1300mm.

Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Turin (2009), and chief curator of the same museum from 2002 to 2008. In October 2012 ArtReview magazine named her number one in their annual Power 100 list of the most influential figures in contemporary art” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carolyn_Christov-Bakargiev).

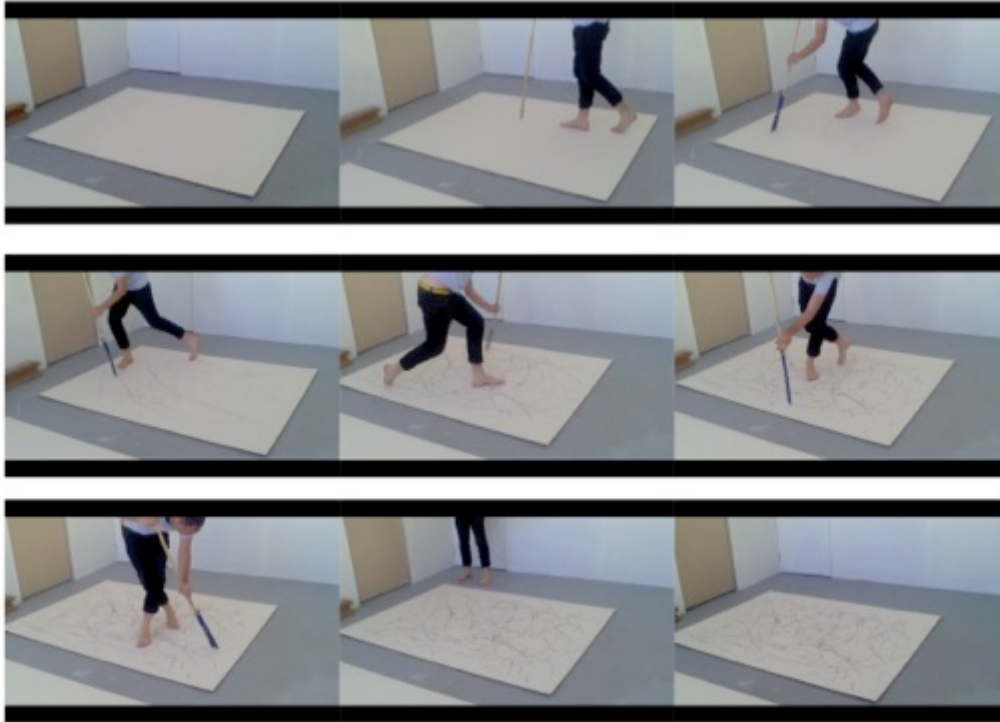


Fig 44. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Bourrée*, 2015. Video stills showing making of the drawing as a dance.



Fig 45. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Monument for Things that Disappear*, 2016. Painted bronze. ed. 5+1AP, 70mm d x 25mm h. This is the first sculpture I made. It is a personal response to the closing of GALLERY AOP and the first work I made after the gallery closed. It was first exhibited at Commune1 gallery as part of the *New Monuments* exhibition.



Fig 46. Jacob van Schalkwyk with Sinazo Chiya, *Liftup*, 2016. Site-specific intervention.

For *Open Dialogue Box*, a site specific temporary gallery on Buitenkant street in Cape Town, I chose to lift the shipping container serving as the gallery space up for two hours as a temporary sculptural intervention. I wanted to make something ‘big’ but fleeting to follow my ‘small’ but permanent bronze roll of tape. I stood underneath the suspended container with a projector showing CCTV footage of me painting in my studio. I invited the viewer to join me underneath the container to see the footage and stand together.

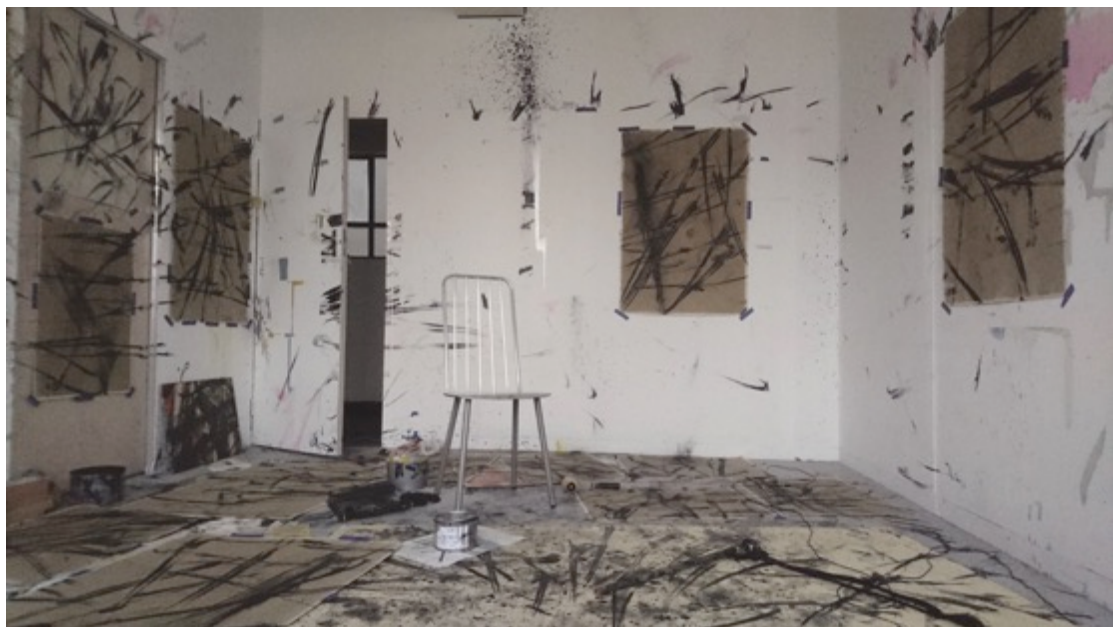


Fig 47. Following *Liftup*, I returned to the studio to make a new series of drawings called *Klaar Gepraat (Done talking)* using lengths of cloth tied to broomsticks. This is a shot of my studio at the time.



Fig 48. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Klaar Gepraat*, 2017. Lithographic ink and graphite on paper. 1120 x 760 mm.

Perception in Descartes and the role of the artist today

I'm not so well versed in philosophy that I can write about perception in Cartesian philosophy with authority. What interests me in terms of my work for this study is an analogy Descartes uses about mutability. In a response to Henry More on 5 February 1649, Descartes mentions his “analogy of the wax” when he addresses More as follows:

I do not see why you say that it is absolutely necessary for all matter to be perceptible. On the contrary, there is no matter that would not be obviously imperceptible if it were divided into parts that are much smaller than the particles of our nerves and if the individual parts were moved quickly enough (Descartes. 1998: 167).

At issue is “why, in defining body, [Descartes] said that it is an extended substance rather than a substance that is perceptible, tangible or impenetrable” (Descartes. 1998: 167). Why this is important to me is that Descartes then draws a clear distinction

between the nature of substances and our ability to perceive them using sense perception:

It is clear that, if it is called a perceptible substance, it is defined by its relation to our senses; in that way only one of its properties is explained rather than its full nature, which certainly does not depend on our senses, since it could exist even if there were no human beings (ibid).

Descartes does not consider sense perception as adequate to explain the “full nature” of a substance.⁵¹ Nor does he consider the full nature of bodies or substances as dependent on the presence of human beings. However which way this debate between More and Descartes has manifested and repeated itself throughout philosophy since – and again, I am not in a position to comment with authority – Descartes’s argument is reminiscent of issues that are being raised in contemporary definitions of artistic practice where the role of artists as “interested in dealing with the world at large through their embodied ‘amatorial’⁵² artistic, social and discursive practices, even in their most inward-looking or most exquisitely crafted artworks and projects” is being called into question (Christov-Bakargiev. 2014: 4). In her article *Worldly Worlding: The Imaginal Fields of Science/Art and Making Patterns Together*, published in *Mousse Magazine* of April/May 2014, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev questions “how we can (not) define artistic practice and research” and suggests “how exhibits based on the accepted separation of fields of enquiry—between the various physical and social sciences and art—could be re-imagined for the purpose of a more worldly ecology, co-evolution and flourishing of all forms of life on the planet” (2014: 4). She identifies contemporary art as emerging from the “European notion of the autonomy of the modern work of ‘high’ art, which began to develop in the eighteenth century” inasmuch as much contemporary art still constitutes “a purposeless yet intentional imitation of the beauty of ‘nature’ by the ‘creative genius’; while ‘natural beauty’ is made by ‘nature’ without awareness nor aesthetic intention, and often for a purpose.”

⁵¹ Incidentally, in his introduction to *The Interaction of Colour*, Joseph Albers echoes Descartes’s mistrust of sense perception to explain the ‘full nature’ of things when he writes that, “In visual perception a colour is almost never seen as it really is –as it physically is. This fact makes colour the most relative medium in art” (Albers. 2013: 1). On the role of the Soul in artistic perception, see my discussion of Constable in Chapter 5.

⁵² ‘amatorial’ is a synonym of ‘amorous,’ i.e. expressive of love

(2014: 5) It is this (eighteenth century) distinction between art as purposeless imitation of the beauty of nature and nature as being resultant of purpose that, according to Christov-Bakargiev, generated “the idea of the autonomy of art.” She identifies this idea of the autonomy of art “that actually does serve an important purpose—to mark and embody our time of leisure and contemplation—[as] generally still accepted today, especially among collectors, and at the origin of some current working definitions of artistic practice” (Christov-Bakargiev. 2014: 6). However – and this is where Descartes’s definition of bodies and essences not being contingent on sense perception or the presence of human beings seems pertinent to Christov-Bakargiev’s proposed re-imagination of artistic practice today – current scientific research is making it clear that the eighteenth-century definition of nature that contemporary art evolved from is not apposite. According to Christov-Bakargiev,

As more and more biological research is done on a molecular and sub-molecular level, and even sub-atomic level, we see how all materials and sentient beings intra-act; they touch each other as they touch themselves, and come into the world through this touching, rather than previous to it (Karen M. Barad). Indeed, the broad division and classification of species and sub-species seem less fruitful, less topical and less useful than studying endosymbiotic evolutionary processes across species, across the mind/body, nature/culture and even plant/animal divide (2014: 7).

As scientific research makes perceptible (brings within analysis, explicates and proves by peer review) what remained imperceptible in the time of Descartes, we are becoming more and more aware of the intra-action of materials and sentient beings and that the broad division of species even in terms of the plant/animal divide seems less fruitful. It is exactly the mutability of forms, and in terms of the focus of this thesis, forms that inspire doubt like the mystical forms in Rakgoathe, that are at the core of what is pertinent in artistic practice today –at least as re-defined by Christov-Bakargiev. Seen in this light, forms such as mystical form, that assist in the understanding of the unknown are at the vanguard of what is demanded of artistic practice today: to call into doubt the dichotomies and divides that are hangovers from an era of thinking that is no longer apposite. With this in mind, I’d like to return to

Descartes and his “analogy of the wax” from his Second Meditation on First Philosophy:

Consider those things that are commonly thought to be understood most distinctly, namely bodies which we can touch and see... For example, let us take this wax. It has just been extracted from the honeycomb. It has not yet completely lost the taste of honey and it still retains some of the scent of the flowers from which it was collected. Its colour, shape and size are obvious. It is hard, cold, easy to touch and, if tapped with a finger, it emits a sound. Thus it has everything that seems to be required for a body to be known as distinctly as possible. But notice that, as I speak, it is moved close to the fire. It loses what remains of its taste, its smell is lost, the colour changes, it loses its shape, increases in size, becomes a liquid, becomes hot and can barely be touched. Nor does it still emit a sound if tapped. But does the same wax not remain? (Descartes. 1998: 27).

I have this analogy in mind when I work with the wood I am using for my practical work. When I burn the wood, where does it go? Does the wood remain somehow? Is the trickle of smoke it causes, or the memory I have of its smell still form? Is that mystical form? In my *Preparation Piece*, what are the potential forms I can generate if I plant the brown linseeds I sprinkle over my breakfast? As I watch my seeds grow in my garden, and I run my hands through the flax plants –which are frail and cool to the touch, yet demand that I marvel at their resilience compared to everything else I’ve planted in my garden – as I watch them change every day, what fleetingly delicate variety of form is that realisation? These plants have made me doubt whether or not I am the same person everyday, they remind me that I too am changing every day. They inspire a different kind of doubt than what is evoked when I approach my *Monument for Things that Disappear* (Fig 45): on a material level, there is doubt as to whether or not my monument is an actual roll of tape. It could easily be mistaken or *misapprehended* as a functional item rather than a monument or memento fabricated out of bronze. Similarly, with *Liftup* (Fig 46), by inviting the viewer to join me under a 2.4t shipping container suspended from the ground, moaning and oscillating in

40km/hour gusts of wind in Cape Town, I wasn't simply making a statement about turning the gallery space on its head. I tried to inspire doubt in the viewer on a participatory level.



Fig 47. William Kentridge *Set of 5 Polychrome Heads*, 2014 Oil paint on bronze, on wood and steel trestle, 31 x 165 x 30 cm.
Goodman Gallery.

This is an example of Kentridge using a similar technique to my *Monument*, pictured above, to play with doubt in the mind of the viewer on the material level. While it looks like a sculpture made with paper, it is in fact fabricated in painted bronze. In his recent work, pictured below, Wim Botha has followed a similar approach.



Fig 48. Wim Botha, *Prism 27 (Ecstatic)*, 2016. Bronze, 56 x 33 x 27cm. Stevenson Gallery.

In this work, Botha presents what looks like a polystyrene foam construction but is in fact a bronze sculpture



Fig 49. Michael Macgarry, *Mercantile Capitalism*, 2010. Bronze, prosthetic eyes. 200 x 260 x 330mm.



Fig 50. Vito Acconci, *VD Lives/TV must die*, 1978. Rubber, cable, bowling balls, video with sound. Approx. 305 x 916 x 2135cm. Installation, The Kitchen New York.

It is Acconci's own critical comments around this work that convinced me to be present under my suspended container so as to join the viewer in danger, rather than force them into a situation of danger alone. In an interview with Mark C. Taylor, Acconci says, 'danger to the viewer is unfair; it takes advantage of somebody who's already down' (Bloomer, Taylor, Ward. 2002: 11-12).



Fig 51. Pierre Huyghe, *After ALife Ahead*, 2017. Installation for Skulptur Projekte Münster, Germany. Concrete floor of ice rink, logic game, ammoniac, sand, clay, phreatic water, bacteria, algae, bees, aquarium, black switchable glass, Conus textile, GloFish,

incubator, human cancer cells, genetic algorithm, augmented reality, automated ceiling structure, rain. Location: Former ice rink, Steinfurterstraße 113 – 115. Temporary installation for the duration of the exhibition.

Getting to the core of what Christov-Bargakiev means when she calls on artistic practice today to call into question, for example, the plant/animal divide, is another approach to inspiring doubt altogether. An example of an artist doubting the veracity of these divides today is the French artist Pierre Huyghe (b1962), whose spectacular large-scale installations like *After Alife Ahead*⁵³ employ nature itself as material. At an abandoned ice rink in Munster, Germany, according to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in ARTFORUM, September 2017, Huyghe cut through the concrete floor to reveal “layers of groundwater, sand, and clay, some of them even traceable to the geologic deposits of the last prehistoric movements of glaciers in this Westphalian region” (2017: 14). Simply describing the installation takes up several paragraphs. I’ll let Buchloh do the heavy lifting while I italicise to emphasise how Huyghe incorporates nature within his work:

Several mounds of earth and clay were subsequently formed into towerlike structures to house *two populations of bees*, which also contain sensors *recording the movements and activities of the bee population itself*. As in a common surveillance system, information is collected about the biosphere’s interlocking living and material elements; the sensors are connected by buried cables to a *cancer-cell incubator*, an obdurate form that appeared like an uncanny refrigeration unit resting on the banks of the massive pit. The data is processed using *a set of algorithms that can accelerate or slow the multiplication of the cancer cells*. These, in turn, trigger an app that spectators can download, displaying on one’s phone screen mysterious geometric forms that move in response to the activity of the cancer cells. Another natural pattern likewise determines the opening of massive apertures in the roof, mechanized geometric panels that automatically open and close without any apparent logic. In this way, an entire universe of the microscopic and macroscopic, mechanical and organic, real and virtual, shifts according to the

⁵³ *After Alife Ahead* cost about \$783,000 according to ARTNEWS. (Russeth, 2017)

frequencies of bodily movements and vital signs emerging from the setting at large, as if to compel spectators' insight into *the utter interdependence and continuous exchange between the normal and the pathological forms of contemporary everyday life* (Buchloh. 2017: 14. Italics mine).

While I cannot imagine what impact *After Alife Ahead* had on its viewers or, perhaps more aptly put, its spectators, I can imagine that entering an ecosystem where human cancer cells were active must have had quite an impact. Indeed, *After Alife Ahead* may indeed offer a view of “contemporary everyday life” (Buchloh. 2017: 14). wherein nature is in the midst of catastrophic special decline. As Buchloh rightly states, Huyghe’s incorporation of fauna and flora in his work “opens onto a veritable semiology of forms, organisms, and structures that confront this history of nature, systems, and biopower” (2017: 16). At the heart of the incentive to do so, according to Buchloh, is the ability of “Huyghe’s dystopian displays of interconnected social, biological, and physical systems” to appear as the “technologically mediated stages on which the imminent relapse of enlightenment into myth and ecological catastrophe can be most dramatically performed” (2017: 13). What Huyghe is in the process of doing then, is to destroy Enlightenment-era thinking about nature. He is doing exactly what Christov-Bakargiev demands of artistic practice today. Huyghe’s is an artistic practice deeply concerned with nature, one that questions the plant/animal divide but also the human/nature divide directly. In the following chapter, I discuss my own relationship to nature and how it informs my understanding of seeing, specifically with mystical form in mind.

Conclusion to Chapter 4

I have shown how Descartes’s thinking about perception and the mutability of substances is pertinent to current thinking about the role of artistic practice today as outlined by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. I argued for the importance of mystical form to explicate the unknown and challenge dichotomies and divides that are no longer apposite. I have cited examples of my own work and that of artists working today as being preoccupied with doubt on the material and participatory level, and in the case of Pierre Huyghe, the way in which we view, incorporate and understand nature

today. Specifically, I showed how current thinking about nature in Huyghe's work differs from an Enlightenment-era approach to nature such that accepted divides like the animal/plant divide, or the human/nature divide are being called into question.

CHAPTER 5: THE SOUL IN PERCEPTION: ON SEEING IN JOHN CONSTABLE



Fig 52. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Swerve*, 2013. Lithographic ink on aluminium in kiaat frame. 1250 x 1250mm

Introduction

In 2014 GALLERY AOP sold my painting *Swerve* (Fig 52) to the Nando's collection. Friends from Pretoria had moved into a National Trust property in Polesden Lacey, outside of Dorking in England. With the money from the sale, I could afford to go and see my friends and, at the same time, buy some of my preferred paper from St. Cuthbert's Mill, which is in Wells, England. I had never been to the English countryside. When I arrived at London City Airport on the 27th of July, it was summertime in England. Soon I found myself meandering through the grounds of

Polesden Lacey picking wild raspberries and watching sheep think nothing at all. I followed ancient Roman paths through pollarded trees. At the end of the day, I felt the late-afternoon sunlight stretch against the Surrey dusk for two extra, glowing hours before it exited abruptly into night. It was a magical summer.

On the day of my arrival in this quietly sentimental landscape, from which all things predatory, poisonous and mildly offensive have been removed – I knew that as a teenager studying art history, I had been wrong about John Constable. I spent the rest of my six weeks in England reading extracts of his letters, visiting museums specifically to see his paintings, and acquiring facsimiles of two of his sketchbooks to study from his hand. Page after page confirmed that Constable wasn't sentimental, he was simply accurate in his observations of an obscenely pleasant, adrenaline-void landscape. He had spent his life copying from nature as it was presented to him. My re-thinking of Constable lead me to an understanding of nature that has informed my approach to mystical form. My main concern in this chapter is **how mystical form can be approached through artistic perception or 'seeing.'** I begin by discussing Constable's approach to nature and seeing. Thereafter, I discuss how that approach has informed my understanding of the ontology of Alain Badiou, specifically with regards to *becoming* and *appearance*. Throughout I reference my own work and how my thinking around mystical form is related to the discussion.

Constable and nature

Observe that thy best director, the perfect guide is Nature. Copy from her. – In her paths is thy triumphal arch. She is above all other teachers; and ever confide in her with a bold heart; – especially when thou beginnest to feel that there is a sentiment in drawing.

This quote was found amongst Constable's papers after his death. It is from Cennino Cennini's *Craftsman's Handbook* of the fifteenth century (Leslie. 1951: 275).

Exactly how accurate Constable became in his observations is clear when paging through his sketchbooks, of which Constable left us “not more than forty or fifty”

(Leslie. 1951: 12). Humbly bound, Constable's sketchbooks are all "centered upon places with which he became deeply familiar" (Leslie. 1951: 12). Measuring smaller than the size of a postcard each, Constable made his sketchbooks pocket-sized: "It was a novelty for him to carry a small sketch-book which he could slip into his pocket during his walks in the fields, and to use it for a number of miniature sketches, fully realised in detail but often occurring two or three on a page" (Leslie. 1951: 9). In these pocket sketchbooks, nothing has been completed in a hurry (Fig 53). The same subjects are drawn repeatedly, but at varying dates and times of the day. What interested Constable was not just accurate observation of specific objects, but how varying effects of light and shadow are perceptible through steady observation of these objects over time: Specifically in his sketchbook from 1814, Constable "concentrates upon broad effects of light and shade and places a particular emphasis upon the contrasting shadows of the cloudy skies" (Leslie. 1951: 10-11).

In studying his sketchbooks it becomes clear that Constable really was an artist whose ambition was "not to paint many things imperfectly, but to paint a few things well" (Leslie. 1951: 286). Compared to his contemporary Turner, Constable is seen to have had an extremely parochial view of the world. Yet, even the briefest glance at his sketchbooks makes it clear that his are not the drawings of an isolated mind. The sensitivity of his line betrays huge intelligence, experience and faculty. His approach to his subject matter is methodical – Constable's sketchbooks, filled not only with drawings but with notes on times and dates accompanying the drawings, are the field recordings of a mind enquiring repeatedly within a controlled, limited environment as to the underlying nature of a specific set of things. Leslie⁵⁴ confirms this when he writes that "to Constable's art there can be little doubt that the confinement of his studies within the narrowest bounds in which, perhaps, the studies of an artist ever were confined, was in the highest degree favourable; for a knowledge of atmospheric effects will be best attained by a constant study of the same objects under every change of the seasons, and of the times of the day" (1951: 286).

Anatomy: the underlying mechanics of form

⁵⁴ Charles Robert Leslie, (1794 – 1859) was an English genre painter and friend of Constable.

Constable's love of nature begins at an early age. In 1802, when he was 25 years old, he wrote home to his friend John Dunthorne about a series of anatomical lectures⁵⁵ he had been attending in London: "I am so much more interested in the study than I expected, and feel my mind so generally enlarged by it... Indeed the whole machine which it has pleased God to form for the accommodation of the real man, the mind, during its probation in this vale of tears, is as wonderful as the contemplation of it is affecting" (Leslie. 1951: 12).

Six years Constable's senior, John Dunthorne (1770 – 1844) was "a plumber and a glazier who lived in a little cottage close to the gate" of Constable's father's house. Dunthorne "devoted all the leisure his business allowed him, to painting landscapes from nature, and Constable became the constant companion of his studies." Leslie writes that Dunthorne "possessed more intelligence than is often found in the class of life to which he belonged⁵⁶" and was "the only person in the village who had any love for art, or any pretensions to the character of an artist." Having formed a "close alliance" with Dunthorne in boyhood, by the time he was sixteen or seventeen, Constable "had become devotedly fond of painting" (1951: 3).

If Constable enjoyed witnessing anatomical dissection in 1802, I suspect he felt less inclined to study anatomy from books in 1797, aged 21, when he writes to the then well-known draughtsman and engraver John Thomas Smith, "I devote all my evenings to the study of anatomy." That he was in 1802 so much more interested than expected in attending the lectures of Mr. Brookes, suggests that his previous exposure to the study of anatomy had been dull. Perhaps in writing to Smith, who had taken the role of Constable's mentor, the young Constable wanted to impress his attempted diligence rather than his actual enjoyment of a subject that does not maintain its wonder in books (Leslie. 1951: 7).

⁵⁵ Leslie identifies these lectures as being by a Mr. Brookes at his Anatomical Theater, to which students at the Royal Academy had free admission (1951: 12).

⁵⁶ I include Leslie's remark on Dunthorne to make the point that the wellspring of Constable's love of landscape painting is rooted in intimate contact with someone considered lower-class, rather than the elite, who viewed painting from an entirely different perspective.

To return briefly to the origins of my own work, I was lucky enough at Pratt to blunder my way into what had been called a “second renaissance of sorts” (Johnson, 1990), where human dissection was being practiced again in anatomical drawing classes. For a year and a half, I took the A train from Brooklyn to the Bronx every second Saturday to attend Dr. Salvatore “Sal” Montano’s artistic anatomy dissection classes at Columbia University Medical School. Like Constable, I too fell for the structural complexity of the human body. Sal would guide us through the mechanical workings of the body with the cadaver present, alongside a nude model and the skeleton. In this way, we could see how what happened subcutaneously – what Leslie calls “mechanical” in Constable’s work – influenced what was visible on the surface. I learnt in those classes the importance of drawing from the inside out. I learnt that to understand the surface of form you had to know its inner workings. I learnt that to draw visible form well – the surface – I needed to know what was invisible about it.

What anatomical dissection allows the mind to witness is the wonder of specificity of form, of which the human body is encyclopedic as proof. The wonder of specificity extends from the anatomical theater outward to encompass one’s entire understanding of the world. Once the mind has been awoken to the possibility that every instance of form, at every moment, with every observable event *could be* the result of a related underlying logic or *mechanism*, observation becomes open to experimentation, with the revelation of the underlying logic of form in mind. With this awareness, drawings are no longer simply musings. They can be inquiries into the nature of things or ideas.



Fig 53. John Constable's sketchbooks of 1814 and 1814 showing cows and mills. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

It has been said of Constable that when you look at his painted mills, you feel that they “will go round” (Leslie. 1951: 4). They feel that way because of the specificity of Constable’s knowledge about both the visible surface (the play of light) and the subcutaneous, invisible mechanics of the exact mill he is painting.⁵⁷ When painting cows in *Cathedral from the Bishop’s Grounds*, he is aware according to Leslie of “a circumstance familiar to all those who are in the habit of noticing cattle,” that there is generally one cow in a herd that is “*the master cow*,” leading the herd. The herd will do nothing until the master cow has taken the lead. When Constable paints cows, he is aware of their *behavioral mechanics* in addition to their appearance. His cows are painted with such specificity that Leslie can identify them as being of the Suffolk breed, “without horns; and it is a curious mark of Constable’s fondness for everything connected with his native county, that scarcely an instance can be found of a cow in any of his pictures, be the scene where it may, with horns” (1951: 96).

⁵⁷ In anatomical drawing, I was taught to draw what I saw but always to use my imagination to draw what was invisible to me, the subcutaneous form that I knew through study to be underneath what was visible. Artistic perception is therefore not merely a matter of seeing what is visible, but a combination of seeing, imagination and knowledge of what is not visible.

Painting as natural philosophy

By the end of his life, Constable had come to regard painting as a science. He delivered four seminal lectures at the Royal Institute, concluding his fourth and final lecture as follows:

Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature.

Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but experiments?

(Leslie. 1951: 323).

It is easy to dismiss this statement as a relic of a particular point in Western art history, where the likelihood of painting taking a seat next to natural philosophy seemed somehow plausible. But to do so would miss the impact of Constable's work not on the history of painting, but the implications his work *should have had* on what he called "natural philosophy," what we would now call natural science.⁵⁸ A hundred years before the dawn of phenomenology, here was someone – a painter – concerned with an accurate and exact description of natural phenomena at a level of great specificity. What Leslie refers to, rather drily, as "atmospheric effects" takes flight in Constable's writing: In his third lecture at the Royal Institute, Constable says of chiaroscuro that "we find it everywhere, and at all times in nature; opposition, union, light, shade, reflection, and refraction, all contribute to it" (1951: 316).

More specifically, he continues:

⁵⁸ It is here that I disagree with Christov-Bakargiev on Enlightenment-era artistic practice. While I agree that the Enlightenment-era "notion of the autonomy of art that actually does serve an important purpose—to mark and embody our time of leisure and contemplation—is generally still accepted today, especially among collectors, and is at the origin of some current working definitions of artistic practice," I do not agree that Constable's artistic practice fell prey to the "tautological notion" whereby "an artist examines how perception is transformed into knowledge by using the subject matter itself as the means of investigation (exploring color through color, representation through representation, gesture through gesture, sociality through social activities and so on)." At a time when neither science nor mathematics had yet discovered the tools to measure or account for organic forms with exactitude, the specificity and exactitude of Constable's artistic practice, unlike that of some painters today, did not serve simply to explore colour through colour. Constable approached painting as a science, with artistic seeing – a combination of perception, imagination and scientific knowledge that, according to Constable, involves the soul – as method of gaining new knowledge.

All effects of light and dark are but modifications of reflection and refraction, with the exception of things self-luminous, as fire, the sun etc., which occasion what we call lights on other objects by being reflected from or refracted through their surfaces; leaving, where such reflections or refractions are interrupted by intervening bodies, the reflections of inferior lights from other objects, which being less powerful appear as shadows. (Leslie. 1951: 316).

We should understand here that Constable, with some brilliance, refutes entire schools of thought about painting still prevalent in England at the time, mainly those reliant upon an oversimplified understanding of light and dark. In Constable's observation of the natural world, *there is no shadow*, merely "reflections of inferior lights from other objects, which being less powerful appear as shadows." Chiaroscuro in Constable is a matter of *relation*. Every effect of light and shadow is the result of "modifications of reflection and refraction" that can be observed, understood by *relation*, and painted.

Constable's is an immensely complicated way of seeing. It is one that views every observable instance of light and shadow in terms of cause and effect, to be understood by *relation*. If we add to this an awareness that the effects of light are constantly changing, he presents us with a way of seeing that is infinitely complex. It has become a cliché to quote the adage about Constable that 'no leaf is the same.' We do so almost dismissively. What Constable understands is that the observable world and its subcutaneous *mechanics* – its ontology – is the result of a process of infinitely complex appearance and disappearance of form in infinite variation, where no single form is *ever* exactly equal to another. Therefore, according to Constable, every relation, every observation, and by extension every drawing or every painting that reflects this state of affairs, is unique:

The world is wide; no two days are alike, nor even two hours; neither were there ever two leaves of a tree alike since the creation of the world; and the genuine productions of art, like those of nature, are all distinct from each other (Leslie. 1951: 273).

What Constable does here is absolutely wonderful. He connects – with light – freedom of expression to the nature of being and the ordinance of time. It is exactly because things are constantly changing over time that we are able to make work of infinite variation. In Constable there is a direct correlation between the expression and seeing of nature:

No doubt the greatest masters considered their best efforts but as experiments, and perhaps as experiments that had failed when compared to their hopes, their wishes, and what they saw in nature (Leslie. 1951: 307).

The correlation is one of *understanding*.

“We see nothing truly till we understand it” (Leslie. 1951: 318).

How does Constable define how we understand? How is it, according to Constable that we come to knowledge?

“It is the Soul that sees, the outward eyes
Present the object, but the Mind descries”
(Leslie. 1951: 318).

Feeling first, observation second, mind as searching for relations based on knowledge last. This is the artistic approach to epistemology, where everything remains an experiment. To be clear, Constable places the Soul at the level of primary importance. Artistic seeing is not a matter of sense-perception alone, nor is it the perception of the mind in accordance with Descartes. Constable defines seeing as being the function of the Soul, which is the domain of mystical insight into forms that are unknown, undefinable and otherwise imperceptible. *Seeing*, in the artistic tradition of Constable, is sensitive to the observation of mystical form. It is a mode of ‘perception’ that is outside of what is understood as perception in a purely analytic sense. It is a mode of perception wherein not *informing* the subject but *allowing* it to inform one’s

understanding is of paramount importance. It is not an identity-based inquiry into form but a relational study in the *quality of being* of form. This is the method of Giotto according to Cennini, of Michelangelo, Of Titian, Claude Lorraine and Constable. It is also the method I was instructed in and why I am making the argument for mystical form in this thesis. It is through his sensitivity, one which allows a mystical understanding of form, to what Leslie calls ‘atmospheric effects’ that Constable is able to come to an exact understanding of the quality of being in nature. I think this is what he means when he makes the case for painting as being both ‘scientific’ and ‘poetic:’

I am here on behalf of my own profession... I am anxious that the world should be inclined to look to painters for information on painting. I hope to show that ours is a regularly taught profession; that it is scientific as well as poetic; that imagination alone never did, and never can, produce works that are to stand by comparison with realities...” (Leslie. 1951: 303).

In my exhibition statement for *Topoi, Tropi, Aotropos* in 2014, I wrote that “the same rigour Constable applied to the art of painting nature... could be applied to abstraction.” Specifically, I wrote that the rigour Constable applied to painting, “a ‘long and patient study’ of not only the *appearance* of a landscape (through careful and specific chiaroscuro) but also of the *underlying onto-logical principles* inherent in landscape (eg. understanding the science behind cloud formation) - could be applied to abstraction.”⁵⁹ In comparing Constable’s approach to painting based on an understanding of nature with that of my own, I was influenced by how much his scientific and poetic approach to the effects of light had in common with what I knew about the ontology of Alain Badiou.

Badiou’s ontology

The clearest summary I’ve found on the ontology of Badiou – the understanding of which I’ll admit is a daunting task– is that Badiou sees ontology as thought that is axiomatic rather than participatory in *being* itself. I have throughout this thesis stated

⁵⁹ Addendum, *Topoi*, p3

that I cannot speak with authority about philosophy and when it comes to Badiou, I have to reiterate this statement twice over: I am an artist, not a philosopher or mathematician. What follows is my best effort to discuss an understanding of Badiou that has developed alongside and through my practice such that it has become important to how it is that I approach form.⁶⁰ The key to Badiou's ontology is how he defines being:

Let us propose, in the style of the ancient Atomists, that being is pure multiplicity, without ground or meaning. Taking this loss of the One to its ultimate consequence: experience is not constitutive, there is no generic Life. There is only the flat surface of indifferent multiplicity (Badiou. 2014: 165).

Ontology or “what can be said of Being *qua* Being”⁶¹ (2006: 43) in Badiou consists of thoughts that are *rules that govern* the behaviour of forms that make up Being. Having defined Being as “pure multiplicity without ground or meaning,” ‘ontology’ in Badiou is by extension what can be said about multiples that are generated from pure multiplicity. In *The Question of Being Today*, Badiou lists “five conditions for any ontology of the multiple to be conceived in its defection from the One's power.” The first is that,

Ontology is the thought of the inconsistent manifold, that is, of what is reduced without an immanent unification to the sole predicate of its multiplicity (2006: 40).

This is a radical departure from definitions of ontology that rely on oneness, unity, certainty or strict equality. To base *ontology* on the “thought of the inconsistent

⁶⁰ In a sense, I have dug my own grave: in writing about mystical form. I knew I would have to speak about ontology and being at some stage. Unfortunately, it is a discussion I cannot sidestep any longer. I'm almost at the end of my thesis, so here goes nothing. Or here goes something from nothing? Everything from nothing? Everything from nothing to everything to nothing again?

⁶¹ Being *qua* Being (or Being *from* Being) differs from pure Being inasmuch as it concerns forms that are generated from or by Being.

manifold,” such that it cannot be reduced to anything but *that it is* and *that it remains* multiplicity is a radical assertion, but not without precedent.⁶²

Badiou’s remaining four conditions for any ontology of the multiple – the conditions that limit the multiple from the one, are as follows:

2. “The multiple itself... only consists of multiples.”
3. “The multiple can thus be considered infinite.”
4. “a multiple can be considered as *not* being a multiple of multiples” but instead, “a multiple of nothing” where ‘nothing’ is “endowed with a consistency principle.”
5. Badiou’s fifth condition states simply that “actual ontological presentation is necessarily axiomatic” (2006: 40).

These are the “conditions” I understand he refers to when he states the following about Being when continuing the *Introduction to Part Two. Being There:*

Mathematics of the Transcendental:

Under these conditions, to be is, for a multiple, to belong to another multiple whose being is already presupposed. We name ‘situation’ this referential multiple whose prodigality is such that it gives its bit of being to anything inscribed within it as an element. We will then say that to be is to belong to a situation... if ε is the multiple we are sure it is, and if S is the referential situation, the statement which assures the being of ε is written $\varepsilon \in S$ (Badiou. 2014: 165).

Badiou’s use of the word ‘situation’ is one that lends itself to infinite variability. By naming a ‘referential multiple’ as ‘the situation,’ infinite variation is gifted to the thing that is so prodigal, so sharing of itself that it “gives its bit of being to anything

⁶² In *The Nature of Things* (Lucretius. 2007) Lucretius presents the *clinamen*, the underlying, unquantifiable motion on which all quantifiable matter rests. *On Nature* is Lucretius’s attempt to convey to the Romans – in the only form they were amenable to, the epic poem – the pre-Socratic ideas of Epicurus, of whose philosophy mere fragments have survived. My exhibition *Constraints* was influenced heavily by Lucretius and Epicurus.

inscribed within it as an element.” This is a wonderful vision where the division between belonging and inclusion collapses at will when desired by the elements that make up any ontology based on the multiple.⁶³ There is nonetheless, a caveat:

However, this assertion of being does not tell us in what sense the element ϵ exists. If ‘to exist’ does not mean as ‘to be,’ then it is to the pure neutrality of multiple-being (which it obviously requires) that existence adds something. This addition cannot be ‘quantitative’ because the notion of quantity is entirely subsumed by the multiple composition of any singular being... existence is nothing if it is not a *quality* of being (Badiou. 2014: 165).

Badiou goes on to assert that, “quality implies variability and nuance.” He makes the wonderful point that “every quality is modal” and because multiple-being “ignores modality,” a multiple, insofar as it belongs to a situation, either “*is* (relative to that situation), or else it does not belong, and as such *is not*.” Thus “existence names exactly that which, ontologically, is not: a degree of being. Nor does this degree in any way affect the being of being. It is an index of *its appearance* (in the situation). This is why existence is always a matter of *more or less*... which amounts to saying that the multiple ϵ exists in S , ‘to a certain degree’... Being is essentially being-there (*Da-sein*)” (Badiou. 2014: 165-166).

I admit that Badiou’s distinction between the quantitative nature of being and the qualitative nature of being (being-there as an index of its appearance) is difficult to understand. As an artist, I can understand *being-there* in the same way I understand tonality. To further this understanding, I made a series of drawings wherein I had Badiou’s indexing of appearance in mind.

⁶³ Such freedom is mirrored in Constable where he writes that “every truly original picture is a separate study, and governed by laws of its own; so that what is right in one, would be often entirely wrong if transferred to another” (Leslie. 1951: 281).



Fig 54. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Degrees of Appearing*, B1, B2, T1 and T2, 2014. Lithographic ink on paper.
240 x 165mm and 180 x 135mm

Being-there and tonality

I understand Badiou's redefinition of being as *being-there* similarly to how I understand Constable's redefinition of shadows as being the results of inferior light sources: just as Constable's redefinition extends brightness into the tonality of shadows, Badiou extends the tonality of being into *being-there*. He is interpreting existence not in terms of whether something is or is not – much like a painter before Constable would look at chiaroscuro simply as being a variation of light and dark. No, he is defining existence in terms of *how much something is*. He opens up a way of describing existence that has a tonal range far greater than merely a affirmation or negation. With Badiou we are able to imagine the Real as constituted by an infinite amount of quantities that are existent *qualitatively*, on their way in and out of existence in various stages of intensity and formed-ness. I understand what Badiou calls *appearing* as the greatest tonal range of how much forms exist, rather than a

binary ontology, where things either are, or are not. Constable might have said of Badiou's ontology that it would invite us to examine Being itself in the most seductive way:

Tone, tone, is the most seductive and inviting quality a picture or print can possess; it is the first thing seen, and like a flower, invites us to our examination of the plant itself..." (Leslie. 1951: 261).

With tone in Constable in mind, Badiou's definition of appearing seems less daunting:

We will call *appearing* that which, of a being as such (a mathematical multiple), is seized in a situated relational network, such that we can say this being is more or less different from another multiple that belongs to the same situation... we will call logic the law of the network of relations that determines appearing in the situation of multiple-being. Every situation possesses its own logic, which legislates on appearing, or the 'there' of being-there (2014: 167).

Just like Constable presents a way of seeing, Badiou presents an ontology that is immensely complicated, or rather computation-heavy. My feeling is that, just as Constable's way of seeing infinite variation in refraction and diffraction of light in a meadow or a pebbled road⁶⁴ must have been almost impossible to comprehend in his day, we will get used to this *computation-heavy* way of viewing ontology as our ability to comprehend its complexity – where every situation possesses its own logic⁶⁵ – increases. I know from my work that it has become easier for me to see the world in this way over time, with repetition.

⁶⁴ In his Third Lecture at the Royal Institution of Great Britain of 1836, Constable remarked that, All effects of light and dark are but modifications of reflection and refraction, with the exception of things self-luminous, as fire, the sun, etc., which occasion what we call lights on other objects by being reflected from or refracted through their surfaces; leaving, where such reflections or refractions are interrupted by intervening bodies, the reflections of inferior lights from other objects, which being less powerful appear as shadows... The effects are exactly similar on a meadow; the light of the sun being reflected from or refracted through every blade of grass, and where intercepted leaving the reflection of the sky, and on a road, the light is spread by reflection from every particle of sand, gravel or clay (Leslie. 1951: 316).

⁶⁵ The same can be said of every drawing, every landscape, every opportunity to truly see something

It is essential to see that existence is not a category of being as such, but rather a category of *appearing*. Or, more rigorously, that existence concerns the logic of being, and not its ontological status. It is only according to its being-there, and not according to its multiple composition, that a being can be said to exist. And this is always, at the same time, *a degree of existence*, situated between inexistence and absolute existence. *Existence is at once a logical and an intensive concept* (Badiou. 2014: 168, my emphasis).

It is with this quantitative and qualitative definition of existence that I approach mystical form. To be clear, I don't think that Badiou's definition of existence equals the immeasurable subtleties in artistic perception – whether it be with the role of the Soul in Constable's definition of seeing, or Rakgoathe's mystical modality – that the artistic process accounts for. I'm sure that there are many problems with Badiou's ontology but looking at thinking this way, and looking at drawing in this way, I feel that I have been able to make sense of what it is that I do with some exactitude when it comes to form. More pertinently to the core focus of this study, I think that Badiou's ontology, wherein appearance serves as a qualitative indexing of how much something is, or exactly where it is situated in *becoming*, might lend itself to a more exact understanding of mystical form and by extension, the unknown. For example, if I could calculate with great exactitude what happens to my wood when I burn it, where all the particles go and where they return to nature, I'd have a much more exact understanding of mystical form. Perhaps at that point, I could consider those forms simply as form. Before I conclude this chapter, I'd like to compare what I've called mystical form with what Constable calls the character of brightness.

In a lecture that Constable considered as the best on chiaroscuro he ever had, “because it was a practical one,” he received the following advice from a certain Mr. West about brightness:

Always remember, sir, that light and shadow *never stand still*. Whatever object you are painting, keep in mind its prevailing *character* rather than its *accidental appearance* (unless in the subject there is some peculiar reason for the latter), and never be content until you have transferred *that* to canvas. In

your skies, for instance, always aim at *brightness*... even in the darkest effects there should be brightness. Your darks should look like the darks of silver, not of lead or slate (Leslie. 1951: 14).

Conclusion to Chapter 5

In this chapter, I discussed how mystical form can be approached through artistic perception or ‘seeing.’ To do so, I discussed the approach of John Constable to nature and seeing, applying that understanding to the ontology of Alain Badiou. I explained my understanding of how Badiou divides his ontology between a quantitative and the qualitative nature of being, with appearance as an index of becoming, such that existence is “at once a logical and an intensive concept.” I argued that mystical form might be more exactly understood as participating in nature, given Badiou’s understanding of ontology. In my final chapter, I discuss my work for the practical component of this study, in which I attempt to make work that makes mystical form immanent.

CHAPTER 6: ON THE DUCHAMPIAN NOMINALIST MODE AND MY WORK AS IMMANENTISATION OF MYSTICAL FORM

Introduction

There is a significant break between *Auntie Doreen* and my next work at GUS, *Immanentisation or Preparation Piece*, exhibited in August 2018. In this interval I worked on my thesis and made a number of changes to my practice resulting in work that has largely abandoned drawing and painting in favour of sculpture and installation. Here I am intent on finding installation equivalents to the kind of plastic and axiomatic procedures I adopt when drawing, which is to say that in my work now, I am concerned with sculpture. In this chapter, I discuss my current work as immanentisation of mystical form, specifically positioning my approach to sculpture and installation within the current definition of artistic practice as supplied by Christov-Bakargiev. I discuss what Christov-Bakargiev calls the “Duchampian nominalist mode” and how her criticism of the continuation of that mode is pertinent to my approach to my current work. Much of the complexity of the discussion has been confined to lengthy footnotes, with readability in mind. Since my work for my final exhibition is not yet complete at the time of writing, I provide a series of ‘notes’ on what remains work in progress, in addition to notes on my *Preparation Piece* exhibited at GUS in August 2018.

The Duchampian nominalist mode

In the same article by Christov-Bakargiev I discussed in chapter four, Christov-Bakargiev identifies the continuation of what she calls the “Duchampian nominalist mode”⁶⁶ as an approach adopted still by “many curators, art critics and exhibition or

⁶⁶ “Nominalism is the doctrine that only individual or disparate things exist and that our classifications of them are only contingent and changeable inventions. Pictorial nominalism is the view that the “ideas” that allow us at a time and place to classify things pictorial are open to problematizing events and are not fixed by an essential nature. The aesthetic of such nominalism is the aesthetic that opens these ideas to our judgment. It is an aesthetic not of taste or beautiful appearance (or of the antiaesthetic or the tasteless), but of the *invention* of new sensibilities, new concepts, new techniques and ideas of technique in response to those incommensurabilities that question our practices and that eventualize our relation to them” (De Duve. 1991: xxii, my emphasis). I emphasise *invention* as it smacks of the kind of anthropocentric egotism that Christov-Bakargiev identifies as being part of the Enlightenment-era thinking that is no longer apposite in artistic practice today. In terms of the core focus of my study, my argument with nominalism as defined here is that an artistic sensitivity to mystical form precludes the kind of thinking that allows for the *invention* of “new sensibilities, new concepts” etc. that respond to “incommensurabilities that question our practices and that eventualize our relation to them.” Rather than *invention*, I agree with Christov-Bakargiev that the task at hand is to “argue for a broader vision of the situation, and for alliances between art and organic life, new materialisms, and scientific studies, so that forms of art and forms of life can be combined, sharing architectural and creative knowledge with bees and butterflies and beavers, with bacteria and microbes, with eukaryotic cells as well as with software; cobbling together desires, sensibilities and abilities on a par with the microcosmic world within our bodies and the macrocosmic ‘music of the spheres’ in a multi-species dimension, extending the ‘we’ to all living sentient beings.” (2014: 15-16).

collection makers.” It is, therefore, a pervasive approach adopted by artists, curators, critics and collectors alike. In the discussion that follows, I show how my own approach is opposed to this Duchampian nominalist mode and also argue that the Duchampian nominalist mode is a misinterpretation of Duchamp, one that has had great impact on the limitation of what I called artistic seeing in chapter five, that is, an approach to perception that is inclusive of mystical form. First, I’d like to return to Cristov-Bakargiev:

While most artists are interested in dealing with the world at large through their embodied “amatorial” artistic, social and discursive practices, even in their most inward-looking or most exquisitely crafted artworks and projects, many curators, art critics and exhibition or collection-makers do not share their openness: instead, most of these practitioners “cut” the work of the artists “off” from the world at large to protect it, *in what continues to be a Duchampian nominalist mode: they harness artistic practice through a system of signs and display, and within a specific genealogy and history of art*, even when they are working with political art. (“It is art because the artist and ‘I’ position it systemically within that field”, they might say.) To me, this does not make much sense anymore, certainly not in terms of a worldly (Donna Haraway) alliance (Susan Buck-Morss) of cosmopolitical (Isabelle Stengers) intra-acting (Karen Barad) and cobbled-together (Haraway) human and non-human agents (Bruno Latour). (2014: 4, my emphasis).

I discussed in chapter four how, according to Christov-Bakargiev, recent advancements in biology on the molecular and subatomic level are causing “the broad division and classification of species and sub-species” to seem “less fruitful, less topical and less useful than studying endosymbiotic evolutionary processes across species, across the mind/body, nature/culture and even plant/animal divide” (2014: 7). In the quote above, Christov-Bakargiev presents a composite understanding of a number of important theorists pertinent today to make the point that the Duchampian nominalist mode “does not make much sense anymore.” It is outside the scope of my focus to discuss in detail what Christov-Bakargiev refers to when she cites, for

example, Karen Barad's "intra-acting," but suffice to say, Christov-Bakargiev's argument is that current thinking, based on recent advancements in biology, are not calling into question, but *disproving* the Duchampian nominalist mode as an artistic practice based on nature. The Duchampian nominalist mode, Christov-Bakargiev is arguing, does not make sense. Which is to say that the mode of harnessing "artistic practice through a system of signs and display, and within a specific genealogy and history of art" does not make sense. There are two points of discussion that this statement raises:

1. identifying the "specific genealogy and history of art" referred to as defining, codifying and canonising the Duchampian nominalist mode
2. identifying the *exact* approach to "a system of signs and display" at play within the Duchampian nominalist mode

The Duchampian nominalist mode according to Ernest Mancoba

In his interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist of 2002, the South-African born sculptor and painter Ernest Mancoba provides what I believe to be a succinct summary of Christov-Bakargiev's genealogy of Duchampian nominalism, when he positions "the misunderstanding around Duchamp" as becoming "the accepted interpretation" of Duchamp's "challenge thrown in the face of the Academy and its spiritually empty canons":

In my opinion, a certain evolution of art in the second part of the twentieth century has been influenced by the misunderstanding around Duchamp. Duchamp never pretended that exhibiting a manufactured product was, in itself, art.⁶⁷ But the world,

⁶⁷ In *The Bicycle Wheel and the Bottle Rack, Marcel Duchamp as a Sculptor*, Herbert Molderings argues that, "Two things stand against the widespread notion that the Ready-mades are transformed utilitarian objects that became art through a mere transfer of location" (2000: 147). Molderings argues that despite André Breton's definition of a Ready-made in his *Dictionary of Surrealism* of 1938 as "a utilitarian object, which, through the simple choice of the artist, has been elevated to the level of an artwork" succeeding in "asserting itself historically" and guiding "the understanding of the Ready-made up until today," there are two "concrete historical reasons for Breton's narrow view of the Ready-mades" to be called into question (2000: 146). First, he argues, "the term and concept of the Ready-made were not yet formulated by Duchamp in 1913." The term Ready-made "appears for the first time in New York in the autumn of 1915" when Duchamp "used this expression for the first time when he presented a snow shovel to his astounded artist friends in New York and lifted the shovel from the ocean of mass wares into the realm of the Ready-mades by inscribing it with the words "In Advance of the Broken Arm." Molderings argues that in the period between 1913 and 1915, Duchamp was deeply concerned with sculpture, and that the interpretation of his objects from that period (the *Bicycle Wheel*, the *Bottle Rack*) "are not the gags of a sensationalist artist and a notorious farceur (although, of course, they do have something of this), but that they are modern sculptures" (Molderings. 2000: 145-146). Molderings argues convincingly that Duchamp was deeply concerned with Umberto Boccione's *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* in the period between 1913 and 1915 and that "there is no artist that fulfilled the central demands of the manifesto of Futurist sculpture more radically than the painter Marcel Duchamp" (2000: 151). Seen historically, Duchamp's Ready-mades are responses on the material level to the challenges outlined by Boccione's manifesto to "destroy the wholly literary and traditional nobility of marble and of bronze. Deny the exclusiveness of one material for the entire construction of sculptural ensemble. Affirm that even

the so-called art world, has always made as if he had. In fact, as he himself insisted, his readymade – bought at the supermarket and put on a pedestal – is only a challenge thrown at the face of the Academy and its spiritually empty canons.⁶⁸ However, the misunderstanding became the accepted interpretation of this artist because it fitted into the aims of a certain established nihilism which, under the fastidious form of an objective aestheticism, in turn came to constitute a sort of new academicism (Obrist. 2003: 62).

twenty different materials can compete in a single work to effect plastic emotion... The new plastic art will, then, be a translation into plaster, bronze, glass, wood, any other material, of those atmospheric planes that link and intersect things” (Molderings. 2000: 151). Boccione’s challenge to translate the atmospheric planes that link and intersect things is echoed in Christov-Bakargiev’s criticism of Duchampian nominalism as no longer making sense. It is clear, following Molderings, that Duchamp himself was responding to Boccione’s challenge on a material level and that Mancoba’s “misunderstanding of Duchamp” goes right to the point, wherein the genealogy of a “new academicism” operating under an “objective aestheticism” has usurped the “concrete historical” proof that exists to prove that Duchamp was never concerned with exhibiting non-art as art. He was concerned with sculpture, specifically, with sculpture that would translate the “planes that link and intersect things,” which, even a hundred years later, is still being called for in Christov-Bakargiev’s rallying cry to rethink current artistic practice in terms of Barad’s “intra-connectedness.” To drive his point home, that the Ready-made is not simply the result of a utilitarian object subjected to a mere transfer of location, Molderings referring to Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, notes that, “we see that it was first publically exhibited in 1951, some 38 years after it had come into being... The work exhibited was neither the original *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, nor the first replica of 1916. Because of his move to New York from Paris, and then back to Paris from New York, Duchamp had thrown or had somebody else throw the first two bicycle wheels mounted on stools into the garbage. Thus, in 1951, he had to make a third replica” (2000: 147). It was a sculpture, made, remade and remade again, exhibited for the first time almost four decades after its initial designation as an art object. To understand *this* is to see clearly the misunderstanding around Duchamp’s work and, if I might add, why and how so much stuff that makes no sense is considered as art today.

⁶⁸ Mancoba defines the “spiritually empty canons” of the Academy as the “purely intellectual ersatz” that views art as belonging to “some outdated form of humanity” when he says to Obrist that, “Moreover, certain philosophers in Europe have had a more or less hidden aim to get rid of art altogether – for supposedly belonging to some outdated form of humanity – or to replace it by some purely intellectual ersatz that would help discipline and control the inspired freedom of poetry, a concern shared by the political authority: this, as far as I can understand, was the main motivation behind the foundation of the Academy” (Obrist. 2003: 61). Mancoba identifies a “terrible atomization of the essence of human life” that has resulted from a “new academicism” in art (the Duchampian nominalist mode) that, in his view, has been supported by political authority, specifically in order to “discipline and control the inspired freedom of poetry.” It is for this reason, according to Mancoba, that “we have lost the capacity to unite in our vision the outward aspect with the inner significance. Because our eye has been mis-educated, so to speak, by the superficiality of academicism, which can only estimate the worth of any representation of man according to the abidance by the purely esthetic rules it has established – as, for example, the one decreeing that the human head must come eight times (or seven, I have forgotten) into the full length of the body” (Obrist. 2003: 61). The rules of proportion Mancoba references here are now largely valueless after Darwin. I refer to Gamwell: “Before Darwin, artists sought ideal proportions in classical images such as Leonardo’s picture of Vitruvius’s timeless, immobile man, who reflects divinity by fitting within a perfect circle. But in today’s multi-cultural climate, artists – schooled in evolutionary biology – know that each person occupies a unique place on the tree of life, and the body changes over a lifetime. Systems of proportion based on an ideal, immutable human body slowly fell into disuse, and the myth of the Golden Section is fading into history as artists and architects come to understand patterns and proportions in nature as the result of a long process of evolution by natural selection” (2016: 107). Therefore, the principles of proportion that evoked responses to African sculpture in Europe when, according to Mancoba, “they see an African sculpture with, for example, an enormous head and short legs” and “consider it ugly and judge it ‘worthless’ are, like Christov-Bakargiev’s critique on Enlightenment-era thinking, no longer apposite to artistic practice. Mancoba’s view that “for the African artist it is not so much the abidance by certain rules (though he, too, generally works according to particular canons) that makes a thing beautiful, but its capacity to evoke the inner being by the strength of the outward aspect” (Obrist. 2003: 61) is akin to Christov-Bakargiev’s insistence on an approach to artistic practice today that focuses on the “intra-connectedness” of things. I am aware of the critical debate around essentialism and universalism in Mancoba, specifically as it pertains to his use of “inner being,” and his dictum and definition of art as affirming that “Man is One.” I also understand how the terminology he uses does not stand up to current feminist critique of the use of “Man” as pertaining to all humanity. I am however drawing a parallel between how Mancoba’s refutation of an ideal proportion echoes Christov-Bakargiev’s refutation of certain accepted divides like the plant/animal divide, and that the “objective aestheticism” of Duchampian nominalist mode, being opposed to what Mancoba calls “inner being,” is incapable of accounting for the intra-connectedness of things, in accordance with my definition of mystical form.

It becomes clear that while Mancoba and Christov-Bakargiev use different terms, they focus on the same issue: Mancoba's "new academicism" (which he considers evolving from the "aims of a certain established nihilism") is akin to the "specific genealogy and history of art" that Christov-Bakargiev ascribes to the Duchampian nominalist mode. Both Mancoba and Christov-Bakargiev are critical of this "genealogy" or "new academicism." Where Mancoba sees it as being "spiritually empty," Bakargiev simply considers it a mode of artistic practice that is no longer apposite. Furthermore, Mancoba identifies the *exact* approach to her "system of signs and display" when he connects "the fastidious form of an objective aestheticism" to this new academicism with its "spiritually empty canons" and outdated rules of proportion, which I am arguing is the genealogy of Duchampian nominalism that Christov-Bakargiev considers as no longer making sense. It is in opposition to this genealogy of Duchampian nominalism or "new academicism" that I position my work, my definition of mystical form, and that my notes that follow may be interpreted.

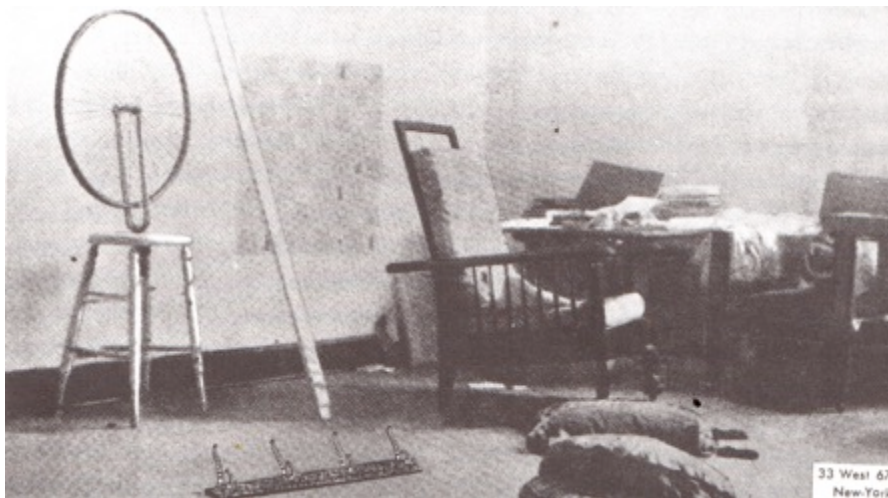


Fig 55. Marcel Duchamp's Studio in New York (1917-1918) showing his *Bicycle Wheel*. Retouched image from Duchamp's *Boite-en-valise*, 1941. MoMA, New York.

Notes on *Preparation Piece*

Some of the objects I include in my installations *reference* my practice outside of the program. I've chosen to do so as a way to provide contextual reference to how I am approaching what it is that I am doing. So, while with *Preparation Piece*, (Fig 69)

some of the objects included in the installation reference prior work, projects or *moments* in my past output, *Preparation Piece* should be seen as a unique work, of which the main focus and majority of objects is specific to the course. I realise that this is tricky ground as far as the requirements of the course are concerned, but I have approached the inclusion of objects with integrity, being careful to stick to *reference* rather than *inclusion*. For example, while the Yamaha guitar I included in *Preparation Piece* references the work I did between 2009 and 2011 with *Jaco+Z-dog*⁶⁹ (Fig 57) and more recently as an autonomous *Song Sculpture* at my exhibition *DOLCEFARNIENTE* of 2017, and it being played on the second of August 2018 with my band *NRNA* (Fig 62); I have not included any of the work that resulted from those projects. I am simply, by including that specific guitar, *referencing* the meaning it has to me as an object and it being a tool for expression. As far as incorporating music, noise and experimental performance into my artistic practice, I see this as a result of having been, while in New York, exposed to what was standard practice for multiple generations of artists who were steeped in experimentation as not only the core but the sum-total of their artistic practice. I spent my youth on a healthy diet of John Zorn⁷⁰ performing live, being exposed to the work of Christian Marclay⁷¹, Zhang Huan⁷² and Miranda July⁷³ through Anthology Film Archives⁷⁴ and experimental film programs, specifically that of Astria Suparak⁷⁵, whom I assisted. In the early 2000s, venues such as The Knitting Factory, The Kitchen and Tonic were all active in New York and the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival presented an annual season-long program of theater and performance ranging from Sankai Juku and Pina Bausch to Patti Smith, Laurie Anderson and Lou Reed, from Jan Louwers with *Needcompany* to Heiner-Müller's *Hamletmachine* performed in miniature by an Argentinian puppetry company. John Zorn's *Arcana: Musicians on Music* (Zorn, 2000) sits proudly on my bookshelf, its introduction claiming vehemently the power

⁶⁹ "JACO+Z-DOG is a 2-piece band from Johannesburg formed in 2009 by Zander Blom and Jaco van Schalkwyk." <http://www.blankprojects.com/exhibition-press/avant-car-guard-jaco-z-dog-and-friends/>

⁷⁰ John Zorn (b1953) is an American composer, arranger, record producer, saxophonist, and multi-instrumentalist.

⁷¹ Christian Marclay (b1955) is an American-Swiss visual artist and composer. Marclay is a "pioneer of using gramophone records and turntables as musical instruments to create sound collages" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Marclay).

⁷² Zhang Huan (b1965) is a Chinese painter and performance artist based in Shanghai and New York City.

⁷³ Miranda July (b1974) is an American film director, artist and author.

⁷⁴ Co-founded by Lithuanian artist and filmmaker Jonas Mekas, Anthology Film Archives "is an international center for the preservation, study, and exhibition of film and video, with a particular focus on independent, experimental, and avant-garde cinema" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthology_Film_Archives).

⁷⁵ Astria Suparak is an American artist and curator from Los Angeles, California. She was the director of the Pratt Film Series between 1998 and 2000.

of practice to rock the socks off theoretical interpretation. It is a resistance to classification that I live and work by, and why I insist on playing my guitar:

Music explicitly and violently resists the classifications that these so-called thinkers have so desperately tried to impose on it: from the ludicrous *comprovisation* to the ambiguous *postmodernism* to the meaningless *totalism*. More likely it is because of the musicians' understandable and very deliberate antagonism to such catchwords – their rejection of attempts to simplify the work, package it for the marketplace, and conceal the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) distinctions between the works of the many individual artists concerned (Zorn. 2000: v-vi).

A note on my use of the electric guitar



Fig 56. Christian Marclay, *Guitar Drag*, 2000. Still from video. Artpace, San Antonio.

Marclay's politically charged *Guitar Drag* remains a constant reference to me. While I am aware of interpretations wherein guitars are considered 'phallogentric' or connected to male masturbation, such interpretations do not concern me. In fact, they

seem to drastically simplify the complexities of emancipation, race and social justice that the electric guitar has become iconic of. According to Artpace, the international artist in residency program where Marclay conceived and executed *Guitar Drag*, “The many-layered video work references the practice of smashing guitars during rock concerts and demonstrates Marclay’s interest in inventing new types of sound. The piece was also created in response to the 1998 murder of 49-year-old James Byrd, Jr. of Jasper, Texas by three white supremacists and the tragedy’s widespread repercussions” (http://www.artpace.org/works/hudson_showroom/hsr_summer_2015/guitar-drag).

According to Wikipedia, Byrd Jr. was dragged “for three miles behind a pick-up truck along an asphalt road. Byrd, who remained conscious throughout most of his ordeal, was killed about halfway through the dragging when his body hit the edge of a culvert, severing his right arm and head” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_James_Byrd_Jr.).



Fig 57. *Jaco+Z-dog live (with the Make-Overs)*, 2011. Blank projects, Cape Town. In this photograph of our performance at blank projects, my Yamaha guitar is off stage.



Fig 58. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Song Sculpture*, 2017. Installation, David Krut Projects, 142A Jan Smuts Avenue, Johannesburg. In this installation, my Yamaha guitar is propped up against the gallery wall. As the fans oscillated, they would ‘strum’ the guitar, which was tuned to produce a specific chord. Anecdotally, I found in researching this thesis that “In the notes and sketches Duchamp left behind from the years 1913 to 1915, there are numerous ideas for sculptures expressed both in literary and drawn fashion. He conceived of a ‘musical sculpture’ (‘Sounds leaving from different places and forming a sounding sculpture which lasts’)” (Molderings. 2000: 148). So much for the so-called “*invention of new sensibilities, new concepts, new techniques and ideas of technique*” espoused by pictorial nominalism. My *Song Sculpture* is an interpretation of an idea that is more than a century old.



Fig 59. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Song Sculpture (Muted)*, 2017. Installation, David Krut Projects, Newlands, Cape Town.
By the time my exhibition *DOLCEFARNIENTE* moved to Cape Town, I felt less inclined to allow the *Song Sculpture* a voice, so I muted it. It was exhibited as an installation that had been destroyed. There is a link to how I included 'muted' or 'unplayable' instruments in my *Preparation Piece* at GUS.



Fig. 60, Michael Macgarry, *Mean Magic*, 2018. Electric guitar, reinforced concrete, 160 x 86 x 30cm.

I think my friend is saying here that in 2018, the chance of expression or emancipation is severely limited. An optimist by trade, Macgarry has made sure that while encased in cement, this guitar is still playable.



Fig 61. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Guitar Bell*, 2017. Sound installation with guitar, amplifier, microphone, cable, rope and rock.
David Krut Projects, Newlands, Cape Town.

In this sound installation, playable by the viewer, a rudimentary pulley system allowed the viewer to ‘ring’ the suspended guitar like a bell. The rope mechanism caused a microphone to swing onto the fret board of the guitar, which was amplified to create a bell-like ringing sound when struck. I wanted the audience to understand that it was up to them to create culture.



Fig 62, *NRNA live*, A4 Arts Foundation, 2 August, 2018.

In this photograph of the detritus of our performance space at the A4 Arts Foundation in Cape Town, my Yamaha guitar is on the carpet. During the performance, I'd mimic famous Rock and Roll guitar moves, like Chuck Berry's ‘Duck Walk’ in a mock show of virtuosity before dropping the Yamaha onto the floor, abruptly muting any sound. I suppose the performance could be interpreted as a giant wank-off of male masturbatory prowess, but that would not take into account the history of great female guitarists or the history of the event, where the band was threatened and targeted by an activist collective intent on stopping the performance. The performance was a response to being muted and a refusal to be silent.



Fig 63. This is an image of NRNA's first album, published in 2018 by Bad Paper Music in an edition of 20.



Fig 64. On my trip to England in 2013 mentioned in chapter 5, I managed to meet Viv Albertine, punk legend as member of *The Slits*, at a book signing somewhere in London. I had read her memoir *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys*, and said to my girlfriend before going to England that, "I am going to meet Viv Albertine." On the emancipatory power of the electric guitar, Albertine's memoir is an astonishing read. She broke out of being trapped twice, once as a member of *The Slits*, and more recently, picking up the guitar again after finding herself in a crappy marriage. Sometimes one needs a guitar.

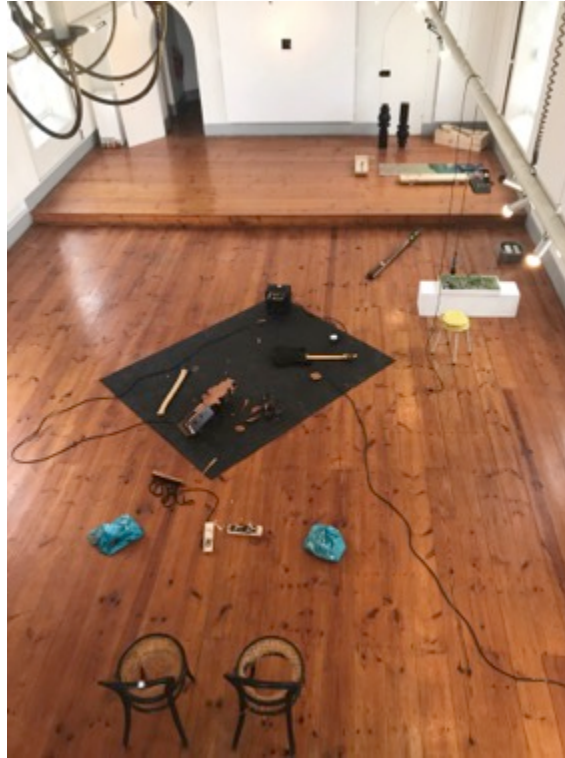


Fig 65. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Immanentisation* or *Preparation Piece*, 2018. Installation, GUS.

In this overhead view of my installation at GUS, my Yamaha guitar is positioned on the black square carpet. It references all of the above.

My Yamaha guitar is what I would call an ordinal object: one that has a clearly definable history of being in time and having generated meaning within specific contexts of usage. In the images above, I provide some context as to what I mean by history. Along with Viv Albertine, (Fig 64) I include my own work and examples of the work of two other artists using guitars that I am influenced by: Christian Marclay (Fig 56) and my friend, Michael Macgarry (Fig 60). The history of the objects I include in installation is important because it relates to my attempt to generate, create or make ‘mystical form’ as is my stated motivation for this study: I need things that come with a certain sense of history.



Fig 66. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Artist Unknown*, 2018. Rubber tyre strips and wood, dimensions variable. Installation for Joburg Art Fair.



Fig. 67, Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Artist Unknown*, 2018. Rubber tyre strips and wood. Installation view, dimensions variable.

A note on *Artist Unknown*

Since I cannot include my work *Artist Unknown* (Fig 67) in this study as it has been exhibited with Bad Paper at the 2018 Joburg Art Fair, I'll discuss its structural support, which due to the kind of space limitations that come with the cost of wall space within a hyper-commercialised exhibition area, was not exhibited at the Fair

and therefore qualifies for inclusion here, and in my final exhibition. Both the work, which I'll not discuss here, and the support structure were influenced by a trip to Malawi where I attended the wedding of two friends. I was included in the formal proceedings as part of the family of the bride. Thus I was introduced to the close family of the groom – my friend – in a pre-wedding ceremony that took up most of the day while an extended family of many hundreds of people amassed outside the room we were in. I enjoyed how much preparation preceded the ceremony. A few days after the wedding, which continued into the small hours of the night, we were escorted from Lilongwe to a residence on the banks of Lake Malawi, four hours away by car. All along the road, as was the case throughout my time in Lilongwe, people displayed their wares either arranged on plinths or makeshift tables, or hanging from simple A-frame and cross-beam constructions, usually assembled using branches from nearby trees. I was struck by the aesthetic quality of these displays and the functionality of the support structures from which bunches of dried fish, sponges or strips of repurposed rubber tyres were hung. When I returned home, I did so with the object that my work *Artist Unknown* consists of, and the memory of the support structure it hung from. Once I had hung the object in my studio for some months, and through repeated viewing concluded that there could be no better way to repurpose it as art than leaving it as is and replicating the way it was displayed on the banks of Lake Malawi, I decided to find some wood on the hill behind my house in Sea Point. I collected a few branches that were lying about the perimeter between the tree line of Signal Hill and the back gardens above High Level Road in Sea Point and carried them down the hill so I could make the A-frame and crossbeam structure from which I could hang my sculpture.



Fig 68. *Artist Unknown*, 2018. Rubber tyre strips and wood. Installation view at Bad Paper booth, Joburg Art Fair 2018.

When it became clear quite late that there would not be enough space at the Fair for the support structure (somewhere a wall that was ordered did not become a reality), I took an axe to the support structure and sawed off a the central segment of the crossbeam from which the object hung and sent that off to the Fair where it was exhibited. The rest of the structure remains in my backyard, waiting to be exhibited as part of my final exhibition for this course. I see it as a handy way to *possibly* include *negation* or *meaninglessness* within my exhibition and as such, combined with the timescale within which it came into *being*, the unintended nature of it's *becoming* a work in itself, and the force of its *existence* determined as unfit for participation in a hyper-commercialised space, a pretty decent example of mystical form as I've argued for in my thesis.

What was important about *Artist Unknown* for the purposes of this study, is that it made me aware of how I could leave things be rather than altering them or making

them into something else. This became an important consideration in my *Preparation Piece* installation. Of course, as with my *Song Sculpture*, Duchamp had been there a hundred years ago already. Molderings writes about “a famous anecdote that has Duchamp as its focus. In October/November 1912, Duchamp and his friends Fernand Léger and Constantin Brancusi attended the fourth aviation salon held at the Grand Palais. While strolling past the newest airplanes, Duchamp stopped in front of one of the wooden propellers and said to the sculptor Brancusi (who, of course, possessed a copy of Boccioni’s *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture*⁷⁶), ‘Painting’s washed up. Who’ll do anything better than that propeller? Tell me, can you do that?’” (2000: 153). If I were to answer Duchamp’s question, with the strips of retreated rubber tyres that make up my *Artist Unknown* in mind, taking into account the thousands of hours of usage and re-usage involved in getting them exactly to the material point they are now, I’d have to say ‘no.’

⁷⁶ In his manifesto, Boccioni writes “We cannot forget that the tick-tock and the moving hands of a clock, the in-and-out of a piston in a cylinder, the opening and closing of two cogwheels with the continual *appearance and disappearance* of their square steel cogs, the fury of a flywheel or the turbine of a propeller, are all *plastic and pictorial elements* of which a Futurist sculpture must take account. The opening and closing of a valve creates a *rhythm* just as beautiful but infinitely newer than the blinking of an animal eyelid” (Molderings. 2000: 152, my emphasis).

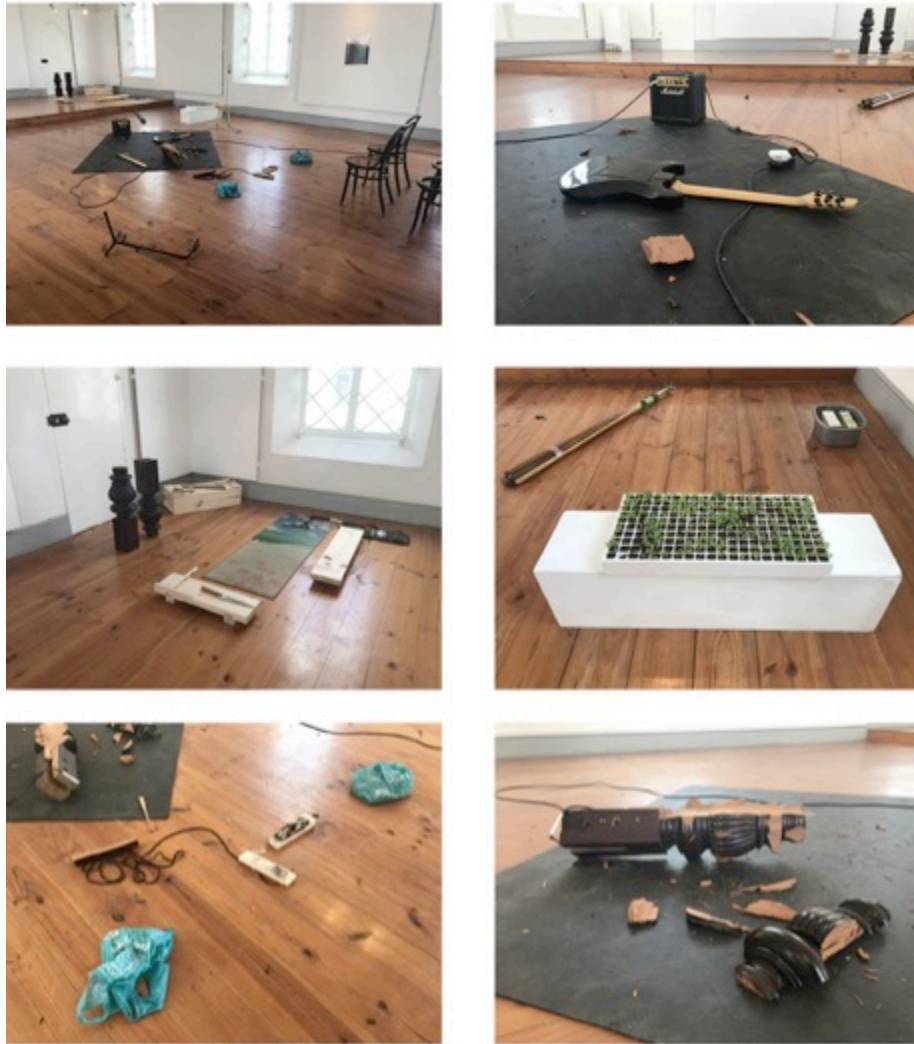


Fig 69. Jacob van Schalkwyk, *Preparation Piece*, 2018. Installation views, GUS, dimensions variable.

A note on *Preparation Piece*, GUS August 2018

There are a number of objects included in *Immanentisation* or *Preparation Piece*. I'll not describe all of them here. More pertinently to the central theme of my study is how these objects serve as immanentisations of my thoughts around mystical form: that they are statements of my preparation to make work that functions or is indicative of what I discuss in my thesis as mystical form. On a white plinth that forms part of the installation in the main gallery of GUS, I exhibited a seedling tray wherein I'd germinated linseeds. These are the same linseeds I sprinkle over the porridge I sometimes have for breakfast. I suppose there is affinity between the idea of working

with lentils, split green peas and linseeds, inasmuch as they are all things I located in my kitchen cupboard, but what interested me specifically in germinating brown linseeds is that a) they speak about painting given the use of linseed oil as medium for oil paint and b) that they speak about weaving given that when allowed to grow, they mature into flax plants that can be threshed into linen fit for weaving. A third consideration is colour. Between the green of the seedlings, the yellow of the chair the blue of the Checkers plastic bags and the bright colours of my tatami yoga mat, *Preparation Piece* is as much about colour as any composition I have drawn or painted. By germinating my breakfast seeds in the seedling tray, and sowing them in my garden, I might succeed in growing flax plants from which I might weave something once I've harvested and threshed the plants. I have no idea how much linen I'll end up with, if any – my cat keeps destroying my homework, but that is of little importance to me. What interests me is the passing of time and the attitude I am able to adopt with regards to these plants: I leave them be to take pleasure from them.⁷⁷ At GUS I installed the seedling tray in what would have been the southern semitranssept of the church, in close proximity to a stool and a microphone, with the microphone positioned so that one might sit on the stool and comment on the germinated plants, or, that the “sound” of the growth might be heard through the microphone.

⁷⁷ Molderings writes that Duchamp had a similar approach to his *Bicycle Wheel*, which he would reconstruct in his studio on multiple occasions: “It was simply letting things go by themselves and having a sort of created atmosphere in a studio, an apartment where you live. Probably, to help your ideas come out of your head. To see that wheel turning was very soothing, very comforting, a sort of opening of avenues on other things than the material life of every day. I liked the idea of having a bicycle wheel in my studio. I enjoyed looking at it, just as I enjoy looking at the flames dancing in a fireplace” (2000: 160). According to Molderings “the comparison of the turning wheel with the movements of flames in an open fireplace was repeated by Duchamp in almost all of his comments on the *Bicycle Wheel* between 1955 and 1967, and by doing so, he emphasized the meditative and contemplative function that this sculpture had for him, despite its radicality of new materials and its new form. In this way, it is no different than certain traditional paintings or sculptures, since these were also always objects of contemplation and meditation” (2000, p161).



Fig 70. *Preparation Piece* (detail), 2018. Installation view of microphone and seedling tray.

Interestingly, the seeds I have sown directly in my garden and not watered regularly, have outgrown the seeds I have germinated carefully. I eventually replanted the seedlings from the tray into the garden. They are doing much better now that I am not nursing them into existence.

Only, the microphone was left unplugged, with the termination point of its cable clearly visible so that, along with the electric guitar that was also visibly unplugged, there would be no way for any of the tools that required amplification for expressive usage to function as intended. With the seedling tray, the stool, the microphone and guitar, I wanted to present a conundrum but I also wanted to speak to perception and mutability in Descartes and the redefinition of artistic practice in Christov-Bakargiev.

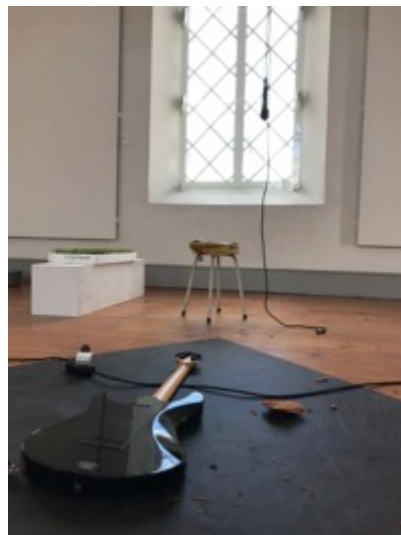


Fig 71. *Preparation Piece* (detail), 2018. Installation view of stool, microphone, seedling tray and guitar.

Upon entering the gallery through the main doors, the viewer would first see an arrangement of bentwood chairs, positioned in the nave on the edge of the narthex, as one would place chairs for an audience. Only, none of the chairs could be used as seating – their seats of woven straw had all split over time. Before the exhibition, I put my foot through two seats that had not split. I wanted the viewer to think about the fact that they could not sit down. This was derelict seating that had not functioned properly in a while. The only useful seat available was the stool next to the microphone, positioned in proximity to new growth.

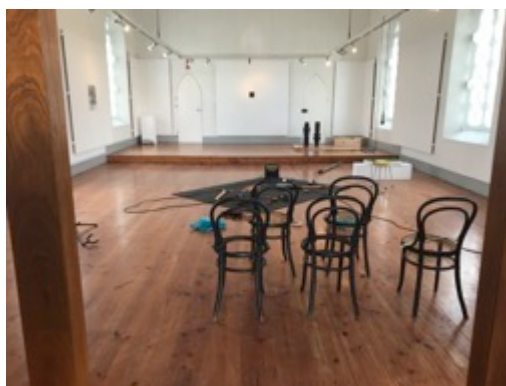


Fig 72. *Preparation Piece* (detail), 2018. Installation view of bentwood chairs in nave.



Fig 73. *Preparation Piece* (detail), 2018. Installation view of projection in ancillary room.

In the ancillary room I projected a video that documented me ‘using’ the installation to work on a piece of furniture made out of wood. The video depicted me kneeling to saw into the leg of an antique snooker table rested on a low workbench positioned in the choir of the church before transferring the leg onto a stage area positioned *in the*

crossing. Once I had placed the leg on the stage – which consisted of a black square⁷⁸ piece of industrial foam, the kind used underneath industrial carpeting, on which I'd positioned my Marshall practice amplifier⁷⁹ – I switched on the amp to generate a hum before using an axe to chop into the leg, causing shards and splinters of antique English rosewood to fly about the gallery. It then depicted me switching off the amp, collecting some of these shards and setting them on fire in the nave closer to the narthex, along with wood-planed shavings of a lighter wood that I'd collected in a supermarket plastic bag.⁸⁰ While the video ran in the ancillary room, I burnt more shavings in the main room to fill the gallery with the smell of burning rosewood, then hacked into the table leg with the axe a couple of times, timing it to coincide with the end of the video and draw attention back to the main gallery. When the class returned to the main gallery, I had put the axe down and pretended that I'd not done anything. I just stood there for a bit, smiling as I do, before asking my supervisor to introduce the piece to be critiqued. It was all smoke and no mirrors. I'd improvised something out of nothing.

⁷⁸ Here I tipped my hat to Malevich. When I bought the piece of industrial foam, I thought immediately that it looked like the crackled surface of his *Black Suprematist Square*. I like having something I can roll out to designate a stage where I can dance on Suprematism.

⁷⁹ Practice amplifiers are not particularly cool but I think they are all you need most of the time.

⁸⁰ The burning of wood is informed by my understanding of mutability in Descartes and his "allegory of the wax." If I burn the wood, does it not continue in another form? Does it return to nature? Am I, through destroying the original form, returning the wood to nature? Does this thinking constitute an artistic practice from Christov's eighteenth century contemporary art practice, or is it a re-thinking of the role of the artist? Or, am I reclaiming in this act the 18th century role of the artist while refuting it by growing the flax seed?



Fig 74. This is my copy of Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit*. It contains over 150 instructions on how to make something out of nothing. One of my favourites is "WATER PIECE" which says 'Steal a moon on the water with a bucket. Keep stealing until no moon is seen on the water. 1964 spring' (Ono. 1970).



Fig 75. Yuki Kobayashi performing Yoko Ono's "WATER PIECE" (1964 Spring), Fluxus event scores from the collection "Grapefruit" as part of a Solo exhibition of Christian Marclay at White Cube Gallery, Bermondsey, London, UK, 2015.

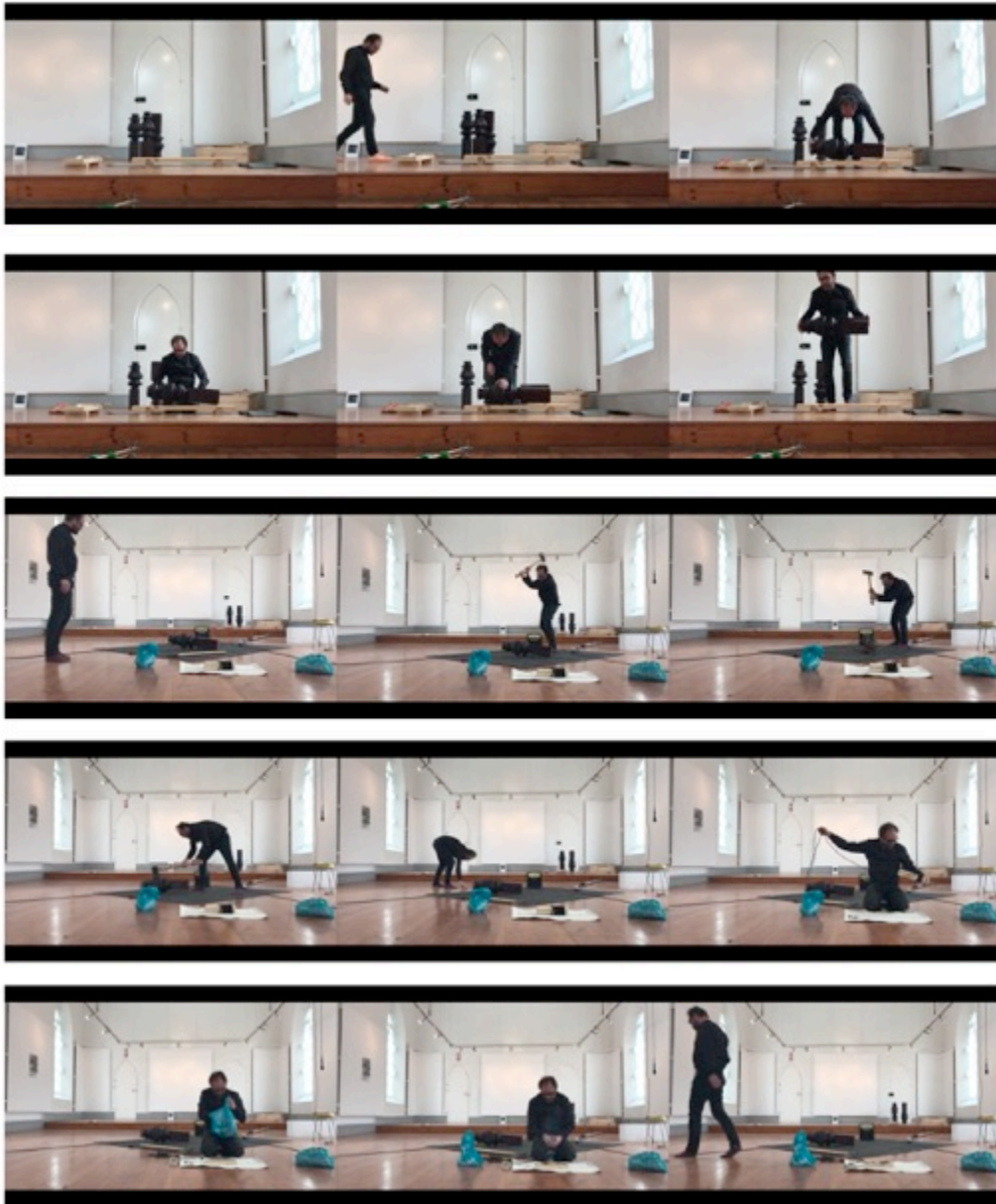


Fig 76. *Preparation Piece* (video stills), 2018. Video of performance in main gallery, projected in ancillary room.

In the far corner of the gallery, on what used to be the *choir* at the liturgical east of the church, I had placed a toolbox and two low workbenches I'd made from pinewood using Japanese woodworking tools. I made these according to instructions I had followed in *Japanese Woodworking Tools, their Tradition, Spirit and Use* by Toshio Odate (1998), who was my second year sculpture lecturer at Pratt. I positioned the tools I used around the toolbox. The toolbox, the workbench and the tatami mat I sit on when I work were all positioned in the corner of the room, as is the traditional placement of these items in the *shokunin*⁸¹ or Japanese nomadic carpenter tradition. As I am a novice woodworker, following Odate's instructions, I do not own fancy tools. My tools are only humble of the range examples of Japanese craftsmanship.⁸² I'd like to speak about my tools and what they mean to me.

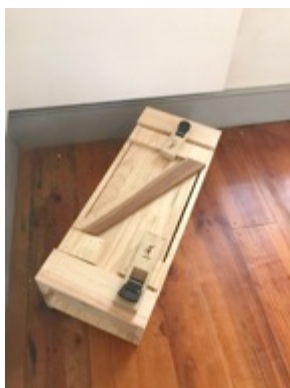


Fig 77. *Preparation Piece* (detail), 2018. Installation view of toolbox with planes. I made this toolbox from cheap wood in accordance with Odate's instructions at the beginning of his book. Unlike the complicated joints used in Japanese cabinetry, the *shokunin*'s toolbox is traditionally nailed together in an unfussy manner. Odate explains this by saying that, "the sight of a *shokunin* carrying on his shoulder a beautifully painted and carefully joined toolbox without nails would provoke me to an overwhelming sense of awkwardness" (Odate. 1998: 11). The toolbox is a workhorse and while it is a sign of a *shokunin*'s skill, it is not supposed to be ostentatious. Mine is not quite straight all around, but it is sturdy and holds all my tools. I did add one bit of flare to it. Having run out of wood, I used an offcut of South African kiaat wood for the diagonal handle of the lid.

⁸¹ According to Odate, "This Japanese word is defined by both Japanese and Japanese-English dictionaries as 'craftsman' or 'artisan,' but such a literal description does not fully express the deeper meaning. The Japanese apprentice is taught that *shokunin* means not only having technical skill, but also implies an attitude and social consciousness. These qualities are encompassed in the work *shokunin* but are seldom written down" (1998: viii).

⁸² In a chapter devoted to planes, Odate tells a story of an expensive wood plane he secretly bought as an apprentice *shokunin*. When it was revealed to his master, his master took the plane away. "Holding the plane in his hand, my master came to me and told me simply that it was too good for me. As I expected, I never saw the plane again." If this seems punitive, Odate provides an explanation for his master's reasoning that provides insight to the kind of social consciousness and attitude of the *shokunin*. "That plane was not for me, and I should not have owned it simply to keep it hidden away... I know now that I should have had greater respect for the tool and its creator. Such respect did not mean allowing the tool to be idle" (1998: 83).

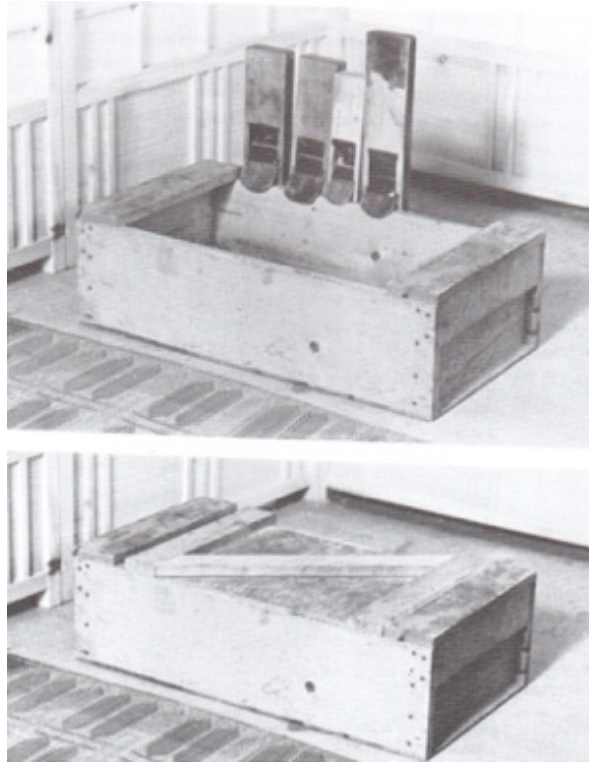


Fig 78. Images of Odate's perfect toolbox, positioned as is customary, in the corner of the workshop (Odate. 1998).

A note on my tools

I am learning to work with wood. At Pratt, Toshio never taught me about wood. He reserved that knowledge for the sculpture majors. After my second year I chose lithography over sculpture and majored in drawing. Years have passed, wherein I have wanted to work in wood. Early in 2018, I found Toshio Odate's book on Japanese woodworking tools and ordered it online. I remembered that a friend of mine, Botha Kruger, who hosts The Wrong Rock Show on Bush Radio, had started a company called WaZa, importing Japanese goods to South Africa. I saw he had a selection of Japanese tools and ordered a set of saws, chisels, planes and sharpening stones. Botha introduced to a carpenter in Paarden Island. He too had lived in New York and he too, knew about Toshio Odate's book. I lent him my copy of Odate's book in exchange for a lesson on how to sharpen my tools. I returned home and set about learning how to use my tools. To learn how to use my tools, I made my toolbox and two Japanese-style low workbenches as per Odate's instructions.



Fig 79. My workbenches installed at GUS

Japanese woodworking saws and planes differ from their Western equivalents in that they work on the pull stroke rather than the push stroke. Instead of standing to work at a bench, most work is done seated or kneeling. Planing is done standing on a diagonal planing beam. I work seated on a tatami yoga mat when I saw or chisel. It has a brightly coloured motif of Mount Fuji on it. I think it is super-cheesy. It reminds me not to take anything too seriously.



Fig 80. Odate pictured working with a chisel in a seated position (Odate. 1998).



Fig 81. Odate pictured planing on a planing beam in a standing position (Odate. 1998).

Working with the wood, I am calm. I often lose time when planing or chiseling. Japanese workbenches are small and low on the ground. To make them, I had to chisel sliding dovetail joints. I didn't really get those right at all, but my workbenches are sturdy and level. Chiseling has made me aware of the edges of things. Ever since I made my benches, I spot the square-ness of sets of steps or breaks in the pavement. I am more aware of things around me that have been made. I am more interested in how the world was made. I pause to consider how well something has been made. I am pausing a lot.

A note on the wood I am using

I have in my possession a complete antique snooker table made of rosewood. It's something of a priceless antique but nobody in my family wants it. My mother has carted it around for decades. The table belonged to my grandmother's second husband. For my final exhibition, I am finding ways to use this wood to make things with mystical form in mind.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the Duchampian nominalist mode and spoke about guitars. I discussed my *Preparation Piece* at GUS and the personal history of some of the objects I used in the installation. I showed how I approached my installation as an attempt to create mystical form and how I think about what I'm doing now in relation

to current thinking and art historically. After discussing why performance is an important part of my practice, I provided notes on the tools and wood that I am using for my final exhibition and how the work I am making for that exhibition relates to the core focus of my study.

CONCLUSION

To answer my research question, **what is mystical form**, I discussed how I arrived at mystical form in my own work, specifically my first installation piece for this study *Auntie Doreen*, exhibited at GUS in August 2017. I identified examples of mystical form in Dan Rakgoathe and discussed the plastic and axiomatic significance of these ambivalent forms that inspire doubt with regards to artistic epistemology. After discussing Rosicrucian mysticism from a historical perspective, I showed how mystical form and ‘doubt’ in Descartes is relevant to current debates (Christov-Bakargiev) around the redefinition of artistic practice to reflect a definition of nature that is apposite today, showing examples from my own practice and that of other artists who define their practice this way. I discussed the approach to seeing and artistic perception of John Constable, wherein seeing is an act of perception that combines mysticism (“the Soul that sees”) imagination, scientific knowledge and artistic practice. I discussed how Constable’s way of seeing – which allows for mystical form as mode of analysis – is a way of understanding an approach to ontology (Badiou) that is capable of accounting for both the quantitative and qualitative nature of being, such that mystical form might be incorporated within a system of analysis that has exactitude in mind. Finally, I positioned my installation work for this study, *Preparation Piece* of 2018, as an immanentization of mystical form in opposition to the Duchampian nominalist mode as identified by Christov-Bakargiev. Discussing my recent sculpture, *Artist Unknown*, I showed how the Duchampian nominalist mode relies on a misinterpretation of Duchamp’s Ready-mades by a spiritually empty academic approach to art (Mancoba) that is easily refuted historically (Molderings). After discussing guitars and the role of performance in my work, I provided notes on some of the tools and the wood I am using to make work for my final exhibition. I have shown that mystical form is a core concern in my work and has been included within a tradition of seeing and artistic perception that has exactitude in mind.

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APPENDIX

On the Influence of transfinite arithmetic on non-objective painting

Introduction, Research Question

Artists and mathematicians have a common cultural history of contact tracing back to antiquity. In her recent book, *Mathematics and Art, a Cultural History*, Lynn Gamwell presents and interprets the historical evidence supporting this cultural history, particularly at zenith points in the development of artistic interpretation. The

historical evidence supports a larger argument that art and mathematics have enjoyed a shared developmental history. In this essay, I would like to highlight a specific point of contact between art and mathematics at the tail end of the 19th Century. This point of contact resulted in the artistic production of non-objective, formalist and plastic art throughout the 20th Century, a tradition that has bearing on my practise as a contemporary artist. The central question of this essay is **how did Georg Cantor's discovery of transfinite arithmetic influence the rise of non-objective painting in the early 20th century?** Throughout this essay I will relay the historical evidence supporting the argument that Malevich, Rodchenko and Mondrian came into contact with Cantor's discovery of transfinite arithmetic prior to embarking on the work associated with their contributions to 20th Century art history. I will show how each of these artists interpreted some of the ideas and concepts brought about by Cantor's discovery; and I will show how and why these interpretations differed.

Chapter 1

Georg Cantor and the discovery of transfinite arithmetic

In 1883, the German-born Russian mathematician Georg Cantor published his *Foundations of a General Theory of Manifolds*, “detailing a precise mathematical definition of the size of an infinite set” and “describing how to do arithmetic with infinite numbers” (Gamwell. 2016: 109). Cantor's transfinite arithmetic “arrived in the mathematics world as a completely new and surprising idea” (Gamwell. 2016: 109). It is an idea that has had far-reaching and divisive consequences on mathematics and, by extension, art throughout the 20th Century. Before presenting the historical information linking Cantor's mathematical discovery of transfinite arithmetic with the work of Malevich, Rodchenko and Mondrian, I'd like to spend a moment discussing the discovery itself, of which, Cantor wrote in 1884 that:

I am investigating the application of set theory to the study of organisms, to which we cannot apply traditional mechanical principles... For this we need new mathematical resources, which can essentially be found in the set theory that I have developed... The idea of a more precise explanation of the nature of all organic forms has occupied me for 14 years. It is the real reason [die eigentliche Veranlassung] why I have pursued this tedious and thankless investigation of set theory and why I never lost sight of it” (Gamwell. 2006: 132).

Without mathematics, exactitude is a matter of opinion. Mathematics is, as Gamwell writes in her introduction to *Mathematics and Art, a Cultural History*, “the international language of exact thought” (Gamwell. 2006: xi). The compunction to describe the natural world *exactly* and *precisely* is one that has occupied mathematicians and artists since antiquity. Whether describing form precisely, or presenting exacting explanations of natural phenomena, mathematicians and artists *from all corners of the earth*, have continually, in practise and in theory, meditated on both the greatest and the smallest questions posed to humanity. They have done so using numbers, lines, paint and meditation.⁸³

During the nineteenth century, scientists in Europe began to turn their attention to the micro-world of heat, light and electricity. To present exacting explanations of the nature of these phenomena, they needed to develop “new mathematical tools to describe another kind of moving phenomena – an oscillating wave” (Gamwell. 2016: 121). To understand *exactly* what happens when heat is transferred through a solid object, for instance when a frying pan is heated, the French mathematician and physicist Joseph Fourier defined a mathematical series that allowed for the analysis of complex phenomena based on oscillating waves. “Fourier showed that any complex wave pattern (such as the sound produced when playing a chord on a piano) can be analysed into “pure” waves (sounds produced by striking tuning forks).” He defined a

⁸³ In his essay *Suprematism*, Malevich writes that, “With the most primitive of means (charcoal, hog bristles, modeling sticks, catgut, and steel strings) the artist creates something which the most ingenious and efficient technology will never be able to create” (Bowlit 1976: 97).

mathematical series that “decomposes any periodic function” into a set of “simple oscillating functions of which the periodic function is composed” (Gamwell. 2006: 121). So, when a frying pan is heated, our ability to describe with mathematical precision the irregular pattern of that heat transfer *at any point*, requires a computation-heavy process by Fourier transformations, breaking the irregular heat transfer pattern into regular oscillating wave patterns that, in combination, allow us to exactly describe what is happening at any specific point in the heating or cooling down of the frying pan. Fourier transformations are notoriously computation-heavy. It was only with the invention of the computer, more than a hundred years later, that Fourier’s work was brought into practise.

It was while working on Fourier series that Cantor discovered transfinite arithmetic. Cantor, writes Gamwell, asked the question “When must two Fourier series be identical in every way?” (2006: 121). Gamwell continues: “His work on infinity – transfinite numbers and transfinite arithmetic – was a by-product of his study of the trigonometric functions related to this question” (Gamwell. 2016: 121). Cantor’s was a discovery that changed the way mathematicians and artists were able to look at the world. After Fourier and Cantor, and especially after the invention of the computer allowed for the vast computation necessary to do so, the ability of mathematicians to *analyse irregular forms and phenomena with exactitude* became a reality. The vast impact of these new mathematical tools on the development of science, mathematics and perception itself cannot be understated. While the impact of Cantor’s discovery on art, specifically painting in the early 20th Century, is perhaps less readily understood, the historical record clearly details a zenith point of contact between mathematics and art that catapulted painting into non-objective modes of expression still relevant today.

Chapter 2

Cantor and Suprematism

By the early 1900's, Georg Cantor's mathematical discovery of set theory and his work on infinite sets had spread to the thinking of avant-garde Russian literary and artistic circles. While Cantor's colleagues in German academia criticized his work on infinity, his "practise of mathematics, as well as his philosophical and theological views were welcomed in Moscow," particularly at the Moscow Mathematical Society under Nikolai Bugayev, president of the Society from 1891 to 1903 (Gamwell. 2016: 110). In 1904 Pavel Florensky, a young mathematician who enrolled as a student of Bugayev in 1900, published the first exposition in Russian of Cantor's *Transfinite Arithmetic*, "not in an academic journal but in a periodical of symbolist poetry" (Gamwell. 2006: 135). By 1911⁸⁴, Cantor's discovery of transfinite arithmetic had spread to the Russian avant-garde group *Triangle*, founded by neurologist and self-taught painter Nikolai Kulbin. *Triangle* included not only the painter Wassily Kandinsky but also the poet Aleksei Kruchenykh, originator of a language he coined "zaum" (Russian for "transrational") that "described a realm beyond common sense and mundane logic" (Gamwell. 2006: 137). In 1913, Kruchenykh wrote "*Dyr bul schyl*," an untranslatable arrangement of letters entirely in *zaum*. It was this poem that "inspired Malevich to develop a painterly counterpart to *zaum* that would describe his expanded vision of a transcendental realm" (Gamwell. 2016: 138).

Also in 1913, Malevich collaborated with Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov on a theater piece *Victory over the Sun*, which premiered in St. Petersburg to public and critical outrage. That "Malevich designed the costumes and sets, Khlebnikov wrote the preface to the libretto by Kruchenykh" (Gamwell. 2016: 140), which was entirely in *zaum*, confirms not only Malevich's contact with *zaum* but positions his relationship with the originators of *zaum* at the level of collaboration. It was in no small part through this collaboration "to destroy the archaic movement of thought according to the laws of causality" (Janacek, 1996: 111) that Malevich was spurred into non-objective painting, culminating in the thirty-nine "Suprematist" paintings he exhibited in December of 1915 at the famous *0.10* exhibition, including his *Black Square*, painted in the Russian spring of that year.

⁸⁴ The publication date of Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*

2.1 “Feeling, desert, perfection.”

Malevich’s interpretation of transfinite arithmetic

Having developed his interpretation of *zaum*, and by extension transfinite arithmetic, in painting between 1913 and 1915, Malevich exhibited the results of these attempts under the moniker of “Suprematism,” a term he would define for the remainder of his life, mostly in isolation. In 1927, he was allowed to leave Russia on an official journey to Germany to exhibit his paintings at the *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung*, taking with him the manuscript of his *Non-objective World*. Published in Germany in the same year, the manuscript contained two essays, the second of which, *Suprematism*, is an exposition of his ideas on non-objective painting. With the opening sentence of the essay, Malevich defines Suprematism:

Under Suprematism I understand the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art. (1964: 93).

Malevich’s interpretation of transfinite arithmetic, his interpretation of *zaum* in painting, is therefore a matter –above all else– of *feeling*. But what does Malevich mean when he speaks of feeling?

To the Supremacist, the appropriate means of representation is always the one which gives fullest possible expression to feeling as such and which ignores the familiar appearance of objects. Objectivity⁸⁵, in itself, is meaningless to him; the concepts of the conscious mind are worthless. Feeling is the determining factor... and thus art arrives at non-objective representation – at Suprematism (Malevich. 1964: 94).

Here Malevich places the world of objects in opposition to the “fullest possible expression of feeling.” The Supremacist must eschew the world of objects to arrive at

⁸⁵ Malevich uses “objectivity” in the sense of what we would term ‘naturalism’ or ‘representational’ today. He means literally, the use of recognizable forms in painting that correspond to “objects” like the figure, a violin, a mountain.

“non-objective representation.” To Malevich, even “the concepts of the conscious mind” should be discarded. “Feeling,” he stresses, “is the determining factor.” Feeling, in Malevich, is what remains once the world of objects *and* concepts generated by the mind in contact with those objects has been removed from the creative act.

It [Supremacism] reaches a "desert" in which nothing can be perceived but feeling. Everything which determined the objective-ideal structure of life and of "art" – ideas, concepts, and images – all this the artist has cast aside to heed pure feeling (Malevich. 1964: 94).

While Malevich admits that “the ascent to the heights of non-objective art is arduous and painful” (1964: 94) – the Suprematist must be willing to give up “everything we loved and by which we have lived” (ibid) – the underlying motivation is one that is “nevertheless rewarding.” (ibid) The “desert” is filled “with the spirit of non-objective sensation which pervades everything.” (ibid) In a surviving letter of January 1920 to Mikhail Matiushin, we are privy to the intensely private wonder that Malevich identified in his ‘desert’.

We must not miss a single movement or whisper of the perfection that is within us... Do you see the new infinity, which will become the new universe? If so, cast a keen glance because something remarkable will happen. I can already see it: a line has flashed by and millions of hands have grasped it, the hands of millions of egos of personal individualism; now see how everything has risen up and become established as the perfection of squares⁸⁶ ...” (Druitt. 2003: 238).

⁸⁶ In a footnote to this letter (2003: 239), Druitt writes that “Malevich was influenced by M. Gershenzon's book *The Threefold Image of Perfection* (1918), and incorporated “perfection” into his basic concepts.” According to the web page of the M. O. Gershenzon Archive at Tulane University, (<http://cdm16313.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p16313coll59>), Gershenzon (1869-1925) “was an important scholar and philosopher of Russia's Silver Age; a mystic, he believed in the power of the “cosmos” to bring unity to the world and happiness to the individual.” We can assume, therefore, that when Malevich speaks of “the perfection of squares,” he is influenced by Gershenzon's mystic ideals of unity and happiness.

Reinforcing publicly what he mentioned in private, Malevich writes in “Suprematism” about his *Black Suprematist Square*:

This was no "empty square" which I had exhibited but rather the feeling of non-objectivity (1964: 95).

When Malevich speaks of “feeling” then, we can connect to his terminology a delicate, mystical understanding of “perfection.” When he speaks of the “perfection of squares,” he is speaking not only of his own work of 1915, but of Supremacism, and by extension, all art that prioritizes “the spirit of non-objective sensation” above all else.

That Malevich’s was connected with spiritualism and the Absolute is well documented. Two installation photographs that survive show clearly the reverence Malevich reserved for his work of 1915. The first shows his *Black Suprematist Square* as installed during the *0.10* exhibition. The work is hung in the corner of the room, a place specifically reserved for the hanging of icons in the Russian Orthodox tradition. The second shows a version of *Black Square* hung on the wall above his deathbed in Leningrad, lying in state “in a variation on the display of the deceased in an Orthodox home, where the coffin points into the holy corner where the icon is hung” (Gamwell. 2016: 145). In Malevich, the journey from Cantor through Bugayev, Florensky and Kruchenykh is completed in a life’s work dedicated – at great personal cost – to the primary importance of *feeling*.

Chapter 3

Cantor and Russian Formalism

In 1921, Aleksandr Rodchenko painted *Red*, a monochrome, single-hued work as part of the exhibition $5 \times 5 = 25$. Rodchenko declared the paintings in the exhibition to be his last, saying:

I took painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvasses: red, blue and yellow, asserting that: Everything is over (Gamwell. 2016: 177).

What does Rodchenko mean with this assertion? It is easy to interpret Rodchenko's statements as nihilist: that, by 1921, his outlook on painting and art in general had become negative or lacking all hope. But to do so would be missing the triumphal aspect of this statement. $5 \times 5 = 25$ was the culmination of six years of considered work made with an emotionally neutral, formalist approach to visual art adopted by Rodchenko in 1915 when he moved to Moscow from Kazan. It was in Kazan that Rodchenko came into contact with the formalist approach, and where historical information points to contact between Rodchenko, formalist poetry and specifically, the transfinite arithmetic of Georg Cantor.

In the 1880s, at Kazan University, "the formalist approach in mathematics gained ground" (Gamwell. 2016: 167) after the publication of the first edition of collected works of Nikolai Lobachevsky. As a young mathematician, Lobachevsky had attempted to prove Euclid's fifth postulate (that parallel lines meet in infinity) by a proof of contradiction. Assuming the opposite of what he wanted to prove, i.e. that parallel lines *don't* meet in infinity, Lobachevsky – in stead of deriving contradiction – found himself "proving theorem after theorem in a self-consistent structure." (Gamwell, 2016, p155) Lobachevsky worked out the mathematics of a non-Euclidean geometry and published it in his *Imaginary Geometry* of 1826. The impact on geometry was titanic. Lobachevsky became an icon of local pride and Kazan developed as a centre for the study of non-Euclidean geometry. From Kazan, Lobachevsky had, at the age of 34, taken on a founding principle of geometry, and managed to dislodge it at its core. The parallel postulate had been law for almost two millennia. It was in this environment of giant slaying that Aleksander Mikhailovich

Rodchenko spent his formative years. His future impact on culture would be no less severe.

As with Malevich in Moscow, Rodchenko's introduction to mathematics in Kazan came from contact with Russian avant-garde literary circles. In 1914, Rodchenko attended lectures by David Burluik, the "father of Russian Futurism," and performances of the poems of futurist poet and artist Vladimir Mayakovski. Both Burluik and Mayakovski had been influenced by Velimir Khlebnikov, who had enrolled at the University of Kazan in 1903, becoming one of the first poets to adopt a formalist approach to language, according to Burluik "reducing poetry to its essence in self-spun words and sounds" (Gamwell. 2016: 172). Burluik, himself a painter, wrote two essays in 1912 extending Khlebnikov's approach to the visual arts, wherein he observed that "painters of his day were focusing on the essence of their medium" (Gamwell. 2016: 172). In "Cubism (Surface-Plane)" he writes that,

Painting has begun to pursue only painterly objectives. It has begun to live for itself (Bowl. 1976: 70).

Burluik's statement that painting lives for itself is central to a cogent interpretation of Rodchenko's 1921 paintings. But what exactly does Burluik mean? In viewing Cezanne, Burluik leaves us with this wonderful example of what he called "New Painting:"

The man deprived of a Painterly understanding of Nature will, when looking at Cezanne's landscape *The House*, understand it purely narratively: (1) "house" (2) mountains (3) trees (4) sky. Whereas for the artist, there existed I linear construction II surface construction (not fully realized) and III color orchestration. For the artist, there were certain lines going up and down, right and left, but there wasn't a house or trees . . . there were areas of certain color strength, of certain character. And that's all (Bowl. 1976: 74).

We can understand Burliuk's statement of painting living for itself as painting concerned with the formal elements under consideration in the act of painting. In "New Painting," these considerations are not subject to the "narrative" constraints imposed by the subject – depictions of objects like houses, mountains or trees. Freed from narrative constraints, "New Painting" may choose to concern itself with only the formal aspects of the act of painting itself. What are these aspects according to Burliuk?

It has been known for a long time that what is important is not the what, but the how, i.e., which principles, which objectives, guided the artist's creation of this or that work! It is essential to establish on the basis of which canon it (the work) arose! It is essential to reveal its painterly nature! It must be indicated what the aim in Nature was that the artist of the given picture was So attracted by. And the analysis of painterly phenomena will then be a Scientific criticism of the subject (Bowl. 1976: 75).

Here Burliuk continues his push away from the constraints of the subject matter of "Old Painting". In "New Painting" the subject is the formal "how" of painting itself. So much so that analyses of "New" paintings will be able to occur on a level reserved for scientific critique. In the same essay, Burliuk lists the criteria for such analysis. We can adopt these criteria as his foundations of "New Painting:"

The component elements into which the essential nature of painting can be broken down are:

I. line

II. surface

(for its mathematical conception see epigraph)

III. colour

IV. texture (the character of surface) (Bowl. 1976: 73).

If a painter is to be concerned with the “essence of his medium,” we can take it that according to Burliuk, that painter would be concerned with line, surface, colour and texture.

When coming into contact with Burliuk at the Kazan School of Fine Arts in 1914, Rodchenko, then, would have come into contact – through Burliuk’s links with Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh – with the same literary avant-garde that through contact inspired Malevich to create a painterly counterpart to *zaum*. But while Malevich in Moscow interpreted the transfinite arithmetic of Cantor through mysticism and *feeling*, Rodchenko’s approach, as manifested in the work in $5 \times 5 = 25$, remained decidedly secular and *analytical* in comparison. Rodchenko himself specifically linked his definition of line (Burliuk’s first component element of painting) to Cantor’s concept of the continuum in 1920 when he wrote:

The number of points located on an entire straight line is the same as a number of points on any of its sections; and this means that our entire universe, with all its endless planets, suns, Milky Ways – consists of the same number of points as any, even the smallest, section of a straight line. The entire universe could be created from a piece of straight line, just by placing the points in a different order (Gamwell. 2016: 175).

The influence of Cantor on Rodchenko then, occurs at the most basic level of Burliuk’s definition of Formalist priority. Where Cantor’s influence on Malevich leads to the rejection of the “objective” world, in search of a “desert” filled with universal “sensation” and “perfection,” Rodchenko *incorporates* Cantor’s transfinite understanding of the continuum *within his definition of line* as analytical tool.

With this tool in hand Rodchenko, between 1915 and 1921, systematically dissects from his work all elements that fail to adhere to the strict principles of “New Painting” as called for by Burliuk. In 1919, Malevich and Rodchenko are exhibited alongside each other at the *Tenth State Exhibition* in Moscow. While Malevich exhibits his series of white paintings including *White on White* of 1918, Rodchenko

has reduced his palette to blacks and greys, exhibiting *Non-Objective Painting no. 80 (Black on Black)*, also completed in 1918. While Malevich “saw *White on White* as a step on the road to Absolute Spirit; Rodchenko understood *Black on Black* as an arrangement of meaning-free forms” (Gamwell. 2016: 173). While Malevich’s statement for the exhibition speaks of “truth” and “eternity,⁸⁷” Rodchenko begins his brief statement by condemning everything that came before him, including Malevich’s Suprematism, as “dead truths”:

The downfall of all the "isms" of painting marked the beginning of my ascent. To the sound of the funeral bells of color painting, the last "ism" is accompanied on its way to eternal peace, the last love and hope collapse, and I leave the house of dead truths (Bowl. 1976: 149 -150).

He continues by proclaiming the superiority of analysis over “synthesis,” before positioning his work firmly removed from any influence outside of painting itself:

The motive power is not synthesis but invention (analysis). Painting is the body, creativity the spirit. My business is to create something new from painting, so examine what I practice practically. Literature and philosophy are for the specialists in these areas, but I am the inventor of new discoveries in painting (Bowl. 1976: 150).

By 1918, Rodchenko is not concerned with literary, philosophical, theological or mystical influences or interpretations of his work. He is, quite simply, an inventor of new discoveries. With his next sentence, Rodchenko essentially concludes his statement by comparing his “ascent” to the discovery of the New World:

Christopher Columbus was neither a writer nor a philosopher; he was merely the discoverer of new countries (Bowl. 1976: 151).

⁸⁷ Malevich writes in *Suprematism* that, “The blue of the sky has been conquered by the suprematist system, has been breached, and has passed into the white beyond as the true, real conception of eternity” (Bowl. 1976: 144).

By 1921, Rodchenko “reached the end of the formalist reduction by removing the last vestige of representation; his monochrome *Red* is nothing but itself” (Gamwell. 2016: 177). He had succeeded in “making art as a self-contained autonomous system” (Gamwell. 2016: 177). In the same year, Rodchenko removed painting itself from his output (although he “returned to easel painting⁸⁸” in the 1940s), joining the *Constructivist Working Group* as founding member, declaring “irreconcilable war against art” as “artists yesterday, constructors today”. By 1928, he Rodchenko had revolutionized photography, exclaiming in *Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot* that

Art has no place in modern life. It will continue to exist as long as there is a mania for the romantic and as long as there are people who love beautiful lies and deception. Every modern man must wage war against art, as against opium. Photograph and be photographed! (Bowl. 1976: 253).

By the time of his death in 1956, Rodchenko had applied his analytical tools to painting, design, topography, photography and sculpture, having “laid the foundation for formalist art to this day” (Gamwell. 2016: 177).

Chapter 4

Mondrian: “subjectivity, objectivity, contrast and intuition.”

Intuition enlightens and so links up with pure thought.
– Piet Mondrian (1964: 122).

Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art is regarded as “the most influential” of Piet Mondrian’s essays. It is “one of the few by any artist which “constructs a complete,

⁸⁸ (Bowl. 1976: 251)

integral aesthetic system” (Mondrian. 1964: 114). Originally published in the 1937 art book *Circle: International Survey of Constructivist Art*, Mondrian divides his essay into two parts. In *Part I*, Mondrian outlines his problem statement as follows:

The only problem in art is to achieve a balance between the subjective and the objective. But it is of the utmost importance that this problem should be solved, in the realm of plastic art –technically, as it were – and not in the realm of thought (1964: 115-116).

He continues to stress that the work of art “must be produced, constructed.” It is the task of the artist to “create as objective as possible a representation of forms and relations.” The only solution to the problem statement of art, according to Mondrian, is to *make art that achieves a balance between the subjective and the objective*. In *Part II*, Mondrian expands on the character of successful pure plastic art:

...it must contribute to revelation of the subjective and objective factors in mutual balance. Guided by intuition, it is possible to attain this end. The execution is of the greatest importance in the work of art; it is through this, in large part, that intuition manifests itself and creates the essence of the work (1964: 129).

But what does Mondrian mean by “subjective” and “objective?” And what does he mean by “intuition?” We find a direct definition of ‘subject’ in *Part II*:

For pure art then, the subject can never be an additional value, it is the line, the colour, and their relations which must ‘bring into play the whole sensual and intellectual register of the inner life...’ not the subject (Mondrian. 1964: 126).

The ‘subject’ of pure art for Mondrian, therefore is nothing but art itself, specifically the plastic or technical *formalist* considerations involved in the making of the work. In a narrow sense, Mondrian positions himself in close proximity with Burliuk and Rodchenko. Yet his system is more malleable than Rodchenko’s:

...we must carefully distinguish between two kinds of reality: one which has an individual and one which has a universal appearance... While universal reality arises from determinate relations, particular reality shows only veiled relations... The one is free, the other is tied to individual life, be it personal or collective. Subjective reality and relatively objective reality: this is the contrast (Mondrian. 1964: 127).

It is this “contrast” that continually feeds Mondrian’s problem statement – that the only problem in art is to achieve a balance between the subjective and the objective – and by extension the necessity to create art. Mondrian would say that Rodchenko, in jettisoning painting after 1921, has placed too much emphasis on the subjective, ignoring the objective reality or at the very least, neglecting to bring these two into realities into “mutual balance.” In fact, Mondrian writes that “in all art it is the artist’s task to make forms and colours living and capable of arousing emotion. If he makes art into an ‘algebraic equation’ that is no argument against the art, it only proves that he is not an artist” (Mondrian. 1964: 126). For, unlike Rodchenko, Mondrian is sensitive to the difference between what he terms “static” and “dynamic equilibrium.” In Mondrian, the balance between the subjective and the objective is *subject to time*:

Both science and art are discovering that time is a process of intensification, an evolution from the individual to the universal, of the subjective to the objective; toward the essence of things and of ourselves (1964: 117).

Furthermore, this process of intensification over time does not – in art – follow a linear progression or “static equilibrium:”

First and foremost there is [in abstract art] the fundamental law of dynamic equilibrium which is opposed to the static equilibrium necessitated by the particular form. The important task of art is to destroy the static equilibrium by establishing a dynamic one (Mondrian. 1964: 122).

Mondrian here re-affirms the necessity to make art *continually* to establish dynamic equilibrium over and above existant examples of static equilibrium. For Mondrian, there can be no “logical conclusion” to painting like there was for Rodchenko, for every painting – as “necessitated” by its “particular form,” exists merely as a static example of the fundamental law of dynamic equilibrium. When Mondrian speaks of “subjective” and “objective” then, we must understand him to mean not simply individual and universal realities, but a contrasting, dynamic equilibrium *over time* in accordance with the fundamental laws of nature. And it is *intuition* through the process of *making* that guides the artist towards the expression of *balance* between these realities.

But, as with so many of Mondrian’s terms, “intuition” is not of singular complexity. Placing man’s desire for destruction on a par with bad art, he writes that “in spite of world disorder, instinct and intuition are carrying humanity to a real equilibrium, but how much misery has been and is still being caused by primitive animal instinct. How many errors have been and are being committed through vague and confused intuition? Art certainly shows this clearly” (Mondrian. 1964: 120-121). Artists should, according to Mondrian, cultivate “conscious” intuition lest they create “vague and confused” expressions of the balance between subjective and objective realities.

4.1 Mondrian and the intuitionist mathematics of L.E.J. Brouwer

The interchanges between mathematics and the arts are generally one-sided in the sense that they are almost always a case of an artist finding inspiration in mathematics, and not vice versa. This is a rare exception in which the architect Brunelleschi invented linear perspective, after which the mathematicians Poncelet and Brouwer generalized perspective into projective geometry and topology (Gamwell. 2016: 233).

In 1812, the French mathematician and engineer Jean-Victor Poncelet was left for dead by the retreating Napoleonic army. Recovering in a Moscow prison camp, Poncelet passed the time occupying his mind by “generalizing linear perspective into projective geometry” (Gamwell. 2016: 229). He asked “what each object had in common with its projection.” Poncelet considered not only projections onto an upright, Renaissance picture plane perpendicular to the horizon, but also planes that are tipped or rotated. He noticed that “a straight line always casts a straight line, although the length is not preserved,” publishing his results in his *Treatise on the projective properties of figures* in 1822. Between 1909 and 1913, the pre-eminent 20th Century Dutch mathematician L.E.J. Brouwer, “turned his attention from philosophical speculation to the practise of mathematics” (Gamwell. 2016: 229) to generalize Poncelet’s projective geometry onto “surfaces that are stretched or distorted into any shape – so-called rubber sheet geometry,” founding topology, a study that has become a major branch of mathematics.

Brouwer came to prominence during the early 20th Century by tabling a minority position called “Intuitionism” throughout the debates on the foundations of mathematics that followed the disarray caused by Cantor’s continuum hypothesis and Lobachevsky and Gauss’s discovery of non-Euclidean geometry. As mathematicians “were forced to reexamine the foundations of their science” (Gamwell. 2016: 197), Brouwer’s often ridiculed position nonetheless managed to expose faultlines in the essential axiomatics of mathematical systems that continue to cause fissures to this day. Brouwer was a student of the mathematician Gerrit Mannoury, who “professed a mystical pantheist vision of an organic cosmos culminating in Hegel’s Absolute Spirit” (Gamwell. 2016: 227). Drawn to Eastern thought, Mannoury published a book in 1907 “comparing Absolute Spirit with the cosmic spirit of the Buddhist Brahma” (Gamwell. 2016: 228). Brouwer accompanied Mannoury to discussions at the “Dutch Walden,” a countryside commune for artists, intellectuals, physicians and mathematicians found by the psychiatrist and writer Frederik van Eeden. The influence of Mannoury, and van Eeden’s Dutch Walden on Brouwer’s thinking was formative.

While still a graduate student, Brouwer bought a piece of land outside Amsterdam, adopted an ascetic lifestyle, “exercised vigorously, ate a vegetarian diet, and dedicated a period each day to silent meditation” (Gamwell. 2016: 228) thinking about numbers, “a practise that became central to intuitionism” (Gamwell 2016: 225). From his cottage, Brouwer engaged in philosophical thought and the practise of mathematics. On intuition, he wrote that,

Proper to man is a faculty which accompanies all his interactions with nature, namely the faculty of taking a mathematical view of his life... The basic phenomenon therein is the simple intuition of time, in which repetition is possible in the form: ‘thing in time and again thing,’ as a consequence of which moments of life break up into sequences of things which differ qualitatively. These sequences thereupon concentrate in the intellect in mathematical sequences (Gamwell. 2016: 229).

For Brouwer, *intuition* is intrinsically linked with man’s understanding of time. He called it the “primordial intuition of time,” a realization that comes when lost in pure thought, “without the aid of words or symbols” (Gamwell. 2016: 229). It is then that the mind begins “its transition from its deepest home to the exterior world in which we cooperate and seek mutual understanding” (Gamwell. 2016: 229). Brouwer’s method of doing mathematics “was to return to that ‘state of stillness’ where he explored, in silent meditation, the order and pattern of numbers” (Gamwell. 2016: 229).

One such ordered pattern, detailed in an address of 1923 *On the significance of the principle of excluded middle in mathematics, especially in function theory* “shows how several important results of classical analysis become unjustified once the law of excluded middle is abandoned” (van Heijenoort. 1967: 334). In fact, using a single equation, Brouwer exposes classical analysis over infinity as *infinitely* incomplete:

“Let $c_v = (-\frac{1}{2})^v$; then the infinite sequence c_1, c_2, c_3, \dots defines a real number r for which none of the conditions $r = 0$, $r > 0$, or $r < 0$ holds” (van Heijenoort. 1967: 337).⁸⁹

Brouwer’s critique of the tools of classical analysis did not go unnoticed in the world of mathematics. In *The Foundations of Mathematics*, David Hilbert responds furiously to Brouwer:

I am astonished that a mathematician should doubt that the principle of excluded middle is strictly valid as a mode of inference. I am even more astonished that, as it seems, a whole community of mathematicians who do the same has so constituted itself. I am most astonished by the fact that even in mathematical circles the power of suggestion of a single man, however full of temperament and inventiveness, is capable of having the most improbable and eccentric effects. (van Heijenoort, 1976, p476)

However vilified in mathematical circles, Brouwer’s thinking continued to influence Dutch intellectual circles in the early 20th Century. One such individual was M.H.J. Schoenmakers, “a student of theology who was ordained into the Catholic clergy in 1909. But within two years... had dissolved his vows and was searching for a new spiritual outlook” (Gamwell. 2016: 234). Schoenmakers was invited by Van Eeden’s to the Dutch Walden to “help create the universal language that he called ‘Significs’”. After Brouwer himself joined the group, they set about creating a basic language of new words that they called Intuitive Significs. “Intuitive Significs,” wrote Brouwer in an introduction to a lecture by van Eeden, “concerns itself with the creation of new words forming a code of basic means of mutual understanding for the systematic activities of a new and holier society” (Gamwell. 2016: 234).

⁸⁹ The law of excluded middle states that either a proposition is true *or* its negation is true. Its earliest known formulation is by Aristotle in *On Interpretation*. However, the abandonment of the law is central to an understanding of mystical forms in mathematical systems of thought spanning multiple civilizations since antiquity, including Egyptian and Pythagorean mystic cults as detailed by Gamwell.

During the same period (1915-1916), while revising his essay *Neo-plasticism in Painting*, Piet Mondrian “met Schoenmakers, who was his neighbor in Laren... soon adopted Schoenmakers’s spiritual interpretation of the forces of nature as well as his horizontal and vertical lines” (Gamwell. 2016: 239-240). It was Schoenmakers, continues Gamwell, who “was the bridge from Brouwer to Mondrian, who also put his faith in intuition and meditation” (2016: 240).

We can surmise then that Mondrian’s use of “considered intuition” is closely related to that of Brouwer. Gamwell concludes that “Mondrian’s art, like Brouwer’s philosophy of mathematics, remained firmly rooted in German Romanticism, with its antagonism to analytic rationalism and trust in intuition” (Gamwell. 2016: 246) The striking similarity between Mondrian’s thinking and that of Brouwer is clear in the following passage:

Only he who recognizes that he has nothing, that he cannot possess anything, that absolute certainty is unattainable, who completely resigns himself and sacrifices all, who gives everything, who does not know anything, who does not want anything and does not want to know anything, who abandons and neglects everything, he will receive all.

– L.E.J. Brouwer, *Life, Art, and Mysticism*, 1905 (Gamwell. 2016: 255).

Perhaps, to follow Brouwer, even with mathematics, exactitude is a matter of opinion. It might even be the case that exactitude falls squarely within the realm of art.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown that mathematics and art have a shared cultural history. Having first presented historical information proving contact between the mathematical ideas of Georg Cantor and the art of Malevich, Rodchenko and Mondrian, I have shown the influence of the discovery of transfinite arithmetic on 20th century painting, specifically abstraction and non-objective painting. I have interpreted primary sources from within the art-historical canon, identifying specific terms and defining them precisely in a mathematical context.