

# CAPE MONGO



FRANCOIS KNOETZE

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FRANCOIS KNOETZE

A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Fine Art  
Michaelis School of Fine Art  
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INTRODUCTION



*Cape Mongo*<sup>1</sup> is an anti-fable to the mythologies of Cape Town's consumer culture. This anti-fable takes shape through an amalgamation of sculptural, performative and video-montage processes, culminating in five films. Each of these films follows a different *Mongo* character as it journeys through various urban spaces. Throughout these journeys, the project attempts to construct a form of social commentary on the current spatial, economic and political conditions of the city by exploring the variety of possible contexts and urban spaces that these discarded objects may have inhabited during their life cycles.

This process has also involved a great deal of reflection on my personal entanglement with the conditions of living and consuming in the city. The journeys of the commodities that I consume and discard on a daily basis can be traced to reveal the intricate economic networks which underpin the consumer culture of Cape Town. The recyclable packaging of consumer goods is presented as mnemonic vessels of interconnectedness which expose the relationship between myself and the spaces and lives these objects inhabit. As the films follow the *Mongo* characters through various cityscapes, their journeys conjure up imagery relating both to my childhood as well as to several of the historical trajectories that have lead up to the endemic inequality<sup>2</sup> and social alienation which characterise present day Cape Town.

The first film, featuring the *VHS* character, acts as a prelude to the project and introduces the inter-disciplinary nature of the work. Constructed from melted and unravelled *VHS* tapes, the character acts as a kind of physical embodiment of the interplay between the various media I employ.

The film also features a selection of clips from my own childhood home-videos, introducing the splicing of found footage throughout the other films. These four films each feature a unique recyclable packaging *Mongo* character; namely: *Glass, Paper, Plastic* and *Metal*. These characters have grotesque<sup>3</sup>, animal-like features and are present-day evocations of the creatures that inhabited the television programs, cartoons, toys, video-games and stories of my childhood. The films show each of the four characters embarking on a journey across the cityscape, retracing the material processes which are responsible for the objects each sculptural suit is composed of.

I have sought to re-examine personal and urban histories that are intertwined with discarded and reclaimed materials by sculpturally restructuring these objects into wearable suits for performance. The filmed documentation of these performances has been arranged into separate narratives where these journeys are intercut with found footage from Youtube which relates thematically to each specific material. In the same way that the city's garbage dumps are relegated to the hidden outskirts, the course of the city's history often lies obscured by a spectacle which promotes luxury, conspicuous consumption and material excess. From behind the sanitised facade of the city's clean streets, tourist brochures, and public monuments, the project seeks to emerge as a counter-history which recounts the stories of its waste. By regarding and presenting these consumer objects as cumulative products of a long series of hidden processes, I am attempting to counteract the disavowal and un-remembering that is inherent in the act of throwing something away. In this sense, I hope to render visible the network of (often exploitative) processes in which I – as a consumer in a position of historical privilege – am complicit.

<sup>3</sup> In what is widely considered the most comprehensive study of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser (1966: 184) notes that 'the grotesque is a structure' and can be summed up as the 'the estranged world'. My use of the grotesque will be further explored in Chapter Two.

<sup>1</sup> *Mongo* n. slang. object thrown away and then recovered (Vergine 2007: 6). *Mongo* is also the name of a fictional planet on which the comic strip *Flash Gordon* (1934) is set. Reference is made to this planet throughout the films.

<sup>2</sup> Liebrandt (in Hallows 2014: 7) notes that 'between 2000 and 2008, the richest 10% of South Africans increased their share of income at the expense of everyone else'.



Video still from *Cape Mongo (VHS)*, 2015



*Cape Mongo (Plastic)*, 2015  
Photo by Anton Scholtz

My exploration of the 'lives' of pieces of recyclable packaging aims to generate an alternative imagining both of the city and of my own identity; one in which the waste hidden beneath consumerism's glossy facade is more fully recognised and incorporated into my understanding of the cultural landscape I inhabit.

Chapter one attempts to situate the project within the historical context of Cape Town as a globalised hub of consumption and also as a space which has been significant in the formation of my own identity. I provide a brief look at historical incidences in which the urban poor have been equated with notions of waste – a problematic metaphor which I explore in my work. I also look at the genealogy of space in terms of the 'layering and relayering' of historical influences and how the 'city space is contained and managed, presented and represented' (Bank & Minkley 1999: 11). I propose the idea that the way in which the city has given shape to my identity is mirrored by my project – which is also engaged in a process of shaping and imagining the city in order to suggest alternative representations of space, as well as challenge conventional or monumental accounts of history.

Chapter two looks at various types of interconnectedness between the media and materiality used in the project. Here I explore the materiality of consumer packaging as something which simultaneously separates and connects; conceals its contents whilst drawing attention to itself; and exists in a paradoxical state of permanent fluidity and ambiguity because of the myriad contexts and value systems it both inhabits and moves through. I also consider the significance of the interplay created between the live, the everyday, the performative<sup>4</sup> act and the recorded, while outlining the various media employed in the making of *Cape Mongo*.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler (1997: 8) describes the performative as a set of behaviors and gestures - taking place within the regulations and constraints of power structures - that contribute to the formation of identity.

Chapter three looks more specifically at the body of work in terms of its engagement with the historical and theoretical context outlined in Chapter one and two. Here I discuss in closer detail some of the aesthetic and stylistic choices I have made, and outline the methods I have employed by referring to specific examples in the work. I also make reference to specific thematic and social issues engaged with in each film.

By sculpturally appropriating objects deemed useless, obsolete or out of date, into performative enactment – a form that itself originates and disappears within the fleeting present – the work aims to redramatise what Zygmunt Bauman terms, the 'steadily shortening distance between the fragrance of novelty and the odor of the rubbish bin' (2008: 188). The acceleration of this willingness to discard unwanted matter is mirrored, as Achille Mbembe (in Pithouse 2012: 1) notes, in the hurriedness with which human beings are rendered waste in South Africa by the 'interface of racism and capitalism'. Apartheid's residual boundaries of socio-spatial exclusion between a populace treated as surplus and an affluent consumer class remain highly visible and geographically defined in Cape Town. *Cape Mongo* attempts to retrieve life from the city's growing dumps of consumer culture by rendering the rigid margins which separate and classify spaces, objects and people more permeable. To me, reclaiming ownership of trash quite literally means acknowledging the entanglement of my identity within the exploitation and wastefulness underlying the historical formation of Cape Town's consumer culture. My aim is to redefine garbage as something which is not dirty or dangerous, but rather as something which is inextricably linked to one's identity and which has inherent value in the powerful scope its amorphousness allows for reorganisation and redefinition.







## CHAPTER ONE

**OF TIME AND THE CITY: SITUATING CAPE MONGO WITHIN A SPATIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

## Cape Town and the Mythology of Consumerism

At the beginning of 2013 I returned to Cape Town, my birthplace, after twenty years spent living and studying in Grahamstown; a period that roughly coincides with the country's 'twenty years of democracy'<sup>1</sup>. The experience of reflecting on this cleft in time has evoked feelings of nostalgia and disquiet, both from a consideration of the various selves I have since shed, and in the knowledge of the undeniable position of privilege my whiteness enables me to continue to inhabit. This process of reflection has prompted me to explore the formation of my identity and the environment I inhabit by studying the evolution of Cape Town's social circumstances. Just as the discarded packaging of a product can be traced back to its source, so too my identity remains historically inseparable from the centuries of injustice, suffering and racial prejudice that have shaped present-day Cape Town.

While my project is concerned with the ways in which my identity has been shaped by the city through my entanglement in its intricate networks of commodification, it also attempts to highlight the notion that cities are not simply material or lived spaces; they are also 'spaces of the imagination and spaces of representation' (Bridge & Watson 2000: 1). Just as discarded objects have the potential to be reassigned meaning, I see both myself and the city as subject to open-ended processes of becoming<sup>2</sup>; as organisms which are the sum total of millions of outwardly invisible processes – consuming, shedding and shifting over time. In this way *Cape Mongo* is a fluid, alternate account of Cape Town's history; one

which reinforces neither 'the glossy tourist brochure image of the multicultural city nor the ahistorical description of Cape Town as simply a violent, racist and un-African city' (Field & Swanson 2007: 7). Instead it attempts to re-look at and reimagine a non-hierarchical, shifting notion of the city and the processes which underpin it.

On the one hand, the project attempts to construct a counter-discourse to that of the utopian consumer city; a denunciation of excess through the construction of a mythology focused on the lives of discarded objects. Rather than looking at waste in isolation, the project explores garbage as a necessary by-product of the intricate cycles of capitalist modes of production, consumption and excretion. By focussing on how my own identity is informed by consumer culture, the work explores the claim that by 'reconnecting locations of production, networks of distribution and acts of consumption, the alienating effects of modern capitalism can be exposed' (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke & Malpass 2011: 2). Similar to my exploration of waste as something that fits into broader systems, I have employed a range of interconnecting media throughout the project; challenging notions surrounding the materiality of waste through sculpture; performing in various spaces relating to these objects; and using film to condense the separations of space and time which ordinarily ensure that these networks remain isolated and uncontested.

On the other hand, the project is self-consciously steeped in contradiction. Just as I am very much dependent on the processes of consumption and accumulation which I denounce, so Cape Town's consumer culture of excess requires its denunciation for the mythology to be complete. Baudrillard (1998: 193-196) asserts that

Consumption is a myth. [...] Our society thinks itself and speaks itself as a consumer society. As much as it consumes anything, it consumes itself as consumer society, as idea. [...] Like every great myth worth its

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<sup>1</sup> A popular phrase used extensively by the mass media and political parties during the National Election campaigns in celebration of the fall of the apartheid regime.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze (1995:171), who was particularly concerned with notions of Becoming, notes that 'History amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to 'become,' that is, to create something new'.

salt, the myth of 'Consumption' has its discourse and its anti-discourse [...] it is the critical mirage, the anti-fable which rounds off the fable – the discourse of consumption and its critical undermining. *Only the two sides taken together constitute the myth.*

In this sense, *Cape Mongo* could be seen as an anti-fable – a dirty reply to the monotony of mall-culture and lifestyle magazines which seek to normalise existing structures. Throughout various stages of producing the work, I have explored how the elaborate mythologies of my youth have

transformed, adapted and readjusted in order to accommodate and help in navigating my present-day understanding of the city. As if in conversation with my five year old self, the project has served as a re-entry point into the numerous and often perplexing set of contradictions which I continue to inhabit. Here, the project's expression of nostalgia does not speak of a desire to relive the blissful ignorance of my youth, but aims rather to critique the obliteration of history through the reconstruction of residual images, memories and narratives – forming what Boym refers to as 'a private or collective mythology' (2002: 152).



*Cape Mongo (Metal)*, 2015  
Photo by Anton Scholtz



*Cape Mingo (Paper)*, 2015  
Photo by Anton Scholtz

The mythological cityscape of *Cape Mongo* is both a reimagining of Cape Town's waste adopting the epic status of its monumental history, as well as a nostalgic restructuring of fragments of my past in order to reach a new understanding of the city in which I was born, and presently live in.

In order to articulate *Cape Mongo's* own limits in constructing a meaningful critique of consumer society, I have tried to acknowledge that the project is perhaps in part driven by a misdirected desire for coherence, and that 'such senses of self and identity are only attainable through myths' (Field & Swanson 2007: 10), or what Samuel and Thompson (1990) refer to as 'self sustaining myths' or 'the myths we live by'. While much of the project focusses on the process of looking back and coming to terms with the injustices of the past, it is also a dystopian imagining of the future; one in which the wastefulness dragged in the wake of consumerism catches up to even the most sheltered corner of the city. Chrostowska (2010: 52) notes that

If our struggles abroad, our self-preservation and self discovery, solidify our self, or multiply it as they did Odysseus's, then our homecoming is a flight into fluidity or else a shedding of selves. We should arrive vulnerable, not ourselves, as if never having been exposed to the tempest of the elements or confronted with alterity. The self is a journey homeward, the homely return ever beyond the horizon.

Although *Oikos* – the ancient Greek equivalent of a household, house or family – serves as the root of the English words *ecology* and *economy*, the modern middle-to-upper-income household in Cape Town resembles neither an ecology nor an economy (O'Hara 2010), but rather a locality for consumption and the pursuit of comfort. Food and goods enter the household from a combination of faraway mines, mills, refineries and factories which no consumer is ever likely to see, and waste is sent away to places which are even less prone to visitation.

The story of Odysseus' arduous voyage home provides a useful metaphor for the process of remembering childhood, as well as for the winding journeys that the characters of *Cape Mongo* take around the city. This mythological sea voyage also makes reference to Cape Town's complex maritime history, which is inextricably bound up with notions of trade, economy and historical consumer culture. While every economic process is dependent on nature, both for the input of raw material and as basins for the disposal of waste generated, neither of these occur within the modern domestic sphere (O'Hara 2010: 87). By allowing for the disconnection between our lifestyles and the economic and ecologic processes which sustain them, we subconsciously submit to a system that 'disregards environmental and human factors at virtually every level of aggregation' (O'Hara 2010: 85). Beginning to reimagine the commodities we consume and the waste we generate as delicate bonds of *interconnectedness*<sup>3</sup> is a vital step towards reclaiming this power and mending the historical fractures which continue to separate and alienate people from the environment and one another. *Cape Mongo* produces an interplay between various elements of the city – media, histories, people, places and things – and in doing so attempts to retrace the interconnectedness of order and disorder, affliction and wellbeing, skyscrapers and shacks, value and waste.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter van Wyck (2005: xi vii) notes that *interconnectedness* is a premise which 'allows the very possibility of contesting practices that are geographically and temporally remote or that otherwise appear to be causally unrelated. Interconnectedness allows us to build up a picture of interactions and allows this picture to be superimposed on historical, industrial and consumer practices that are otherwise construed as unrelated'.

## The Feast Is Ended (But The Odor Lingers On): Retracing the Residue of Cape Town's History of Waste

Situated on the continent's Southern Tip, which drives a mountainous wedge between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, Cape Town is at once a geographically isolated, enclosed and accessible space. As a sea port it has been the site of trade, convergence, contrast and integration for hundreds of years. It is a point at which all the world seems to collide; as the traditional homeland of 'the first people' the Khoi and San, as a 'historical "halfway station" between west and east' (Field & Swanson 2007: 4), and as an investment-friendly tourist hub. However, Cape Town's vibrant multicultural makeup and remarkable scenic beauty masks a brutal underbelly of poverty and marginalisation, as well as a history of displacement, subjugation and racial separation. Although certain efforts have recently been made to correct the injustices brought about by colonial and apartheid rule through Integrated Development Plans<sup>4</sup> (IDPs), the degree of inequality created by apartheid city planning and colonial rule has continued to grow over the past twenty years. Hofisi notes that IDPs 'were found [by the 2001 Ministerial Advisory Committee] to be mere shopping lists, instead of being a framework for a strategic

<sup>4</sup> A method developed by Local municipalities in South Africa to plan future development in their areas. Hofisi (2012: 68) notes that 'The South African Constitution of 1996 provides for a new developmental mandate for local government, with the Municipal Systems Act of 2001 requiring municipalities to come up with IDPs for strategic, inclusive, responsive, and performance-driven municipal governance'.

long-term vision for the development of municipalities' (2012: 68).

This growing gap between rich and poor – exemplified by the heights of skyrocketing property value and the depths of the city's longdrops – is paralleled by the growing mounds of garbage which lie scattered around the city's peripheries. While the fall of apartheid may have lifted the legal racial bias that prevented the majority of the population from entering the economy, it did little to dismantle the economic structures which are grounded in the exploitation of labour, resources and the production of waste. Chakrabarty (in Bank & Minkley 1999: 12) argues that the very concept of modernity is structurally based on 'the twin phenomena of mass consumerism and mass poverty', suggesting that the urban slum is not just simply a glitch in the system of modernity, but rather 'its "uncanny realism" as much as the boulevards and civic centres' (Bank & Minkley 1999: 12). By the same measure, although garbage is rendered invisible within the confines of a bin and on the outskirts of the city, it remains intimately connected to who we are.

In the following section I will retrace some of the historical origins of Cape Town's socio-spatial layout which continues to facilitate the discriminatory systems implemented by the city's neoliberal post-apartheid regime. In doing so, I hope to complicate the grand narratives of liberation and reconciliation, by highlighting how various cycles of exploitation, discrimination and waste have remained largely uninterrupted since the fall of apartheid. Despite the popular portrayal of apartheid's demise as a point of total rupture from previous systems of oppression, the country's transition into democracy has in many ways failed to address the injustices of the past. This section will look specifically at the relationship between the range of anxieties and fascinations attributed to both trash and the urban poor; in terms of issues surrounding spatiality, commodification, sanitisation and security.



## The Urban Spatiality of Waste

The urban landscape of post-apartheid Cape Town continues to display a spatial polarisation which is 'dominated by the juxtaposition of centrally located affluent suburbs and economic centres alongside poverty-stricken and overcrowded settlements on the city edges' (Lemanski 2004: 103). This geographical marginalisation, or 'fringe effect'<sup>5</sup>, of seemingly unwanted people is mirrored in the treatment of the city's garbage, which is swept out of sight of economic centers and scenic tourist attractions to ensure that the cycles of consumption continue unabated by the build up of waste. As David Hallows and Victor Munnik (2008: 179) note:

The system that makes waste of people and their environments is now making waste of itself. The competition between cities for investment in conspicuous consumption has excluded investment in waste and in the poor. Landfills and incinerators represent large investments but these are investments which destroy local property values. The presence of poor people is likewise destructive of value in the consumption city. The politics of this economy is therefore to expel both poor people and waste to the city margins – within reach but out of sight. The making of poverty and the making of waste are necessarily complimentary and those made poor must live in the environmental waste lands created by capital.

The characters of *Cape Mongo* function as intermediaries between polarised spaces which are purposefully kept separate in order to render the excesses of consumption tolerable. As they travel between the

rigidly separated spheres of production, consumption and disposal of waste, their journeys also come to represent a quiet struggle against the erasure of the histories connected to the spaces they navigate. This is demonstrated, for example, in the *Glass* film, which connects the opulence of the wine-tasting farm to both current and historical injustices related to labour conditions in the Cape vineyards; and in the *Paper* film, which looks at the spatial patterning of Cape Town's residential areas by framing present-day instances of forced removals and relocations through the lens of the past. In this instance, I compare contemporary examples such as the 2014 evictions of Lwandle shack-dwellers to historical examples such as the ambitious process of racial rezoning through the implementation of the Group Areas Act (No.41 of 1950)<sup>6</sup>.

As the characters of *Cape Mongo* retrace their journeys through spheres of production and consumption, they act as agents for mending the severance caused by discarding something and forcing it out of sight. The project aims to bring spaces relating to various material processes into dialogue with each other in order to highlight historical injustices which persist into the present, and also to produce an incriminating proximity between an act of wastefulness and its distant repercussions.

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<sup>6</sup> The most notable example of the uprooting and relocating of communities during this period is the destruction of District Six and the forced relocation of its residents from the elevated foothills of Table Mountain to the lower lying Cape Flats.

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<sup>5</sup> A term used by archaeologists to describe the expulsion of garbage to the edge of an occupied space. In *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (1992), William Rathje and Cullen Murphy note that archaeological excavations of ancient living surfaces have suggested that bits of garbage that fell on the floor were brushed into corners, trampled into the dirt, and later covered with fresh layers of clay.





Video still from *Cape Mongo (Metal)*, 2015



Video still from *Cape Mongo (Plastic)*, 2015



Video still from *Cape Mongo (Paper)*, 2015



Video still from *Cape Mongo (Glass)*, 2015

## Marketing the marginalised

Cape Town today, twenty years after Apartheid, forms part of a ‘chaotically pluralistic postcolony’ (Mbembe in Comaroff & Comaroff 2001: 634). After old systems buckled under the global demand for democracy in the 1990’s, the surfacing of the new South Africa signalled the country’s ‘political coming of age’ in the form ‘of neoliberal global capitalism’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001: 633). This revolution bore the promise of social cohesion, the protection of human rights, greater equality, and the celebration of diversity. This celebration of diversity has in turn created a set of conditions in which South Africa is faced with the conundrum of either continuing economic growth through the maintenance of essentialised forms of culture, or rupturing entirely as a result of the high ‘level of abstraction at which it exists’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001: 634-635). Just as some cultural identities are moulded for consumption due to their uniqueness – becoming ‘yet another possession [...] to be patented, made into intellectual property, merchandised [and] consumed’ – others are marketed according to the assumed

homogeneity which they seemingly represent. Richard Pithouse (2012: 1) argues that,

today, as in the past, human beings become objects to others, either invisible or hyperpresent, their faces distorted into caricature or worn into nothingness by the enduring weight of the economic, spatial and symbolic division of the world [...] One of the categories of people whose sociological existence as a class is still routinely, and without scandal, assumed, in public discourse, to imply a particular ontological existence is the urban poor.

This assumed ontological existence of the urban poor not only played a vital role in the build up to institutionalising forms of racial exclusion which culminated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but continues to occur within the media and current public discourse. Furthermore, the processes of essentialisation and aestheticisation which are at play also allow the marketing of marginalised communities as ‘exoticism for tourism consumption, in township tours<sup>7</sup> and coffee table, township picture books’ to take place (Mirafab 2007: 616).

<sup>7</sup> The township-tourism industry attracts over 300 000 visitors each year (Rolfe 2009: 421).



Video still from *Cape Mongo (Metal)*, 2015

Through this lens, my performative engagement with marginalised communities could perhaps be described as superficial and intrusive. As a privileged person entering and engaging with a multitude of spaces without invitation, filming these interactions and presenting the work on an elitist platform such as the University of Cape Town Masters of Fine Art program, the project risks contributing to the very cycles of consumption it attempts to critique.

In acknowledging this problematic dynamic, I have endeavoured to counteract the mechanisms of this unbalanced exchange by providing historical context to my interventions and highlighting some of the historical and economical factors responsible for the marginalisation and essentialisation of South African townships and informal settlements. I have done so by visiting a range of spaces relating to the materiality of each *Mongo* suit, presenting the performances in these spaces within broader spatial and historical contexts, rather than as neatly isolated and framed fragments for the viewer to consume. However, although visiting a broad socio-economic range of spaces reduces marginalisation and unfair representation, this does not necessarily offset the physical, aesthetic, spatial, and ideological intrusiveness of the performance itself.

By approaching my interventions in these spaces as a disguised player in an interactive performative event which is visibly video-recorded instead of as a tourist or viewer, I have attempted to make reference to my own alienness and 'out-of-placeness' within these spaces: an inherited alienness; a remnant from a racially segregated past. However, I hope also to highlight the connectedness of these spaces to my history and the formation of my past and identity as part of the broader landscape of the Cape; to resist notions of essentialised forms of culture which exist in mutual exclusivity from one another. The performance events are premised on unpredictability and improvised exchanges in

which viewers<sup>8</sup> are positioned not as passive bystanders, providing a backdrop to the action, but rather as incidental participants able to engage with the performance in a way that is not mediated or bound by social conventions (participants can simply leave and are not confined by a formal space), but rather brought forth by the experience of the intrusion of the grotesque in the everyday moment.

### Sanitising and Securing the City

The structural transition from colonial town to modern city occurred in the final decades of the nineteenth century, as thousands of migrants flooded into Cape Town. While this influx of people caused an increase in the city's economic activity, it also brought with it new challenges to governance and infrastructure. The creation of Ndabeni, the city's first African township, during an outbreak of bubonic plague in 1901 marks a defining moment in the shift toward establishing residential segregation along racial lines (Bank & Minkley 1999: 7). Maynard Swanson was the first to emphasise the 'sanitation syndrome' as a major strand in the evolution of urban apartheid, noting that the threat of epidemic outbreak often serves as a 'dramatic and compelling opportunity for those [...] promoting segregationist solutions to social problems' (1977: 387). Though advances in medicine throughout the twentieth century largely defused this threat, the persisting depiction of African shanty towns as 'places of ill fame peopled by women and men of evil repute' (Fanon 1976: 103) succeeds in maintaining the spatial fractures of the past.

The 'sanitation syndrome' has since been replaced by a type of 'security syndrome', with middle class fears steadily shifting focus toward the perceived threat of 'black crime' from the city's townships. Notions of

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<sup>8</sup> From now on I will refer to viewers of the public performances as 'viewer-participants' in an attempt to highlight the interactive nature of the interventions.

security are explored in a number of ways in the project, though most notably in the film following the journey of the *Metal* character. In this film the character visits various sites in which power is connected to the ability to oversee or to gaze, such as the Castle of Good Hope and Table Mountain, a landmark which is surrounded by some of Cape Town's wealthiest suburbs. I have also looked at how the security of this privileged vantage point often translates into the insecurity of those left outside castle walls, away from the slopes of the mountain, and without a seat at the table. Here the 'high point of view' or 'panoptical' stance' – which Anne McClintock (1995: 122) argues is 'enjoyed by those in privileged positions in the social structure, to whom the world appears as a spectacle, stage, performance' – is compared to the security of knowing that there will be food on the table tomorrow. In Cape Town, issues of food and security have been intertwined from the time Jan Van Riebeeck first established a refreshment station for passing ships in 1652 to the present day.

As the margins of the refreshment station slowly expanded outward and inland beyond the fringes of the castle walls, the introduction of market-oriented farming practices had sudden and devastating effects on the region's ecosystems, leaving hunter-gatherer societies, whose food supplies were dependent on seasonal migrations, severely compromised. Mohamed Adhikari (2011: 19) notes that since hunter-gatherer methods conflicted with farming practices, 'colonial society viewed the foraging way of life as one to be eliminated.' This approach led to the

outright extermination of entire communities that can be described in no uncertain terms as genocidal.

*Cape Mongo* is an attempt to retrace the tendrils of this vision of domination as they continue to extend into the psyches of the present. In my experience, one of the most commonly encountered distortions of the colonial past is the prevailing caricature of the black urban poor as 'unclean', and therefore dangerous. 'Imperial cleanliness,' as one early twentieth century public health bureaucrat wrote, is 'development by sanitation [...] colonising by means of the known laws of cleanliness rather than by military force' (Cumpston date unknown: 13). This 'sanitisation process' continues to play out in today's public discourse, with terms such as 'safety and security' used to rally support for neoliberal city planning initiatives just as colonial urban reformism found support in terms such as 'sanitation and hygiene' (Miraftab 2007: 611). Though the focus of exclusionary tactics have shifted over the past three hundred years – from the outright extermination of hunter-gatherer societies, to colonial era 'sanitation syndrome' segregation, to present day 'security syndrome' marginalisation – the historical residue of the city's wastefulness seeps unabatedly into the present.

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<sup>9</sup> A Panopticon is an architectural design developed by Jeremy Bentham and originally used in prisons during the late eighteenth century. The design enables a sentry to observe all the inmates from an elevated position, or 'inspection house', without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched. For Foucault, the notorious design symbolised the punitive nature of modern society with its desires to supervise and normalise.



*Cape Mongo (Metal)*, 2015  
Photo by Anton Scholtz



## CHAPTER TWO

THE MATERIALITY OF AN 'INBETWEEN', OVERLAPPING AND INTERCONNECTED SURFACE.





*Cape Mongo* (VHS), 2015  
Photo by Francois Knoetze

## Method in the Mongrel: A Sketch of a Creole<sup>1</sup> City

Organic world and inorganic world, abject poverty and insolent luxury enter into the most contradictory communication; the commodity intermingles and interbreeds as promiscuously as images in the most tangled of dreams (Benjamin 1999: 827).

In his description of the interrelatedness he saw revealed in the capitalist dreamscape of an arcade, Benjamin refers to several fragmentary ideas which are relevant to my practical body of work. *Cape Mongo*, like *The Arcades Project* (1927-1940), is a phantasmagorical<sup>2</sup> sketch of a city; a fractured representation of a 'primordial landscape of consumption' (Benjamin 1999: 827). Similar to Benjamin's technique of 'literary montage' (ibid: 460) – a recontextualising of fragments, or 'lightning flashes' (Benjamin 1999: 456), of knowledge into a dialectical image – *Cape Mongo* fractures materials and audio-visual media, before rearranging them into visual and aural montage according to a new set of rules, contexts and themes. Mary Douglas (1960: 117) has articulated the potency of disorder and difference through her study of dirt as matter in an amorphous and transitory state. She notes that, while

disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.

<sup>1</sup> See Jeremy Cronin (2006:51).

<sup>2</sup> See Markus (2001) in which he explores 'the concept of phantasmagoria used by Benjamin to speak to the complex ways in which we are mired within the combined material and aesthetic trappings of an advanced capitalist world'.

*Cape Mongo* seeks to draw on the latent potential of disorder in an attempt to re-pattern the fragmentary fallout of the cycles of consumerism. In this sense, the recyclable waste characters of *Cape Mongo* could be likened to the 'intermingling' and 'interbreeding' commodities in Benjamin's vision of the landscape of consumption. These assemblages of the city's impurity contradict absolutist constructions of cultural identity and disrupt notions of continuity and fixed pattern. The 'Benjaminian collage' (Frederick 1998: 166) is not, however, limited to the layering of imagery or materials, but extends equally to the range of artistic media employed in its making. The multi-disciplinary nature of this project – which allows for an 'intermingling' between various forms of sculpture, performance and film – refuses neat classification and separation and creates a tension in which the work is seemingly tangled between various categories of art-making.

The contradictions engendered by the fluidity with which these mediums exchange and communicate are appropriate to the somewhat 'schizophrenic sprawl' of Cape Town (Jamal 2013: 6); an arrangement of spaces which seem to both embrace and disown one another in the same breath. Through the layering of these urban spaces, *Cape Mongo* attempts to highlight what Nuttal and Michael refer to as the 'creolisation' of post-apartheid South Africa, a term used to describe the dynamic processes 'whereby individuals are thrown together and invent [...] a new culture and a new social organisation' (2000: 6).

Throughout the project, collage and montage are used as tools to conflate surfaces and experiences usually separated by boundaries of space and time. I present Cape Town as a space of hybridity and interrelatedness through chance collisions or *encounters*<sup>3</sup> between constellations of seemingly disparate images, materials, and people.

<sup>3</sup> See also Homi Bhabha (2004: 56, 296, 312).

Cornell and Fahlander (2007: 1) note that encounters relate to ‘confusion, tension, trauma, and possibly social change that may emerge’ when people ‘interact actively, when they involve themselves with people and materialities, when they move around, fetch things, use things, leave things’. In this way, the characters of *Cape Mongo* are not merely arrangements of materials, but also catalysts of relational activity able to blur the boundaries between seemingly fixed groupings. In the landscape of *Cape Mongo*, the entanglement of the organic and inorganic, of animal form and human interaction, of abject poverty and insolent luxury, often seem to become commonplace (while most viewer-participants stop, stare and take photographs, many others do not give the performances a second glance). Here, pieces of commodity packaging transform into the skin-like exterior of creatures which traverse the cityscape. The characters – a montage of fragments sculpted into hybrid forms, worn and performed-in, filmed and arranged into fragmentary narratives – become a vehicles for unveiling the latent potential of disorder, of facilitating encounters, and highlighting the interconnectedness of various surfaces of the city’s often disguised historical, spatial, economic and bodily processes.

### Embodying Trash

Over the past twenty years, the cityscape of Cape Town has been transformed by shifts in globalised consumer patterns and effects, what Baudrillard (1998: 25) describes as ‘a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods’. This steady descent into a culture of materialism and consumer excess represents a mutation in which people find themselves increasingly surrounded by and dependent on manufactured objects for entertainment, social interaction, comfort, and affirmation of self-worth. Though the development of Cape Town’s consumer hubs have created valuable jobs and attracted investment to the city, the global

race to keep up with accelerating demands for large varieties of consumer goods and services has had catastrophic environmental consequences. With few exceptions, the burden of the city’s culture of excess and disposability is dumped on the poor and marginalised working classes, who are forced to live in areas of ecological degradation due to improper waste management. Hallowes and Munnik (2008: 127) note that,

In Cape Town, more than half of the 895,000 tonnes per year of domestic waste comes from a tiny minority of high income households [which] all goes to rubbish dumps located in poor neighbourhoods on the Cape Flats where people produce far less waste, much of which is not even collected.

As the city’s garbage dumps continue to grow, so too the gap of inequality continues to drive a wedge between its inhabitants. Nowhere is the correlation between the city’s racist spatial segregation and the disposal of its waste more evident than in the juxtaposition of the wastelands surrounding the townships of the Cape Flats and the wealthy suburbs surrounding the Table Mountain National Park. Peek (in Hallowes 2014: 16), who refers to this model as ‘environmental racism’, notes that the ‘blueprint for a black neighbourhood was a waste dumpsite, where waste from rich white neighbourhoods and dirty industry was dumped’.

The process of embodying trash – in the form of the suits of *Cape Mongo* – is an attempt at acknowledging aspects of my position in society that are products of this history of environmental and economic racism. These performances allow me to acknowledge and inhabit the flipside of this historically entrenched privilege; disavowing its image of cleanliness and serenity by submerging myself in the waste produced and hidden in order to maintain this image. In challenging the identity constructs that form part of my colonial heritage, I have attempted to reimagine my relationship to waste outside



Video still from *Cape Mongo (Paper)*, 2015



Video still from *Cape Mongo (Metal)*, 2015

of the conventional structures of the ‘pollution behaviour’ Douglas describes as ‘a reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications’ (1966: 45). By physically attaching these objects to my body, revisiting the spaces of their imagined life-cycles, and engaging with these spaces performatively, I hope to explore the kinds of social relations and commodity exchanges that are implicit in the various objects which make up the sculptural suits. I hope that by retracing the journeys of objects that have been discarded and swept out of sight, I am able to begin to undo some of the erasure that steadily glosses over the history of the city. In contrast to the utopian rural landscapes of Afrikaner nationalism, the *Glass* film presents an image of exploitation, expropriation and revolt. Instead of a ‘wilderness minimally touched by civilization and modernity’ (Foster 2008: 48) the *Plastic* film explores the far-reaching environmental consequences of current consumer practices.

In attempting to reassess my own ‘cherished classifications’ of space and identity, I have drawn from Appadurai’s (2006: 15) notion that ‘persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transactions that surround things are invested with the properties of social relations’. Here I have looked to trash as a way of embodying the histories and landscapes that form an inescapable part of my identity. Though these histories lie veiled behind the facade of a clean, friendly and environmentally mindful city, reinforcing its identity as a utopia of tourism, consumerism and investment, it is in the arrangement of the city’s rubbish dumps that I find the more salient co-ordinates to orienting my exploration of identity.

## Childhood Things Through Adult Eyes

This section will explore some of the entities and images of *Cape Mongo* by unpacking the interplay or process of reconfiguration between my memories of Cape Town (pre 1994) and my current understanding of the city. These processes of transformation, distorting the mythologies and fairytales of my childhood into the nightmarish grotesques of *Cape Mongo*, are drawn from my own struggle in coming to terms with the realities that lay obscured while growing up. In retracing a new understanding of my situation within the context of South Africa, twenty years into democracy, I have incorporated nostalgic visual media and aspects of children’s play into the project.

Johan Huizinga (1955: 13) defines play as ‘a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious”, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly’. The public interventions of *Cape Mongo* rely heavily on the voluntary interaction between myself and viewer-participants who are willing to step outside of the everyday and into the (dis)order of performative play. Although the interactions within this space were intended to be playful and humorous, viewer-participants often behaved (perhaps feigned) as though there were something truly supernatural about the characters’ presence.

The work of American sculptor, performance artist and dancer, Nick Cave, has been a source of inspiration to me throughout the making of *Cape Mongo*. However, unlike Cave’s *Soundsuits* (1999-present) – which reference inter-alia African masquerade, and are framed as ‘vehicles for change’ able to bring diverse communities together through play – the suits of *Cape Mongo* exist outside of the specific cultural and ritualised practices of masquerade; functioning within the realm of personal rather than communal mythologies. The *Mongo* suits are entities which produce a sense of alteration or potentiality through

the interconnecting and juxtaposition of different elements. Cave notes that when worn, his intricately designed, full-body, multi-coloured suits 'allow identities to be lost or hidden and new ones to be claimed [...] like a coat of armor, they embellish the body while protecting the wearer from outside culture' (Cave in Erickson 2012: 148). The shell-like suits of *Cape Mongo* also act as a type of protective layer, creating a distance between my body and the spaces I perform in. However, the suits are fragile and have the propensity to disintegrate when performed in, pointing toward the precariousness of the fabricated margins that seek to separate people, spaces and things. Through performative play, they allow for interactions to arise outside of the constraints of identity, opening up an instance in which the parameters of everyday experience (both mine and the viewer-participants') are able to shift spontaneously.

Throughout the course of constructing and dressing up in the suits, I engaged in processes of imaginatively repurposing materials and personifying them in ways similar to my childhood interaction with toys. While playing with these inanimate objects, I would often project stories, hopes, fears and feelings onto them. Huizinga (1955: 168) notes that this act of personifying the incorporeal and the inanimate 'is the soul of all myth-making' in which 'the thing perceived is conceived as having life and movement in the first place'. In the case of 'dressing up', the body itself becomes entangled in the process of transformation; both as an instrument for manipulating and animating the objects that cling to it, and as a medium with the potential to be shaped. By taking on personas from childhood TV programs, video games and fairytales, I am able to simultaneously mould and be re-moulded by the myths that surrounded my growing up. As I revisit these myths through adult eyes, I find the fairytales of my youth to be tainted, decayed, and indistinguishable from the grim realities of social injustice. The characters of *Cape Mongo*

therefore inhabit a state of ambivalence; being at once absorbed in the child-like activity of play, and grounded in the range of social issues that the project explores. This amalgamation of childhood fairytales and realism falls perhaps most appropriately in the category of the grotesque.

Though there is no one clear method for distinguishing the grotesque; when approached as an aesthetic category, various aspects of it become applicable to the project. The grotesque deals primarily with notions of doubleness, hybridity and metamorphosis. It is generally recognisable through the use of distorted forms and the intermingling of animal, plant and human features, which evokes a sense of both disgust and empathy in the viewer (Astruc 2010). Kayser emphasises that 'the grotesque is experienced only in the act of reception' and that through this experience, 'the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable [...] it is our world which ceases to be reliable' (1966: 181, 185). He outlines a number of structural effects of this estrangement, many of which I feel are present in my work. These include the blending of surfaces which appear to be removed through the use of montage to juxtapose sites related to various material processes; the fracturing of identity through the act of dressing up and taking on various personas; the disfiguration of proportion and form of the sculptural suits; the interchangeability of objects and persons through the embodiment and personification of discarded materials; and the disintegration of a linear historical continuum through the rearrangement of chronology and duration through the fractured narratives of the films (Kayser 1966: 185).

The ambiguous qualities of the characters of *Cape Mongo* reveal a blending of my adult perceptions and the spectres of TV characters that loom in my subconscious. They are perhaps a jaded adult's attempt to salvage those characters from a kind of nihilism having become aware of the

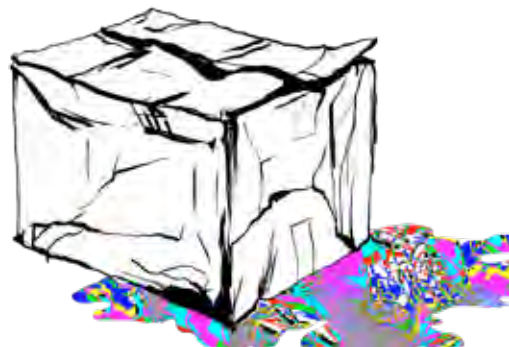
problematic representations and storylines of those same shows. The *VHS* suit introduces the use and reappropriation of found video footage of childhood television programs, a source which has provided me with a number of reference points for each character. The character's journey through the city signals a metaphorical break from past perceptions and relates perhaps to an attempt to let go of various images which obstruct the ability to see the world anew.

As objects in a similar state of conflict with the processes and images of their creation, the recyclable-waste sculptural suits speak of my disenchantment with various modes of thought imparted to me as a child, such as the pervasive 'green rhetoric' of the 1990's, which enthusiastically sought to 'environmentalise kids' (King 1994: 104). Donna Lee King argues that television shows such as *Captain Planet* promoted a 'liberal environmental paradox espousing: a simultaneous call for children to both conserve and consume' and 'simplistic, individualistic solutions to complex corporate and bureaucratic problems' (1994: 103). In the wearing of the *Plastic* suit, I am enacting the dissipation of the childhood illusions of becoming powerful, even capable of saving the world by simply adopting measures such as sorting trash into recyclable categories before disposal, echoing *Captain Planet's* catchphrase, 'The power is yours!'. Throughout the *Plastic* film I compare this feeling of disempowerment to aspects of South Africa's 'rainbow rhetoric', by highlighting how the social constraints and economic inequalities which many children continue to be born into still largely 'coincide with the racial divides of the past' (Wasserman & Jacobs 2003: 16).

This tension between the childlike illusions of the past and the realities of the present is perhaps most acutely demonstrated in the act of 'dressing up' and forms one of the key features of my process. The act of disguising myself in the fallout of the city's consumer waste and taking on different

personas or alter-egos, as the characters of *Cape Mongo*, is for me a process of accessing and grappling with various histories relating to my identity. It expresses a reluctance to let go of the imaginative optimism, enchantment and naivety of my childhood, as well as a recognition of the importance of confronting aspects of my current situation which should not go unchallenged.

Marc Singer (2002: 113) notes that '[t]he idea of the split identity, one of the most definitive and distinctive traits of the superhero, is also one of the most powerful and omnipresent figures used to illustrate the dilemmas and experiences of minority identity'. Although the dilemmas which make up my experience are not ones of minority identity, performing the characters of *Cape Mongo* represents a split between the fantasy and the everyday; between the desire to take on a hidden, 'costumed identity' (Singer 2002: 113), and the desire to reveal and confront the 'largely invisible ways in which white identity continues to suggest normativity' (2010: 10). In an attempt to reconcile this chasm, the project becomes about learning to re-see the fairytale world of my childhood, to re-see the abuse of power of which I am a product, and challenging the hegemonies of which I form part. If we are to agree with Dolby's (2001: 5) statement which describes whiteness as 'a contextual site of identity that emerges and re-emerges from a continually changing set of circumstances'; it becomes clear that by allowing these 'images' to come to the fore, no matter how shameful they may be, this normativity is potentially unsettled and destabilised.



In the wearing of each *Mongo* suit, I am enacting the concept of split identity in a way which attempts to bring together various themes through a range of contrasting and often conflicting characters. For example, throughout the *Metal* character's journey, I explore my entanglement within the local histories of food security and military expansion in the Cape. By assigning various personas to the *Metal* character, such as the *Tin Woodsman* from the film 'The Wizard of Oz', on a quest to find a heart; *Robocop*, who is saved from near death and through medical intervention, becomes the new face of justice; and Kafka's *Gregor Samsa*, who awakens to find himself transformed into an insect; I have attempted to explore and reshape my understanding of how aspects of my identity relate to various histories drawn from an intersection of life and fiction. The process of exploring the characters' personas in a variety of spaces through interactive play has been my attempt to explore new territory in which fresh

understandings of place and identity are able to arise. Grimes (1992: 66) notes that these interactions can, on the one hand, be an experience of freedom and power, as wearing a mask hides one's identity and personal feelings; and on the other, be an experience of 'bondage' where 'one feels unimportant, a mere channel for forces greater and more important' where one 'acts out of obligation, not out of a desire for, or a feeling of, power.' In an attempt to salvage some of the childhood optimism and innocence from the progressive disillusionment of adulthood, the characters of *Cape Mongo* retain a degree of childlikeness, despite their grotesque features. As if from the interstitial cracks created by the estrangement from my childhood perceptions, they seem to emerge and intrude into the present as warped manifestations of a multitude of fantastic fairytales, superheroes and childhood television show characters. However, stripped of some essential component, they emerge powerless, even vulnerable, and seemingly bewildered by the realities of the world outside of the comfort of fantasy.



In distinguishing the grotesque from the purely fantastical, Stieg (1970: 253) notes that, in 'the true grotesque we are kept aware of the connections between the alien world and our own'. Here I see the characters of *Cape Mongo* as representative of a loss of innocence; a realisation and acknowledgment of the unseen dystopian circumstances that surrounded my growing up: that *Captain Planet* was probably nothing more than an environmental impact assessor for a multinational corporation, that *Maya the Bee* collected pollen overtime to produce honey which she never got to taste, and that the cat who worked in *Mina Moo's* milk factory probably didn't earn enough to buy his kittens new school shoes.



Video stills from *Cape Mongo* (VHS & Metal), 2015



*Cape Mongo (Plastic)*, 2015  
Photo by Anton Scholtz

## Analysis of Methodology and Media

### 1. Materiality and the Sculptural Suit

David Hallows and Victor Munnik (2008: 1) note that, 'until we see waste through a broader systems lens our interventions are at best limited, and are often worse, perpetuating the environmental health and social problems which motivate our interventions in the first place.' My decision to use trash (specifically packaging) as a creative medium with which to explore the dirty underbelly of the sanitised sphere of consumption is motivated by the belief that, through artistic intervention, used objects are able to become storytellers of the worlds they inhabit, as if imbued with characteristics of the people and places they have come into contact with.

Whilst the process used to construct the sculptural suits of *Cape Mongo* can be likened to that of assemblage<sup>4</sup>, each suit comprises one dominant material, namely: glass, cardboard, plastic bottle caps, tin cans and VHS tapes. The emphasis is therefore shifted away from the 'semantic fission [and] unexpected fusion' (Charbonnier in Kelly 2008: 28) of bringing together disparate objects which have been removed from their original contexts. Rather, *Cape Mongo* focuses on the inherent disparity within seemingly homogenous objects. The project therefore seeks to complicate the materiality of trash, not by analysing one object in relation to another object, but rather by exploring the variety of contexts that act upon and transform one's understanding of an individual object. Gillian Whiteley (2011: 24) notes that,

[a]ttempts to define trash lead back to a fundamental link to systems of value which are time and place specific. There is no material which is intrinsically trash. Indeed, it is a social and culturally constructed concept – the word, like its physical manifestation, is in a continually shifting state of conceptual, symbolic and material flux.

In keeping with Whiteley, I have sought to uncover the fluidity and dynamism of these seemingly banal and everyday objects by employing the *social study of materialities*, which focusses on 'the social significance of objects and other material matter in the constitution of social relations' (Cornell & Fahlander 2007: 5). The sense of transformation, of dynamism and flux, of time past as well as future possibility, captured in the frozen folds of El Anatsui's delicately draped sculptures – each consisting of thousands of flattened bottle tops joined at the corners with wire – is something which I hope the characters of *Cape Mongo* might evoke. As I reconfigure trash into new shapes and assign them new stories, I hope that the fragments, as Olu Oguibe writes of some of Anatsui's earlier work, 'retain a metonymic reference to the original entity, becoming a reliquary of memory, the encryption of a history' (1998: 54).

Similar to the work of Anatsui, Brian Jungen's plastic sculptures monumentalise the homogenous, globalised, mass-produced objects of the everyday – not merely in scale, but also by acting as a vantage point from

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<sup>4</sup> William Seitz (in Dezeuze 2008: 31), curator of the seminal exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* (1961), defines assemblage as 'the fitting together of parts and pieces' that should be 'discarded or purloined' (while remaining 'identifiable') 'rather than new'. Furthermore, according to Seitz (in Kelly 2008: 24), assemblage's 'constituent elements are preformed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials'.



which to view vast stretches of time and landscapes freed from their original contexts. In *Cetology* (2002) Jungen arranges hundreds of plastic deckchairs to form a complete whale skeleton, comparing bone to plastic in their mutual resilience to the grinding of time. Bill Brown (2010: 199) notes that by 'divesting the chairs — in these acts of misuse — of their exchange-value and their use-value, [Jungen] free[s] them from the drudgery of being useful.' In this way, context becomes of utmost importance. Both Jungen's sculptures and the figures of *Cape Mongo* encourage the viewer to engage with the materials both before and after they are useful: the contexts which ordinarily remain hidden. The materiality of the suits is intended to highlight the juxtaposition between the disposability of the materials used and the permanent and grave implications of our use of these materials on the environment, and on the widening landscape of exploitative economic practices. The status of a material from useful to used to useless is ever-quickenning and the recontextualisation of these materials allows the viewer to 'press pause' on his or her consideration of a material's value at a particular moment in time.

In the project's prelude, the VHS tape is explored in terms of its (now obsolescent) capacity for chronicling and recording fragments of ubiquitous, every-day experiences. Situated within a fractured historical continuum which obscures, reclaims and reconfigures the *VHS* character's origins and chronology, this journey explores what Homi Bhabha (in Bouttiaux 2009: 58) terms 'a new sense as an insurgent act of cultural translation.' In the *VHS* film, the past becomes a malleable mechanism to interrupt and reframe perceptions and performances of the present. In various ways and via various explorations of materiality, all five works discussed exist within the same fractured continuum, exploring the chronological, spatial, social and environmental relations which underlie their production, consumption and disposal.

While factory assembly-lines specialise in uniformity and homogenisation, used and reclaimed objects literally bear witness to the enormous diversity of contexts and conditions that might act upon an object: the object is physically transformed, tarnished and re-shaped by its journey. As a collection of reclaimed objects, the sculptural suits of *Cape Mongo* can be viewed as tapestries of collective memory, a collection of life-cycle strands forming a narrative web that potentially spans across the city. These narratives are not inherently fixed to the objects which comprise the suits; rather, their stories arise from the viewer's interpretation of the range of images and spaces presented in the films. The suits are mobile and dynamic, not merely as wearable objects, but also in the interpretability of their materiality and form. Nicholas Bourriaud (1998:41) notes that,

[i]f a work of art is successful, it will invariably set its sights beyond its mere presence in space: it will be open to dialogue, discussion, and that form of inter-human negotiation that Marcel Duchamp called 'the coefficient of art', which is a temporal process, being played out here and now.

While the suits are concrete objects – made by joining packaging materials that specialise in containing, protecting and preserving commodities, and therefore excellent at resisting decomposition – the bonds that hold them together are prone to disintegration during performance. The suits therefore escape their 'mere presence in space', not only in the dialogue, or public interactions to which they are left open, but also in their rendering of value and materiality as something malleable and impermanent.

## 2. Movement, Performance, Masks and Persona

Each suit consists of a number of separate pieces which are made to fit parts of my body through laborious processes of moulding, sticking, fitting and adjusting<sup>5</sup>. When the pieces are worn simultaneously, each suit forms a carapace that restricts and dictates the movement of my body. To me, these restraints, a result of the debris clinging to me as if refusing to be thrown away, speak to the incriminating realities underlying the pervasive culture of consumer excess, in which the ease of consuming and throwing things away translates into moments of repression rather than the freedom it is disguised as.

Inspired by late 60's sculpture and Minimalist theories of the 'body as architecture', Paul McCarthy's work 'allegorizes the (socialized) human body as a prison [...] alienated from the individual body itself – a space of repression' (Werner, 2011: 162). During his performances, the use of small claustrophobic rooms as settings and child-like masks trapping the faces behind them, serve to frame the body as imprisoned by restrictions, by the lack of choice or agency it possesses as an objectified instrument of consumption. However, for Levine (2010: 62), McCarthy's characters' refusal or inability to adhere to the standards which keep the body in check, 'smashes the double illusion of control [both] self and social'.

Similar to McCarthy's performative contraventions of socialised modes of consumption, my performances in the restrictive suits of *Cape Mongo* seek temporarily to transgress normalised cycles of waste disposal. Through a process of restricting my body with waste and thereby relinquishing the ability to move about freely,

the performances seek to highlight the fact that 'consumerist freedom drags behind it a huge shadow of its slave origin' (Levine 2010: 62). As Zygmunt Bauman (2001: 90-91) notes,

it is not the things produced or consumed, but things thrown out each day that signify genuine opulence [...] Nothing is 'too much', except the resentment of 'too much' [...] Waste shows that the capacity to move is the asset more important than the movement itself.

Performance and movement are inextricably linked in *Cape Mongo*, since much of the 'action' involves exploring cityscapes. These performances often take place on public streets, transforming the everyday activity of walking through a space into a frenetic bustle of interaction. I noticed on various occasions throughout these 'walks' the inconsistency of the boundaries separating the public from accessible and restricted spaces of the city. While performing and moving in the suits seemed to afford me entry into some areas which would usually be off limits (such as shipments container yards and factories), it seemed to restrict my movement around spaces in which I would usually be free to roam, such as a video-store, supermarket or wine-tasting farm.

The unpredictability and idiosyncrasy of these *walks*, or *strolls*, arise from the fact that these sites or *scapes* are not visited in preparation for a performance. This is in keeping with Benjamin's notion that the performative enactment is an essential part of the 'the art of straying' (Benjamin 1997a: 298); 'premised in its form on opening a space of enquiry that figuratively replicates the stranger's encounter with the unknown terrain of the city' (Whybrow 2010: xvii). While I, as the performer, may be encountering these sites for the first time, the *Mongo* characters are ostensibly revisiting their imagined pasts – the locations associated with their material existence and the constitution of their social relations – as if walking against the consumer-

<sup>5</sup> Here the suits can be compared to the notion of a 'transition object' (Winnicott 1975; Schechner 1985:36), 'a thing simultaneously the self and not the self' (Grimes 1992: 66).



Video still from *Cape Mingo (Glass)*, 2015

driven currents of city. Although the wandering journeys of the characters of *Cape Mongo* may seem aimless, these walks achieve a new function in that they allow for various explorative opportunities which counter the 'stereotype views of city planners [...] with the real views of the citizens' (Burckhardt in Grillo & Brauner 2011: 15).

These real views of the performances – as sequences of 'flashing' or 'disappearing' images – appear substantially different depending on which side of the mask one is looking from, or *through*. For the viewer-participant, the performance appears within the 'dramatic distance' (Picton 1990: 192) created by the mask, whereas, for me, as performer and mask-wearer, the performance is situated within the spontaneous interactions with viewer-participants. Ronald Grimes (1992: 66) notes that this divergence requires the mask wearer to 'internalise what an audience sees, thus being forced into reflexivity with regard to their masks'. Therefore, while wearing the masks can be 'an experience of freedom' (Grimes 1992: 66) as it maintains my anonymity and conceals my emotional reactions, by reflecting on the performance through the eyes of the viewer-participant, I am 'forced to recognize the constructedness of [my] power' (Grimes 1992: 66).

Here, the use of masks links strongly to my concerns regarding the representation of the body as a space objectified by the mass media. As I put on the suits, my shadow becomes the shadows of the characters I portray, and the suits form a tangible layer which constricts my movement and makes it difficult to interact conventionally with people sharing the spaces with me, while at the same time allowing for a certain freedom of interaction and play. In this sense, masking simultaneously creates a distance, in terms of a one-on-one interaction, and proximity, as participants in the performances tend to drop their guard and interact with less

restraint and inhibitions<sup>7</sup>. The range of personas I adopt through this process of self-reflexive performance, coupled with the physical restrictions of the suits, produce the characters of *Cape Mongo*. Here I refer to Mark Sadoski's (1992: 272-273) definition of persona as

a particular self-image, part of a multitude of personae, or self-images, that can be construed from our overall personality, or mental life. [It] is the vehicle by which mental acts are carried out in the minds of both authors and audiences through authors' imaginings of themselves as both authors and as audiences.

Performing these *Mongo* characters is a process of acquiescing contradictions. The characters are the embodiment of forces of both movement and restraint. They are at once mythological, fictitious agents of power, and instruments for revealing the constructedness of power; they bring me into closer proximity with the places and people associated with the material existence of the commodities I consume, while simultaneously reproducing this distance through the surface of the mask. Similar to Whybrow's (2010: 3) reading of Benjamin's archetypal figures of the 'urban wanderer' and itinerant 'ragpicker' as embodying the 'contradictions of evolving urban conditions: a man [sic] immersed in the crowd, yet alienated from it'; the characters of *Cape Mongo* are the embodiment of both my entanglement with, and detachment from, the urban landscape of Cape Town.

<sup>7</sup> As has been suggested at seminars throughout the duration of the degree, *Cape Mongo* draws from, and shares similarities with masquerade. The project, however, does not claim to form part of masquerade traditions, and the specific cultural practices and contexts from which they have been generated.

<sup>6</sup> Peggy Phelan (1993: 146) notes that 'Performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance'.



### 3. Reproduction, Spectacle and Postproduction

Phillip Auslander (2006: 1) notes that performance documentation has generally been understood to consist of two categories: the ‘documentary’, in which the link between performance and document is thought to be ‘ontological, with the event preceding and authorizing its documentation’; and the ‘theatrical’, in which performances were ‘staged solely to be photographed or filmed and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences’. I would argue that the films of *Cape Mongo* inhabit both of these categories, creating a reciprocal exchange, or interconnectedness between the live event and its reproduction.

While I see the public performances of *Cape Mongo* as events significant in and of themselves, these enactments also function outside of notions of performance art which focus solely on the process of making rather than the production of objects (Schimmel 1998: 17). Just as the efficacy and potentiality of the sculptural suits are explored through the performances, so too the public performances rely on the resulting films in order to elaborate on certain ideas and themes. By documenting the performances in a carefully measured and nuanced way – allowing this documentation to contribute to the ‘amplification of discourse’ (Ginsberg in Sayre 1989: 19) without betraying ‘the promise of its own ontology’ (Phelan 1993: 146) – I have attempted to create a reciprocity, or *interconnectedness* between the live event and its reproduction.

The use of audio-visual media in *Cape Mongo* serves two main functions. Firstly, it allows for the work to be copied, circulated online and presented to a wider audience outside of the gallery context. Secondly, it allows for the use of narrative and montage devices. The project’s engagement with found VHS footage not only situates the project within a personal historical context, but also an art historical one, as the proliferation of the

VHS video camera facilitated a major shift in contemporary art practice, ostensibly turning the public into potential film-makers. Many early video artists used this innovation to increase and explore the representations and interests of marginalised or disempowered communities, whose presence on broadcast television was subject to manipulation and/or erasure (Cottingham 2002: 8).

Benjamin observed that the mass audience of the technological reproduced work of art ‘produced a change in the mode of participation’ (1935: 7) from that of the unique work of art, which had ‘always exerted a claim to be viewed primarily by a single person or a few’ (Benjamin in Haxthausen 2004: 61). While recorded video is easily reproducible – and therefore accessible to larger audiences, putting the ‘public in the position of the critic’ (Benjamin 1935: 14) – it is also capable of transforming the viewer into a passive consumer of a spectacle<sup>8</sup>. *Cape Mongo* attempts to counteract the mass media’s often pacifying capacity by foregrounding the ‘collaborative participation of an audience’ (Bauman in Auslander 2006: 5), both in the performances, and in the fragmentary editing style of the films that necessitate viewers interpretation, rather than passive consumption. Jacques Ranciere has suggested that counteracting the mass-media spectacle requires

spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story. An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators. (Ranciere 2009: 22)

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<sup>8</sup> See Zizek (2003: 33-34), in which he observes that since the advent of canned laughter in the 50’s, the spectator’s ‘most intimate feelings can be radically externalized. [The spectator] can literally laugh and cry through another’. This has produced the frightening scenario where one is even deprived of passivity, of ‘authentic passive experience’, thus preparing us for ‘mindless frenetic activity – for endless work’. Also see Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967).

By highlighting the diversity, fluidity and intersectionality of both the material and the social world of things, my work attempts to generate discussion. It functions as a visual argument against our propensity toward imposing fixed categories and stereotypes onto people and things. By taking ‘trash’ and showing that it can so easily be something else (both in the forms I construct and in the open-endedness of the videos I create) I hope to emphasise the subjectivity of value, the fluidity of seemingly fixed groupings, and the multiplicity of meaning.

Similarly, my approach to assembling clips from the archive or cultural dumpsite known as YouTube is akin to the act of rummaging through piles of discarded objects at local municipal waste disposal site, selecting specific materials, and arranging them into sculptural suits. In this found video footage, I continue to explore the ways in which homogenized manufactured objects can be co-opted and repurposed. The process of editing the films during postproduction plays an integral role in ordering and framing the narrative journeys and involves finding a balance between cinematically arranged shots and the frenetic montage scenes. These scenes make use of short clips of found footage relating thematically to the characters, the materials they consist of, the landscapes they inhabit, and the personal and material histories associated with them.

The use of montage allows for the juxtaposition of two or more images from otherwise distant spatial and temporal contexts. These images – once torn and isolated from the original context of news bulletins, advertisements, cinema and other programs – are placed within a new narrative context, and ascribed a range of alternative meanings. Positioning these displaced images alongside the narrative structure of the *Mongo* characters is an attempt to condense the alienating stretches of time and space that separate the consumer from the social and environmental realities underlying their consumption. In this sense, the arrangement

of gestural images creates a fractured narrative relating to the materials explored in *Cape Mongo* in which images usually separated by historic and geographic clefts are placed within the immediate proximity of one another through film. The selection and juxtaposition of various locations throughout the films forms an integral part of the project. The interplay between these two styles invites the viewer freely to make connections between the narrative, the interactions of the characters, and the content of the interspersed found footage.

Although *Cape Mongo* is a social critique of the consumer culture of Cape Town, by re-entering the capitalist economy as a reproducible, commoditised, cultural object, the project runs the risk of contradicting its critique and feeding into a system which seeks to ‘extend (and profit from) the promise of future repetitions of that which was once actualized and regularized’ (Jakovljevic in Jones 2011: 50). In an effort to sustain its critique, the project cautiously straddles the boundary between reproduction and ephemerality; both in its sculptural rendering of mass-produced consumer waste as matter existing in a ‘continually shifting state of conceptual, symbolic and material flux’ (Whiteley 2011: 24), and in its consideration of the often reciprocal and conflicted exchanges between the recorded and the live.



Video still from *Cape Mongo* (VHS), 2015



## CHAPTER THREE

DISCUSSING THE BODY OF WORK



## The films of Cape Mongo

### Prelude: VHS

Similar to *The Mighty Boosh's* 'Betamax Bandit'<sup>1</sup>, this is an ambivalent character; a floating signifier able to attach itself to or be ensnared by a range of uses and meanings. The VHS film's function is three-fold. Firstly, it acts as a prelude to the other four films. The film features a figure on whose shoulders rest an angular mass of VHS casings which jut out at irregular angles: a singular, forlorn character constructed from obsolete technological shells who acts as the viewer's introduction to the aesthetic, symbolic and thematic landscape of *Mongo*. Secondly, the figure subtly introduces the viewer to the four physical materials which will be dealt with in the series: paper, plastic, metal and glass. These materials are planted throughout the film as visual cues: the *VHS* character interacts with each of the materials which comprise the other four characters – finding sustenance in a half-empty tin of baked beans; drowning its sorrows in a bottle of wine; washing with water from a plastic bottle and finally falling asleep on a makeshift cardboard bed. Thirdly, the VHS character functions on a referential level. This character is the embodiment of the multiplicity of narratives, histories and mythologies which will unravel with each of the following films. A broad horizon of competing, yet co-existing narratives is contained within each of the films and this notion is made manifest in the VHS figure.



Video stills from *Cape Mongo (VHS)*, 2015

The VHS film cuts between footage signalling the present day and footage from my childhood, a distinction I have highlighted by contrasting colour grading. I have done so in an attempt to introduce the combination of performance documentation and the recording of live television. Unlike the discrete, precise systems of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> A fictional character made of VHS tapes that appeared on the British television series in 2005.



*Cape Mongo (VHS), 2015*  
Photo by Francois Knoetze



*Cape Mongo (VHS), 2015*  
Photo by Catherine Trollope

digital archiving, the constant recycling of videotape, in the form of recording and re-recording footage onto the same tapes, created the likelihood of mistakenly recording broadcast television over footage of real life events. While reviewing old home-videos during the editing process, I regularly came across snippets of televised sports matches, advertisements and childhood programs, abruptly interrupting footage of a birthday party, a day at the beach, or relatives (some deceased) gathering for family events. Through a combination of mass-media imagery and live-recorded footage of significant events of my life, the home-videos create an inadvertent merging between images from my real-life and mass-

media images which saturate the world around me.

By juxtaposing found home-video and television footage from my childhood within the narrative of estrangement, obsolescence and destitution, the *VHS* character's journey embodies the idea of re-fashioning discarded narratives. When the character finally scales the city's heights to release hundreds of VHS spools to the wind, the visual spirals into a dizzying whirl of my own childhood home videos and found footage: an introduction to the style which will characterise the series of films to follow.



Video still from *Cape Mongo* (VHS), 2015

## Glass

The film features the dog-like *Glass* character, whose journey is arranged according to the imagined reverse life-cycle of a bottle of wine as it moves around the Cape. This film attempts to draw comparisons between the material processes involved in the production of a bottle of wine, and the social processes which underpin this production. The journey looks specifically at the exploitative working conditions for farm labourers in the Cape wine industry; an industry which generates massive revenue through tourism and export. According to a Human Rights Watch (Cordes 2011: 25) report, wine produced in the Western Cape in 2009 had an export value of R5.91 billion, with the industry contributing an estimated R26,223 million to South Africa's gross domestic product. Despite this, the report concludes that labourers on wine farms must contend with gruelling conditions such as severe weather, lack of drinking water or lavatory access, the lingering effects of the *dop* system<sup>2</sup>, exposure to dangerous pesticides, and are compensated with among the lowest wages in the country (Cordes 2011: 4). These exploitative conditions are concealed by the attractive outward appearance of the Cape wine industry, drawing tourist-consumers from all over the world, reflecting a massive fissure between the production and consumption spheres of this industry.



Video still from *Cape Mongo (Glass)*, 2015

The *Glass* film explores the notion of this fissure or dislocation between the outwardly visible and the concealed. It attempts to demonstrate the grave implications of the continued disregard for hidden processes, and the varying levels of proximity of people to waste around the city. In some cases, this is vast, reflecting a massive dislocation, in others, the degree of proximity is uncomfortably intimate. This is captured in two contrasting scenes in the film where

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<sup>2</sup> A highly problematic system of payment whereby workers are compensated or partially compensated with the wine they produce in lieu of a salary.



*Cape Mongo (Glass), 2015*  
Photo by Catherine Trollope

viewer-participants of the performances seem to relate to the *Glass* character as an embodiment of trash. In the first scene, the character is approached by a man in a liquor store on Kloof Street who invites it to join a Table Mountain clean-up, ‘We’re cleaning up all of this kind of shit,’ he says, gesturing the character’s body. In the second scene, as the *Glass* character walks through the township of Cloetesville, a woman from the crowd of onlookers instructs a boy to take a photo of the character with his cellphone. However, as it approaches a pile of rubbish that has been dumped on the side of the street, she decides against it: ‘Nevermind, he’s going to the trash!’ This juxtaposition serves as an example of the city’s enduring legacy of environmental racism, with the white citizen from a high-income area rallying behind the cause of keeping the scenic natural attractions of the city pristine, while the woman living in the low-income area must settle for avoiding the uncollected piles of garbage littering the streets.



Video still from *Cape Mongo (Glass)*, 2015

I also present a montage of scenes relating to the industrial glass-blowing process and scenes of the farmworker protests in De Doorns at the end of 2012. Here I attempt to juxtapose images of the precision of mechanical processes with images of state violence crushing the uprising. I intersperse images of a furnace superheating the sand with images of vineyards burning; glowing hot tubes of glass shooting out of the assembly line and police firing rubber bullets at scattering crowds; rows of finished bottles and rows of marching police; bottles being cooled by mechanical sprinklers and water canons dispersing crowds. This serves to underline the inextricable link between state violence and economic processes; a characteristic of post-apartheid neoliberal capitalism which succeeds in conflating the interests of big business and political entities. In the last moments of the film, the figure finds itself on a deserted beach before burying itself in the sand – a final return to the origins of its material composition.

By incorporating a range of found footage relating both to the production and consumption of wine, the film's narrative oscillates between images of refinement and high-culture generated by the tourism and retail industries and the dehumanising and manipulative labour practices of the commercial wine industry. In juxtaposing these images, the film attempts to condense distances (between spaces of production and consumption) and stretches of time (between the historical and present-day injustices); detachments whose continuing perpetuation allows the human rights violations underlying the wine-making industry to persist.



Video still from *Cape Mingo (Glass)*, 2015

## Paper

The film following the journey of the *Paper* character provides an account of Cape Town's current housing crisis and failure to address the deeply entrenched racially and spatially defined economic disparities of the past. Throughout the process of creating the work, I have also explored notions of home and belonging as they relate to my personal journey of returning to the city of my birth. By approaching these notions through a historical lens, I have attempted to interrogate my experience of belonging in the city as something which is mediated by structures of privilege produced through the dispossession and alienation of others.

The film touches on the city's history of land expropriation, forced removals, and construction of temporary relocation areas; making reference to events such as the forced removals and demolition of District 6 during apartheid, the implementation of the 1913 Native Land Act, and the annexing of territory during Dutch colonial expansion. These historical reference points are interspersed with clips showing contemporary examples of forced evictions and homelessness, presenting the struggle for adequate housing which many inhabitants continue to endure as something which forms part of a largely uninterrupted historical continuum since the establishment of the city.

Unsteadily traversing the cityscape on a pair of cardboard hooves, the journey of the antelope-like *Paper* character follows the reverse life-cycle of a cardboard box. As it moves through a range of functions and value systems, the character is transported on top of a cardboard-picker's trolley, on the back of a bakkie, and inside a shipping container (an object which epitomises the current era of globalised movement). Starting at a paper recycling centre in Parow, the character's journey ends with its assimilation into an invasive European pine tree in Newlands Forest, with chunks of bark leaping up to cover the cardboard. The character's return

to its material origin relates to my attempts to acknowledge and come to terms with my colonial heritage. Movement and transience are central motifs of the character's meandering journey, and are suggestive of my personal feelings of uprootedness, disillusionment and alienation towards Cape Town; a place in which thousands continue to live in a perpetual state of displacement, while others are afforded the luxury of permanence, space, security and sea-views.

During the processes of making the suit, performing in it, and constructing the narrative of the character, I have explored the material characteristics of cardboard in relation to notions of home-making as an ever-shifting, transient exercise. As Santo Mofokeng (in Peffer 1998: 83) notes, '[h]ome is an appropriated space; it does not exist objectively in reality', but rather 'is a fiction we create out of a need to belong'. Similar to the versatility of cardboard – a simultaneously strong, malleable, insulating and soft material which inhabits a wide range of functions and value systems throughout its life-cycle – the home is something which takes many forms within the city. Throughout the *Paper* character journey, it visits a range of these 'appropriated spaces', including a fortress-like mansion in Oranjezicht, seemingly carved out of the foot of Table Mountain, and a makeshift shelter under the N2 highway.

The film also includes a number of montage cutaways. One such cutaway shows a number of evictions around the city, as the sound of a crowd chanting, 'Zilla/Zille!' fades in. The montage leads into a scene of the *Paper* character walking through a crowd of service delivery protestors gathered outside Western Cape Premier Helen Zille's office. The comparison between Premier Zille and *Godzilla* relates to the local government's heavy-handed approach to regulating the inevitable informalisation and organic development of low-income areas. Robins (2002: 513) notes that

despite the hybrid and improvisational



*Cape Mongo (Paper), 2015*  
Photo by Philip Gordon Wilson

nature of the building styles of brick and corrugated iron of poor communities in the developing world, South African planners and policy makers continue to have fantasies of dramatically transforming and standardising the everyday urban spaces of ‘the poor’.



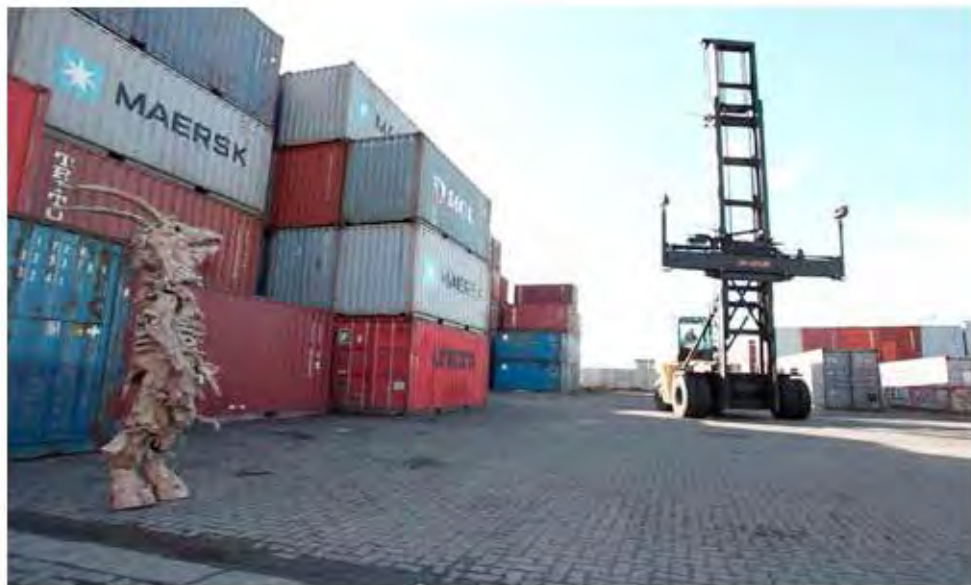
Video stills from *Cape Mongo (Paper)*, 2015

The neoliberal post-apartheid regime's capacity for forced evictions and demolitions is underpinned by 'the intent on constructing a city according to the utopian and technocratic plans and blueprints of "suburban bliss"' (Robins: 513). One of the primary concerns of the film is to highlight the widening gap in living conditions between the city's low-income and marginalised inhabitants and its high-income inhabitants. I have juxtaposed imagery and spaces throughout which relate to either extreme of this economic spectrum in an attempt to contrast different everyday experiences of *home*. Examples of this include a montage scene which shows footage of extravagant wealthy white homeowners showing off their mansions on lifestyle programs such as *Top Billing*, spliced with newsreel clips of informal housing residents sitting next to their belongings after being evicted; an apartheid-era city planner mapping out housing developments on the Cape Flats while another wealthy homeowner discusses interior design as a tool for making efficient use of floor space.

For many a home is a vulnerable, shifting territory. In these cases, maintaining places of home and shelter necessitates a constant refiguring and co-opting of space (from public to private to domestic and back again). This is in some ways similar to the process of recycling cardboard – paper is pulped, rolled out, corrugated, cut, folded, stuck, used, and re-pulped again. These standards of permanence, impermanence and value are affected by conflicting perceptions of order and disorder. This is where town planners' idealised, heterogeneous models of use and space are confronted by the strategies of city-dwellers who informally adapt these models

for new and alternative purposes.

At these intersections, utopian ideas of suburban bliss stand in sharp contrast to the practicalities of lived experience. These contradictions were also readable in viewer-participant interpretations of and interactions with the *Paper* character. While the monstrous appearance of the suit intimidated many viewer-participants, its soft texture also allowed for physical contact. This multiplicity of meaning, both in the form of the suit and the material it comprises, forms the foundation of the film's exploration of *home* as an unstable, transitory notion, and one that takes many forms within the city.



Video still from *Cape Mongo (Paper)*, 2015

## Plastic

The *Plastic* film explores the often toxic legacy which is passed down from one generation to the next in the city. The form of the bird-like suit combines a range of references relating to childcare, legacy and motherhood, such as the nesting albatross chicks of Midway Island<sup>3</sup>, and 'Big Bird', a character from the educational children's television program, *Sesame Street*. The film interrogates notions of environmental degradation, lack of proper education, and the perpetuation of 'rainbow rhetoric' to South African youth through myths of reconciliation. In this film, I have attempted to compare the lack of foresight dictating the unsustainable nature of current practices of consumption, to the inextricable link between inadequate childcare and the self-perpetuating cycles of poverty, unemployment and crime. Although plastic packaging is responsible for massive ecological devastation, current consumption trends continue to rely heavily on it due to its cost-effectiveness and the lack of political, economic, and environmental resistance against its use. Recent estimates show that worldwide polymer production has continued to grow at a rate of 500 million metric tonnes per year, half of which is used for 'single-use disposable applications, such

<sup>3</sup> Midway Island is situated approximately halfway between North America and Japan. Here, albatross chicks are accidentally fed lethal quantities of plastic by their parents, who mistake the floating garbage for food. Once a bird dies and decomposes, the bits of plastic reappear inside the abdomen of the bird's carcass.

as packaging and disposable consumer items' (Hopewell, Dvorak & Kosior 2009: 2115).

As a packaging material, plastic exists in the double-bind of being excellent at preserving consumables and thus helping to minimise food wastage, while at the same time being virtually non-biodegradable and largely impervious to the corrosive forces of nature. I have attempted to present these material qualities as a metaphor for the intergenerational transfer of knowledge systems, practices and epistemologies. This metaphor encompasses both the positive aspects of this chain of transfer such as the continued legacy of constructive values and the value of preservation as well as the negative aspects of intergenerational transfer such as the perpetuation of inherited privilege.

In this vein, the film plays heavily on the notion of motherhood and its broad horizon of connotations and associations, teasing out ideas around nurturing, legacy and neglect. The film opens with the disturbing footage of an albatross feeding its baby pieces of plastic which it has mistakenly identified as food. This image of the toxicity of legacy is at play throughout the film. Ultimately I make use of this metaphor to address the undeniable privileges that have been passed down generationally to me due to the colour of my skin; privileges which grant me the opportunity to live virtually unimpeded.

The film negotiates spaces relating to the imagined life cycle of a plastic bottle top, and spaces dedicated to providing care and resources to children in the so-called 'Mother City'. More specifically, it explores spaces of play and learning available to children from different economic backgrounds, and attempts to highlight some of the persistent inequalities that continue to disadvantage children from areas of the city marginalised by historical laws of segregation. It also explores experiences and associations from my own childhood, juxtaposing the primary coloured toys and television of my youth





*Cape Mongo (Plastic)*, 2015  
Photo by Anton Scholtz



*Cape Mongo (Plastic)*, 2015  
Photo by Anton Scholtz

with images relating to growing up in the so-called ‘rainbow-nation’ – a place of accomplishment, reconciliation, hope and unity. However, Evans (2010: 309) notes that the ‘reconciled’ national identity displayed in televised ‘spectacles’ (such as Mandela’s release from prison and the Rugby World Cup of 1995) ‘was in many ways illusionary and did not promote the necessary steps needed to dismantle the deep-seated socio-economic effects of apartheid’. The film attempts to provide a peek through the curtain of the colourful media facade which is used to create an appearance of stability and harmony; an intermediary which is responsible for ‘masking many of the contradictions of the era and diverting attention away from some of the more real implications of the transition’ (Evans 2010: 309); a spectacle in which the toxicity underlying consumption is reassuringly brushed over with bright colour.

As if summoned from the sea, this character is suggestive of a future in which the phenomenal assemblage of intercontinental waste known as the ‘Great Pacific Garbage Patch’ stretches all the way to the shores of Cape Town. Oceanographer Charles Moore (in Brown 2011: 199), who first came across this rotating mass of plastic, describes the day he discovered it:

As I gazed [at] what ought to have been a pristine ocean, I was confronted, as far as the eye could see, with the sight of plastic [...] In the week it took to cross the subtropical high, no matter what time of day I looked, plastic debris was floating everywhere: bottles, bottle caps, wrappers, fragments.

By arranging images relating to this environmental devastation to the sound of Nelson Mandela reciting Ingrid Jonker’s ‘The Child is not Dead’ during his address at the opening of the first democratic parliament on May 24, 1994, I have attempted to introduce the metaphor of a fading ‘Rainbow Nation’ as if manifesting in the form of a multi-

coloured oceanic garbage patch. The *Plastic* film is suggestive of my disillusionment with the rhetoric of national reconciliation and the spectacle of imagery promoting the idea that the country has moved beyond the injustices of the past. The colourful plastic suit is used to communicate the toxicity of this illusionary facade, created not for the well-being of the South African citizenry, but instead to placate it.



Video stills from *Cape Mongo (Plastic)*, 2015

## Metal

The *Metal* character – an overweight, cockroach-like armour clad creature constructed from flattened tin cans – appears in a film that examines issues of food security within the context of Cape Town; a space which is rapidly evolving in order to accommodate the population influx of immigrants and people from rural areas. The character inhabits this present-day situation, while also marching back



Video stills from *Cape Mongo (Metal)*, 2015

through the history of military expansion in the Cape, taking note of how the path was paved through the securing of a steady food supply. I have also retraced the historical entanglement between food preservation and the spread of militaristic imperialism. The film looks specifically at the establishment of the Dutch East India Company's refreshment station at the Cape, and the legacy of Cecil John Rhodes in the form of the Rhodes Food Group and the Rhodes Memorial. The film is situated within the broad context of South Africa's agricultural landscape, whose retail sector is becoming increasingly dominated by supermarkets which are supplied by as few as 40 000<sup>4</sup> large-scale commercial farmers. Another significant indicator of the lack of transformation of the agricultural sector is the fact that the vast majority of these farm owners remain white and male. The film also looks at the effects of the sharply rising cost of food on the food security of people living in low income areas. Essentially, the film highlights pressing contemporary concerns in Cape Town such as the malnutrition of the urban poor and the monopoly of supermarkets by linking them to the idea of aggressive military takeover and control.

The physical appearance of the *Metal* character pays homage to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the story of a young man, Gregor Samsa, who awakens one day to find himself transformed into an insect. As in the story, the film attempts to challenge the structures of hegemonic masculinity, here examining this notion both in the context of the historical monumentalising of militaristic male figures, and in the context of the male dominated agricultural sphere. The notion of the patriarchal figure as synonymous with that of the state in fulfilling the role of provider, protector and leader of the people, is most persuasively visualised in the clip showing the engraving which reads 'Farmer, Soldier,

<sup>4</sup> Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. 2011. 'Abstract of Agricultural Statistics 2011'. [http://www.daff.gov.za/docs/statsinfo/Abstract\\_2011.pdf](http://www.daff.gov.za/docs/statsinfo/Abstract_2011.pdf) (accessed 01 Aug. 14)



*Cape Mongo (Metal)*, 2015  
Photo by Anton Scholtz



*Cape Mongo (Metal)*, 2015  
Photo by Anton Scholtz

Statesman’ – below the monument of Louis Botha, outside the entrance to parliament. By arranging found footage relating to the current state of urban food security in Cape Town, as well as making reference to characters which provide an opposition to this understanding of masculinity – I juxtapose the *Tin Woodsman* from ‘The Wizard of Oz’ searching for a heart, with the punch-line of an advert for the Rhodes Food Group (the narrator reads: ‘Rhodes puts a smile in every heart’) – the film attempts to deconstruct and overturn this outdated conflation of patriarchal roles.

The character’s journey begins in a metal scrap yard on Voortrekker Road, with the cockroach-like figure rising up like Kafka’s Samsa from a pile of compressed tin can blocks. The mound of silvery bricks is echoed in the shape of Devil’s Peak and Table Mountain, which is visible in the distance. From this trash pile, the character emerges as if crawling out from under the iconic landmark in search of scraps of food which may have fallen to the floor during a meal. The character then embarks on a journey which links spaces which reference imperial expansion such as Rhodes Memorial and the Castle of Good Hope, and spaces relating to the production and consumption of food, such as the farmlands of Phillipi and the food court in Canal Walk shopping center – the central metaphor of the film.

This juxtaposition of spaces ultimately converges in the Company Gardens, a portion of which is currently being restored to its original purpose (of cultivating vegetable and fruit trees) as a project under the umbrella of the World Design Capital 2014. The gardens are also the inception point of slavery in South Africa. Here the figure stands under a monument to Jan Smuts, while security guards compare the character to *Robocop*. The character is soon joined by a group of Rastafarians who are marching through the gardens demanding the legalisation of marijuana. One man interprets the character as a representation of ‘Blikkiesdorp’ (Afrikaans for ‘Tin Can

Town’ and formally known as ‘Symphony Way Temporary Relocation Area’ in Delft), which becomes the site for the next scene of the film. As the character walks through what were once neatly arranged rows of corrugated iron shacks – now decked out with elaborate home-extensions clearly denoting the passage of time during which the residents have been forced to inhabit this ‘temporary’ space – one viewer shouts ‘*hy’s van hier!* (he’s from here!)’. Another sees the character as a possible business venture, laughing as he says ‘*ons kan daai op die skaal gooi!* (we can throw it on the weighing scale!)’. Through these interactions, the film touches on the substantial role that waste reclaiming plays in the informal economies of the city. Apart from having ‘a profound influence on the viability and effect of recycling initiatives’ (Samson 2007: 44), the reclamation of waste provides a source of livelihood to a growing number of the city’s inhabitants.

By retracing a tin can through spaces relating to scrap metal, farming, food consumption and military monuments, the *Metal* film looks at the obsolescence of patriarchal values and the need to reassess the entanglement of food and security. By pointing towards the conflation of these highly nuanced issues, the film attempts to demonstrate the necessity of addressing them with empathy and context-specific understanding. The film suggests that, though South Africa is not technically at war, there is a new enemy – that of neoliberal corporate domination – hiding within the castle walls, waging war on its citizens through the lens of a surveillance camera, and in the queues of the shopping mall.



CONCLUSION



Over the course of the past two years, my exploration of 'trash' has taken many forms. From reading and writing about it; throwing it away, collecting someone else's and transforming it; to wearing it, and interacting with strangers in a playful, immersive way; I have attempted to explore new ways of relating to my surroundings. I have looked at trash in terms of how it is defined, categorised, concealed and condemned. This has, in turn, raised a number of questions around identity, and how these tie into notions of space, time, and the networks of production, consumption and disposal which support my day-to-day experience of a the city. In this sense, trash has acted as a medium through which to present my interpretation of a multitude of social issues in Cape Town, as well as a medium through which to forge new ways of navigating this environment.

In *Cape Mongo* I have imagined trash objects – specifically, the packaging of domestic consumables – not merely as disposable items which are purged from our lives as soon as the garbage truck disappears around the bend or lie dormant in an ever-widening layer in the crust of the earth for future archaeologists to marvel at. Rather, *Cape Mongo* is the imagined journey of ordinarily discarded objects, as mnemonic vestiges of the activities that shaped them. It explores the roles these items may have played in the lives of the people who handled them throughout their journey.

I have explored 'trash' as something which society aims to conceal and distance itself from; something which is in some contexts regarded as 'offensive' and in others as a resource, undergoing rigorous processes of sorting, categorising, filtering and reordering. I have applied my interrogation of these processes to my own life, attempting to unpack aspects of my identity which I have discarded or reordered over the past twenty years. Just as I am in a constant state of becoming, of accepting and rejecting new information and ideas about myself and the world I inhabit, so this process is mirrored in my interaction with the material world. In reclaiming some

of the waste whose production I contribute to, and rearranging it into forms which cling to my body, I have attempted to construct a metaphor or vehicle through which to explore various other invisible processes with which I am complicit and connected. Through mythology and nostalgia, I have attempted to explain my desire to communicate a sense of naivety, or ignorance, in response to the social issues probed in the project. In this sense, the characters of *Cape Mongo* have served as a tool with which to make sense of the glaring contradictions I inhabit and encounter on a daily basis.

In my use of visual media – a process which has often refused neat classification as a montage of montages – I have drawn on the work of other artists in an attempt to situate my project within a contemporary art context which stretches across, and is tangled between various categories of art-making. In my approach to materiality, the sculptural suits of *Cape Mongo* have proved vehicles with which to explore the relation of a single material to the variety of contexts and spaces it inhabits. In performance they were both yielding and unforgiving; restricting my movement, while also allowing me to wander through new and unpredictable situations. In my approach to film and post-production, I have noted various positive and negative effects of the transition from live to recorded media, and in doing so, have observed how reproducing artwork into forms which allow for a wider distribution inevitably translates into a mediated distance between the viewer-participant and the action.

In a detailed contextual analysis of each film I have attempted to highlight the themes and set of social issues raised in each. By analysing the narratives of the films and attempting to provide my intended readings of both the characters and the journeys which they undergo, the ways in which both the historical and theoretical context of the project are made visually manifest in the films are suggested.

Throughout the course of the past two years I have used sculpture, performance and film to engage various issues, and to navigate my continuously shifting relationship to my environment. When viewed in its entirety, *Cape Mongo* becomes a personal mythology of various social and historical aspects of Cape Town viewed through the imagined journeys of imagined creatures, as they move through spaces relating to the production of objects, the construction of values, and the concealment of waste through which I hope to communicate these concerns to a wider audience. In this world the fictitious and the real, the animal and the object, the rich and the poor, space and stretches of time are in some cases separated by blurred boundaries, and in other cases rendered wholly interconnected.

While *Cape Mongo* examines the broad historical evolution of the city's economic disparities through the personal lens of my

relationship to the city over the past twenty years as though it were a conversation between the imaginations of my five year old self and my reflections on my current situation, it also reflects considerations that impact each and every person living in the city.

In the process of scavenging through the city's waste to find the hidden and valuable lives of materials, I discovered the profound and intimate ways in which trash functions in, informs, enters and leaves the lives of people. I hope that the work might serve to both highlight the colossal chain of manufacturing, consuming and discarding which is constantly at play, but also to provide an account of the nuanced ways in which micro-systems involving human lives operate within this macro-system we call waste. It is my hope that in becoming the characters of *Cape Mongo* and disguising myself in this waste, something has been disclosed.



*Cape Mongo (Plastic)*, 2015  
Photo by Anton Scholtz

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