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THE PIONEERING SPIRIT IN THE FACE OF MYSTERY

A Creative Exploration of Phenomena Pertinent to
The Information Age in a Systems Paradigm

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For my parents, and for Stefan, my love

University of Cape Town

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INTRODUCTION

My artwork deals with the experience and concept of 'mystery' – mystery that inspires awe – and sometimes fear – and that is located beyond the known. The sublime is one area where I experience mystery intensely. Immanuel Kant, an important philosopher of the Enlightenment, proposes that one can and should contain the sublime with reason, and in the process elevate it to an objective, universal and rational truth. My response to, and understanding of, the sublime differs from that of Kant: I do not attempt in any way to contain the sublime. In my work, I wish only to express my relationship to it, and to experience it as a personal, intimate and emotional truth.

In the first Section of my thesis, I explore the theoretical and historical context of my work. Here I look at the notions of the sublime and systems thinking. Kant formulated his notion of the sublime as a reflective aesthetic assessment that causes the individual pleasure by overwhelming her¹ by sheer magnitude or power². I explore here the way in which the sublime occurs in systems thinking. I contend that the sublime has a significant presence in certain aspects of systems thinking, which is a contemporary scientific paradigm that focuses on interrelations and connectedness in order to understand complex systems.

¹ For the sake of simplicity, I use the term 'her' throughout this thesis when referring to the individual, rather than 'him or her'. This dissertation has no direct feminist agenda, but because its nature is personal and it conveys the dynamics of my creative process, I have chosen to use a specifically feminine term when referring to the individual.

² I examine the process of the sublime experience, as formulated by Kant, in more detail later in the dissertation in Section 1.

This Section serves as an introduction to some of the major mental and emotional activities and processes involved in the production of my work. It is not intended to present an in-depth philosophical and theoretical study of this aspect of Kant's theory of aesthetics. Nor does it attempt to give a thorough account of the entire scope of systems thinking.

Kant asserts in his theory of the sublime that reason dominates the senses and imagination, thus privileging reason itself above emotional and personal responses. In contrast, in the second half of the first Section, I show how my creative visual output, and my own experiences of the sublime, have been formed from, and shaped by, personal and intimate responses and experiences. This divergence from Kant's understanding of the sublime, this emphasis on the personal response, as I demonstrate, is central to my art.

In the second Section of the thesis, I review contemporary artists who have influenced my art. Here, I explain briefly my particular interest in the art of Jenny Holzer, Breyten Breytenbach, Ernesto Neto, Walter de Maria, Keith Tyson and Mark Wallinger. I highlight aspects of their art that fascinate me, particularly the nature of their ideas and the role of 'sentience' in their work. And following this, I look in more depth at the significance of Willem Boshoff and Martin Creed as influences upon my own work. The way in which Boshoff uses interplays between text, language and meaning, and Creed's idiosyncratic combination of seriousness and humour, have been particularly important influences, as I will show.

I describe some of the most prevalent methods and processes employed in my work within the third Section. Here, I discuss the role that information technologies, language and drawing play in my creative process.

In the fourth Section, each of my artworks is described and partially interpreted. I examine selected intentions behind these works and show how the concept of the sublime is intimately connected to them.

The fifth and final Section describes the themes and *leitmotifs* of my work. Grouping the works according to four broad mediums – namely video, tactile objects, images made with so-called 'old media', and computer-generated works – I describe the

rationale behind choosing the specific medium of each work. I examine too, the thematic implications of each medium. Finally, I explore some of the *leitmotifs* recurring in my art, focusing specifically on that of 'the double' and its derivatives.

It is important to note that I write this text as an artist and as a creative visual practitioner, not as a scientist, mathematician, or theorist. This dissertation is not intended as a validation for, or justification of, my visual work. Instead, it resonates with my art to describe some of my idiosyncrasies and motivations, thereby opening the work up to the audience.

Part 1

A mountain is a strange and awful thing. In old times, without knowing so much of their strangeness and awfulness as we do, people were yet more afraid of mountains. But then somehow they had not come to see how beautiful they are as well as awful, and they hated them – and what people hate they must fear. Now that we have learned to look at them with admiration, perhaps we do not feel quite awe enough of them. To me they are beautiful terrors.

From: *The Princess and Curdie* by George MacDonald (1882:11)

People who have not been in Namia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time.

From: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by Clive Lewis (1970:117)

I say this in all humility.

From: *The Soul of the White Ant* by Eugene Marais (1973:118)

SECTION 1 THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1.1 THE SUBLIME: IMMANUEL KANT

When the term 'the sublime' is used to describe an aesthetic assessment³, the intention is typically to suggest a feeling of immense magnitude, power and significance. Kant, for example, states that the sublime is a pleasure arising indirectly: when an individual is confronted with a sublime object or concept, the comparison made between herself and the sublime item brings about a shocking realisation of her own diminutive scale, followed almost instantaneously by an overwhelming realization of the magnitude or might of the sublime object⁴ (Meredith, 1911:91).

The term 'sublime' is also used to describe an experience of an object in nature or art⁵, or a concept, which is too great to be contained by the senses. An object of nature cannot of itself be said to be sublime, only to "lend itself to the representation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind" (Meredith, 1911:92). The individual recognises characteristics in the sublime object or concept that ignites a stream of thoughts, linked by similar associations, causing that individual to experience the feeling of the sublime. This overwhelming reflection or sensation of the object or concept, reminds the individual of a vastness and infinity beyond themselves, bringing

³ Kant uses the term 'judgement' when referring to the nature of sublime; this 'judgement', he argues, forms part of the process of claiming or understanding something such as a piece of art, as 'beautiful' or 'sublime'. I have chosen to use the term 'assessment' instead, because it suggests, to my mind, a more neutral, possibly even positive, process of evaluation. In so doing, I have tried to avoid the more negative implications inherent in the word 'judgement'.

⁴ Kant describes this process as a pleasure "being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital sources followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful" (Meredith, 1911:91).

⁵ For Kant, objects of art are "always restricted by the conditions of an agreement with nature" (Meredith, 1911:91). When Kant refers to objects of nature, objects of art are necessarily implied.

about an emotion that she can identify as the sublime. In Kant's theory, when an object or concept is too great to be contained by either the senses or by the imagination alone, it is reason that describes and consequently contains it.

An object or concept could be said to embody the sublime if it is an overwhelming, vast, terrific or terrifying. When, for instance, the individual realises her inability to comprehend an object due to its scale or power, she might be said to have experienced the sublime. In my experience, this aspect or dimension of the sublime leads to humility: not only does the individual have to be in a humble position in order to first experience the sublime, but the sublime experience itself confirms her relative inadequacy. This is a cycle that thus reinforces a humbling dynamic. We could argue that the individual's experience of the sublime depends on her capacity and willingness to become aware of relative vastness or might. But it is important to note that the sublime is not so much an effect of the inadequacy (or adequacy) to understand, but rather an effect of *feeling* profoundly overwhelmed by an object or concept of magnitude and power.

For Kant, the sublime itself does not lie in the structure or characteristics of an object, but rather in the disposition of the individual towards the object. He reasons that it would be inappropriate to call a stormy ocean 'sublime'. However, as he reasons, such an ocean may act as a catalyst for a series of connotations and connections in the mind. "[O]ne must have stored one's mind in advance with a rich stock of ideas, if such an intuition is to raise it to the pitch of a feeling which is itself sublime – sublime because the mind has been incited to abandon sensibility, and employ itself upon ideas involving higher finality" (Meredith, 1911:92). Consequently, we should assume that each individual will experience the sublime differently, depending on their personal disposition towards the object and the nature of the connotations they personally associate with such an object. It would be logical to argue therefore, that individuals will have varying capacities to feel (or experience) the sublime, because of individual degrees of sensitivity towards the sublime as embodied by concepts and objects of nature.

Kant, as an idealist, distinguished between the phenomenal world and the world of "things in themselves" (Capra, 1997:21). According to his Platonic reasoning, the actual things that we can see are, in fact, only (partial) instances or occurrences of

higher Ideas. Kant argues that the experience of the sublime occurs when the mind abandons its normal sensibility and becomes occupied with "ideas involving higher finality" (Meredith, 1911:92). My creative process and experiences differ from this process suggested by Kant, and from his idealist conclusions, and I return to these important differences later in the thesis in Part 2.

1.1.1 Characteristics of the sublime: that which is beyond our understanding

Kant draws a distinction between 'the beautiful' and 'the sublime' as different types of aesthetic judgements. As Kant argues, both the beautiful and the sublime give the individual pleasure, and function as an assessment of reflection. Although this study is concerned with the sublime rather than the beautiful, the differences that Kant believes exist between that of beauty and the sublime are useful in elucidating specific characteristics of the nature of the sublime itself. One such characteristic is the notion of formlessness or infinity.

The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness*, yet with a super-added thought of its totality

(Meredith, 1911:90)

Paul Crowther (1989:79) develops this concept of the formless object further in two examples demonstrating how the way in which an individual sees an object determines their perceptions and experience of it. In his first example, a mountain is initially seen from a distance, its top and base are visible simultaneously. Bought forward, the mountain is seen at such close proximity that the top disappears into the clouds. Crowther explains that when the mountain is visible in its entirety, it is contained and manageable within the reason of the individual and thus does not readily evoke the sublime. In contrast, when we are too close to the mountain to conveniently identify and contain it as a picture of 'a mountain', it becomes an immense and overwhelming mass, thus evoking a feeling of the sublime⁶.

⁶ To some, a mountain is sublime in itself. For such people, in other words, any mountain will evoke a sublime feeling within them, however it is represented or seen.

In the second example presented by Crowther, the mountain forms part of a larger series. Although the peaks can now be identified individually as 'mountains', the range stretches across the horizon and seems endless. Again, as he suggests, it is this limitlessness that has the potential to evoke a sublime experience. In these examples, Crowther demonstrates clearly how "an object can appear to be formless by overwhelming our perceptual faculties and suggesting the idea of limitlessness or infinity to us" (Crowther, 1989:80). Logically, it follows that a key characteristic of the sublime is that reason struggles to contain the object or concept.

1.1.2 Paradox as flux, flux as pleasure

According to my understanding of the sublime, the sublime has a paradoxical appeal to the individual, simultaneously attracting and repelling. For instance, one may be drawn by the immense power of a raging storm, but simultaneously repelled by the resultant destruction⁷. Consider, too, sensational or cataclysmic events such as the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in New York on September 11, 2001; the tsunami in South East Asia at the end of 2004; or the more recent hurricane Katrina and the destruction of New Orleans. In the media, these events were presented with a mixture of simultaneous fascination and horror: fascination because of the magnitude and power of the events as they unfolded, and horror as a result of the overpowering devastation of each.

⁷ There is a close etymological connection between the words 'terrifying' and 'terrific'. "Terrific: 1667, "frightening," from L. *terrificus* "causing terror or fear," from *terrere* "fill with fear" (see *terrible*) + root of *facere* "to make" (see *factitious*). Weakened sense of "very great, severe" (e.g. *terrific headache*) appeared 1809; colloquial sense of "excellent" began 1888." (Harper 2001). This connection between both terms and the root concept of terror, illustrates well the intrinsic paradox discussed.



FIGURE 1: SHADE AND DARKNESS – THE EVENING OF THE DELUGE (1843)

J.M.W. Turner

Oil on canvas, 78 X 78 cm.

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/multimedia/turner/index_item_10.shtml)

The Romantic paintings of John Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) are examples portraying the paradoxical nature of this positive/negative dynamic. Turner's paintings often depict a landscape that threatens to overwhelm the human elements contained within them: a device that denotes a vastness of scale and the force of the elements depicted. Turner creates a strong sense of movement in his paintings by using elements that evoke restlessness and dynamism, such as clouds and waves. *Shade and Darkness – the Evening of the Deluge* (1843), for instance, depicts a restless landscape that both upsets and intrigues the viewer.

Kant captures this dynamic within his understanding of the sublime, between attraction and repulsion, between awe and fear, when he writes: "the feeling of the sublime involves as its characteristic feature a mental *movement* combined with the estimate of the object" (italics in original) (Meredith, 1911:94). This, he contends, contrasts with the restful, stable, contemplative state that characterises the feeling of 'the beautiful'. However, since the sublime is ultimately a positive experience, this mental movement should be understood as "subjectively final" (Meredith, 1911:94). In other words, the finality – and therefore the delight – of the sublime, lies in this mental movement itself.

The principle of attraction and repulsion within the sublime, as Kant claims, is important in understanding the relationship between individual, separate objects⁸ and the way in which this relationship or connection influences the feeling or experience of the sublime. As Langton writes, "[t]he physical world cannot arise from the mere existence of substances, but only from their forces, of which there are two, attraction and repulsion" (Langton, 1998:99). For Kant, "[s]pace is filled by forces, not by solid atoms" (Langton, 1998:100). Kant suggests that relationships between objects do not exist independently from the objects, but are functions of the intrinsic nature of the objects (Langton, 1998:102), thus relational properties can exist *because* of the intrinsic properties of the objects.

This philosophy and viewpoint are important to the process of my creative production for two reasons. Firstly because change – and ultimately life – is possible because of the connection between objects, and because these connections are dynamic. An object in isolation would not change, prohibiting progression and growth. Secondly, Kant claims that human knowledge is receptive⁹, that we have no knowledge of things in themselves (Langton, 1998:4), and, as I have shown, this acknowledgement

⁸ Rae Langton (1998) shows how Kant differentiates between the concept of the 'object' and the 'substance' - the object being an instance of the substance. For the purposes of this thesis, the distinction and debate is not intrinsically relevant and so I refer solely to 'object/s' in my discussion.

⁹ The concept of 'receptive knowledge', implies that one *receives* knowledge, is *given* it or *exposed* to it. This notion assumes that the individual is in a relatively passive position when obtaining knowledge and this is not necessarily true.

causes epistemological humility. I will not explore these ideas in more depth here due to the limited scale of this thesis. However, the concepts of change, relationship and humility themselves are central to my work and creative production. I will show later how these notions are important themes in my work (Sections 4 and 5), as well as intrinsic to both my method and process (Section 3).

1.1.3 Kant and systems thinking

Given that the connection between objects is an important component of Kant's understanding, I would argue that there is a potentially significant link between Kant's view of the sublime and that of the philosophy of systems thinking which focuses, similarly, on connectedness.

Kant's critique proposes that the immediate feeling of the sublime should be elevated to a universal, colder morality (Crowther, 1989:100). In contrast, my response to the sublime is an immediate, personal and intimate one. This more personal response is of key importance to my art and will be explored in Part 2 when I review my own artworks in more detail. But first I want to explore how the concept of the sublime is present in the paradigm of systems thinking.

1.2 SYSTEMS THINKING

Fritjof Capra (1997:29)¹⁰ describes systems thinking as a new understanding of connectedness, relationships and context, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. "According to the systems view, the essential properties of an organism, or living system, are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have. They arise from the interactions and relationships between the parts" (Capra, 1997:29). Capra suggests that this shift in emphasis from the parts to the whole was the result of a profound change in Western scientific thought¹¹ brought about by a variety of factors. This development in thought was profound, because it marked a shift away

¹⁰ Capra is an Austrian-born American physicist who has done groundbreaking work in the field of systems theory.

¹¹ For the purposes of this thesis, the term 'science' is used to refer to the study of the physical world and its manifestations, especially by using systematic observation and experiment (http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_/science).

from the earlier analytical emphasis of Western science. I explore this shift in more detail below.

1.2.1 Short history of systems thinking

1.2.1.1 Cartesian mechanism

As a result of the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the world and living organisms came to be seen within dominant paradigms as analogous to machines. The work of Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, Bacon and Newton all reflect this mechanistic worldview in which all natural phenomena were seen as the product of physical causes (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mechanism_%28philosophy%29). Analytical methods typically entailed an understanding of the behaviour of the whole based on a study of the properties of individual parts (Capra, 1997:19).

This way of thinking was challenged by the Romantics and by further philosophical debates in science, biology, psychology and ecology. Critics asserted that an understanding of the dynamics *between* the parts of the whole was essential to the study of complex systems. In particular, the analytical method began increasingly to be viewed as inadequate for the study of complex systems, such as living organisms. The analytical method, for example, as Capra notes, disregards emergent properties - properties of a system that appear only at a higher level of complexity but do not exist at lower or less complex levels (Capra, 1997:28). Capra asserts: "systems are integrated wholes that cannot be understood by analysis" (Capra, 1997:30).

1.2.1.2 Key players in the development of systems thinking

Systems thinkers, in contrast, focus not on mechanistic concerns but on an ecological worldview: the earth is no longer understood to be a machine, but as a living organism. Furthermore, the focus of systems studies is focused on the whole rather than just the parts of the whole. As Capra argues, the mechanistic worldview was challenged by Romanticism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and by debates within the twentieth century in fields such as organismic biology, quantum physics, Gestalt psychology and ecology. All of these fields contributed essential concepts to what we understand today as 'systems thinking'.

Goethe acknowledged the dynamic, developmental nature of organic form and "conceived of form as a pattern of relationships within an organised whole - a conception which is at the forefront of contemporary systems thinking" (Capra, 1997:21). Along with others, he conceptualized the idea of the earth as a living organism, sometimes referred to as Gaia or the Earth Goddess (Capra, 1997:22).

As an idealist, Kant distinguished between the phenomenal world and the world of "things-in-themselves" (Capra, 1997:21). He acknowledged that the mechanistic interpretation of the science of his own time was sometimes inadequate, and that it needed to be supplemented by a viewpoint that "consider[ed] nature as purposeful" (Capra, 1997:21). Kant asserted that the parts of an organism exist by means of each other, in other words producing each other in an interdependent way, and that the parts of a machine exist for each other (Capra, 1997:23). He pointed out that organisms differ from machines in that they are "self-reproducing, self-organising wholes" (Capra, 1997:21).

Organismic biologists explored the concepts of organisation, organised complexity as well as pattern (that is, the configurations of ordered relationships) (Capra, 1997:27). Furthermore, they emphasised the multi-levelled, dynamic and hierarchical nature of living organisms of systems within systems (Capra, 1997:28). This shift in emphasis from individual components, or parts, to the whole was particularly apparent in quantum physics. In the 1920s it was argued that the principles of Cartesian mechanics were redundant at a subatomic level, because at this level matter dissolves into patterns of probability of *interconnections*, and not probability of *things* (Capra, 1997:30). Molecules and atoms "have no meaning as isolated entities but can be understood only as interconnections, or correlations, between various processes of observation and measurement... In quantum theory, we never end up with any 'things'; we always deal with interconnections" (Capra, 1997:30).

Gestalt¹² psychologists developed followed an holistic approach and believed that the whole was always greater than the sum of its parts, an approach which became central to the key principles of systems thinking (Capra, 1997:32). The idea of the

¹² *Gestalt* is a German word meaning 'organic form'. The German word *form*, by contrast, translates as 'inanimate form' (Capra, 1997:31).

pattern was also central to the thinking of Gestalt psychologists and this idea, too, became central to systems theory. Capra (1997:80) asserts that "[f]rom the systems point of view, the understanding of life begins with the understanding of pattern."

Ecology, or the study of "a community of organisms and their physical environment interacting as an ecological unit" (Capra, 1997:35) emerged as a science early in the twentieth century. From this field, two concepts in particular - community and network - further influenced systems thinking (Capra, 1997:35). Some organisms - for instance ants¹³ - cannot survive, it was reasoned, on their own but rather live together in a group or community that in turn resemble a single new organism or network. This concept of the network came to be seen as central to ecology. Individual networks were seen as nesting within other networks, and every node of a network was seen as revealing another network, and so on. Capra (1997:35) asserts "during the second half of the [twentieth] century the network concept has been the key to the recent advances in the scientific understanding not only of ecosystems but of the very nature of life".

1.2.2 Mystery: The sublime in systems thinking

Another way to compare and contrast analytical thinking and systems thinking is to imagine their structures graphically represented. So, for example, we can imagine the structure of analytical mechanics resembling a strict, stable, static hierarchy with subdivisions of subdivisions, until the whole cannot be divided any further. The analysis is finite in a sense, and the sum of the components constitutes the whole. In

¹³ Eugène Marais (1872-1936) was a pioneer in the disciplines of Afrikaans and science. Arguably his most important work is "The Soul of the White Ant" ("Die Siel van die Mier") in which he recorded years of observation and study of the termite colonies in the mountains of northern South Africa. His research led him to view ant colonies as a complete system, even as an organism, because of the specialized and interdependent functions of the different termite groups within the colony. "The individual worker or soldier possesses no individual instincts" Marais wrote. "He forms part of a separate organism of which the queen is the psychological centre" (Marais, 1973:125).

contrast, systems thinking would typically resemble a network of hierarchies, with networks nested inside networks. In the analytical hierarchy, one would be able to zoom into a node only up to the point of the smallest components, typically molecules and atoms. But in the systems network, zooming in closer to any node, reveals yet another network. This absolute connectedness evokes a profound sense of infinity, a feeling I believe is associated with the sublime.



FIGURE 2: TWO EXAMPLES OF THE MANDELBROT¹⁴ SET

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fractals>)

The dynamic structure of systems thinking is evident in the physical world in examples such as fractals, galactic structures and the structural similarity between the micro- and macro-cosmos. Visual representations of fractals, for example, are created by specific mathematical calculations and are characterised by their infinitely repeatable pattern. According to the online, open-source encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, "fractals are said to possess infinite detail, and some of them have a self-similar structure that occurs at different levels of magnification" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fractals>). Random fractals can be used to describe 'real-world' objects that are highly irregular, and therefore have great practical use. Examples of these real-world objects are clouds, mountains, turbulence, coastlines and trees.

¹⁴ Benoît Mandelbrot is a mathematician and leading proponent of fractal geometry. He was the first to use a computer to plot the Mandelbrot set (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beno%C3%AEt_Mandelbrot).

An example of the 'ecological' view proposed by systems thinking is that of information technology, and particularly the Internet. The discipline of ecology speaks of nested networks, or networks within networks. Similarly, websites typically function as networks in themselves, given that they are nested within bigger networks, which in turn are nested inside the Internet. The term 'Internet' or 'inter-network' – affirms that this ecological structure underlies the basic structure of this system. None of the Internet's separate pieces of information exist in isolation, but are instead all interconnected and accessible¹⁵.

That which is found to be outside the range of our understanding, is an opportunity for fresh inquiry rather than failed and useless results. Meredith (1911:92) writes:

Self-subsisting natural beauty reveals to us a technic of nature which shows it in the light of a system ordered in accordance with laws the principle of which is not to be found within the range of our entire faculty of understanding.

Apart from overwhelming the individual, the sublime may itself cause or encourage active inquiry. This 'activating effect' could, for example, be evoked through a fascination with an object. It is born not only from the recognition – or lack thereof – of a sublime object in nature, but also from the recognition of patterns and principles between these objects.

1.2.3 *Baraka*. The sublime in film

In order to understand something about the ability of systems to evoke wondrous reflection and a feeling of the sublime, it is useful at this point to refer to the documentary feature film *Baraka* (1994). This film explores the nature of life itself and is a useful example of the sublime within systems. *Baraka* evokes the sublime for me through the nature of its subject matter. Scenes vary between expressions of nature and accomplishments of human endeavour as the film take the viewer on a tour of

¹⁵ The correlation between information systems and the nervous system reveals another curious pattern. The design of information systems would sometimes seem to suggest that such systems aim to imitate the design, structure and function, of actual nervous systems.

different cultures from around the world. The film has no dialogue or obvious narrative, the soundtrack is a combination of grandiose classical music and curious ambient noise, and the surprising length of some repeated scenes generates remarkable suspense and intensity. Examples of 'events' portrayed in the film include the traffic of a cityscape at night sped up to reveal complex patterns, huge demolitions and explosions, the building of a tropical storm, and a variety of life cycles.

The film manipulates both time and space to explore correlations between systems. As the traffic of the cityscape accelerates more and more, the similarities between the movement of the streets and movements inside the human circulation system becomes increasingly striking. Footage of an extreme close-up of flow patterns in sand is juxtaposed with footage shot from a great distance, including satellite images, to reveal similarities across these very different scales. These visual representations are fascinating in terms of their magnitude and might, and simultaneously awesome and awful, terrific and terrifying. *Baraka* is a strongly emotive film that encourages reflection and even humility by presenting these visual parallels.

1.2.4 A defence of intuition

Based on the assumption that patterns and connectedness are implicit to the nature of life¹⁶, I would suggest that one can intuitively anticipate connections and correlations. In other words, my desire to explore the connections and links between concepts, systems and objects freely, even prior to conclusive proof of specific correlations, is due to the fact that the principles of patterns themselves 'predict' such connections. Inexplicable and strange phenomena, such as the Sheldrake experiments¹⁷, the Six Degrees of Separation Rule¹⁸, the Hundred Monkeys

¹⁶ This is an implicit assumption of systems thinking.

¹⁷ Dr. Rupert Sheldrake is a controversial British biologist whose mission is to extend science into areas it has neglected thus far. He writes extensively on animal and plant development and behaviour, telepathy, perception and metaphysics (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rupert_Sheldrake).

¹⁸ The theory of the 'six degrees of separation' states that everyone on earth is connected to every other person on the planet through a chain of no more than five intermediaries (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_degrees_of_separation).

experiment¹⁹, and so on become open to investigation. The fact that I explore these theories does not necessarily mean that I consider any of them to be 'true' and nor does this matter. Even without the expert knowledge of a specific field, the maverick artist, the artist with a pioneering spirit, may happen upon connections, or at least explore a humbling and intensely emotional moment in the process of looking.

The effect of the sublime and of systems thinking in my creative process is not cold, but sobering and humbling. It is cognitive, but emotionally so. It is profound, but invites play, curiosity and exploration. Its vast scale and magnitude enhances locality, intimacy and the personal.

1.2.5 Experience

But in what we are wont to call sublime in nature there is such an absence of anything leading to particular objective principles and corresponding forms of nature, that it is rather in its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation, provided it gives signs of magnitude and power, that nature chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime (Meredith, 1911:92).

The above passage suggests that the sublime in nature is "far less important and rich in consequences than ... beauty" (Meredith, 1911:93) because the sublime does not lead to concrete, resolved interpretations, and neither does it require fixed objective finality in nature. "For the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground external to ourselves, but for the sublime one merely in ourselves and the attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature" (Meredith, 1911:93). Kant, however, seems to dismiss the importance of the sublime because of its subjective and inconclusive nature when he draws a comparison between the beautiful and the sublime in terms of their 'usefulness' or 'consequence'. In comparison to the beautiful, which may lead to concrete, final conclusions due to its limited nature, the sublime does not lead to "particular objective principles" (Meredith, 1911:92).

¹⁹ The Hundred Monkeys theory contends that if enough members of a particular group acquire knowledge, that knowledge will enter the collective unconscious of the entire group with every member gaining access to it, even though the individuals may not have acquired the knowledge personally.

I find Kant's dismissal problematic for two reasons. Firstly, the feeling of the sublime need not be a necessarily shallow reaction to a representation. If this was the case, the feeling of the sublime would be of potentially little consequence. However, if the feeling of the sublime marks the subject's recognition of his or her own position, scale and existence, and this recognition causes a process of investigation that may lead to concrete and useful discoveries, then the sublime can be said to be of great consequence.

Secondly, Kant's argument implies that value lies only in ultimate usefulness. As such, his argument discredits the value of the subjective itself, and the significance of specific, local, intuitive, personal and subjective experiences. Perhaps it was the absence at the time of an adequate philosophical language with which to describe the sublime or "the lack of mathematical techniques for dealing with the complexity of living systems" (Capra, 1997:79) that caused Kant to disregard this potential of the sublime. In this regard, it is interesting to note that early critics of systems thinking had reservations about this new approach that mirrored Kant's own doubts about the value of the sublime. Systems thinking, for example, was criticised for being fascinated with analogies between disciplines, while not producing any real solutions to actual, substantial problems (Lilienfeld, 1978:191-2). Prior to the mathematical techniques necessary to describe the complexity of living systems, systems thinkers did not have the actual means or language to articulate the significance or relevance of their findings.

The use of computers in schools is based on the now outdated view of human beings as information processors, which continually reinforces erroneous mechanistic concepts of thinking, knowledge, and communication. Information is presented as the basis of thinking, whereas in reality the human mind thinks with ideas, not with information. As Theodore Roszak shows in detail in "The Cult of Information", *information does not create ideas; ideas create information. Ideas are integrated patterns that do not derive from information but from experience.* [italics not in original]

Capra, 1997:70

Personally, this shift in scientific thought as it is embodied in systems thinking, excites me. This shift offers to me a new focus on, and respect for, ideas, and provides me with a paradigm that not only allows me to cope with the enormous amount of information that prevails in the Information Age, but also to recognise information as being subservient to ideas. The shift towards systems thinking brings us to a place where pattern, intuition, stream of consciousness and relationships are valid and valuable concepts for (artistic) exploration. This I find exciting, as well as the fact that these concepts have long fascinated me.

1.3 RELATED CONCEPTS

Other ideas have also influenced my creative process significantly and are present in the works themselves. For the purposes of this dissertation, and due to the limits of time and space, a brief list of these ideas must suffice.

These influences include the idea of the 'divine paradox' which describes the phenomenon where two seemingly mutually exclusive ideas co-exist together. (There is, for example, a derivative of the divine paradox in Kant's so-called Twoism). Other ideas that have shaped my work include those of sentience, language, Afrikaner identity, consumerism, surveillance, privacy, sensory awareness and the pioneer. I consider these ideas as integral and connected both to the sublime and each other, and believe that they form a rich, fertile and inspiring web of interrelated concepts and paths of consciousness.

Other influences upon my work, such as those of contemporary artists, are discussed further in Section 2.

SECTION 2 CONTEMPORARY REFERENCES

I identify with, and have been influenced by, a variety of contemporary artists - conceptual artists in particular. Jenny Holzer, Breyten Breytenbach, Ernesto Neto, Mark Wallinger and Keith Tyson are among those who have had a significant impact on both my thinking and my art. In this Section, I detail first the important features of the work of each of these artists and then examine the way in which artists such as Willem Boshoff and Martin Creed have inspired me.

The unifying connection between these artists, and the factor that explains their appeal to me, is their fascination with ideas and knowledge, and their common interest in the notion of 'sentience'.

2.1 SOME ARTISTS: SENTIENCE AND SCINTILLATING IDEAS



FIGURE 3: Artmachine Repeater Series: DUAL WORKSTATIONS (30 SECONDS LATE AND EARLY) (1998-99)

Keith Tyson
(Hyde 2005)

I am particularly interested in the work of Keith Tyson. His art is inspired by a fascination with ideas, scientific concepts and philosophical theories. His approach is often characterised by playful experiments with 'serious' ideas. As part of his work, Tyson develops unusual games and objects in a pursuit of knowledge. *Artmachine* a computer system that he developed that 'randomly' combined concepts to generate ideas, which he then would have to execute (http://www.delfina.org.uk/exh/pr_tyson.html).



FIGURE 4: AN OPEN LECTURE ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT WAS NECESSARY TO BRING YOU AND THIS WORK TOGETHER AT THIS PARTICULAR TIME (2000)

Keith Tyson
Mixed media sound installation, 244 x 488 cm
(Binder and Haupt, 2001)



FIGURE 5: SAVOR KINDNESS BECAUSE CRUELTY IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE LATER (2003)

Jenny Holzer
Imperial white marble, 42,5 x 57,2 x 39,4 cm.
(Dailey 2005)

Jenny Holzer is an American artist often associated with feminism. She creates textual works that attempt to address the human condition, and are exhibited in a variety of ways, including projections, engravings or even prints on T-shirts. Her text-based works are referred to as 'truisms' (Dailey 2005). Holzer's truisms are often presented as understatements and so present dilemmas in a quiet yet powerful way. The personal, intimate content of her work, presented in a deliberately undramatic fashion directly inspired similar ideas within my own works.

Mark Wallinger is an English painter, sculptor and video artist (Stonard 2000). In his videos, Wallinger often utilises inversions and paradoxes, including, for example, spoken language played backwards, and his concepts and ideas have inspired me to develop these themes within my work (Stonard 2000).



FIGURE 6: ECCE HOMO (1999)

Mark Wallinger
 Marbleised resin, gold leaf, barbed wire, life size (installed in Trafalgar square July 1999 - February 2000)
 (<http://www.artnet.com/artwork/423927125/mark-wallinger-ecce-homo.html>)

Ecce Homo (1999), also by Wallinger, is a life size sculpture of Christ that was commissioned for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square: “[c]ontrasting with the monumentality of the surrounding public statuary and architecture, this work suggested contemporary relevance for themes of suffering and redemption, and a plea for racial and religious tolerance” (Stonard 2000). The impact of the sculpture lies largely in the surprising paradox in scale that Stonard points out.



FIGURE 7: Film still from ANGEL (1997)

Mark Wallinger
 (<http://www.artnet.com/artwork/423933055/mark-wallinger-angel.html>)



FIGURE 8: Film stills from CREDO – THRESHOLD TO THE KINGDOM (2000)

Mark Wallinger
 (Stonard 2000)

I like the way that Wallinger processes messages, texts and language. His playfulness with the ideas of speech and paradox is clearly illustrated in his work, *Angel* (1997), where he recites a passage from the Bible backwards and then plays the same recording backwards, so that the sounds still seem natural and are still meaningful. Furthermore, his work seems to me to have a confidence and quietness that seems at once understated and dramatically powerful. For example, *Credo – Threshold to the Kingdom* (2000) is a video of passengers international arrivals hall at a London airport. "Filmed in slow motion, the video is silent except for Allegri's Miserere, a setting of the 51st psalm ("Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness/In your compassion blot out my offence"), which for centuries was sung only in the Sistine Chapel" (Dorment 2001). The video seems both everyday in its familiarity and sublime in its portrayal of the afterlife. Within my work I have developed similar interests in paradoxes.

I am interested, too, in artists whose work includes animal associations and references. Breyten Breytenbach²⁰, for example, who frequently plays with words and ambiguities, often includes dogs in his work. His paintings, often in a narrative, surreal style, appeal to me because of this. Ernesto Neto's use of smell and scale makes his sculptural work *The Animal* (2001) an emotive, sensual, intimate yet overwhelming piece. While Breytenbach's work is perhaps more intellectually evocative, Neto's art is more emotive, addressing the more primary faculty of smell rather than thought. As mentioned earlier in this section, horses figure prominently in the work of Wallinger, such as in the painting *Half-Brother (Exit to Nowhere – Machiavellian)* (1994-5) where horses are associated with winning in the context of gambling and horse-racing, as well as the beauty of the thoroughbred (Button 2003b).

²⁰ Breytenbach is a South African artist living and working in France. He is probably better known for his writing than his painting. He is strongly associated with anti-apartheid politics (Bruer 2006).



FIGURE 9: Ô BICHO! (THE ANIMAL) (2001)

Ernesto Neto
Lycra, tulle, poliamide stockings, pepper, curcuma, clove
(Haupt and Binder 2001)



FIGURE 10: HALF-BROTHER (EXIT TO NOWHERE – MACHIAVELLIAN) (1994-5)

Mark Wallinger
(Button 2003b)



FIGURE 11: Detail, Ô BICHO! (2001)

Ernesto Neto

Lycra, tulle, poliamide stockings, pepper, curcuma, clove
(Haupt and Binder 2001)

I find it valuable to explore, and to be inspired by, the different approaches of artists to subject matters similar to my own. This is particularly the case in terms of my interest in animals. Dogs, as I have mentioned elsewhere, are part of my (visual) language for self-portraits. Wallinger exults in the form, nobility and status of the pure-bred racehorse. Neto, in contrast, creates a sensuous, evocative space that is evocative of an internal space and alerts the senses. And Breytenbach's work is in an almost 'stream of consciousness' style, with dogs often appearing in or between words, metaphors and even within self-portraits. Just as the visual and logical approaches of these artists vary from each other, so their approaches and solutions have all impacted on my work in different ways. In form, my current work probably seems most similar to that of Wallinger, exploring the form, structure and associations of dogs visually.

2.2 WILLEM BOSHOFF: WORDPLAY

Boshoff is a South African artist who works with a wide variety of materials, ranging from wood to graphic media, to make text- and language-related artworks. Boshoff uses language in a playful, and often subversive way to expose its potential power.

Like Boshoff, I too am required to work in an English environment, where my first language, Afrikaans, is often viewed with condescension.

In a lecture that I attended in 2002,²¹ Boshoff described the history of his relationship with English. As an Afrikaans speaker, Boshoff worked in an art community that was predominantly English, and was faced with the disadvantage of being a second language speaker. Ivan Vladislavic (2005:48) explains that Boshoff often “felt judged and ridiculed by his English-speaking colleagues. They assumed that because he spoke English with an Afrikaans accent, he was stupid and uncouth”. His colleagues would deliberately use “difficult” words as a means of ridiculing him, and as some kind of mean, intellectual game. Boshoff explained how he felt that English initially limited his ability to express his ideas, and that his inability to use the language jeopardised the degree to which he was taken seriously.

In what Vladislavic (2005:48) terms “a prank with a serious purpose”, Boshoff decided to beat his colleagues at their own game. He started to study dictionaries and, in particular, rarely used and specialised words within the English language. He thus came to use these words as tools of power. “Soon he was in a position”, writes Vladislavic “to turn the tables on his colleagues, to correct them when they made a mistake, to pepper them with etymologies, to use words *they* did not understand” (italics in original) (Vladislavic 2005:48). Boshoff thus found himself in a position of power because he had gained new knowledge of the meanings of words and language.

²¹ Department of Visual Art, University of Pretoria.



FIGURE 12: THE BLIND ALPHABET (1991-2000)

Willem Boshoff

Wood, steel, and aluminium, height of each box 73,5 cm.
(Vladislavic 2005:55)



Figure 13 Detail, THE BLIND ALPHABET (1991-2000)

Willem Boshoff

Wood, steel, aluminium, height of box 73.5cm.
(Vladislavic 2005:54)

Boshoff often uses language to expose imbalances in power relationships. His works often act as a means to empower a group that is usually disempowered, while also disempowering those normally accustomed to power. In *Blind Alphabet* (1999-2000), for instance, Boshoff reverses the normal power relationship between the seeing and the blind in the visual context of fine art:

In an inversion of power relations, the work creates a dependency on the touching and reading skills of blind guides. Without blind people in attendance, the *Blind Alphabet* remains lost - an exercise in aesthetic futility.

(Boshoff, 2005)

This work is structured similarly to a dictionary – in this case of uncommon, curious words from the field of morphology. Each sculpture is presented in a box that keeps the objects largely hidden from sight. On the lid of every box is an explanation in Braille that reveals the meaning of the sculpture to the 'reader'. The definition is thus deliberately revealed only to the blind and withheld from the sighted. The normal power relationships between the seeing and the blind are thus reversed: the blind person gains exclusive knowledge about the work while the sighted lack such access.

Blind Alphabet also intends – like much of Boshoff's work – to "rehabilitate the sense of touch" (Vladislavic 2005:54). It rebels against a society preoccupied by the visible and by visible characteristics – skin colour in particular – and offers touch as a useful alternative sense through which a person can access meaning and understanding (Boshoff 2005).

Most of the characteristics of Boshoff's art that I have outlined have influenced my art because we share similar interests. One of the most salient connections is the common fascination with language. My use of language and text within my own work often resonates with the ways Breytenbach does so too. I relate, also, to his concern for "disenfranchised social groups or vulnerable ecological issues" (Boshoff 2005). Formally, I identify with his improvisational use of different materials for different works, depending on the nature, content and theme of the work.

2.3 MARTIN CREED: "I WANT TO MAKE THINGS...BECAUSE I WANT TO BE LOVED"



FIGURE 14: WORK NO. 200 – HALF THE AIR IN A GIVEN SPACE (1998)

Martin Creed

White 12" balloons, dimensions variable

(<http://www.martincreed.com/workno200.html>)

Martin Creed is a British artist, living and working in the United Kingdom. He was a key member of the YBA (Young British Artists) movement in the 1990s. Creed's work is characterised by a combination of seriousness and humour, a mixture which I appreciate. So, for example, although a 'serious' artist, he numbers his works arbitrarily rather than sequentially. The concepts that he expresses are sometimes understated, sometimes incredibly overstated, and sometimes appear to have been selected in a disturbingly arbitrary way. For instance, for "*Work No. 200 – half the air in a given space*" (1998), Creed determines the volume of a given room and then packages exactly half of that air using balloons. He displays a degree of indecisiveness in his work that suggests that the choices underlying them that he has

to make are somehow both profound and mundane. The choices he makes suggest to me an integrity and motivation that seem to correlate with my own:

Ultimately, however, Creed seems to want to do what art has always been supposed to do: 'I want to make things. I'm not sure why, but I think it's got something to do with other people. I think I want to try to communicate with other people, because I want to say "hullo", because I want to express myself, and because I want to be loved'.

(<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/turnerprize/2001/Creed.htm>)

In *Work No. 112 (39 Metronomes)*, Creed has placed a row of metronomes, all set to different tempos (*Martin Creed 2001*). The first metronome is set to the slowest tempo, or *grave*, and the last one to the fastest, or *prestissima*, each metronome inbetween is set to a tempo faster than the one before. *Creed (Martin Creed 2001)* asserts that the metronomes represent a finite, human selection of the infinite possibilities of tempos. By attempting to use all of the possible tempos, the work describes, in effect, the limitations of the metronome. This work alludes to the limitations of creativity: without this limited context no activity would be possible.

I associate with the playful seriousness and serious playfulness that characterise the art of both Boshoff and Creed. Both artists also have a cerebral aspect to their work that attracts me: Boshoff's *Dictionary of Perplexing English*, and Creed's *Work No. 200 – half the air in a given space*, for instance, require a measure of intellectual activity to appreciate them. But over and above their cerebral interests, both artists reveal an intuitive, sentient interest in and through their work.

In this Section, I have highlight particular artists and the characteristics of their work that have caught my attention and inspired my art and thinking in some or other way. The themes and ideas that have run through this Section include those of sentience, animal associations, paradox, serious playfulness and playful seriousness. This Section has hopefully led the reader to form a clearer understanding of my artistic intentions and passion. In the following Sections, I deal directly with my own work and show how the concepts discussed earlier, namely those of the sublime, systems thinking and the specific interests within selected contemporary art, take form in my art. Section 3 will explore the methods and processes that I use, while Section 4

describes individual works of mine and some of their underlying meanings. Lastly, I investigate *leitmotifs* and connections inside my body of work in Section 5.

PART 2

University of Cape Town

SECTION 3

METHOD AND PROCESS

I find it necessary to foreground the limits of my knowledge when I explore objects, concepts and relationships given that I do so in a humble and curious way. As I explained in the previous section, the individual first needs to be sentient and have a keen awareness of the sublime in order to be able to recognise it when it confronts her. The disinterested individual might, as I have argued, easily overlook the sublime. In my creative process, I employ strategies to find and reveal the sublime in objects and concepts. My strategies usually entail extensive questioning, and a desire to probe deeper and deeper into the meanings or nature of an issue, until I find a boundary that presents itself explicitly as the limit of my knowledge. Socrates once wrote "I know nothing except for my own ignorance" (Kemerling 2001). It is at this 'boundary point' of my knowledge, that I accept this and open myself to an experience of the sublime if the object or concept will yield it.

Thought experiments attempt to solve problems using the power of imagination to construct an analogy for a problem. This is useful when it is not possible (or is extremely difficult) to perform a physical experiment. According to the online Wikipedia encyclopedia "[t]hought experiments design a hypothetical situation in which our intuitive response is contrary to our actual responses in similar real-world situations. Many thought experiments include apparent paradoxes about the known or accepted, that with time have led to the reformulation or precision of theories" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thought_experiments). As such, my artworks could be understood as visual 'outcomes' of my own thought experiments. These outcomes are not literal conclusions as such, but often playfully ironic, and frequently self-effacing.

In this Section I will discuss the methods that I apply in my creative process. I look specifically at the technologies that emerged with the Information Revolution, the issue of language as well as the significance of drawing.

3.1 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY: A NEW SPACE FOR PLAY

3.1.1 The Internet and other toys

Communication, networking and interconnectivity are key features of the Internet. The scale of this interconnectivity, it could be argued, conveys a sense of limitlessness that can seem overwhelming at times. In systems thinking, any node within a network can be expanded to reveal another network. Similarly, each hyperlink on the Internet could theoretically be expanded to reveal another network. When one views the Internet as a potentially ever-expanding source of information, its scale threatens to become overwhelming. As such, we could liken the Internet itself to the example discussed earlier of the range of mountains disappearing far into the distance. Even though we know there is an ultimate limit to the information, it still overwhelms our perception and understanding.

Since the Information Revolution²², there have been many new areas for artists to explore, and new methods of exploration. These new areas and media – or systems and tools – are important aspects of my art making process. I have used them, for example, to explore some curious and ironic qualities of technology, communication and information, as found in the Internet. The Internet, for example, is a significant outcome of the Information Revolution and has opened a rich collection of new possibilities through facilities such as search engines. In my work, I have used two of these new facilities: Google (in particular) and online translation applications.

3.1.2 Google: Search and find

Prior to the invention of the Internet, a large quantity of information was limited to print, and could be accessed by a limited number of people in society and often only in specific places, such as libraries. Although access to the Internet today requires a certain level of infrastructure (such as computers, connection facilities and basic literacy), and is therefore still accessible largely by those people who can afford this, information has become more widely and readily available than ever before. The Internet can be seen as a virtual library, that differs from a physical library in the sense

²² The Information Revolution is a term associated with the change brought about by the dramatic growth of technology, information and service-related industries, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century.

that one book can now be read simultaneously by many people. An Internet connection gives one relatively instant access to a vast amount of shared information.

Google's Corporate Information web page states that the company's mission "is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful" (<http://www.google.co.za/intl/en/corporate/facts.html>). Google is one of the Internet's most popular search engines, and has become almost synonymous with using the Internet itself. Instead of asking, "Have you done a search on it yet?" many people would prefer to ask "Have you Googled it?".²³ As such, Google can be seen as a new cultural and social phenomenon, affecting the way information is generated, distributed and shared.

I have used Internet tools extensively in my work, in both direct and indirect ways. The Internet has been used directly in developing my ideas and in giving me rapid access to information. Relevant information can be found quickly, and this can, in turn, lead to the discovery of further, related ideas through Internet searches, thus sparking further related ideas. In this way, the Internet can be seen as adding a new dimension of support and enriching a stream of consciousness technique. I used Google directly in a work called *Googisms* in which I explored aspects of 'truth' on the Internet. I will discuss this work in more detail in Sections 4 and 5. Indirectly, too, the Internet aided the development of another of my works, namely *The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date*. Without the capacity of the Internet to bring together processing power from different, widespread sources, this number would have been extremely difficult to find. This chosen number and the resulting artwork reveal pertinent elements in my thought processes and art practice and I will now explain

²³ Internet searches made via Google are practically instantaneous, producing results in only seconds. Similarly, searching an electronic document using the control-F (or Apple-F) functions in word processors is similarly rapid. Both these almost instant search methods might carry more significant implications than are initially apparent. Google and control-F give an individual the ability to locate specific information in a very short period of time from an almost unlimited amount of data. I suspect that the fact that the information can be searched in such a relatively easy way encourages the contemporary interest in the uncanny.

the importance and relevance of prime numbers in more detail in the following section.

3.1.3 Prime numbers

A prime number is an integer greater than one, and one that can be factorised by only one and itself.²⁴ According to the fundamental Theorem of Arithmetic prime numbers are the building blocks of positive integers given that “every positive integer is a product of prime numbers in one and only one way, except for the order of the factors” (Caldwell 2006). This is also the key to their importance: the prime factors of an integer determine its properties. In other words, prime numbers are the basic numbers that build up more complex numbers.

The most prominent commercial applications of prime numbers are found in cryptology and security services. For example, information can be encrypted to protect privacy by using security encryption methods involving the multiplication of two large and undisclosed prime numbers. Without any knowledge of the specific prime numbers used in particular encryptions, it is almost impossible to decrypt or decipher the encoded information. Clearly, the larger the number used for encryption, the more complex it will be, and the safer the security system will be. The security application of prime numbers makes them valuable, and the need to improve security levels lies behind the ongoing attempts to find ever-bigger ones.

Prime numbers are not distributed in a predictable way, or at least not in a way that is considered ‘predictable’ as yet. Current technology plays an important role in finding such numbers. Prime numbers are found by testing every probable number to establish if it can be factorised. If a number is found that can be factorised only by itself and 1, this is said to be a prime number. It would have been practically impossible to calculate very large-scale prime numbers without the existence of computers, and significantly more difficult to find out what they were without the Internet.

²⁴ An example of a prime number is the integer 5, because 5 can only be factorised or divided by 1 and 5. 4 is not a prime number, because it can be factorised by 1, 2 and 4 ($1 \times 4 = 4$ and $2 \times 2 = 4$).

The reason I find prime numbers fascinating is rooted in my approach to, and understanding of, mathematics. I do not regard mathematics as an absolute, concrete, or coldly scientific field of study at all. (In fact, the deeper one investigates this discipline, the less ‘concrete’ and more philosophical it seems). Instead, I view mathematics as an attempt to study the abstract, to describe our physical reality, to understand complexity, and to search for principles – or patterns – in nature.

My interest in prime numbers is linked to the fact that they represent and describe conceptually simple things.²⁵ Keeping in mind that prime numbers describe a mathematically simple and pure concept, the size of large prime numbers is, to me, paradoxically staggering. To give an idea of the size of these impressive numbers, consider that the largest known prime, $2^{25,964,951} - 1$ was discovered after more than 50 days of calculations on the 2.4 GHz Pentium 4 computer of Dr. Martin Nowak from Germany, a participant of the GIMPS²⁶ project and consisted of 7,816,230 digits. This large scale is different – bigger – than I would have initially expected. The largest prime numbers found to date, it can therefore be reasoned, affirm nature’s sublimity²⁷.

3.1.4 Online translators

²⁵ There is a slight discrepancy found between ‘building blocks’ as a key concept and the paradigm of systems thinking, because the concept ‘building blocks’ is substituted for nested networks in systems thinking. I do not believe that this discrepancy discredits either prime numbers or systems thinking. Rather, their relationship interests me and would perhaps become more – or less – resolved in further study.

²⁶ GIMPS is an acronym for “The Great Internet Mersenne Prime Search.” A Mersenne prime is a special type of prime number that can be described as $2^p - 1$, where p is also a prime number. Mersennes has a higher probability of being prime numbers than normal prime numbers, that is to say prime numbers where p is not a prime number. (<http://www.mersenne.org/prime.htm>)

²⁷ In a sense, these prime numbers might be seen as mathematical ‘proof’ of sublime feelings.

Automated online translation services are examples of other facilities found on the Internet. There are a number of these free computerised services, such as Babelfish²⁸ and Worldingo²⁹. These translator services are pre-programmed and limited to mechanistic rather than human translations, and the translations produced are, more often than not, of dubious quality. The automated understanding results in rigid and inaccurate 'literal' translations. These shortcomings become clear when a phrase is translated from English into another language and then back into English. If this process is repeated a number of times, the mistranslations become progressively worse, and the original phrases become increasingly distorted. The subtitle in the image on the left (fig. 15) is the original translation of the Afrikaans conversation into English. The subtitle was then repeatedly translated by the online translator. Note the distortion that the online translator has added to the subtitle in the image on the right.



FIGURE 15: Stills from TRANSLATIONS (see Section 4.1)

These 'interpretations' offered by online translators are significant in that they expose a key problem in language communication: the understanding that they imply is limited by rigid and limited levels of comprehension. Misunderstanding often occurs as a result of people having dissimilar definitions and associations for the same word:

²⁸ www.babelfish.altavista.com

²⁹ www.worldingo.com

even if two people use the same words, the assumption is usually that they share a common understanding of its meaning. A sublime feeling is evoked in me when I reflect upon each individual's complexity, and how individual understandings are shaped by, and consist of, vast and complex combinations of experiences. But as a result of each person's unique experiences and consequently unique associations linked to each word, misunderstandings can slip into a conversation. Online translators expose the fragility of communication in a clear and intriguing way.

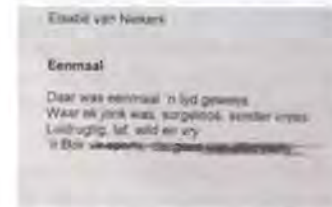


FIGURE 16: Detail, ME ME (See Section 4.12)

3.2 LANGUAGE

I am fascinated by language and text, because these are integral to human relationships and play an important role in connections between individuals. Although language and text are often associated with the understanding that exists between individuals, there are occasions when language and text obscure meaning rather than facilitate it. Language does not provide absolute meaning. For example, differences may arise through personal (and different) associations, past experiences, cultural conventions, degrees of language proficiency, situational friction and the like.

In the South African context, the potential for exclusivity and inclusivity inherent in language, makes our sensitivity to, and understanding of, such issues highly pertinent. Afrikaans, for example, was forced upon non-Afrikaans speaking people during the apartheid era, and became a powerful tool for social inclusion, exclusion and control. Similarly, language and accent are integral to the way stereotypes are conceived, confirmed and perpetuated.

In George Orwell's *1984* (Orwell 1990:52), language is used as an oppressive tool of power. The development of language is described in this novel, as strictly controlled and intended to limit reality by limiting and controlling the actual words that describe it. The logic of this controlled language or "Newspeak" as it is called, is that concepts and feelings only exist if there are words to express them. If there is no word to describe something, that 'something' does not officially exist. Syme, a character in the novel, praises Newspeak as a "reality-control" and "the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year", its aim to narrow the range of thought and consciousness (Orwell 1990:52).

In my work, I explore the aspects of language that cause misunderstandings, as well as the capacity of language to carry secrets. My intention through my art is to show how understanding between individuals can be improved if we take into account not only the limitations of language, but also the fact that we do not have a perfect, absolute knowledge of each another. If one acknowledges and realises that there are unknown factors shaping the nature of each individual, one will become more open to less rigid interpretations of other people.

My interest in language is echoed in the Afrikaans phrase: *moenie mense vlak kyk nie* (the phrase is a warning against assessing people in a shallow way or underestimating them). The phrase reminds me that each individual is dynamic and complex, a composition of sublime proportions: a complexity that cannot be contained by simplistic, patronising interpretations. I often struggle to convey my opinions in spoken language. I experience such difficulties for a number of reasons, including the fact that I am a second language English speaker. In my experience, one's understanding and the relevance of one's comments are subconsciously evaluated by a listener through, for example, the extent of one's vocabulary and rhetorical virtuosity.

My interest in language is focused not only on the way people misjudge others, but also on the role that language and accent play in stereotyping. This experience brought the issue of globalisation and the use of English as *lingua franca* to my attention, and brought about sympathy for second-language speakers in general within my work. I use different forms and expressions of language in my work: subtitles, relatively uncommon languages like Afrikaans and Latin, Morse code, NATO

code language, and sign language. Each of these different forms and expressions form explorations of different aspects of communication. For instance, when subtitles appear within my work, they could be seen as an 'explanation' of some kind. If a conversation occurs in a movie or video in a language that is unfamiliar to the viewer, the expectation normally would be that the subtitles are there to provide an accurate translation of the dialogue. However, when subtitles occur in my works, they do not explain as much as they deliberately complicate or obfuscate. The subtitles in *Vertaal*³⁰, for example are distorted through translation processes, using online translators, and become increasingly unreliable.

³⁰ The word 'vertaal' literally means 'translate', but is also a homophone for 'for language'.

3.3 DRAWING: FLOW OF INK AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Although drawing does not emerge in the final works in an obviously prominent way, it is a crucial part of my creative process.



FIGURE 17: EXAMPLES OF MY INK DRAWINGS

My style of drawing is direct and spontaneous, and my iconography consists of a combination of recognisable iconic images, abstract forms and gestures, and text. The drawings usually develop organically and associatively, in what could be described as a 'stream of consciousness' process: one element will spark off another element or text, and the concept will grow through this process. I frequently use ink, a medium that lends itself particularly to unpredictability, accident and surprise. Accidents encourage improvisation from the artist, and it is this unpredictability of ink that encourages improvisation in terms of content as well.



FIGURE 18: AN EXAMPLE OF 'STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS' IN MY DRAWING

When drawing with ink, I find it easier to follow this 'stream of consciousness' of logic and emotion. Although the concept of 'stream of consciousness' has only been discussed briefly here, it is of great importance in my final creative visual output. My drawing sometimes reminds me of automatism, a spontaneous style of drawing that was developed by the Surrealists to transcend the conscious mind and reveal the

unconscious mind. Sometimes my haptic³¹, spontaneous drawing have been the result of a stream of unconsciousness process of that developed in ways I found surprising and positive.

³¹ The term 'haptic' refers to the sense of touch. Used in this context, I use the term to describe the intuitive aspect of my creativity. As such, my haptic approach correlates to the importance of sentience in my art.

SECTION 4 INDIVIDUAL WORKS

In this section, I discuss each of my artworks individually. Each work is described in terms of its physical specifications, its reference to other works, and its underlying meanings. I will explore the links and underlying themes within and between the works in Section 5 .

1. Translations
2. Si Hoc Legere Scis Nimium Eruditiones Habes
3. Underbellies
4. The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date
5. Googlisms
6. She Always Speeds Up When She Smells Home
7. Socrates
8. Loba (Self Portrait)
9. 10 Questions I Am Most Scared to Ask
10. Extensions
11. Maps
12. Me me



FIGURE 19: Stills from TRANSLATIONS

4.1 TRANSLATIONS

Translations consists of six videos. In each of these videos, a piece of footage from a conversation that I had with a close friend is repeated several times. Each of the segments of conversation that I have chosen to isolate and repeat, has a common trait: the words have an undertone of profound truth in that they reveal the speaker's character (as I know it), yet the words are arbitrarily decontextualised from the conversation and presented in the video only as a verbal fragment.

Importantly, all the participants in the work are Afrikaans speakers. I added subtitles to the video, first in English, and, by using an online translation programme, translated these subtitles to a number of other languages and then translated these, once again, back into English.

The participants were given a deliberately vague brief: they were asked to make a statement they would normally feel too scared to make, or that they felt others would not understand. One participant questioned the brief itself ("I can think of nothing if I have to think about everything"). Another revealed a personal secret ("OK I'll tell you something that nobody knows about me..."). I did not, however, include her actual confession in the video, because I wanted to somehow mirror the inability of the subtitles to actually communicate or explain. The fact that her confession remained secret by excluding it from the final video, also mirrored the secrecy of the language itself, especially a language as uncommon as Afrikaans.

Although subtitles normally provide a clarification of meaning, they do not do so in this work. Rather, they evolve into new, inaccurate translations. Each repetition, further translated adds to this confusion, and moves the text in the subtitles still further away from the correct wording. To me, the subtitles almost take on a life of their own as they evolve into these new versions. Their evolution reminds me of the way in which stories that are told over and over might become more exaggerated with each retelling, or the way in which information changes as it is passed on from person to person. The unexpected 'behaviour' of the subtitles comments, therefore, on the complexity inherent in communication, whether across language, personality, local or general culture, ideology or personal aesthetics.

This process of change both adds to, and strips meaning from, the original text, sometimes distorting and at times revealing the true version. On first reading, the subtitles seem only to distort the meaning of the original message. The words are translated without accuracy, and finer nuances are lost through the mechanical translation process. I observe, too, a further significance emerging from this distortion. As the sentences become increasingly confused, a cruder, more basic version replaces the straightforward original. Perhaps the viewer will realise that the subtitles are not clarifying as they may initially be assumed to be doing, and that it is necessary to find an alternative to the default 'direct' translation in order to obtain any understanding from the speaker in the video. I am convinced that it is a valuable pre-requisite to successful mutual understanding if one can acknowledge that it is highly improbable that one understands someone else's words completely.



FIGURE 20: Stills from TRANSLATIONS



FIGURE 21: Still from TRANSLATIONS

The original subtitle was: "I'll tell you something that nobody knows about me. Or I think nobody knows it. Should I...OK. I struggle – sometimes – ..."



FIGURE 22: Stills from TRANSLATIONS demonstrating the stages of distortion of the subtitle from top left to bottom right (the last frame is from the last stage of another chain of subtitles, starting with the phrase: "It is better to be something of worth than something of use")



FIGURE 23: Still from SI HOC LEGERE SCIS NIMIUM ERUDITIONES HABES

4.2 SI HOC LEGERE SCIS NIMIUM ERUDITIONES HABES

In this work, two similar - but not identical - videos play alongside each other. The videos are animations composed of a series of photographs that fade into each other, thereby suggesting movement of the figure inside the picture plane, sweeping a pavement outside a white building. Each video has subtitles: Latin beneath the video on the left and Afrikaans beneath the video on the right. The phrases in the subtitles are statements of personal significance, such as "I like you more than you know", "Thank you for not smoking", "Love is the essence of life" and "My grandmother told me she has only one talent and that is to be happy." Loosely translated, the title *Si Hoc Legere Scis Nimum Eruditiones Habes* means, "if you can read this, you are overeducated".

In this work, a figure in white overalls sweeps endlessly outside a building, which has recently been painted white. His environment is sparse: only chevron tape blown along the tar, a leafless tree, and a white truck share the space with him. His endless sweeping is like an unending cleaning process, and refers to meditative and historical processes. Historical time differences are represented by different tempos or relative scales of our perception of them: the Latin part is a faster and shorter loop, portraying Latin as an event of the past, while the Afrikaans part is a longer, slower loop, representing a very recent historical era.

The juxtaposition of Afrikaans and Latin reveals both similarities and differences between each language. Both languages, for instance, are understood by only a relatively small number of people; Afrikaans is one of the youngest, Latin one of the oldest languages; the usefulness of both are questionable to people who do not use them; Latin diverged into a number of languages, while Afrikaans is the convergence of a number of languages; both have been used as tools of power³²; Latin is a so-called classical language associated with scholarly and intellectual endeavour, while

³² An anecdote: During a conversation with a European woman studying in Cape Town, the topic turned to socio-economic issues in South Africa, and she told me: "I refuse to speak Afrikaans, because it is the language of the oppressor." I doubt if this statement can be made without irony when discussing any particular language. Most languages, including English, can be linked to some moment of oppression. I refer to this issue of language and oppression again in my artwork *Socrates*.

Afrikaans has historical origins as a *kombuistaal*, or less formal 'kitchen-language' spoken originally by 'common' people. The juxtaposition of these languages could even be seen as a comment upon the stereotypical bravado I associate with 'Afrikaners', for in my piece Afrikaans is shown alongside a linguistically formal language like Latin – a language once used by a powerful empire.

In a sense, languages function as a secret code, shared only by the people who can understand them. As such, although languages can be viewed as exclusive, they also afford a sense of community and belonging amongst those who share them. The subtitles in this work are like personal jokes seen in public, ultimately understood only by those who can decode them. The point of such personal 'jokes' or statements is to make a meaningful, perhaps thought-provoking connection with those who understand them.



FIGURE 24: Stills from SI HOC LEGERE SCIS NIMIUM ERUDITIONES HABES

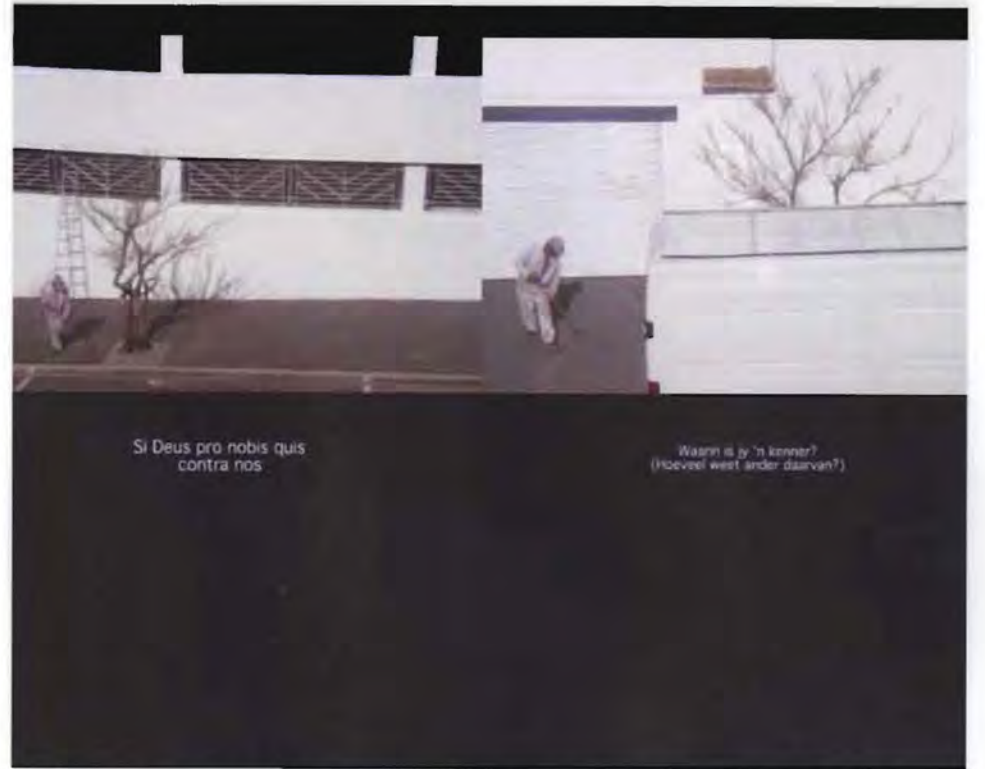


FIGURE 25: Still from SI HOC LEGERE SCIS NIMIUM ERUDITIONES HABES



FIGURE 26: Still from UNDERBELLIES

4.3 UNDERBELLIES

This work is also a looped video of my three dogs playing. The *mis-en-scene* is sparse, showing only the dogs, or part of the dogs, and their specific appearance in the video plays an important role in the work. Two of the dogs are black, and the other is white. They take on different roles in their game: the white dog barks incessantly, without getting too involved with the others; the male black dog, Volvo, bullies his sister, Loba, who takes on the role of underdog, mediator and often instigator.

As the title of the work suggests, Loba's showing of her underbelly as a sign of trust is central to the concept of this artwork. *Underbellies* investigates the unique and curious dynamic that is present between the dogs in their game-play. Their roles oscillate between 'top dog' and 'underdog': it is precisely the continuous dynamic of mock aggression and submission that feeds their game. One can observe this dynamic closely through the repetition and slowed-down tempo of the video. I do not want to be prescriptive about possible interpretations of this work because the nature of the piece itself is lenient, subtle and intended to provoke (inner) debate rather than offering a rigid meaning. I do, however, want to suggest that the 'everydayness' of pets is underrated in terms of its significance, meaning and curiosity, and that the relationship that we choose to have with them is a rich space for exploration.

It is important to note that in *Underbellies* I was not attempting to create an anthropomorphic project to demonstrate the 'human-ness' of animals, but rather to explore, and to understand (or at least experience) something like life, with fascination and enthusiasm. The essence of my approach, my attempt to explore this meaning, parallels the attempts by Marais in his book, "The Soul of the White Ant", to explain the mysterious governing power of the queen termite. He writes:

It appears therefore as if the workers and soldiers carry with them *something* of their own queen. We will assume it is something analogous to scent. Personally I do not think it is scent but something much more subtle. But if we think of it as scent it will simplify matters for we are actually dealing with something far and away beyond human senses. [italics in original]

(Marais 1973: 122)

I feel humble and self-aware when I discuss my dog and the presence of animal associations in my art. I acknowledge that these moments cannot be fully experienced by my limited senses, but at the same time I have the *vrymoedigheid* (the boldness), to engage.

I offer one possible interpretation of *Underbellies*, and this is that Loba, the dog functions as a self-portrait, and that I am expressing my own ideas through my identification with her. My approach to art is a playful one. In my work, I can be said to adopt the style of Loba's playing, a similar combination of action, initiation and submission. My style is essentially responsive. And importantly, I often expose my own underbelly: an honest, humbled and vulnerable position.



FIGURE 27: Stills from UNDERBELLIES



FIGURE 28: Still from UNDERBELLIES



FIGURE 29: THE BIGGEST PRIME NUMBER FOUND TO DATE
14,7 x 16,2 x 2,4cm.

4.4 THE BIGGEST PRIME NUMBER FOUND TO DATE³³

For this work, I created a pocket-sized book containing the largest prime number found to date. The book is in A5 format and has 314 pages. One can conveniently carry this book in one's handbag, should the need arise.

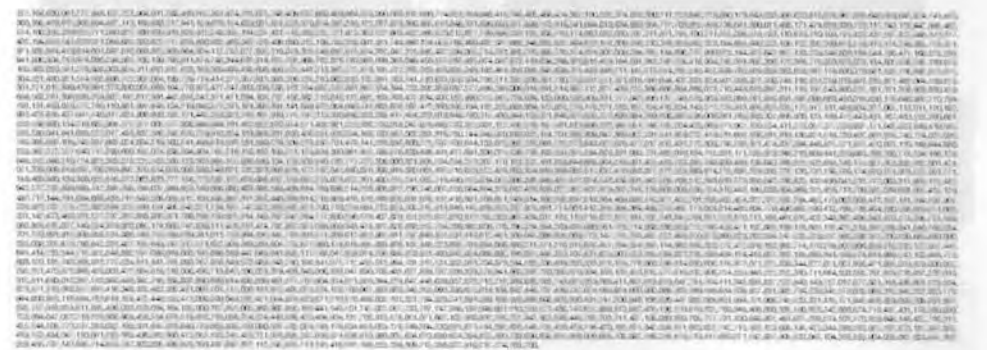


FIGURE 30: The first few lines from the book THE BIGGEST PRIME NUMBER FOUND TO DATE

Prime numbers are found and used in the realm of information technology (See Section 3.1.3 for a more detailed discussion of the importance of prime numbers). Despite the fact that this number is accurate to the last digit, it is practically useless, in and of itself, in its printed form. It does, however, in printed form give me a sense (or perhaps a non-sense) of the scale of the number³⁴. In my art, prime numbers refer to complexity and ultimately to the patterns of life. To me, the book is like a

³³ On December 25, 2005, a new largest prime number was announced (<http://www.mersenne.org/prime.htm>), making my current artwork dramatically outdated and redundant. Although I am in the process of reprinting *The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date*, this ironic development serves to highlight the fragility of the notion of ultimate knowledge as this work tries to pin down.

³⁴ *The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date* would also be a prime example of what has been referred to as Kant's "mathematical sublime" (Crowther, 1989:85).



FIGURE 32: Detail, GOOGLISMS

4.5 GOOGLISMS

Googlisms started as a group³⁵ experiment, in which we searched for binaries or paired words on the Internet. Using the Google search engine, it is possible to search for a word - for instance 'nature' - with the results of the search presented as 'hits', or hyperlinks to websites containing the chosen word. When searching for another word - such as 'nurture', and comparing the number of 'hits', the difference between the number of hits shown could be seen as an indication of the presence and prominence of the concepts on the Internet. So, for instance, if the search for 'nature' yields x number of results and 'nurture' yields y number of results, and y is bigger than x, then one could draw the fallacious conclusion that nurture is more prominent as a concept amongst the Internet community.

In this way, it can be argued that Google's search results act as a commentary on the state of the world. In other words, one can use Google searches to engage (ironically, of course) in debates, such as the debate about nature versus nurture, whether there is more good than evil, whether there are more men than women in the world, or whether supply exceeds demand, and so forth. The results or comparison of results to (falsely) resolve a seeming conflict is a Googlism³⁶.

I selected fourteen *Googlisms* and engraved them onto brass plaques. These plaques evoked for me memories of memorial plaques in war museums or on park benches, as well as those attached to trophies. In this way, my own plaques dramatised the false, 'memorialised' nature of my information and findings.

The process of creating a Googlism depends on a series of poor deductions. Even so, the results can sometimes appear significant. In the Googlism generated by comparing 'me', 'you' and 'us', there were more hits for 'you' than 'me', while the hits for the word 'us' were almost equal to the sum of all the hits for the words 'you' and 'me'. Perhaps it is the simple-mindedness of this Googlism 'game' that attracts me. I find myself fascinated with the vastness and interconnectedness of the

³⁵ The MFA New Media group in 2004 consisted of Charles Maggs, Sarah Rynn, Karin Andersson, Nalisha Gulab, Tania Sanjurjo and myself.

³⁶ The term 'Googlism' developed during the mentioned group experiment.

information that the Internet holds. I am also fascinated by the fallacious/profound and unpredictable results of *Googlisms*.



FIGURE 33: GOOGLISMS (possible installation view)

Engraved brass plaques, each 18,2 x 4 cm.

Currently 28 plaques in total (14 plaques in duplicate)



FIGURE 34: Detail, GOOGLISMS



FIGURE 35: Detail, GOOGLISMS



FIGURE 36: SHE ALWAYS SPEEDS UP WHEN SHE SMELLS HOME
Engraving on metal bowl, 26,5 x 8,5 cm.

4.6 SHE ALWAYS SPEEDS UP WHEN SHE SMELLS HOME

In this work, I used the image that accompanied the Pioneer X spacecraft on the first journey beyond the planets of our solar system (<http://www.nasm.si.edu/exhibitions/gal100/pioneer.html>). This image was of a naked male and female figure with Caucasian features standing alongside a diagrammatic representation of the solar system. I found it startling that this single image could function as a summary of the whole of humankind.



FIGURE 37: Detail, SHE ALWAYS SPEEDS UP WHEN SHE SMELLS HOME

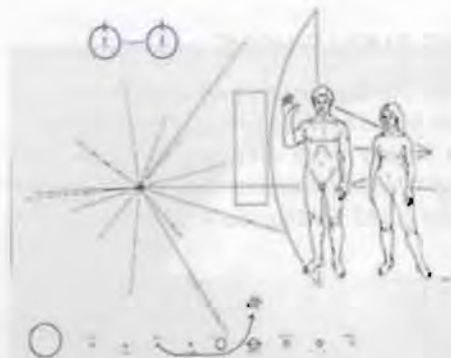


FIGURE 38: IMAGE FROM PIONEER X

(<http://www.nasm.si.edu/research/dsh/artifacts/SS-pioneerX.htm>)

I engraved this image on the underside of a dog bowl. By so doing, I wanted to bring this vastly ambitious project and the image into a domestic context. The original image, representing the identity of humankind, is transposed in *She Always Speeds Up When She Smells Home*, from the grandiose and dramatic context of a space mission to a very ordinary domestic object: a dog bowl.

The title, *She Always Speeds Up When She Smells Home*, refers to the way a horse might quicken her pace when she becomes aware that she is close to home. In the context of the distances involved in the original space project, the scale of the distances referred to changes considerably. Both the image and the title refer also to identity. The image onboard the Pioneer X was an icon for humanity identity, while the title of my work refers to the moment that a horse recognises her own home. In this context, the title raises questions of identity – including community, relationships, and the local (or home) – in a simultaneously globalising (and expanding) and imploding world, in which everything is more integrated. To me, identity and these relationships becomes highlighted in the context of the sublime.



FIGURE 39: Detail, SHE ALWAYS SPEEDS UP WHEN SHE SMELLS HOME



FIGURE 40: SOCRATES

14 blind spot mirrors, each mirror 5,7 x 3,7 cm.
Dimensions of installation varying

4.7 SOCRATES

Socrates is a collection of blind spot mirrors placed in a seemingly random way on a wall. The distribution of the mirrors is, however, not entirely random but is derived from a number of pattern references, including for instance, the way a group of animals might naturally distribute themselves when standing in a herd. Blind spot mirrors have specific features that make them useful. Unlike normal mirrors, blind spot mirrors enable one to look at one's immediate environment, but not to look at oneself *per se*. For that reason, this work can be seen as a reflection of, and commentary upon, Socrates' concern that the unexamined life is not worth living (Kemerling 2001).

There are potential associations of fear linked to blind spot mirrors, given that their function is to expose danger that would otherwise be invisible. Any danger that lurks in one's blind spot is often too close to be visible normally but can still pose an immediate threat. In contemporary society, many urban environments are saturated with surveillance equipment, a situation generated by fear and by the need for both privacy and control. The blind spot mirror, as such, is a 'low-tech', understated consequence of this paranoia.

Within blind spots, danger is often too close to be seen or recognised. Similarly, in society, judgement is often passed upon others and the past actions of regimes, seemingly with ease, while at the same time similar, indistinguishable atrocities continue to occur. This, I believe, is self-righteous, blind spot logic and suggests a clear lack of self-knowledge or awareness of danger.

Would we know more if we had more blind spot mirrors? Does the presence of more blind spot mirrors mean we have more blind spots? Is it even a logical possibility to consider the existence of metaphorical blind spot mirrors, or would even metaphorical blind spots be completely inaccessible areas? What current blind spots exist within us? What are we really missing? Again in this context, it is useful to consider Socrates' dictum: I know nothing except my own ignorance (Kemerling 2001). My work is not intended to be moralistic or judgemental about our awareness (or otherwise) of ourselves or of danger, but is intended to 'reflect' upon these issues.



FIGURE 41: Possible installation of SOCRATES



FIGURE 42: LOBA (SELF PORTRAIT)

Photographic print and lightbox, 120 x 90 x 15 cm.

4.8 LOBA (SELF PORTRAIT)

This work consists of a light box and an image of my dog, Loba, lying on her back. The work *Loba (Self Portrait)* is intended to be an artistic 'relative' of the artwork *Ghost* by Mark Wallinger which consists of a backlit photographic negative of a unicorn. Wallinger's image of the unicorn strikes me as an iconic one. But where Wallinger's unicorn is iconic, my presentation of the dog is highly personal. *Ghost* is distant, cold, objective and final; *Loba (Self Portrait)* is close, warm and subjective. Loba is in a vulnerable position, exposing her underbelly as a sign of trust. In doing so, she reveals the close relationship I have with my dog. As such the contrasts between *Loba (Self Portrait)* and *Ghost* reflect the contrast between my own immediate and intimate response to the sublime and that of Kant, who viewed the sublime as grand and impersonal.

FIGURE 43: GHOST (2001)

Mark Wallinger

(<http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/reviews/robinson/robinson6-7-5.asp>)

In both *Loba (Self Portrait)* and *Underbelly*, the use of a dog in the artwork is significant. I have often used dogs in my work, and they have personal and significant meaning for me. In my iconography, dogs, as animals with acute senses, especially smell and hearing, represent the ideas and concept of heightened awareness and responsiveness. Furthermore, dogs also denote loyalty, trust, vulnerability, community and relationships. As such, dogs are important in my artwork because they reflect upon the idea that in order to be open to the experience of the sublime, one needs to be as sensorially aware as possible.

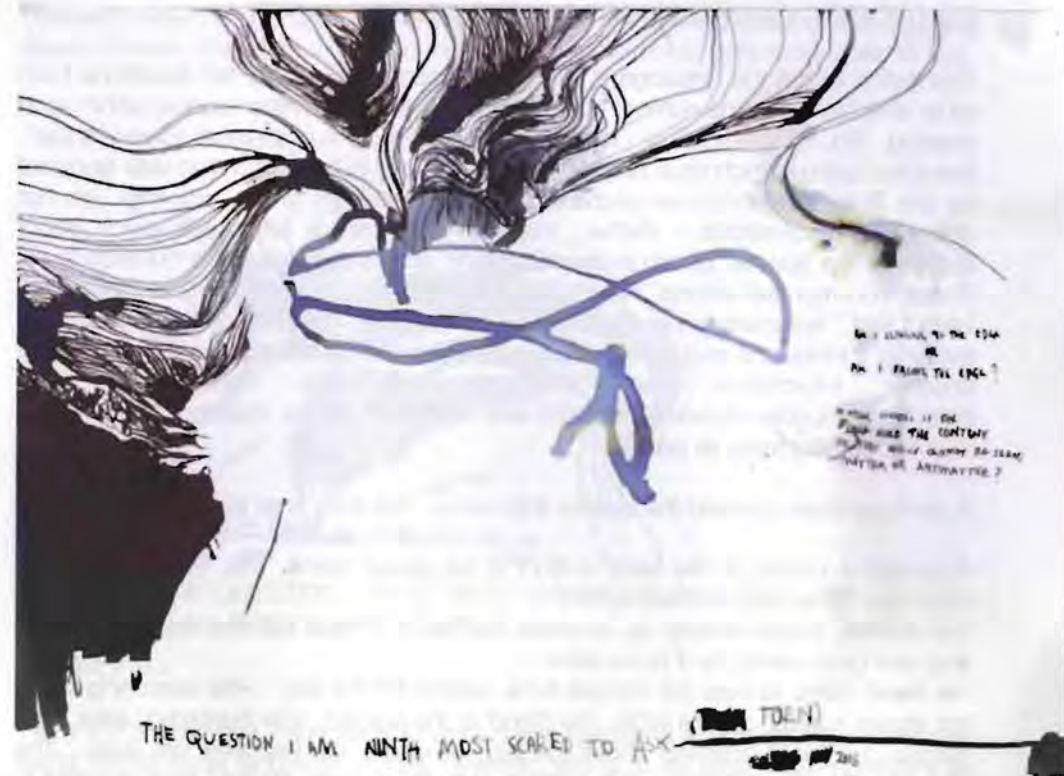


FIGURE 44: THE QUESTION I AM 9TH MOST SCARED TO ASK (FROM 10 QUESTIONS I AM MOST SCARED TO ASK) 21 x 14,7 cm.

4.9 10 QUESTIONS I AM MOST SCARED TO ASK

This series of ten ink drawings is a visual representation of the ten questions I am most afraid to ask. The number of each question appears written as text within each drawing. So, for example, you will see "the question I am ninth most scared to ask". Executed using a technique similar to the method of automatism that was favoured by the Surrealists (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrealism>), these drawings are not directly representational. Rather, the lines and marks within the piece occur alongside the specific question they intend to ask, and replace the question itself. These non-representational ink marks allude to the psychoanalytical Rorschach inkblot test. Automatism has the alleged potential to reveal meaning by transcending the artist's inhibitions and consciousness, and the Rorschach test was developed to uncover information related to an individual's unconscious mind (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rorschach>), and both techniques, therefore, enabled me respond as personally as possible.

A particular story sparked the idea for this series. The story is as follows:

A nomad is looking in the sand in front of his desert home. His friend arrives and asks him: "What are you looking for?"

The nomad, barely looking up, answers his friend: "I have lost the key to my home and now I am looking for it in the sand."

His friend starts to help the nomad in his search for the key. After searching in the hot desert sun for quite a while, the friend of the nomad, now frustrated, asks if the nomad can recall anything about the key, or where the key was last seen. The nomad answers indifferently: "Oh, I lost my key there, in my house," while pointing to his desert home. His friend can hardly believe this. "If you lost your key inside your house, why are we then looking for it out here?"

The nomad wipes the sweat from his tired forehead and answers plainly: "Because it is too dark inside the house."

This story is a commentary upon the idea that people tend to avoid the very places which contain what they are looking for. The places where our keys, answers, or treasures, are kept, are potentially intimidating and daunting places. But those intimidating or daunting places are precisely where we may have stored such items. I

believed I would find proper answers if I went to the most intimidating and daunting places I knew. Therefore, I decided to ask the ten questions I was most afraid to ask.



FIGURE 45: THE QUESTION I AM 4TH MOST SCARED TO ASK (FROM 10 QUESTIONS I AM MOST SCARED TO ASK)

21 x 14,7 cm.

I was too scared and intimidated to voice these questions in conventional sentences using conventional language. I was, however, willing to visualise these questions as ink drawings that I executed in an auto-drawing style. The drawings, ultimately, might be more revealing than drawings done using other conventional methods, because they could be seen as potentially exposing underlying meanings, like a gesture of the body, perhaps, that might contradict spoken words. The medium of ink is also a reference to the Rorschach inkblot test itself. These drawings are as close to the actual expression of my scariest questions as I can deal with at this point.



FIGURE 46: THE QUESTION I AM 2ND MOST SCARED TO ASK (FROM 10 QUESTIONS I AM MOST SCARED TO ASK)

21 x 14,7 cm.



FIGURE 47: SCAG from EXTENSIONS acrylic on canvas, 100 x 120 cm.

4.10 EXTENSIONS

Two paintings, each depicting a studio drawing of a concept design, and concerned with the senses of sight and hearing respectively, make up the work *Extensions*. This project is whimsical in nature, because the designs were not intended for production, but as a kind of thought experiment. The two designs were intended to extend the normal functionality of the senses of sight and hearing by means of technology.

The extension of sight in this piece is made using wide-angle glasses that enable the viewer to extend her field of vision to almost twice the normal range. This artwork was developed partly by the idea of the extended field of vision that a blind spot mirror gives, and partly from the practical way in which a person can alter or improve her sight by wearing sunglasses or spectacles. Wide-angle glasses are designed to combine the curvature of a blind spot mirror and the wear-ability of normal glasses so that the wearer will have an extended field of vision. The field of vision that wide-angle glasses offer, go beyond human limitations, for our own vision is determined and constrained by the location of our eyes that make our own field of vision similar to that of animals, fish and birds.

The extension of hearing is made possible through a selective white noise generator, that allows the wearer to block out specific sounds. The wearer can carry a small apparatus in her ear, like a type of headphone, which will generate a series of specific sound-waves. These sound-waves are specifically pitched to cancel out particular incoming sounds through destructive interference. If a sound-wave is generated that is the exact inverse of an incoming sound-wave, the two waves cancel out each other and the undesired sound will not be heard.

The glasses, as I have suggested, widen the scope of the viewer's sight, while the hearing 'aid', in contrast, decreases the range of hearing. The glasses allow more stimuli to be seen, while the hearing aid selectively filters stimuli. Both therefore are comments upon a culture of choice: wide-angle glasses allow the greedy onlooker to miss less, while the selective white noise generator gives the fickle person the ability to choose what (or whom) to listen to. Of course, these designs need not be perceived in a wholly negative way, because, it could be argued for example that the

glasses might assist a keen observer and the white noise generator could filter out distracting noise.

However, *Extensions* is intended to be a critique rather than mere senseless experimentation. Its critique is directed towards a numb, lazy, and disinterested culture. The ideas within this piece address issues such as awareness, sentience and responsiveness. In these works, technology that functions as a means of artificial sensory extension, by heightening our natural human senses, is scrutinised. *Extensions* comments upon the numbness that is brought about by artificial means and by technology when such technology 'aids' us to such an extent that we cannot function fully without it. As such, the rationale behind this project is that of an awareness campaign, asserting the need to emphasise the senses and sensitivity.



FIGURE 48: Detail, SCAG from EXTENSIONS

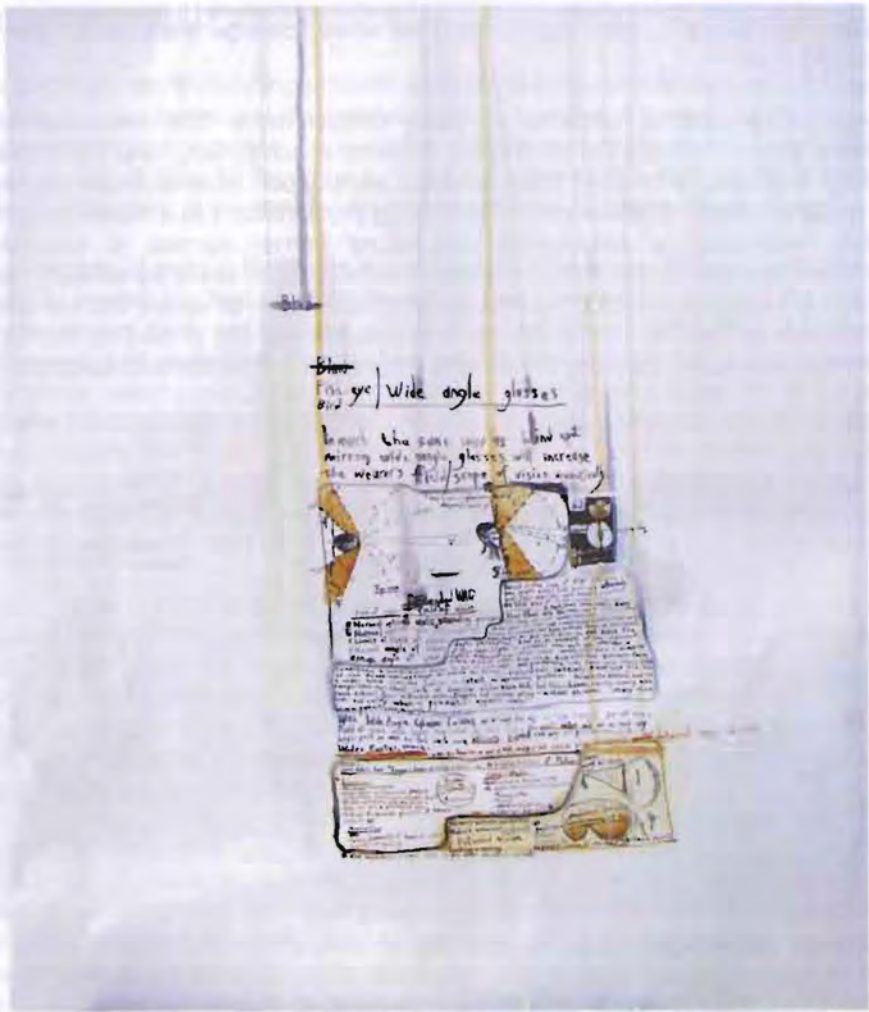


FIGURE 49: WAG from EXTENSIONS acrylic on canvas, 100 x 120 cm.

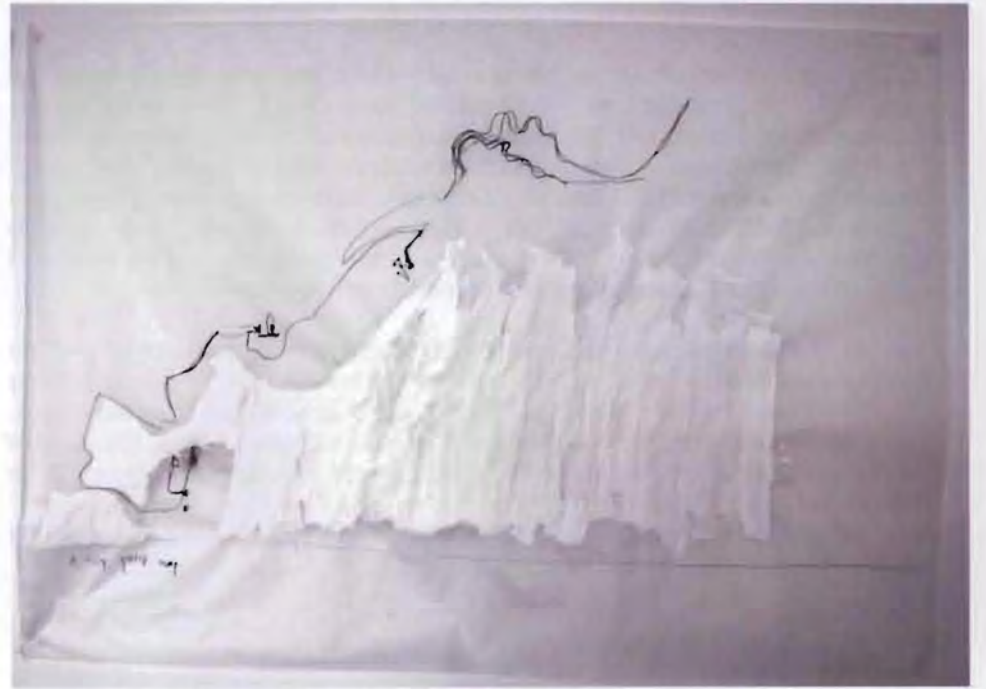


FIGURE 50: A VERY QUICK MAP from MAPS
PVA and charcoal on paper, 84 x 62 cm.

4.11 MAPS

Maps is a series of two drawings named *A Very Quick Map* and *Manifesto*. Using charcoal and thick white paint, the media applied seem almost too heavy for the thin paper beneath to support. At the same time, the words are in rather subtle tones and not very discernable. The drawings incorporate haptic graphs, writing and personal slogans. The text in *Manifesto*, "Don't give up on me / I'm not giving up on you", is not intended to be rigid, but rather remains ambiguous and open to interpretation. The phrases might be seen as expressing an inner or imagined dialogue, or they could be seen simply as isolated, desperate statements.

As the title of the series suggests, I wanted to form graphic representations of my emotional landscape. These graphic representations function as maps offering insight into spaces that I find difficult to imagine, and that I can use to locate myself. They are tactile, concrete representations of inner landscapes. Like *The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date*, these drawings attempt to isolate a single instance from an overwhelming, sublime space and concentrate it into a containable, 'useful' object. *Maps* is an expression of my experience of the sublime, an emotional and deeply personal response to that relationship.



FIGURE 51: MANIFESTO from MAPS

PVA and charcoal on paper, 84 x 62 cm.

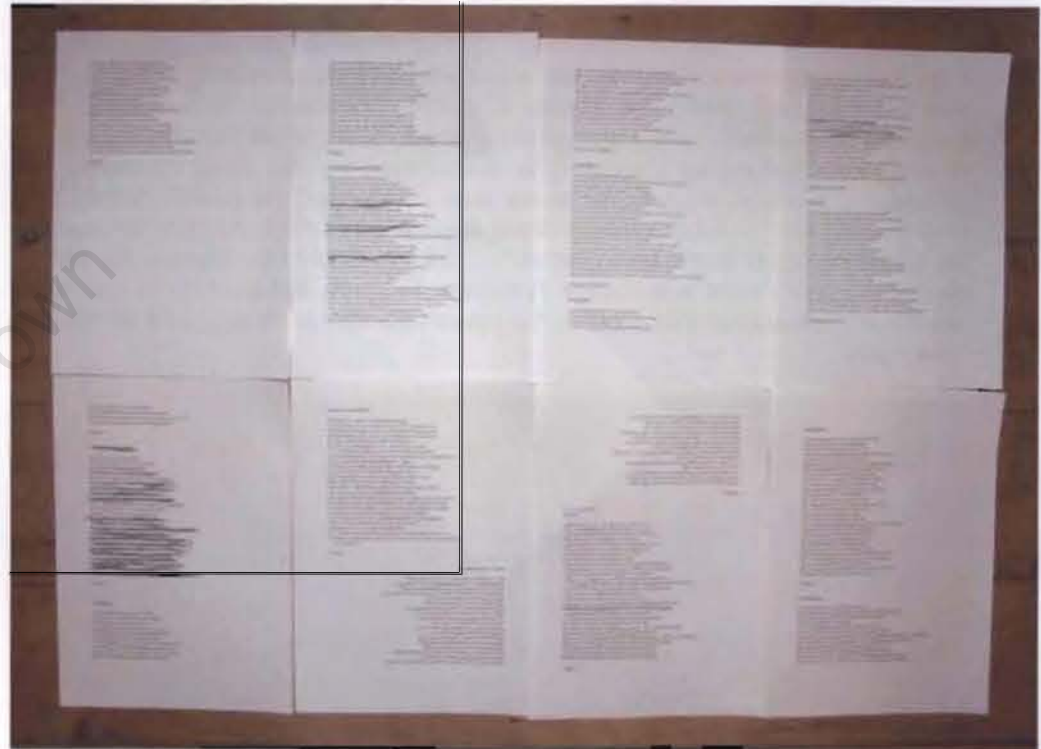


FIGURE 52: ME ME
84 x 60 cm.

4.12 ME ME

I appropriate poems in *Me Me* that were published on a website under a name identical to mine. Seeing the poems in public, poems that have already been assumed to be mine³⁷, was a strange experience. Stranger still was the fact that the poems described events correlating to events from my life, using vocabulary and addressing issues in ways similar to my own. However, the poems differed from what I would write in subtle and significant ways, and I found it strangely disturbing to be 'misrepresented' in this way. I scratched out the parts of the poems with which I cannot or do not want to associate to reclaim my name and identity. In that sense *Me Me* is a self portrait that explores the power of language to represent identity and personality.

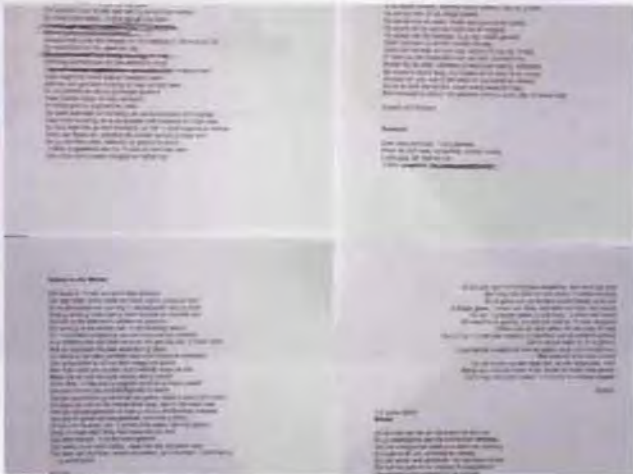


FIGURE 53: Detail, ME ME

³⁷ I was told by a friend that she liked my poetry on a specific website. However, I have never put poetry on the Internet. On further investigation, I found poems written by an 'Elsabé van Niekerk'.

SECTION 5 BODY OF WORK

Martin Creed compares his artworks to pieces of music that can be read, interpreted and performed by the viewer (*Martin Creed*, 2001). Extending this analogy, the works in my exhibition form a whole in the way that the movements in a Bach suite, for example, form a whole: the *gigue*, *allegro* and *gavotte* movements each have distinct characteristics and different structures, but together they flow from and play off against each other within the complete work. In this section, I examine the concepts and ideas that link my different works. I also point out how they relate to the sublime and to systems thinking, as discussed in the first section of this thesis. Here, I will first organise the works according to the medium used in each, and then look at *leitmotifs* that run through my body of work.

In my view, my work shows a fascination with mystery. For me, this lends an evasive, perhaps elusive, element to my work, as if one has to look at it out of the corner of one's eye in order really to see it: like a refraction of light that disappears when one looks at it directly. This 'indirectness' is ironic, because my work is strongly concerned with directness, awareness and intimacy.

5.1 MEDIUM: WHY THE PIECES LOOK THE WAY THEY DO

5.1.1 Videos: See it in the replay

Translations, *Si hoc legere* and *Underbellies* are video works. Repetition is an important strategy in all of them: each is composed of a number of video loops, or infinitely repeating pieces of footage. In all three of these works, a chance encounter or seemingly insignificant event is isolated and repeated. In *Underbellies*, the movements of three dogs are played repeatedly in slow motion; in *Si Hoc Legere Scis Nimum Eruditiones Habes*, a man keeps sweeping a pavement; and in each part of the *Translations* series, a fragment of a conversation is repeated. None of these works elevate the mundane to a spectacular or dramatic status. Rather, they explore the tender, intimate meanings inherent in these events, which may be profoundly significant. As I reflect on these events, or just continue observing them, they inspire feelings and thoughts that form new ideas.

5.1.2 Haptic: The tactile object

The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date, *Googlisms*, *She Always Speeds Up When She Smells Home* and *Socrates* are works that I realised as material objects. The clinical appearance of the works stands in contrast to their emotive rationales. The reflective surfaces are a play at reflection, and the engravings are a play at relationship³⁸. Their materiality is an attempt to embody their concepts and by so doing produce a tactile, real 'thing' with which I can conduct experiments of sorts.



FIGURE 54: SOCRATES (possible installation)

FIGURE 55: Detail, SHE ALWAYS SPEEDS UP WHEN SHE SMELLS HOME

In my work, I often attempt to take concepts that are inconceivably large or overwhelming and to personalise them by making them accessible to the senses (especially touch) - not only to the intellect. *The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date* is an attempt to physically embody a phenomenally large number, in this case the largest prime number known to date³⁹, in a form that would make it possible for me to relate to. The 'experiment', however, proved the opposite of what it set out to

³⁸ These conclusions could be seen as a 'rip-off' or play upon scientific principles. Any two bodies of matter in creation attract each other, as a result of gravitational force. After thinking about this principle, this force, I decided to use the engravings as signifiers of attraction and relationship.

³⁹ See Section 3.1.3 for a discussion of the importance of prime numbers to my work.

do: in book form, the number seemed even more staggeringly and unfathomably large.

Socrates consists of a constellation of blind spot mirrors representing both time and self-awareness. In *She Always Speeds Up When She Smells Home*, I tried to personalise the enormously ambitious Pioneer X space project of 1983 by delicately engraving the famous image of mankind (sic) on a dog bowl. The series of *Googlisms* is another subtle sweeping statement. This series attempts to subvert the Internet, in a mock-search for 'truth'. The subversive playfulness of the works does not derive from any distrust of the concept of ultimate truth, but from a distrust of the instant gratification of a convenience culture that dulls honest thought.

5.1.3 Images in the real world

(If digital ≠ the real world)

Loba, *10 Questions I Am Most Scared to Ask*, *Extensions* and *Maps* are works I created in the physical world, as opposed to the digital world. Although the digital is an important influence, in *Extensions*, for instance, I wanted to stress the importance of real, manual art-making in a digital environment. The concepts behind and within these works are particularly personal, and their expression in paint and ink emphasizes their personal and directly expressive nature. *Maps* is a series of thick paint and charcoal on thin, delicate paper. These drawings are graphic representations of my physical and emotional landscapes. In *10 Questions I Am Most Scared to Ask*, I expose my ten deepest fears graphically, using an emphasis upon gesture and movement, while in *Extensions* I express my wariness towards the numbness caused by artificiality.

5.1.4 Computer: using a big calculator

I am interested in the new, and new ways of doing things that become feasible as a result of the possibilities offered by information technology.

Exchange between real and digital

During my art making process, some of the works often vacillated between the real and the digital. For instance, the *Googlisms* series which originated in the real (questions of the nature of life arising from my lived experience), entered the digital realm (as queries in Google in this example), re-entered the real world (results from

Google engraved on copper plaques) and then re-entered, once more, the digital realm (plaques exhibited in documentation format in a digital environment, namely the CD-Rom). I have always enjoyed the cross-pollination between disciplines and media, and therefore I do not think that my interest in the digital is a singular one, but simply a product of the particular time in which I find myself and the fact that there are currently so many new (artistic) possibilities to explore. In other words, the fact that I am creating artistic work within a digital environment is secondary to my attraction to interdisciplinary cross-pollination. Perhaps this process is just my personal assimilation of 'new' media from the arsenal of all the available media options.

5.2 LEITMOTIFS

Several *leitmotifs* present in my work have been discussed on a general level thus far. Here I shall discuss some of them in more detail.

The 'double' is an important *leitmotif* within my work and recurs in several forms. My use of mirror images, inversions, divine paradox, mirror writing, Doppelganger and editions of two, are all informed by the notion of the double. Earlier, in my discussion of the sublime, I showed how Kant's understanding of the concept emphasised its dualistic nature. Divine paradox and the natural co-existence of seemingly opposing factors, as I discussed earlier, were frequent themes in Kant's writing. These same themes are present in my visual works: *Extension*, for example, consists of two concepts/paintings; *Loba* is a conceptual inversion of *Ghost* as well as an 'inverted' photograph (that is, a negative). *Si Hoc Legere Scis Nimum Eruditiones Habes* consists of two similar, but not identical animations/videos, one with Latin and the other with Afrikaans subtitles; each *Googlism* typically consists of a pair of contrasting concepts; and *Me Me* confronts a Doppelganger.

Another common preoccupation that can be observed throughout my body of work is that of scale. Most of the physical pieces ended up as small objects. For example, *The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date*, *Googlisms*, *She Always Speeds Up When She Smells Home* and *10 Questions I Am Most Scared to Ask* are all small enough to easily hold in one's hand. The videos, too, are of modest or humble scale in terms of their style. *Si Hoc Legere Scis Nimum Eruditiones Habes*, for instance, is highly simplified and repetitive. What makes this 'modesty of scale' particularly significant is the fact that the objects, though small, are informed by, and refer to, enormous

concepts and ideas – concepts and ideas that are vast enough to evoke feelings of the sublime. In my work, therefore, the sublime might, in essence, be said to be an ‘overwhelming’ theme, but the pieces display this on a small scale.

I chose, in these cases, to work on a small scale because I somehow needed to make the uncontainable concept of sublimity “manageable”. *The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date* is a good example of this choice: here I explicitly wanted to be able to portray and reflect upon the enormity of the number. As with some of my other works, this intention failed spectacularly. The ‘uncontainability’, the scale, of the number only became more pronounced when it was expressed in miniature.

However, I have found myself feeling more comfortable in other ways in relation to the sublime when it has been represented at a reduced scale. This is indeed fitting, as I have indicated at the beginning: my thesis states that I want to relate to the sublime in a personal and intimate way, as opposed to the objective and rational way that Kant suggested.

This brings me to my second key point about the significance of the small size of my pieces. I think of my pieces as the distillation of my creative process: a collection of ideas culminating in the creation of small, but dense works. Playing with a myriad of ideas at the same time, making connections and drawing analogies between them, and using them more or less recklessly in thought experiments, I let the pieces emerge in a subtle, delicate and sometimes even a fragile fashion. All the ideas that influenced the creative process became concentrated into small, but multi-layered pieces that inconspicuously carried a high level of complexity.

In *The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date* lies the largest number of its kind of which we know. It represents the limits of our knowledge of this number, which alludes to the entirety of our knowledge about it, and this is simply contained in an ordinary-looking little book. The video *Si Hoc Legere Scis Nimum Eruditiones Habes* appears meditative, even tranquil, due to its monochrome palette, cyclical structure and the soothing sweeping movement of the figure. However, the piece carries within it the convergence of significant, even overwhelming themes: history (particularly apartheid and similar conflictual events); language, misunderstanding and the power of assumption; self-examination, forgiveness and cleansing rituals.

The importance of scale is evident, too, in the way my body of work has been exhibited. In the gallery space, two small works are exhibited on two plinths in the gallery, resembling a pair of small, almost symmetrical monuments. The one book is the artwork *The Biggest Prime Number Found to Date* and the other is *Googlisms*. All the artworks are exhibited digitally and exist within the actual gallery only on the CD-ROM accompanying the dissertation. Thus the physical exhibition can be said to be both small and monumental, humble and bold.

I want to travel lightly. I am interested in new things and novel connections between things, and I want to make subtle comments about these connections as I go. I like to think and speak of connections, not to be burdened by them. In *Maps* I mention in passing something that I find profound (“Don’t give up on me / I’m not giving up on you”), a statement presented, perhaps, like a visual whisper.

CONCLUSION

This paper investigated my visual explorations of my experiences of both the sublime and of mystery. Part 1 contextualised my work historically and theoretically, and described an area in contemporary art with which I associate. In Part 2, my art was described and explored directly in terms of the methods and processes that I use; the individual artworks; and the themes that run through my entire body of work.

I reviewed both the concept of the sublime and systems thinking, and outlined the function of mystery in both. The feeling and nature of the sublime was described, together with the processes that allow one to experience it. I pointed out how my response to the sublime differs from that proposed by Kant. While Kant suggested that the immediate experience of the sublime should be elevated to the status of a universal truth, I have, in contrast, wanted to experience the sublime in a personal, intimate way. I showcased a selection of contemporary artists and highlighted aspects of their work that have inspired mine. I explained some of the most important aspects of my methods and processes and described my body of work.

Sentience and responsiveness were highlighted as essential to the experience of the sublime. My personal and intimate response to the sublime is mirrored in my language and the idiosyncrasies that emerged in this thesis. The body of work under discussion is the product of my exploration of the sublime and mystery, and perhaps it is appropriate that an exploration of mystery should be open-ended. It is in a playful, pioneering spirit that I pursue the connections in and between language, identity, mathematics, nature, fear and relationship.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW

Elsabé van Niekerk interviews Elsabé van Niekerk, Cape Town, January 2006.

Sic.

Your pieces engage with such a variety of subjects and fascinations, that it is hard to summarise your art. Can't you just simplify it?

Die integriteit van my kuns is vir my van die hoogste belang. Capra se boeke is almal onderlê met die idee dat alle dinge verbind is op 'n misterieuse manier ("there are hidden connections between everything" (Capra 09.12.2005)). Ek onderskryf aan die interkonnektiwiteit wat Capra inspireer. Daarom is ek rustig oortuig dat daar sterk bande tussen al my werke bestaan, aangesien hulle almal my 'verwoording' van my eie fasinaties is. Ek probeer nie kompleks wees nie en ek raai en hoop dat my kuns in 'n natuurlike wyse sal konvergeer sodat my werk begrip eerder as verwarring sal bevorder. Wat ontwikkeling aanbetref, dink ek dat ek volgende die fragiele wil verken.

The difference between *explore* and "*verken*" is significant to you.

Ja, inderdaad. "Verken" is die Afrikaans vir "explore", maar die woord se konstruksie fasineer my. "Ken" is "to know", dus het die Afrikaanse vorm van "explore" miskien 'n invalshoek wat fokus op herkenning, erkenning en om iets te *ken* eerder as om dit te *verstaan*. Ek wil eerder ken as weet. Ek wil die brose (die fragiele) ken, ek wil emosie ken, ek wil berge en weerpatrone ken, en ek wil God ken.

Perhaps you are more scared than you would like to admit.

Dalk. Vrees is gereeld 'n dryfveer vir menslike gedrag, en ek sien dit as die teenoorgestelde van liefde. My kuns voed in 'n groot mate op die dinamika wat tussen hierdie twee konsepte of ervarings bestaan.

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