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Cathy Abraham

A Deeper Kind of Nothing

November 2018

Master of Fine Art

Supervised by Associate Professor Virginia MacKenny and Carine Zaayman
Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town

Name: Cathy Abraham

Student Number: SRLCAT001

Course: Masters in Fine Art

Declaration

I know that plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is to use another's work and pretend that it is one's own.

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Signed by candidate

Date 19 February 2019

Perhaps we should let the emptiness speak for itself.
At the very least, listening to nothing would
seem to require exquisite attention to every subtle detail.

Karen Barad

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List of Artworks

1. Endure
film
2. Batch 8
film
3. Batch 5: Conversessions
620pg handmade book
4. Immanence
painted eggshells, perspex plinth, fan and microphones
6 x 3 m
5. Psychosomatic
13 bronzed balloons
6. Drawing Breath
installation wall and balloons tied with string
6 x 3 m
7. Batch 11: Vestige and Residue
VR film and installation residue from the banquet

1. Endure
film





2. Batch 8
film

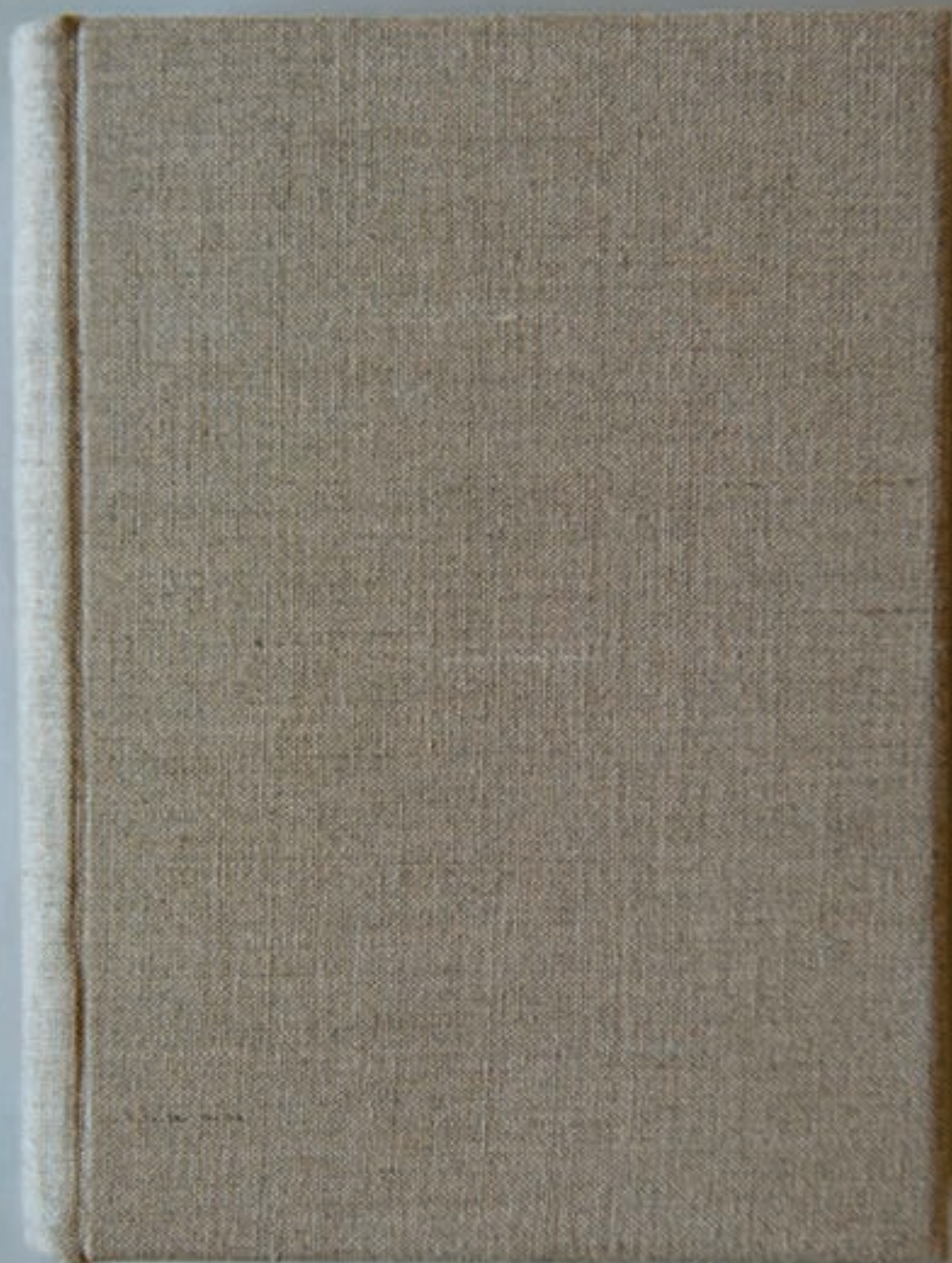








3. Batch 5: Conversations
620 page book







Handwritten text, possibly a signature or date, located in the lower right quadrant of the page.

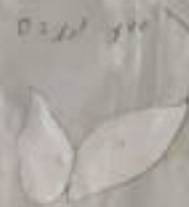
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4th row
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English
of letters



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Handwritten notes on the left side of the top row.

Handwritten note above the second egg in the top row.

Vertical handwritten notes on the right side of the top row.

Red handwritten text on a small piece of paper in the top center.



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Handwritten notes on the left side of the third row.



Handwritten note on the left side of the fourth row.

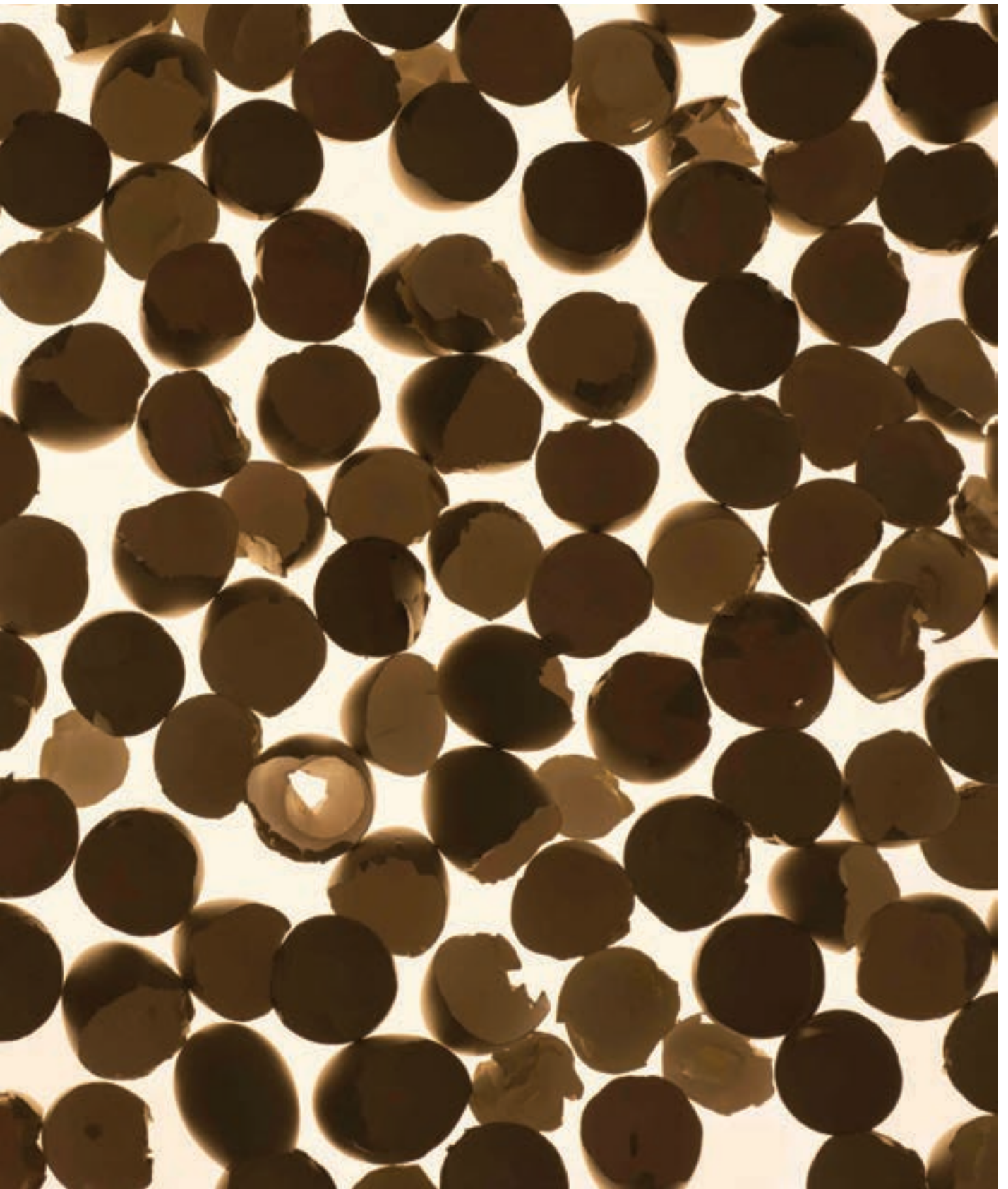






4. Immanence
installation of 7 128 eggshells













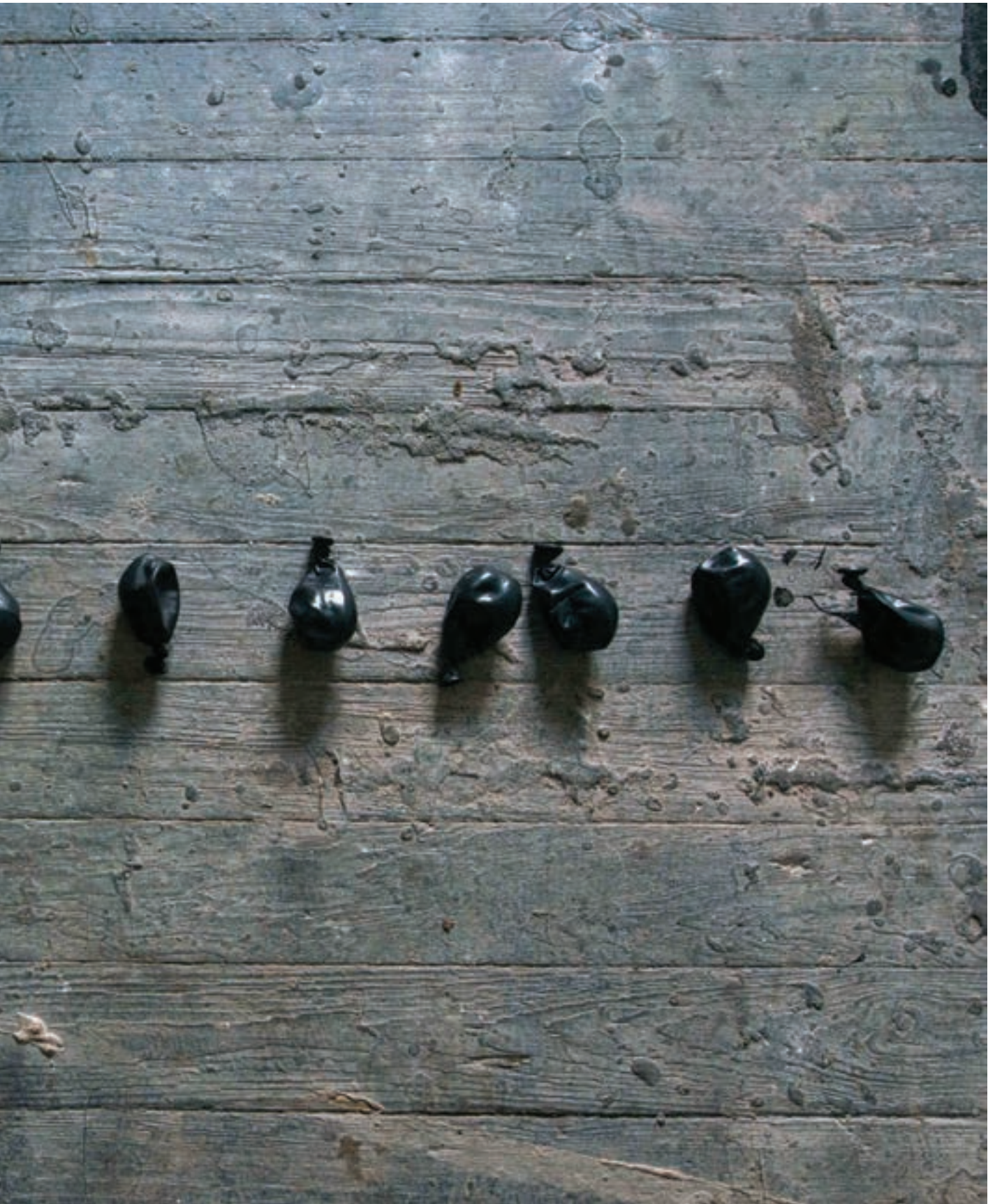
5. Psychosomatic
13 bronzed balloons











6. Drawing Breath
installation wall and balloons tied with string
6 X 3 m











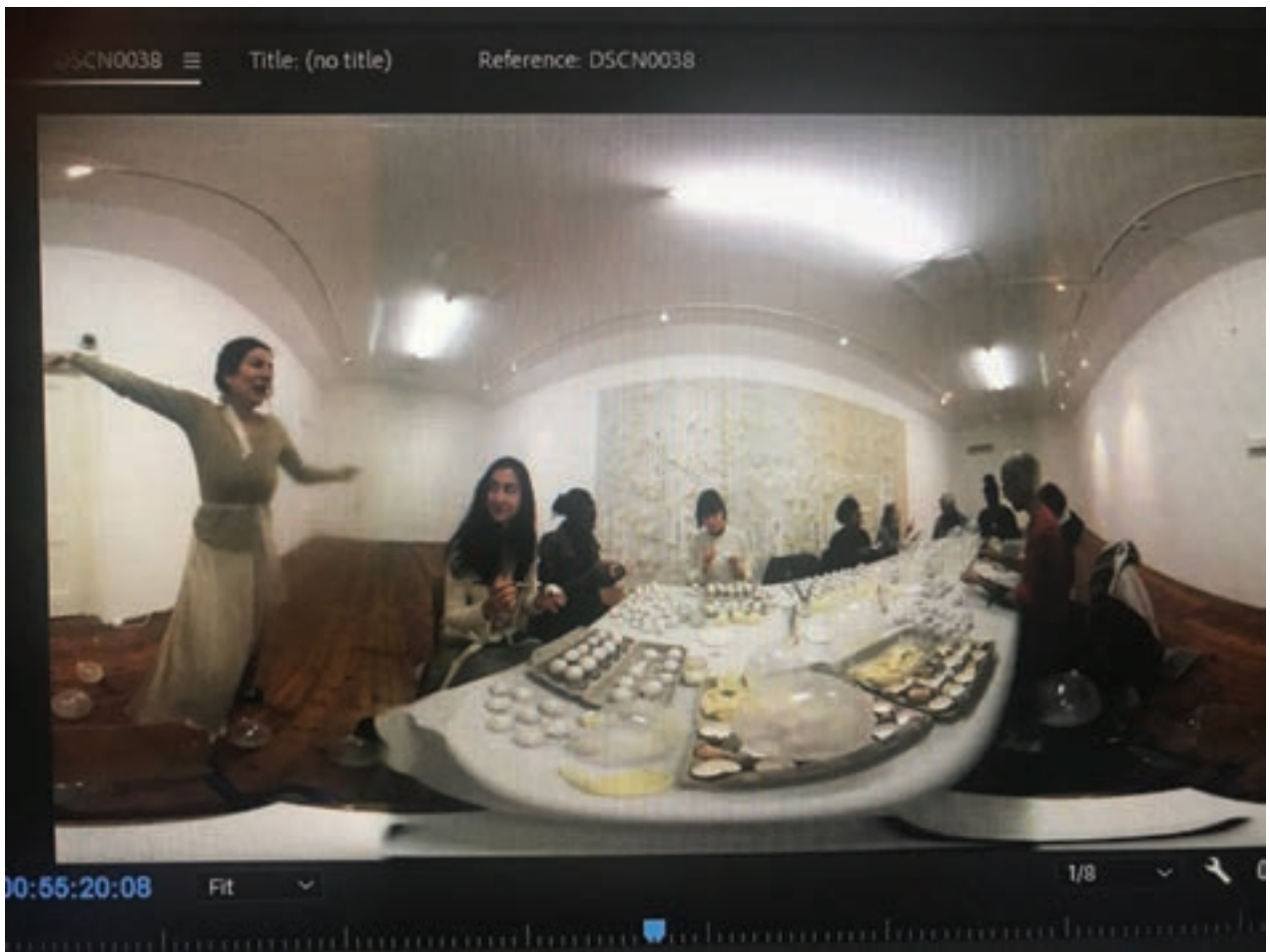


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7. Batch 11: Vestige and Residue
VR film and installation residue from the banquet









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2020



Preamble: Before there Was Nothing

‘Nothing’¹ is frequently associated with insignificance. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘to reduce to nothing is to consider or treat as worthless or unimportant’. This project aims to reveal that this form of nothing is, essentially, something.

As a child, I was told that my struggle with breath, with asthma, was nothing but psychosomatic. This was a version of ‘nothing’ that held within it the power to be life-threatening. The dismissal of concern for my asthma led me to dismiss other major events in my life as nothing too. I cannot be sure what residues of ghastliness haunt and inspire me, as there are so many events I would like to forget, yet I remain aware of these experiences and their after-effects. I have, however, gained perspective over time, and my current work has brought about visual forms for much that I would not otherwise have been able to resolve – visual forms that embody and focus on nothingness.

When I was young, I believed the path to fulfilment lay in being good. If I were a good daughter, the least amount of trouble, kept quiet about my problems, did not have problems, did not cause trouble or, when trouble came to me, did not complain, I believed I could make the worst experiences turn toward the good. I no longer believe that all bad can be turned to good, and I no longer try to make nothing out of something. Instead, I have inverted this thinking in my practice and aim to make something out of nothing. To this end, I find inspiration in the broken and the disregarded.

During the times that I lived with a family member in active addiction – firstly my brother for 8 years and secondly my husband for 18 years – ‘walking on eggshells’² became a very familiar experience for me. By working with objects destroyed or damaged in the course of daily domestic life, I wish to speak to the mass of irreparable ‘brokenness’ that constitutes my life story;³ irreparable yet redeemable. I mark unrecognised potential within objects considered not good enough or not good at all, and I mark the outcome of damage caused by actions or thoughts upon them.

My intention with this body of work is not to focus on my own story, but to seek ways to connect with others through a shared humanity. Consequently, I have developed a practice that allows me to engage and converse with others. As Rainer Maria Rilke, poet and novelist, suggested:

1 The Oxford English Dictionary definition of nothing: ‘Not any (material or immaterial) thing; nought.’

2 A phrase used to convey overly cautious behaviour.

3 When my parents were distracted with my brother’s eight years of drug addiction, I endured many extreme events, including sexual abuse from a very young age. When I was 16, I was also raped in my home by someone I mistakenly thought was a friend. This is not the focus of my body of work, but is part of my life story.

losing too is still ours; and even forgetting still

has a shape in the kingdom of transformation.

When something's let go of, it circles;

and though we are rarely the centre of the circle

it draws around us its

unbroken marvellous curve.

This version of something out of 'nothing' holds within it the power to be life affirming.



Introduction: What Is Nothing/Nothing to Me

The overarching title of this project, *A Deeper Kind of Nothing*, was garnered from theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss's *A Universe from Nothing: Why there Is Something Rather than Nothing* (2012) in which he explores the origins of our universe. In this book, he refers to nothing as the space that exists where something once was, an absence. He explains that 'all signs suggest a universe that could and plausibly did arise from a deeper nothing – involving the absence of space itself – and which may one day return to nothing' (2012: 183). Krauss asserts that 'nothing is every bit as physical as something', and this idea of a 'deeper nothing' stirred my thinking. Nothing is one thing, but a deeper nothing, one that the universe may have arisen from, is quite another. Relating this to the impact of seemingly insignificant objects, events and feelings, nothing becomes something physical that is understood to be both tangible and generative of something new. It is this 'something new', the outcome of what is considered 'nothing', which is the deeper kind of nothing that this project presents.

The starting point for this project was my interest in the power of what is deemed to be absent, or psychosomatic. When my asthma was dismissed as nothing, this disavowal led to a deeper, propagative nothing within me. In my later life as wife and mother, I found the domestic space to be one of oppression. Repetitive daily labour, taken for granted but necessary, had other, personal, implications. As philosopher Andrea Veltman (2004: 125) declares in her paper *The Sisyphean Torture of Housework*, 'housework creates nothing lasting but is ceaselessly negated by the recurrence of more dirt and disorder'. She continues, 'it is necessary for life but lends it no significance'. The heart of this project is a physical manifestation of a psychosomatic nothing, my own discounting of physical abuse and the sense of personal insignificance implied by repetitive, unacknowledged housework.

My reflections on generative nothingness have produced a series of performative processes:

1. Collecting – breaths, eggshells (the main materials of this body of work) and words
2. Working with breath, eggshells and words, on my own and with others
3. Conversing while painting eggshells.

These methodologies are made manifest here in a book that is a record of the transcribed texts, short films, balloons, painted eggshells and boxes, bronzes and residue from a 'banquet'. Five main installations make up A Deeper Kind of Nothing, namely: Batch 5: Conversessions; Immanence; Psychosomatic; Drawing Breath and Vestige and Residue. In the main body of this text, I reflect on how these installations are formed in each component of the installation.

Discarded eggshells and exhaled breaths are traces of the everyday that are typically overlooked. The dispensability inherent in both provides a basis from which to express real and imagined subjugation experienced by 'the good child', 'the good wife' and 'the good mother': the child who felt shame for causing a fuss over her struggle to breathe and the wife who walked on eggshells. The roles of the good child and the good wife are pivotal to an understanding of this project and the ideas laid out in this paper. I learnt from my own childhood that a good child is one who never causes any trouble. I learnt from my religion that a good wife is one who supports her husband uncomplainingly, all the while looking after the household and children and never asking for anything for herself. She is ever-enduring, never tires or gets sick, is a consummate cook, keeps a tidy, organised house, and is a patient and calm mother.

Religions often charge women with the task of maintaining the domestic space by overlaying it with dutiful meaning, as illustrated in the song I have heard sung every Friday night at the beginning of Shabbat dinner, called Eishet Chayil, meaning 'The Good Wife'. These are the words translated from Aramaic into English:

A Woman of worth, who can find? She is more precious than corals.
Her husband places his trust in her and only profits thereby.
She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.
She seeks out wool and flax and cheerfully does the work of her hands.

She is like the trading ships, bringing food from afar.
She gets up while it is still night to provide food for her household, and a fair share for her staff.
She considers a field and purchases it, and plants a vineyard with the fruit of her labours.
She invests herself with strength and makes her arms powerful.

She senses that her trade is profitable; her light does not go out at night.
She stretches out her hands to the distaff and her palms hold the spindle.
She opens her hands to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She has no fear of the snow for her household, for all her household is dressed in fine clothing.

She makes her own bedspreads; her clothing is of fine linen and luxurious cloth.
Her husband is known at the gates, where he sits with the elders of the land.
She makes and sells linens; she supplies the merchants with sashes.
She is robed in strength and dignity, and she smiles at the future.

She opens her mouth with wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks after the conduct of her household and never tastes the bread of sloth.
Her children rise up and make her happy; her husband praises her:
'Many women have excelled, but you outshine them all!'

Grace is elusive and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord – she shall be praised.

Growing up, this prayer/song had a powerful, albeit unconscious, influence on my thinking and on what I believed was expected of me in my role as woman, wife and mother. The song seductively promises praise from none other than G-d, and this made its mark on me. Who was I to disappoint G-d? Anything less than what is outlined in these words would result in my failure as a Woman. Ultimately, it was my attempt to live up to these words that brought me so much pain in my marriage.

I started this project by collecting eggshells from my home and painting them and by performing a daily breathing practice. I have now memorialised 7 128 discarded pieces of eggshell by painting them with eight⁴ layers of household paint. Painting the eggshells came from a desire to develop a practice of meditation that would help me to attend to the exhalations of the breath work. When added together, $7 + 1 + 2 + 8 = 18$, which, according to Kabbalah,⁵ symbolises life. By repeatedly counting to 18 and painting in groups of 18, I infuse the eggshells with 'life', and numbers become integral to both the ritual of the process work and the binding together of the disparate elements of the project. Jungian psychologist James Hillman writes in his essay titled *A Practice of Beauty* (1998) that 'the timeless repetitious character of ritual lifts repression from beauty. Ritual suspends the forward motion of will and ego toward some fixed purpose; instead, a dedication to the powers served by the ritual' (1998: 273). Since ritual forms are an integral part of both my personal life and my art practice, I was moved to develop a process-based practice which drew on this.

Informed by process art, which emphasises the action or means whereby artworks are produced rather than any predetermined composition or plan, this methodology is particularly intent on allowing change and transience to emerge. The process of painting the eggshells as a daily practice resulted in a body of 'reformed' eggshells that constitute a synecdoche of the process, as well as a deeper kind of nothing. In *All About Process* (2017), Kim Grant (2017: 223) writes that a process-based practice utilises three elements: one, dedication and

4 Eight: symbolises that which is beyond nature and its (inherently limited) perfection, as biblically the world was created in seven days (Chabad.org).

5 Kabbalah: as defined by Baruch Emanuel Erdstein, is an ancient tradition of mystical interpretation that reveals underlying structures from which to view spirit within matter, to raise our consciousness to the point where our perception of reality is completely changed (Chabad.org).

attention to the labours of the creative process; two, the creation of work that is not predetermined but rather a natural outgrowth of the artist's process; and three, situating the work within cultural and social relations.

Although this project began as a solitary practice, I eventually felt compelled to invite others to paint with me as a response to a world that I experience as full of conflict and division. This part of my practice is situated within a strain of contemporary art practice termed relational aesthetics, an appellation first articulated by curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998. The term describes an art grounded in human relations and their social context. He indicates that this kind of artistic activity 'strives to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another' (2002: 8). In my project, the work of art arises from the social engagement that is engendered by both the intimate conversations that are shared and the accumulating mass of painted eggshells. In *Conversations*, a work resulting from a series of conversations while painting eggshells, I look for a suspension of pre-conceived judgements in order to overcome the painful causes of our antagonism and separateness.

In her book *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway (2016: 1) writes:

We are living in disturbing times, mixed up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is, to become capable, with each other in all our bumptious kinds, of response. Mixed up times are overflowing with both pain and joy – with vastly unjust patterns of both pain and joy.

By opening my project up and inviting others to create the work with me, I hope to connect the overflowing pain and joy that resides within each of us and which may have been discounted. I hope that such connectedness will allow us to become capable of responsiveness with each other, in all our diversity.

A Brief History of Nothing in Art

My two core materials, the egg and the balloon, have an established history of their own in cultural and artistic practice.

Eggs

In Judaism, eggs are used at Passover, both on the Seder plate and at the Passover meal, served in salt water to represent the bitter tears that were cried during the exodus from Egypt. This articulation of life and fertility grounded in religious symbolism is specifically reflected in the meaning of eggs in my own project, in that all the eggshells used are from my home, not only from everyday breakfasts, but also from the challah I bake every Friday for Shabbat. Using the egg suggests a connection between the human (earthly, everyday sustenance) and the sacred.

Historically, in pagan festivals, eggs signified new life. In Christian iconography, we can see this when artists referenced the resurrection of Christ with the egg, for instance in Piero Della Francesca's *Madonna of the Egg* (1472). Continuing this tradition, Velasquez' *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (c. 1618), includes a foregrounded domestic scene of a peasant girl working, while on the table are foodstuffs such as fish and eggs. Both emblematic of the Christian faith, this religious connotation is underlined by the painting/mirror reflection/aperture view of Christ in the house of Martha and Mary framed on the wall behind. Painted in the tradition of *bodegones*, which usually relate images of contemporary domestic life in Spain to biblical themes, it was paintings such as these that remained as an echo of virtue.

Eggs in the domestic context thus continued to represent the faith even as these other, more directive clues as to their religious implication disappeared. Genre and still life paintings often included them as symbolic of faith in the home and emblematic of virtue and chastity. In the still life paintings of Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, eggs are often placed alongside brass pots and other cooking utensils to signify domestic order – a cleanliness and order that by virtue of association spoke to the godliness of the household.



Piero Della Francesca *Madonna of the Egg* (1472)



Diego Velasquez *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1618)



Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin *Still Life with cooking utensils* (1732)

While the eggs described in the above works carry religious symbolism, their symbolism became more secular in the 20th century. Maintaining connotations of birth, some contemporary artists use eggs and/or eggshells to initiate a deeper understanding of them as a material and a subject. Belgian surrealist-conceptualist-minimalist poet-turned-artist Marcel Broodthaers uses household objects and found or discarded materials, particularly eggshells and mussel shells. He said, 'I am painting with eggs' (Bradnock, 2004), a comment which could be seen as a pun: not only does Broodthaers use eggshells in his work, but he also humorously references 'egg tempera paintings', in which yolk is mixed with pigment to make paint.⁶

In 1965, suggesting the importance he attributed to the egg, Broodthaers wrote:

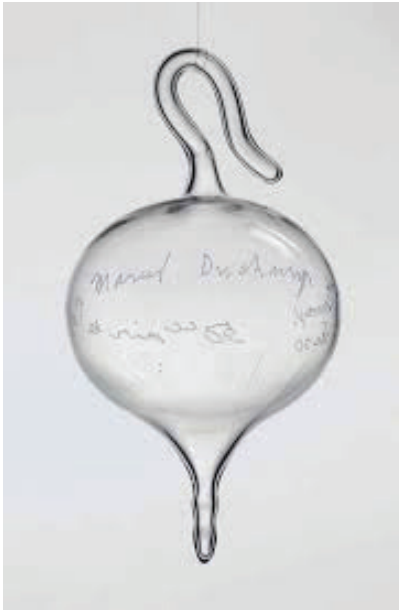
All is eggs. The world is an egg. The world is born of the great yolk, the sun. Our mother, the moon, is covered with eggshells. And the belly of the wave is white. A heap of eggshells, the moon. Dust of eggshells the stars. All, dead eggs. (Schultz, 2007: 114)

In the same year he made *White Cabinet and White Table* (1965), in which he filled an antique cabinet entirely with painted eggshells, referencing museum displays in which precious artefacts are held in glass cabinets. However, instead of using objects easily recognisable for their aesthetic or financial value, Broodthaers fills the cabinet with painted eggshells, thereby elevating their status as objects worthy of display. While he uses eggshells as a medium, he also uses them symbolically, stating that 'everything leads us to believe that there exists a state of mind where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, no longer seems contradictory' (Oisteanu, 2010). In this way, Broodthaers not only uses eggs as a material, he also underscores how eggs can be perceived to be both valuable (as in their symbolism in religious iconography) and unvalued for their mundane qualities.



Marcel Broodthaers *White Cabinet and White Table* (1965)

⁶ The technique of egg tempera painting existed before the invention of oil or acrylic paint and was used to paint well-known paintings, such as *Madonna and Child* (1290 - 1300) by Duocci di Buoninsegna.



Marcel Duchamp *L'Air du Paris* (1919)



Piero Manzoni *Artist's Breath* (1960)

Art historian Norman Bryson notes distinctions between things that are perceived to have value and those that do not. In his book *Looking at the Overlooked – Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Bryson (1990: 60-61) highlights the discrepancies between these categories as well as their mutual interdependence:

The concept of importance can arise only by separating itself from what it declares to be trivial and insignificant; 'importance' generates 'waste', what is sometimes called the preterite, that which is excluded or passed over. It attends to the world ignored by the human impulse to create greatness.

Broodthaers states that eggshells 'are without content other than air' (MOMA: online), describing air itself as a substance, and his use of eggshells as both material and subject elevates them from mundanity. Upon closer examination, it can be seen that eggshells are, in fact, quite remarkable even in their simplicity. Bumpy and grainy in texture, an eggshell has as many as 17 000 tiny pores. Remarkable and easily overlooked, eggshell is made almost entirely of calcium carbonate (CaCO_3) and has a semi-permeable membrane that allows air and moisture to pass through its pores.

Balloons and Breath

If Broodthaers sees the egg as 'without content other than air', literary scholar Steven Connor writes that 'air brings forward the idea of not being there and, by extension, art's capacity to summon and sustain this condition of the not-all-there, the next to nothing' (Connor, 2007). Referring to Marcel Duchamp's *L'air du Paris* (1919), Connor states that 'air, in this way, acts like breath, becomes an object and speaks of an immaterial sensibility and attempts to imbue it with value' (2007: 2). *L'air du Paris* is a glass vial that Duchamp emptied of the liquid it originally contained, thereby effectively filling it with air – specifically Paris air. Normally perceived as intangible, the specificity of the air contained in the glass also imbues the air with presence. In addition, were it not for the vial that contains the air, the air would diffuse with the environment. In my project, I have used breath and captured it in balloons, thereby similarly designating breath as both subject and material.

Piero Manzoni, an Italian artist best known for his iconoclastic approach to art and notorious for canning his own faeces, used everyday objects such as bread, eggs and balloons in his practice. Manzoni humorously yet pointedly utilises the ordinary to examine notions of value. In his work *Artist's Breath* (1960), Manzoni says that when he blows up a balloon, he is 'breathing (his) soul into an object that becomes eternal' (Celant, 1998: 144). For him, the balloon is an object of pathos as well as a metaphor for a deflated body (Howarth, 2000). In this work, what begins as a buoyant, full-blown, red balloon becomes a splatter of latex when it bursts – the piece encapsulates the transience of the artist's breath, particularly pertinent as Manzoni was only 29 when he died. In showing the balloon after it had burst, its apparent uselessness is further emphasised. The residue of the thing is left, but its original form is no more.



Kimsooja *To Breathe: Blackout* (2006-2016)

While Manzoni worked with pathos and humour, Kimsooja, a multi-disciplinary conceptual artist, often uses breath as a central metaphor in her work. In her installation *To Breathe: A Mirror Woman* (2006–2016) she merges the space between the internal and the external with a floor lined with mirrored film and windows lined with a diffraction film. This space challenges the viewer's sensory perception through the interplay of light. The resulting reflections, refractions and transparencies serve to destabilise the viewer's embodied experience by fragmenting visible perception into infinite iterations. Most importantly, the sound that occupies the space is that of Kimsooja breathing at different paces and emotional intensities, ranging from slow to fast, from light to deep, illustrating changes in our breathing as our emotions change.⁷ The sound inescapably enters the viewer's experience and leads them on a similar emotional journey, suggesting similar emotional triggers in the imagination. For example, rapid breathing may indicate panic, while a steady, slow breath may suggest calm. The viewer is affected by both the visual experience of the mirrored reflections and their shared experience of Kimsooja's breathing. In an interview with Kimsooja, Nicholas Bourriaud (2002) suggests that she is 'trying to turn the invisible into a shared experience'. This work resonates with my interest in the complex relationship between breathing and trauma.

⁷ This is a sound piece she used from an earlier work titled *The Weaving Factory* (2004).



Abramovic and Ulay *Breathing In/
Breathing Out* (1977)

While the varying sounds of Kimsooja's breath evoke different emotions, performance artists Marina Abramovic and Frank Uwe Laysiepen, known as Ulay, used the act of breathing in *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977) to pursue a question of duality through an act of endurance. As in Kimsooja's *To Breathe*, the sound of their breathing is amplified by microphones attached to their chests, which intensifies the experience for the viewers. The work was performed twice, and lasted 17 minutes and 15 minutes respectively (after which time the artists fainted). The performative, repetitive, everyday act of breathing combines with the artists' commitment to endurance and their reliance on each other to create a simple yet powerful work. Abramovic and Ulay use their breath symbolically to demonstrate the interdependence we have on each other, as well as the power we have to destroy each other. Exemplifying the physical limitations of the body, this work is contingent on both performers, yet the nature of the piece, while an act of trust, love and cooperation, is also a poisonous one, as the performers inhale the other's exhaled carbon dioxide.

Since breath is an integral part of sustaining life, its use as an art material, as shown in the above artworks, reflects its capacity to rouse stress as well as alleviate it. While it may be unseen, it is experienced through how our capacity to breathe changes when emotions are aroused or when health is challenged. Seemingly without form, breath is suggested in the form of Manzoni's burst balloon, Kimsooja's evocative space-occupying sound and Abramovic and Ulay's interconnected breathing. These works in their various forms signifies the potential power of breath. This in turn speaks to the immaterial.

My concern with being able to breathe is integral to this project as I have always been aware of the consequence of being without air. This has manifested as a growing tightness in my chest, a reduced capacity to inhale, and having to alternate from nose breathing to mouth breathing. A consequence of my asthma is my compromised ability to blow up a balloon, and for this reason I have chosen balloons as the measure of my breathing capacity. Moreover, I have a keen awareness of the impact of stress and heightened emotion when added to this precarious ability; for example, the effects of panic result in an ever-increasing physical sensation of a large dark mass weighing on the centre of my chest. I use breath in this project to manifest the unseen implications of trauma and illness within and without the body.

Duram

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Product: ENDURE L/SHEEN
Base: Sat. PASTEL, 1 L
KCh.58 XE+2.00 XF+0.75
BAW Constaniaberg (021) 963-2057

ENDURE

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Washable and dirt resistant + Attractive,
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emulsion + Excellent adhesion

FOR WALLS AND CEILINGS

8 YEAR GUARANTEE

My Kind of Nothing (nothing else matters)

Holding Nothing

In *A Deeper Kind of Nothing*, eggshells and latex balloons provide semi-permeable containers that allow air to escape slowly. Emptied, they leave a sense of vacated space behind. Because they allow air to escape slowly, they gradually reveal the 'nothingness' that is left behind. This 'nothing' represents dismissed traumas, illness ascribed as psychosomatic, and unending, unappreciated domestic labour.

Two short films further encapsulate this nothingness.

Endure

The first film, a stop-motion animation, is a record of paint disappearing from the lid of a paint tin, which I used as a palette when painting the eggshells. Initially loaded with paint, the lid becomes increasingly empty. Ever-diminishing paint creates a space that slowly 'grows' to the edge of the lid until all the paint has been used. In the animation, the process is reversed and the supply is refilled. Like inhaling and exhaling, the paint is depleted and replenished. As the paint is removed from the lid and is transferred onto the eggshells, an aspect of the act of painting ordinarily unseen is made visible. Whereas the effect of a brushmark is normally visible as a mark on canvas, in the film it is rendered by the removal of paint from the lid. Initially, the paint quickly refills the gap where the brush lifted the paint away, but as the quantity of paint on the lid diminishes, its capacity to refill the gap begins to fail and the gap widens. When all the paint has been removed, only the inside of the plastic lid is left, with all its newly revealed marks and indentations. Reminiscent of physical harm or emotional trauma, this echoes how repeated scarring in the same site of pain may at first heal, but eventually the capacity to recover fails.

The film is titled *Endure* after the Duram brand of paint *Endure*, and its meaning was amplified for me when I noticed the full legend on the side of the paint tin: *Endure, Low Sheen: Interior & Exterior with an 8-year guarantee. It also promises 'excellent obliteration', the implications of which did not pass me by. I used this brand to paint eight layers of paint on each eggshell in a meditative act of persistence, covering (obliterating) the shells' exteriors while drawing attention to their presence. Similarly, while the paint is being used to 'obliterate' the surface of the shell, it (the paint) is in turn obliterated from the lid and eventually disappears. The film is indicative of intricate, intimate moments, when something appears to vanish from existence. Although the paint vanishes from the lid, it resurfaces on*

the eggshell. This illustrates the different states that a thing can exist in, in the same way that water can be liquid, solid or vapour. It can seem to disappear from one place only to reappear, in a different form, in another.

Infinite Ways of Breaking

Infinite Ways of Breaking is a film made up of 648 individual images or ‘portraits’ of each eggshell from Batch 8.⁸ Linked together in a stop-motion animation, the 648 individual pieces appear to become one piece, changing in size and shape from frame to frame. While an egg has an oval shape, appearing uniform before it is broken, once it is broken the resulting pieces are unique, suggesting that there are an almost infinite number of ways that one shape can break. This observation aligns with Barad’s elucidation that “the smallest bits of matter are an enormous multitude. Each ‘individual’ is made up of all possible histories of virtual intra-actions with others.” (2012: 15). Contrary to this notion of infinity, this film portrays the individual ‘ones’ (the individual broken bits) as a singular ‘one’. The film introduces the eggshell as both an individual, broken object and as part of a greater mass of broken pieces, infinitely different yet formed together as one body. Something broken can be made whole – not into the whole that once was, but as a new whole.

Together, these two films invite the possibility that one may re-see or re-imagine that which has been discarded or deemed to be of no importance. Both films use traces of ‘nothing’ to posit a deeper kind of nothing.

The Exhale and the Eggshell (Much Ado about Nothing)

The adage ‘Much ado about nothing’ refers to when much is made of very little.⁹ The idea of making a fuss where some believe no fuss is necessary is echoed in medicine in terms like ‘placebo effect’ or ‘psychosomatic’ to refer to an illness where aspects of what is in the mind manifest in the body. In these situations, it is believed that a patient’s thoughts are either causing them to become ill or to heal – both ‘placebo’ and ‘psychosomatic’ imply that illness and cure can exist in the mind. The heart of psychosomatic illness relies on the premise that the mind causes illness in the body. Whereas a thought is invisible, the effects of that thought on the body can manifest as tumours, rashes, headaches, panic attacks or, in my case, a struggle to breathe – asthma. This can be a philosophical issue, as it is not clear or scientifically proven that an intangible element such as a thought can have a tangible effect on something physical, such as a body.

8 648 is the total number of eggshells in a batch (36 pieces in 18 boxes = one batch).

9 This phrase has been in use since the 1500s to describe someone overreacting. It is also the title of one of William Shakespeare’s plays (1598).



Felix Gonzalez-Torres
Untitled (Placebo) (1991)

The exhibition *Morbus*, curated by Christiana Myers in Glasgow (2018), showcased artistic practices that destigmatise the unwell body. To shift perceptions of morbidity towards an understanding of disease as natural and without stigma, Myers invited artists and writers to contribute their ideas about their illness and living with pain. Works shown in this exhibition dealt with illnesses like Crohn's disease, fibromyalgia, depression, eating disorders, migraines, pulmonary stenosis, scoliosis and cancer. While *Morbus* focuses on the perception of these illnesses from a medical point of view, most of them can have psychosomatic causes that could potentially be healed through the mind. In *A Deeper Kind of Nothing*, I highlight the existence of psychosomatic disorders as real rather than imagined. Because I was told that my asthma was 'nothing', psychosomatic, it appeared that I was making it up, but my body's particular inability to blow a balloon indicated the mind's direct effect on the body.¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Arnold's statement that 'the metaphysics of the mind lies at the heart of psychosomatic illness' (2013) encapsulates the arena in which my interest and focus lies.

In a work exploring the complex relationship between the body and illness, Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Placebo)* (1991) comprises thousands of candies wrapped in silver cellophane, covering a large expanse of gallery floor. Gonzalez-Torres' title is telling – a placebo is a substance that has no bodily therapeutic effect, and is used in lieu of medicine to humour or placate a patient where there is perceived to be no physical ill health, but a need for a response. A placebo is effectively 'nothing', and its effects, if any, are believed to be psychological rather than physiological. Visitors to Gonzalez-Torres' work are invited to take candies away with them, thus affecting the appearance of the work and creating an absence over time. Gonzalez-Torres' work was in response to the AIDS crisis of his time, to the lack of effective medical response and the resultant loss of life. The placebo's were, in this case, ineffectual.

In my practice I perceive the placebo differently. My use of balloons was inspired by what I accept as a psychosomatic pathology, while my work with eggshells arose from an anxiety not to offend or upset. While the latter was generated by circumstance and is, hence, not strictly psychosomatic, through my process of artmaking I wish to engage with the possibility that a placebo effect can be transformative. The project originates from conditions of anxiety and difficulty in

¹⁰ I realised this when I realised that I have not had an asthma attack since my father died from a brain tumour on the 8th of May 2010.

breathing, and by engagement through metaphor, materials and the actions of painting and breathing consciously, I find a resultant, very real, placatory effect. After painting eight layers onto eggshells, I no longer feel such anxiety. Similarly, after exhaling into and bronzing the balloons, I no longer see my inability to blow up a balloon as a disability.

As previously mentioned, I use the eggshell and exhaled breath to represent philosophical and psychological 'nothings'. Living organisms inhale and exhale, transforming the air into breath and making it life-sustaining. An egg generated from within a body (human or other animal) moves from the internal space to the external, either in the form of a newborn human or mammal or as an egg to be hatched or cracked open. Breath also moves from the internal to the external, creating an absence, as an inhalation removes something from the air and an exhalation removes something from the body. I use repetitive processes (breathing, painting) to achieve two things: to create a visual, perceptual form for the overlooked and disregarded; and to prompt a re-seeing of such forms.



Cathy Abraham *Drawing Breath* (2018)

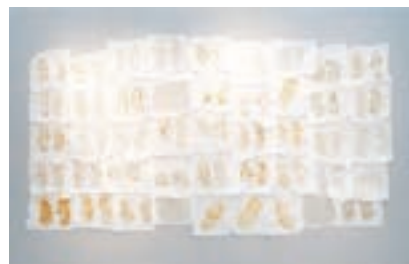
Forming from Nothing – Drawing Breath

As being asthmatic has left me unable to fully inflate a balloon with my breath. The results of my attempts result in less inflation of a balloon than that a healthy lung could produce. My breaths are captured in two forms in the exhibition – in the balloons that they were breathed into, and in balloons in a more deflated form that are cast in bronze. The irregular breathing that I have lived with all my life further informs my methodology. I began the process-oriented part of this work with the daily practice of a conscious, timed breathing meditation called a 'square-breath exercise', which takes a 5-5-5-5 framework: breathing in for the count of five; holding the breath in for a count of five; exhaling into a balloon for a count of five; and holding the breath again for a count of five while tying the balloon.

The square-breath exhalations into the balloons resulted in an average of 13 exhaled breaths per five-minute breathing exercise. These balloon-captured breaths were then strung together with eight metres of coloured embroidery threads (chosen to match the pre-existing markings on the drywall of



Cathy Abraham *Psychosomatic* (2018)



Cathy Abraham *All the Days of Her Life* (2013)

my studio).¹¹ The six metre by three metre studio wall work is titled Drawing Breath. The traces of paint, left over by painters who occupied the studio before me, are amplified by highlighting their colours with the thread. Ordinarily, marks left on walls would be painted out or left behind when the finished work left the studio, but here, the wall, complete with the residue of found marks, is co-opted into the work.

Breath is made visible through the tangibility of the balloon. To 'draw breath', as the saying goes, draws attention to the action and time specifically taken to breathe. The exhalations given to me by the participants from Batch 5 were added to the strings of my own exhalations (I will elaborate more on this process when discussing The Conversessions). These 'donations' take the form of the bigger balloons in Drawing Breath, as most of the participants were able to blow the balloons up to their full capacity. As these fully expanded balloons deflate, they resemble something more abject than the balloons that were not properly blown up in the first place.

As a direct reference to how others perceived my asthma, I named the second form of the breath work Psychosomatic. In this work, 13 balloons represent a full five-minute breathing cycle. Each balloon is cast in bronze, with a matt-black patina. A deceptive relationship is generated between the real balloons and the cast ones, as the patinated bronzes can be mistaken for the deflated balloons. Making solid what was previously airy, giving weight to the previously insubstantial, they are transformed from the inconsequential to the substantial. The heaviness of the bronze mass is a manifestation of the exhalation made solid, giving weight and shape to the formlessness of breath. The title implies a mind-body connection and suggests psychological factors such as mental stress, internal conflict or other subconscious issues – beliefs, attitudes, feelings and 'mental states' can manifest as physical issues in the body. While deemed 'nothing' more than psychosomatic, whether induced through mental trauma or imaginings, asthma manifests as a real physical inability and a struggle to breathe. Psychosomatic memorialises this 'nothing' in bronze.

Nothing Can Come from This – Immanence

The second part of the project was born out of a work I did in 2013, All the Days of Her Life, which utilised the residue on the baking paper of the bread I baked every Friday night for our family Shabbat dinner. (The title is a line from the song 'A Good Wife', quoted earlier.) These collected sheets of baking paper would ordinarily have been discarded once the plaited bread had been removed and consumed, much like the eggshell is thrown away when the white and yolk have been cracked out of it. I collected the sheets until enough had accrued to form the work. In the same year, prompted by the psychological state of walking on eggshells, I began to collect the eggshells I used when cooking in our home.

11 There is a 'fake' wall in the studio where I work, a drywall that was installed so that painters can hang their canvases and paint freely without worrying about marking the wall. This 'fake' wall now forms part of my work, as it bears the residue of the painters who were in the space before me. It brings attention to the walls that are often overlooked when paintings are complete.

Eggshells are one of the leftovers of cooking and baking. As well as being physical containers that suggest many life forms, they also represent an absence – the yolk and the white, the whole shape of the egg and the moment of breakage. Writing about *xenia*,¹² a term used to describe early Classical Greek and Roman still life mosaics, Bryson (1990: 17) states that these ‘things essentially come to us as a ruin; we possess only a minute fraction of the still life of antiquity, mere fragments of what once was there’. The broken eggshells in this project represent fragments of my story. Broken in my home, they represent the effect of how we break things in each other and in the world. The eggshells bring up many personal stories and remind me of things that are overlooked and discarded. Sometimes the break represents a wound, a death or a psychologically fractured state. While the egg itself offers sustenance, the shell is indicative of brokenness and ruin.

At the beginning of 2017, I commenced painting the halves of each shell, using the same size brush throughout. As the brush wore down, I replaced it with a new one of the same make and size. As the sole of a shoe wears through from repeated walking, here the brushes wore down from repeated painting. In this way, painting mirrored the imagined act of walking on eggshells, but where actually walking on them would have destroyed the shells, painting them was an act of nurturing and restoration. Bill Brown, an English professor at Duke University, has developed a theory around the entanglement of presences and absences in the world and writes that ‘things remain tangled among other things, including the least graspable things, like the thing that is missing ... the thing whose absence is nonetheless present’ (Brown, 2001: 534–5).

Process, Endurance and Repetition

I have found that the maintenance of a home requires resilience and endurance, particularly psychological endurance, to overcome the domestic tasks that are on a seemingly endless cycle of repetition. To rearticulate the labour of the domestic in the artistic realm, endurance and resilience are integral to the process of my making. By repeatedly painting the eggshells, I aim to echo attention to the repetitive nature of domestic labour, which goes unnoticed and is regularly taken for granted. In this section, I consider the work of artists who have incorporated repetitive methodologies in their practice or employed domestic objects as materials.

Grant (2017: 228) explains that the repetition of a task can be perceived to be endless, automatic and banal, but if utilised as part of artistic practice it ‘is never simple repetition in the manner of industrial assembly-line labour but rather part of a process of mastery’. In art, repetition resulting in mastery serves to reinvigorate the subject, and Grant (2017: 225) highlights the role of the artist in mirroring the

¹² *Xenia* more broadly describes hospitality in Greek classical times and refers to mosaics of still lifes and groupings of mostly edible items.



Tehching Hsieh *Doing Time* (1980-1981)

actions of daily life and bringing them into 'art's arena'. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1994: 24) likens repetition to a meditative method, analogous to Buddhist mindfulness, when noticing thoughts and actions in a non-judgemental way, believing that in artistic practice, by 'repeating habitual functions, it is possible to find the slight differences inherent in each of them'. By using repetition to draw attention to small, incidental details, my understanding of the mundane has been enhanced, as visible implications manifest of the unique and infinite ways that one shape can break. The places of breaking, in their individuality, become unique. In this way, my understanding is similar to the Japanese art of kintsugi,¹³ which recognises the beauty of every break through the mending of cracks with gold – my practice is different, however, as the eggshells are not mended. Ostensibly, they remain broken, but are imbued with new strength and form. While kintsugi seeks to repair a vessel or object, I seek to establish the broken object as a new 'whole'.

Repetition, endurance and resilience are evident in performance artist Tehching Hsieh's personally rigorous One Year Performance pieces. Hsieh made five consecutive, year-long performance works, in which he committed himself to a practice of endurance, isolating himself and performing repetitive tasks laid out under a strict set of self-imposed guidelines. One of these works, *Doing Time*, One Year Performance 1980–1981 is an investigation of time and labour. In it, he committed to 'clocking-in' using job cards – a factory method of controlling and monitoring a workforce – every hour on the hour, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Each time he punched his card, he took a still image of himself next to the machine. When the images are viewed consecutively, the resulting work is a six-minute film. In the same viewing area, the film was surrounded by walls of images, poignantly displaying the passing of time and life. Hsieh used the factory method of 'clocking in' to mark time, and, as Grant (2017) argues, 'such work may be understood as a particularly pure investigation of process understood first and foremost as the experience of existing in time.' In the case of domestic work, which is not as stringently regulated but is still time based and unending in nature, perhaps the marking of time might be measured differently.

13 Kintsugi highlights and enhances the breaks, thus adding value to the broken object. It is called kintsugi (金繕い), or kintsukuroi (金継ぎ), literally golden ('kin') and repair ('tsugi')



Martha Rosler *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975)



Usha Seejarim *Security blanket* (2018)

Nothing Was the Same (contemporary artists working with nothing)

The Domestic and the Banal

A Deeper Kind of Nothing uses the mundane to embody gendered domestic space. In this section, I focus on the use of banal domestic objects that speak to repression and what lies beneath the veneer of the seemingly ‘safe’ and ‘happy’ home. In *The Powers of Horror* (1982: 12), Julia Kristeva, philosopher and feminist, writes about how personal meaning may be prompted by an object, suggesting that the ‘sublime object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory’. Amplified by associations with past experiences, objects can unexpectedly trigger haunting memories, some associated with the drudgery of domestic chores. This association further represents the subjugation I referred to earlier. In the performance piece *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Martha Rosler uses kitchen implements and everyday domestic routines as a framework for ‘resistance and change’ when she creates a parody of the cooking demonstration videos of Julia Child.¹⁴ Instead of demonstrating the uses and proper functions of an A to Z of cooking utensils, Rosler uses them to express her rage at the repression experienced by many trapped in the role of housewife or housekeeper. Objects such as knives, rolling pins and sieves are revealed as threatening or dangerous instead of useful and domestic.

The rearticulation of domestic objects to reveal alternative understandings of them is also apparent in the work of Usha Seejarim. Seejarim’s work is concerned with the idealised representation of women and the mundane reality of so many women’s lives. Highlighting the performative nature of some of the repetitive tasks relegated to everyday domestic work, she combines mundane domestic utensils such as safety pins, wooden pegs, irons and brooms to give new form to the everyday.

14 Julia Child (1912–2004) was an American celebrity chef who brought French cuisine into the domestic realm by demystifying techniques required in its making. She raised the bar of home cooking.

Seejarim's *Security Blanket* (2018), which comprises a multitude of wooden pegs clipped together to resemble a blanket curled at the edges, echoes something paradoxically not secure or even usable as a blanket, implying instead a discomfort and unease in the domestic space. When something is said to be 'pegged together', we recognise a quality of transience and a lack of durability. Ordinarily, a blanket is thought of as comforting or nurturing, used to cover or warm someone, but in this work the pegged blanket is not usable, nor are the pegs themselves, pegged onto each other as they are. In this work, the blanket depicts the paradox of comfort versus pain, as pegs pinch instead of cover. The contradictions apparent in Seejarim's use of materials, their formation and the title provide an engaging interplay between conceptions of nurture and comfort with futility, transience and pain. Seejarim's use of wooden pegs, banal household objects suggesting daily domestic chores, also calls up multiple associations.

Broken eggshells and breath captured in balloons represent a vitality of life trapped within the banality of the domestic. However, I depict not only the gendered domestic space (implicit in the egg's origination in a hen) and traumas arising therein, but also suggest a new formation and rearticulation of those objects, which can represent a kind of haunting through their implicit association with abandoned histories. In this way, they perform as ghosts would, not in a spectral or horror manner, but in the way of association and insight. In *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, writers María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2013: 9) write that:

The ghost, even when turned into a conceptual metaphor, remains a figure of unruliness pointing to the tangibly ambiguous. While it has insight to offer, especially into those matters that are commonly considered not to matter and into the ambiguous itself, its own status as discourse or epistemology is never stable, as the ghost also questions the formation of knowledge itself and specifically invokes what is placed outside.



Cornelia Parker *Neither from nor Towards* (1992)



Rachel Whiteread *Ghost* (1990)

Ghosts of nothing

The rescued eggshells reflect not only their obvious brokenness but also echoes of other losses and ghostliness. Such ghosts of previous presence are evident in Cornelia Parker's *Neither from nor Towards* (1992), where her rearticulation of weathered bricks in new formations allows perceived memories and experiences held in their materiality to be conveyed as ghosts. The found brick fragments of a wrecked house hang suspended as if in freeze-frame. The bricks' placement echoes their previous life, reminding us of the passage of time over which we have no control. Parker rescues ordinary bricks from oblivion and reinvigorates them. The bricks, haunted by the ghost of the building they once formed, are rearranged in the gallery space and take on new significance.

This kind of ghosting is also conjured up in Rachel Whiteread's works, many of which use negative space to create form. In *Ghost* (1990), she gives form to the invisible, negative space of a house by casting an entire domestic interior in plaster. The negative space of the room shows signs of having been lived in and then vacated, and the residue of memories and experiences are evident in the marks on the plaster cast. Both Whiteread's negative space and Parker's discarded bricks transmute the previously 'invisible' into something tangible and recognisable for its substance and its history.

The remnants of a house long 'dead' in Parker's work and the solidity of the empty, negative space in Whiteread's *Ghost* recall the houses they originate from and the forgotten lives that once occupied them. As Alison Ferris (2013: online), curator of the Museum of Art in Brunswick, states, 'not simply dead or absent people, ghosts are the return of the repressed, symbolic manifestations of a past that will not stay dead.'

The dualities inherent in the objects used – be they pegs or bricks or eggs or balloons – and titles that suggest an underlying meaning reflect the layered experiences to be found in a home, amongst all its objects. Objects that, while useful, comforting or necessary, can also represent oppression and fear when the home turns out not to be what it seemed or was imagined to be. Though the focus of this project is to re-see things that are ordinarily discarded or dysfunctional, there is also a desire to reflect the menacing undertone that 'domestic bliss' can often hide.



Gabrielle Goliath *Elegy* (2018)

Domestic Labour and Gender-based Violence

Due to its routine and repetitive nature, domestic labour is an easily overlooked yet vital element in the creation of the ideal of domestic bliss. In and of itself, domestic labour is not menacing, but how it is so readily taken for granted can enact a subtle and unacknowledged violence on those responsible for maintaining it. Given that the domestic sphere is generally managed by women, such a lack of acknowledgment can also reflect a deeper violence of non-recognition that manifests as a gender-based domestic violence. ‘Gender-based violence (GBV) is the general term used to capture violence that occurs as a result of the normative role expectations associated with each gender, along with the unequal power relationships between the two genders, within the context of a specific society’ (Bloom, 2008: 14). Gender-based violence within the domestic sphere is most often perpetuated against women, which in South Africa is not acknowledged or foregrounded often enough, given the scope of the problem.¹⁵ Both domestic violence and violence against women have become commonplace, but hidden and overlooked, where verbal, physical and/or emotional abuse manifest.

Many, if not most, victims fall into an unknown category, as many of these crimes are not reported. Advocate Jackie Nagtegaal (2018) reports that ‘the prevalence of sexual assault and rape has led to South Africa being dubbed “the rape capital” of the world’ and describes rape as being normalised in this country. Up to 100 rapes are reported in our country every day, or tens of thousands per year – and those are only the reported cases. When I experienced sexual assault at the age of 16, I was clear that I did not wish to become

15 While gender-based violence (GBV) affects men, boys, trans and non-binary people, it continues to mostly affect women and girls. It is a form of emotional and physical violence that results in disempowerment. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), ‘Violence against women and girls is one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world. It knows no social, economic or national boundaries. World-wide, an estimated one in three women will experience physical or sexual abuse in her lifetime.’ (updated 18 September 2017) (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2017).

stigmatised with rape as my 'story'. Instead, I chose to survive and spoke nothing of it for many years. By the time I felt ready to face the person who did this, I discovered that he had been shot by his wife and was deceased. There are ramifications to gender-based violence, even though it is 'normalised' or unspoken. The evidence remains as ghosts and hauntings by way of deep, buried scars. South African women who have been killed as a result of such crimes become statistics, and the essence of their humanity is but an echo.

South African artist Gabrielle Goliath works with durational pieces that address violence against women. Her commemorative performance, *Elegy* (2015–present), uses sound to enact a keening for raped and murdered women. In a commemorative performance lasting approximately 45 minutes, a group of female vocal performers collectively enact a ritual of mourning by passing a single note to each other through their voices, so that it sounds like one long note. This performance foregrounds the factor of time, as endurance and cooperation between the members of the chorus is required to carry the note. It is physically taxing and serves as a cry for the souls of murdered women. Evoking their absence, it is a haunting performance that honours the spirit of women lost to South Africa's violent rape culture. Performed many times since its inception in 2015 at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, the Verbo Performance Arts Festival in Mexico and Video Brazil, *Elegy* brings performance, endurance and repetition together to convey the memories of the violent deaths of women. In this country, such violence and domestic subjugation are commonplace and even mundane.

As with Hsieh's *Doing Time*, *Elegy* invokes endurance for its performance and witnessing. Endurance in this way facilitates a practice that echoes the life experiences the artworks depict. In *A Deeper Kind of Nothing*, the endurance that I have needed in my life is represented as a method within my art practice.

All or Nothing

I began painting the eggshells in early 2017 in batches of 18.¹⁶ There are 18 eggs in a large box, but 18 is also a powerful symbolic number in Kabbalah, a spiritual tradition that informs my religious understanding. In Gematria,¹⁷ the number 18 represents 'life'. As numbers and counting help me systematise, control and order my work, I developed a system within which to hold the 7 128 pieces of eggshell I painted.

16 Eighteen: this is the numeric equivalent of the Aramaic word *chai*, meaning life. It consists of two Hebrew letters: *het*, equivalent to the number eight, and *yud*, equivalent to the number ten, which together add up to 18. (ben David, H: 2007) It is also linked to enduring my husband's addiction, which lasted for 18 years.

17 Gematria: a Kabbalistic method of interpreting the Hebrew scriptures by computing the numerical value of words based on the values of their constituent letters, also known as Hebrew numerology. It is believed that each letter has a numerical equivalent and subsequent meaning carrying specific energies

Here I outline the methodology of this system and explain the relevance of the numbers I chose for this project, namely eighteen, five¹⁸ and eight.

- The eggshells, after being sorted into their egg boxes, are divided into batches.
- A batch is made up of 18 boxes of 18 eggs each.
- As each egg is broken in two, there are 36 pieces of eggshell in each box.
- There are 11 batches in total, culminating in 7 128 painted pieces.
- Apart from Batch 5 and Batch 11, each piece was painted as a solitary act.
- Each piece is painted with eight layers of bone-coloured household paint.
- The paint, bought and mixed at Builder's Warehouse, is frequently used on building interiors and exteriors and is of a colour that, once applied, is commonplace and easily overlooked.

The eggshells begin as fragile, broken pieces but are slowly, layer by layer, reinforced by the paint. Delicate shards are strengthened, and unique tiny sculptures are formed. Once all the eggshells are painted, I code them with a batch number, box number and placement number in the box. For example, 01.10.24 is Batch 1, Box 10, Piece 24. This 'archiving' further iterates their new form, differentiating them from something to be discarded to something worthy of archiving and cataloguing. This form of reordering transforms the eggshells, which are not repaired but renewed.

From Nothing to Something

To emphasise their transformation from discard to value, the painted eggshells are displayed on a raised Perspex floor illuminated from below.¹⁹ Air from a standing fan blows on them intermittently, moving them and knocking them against each other. The sounds that emerge are reminiscent of sounds from nature – wind in the trees, rain on a roof, the sea pulling shells across the sand – bringing to the eggshells a vibratory vitality. In this way, they may be understood in terms of what Jane Bennet (2010: 57), political theorist and philosopher, refers to as a 'vibratory effluence'²⁰ that persists before and after any arrangement in space'.

18 Five: represents transition, as it is near the middle of the complete number of batches. It represents communication, movement and versatility. It is the number of the intellect and of both written and oral expression (<https://weathymatters.com/2014/07/13/chaldean-hebrew-kabbalah-numerology/>).

19 The floor is slightly raised from the ground and is made of 1 m x 1 m modular squares of Perspex.

20 'Effluence' is used by Bennet to indicate a vibration of what she terms vital materialism, or 'thing power'.

This vibratory effluence can be likened to immanence, in that there can be an awareness of the sacred within an object or action. In some philosophical and metaphysical theories of divine presence, immanence²¹ is used to suggest that the spiritual world permeates the mundane, and hence it became the title of this installation. In her book *The Second Sex* (1949), which laid the groundwork for second wave feminism, French writer, intellectual, existentialist philosopher, political activist, feminist and social theorist Simone de Beauvoir used the term 'immanence' in the context of women's work in the home when outlining the structures of patriarchal oppression prevalent in Western society, thereby reshaping the initial meaning of the word. A similar emphasis is made by writer Andrea Veltman (2004: 123), who divides humanity into two sections when explaining the basic features of oppression, writing that there are 'those who achieve transcendence through constructive activities and those relegated to the sphere of immanence'. The duality of the practice with which I am engaged is that on one hand the eggshells have been rescued from being discarded, but on the other they are used to reflect a spirit trapped in the mundane.

21 Immanence is usually applied in monotheistic, pantheistic faiths to suggest that the spiritual world permeates the mundane (Wikipedia).



Cathy Abraham (close up) *Batch 5: conversessions* (2018)

Nothing but the Truth

The Conversessions: An Invitation to Talk about Nothing in Particular

Although my original aim was to paint every broken piece of eggshell myself, I decided to invite people to join me for Batch 5 and Batch 11.^{22, 23} The project started as a solitary, ritualistic act through which to transmute the psychological manifestations of everyday actions and objects, but while working by myself it became clear that not only was endurance necessary, but so too was finding connections with others during the making process. As the number five is integral to this project, I chose to invite people, some whom I already knew and some whom I did not, into my studio for a conversation while we painted the shells of Batch 5. (The community of Batch 11 is discussed in a following section.)

A batch comprises 18 boxes, so I invited 18 people to join my process. I assured the participants that once they accepted my invitation, their identity would remain anonymous – for this part of the project, anonymity is key. While I appreciate the complexities of the participants' anonymity from a viewer's perspective, for the purposes of this project it was essential. Without it, the participants would inadvertently be placed into demographic categories of race, religion, age, status or gender, to name but a few. The intention of this project is not to alienate, divide or draw conclusions based on any of the above categories, but to find threads of connection despite apparent differences.

Almost everyone who interacts with this project wants to know who else took part. I have been asked broad questions

22 Five is important as it is the measure for the square breath meditation, and I thought it a fitting number to apply to the interactive and participatory part of the project.

23 In Kabbalah, the primary number 11 signifies the conveyance of the divine light that transcends the limits of the world within the limits of the world, which indicated to me that this was the correct batch within which to do the VR film. It is also the reason why there are a total of 11 batches.

such as ‘What is your demographic?’ or, more specifically, ‘Why did you ask me?’ While the specifics of a person’s race, gender, religion, age or status all contribute to their personal identity and life experience, I was more interested in finding common ground than in amplifying differences. One of the first questions many participants asked me was, ‘Why did you choose me?’ The impulse to invite someone was based on just that – an impulse. Most of the participants were relatively unknown to me: For example, I invited people I met through reading their book, or hearing them speak; I even invited people I met while standing in a queue. Those who accepted my invitation became a part of the project.

The experience of breathing, painting and conversing together is an intimate one. Though I was a relative stranger to most of the participants at the outset, our connection had been deeply enhanced by the end of our session.

Once someone accepted my invitation, and we had agreed on a suitable time, they would arrive at my studio, and we began a one- to two-hour process, commencing with the five-minute breathing exercise I do every day before I start my painting practice. Together, we collected exhaled breaths in balloons and tied our individual captured breaths onto threads, which I pinned to the wall amongst the other gathered breaths. Then, together, we began the task of painting one box of 36 pieces of eggshell. The recording device was switched on and we conversed. I named these conversations *Conversationsessions* (conversing during painting sessions), because they are not generic conversations in which two people sit engaging only in spontaneous dialogue. The words that arose were connected to the act of painting. Time, process and conversation were interconnected and facilitated through this dual focus. Painting while talking helped avoid awkwardness, as the activity interspersed and filled the natural lulls in our conversations. Finding places of connection by listening, conversing and painting are informed by my desire to work with a methodology centred on communicating experiences and thoughts that are ordinarily hidden, normatively insignificant and without value; considered ‘nothing’.

In *Conversationsessions*, we spoke about many things, from banal, everyday experiences to difficult subjects such as suicide, rape culture, violence and other forms of suffering. The conversations unfolded organically, and we shifted from topic to topic as if dipping in and out of various intensities of experience. One moment, we spoke about loss, the next about the process of egg painting, the next about breakfast. In *Conversations Before the End of Time*, artist and theorist Suzi Gablik (1995: 81),



Cathy Abraham (close up) *Batch 5: conversations* (2018)



Kimsooja *Archive of Mind* (2016)



Cathy Abraham (close up)
The coded eggshells from batch 9
(part of *Immanence 2018*)

explains that ‘talking is a living art. You allow for the interruptions and the unexpected turns, and you don’t try to monitor or edit ... what you don’t want to lose is the vibrancy of the moment, the intensity conversation has.’ These intense and intimately revealing connections could not have occurred were it not for the promise of anonymity, because the anonymity allowed for a certain degree of unguardedness.

The artist Kimsooja is driven by a profound belief in art and co-existence and the hope of worldwide peace as a central motivator in her work. Art historian and curator Christina Grammatikopolou (2015) links Kimsooja’s visual language with her ‘deep humanism’, as she explores the notion of being human while weaving different cultures and lives together. In *Archive of Mind* (2016), Kimsooja invites viewers to participate in the work via various instructions: without speaking, to collect a lump of clay; sit in a particular way; roll a sphere from the clay; place the sphere on the round table; put energy into the clay. The resultant collection of accumulated spheres ultimately formed the work, collected on a large, round table, suggesting community or family and a ceremonial coming together in a collective identity. This work is an example of relational aesthetics put into practice, where the encounter between the viewer and the material creates the work in the gallery space. As the title suggests, an altering or voiding of the archives of the minds of the participants through the meditative act of rolling the clay is offered.

In his essay *The Archive as Metaphor* (2004), Wolfgang Ernst defines the archive as “the place of classifying, sorting (out) and storing data resulting from administrative acts” (2004: 2). In this definition, Ernst refers to physical archives and their functions. Kimsooja employs the term ‘archive’ in a different manner in her work *Archive of Mind*. Instead of referring to conventional archival material, such as documents, Kimsooja brings into play that which cannot as such be archived, namely thoughts in the mind. Thus the work can be understood as counter-archival in a sense. An archive further exists to preserve those materials in its collection. *Archive of Mind* is metaphorically archiving the intangible, which, with its shifting notions, is invisible and mercurial. A paradox exists in this form of ‘archiving’, because the results of archiving in the common sense of the word take the form of collections carefully conserved and classified, whereas the clay balls can only ever be approximations of that which it aims to preserve. Karen Barad, feminist theorist, stipulates that ‘measurements are agential practices, which are not simply revelatory but performative: they help constitute and are a constitutive part of what is being measured’ (2012:

6). The participatory performative method involved in Archive of Mind measures the size and placement of each clay ball as a metaphor for the immeasurable.

Archive of Mind has some parallels with Batch 5: Conversessions in its methodology, such as instructing participants to perform various processes - exhaling into balloons and painting pieces of eggshell. Moreover, the resulting balloons and eggshells also act as proximations of the unarchivable moments in which they were created. I have further made reference to the practice of archiving by numbering and cataloguing each eggshell. This process refers to the creation of order within archives. While the act of numbering each piece is meditative, it also confers value upon the eggshell as it is carefully placed back in its container to be preserved rather than discarded.

I reference the practices of archiving and preservation by my use of counting and numbers. Informed by the belief system within Kabbalah that we are born with a finite number of words, and the ancient yogi belief that we are born with a finite number of breaths, numbers and numbering become a measure of existence. I have applied this to all that is collected in this body of work. The eggshells, the exhales and the words shared all are counted. The eggshells are counted in their boxes and batches; the exhales in their five-minute meditation and the words in the book of the conversessions, as each box is marked by the number of words shared between myself and the participant. In essence, each object, each action, counts.

By inviting participants to Batch 5: Conversessions, the body of eggshells grew and a body of text formed, mediated through me, but formed collectively. In the Gonzalez-Torres work *Untitled (Placebo)* mentioned earlier, audience engagement actively disappears the work, where viewers subsumed it in their very being (SCAD Museum of Art, 2017), whereas in my work, participant engagement builds the work in the form of exhalations, words and painted eggshells.



Size 18 brushes used to paint the 7128 eggshells

In Kimsooja's Archive of Mind (public making) and Gonzalez-Torres' Untitled (Placebo) (public removing), 'art as a state of encounter' (Bourriaud, 1998: 44) is manifest. Bourriaud (1998: 45–6) sees artists as facilitators rather than makers, and his relational aesthetics emphasises art as an experience that connects viewer and artist rather than separating the viewer from the art. In my work, I combine process – in the production of the painted eggshells and balloons – and a relational aesthetic wherein the art is the immateriality of the encounter with the participant.

As in participatory art practice, which exists in a variety of forms (including interactive, relational, cooperative, dialogical and community-based processes), relational aesthetics incorporates the effect that participants have on the work. In this project, I have combined a process-based practice with aspects of relational aesthetics.²⁴ Relational aesthetics²⁴ require the involvement of participants generally in simulated social environments. In my project, the interactions between myself and the participants happen in order to create the work and not as the work in its final outcome. A residue of the conversations exists in the painted eggshells and the transcribed words. While I do create an arena for discussion and exchange, it is the residue from repeating the work 18 times that I wish to form the body of the work. Specifically, the residue of the words transcribed. The relational part of the process happens privately, not publicly.

In *Joining the Resistance*, Carol Gilligan expounds her theory of an ethics of care. She states that we are by nature 'responsive relational beings, born with a voice and into relationship, hard-wired for empathy and cooperation, and that our capacity for mutual understanding was – and may well be – key to our survival as a species' (2011: 3). Ethics of care,²⁵ centred around empathy between humans, promises co-existence as the reward and way forward on this planet. With this in mind, I invited people into my practice to share stories.

24 In relational aesthetics, the conversation is the medium and the message; the moment of shared communication, the realisation of the artwork. In *Conversations*, however, the conversation is but one of the media, and the message is shared through the transcription. It does not occur only in the moment of shared communication and thus does not happen in the original sense of Bourriaud's definition of relational aesthetics

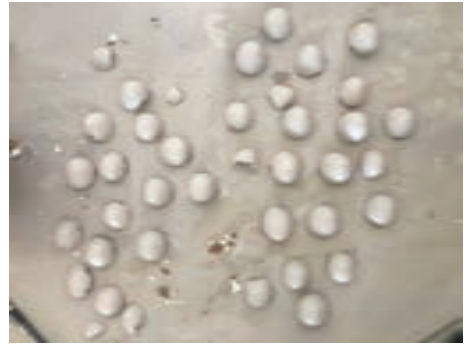
25 The ethics of care is an ethical theory that proposes that moral action centres on interpersonal relationships.

As Gablik writes, when she converses with people, a ‘spaciousness’ through listening may be created from which something new can emerge. By inviting people to paint and converse with me, I hope that a spaciousness for dialogue is shaped. By focusing on the interconnectedness of human experiences, as revealed in the transcribed texts, I share and support Gablik’s assertion that ‘the philosophical basis for Western culture has deprived art of its astonishing potential to build community through empathic social interaction’ (1995: 17). I believe that the ‘philosophical basis’ she refers to has caused much division based on culture, gender, race, age and religion. Consequently, I use the participatory nature of my art practice to diffuse difference and build connections.

While Gablik (1995: 49) writes that her conversations ‘move like life’, like spoken stream-of-consciousness,²⁶ Alexandra Ross (2014), lecturer in Contemporary Art and Curating at the University of Glasgow, defines conversation in her doctoral research as ‘an interchange of thoughts and words; an occupation or engagement with things; the resulting condition of acquaintance or intimacy with a matter.’ She asserts that conversation is

... distinguishable from other forms of inter-human communication by certain attributes relating to the moment of the encounter – namely, uncertainty of the outcome; any questions/answers, or statements/responses stemming from a close listening to the other participant(s) in the conversation; and a flow and rapport which accommodates for interruption, digression and even silence. (2014: 61)

Similarly, in *Conversationsessions*, we were occupied with the painting of the eggshells and the interchange of thoughts and words, which resulted in an intimacy through sharing of experiences. The uniform colour and brush size created a level platform that encouraged a collective togetherness to emerge through the unfolding body of text and eggshells. As the painting did not require a specific skill set,²⁷ it became a levelling task, as no brush mark was more worthy than another and no conversation was more important than another.



Cathy Abraham *Batch 5: conversationsessions*, 2018



Cathy Abraham *Batch 5: conversationsessions*, 2018



Cathy Abraham (inside view)
Batch 5: Conversessions handmade 620pg book, 2018

26 In literature, stream-of-consciousness narration describes the flow of thoughts in the minds of its characters. It was originally coined by psychologist William James in his research *The Principles of Psychology*. This style of writing is marked by an abrupt rise of thoughts and lack of punctuation (<https://literarydevices.net/stream-of-consciousness/>).

27 Participants did not need to be proficient in painting or sculpture or any other art forms.

Instead, the individual participant, while anonymous, was critical to the project through their unique presence, which affected and grew the manifesting work.

The conversations presented here occurred intermittently between November 2017 and October 2018 and revealed serendipitous sequential connections. There were times when a conversation arose that, unknown to the participant, seemed directly related to the previous conversation. The careful listening necessary for the Conversessions happens through the transcriber, who had the arduous task of painstakingly listening to and writing down everything the participants and I said. After reading all the transcripts, I was struck by the somewhat 'ordinary' words used to express such extraordinary stories. Capturing these words in a word cloud,²⁸ I could see how many times each word was said and which words we most commonly used to express ourselves. Words like 'know', 'we're', 'love', 'like' and 'yes' were most frequent, while words like 'violence', 'rape', 'grief', 'father' and 'mother' were less frequent yet were nonetheless used in a surprising number of conversations. The words used more frequently, that filled space and linked the less frequent, weightier words, enliven the conversations even though they may seem less significant – much like domestic labour itself.

28 A word cloud measures the frequency of words and depicts high frequency words in larger fonts and less frequent words in smaller fonts.

Human experiences of loss, trauma, violence, shame, fear and humour were common to all. One participant, who also has asthma, had lost two premature babies; another is an addict in recovery who lost a brother to suicide and battles with her own thoughts of suicide; another lives with a constant feeling of shame due to an inability to manage time. Threads emerge between the participants that uncover a collective connection and shared humanity through and despite differences. These transcribed conversations are presented in a handmade book titled *Batch 5: Conversessions*. The conversessions appear in the order they occurred and are referred to by their box number and the number of words that were spoken, for example 'Box 5, 20 702 words'. Shared words were selected out of the word cloud-generated list via a system connected to the numbers that are the grid for this project: segmented into groups of 18 words, I extracted all the 18s, 13s, 11s, 8s and 5s. The resulting 692 words are printed as an insert in the front of the book. What is presented here arises from a relatively small group but will form part of my ongoing work.

In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway (2016: 1) argues that we need to make 'lines of inventive connection in order to live and die well together'. She suggests that finding new ways to connect will help us integrate with people, creatures and the planet. Bennett (2010: xi) proposes that 'human decency and a decent politics are fostered if we tune in to the strange logic of turbulence.' Bennet's 'strange logic of turbulence' and Haraway's 'mixed up times' both address the current state of the world and suggest that the potential to overcome it lies in paying attention to the difficulties and damages that have arisen. As editor, writer and Professor of Anthropology Anna Tsing (2015: 34) writes, 'It is in listening to that cacophony of troubled stories that we might encounter our best hopes for precarious survival'.

Tsing (2015: 213) also observes that 'To write a history of ruin, we need to follow broken bits of many stories and to move in and out of many patches'. I wish to pay attention, by listening to stories of brokenness while painting broken things. This forms an artistic practice of noticing the small, seemingly insignificant details that make up the exact lines and shapes of broken objects, as well as the unique ways in which people experience life. In *Conversations*, we engaged with turbulent matters through the sharing of personal stories that reflected the fragility of the eggshells that we painted. While the quantifying and objectifying gaze of categorising, of judging people based on religion, race or gender, for example, strips away individual significance, the inventive communication of *Conversations* offers a way to connect.

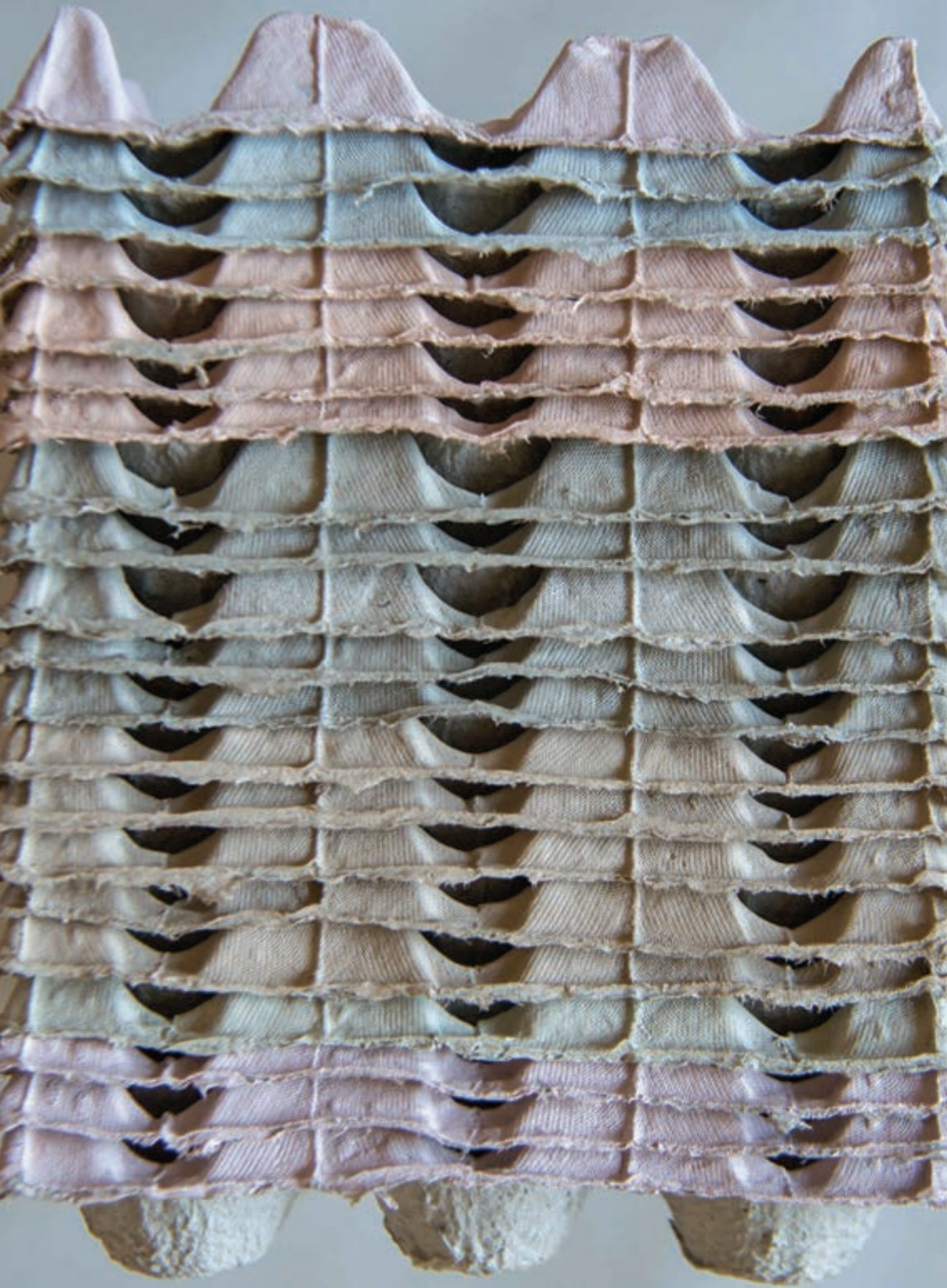
Nothing to Lose (good for nothing)

While the rest of this body of work deals directly with psychological and personal subject matter, these final two works address practical notions of presence and absence, echoing another theme of *A Deeper Kind of Nothing*, where what remains is the absence of something and a trace of the effects of that 'something'.

Vestige and Residue (what's left after nothing)

Whereas anonymity was key to *Batch 5: Conversessions*, *Batch 11: Vestige and Residue* requires full disclosure. Here, the participants from the earlier *Conversations* were invited to together paint the final batch of eggshells at a filmed 'banquet'. Participants were given three options: take part in the VR filming, send a proxy in their place, or have their space at the table empty to make present their absence. They could choose to be anonymous or not. A recording of the final painting session is presented as a VR film and is shown in the space where it was created. It can be seen through a VR headset – the past is replayed in the present, and the event reoccupies the space in which it was originally enacted. The virtual-reality (VR) film and residue from the set of the film are situated in the final room. Residue from the table at which the participants worked is still in the space, but the participants themselves exist only as 'ghosts'. The headset is positioned at the table, locating the viewer at the exact spot where the 360-degree camera filmed the work. This allows the viewer to feel that they are at the table, able to look around and see what the participants were doing.

The work is titled *Vestige and Residue* to draw attention to the similarities in the meaning of the words as well as their slight discrepancies. As traumatic experiences leave their trace and echoes within us, so will we, in turn, leave both a vestige and a residue in this world after we are gone. In the work, the aftermath of the filming experience remains, as the energetic emanation of the experience remains in the traces of dirty water, painted shells and exhaled breaths trapped in balloons. A vestige is the mark or track left behind like a trace, while a residue is what remains after something else has been removed. *Vestige* (virtual) and *Residue* (reality) combine to form VR, taking place in the mind and memory and only viewable alone, through the headset. It is a scene similar to that after a dinner party, when all the guests have left; only an echo remains of the people who occupied the space, blew up the balloons and painted the eggshells.



Finally

A Return to Nothing

Overall, in *A Deeper Kind of Nothing*, I have aimed to make visible immaterial ghosts in relation to identity and trauma, significance and value. I concur with Karen Barad when she states that “the void is a spectral realm with a ghostly existence. Not even nothing can be free of ghosts.” (2012:12). The ghosts of time, childhood trauma and the weight of domestic expectation speak through the chosen materials and repetitive practices. By creating a space in which it was possible to connect deeply while discussing both seemingly insignificant and significant things, important, life-changing experiences were shared. The participants and I impacted upon and affected each other, mirroring the permeability of the material. Connections were made in what was shared and what was formed.

The eggshells and exhalations are a residue and a representation of the process. In *A Deeper Kind of Nothing*, I question our conception of human engagement and the artistic language in which these interactions manifest. Specifically, in Batch 5: *Conversations*, Batch 11: *Vestige and Residue* and *Drawing Breath*, the reality of art as encounter is established in a collective body of texts, painted eggshells and breaths. Here, the conversations are as much a part of the art as are the act of painting, the materials and the breaths themselves.

This project originated from experiences, objects and ideas that have been overlooked and deemed to be of no value, be they psychosomatic, hidden experiences or daily labour. They manifest here in the tangible form of breath caught in balloons, cast in bronze, and in painted pieces of eggshell, as a measure of the deeper kind of nothing I wish to instantiate. By considering that lasting effects and traces of experiences are often disregarded or deemed as nothing, I hope that that ‘nothing’ can transcend the common sense of the word. *A Deeper Kind of Nothing* is a lasting remnant of that which is, and has been, perceived as nothing. It is the residue left in the space where something once was. The choice we have, to determine our residue, lies in which words we use and how we breathe.

Life is an illusion. I am held together in the nothingness by art.
Anselm Kiefer

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