

Unpublished paper by Dr Gwenneth Miller presented at 6th IAEE CONFERENCE: A LONG WALK TO EDUCATION

(SLIDE 1) Title Slide

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Affect and complexity of ethics in visual arts: a curatorial reflection

Dr G Miller

(SLIDE 2) Ethics, affect and endurance

I aim to analyse the exhibition *Ethics, affect and endurance* and reflect on the premise and implications of its curatorial vision and critically consider **the role art plays in nurturing ethics as an affective register of culture, affirming our capacity for self-reflection and change**. This exhibition also forms part of a broader project: 'the ethics of CARE', which I am researching.

I aim to identify how participating artists critically address adverse conditions through active engagement of content and issues visualised in images, but also how the **aesthetics, materiality and process** may provide tools to open practice and agency for accountability. I aim to probe how the art of participants instigate conditions that could transform our interrelations. This presentation will make evident how artistic 'labour' as cultural work, is complexly intertwined with the rest of artists' lives: either influenced by capital, driven by personal needs or the needs of a community (Nickl 2018:65). I will compare the **complex relationships** made evident by selected art works, which I have grouped into two themes:

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Firstly, **WORK & POLITICS: CULTURE AS CRITICAL AGENCY**, reflected in the art of Alicia Hindson, Ingrid Bolton, Kabelo Maja, Karin Lijnes, Nyasha Bwerinofa and Zyma Amien.

(SLIDE 4)

Secondly, **TRAUMA & COMPLEXITY: MAKING SENSE OF WORLDS**, reflected in the art of Carolyn Parton, Emma Willemse, Masenya Fisha, Mem Sevenster, Nathani Lüneburg, and Mari Retief and Roxane Wilson.

(SLIDE 5) Curatorial selection

The curatorial decision for selection was further based on foregrounding artist's that are young in their art careers. I selected alumni, lecturers and students from UNISA to highlight the aspects of ethics, research and education.

The curation of this exhibition further endorses the views of Rosi Braidotti's *Nomadic Ethics* Following Deleuze, Braidotti (2013:342) writes that we must have a "robust nomadic vision" of ethics and explains that nomadic vision searches "for the way in which otherness prompts, mobilises and allows for flows of affirmation of values and forces which are not yet sustained by the current social and historical conditions," implying both criticality and flexibility.

(SLIDE 6) Alicia Hindson

1. WORK & POLITICS: CULTURE AS CRITICAL AGENCY

Alicia Hindson's *Jerusalem* (2018) and Ingrid Bolton's *Directional lines* (2018) probe the ethical values of big business and **art's ability to mobilise:**

Hindson depicts a landscape of mine-dumps, shacks at the foot and monstrously large birds ominously perched on top of the mine dumps. The reality is that due to the mining activity the water and soil has become radioactive. Local people living here long before the mines were established eat the soil as a delicacy, called *Pica*. This artwork calls into question the **accountability** of gold mining sites of the West-Rand, which the artist has researched

extensively as is evident in her workbooks **exhibited here. I invite you to page through these remarkable documents of research.**

In her statement Alicia maintains that “This narrative asks for an embodiment of a new ethical consciousness, where we need to take responsibility for the past.” The artist used layers of glass filled in with ink and paint, both bringing together and severing the image. The formal application and technique becomes a tool **to critically slash ethical non-accountability** of the capially-driven industry. Hindson’s choice of material is informed by the aesthetic of fragmentation and deliberately engages with the *unrepresentable* horrific reality, pointing the finger at the social and political devastation caused by mining companies.

(SLIDE 7) Ingrid Bolton

Ingrid Bolton critically reflects on the politics of big business in *Directional lines of roots and boundaries* (2018). Bolton foregrounds raw media as image: Coal Calcium Carbonate, turmeric, porcelain and laboratory ware are pointers and signifiers to question the relationship between’ substances and growing ecological disaster. She laments that “South Africa’s on-going commitment to coal fired power stations” is depleting calcium carbonate, which is a compound essential for skeletal and shell production in marine animals. This has a devastating impact on the oceanic environment. Her work visualises a game of Pseudo-science of shifting icons to topple the hierarchy of politics, a politics that is either ignorant or deliberately ignores the impact on the environment.

Both Hindson and Bolton deal closely with the resources, their location and the politics of capitalism, which negatively influence the environment.

(SLIDE 8) Kabelo Maja

Kabelo Maja probes the power politics in sport in *Its playtime* (2017). He writes that “The closeness of art and sport to everyday life makes them strong proponents of cultural dilemmas embedded in positions of power, fair play and teamwork” (Maja 2017). Maja’s

work presents us with a jubilant array of soccer boots and referee whistles. Each boot is handmade in clay and thus speaks of the individuality of the colourful players. Like the hierarchies in games the shoes vary in size but the whistles dominate. Maja, a semi professional soccer player, artist and academic is acutely aware of the overlaps and dynamics between life and sport. As in sport, artists “play” in their experimentation with media – this is a colloquial term referencing the experimental search for medium and technical exploration to find just the correct equations to speak about a subject. In Maja’s play, the clay medium’s character varies between an exquisitely modelled object and a clumsy lump of earth, whilst engaging the tensional politics in life and sport. The malleable medium speaks about our nature of becoming (Braidotti) and our affective nature capable of change. Maja’s tacit understanding of both his medium and his subject enables a methodology of reflection affectively considering the significance of joy, yet the underlying strains within its value systems.

(SLIDE 9) Karin Lijnes

When looking at **Karin Lijnes** work *Rebel* (2016), the playfulness belies her serious concerns with female identity. Based on the interrogation of cosmetics industry, Lijnes uses the title “Rebel” of a lipstick brand to cross reference the political critique. A smiling shiny smooth ceramic head sits rather disturbingly next to the neon sign of the title. Prof Cilliers (2012:33) from Stellenbosch University writes about the HEALING POWER OF HUMOR that "Humour intends change" and indicates that laughter for the sake of transformation is inherently ethical" Integral to humour is *incongruence* – the difference between wisdom and stupidity or life and death. Other than common association with cynicism, laughter offers possibilities of healing, in traditional carnivals the voices of the marginal were allowed to be heard (Cilliers 2012:24). and here in Lijnes’ artwork, her clown-like doll head comments on value systems, allowing the artist to speak from the margins of society beyond the powerhouse politics about beauty, creating unconventional beauty to reinvigorate culture.

In both Maja and Lijnes humour in the work affirms dignity and fosters freedom: it “underlines the fact that ...this life is worth laughing (and crying) about” (Cilliers 2012:34).¹

(SLIDE 10) Nyasha biv Bwerinofa

Two films by Nyasha biv Bwerinofa’s *The Education Siestem: The Class* (2017) and “*The Education Siestem: The Balance* (2017), deal with problems in our education system. We accept that the art film of Bwerinofa is staged. Bwerinofa playful aesthetic touches on a grave reality of an educational system that does not prepare youth for vocations. In this activist film he highlights the ethical dilemma of a system that fails its community. Where he teaches in Kimberley pupils leave school and cannot find jobs. His work demands that we reflect of how ethical it is for a country to continue with a rather conservative, unchanged curriculum that sends ill-equipped young people into the workplace.

(SLIDE 11) Zyma Amien

Like Nyasha, Zyma addresses real, philosophical and at times, traumatic life worlds, about the limited opportunities offered to women working in the garment industry. In *Transfer* (2016), the cacophony of sewing machines labourers is isolated, doing repetitive work. The politics of this industry demands long hours of ruthless concentration. Speaking of personal experience as her mother is in the industry, Zyma’s animation has a seemingly simple style of clean black lines. The reality is that the technique of Rotoscoping links the concept with this technique “that involves making repetitive marks over a live video and then seaming it together” (Amien 2018). Emulating the garment workers her animation thus becomes a statement of empathy, to call us to reflect on the ethics of exploitation politics.

(SLIDE 12) The artists from the second theme: TRAUMA & COMPLEXITY: MAKING SENSE OF WORLDS

¹ “Laughter broadened the horizons, opening up and addressing universal problems of life and death, and at the same time serving as an integration of life. It offers new and surprising insights into reality” (Cilliers 2012: 23).

Carolyn Parton and Emma Willemse, approached their work from an ecological point of departure. Parton's *Notes on the wind* (2018) and *Invisible chords* (2018) work with leftovers of artmaking, and reflects an archaeological approach, the materials carry ethical and cultural issues. Parton reminds us in very poetic manner that in our best intent of creating beauty, we are in fact leaving a footprint of waste.

(SLIDE 13) Carolyn Parton

The works' weight and multiple layers of unwanted materials suggests an ethical weight and reminds us to re-envision our values while we create objects for cultural use.

(SLIDE 14) Emma Willemse

Willemse uses wooden parquet blocks as mute reminders of previously installed floors of homes in Woodstock, Cape Town; and invite the viewer to handle her books: opening and closing of this artist's book evokes the sounds and acts of floors being ripped out of their established places. This metaphoric work, *Rupture book VI* (2017) is part of a larger exhibition where Willemse created 101 books each in complete different format. You are welcome to page through her catalogue lying next to the artwork, which you may handle.

(SLIDE 15) Masenya Fisha

Masenya Fisha, Mem Sevenster and Nathani Lüneburg, all deal with the ethics of personal trauma, which enables the viewer to discover the discomfort in their narratives of guilt and pain.

Masenya Fisha's video *Calling the Spirit* (2016), deals with a near-death experience, and his trauma of surviving whilst others perished in the accident, leaving him in anguish about the ethical dilemma of surviving. In his videos he performs rituals and ceremonies at a particular site where the accident happened to "collect the spirit off the dead" to give the spirit rest.

Thereby finding his own peace and reminding us to respect and show reverence to the living and the dead.

(SLIDE 16) Mem Sevenster

Mem Sevenster's obsessive *Mea Culpa* (2018) is the result of writing (through my fault) "The pen and pencil drawing work here refer to the method of "writing-based punishment - used to provide a learning lesson about behaviour and consequence - and represents my mental self-castigation" (Sevenstar 2018). In these two works she emphasises the need to behave ethically and how this is exaggerated in people who suffer from obsessive compulsive disorder, referred to as Ethical Sensitivity. This personal reflection questioning her OCD also reflects a broad society's needs to be self-reflexive.

(SLIDE 17) Nathani Lüneburg

Nathani Lüneburg, in the animation series of *Displacement* (2016), uses the surrealist dreamscape as narrative to speak about traumatic memories and how these become the fabric of a subconscious. In a world where experiences of loss and children's sexual abuse, violence toward women and negligent care of the frail are daily realities, we deal with it simply through process of repression. Her own memories of traumatic events which took place in South Africa in the past decade, positions herself as a witness of the brutal murders and rapes of four young South African girls. In this Lunenburg also calls us as witnesses.

(SLIDE 18) Mari Retief

Finally, **Mari Retief's** *Words Matter* (2017) and **Roxane Wilson's** *peoplesExploitation* (2012) are grouped for their aesthetic as a sense of archive – but also a method of masking identity in ethics.

Retief's work *Words Matter* (2017) deals with the 54 letters containing a total amount of 14,208 written words. She hand stamped all the words in black ink with a typesetting office stamp, creating a dense map of words from most frequent to least frequent. Apart from the

word “the”; it is the word “I” (801) and “you” (423) that were most repeated, which reinforced the concept of personal correspondences and the interconnected world in which we operates. The 22 artist’s books of Retief examine how these connections fade as time and distances increase. Both the book title (gauche on packaging card) and the letter are printed in RMSC4 barcode, thereby ethically obscuring the identities of the writers.

(SLIDE 19) Roxane Wilson

Wilson’s tragic portrayal of trafficking of a successful marketing campaign highlights a sense of complicity during the marketing in the misery of the abused. In *peoplesExploitation* (2012) she promotes a fictitious company, *ITI, International Trafficking Initiative*, through the fabricated but typical business-like expo stand. Most cynically and shockingly the artwork seemingly advertises a lucrative industry of trafficking in women and children – yet we have to remember that the work intend to shock as it is an activist critique, utilising a satirical and mocking lens to highlight the monstrous nature of this desperate social issue, which we, like the work simply experience as a quiet dark side of society, best ignored, or worst sanitised through media. I believe that Wilson avoids the pitfall of the ‘beauty of pain’, which commodifies suffering for our aesthetic pleasure by her deliberate choice of confrontational presentation.

(SLIDE 20) CONCLUSION

These artists discussed above highlights the manner in which political economy and institutional systems cause ethical dilemmas. My presentation highlights the Intermedial role of art – as educational, provocative critique. The art works’ material processes and media carefully stir the viewer to mobilise ethical reflection. These works aim to bring about values and forces which are not yet sustained by the current social and historical conditions. The artworks on exhibition, drawn from diverse contexts, all address real, philosophical and at times, traumatic life worlds. The insight developed through this reflective research will offer educational opportunities for both our Ethics Committees and researchers interested in finding alternative/innovative ways to articulate ethical dilemmas.