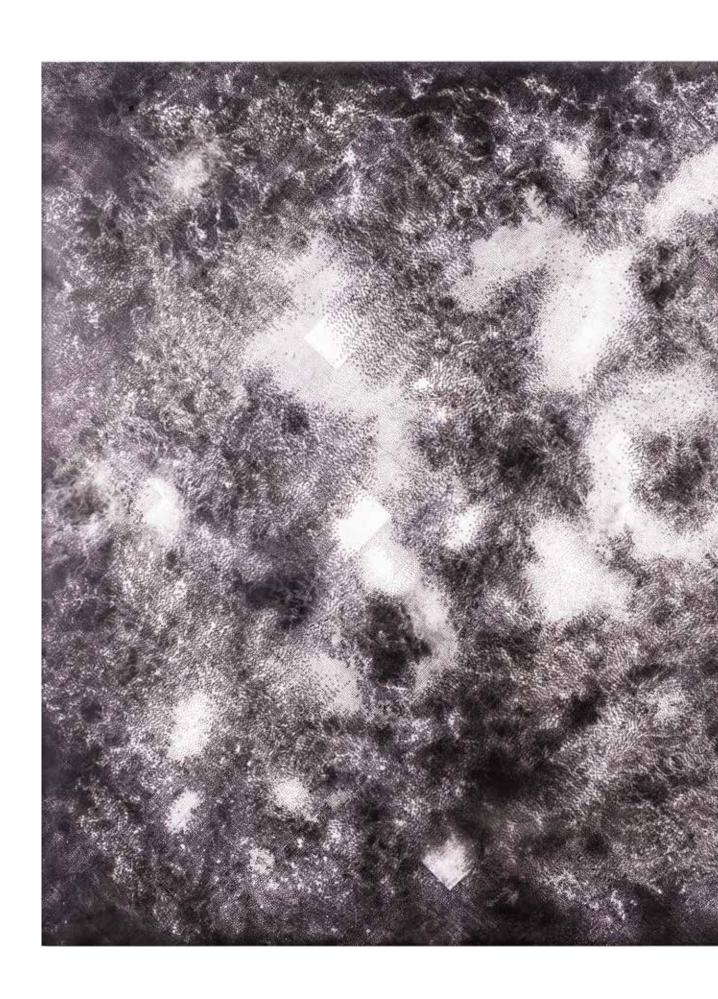
# invasion Ernst Van Der Wal



# invasion

Ernst Van Der Wal

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#### **Untold Stories**

"Stories give flesh to the bare bones. Out of stories, we make culture, not from the bones of the dead, though the bones are the rationale for stories being told. Whereas in art, this impulse is clearer, science too is about telling certain stories. It is out of stories that we make society. Out of stories an individual constructs a self."

Kopano Ratele, Life of Bone (2011).

Ernst van der Wal is a South African researcher, writer and visual artist who works between an exciting range of creative disciplines. As a senior lecturer in the Visual Arts Department of Stellenbosch University, where he also obtained his doctoral degree, van der Wal teaches visual theory, and such, his rich knowledge and understanding of contemporary theoretical approaches to the visual is abundantly evident in his artwork. His theoretical interest in the relationship between art and science provides insight into his remarkable exhibition, invasion (2019).

Art can be a narrative site, stretching between two points, between then and now, engaging narratives of the past and the present, and between the past and the future. Art enables matter to become expressive, art not just satisfies but also intensifies, resonates and becomes more than itself (Barrett, 2007). As a keeper of historical memory, art creates a site for trans-subjectivity and transhistorical becomings<sup>1</sup> that both witnesses and wit(h) nesses<sup>2</sup> (Pollock, 2010).

Art brings stories into being; these stories can be entangled geographically, biologically and cosmically. Art becomes a site interwoven with the world, the artist, and other material things. Van der Wal's work compels us to investigate the physical world as storied matter, composed of various narrated agencies<sup>3</sup> that make the world intelligible (Oppermann, 2013:57). Storied matter

# Cover Page

Untitled 2019 Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 99.5 x 70.5 cm

# Page 1

Untitled 2019 Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 120 x 120 cm

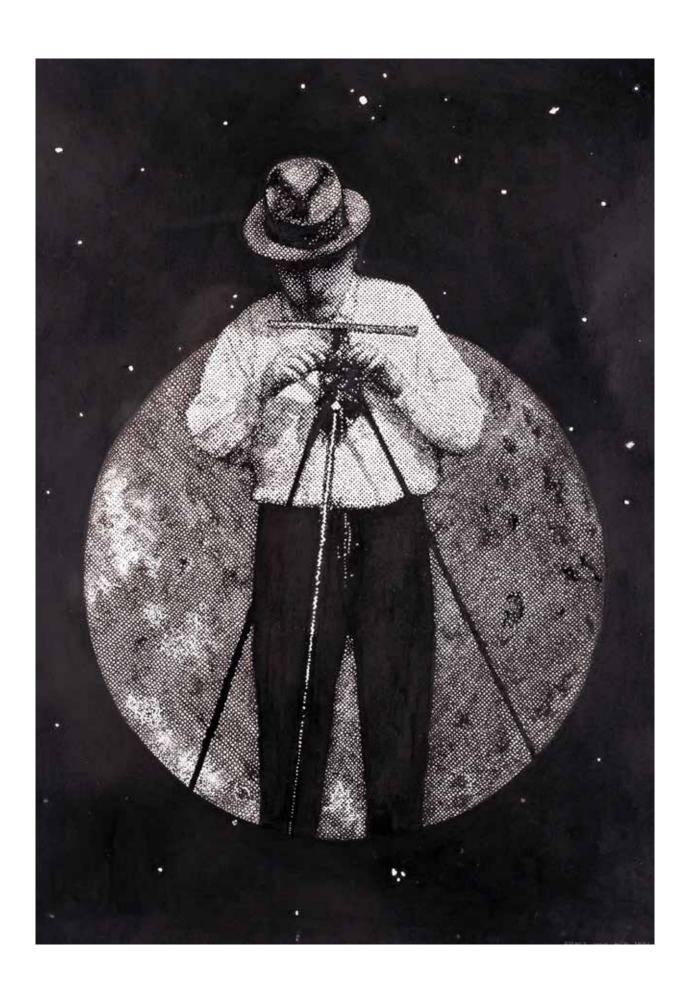
and the multiverse of narrated agencies it delineates makes us aware that the world we live in is vibrant with movement and flux, and that matter is encoded with numerous narratives that render the universe eloquent. Matter thus continuously formulates signs and meanings that can be interpreted as stories (Oppermann, 2017:294). In his Invasion series, van der Wal's represents a multitude of stories meticulous crafted onto delicate sheets of Fabriano paper, teeming with microscopic and macroscopic ecospheres (van Robbroeck, 2019) and compilations of cosmic matter intra-actively becoming.

*Invasion*, is composed of a collection of meticulous, detailed black and white drawings and sculptural installations that explore the intricate relationship between the ways humans think of themselves (ie: human epistemologies) and forms of scientific representation. At present, van der Wal's research and artistic practice investigate human-object relationships within the age of the Anthropocene and can be seen visually represented in this exhibition where he used invasion as a thematic backdrop and investigated how scientific tools of monitoring invasions are interwoven in the human perception of self. According to van der Wal (2019); "Acts of invasion stand central to how we define ourselves as human beings – how we look outside of and within our own bodies to comprehend things that exist far away or deep inside." In van der Wal's work, we gaze deep into the night sky but also deep into the complex structures of matter; using both a telescope and microscope, our perceptions become obscured alongside our ability to differentiate scale.

Throughout van der Wal's great cosmic story, we will explore how he undoes the familiar Grand Narratives of science and progress, by destabilising the scientific man as the holder of all knowledge and the centre around which the universe turns, we will engage his multidimensional use of scale, alongside Karen Barad's (2007) elaborations of apparatus<sup>4</sup>. It will become clear that we are not merely humans, but trans-species hybrids, enfolding, folding, unfolding, and entangling in our cosmic system, where everything revolves around everything else. Stories will be our greatest tool in this great cosmic retelling, reversing and displacing the central myth of origin in Western culture as we transgress boundaries to become cyborgs<sup>5</sup> (Haraway, 1991).

This article is centred on the work of van der Wal in his series invasion, through van der Wal's artistic practise, we will engage contemporary cultural theories through which we will witness a new materialism at work. This new materialist ontology, based on difference, will traverse traditional dualism that has situated modernist modes of thinking (Dolphijn, & van der Tuin, 2011:383)6. Through this ontology, the meaning of nature and all that constitutes it has been re-evaluated into a complex mesh of naturalcultural realities that cohesively exist in a complex entanglement of human and non-human entities. This is made visible through bodily matters, trans-corporeality<sup>7</sup>, and materials interdependency and discursive practices. New materialist agentic capacity and generative powers no longer situate matter as inert or passive, but rather a site of vibrant processes (lovino, 2015:70) that eviscerate our agential concepts and understanding. This article will underscore how van der Wal's work depicts the expressive dimensions of material agentiality and the particular intra-actions<sup>8</sup> it undertakes as it situates narrative agencies (Oppermann, 2017:294). These narrative agencies are constituted by compound individuals that are critically investigated and depicted as we explore the stories they tell.

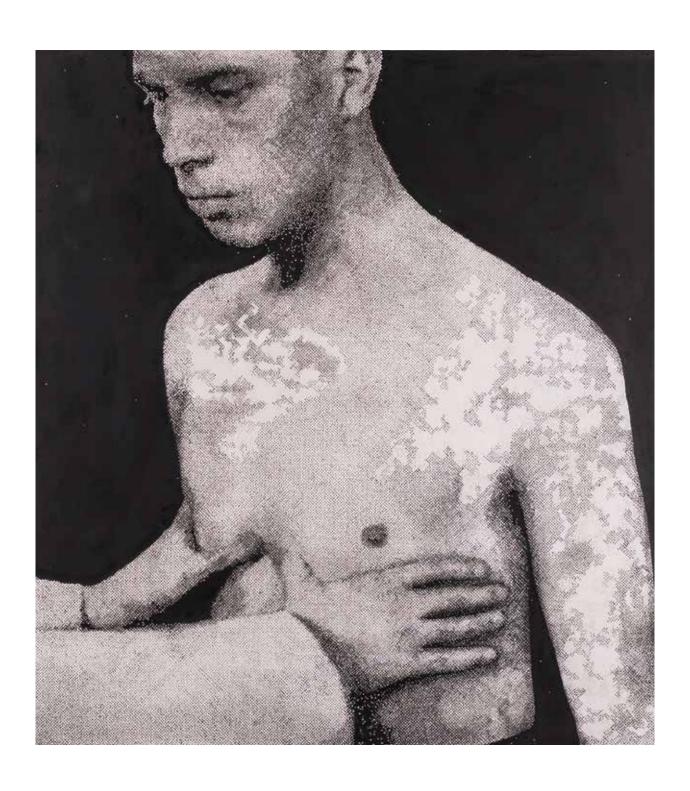
Rendering materiality as more than mere matter but rather a phenomenon (Kleinman, 2012:76), implies that agential material is laced in meaning and, through its becoming, situates a narrative by investigating the representation of these narratives in van der Wal's work

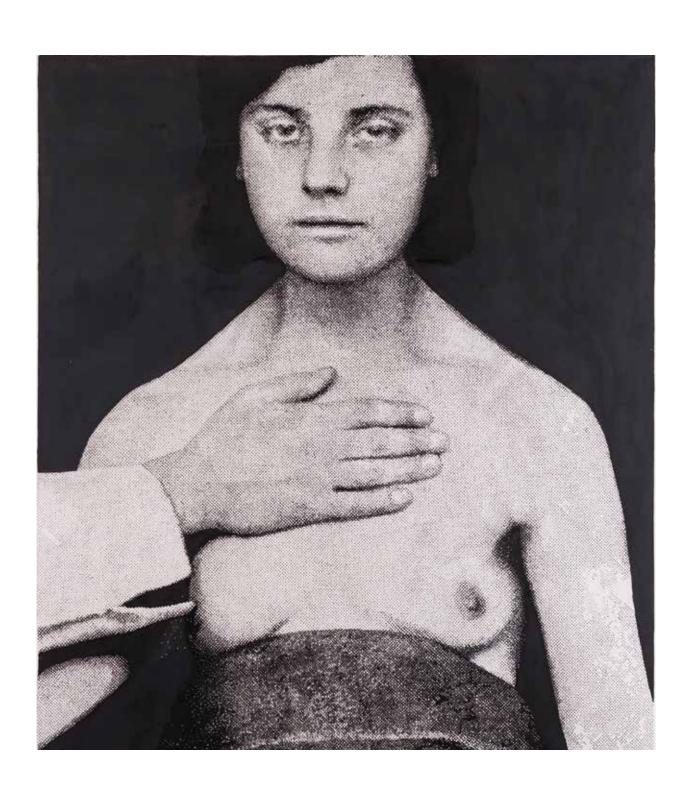


# Page 5 Untitled 2019 Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 48.5 x 39 cm

we aim to discover a story. Storied matter is a site of creative narrativity, these narratives are transmitted in the interchanges between organic and inorganic matter, these material interchanges, and the continuity of these forces, situating an interplay of bodily natures, formulating an active dialogues that transcend historical dichotomies. Storied matter is thus encoded with a mesh of meanings, proliferating stories and a trajectory of narratives. By visualising matter's complexity, and narrated agency, the centralised idea of humans as the only storied being is debunked. Humans rather live in an ecosphere, where they intra-actively partake in the ongoing ontological performance (Barad, 2007:184).

The Greek etymological root of the word planet means wanderer, this referring to the ancient cultures believed that celestial bodies revolved around us. We believed our earth was the centre of the universe, with us at its centre (Chuang, 2020). The scientific man became the holder of all knowledge9, a removed agential observer with his telescope or microscope in hand, negotiating scale in the blink of an eye. However, this universal centre is wobbling man is no longer its barycentre or a removed observes, but according to Karen Barad's (2007) part of an ongoing intra-activate becoming of the world (lovino, 2015). Knowing becomes an ontological performance, where the observer is not estranged from the act of observation but part of its production. The production of knowledge entails a specific process through which the world is differentially articulated and accounted for. Knowledge production is neither bound nor closed (Barad, 2007:149), but endless encounters and collaborations between human and non-human<sup>10</sup> actors. Van der Wal's cosmic story is one of diffraction<sup>11</sup> - as Donna Haraway (1997:14) says - causing ruptures in the linearity of the singular modernist Grand Narrative, these interferences "make a difference in how meanings are made and lived" (Haraway 1997:14).





# Page 7 & 8

Untitled 2015 Indian Ink and Graphite on Fabriano Paper 71 x 60 cm

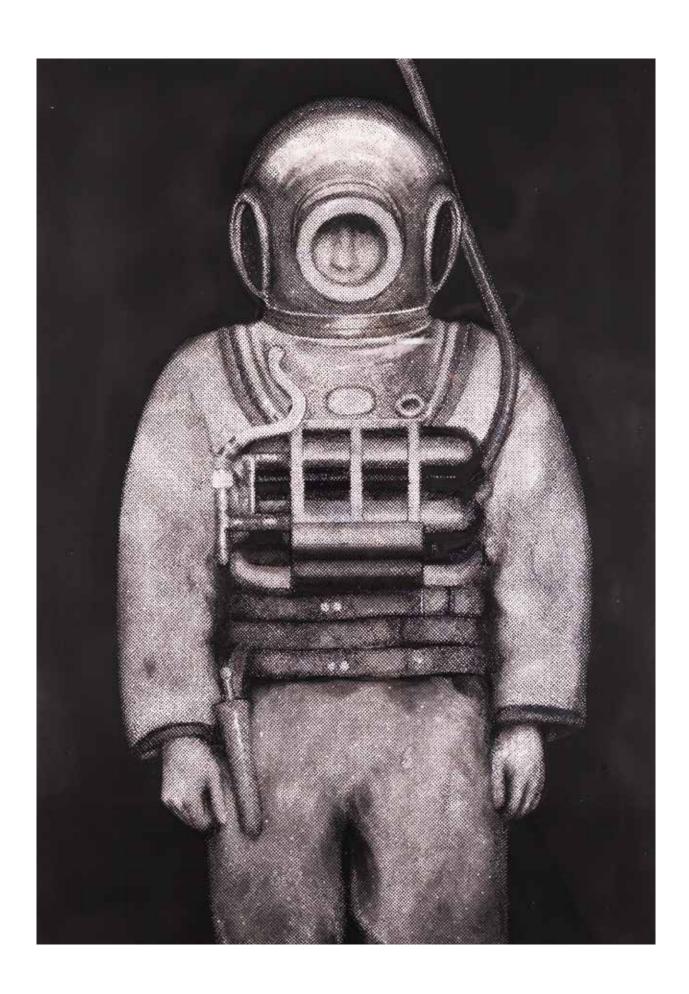
Untitled 2016 Indian Ink and Graphite on Fabriano Paper 81 x 64.5 cm

Human actors need to actively live and participate in the implosion of multitudinous binary oppositions<sup>12</sup> to compose a common world because communality is not to be taken for granted. This includes acting and observing on various scales. Man navigates the limitations of scale by designing specific visual apparatuses, telescopes and microscopes (Barad 2007:134). From a new materialist viewpoint, apparatuses are not just revelatory tools of measurement but part of performative agential practices that help constitute and are constitutive parts of what is being measured (Barad, 2012). Apparatuses become material conditions entangled in the processes of materialisation and enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering. These intra-actions form part of a set of material practises that influences an agential cut<sup>13</sup> between what is seen as a subject and object. By performing these critical acts of inclusion and exclusion, apparatuses determine how and what comes to matter. The apparatuses interactive performance of an agential cut is central to Barad's (2007:140) conceptualisation, whereby she situates the apparatuses as a boundary drawing practise that both produce and are part of material phenomena in their becoming. Through the apparatuses dynamic of cutting things together/apart, we come to understand that it is not the subject that makes the object, but they are entangled through agential cuts (Barad 2007:184). In this agential realistic account, these intra-actions are seen as agentive and account for how humans use technology in scientific methods. The knower does not stand in absolute externality to what is being observed, but becomes part of what is being viewed in an ongoing intra-activity. Apparatuses are no longer simply assembled for scientific observations or for gazing deep into the night sky to satisfying epistemologies or western science but are themselves part of the worlds ongoing reconfiguration (Barad 2007:184).

In invasion, we engage the subjective man with scientific tools of monitoring. Explicitly designed as visual

apparatuses, telescopes and microscopes are the stuff of mirrors, merely reflecting their microscopic and macroscopic observations. It becomes clear that in this series, van der Wal obscures our ability to differentiate scale and through his use of visual apparatuses, we observe dynamic negotiations of micro-macroboundaries. This negotiation is evident in the background of his engaged astronomer (seen on page 5); not only do we see it teeming with tiny stars, but also what appears to be an enormous moon or a view through a microscopic lens. Throughout this series, scale is a thematic interest of van der Wal, and no object or phenomenon is too vast or too minute for him to draw. His meticulous drawings depict views through a microscopic lens alongside views through a macroscopic lens in so far that these depictions become almost impossible to differentiate. Though van der Wal's lens constellations and views of bacteria are represented on the same visual plane (page 19, the depiction of a virus, and page 20 a galaxy), mixing, crossing, merging and collaborating, simultaneously pushing, tearing and unsettling the borders between the epistemic gap of big and small. Van der Wal's indistinguishable drawings make it clear that the inner microscopic world of the body, and the outer realm of space comprise of uncannily alike forces (van Robbroeck, 2019). Through his use of scale, our differential ability becomes obscured, and drawings of viruses in the human body become indistinguishable from the far away moons of Jupiter (page 13 &14). In invasion, the disillusion of human-centred views is magnificently celebrated, and our most stubborn dichotomies become obsolete (van Robbroeck, 2019). By van der Wal's use of the apparatus, we become more than mere observers, but part of the world's ongoing intra-activate becoming (Barad 2007:184).

Alongside the portraits of the medical patients under the gaze of western science (page 7 & 8) and the astronomer, van der Wal also draws a deep-sea diver (page 11). This drawing is quite interesting as it can stand as an



# <u>Page 11</u> Untitled 2019 Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 85.5 x 60.5 cm

introduction to the exhibition as a whole. This exhibitions titular theme connotes the dive to invade or breach a barrier, an act van der Wal investigates at a microscopic scale, and in the outer realms of the cosmos. In addition, van der Wal's rendering of the diver also presents very similar visual characteristics to a modern-day astronomer. The deep-sea diver is an example of how humans use technological apparatus to explore worlds that do not necessarily accommodate human life. Through the use of technology, a human extends its organism and assembles cybernetic systems that simulate habitat conditions. By wearing the diving suit, the human becomes a cybernetic organism, carrying the planet as an extension of the self (Chuang, 2020). Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline (1969) coined these cybernetic organisms as cyborgs. A cyborg is a hybrid of machine and organism and is a construction of social reality but also fiction. According to Donna Haraway, "social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a worldchanging fiction" from a feminist point of view Haraway situates the cyborg as an amalgamation of fiction and lived experiences that can change what counts as a woman's experience in everyday life. As a hybrid of machine and organism, the cyborg challenges traditional Western science and politics due to its deconstruction of dichotomous boundaries. The cyborg is significant in this exhibition as its hybridity transverses the post-human and pre-human nonlinear temporality. We have never been merely humans, but we are also no longer just humans.

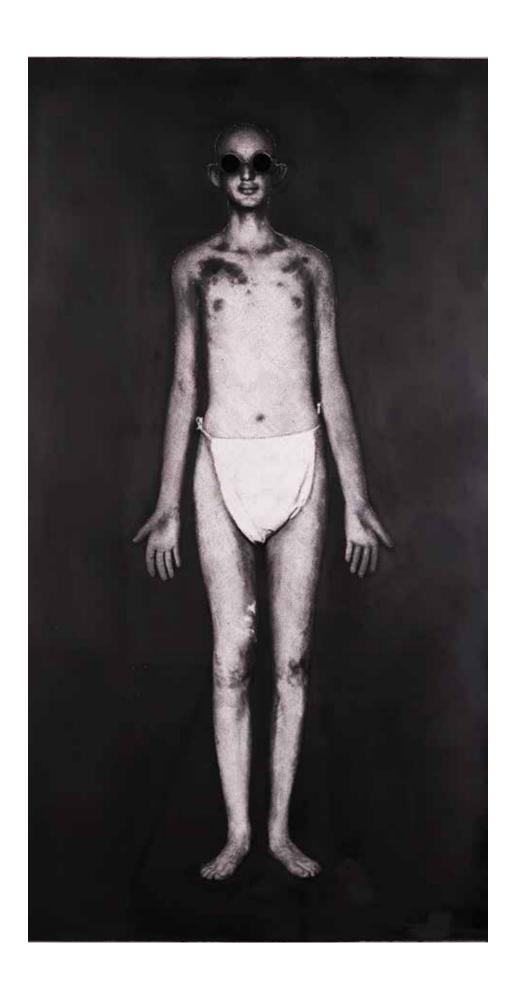
The drawings in invasion is a combination of portraits and landscapes, some of the series earliest works are detailed black and white redrawing from old medical textbooks scaled up exponentially and traced with surgically precision using a traditional grid system. Using ink and pen van der Wal's meticulous redraws the diagrams in a half-tone style, corresponding to the printing technique used in the referenced medical textbooks, furthermore,











# Page 13 & 14

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 60 x 60 cm

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 63 x 63 cm

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 63 x 63 cm

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 63 x 63 cm

# Page 15

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper

117 x 62.5 cm

he carefully applied charcoal dust that is worked and reworked, using methods of erasure and scratching. The woven array of half-tone dots, synthesis into a depiction of medical patients with skin conditions (page 15), astronomers gazing into the cosmos, microspheres and exospheres, dynamic interactions of compound matter. The micro-macro illusion visualised by van der Wal's use of the dots can be seen as a metaphor for new materialist ideas on matter. Matter is no longer seen as a single mass but rater indeterminate constantly, being shaped and reshaped in unexpected ways. It could thus be delineated that matter is in the process of becoming, rather than just being. In van der Wal's work, we witness a becoming as the dots synthesise the depicted images, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010:10) explains that:

"It is in these choreographies of becoming that we find cosmic forces assembling and disintegrating to forge more or less enduring patterns that may provisionally exhibit internally coherent, efficacious organisation: objects forming and emerging within relational fields, bodies composing their natural environment in ways that are corporeally meaningful for them, and subjectivities being constituted as open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes."

Coole and Frost (2010) thus suggests that it is in the active process of becoming that a compound mattering is produced, this mattered-meaning engages both nature and humans to produce articulated stories, it is through van der Wal assemblage<sup>14</sup> that he produces storied matter. New materialism delineates that matter is not undifferentiated and static, but is instead constituted out of stabilising and destabilising processes through which differences are continually produced (lovino, 2015). This ontology of process does not just capture and embrace the agency of the individual being, but also the combination of elements, processes and particles, at

various scales, that situate it. Matter is not only endowed with agency but rather a site of multiplicit and diversely articulated agencies, acting on and through each other to produce unique and plethoral forms. In van der Wal's work humans come together with various non-human actors, whose agencies whether intentional or not come to shape the fabric of his depictions, departing ever further from modernist ideas as boundaries between human and non-human agencies become ever more blurred.

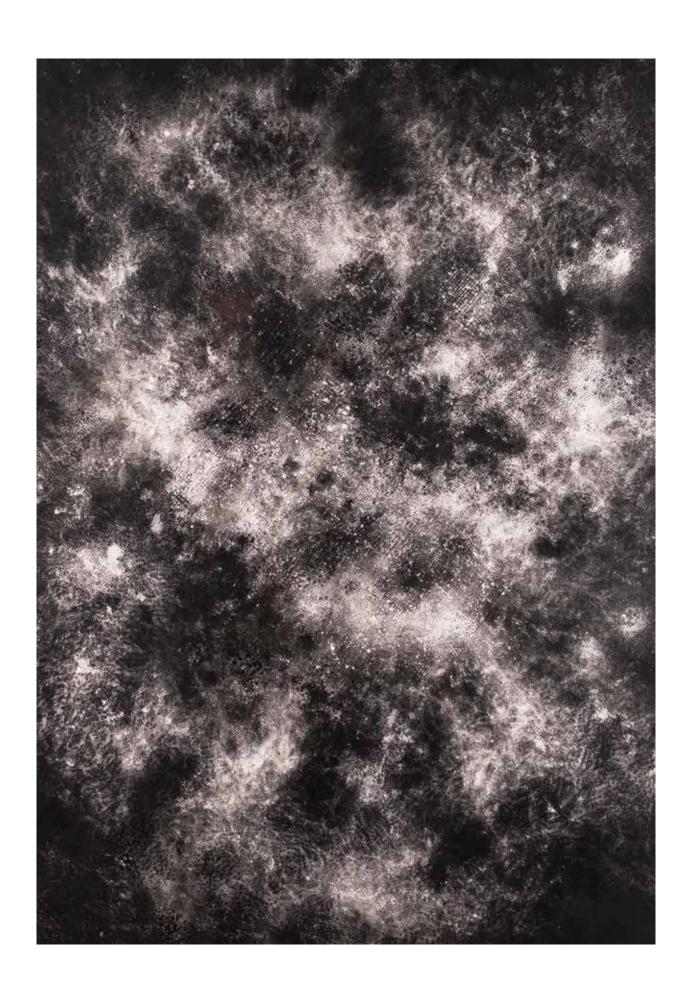
Human and non-humans become evermore entangle formulating a collective, collectives can be found everywhere and infers an exchange of properties between beings, it constitutes a network of agencies in which all things are complex agential actors (Latour, 1999). This network of agencies situates matter as a site of narratively, ensuing an interplay of discursive dynamics entangling matter and meaning (Oppermann, 2017:291). The human body is guite an obvious example of this dynamic entanglement and constitutes as a living text, Serenella Iovino (2012:136) situates the body as a site where matter evidently performs its narratives. Historically cultural narratives are enacted on the human body by gender, race, class and health, rendering the body like all other material beings as discursive composition, but through these, the human being is never disconnected from its material enmeshment. Van dew Wal depicts quite a few human bodies in this exhibition these bodies are opening up to a more than human world, not existing in isolation but inta-actively becoming part of the world. The human body is not it's own but rather a complex myriad of material interchange. The skin a semipermeable membrane between the inside and outside, is a space teeming with organisms and discourses. Stacy Alaimo (2008) notion of trans-corporeality significantly give voice to this matter, expressing the way bodily natures entangles organism and discourses, and the bonds

connecting life forms and life conditions (lovino, 2015). Bacterial communities that live on the human skin are exceptionally varied, not only is their corporeal narrations between humans and their symbionts but also between the various species using chemical and molecular signs (van Robbroeck, 2019). This array of human-nonhuman entanglements in a universe of macro-forces with micro-interactions is the underlying story in many of the works in van der Wal's series.

As already discussed, the human body's identity can never again be viewed as a static or finished product. However, the body is in a constant interchange, both with its environment and the symbionts on it. The body is thus a space of interplay radically open to its environment, and as Moira Gatens (1996) states, can be "composed, recomposed and decomposed by other bodies" in its constant interaction (Alaimo, 2010:13). An assemblage of dots narrates van der Wal's bodies, these crafted landscapes become a depiction of a reality, glimmering with agential matter. As a concept, assemblage delineates the complexity of systems and our entrapment in discourse and discursive practises but also our bodies relation to other forms of life (Davies, 2018:119). In these artworks, van der Wal investigates not only materials trans-corporeality but also disease. Disease acts as a constant reminder that we are not alone in our bodies, but a constituted collective, interchanges with some bacterium or viruses may thus result in illness or death (Alaimo, 2010:13). Interchanges with other bodies can therefore be good or bad and rely on nature to situate the reaction and enactment. The study of disease is pathology and duly investigates cause and effect as disease takes over the body.

A distinct grid system is seen in van der Wal's monumental drawing of the HIV virus invading the human body (page 21). Grids are very important in







# Page 19 & 20

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 100 x 70 cm

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 99.5 x 70.5 cm

# Page 21

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper 100 x 70 cm

# Page 23

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on Fabriano Paper

122 x 120 cm

van der Wal's work not only were they the first point of entry to the images he sourced, this referring to the gridded dot screen style of printing used in the old medical journals, but also an essential part in the creation of his work allowing him map composition composing of cosmic worlds. Contemporary life is also a compilation of grids, there are grids used in urban planning and those used to locate the geographies they occupy, power grids, grids of communication enabling social grids, the grids of visualisation that exist in the form of the pixel that depict the objects they construct and represent, and of course, various historical grids of computation both ontological and epistemological (Blas 2009). Historically grids formed part of a scopic regime (Jay 1999), composing of an ensemble of practices and discourses that establish the truth. Following a new materialist methodology, grids are not static but always in flux as processes alter and mutate. The lines that compose these grids are no longer purely linear, singular, or of cohesive trajectory but, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), are conjunctions, multiplicities, and complex continuations along other lines. In van der Wal's work, the grid's purity and autonomy is subverted alongside other underlying modernist discourse. The visible grid pattern in his drawing of the HIV virus also corresponds to the early acronym GRID (gay-related immune deficiency). In invasion, the grids collapse through the use of the concept of entanglement, Jacqueline Viola Moulton (2020) situates entanglement as the praxis, which weaves interdependent threads into an assemblage, thus a grid. The concept of entanglement can therefore be seen as a grid, mapping relational assemblages within this context. Through van der Wal's use of grids, he creates a more than human world where humans, viruses and cosmic entities are entangled.

In this exhibition, we have investigated how we have become more than human - how we look outside of.





and within our own bodies to comprehend things that exist far away or deep inside. We have seen how our observational regime of measuring continually expand, allowing us to see ever smaller, deeper, further and larger, and how we have become entangled in the middle, between the most extensive macrocosmic forces and most minute atomic elements. We have become part of a multi-scaled existence, a mixture of molecular and planetary. We have become terrestrial beings.

# **FOOTNOTES**

- 1. The term becoming is explained by Karen Barad as an enmeshment of matter and discourse; it is based on the understanding that interconnections between entities form the basis of life. According to Joanne Cassar (2017), the term emerged from "different possibilities occurring at each moment and comes into existence through the fusion of social and material phenomenon, which are not distinct entities. This implies that dualities do not exhibit clear boundaries, but form an integral part of the world in its becoming."
- 2. The term wit(h)ness emerged from the work of Bracha L. Ettinger, who inserts the letter (h) into the word witness. The term wit(h)ness implies being with and remembering for another through an act or encounter, it is a direct exchange of experience and can be between humans and non-humans (Pollock, 2010).
- 3. In new materialism, there is no singular decisive notion of agency. However, agency can be seen as something referring to "the relationality of the political cultural position that and by which matter and things are defined, distributed, and organised," as stated by Felicity J. Colman (2019). The relationality referred to by Colman refers to that of other matter and things, which do not have pre-existing ontologies. Agency is a core question

for new materialist thinkers.

- 4. An apparatus can be explained as a set of instruments required to perform an experiment, but it is also a new materialist term. Karen Barad (2007) explained it as the material conditions that enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering.
- 5. The term cyborg does not only refer to a hybrid of machine and organism, but as Donna Haraway's explained in the Manifesto for Cyborgs (1997), it aims to deconstruct the story of origins, kinship, and purity that still haunts the bodies of everyone marked as the other. Haraway's Cyborg is instrumental in feminist and queer theory and is a tool for troubling historically recurring ideas about the naturalness of gendered and racialised bodies and identities.
- 6. New materialism is a specific branch within posthumanism that gives specific attention to matter by avoiding traditional binary understandings (eg. humans and nonhumans). It is important to note that new materialist concepts are not new as indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies offer ways of thinking that break binary distinctions (Leonard, 2020)
- 7. Trans-corporeality refers to how the body is never one but part of open systems (Rogowska-Stangret, 2017)

- 8. Whitney Stark (2016) explains intraaction as "a term used to replace 'interaction,' which necessitates preestablished bodies that then participate in action with each other. Intra-action understands agency as not an inherent property of an individual or human to be exercised, but as a dynamism of forces (Barad, 2007:141) in which all designated 'things' are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably. Intra-action also acknowledges the impossibility of an absolute separation or classically understood objectivity, in which an apparatus or a person using an apparatus are not considered to be part of the process that allows for specifically located 'outcomes' or measurement."
- 9. Modernists epistemology believed that scientific methodologies produced objective knowledge.
- 10. Atoms, molecules, cells, and other nonhuman species and objects.
- 11. "Diffraction is an iterative practice of intra-actively reworking and being reworked by patterns of mattering. A diffractive methodology seeks to work constructively and deconstructively (not destructively) in making new patterns of understanding-becoming" (Barad, 2014:187).
- 12. Subject and object, culture and nature,

- organism and machine, man and woman.
- 13. Agential cut, refer to the matter of practice of being of/in the world, to the connections between materiality, meaning, acting, and happening and is a crucial shift in the understanding and addressing of agency. Apparatus enact an agential cut, affecting causal structure and agencies of operation (Kissmann & Loon, 2019).
- 14. Assemblage is a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, originally presented in their book A Thousand Plateaus (1987).

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