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## PEREC/PONTE

STEIDL

THE WALTHER COLLECTION



Georges Perec never visited Johannesburg, yet it is easy to imagine him casting his wistful, mischievous glance towards Ponte City while listening to some of the wild stories that have been told about it. Perec was a French writer who loved other people's stories, and he would surely have included a few of the new ones he heard in his next book. But there is something else about Ponte City that might have attracted him, just as it has attracted Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse: for its tenants it serves as a gateway, a threshold to a new world. The same can be said of Ellis Island, New York, a place which Perec wrote about just a few years before he died in 1982, four days short of his 46<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Perec was a member of Oulipo, a group of writers particularly interested in ways in which linguistic constraints in the writing process might yield fresh textual experiments. He used a wide array of such constraints, including algorithms, typography and the removal or addition of various linguistic ingredients in a given context. One of his most famous experiments involved the writing of an entire novel of 320 pages (*La disparition*) without the use of the letter 'e.' He also made use of more common yet equally effective tools, and one of these in particular has been extensively employed in the Ponte City project by Subotzky and Waterhouse, though they of course generally use images instead of words.

### INVENTORIES

Georges Perec's work is filled with a great number and variety of inventories, more or less complete lists drawn up using certain constraints that give them an aspect of homogeneity. Some of these inventories seem, at least at first glance, to be purely playful. One, for example, records everything he ate and drank in the year 1974,<sup>1</sup> while another presents 243 messages written on the backs of imaginary postcards, all of them utterly banal yet carefully composed out of words beginning with different combinations of letters of the alphabet.<sup>2</sup>

Other inventories of Perec's are clearly linked to intimate questions concerning his past. One set of these involves what was known as the 'immigrant inspection station' at Ellis Island, just outside New York, and includes the numbers of immigrants who arrived

there from various countries, the rote questions they were asked by immigration officers, the letters of the alphabet used by these officers to designate their various ailments, and objects related to the passage of immigrants through the Island and still to be found there. In the same text, this subject leads Perec to touch on the immigrant story of his own family, as well as his own identity.<sup>3</sup> Another inventory, begun but never completed, lists all the things Perec saw and heard when visiting (more than once, at predetermined intervals) twelve places in Paris of particular significance to him. One of these places is the street on which he lived as a child with his parents, before losing both of them.<sup>4</sup>

On several occasions Perec gives himself instructions as to how his inventories should be written, for example concerning *Ellis Island*:<sup>5</sup>

In the beginning, one can only try  
to name things, one  
by one, flatly,  
enumerate them, number them,  
in a manner which is as  
banal as possible,  
in a manner which is as precise  
as possible,  
trying not to forget  
anything.

‘Flatly’ means stripping away adjectives and signs of emotion; removing, as far as possible, all direct involvement of the self. ‘An inventory,’ says Perec, ‘is when one does not write.’<sup>6</sup>

Yet one of the principal interests of such inventories lies precisely in the tension between their impersonal, systematically ordered nature, and various aspects of Perec’s life, not least of all given the fact that in his childhood he survived the violence and uprooting of the Second World War.

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For their project on Ponte City, Subotzky and Waterhouse have collected together several different kinds of elements:

Large photographs taken near Ponte City, setting it in a wider landscape.

Printed matter produced as part of a campaign to advertise Ponte City to prospective tenants, found in archives of the 1970s.

Ground plans of the building.

Large photographs showing the building from the inside and the outside.

Small photographs of all the internal doors, windows and television screens they found in Ponte City.

Large portraits of some of the City’s residents taken in the lifts.

Various objects and documents left behind by evicted residents.

The first three elements on this list – the photographs setting Ponte City in a wider landscape, the printed matter for the advertising campaign and the ground plans – all situate the building, in terms of the fashions of the time.

The remaining elements, those concerned more closely with the internal life of the building, speak to one another in different ways.

Firstly, the photographs of the larger structure, which show broken panes and dust rising from the rubbish at the bottom of the core, reveal a chaotic, malodorous space in a state of disrepair, sweeping upwards to the sky. By contrast, the photographs of doors, windows and screens are arranged systematically by type and location, the resulting sense of order strengthened by their presentation for exhibition in three large, free-standing panels, together forming a triptych.

Secondly, the objects and documents found in the abandoned apartments collectively mark out a fragmented, disordered, lively, horny, drunken, innocently curious, lopsided procession of immigrants, shifting all the way from their homes elsewhere in South Africa or across the continent to their tenuous dwelling place in Ponte City, and now displaced once again. These objects and documents can be contrasted with the portraits of residents – some of whom may be the same people – made by Subotzky and Waterhouse in the confines of the building’s lifts. Again these photographs, various but similar, are linked together in a kind of extended composition, given unity by the same metallic, cubed walls which frame them.

These contrasts lead me to conclude that the Ponte project involves a conversation between composition and chaos, between chosen artistic form on one hand, raw-edged witnessing on the

other.<sup>7</sup> This is clearly evident in the three free-standing panels of photographs of windows, doors and television screens. Each individual photograph is a fairly 'flat' visual description in Perec's sense. It does not bear the aesthetic signature of any particular photographer, and could have been taken by anyone possessing the necessary degree of technical competence. However, not every photographer would have chosen this particular subject matter or aligned it in this very particular way, nor would they have spent two or three years engaged in assembling these photographs. Their 'flatness' is a sign of distance, yet the degree of involvement required to assemble them might lead one to seek out some hidden connection between the photographers and the story of Ponte City.

### ACCUMULATION/OBLITERATION

Perec repeatedly strove to cover his chosen subject matter entirely with words, using constraints as a means towards this end. For example, he used algorithms and the movement of a knight across a chessboard as models to help him multiply the number of angles from which to explore, following a predefined pattern, the present and past lives of people in all the apartments, cellars, attics, entrance hall and stairway of an imaginary Paris block of flats. The resulting novel, *La Vie mode d'emploi* (*Life, a User's Manual*), comprising almost 600 pages of small print, is another book which can profitably be compared with the work done by Subotzky and Waterhouse. Perec introduces the novel by comparing it to a handmade jigsaw puzzle. The person assembling the puzzle, he says, is not alone, but is in the company of the person who designed its various parts.<sup>8</sup> The writer is not so much writing about his subjects, as writing in their company. At least one character in the novel could easily be Perec himself.

The image of the chessboard is significant. Perec's work is strewn with references to squared spaces, checked tablecloths, tiled floors. At the end of *La Vie mode d'emploi*, at the window of the room in which one of the principal characters has just died, there is a large square canvas, divided into the regularly squared ground plan of a block of flats.<sup>9</sup> Perec liked writing on squared paper, dividing his subject matter into small squares that he could investigate

one by one, composing poems in the shape of squares or rectangles. Bernard Magné, who has investigated this aspect of his work, names the square as 'a place of anchorage' for someone who 'does not stop reassembling what has been dispersed.'<sup>10</sup>

For Perec, the act of reassembling is not an end in itself but a means of dislodging something else, a restless questioning energy that will lead him beyond any place. Of Ellis Island he says that in order 'to look beyond this place, to find there a feeling of insecurity or transform it into a question, one must describe it with the attention of a maniac.'<sup>11</sup> A banal, minute description, he says, can saturate a surface until it is 'so encumbered with details that it no longer exists at all.'<sup>12</sup> In his writing, Perec is constantly walking on a tight-rope, balancing the accumulation of words against the emptiness of the page, needing to leave a meaningful trace while obliterating his subject matter by means of those same words.

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The photographs of the windows, doors and television screens of Ponte City have been meticulously aligned from left to right and from top to bottom in an order corresponding to the actual living spaces where they were taken from the top to the bottom of the building. This total inventory, divided into three rectangular panels, also records several forms of transformation.

A careful look at the photographs taken through the windows shows changes in the Johannesburg cityscape across the more than two-year duration of the project. The passing of the seasons is traced in the vegetation. A giant football appears on the top of Hillbrow's Telkom Tower to mark the advent of the FIFA World Cup in 2010. The constant attachment to photographing a single space yields a trace of the passing of time.

The same could be said of the colours of the doors, which show how different property developers each decorated the interior of Ponte City according to their own taste. The red doors near the top of the building go back to the 1970s, whereas the black doors with blue neon lights lower down date from the failed redevelopment of 2007/08. Perhaps different programmes shown on the television screens might similarly reveal to an informed viewer something of

the time when the different screens were photographed, and something about the channels broadcasting them.

Of great significance for the viewer is the cumulative effect of the three sets of photographs of windows, doors and screens. At the optimal distance from which the viewer can best appreciate all three panels, with their carefully and systematically assembled detail, their original subject matter ceases to exist.

If the photographs of the core, and the documents and objects, as well as the portraits, fix the tower and its inhabitants in time and space and allow it to speak to landscape and history, then the photographs of windows, doors and screens, seen together from just a few metres away, translate its time and space into the realm of light and darkness, the photographer's basic, insubstantial materials.

### NOMAD

Perec has been called 'an urban nomad,'<sup>13</sup> crossing the city in movement and words as he continuously shifts like a mapmaker from one point to another. He says of his own books that they 'travel along a path, mark out a space, set signposts along a hesitant itinerary.'<sup>14</sup>

Behind him, echoing all the more strongly when only hinted at in his work, are the events of the Second World War, during which he lost several members of his family, including his parents, his mother killed on the way to or at Auschwitz, his father shot fighting for France in the Foreign Legion days before the country capitulated to the Nazis. After the war, Perec returned from the refuge of the countryside to Paris and grew up there. Then, as an adult in the late 1960s and 1970s, he witnessed a spectacle of destruction, all the more apparent to him given his experience of the war, as property developers began tearing apart whole chunks of the city, including parts of the popular quarter of Belleville where he had spent the first six years of his life. Between these two poles of destruction he wove the paths of his writing, aware at every moment of the tenuousness of his trajectory: 'Space collapses just as sand slips between one's fingers. Time takes it and leaves me only formless shreds.' In his writing, he says, he 'tries to get something to survive.'<sup>15</sup>

Perec's family had emigrated from Poland to France, but could just as easily have gone to the United States, as he points out when

writing about Ellis Island in 1979. He is struck by both the nature of this place and his own reaction to it:<sup>16</sup>

the questions that I, Georges Perec, have come to ask here  
concern wandering, dispersion, the diaspora.  
Ellis Island is for me the very place of exile,  
that is to say  
the place of the absence of place, the non-place,  
nowhere.  
this is the way in which these images concern me,  
fascinate me, implicate me,  
as if the search for my identity  
included the appropriation of this depositary place

Yet in this search for identity, Perec refuses any easy recourse to the ancestral past, insisting that he situates himself outside of any specifically Jewish tradition, language or community, adding that he is ultimately 'a stranger in relation to something of myself.'<sup>17</sup>

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Ponte City was completed in 1976, originally intended for young, white, upwardly mobile couples, 'mobile' meaning that they would not stay long, but move on to the leafy and far more spacious comfort of the suburbs to found a family. In other words, it was designed as a place of transition. The year 1976 was the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Johannesburg, a city whose locally born white population was no more than four generations deep and often considerably less than that, a city of white immigrants who kept Africa at arm's length while settling as quickly as possible into the cushioned amnesia of the present. They were politically and materially powerful, and filled their city with their inflated colonial sense of belonging.

Yet 1976 was the year when they discovered that they were sitting on a volcano, as the children of Soweto and other townships in the country took to the streets to say they had had enough. By the 1980s certain neighbourhoods of Johannesburg had begun turning 'grey,' the colour whites used to describe the gradual yet lively movement by blacks into what they had thought of as their

own exclusive territory, particularly in and around the core of the city, which included Hillbrow.

Grey, the colour of old age, bad weather, ash, the end, not what you get when black and white people mix.

But in Hillbrow there was less mixing than 'white flight.'

It was not long before Ponte City filled with black inhabitants.

It was an outpost, a landing pad, a wave contained for a while in a tower.

It was a place where the wave crashed inwards upon itself, with the seething violence of delayed hope.

It was Africa coming back, but with nowhere yet to go.

It was halfway in Johannesburg, halfway to elsewhere back in the past, halfway to a dream of the future. An immigrant might cross a physical frontier but it takes longer for the heart and the mind to arrive, for years the frontier one thinks one has crossed stays close to one's ankles like a dog waiting to go home.

It was a place of initiation, observation, warfare, survival.

It was 54 floors of people in between other places.

Photographing its world, years after its construction, meant taking in the droning life absorbed in its walls, the beating, arching wings of history, swarming, as if a great airy page were being turned.

Photographing it, at least for a South African, meant picking up, somewhere inside oneself, something of one's own past, one's own colour, the edgy swirl of human movement which has brought waves of people to where they are now in South Africa, and which under apartheid was arrested, for under apartheid the country constantly came to a creaking standstill, law by uneasy law, with its brakes on and their rubber pads beginning to burn.

Photographing it meant finding one's own immigrant glance, perched at the frontier of the lens, one's own nomad restlessness, displaced, hungry for the next eyeful of the world.

Photographing it meant finding oneself at the hub of uncertainty, where some great new wheel of unknown radius was already turning.

Choosing to assemble photographs of doors and windows and screens would be logical, and not only due to their rectangular shape.

A door opens inwards and outwards.

A window opens inwards and outwards.

A screen leads elsewhere.

Doors, windows and screens are thresholds for our coming in and our going out, little frontiers of everyday life.

## CATHEDRAL

Perec wrote the Ellis Island text when the Vietnamese boat people were still adrift between continents, affirming that 'Ellis Island is not a place reserved for Jews, it belongs to all those whom intolerance and misery have chased and still chase from the land where they grew up.' With the boat people in mind, he holds out 'these two soft words, irreparable, unstable and flighty, constantly reflecting between each other their flickering lights: they are called wandering and hope.'<sup>18</sup>

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The panels of assembled photographs of windows, doors and screens remind me of the stained glass of a cathedral.

It is 'a cathedral without religion'<sup>19</sup> as Henri Michaux (writing about icebergs) might have termed it.

Cathedrals are places one visits while travelling in foreign parts. After miles of horizontal speeding, blurred highways, radiators and feet hot and fatigued, they are the cool vertical invitation, the tall pause, the quest greater than any camera's dark chamber.

When I look at the work of Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse, and the writing of Georges Perec, with places like Ponte City and Ellis Island behind them, I think of the restless journeying shared by both artist and immigrant, anyone who is waylaid, unwillingly or by choice, from the rancid pattern, the rusting map of habit; anyone hovering, on the loose, eyes skinned for vital signs of whichever place has been reached along the way, in words or images or footsteps, constantly at the threshold of what is to come.

With thanks to Robert Berold and Adine Sagalyn for their careful critical reading of this text.

1. 'Tentative d'inventaire des aliments liquides et solides que j'ai ingurgités au cours de l'année mil neuf cent soixante quatorze' ('Attempt at an inventory of the liquid and solid food which I ingurgitated in the year nineteen seventy-four') in *l'Infra-ordinaire* (*The Infra-ordinary*) (Paris, Seuil, 1989), pp. 97–106. All quotes refer to books by Perec unless otherwise specified.
2. 'Deux cent quarante-trois cartes postales en couleurs véritables' ('Two hundred and forty-three postcards in true-to-life colour') in *l'Infra-ordinaire*, pp. 33–68.
3. *Ellis Island* (Paris, P.O.L., 1999 (1980)).
4. 'La rue Vilin' ('Vilin Street') in *l'Infra-ordinaire*, pp. 15–32. Another of the places Perec chose for his vast, unfinished project was the Place Saint-Sulpice. He appropriately gave this section of the project the title *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, translated into English as *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (Cambridge Mass., Wakefield Press, 2010).
5. *Ellis Island*, p. 43. All translations from the French are mine.
6. 'Notes concernant les objets qui sont sur ma table de travail' ('Notes concerning the objects on my work-table') in *Penser/Classer* (*Thinking/Classifying*) (Paris, Seuil, 2003 (1985)), p. 21.
7. After writing this text I discovered that some of the photographs which I thought had been found in Ponte City, left behind there by one-time tenants, were in fact taken by Subotzky and Waterhouse. They have deliberately blurred the lines between the chaotic and the composed, which I think only underlines the importance of the dialogue between these two components of their project. Subotzky and Waterhouse's procedure here makes me think of the 'clinamen' or programmed dysfunctioning of a system, a procedure Perec was adept at, breaking the systematic model he had developed when, for example, writing *La Vie mode d'emploi*.
8. *La Vie mode d'emploi* (*Life, a User's Manual*) (Paris, Le Livre de poche, 2011 (1978)), p. 20.
9. *La Vie mode d'emploi*, p. 580.
10. Bernard Magné, 'Quelques pieces pour un blazon' ('A few elements of a coat-of-arms') in Paulette Perec (ed.), *Portrait(s) de Georges Perec* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2001), pp. 199–231.
11. Jean Liberman, 'Georges Perec et Robert Bober: "Ellis Island, c'est le temps où les Etats-Unis incarnaient la terre promise"' ('Georges Perec and Robert Bober: "Ellis Island was the time when the United States incarnated the promised land"') in Dominique Bertelli and Mireille Ribière (eds), *Georges Perec, entretiens et conférences* (*Georges Perec, Interviews and Talks*), Vol. 2, 1979–1981 (Nantes, Joseph K, 2003), p. 141.
12. Claudette Oriol-Boyer, 'Ce qui stimule ma racontouze' ('What stimulates mah desiah ta spin yarns') in *Georges Perec, entretiens et conférences*, p. 176. See also the section on Perec in my book *White Scars* (Johannesburg, Jacana Media, 2006), particularly pp. 158–60.
13. Paul Virilio, 'Un homme qui marche' ('A man who walks') in Paulette Perec, *Portrait(s) de Georges Perec*, p. 159.
14. 'Notes sur ce que je cherche' ('Notes on what I am looking for') in *Penser/Classer*, p. 11.
15. *Espèces d'espaces* (*Species of Spaces*) (Paris, Galilée, 2000 (1974)), p. 181.
16. *Ellis Island*, p. 157. The Ellis Island text is in fact the script of a film Perec made with Robert Bober and the 'images' he refers to in the quote are those of the film.
17. *Ellis Island*, p. 159.
18. *Ellis Island*, pp. 63–4.
19. Henri Michaux, 'Icebergs' in *La Nuit remue* (*The Night Shifts*) (Paris, Gallimard, 1935).





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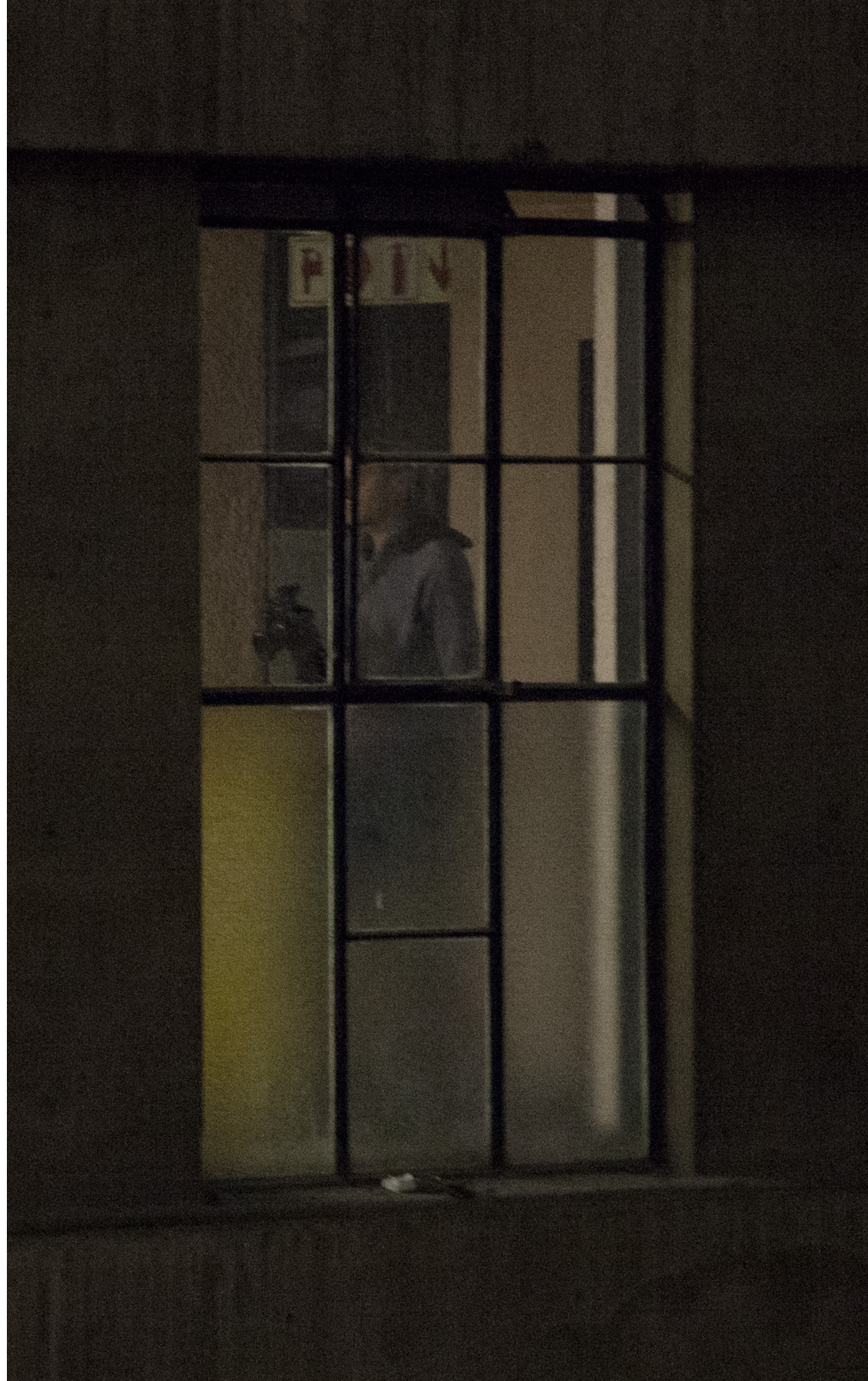
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Back cover: Detail from the notebook of former building manager  
Danie Cilliers, early 2000s



- 3009 - 1 sideboard, 2 couches, 1 lounge chair  
 3006 - broken furniture.  
 2910 - Storing broken furniture.  
 2106 - 2 single lounge chairs, sofa, 1 coffee table  
 2904 - 1 couch, 2 coffee tables  
 2801 - 1 big table, 1 coffee table  
 2804 - 1 big table, 1 sideboard, 1 lounge chair  
 2805 - 2 broken lounge chairs.  
 2806 - Storing broken furniture.  
 2813 - 1 bar stool, 1 table, 1 coffee table  
 2706 - 1 table, sideboard, 2 lounge chairs, 1 single bed  
 2708 - 1 sideboard, 1 couch, coffee table, 1 chair.  
 2709 - 1 sideboard, 1 couch, coffee table, 1 chair.  
 2601 - 2 lounge chairs, coffee table, 1 single bed  
 2602 - 1 sofa, 1 single base, 1 sideboard  
 2505 - Broken sideboard & couch  
 2506 - sideboard, double base  
 2411 - sideboard, 2 lounge chairs, coffee table  
 2413 - 1 table  
 2301 - 1 sideboard, 2 side tables, table & chairs  
 2 lounge chairs  
 2208 - 2 side tables, 1 x 3 seater lounge sofa & coffee table  
 2211 - 1 table 1 x 2 seater sofa  
 2101 - 1 sideboard, 1 lounge chair  
 2110 - 1 x 2 seater sofa, 1 lounge chair, 1 coffee table  
 2001 - sideboard, coffee table, 2 lounge chairs, table  
 2005 - 1 sideboard 2 lounge chairs, 1 coffee table, 1 chair  
 2002 - 1 broken lounge chair, sideboard, 1 chair table  
 2009 - 1 couch, 1 coffee table  
 1904 - 1 table, 1 chair  
 1907 - sideboard