

Customs

Curated by
Sumayya
Vally & Josh
Ginsburg

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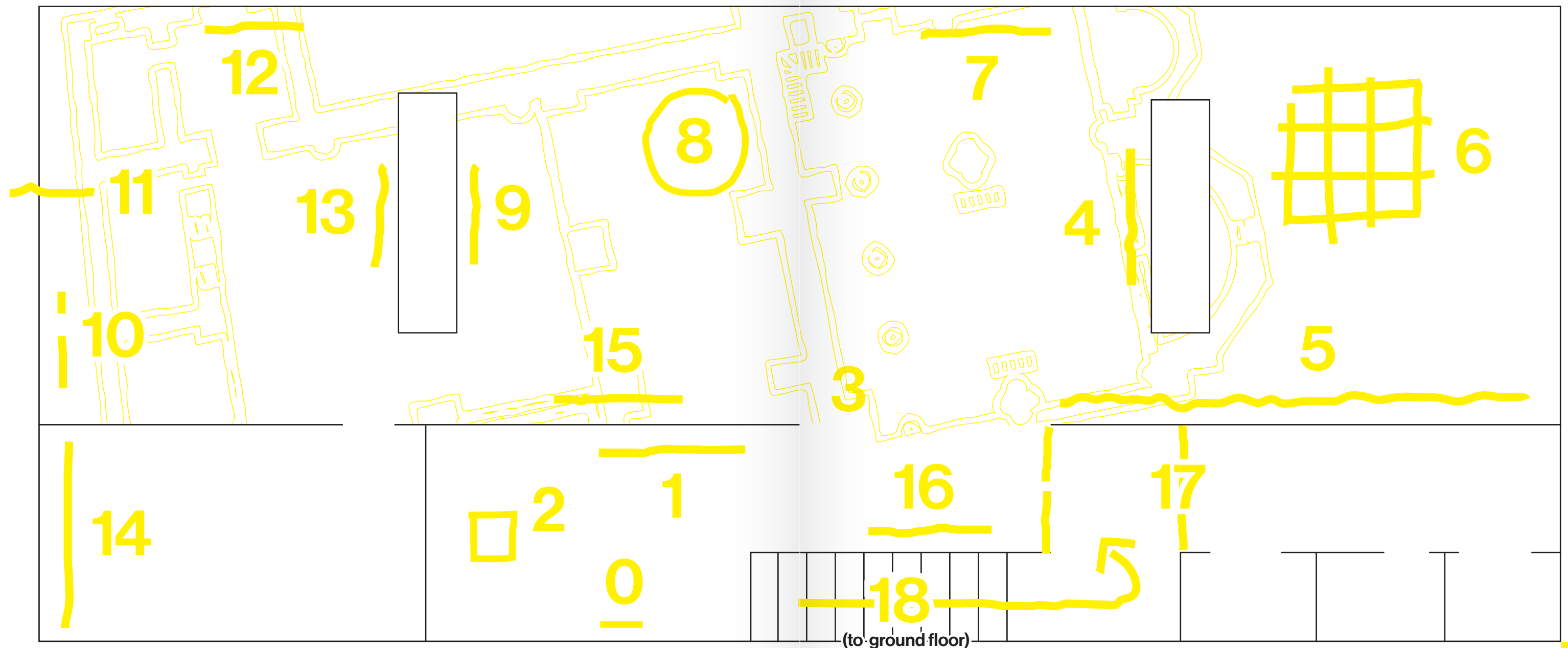
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(to ground floor)

Introduction to **Customs** – extract from an ongoing conversation between Josh Ginsburg (J.G.) and Sumayya Vally (S.V.)

Dialogue



J.G. We begin with your research project at A4 titled Waiting Upon. Here's a quote that speaks to the kind of exploration we invited with that title:

It is not a suspenseful waiting but that of potential. It knows something will happen, but precisely what will be determined by that which is brought to the communal table.

There was a moment in a conversation we had with Stephen Steyn and Kathryn Smith as part of that research process where we were wondering after the vessels that carry ideas and, crucially, how these are opened and performed in the present. The word 'customs' arrived and seemed to offer us a framework for thinking about an exhibition.

S.V. As we began to gather artworks, we were pursuing a shared interest in practices that recognise 'inarticulable' knowledge. I say inarticulable, not because they are *not* being articulated, but because their articulations counter dominant bodies of knowledge and categorisation. They offer other entry points to engage, and hold other systems and logics embedded within them.

J.G. 'Affordance' is one option: where the qualities of the thing imply its use. The object or structure clarifies itself. But some ideas, like genes, can be recessive – present but not active, requiring a committed decoding to be used.



S.V. Following the interest I had taken in the roadside mosques after a road trip with the artist Moath Alofi in Saudi Arabia in 2021, we were curious about the ways ideas traverse time in objects and practices, and in the tools (conceptual, ritualistic or other) that help us to use those ideas. I was intrigued by the varying architectural forms — the simplest of space-making structures, where clear demarcations of boundaries and thresholds invite specific use by an itinerant community of practitioners.

In being used, they are maintained. This collective maintenance-through-use is a beautiful example of the word 'maintenance' in action. Throughout our conversations, we have been wondering after how certain practices or modes of thinking are preserved and passed along. We have been inclined to connect to the affirming edge of this: powerful ways of being, hard-won by people across contexts and generations, filtering into our lives through brilliant vessels of proliferation, preservation and performance. But we need also be vigilant about how



some models can preserve less than ideal frameworks. An undesirable status quo can be maintained by the self-same tools. I see it as an additional motivation for this project that acknowledges the transmission of practices, rituals, procedures and traditions.

J.G. Where maintenance works with things that exist in the world, innovation is a creative act that imagines into the world. It's a very attractive mode (there is an excitement for the new), but it often relies on a relegation of what *is* in favour for what *could be*. It may ignore or simply not invest in existing value. In one of our conversations, you offered the phrase 'dynamic preservation' that suggests an emergent relationship premised on

adaptation while prioritising what is known and held dear.

s.v. The Grand Mosque of Djenne in Mali is reconstructed every year during a night of communal work known as the Crépissage. This preservation is dynamic, found in the festival of its making, which involves everyone in the town, generation to generation. The mosque is preserved but it is also slightly altered by being remade each time over hundreds of years.

A piece of text I encountered when researching Sufi practices of chanting dhikr (embodied ways of chanting to remember God) maps each person in the gathering's position in relation to each line in a chant or song. So effectively, anyone entering the gathering is implicated in its making. There is no separation between the spectacle and the spectator – everyone is involved. Different kinds of infrastructures for gathering offer opportunities that are vital for thinking about methods for making architecture that look beyond that which is dominant. In Arabic, a word that can be helpful here when wondering about the complexities of maintenance, or preservation, is niyyah; intention. What is it that we consecrate, and how?

J.G. There is one mosque you photographed that we kept referring to: it had very low walls that could be easily stepped over. But inside those walls was a small gate. The gate asked for more than

decorum. By using the gate to enter and exit, one acknowledged the passing of a threshold. This threshold was one of transformation from one state to another, in this case, from the mundane to the sacred. Customs also pertains to thresholds. For example, one must 'pass through Customs' when travelling across borders, where customs officials audit people and attendant goods.

boundary' to declare a space to be a mosque.

J.G. It *is* because one declares it to be so. I think this is interesting in terms of artworks and exhibition making. Both are activated through engagement, either with us (viewers / participants) or with proximate artworks. Transformation happens through use. I'm interested to see what lies nascent within Customs that

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s.v. Borders can do this terrible work of inhibiting access. Boundaries can also be powerful thresholds, where demarcations afford transition or transformation. There is an evocative instance within Islam, that one need only hold the intention in mind or utter the words ‘this is the

boundary’ to declare a space to be a mosque.

J.G. It is because one declares it to be so. I think this is interesting in terms of artworks and exhibition making. Both are activated through engagement, either with us (viewers / participants) or with proximate artworks. Transformation happens through use. I’m interested to see what lies nascent within Customs that may be unlocked through contact with the exhibition.

s.v. We’ll continue to open up the wondrous variety of vessels for carrying ideas, rituals and practices across time and space, and the meta-practices that can animate or perform these ideas into the present.

ogue





George Hallett

b.1942, District Six; d.2020, Cape Town

***Peter Clarke's Tongue*, 1979** Gelatin silver print, diptych Each panel 100 x 100 cm

George Hallett's photographs traverse geographical borders and political regimes. Hallett, who first gained recognition for his photographs of District Six, moved to London in 1970 to escape the untenable racism and violence of apartheid South Africa. He established collective homes away from home with other South African exiles in England and France. His images of these writers, artists, intellectuals, and activists embody intimacy. Hallett's humanist approach to photography intercepts the camera as it seeks to separate himself, the silent observer, from his subject. In his words: "I became the camera...aware that when the lighting changed, [then too]



the mood changed, the music changed." Returning in 1994 to document South Africa's first democratic election for the African National Congress, his photographs possess an optimism that distinguishes them from those of his contemporaries. This optimism does not compromise the integrity with which Hallett captured sombre scenes;

instead, it points to historical texture, to dispersed beauty, and to the fervent complexity of a transitioning South Africa.

Peter Clarke's Tongue is a tribute to the coupling of old friends. Photographed in France, it comprises two parts. The first is an intimate portrait of artist Peter Clarke cradling a cowbell, his eyes downturned. The second image is a subtle study in foliage. The diptych's title offers more questions than answers. It is startlingly intimate; sensual and sonic. Can Peter Clarke's tongue be found in the bell's clapper? In the whispers of wind finding grass? In a story Peter told George that day? Of his time in France, Hallett has said:

I started photographing more abstract stuff – patterns, textures. I took portraits of Peter Clarke there – an amazing portrait, the one with a cowbell. James Matthews in the water. That's there. They came to visit me there. We played with each other. I photographed Peter in a Basotho hat, I photographed him stripped to the waist, doing all kinds of things. It was great.

Clarke continued living in South Africa (in Ocean View, where he was moved by force when his home of Simon's Town was declared a 'whites-only' area under the apartheid government's Group Areas Act), when many artists of his generation went into exile. The comfortable silence located in the space between photographer and subject is testament to the enduring tenderness between two friends.

Editor's note:
Clarke's painting *Anxiety* (1969) is included in *Customs*, visible in the distance behind this portrait by his friend.



Ezrom Legae

b.1938, Johannesburg; d.1999, Johannesburg

Face Bronze 12 x 16 x 16 cm

In bronze, Ezrom Legae transcribed the socio-political moment into visual metaphor. He was, in addition to a sculptor, a prolific draughtsman, his works on paper more often dark, phantasmagorical scenes of violence. His sculptures are less explicit in their invocations, the heaviness of the bronze lending the works a studied quiet. Legae's sculptures and drawings share a psychological intensity emblematic of the time, if only in different registers.

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Face is a small, studied work in bronze. Its subject – an abstracted head represented by geometric shapes that abut and adjoin at irregular vertices – exudes emotional potency. *Face* forms part of Legae's long-running series of stylised heads within totem-like compositions. Moulded in terracotta before being cast in bronze, the artist pursued a balance between supple lines and hard-edged rigidity. As three-dimensional objects encountered in the round, the works are small enough to feel portable, like artefacts carried across time and place. Is it that *Face* asks to be handled, or that we want to touch? It seems to tell of acquisitiveness, of possession. Historian EJ de Jager wrote of Legae's work, "one becomes aware that an ordinary physical substance is being transformed into something spiritual and meaningful."



Dor Guez

b.1981, Jerusalem; works in Jaffa

Double Stitch, 2022 Vinyl Dimensions variable

"I vdda is where I go to think" Dor Guez says of his ancestral home. After

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To work playfully – to do something unexpected or impulsive – one needs to be in a space that has not been fully explored or is not yet fully understood.

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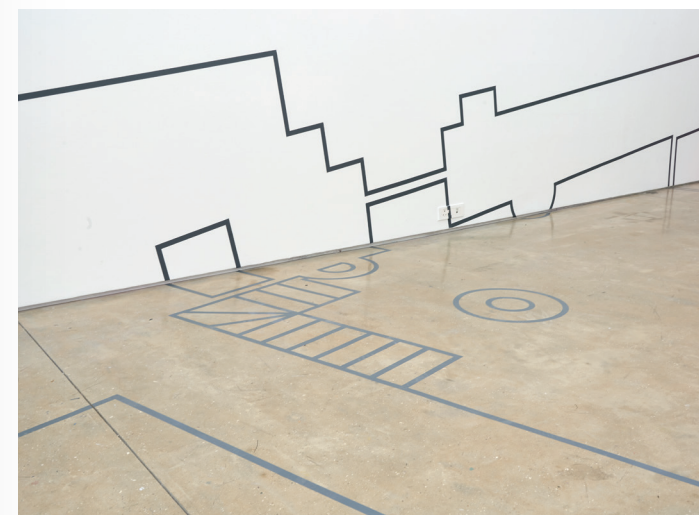
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Double Stitch, 2022 Vinyl Dimensions variable

“Lydda is where I go to think,” Dor Guez says of his ancestral home. After years spent living between New York and Jaffa, Guez felt compelled to make a permanent return. He lives not far from the church around which the life of his Christian Palestinian family and their community had, for centuries, revolved. “He saw himself as a rock in the landscape, and around him, everything was swirling,” Guez says of his grandfather's experience of living in a territory whose people bear the incessant violence inflicted by disputing political masters. His practice is a constant dialogue between peeling and layering (peeling back that which has been covered over while layering the present with what has been removed – both history's materials, and its narratives). Guez' work evidences borders and their bleed, his practice a form of maintenance against the threat of erasure. What customs are carried across time, when multiple identities tessellate in one terrain?

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“In the town where I grew up, a church and a mosque share a wall,” Dor Guez writes of the church and mosque in Lydda that contain – and are contained within – parts of one another. Between them, they share one another's features and multiple tellings of a story. *Double Stitch* is a new installation by

Dor Guez that underpins *Customs*: an interpretation of the floor-plan for St George's Greek Orthodox Church and the adjacent El-Khidr Mosque, which in its enactment in A4's gallery has been tugged askew at the corners. A forensic walk within and without the map reveals its signs and symbols: built in the 19th-century over a 12th-century Crusader structure and a 14th-century Mamluk



mosque, there are stairs to the crypt, a series of columns, an apse. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem was granted permission by Ottoman authorities to build a church on the site of a previous basilica, stipulating in their permissions that a portion be made available for a mosque.

Following the artist's description, the structure is evoked beyond the linear outlines and abstractions of the floorplan:

The minaret is towering high by the belfry. On the western part of the church, the mosque was constructed in the thirteenth century. Entering the mosque's square, one notices the remains of the Byzantine basilica, including hewn stones, granite and marble columns with capitals from the ruined church. Using the southern wall of the church, the mosque's northern façade overlooks the courtyard. On the eastern side of the prayer hall, a Byzantine apse has survived. Beneath the mosque there are subterranean halls built by the crusaders as water reservoirs for the church and the town dwellers.

Double Stitch stands as metonym for what is touched, and incorporated; of the difficulty, even impossibility of delineating personal and shared histories into even portions across time, without necessitating substantial cutting and loss.

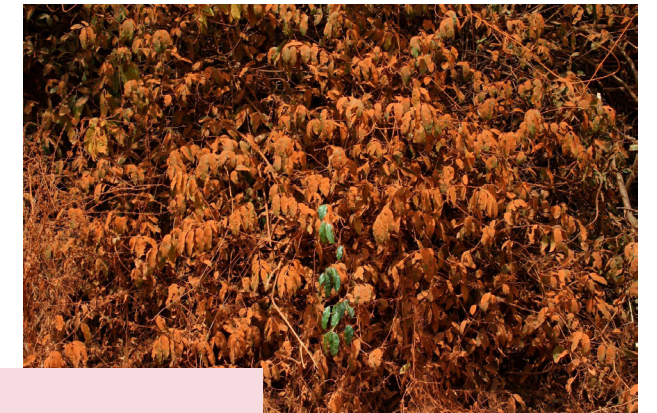
During the 1948 war, the Church became a place of sanctuary. Considered to be a patch of Greek land within contested territory, it was untouchable. Hidden in the church's cellars, Guez' family were among those who managed to remain in Lydda in the aftermath of the war. Unable to return to their homes, they continued within the neighbourhood ghettoed around the church.

Editor's note:
Dor Guez' work *Samira* (2020), which also appears in *Customs*, is an image of his grandmother on her wedding day; the first wedding to take place after the capture of Lydda. Inside the church, a chair belongs to Guez's family. This seat is passed from one generation to the next, from Guez' great-grandfather, to the artist, along the family line.

Kapwani Kiwanga

b.1978, Hamilton; works in Paris

Vumbi, 2012 Video 31 minutes



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Double Stitch stands difficult, even imposing even portions across

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Editor's note:
Dor Guez' work *Samira* (2000) depicts a place after the capture of Lydda from Guez' great-grandfather.

Work that makes you feel comfortable is like hearing a voice that is singing and sounds familiar.

Kapwani Kiwanga

b.1978, Hamilton; works in Paris

Vumbi, 2012 Video 31 minutes



"I'm very reluctant to talk about what's happening now – the hot topic, the outrage of the moment," Kapwani Kiwanga writes. "It seems necessary to ask: how did we get here?" Trained in both art and anthropology, Kiwanga approaches her subjects with the precision of an archivist; that she might offer alternative insights as to how the past transcribes the present. Her practice is as much historical reflection as contemporary criticism; an elegy to the past and invocation to futurity. Pairing rigour and lyricism, Kiwanga's preoccupations range across disciplines and thematic concerns in works at once urgent and materially elegant. She looks not only to history's narratives but to its footnotes and less-familiar anecdotes, carefully mining the past for unexpected incidents and marginalised retellings. Her primary gesture as artist, Kiwanga suggests, is "resuscitating a moment to revisit so one can look at it again. And through looking at this moment again, what do we understand? When looking, does it simply remind us, or do we see something differently? These moments are reactivated fully knowing that you cannot go back to that time; that time has passed. We can look back and ask 'what would have happened if we had embarked on another direction?'"

Named for the Kiswahili word for dust, *Vumbi* recounts a performance of futility. Filmed in rural Tanzania during the dry season, the scene is a monochrome brown, the foliage along the roadside heavy with clinging dirt. The artist steps into frame, holding a rag and a fuel canister of water. One by one, she begins wiping leaves clean with methodical exactitude, revealing their brilliant green against the sepia surroundings. Thirty minutes pass. The artist walks away, leaving her small offering of viridescence to be again covered by dust. Any control the artist appeared to have, any progress she might have made, is subsumed by the environment. "It questions how we look at land," Kiwanga says of her film, "particularly when our gaze is towards whatever gains might be had; questions of ownership and power struggles over land itself."

Nolan Oswald Dennis

b.1988, Lusaka; works in Johannesburg

garden for fanon, 2021

Bioactive system, books, glass globes, microcontroller, and steel armatures Dimensions variable

Investigating the material and metaphysical conditions of colonialism and the aesthetics of knowledge, Nolan Oswald Dennis explores the interactions between objective and subjective conditions of change. What structures of organisation – whether technological, historical, the known or invisible – maintain or transform conditions? “What do these structures mean for our work – the work of trying to find, or make, or change the world?” Dennis asks, his drawings and diagrams offering entry points to the cosmologies that he is preoccupied with; his models inviting strategic play. “Reciprocity is the key mechanic of play that I’m interested in,” says Dennis. “The humorous and playful aspect is the part of the work that operates on the surface – this is a cover underneath which a lot more can happen.” South Africa’s democracy is rigged by the structural and systematic remnants of colonialism, and it is through this invitation to play that the audience can begin to engage in potent critique. Dennis’ practice is equal parts experimental and complex – testing reality with the curiosity of the scholar; the precision of an astrophysicist.



garden for fanon presents a complex bioactive system of metal stands, books, and glass globes, assembled to accelerate the activity of a community of earthworms. The protocols accompanying the installation have a two-fold effect: the carer is instructed to feed the worms and maintain a conducive environment, and the worms process copies of Pan-Africanist philosopher and psychologist Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, converting the fibre of the books into fertiliser. “The worms are making soil as

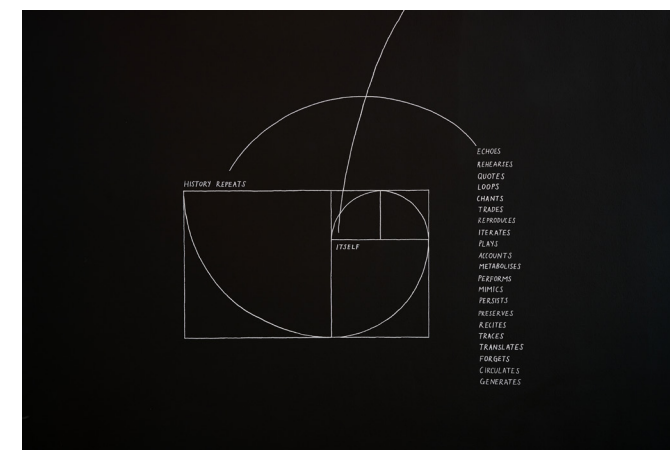
they’re eating books – this is a game of meaning,” says Dennis. “There is something funny about having worms in a gallery, eating a book. What makes it funny is what gives it weight.” Fanon concludes *The Wretched of the Earth* by imploring the reader to flee from motionless movement. Dennis similarly states, “Routines or procedural structures contain *action*... They delineate the possible, and then produce reality through that delineation.” In *garden for fanon*, Dennis petitions his audience to enact a procedural care – to tend to the garden, to ensure the survival of the earthworms, to feed soil with knowledge – while digesting history’s complexities.

Options, 2018

Wall installation according to artist’s instructions Dimensions variable

Options is a large-scale formulaic drawing that takes the Fibonacci spiral as a starting point. Paraphrasing German philosopher Karl Marx, it reads: *History repeats itself first as tragedy, second as farce.* ‘Second as farce’ has been crossed out, and a path drawn to the phrase ‘second as strategy.’ The work allows a technician who installs it to select synonyms for ‘repeats’, ‘tragedy’ and ‘strategy’. “This procedural function allows someone else to engage with it, not by reproducing it but by producing it with space for transformation,” says Dennis. In this way *Options* becomes infinitely generative, with change contained in its structure and instructions. It performs between the textual and the visual, analytic and intuitive, past and present. Artist Bella Knemeyer was invited to play the role of technician to install the work in Customs. The ratios are calculated from measurements Knemeyer made of her body against the wall (such as the length of her hand, her wingspan – one outstretched arm to the other – and the height of Knemeyer’s eyes). Her handwriting makes *Options*.

Editor’s note:
Chosen by Bella Knemeyer together with the curators, history ‘echoes’, ‘rehearses’, ‘quotes’, ‘loops’, ‘forgets’, first as ‘collapse’, ‘catastrophe’, ‘ruin’, ‘glitch’, second as ‘tactic’, ‘distraction’, ‘struggle’, ‘story’, amongst other things.



Peter Clarke

b.1929, Simon's Town; d.2014, Ocean View

Anxiety, 1969 Acrylic on board 51 x 40.5 cm

The late Peter Clarke's paintings, prints, and poems offer an intimate window into life under the apartheid regime and the country's imperfect transition to democracy. An artist acutely sensitive to the poetics of the ordinary, Clarke played the role of 'quiet chronicler' and found in the domestic, everyday scenes around him a reflection of the historic moment. The many scenes Clarke depicted – both urban and rural – are at once document and symbol, as much images of place as they are of feeling. "I've been interested in space for a very long time," he said of his peopled landscapes, "the spaces that separate people. The spaces that people have to traverse." Such considerations would become particularly urgent to the artist. Clarke and his community were forcibly removed from their homes in the seaside suburb of Simon's Town to Ocean View in 1972.

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Anxiety is a study in despair; the brilliant red that dominates the composition saturated, the artist said, with "hot blazing anger and frustration." In 1967, Simon's Town was declared a whites-only suburb under the Group Areas Act. For five years, Clarke's community persisted in a state of uncertainty, waiting for the final notice. Painted during this time, *Anxiety* transcribes – in the artist's words – a "social expression"; the image charged with the emotive intensity of their shared predicament.



Igshaan Adams

b.1982, Bonteheuwel; works in Cape Town.

65 Bloem Street, 2022 Stainless steel and memory wire, silver and gold link chain, plastic, glass, metal and stone beads, metal and copper charms (knives, disks and ornamental), fringe, found chandelier and enamel paint 330 x 140 x 115 cm

Collected under the loose description of tapestry, Igshaan Adams' woven works offer a haptic meditation on the changeability of being, which is never static but



always reworked, stitched and unstitched. To the artist, the ritual repetition necessary to his medium presents itself as spiritual simile; each bead strung a material dhikr. Much like the ninety-nine names of Allah are chanted in Sufi practice, that they might wake the dormant divine within the speaker, so weaving too is an embodied commitment to slow accumulation and transformation. Bearing witness to life's traces and traumas as inscribed in overlooked spaces – particularly those of Bonteheuwel, a working-class suburb on the Cape Flats where Adams was raised – the artist transcribes desire lines across fields and worn paths on linoleum floors, honouring the passages of time and people that shaped them. Adams' work is marked by both a distinct, even sensual, pleasure in the tactile, and a lyrical invocation of the immaterial; the patina of the past distilled in objects of singular beauty and quiet dedication.

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When Igshaan Adams took up residency at A4 in August 2020, the first work he hung in the gallery was the sculptural form

Oorskot (2016). A predecessor to *65 Bloem Street*, *Oorskot* was placed in almost exactly the location *65 Bloem Street* now appears in Customs. An accumulation of beads, wire, and rope, Adams spoke of the work as a place for play as well as risk. Pieces stored from past tapestries found themselves accumulating form, gathering in what the artist described as dust clouds. Recalling one particular day, standing alongside Adams as he flung a string of jewels toward one such sculpture; it caught, the dark glass beads seeming both dangerous and tenuous. This was memory as material. Adams describes these sculptures in relation to his ancestral home of Namaqualand, where children kick up the red sand and soil when dancing a traditional dance called the reel. “That’s the visual I have for how I plan on installing these clouds, how I look at them at this point – as the animation of those dust particles, and the movement through this space. How close can I get with this material to that accuracy?” Within *65 Bloem Street* is an ensnared chandelier, crystal beads, charms shaped like silver scimitars. Like archived dreams these hang suspended and glinting in the gallery’s light offering clues; asking questions.

8

Steve McQueen

b. 1965, London; works between London and Amsterdam

Remember Me, 2016 Acrylic paint on neon borosilicate tube 12 x 51 x 3 cm



“Life and death have always lived side by side... We live with ghosts in our everyday.” In attending to the tensions of collective memory and public forgetting, artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen recalls tragedies real and imagined, some imminent, others passed, and still more narrowly escaped. There is to his work a restless urgency, an insistence on remembrance as an act of political necessity. Where his feature films, such as *12 Years a Slave* (2013), offer narrative engagements with such considerations, his nebulous and abstracted video works extend a more elliptical mode, affording oblique meditations on memory. Death offers the thematic undertow, his works more often touching on individual lives lost to violence, as in *Ashes* (2002–2015), an elegy to a young Grenadian local killed by drug dealers, *7th Nov* (2001), in which a man recounts accidentally killing his brother, and his upcoming Grenfell project, a filmic memorial to the 2017 fire. As supplications against amnesia, the artist writes of these works, “I’m saying, no, no. Let’s not forget.”

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Taken from a series of neon lights, each bearing the same inscription written in different hands, *Remember Me* is a monument without referent. Drafted by the artist, his friends and acquaintances, the phrase appears differently charged, changed by the inflexion the respective letterings lends it. Each writer is rendered anonymous, the ‘me’ that asks for remembrance indistinct from every other. In some instances, the request – the demand, the desire – appears near-illegible, scrawled with apparent hurry; in others, it is carefully transcribed, written with slow precision. The phrases, translated in neon, glow darkly – the exposed side of the tubing obscured by paint, that the words might appear at once shadowed and illuminated. Without certain provenance, the repeated refrain becomes both a *memento mori* and a luminescent reflection on the living’s duty to the dead.

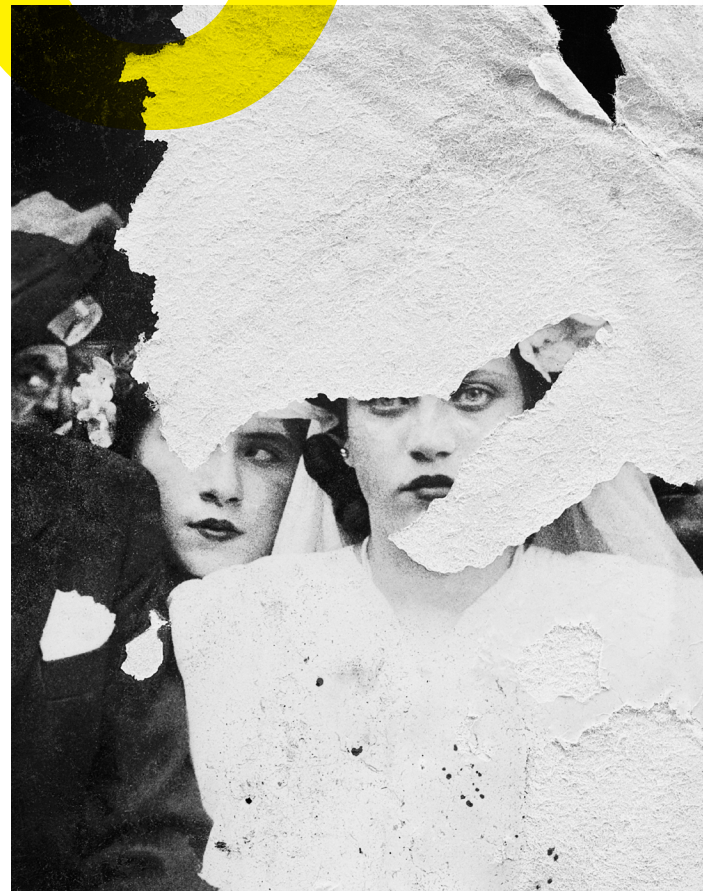
Dor Guez

b.1981, Jerusalem; works in Jaffa

Samira, 2020 **Archival inkjet print** **145 x 112 cm**

Artist bio on p. 13

Samira in the work is Dor Guez's grandmother on her wedding day. Guez found the damaged photograph in amongst a suitcase of family pictures, using three scanners to create a layered composite. The number three lends the image alchemical as well as archetypal qualities, as past, present, and future project from Samira's gaze. She is both herself and other. By the crop of the photograph, the image is a portrait. Abstracted by the blocks of white across her head and body where the subject's specificity has been removed via damage, the image accumulates a painterly quality, read in shapes of black and white. "The more you deal with a specific narrative, like my own family's personal catastrophe, the more it tells a broader story," Guez said on the occasion of the artist's exhibition Catastrophe at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá in March, 2022. His Christian Palestinian grandparents' wedding was the first to be held after the war of 1948. The Palestinian community that hid within the walls of the Church of Saint George (where this wedding took place) were the only inhabitants of the city who managed to remain in Lydda, although not beyond the confines of the church and the slice of neighbourhood that was ghettoed in the aftermath of the war.



A startling detail is carried in Samira's stare – anyone who meets Dor Guez is immediately arrested by the artist's ice-blue-green eyes. Samira's eyes are the same as the artist's, their lightness visible in the black and white image, and for those who know the artist, are repeated again through his young daughter. If *Samira* is troubling to look at, this is because the image troubles the preposition. Is it *at* or *through*? The inscrutability of her expression evokes that of the most famous painted woman – the Mona Lisa, for the closer one looks, the less identifiable she becomes. What remains is a cipher for inheritances carried across time and place; a stare intense, probing, resolute. What is Samira asking of her viewer, in this present?

Editor's note:

Samira was the first artwork proposed by the curators for Customs. It could be said that *Samira* is the cornerstone, and from her

A simple expression of ritual is the demarcation of boundary and threshold. Sacredness is established by a set of ritual acts.

Dor Guez

b.1981, Jerusalem; works in Jaffa

Samira, 2020
Archival inkjet print
145 x 112 cm

Artist bio on p. 13

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10

Kapwani Kiwanga

b.1978, Hamilton; works in Paris

Ground, 2012

40 colour photographs, protocol
Dimensions variable
(each photograph 10 x 15 cm)

Artist bio on p. 15

‘Ground’ or ‘to ground?’ The latter: giving something a theoretical or practical basis, alternately, connecting an electrical device to the earth. Contrary to what we might think, lightning strikes in the space between atmosphere and ground, moving upwards and downwards.

“I’m always trying to look at multiplicities, or multiple tellings of the same story,” says Kiwanga. *Ground’s* proposal, one strike made of multiple lightning bolts (from photographs found on the internet) as if soldered together – connected as one would a current – is testament to Kiwanga’s commitment to meanings being plural.



When I make an artwork, I’m trying to be in dialogue with the visitor, and I

am proposing a way of seeing, or many ways of seeing. It’s an open invitation somehow for people to spend time with an idea as opposed to being presented with a discourse.

Frida Orupabo

b.1986, Sarpsborg; works in Oslo

Going home, 2021

Collage with paper pins
176 × 203.5 cm

“Toni Morrison talks about the importance of writing the stories you want to

I had to begin to appreciate these aberrations for what they are; these beautiful marks, or events that have left a mark behind, from which one can read a piece of the story. Where it would be difficult, or impossible, to know the full story, the mark speaks to us of something that happened.

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Articulate the limits
of a system you find
yourself in.
This articulation is
an invitation to imagine
the system differently.

Frida Orupabo

b.1986, Sarpsborg; works in Oslo

Going home, 2021

Collage with paper pins
176 x 203.5 cm

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“Toni Morrison talks about the importance of writing the stories you want to read,” Frida Orupabo says. “That’s a principle I try to work by. If it doesn’t exist, I feel the need to create it.” Pairing photographs from colonial-era archives with images found in contemporary media, and online, Orupabo confronts the ethnographic gaze and the colonial photograph’s legacy as a tool of subjugation of enslaved and colonised peoples. The artist cuts, stitches and pins her source material to create composite figures who are tenderly remade from ‘subject’ into protagonist. Most often, they appear possessed of capacities tending toward the magical – limitless, or unexpectedly constrained, refusing to conform, or collaborate. By excavating existing narratives, Orupabo lends expression to more expansive histories.

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“For me, the beginning is always the body,” Orupabo says of her collages. Yet in this work, the two figures are curiously *without body*, floating or flying against the white expanse of paper on which they are pinned. Calligraphic brushmarks offer the impression of form; only their faces, a pair of sky-blue boots, and a single hand, borrowed from found photographs. Gesturing upwards with pointed index, the hand is raised in a manner reminiscent of Christian iconography’s assertion of the heavens. This, paired with the figures’ insubstantial forms, lends the work a spiritual import; the title’s invocation of return – to myth-making, story-telling – a celestial homecoming.



Moshekwa Langa

b.1975, Bakenberg; works in Amsterdam

What is a home without a mother, 2008 Mixed media on paper, diptych Each panel 149 x 109 cm (framed)



Asked for an adjective to describe his practice, Moshekwa Langa replies with *fugitive*. In medium, his work is disparate; in sensibility, inconstant and changeable. He moves across such mediums as installation, drawing, video and sculpture with easy fluency, his materials as various as string, paper bags, oil paint, words, photographs and found images. Like an anthropologist recording his surroundings in obscure maps, Langa's practice is an exercise in visual note-taking. It is perhaps fugitive in that the artist's attention is only transitory, each work an index of a moment soon passed. In a text accompanying the exhibition *Ellipsis* (2016), the artist's wandering mind is made evident: "Something broke in the description," he writes, "and I am just leaving it here for the moment and I will open another topic because I am talking about many different things...there is a break because I get distracted – maybe it was sunny and then it started raining, and then suddenly, I do not know, something else happened." His work – however changing, however unfocused – is a gesture of time-keeping, a record of things come and gone. Langa's maps may be illegible, unfinished, without compass, but they pose a curious visual question: how might one transcribe a life in all its routine complexity?

Without the accompanying title as guide, the words written across the two sheets of paper at first appear illegible. *What is a home without a mother?* The question demands no answer, gesturing instead to grief's weight, its worn-out words, its inexpressible silence. It is not a question to be read, the artist's broken lettering suggests, but one to be asked, spoken into the absence of the other. The work is among Langa's most personal and intimate, made in a year of profound loss. The artist, returning home to South Africa after several years abroad, arrived to find the fabric of his previous life unravelling. Notating his mourning, he traced this period of his life on paper, transcribing the minutiae of his loss with unclear symbols of personal significance.

Binelde Hyrcan

b.1983, Luanda; works between Luanda and Nice

Cambeck, 2011 Colour video with sound, subtitles 2 min 30 sec

Binelde Hyrcan is the youngest child of thirteen. This must in some way account for the feeling of free-play which characterises much of the artist's work. Mischief, games, a puckish caper; the fun of Hyrcan's practice contains a strong kick, as if used to the myriad humiliations that only siblings can exert on one another underwritten by the insurance of affection. In his performance works and films, Hyrcan creates a theatre of absurdity, a biting comedy. In *White Rain*, he sat under a tree opposite a state building in Luanda. The tree's inhabitants – a multitude of birds – repeatedly shit on him. In Monaco, from inside a cage, he proclaimed himself 'King', ordering passersby to push him around. "We will repaint the world," writer Jean-Baptiste Gauvin quotes Hyrcan as saying. The backdrop to Hyrcan's childhood was the Angolan Civil War, a twenty-seven year conflict which displaced over a million people. Movement – the



freedom to move, attendant themes of migration – is a recurring theme in Hyrcan's work. In 2020, finding himself alone during the Covid-19 pandemic due to mandatory quarantines and attendant isolation placed on citizens world-wide, he created life-size 'puppet friends' and posted videos on Instagram, drinking

wine with one, exercising with another. As soon as restrictions were lifted, he began a solo walking journey from Paris to Lisbon along the coast in the manner of religious pilgrims. Hyrcan pokes fun at entrenched 'pecking orders' and calls out hypocrisy, while remaining committed to play.

*Chauffeur, go faster!
I'm getting tired.
Chauffeur, don't talk, just drive!*

These English subtitles accompany Hyrcan's short film *Cambeck*, which features four young children on a beach in Angola playing at big-shots and servants. For a vehicle, they've dug themselves into the sand. Equipped with meagre props – a flip-flop for a steering-wheel, a sea view – the scene contains multiple readings. In one, it's a playground-paradise, the children's agency apparent in 'making-do' while 'making-it-up.' In another, they yearn for an imagined elsewhere possessed of riches and resources, in rapid dialogue:

*Your father is the doctor
He's taking me to America, to live in a building.*

The conversation progresses in Portuguese, the highest pitched voice of a small boy features the loudest (he's the boss, plays the wealthy man shouting at the driver). The phrase, *The good life* is said in English. *In Brazil, they get around by planes, it's not like in here, there's no shitty car like this one.* The chauffeur of the shitty car keeps his eyes on the road in spite of the cruel comments levelled towards his vehicle, not once taking his eyes from the horizon-line over the ocean, or ceasing to push at his steering wheel. The children's play features the polarity acted in so many childhood games. Think cops and robbers, the multitude of 'goodies vs baddies' characters that populate these imaginative processes. Present too is the ambivalence, even rogue sensibilities children reveal when taking on these roles. Who is the hero? Cop or robber? The rich man hurling abuse at this driver, or the abused?

Nairy Baghramian

'do it' Instruction, 2012

Card with printed text

b.1971, Isfahan; works in Berlin

Nairy Baghramian's sculptural forms are studies in movement and propositions for motion, defying their realities as permanent and structural. In Baghramian's hands, solid matter appears putty-like, soft and yielding. Where this is suddenly juxtaposed with something sharp and steely, the forms evoke damage and attendant repair. Something of Baghramian's method appears histological – objects as studies in the microscopic anatomy of biological tissue – but turned inside-out: organs, appendages; things supple, private, sensual, or rude. The art critic Evan Moffitt says, "Her sculptures often assume forms that we take for granted, yet upon which we lean... Baghramian's supports may not always be structurally necessary, but their intimation of balance makes us consider the firmness of our own footing."

—

do it started as a conversation in 1993 and first appeared as a book when its creator Hans Ulrich Obrist invited 12 artists to send him instructions. Also termed 'scores' by Obrist, these instructions can be interpreted and carried out by visitors to exhibitions of *do it*. Itinerant and flexible, these have been held globally and almost continuously since May 2013 when *do it* happened in Socrates Sculpture Park, New York. While repeated anywhere, carrying out a *do it* often performs as site-and audience-specific, generating new interpretations and readings in its context.

Nairy Baghramian's *do it* (2012) instructs as follows:

Following Gertrude Stein, every now and then sit with your back on nature.

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BAGHRAMIAN, Nairy
(2012)

Following Gertrude Stein, every now and then sit with your back on nature.

Willem Boshoff

b.1951, Johannesburg; works in Johannesburg

***Blind Cards*, c. 1980** **Cardboard** **88.5 x 63 cm**



A concrete poet, conceptual artist, and compiler of dictionaries, Willem Boshoff is singularly preoccupied with words; their origins, implications, taxonomy and texture. Giving shape to language, he makes the verbal visual and the written tactile. Among his most notable works is the *Blind Alphabet* (1990 onwards), a series of object studies of uncommon words to be touched and held. *Abaxial*, *acinaciform*, *acrolith*, *acromegaly* – the list goes on, each term transcribed as wooden sculpture. Other similarly ambitious projects include *The Dictionary of Perplexing English* (1999), a collection of eighteen-thousand puzzling phrases, and *Garden of Words* (ongoing); the artist committing to memory the names of thirty-thousand botanical specimens. In all his wide-ranging interests – from ecology to politics, astronomy to philosophy – Boshoff remains primarily concerned with classification; with the ways in which the world is linguistically arranged. To the artist, language offers itself as material, meaning, performance and form.

At first glance, *Blind Cards* is a study in the myriad ways paper discolours and ages as time passes. Yet beyond its formal intrigue, the work extends meditations on obsolete systems of ordering knowledge. Its composition took form, Boshoff writes, in “the period when the library converted to a new system for lending books.”

Everyone’s names and personal details were transferred onto computer, making redundant the boxes of library cards that had been used earlier to store this information, and the trays in which they had been kept.

In *Blind Cards*, the now-defunct cards are stacked one on top of the other in neatly arranged columns. Stripped of their function and rendered unreadable, they become a cipher: an unintelligible system that once notated a history of books borrowed and returned.

Yoko Ono

b.1933, Tokyo; works in New York City

***MEND PIECE*, A4 Arts Foundation,** **Cape Town version, 1966/2018** **Cups and saucers, glue, tape,** **scissors, twine** **Dimensions variable**

Can a project be like a sun?

necessitated their canvas accompanied the fabric has all but understated, those instead as text, “to the the sky” via “y outside, prompted . Many exist only instructions: “Light a ch till it goes out,” “if you disappear,” “fish sandwich and d as poetry, others act. With these ces’, Ono invites perform the gesture stepping back so ay come forward e. Even when the 965), she remains e piece to continue ntradiction: the ng go.

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Blind Cards, c. 1980 Cardboard 88.5 x 63 cm



A concrete poet, conceptual artist, and compiler of dictionaries, Willem Boshoff works with words; their originality and texture. Giving shape to the verbal visual and the visual verbal, his notable works is the *Book of Uncommon Words* (1999), a collection of words such as *acromegaly* – the list of words. Other similarly ambitious works include *Words* (ongoing); the *Botanical Specimens*, *Politics*, *Astronomy* to *Classification*; with the artist, language offers

When walking through a doorway
touch the right post, with
your right hand, at head
height—
consider the room you
are leaving
consider the room you
are entering
consider the gap between
the two.

At first glance, *Blind Cards* and ages as time passes meditations on obsolescence and form, Boshoff writes, “for lending books.”

Everyone’s not making redun store this info

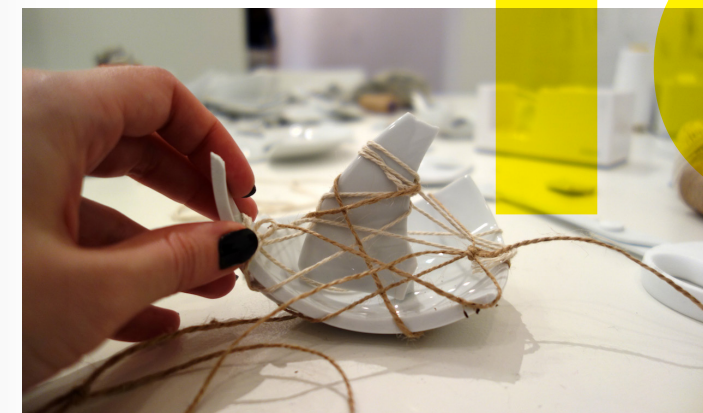
In *Blind Cards*, the novel neatly arranged colour they become a history of boo

Yoko Ono

b.1933, Tokyo; works in New York City

MEND PIECE, A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town version, 1966/2018 Cups and saucers, glue, tape, scissors, twine Dimensions variable

Among the art objects Yoko Ono has made, many have necessitated their own disappearance, much like *Smoke Painting* (1961), a canvas accompanied by the invitation to press lit cigarettes into its fibres until the fabric has all but burnt away. Drawn to the ephemeral, the incomplete and understated, those among her works that find no material expression persist instead as text, performance or film. In 1966 the artist created “A TV just to the sky” via *Sky TV*, a live 24 hour video feed into the building of the sky outside, prompted by a time when Ono was living in a windowless apartment. Many exist only



as koan-like instructions: “Light a match and watch till it goes out,” “draw a line until you disappear,” “make one tunafish sandwich and eat.” Some read as poetry, others are matter-of-fact. With these ‘instruction pieces’, Ono invites the viewer to perform the gesture she proposes, stepping back so that another may come forward to take her place. Even when the

artist is bodily present, as in the performance *Cut Piece* (1965), she remains impassive; allowing her clothes to be cut away, allowing the piece to continue on to its conclusion. Her work is coloured by this quiet contradiction: the precision of her propositions and her commitment to letting go.

In *MEND PIECE*, Ono invites the viewer to repair ceramic fragments, impossibly broken, to compose splintered parts into a new imperfect whole. To the artist, the simple act of mending is one of both personal and universal significance. “*MEND PIECE*,” she says, “is a wish piece,” a

supplication to healing. This work, the *Cape Town version* created by the artist in 2018, reads:

*Mend with wisdom
mend with love
mend your heart.
It will mend the earth
at the same time.*

Unable to restore the many broken pieces to their previous forms, the viewer must instead imagine them anew – no longer cups and saucers, but abstract notations of time spent and care taken.

Editor's note:

Five years ago in 2017, A4 brought Yoko Ono's *MEND PIECE* to Cape Town, the work kindly loaned to the foundation by the Rennie Collection in Vancouver. This was the New York version of *MEND PIECE* and it appeared in the first group exhibition A4 held to celebrate its opening, titled *You & I*. The version that will be realised through visitors' participation in *Customs* is a *MEND PIECE* for Cape Town that has been in A4's care since 2018, and remained unopened. *Customs* marks the first performance of Yoko Ono's *MEND PIECE*, A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town version (1966/2018).

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Josh Ginsburg (b.1981, Cape Town) is the director of A4 Arts Foundation in District Six.

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