

**The
Future
Is
Behind
Us**

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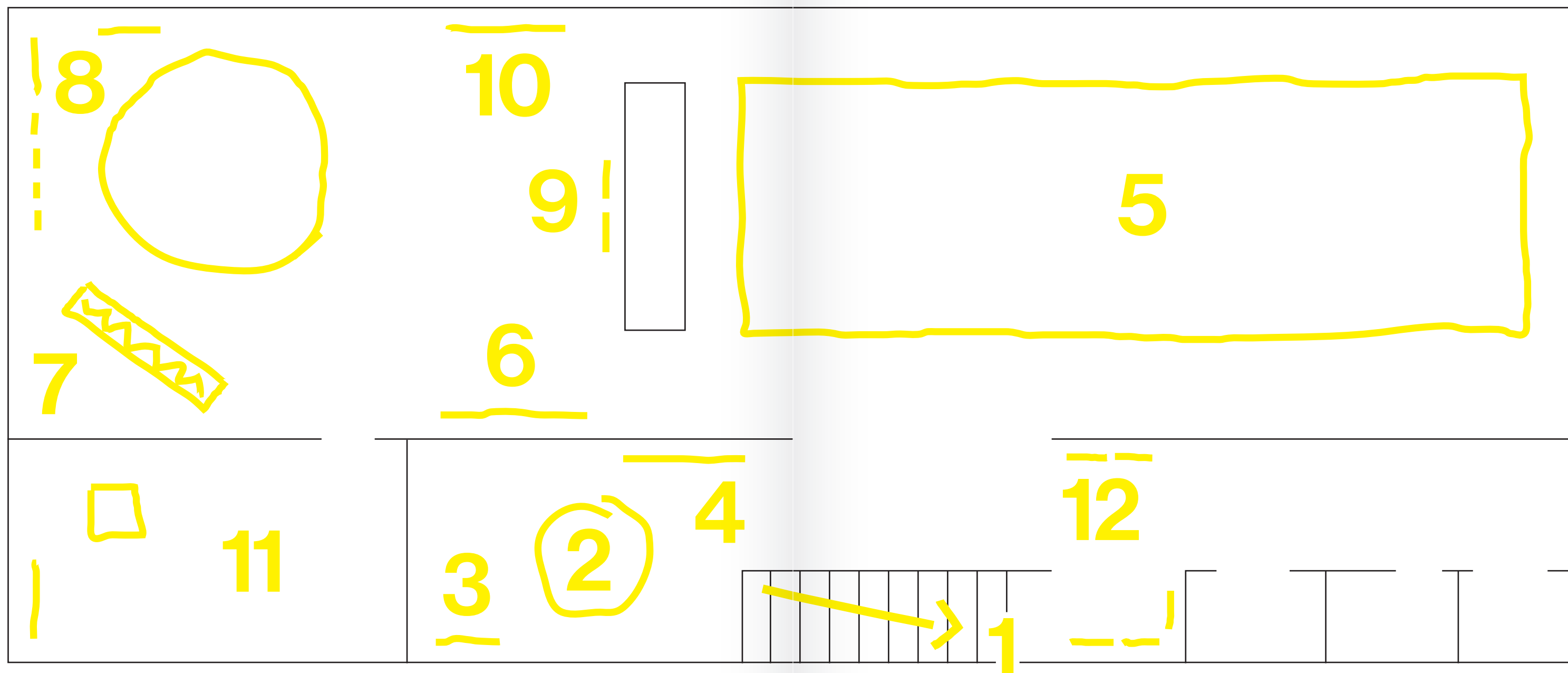
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An abridged conversation between
Tarik Yildirim (T.Y.) and Josh Ginsburg (J.G.)
in preparation for **The Future Is Behind Us.**

J.G. The idea behind this show came from something you said, which in my memory was almost said in frustration one night over dinner. You said, “Why is it that we refer to the future as something in front of us, when in fact we can’t see the future. What we can see is the past. The future is behind us.” **You were saying that we effectively walk backwards into the future,** which to my mind is a poetic idea and a sensible idea – an intersection of poetry and sense.

T.Y. Some symmetry breakings, like reading from left to right rather than right to left, happen for no apparent reason. In physics, they’re called ‘spontaneous symmetry breakings’. But this one has a certain angle to it – it isn’t arbitrary, because it affects how we view time.

And how you view time is a fundamental indicator of your cosmic view. Time is a very mysterious concept, but within the dominant Western paradigm, physics doesn’t view it as mysterious at all.

In fact, **the Western metaphysical paradigm is preoccupied with killing time; turning time into space.** There’s a dichotomy between space and time – space is studied through mathematics and time through computation. While time refers to an actual unfolding, space refers to the structural aspects of that unfolding. The success of physics depends on the fact that time lends itself to so much structural characterisation. **This is the purpose of physics – to separate what’s unchanging from what’s changing.**

J.G. Can you spend a moment talking about the relationship between time and space? In colloquial terms, that they are somehow interconnected is often referred to candidly. You said that time is an unfolding and that space is some kind of vessel.

T.Y. The word ‘spacetime’ was coined by Einstein. He came up with an object that allowed him to trivialise the effects of gravity by formulating it as a curvature. This is, however, a simplification.

Time has since been represented as a linear object, stretching from zero to infinity with all else indexed to it. It’s the primal index of physics. **Time is what prevents things from co-happening – it gives order to life.**

There was a famous public debate between Einstein and Henri Bergson in Paris. Bergson had two philosophical obsessions – the first was evolution and the second was time. While Einstein spatialised time completely, Bergson wanted to do the opposite and temporalise space by viewing space as something like ‘dead time’. Bergson lost the debate, and thereby humanities lost against science on probably the most important philosophical topic of all.

Put in a different language, what Bergson was trying to articulate was the structure of ‘now’, a notion that lies at the heart of Eastern metaphysics.

What’s already happened – the collection of past ‘nows’ – do lend themselves to a certain characterisation. But ‘now’,

itself, keeps generating novelty that can never be completely anticipated.

An action unfolding, at the moment of unfolding, is deeply connected to the notion of consciousness. In fact, the simplest word for 'consciousness' in Eastern metaphysics is 'now'. So this view of time is very subjective. Of course, science and Western metaphysics don't like what's subjective – **they want to objectify the world, codify the world, put it in mathematical language and place it on a shelf.**

What Bergson argued for, against Einstein, was a defence of Eastern metaphysics in disguise, formulated in the language of the new century.

J.G. Within that, you pointed earlier to time articulated simply as a line. In either of these cases, do they offer alternative pictorial, graphic or other models for how to imagine time?

T.Y. Western metaphysics pictures time as a simple line, which in turn is merged into space to become 'spacetime', which can curve like space itself. It's visualisable, but only from the so-called God point of view; from outside the universe.

But how can you be outside of time? And is there a corresponding graphical representation of time in Eastern metaphysics? I think categorically there cannot be, because once a phenomenon is put into a linguistic form, it becomes static and no longer truly represents what was originally meant.

p.12 Time, in the Eastern view,

is hard to articulate because it is fundamentally inarticulable.

Of course, explicit articulation is a function of the analytical side of the brain, as opposed to the intuitive side. And intuition is why art exists. If things were simple and homogeneous, we wouldn't need art.

The best visual representation of time in the Eastern program would look like a flow – of water, perhaps, but a 'structured' kind of water. I personally view it as a 'dark' flow that is informatic in nature, as opposed to being merely energetic.

Energy is the currency of mathematical models, and information is the currency of computational models. Due to the dichotomy between energy and information, we tend to think of fluids as solely energetic objects. **But time as a flow constantly evolves and evades complete spatialisation, always remaining partially in the dark, in the domain of the unknown.**

J.G. What comes with trying to assemble a picture or language to describe a phenomenon in your mind is a capacity to talk and think collectively.

T.Y. Religious leaders had a similar problem while trying to articulate a deep concept in a way that was understandable. I think the best analogies come from the world of Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam. Sufism has a particular obsession with visual metaphors. They have several well-known metaphors, one being water. They also say that stark

reality is like a mirror. When you look at a mirror, you see yourself. But, there's an illusion. The mirror is actually behind the reflection, and it's in the dark. You never see the actual mirror. The true object doesn't reveal itself to you – it remains unknown, in the back.

Think of yourself as a mirror. What remains at the back, in the dark part? Your mind, your thoughts? What appears to others in the front of the glass? Your body? Which is more real?

J.G. In an exhibition, for example, the artworks would be nodes and the dynamics between them, the flow. One of the pieces in this exhibition is called *Prayer* by James Webb – a project that the artist started 22 years ago, recording the prayers of as many denominations or faith groups that he could find in a particular city. There's a red carpet with twelve speakers on it, each one playing a different prayer. You either hear a cacophony of prayers or, if you sit listening, one individual song.

Another work, just two mirrors, is by a now-deceased artist named Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The mirrors stand alongside one another, representative of himself, his lover, the infinity of their love, the affinity of their love.

T.Y. I don't know what those artists were thinking, but you can always re-conceptualise artworks after they've been created. Creation is an unconscious process. I don't think artists always know what they're

doing, which is why interpretation is necessary.

J.G. I think it's worth noting that interpretation occurs not only through text or in overt communication, but as a function of proximity to other things. The flow that you've been referring to is in some form similar to how those philosophical inquiries occurred when there was an incapacity to render them. What was experienced was a relational event. To some extent, the dynamics between things are also an expression of what is happening.

T.Y. These artworks won't communicate with each other by themselves, someone needs to mobilise their communication flow, which is why we have curators. **It is always life itself which mobilises the flow.**

This is much easier to visualise in the world of science. If we were to replace artworks with scientific articles and the links between them with citations, a network with articles as nodes and citations as links would be created, establishing communication between what are otherwise static objects.

Sometimes I open a book and start from the reverse. By looking at the biography, I can tell what the thesis is. I can feel what this author is about to say because I can see where the substantial meat of the text comes from. We are all making very small contributions to the general accumulation of

culture. We are connecting things and adding small bits of our own. The Western world over-emphasises agency and individualism, and so we view ourselves as masters of the universe. But history doesn't work like this, art doesn't work like this, science doesn't work like this because they are collective phenomena. **We are facilitating a flow. We are like nodes in a network.** Ideas flow through us, through articles.

Ideas, words, sentences, and metaphors in books want to jump out of the text, become mobile and dynamic. We try to counteract this, freeze ideas and attach names to them. But the truth of the matter is that the essential core of any work does not belong to the artist nor the author, and whatever sliver of originality is produced sooner or later becomes anonymous, if it is any good. We can only protect ideas for a limited amount of time. We think of a library as representative of culture. I think of it as a skeletal relic. **The live parts, the good ideas, have already been extracted and are circulating among us.**

The time we can see is the 'dead' time, the library etc. This is what Bergson wanted to emphasise too.

J.G. If one's inclination is to make a picture to understand something, then one needs, in the same minute, to resist that image, to allow it to evaporate and let it keep acknowledging its natural limits. Otherwise, one would stick too tightly to analogy.

p. 14 And analogy is, at best, a

weak attempt at representing an inarticulable, potentially unknowable condition.

There is a dynamic between using the mind and resisting the mind, a proportional dynamic that needs to be put in place. If badly proportioned, one sticks too closely to a limited pictorial framework.

Can we go through the death analogy again? In your picture of a library of books, the citations, the relations or learnings that emerge from the reading of them are the life force. They move, they catalyse. But what is the book itself?

T.Y. The book is a mediator. It's a node in a slow network.

J.G. So it's not deceased because it has the capacity to do work.

T.Y. No, it's nothing in isolation. It is animated by us.

J.G. Maybe it is as dead as a stone is dead?

T.Y. I view it as a sponge that is squeezed as it's animated.

J.G. Time, as you pointed out earlier, seems still to be orientated around space. It seems to be situated in a conceptual model of space.

T.Y. That spatialisation paradigm has reached its limit, and time is returning, we can't get rid of it.

J.G. This may be an over-simplification. But if the future is an

unseeable domain, then it's arguably unseeable by everyone, which means you're no longer arguing over a differentiation of view. If there's a condition that agrees to the fact that that future is unseeable and that we all sit inside this unseeable future, we move closer to the proposition of oneness. We limit the noise of competing ideas.

T.Y. It's a revelatory process. We are trying to decipher this revelation together, but it requires courage in the sense that we, people, know we're walking into darkness.

J.G. The alternative is an acknowledgement that you don't see anything, and that nothing is lit because it's behind you. I'm reiterating this in the spirit of feeling a plausible, generative condition off the back of your quote. It's not only an optical orientation, but a philosophical orientation.

T.Y. But your conclusion is that, at an instinctive level, both views are wrong – that the future is neither behind us, nor in front of us.

Einstein said that God is subtle but not malicious, because he, himself, ventured into one of the greatest darknesses in our intellectual history and emerged with light. Newton spent ten to fifteen years in darkness too, which no one would do today. What motivated both Newton and Einstein was religion.

Newton was more of a theologian than he was a physicist. His belief in Western metaphysics,

in the unmoving truth behind all this flux, motivated him not to give up for all those years. Einstein was not a believer in Christianity, but he was a very spiritual person. He believed that God was kind and framed this as a motivation for the young scientists of the future. Because when you venture into the darkness, you need to know at least that success is a possibility, that an object in the darkness is actually waiting for you to discover it.

Why is God kind? Life doesn't seem to be a coincidence or a fluke. It seems that we are here to play a potentially solvable, yet unsolved game.

I studied mathematics at Harvard University, and in retrospect, I feel like these places are the new temples of the Western world. Mathematicians are looking for clues to solve the cosmic riddle. They are doing priestly work, at the frontlines, at the cutting edge of the unknown.

Someone said that the future is already here, but that it's unevenly distributed. We are living in the year 2022, but according to what metric? Because the earth revolved around the sun a certain number of times?

J.G. I hadn't considered that time is subjective, distributed unevenly across all participants. As opposed to a situation in which there is a barrier that we're either in front of or behind, there are coexisting conditions of time.

T.Y. **The future is not behind or in front of us, it is both.**



Naama Tsabar

b.1982, Tel Aviv; works in New York City

September 1 2018 – January 15 2021, 2018–2021

Shoes, metronome, motor, battery
25 x 20 x 35 cm

1

Rejecting passive observation, Naama Tsabar encourages an active curiosity in her audience. Her works are at once sculptures and auditory interventions; their sounds a mechanism to effect change, disrupting the white-walled gallery to bring to light those systems and spaces that go unsounded or unheard.

Unique in its rhythmic persistence, *September 1 2018 – January 15 2021* is among the artist's few works that does not require physical engagement from its audience. Rather, it offers a distilled notation of Naama Tsabar's travels on foot, the rhythm of her footsteps resounding in the measured ticking of the metronome. Titled after the period for which the shoes were worn, the paired objects offer a contemplation of time – its regulation by capitalist forces, the world's slowing down during the global pandemic, those objects we carried through it. With leather scuffed and soles worn, the work is imprinted with the weight of the artist's body.

"I base my work on my own body. Some pieces are played from the outside, others require someone to stand inside the barrier and speak into the microphone, so the musicians I work with may have to lean over or tiptoe to complete the performance because of their different heights. It also goes back to the logic that the human body needs to adapt to architecture or musical instruments, and the same goes for the audience" (Naama Tsabar, 2022).

Cornelia Parker

b.1956, Cheshire; works in London

Thirty Pieces of Silver (Exhaled) French Horn, 2005

Pressed silver-plated found objects, wire
110 cm diameter

2

An alchemist of matter, Cornelia Parker transmutes found objects into novel forms. Her practice is shaped by two competing impulses; to preserve and to destroy. Subjecting her mediums to a transformational (and more often physical) force, the artist at once denies them their previous symbolic lives and lends them new import. A garden shed exploded, seized cocaine burnt to benign ashes, pornographic VHS tapes dissolved in acid, a church struck by lightning – this last by accident, not at the artist's request. A poet of disrupted forms, she favours those things shaped by violence and accident; everyday objects made profound by their provenance. Debris or relic – or something else besides – Parker's accumulated objects become metonyms for our psychological shadows.

Thirty Pieces of Silver (Exhaled) French Horn comprises 30 silver objects – flattened by a steamroller – suspended together in a circular arrangement; spoons, gravy boats, a candlestick, a teapot, the titular horn. First exhibited in a larger installation of 30 such floating forms, the work's title alludes to the apostle Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ in return for 30 pieces of silver, and the accompanying themes of money, death and resurrection. In this work, once-valued keepsakes – sourced from junk shops, antique markets and car-boot sales – lend themselves to a formal enquiry into materiality and anti-matter. For all the delicacy of the installation – the careful suspension of the objects set floating on thin threads – a frisson of danger remains, the violence of their flattening embodied in their altered forms. The work revels in this tension: that of its levitating lyricism and the muscular force of its making.

“Silver is commemorative, the objects are landmarks in people's lives. I wanted to change their meaning, their visibility, their worth... In the gallery the ruined objects are ghostly levitating just above the floor, waiting to be reassessed in the light of their transformation” (Cornelia Parker, 1990).



Ian Wilson

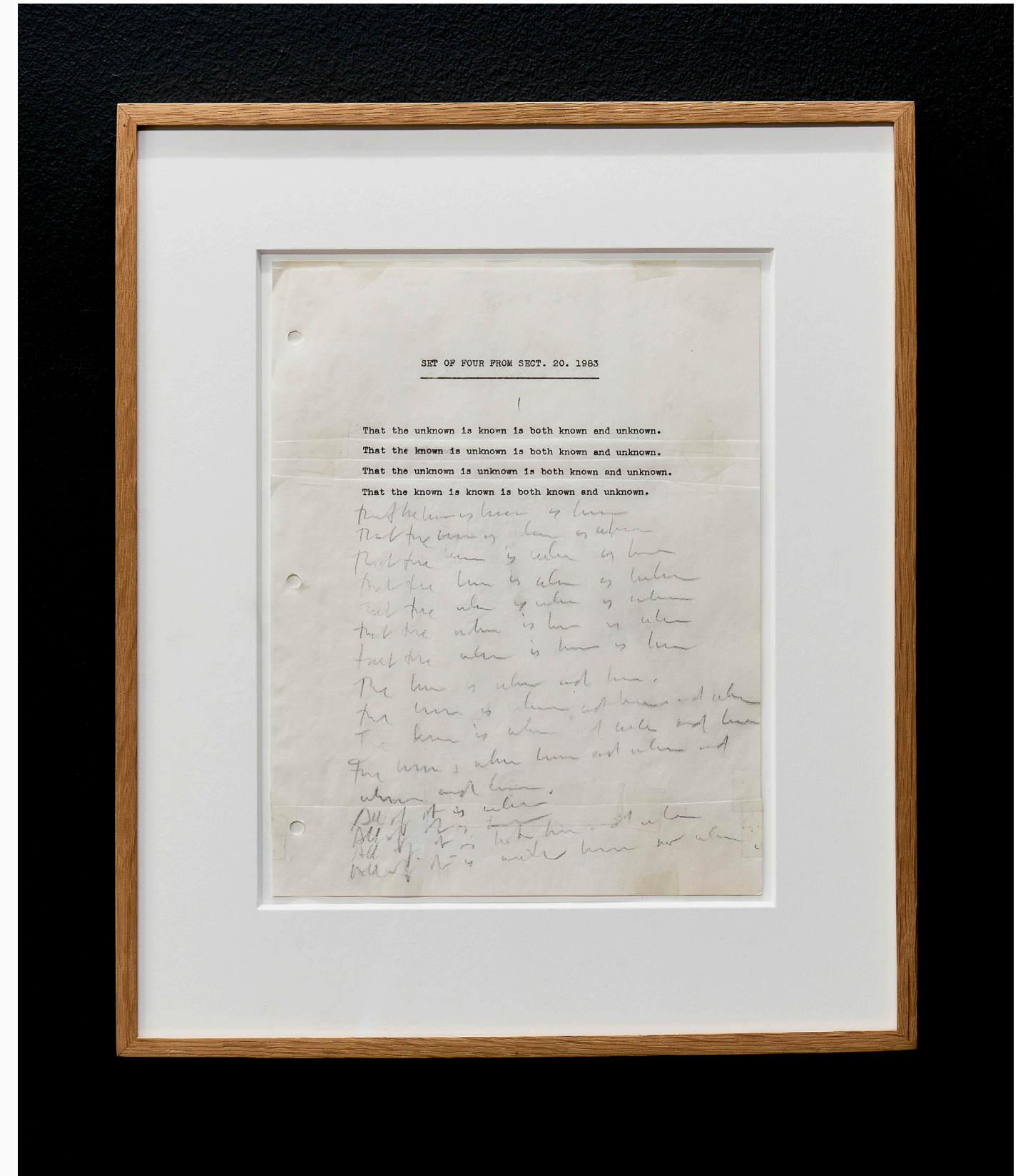
b.1940, Durban; d.2020, New York City

Set of Four From Sect.20, 1972 Typed and handwritten text on paper, tape 28 x 21.5 cm

3

“Conceptual art is not about ideas,” the late Ian Wilson wrote. “It is about the degree of abstraction of ideas.” Wilson left South Africa in 1960, when he was twenty years old. He became a contemporary of Joseph Kosuth, Art & Language, and Lawrence Weiner. “If you have one more of those invisible artists out here, you’re fired,” John Baldessari recounted Paul Brach having said after Baldessari invited Ian Wilson to the Cal Arts visiting artist programme. Ian Wilson was pivotal in the dematerialisation of the art object, which marked the final chapter of the modernist narrative. Unlike his fellow Conceptualists, however, his intrigues were primarily mystical; the artist pursuing an unmediated truth. “The heart of consciousness is a state of being which is formless,” Wilson said with sage-like opacity. An art of concepts, he believed, was necessarily without matter, belonging not to physical space but to the province of the mind. This was non-objective art taken to its final form; thought without corresponding sign. From 1968, the artist began mentioning the word ‘time’ in a series of informal interactions, curious to see what might arise.

Set of Four From Sect.20 is an uniquely tactile offering from an artist whose accumulated traces are primarily composed of simple, typed sentences. Its designation as an art object is uncertain; the text initially included in an invitation to the artist’s Oral Communication and Discussion Series at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven on 3 June, 1983. Multiple sheets of paper have been taped together to form a repetition of the printed sentence. These sentences are then repeated in handwriting. The pages appear taken from one of his Section works, a project conceived in 1971, in which the artist printed editioned books that featured single words or phrases throughout. These modest manuscripts were pivotal in Wilson’s conception of ‘pure awareness’ and are the only objects the artist produced from 1968 until his death in 2020. “Good conceptual art leaves nothing,” he wrote. “The reader is suspended, and it is from this vacuum that true consciousness emerges.”



Santu Mofokeng

b.1956, Soweto; d.2020, Johannesburg

Buddhist retreat near Ixopo, 2003 **Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag** **123.5 x 183 cm**

4

“I am interested in the ambiguity of things,” the late photographer Santu Mofokeng wrote. “This comes not from a position of power, but of helplessness.” In many of his pictures, this ambiguity appears as a spreading opacity, a diaphanous pall of rising smoke, mist or dust. Mofokeng grew up, he wrote in his essay *Caves*, “on the threshing floor of faith...and while I feel reluctant to partake in this gossamer world, I can identify with it.” There is to all Mofokeng’s works a distinct quietude – the artist looking not to political drama but to life’s minutiae, those “things I ordinarily do or see.” The tumult of the times, Mofokeng believed, need not be made explicit in photographs. Rather, he suggested, “the violence is in the knowing”; latent in the very places and people he pictured. “His voice, his awareness of where he was in space and history, his ability to think around what he was doing,” Joshua Chuang says of the artist, “wasn’t predictable but open and raw and simultaneously hidden.”

Included in the photo-essay, *Chasing Shadows*, *Buddhist retreat near Ixopo* continues Mofokeng’s reflections on the “gossamer world” of spirituality in places and practices of ritual significance. The essay’s first images were made on Good Friday in 1996, when Mofokeng travelled to Motouleng Cave, a site sacred to the Zionist Apostolic Faith. These initial scenes proposed the themes of ritual embedded in landscape – and memory embedded in ritual – which continued to shape much of Mofokeng’s practice for the proceeding decades. The shadows to which the title refers gesture not only to the absence of light, but borrow from the Sesotho articulation of the word – *seriti* – which extends shadow’s definition from physical manifestation to include invocations of aura, presence, and sympathetic magic. As to the success of such gnostic pursuits, Mofokeng later reflected: “Perhaps, I was looking for something that refuses to be photographed. I was only chasing shadows.”





James Webb

b.1975, Kimberley; works in Stockholm

***Prayer*, 2000– 12 speakers, carpet Dimensions variable**

5

There is to James Webb's work an eloquent distillation in form and thought. While his primary medium is sound, the artist suggests that "listening and doing nothing" perhaps better describes his preoccupations. Attuned to the poetics of the ordinary and understated, his work draws attention to the numinous in the normal. With objects minimal and more often monochrome, Webb lends to his sounds a material housing.

Prayer is Webb's most ambitious and expansive installation. Begun in 2000, in Cape Town, *The Future Is Behind Us* offers all the recordings – as many faith groups as Webb could find within the ten cities he has included over 22 years of *Prayer*. With the prayers of each city sounding asynchronously, the moment the visitor steps onto the carpet is unlikely to be repeated; the work offering almost infinite combinations.

The following is an excerpt from a conversation between James Webb (J.W.), Josh Ginsburg (J.G.), and Sara de Beer (S.D.B.) in preparation for the Future Is Behind Us, 5 December, 2022.

S.D.B. In our previous exhibition, *Customs*, Sumayya Vally referenced a conversation she had had with you, James, in which you spoke about the work, *Prayer*, as being like a sun. "Can a project be like a sun?" Sumayya asked. She continued: "I think so. The process of *Customs* has been like a sun for me."

J.W. The artwork *Prayer* can be thought of like a sun, because new artworks came out of it, as well as new friendships. *Prayer* has created connections and given life to other projects.

J.G. This exhibition, *The Future Is Behind Us*, is an opportunity to walk backwards into nowhere. You pass things that come into view. You may choose to collect them in your sight; see what comes from them being in relation to one another.

The challenge is to not reach too far forwards into what it is, or what it could be. Let it play itself out.

J.W. There are ideas and flows of time happening in the installation: the work is a space where all these time-based events have taken place.

I made the first *Prayer* in 2000, in the so-called (and in inverted commas) 'post-Apartheid' city of Cape Town. Religion has always played a part in South Africa, both in Apartheid, as well as in anti-Apartheid movements. I wondered: what would it be like to hear so many different people praying at the same time? I wanted the group; the many – the merging of different positions and beliefs.

Prayer has since taken place in ten cities, over the span of 22 years. Each version of *Prayer* is of its moment. It's not a municipal census. I ask people to help me, and those that will, do. I couldn't make the work without them. *Prayer* creates kinship and community. My interest in this has created a problem I have to try and solve with the help of other people.

J.G. What would you call it now if you could rename it?

J.W. *Prayer* is an umbrella term: it's where I was in 2000. Would I call it *Untitled* now, I don't know. Each time it is created it's new because the world has changed. There is *Prayer* before, and then after, 9/11. Before and after the invasion of Iraq. Before and after Jacob Zuma. Within the prayers are recorded historical moments: in *Prayer (Malmö)*, for instance, a Vietnamese Buddhist priest prays for the ships carrying refugees across the Mediterranean Sea. Another participant prays in the morning, upon waking, "Thank you, God, for letting me wake up sober this morning." Gordon Brown is in there insomuch that he was prayed for by some of the participants in *Prayer (Nottingham)* in 2009. There are prayers that reach beyond the lines of everyone's assumptions. Religion is a political force, and it is also social care and self-orientation.

J.G. Is it a cacophony? Is it a Babel moment? A collapse, or an arise?

J.W. It's many things, and, in a way, those descriptions are up to the audience. When you enter the gallery you see an event and you hear an event. A thundercloud, a garden, a mass, a symphony, a gurgling: someone once said it's the sound of God's answering machine.

Then there is a choreographic moment; a change as you take off your shoes and feel the carpet under your feet. Step within the voices and you are now part of a community. When, as an artist, I enter a place of worship, I am entering into a new space as a guest.

You can tune in and out, intercept the shimmer of voices around you, or you can kneel down, genuflect and hear just one. But that one isn't taken out of the context of the many.

J.G. How did the project change your lens of each city?

J.W. I can say what I found: I found hospitality and humanity. I have been moved by the positive responses, by the hospitality of people willing to share their time and their beliefs and practices with me. There are people who disagree with one another but who are happy to be recorded together and to be listened to.

Listening, which is a lot of what *Prayer* is about, changes one's perception of the world by giving time to the world. I am interested in listening because it requires one to give time and respect and an openness to the person and/or environment you are listening to – there's a pausing of other activities and a focusing of attention. Adam Phillips speaks of therapy as the 'listening cure': we find something when we listen to ourselves and know someone else is listening to us.

J.G. The work tinkers with infinite combinations. The prayers play asynchronously, and this is the first time that all the prayers have been heard together, in one place. Each person's moment on the carpet will be a different moment.

J.W. I like to think that visitors to the piece are remixing it as they move from place to place along the carpet. Perhaps their perspectives of the city are expanding, mixing, and remixing then, too.

J.G. What is your geometry of time?

J.W. I think of these ten editions as time capsules. To pray locates one in the moment, honours the past, and perhaps, is desirous of some kind of future. Absence is a key thing in my practice; the imagination goes into that absence and attempts to populate it. *Prayer*, the artwork, is a request that is answered. This is a lifelong project. At least, I hope it is.

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Gian Maria Tosatti

b.1980, Rome; works in Naples

5_ I fondamenti della luce - archeologia (intonaco 7), 2015–2017

Plaster, canvas

114 x 170 cm

6

Gian Maria Tosatti left Italy for New York in protest of the Italian Ministry's utterance at the time: *You cannot eat with culture*. "For me as an artist, to have stayed in Italy, would have been like living in a house where your father tells you, 'You will get nothing from this family.'" In Italy, Tosatti worked as an artist-activist with immigrant and refugee communities. In New York, he took part in projects made by artists and curators working in buildings left empty by the financial crisis of 2008. A collateral outcome of the attention that cultural practitioners applied to these buildings and areas, was that these abandoned spaces became interesting to developers and buyers, and the market value increased. On his return to Italy, the artist upended the traditional state-funding model. Where governments could be expected to provide cultural workers, artists and practitioners with state support, Tosatti would instead rejuvenate buildings that stood derelict and return them to municipalities and public institutions. Art, and the artist, would work with the communities of Naples to restore the city, and give back to the state. Gian Maria Tosatti "works on a large canvas...the city of Naples," Fondazione Morra announced for the artist's long-duration site-specific project, *Sette Stagioni dello Spirito*, in 2015.

The old convent di Santa Maria della Fede stands in the centre of Naples, "almost as if one could put a pin to know that one is in the very middle of the city," Tosatti says. In the fifteenth century, the building was administered by nuns as a place for sex workers, concubines; women unmarried or abandoned. Though not entirely a prison, it was a closed environment of rigid moral discipline. During wartime, it became a home for the displaced. After the earthquake in Naples, it was a refuge for the poor. In the 1990s, it was bought by a corporation with links to Naples' criminal underworld. Half-renovated and with the renovations abandoned, for twenty years, the building stood empty, used for illicit activities. In a densely populated city, in which there is little outdoor space and children play in the street, the environment around Santa Maria della Fede became increasingly dangerous. The citizens took it upon themselves to reclaim the building. Tosatti made the renovation of Santa Maria della Fede in the framework of the project *Sette Stagioni dello Spirito*.

5_ I fondamenti della luce - archeologia (intonaco 7) performs the same

techniques utilised by conservators – those used to preserve frescoes of cultural significance – upon the walls of the Santa Maria della Fede.

Gian Maria Tosatti was in residence at A4 in 2019, where he created the ambient installation *My Hart is so Leeg soos 'n Spieël* (*My Heart is a Void, the Void is a Mirror*).

The following is an excerpt from a conversation between Gian Maria Tosatti (G.M.T.) and Josh Ginsburg (J.G.) in preparation for The Future Is Behind Us, 8 December 2022.

G.M.T. When I started *Seven Seasons of the Spirit* in Naples, 200 churches stood abandoned and closed in the centre. There was, at the same time, a sense of monumentality, and a sense of abandon. I was demonstrating, through culture and private funding, that art can fundamentally restore back to the public their institutions. As an artist, I was giving to the state. I want to treat the lives of the people who have lived in these rooms, to give to their lived experience, the dignity that is given to the frescoes of Giotto. Just leaving the trace of one's passage is a masterpiece. I consider this work one of my most political works, for just living is a miracle of beauty.

J.G. If you use the device of the frame you can find beauty anywhere. This is less a projection but more an acknowledgment of the present.

G.M.T. This idea of the future is behind you: there is a Sicilian way of saying: If you want to know your thoughts of yesterday, look at your body now. If you want to know how you will be tomorrow, look at your thoughts of today.

J.G. Artworks are sometimes afraid of talking to beauty.

G.M.T. Looking for beauty could be something dangerous – or rather, the idea of beauty, of what we decide it should be. Instead, beauty has to do with awareness, not construction. The flower doesn't want to be beautiful. The flower just wants to blossom. Flowers are beautiful because they have the whole of nature around them, and nature does its part. I don't feel myself to be the author of the works, or them to be a product of my imagination. I take the phantom thread from the jacket of every person I meet and sew these together; one line of a novel sewed into each person's jacket. I ask each one to give me these lines, and like a technician, or an editor, I construct the novel that was already there. The great artist is one in which the portrait is a mirror through which you can see the soul of the person. We don't need mirrors to see what is visible. We can see the largest part of our body without a mirror. The other parts of the body we can 'see' with our other senses; by touching them. What we see with the mirror is what is invisible. Art is a mirror that changes in context. The mirror is not reflecting only the person that stands in front of it. The mirror must be placed somewhere. Sometimes it is important to see the darkness or sadness, but sometimes it is about seeing the light.

Jo Ractliffe

b.1961, Cape Town; works in Cape Town

N1: every 100 kilometres, 1996/99 **15-page hand-bound accordion book** **with open spine** **Dimensions variable; cover 14 x 18 cm**



Twenty-eight black-and-white landscape images, framed by the windshield of a Toyota Conquest and bound as an accordion, form *N1: every 100 kilometres*. Described by Jo Ractliffe as an "inventory of the road," the book constitutes a two-fold experiment: firstly, in testing a recently-acquired Holga camera and secondly, in the consistency of a singular action – that of pointing the camera towards the road every 100 kilometres and releasing the shutter. Ractliffe twice photographed the route along the N1 between Johannesburg and Cape Town, first in one, and then the other, direction.

The following is an excerpt from a conversation between Jo Ractliffe (J.R.) and Josh Ginsburg (J.G.) in preparation for The Future Is Behind Us, 1 December, 2022.

J.R. In a way, it was a work about nothing. I was going to drive across the country and reduce it to an image of nothing. A photograph every hundred kilometres. More or less. Photographing the road every hundred kilometres was an exercise – I had no initial intention for it as a work. I was taking the drive and so there it was – nothing better to do. But the disruption of that exercise – the donkey – precipitated an exhibition. It was one of those photographs that was more than the sum of its parts.

On one level, *N1* is a perfect document of what the camera doesn't see – or at least, those things that are absent – which also runs through the Angola work, the Vlakplaas work – all my work really. In this document though, the unseen is measured out in a very explicit yet invisible way.

One photograph every hundred kilometres and a portrait of a dead donkey: this became the project.

J.G. The unnameable, infinite road – the fuck-all landscape, as David Goldblatt would have said – becomes an infinite loop rather than a moment in time; it gestures towards the unknown, the unlimited. And then: this disruption.

J.R. That's what happens with all travel. Life happens; the journey is interrupted. I wanted to mark this interruption to the journey. I wanted to register something of how that interruption changes an experience of landscape. How – when I drive – I assume that space 'belongs' to me, I regard my view of the landscape as if it's mine. While I was standing looking at the dead donkeys, I heard what sounded like a gunshot – it was so loud. It was a car pulling a caravan and the tyre blew. It gave me a fright, I almost dropped to the ground. But in that moment, I realised where I actually was. That was not my place, I was alien. I wanted to register something of being made strange in that moment. That's why I made the billboards.

J.G. To my mind, the project survives most exquisitely in this book form. It offers an ordained view of the journey, it establishes and holds its sequence. The idea is made more vivid in the concertina.

J.R. Images time-travel, we know this. But I'm also drawn to the idea of the latent image – or latency. The things not pictured that are present in the photograph. It's something magical... You are looking at more than you're seeing. Photographing, for me, is a way of accessing those other unseen things.

Within the landscape – here as in Angola – my sense is there is no past, no present, no future. Pasts, presents and futures are all happening simultaneously.

J.G. The idea of 'the future is behind us' as a prompt encourages those modes I really admire – play and improvisation as opposed to pre-emptive pragmatism. You're not looking ahead but instead working with what you can see. The improvisational mode doesn't decide. It trusts. It's intuitive – free within a set of given constraints. It sets the conditions for being everywhere and nowhere. Similarly, the feeling of your concertina book is one of infinity. The rule-based practice with which it was made – the structure – set you free. A present was afforded in the predetermination of the guiding choice. The rule is the thing that is being followed; whatever you find in following the rule – whatever photograph you take – must be accepted.





Kader Attia

b.1970, Paris; works in Berlin and Paris

Untitled (Ghardaïa), 2009 **Cooked couscous on wooden table,** **digital prints on paper** **Dimensions variable**

In (*Untitled*) *Ghardaïa*, Kader Attia considers the influence of Mozabite design on the modernist architects Le Corbusier and Fernand Pouillon. Recalling the Algerian town and mud architecture of Ghardaïa in a scale model made of couscous, Attia considers this aesthetic appropriation within a colonising mechanism. That the town's Mozabite architecture informed Le Corbusier's spatial design ethos is a fact unacknowledged yet patently apparent. In colonising the North African territory, the French may have transposed their European image on the subjugated land, but the image of Algeria was similarly transcribed onto colonial France. Pouillon's social housing projects, built during the 1960s and 1970s on the outskirts of the French capital, is a particularly salient example. In Attia's retelling, Pouillon made use of Algiers as an architectural testing ground in the 1950s, fashioning the structures that gathered Algerians en-masse into controlled urban centres. This 'urban planning as control' was then taken back, to be deployed in France following the withdrawal from its colonies. "Just as, historically, museums have accumulated objects in cabinets of curiosity," critic Jane Ure-Smith offers as example, "post-colonial France now amasses the descendants of people from its former colonies in the 'open-sky jails' of the banlieues, north of Paris." Shaped from the culinary staple of Algeria's Berber communities, Attia's fragile construction evokes this confluence of influence. Accompanying the model are photocopied portraits of Le Corbusier and Pouillon, and the UNESCO certificate that declared Ghardaïa a World Heritage Site in 1982, two decades after the country gained independence.

*The following is an excerpt from a conversation between Kader Attia (K.A.) and Josh Ginsburg (J.G.) in preparation for *The Future Is Behind Us*, via Zoom, 29 November, 2022.*

J.G. What is your relationship to time?

K.A. Time is more cloudy – history is a cloud. I don't think chronology is linear, but rather is expressed in such things as circles, numbers,

movement, and space.

You can turn your back to the future when you look at the past, and look at the past when you turn your back towards the future, but you can never have the present on your back. Phenomenologically, consciousness is a linking fibre to the present – this almost imperceptible present – that makes you aware, ontologically, of being a subject.

The relationship we have with art is very much about the conscious present. We can really feel it with music, for instance. When you recall a melody – the moment you remember it – you are experimenting with the melody in the present.

The experience of an artwork is linked to time. The philosopher Bergson proposes that even without moving, you move. You move in time, without moving. This idea applies to life, to emotion – because emotion is life, because emotion is consciousness.

J.G. How does repair fit into the cycle of things? Does repair imply conclusion, or is repair a continual engagement?

K.A. The question of repair is bound to a wound. You cannot repair what is not injured. Repair is an oxymoron because – without naming it – you invoke the wound, be it physical or immaterial. For years, I've been reflecting on repair, and I've come to the idea that, in the end, there is a strange movement between the wound and the repair. Both turn around each other. Repair is a movement from a state – the accident, the injury – to the gesture of healing.

This is not a ruin. I am not representing a ruin. The crumbling of this installation throughout the exhibition is significant of life, of the living process of the architecture through time. For me, it's very important that *Ghardaïa* starts to crumble, for one to think about time.

I am interested in the idea of reenactment. This work provides a possibility to enter an untold story, and, at the same time, by experimenting with this crumbling, even waning architecture, the viewer experiences the paradox of this reenactment.

Mud returns to nature, it is in harmony with the environment – mud architecture returns to the environment. It is not polluting; it is merely earth, water and compression. It becomes a continuation of the body. Clay architecture has no right angles, which is a fascinating detail with regard to Le Corbusier, who loved right angles. He wrote poems on them; he was crazy about them. But the human body has no right angles, it is made of curves. Caring about mud architecture is like caring for a body.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

b.1957, Guáimaro; d.1996, Miami

“Untitled” (Orpheus, Twice), 1991 **Mirror** **150.5 x 195 cm**

91

Transforming everyday objects into poignant metaphors, Felix Gonzalez-Torres (or Félix González-Torres) addresses themes of love and loss, sexuality and sickness in works of material and formal simplicity. His practice pursued articulations of life and its fragility; the inevitability of the end. Initially trained as a photographer, Gonzalez-Torres' installation works extend a striking pictorial clarity. Often pairing identical objects – two clocks on a wall, two circles on a page, the two mirrors that comprise *“Untitled” (Orpheus, Twice)* – his double forms gesture to two lovers and their sharing of image and consciousness; the ideal of perfect synchronicity with another. Following the death of his life partner, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS-related complications in 1991, these twinned works assume a shade of mourning. *“Untitled” (Orpheus, Twice)* recalls in its title the myth of the Greek prophet, who descended to the underworld to find his lost lover and return her to the world of the living. Thwarted in his attempts, he was later killed by followers of Dionysis, who – in some retellings – had tired of hearing his mournful songs. The work holds a particular resonance in relation to Gonzalez-Torres: in 1996, the artist followed his partner in death.

The following are excerpts from various conversations with the practitioners Kader Attia (K.A.); Tarik Yildirim (T.Y.); Jo Ractliffe (J.R.); Gian Maria Tosatti (G.M.T.) and Josh Ginsburg (J.G.) in preparation for The Future Is Behind Us.

29 November, 2022

J.G. Opposite *(Untitled) Ghardaïa* is installed *“Untitled” (Orpheus, Twice)* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The work, two mirrors side by side, draws the other works that are in the room inside of it. There is the dialogue between the viewer and the artwork, and between the artworks in the room.

K.A. The mirror is a camera in and of itself, moving around and pulling whatever it reflects into it.

11 November, 2022

J.G. Two mirrors stand alongside one another, representative of himself, his lover, the infinity of their love, the affinity of their love.

T.Y. In Sufism, it is said that reality is like a mirror. When you look at a mirror, you see yourself. But, there's an illusion. The mirror is actually behind the reflection, and it's in the dark. You never see the actual mirror. The true object doesn't reveal itself to you – it remains unknown, in the back.

Think of yourself as a mirror. What remains at the back, in the dark part? Your mind, your thoughts? What appears to others in the front of the glass? Your body? Which is more real?

1 December, 2022

J.G. Tarik said something very curious about mirrors – that when you look into a mirror you never see the mirror; the mirror is not what you are looking at. You see what the mirror shows you, you cannot see its dark layer – but it is precisely the dark layer that allows you to see the reflection.

J.R. I think it's similar to an eye. Though sometimes you can see – however slightly – the split in the mirror; the double surface.

8 December, 2022

G.M.T. We don't need mirrors to see what is visible. We can see the largest part of our body without a mirror. The other parts of the body that we can't see, we can 'see' with our other senses: we can touch them.

What there is to see with the mirror, is what is invisible. What I cannot see without the mirror is the veil of sadness, or happiness. The mirror can show us the soul; show us what is invisible.

Art is a mirror. This can change with context, because the mirror is not reflecting only the person who stands in front of it, else the artist would be only a technician. The mirror must be placed somewhere.





Asemahle Ntlonti

b.1993, Cape Town; works in Cape Town

Emaphandleni, 2022

**Acrylic, acrylic gel medium, paper
and polypropylene thread**

178 x 200 cm

10

Asemahle Ntlonti revolves the canvas one way and then another, applying, glueing, stripping, and scrubbing at both the back and front planes. The method the artist has devised etches a feeling of 'round' within her paintings, where paper is no longer flat; where what will become the face begins from behind. Working on the floor rather than against the wall, and across multiple works at any one time, Ntlonti interprets the colours and environments of her ancestral home in the Eastern Cape, "researching to understand myself, having conversations with my people because my history is not vastly written about." The works are at once landscapes of place as well as portraits of interior spaces with their attendant intimacies. Speaking of her mother's homestead, Ntlonti says, "The wall looks like a topographical painting, mud filling the cracks, pink paint: it's easy and natural, and that's the way I want to work. People think these huts are beautiful, but they don't consider them to be 'art'. What, then, is abstraction, for me, as a Xhosa person from the Eastern Cape? This is not resolved. I have to challenge myself."

(For more information about the artist, please continue to page 46.)



Mitchell Gilbert Messina

b.1991, Nababeep; works in Cape Town

Play for Artworks, 2022

**Kyle Morland, *Stacked Facets* (2022);
Asemahle Ntlonti, *Intaba* (2022); light; sound
10 mins**

Play for Artworks, directed by Mitchell Gilbert Messina, began during Parallel Play v.2, when artists Asemahle Ntlonti and Kyle Morland were invited to make mobile studios in A4's Gallery in between the exhibitions *Customs* and *The Future Is Behind Us*.

Asemahle Ntlonti's *Intaba* is stapled to the wall. A sculpture that Kyle Morland put together incidentally – accidentally – stands on a plinth. Mitchell Gilbert Messina animates their surfaces with light, lends their conversation sound.

Kyle Morland

Kyle Morland's *Library of Forms* is assembled from the artist's 'arcs', 'facets' and 'lofted flanges'. The arcs are curved, the facets hard-edged, the flanges pleated and nipped into both circle and edge. Each shape is numbered, the numbered pieces then tumbled together to create a form that can take its place on the library's shelf. By the time each aluminium piece is folded, welded, polished, buffed, the evidence of the artist's hand is almost imperceptible, so clean and clear is Morland's appropriation of machine-like dexterity in his work. He eschews words, names, anything that could detract from pure form. Only a string of numerals added together and the letters that designate the pattern persist: LB28_76+82+92+92, X06, 51_.

Mitchell Gilbert Messina

Offering humorous insights into the serious business of art-making, Mitchell Gilbert Messina's "joke gestures" extend curiously compelling reflections on his chosen subjects; be it the state of video art after Youtube introduced its autoplay feature, an imagined siege of the British Museum, an animated exposé on an African art institution, or a fictional 'curator emulator' for online exhibitions. A "post-internet collagist" – to borrow from Sean O'Toole

– Messina pairs a light-hearted playfulness and sense of provisionality with pointed institutional critique. In addition to artist (and his other art-adjacent roles), his role at A4 is that of ‘animator’.

(For information on **Asemahle Ntlonti**, please refer to page 43, or continue below.)

What follows is an excerpt from a conversation between Asemahle Ntlonti (A.N.), Kyle Morland (K.M.), Jean-Marié Malan (J.M.M.), Anelisa Ntlonti (A.N.N.), Sean O’Toole (S.O.T.), Sara de Beer (S.D.B.), Mitchell Gilbert Messina (M.G.M.), Nkhensani Mkhari (N.M.) and Josh Ginsburg (J.G.) on the occasion of Parallel Play v.2, 25 November, 2022.

J.G. When we started this instance of Parallel Play, it wasn’t done on the basis that there would be overlaps in the coordinates of Kyle and Asemahle’s practices but many interesting and unexpected touch points have arisen.

M.G.M. Both Asemahle and Kyle’s practices involve making and moving things until they settle. When does the work rest? When do you stop shifting? When do you feel a work is finished?

A.N. I begin with an idea, but as I make, new things arrive. The idea changes; I follow new directions. Before I start on the big work, I’ll sometimes work on small ones to offload what is in my head. If I can’t answer or resolve the work at the time, I turn over the next page, in a way. This is a process like writing: when I write in my notebook, I don’t use a full page. There will be two sentences, on different pages.

K.M. Once you’ve preserved a form, it’s finished. Once the form has been sanded and sealed. I follow a series of steps towards resolution. It’s a given logic.

S.O.T. Thinking of two verbs: work and play. Work is directional but play can accommodate failure. There is experiment in the first but also a formality. Perhaps you accept failure in play; you are released from the idea of a final work.

A.N. For me, the distinction between work and play can be challenging at times. Are you playing for the sake of playing, or because you want something out of it? Are you being honest in your playing? It’s probably a bit of both.

p. 46 But play is always productive; you can salvage things created in play.

I revisit my pile of discarded things. Visitors to the studio are drawn to it. These things have potential: a pile of things I don’t have a place for, yet.

J.G. A target is a thing that one is driven to realise in all its precision. Then is the detritus; the tests that generate these beautiful objects along the way.

M.G.M. How does the looking look? What is the research behind the practice?

K.M. Trying and trying again. Trial and error. Learning. There isn’t frustration, just work and problem-solving. I don’t engage in intentional research nowadays; rather, I pursue conversations with studio peers and other practitioners. I understand my work within a lineage but I no longer feel preoccupied with it.

J.G. In your work, Asemahle, there are senses of both excavation and topological compositions. Both are part of the same discipline, the ground seen from different proximities like two geometries on a shared plane.

Non-objective art is an imagining of pure form, an art without pictorial subject. But in your case, your works refer explicitly to something while maintaining their formal abstraction.

S.D.B. There is also – in both Kyle and Asemahle’s practices – a shared engagement with the multiple, with assemblage and collage. There are so many different things happening, and opportunities for things to happen in ways other than what they were initially intended.

M.G.M. [After a pause] What sound would your artworks make?



Kemang Wa Lehulere

b.1984, Cape Town; works in Cape Town

Teacher Don't Teach Me Nonsense, 2017 Blackboard paint, 365 paver bricks, 5 shelves Dimensions variable

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Working against collective forgetting, Kemang Wa Lehulere gives to South Africa's recent past images, objects and gestures – each a mnemonic sign for those stories lost in historical abstraction. Poised between amnesia and archive, his installations and performances become poetic translations of memory. The artist counts among his many mediums: collaboration, quotation, objects both found and made, and chalk. To the latter, Wa Lehulere gives material significance; for its pedagogy, its fragility, the palimpsest of a blackboard. It extends, he suggests, “into broader ideas around history and memory; the writability of history...the erasure of history, the marginalisation of certain histories, and the re-writing of history.”

Sean O'Toole in *A Model Brick: A Literary History of the Brick in Johannesburg* frames the brick as “an object capable of reciting itself – of being this, a metaphor for suspended outrage, but also that, a pilfered building block, a stony nothing.” Composed of 365 bricks, one for each day of a year, Kemang Wa Lehulere's *Teacher Don't Teach Me Nonsense* is a library. Each of the brick-books is painted with blackboard paint. For this installation of the work, the shelves and surrounding walls have been painted 'library' green, reminiscent of classroom boards. Collected together on these shelves, the bricks appear to be wrapped, jacketed, uniform; a set of dusty objects unboxed from history's attic. The work's title is borrowed from a 1980 song by the Nigerian singer Fela Kuti – a protest anthem against the colonially-imposed Western education system's failing of African students. The brick itself can be both used to build, or to dismantle, “alluding to the harshness of the state, and at the same time, used in protest as a weapon. There's an ambiguous materiality,” says Wa Lehulere, gesturing to the political potency of literature through the formal qualities of the brick.

The following is an excerpt from a conversation between Kemang Wa Lehulere (K.W.L.) and Sara de Beer (S.D.B.) in preparation for The Future Is Behind Us, 13 December, 2022.

S.D.B. What is your relationship to the future?

K.W.L. The future is a desire that never arrives. History is something that lives in the present. Everything that exists was created previously. When something is produced, it becomes present and past at the same time.

I've spoken before in other interviews about time being elastic. When one moves away from non-linear time, it becomes possible to time-travel in an artwork, accessing the future, present and past at the same time.

The Future Is Behind Us is curated by Josh Ginsburg

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