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**PAINTING AS A RESPONSE TO A SENSE OF DISLOCATION  
IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL FABRIC**

Documentation and commentary on the body of practical work submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Art at the Michaelis School of Fine Art,  
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**DEDICATED**

**With Love to my Parents**

**Helen and Abraham**

**with deep appreciation for their unwavering support**



# CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
PROPOSAL ABSTRACT	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
BACKGROUND ESSAY: THE BAGGAGE OF DISLOCATION	5
A SELECTIVE ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT	14
PART ONE: POLLOCK, SERRA AND RAUSCHENBERG	17
JACKSON POLLOCK	18
RICHARD SERRA	23
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG	25
PART TWO: ART IN GERMANY AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR	29
THE WORK OF JOSEPH BEUYS: THE WILL TO TRANSFORM	32
ANSELM KIEFER: THE REFUSAL OF REPRESENTATION	40
PART THREE: ANTONI TÀPIES: THE APPREHENSION OF MATTER	49
PART FOUR: ANTONIN ARTAUD – THE ENCODING OF ARTAUD	59

	Page
ILLUSTRATIONS	64
DOMESTIC BAGGAGE: INTRODUCTION AND EXPLICATION OF WORKING PROCESS	69
PAINTINGS ON CANVAS	70
DOCUMENTATION AND NOTES ON INDIVIDUAL PAINTINGS	73
THE GRIDS	91
NOTES ON THE PRELIMINARY WORKS ENTITLED <i>THE GRIDS</i>	92
A SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY	102

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## PROPOSAL ABSTRACT

My proposal was to produce a series of paintings as a response to a sense of dislocation in the South African social fabric.

The body of paintings is entitled *Domestic Baggage* and consists collectively of paintings on canvas and preliminary works entitled *The Grids*.

Thematically consistent, the works and the accompanying research document emphasize the disturbed and marginalized dimensions of fragmented society. A significant frame of reference is the claustrophobic, persistent presence of increasing violence and loss of life arising from the dislocation ethos.

Iconographically, a strategy of allusion has been adopted, allowing for the interaction of figurative, gestural and material referents. Dependence on overtly illustrative or purely narrative modes of representation has been deferred.

An extensive background essay highlights the appropriately identified specifics of the backdrop against which the series of paintings has been developed.

A detailed art historical contextualization foregrounds those precedents most pertinent to the formal and conceptual processes informing the *Domestic Baggage* series.



## INTRODUCTION

You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something; it is something.

Jonathan Kalb on the writing of James Joyce (Kalb 1989: 3).

This dissertation accompanies a series of paintings completed between 1991 and 1994, and collectively entitled *Domestic Baggage*. The broadly art-historical and historical nature of the research contextualizes the body of paintings. Emphasis is placed on the element of dislocation in the South African social fabric.

Working in the domain of image-making in South Africa I am aware of the rapidly disintegrating siege-mentality which for so long invaded every aspect of one's life. Our isolation from the rest of the world has been supplanted by a growing awareness of co-existent cross- and inter-cultural endeavours both internationally and locally. The plurality within life and in art is in a state of ongoing flux informed by and contributing to a range of inter-disciplinary discourses. The post-modern ethos has seen a proliferation of interweaving voices, characterized by the convergence of art, art history, history, literature, semiotics, the media, materials and philosophy.

Arthur Danto writes of 'a historical moment in which art makers, art historians, teachers, philosophers, and critics of art are so interlocked in one another's activities that the making of any artwork whatever – even if it looks absolutely traditional – demands a complex philosophical justification and a critical apparatus it is often up to the artist also to furnish' (Danto 1990: 7).

It is with an awareness of Danto's assertions that this dissertation foregrounds intertextual discourse and the interrogation of fixed positions. I have approached the dual roles of interpreter and writer informed by a non-absolutist attitude. Prescriptiveness is not intended in the comments concerning the paintings documented in sections 3 and 4 of this dissertation. The documentation proceeds from the viewpoint that interpretation is a subjective exercise. The inconclusiveness of interpretation and the elusiveness of meaning is acknowledged.

The dissertation includes the following:

1. A background essay outlines the salient features of the political, social and historical precedents pertaining to the central theme of the body of paintings. The focus is the divisive effects of apartheid. Indexical of a politically corrupted social ethos, dislocation is at the core of the collective content of this written component.

The paintings are not merely illustrative of periodic phenomena or time constrained events. The working process has been determined by a desire to develop a body of evocations which are redolent of an awareness that the past and the present are interpenetrative phenomena subjectively experienced by individuals and by communities.

2. A selective art historical contextualization concentrates on the formal and historical precedents informing the processes of those artists who have re-appraised the accepted relationships between art, artist and society. The evocative properties of material, of form, of concept and of process are examined. Four groups of artists have been selected who deal centrally with the idea of **art as an arena in which to act**. These artists have provided conceptual, philosophical and technical models for my own approach to painting.

- (a) Jackson Pollock, Richard Serra and Robert Rauschenberg are three American artists who epitomise the will of the artist to construct new approaches continually and radically.

- (b) Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer have identified strongly with the history of their country. A crucial area investigated is the artistic responses of Beuys and Kiefer to the impact of the Second World War on Germany. Their strong need to find appropriate artistic languages in a time of instability parallels my search and response regarding the fragmented South African experience.
- (c) Antoni Tàpies is included for his engagement with materiality and for his deep affinity with Catalan culture and his immersion in Zen Buddhism. An exploration of Tàpies' methods and concepts are of particular importance to my use of evocative materials.
- (d) Antonin Artaud, the French theatre theorist, director of plays, poet, actor and artist was seminal in restoring the body to the art act. Within the iconographic and conceptual terrain of the *Domestic Baggage* series, the encoding of Artaud is the encoding of a pathological/existential referent with particular emphasis on marginalization.

3. Documentation and Notes on Individual Paintings:

A short interpretation of each work situates references to iconography, materials, art history, literature and technical procedures within my perceptions of a dislocated social environment. The comments have been made in the recognition that meanings of images expand when interpretation takes into account the refusal of meaning to be conclusive and fixed.

4. General Notes on the preliminary works on cardboard known as *The Grids*. These are exploratory and preparatory works for the larger paintings on canvas.

The paintings, the references to art history and the historical material have been situated in intertextual relationships with local and international writings of, among others, Johan Degenaar, Susan Sontag, André Brink, Jacques Derrida, Marion Arnold, Ivor Powell, Gary van Wyk, Arthur Danto, Rian Malan, Rosiland Krauss and Donald Kuspit.

Presented in conjunction with the body of paintings, this dissertation provides a link between the material and underlying conceptual dimensions of the *Domestic Baggage* series. Implicit in the scope of this project is an attempt to join historically situated events with personal perceptions and responses.

In the opening quotation, Jonathan Kalb's observation dispels any reliance on conventional assumptions regarding the writings of James Joyce. Joyce's work ultimately projects the materiality of the text. In this vein, my paintings and this accompanying document proceed from an acknowledgement of material as language – both written and painted.

## BACKGROUND ESSAY

### THE BAGGAGE OF DISLOCATION

The aim of this background essay is to highlight some of the primary features of the context within which the process of my painting has occurred. My intention is to convey a sense of the perceived character of the pervading dislocated South African historical, social and political environment. To clarify my relationship to the 'grand narratives' of South African history, I have chosen a few key images which foreground the relationship between history and identity. The particular sites of concern are the historical precedents of the present conflicted scenario in which the forced separations of people forms the central focus.

The 'baggage' referred to in the title is that which 'contains' the experiences of adversity, personal and collective, in South Africa. Inferences to the 'carrying of a load' are intended – a 'load' which includes historically determined experiences as well as the objects produced in the art making process. 'Domestic' refers to the South African location of the thematic impulses resonant in my body of paintings. In the light of the histories of dispossession and possession of land and the exercise of hegemony, the South African social scenario reveals an obsession with owning and with the resultant protection and control of ownership. In literal and figurative terms we 'carry' the substance of this obsession in our collective 'domestic baggage'.

This essay is not simply about the incongruities of South African politics or history, or about violence, or about art and political correctness, or about wounded landscapes, or droughts, dust and locust plagues. The backdrop against which I have chosen to work features all of the above and more. The particulars and universals of lived experience merge with those of the mediated experience.

The engagement with and sensitivity to our South African histories, both distant and more recent, is indicative of my need to locate and, to identify myself. To seek connections with past events and people is to create opportunities for the re-appraisal of one's origins. We look again at what

constitutes what/who we 'are' through an interrogation of what we have 'become' and are 'becoming'. Particular images from the past have the potential to resonate with meaning in the present. Looking, listening, reading, writing and re-writing have brought to the fore primary images embedded in our historical texts and experiences – distant and recent.

Such a primary image is an archival photograph which depicts a group of exiled Xhosa chiefs on Robben Island (Figure 1). They were photographed in 1859, the year in which they had been transported to the island. Their exile was a consequence of the conflict between the British and the Xhosa nation. The photograph foregrounds what Johan Degenaar has termed "the unfinished business of our collective history" (Degenaar 1992: 11). The image of the exiled chiefs evoked and invited a personal re-appraisal of the antecedents of dislocation in our past.

In the adversarial South African political climate Robben Island has assumed the symbolic dimensions of a place of enforced isolation which Nigel Penn has described as follows:

Throughout its history it has been used as a place of banishment; a repository for those the state has deemed virulently sick, mad or bad; an oubliette for the Other; a sea-girt, wind-swept place of pain and punishment (Penn 1992: 5).

An island for the socially unacceptable: for exiles and convicts, for the isolation of lepers and the insane, the island was both prison and asylum. By way of analogy: the South African psychic topography is characterised to a large extent by demarcated 'islands' of separation. The inhabitants of this partitioned country share the traumas of a social impasse spawned by wide-ranging legislative structures permitting limited social contact. The racially prescriptive apartheid laws have divided the country into 'islands' of enforced separateness and segregation.

The collision of two worlds, Europe and Africa, on Southern African soil has had far-reaching significance across the full spectrum of human habitation and endeavour in this region. The attendant hostilities go back a long time. In 1510, for instance, Viscount D'Almeida, the Portuguese voyager, was killed by indigenous people along our Southern Cape coast. Over 300 years later acts of attrition enveloped the Xhosa and the colonial British on the Eastern Frontier. "In the last two weeks I have burned 2,700 huts", Harry Smith wrote to Sir Benjamin D'Urban in 1835 (Low 1992: 8). The cultural interactions notwithstanding, the campaign of economic destruction waged by the British against the Xhosa saw the sowing of the seeds of future enmities. "Frontiers are also psychological and philosophical, cultural and scientific" (Low 1992: 8). The colonial powers attacked the indigenous peoples on all these fronts. Full-scale hostilities eventually erupted in the nine campaigns along the banks of the Fish River.

The second primary image I have chosen is encapsulated in a song. The people of Sophiatown made the song the medium of their protest against their forced removal to Meadowlands and other areas on the Rand in the 1950s. The song as an image of defiance essentializes the spirit of a community response to the threat of dislocation.

ua utloa makhooa a reng?  
ha re yeng ko  
Meadowlands.

do you hear what the whites are  
saying?  
we must go to Meadowlands.

ua ba utloa botsotsi ba  
reng?  
ons daak nie, ons phola hil

do you hear what the tsotsis are  
saying?  
we're not budging, we're playing  
it cool right here!

(Kavanagh 1981).

Sophiatown became the legendary centre of black South African cultural and political life during the 1940s and 1950s.



More than any other community, Sophiatown embodied the aspirations of black urbanites while supplying the conditions for their achievement. Its destruction epitomised the nature of apartheid and remains one of the darkest chapters in South Africa's modern social history (Coplan 1985: 6).

The community of Sophiatown was one of the great many so-called 'black spots' deemed undesirable by the government. Resettlement of the displaced people forced to move saw the rise of townships like Soweto. In the Eastern Cape, for instance, Platzky and Walker have noted that 'over the past twenty years the government ... has moved 80,000 people out of Duncan Village ... to Mdantsane' (Orkin 1991: 168). The richness of life in Sophiatown has often been compared with the dynamic spirit of another area demolished by state legislation, namely District Six. The vibrant community of District Six was forced to move from an area which had had its origins in Cape Town around the turn of the 19th Century.

Beyond the physical removals there is at a fundamental level, the destruction of the material lived history of the splintered communities. A deeply etched sense of identity was nurtured by generations for whom there was the parallel sense of security and community. Richard Rive has written of the people who were driven out of their secure neighbourhoods and relocated to the soulless concrete, council dormitories of Manenberg and Hanover Park. He refers to their involvements with the challenges presented by the demands of relocation:

When people are trying to exist they have little time for protest until they reach that dangerous point where existence and protest become synonymous. Then they are prepared to face Casspirs with stones (Jeppie and Soudien 1990: 110).

The stark image embodied in Rive's last observation is one that has become a daily feature of the South African visual vocabulary. Even though the last vestiges of apartheid are being dismantled, the legacy of the past with its accumulated aggregate of conflict is presently giving rise to levels of violence that defy reason.

"There was so much horror in my country, and it came in so many forms" (Malan 1990: 220). His travels into the interior of his country left Rian Malan sickened with disbelief: afflicted by a sense of paralysing trauma, Malan found himself adrift, his grip on reality annihilated. Malan's honesty is revealing of the deeply disturbing social impasse that individuals are struggling to cope with. He writes of the statistics in 1984.

When that terrible year was done, statisticians in the service of liberal Institute of Race Relations counted only 79 'perceived collaborators' among 1,302 unrest fatalities. Of the remaining deaths, 265 were attributed to internecine conflict among blacks, a further 98 to 'unexplained conflict'. And beyond that, beyond internecine and inexplicable violence, beyond 'accidents' (10 deaths) and 'indeterminate' (31), lay the black hole of 'burned bodies found' – 231 of them in all, the anonymous burned alive by the faceless, under circumstances no one dared examine too closely (Malan 1990: 270).

Recently released body-count figures reveal the extent of the enormous loss of life over the last nine years of almost continuous attrition, hostilities and violent conflict. The Cape Times of 3 July 1993 reports that more than 13000 people are believed to have died in political violence in South Africa since 1984. The Human Rights Commission has released a figure of 500 people killed in the month of July 1993. Born of extreme anger and decades of pent-up frustration, the anarchy which has presently erupted in the townships has added dimensions of unforeseen violence to the already overloaded archive of images of violence in South Africa.

Ironically, media coverage unloads the extremes of adverse imagery right across the divisions of our separate 'islands' of experience and habitation. Our domestic baggage contains our peculiarly South African imagery.

Images are at the heart of this essay. Creative interventions have significantly always been at the heart of life in our turbulent times. During the dark days when texts, photographs, plays and songs were suppressed, courageous people still succeeded in stirring memory. When the mass media was censored, art, in the form of the poster, was deployed to serve communities denied access to the media. Artists were able to contribute their skills to the formation of silkscreen workshops like those at the Community Arts Project in Cape Town and the Screen Training Project in Johannesburg. Posters conveyed both the visual and the verbal messages. Ivor Powell draws attention to the direct manner in which some poster makers have succeeded in conveying the peculiarities of the harsh living conditions experienced by township people during the 1970s and 1980s. "Especially in the productions by grassroots community groups like the Huhudi Youth Organisation – there is a simplicity and directness of feeling, a stark and appropriate choice of basic motifs that attains the power and economy of real art" (Powell 1991: 44). The fact that the Huhudi silkscreen printers were constantly harassed but were nevertheless successful, might have prompted Powell's otherwise patronising assertion that the posters achieved the status of "real art". The people of Huhudi, a black township in the Northern Cape, started printing posters at the Lesedi Silkscreen Workshop in 1985 (Figure 2). Threatened by forced removal to a government designed bantustan backwater, the people resisted and set about the production of posters to proclaim their struggle. The poster workshop was seen as a subversive element by the state. The workshop was petrol-bombed and the State of Emergency imposed after 1985 saw the eventual closing down of Lesedi.

Undeterred by, and possibly as a result of the lack of conventionally construed Western art education, black artists have continued to work with astounding self-determination. As individuals, the township artists continue to defy easy categorisation. Sculptors, painters and printmakers, informed by a strong sense of the didactic, preserve an active relationship between art and lived experience, and art and highly diverse communities constantly in a state of flux.

Ruptures in community life, threatened and destroyed domesticity and erosions of identity have been the common collective experience of Black people when, after its rise to power in 1948, the Nationalist Party began the implementation of its apartheid system against a voteless Black majority. The paintings of Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993), the sculptures of Sydney Kumalo (b. 1935), the prints of John Muafangejo (1943-1987) and the more recent works of Helen Sebidi (b. 1943) each manipulating individual formal stratagems are resonant with signs of disturbance, violation, dispossession and the threat of disruption. Sekoto's paintings quietly assert the traces of ominous foreshadowing, of the imminent disruption of family life (Figure 3). Kumalo's sculpted figures reveal the conflict between the overt and the insidious, the stifled and unleashed energy (Figure 4). Muafangejo has worked in words and images to document his feelings and responses to historical events in Southern Africa (Figure 5). Sebidi's torn, collaged, painted and drawn works (Figure 6) are described by Marion Arnold: "Her art making process is a metaphor for black female experience; it is about fragmentation and negotiation between opposing forces in order to constitute new unities which are often fragile and temporary" (Arnold 1989: 8).

Steven Sack writes of changing orientations within the aesthetic of township art:

The violent imagery of Dumile was complemented in the 1960s and 1970s by a different kind of aesthetic: an art that celebrated the beautiful and the mystical. It was an art inspired by music, literature, poetry and an affirmative view of the political struggle: as a site of hope rather than despair. Fikile Magadlela, Thamsanqua Mnyele, Dikobe Martins, Peter Clarke and others reacted against the prevailing township imagery of hopelessness. They were a generation of artists who showed the way out of the aesthetic of distortion, producing images of great beauty and mystery, evolving a symbolism that offered some relief from the degradation and squalor (Sack 1988: 17).

The complexities of the past and its discourses, and the deficiencies of historiography cannot be oversimplified. The concept of a society's dislocatedness cannot be reduced to a set of referents. For these reasons I have deemed it necessary to present the most salient features in this expanded form so as to provide a sense of the particular background against which I have chosen to work.

In negotiating the terrain of the present, the past can provide necessary landmarks. Memory can illuminate perceptions, can enlighten the tracing of and sharing of experience. The paintings that have emerged do not illustrate my responses to the restless social milieu of which I am part. These paintings are the response, the visual baggage that has arisen through me. Memory has asserted its presence in the process of arriving at these images.

Referring to the South African memory André Brink has written of the damage caused by the legislated silencing of writers, the bannings and censoring of literature. He points out that not only have the literary arts suffered but that a vital part of the South African memory was excised from the public consciousness. And without memory, Kundera more than any other modern writer has reminded us, a whole society, a whole culture becomes maimed, if not paralysed" (Brink 1992: 45).

South Africans have engaged each other as never before in a dialogue loaded with retrospective analysis. The blanket of silence is being slowly lifted.

In conclusion, Johan Degenaar comes to mind as he, himself, grapples with the dynamics of the relationship between history, consciousness and art. He highlights the significance of the historical consciousness: "... even if we want to hold on to the Nietzschean idea of the celebration of art based on the notion of the eternal joy of being human, we should not do it at the expense of a historical consciousness and of a sensitivity for what is happening in our country" (Degenaar 1991: 12).

## A SELECTIVE ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The contextualization of my paintings is in part motivated by Carter Ratcliff's statement that

... of all the painting of the last two centuries – modern painting – is inhabited, haunted by the wilful figure of the artist

(Ratcliff 1984: 47).

The will of the artist is at the core of the observations which form the framework of this contextualization. The artists and art-historical precedents have been selected for the purposes of exemplifying and highlighting those formal and iconographic concerns most pertinent to an appraisal of my paintings. An act of war is, similarly, central to this survey which is inclusive of artists from both sides of the North Atlantic. In 1940 the German army invaded Paris. The occupation brought an end to the role of Paris as the art capital of the world. The Second World War had a far-reaching impact on the shape of art-historical developments. New York became home to those European artists who had sought refuge there from the Nazi invasion and its ascent as the international art capital was set in motion. Contact with European artists greatly enriched the artistic impulses of the emergent American avant-garde.

Viewed in retrospect, the oeuvre of Paul Cézanne has come to represent a watershed in the wide range of aesthetic and philosophical ideas formulated and practised by European artists around the turn of the last century. After his death in 1906, it became clear that Cézanne had not only questioned the nature of painting but that, since the 1870s, he had occupied himself consistently with the fundamental proposal of painting as an act of analyzing representation. John Russell suggests that Cézanne had "... rebuilt the experience of seeing" (Russell 1991: 31). The legacy of the enduring act; of the will of a painter, as exemplified by Cézanne, was at the root of the European avant-garde spirit and is manifest in the work of artists as diverse as Matisse and Picasso, Klee, Mondrian and Miro; Arp, Duchamp and Tatlin, Marc, Magritte and Ernst. With precedents in Monet, Manet and Degas, Cézanne's plastic innovations gave rise to the crucial re-interpretative undercurrents in the iconic framework of Cubism.

In 1912 Wassily Kandinsky published his influential work *On the Spiritual in Art*. Two of Kandinsky's seminal abstractions entitled *Composition 4* (1911) and *Improvisation 26* (1912) reveal his development of formal autonomy in painting. Malevich had painted his *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (c.1918). Brancusi's sculptures had been shown in New York for the first time in 1914. Duchamp had started his *Large Glass* in 1915 and by the 1920s Mondrian was painting his minimally configured geometric compositions. The Bauhaus had made a significant impact both in Europe and in the United States. The violent upheavals of the First World War had caused great suffering within the social fabric of Europe and yet, seemingly generated by the conflict, Europe had become a cultural and technological powerhouse.

The American artists of the 1940s inherited the legacy of the European cultural community in all its diverse forms. The questioning of traditions and the redefinitions of the meanings and nature of art motivated the American painters in the approach to mid-century. As with Cézanne, the task of redefining the nature of painting assumed such centrality as to become the primary subject of painting.

In the following section I have chosen a series of case-studies of artists who provide co-essential reference points to my own work. This approach provides the general and the specific contextualization of the key impulses I have identified as having pertinence to my working processes.

The artists in this study reveal a number of similarities. Most notably, they declare an open-ended approach to their use of materials. Their works and artistic standpoints are without artifice. They have extended their artistic vocabularies. Artists like Pollock, Serra, Rauschenberg, Beuys, Kiefer, Tàpies and Artaud have re-defined art-practice through their personal engagement with issues such as nationalism, history, culture and identity. What is significant for me, is the way these artists have sought to erase the boundaries between art and life. Equally significant is their relationship between the body and art and how art potentially has the power to clear an alternative space, outside of traditional parameters, in which processes of catharsis, self-reflection and healing are made possible.



PART ONE

POLLOCK, SERRA AND RAUSCHENBERG

## JACKSON POLLOCK

This essay does not propose to cover the many aspects of Modernism, nor does it include a critique of Modernism per se. However, writing about the work of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) means also writing of Modernism. Three important issues arise:

Firstly, it is significant that the post-Modernist critique has introduced a questioning of the proclaimed absolute nature of formalist principles advocated during the Modernist epoch. Clement Greenberg was the foremost champion of formalism and of the abstractionist tendencies in the 1940s. Arthur Danto writes of Greenberg's insistence on the pursuit of purity in painting, of his emphasis on the medium and on the flatness of the surface. Danto writes of Greenberg's identification "of a certain kind of abstract painting as the inevitable absolute that the avant-garde had been seeking." He quotes a key statement by Greenberg: "Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself" (Danto 1993: 66).

Concurrent with Pollock's non-easel action paintings of 1948, Greenberg had warned of "the crisis of the easel picture" (Danto 1993: 64).

Alternative to the purity of the procedures and guiding principles informing the modernist approach of the Abstract Expressionists is the hybrid nature of current post-modern approaches inclusive of literature, the media, anthropology, historical sources and popular culture. The grand narrative of Modernism, typified by Greenberg's claims to the exclusive validity of a single form of aesthetic reality, its inappropriate use of terms, and the over-simplified teleology of Modernist art movements, is constantly debated in post-modernist discourses more positively disposed towards interacting pluralistic perceptions of life and culture.

The second issue relates to the use of the terms 'primitive' and 'primitivism' in reference to subjects or forms borrowed from, or appropriated from non-Western sources. The arts of Asia, Africa, Oceania and the Americas offered the Western artists iconographic alternatives to the illusionistic traditions that had prevailed since the Renaissance. In this essay, the terms 'primitive' and 'primitivism' have been placed within quotation marks since present critical opinion suggests that these terms are inaccurate and have derogatory, ethnocentric characterizations associated with their usage.

In 1984 the Museum of Modern Art in New York staged the exhibition *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. This show sparked off the 'primitivism' debate in earnest and signalled the end of an unquestioning attitude towards the appropriation of styles and the conjoining of the terms 'modern' and 'primitive'.

Generally perceived as primal and exotic, the primitive posed a double threat to the logocentric west, the threat of otherness and relativism. It also posed a doubly different artifact, more "immediate", more "magical". We know how the early moderns reclaimed this artifact as art, abstracted it into form; how, also, the "Primitivism" show mitigated its otherness, projected it as affinity (Foster 1985: 193).

Thirdly, and flowing from the second point, is the issue concerning misrepresentations of Pollock's 'primitivism' and his affinity with the Navaho healing rituals. The rituals and objects of 'primitive' cultures have habitually been presented as art objects and events alongside assumptions about their meaning. This misrepresentation hinges on the argument that the intentions and contexts of the rituals or objects are not adequately known or revealed. These de-contextualizations and altered meanings have contributed to the myth of the 'primitive' artistic sensibility.

Thomas McEvilly writing in particular of the misrepresentations by museum curators says: "The sacrifice of the wholeness of things to the cult of pure form is a dangerous habit of our culture. It amounts to a rejection of the wholeness of life" (McEvilly 1984: 59). He argues for the sort of investigation,

within the disciplines of theoretical discourse and curatorship, that would open up a greater empathy in explorations of the more fully configured meanings of rituals and objects of 'primitive' cultures.

Random co-option of the cultural imagery derived from tribal sources has led to the mistaken belief that tribal art has the capacity to transcend the intentions and conditions that shaped it.

Pollock has become an emblematic figure in the history of art. He first showed his action paintings in 1948. His break with traditional easel painting was decisive and re-definitive. The act of spreading his canvas on the studio floor, the act of pouring and dripping paint redefined the nature of the art-making act. Painting itself became the subject.

Pollock had freed himself of the parameters of description and equivalence. His break with mimetic tradition allowed him to make of painting a formal statement which was the result of a self-activated engagement with his materials as the primary impulse.

Harold Rosenberg had coined the term action painting to categorize the gestural variant of Abstract Expressionism. He characterized the interaction between artists and their materials as an "arena in which to act." Instead of the reproduction or representation of actual or imagined subject matter, the canvas revealed "not a picture but an event" (Chipp 1968: 569).

Pollock worked directly. Using his whole body he moved around and on the canvas, weaving strands of flowing paint across the entire surface of the horizontal canvas (Figure 7). The boundaries of scale, the predetermination, of expectation as to the constitution of a painting had been shifted.

Wall-size paintings were made by Pollock in which a primary generative technique was the harnessing of spontaneous mark-making. The dialogue between the incidental, the unpredictable and the exercise of appropriate control over his creative energies is visible.

Two statements by Pollock assert his sense of integration with his painting process:

1947 On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting. This is akin to the method of the Indian sand painters of the West (Chipp 1968: 546).

1951 I don't work from drawings or color sketches. My painting is direct ... . The method of painting is the natural growth out of a need (Chipp 1968: 548).

Pollock had also said "I am nature" (Weisberger 1986: 292). The artist was not imitating the appearances of natural forms. He was allowing energy to flow through him in the act of painting. This perception of self-integration finds an echo in his stated affinity with the shamanic healing ceremonies of the Navaho. The rituals include the preparation of large-scale sand paintings made from memory by the Navaho shamans. Rushing writes that, integral to the actual healing rituals, the sand paintings are "designed to cure illnesses by restoring the patient to wholeness and to harmony with nature" (Weisberger 1986: 291).

A number of coinciding and reinforcing involvements in 'primitive' art were circulating in the art circles at the time. Pollock, Richard Ponsette-Dart, Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman were painters who shared with John Graham, the writer, the idea that a knowledge of American Indian Art had significance for contemporary art and life. Graham was the author of the then influential text, known to the artists of Pollock's circle, *System and*

*Dialectics of Art* (1937). Their affinity with the 'primitive' reflected a Jungian belief in a cultural continuum with the potential for a bridging of the primordial and the contemporary. The artists seemed to be addressing the loss of meaningful contact between culturized people and nature.

The break with traditional painting aesthetics was an assertion by Pollock of his will to be free of imposed logic. The technique of allowing the flow of fluid paint, of including sand, broken glass and other matter in the physical confrontation with the canvas foregrounded the surface. An extension of drawing, the technique was more direct than that dependent on brush or palette-knife. The flowing skeins of paint form a network of lines and layers of paint in varying densities. An overallness was achieved on a large scale and was made possible by the confluence of elements constituting the painting event. Chief among these were: the approach of working without preliminary drawings, the spreading of the canvas on the floor, allowing for the movement of the artist in a relationship with time and space, experience of the process and the image in the act of doing. The scale of the action paintings, the evidence of energy expended suggest that Pollock was not sparing of himself. He had learned from Siqueiros that painting of mural dimensions was more accessible to interaction with people. Writing of an earlier painting but equally applicable to the drip paintings Rushing says "... Guardians of the Secret (1943) (Figure 10) indicates that for Pollock, coming to know the self was like standing at the heart of a flame ... realization of the discovered self was an arduous task" (Weisberger 1986: 292).

Salient examples of Pollock's work produced during this phase of his career are:

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|--|--|
| 1. Autumn Rhythm (Figure 8)<br>1950<br>Oil on Canvas<br>266.7 x 525.8 cm | 2. Number 31 (Figure 9)<br>1950<br>Oil on canvas<br>269 x 518 cm |
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Jackson Pollock, in emblematic terms, is the quintessential action painter.

## RICHARD SERRA

Emerging from the survey of Pollock's action painting phase is the crucial concept of process, which was extended in different ways by Richard Serra (born 1939) and Robert Rauschenberg.

In Serra's *Casting* (1969) (Figure 11), Pollock's gestural act is foregrounded as a signifying precedent for Serra's throwing and splashing of molten-lead (Figure 12). The work involved the act of flinging the molten metal repeatedly into the juncture between a wall and floor. The resulting hardened lead forms were moved away from the juncture one after the other until, through the repetition of the act, a series filled the floor-space between the walls.

Under consideration here are those parallels aligned to the concept of process-as-medium.

The concept involves the heightening of the role of the artist as performer of the definitive act. The artist is 'self-present' simultaneously with the duration of the work. The vestiges that remain after the event are a reminder of the process that shaped its form. The event in this instance, the primary act of which was the flinging of molten lead, was not focused on the production of a fully pre-determined result. Room was made for the incidental, for chance, for the actuality of the material content.

In the late 1960s Serra compiled a verb list containing those verbs that specified the processes linked to the making of sculpture. The verbs "to cast" and "to splash" (Krauss 1986: 16) are among the verbs that named the actions which were the focus of the process-works involving the artist in the act of throwing (casting, splashing) molten lead.

*Casting*  is neither painting nor sculpture per se. The process is visible in the resultant lead forms. Material has been acted upon. Bodily gesture, time (duration) and spatial configurations are the raw elements of Serra's concentrated act.

There is a parallel here with what Robert Pincus has referred to as *On a scale that competes with the world*.<sup>1</sup> The division between art-making and lived existence is blurred. Art-making, in Serra's case, enters the living space more closely. The actual, actualization and actuality occur as presences within the duration of the event: "... it is a temporality that has nothing to do with narrative time ..." (Krauss 1986: 16). The living art-act of the artist and the material transformation happen simultaneously. The activity involves 'becoming'. Artist and material 'become' an event, 'become' art as living experience not as imitation of life.

The iconoclastic element in Serra's  *Casting*  deconstructs the familiar definitions of art-making and allows for the alternative construction of a framework which includes the concept of event-as-art. The nature of the work and its primal qualities, are defiant of and stand in high contrast to conventional notions of 'civilized' standard art practice.

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<sup>1</sup>The title of Pincus' book on the sculptor Edward Kienholz.



## ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

The spirit of the 1950s and 1960s in America was moved very strongly by the reverberations from within the cultural ethos. Alongside the artists there were the Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg, Jazz and Rock musicians, Happenings and Performance art. Robert Rauschenberg (born 1925), Jasper Johns, John Cage and Merce Cunningham were very much part of the avant-garde impulse. The impact of Pollock's approach to painting and the momentum flowing from it found resonance in the work of Rauschenberg.

From the outset, he worked at constantly challenging the conventional definitions of painting. In spite of the iconoclastic streak revealed most literally in his *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), Rauschenberg was insistent that he was not a neo-Dadaist but that paradoxically he was "pro-art" (Kotz 1990: 91).

The works that were to become landmarks in his personal breakthrough as an artist were also those which characterized his rejection of the endorsed Abstract Expressionist movement. He addressed the canvas support, the painting surface, as the site of conceptual deconstruction. In his work of 1955 entitled *Bed* (Figure 13) an appropriated patch-work quilt, a sheet and a pillow have been attached to the support. Random splashes of paint were added. The usual stretched canvas support had been extended by the 'found' and 'ready-made' constituents of the painting.

His continuing awareness of the limitations of the surface as primary site of painting led him to make assemblages and constructions with found material. These works included elements that were both painting-connected and sculpturally related but they were neither. Rauschenberg referred to them as 'combines'.

Pollock had created an overallness of surface with paint. Traditional perspective was replaced by what the critic Leo Steinberg had called a "flatbed picture plane" (Kotz 1990: 87). For Rauschenberg the surface became a repository for found objects. Objects extended into the viewer's space. High relief was contrasted with flatness, extending beyond the frame, above and below. The painting had itself become an object more physically present.

Rauschenberg was opening up the framework of his art to include the perception of the randomness of experience. Spontaneity, impulse, discovery, risk, invention and the unexpected, co-exist in those 'combines' intended as wall-pieces as well as those constructed as free-standing objects. Everyday experience is embodied in the actual objects or surface qualities assembled. Motor-car tyres, Coke bottles, road sign fragments, fabric, paint, stuffed birds signify their origins directly. The objects relate to and derive from their various sites of origin in the world.

"Like Duchamp, Rauschenberg felt that the observer had to be a collaborator, to help complete the work" (Kotz 1990: 91). The 'combines' reveal the artist's working processes as an essential part of the apprehension of and configuration of the works. Seen singly or collectively these works have a the potential for physical and optical discernment. A reading of the work includes a reading of its construction. References to work are literally present in the processes of hammering, gathering, gluing, layering, pouring, hanging, as well as heaviness and lightness. As with Richard Serra, the naming of the acts of doing become visible. The verb is given material form through the act/intervention of the artist. The optical and physical experience of the construction of the work reveals to the viewer traces of the artist's relationship to the world, inclusive of art history and the cultural ethos.

Mary Lynn Kotz writes that Rauschenberg's 'combines' "were also autobiographical" (Kotz 1990: 87). She quotes a statement by Richard Koshalek, director of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, to illustrate her assertion: "Bob Rauschenberg painted himself into the picture, much as Velázquez did. The difference is that "himself" is what he happened to have around him, at the moment" (Kotz 1990: 87).

In *Monogram* (1959) (Figure 14), a free-standing 'combine', considered by art historians to be one of the seminal artworks of the 1950s, Rauschenberg combined a stuffed angora goat and a motor-car tyre. With paint splashed on its face, the stuffed animal's mid-section is encircled by the tyre. The base platform has been covered with paint and assembled collage elements. The title implies a relationship between the 'combine' and an emblem. Usually a monogram as badge or emblem features intertwining letters. The 'combine'-as-emblem brings with it an autobiographical reading of *Monogram*. The work seems to have significance as a statement about Rauschenberg's personal emblem. The iconoclastic nature of the piece could therefore be seen as emblematic of his critique, of tradition and the prevailing aesthetic currents in the artistic avant-garde of the 1950s. *Trophy 1 (For Merce Cunningham)* (1959) (Figure 15), was made for the dancer Merce Cunningham with whom Rauschenberg engaged in a number of multi-media collaborations.

The iconoclast in Rauschenberg was not aiming at destruction without reason. Seemingly 'primitive', seemingly lacking the 'sophistication' of an educated artistic sensibility, the 'combines' deconstruct hierarchies within the aesthetic of the painting field. Intentionally rough-hewn, they were in their time, formally and iconographically difficult to place within any convenient art historical category.

Rauschenberg intentionally distanced his colour-usage from the emotionally-based colour symbolism he perceived in the work of the Abstract Expressionists: Andrew Forge describes his use of the "... self-colour of an object as pictorial colour. It was on the basis of this view of colour as an attribute to real things rather than as an idea or an essence, a privilege of painting, that he came later to absorb such a fantastic range of objects into his palette" (Forge 1969: 13).

Objecthood and objectness are among the primary signifiers of Rauschenberg's concern with the present, with material manifestations apprehended in a found state. His situating of marks and objects within the framework of the 'combines' indicates his capacity for engaging with the unknown. This

has involved his working with the cast-off objects found low in the hierarchical order of aesthetic acceptability. Parody, absurdity, irony and paradox feature in the dialectic between his combinations of objects and imagery selected or found in the real world, and their re-positioning in the art world.

The perpetual process of discovery which informs Rauschenberg's statement: "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)" (Kotz 1990: 89) has also informed his impulse to make life-affirming works imbued with his inexhaustible energy for constantly disturbing comfortable norms of acceptability in both art and life.

His urge to experiment has brought about various collaborations with other artists, dancers and musicians. Rauschenberg's ground-breaking extensions of the parameters of art have included his performance work in the public arena inside and outside of the gallery space. He subverted the Modernist coherence espoused in the formalist canons of Clement Greenberg. His expanded collaging, with its undertones in Cubist objectifications, provided seminal precedents for later, expanded, post-Modernist approaches wherein art-making became **an arena in which to act.**

## PART TWO

### ART IN GERMANY AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

This section is a focus on developments in post-Second World War German art with specific reference to the work of Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) and Anselm Kiefer (born 1945). Of particular relevance to my work is the response of Beuys and Kiefer to the relationship between art, history and society.

In post-war Europe, Germany, in particular, was a site of crisis. With the surrender of the German army in 1945 the catastrophic events of the preceding years of conflict became known. The Nuremberg trials of major war criminals were heard in 1946. Prolonged encounters with the details of the Holocaust reached a climax when the Auschwitz trials took place in Frankfurt in the 1960s. Public awareness was radically deepened as the horrors of the concentration camps emerged. The Second World War had claimed fifty million lives. The Nazi catastrophe weighed down heavily on the conscience of the post-war generation. In the 1950s Germans struggled to come to terms with their experiences of grief and guilt.

German artists had suffered humiliations during the *Degenerate Art* campaign of the Nazis in 1937. Beckmann, Schwitters, Klee, Feininger, Kandinsky, Meidner, Grosz and Kokoschka were forced to leave Germany in order to survive as working artists. Works were withdrawn from public collections. Books were burned. Emil Nolde and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff had been forbidden to paint by the Nazi government. The classification of 'degenerate art' was applied to German Expressionist painting as well as to the works of the Impressionists, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Picasso. Expressionist concepts as they had originally been utilized were virtually non-existent after the war. However, the artists who had left Germany for other European countries and the United States provided a vital stimulus to the development of Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism on the Continent as well as across the Atlantic.

In Germany, America financed the reconstruction of the western sector of the then divided country so as to ensure a buffer against the possibility of Communist expansion from the East. West Germany became the epitome of a rich industrialized, technologically advanced country. The 'economic miracle' of the 1960s was in fact a superficial materialist screen behind which the traumas of the war years refused to lie down and be buried.

Beuys and Kiefer represent two profound post-holocaust artistic responses to the traumas of the war years in Europe. This contextualization is aimed at emphasizing the formal, procedural and conceptual approaches within their individual responses. Differences and similarities, parallels and ambiguities are discernable, particularly with regard to the material engagements of each artist.

During his lifetime Beuys rigorously contested the barriers between art and life, between process and the static object, between science and art. In retrospect, his output eludes convenient art historical labelling and extends as a continuum to be inclusive of objects, prints, multiples, installations, performances, videos, publications, videos and photographs.

While Beuys can be said to have worked with the transformative energy of art to empower the social body, Anselm Kiefer's major thrust has been in expanding the possibilities of painting. Primarily evocative, Kiefer's painting processes are foregrounded in this documentation. Historically conscious, the paintings are also repositories of complex material, existential and philosophical issues. Spiritually charged, with a strong conceptual and self-critical positioning, Kiefer's paintings evidence the questioning artist's struggle to engage materially with the past whilst encountering the constantly shifting present.

## THE WORK OF JOSEPH BEUYS: THE WILL TO TRANSFORM

Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) has been the foremost German artist to have striven to confront the deeply personal as well as the more collective trauma of the Second World War and post-war experience.

The work of Beuys represents a significant paradigm shift, the impact of which emerged as he widened the concept of art to embrace the process of living. Art, for Beuys, extended beyond the passive apprehension of objects, paintings or events. His art was a means to bring into being a formal organic language with the capacity for generating socially transformative energy. Woven into his work was a critique of the concept of 'the artist'. He proposed that "Everyone is an artist" (Adriani 1989: 21). For Beuys, the essential nature of humanity was encapsulated in the term 'artist'. He attempted a subversion of the myth of the 'autonomous artist' and the myth which defines the audience as passive. His redefinition of art was one which paradigmatically shifted the responsibility of creativity and the stimulation of creativity to everyone.

Beuys adopted the role of the shaman. The shaman's traditional role as wounded healer is strongly encoded in the work of Beuys. This limited survey is focused on two selected iconographic concerns which have been consistently present in his oeuvre: the **Wound** and the **Healer**. Further, the intention is to consider Beuys' work in the light of the artist making art as a means of identifying symptoms of crisis in the social sphere and of providing warning signals from within the art field. He was aiming at creatively directing a cure for a wounded society.

One of the earliest expressions of Beuys' idea of the wound is to be found in a work titled *Auschwitz* (1958) (Figure 16). Beuys displays an accumulation of drawings and objects in a glass showcase. The collection of objects does not offer any description of the death-camp experience.



Instead, the sense of catastrophe is revealed through the accumulated materials. A sense of loss pervades the displaced collection of assembled remains. Seemingly absurd inclusions, transgressions of the then accepted boundaries within which art was held to operate, are isolated behind glass: the electric warming plates with blocks of fat are accompanied by a drawing of a starved, crippled girl; charred remains; a dead rat with a stylized representation of lightning, lengths of blutwurst; goggles for protection against ultra-violet rays; small phials of poison.<sup>2</sup>

Beuys spoke of his perception of a contemporary Auschwitz in which there was "... a form of spiritual execution, the creation of a climate of fear perhaps even more dangerous because it is so refined" (Tisdall 1979: 23). He worked at confronting his painful wartime experiences with a personalized intensity. Beuys' actions (performances), sculptural environments and objects, drawings and blackboards, seen as a totality, tapped into the historical and collective memory of his audience. His psychologically weighted imagery, his attempts at uniting life and art were underscored by a didactic attitude with echoes of the anthroposophical teachings of Rudolf Steiner. His approach also included selected mythological references deeply rooted in the Celtic ancestral heritage of Europe.

From 1941 to 1946 Beuys had first-hand war experiences. He had served as a radio operator and pilot in the German air force. He was wounded five times. In 1943 he was shot down over the Crimea. He was trapped in the wreckage of his plane in freezing snow-bound conditions. Fortuitously, his life was saved by a group of Tartars who had rescued him and then nursed him back to health. Part of their treatment was, significantly, to cover his body with fat to preserve warmth and to wrap his body in felt blankets as insulation against the cold. He was later to be held at a British prisoner-of-war camp in Cuxhaven, Germany.

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<sup>2</sup>Extracted from Tisdall 1979: 21.

During the years of bodily and spiritual healing after the war, Beuys searched for aesthetic symbols imbued with a sense of redemption, a sense of the restoration of life. His search found expression in the use of substances and materials like fat, felt, honey, copper, gold-leaf, cobalt, platinum, iron and various chemicals with alchemical and healing connections. His wartime experiences of wounding and subsequent healing were seminally formative for his life and art.

Beuys' aesthetic was also to be seminally significant for the course of art developments in Europe and internationally. Arte Povera, and the Fluxus artists in particular, gained from Beuysian influence and participation. More directly, a generation of young artists were taught by him at Dusseldorf during his eleven year term at the Art Academy.

ART = CAPITAL was a simplified formulation used by Beuys to underline the basic precept of his 'expanded concept of art' (Stachelhaus 1991: 64). By 'capital' Beuys did not mean money but ability and the products of ability. This broadened concept is the guiding principle which embodies his idea that everyone is an artist. A revolutionary approach, mostly misunderstood, this idea referred to the re-shaping of consciousness relative to the meaning of art as well as regarding the meaning of being human. Beuys wanted to activate the creative ability within each person as a prerequisite for the healthy transformation of the individual and by extension the social body. Giving momentum to the creative principle provides greater potential for people to become more profoundly experienceable to themselves and to each other. In explaining his 'expanded concept of art', Beuys spoke of widening the scope of art so as to develop his concept of "social sculpture" (Stachelhaus 1991: 67) His attempts at reshaping social consciousness involved "... the warmth processes of the Theory of Sculpture, metaphors of natural and social behaviour, and analogies for physical and spiritual production are consistently linked" (Tisdall 1979: 44).

It is significant of his concerns for the environment that the Green Party in Germany came into existence with Beuys as a founder member (Stachelhaus 1991: 120).

Beuys had been preceded by another seminally important artist. In 1957 Yves Klein had shown his monochrome paintings for the first time in the Federal Republic. Alfred Schmela, Dusseldorf gallery owner was the host to Klein's ground-breaking works. Eight years later, Beuys performed his own ground-breaking *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) (Figure 17) in the Schmela gallery. He spent three hours in isolation with the dead hare cradled in his arms. Visible only from the doorway and the street window of the gallery, his head covered with honey and gold leaf, an iron plate tied to his right foot, Beuys immersed himself in near silent communication with the silent, inert animal. The photographs of this event have become legendary images of Twentieth Century art, evoking as they do the intensity of the artist's whole involvement with the art act.

Beuys also engaged in a week-long dialogue with a coyote in *'I like America and America likes me'* (1974) (Figure 18). Other performances included *Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch) Scottish symphony* (1970); *Eurasia* (1966) and *Eurasian staff* (1967).

Ultimately Beuys' art was inseparable from his body and his body image. Art for him was a means to remake an injured body, and the sense of self that depends on it – and in so doing to remake art, to root it once again in the body (Kuspit 1991: 83).

With his performances Beuys had established his own variant of a powerfully evocative medium, linking his work with the impulses that had grown from Pollock's *action painting*. The legacy that Allan Kaprow had inherited and which was to expand in the proto-Happenings of Oldenburg, Grooms and Dine and the collaborations of Rauschenberg, Cage and Cunningham was to unfold in the equally non-conformist Fluxus events. Beuys participated in Fluxus activities from 1962 to 1965. The international Fluxus movement with its interdisciplinary objectives, rejected all orthodox art practices and the materials accepted by orthodoxy to be appropriate to art. The Fluxus approach was founded on the dictum of Heraclitus: "Everything is in a state of flux" (Adriani 1989: 17). Here was a concerted effort to de-dogmatize art activities. The Fluxus artists were determined to break down the barriers

separating art from life and also to remove the demarcations between the various arts. The objective common to the Fluxus participants was to engineer a change in human consciousness. Their interdisciplinary mode came very close to Beuys' own approach. Fluxus afforded him the opportunity "... to present my personal ideas to a broader public" (Adriani 1989: 17).

However, Beuys' connections with Fluxus were not lasting. His activities were the result of more sustained inner necessity and spiritual conviction. He, moreover, exemplified the sense of the universal in the individual, the metaphysical within the physical and the complexities of existential crisis and resolution.

For Beuys, art was contained in an array of tools, materials and sets of procedures, not unlike the paraphernalia associated with shamanic rituals. The fat-corners (Figure 19), fat-wedges, felt-corners (Figure 20), felt-wedges, felt-piles, batteries, walking sticks, flashlights were the essential material vehicles of his concepts of warmth and cold, sickness and healing. Donald Kuspit writes of the "healing intention of Beuys' art – its therapeutic mission." An artist who "... wanted to give his German audience the care that would cure it of its postwar feelings of deprivation, isolation and hurt, inflicted on it by the desperate failings of the parent state" (Kuspit 1991: 82).

*Show your wound* (1976) (Figures 21 and 22) is a work which illustrates Beuys' use of the wound as a motif in his work. The environment *Show your wound* was installed by Beuys in the underground pedestrian area between Maximilianstrasse and Altstadttring, Munich in 1976. Heiner Stachelhaus describes the installation as a "death piece, a momento mori" (Stachelhaus 1991: 161).

Beuys had selected the site and had identified it as a place of concrete urban desolation, a "sick" spot. He had registered his concern for the collective sickness, the alienation from nature, that he perceived in society. He had wanted "... to make visible the death zone toward which today's society is rushing with great speed" (Stachelhaus 1991: 162).

Five double objects were arranged by Beuys as follows:<sup>3</sup>

1. Two beds, the dominant images of the environment, which are in actual fact two mortuary tables from a pathology lab, have been drawn up side by side; two lamps – galvanized iron boxes, each fronted with a glass pane smeared inside with fat; two galvanized iron chests filled with fat and each fitted with a clinical thermometer and a test tube containing the skull of a thrush; and two preserving jars covered by gauze filters.
2. Two school blackboards, on which *Show your wound* has been chalked in Beuys' own spontaneous hand.
3. Two implements, with wooden shafts and wrought-iron blades, bearing *Brown Cross* and *Mainstream* stamps, leaning with blades together against a two-part, white-painted wooden board on the wall.
4. Two standards, wooden-handled iron forks, each with a red rag tied round their handles, middle prongs removed and each standing on a slate tablet onto which a semicircle has been scratched.
5. Two bundles of the Italian newspaper *La Lotta continua* (The Struggle Continues).

In that unconventional location the objects had an awkward, displaced presence. Evocative of the pathological, of death, the environment re-presents the objects which were used or were present in a situation of suffering. Traces of the memory of life inhere in the texture of the environment with its extraordinary array of objects and materials.

But a dissonant chord had been struck: Armin Zweite, director of the Städtische Galerie in Lenbachhaus also pointed out the "... connection with the

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<sup>3</sup>Details extracted from Tisdall (1979) and Stachelhaus (1991)

evocation of death", but he added that what was more directly experienced was "... the development of feelings of shame and embarrassment" (Stachelhaus 1991: 161) arising from the confrontation with a taboo subject. Zweite explains that the injunction *Show your wound* is indicative of "... the simultaneous existence of social prohibitions and restrictions and of their psychic substrate: specific fears and feelings of aversion and embarrassment" (Stachelhaus 1991: 161). Zweite furthermore says in relation to the vehement reactions provoked by the work: "The encounter with death, even in this objectivized, indirect form, is equivalent to confessing one's own impotence in the face of terror and also one's inability to give an adequate response" (Stachelhaus 1991: 161).

Clearly, the mortuary equipment carries overwhelming symbolic associations with death, but Beuys had not abandoned his therapeutic mission. The presence of the equipment in a public place is a signal of an incongruous sort. Attention is called to the need for a caring intervention. Beuys has inserted the symbolic analogy of homeopathic treatment, of healing like with like, through the inclusion of the life-enhancing elements from his vocabulary of regenerative materials viz. fat, batteries and filters.

*Show your wound* can be seen as a bridge between his earlier war-related works like *Auschwitz* (1958) and his later works like the basalt stone installation *The End of the Twentieth Century* (1983-85) (Figure 23). Thematically consistent, formally diverse, the works reveal a dialectic in which pessimism is counteracted by the presence of revitalising matter. Beuys: "I experienced it in the war and I feel it now everyday: this state of decay that comes with a one-sided understanding of the idea of materialism" (Tisdall 1979: 23).

For Beuys the objective of his procedures was to stimulate a transformation in thinking and the activation of new attitudes. From that perspective, *Show your wound* is vulnerable. The aesthetic it represents is at risk in the face of materialist obsessions and fluctuating trends in art. Beuys was, however, an undaunted optimist. His entire artistic endeavour was full of risk-taking, provocation, full of the desire to encourage the development of new forms

of sensibility. The theory of, and the interwoven artistic output of his 'social sculpture' procedures represent a significant paradigm shift in Twentieth Century art.

The unseen, intangible essence is an inherent aspect of Beuys' work. The nature of the form, meaning and structure of his work is not necessarily accessible to or dependent on rational analysis. The non-visible essence is dependent rather on the experience of the whole work through intuitive apprehension of the interwoven phenomena, sometimes obscure, at other times ironic and often unforeseen or unexpected.

Symbolically viewed, Beuys' objects, performances and drawings symbolise his understanding of the existential dimension of human experience, of the complex relationship between creativity, reason and intuition and evolutionary connections between time and place. "Beuys believed that in earlier ages and cultures the term 'moulding' had applied equally to moulding consciousness and moulding material in the sculptural sense" (Adriani 1989: 18).

In order to re-awaken the senses to the feeling of primal inter-relatedness, of the possibility of restoring to creativity the unified concepts of reason and intuition, Beuys employed unconventional strategies which often provoked hostile reaction. He persistently counteracted artifice by working with his basic unclothed materials. In the process he introduced conceptually rich polar contrasts into the sculptural arena: warmth and cold; reception and transmission; solid and liquid; birth and death; organic and crystalline. Copper conducts, fat soaks and infiltrates, felt warms, absorbs and insulates, honey nourishes and batteries charge.

Beuys' final assertion is that the intrinsic and continual deposits of energy within matter can be activated by humankind, as agents of transformation (Rainbird 1993: 18).

## ANSELM KIEFER: THE REFUSAL OF REPRESENTATION

Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945) is one of many German artists who participated in the resurgence of European painting during the 1970s and 1980s. Other artists are Baselitz, Penck, Immendorf, Polke, Richter and Lüpertz. Their lives and visions have been shaped by the Second World War and the post-war experience.

By the beginning of the 1980s, New York was no longer the pivotal axis of the avant-garde. German, Italian and British painters were asserting themselves with renewed vigour. An essential component in the upsurge of painting was the renewed interest in figuration. Auping writes that this "... refiguration" of painting was bewildering to "... those who had constructed a linear history of Twentieth Century art based on the development of abstraction" (Benezra 1990: 164).

In Europe the 'new spirit' in art – characterised by the re-assessment of art-historical interests, by the assertions of new critical models, theories and philosophies saw a return of interest in the work of Giorgio de' Chirico, Max Beckman and Francis Picabia. There was an open declaration of involvement in narrative, myth, history and politics, associations which had previously been displaced by the Modernist ethos. Various international exhibitions signalled the return of painting to the centre stage of world art: the historical exhibition *Westkunst* in Cologne in 1981, *A New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy in London in the same year, *Zeitgeist* in Berlin and *Documenta VII* in Kassel in 1982, *German Art in the 20th Century* of 1985 and *Refigured Painting, the German Image 1960-1988* of 1989 were the watershed exhibitions marking an upsurge in painting in Germany.

German artists were facing the challenges of a divided Germany and the impoverishment of its culture caused by the war and the cultural-cleansing programmes of the Third Reich. The essence of this post-war period has been appropriately summed up by Richard Calvocoressi in his introduction to a catalogue on the work of A.R. Penck:



German so-called Neo-Expressionism can be seen on one level as a search for identity, an existential response to the alienating and psychologically humiliating effects of post-war German society. In order to resist the massive injection of predominantly American values – economic, political but above all aesthetic – the artists had been forced to draw strength from a specifically German tradition (Martin 1983: 29).

The response of the German artist was not only the result of the enormous and immediate pressures of modern German history, but also because of the tradition in German art and culture which involved a certain empathy with the human condition. Such a tradition was present in the evocations of empathy of the Expressionists from about 1905 to 1933. Expressionism revealed the repressions in the society of the time and exposed the need for an understanding of the complex origins of humanity. Donald Kuspit takes the point of view that "Art of the past has often had an empathic function, which has been confused with or submerged by its ideological orientation (Christian, aristocratic, etc.). Expressionism can be regarded as an attempt to regain this possibility ..." (Kuspit 1984: 116).

Kiefer's work has been marked by a conscious concern with the repressed history of his country. He has probed the Fascist past by making connections between selected Nazi symbols, and the present-day role of the artist and of painting practice in addressing these issues. He approaches what Jacques Derrida has described as "... the experience of the unspeakable" (Felix 1991: 33) in his efforts to confront collective repressed memory.

Kiefer has asserted the artist's right to grapple with forbidden themes and in so doing he makes a strong statement about the need for the freedom of expression. With intended irony, Kiefer's site of concern is the Nazi catastrophe, a period during which artists were severely censored. His work is a gesture of defiance in the light of the persistence of conventionally puritanical views on art, echoes of the Nazi invasion of the artistic freedoms of the most progressive artists at the time.

For the purposes of this contextualization, a three-pronged focus on Kiefer's work has been chosen:

- (i) The series *To The Unknown Painter* (c. 1980).
- (ii) The series *The Death Fugue* (c. 1981).
- (iii) The concepts of Fire and Burning (c. 1974).

The architectural imagery of the series *To The Unknown Painter* is derived from various Nazi buildings such as Albert Speer's (Hitler's architect) *Reichskanzlei*, the Fuhrer's Chancellery building in Berlin, demolished at the end of the war. Another such setting features the unrealized project of a Memorial Hall for fallen soldiers. In Kiefer's paintings these buildings appear as huge hollow chambers, or empty colonnaded interiors, some of the structures open to the sky, others dark, decaying and derelict. Mostly painted in the style of single-point perspective with receding orthogonals, these huge wall-size paintings have the presence of theatrical back-drops.

*To The Unknown Painter* (1983) (Figure 24), depicts a large courtyard formed by a colonnade of square columns. The look is strict and severe. An artist's palette is seen, mounted on a stand in the middle of the otherwise empty courtyard. Predominantly painted in blacks and greys and whites, the columns are of an ochre hue. Kiefer has used straw in this painting, the yellow fragments appearing through the dark, black and grey patches of the sky.

The palette, centrally placed, is a reference back to the source of the painting, namely the artist. Its appearance in the colonnaded precincts of the monumental structure is an ironical statement about the power of art to subvert the perverse ideology it addresses. Kiefer does not prescribe a particular interpretation. A number of readings are possible.

The palette's presence is an understated one, at odds with the neo-classical orientation of the monument. Its reduced size, almost whimsical, stands in strong contrast to the looming colonnaded structure. The palette mocks the absurdity of an ideology represented by sham neo-classical architecture. It proclaims the freedom of the artist in the face of an authoritarian system. Conversely, but in an ominous vein, ironical nonetheless, is the interpretation that the artist, demeaned by the dogma of the Nazis, is still there undaunted, memorialized just as a fallen unknown soldier would have been – parody and irony combine in undercutting absurdity. The artist is the anti-hero, the outsider who defies prohibition, who goes against the grain of consensus and makes his presence known even on tainted ground. Power, as manifest in the Fascist variant, attested to by its attacks on the artists in Germany, is seemingly unable to keep the artist (as palette) at bay.

The mixture of irony, parody and the appropriation of the 'ready-made' image is present in Kiefer's approach. He has appropriated, from the archival imagery of the Third Reich, those 'ready-made' facades and interiors of monumental buildings. Kiefer exposes the cliché of the monument and the absurdity of official art which, in the case of the Nazis, was intended to represent the purity of their power. Kiefer's paintings point to the hollow fiction of the monuments. His work serves to remind a post-war generation of the necessity to expose the brutality that those monuments in fact have come to represent.

In the painting *Sulamith* (1983) (Figure 25), there is a combination of themes. Kiefer has combined the monumental with another of his concerns, namely the fate of *Shulamith* and *Margarete*, the Jewish maiden and her German counterpart of Czech poet Paul Celan's Holocaust poem entitled *Death Fugue* written in 1945. The poem, featuring the names of the two women in incantatory mode, is a metaphoric depiction of the horror of Auschwitz. The painting titled *Sulamith* contains another specific architectural reference. The *Soldatenhalle* in Berlin, Wilhelm Kries's massive crypt-like memorial hall, is the source. A dark cavernous interior is depicted. The name *Sulamith* is written across the upper left-hand corner. Kiefer establishes the link with Celan's poem in the use of her name:

A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes he writes when night falls to Germany your golden hair

Margarete

Your ashen hair Shulamith we are digging a grave in the sky it is ample to lie there.<sup>4</sup>

Flames are shown burning in the dark interior of the memorial hall. A ritualistic, tomblike atmosphere pervades the painting. Here is a superimposition of the aspect of death and the concept of memorialization. Once more, with an ironic undertone, Kiefer undercuts the memorializing intention of the Nazi building. By introducing the name of a Jewish woman into the context of a Nazi Funeral Hall for war heroes, Kiefer raises the memory of the Jewish war victims. His strategy of repetition and representation works at bringing the poem into a critically counterpointed relationship with the painted image. The word, like the palette of the previous work cited, starts off being dominated by the architectural aspect of the painting. Closer reading and retrospection bring about a cognized reconsideration of the relative connections between word and image. Memorialization could be seen as an absurd attitude in the light of the Nazi catastrophe. The emptiness of the hollow crypt places the structure at a distance, conceptually, from the name of the Jewish war victim. A reconciliation does not seem possible even if at first Kiefer would appear to have been suggesting the rededication of the memorial to the memory of *Sulamith*.

Another motif repeatedly occurring in Kiefer's paintings and books is that of fire and burning. He has often foregrounded the concept of the creative act as being equivalent to the transformative power of fire. Creative energy, combustion, inner 'burning', creative power is signalled for instance in a painting entitled *Painting = Burning* (1974) (Figure 26). Kiefer has also literally painted with fire, by employing a blow-torch he scorches and chars parts of the painting.

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<sup>4</sup>From Paul Celan, *Todesfuge* (Death Fugue) quoted by Mark Rosenthal in Anselm Kiefer, 1987.

For Kiefer, history is living material. He has spoken of history as "... metabolism (stoffwechsel). History for me is like the burning of coal, it is like a material. History is a warehouse of energy" (West 1988: 64). Metaphorically and literally, fire and combustion have become intrinsic to the iconography of Kiefer's work.

The tragedy of genocide, the perverted use of fire for extermination by the Third Reich is revealed in paintings where fire is suggested by the inclusion of combustible materials. The paintings which focus on "Shulamith" and "Margarete" feature paint and straw mainly but also coal and wood with various paints and varnishes. In *Your Golden Hair, Margarete – Midsummer Night* (1981) (Figure 27), the straw is metaphorically significant of fragility, evocative of the blonde-haired German woman. An ominous connotation is the inflammable nature of the brittle, dry straw which is easily burned. Straw refers to the earth and the burning of the earth is evoked. The references to the death camps and to the scorched-earth policies of war-time arise in relation to the encoding of the name Margarete, derived from the *Death Fugue* poem.

The straw, paint and the words form part of the complex interplay between iconography, history, poetry and art historical emblems. Daniel Wheeler writes of the presence of Pollock in Kiefer's painting practice. The materiality and spatial expansiveness of Pollock is brought into play in Kiefer's *Margarete* painting. There is a visible working and re-working of the complex Pollock-like approach, and the strategies of representation and repetition. The straw is not mimetically painted. Actual straw has been collaged into the composition alongside the black painted marks. Neither of these elements by themselves represent. Only in relation to the inscribed words do the straw and paint gain symbolic and representational signifying power.

In Kiefer's oeuvre the emblematic motifs of war, the holocaust and the presence of fire are inextricably linked with the German landscape. The equation of the title *Painting = Burning* implies, thus, that the act involves an acceptance of futility. The memory of the war-time burnings renders his painting

act a non-act. Kiefer cannot avoid the persistent memory of the catastrophe of burning and destruction. The landscape is the container of those events and of the memory of the events. The catastrophe fills his palette and his vision. It has invaded his canvas to the exclusion of all else. The burning of the landscape and the act of painting have become synonymous since the time and the place Kiefer has lived through is synonymous with burning. Landscape as memory is 'burned' into his consciousness.

That Kiefer is capable of self-parody, of ironical tongue-in-cheek self-deconstruction, cannot be discounted. However, the form of the painting suggests a more critically considered reading of the content. *Painting = Burning* serves to reveal what Andrew Benjamin has called "... that which refuses representation" (Norris and Benjamin 1988: 53). Art, as the means by which representation may be achieved, as the sign by which presence may be signified is shown, in Kiefer's painting, as an outlined palette. The outline includes within its demarcation the painted depiction of a burnt-out landscape. The outline of the palette 'frames' the scene – a function of painting is stated. The mere outline makes known the means of representation as a limited endeavour. The painting has already been burned (painted)! What remains is for the artist to reveal the distance between signified and signifier, between representation and reality, between art and life.

The event is not depicted in the painting, the resultant burnt out landscape as the evidence of an event, historically time-related, is revealed. Displacement in time, between what has happened historically and the present activity of the painter in attempting a representation, is another crucial question addressed by Kiefer in *Painting = Burning*. Situated in time, the processes of construction and destruction, polar parameters of the concept of creation and re-creation, defy fixed fully-formed actualization in the two-dimensional field of painting.

The paradoxical title *Painting = Burning* and the painting itself see the extension of meanings in the form and content discourse. The act of painting is denied its constituting material viz. paint. The title implies another denial – the expectation that the act of painting should produce an object is

denied. In this instance there is the assertion that painting is a process not a guarantee of results, in the traditional terms. Since the painting falls within that cycle of Kiefer's concerns with Germany's recent past, a complex relationship between history, memory, time and the acts of representation and painting is at the root of his discourse.

Burning leads to obliteration or the erasing of essentials. Sometimes only traces remain. Obliteration of the painted image can be seen in one of his book series entitled *The Burning of the Rural District of Buchen* (1975) (Figure 28). In the making of the nine books Kiefer cut up rejected landscape paintings, treated the residue of paint on the burlap pages to burning, iron oxide and linseed oil. The bound books reveal the burned nature of the material acted upon, emphasizing process and matter, which in book format, replaces the experience of words with the experience of the actual.

Burning and obliteration and the foregrounding of the materiality contribute to the presence in Kiefer's work of a sense of the anti-image. An act of purification by fire introduces a sense that there is no eternal belief system worth preserving in painting except to reveal the material and the process. In this light Kiefer's auto-interrogation underlines the doubt, the cynicism about the true or fully formed image. He is questioning of his own position: the position of the artist in relation to the element of representation. While addressing apparently concrete situations, like the ravages of the war, his demystification of the image indicates that he is sceptical of the aestheticising of the war damage. He inserts constant questions that point to the limitations of representation, our human inability to locate, or fully apprehend truth or reality, as well as the limitations of the expectation that the artist is the 'one who knows'.

Kiefer's work echoes the words of his mentor, Joseph Beuys in relation to the analysis of history and his work in the realm of mythology: "I do not want to return to a world of magic or myth. No, what I want to do is to analyze history with the aid of these pictures, in other words, to make people conscious of an element of historical analysis" (Adriani 1989:13).

In a time of great uncertainties, Kiefer's paintings embody that aspect of the visionary artist who has held onto a belief in an art that emerges from an interpenetration of the past and the present. His recent works, inclusive of his lead books and his explorations of religious or mystical references from the past, involves what Armin Zweite identifies as the process of tracing

... the external forms of ancient legends back to a nucleus of constants which the artist would certainly never think of categorizing as eternal certainties. On the contrary: in such a context, he would prefer to speak of eternal uncertainties, or permanently open questions ... . History, for Kiefer, becomes a material, like landscape or paint. He reflects a great deal on religions, because science gives no answers (Benjamin 1991: 121).



PART THREE

ANTONI TÀPIES

## ANTONI TÀPIES: THE APPREHENSION OF MATTER

The story of the mind exiled from nature is the story of Western man. It is the story of his progressively more desperate search for mechanical and rational and symbolic securities, which will substitute for the spirit-confidence of the Nature he has lost (Tucker 1992: 194).

The quotation above, from poet Ted Hughes, echoes the words of Joseph Beuys and serves to introduce an appropriate context for the appraisal of the work of Antoni Tàpies. In many ways Tàpies can be considered a Mediterranean counterpart to Beuys' Northern European spirit.

Tàpies (b. 1923) has lived and worked in Barcelona, his career as an artist spanning over forty years. He has become synonymous with an art that is redolent of the earth, of walls, of material. Tàpies has been typified as an "objectified surface" painter and he could be seen as having prototypical connections with impulses derived from cave paintings, rock engravings, archaic clay tablets, ancient hieroglyphic inscriptions, contemporary graffiti and the old, peeling walls of Barcelona. Mixing paint with glue, plaster of Paris, marble-dust, sand and pigments he has created rich surfaces into which signs and images have been inscribed, imprinted, embedded, scratched, gouged or scraped. His combination of materials has been extended to include varnish and latex to create thick, rough grey surfaces that achieve a resemblance to cement walls. These works have the presence of hanging objects more than painted canvases. The paintings reveal the organic qualities of elemental process. For Tàpies, engagement with humble and essentially basic materials, is a means to the resurrection of the presence of the elemental dimensions of existence in matter.

Even though he works outside of any current contemporary art mainstreams, Tàpies is not cynically self-indulgent. He has consistently returned to the basic material origins of painting. Choosing to evoke rather than to describe, he signals a belief in the empathic role of painting as a viable force

in the continually changing, often troubled relationship between artist, art and society. This summation of selected aspects of the work of Antoni Tàpies is focused on four main aspects of his artistic activity:

- (i) the major influences on his art and life;
- (ii) the Catalan spirit;
- (iii) the impact of Eastern philosophical systems;
- (iv) the Matter Paintings.

Tàpies has been a passionate defender of his Catalan heritage. Significantly, he has taken a progressive political stance with regard to the struggle for political autonomy in Catalonia. His artistic engagement bears the mark of both his political commitment, as well as his commitment to the Catalan cultural avant-garde. Chief among his concerns in life and art have been the social issues emanating from the Civil War period, 1936-1939, and the post-war consequences when Franco ended self-government in Catalonia. The Catalan language was banned in schools, on radio and television. Pere Gimferrer writes of the lack of freedom prevailing in Catalan culture at the end of the Civil War. The necessity for progressive artists to re-activate the authentic Catalan spirit has been voiced by Tàpies himself. Gimferrer takes his cue from Tàpies when, writing of the integration of the avant-garde and Catalanism, he says: "Any defence of avant-garde art, therefore, will be a defence of the true Catalan spirit ..." (Gimferrer 1986: 61).

Tàpies' development as an artist has been informed by and significantly influenced by his intense involvement with literature generally, and more particularly the literature of his native Catalonia. He has produced a number of paintings and prints with references to literary figures inserted into the iconography. Chief among the writers and philosophers or poets included by Tàpies are Ramon Llull, J.V. Foix and Joan Brossa. The paintings and

prints feature the names of the writers or their initials in concert with other signs some of which have allusions to the Catalan cultural heritage shared by writers and artists.

Tàpies' interest began with Ramon Llull, the 13th Century poet, philosopher, theologian and scientist, a 'doctor illuminatus' who is venerated in Catalonia as a kind of patron saint. Llull's writings in Catalan helped to elevate the language to the status of a literary language. The Surrealists and subsequently Tàpies, whose early work was Surrealist inspired, were fascinated by "... the way in which the philosopher created connections between widely differing areas of knowledge, practising what he himself called the 'art of combination'" (Catoir 1991: 14). Llull employed his *ars combinandi* in his pursuit of philosophical and scientific truth as well as in his poetry.

Barbara Catoir writes that Tàpies' use of letters, signs and numbers has strong connections with Llull's integrated system wherein he devised an alphabet in which the letters represent concepts. By varying the combinations of diagrams, figures and systems of signs with the letters he was able to derive various meanings. The resulting ambiguities, as in Tàpies' work, allows for numerous interpretations but, as Catoir asserts, when confronting the work of Tàpies the "... abstract sign is, in addition, a means of breaking the mimetic character of the pictorial image through the introduction of abstract thought" (Catoir 1991: 15). The signs in the work of Tàpies initiate a dialectical process in which associative thinking is opened up but their ambiguity, however, conceals the totality of meanings locked into the combination of signs. Tàpies' response to Llull is revealing of his own integration of mysticism, art, spirituality and materials.

A modern Catalan writer who is regarded as important for Tàpies' intellectual and aesthetic development is the Surrealist poet J.V. Foix (1894-1987). Foix passed the Surrealist tradition on to Tàpies via Joan Brossa. After the Second World War the Surrealists were still seen as the leaders of the avant-garde in Spain. Foix and Brossa are the contemporary literary figures singled out by Tàpies, who, together with fellow Catalan painter Joan Miro have

made the deepest impact on his life and work. Foix had been influenced by Dada and he had published an informative account of the Dada movement, written in Catalan and entitled *From Here to There*. Tàpies has stated his acknowledgement of the significance of the article and the deep impression it had on his own work. He found the Dada tactics outlined by Foix "... useful in opposing the Franco regime" (Catoir 1991: 101).

Tàpies has nurtured his affinity with Eastern philosophical and spiritual systems since the 1940s. The diversity of his sources of influence include his intense readings of Eastern thought and culture. Eastern non-dualistic philosophy parallels Tàpies' belief in a continuously flowing integrated reality, rather than separate realities. Tàpies speaks of his identification with the connections between spiritual practice and art:

Like yoga exercises and Buddhist koans and kasinas, I attempt in my painting ... to develop a technique which will inspire meditation and ultimately enlightenment (Wye 1991: 28).

Working from the premise that art has the capacity to shock the viewer into thinking about the meaning of life, Tàpies combines the provocative and the contemplative. Informed by the essence of Zen Buddhist thinking, he demonstrates an awareness that there is the contemplative aspect to Zen but that there is also the element of unsettling the foundations of habitual thought so as to provoke a grappling with existential questions. A key resonance emanating from his writings and interviews is the experience of the spiritual dimension through the contemplation of the earth, the magma, the lava, the ashes. He mentions his surprise when he discovered a book of Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen, entitled *Contemplation of the wall in Mahayana*. Equally surprising to him was what he perceived to be the parallel involvement in Zen with the elemental: that in Buddhist meditation, support in the form of special objects, *kasinas*, is employed "... which sometimes consist of earth placed in a frame, in a hole, or on a wall, or in ashes..." (Tàpies 1974: 14).

With his concentration on the fundamentals of material, he has stamped his work with an earthy, everyday directness. Tàpies has elevated humble objects to the status of icons that are evocative of the primal spirit inhering in the art act and in the acts that constitute lived experience. He has intuited what the Sāṅkhya system of Vedic philosophy calls "Prakriti ... the primal substance, the matrix of all life, the matter-energy out of which arises the whole objective creation that the yoga sūtras call 'the world'" (Shearer 1982: 27).

Matter painting was one manifestation of an art of spontaneous abstraction that was widespread in the 1950s. Taking various forms, under different labels such as *Informel*, *Tachisme*, *Art Autre*, and in Japan, *Gutai*, these styles paralleled Abstract Expressionism in America and constituted an international phenomenon. In France Jean Fautrier (1898-1964) and Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) worked with materially dense textures and surfaces. Dubuffet, who had a great interest in the art of the mentally ill, had caused an uproar with his first exhibition in 1944. He had so offended prevailing taste that he characterized his own painting as *l'art brut*. Tàpies acknowledges the influences of Fautrier and Dubuffet. The Italian artist Alberto Burri with his sack-paintings and Lucio Fontana's incised canvasses are resonances present in the matter paintings of Tàpies. Two other precedents are acknowledged by Tàpies as being seminally influential to his own development. Firstly, his contact with Brassai's photographs of graffiti which were reproduced in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* 1930/39, and secondly his contact with the works of Joan Miro (1898-1983).

Manuel Borja has identified parallels in the tendency for both Miró and Tàpies to "... represent elements traditionally considered unaesthetic or even ignoble, such as hair, hairy legs and feet" (Borja 1989: 102). According to Borja, Miró's actual influence was, however, more general than specific, more of an incentive to break new ground with regard to concepts of resemblance and representation, of structure and spontaneity. Even though he had used burlap, sandpaper, copper and other materials as the support of his paintings during the 1920s and 1930s, Miró was not a matter painter per se. Tàpies' use of materials is directly linked to his making of the matter paintings.

The matter paintings, as they have become known, are concretions of a mixed-media ground consisting mostly of sand, varnish, plaster-of-paris, marble-dust and pigment. Tàpies uses his fingers or various tools to incise marks, lines and letters into the still moist matter. Some of these paintings, reminiscent of old walls, marked by traces of graffiti, scarred by age and conflict, have become akin to panels or walls of contemplation. Partly referring to the Spanish Civil War (see Figure 29), the repressive conditions prevalent during the Franco regime and deployed as metaphorical 'witnesses' of history, the paintings do, however, transcend the immediacy of those specific connections to be inclusive of a sense of the mystical, of the spiritual and of the timeless.

In relation to Tàpies emphasis on motifs traditionally considered repulsive or offensive by bourgeoisie standards viz. armpits; severed limbs; hairy legs, male and female genitalia, and feet, Borja points to a significant affinity between the consciousness at work in the paintings of Tàpies and that emanating from the writings of Georges Bataille who was active in Surrealist circles but broke with the Breton-led Surrealists in 1929.

According to Borja, the affinity is best expressed in the recurring image of the human foot. Tàpies has often included the foot in iconic representation: either the image of a foot or the indexical sign of the footprint. Borja sees these representations as intentional rejections by Tàpies "... of ideal beauty, one that has been already disrupted by choosing a motif traditionally considered distasteful and fetishistic" (Borja 1989: 140). In Borja's terms, Tàpies' painting *Material in the Shape of a Foot* (1965) (Figure 30) reveals a foot which is unattractive, swollen and dirty. Bataille has written of the human tendency to conceal the size and form of the feet as much as possible, to treat the feet as painful reminders of his ignoble self. Filled with irony, Bataille's critical viewpoint is aimed at the bourgeoisie inclination to eliminate the natural from life. Equally ironical, Tàpies openly presents images of unconcealed feet. Bataille's critique of society points to the censorship of body and sexuality that results from an obsession with "functionalism" which has turned the human being into an "... economical animal" (Borja 1989: 143).

Borja quotes from Bataille's *Visions of Excess*:

This eruptive force accumulates in those who are necessarily situated below.

Communist workers appear to the bourgeois to be as ugly and dirty as hairy sexual organs, or lower parts; sooner or later there will be a scandalous eruption in the course of which the asexual noble heads of the bourgeois will be chopped off (Borja 1989: 145).

Bataille and Tàpies have emphasized their intention to destabilize formal categorizations in which nature and culture are separated – an outcome of western civilization. Tàpies has responded to the anti-cultural position which views art as an arena for the exposure of the devalued, undesirable, diseased or contaminated features of life. His response has been to include precisely those repressed elements in his oeuvre. Evocations of pain, of exposed skin, of body parts, of mutilations (Figures 31, 32 and 33) and also of unexplained mnemonic graffiti (see Figure 34) characterize his alienation from and opposition to bourgeoisie culture. The matter paintings, whilst confronting habitual notions of acceptability, also confront the desire for rationally, explainable realities, denying easy access to their phenomenological diversity.

A major motivation for Tàpies is his conviction that art provides an opportunity for the re-evaluation of those objects socially condemned or discarded. During the 1970s Tàpies produced a number of assemblages made from collections of simple *objets trouvés*: a chair with dark clothes, a bundle of old cloth marked with paint, a desk heaped with straw (Figure 35), a wardrobe door, its mirror scattered with coloured confetti, a large knotted cloth with debris, or a section of wire fencing with pink bows (Figure 36).

A work which serves to highlight the re-evaluative intention of Tàpies' approach is called *Straw and Wood* (1969) (Figure 37). Minimally constructed, the piece consists of an assemblage of straw on canvas, divided horizontally by a strip of wood. As has been the case with most of his paintings,



Tàpies employed the 'flatbed' technique in the making of the assemblage, which, when completed, was lifted vertically to hang as an object against the wall.

Desacralization and sacralization are the counterposed elements in an on-going dialectic discourse initiated by Tàpies with this work. The culturization of the coarse, humble material and its re-positioning in the art arena, makes it worthy of re-evaluation. Instead of a painted representation, the viewer is confronted by a seemingly absurd assemblage of elemental material from the earth combined with a culturally endowed format associated with traditional art viz. the stretched canvas support. Presentation and representation, allusion and association are some of the concepts contained in his assemblage. Tàpies is, furthermore, engaged with the existential, the authentic material and art-act connections. He is awakening the senses to the primordial which is present alongside the everyday happenings of the here-and-now. A multiplicity of associative ideas is released and Tàpies has written of "... those ancient solar myths which have proverbially originated in the straw of the cowshed" (Tàpies 1974: 8) in a reference to the Vedic philosophical concept which speaks of the presence of great wisdom in the most humble body or object.

Besides his deeply philosophical framework he does reveal a sensitivity towards the fundamental, the primary, and those less fortunate, simple people who struggle to survive, when he says:

To reflect on straw, on dung ... . It means meditating on primary things on which is most natural, the origin of force and of life ... for the artist finds that this origin, the springs of life, the manure that fertilizes the soil, the 'salt of the earth' is really to be found in those who struggle below ... those who are considered scum (Tàpies 1974: 8).

Tàpies has deployed a consistently penetrating fusion of formal strategy and iconographic themes to give form to the dynamics of origins, of growth, of becoming, of decay and of death. In his work the fragility and traces of human presence, the spiritually transcendent and the deceptiveness of reality are contained in authentically concrete materializations.

Deborah Wye identifies the essentially inclusive nature of Antoni Tàpies' artistic richness:

His art acknowledges the inescapability of bodily functions, the intrusiveness of one's environment, the deep pull of cultural heritage, and the ever-present quest for the spiritual; it does not accept their separateness (Wye 1991: 51).

PART FOUR  
ANTONIN ARTAUD

## THE ENCODING OF ARTAUD

Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) (Figure 38), whose anguished life straddled the years of the First and Second World wars was, as a man, writer, theorist and artist, in passionate conflict with the world of his time. A key influence in the development of Twentieth-century theatre and contemporary performance art, especially in Europe, America and Japan, Artaud has been a catalyst for alternative approaches to art-making in which the direct experience of the body is foregrounded.

Artaud takes his place in this series of works against a background of pervasive violence. In this site of concern he is a signifier for (i) the outsider, (ii) the witness of pain, (iii) the need to address the pain and the wounds, (iv) a state of dis-ease, (v) an art that is inclusive of the sense that cathartic experience is the impetus for creative, therapeutic and re-constructive intervention. In the domain of the Artaud referent, art and the hospital rub shoulders. In our state of sustained paroxysm, of unrelieved anxiety, of uncertainty, illness affords the opportunity for revelatory experience and for achieving through art what Donald Kuspit has called "... concreteness through the sceptical gesture" (Kuspit 1984: 139).

By invoking Artaud there is the suggestion that a crisis is at hand both in the individual and amongst people in the broader human community. In the cultural arena, Artaud has been the outsider. The traumas he endured underpin the encoding of his life and work as an emblematic indicator of the individual - as - community in a state of painful social dislocation.

In South Africa the cultural dislocations brought to bear on people have been shaped by an oppressive discourse of power. The languages of the dispossessed have been severely restricted. A valid and active sense of self has been eroded by cultural denials, exile, incarceration, banning and censoring. Dominated by racist ideology, apartheid has represented people as ethnically categorized entities. This categorization has been conducted

from a pre-ordained language-specific position by 'absent' authors. 'Absent' since they have not been required to be present or to be known to the voiceless recipients of their acts of definition. The defining and categorizing means that at birth the person has been 'possessed' and has already been re-presented. Existing as 'something' conveniently labelled whilst wanting, but lacking the recognition of being 'someone'. Representation of the self in this instance signals the death of the person. Through dispossession by naming, language has been used to appropriate, negate and to require an acceptance of one's represented self and the acceptance of being defined an outsider. The desire for a life free from the dictates of discriminatory legislation has in the past been consistently denied. A history of lacks and denials has resulted in the present extreme levels of frustration and pathological states of violence.

By including Artaud's name in the lexicon of my iconography, I am inferring that Artaud is 'present' here among us. This is his *Theatre of Cruelty*. This is his "... second existence", in the words of Baudrillard, "... as the referential of cruelty" (Baudrillard 1984: 280). In referring to Artaud there is the suggestion that one is part of a tortured scenario – a fragmented society in need of healing. Artaud's presence is a sign and a metaphor for a condition of instability characterised by extremes of anger, accumulated rage, outbursts of explosive violence, by the irrational and by the inexplicable.

If Artaud is more pertinent to our afflicted situation here in South Africa it is because the force that emanates from his work and his life is more subversive to the assumption that our cultural fragmentation is reasonable or even intelligible. This country affords its inhabitants various experiences of the legacies of enforced spatial segregation, mutually unintelligible languages and an assortment of modes of communication varying in levels of relative and contextual significance and inclusive of the media, loud-hailers, gestures, graffiti, banners, posters and speeches in traditional and contemporary vernaculars.

According to Susan Sontag, Antonin Artaud "... offers the greatest quantity of suffering in the history of literature" (Sontag 1980: 62). He had a history of internment in mental hospitals from an early age. Throughout his poetic outpourings, complex and uncompromisingly explicit, he contested the boundary between art and symptomatology. "Like Nietzsche, Artaud conceived of himself as a physician to culture – as well as being its most painfully ill patient" (Sontag 1980: 42). His *Theatre of Cruelty* was aimed at awakening his audiences to the cruelty inherent in life. Artaud underwent repeated bouts of insulin – and electroshock therapies over a three-year period during his nine years in psychiatric hospitals. The encoding of Artaud is the encoding of a pathological/existential referent. He suffered existential collapse under the strain of accumulated psychological pressures.

Artaud served most of his life in either the theatre or the mental hospital. The serious challenger to orthodoxy has virtually always been burned at the stake, declared insane or regarded a criminal. Artaud's own tortured existence, his own experience of cruelty becomes emblematic of the individual consumed in a body/mind dislocation. The language of reason pre-ordains for itself a position of surveillance and of representing sanity/insanity, acceptable/unacceptable, freedom/punishment. In relation to Foucault's work on the treatment of madness, Jacques Derrida points out: "For what Foucault teaches us to think is that there are crises of reason in strange complicity with what the world calls crises of madness" (Derrida 1978: 63). The mad person, like the criminal, like the outcast, like the denigrated, like the politically disadvantaged, has been treated or punished in a marginalizing manner by the agents of surveillance and by legislation. The language of the outcast is regarded as suspect, as noises on the periphery of legitimized society. To ensure that society remains uncontaminated the suspect is removed in an act of cleansing.

In relation to Artaud's seminal impact on performance art the insights provided by Arthur Danto are particularly useful. "Performance art is a response to the separation of artist and community, and is atavistic in seeking to achieve a way of erasing the boundary between art and life" (Danto 1990: 123). Danto points to the ritualistic origins of theatre when he outlines the striving for a real transformation of consciousness "... through charged images"

(Danto 1990: 123) that resonate from the actual presence of the artist in performance art. He points to the moral distance upon which theatre was developed but which the original Dionysian ritual was meant to overcome. In contemporary performance art the influence of Artaud is palpable, especially with regard to that original ritualistic principle which Danto emphasises when he locates performance art in a site "... between theatre and whatever dark ritual it was out of which theatre evolved and against which it was a defense" (Danto 1990: 122).

Artaud's persona, his lectures, his plays and poems all opposed ideologically controlled culture. His creative energies were pitted, at times almost unreasonably, against the processes by which signification imposes order on chaos. His was the language of auto-interrogation at the same time as he interrogated dominant culture with its dubious relationship to representation (in the theatre and in life). Derrida writes with reference to Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*. "The theatre of cruelty is not a representation. It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable. Life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation" (Derrida 1978: 234).

Circumstances and statistics are in a constant state of flux. Our apprehension of the incongruities of existence is more often obscured than assisted by the incongruities of representation. If painting provides but a thin layer of ordering it is nonetheless a framing of disorder in an attempt to make sense of chaos. The structuring of materials and forms involves the processes of destruction and construction. By exposing the structuring processes one points to the process of and need for transformative intervention. In seeking to find clarity in the image - making of this series of works, the impulses generated from my readings of and about Artaud have provided the momentum for the location of an energy in my work that acknowledges, but prefers to be defiant of, our capacity to inflict pain on each other.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



## PREFACE

- Figure 1 Exiled Chiefs in front of their hut on Robben Island, 1859. Photograph: South African Library, Cape Town.
- Figure 2 No to Hunger, 1985. Silkscreen poster by Huhudi Youth Organization. Lesedi Silkscreen Workshop.
- Figure 3 GERARD SEKOTO. Yellow-Houses - A Street in Sophiatown, 1940. Oil on Cardboard. 50.8 x 74.5 cm.
- Figure 4 SYDNEY KUMALO. Seated Woman. Bronze. 32.2 x 24.5 x 12 cm. (Date unknown.)
- Figure 5 JOHN MUAFANGEJO. Battle of Rorke's Drift, 1981. Linoleum print. 40.6 x 69.5 cm.
- Figure 6 HELEN SEBIDI. The Message from the Earth, 1988. Mixed Media and Collage on Paper. 230 x 149 cm.

## JACKSON POLLOCK

- Figure 7 Jackson Pollock, 1951. Photograph by Hans Namuth.
- Figure 8 Autumn Rhythm, 1950. Oil on canvas. 266.7 x 525.8 cm.
- Figure 9 Number 31, 1950. Oil on canvas. 269 x 518 cm.
- Figure 10 The Guardians of the Secret, 1943. Oil on canvas. 122.8 x 191.3 cm.

## RICHARD SERRA

Figure 11 Casting, 1969. Lead. Dimensions variable.

Figure 12 Richard Serra throwing lead, 1969. Castelli Warehouse, New York. Photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni.

## ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Figure 13 Bed, 1955. Combine painting. 191 x 80 x 16.5 cm.

Figure 14 Monogram, 1959. Freestanding Combine. 122 x 181 x 181 cm.

Figure 15 Trophy 1 (For Merce Cunningham), 1959. Combine painting. 154 x 104 cm.

## JOSEPH BEUYS

Figure 16 Auschwitz, 1958. Showcase with various objects.

Figure 17 How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare, 1965. Action.

Figure 18 'I like America and America likes me', 1974. Action.

Figure 19 Fat corner, 1960.

Figure 20 Felt corner, 1963.

Figure 21 Show your wound, 1976. Environment.

Figure 22 Show your wound, 1976. Details. Environment.

Figure 23 The End of the Twentieth Century, 1983-5. Basalt, Installation.

## ANSELM KIEFER

Figure 24 To the Unknown Painter, 1983. Oil, aquatex, latex, emulsion, shellac and straw on canvas. 208 x 381 cm.

Figure 25 Sulamith, 1983. Oil, acrylic, emulsion, shellac and straw, with woodcut on canvas. 290 x 370 cm.

Figure 26 Painting=Burning, 1974. Oil on burlap. 220 x 300 cm.

Figure 27 Your Golden Hair, Margarete - Midsummer Night, 1981. Oil, acrylic, emulsion and straw on canvas. 130 x 160 cm.

Figure 28 The Burning of the Rural District of Buchen, 1975. Bound Volume. Oil, charcoal and glue on twenty strips of burlap.

## ANTONI TÀPIES

Figure 29 The Catalan Spirit, 1971. Mixed media on panel. 200 x 270 cm.

Figure 30 Material in the Shape of a Foot, 1965. Mixed media on canvas. 130 x 162 cm.

Figure 31 Material in the Shape of an Armpit, 1968. Mixed media on canvas. 65.5 x 100.5 cm.

Figure 32 In the Form of a Leg, 1968. Mixed media on canvas. 89 x 146 cm.

Figure 33 Elbow-material, 1973. Mixed media on canvas. 82 x 66 cm.

Figure 34 Assemblage with Graffiti, 1972. Assemblage. 208 x 190 x 15 cm.

Figure 35 Desk with Straw, 1970. Assemblage. 110 x 109 x 131 cm.

Figure 36 Wire-netting with Pink Bows, 1970. Assemblage. 109 x 91 x 11 cm.

Figure 37 Straw and Wood, 1969. Assemblage on canvas. 150 x 116 cm.

## ANTONIN ARTAUD

Figure 38 ANTONIN ARTAUD. Self-Portrait, 1946. Pencil on Paper. 65 x 50 cm.

## NAIL FIGURES

Figure 39 Power Figure (*nkondi*). Kongo, Zaire. Wood, nails, metal pins, mirror and cloth. Height 66 cm.



Figure 1

# HUHU DI YOUTH ORGANISATION



**NO TO HUNGER  
NO TO HIGH RENTS  
NO TO PUDUMONG!**

Figure 2



Figure 3

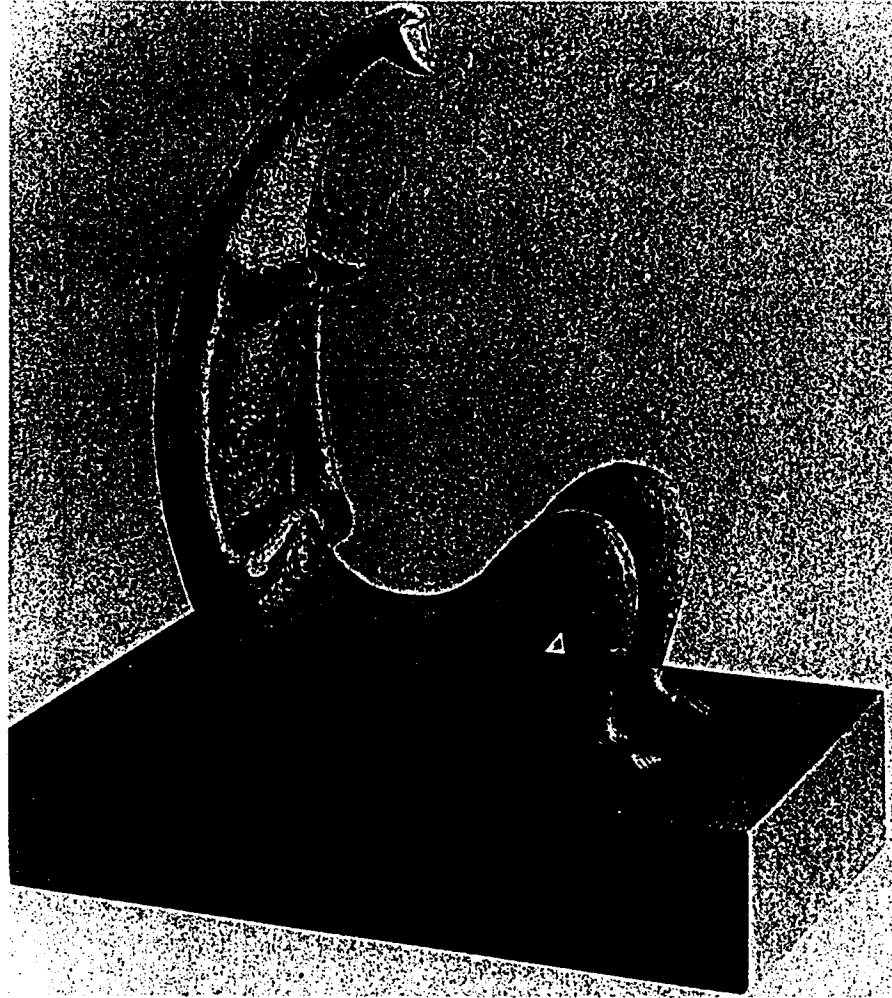


Figure 4



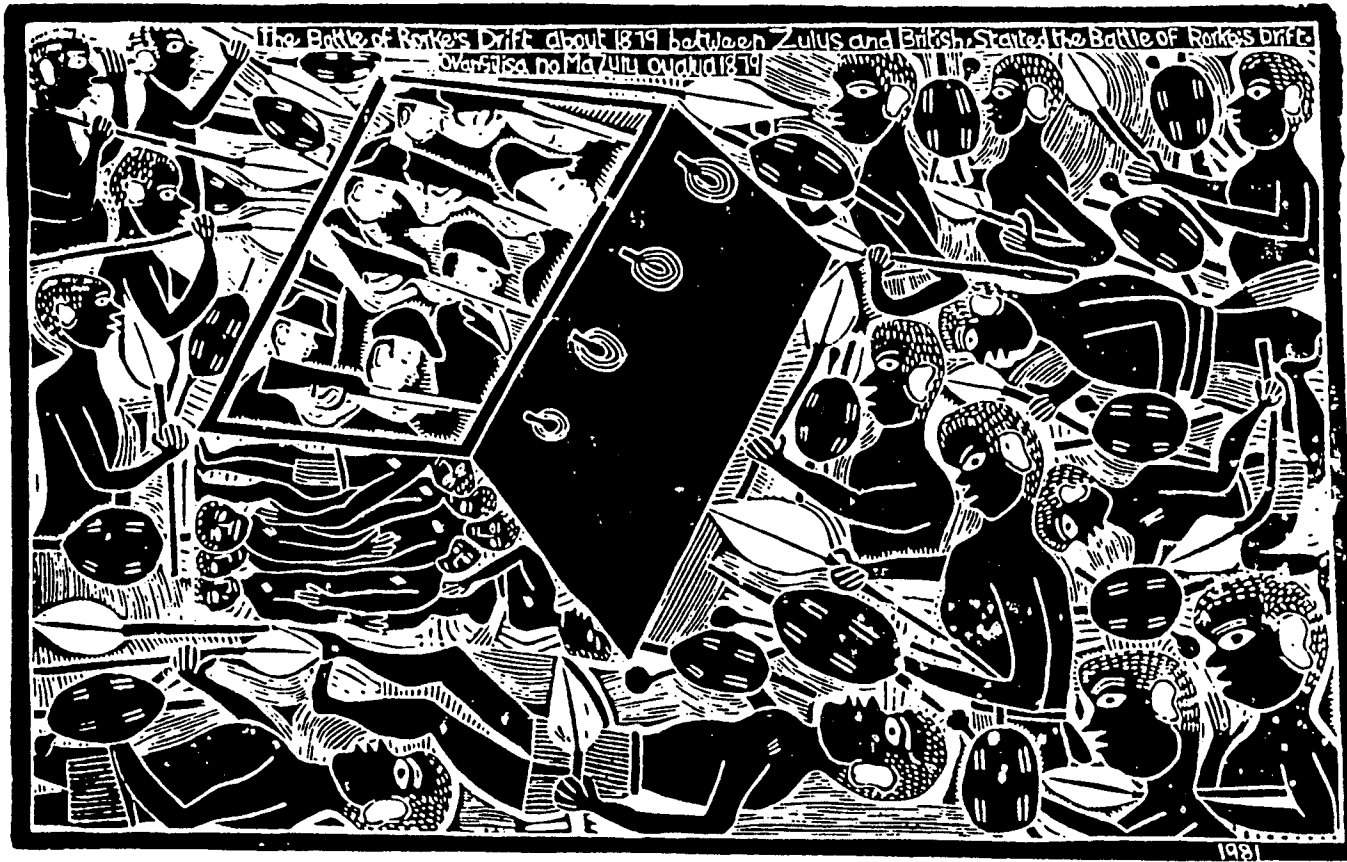


Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

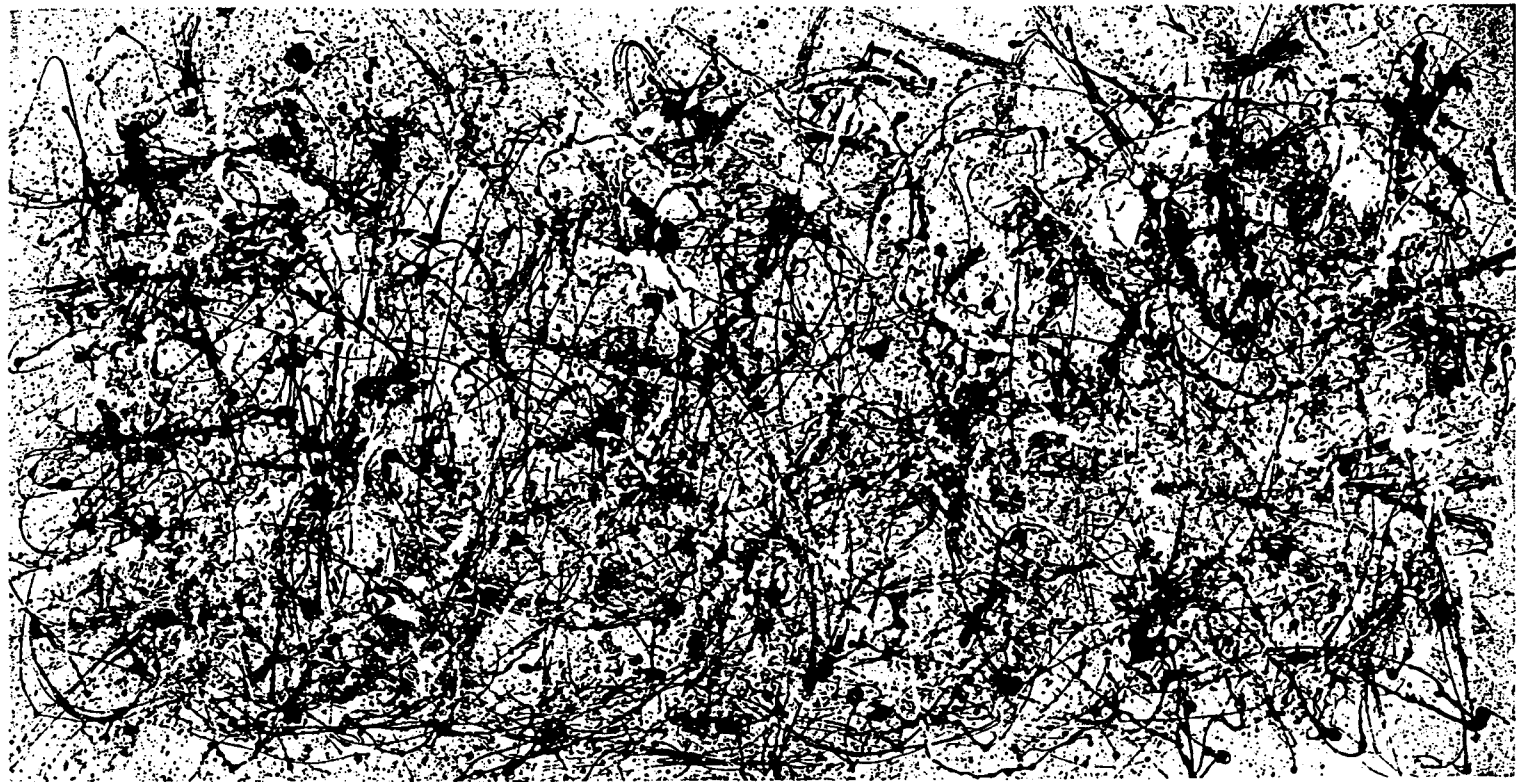


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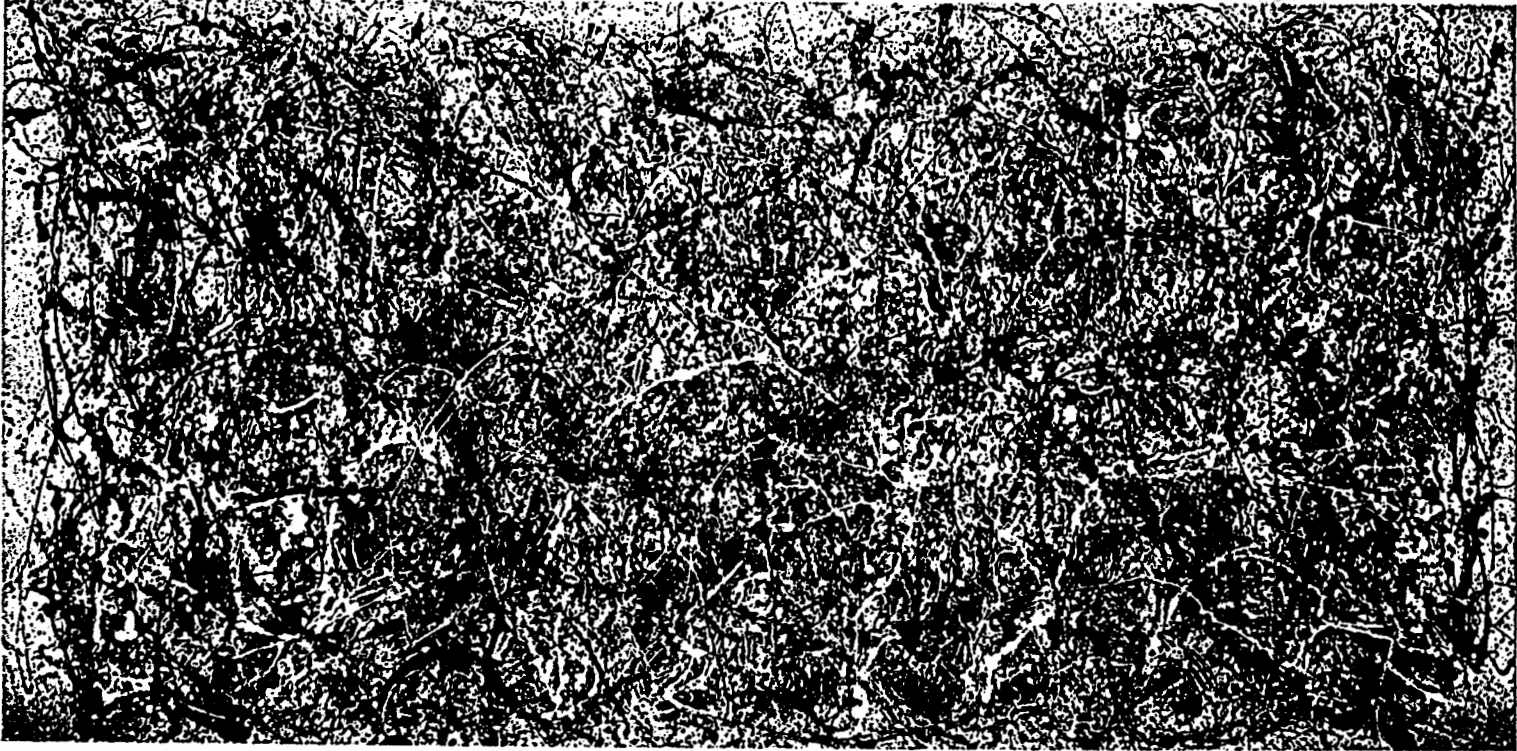


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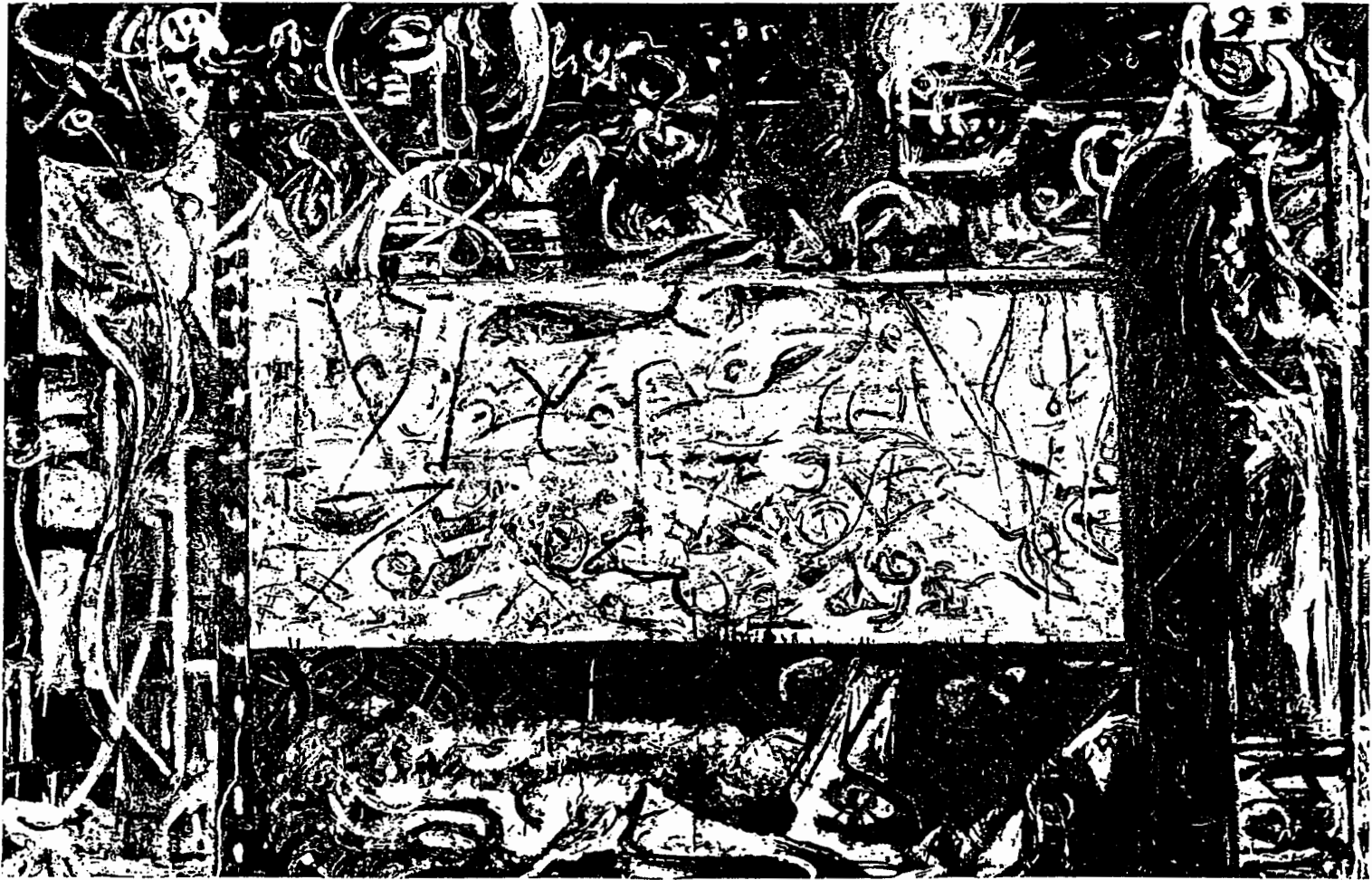


Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12





Figure 13

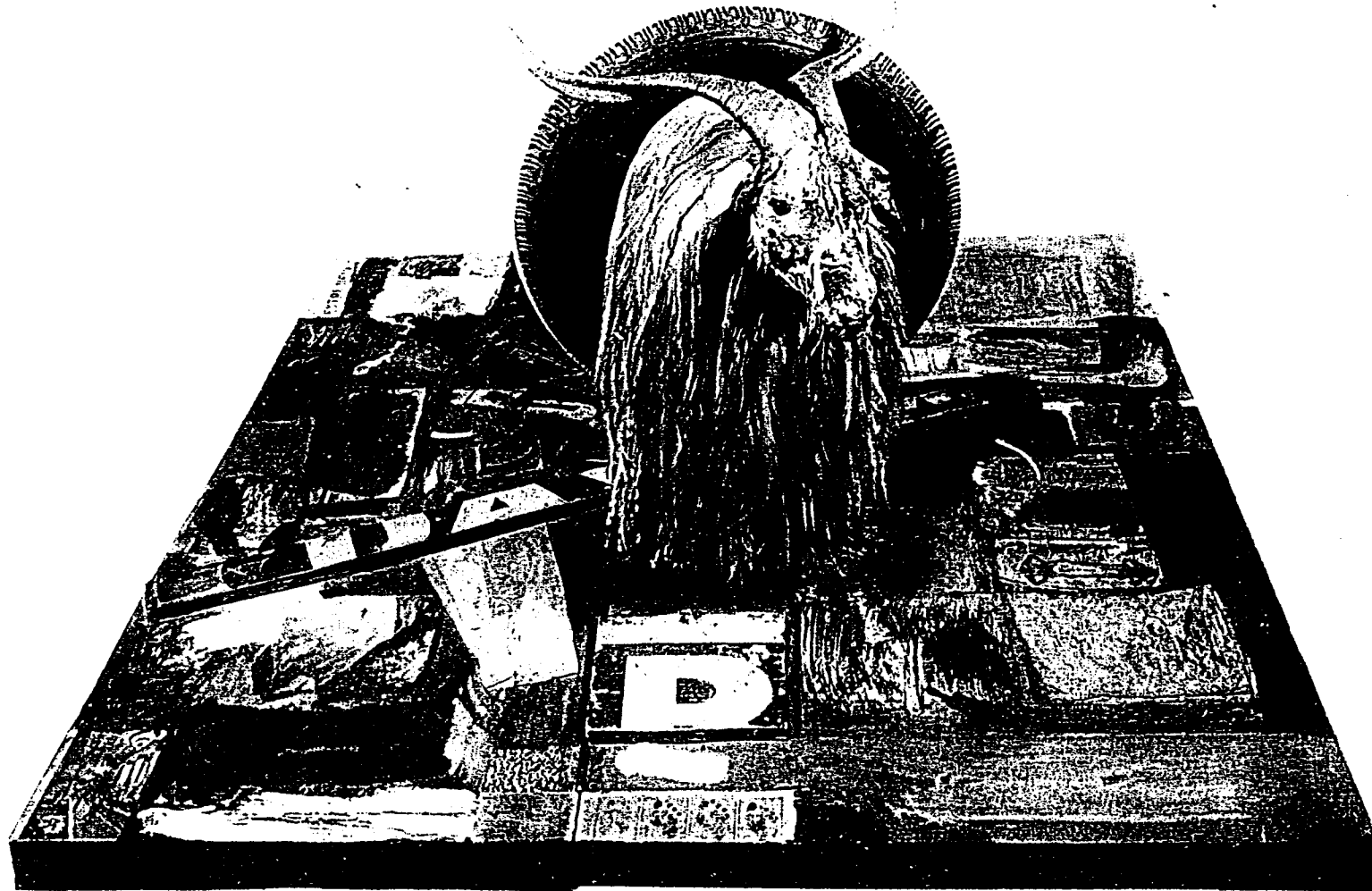


Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

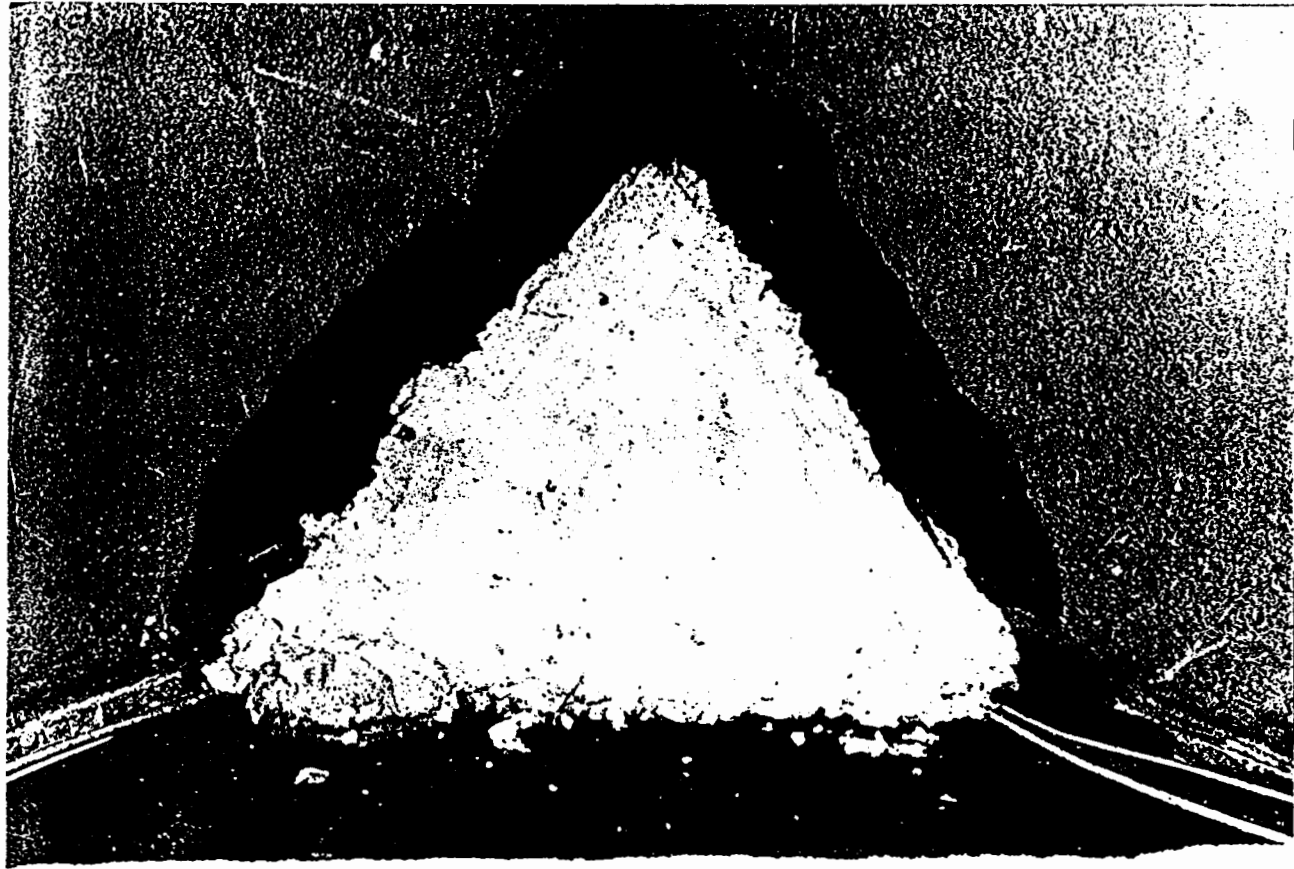


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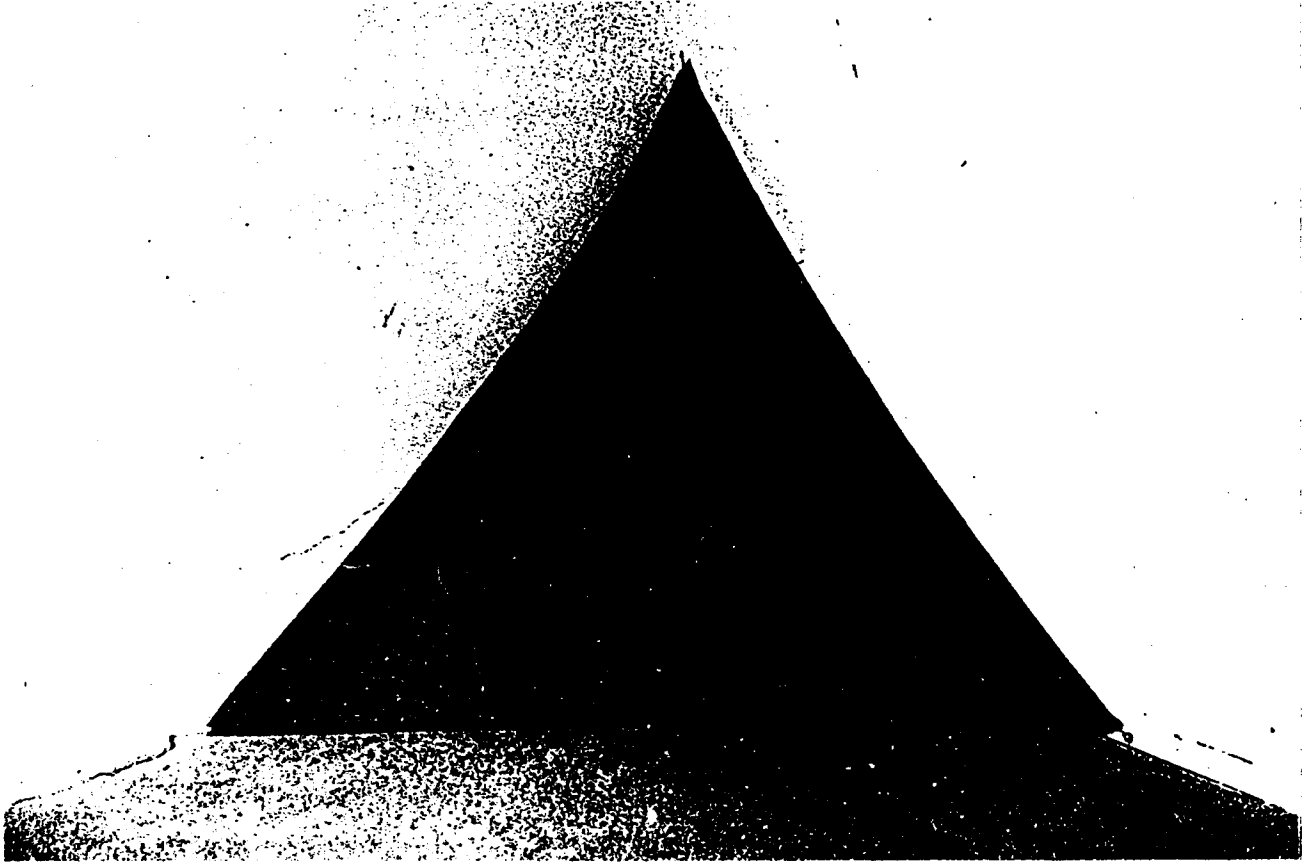


Figure 20



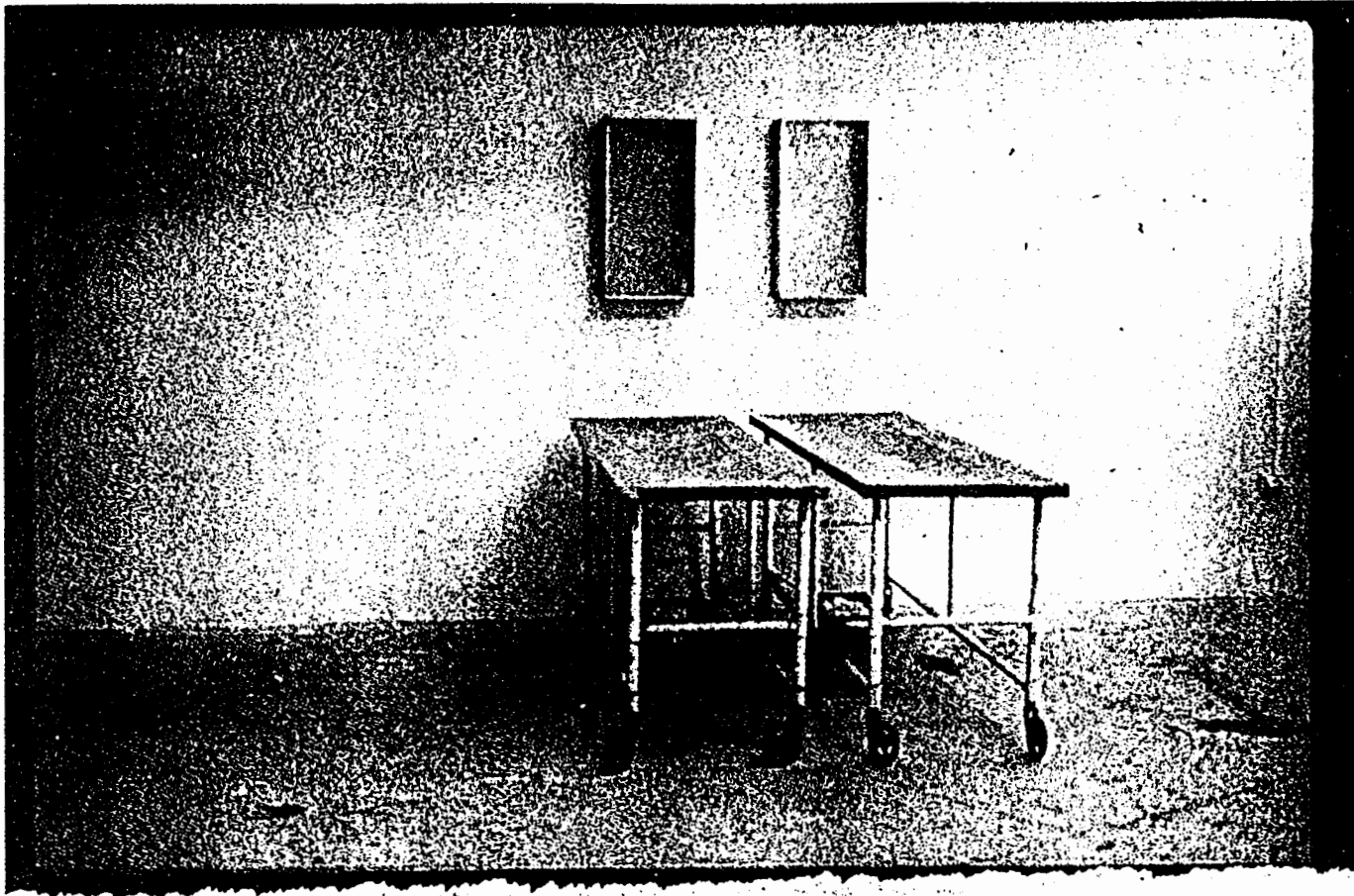


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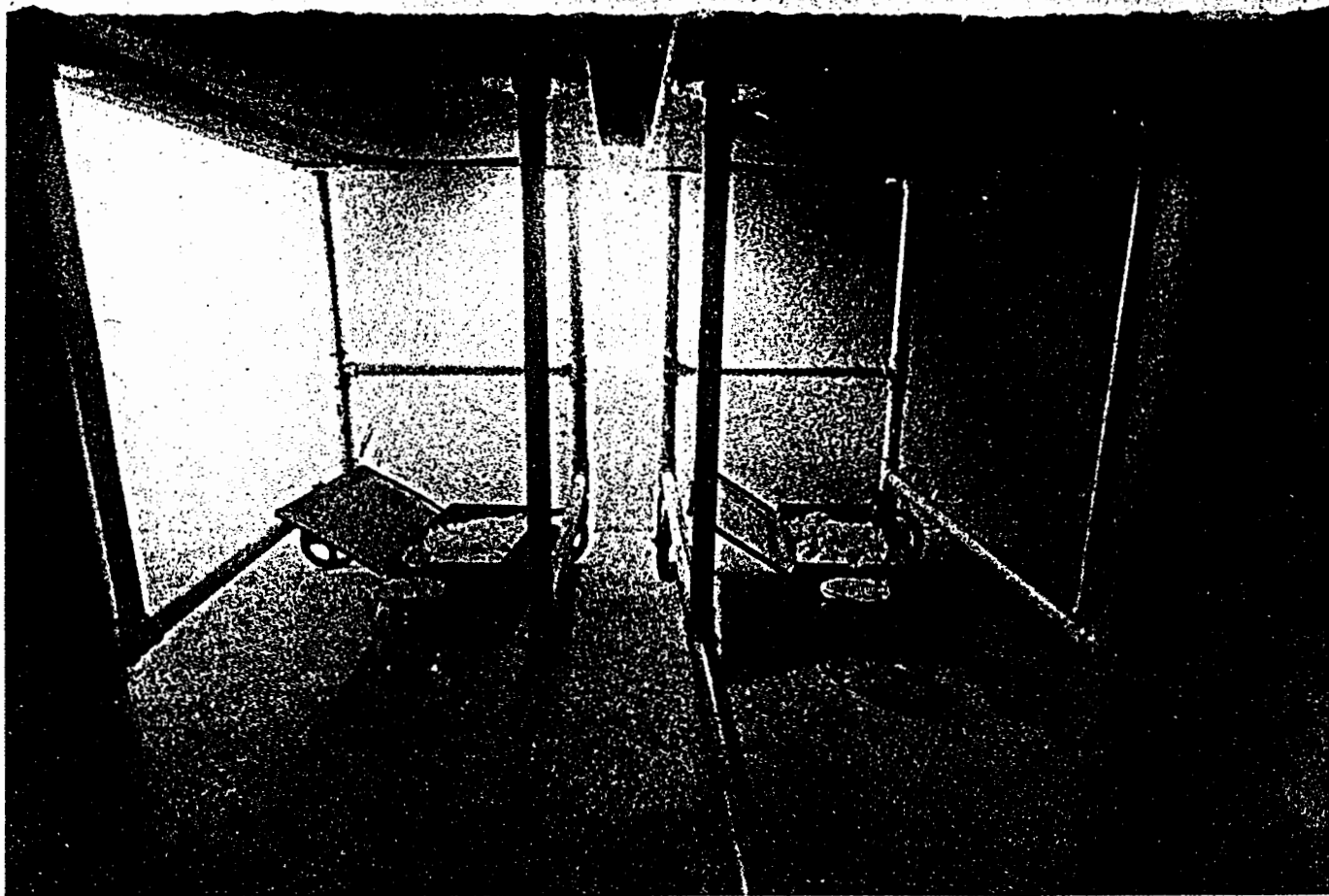


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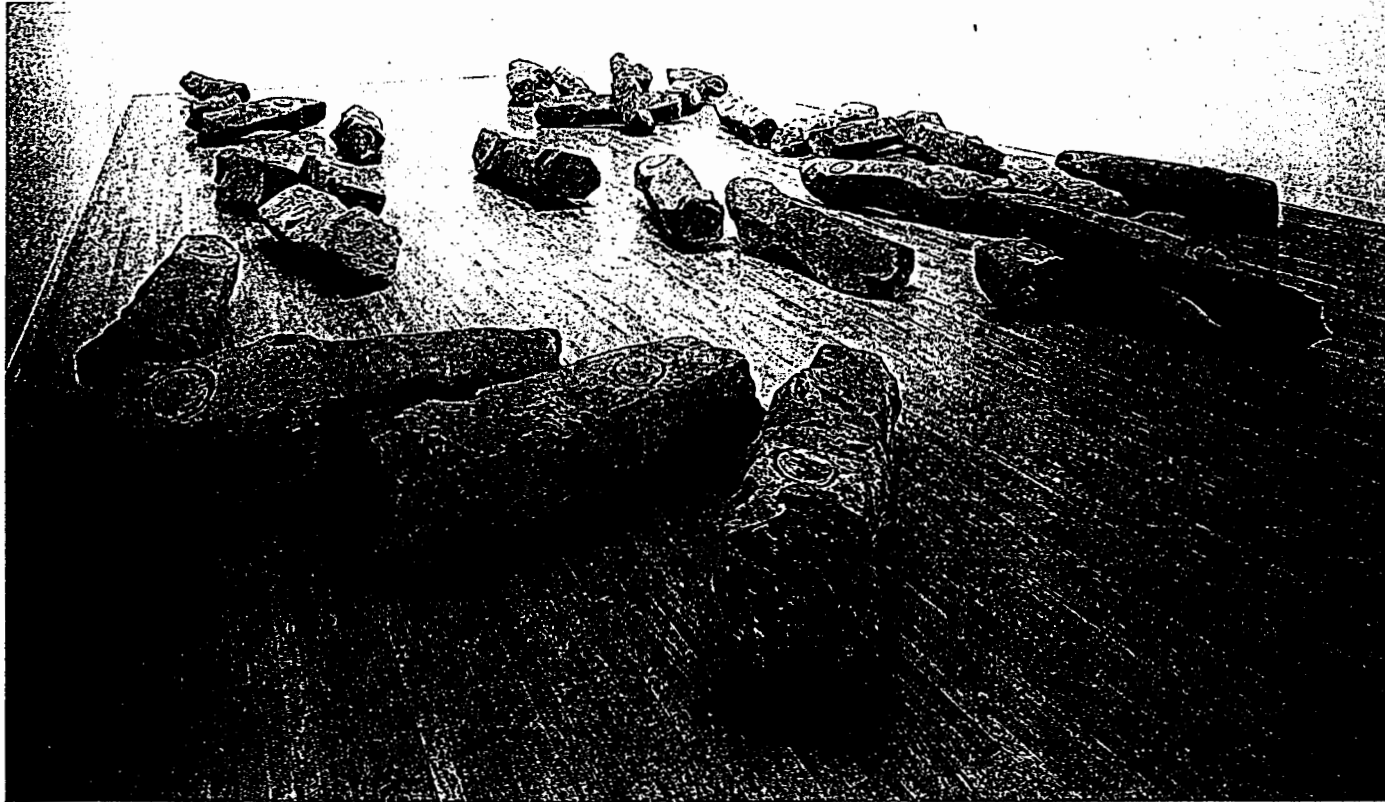


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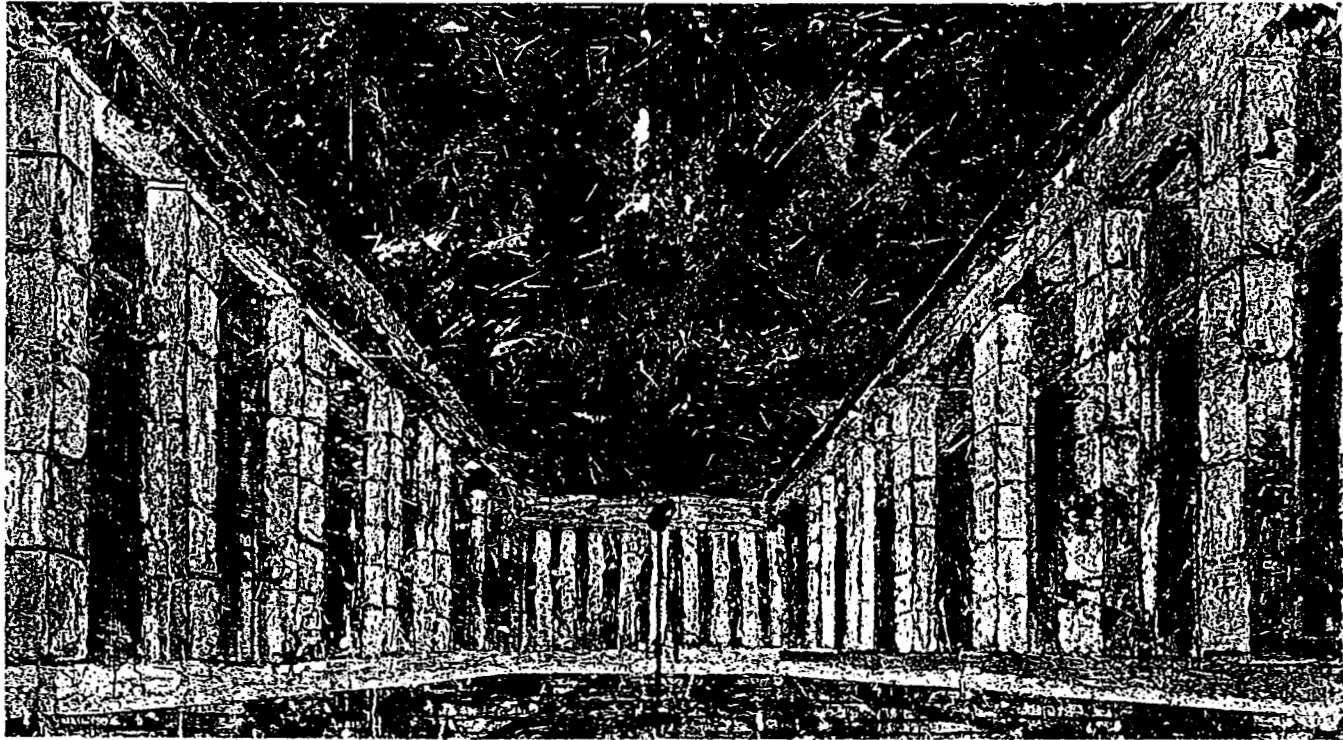


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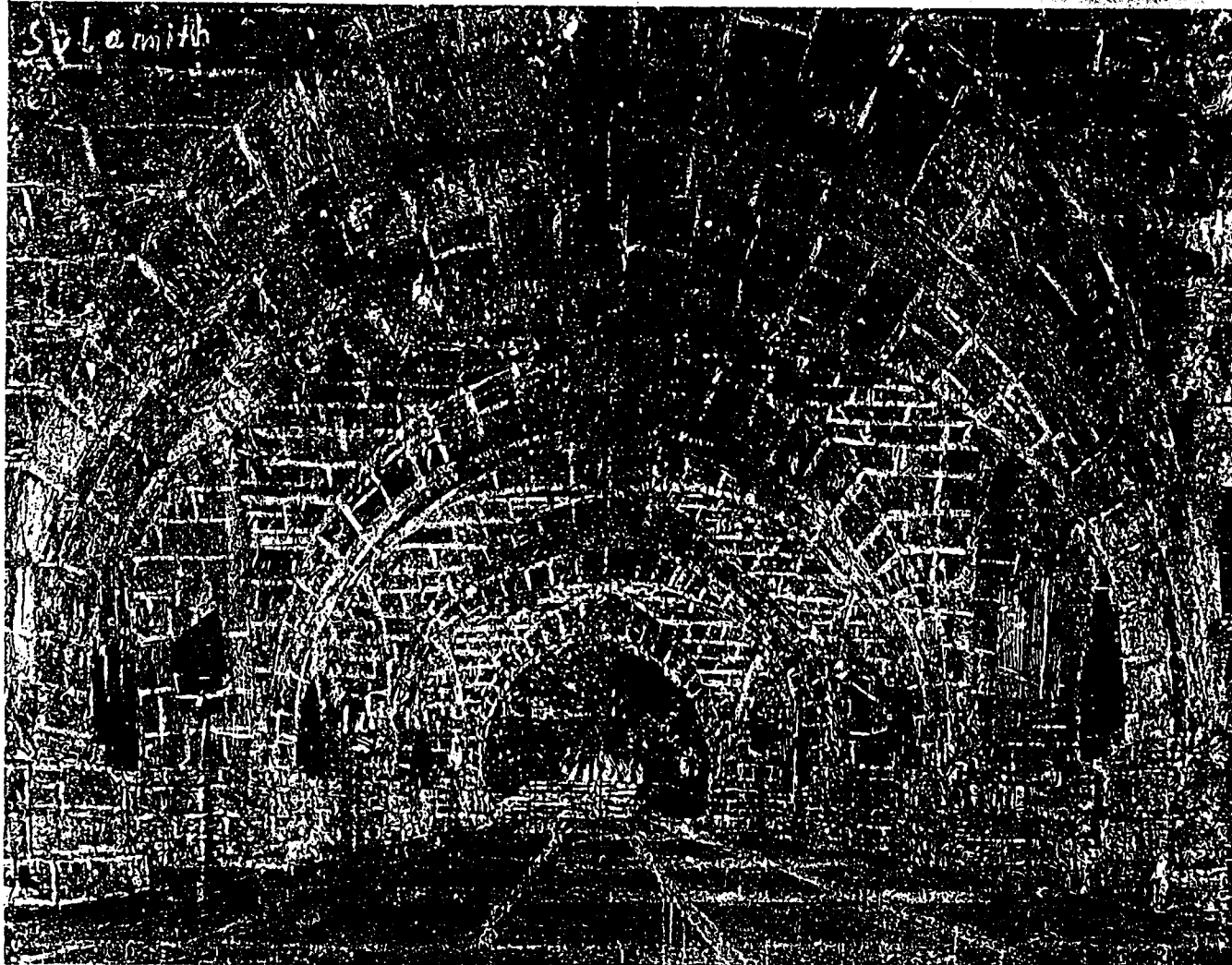


Figure 25



Figure 26

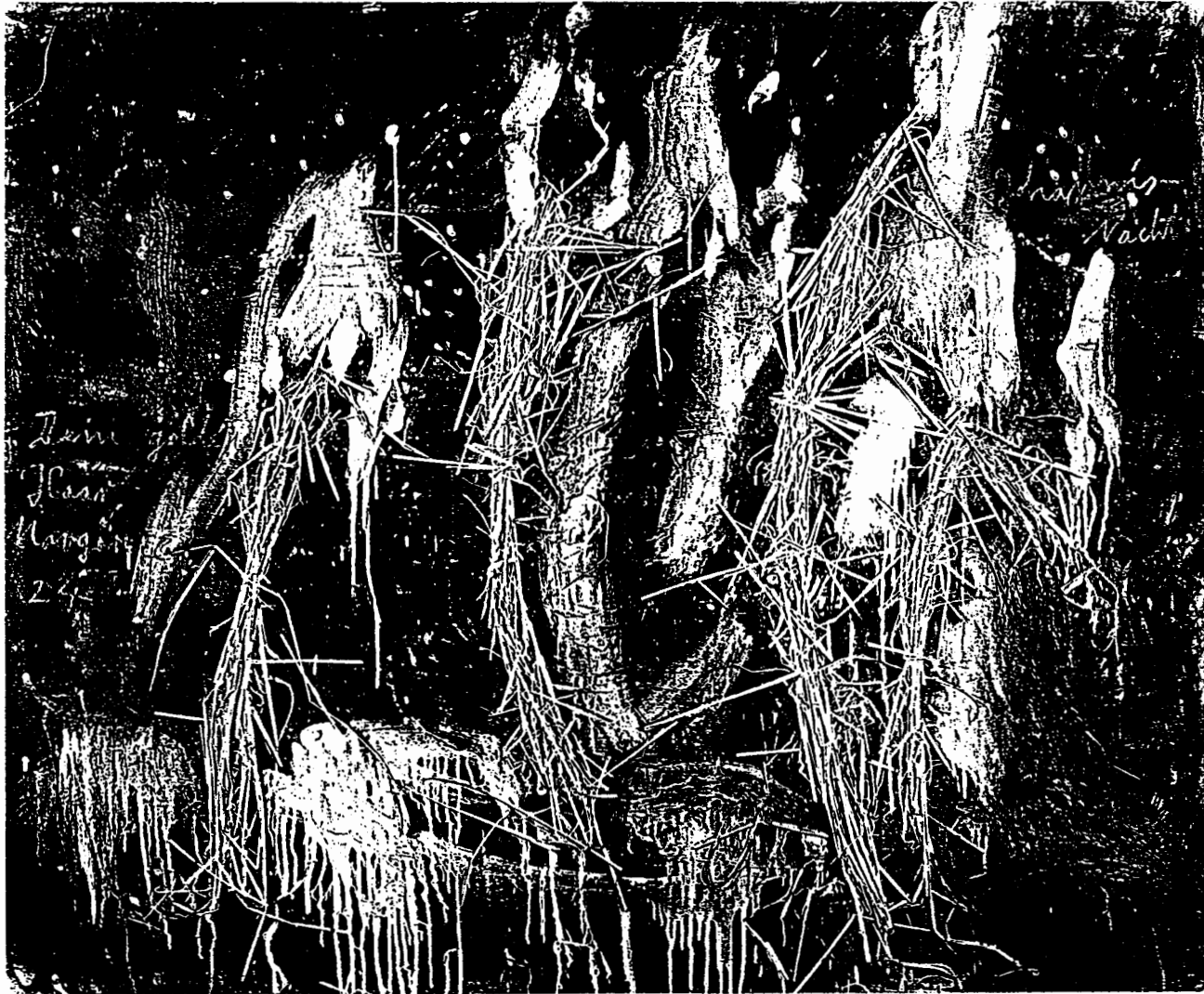


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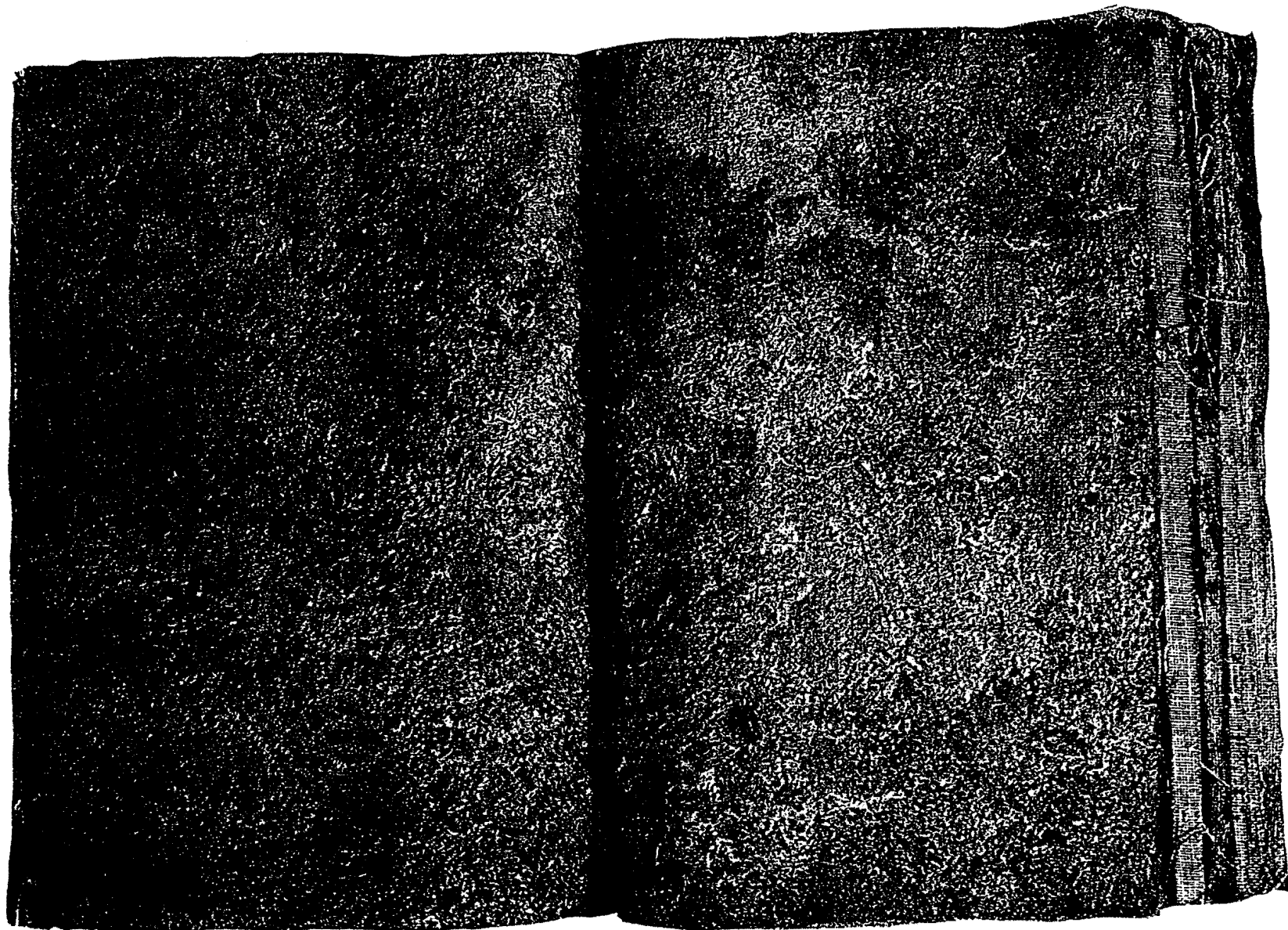


Figure 28







Figure 30



Figure 31

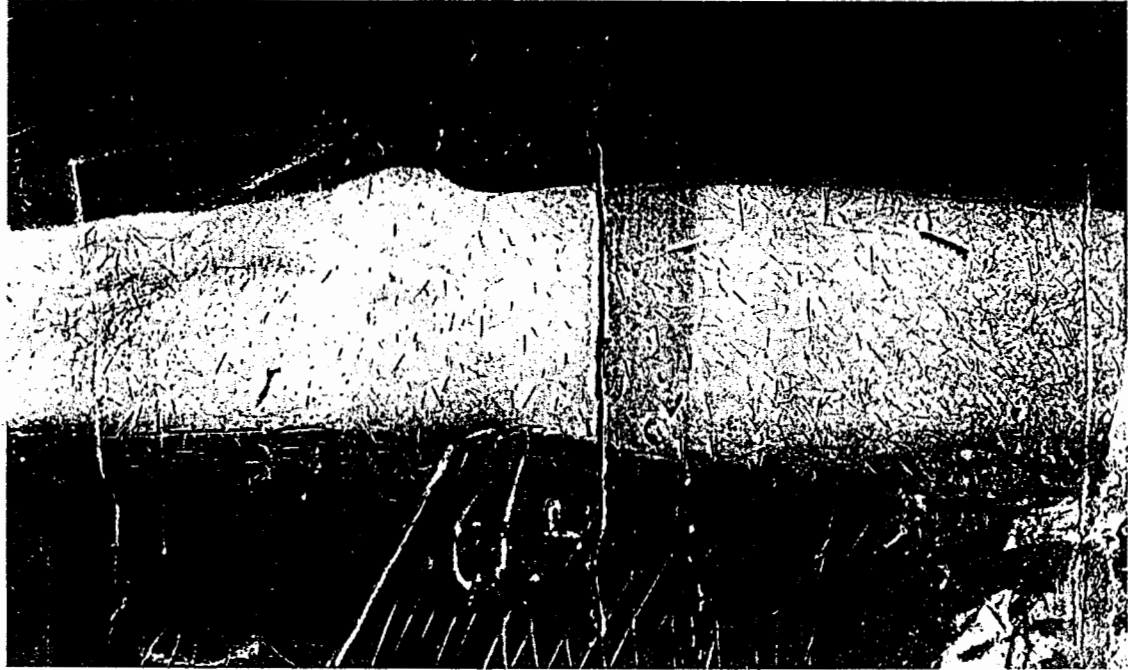


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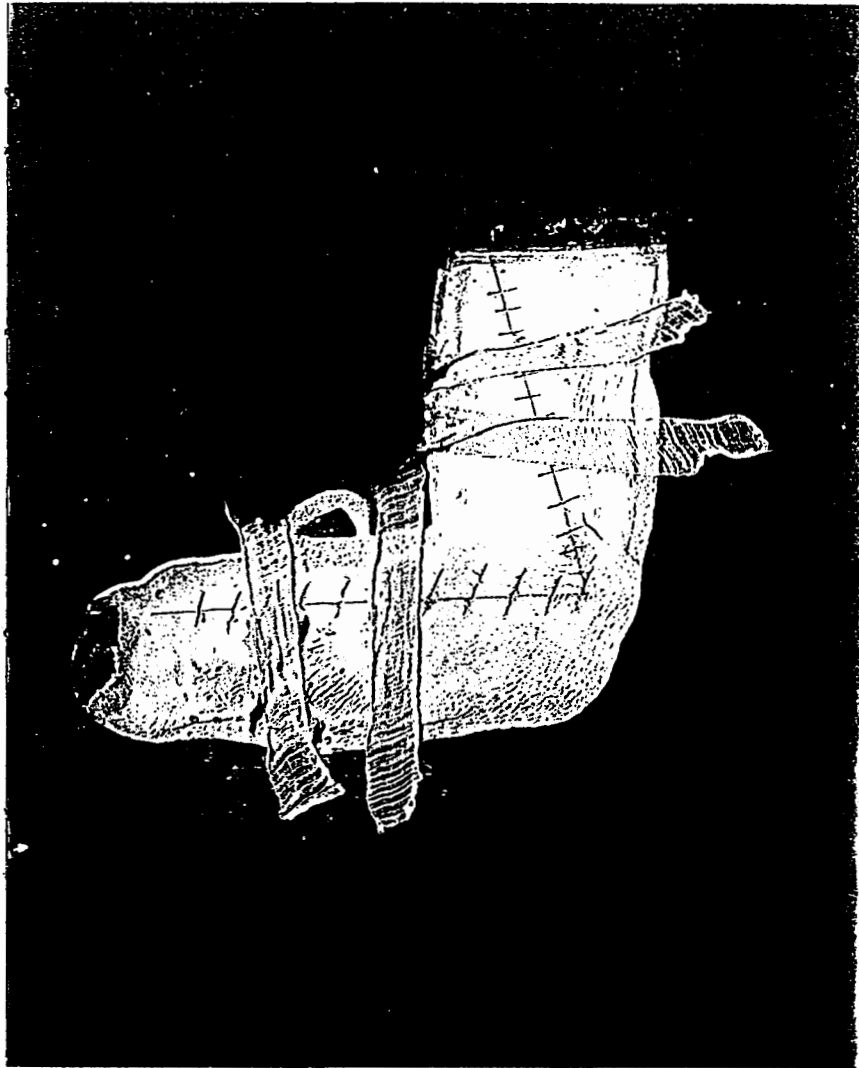


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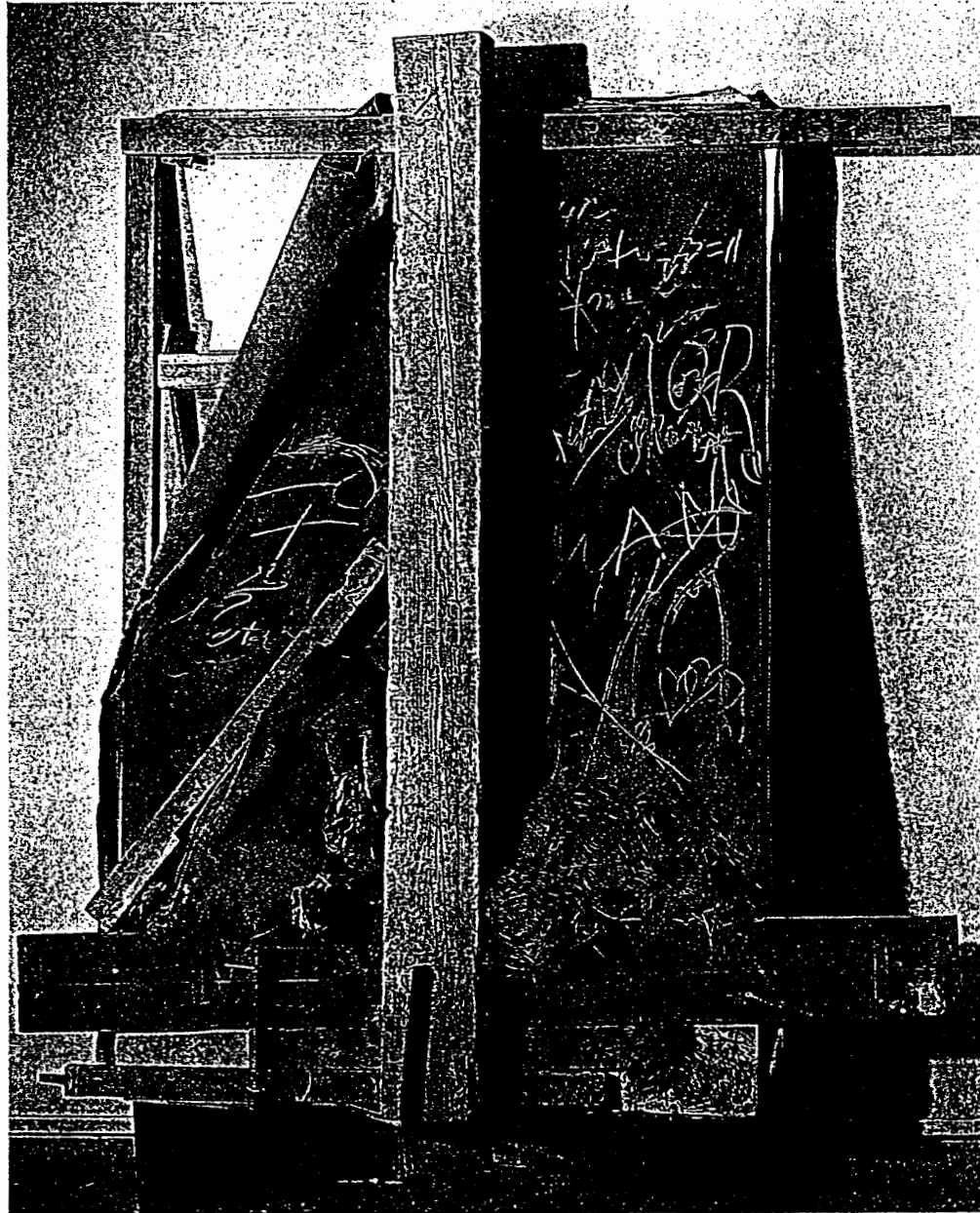


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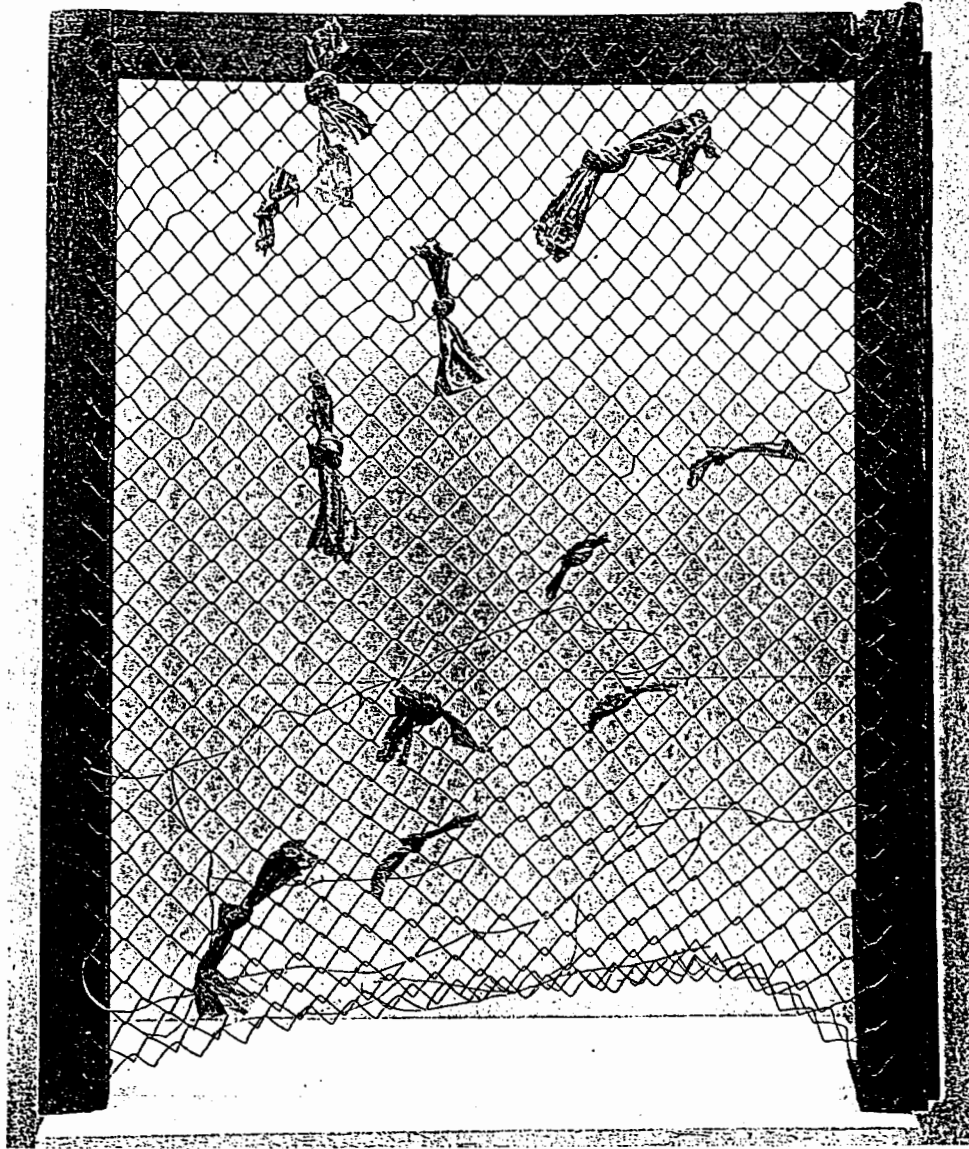


Figure 36





Figure 37



dent on in Antoon  
17 decembre 1985

Figure 38



Figure 39

## DOMESTIC BAGGAGE

### INTRODUCTION AND EXPLICATION OF WORKING PROCESS

## PAINTINGS ON CANVAS

The paintings on canvas have evolved from an identification with a perceived site of crisis. Formally, these paintings were preceded by a series of forays into the grid format. Serially pre-determined, the concept of an **upper** image and a **lower** image was extracted from the exploratory imagery of *The Grids*. Linear divisions inherent in the iconography of the grid explorations were eliminated in the works on canvas. Instead, the geometric foundation is implied by the situating of the pairs of images within the rectangular space of the canvas, consistently placed above and below a non-depicted dividing line. The allusions to earth and sky regions have been developed alongside the concept of a **floating** upper image and a **grounded** lower image. Depicted objects in this series are signifiers of the domestic aspect as well as indicators of the human presence in both sky and earth situations.

The working process evolved over a period of time spanning the past three years. A working pattern has emerged, viz: drawing and painting organically and experimentally in *The Grids* followed by drawings of the isolated pairs of images. Work on canvas proceeded once initial washes of colour had been applied to the cleanly stretched surface. Images were then directly brushed in with a thin mixture of pigment, water and glaze. Subsequent applications of colour are visible in the layering and accumulations of marks making up the completed painting.

Acrylic paint on canvas is the fundamental medium. Selective use of glazing and additions of marble-dust was employed to increase or decrease the luminosity of colour. Areas of paint have been left unglazed allowing for the interplay of brightness and dullness to varying degrees. Absorbed light and reflected light, saturated colour and transparent colour have been facilitated in selective applications of the media. Viscosities and Textures have been manipulated through a number of applications inclusive of washing, soaking, splashing, brushing, scraping, layering, scratching and dragging of the paint.

A mixture of fired clay-dust and synthetic glue combined with paint was used as material signifier of the earth area. Found elements like nails and wire have been embedded in the mixture of matter. The clay-dust and glue application required an average drying time of twelve hours on the horizontally placed canvas. Two of the other materials featured in the series are coal-dust and carborundum grains.

Work proceeded on both the vertically positioned canvas and the canvas placed on the floor. At times work was transferred to the out-of-doors.

Painting is a relatively slow process when compared with satellite-improved news broadcasting. The slowness of painting became a **counter-process** to the indifference of mediated news coverage. The speed of media coverage and the frequency of broadcasts 'flattens' the experience of atrocious acts of violence in this country. Each report adds to the 'debris' of two dimensional mediated experience. Traces of concern survive briefly only to be swallowed by the next shift of emphasis and manipulation of purchased media space.

The working process has included acts of remembering, of reflection, of the retrieval of responses and impulses generated from the interactions with actual events in the local social arena. Whilst referentially committed in this series to working with the specifics of local socio-political issues, the implications inferred in and arising from the iconography are also cognizant of more general existential concerns.

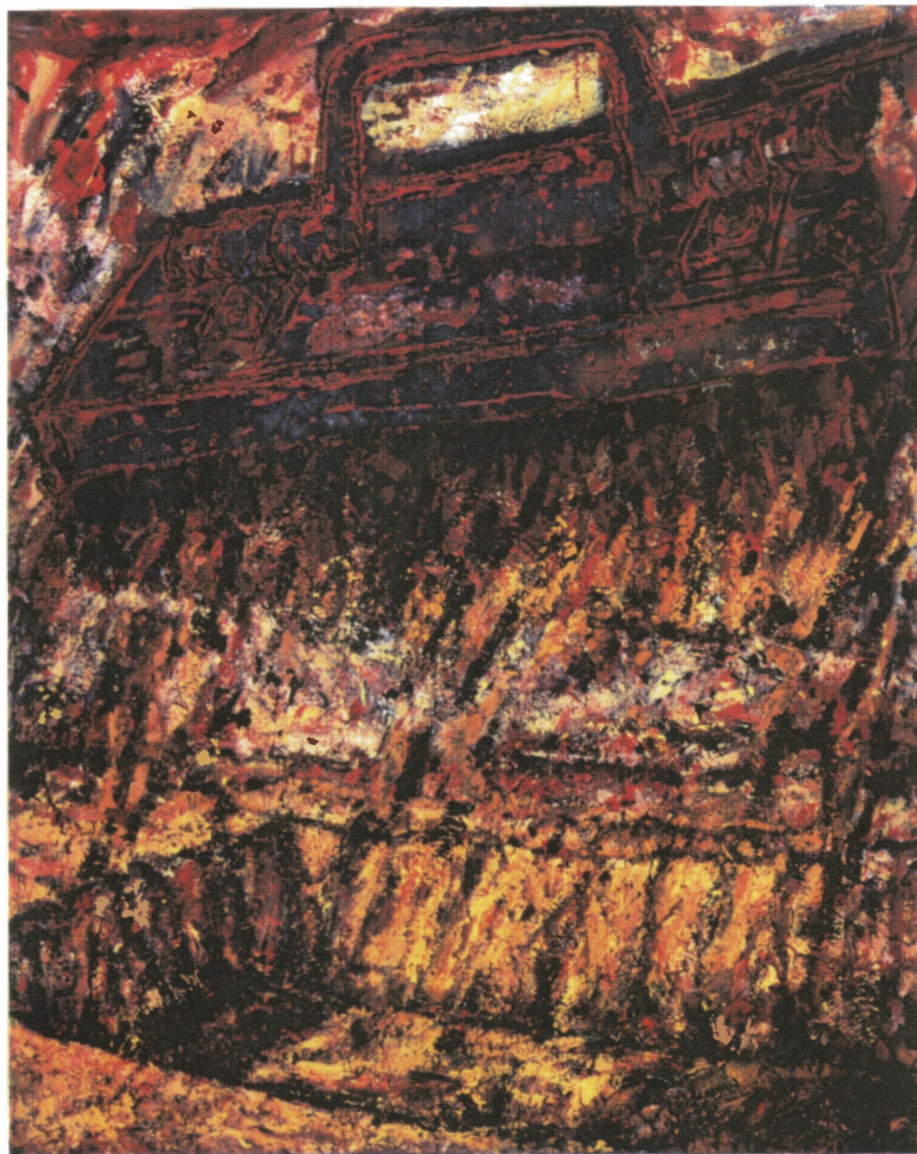
The interpretative endeavours within this explication do not seek to fix meaning, resolve ambiguities or to anchor signs. Inconclusiveness of interpretation is acknowledged. Prescription is not intended in any of the comments on the individual paintings. The statements reflect a subjective response but have been made in the belief that imagery expands in meaning when a non-absolutist approach to interpretation is adopted.

In the light of the crises of identity, insecurities, fear, anxieties and generally pervasive elements of dis-ease gripping this country, it seems essential that artists respond with sensitivity. Artists need to keep alive a consciousness that is infused with a belief in the power of art to evoke the need for empathy and to arouse an awareness of a disturbed social psyche.

Man can no more survive psychologically in a psychological milieu that does not respond empathically to him, than he can survive physically in an atmosphere that contains no oxygen (Kuspit 1984: 114).

DOCUMENTATION AND NOTES ON INDIVIDUAL PAINTINGS





PAINTING NO. 1

## PAINTING NO. 1

### *UNEARTHED*

Dimensions: 200 x 160 cm

Medium: Acrylic, brick-dust and carborundum on canvas

Date: 1992

The painting developed intuitively over a period of time with formal and iconographic changes occurring directly during the working process. Once the primary image had been established on the canvas, the involvement with materials became the fundamental *modus operandi*.

The first painting, chronologically, in the series, *UNEARTHED*, sets the emotional and psychological tone and provides a key to the iconography of later works.

For decades South Africans have lived with the pervasive experience of the forced removals of large numbers of people from settled habitation. The references inhering in this work are related to the expropriation and the excavation of land in South Africa. The image shows the excavation of a section of earth. Traditionally, African dwellings are constructed with materials from the earth, both clay and reeds. The material of the earthen house provides a direct connection between the people, domesticity and the origins of life as symbolically represented in the use of earth. This deep link is one of the major factors in the identification of the domestic architectural space as a sacred space. Traditional, pre-missionary, religious activities also took place within the communal environment of the home and the land. In relation to the displacement of Sotho-Tswana peoples. Gary van Wyk writes of the view held by Prof. the Rev. Setiloane:

Therefore, the policy of the South African government of moving people away from their ancient habitations is tantamount to the destruction of their temples (Nooter 1993: 85).

An instrument of excavation with a handle is the image which dominates the upper half of the painting. The act of lifting an excavated section of earth has been 'frozen' in suspension above the ground. Earth is inferred by paint, colour and by the use of a brick-dust and synthetic glue mixture.

Traces of habitation have disappeared. The unearthing act reveals only the 'wound' in the land. The excavator is anonymous, signified only by the instrument or tool he uses. However, after the act, the tool remains, providing tangible links with the protagonist and the act of expropriation.

The viewpoint is located at some distance above the earth. Below, the excavated hollow in the ground can be discerned. Exaggerated tilting of the excavation instrument, the relationship between the painted image and the edges of the canvas, and the extreme close-up view, reinforce the claustrophobic presence of this traumatic experience - an image which confronts and which refuses to disappear from memory.



PAINTING NO. 2

## **PAINTING NO. 2**

### ***UNPLUGGED***

**Dimensions: 200 x 160 cm**

**Medium: Acrylic, carborundum, nails, clay-dust on canvas**

**Date: 1993**

**This painting features the dominant image of a three-pronged electrical power plug, disconnected and suspended above an area occupied by a suitcase.**

**Unplugged, its connecting electrical cable severed, the plug is a defused power source with the potential to be reactivated. The three-pronged plug, used in domestic and work-related electrical power applications has been rendered temporarily useless. It is seen to be floating, its role undetermined, its function suspended. A sense of disconnectedness is implied. There has been a break in the flow of electrical current. Alongside references to disempowerment are the references to the severing of links both private and public.**

**Handles are a component of both the plug and the suitcase. The implication is that both of these objects are portable. The handles make it possible for the objects to be lifted and carried. Handling, the grappling with, the actual physical engagement with the object is suggested as a part of its nature. The plug and the suitcase are elements of baggage within the iconographic, metaphorical and symbolic designations of the series of paintings.**

The suitcase is a trace of human presence in the landscape. Metaphorical readings of the suitcase include those related to travelling, storage or concealment. There is no clearly stated narrative role for these objects. The relationship between the plug and suitcase includes the encoding of and signifying of a state of transition, of suspended action, time and of disconnectedness.

This painting sees the development of a relationship between objects located above and those located below. Sky and land are inferred or stated without recourse to perspectival devices. The land is signified directly through the material means of clay-dust and glue mixture.

Conceptually, the rendering of the objects differs. The depiction of the plug is clear, more three-dimensionally stated. The suitcase is shadowy, suggested in darker tones, less clearly stated. Its identity and purpose are not literally illustrated. The nails, earth and paint in the lower section of the painting contribute to the signification of a threatened existence, damaged, a life in a state of disturbance. Nails are scattered and embedded in the material of the painting. The painting itself bears the traces of having arisen from a site of disruption, of social upheaval.

Nails are one of the images repeated throughout the series of paintings. Further explication of the use of the nail image is provided in the discussions of paintings which follow.



PAINTING NO. 3

## PAINTING NO. 3

### *LOCK AND HANDLE*

Dimensions: 200 x 160 cm

Medium: Acrylic, carborundum, clay-dust on canvas

Date: 1993

The *pure* motif value of these images is tempered by the formal variations in the material treatment of the objects or spaces depicted from one painting to the next. The specificity of the chosen objects-as-motifs is indicated by their isolation within the iconographic framework of each painting and in the inter-acting readings of their placements within the series of paintings.

In *LOCK AND HANDLE*, paint as material presence is emphasized by various applications: dripping and splattering combined with more precise brushwork, thin and thick impasto, rough and smooth textures, incised and painted linear aspects. The flat two-dimensional surface is emphasized by the integration of the tactile earth element (brick-dust and glue mixture) and the painted elements.

References to the acts of 'locking in' and 'locking out' are foregrounded in the iconography of this painting. The lock is a reference to security, to bondage, to imprisonment, to protection as well as to inclusiveness and exclusiveness. Locks feature in the domestic context and more broadly in the socio/historical/political arena as physical and as psychologically loaded signifiers. In the context of an adverse South African political climate, the lock has become a stereotypical image with precedents in the mass- and popular-media imagery. Locks have become identified as metaphors for, or symbols of imprisonment, arrested action, entrapment or the denial of freedom.



The element of the handle as a device for facilitating the carrying of a container or a heavy load is given emphasis in the lower section of the painting. A box-like container is only partially shown, its full extent cropped by the bottom edge of the canvas. Heaviness is conveyed by the size of the handle, the physicality of the paint application and the sense of its weight is compounded by its placement at the lower extremities of the pictorial surface.

Concealment is a dominant theme in the painting. The external forms of the devices, the tools of concealment are shown or inferred but their content is not revealed in any literal sense. In the play of consciousness and memory, these elements or iconographic motifs are reminders. They are memory-images filtering through the screen of consciousness, re-presenting themselves with ominous insistence.

For a long time South Africa had symbolized the politics of repression in which rising levels of resistance have proliferated. The state had censored and silenced any sign of a challenge to the status quo. Van Wyk writes "In 1985, the state forbade any report, photography, drawing or other representation touching on the repressive actions of the state and its executive arms" (Nooter 1993:83).



PAINTING NO. 4

## PAINTING NO. 4

### *PAINTING WITH BLANKET*

Dimensions: 200 x 160 cm

Medium: Acrylic, blanket, coal-dust, carborundum on canvas

Date: 1993

A discarded blanket, a found element, has been affixed to the canvas surface. A section near the bottom of the painting has been rolled back and held in place with wire. The name Artaud is revealed as part of the word 'Artaudpain' which features in the lower 'earth' section of the painting.

A number of iconographic and formal elements interact in a network of discourses. The upper area of the painting is largely occupied by the image of a container-like box with a strapped-down handle. The ambiguity of the container is intentionally placed within the same iconographic field as the image of the blackened cooking pot lower down in the pictorial field. Both are emblematically designated with understated representational qualities. The depicted cooking-pot is generally recognizable as being such without overt description. The image of the domestic, familiar cooking pot and the partially depicted box are in an undetermined relationship with one another, a relationship which extends to the collage aesthetic inhering in the attached blanket and the inscribed word along the bottom area. Ambiguity does not deny that meaning inheres in the objects depicted. Meaning is not prescribed by the selected images. Furthermore, the painting is a statement about the reluctance of art to provide the key to convenient understanding of the iconographic discourse.

The blanket is a tangible material signifier with domestic connections. References include the need for warmth, for protection, for covering of the most basic kind. Formally the blanket emphasises the materiality and actuality of the surface. Paint, coal-dust, carborundum and the clay-dust and glue mixture contribute to the overall materially foregrounded presence of the work and processes.

The presence of Artaud's name evokes the extremes of social disorder as well as the contribution of the artist-outsider. Bernice Rose describes Artaud as the "... pariah who was imprisoned by madness but who turned the case inside out, returning madness to society" (Rose 1992: 61). Significantly for the painting under discussion, she writes of Artaud's mental instability as a "... paradigm for all those who are forced to extremes of rage by a society that conceives of them as voiceless" (Rose 1992: 61).

A suppressed voice is encoded in the inscribed 'Artaudpain'. The presence of a human being in pain is inferred. Metaphorically the rolling back of the covering has revealed the presence of Artaud-as-word-as-painwacked-body, Artaud-as-earth, Artaud-as-landscape. Artaud is revealed as the "... hidden wound" (Kuspit 1993: 92), an uncovered presence embedded in the 'earth' section of the painting.

The inscribed word introduces the element of graffiti as a referent. The focus in this work is on the energy of the gestural type of daring mark-making with its origins in irreverent acts of defiance. Finding expressive form on walls – a response of people denied access to the media – graffiti embodies acts of scratching, defacing, erasure, randomness, risk and spontaneity which are traces of the human need to register and to affirm the creative impulses within people.

The painting foregrounds an Artaudian premise that writing be directly apprehended as sound. Austerity and objecthood are interwoven in the view that privileges direct apprehension of the painting as object and not merely as two-dimensional mimetic representation.



PAINTING NO. 5

## PAINTING NO. 5

### *TORCH, HANDLE AND NAILS*

Dimensions: 200 x 150 cm

Medium: Acrylic, nails, coal-dust on canvas

Date: 1993

Excavation of memory features strongly in the lexicon of impulses at the root of the imagery in this series. The paintings have become repositories of ambivalent tensions arising from the memory of and personal experience of extended periods of high levels of violence in South Africa. In this painting a torch in the upper area and the wedge-like section of a box in the lower area are the main iconographic protagonists.

The torch, a positive, useful piece of equipment for providing light usually at times of emergency, hovers above the ground. It is a hand-held instrument. Handle and attached box form a unit as part of the overall design of the torch. The attached box, a container element, its function ambiguously unstated, is, in the context of the series, part of the 'baggage' which the torch 'carries' with it.

Whilst the upper image embodies the element of suspended movement, the lower image is characterised by slowness and resistance to movement. Scraping and heavily applied paint contribute to the sense of impeded movement. Actual nails embedded in paint textured with marble-dust enhance the presence of objectness and materiality. Nails are also featured in depicted form, embedded in the box. A handle, like those used in suitcases, suggests that this container could be lifted and carried or dragged.

The partially depicted box appears to have been dragged up from the recesses of another time or place. Metaphorically, and in the context of the role played by memory, the image of the box with its references to concealment and containment, relates to the storage and the possible revelation of information. The continued closure and resulting denial of access to information is simultaneously part of the reading inherent in this ambiguous image. Ambiguity and polyvalency co-exist without the one negating the other.

Formally, conceptually and iconographically, painting becomes a critical activity when the work includes a critique of the act of art-making in its confrontation with a disrupted social fabric. Predetermined imagery has not dictated the usage of materials. Paint as substance, as matter, is permitted to proclaim its physical nature. The painting is not dependent solely on the iconography. Material and referential elements are interwoven. Objectness is evoked through the freeing of paint as material signifier and the inclusion of actual objects.

Details have been minimally suggested in line. Colour in the upper section is lighter, reminiscent of the sky. Paint has been thinly applied allowing the liquid and transparent qualities of pigment dissolved in a glaze and water mixture to evoke lightness and space rather than describe it in a mimetic manner. The painting process developed over a long period of time and included the superimposition of wet on wet paint as well as wet on dry paint. Transparency in the upper areas was enhanced with further applications of acrylic glaze. In the lower section material application is heavier and colour is darker. Material and image interpenetrate emphasising the harsh more threatening scenario in the bottom area.

The motifs constituting the imagery in this painting are tokens of disjunction and brutal alienation. Ironically, though there is an absence of living presence, the painting is resonant with traces of resilience, of the struggle and the need to retrieve a compassionate social centrality in life.



PAINTING NO. 6



## PAINTING NO. 6

### *HAMMER WITH NAILS*

Dimensions: 200 x 150 cm

Medium: Acrylic, carborundum, copper wire, clay-dust on canvas

Date: 1993

Tools are a feature of everyday domestic or working environments. Indicative of work and creative activity, tools are also signifiers of the human will to advance, to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct, to attach, to detach and generally to make useful extensions to the world we occupy.

The hammer, a basic hand-held tool, still useful in the present computer-age, is depicted in the upper section of the painting. The hammer dominates, appearing as though seen through a camera lens in extreme close-up. The image has been cropped by the edges of the canvas, resulting in a sense of claustrophobia with which it engages the confined space. Nails are depicted, protruding from and embedded in the shaft of the hammer. Between the painted nails actual copper wire protrudes from the thickly applied 'skin' of paint. Largely painted in red, the image of the hammer is visually projected towards the viewer.

In some African cultures strategies of accumulation and containment are closely linked in the making of objects and their usage in ritual activities. Kongo nail figures are covered with accumulations of nails and metal blades - intended to activate the forces contained within the empowered body of the figure. Beryl Bellman writes that "Nail figures were sometimes used by oath-takers, who licked the nails before driving them into the surface of the figure" (Nooter 1993: 51). The accumulations of nails and blades protruding from the Kongo nail figures evoke vividly what Bellman describes as "... procedures for disclosing the presence of concealed information without revealing the information itself" (Nooter 1993: 50).

*HAMMER WITH NAILS* features the image of a hammer as 'nail figure'. The impaired tool, rendered useless as a hammer in functional terms, has become a metaphorically empowered tool in the iconographic framework of the painting. Analogous with Kongo nail figures (also called power figures or oath-taking figures) (Figure 39) the hammer, ironically, has become transformed as the receiver of nails.

Schmalenbach writes that the *nkondi* (power figure or nail figure) is activated by the shock of inserted metal blades or nails. Beliefs surrounding the functions of an *nkondi* include the protection of oath-takers, the punishment of those threatening the oath-taker and the detection of dangerous situations (Schmalenbach 1988: 239). Significantly, Pamela McClusky points out that the power figure is credited with wider powers: amongst others the healing of epilepsy, dispensing of justice and the ability to end disputes (Price 1984: 30).

Influences or analogies in the context of this documentation are not absolute, static or prescriptive. Some are direct, others are peripheral to both the making of the work and the reception of the imagery. Some are consciously recruited while most are antecedents of a more subliminal nature.

Another reading of the hammer image in this painting, its African context notwithstanding, privileges the hammer as a signifier of work as well as the worker. In this instance the usually useful tool/worker has had its basic functional energy arrested. Workers in South Africa have been at the forefront of the underlying conflictually volatile socio-political climate and moreover as dispossessed people in the broader South African context, they have been a key constituency in the surge towards the establishment of a new social order.

Conduction of energy is encoded in the inclusion of actual copper wire. Like fine antennae, the copper wire protrusions signify the transmission, reception, the communication of energy or information. These antennae signal the possibility of penetration into the recesses of concealed energy.

Boxes, crates, bundles, cases and baggage generally, suggest the possibility of content, of inside and outside, revelation and concealment. The claustrophobic presence of the hammer finds resonance in the closed box-like element at ground level. A heap of undisclosed material has been piled on top of the equally ambiguous box. The contents of the box remain unknown, unrevealed. This element of withheld knowledge, information or contents arises from the experience of living in an environment of restricted communication where inquiry and penetration into covert activity was made virtually impossible by legislation. The subsequent uncovering of hidden regions of life in South Africa are revealing of the dimensions of concealment. Meaning is elusive and illusionary within a social framework coloured by deep levels of suspicion which have resulted from a lack of transparent interactive community engagement.

Further iconographic contextualization is attended by the inclusion of Artaud's name. A migratory signifier in the series of works, the encoding of Artaud, inclusive of its crisis connotations also signifies the need for a healing intervention. In concert with the hammer image (and its power-figure analogy), the encoding of Artaud is indicative of the dual presence of destructive forces and constructive energies, of physical and psychic instability. Art and its transformational energy is significant of the possibility, that within the catharsis of a disturbed social body there exists the potential for psychic healing.



PAINTING NO. 7

## PAINTING NO. 7

### *HESSIAN BAG AND EXCAVATOR*

Dimensions: 200 x 150 cm

Medium: Acrylic, hessian, brick-dust, carborundum, wire on canvas

Date: 1993

For most South Africans life is characterised to a significant degree by constant threats to one's very existence. Accumulated pressure of pervasive threats, tensions and the anxiety of insecurity is part of a 'pre-conscious' condition when one responds to social instability by making paintings.

Mass demolitions and removals of people from their homes occurred with horrific regularity since the introduction of the Group Areas Act in 1950. Platsky and Walker have written that from 1960 to 1983 "... a total of 3.5 million people, almost all of them black have been subject, in terms of government policy to forced removal from one place to another where they did not choose to go" (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 216).

The title of this painting foregrounds the main iconographic elements in the composition. A hessian bag has been fixed to the upper section of the canvas surface. A formal component and a material signifier, the hessian bag has been selectively integrated with the painted aspects in the upper section. The image of an open, empty box-like object with a large handle has been painted on the hessian surface. Lower, in the earth area, an excavator or large loader is depicted, static and firmly grounded in contrast with the box-like object hovering above, partially shown, as though falling into the scene from outside the edges of the canvas.

Like the blanket in painting no. 4, an actual material object interacts with the represented objects. The hessian bag has not been sanitized or altered to serve purely aesthetic reasons. Chosen primarily for its material qualities but equally because of its humble functions in the world it originates from, the hessian bag has connotations relating to baggage, storage or bedding of people living marginal or disadvantaged lives. Human presence is registered literally in the inclusion of the hessian bag. An expendable item, unsophisticated, roughly made, its origins are close to the earth, the cowshed, the stable, and has metaphorical connections with uncertainty, degradation, isolation and poverty, work and storage.

The excavation scoop or loader has allusions to the removal of earth, rock or waste material. Its large handle is evocative of a hand-held device. Paradoxically, in the context of earth removals power-driven front-end loaders and dump-trucks are employed. The excavator depicted in this painting signifies its connections with the human protagonist through the inclusion of a handle in its form. The design and function of the device are emblematic of the human drive to act both upon material and the social body.

Mass demolitions accompanied the forced removal of peoples when pass laws failed to deter the flow of job-seekers into South African cities. Bulldozers, front-end loaders and the state apparatus pursued the strategy of mass demolitions to the extent that "In the cold, wet winter of 1977, the 10,000 inhabitants of Modderdam Road (near Cape Town) watched as their shelters were razed to the ground. Six months later, Unibel, home of 20,000 people, was obliterated" (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 216).

Implicit in the image of the excavator is its function in the execution of a destructive attitude exemplified by the acts of removal quoted above.



PAINTING NO. 8

## PAINTING NO. 8

### *CRATE AND WEDGE*

Dimensions: 200 x 150 cm

Medium: Acrylic, hessian, brick-dust, carborundum and nails on canvas

Date: 1994

The observations about this series of paintings have been based on a non-prescriptive approach to the uncovering of meaning. In this light the painting under discussion offers an ironically ambivalent stance and a contrary implication, inferred from the imagery, that meaning or the uncovering of meaning is not readily attainable or necessarily always logically present. Neither is meaning absolute or fixed.

A nailed-up crate is the dominant image in the painting - the last work in the series. A rhetorical image, it embodies concealment and denial of entry. As a container, its form is unrevealing of its contents - if any. Inertia and silence are experiences associated with concealment, inaccessibility and the unknown. A lack of communication is signified. The act of representation is revealing of its denial. Anonymity evokes questions about the identity of the crate. What is visible is the absence of the known, the presence of the unknown.

In a traditional African cultural or religious context, containers often conceal secret knowledge. In South Africa, cultural traditions notwithstanding, there is the presence of hidden, censored, protected and secret scenarios. Disconcertingly prevalent, a siege mentality isolates, encloses, shuts in and shuts out, and reveals an obsession with separation. Gary van Wyk prefaces an article on secret resistance in the mural art of Sotho-Tswana women with a quote from Michel Foucault: "Secrecy divides those who know from those who do not. Because knowledge and power directly imply one another, the broaching of secrecy enters a politico-epistemological domain" (Nooter 1993: 81).



Van Wyk describes South Africa as "... a state shot through with secrecy" (Nooter 1993: 82). He writes of the birth of apartheid and of a state spawned and maintained by secret societies, secret services, and secret commando networks. Clandestine organizations evolved on both sides of the politically conflicted coin. "A pervasive paranoia came into being, in which secrecy was not so much latched to content as formless and diffuse – an atmosphere and a way of life" (Nooter 1993: 83).

The tilting of the crate, in this painting, raises the possibility that its inscrutability could be penetrated. Actual nails are embedded in the clay-dust and paint constituting the material construction of the wedge at the base of the crate. The encoding of the power-figure in painting no. 6 is echoed here in the embedded nails featured as part of the wedge, an image redolent with references to an empowered, but secret element with its primary origins in the earth as well as references to wounding and pain.

Sealed-off cultural enclaves have developed throughout the fragmented terrain of this country. The major image in this painting has arisen from a perception that a legislated and enforced state of separation has enclosed scattered groups of people in claustrophobic isolation. However, the elusiveness of the content, implicit in the iconography, is a decisive factor indicative of a refusal to provide a narrative logic within the pictorial framework. A nailed-up crate, an image which makes visible a constructed impenetrability, nonetheless withholds knowledge, information, absence or presence of its contents and which is described by Ravenhill as "The visible functions to keep the invisible invisible" (Nooter 1993: 24).

Ambiguity prevails throughout the pictorial space and extends to the image of the handle above the crate. The function or meaning of the handle is not literally stated. Originating from outside the canvas, the handle is the visible aspect of an invisible or non-depicted entity. The handle is, however, a device for lifting and carrying baggage, signifying not only the carrying or mobilizing of stored contents, but also the need to 'hold' on to something tangible, to enable the negotiation of a conflicted social environment.

## THE GRIDS

## NOTES ON THE PRELIMINARY WORKS ENTITLED *THE GRIDS*.

Formally, the works accompanying the main body of paintings, represent a collective approach to the framing of iconographic elements. In the light of the collective underpinnings of the grid concept, this explication proposes to treat the accumulated imagery as a collective entity.

Situated within the specific concerns of the *Domestic Baggage* theme, these works are cognizant of an atmosphere bristling with innumerable politically grounded antipathies. *The Grids* are a self-imposed response to a system consistently and programmatically bent on the administration of enforced denials on a dispossessed sector of the population. South Africans have endured deep cleavages in every sphere of human endeavour. The work process has involved a systematic ordering of iconography whilst simultaneously questioning the incongruities inherent in the work and in this strange place made strange by estrangement. An attempt has been made at ordering the traces of disrupted communication. To build a collective statement, motifs have been repeated from one image to another, migrating from one work to the next.

Adopting a self-interpretative mode, and though these grids are not of the lineage outlined by Rosalind Krauss, I feel an affinity with her view that this structured code is a means for the "promotion" of silence (Krauss 1987: 158). Krauss adds that the "... grid's power lies in its capacity to figure forth the material ground of the pictorial object ... so that the image of the pictorial surface can be seen to be born out of the organization of pictorial matter" (Krauss 1987: 158). In concert with the elements of silence and formal structuring, Krauss identifies originality and repetition as key qualities bound together in this schematized deconstruction of pictorial space. Adherence to the formulaic approach imposed by the grid format has been motivated in part by the need to deploy the act of repetition – a discredited act with its origins in commercial reproduction – to ask questions about originality and origins and to counteract mechanical logic which fails to empathically explain the anger, fears, anxieties and deceptions of the complex manifestations that constitute the diverse but no less traumatic experiences of dispossession.

Each image is isolated, contained within the pre-coded system. The silence is that of an ordered structure. Surface is emphasized by the imposition of a system which foregrounds stasis and the accumulation of repeated imagery. This 'barrier' which, at most only permits shallow, illusionary, spatial movement within each module, is denying of deep spatial communication. Inhabited by common-place objects mainly, and reminiscent of Andy Warhol's ephemera out of everyday life, *The Grids* also take into account ideas relating to the temporary and the eternal, of high art and low art. The dialectic extends to include questions about the relationship between art and life, viz. the lifting of banal forms out of the context of daily life and then situating them in an art context.

*The Grids* came to signify the lack of change in our fragmented society. Originality, in that sense that implies newness, has been relegated to a privileged domain in the South African context where large numbers of people have lived in states of enforced social regimentation. Unrelieved monotony, anonymity, the lack of explanations and the perpetuation of the absurdities spawned by apartheid have resulted in a claustrophobic arbitrariness. The media provide an unrelenting mood of catastrophe. One is subjected (the promise of a new future notwithstanding) to waves of repeated banality and violence.

One attempts to deal with and to untangle the constant proliferation of imagery which, at times, is indecipherable. Everything – activities, objects, thoughts – has been tainted in some way by banality, by exhaustion, by overexposure to repeated acts of violence. Meanings are elusive, multiple and illusionary when living in a state of suspended belief as one does when one's experience of social turmoil is one in which we are deaf to each other's tongues and blind in each other's cultures.

In negotiating the sphere of the unassimilable, oblique strategies have been attempted. As the multiplicity of images unfolded, *The Grids* became the site for alternative groupings of signifiers. To counteract the banality of predictability and stereotyping, allowance was made for the experimental and

for the arbitrary disassembling and reassembling of modules. Improvisation and exploration contributed to the development of more sensuous, polychrome works after the initial austere black and white pieces. Collage was deployed alongside the incidental as image-generating process. Indications of the incoherent and the incongruous are present within the clusters of ordered referents. Explorations of formal strategies, viz. organic mark-making, resulted in 'silence' being replaced by the 'noise' of activity both conceptually and formally. There is the inference that a continuum is at work. 'Fixed frames' indicate that there is the possibility of closer analysis. Viewed collectively, the simultaneous presence of the images, a series of objects occupying 'fixed frames' – critical moments in time – harbour a refusal of the desire for historical amnesia.

Started in 1991, these works on cardboard and liner-cover are exploratory, preparatory and primary works for the larger paintings on canvas. However, as the series developed, *The Grids* assumed an existence as fully constituted works in their own right.

*The Grids* include:

- (i) the concept of a series of interconnected images consistently developed;
- (ii) the idea of an upper image and a lower image;
- (iii) specific framed referents isolated, extracted from a network of signifiers;
- (iv) the adherence to a formulaic scheme as a pre-condition for the completion of the series;
- (v) the inclusion of words as integral to the signifying framework;
- (vi) repetition as a stylistic device, allowing for the interplay between mechanical and organic approaches to painting;
- (vii) the inclusion of stapled and glued collage attachments within a larger collage-derived format;
- (viii) a range of mark-making strategies organically combining paint, brush, fingers, scrapers, glazing, carborundum, chalk and charcoal.

For the purposes of completing the documentation this general note is concluded with brief details of selected iconographic elements pertaining to *The Grids*. In the light of the polysemic nature of these works any interpretative endeavour has to take cognizance of the open-endedness of the project. Multiplicity of meaning, signifiers in transition and transparent intertextuality are contributing factors in an ongoing discourse informed by a non-exhaustive interpretative process. Symbolic content is undeniably present. The precise nature of the symbolism is not fixed absolutely. The subjective character of individual choice, perception and meaning is welcomed. Instead, symbolism notwithstanding, *The Grids* have become repositories of objects and marks that have been encountered on the way to locating oneself in a dislocated environment. Rather than encoding a single moment of culmination, the gathering of the fragments signify a continuing quest for coherence and for assimilation in the process of understanding the incongruities of dislocation in this country.

Acrylic, charcoal, carborundum and chalk are among the media employed throughout the series. Collage has been selectively applied.



GRID NO. 1



GRID NO. 2

## 1. EMPEDOCLES

88.5 x 113.5 cm

1991

The first work of the forays into this experimental terrain features the name *Empedocles*, a Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C. who was renowned for curing diseases and actively supporting democratic principles. Believing that he had become a god, legend records that of his own volition, he was consumed in the flames of Mount Aetna (Cotterell 1986: 156). Heaps of matter on shelves are featured and appear again in later works in variations of this motif. The ironical encoding of Empedocles, accompanied by cynically intentioned, minimal charcoal drawing, signifies a disillusionment with the possibility of a therapeutic intervention in an adversarial environment.

## 2. KNIVES AND NUMBERS

60 x 91 cm

1991

Painted at a time when greater numbers of people were being killed in township-located violence, casualty figures and weaponry are referred to in the inscribed words. Graffiti-like, the words appear arbitrarily placed in the context of the other images.





GRID NO. 3



GRID NO. 4

### 3. TORCHES

70 x 100 cm

1991

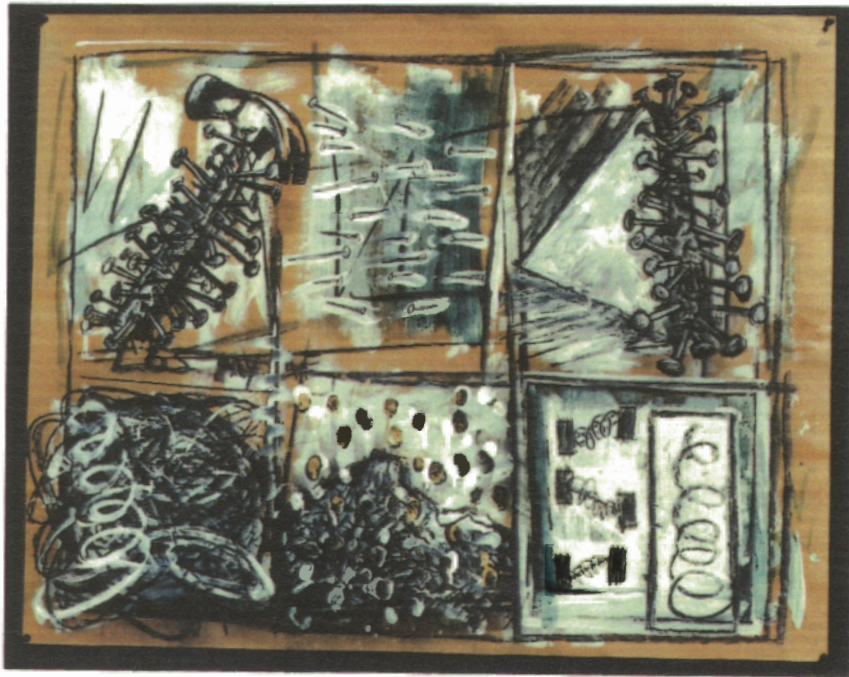
Urgency is implied in the hurried brushstrokes and chalk lines. Austere black, white and grey is emblematic of this stage when the concept of a formulaic approach was primary. The dry, brittle paint application, unglazed, enhances an austerity of surface and emphasises an urgent energy.

### 4. MESHUIS

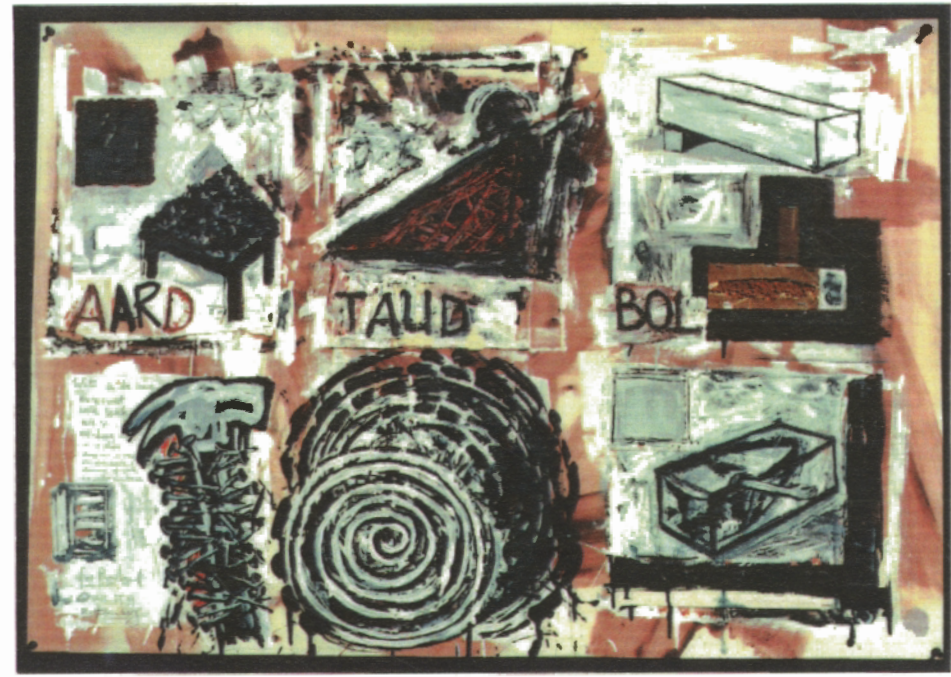
59.3 x 84 cm

1991-1993

The title (translates as Knifehouse) foregrounds a link with *Grid* number 2. Included, in the bottom righthand space is a simplified image based on Man Ray's *Gift* (1921). The iron with its sharp protrusions is an ominous presence. Inscribed above it is a line from the Sophiatown song – *ONS DAAK NIE ONS PHOLA HI ... (we're not budging, we're playing it cool right here!)*. Ironically, the people who were forced to move were only to encounter more hostilities in an unstable environment not of their own choosing.



GRID NO. 5



GRID NO. 6

5. HAMMER AND NAILS

81 x 101.5 cm

1991

More freely applied, there is a lighter employment of drawing and brushwork. The cardboard surface is more visible. The key referents, foregrounded in the title, were later to become part of a larger painting of 1993. A spiralling line in the bottom right-hand block is isolated by a frame indicating its significance as a motif in the series as well as in this specific work.

6. AARDTAUSBOL

70 x 99.5 cm

1991

Painted on Fabriano paper, prepared with a wash of gesturally applied reddish-brown pigment and glaze mixture, the painting features the hammer and nails motif which first appeared in *Grid* number 5. A poem written in pencil alongside the depicted hammer is dedicated to my friend, teacher and colleague, poet and artist, Rowland Allen who passed away in September 1991. AARDTAUSBOL is a title constructed from a combination of the name Artaud and the Afrikaans word *aardbol* (the earth). The allusion to a condition of global dis-ease expands the meanings inhering in the work to be inclusive rather than exclusive of a world-view.



GRID NO. 7



GRID NO. 8

7. SLAGHUIS, STILTE

81 x 101.5 cm

1992

The title, in Afrikaans, translates as slaughter-house, silence. An excavated wedge of land is depicted with three adjacent images of three-pronged electric plugs. Excavations, wedges and the electric plugs are key motifs recurring in later works on canvas. Fingerprints dominate in the lower left hand block of the pictorial surface. As though wishing to remove traces of human presence, the fingerprints have largely disappeared under layers of white paint. Certitude and flux engage one another.

8. GERAAS

81 x 101.5 cm

1992

The only direct reference to the human figure in this series occurs in *GERAAS* (noise). An interplay of metaphors has been set in motion with the repetition of three key referents: a human head in profile, a light bulb and an egg image as a constant motif. The interplay of meanings involves, inter alia, the metaphorical possibilities of head-as-egg, head-as-light and egg-as-light. The title is an ironic reminder that the noise of human activity is present, always ready and potentially intrusive.



GRID NO. 9



GRID NO. 10

9. ARTAUDLIGHEID

81 x 101.5 cm

1992

Gesturally freer, painted areas, and liner cover surface enjoy a more transparent interplay. Images take on a more incidental character, less fixed and organically more interactive with the materials. The title is revealing of another irony in the combination of *ARTAUD* and the notion of *LIGHEID* (lightness) – another indicator of the elusiveness of culturally engaged healing interventions in a hostile social climate.

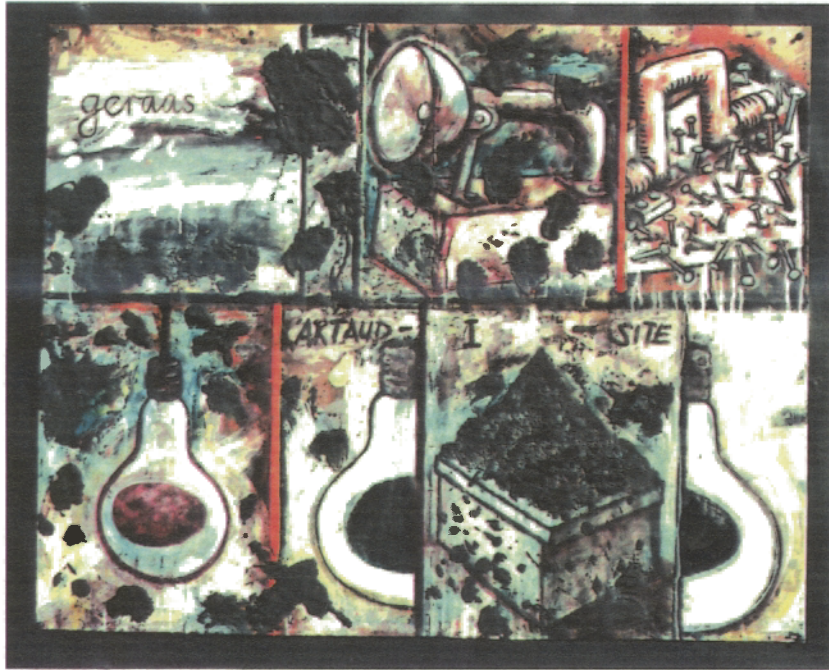
10. GERAAK

81 x 101.5 cm

1992

Two new iconographic inclusions are featured alongside the familiar light bulb, dark egg, wedge, nails and handles. A nailed-up crate tilted on a wedge and a disembodied jacket make their only appearance in the series. Materially this work is rich with various applications of paint, drawing and collage. Washes, heavy impasto, wiped areas and incised lines combine to make for a complex interweaving between form, material and subject-matter. *GERAAK* implies that the act of touching has occurred, or that an encounter, at the least, has been initiated.





GRID NO. 11



GRID NO. 12

11. ARTAUD-I-SITE

81 x 101.5 cm

1992

A persistent presence, Artaud's name reappears intermittently throughout the body of works. In this instance the word-play in the title introduces another reading viz. *ARTAUD-EYE-SIGHT*.<sup>5</sup>

The double reading combined with the images characterises (i) the nature of the site from which the images arise viz. the conflicted terrain of South Africa and (ii) my subjective viewpoint which shaped the visually and aurally (geraas) contingent responses manifest in *The Grids*.

12. RA RO RE

81 x 101.5 cm

1992

Images of handles and the onomatopoeic *RA RO RE* are foregrounded in the final work of the series. Persistently re-appearing, the handles, as signifiers of baggage, are reminders of the key thematic concern of the series. Formally this work is closer to *Grid* number 5. The images and words are less contained giving rise to the possibility of a break with the self-imposed system adhered to in *The Grids*. An instance is in the image of the black egg shape which appears uncontained, free of its previous situation within the enclosing lines signifying light-bulbs or human heads (as in *Grid* number 8).

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<sup>5</sup>Paronomasia is a figure of speech featuring a play on words that are similar sounding but that carry multiple layers of meaning.

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